

Ellen Olenska's Character in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

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Abstract

Old New York was Wharton's term to describe this wealthy and elite class at the top of the developing city's social hierarchy, a society which was utterly intent on maintaining its own rigid stability. Even though, the roles of women in American society changed drastically from 1820's to 1860's due to the civil war and such a progression was due in part to the revolutionary thoughts. Women started taking their right to speak up openly and frankly and become more like men. The role of many women had changed from being homemaker to being able to provide for the family by either getting a job or start to be allowed to have a voice. They had important roles not only in helping the family, but in sharing to rebuild the nation. As a whole, they helped to clean up the process of urbanization and immigration, helping literature grow and helping change the ongoing problem of woman's suffrage. Old New York society to which Edith Wharton belonged did not give equality to women in legal, economic, and sexual matters. The society considered woman supremely satisfying object of masculine possession. Old New York imposed on its members set rules and expectations for practically everything; manners, fashions, behaviors, and even conversations.

Edith Wharton focuses on female's characters more than men in her novels. She tries to show the sufferings of women and her society attitudes towards them, especially the divorced women. Countess Ellen Olenska represents the major female character in *The Age of Innocence*. She is considered a perfect example of women's agony. Wharton presents Ellen Olenska as the sophisticate, a woman who has been lived amid the aristocracy of Europe and has seen the different world. Her style of dress and her manners are exotic to New York eyes, especially in her interactions with men. Everything about Olenska signaled her foreignness. She is delineated as the victim of old New York society. New York is again the center of bizarre traditions and customs.

The matter of Divorce and leaving a husband is unacceptable in New York society. Ellen wants to go home, to people who would accept her but she finds the society she is heading to be not easily accessible and also is not willing to receive anyone from the outside world. Ellen feels alienated and trapped when she returns to New York society. She wishes to reclaim her freedom by divorcing her husband, but she is discouraged from this action because all the people around her especially her family fear unpleasant gossip.

Ellen is not a mere character. She is a new heroine and representative because she stands for all female characters who try to make changes in Old New society.

شخصية الن اولنسكة في رواية عصر البراءة للكاتبة ادث وارتون

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المستخلص

ان مجتمع نيويورك القديم هو مصطلح استخدمته وارتون لوصف الاغنياء والطبقة الراقية في السلم الاجتماعي. المجتمع المحافظ على الجدية الثابتة. على الرغم من ان دور المرأة قد تغير بشكل جذري من 1820 إلى 1860 بسبب الحرب الأهلية وكان مثل هذا التقدم يرجع في جزء منه إلى الأفكار الثورية. بدأت النساء تأخذ حقها بالتكلم بصراحة

ووضوح اكثر من الرجال. ان دور العديد من النساء قد تغيرت من كونها ربة منزل لتكون قادرة على توفير لجميع أفراد الأسرة إما عن طريق الحصول على وظيفة أو البدء في السماح لها بان يكون لها حرية التعبير. كان لديهم دورا هاما ليس فقط في مساعدة الأسرة، ولكن في المشاركة لإعادة بناء الامة. وعامة ساعدت في خطوات التمدن والهجرة، مما يساعد الأدب على التقدم والمساعدة في تغيير المشكلة المستمرة لمعانة المرأة. ولكن نيويورك القديمة فرضت على اهلها مجموعة من القواعد والسلوكيات عمليا في كل شيء الاخلاق، الازياء، السلوكيات، وحتى المحادثات. وتركز ادث وارتنون على الشخصيات النسائية اكثر من الرجال في رؤيتها هي تحاول اظهار معاناة النساء ونظرة المجتمع لهن، وخصوصا النساء المطلقات. تمثل الكونتسية الن اولنسكة شخصية نسائية بارزة من رواية عصر البراءة وتعتبر هي مثال كامل لمعانة النساء. ان مجتمع نيويورك القديم الذي تنتمي له ادث وارتنون لن يعطي المساواة للنساء في المسائل القانونية، الاقتصادية، و الجنسية. وان المجتمع يعتبر المرأة جزءا من ممتلكات الرجال. قدمت وارتنون الن والنسكة كامرأة حاذقة عاشت وسط الطبقة الاوربية الأرستقراطية وشاهدت العام المختلف. يعتبر اسلوب لباسها مختلف لعيون نيويورك القديمة وحتى اخلاقها وخصوصا تعاملها مع الرجال. كل شيء عنها يشير الى غرابتها. رسمت على انها ضحية مجتمع نيويورك القديم. نيويورك مرة اخرى مركز العادات والتقاليد الغربية. ان مسألة الطلاق وهجرة الزوج غير مقبولة في مجتمع نيويورك. ارادت الن العودة الى المنزل، الى الناس الذي يقبلونها ولكنها وجدت نفسها تتجه الى مجتمع لا يمكن الوصول له وكذلك لا يرغب في استقبال أي شخص من خارجه. شعرت الن بالوحدة والاعتراب النفسي عندما عادت الى مجتمع نيويورك. تمتد الن في استعادة حريتها من خلال الطلاق من زوجها، ولكن لم تشجع على هذا العمل وذلك لان كل الناس الذين حولها وخصوصا عائلتها خافوا من الفضيحة الغير سارة. الن ليست شخصية فريدة. هي بطلنة جديدة وممثلة لأنها تمثل كل الشخصيات النسائية التي تحاول التغيير في مجتمع نيويورك القديم

Old New York Women and their Conditions

Old New York society is characterized by its customs and conventions. Women are being strained by their society in terms of their relationships. According to the class distinction, the Old New York society has severely defined the role of women. In the Nobility and gentry's class, women's role is very hard and important. They are expected to manage the home and the household. Unmarried women spend a great deal of time either with other unmarried women or in social parties, balls, and dancing. And once they marry, their role start changing to manage the household. In the middle class, women depend heavily on marrying up into the upper class to begin social prestige; single women are all the time under the pressure of finding a suitable match and getting married. In the third class, the working one, women work in certain positions as in shops, bookkeepers, and teachers. Women in this class may fall into poverty after the death of their father so they are forced to work as governesses¹.

The last one is the lower working class. It includes women of domestic service. They are desperately poor and single. Most of them are described as "able-bodied"² because they are expected to work hard to support themselves. Women of this class are desperate because they suffer a long period of time in working. In other words, they suffer the restraints and repression imposed on them because of hard work.

Wharton shows these problems to her readership, however, she does not offer any real solutions that could be generally applicable to these kinds of problems.³

Women are expected to fulfill their function, to marry, bear children and be a support to their husbands, although they often do not feel like undergoing such a way of life. They are often forced to do so by society, and "whether that role was...accepted by women...is open to dispute"⁴. Remaining single was not conventional, and girls were brought to the marriage market as soon as they reached marriageable age. Marriage was not always closed out of love of the partners: often financial matters or social status led them to marry.

Many women actively search the changes that would allow them to experience life as men's equals rather than as their subordinates. Many obstacles blocked the path to independence, however. Women's suffrage has not been signed into place, which in itself halted the development of further legislation in women's favor by denying women the ability to vote for their own rights; though divorce is legal, it was frowned upon in many circles and, more importantly, is financially impractical or even impossible for most women; and contraceptive measures are not yet legal, transforming women and wives into mothers,

sometimes before their personal wishes would have allowed such a change. Gender roles are rigidly defined, and women who resist them are often ignored, shunned, or criticized with little recourse. As a result of these and many other limiting factors, women, especially wives, were significantly dependent on men⁵.

The legal rights of married women were similar to those of children. They could not vote or see or even own property. Also they were seen as pure and clean. Because of this view, their bodies were seen as temples which should not be adorned with makeup nor should it be used for such pleasurable things as sex.[their role was to have children and tend to the house. They could not hold jobs unless it was that as a teacher nor were they allowed to have their own checking accounts or saving accounts. In the end, they were to be treated as saints, but saints that had no legal right⁶.

Wharton deals with the matter of divorce in her novels and considered it a root of alienation and isolation. Old New York society considers divorced women as fallen women; therefore, women should endure everything she face with her husband to protect her marriage. Nevertheless, the female characters in Wharton's novels are not exceptions in pursuing their happiness through marriage and family, even though the concept of marriage is different from each female character.

Ellen Olenska's Character in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

She is a fructified lady in the first scene of the novel. Ellen emerges as a woman of Europeanized mystery, exoticism and scandal:

The suggestion of her dress, which gave her what, was called a "Josephine look" was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with large old-fashioned clasp. The wearer of this unusual dress, who seemed quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting, stood a moment at the center of the box.⁷

She is May's cousin and Mrs. Manson Mingott's granddaughter. She becomes a countess by marrying Polish Count Olenski, a European nobleman. Her husband is allegedly cruel and abusive, steals Ellen's fortune and has affairs with other women and possibly even with men. In contrast to May Welland, Ellen Olenska appears as the sophisticate, a woman who had lived amid the aristocracy of Europe and has seen the different world. Her style of dress and her manners are exotic to New York eyes, especially in her interactions with men.⁸ Like her grandmother Mingott, the Countess Ellen Olenska showed a marked preference for foreign ways. Though May Welland's mother explained to her prospective son-in-law Newland Archer, "I'm afraid Ellen's ideas are not like ours. She was barely eighteen when Medora Manson took her back to Europe that must have been at least twelve years ago; and since then Ellen has never been to America. No wonder she is completely Europeanized "(143). Everything about Olenska signaled her foreignness. When she spoke, it was "as if she were translating from the French" (127). When she wrote a note to Newland Archer, he could not help "smiling a little at the Frenchness"(139) of the phrasing. Even her dinner dress, "a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur,"(104) reminded Archer of a French portrait he had seen "by the new painter, Carolus Duran, whose pictures were the sensation of the Salon" in Paris" (104). Even Olenek's house and belongings also indicated her European tastes. Upon entering her drawing room, Newland Archer experienced "the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known" (69).The

atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. He has been before in drawing-rooms hung with red damask, with pictures of the Italian school; "what struck him was the way in which Medora Manson's shabby hired house... had, by a turn of the hand, and the skillful [*sic*] use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, foreign, subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments".(70)

Olenka refers to her residence, so unlike anything else New York could offer, as a "funny house." She confides to Archer, "Oh, it's a poor little place. My relations despise it. But at any rate it's less gloomy than the van der Luydens"(72). She is delineated as the victim of the upper-class society. New York is again the center of bizarre traditions and customs. The traditions and social norms emphasized in the novel are the suspicions of failure of New York society. For example, the disapprobation of Ellen's name is a sign of arrogance and excessive constraints in New York society. "...such an ugly name as Ellen, I should have changed it to Elaine" (28). It indicates the social pressure in the new continent. New York reacts so violently against Ellen because she says subversive things that challenge its hegemony. Even as a girl, she "asked disconcerting questions [and] made precocious comments" (60). Ellen repeatedly speaks the truth about New York: "that the van der Luydens' house is gloomy" (79); a comment which is giving Newland an electric shock; that New York studiously avoids the truth and fears privacy. But it is less what Ellen says than her assumption of free speech that must be silenced.⁹

Ellen does not let these condemnatory standards crush her confidence or undermine her determination to be her own. It is assumed that her time away from New York allows her to break free from the chains that bound its upscale society. When she returns home to New York, she expects to be welcomed with open arms rather than subjugated by feeling of disdain. She is the victim of infidelity and asserting her strength of character by choosing to leave her husband. This is not the way society viewed the situation. In elitist's minds, a man's infidelity is not a violation of the code yet a woman abandoning her husband's under any circumstances are.¹⁰ Thus, Ellen becomes painfully aware of this pervasive hypocritical attitude, she is appalled. After witnessing her family and the rest of society's avoidance of emotions, she notices the hypocrisy and contradictions that have outspreaded through the city she has once idealized. The bulk of upscale New York society is undeniably vain, superficial, disparaging and arrogant; all of which are qualities that the free spirited character of Ellen.¹¹

Entering society for divorced person is not easy. Divorce and leaving a husband is just unacceptable in New York society, as well as in Europe. Ellen wants to go home, to people who would accept her and where she will find her lost freedom. She soon finds the society she is heading to be not easily accessible and also is not willing to receive anyone from the outside world. As Woolf ¹²(1882) proclaims: "Naïve at first...but she learns of it cruel social isolation, and she learns of the loneliness of living among the kind people who only ask one to pretend who doesn't want to hear anything unpleasant".¹³ Thus, Ellen feels alienated and trapped when she returns to New York society. She wishes to reclaim her freedom by divorcing her philandering husband; she is discouraged from this action because the family fears unpleasant gossip. The family pushes Newland to take care of her, and tell her about the rules of their society. Newland perpetuates the myth of Ellen as a type of dark lady. But his conversation with her causes Newland to think more about the nature of freedom and whether he wishes to reclaim his own. At first it seems as though one of Newland aims is to disprove the count's charge of Ellen infidelities. This would eliminate Ellen from the ranks of adulterous woman, allowing him to keep his untarnished enthroned image of her intact. Newland keeps waiting for Ellen to produce evidence that she is innocent of these accusations. Ellen neither denies the allegation nor owns up to them. Newland reads her silence as a confession but later discovers the fact. May also wants to be friendly to her and

tells Newland several times to be very kind to Ellen.¹⁴ Thus, He loves Ellen and attempts to elicit from her some sign of her feeling for him. He has a romantic vision of Ellen. “Stealing up behind him to throw her light arms about his neck, while he waited, soul and body throbbing with the miracle to come” (319). Newland’s fascination with the ideal explains his attachment to the art of renaissance Italy. Thus, it makes sense that he is drawn to the glorification of man that was basic to the renaissance, not the imperfect, but instead a struggle for perfection¹⁵.

Not all people had a bad impression about Ellen, Mr. Van der luydon thought her to be “the handsome girl” (71) and “charming women” (90). She has a free spirit who helps Newland Archer see beyond narrow New York society. Newland falls in love with her, but Ellen does not want to steal May’s husband from her, she could have had him, however not as a husband as he was already married, but as a lover, which she refused. She has the instinct of self-preservation and she is also moral.¹⁶ According to Peter Washington¹⁷(1964), Ellen accepts the rules “of sexual and social game as determined by dynasties... the basic laws of this game are that mistress has no rights and that a wife may use means as she dreams necessary to preserve her marriage and the honor of her family”¹⁸

Conclusion

It’s concluded, through the character of Ellen Olenska, that Wharton wants to tell the readers indirectly that though the Lady appears to be a miscreant, she is also a heroine and a victim of her society. She believes the Lady is a victim because she is mistreated by Old New York society. She tries to reveal that Ellen is not suppressed at the end of the novel. On the contrary, she is able to cross the boundaries imposed by patriarchal society quite easily and to relocate herself in a new, genderless society. In *The of Innocence*, the major female character, Ellen Olenska suffers some sort of disadvantage either from filial or marital obligations. Ellen becomes painfully aware of this pervasive hypocritical attitude, she is appalled. After witnessing her family and the rest of society’s avoidance of emotions, she notices the hypocrisy and contradictions that has spread through the city she has once idealized. The bulk of upscale New York society is undeniably vain, superficial, disparaging and arrogant; all of which are qualities that the free spirited character of Ellen .Wharton expresses her complex feelings towards the traditions of her own native country and her sympathetic feeling toward the sense of women’s freedom at that age, she reflects that in Ellen. Nevertheless, she is unlike them because she is able to transcend these undesirable obligations and challenge the patriarchal power. Wharton shows that though Ellen is a divorced woman, but she is a heroine because she has the courage to transcend the stiff limitations of the Old New York society. She is able to escape her helpless life and to succeed in acquiring a very desirable position. Ellen’s troubles are due to the ills of patriarchal society which never gives her the opportunity to love or even to divorce her husband; Edith Wharton justifies her actions because she is completely subject to the customs and rules of her society in her life which renders her unable to make the right decision. She is finally locked up in an asylum because she is seen as a different to their patriarchal society. Wharton seems to suggest that Ellen Olenska can open a window for women to struggle against the shackles of society and defend their rights. The Old New York society looks at her as a dark lady in the house for her situation which is different from other women in a society.

End notes

¹ "Woman of Old New York",

URL:<http://www.crazyray.tripod.com/clpage/writings/other/women.htm>.retrieved 2013/11/12

² Marjorie Levin-Clark. "Engendering Relief: Women, Ablebodiness, and the New Poor Law in Victorian England", *Journal of Women's History*.v.11.4.1991.p.107.

³ Lada Štichová, *Women and Social Networks in Edith Wharton's Fiction*, (URL:http://www.Masaryk...is.muni.cz/.../Stichova_Women_and_Social_Networks_in_Edith_Wha....retrieved 12/11/2013

⁴ Cuncliff Marcus, *The Literature of the United States*. (London: Penguin Books, 1991).p.286

⁵ Sarah Bommarito, *Marriage, Motherhood, and Reception in the Fiction of Chopin and Wharton*,

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⁶ "Women of Victorian era",

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⁷ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*.(New York: D. Appleton and company, 1920)p.7

⁸ Melissa McFarland Pennell, *Student Companion to Edith Wharton*.(New York: Greenwood publishing Group, Inc.2003)p.152

⁹ Clare Virginia Eby, *Silencing Women in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence*, (URL:<http://www.digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2915&context=cq&sei-redir=1&referer.pdf>.retrieved. January 17, 2013.

¹⁰ Tompkins Jane P., *Examine the suffocating effect on characters in Age of innocence*,

(URL:<http://www.essortment.com/age-innocence-edith-wharton-61375-htmi>.retrieved January 5 , 2013.

¹¹ I bid

¹² Adeline Virginia Woolf was an English writer, regarded as one of the foremost modernist literary figures of the twentieth century.

¹³ As quoted by Katerina, Mrtva. in *Marriage and the Position of Women in Wharton's Age of Innocence*,

(URL:<http://www.despace.upce.c2/bitstream/10195/24237/1/d/4933.pdf>retrieved 7 Jan 2013.

¹⁴ McFarland p. 157

¹⁵ Emily J Orlando, *Reading Wharton's "poor Archer": A Mr. " might-have –been "in Age of Innocence*,

(URL:<http://www.jessbargo.files.wordpress.com/.../poor-archer-a-mr-might-have-been>. retrieved January 7, 2013.

¹⁶ Robert Morss Lovett, *Edith Wharton*,(New York: McBride.& Co.1925)p.47

¹⁷ Peter Washington was a jazz double bassist. He went on to study English at the University of California, Berkeley. At Berkeley he became interested in jazz and began freelancing in the San Francisco Bay area. In 1986 he joined the Jazz Messengers and moved to New York City.

¹⁸ Cited by Katerina Mrtva, in *Marriage and the Position of Women in Wharton's Age of Innocence*,

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