
The Problem of Conformism in Age of Innocence

“Ah, don’t say that. If you knew how I hate to be different!” (Wharton 69). Ellen Olenska in Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* is, to Newland Archer, the perfect example of an exciting rebel to the mores of society in the New York aristocracy. He is intrigued by her mysterious past in Europe and all the scandal she brought back to New York with her. Newland’s wife, May Archer, is what he considers the total opposite of Ellen Olenska. May is sweet and innocent, and she makes no attempt to hide the fact she wishes to be very much a product of that society. Newland’s actions and thoughts around the two women make them appear very different, but Newland’s own feelings are not always concurrent with the ladies’ true actions, but rather with what he wants them to be to him. When Ellen’s behaviors, attitudes, and motives are analyzed alongside May’s, it becomes apparent that Ellen’s life would much more closely resemble May’s were she accepted by the upper-class New York society of the 1870s.

The first instance where one can see a tendency towards conforming to society on Ellen’s part is the way both women respond to the subject of Ellen’s divorce. When Newland goes to see Ellen to talk her out of the divorce on the request of his family, Ellen mentions her married life and husband in a “tone that seemed almost to sigh over the lost delights of her married life,” which questions the firmness of her conviction to the divorce. Newland, perhaps, has an overly exaggerated view of the horrid conditions of Ellen’s life with her husband, as he is assuming a great deal (68-69). She says she wants “to cast off all [her] old life, to become just like everybody else [there]” (68). In this it is made obvious that Ellen wishes to be free of the stigma attached to her and simply fit in to the aristocratic society of New York. Ellen’s reaction to Newland’s warning about her husband spreading rumors publicly that could hurt her is indicative that she may not realize the scandal that will come with it – not that she does not care about it (70). She may be so eager to go through with the divorce because she believes it will enable her to fit in better with New York society, due to the fact that she will be free of her old, scandalous life. Ellen finally agrees to drop the divorce; she does not like it, but she realizes now the way that society would look at her decision, and she wants to be accepted. The fact that she does not like all the rules of that society does not imply that she is denouncing them and living independently in her own mysterious and defiant way, as Newland sees her, because she is still complying with them in further attempt to fit in (72).

In the same way that Ellen’s primary concern is the avoidance of scandal, May also shares that goal. May agrees with her mother and her family that Newland must talk Ellen out of it as his duty to his future family. May’s opinions on this subject are made clear as she and Newland drive home from Catherine’s after the archery contest. May asserts that she would have liked to see Ellen, but then she might not have after all because she seems now “so indifferent to her

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

friends, I mean; giving up New York and her house, and spending all her time with such queer people.” May remarks, “After all, I wonder if she wouldn’t be happier with her husband.” Then, when Archer comments about her statement’s cruelty, she replies, “It’s a pity she ever married abroad then” (132-133). So, in the end, both women’s utmost wish is to avoid scandal, which is very much in compliance with the societal mores of the New York they live in.

Another similarity between the young women in Newland Archer’s life is their knowledge of and reaction to the language of flowers. When Ellen receives Beaufort’s bouquet, she quickly becomes very angry. In this, she acknowledges her understanding of the meaning of flowers, proclaiming, “who is ridiculous enough to send me a bouquet? Why a bouquet? And why tonight of all nights? I am not going to a ball; I am not a girl engaged to be married” (101). This scene is evidence of Ellen’s extensive knowledge of flowers, as was a necessity for a young girl in the New York aristocracy in that time (342). In the same way, May is extremely well versed in the language of flowers. The lilies Archer gives May every day signify “purity,” “future happiness,” and “sweetness” (Campbell). Both women realize the significance of flowers in that society, and they are not only very cognizant of the different messages portrayed by flowers, but also are deeply affected by these messages.

Perhaps the most effective way to observe the women is in their actions around Newland, especially when they stray from the personality that Newland sees them as having. For Ellen, this would be in the carriage, when she shows an unsettling coldness to him based on her past experiences. It can be seen when Newland tells Ellen about his meeting M. Riviere that the reason Archer feels Ellen is so “unconventional” is because of the way he acts around her, not because of the way she herself actually acts. When Newland tells her of this happening and then asks if it was Riviere who helped Ellen “get away” from her husband, her response of simply “Yes: I owe him a great debt” is said in a tone that is “so natural, so almost indifferent” (173). She said this in the undetached and low-emotion way in which the New York aristocracy in the 1870s liked to deal with such unpleasantness. The statement’s effect on Newland, however, is that: “Once more she had managed, by her sheer simplicity, to make him feel stupidly conventional just when he thought he was flinging convention to the winds” (173). This is most likely only due, however, to his newfound realization of the society he has been adhering to all his life – with Ellen as good a vessel for the scandal to awaken this reality to him as anyone else would be.

Similarly, as she is discovering her husband’s affair, May handles discussions of such situations with that same indifferent and unaffected tone. As Newland sees May’s pain, he comments that if she were to voice them than he could have “laughed them away,” but that instead she has been “trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile” (176). This is proof that, for the ladies of the New York aristocracy in the 1870s, it was proper to handle such difficult issues in the same “natural” and “indifferent” manner that the seemingly

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

unconventional Ellen dealt with the discussion of the affair. In another example of this, when the couple is in May's carriage as Archer is about to pick up Ellen from her train, May presses him about the lie he has told concerning his going to Washington, and he grows annoyed that she is "trying to pretend that she had not detected him." Newland is flustered when she questions farther than he thought she would, and he "[blushes] for her unwonted lapse from all the traditional delicacies" (170). In this it is made apparent that their society believed it improper for a wife to make it too obvious she had caught her husband in a lie, or to press too hard for details about his life, even if she does know he is having an affair (170).

In another moment during Archer and Ellen's ride in May's carriage, Ellen is revealed to be a woman of great experience and a mysterious past, though her view of scandal is shown to much resemble that of an aristocrat in New York in the 1870s – like May. Unlike the excitement that Newland associates this with, however, Ellen reveals a great deal of pain in her life, telling Archer that she has "had to look at the Gorgon," and that "she [has dried] up [Ellen's] tears" (173). Ellen is more mature than the typical young female product of the New York aristocracy – simply because she has experienced more trials in her life – but that fact is not stopping her from attempting to become one. Ellen does not wish to transform into an honest picture of what a young girl in that society should be and abandon those desires, but rather her intention is to not get caught doing unpleasant things. She does not wish to end the affair, but rather to be "near [Newland] only when [they] stay far from each other" (175). If Ellen truly cared about her family as much as she claims to over the course of this affair, she would not prolong it as she does. In this it is obvious that, no matter how noble she is trying to make herself appear, in reality she is selfish because she wants to be accepted into the society of New York. Also, Ellen knows that if she and Archer were to fall into a "hole-and-corner love affair" (174), she would have no hope of ever being truly accepted into society. She is already surrounded by too much scandal, and she knows that hurting "the people who trust [her]" (175) in this way would destroy any close connection with that aristocracy, and in turn her only hope to become a part of it. May shares Ellen's opinion of scandal, and it is clear that both women's chief aim is to avoid it at all costs. Rather than disrupting her world and family by bringing Newland's affair to light, May simply works behind the scenes to make sure Ellen leaves, and then continues on with her life with Newland. Her plan is made fully clear near the end of the book when Archer's son tells him his wife's words: "She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted" (214).

In May's scheme to have Ellen leave and to hold on to her husband, another opportunity for comparison between the two women is presented. Also, when Ellen and Newland agree to consummate their affair. These are both pivotal points in the ladies' relationships to Newland. Upon May's return from her "long" and "really good" talk with Ellen, she is "breathless," "flushed," and "sparkling with unwonted animation" (188-89) – characteristics not of an unthinking mold of society, but rather of an intensely animated and independently thinking

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

person. This demonstrates how one can be a passionate person and have their own thoughts but still desire to be a legitimate member of the upper class New York aristocracy. This reminds one of Wharton's own life, as she was a dedicated member of that same society, but she was also an opinionated free thinker. Though Wharton lived her life by most standards of her society, she also had her own ideas and desires. For example, she believed that thick layers of "window garniture...[symbolized] the superimposed layers of under-garments worn by the ladies of the period" (236). So, when Wharton had a house of her own, she refused to have them on her windows. Still, Wharton believed that her society, though it had some nonsensical rules, was of important value in that it upheld the important standards of "education", "good manners," and "scrupulous probity in business and private affairs" (249). Therefore, the fact that Ellen showed a bit of passion and independent thought occasionally was not evidence of her rejection of any desire to be included in that society.

When May informs Newland that Ellen is going back to Paris, it is made obvious that she knows more than she pretends to about the effect this will have on her husband by her "fugitive flush" (194). It is mentioned repeatedly that she is keeping the hardened outer shell always required by a proper lady in the aristocratic New York society in the 1870s. When at last she tells Newland about the pregnancy, and it is then discovered that she had lied to Ellen by telling her the pregnancy was certain when it was not, it is seen that she is truly in love with Newland. She wants him to be with her even if she was not pregnant, and she is willing to forgive his past mistakes just to move on in wedded bliss. In this, another blend of both Ellen and May's prominent personality traits is portrayed in the fact that May's first motive was to keep her husband with her. If she had not been pregnant, she still wanted him to stay with her for the fact that a divorce would be unspeakable in her family, but also because it was truly her selfish desire to be with the man she loved, no matter what he had done.

Ellen likewise had to balance her feelings for Newland with an obvious desire to conform to the mores of the aristocratic society. At the Art Museum, she admits she had come to New York in part because she was "afraid...of [Newland's] coming to Washington" (186), and she believed she would "hurt other's less" coming to New York. Shortly thereafter, when Newland exclaims he thinks that plan is, "a thousand times worse," she reveals her true selfish confession that she agrees with him. Ellen had been enhancing any guilt she felt for betraying her family in this love affair to make it appear to be her sole noble reason for ending their relationship. Ellen knew what Wharton also was aware of in her own life, that "in those simple days it was always a case of 'the woman tempted me'" (250). Therefore Ellen knew it would be she who would incur the most blame were the affair found out.

When May's plot to end her husband's affair with her cousin begins to become apparent, Newland is stymied by her deception. She may, however, have felt justified in doing it because she had given him a chance before they got married to be with someone else if he loved

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

another more. Then he had insisted there was no one else and that he was simply eager to marry her, but now she has discovered that there is indeed another woman. Obviously divorce is out of the question in May's mind, so she feels she is doing the best thing she can for everyone involved at this point. Like May, Ellen's selfish intentions are discovered when she admits that she agreed to stay with Catherine not primarily for the sake of her sick Granny. Rather, she confesses she believed it would keep her "safer from doing irreparable harm," then adds, "Don't let us be like all the others!" After a short protest about hurting those around her, she offers this solution: "Shall I – once come to you; and then go home?" (187). Again, selfishness is showcased, mixed with desire to comply with societal mores, but, again, it is seen that the view of the time was that one could lie and do as they wished, as long as it was not made public.

In the end, May's plan is successful and Ellen returns to Paris, though not to her husband. May and Archer continue their life together, having three children and living an exemplary life in their society. They never talk about the affair, though Archer thinks of Ellen constantly. May dies when Archer is 57, and their entire life together held no deepening of love or understanding of each other. This, unfortunately, was very common in that society, and many couples lost out on what could have been a wonderful relationship because their primary concern was to be approved of by society. After May's death, Newland travels to Paris with his son, and when faced with the opportunity to meet Ellen, merely walks away. In this it is difficult to see how Newland could have ever truly loved Ellen if, after all these years of supposedly pining away for her, he refuses to see her. Perhaps Newland Archer's life was wasted ignoring his wife in mourning for a woman who was nothing more than a reminder of the shortcomings of the world in which he lived.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)