The Observer in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*

“We’ll look, not at visions but at realities”

- Edith Wharton

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements p. 3  

Introduction p. 4  

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework in relation to Social Gaze and Gender p. 11  

Chapter 2: Women as Objects p. 16  

Chapter 3: Newland Archer as a failed observer p. 26  

Conclusion p. 36  

Works Cited p. 38
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Introduction

These are human beings arranged for exhibition purposes,
framed, glazed and hung in the perfect light.
- Katherine Mansfield

*The Age of Innocence* looks back to New York in the 1870’s, the city of Edith Wharton’s parents, a place which Wharton located on the edges of history or myth, like Schliemann’s Troy or the vanished Atlantis (*Backward Glance* 55). The narrative focuses on the fictional reworking of old New York and its ruling elite. Although the novel is centered on the main character’s Newland Archer’s point of view, the individual becomes a catalyst for the experience of the group, “expressed in the welter of trifles, the matrix of social knowledge, within and out of which Wharton’s subjects are composed” (Knights 21). Pamela Knight points out that Wharton indicates, particularly in her letters, the importance of this specific social knowledge and “social forms, (…) [which] are imprinted young and are impossible to erase” (Knights 20). A concept of social form which also features heavily in George Herbert Mead’s turn-of-the-century writings, “the self developed through language, above all, in the very process of thinking, grounded in an inner dialogue with the social group” (Knights 21). Social knowledge, and its connection to a concept of self is a main theme in Edith Wharton’s novels. Through her examination of class and social boundaries, she reveals not only the objectification of females in her novel but also the problematic nature of male gaze and female display. Critics such as Margaret McDowell and Mary Papke have previously analysed the feminist concerns of Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence*. However, little or no attention is paid to Newland Archer’s character as a failed observer. By taking a closer look at the themes of gaze, gender and I wish to illuminate the inherent feminist concerns of Edith Wharton. I will argue that Wharton’s narrative not only criticizes female objectification and ‘erotic female display’ but that it also depicts how the male gaze may negatively affect Newland Archer. By introducing a broad theoretical framework of not only literary but also film theory I will examine social gaze and gender in relation to theatricality. In my second chapter I will be examining the concept of women as objects within the novel. I connect Wharton’s fascination with power of gaze, to gender and gender roles. Lastly I will examine
how Edith Wharton characterizes Newland Archer as a failed observer and how this concludes the novel. I will portray how Wharton’s general critique challenges the concepts of societal gaze and its problematic nature.

Edith Wharton was born in 1862, as a child of an aristocratic New York family. Her parents clearly belonged to the “New York social group, known as “The 400” that being, according to legend, the number of people who could fit comfortably into Mrs Astor’s ballroom” (Joslin 2). Only at age forty-three did she start writing about New York in one of her novels. Only at that age did she feel “ready to weave observations of the society about her and the strands of her own past into the fabric of her fiction” (Dwight 8). Prior to this period she often claimed that the city and its community were too shallow to be interesting but she finally decided that “a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals” (Dwight 8). Wharton was incredibly successful in writing in great detail about the social scene. This was mainly caused by her own experience of that same New York society. As a young girl and teenager she and her family would partake in all that was “gracious and genteel, diversions and amusements, walks and drives in Central Park, evenings at the theater and opera, and dinners with friends” (Dwight 24). This, in Wharton’s eyes, shallow community had a long list of rules and regulations: “no tradesman was accepted in society. Business or sexual scandals were not tolerated” (Dwight 24). Looking back she often perceived this time as decidedly lonely because of the “impoverished emotional atmosphere of old New York” (Dwight 24). When writing *The Age of Innocence* Wharton was adamant that she was going to present the atmosphere of New York to her greatest ability, “[I do not think that] accuracy of date in such matters is nearly as important as the rendering of the atmosphere. The unimaginative person who writes a letter to point out that so-and-so did not sing in New York till 1880 is of very little importance” (Dwight 225). The atmosphere that she wished to portray had to be as accurate as possible but the relationships featured in the novel, as multiple of her biographers note, are decidedly contemporary.

Edith Wharton’s choice to focus upon the matter of divorce within her novel, after her own separation from Edward (Teddy) Wharton in 1913, is quite significant. When commenting upon a friend’s divorce, in 1919 while writing *The Age of Innocence* she discusses how one should deal with matters like this:
She was very unhappily married to Grant Richards, and got a divorce and married Royall. (…) I don’t think that anything will shut up a creature like Miss Curtis. (…) My own idea is that, in such a case, “explaining” is a mistake. Elisina’s “past” is what mine is, and yours, and that of any other woman whose marriage has been a calamity—I should have supposed that was no one’s affair but her own; but in any case, there is no mystery about it and her friends would laugh if they heard it suggested” (Dwight 227).

However, in her fiction she portrayed a society from the 1870s that felt otherwise, suggesting her own ambivalence on the subject (Dwight 227). As an author she displays an ardent interest in how society treats people who are seen as unconventional.

The New York which Edith Wharton described was one the verge of a great transition around the turn of the century. The scale, but also the practice, of consumption “changed significantly with increasing competition for elite status” (Montgomery 9). In particular, the women of the ruling elite class were dealing with considerable changes concerning social conventions. Prior to 1870, New York society was still small enough for social influence which originated out of a “family-based network, but rapid population expansion after the Civil War necessitated an extension of these controls (…)” (Montgomery 40). New York attracted a new class of nouveau riche, merchants, bankers, real estate speculators, and industrialists (Ming-Jung 4). They were generally viewed as trespassers by the existing elite but this group also brought a new influx of ideas and capital.

This new class of nouveau riche becomes the main catalyst of change within a lot of Edith Wharton’s end of the nineteenth century novels. In a culture which focused increasingly upon the notions of display of wealth many society women took up the challenge to become figures in the public eye. Often they were held up as leaders of “society, of fashion, of taste, of gentility however, if they were found wanting, censorship was swift.” (Montgomery 9). This created an interesting dynamic between two seemingly conflicting interests of society. On the one hand “traditional social conventions required women to behave and dress inconspicuously in public places” however, the “demands of high-society life required society women to seek notice and publicity” (Montgomery 9). The constructs of display and interaction had to be carefully monitored and managed. Codes of etiquette placed influential limitations on women’s behavior in public, especially “insofar as they reinscribed the dominant nineteenth-century categorization of women as either respectable or fallen”
Wharton’s novel deals with a society influenced by an influx of new money and people but determined to hold on to its original vision. There is a repeated motion almost “seesawing between change and stasis” in the “existential strain of distinction versus assimilation” (Anderson). This great transitional period in New York’s history is reflected in the dynamics of the novel.

When *The Age of Innocence* was initially published in the 1920s, first in serial form and as a book, it was generally seen as a great success (Muda 178). An abundance of positive reviews appeared which focused especially upon the “uncanny” accuracy Wharton used to describe “New York society and customs in the seventies” (Muda 179). Some reviews even go as far as exclaiming that *The Age of Innocence* is “one of the best novels of the 20th century” (Perry 286). Wharton creates a detailed description of New York in the 1870s. A vision of New York which is accompanied by characters which are as elitist as they are realistic: “She has painted them at full length, to hang upon our walls, where they lend historical dignity to the background of the present and utter a silent reproof to our scrambling vulgarities” (Parrington 294). New York society protected its own and even though Edith Wharton excelled at her literary ambition she was not always greeted with warmth, as *The New Yorker* critic Janet Flanner explained in 1929:

As a talented pioneer of professionalism among the domestic women of her class, absolution might have come with the dignity of her fame, had not Mrs. Wharton discovered her sinful skill at sketching from life (...) many of her contemporaries felt they had unconsciously sat across the space of years for too many of her portraits (qtd in Joslin 3).

Edith Wharton’s uncanny accuracy in depicting New York had a decidedly ironic undertone. Society becomes a simplified and cold image, a vision, the contemporary reviewer was fully aware of the delicate nature of such a rendering, or as Katherine Mansfield points out:

Does Mrs. Wharton expect us to grow warm in a gallery where the temperature is so sparkingly cool? We are looking at portraits- are we not? These are human beings arranged for exhibition purposes, framed, glazed and hung in the perfect light. They pale, they grow paler, they flush, they raise their “clearest eyes,” they hold out their arms to each other, “extended but not rigid,” and the voice is the voice of the portrait (Mansfield 292).
The portrayed characters “move with such precision and veracity through the ritual of a frozen caste are here as real as their actual lives would ever have let them be. They are stiff with ceremonial garments and heavy with the weight of imagined responsibilities” (Van Doren 287). This exhibition of humanity is a victory in the opinion of most of Wharton’s reviewers. However, they do differ on opinion on what this exposition suggests. Some revel in the fact that Wharton has no apparent message at all “She, unlike so many of her English contemporaries has no religion to teach no grievance to air no political betrayal to reveal, Her subjects are people, of a period perhaps, but people (…) are not peculiar to the year ’75”(Watson 293). Some hold an opposing view and classify her depiction as an “unsparing accusation of that genteel decade” (van Doren 287). Although one reviewer comments on the lingering sensation which in his view accompanies Wharton’s tale:

She unconsciously irritates because she reveals unobtrusively how much she knows and how perfect is her breeding. She pricks one’s complacency with such devastating certainty; reveals so cruelly one’s plebeian limitations. Her readers are always on pins and needles not to appear out of her class (Parrington 295).

Parrington refers to Wharton’s own privileged gaze which she uses to capture the faded past. She has the “cultural knowledge (connaissance) in order to do so, supported by her upbringing and education, and she has the ‘habitus,’ the predisposition to enter the game as a legitimate player given her position as an insider in New York’s high society” (Montgomery 164). An interest in the concepts of class, not only that of the characters but also that of Wharton’s own elitist upbringing is often present within the reviews.

But it is remarkable how few of these commentators chose to focus upon the gendered nature of the picture rendered by Edith Wharton’s eye. Glaringly absent are any references to emancipation and divorce even though the character of Ellen Olenska’s would seemingly raise questions concerning these issues. Even when Wharton received the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 the judges motivated their selection by stating that the book: “best present[s] the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood” (my emphasis qtd in Lewis 433). The Pulitzer Prize publicized that their jury found the book to be in line with their beliefs and “morally uplifting” (Lewis 433). I find that there is an obvious interest of Edith Wharton in specifically the topic of female gaze and subject. As an author, she focuses not only on the social status but also on the constraints put on women. Geertruida Muda raises these issues about Edith Wharton’s contemporary reviews in
her work about the mirror image within the novel, “They do not look into the represented issue of divorce. Ellen’s liberated behavior is noticed and her sophistication and intelligence are praised, but the issue of women’s liberation is not discussed by them” (Muda 187). The only exception to this rule seems to be an anonymous American review published in *The Woman Citizen*. The review adopts a tone which goes radically against the previously rather complacent reviews: “What Mrs. Wharton’s subtle skill has evoked is naïve society where what women are supposed to know no more of the world around them than of their own anatomy, and that is nothing at all” (qtd in Muda 187). The anonymous author characterizes Wharton’s novel as a ‘mocking betrayal of an artificial morality’. It also decides to focus upon the depiction of May, a character which in some reviews, such as in Van Doren’s two page evaluation, is not even mentioned.

Archer Newland’s beautiful wife, May, elaborately portrayed as too ingénue even to guess at her husband’s emotional states. Yet she dealt with all the amorous twisting of his soul with efficiency a too frank twentieth century lady would never have achieved (qtd in Muda 188).

Even in its singularity, this review is significant in the manner it points out the focus upon gender differences and issues within the narrative. Its importance lies in the connection it makes between the exhibitions of Edith Wharton’s 1870 characters to a larger discourse of social critique.

Connecting fiction to a discourse of feminist critique is not without its dangers. Especially in the case of Wharton who rarely, if ever, makes strong statements or draws definite conclusions concerning topics related to gender. She voices no blatant outcry for change or outright condemnation of gender roles in the 1870s. It is, however, possible to construe an avid interest in the themes of gaze and gender from Wharton’s fiction. R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis note in the introduction to their collection of Edith Wharton’s letters that she as an author “as a superb and intuitive social historian, was to dramatize the condition of women, in the social worlds she lived in” (9). Wharton also displays this concern in her non-fictional writings such as in *In Morocco* (1920); in these, she describes her visit to the harem of a sultan. She communicates with the occupants of the harem via an interpreter in the presence of the brother of the reigning sultan. Wharton wishes to know the interests of the female residents and is consequently told that they “(…) occupy themselves with their household and their children, and the rest their time is devoted to needlework” (*In Morocco*
200). She voices her disbelief by describing the manner in which she subsequently approached the sultan’s brother, “At this statement I gave the brother-in-law a smile as incredulous as his own” (In Morocco 200). Her empathy lies fully with the women who in her eyes are ‘owned’ and who she comes to mimic when her own lips stiffen “into the resigned smile of the harem” (In Morocco 200). Wharton approaches the concerns of gender inequality but rarely makes overt statements. Instead she poses questions about the roles which women are expected to perform in society. In Wharton and Feminism Margaret McDowell names this interest in feminist concerns “cumulative and implicit rather than explicit” (523). Wharton’s interest in the female gaze and subject as an author becomes apparent from not only her fictional but also her non-fictional writings.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework in relation to Social Gaze and Gender

A discussion of Edith Wharton’s interest in gender and gaze has to be viewed in the context of literary but also film theory concerning these topics. The notion of a characteristic male gaze was developed by Laura Mulvey, a feminist film critic, who argues that “the in-built patterns of pleasure and identification seem to impose masculinity as ‘point of view’” (‘Afterthoughts’ 139). She bases this assumption upon the essays of Freud concerning sexuality and the topics of scopophilia, “There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. (...) Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones” (Mulvey 835). This dynamic between the observer and the observed is associated to a specific kind of gaze, “At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 835). Mulvey continues her argument by stating that the world is still inherently based upon a sexual imbalance which connects males to active roles while females are more often categorized in the passive roles. In this context Mulvey intends to imply that the ‘taking other people as objects’ is most often a role delegated to the masculine figure. This determining male gaze “projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 837). The female subject is often simultaneously looked at and displayed. Mulvey discusses this elaborately in the context of film in which appearance is used for strong “visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 837). In light of the psychoanalytical background of the article Mulvey also discusses the connection between female representation “signifying castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat” (Mulvey 843). The unequal power balance which this point of view implies is inherently patriarchic. Females are viewed as objects and spectacles for the male view. It can be even be argued that not only in cinematographic contexts but also in literary ones, the narrative halts at times to contemplate a female image or object in such a manner. The spectacle of femininity is closely connected to a concept of self and identity. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler claims that questions concerning these issues of identity cannot precede questions of gender identity. This is caused by the inherent disputable nature of gender formation and division. Defining and regulating gender are disputed being that she argues that:

discontinuity and incoherence are produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted
genders, and the expression or effect of both in the manifestation of sexual desire though sexual practice (Butler 23).

Identity consequently becomes an effect of discursive practices and gender identity specifically is a complex notion. A concept which is created not only from a dialogue between sex, gender, sexual practice but also desire. Butler’s view upon feminist critique is therefore quite critical, “feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism” (Butler 18). She warns against the possible effects of such a discourse in creating a vicious circle within the dialogue itself, “the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (Butler 18). Judith Butler’s opinion of gaze is centered around her view of its performative nature. She challenges us to think of gender outside of the categories of substance, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (Butler 34). Both Mulvey and Butler provide us with a detailed view upon gender and gaze. The construction of gendered gaze and gender identity is vital in understanding Edith Wharton’s discussion of this particular subject.

Edith Wharton’s interest in gendered gaze is located in a more general dialogue about society. The distinctive opening scene of The Age of Innocence immediately introduces the reader to one of the most important facets of the novel, social gaze. The narrative opens at the Academy of Music in New York featuring Faust the Opera. The actual Academy of Music was seen as important in the social scene of the old New York Elite who, “tried to restrict access to the boxes (…) during the 1870s” (Montgomery 23). In the novel’s fictional rendition all eyes should be centered upon the performer Christine Nilsson who is making her “first appearance that winter” yet the text tells us that the daily press is more concerned with describing the “exceptionally brilliant audience” (1). The priorities not only of the opera but also of the text are made abundantly clear. It is society itself rather than art which takes center stage. It is interesting to note that there is an immediate focus upon the male point of view. Society’s gaze is defined as decidedly masculine. The text focuses upon describing the audience with the exception of a small excerpt from the opera the exclamation, “‘M’ama!’ (…) he loves me,” (3). Wharton’s choice to feature this particular fragment immediately suggests a power dimension within the scene. The fragment portrays that the female performer not only wishes male attention but also more specifically male approval. The theme
of male approval is important because it is central to both the opera scene and the novel in general. The group of spectators mentioned at the start of the narrative consists of people who display blatant disregard during the performance. Their indifference is portrayed in the manner in which the novel elaborately discusses the conversations of the male attendees during the recital. These discussions are primarily centered around two authorities, gentlemen Lawrence Lefferts, an expert on ‘form’ and Sillerton Jackson, the expert on ‘family’ (8). The manner in which they criticize the female attendees is characterized by a distinct male gaze, as they “turned their opera-glasses critically on the circle of ladies who were the product of the system” (6). The act of seeing and being seen is mutually exclusive in *The Age of Innocence*:

these two activities are represented as distinctly gendered—it is the men who do the seeing and the women who are seen. These dynamics are highly relatable to Laura Mulvey’s discussion of the male gaze. To reciprocate the gaze or to look at men is to act like a prostitute (Montgomery 133).

As the narrator, Newland Archer gives us his perception of the women in the novel as a fictional reworking of gender relations in the “New York elite with respect to display and spectatorship” (Montgomery 133). The concept of a gender masquerade in which a “woman situates her gender masquerading, wherein a woman situates her femininity based on the presumed desire of another (..), the novel’s free indirect discourse itself functions in a similar way to gender masquerading while it is in the process of describing various masks” (Jessee 49). The male gaze is interlinked with presumed male spectatorship perspective and therefore also plays a vital role in this narrative of society’s audience.

Within the novel the nature of ‘gazing’ is automatically intertwined with the concept of performing for this gaze, almost as a reciprocating gesture. Historians of the colonial and Victorian periods focus upon theatricality; in fact there is “something of a consensus among these historians, who have all drawn upon the work of sociologist Erving Goffman and his idea that gentility is a performance” (Montgomery 13). This process of theatricality may involve “a high degree of conscious intentionality” (Montgomery 13). Etiquette manuals published around the turn of the century “strongly encouraged self-surveillance through making readers believe that they were constantly under scrutiny by others” (Montgomery 15). This can be seen in the novel during the play of *Faust*, as the actress attempts “to look as pure and true as his artless victim” (my emphasis, 3). In much the same manner the women who
are subjected to the male gaze are performing on behalf of the men. New York’s richest seem to become the actors in a staged play in which the actor’s lines, or moral obligations and social conventions have been well prepared beforehand.

Newland Archer follows the exact same patterns as the rest of the select male audience when he observes the confusion at their discovery of the scandalous Ellen Olenska. He focuses his attention not upon the performance of the play but on the continuation of propriety since, “few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offence against ‘Taste’, that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vicegerent” (12). Newland Archer is very much aware of the importance of enactment and its accompanying element of performance. On occasions, the narrative emphasizes this theatricality, such as when Newland Archer decides to rescue his fiancée. He performs in front of the whole opera as he places himself next to the disgraced lady: “and promptly, and a little ostentatiously, with the desire that the whole house should see what he was doing, Archer seated himself at the Countess Olenska’s side” (15). As a response to awareness of social gaze, performance features as an important facet in the novel. Edith Wharton’s focus upon performing for society’s gaze alludes to a negative aspect of New York society.

The emphasis upon performing and theatricality is emphasized to such an extent within the narrative that it starts to hint at the inherent inauthentic nature of such behavior. The previously mentioned example of Newland Archer’s attempt to aid his fiancée can also be seen in this light. Newland rushes to assist his fiancée not out of moral considerations for her cousin but rather out of his concern for preservation of “family dignity” (14). This concern is decidedly selfish in light of Newland’s upcoming bond with that family. The narrative points out that the previously mentioned Lawrence Lefferts expert on ‘form’ has an extramarital affair thus can be seen as no real expert on the matters of idyllic domesticity. This only adds to the general air of deceit. At the start of the novel, the spectators who themselves take center stage are subjected to Charles Gounod’s version of Faust which, even at the height of its popularity in America, was criticized for “its lack of bite,” “especially in the diabolical sequences” (Lawrence 9). The play can be viewed as a “romanticized, diluted interpretation of the legend” which is “watered down for old New York society” (Kottaras 11). Because Wharton has decided to use this version of the opera in her opening scene, the novel immediately refers to a sense of dishonesty and lack of authenticity. This is also illuminated when the narrative comments upon the unnecessary alteration to the play:
She sang, of course, “M’ama!” and not “he loves me,” since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences (3).

Wharton alludes to the unidentifiable version of the play which is performed in front of New York society. By doing so she also alludes to the fake nature of its attendees. Misrepresentation seems to be second nature to the spectators of the play since their presence at the opera is solely based upon social norms rather than artistic interest. The attendance at Faust seems to have been “an annual tradition, the audience members do not enjoy the performance (…). They watch it without suspense, knowing the entire story, knowing exactly what to expect” (Kottaras 12). The performance is mostly valued for the fact that “no expense had been spared upon the setting” (4). The focus lies on the scenery and appearance not upon substance or actual artistic interest. The inherent fakery within the play but also of the attendees is highlighted by the text. This interpretation of theatricality becomes focused upon the inauthentic nature and the spectacle of society. Wharton sets the stage for her novel by immediately focusing on the pretense which is closely connected to gaze.
Chapter 2: Women as Objects

As mentioned previously, the concepts of spectatorship and performance, the male gaze and women as the observed are highly interrelated. Through a manner of display the female is objectified and becomes almost motionless within the narrative. John Berger comments upon this in his commentary upon art in relation to language.

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object (47).

This specific dynamic is noticeable in the initial opera scene at the start of The Age of Innocence, the male gaze is drawn to the appearance of a relatively unknown female: Ellen Olenska. She attracts the attention of the male spectators because of her unusual manner of dress, “dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old fashioned clasp” (7). Ellen Olenska is (seemingly) unaware of the scrutiny to which her manner of dress is subjected, she was “quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting” (7). But the other observed women are described as facing their “semi-circle of critics with Mingottian aplomb” (12). Facing your critics in such a preconceived manner is so characteristic for Mrs. Mingott’s relatives that the text appoints a unique adjective to this enterprise. However, Newland Archer seems to “discern discrepancies in this offstage performance” (Montgomery 131). This is mostly caused by Ellen Olenska’s revealing dress which showed a “little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing, at least in ladies who had reasons for wishing to pass unnoticed” (12). The dress is not too revealing it is simply too remarkable for a woman who is supposed to be unaware of any scrutiny. Her dress therefore transgresses good “Taste” and her appearance itself is an example of bad “Form”. The surveyed female Ellen Olenska and the predominantly male crowd point once more towards the unequal power dimensions. The male attendees have an unequal advantage, through their power of gaze, they gain power of judgment. This dynamic between display and gender objectifies the observed female within the narrative.

This power of judgment is represented in the novel by the repeated imagery of women shown in or by art. It has been suggested by some critics that the title of the novel The Age of Innocence is based upon the portrait of a young girl by Sir Joshua Reynolds with the same name (Wolff 312). Feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Ammons but also Emily Orlando have
pointed out the implied meaning of ‘innocence’ by relating the title to this particular work of art. Orlando describes Reynold’s painting as “the profile of a small girl seated barefoot in a pastoral setting with bow in hair, eyes open and unquestioning, and hands demurely crossed over her breast” (70). The surveyed female in this case is a child, an allusion in the eyes of some critics to the “perpetual ‘innocent’ child (…) damaging to women because it makes them victims of their husbands and the patriarchal system” (Ming-Jung 17). The surveyed female as a static image does arise frequently within the narrative, often in the form of references to portraits. In the initial opera scene the females are ‘surveyed’ by the “undivided attention of masculine New York” (9). Consequently this leads to “the projection of immaterial concepts on to the female form, in both rhetoric and iconography” (Warner 239). This can be easily deduced from the numerous references to women as static images such as the description of Ellen Olenska as a young girl, “On her first appearance in New York society, as a “brilliantly pretty little girl of nine or ten,” people remarked that she “ought to be painted”” (56). At the end of the novel this imagery becomes even more vivid after Newland Archer has lost his connection to Ellen Olenska, “When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite picture of all that he had missed” (350). The surveyed female not only turns into an image but is also simplified in the eyes of the male audience.

Apart from the manner of referring to women as simplified images or pictures Wharton also focuses on the Newland Archer’s perception of women’s roles. This is very noticeable in the representation of the character May Welland who is initially seen as a constructed model of society’s requirements, when he describes himself as being “oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted” (42). The narrative continuously connects static and inert imagery to the character of May, suggesting an expectation of constancy and comparing her to a:

dead body preserved, (…) the image of preserving fluid in May’s veins appears to suggest that she is a museum specimen, embalmed and archaic to the contemporary readers in 1920s, and the ultimate example of what the ‘Angel in the House’ should be like to both Ellen and the reader (Muda 172).

This notion of femininity was originally based upon the “Virgin Mary, a mother goddess who perfectly fitted the female role” (Gilbert 20). In the nineteenth century this image of purity
was transformed and no longer represented by a “Madonna in heaven but by an angel in the house” (Gilbert 20). The connection between both concepts, however, was still vivid in nature. The noble female is typified by Hans Eichner who in his description of Wilhelm Meister’s Travels by Goethe decides to sum up the exact nature of such a domestic creation:

She (…) leads a life of almost pure contemplation (…) a life without external events—a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not useless. On the contrary (…) she shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travelers whose lives do have a story, can set their course. (…)

She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart (Eichner 616-7).

This description runs close to Newland Archer’s characterization of May Welland as a person who might be chosen to “pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess” (189). She is an ideal compared to the image of a statue.¹ This ideal is represented by the numerous virtues attached to the representation of the ‘angel in the house’ such as: “modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability [and] politeness” (Gilbert 23). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their discussion of nineteenth-century male imagery of women, suggest that this model of femininity became source material for the strikingly similar poem by Coventry Patmore ‘The Angel in the House’ (22). This poem praised one girl Honoraria’s graces focusing especially on her own effect upon the man she loves, “And by her gentleness made great, / I’ll teach how noble man should be / To match with such a lovely mate” (Coventry 17). Her best feature is her effect in creating a ‘noble man’, or as Gilbert and Gubar state, “in and of herself, she is neither great nor extraordinary” (22). As mentioned previously, in the context of theatricality, nineteenth-century conduct books were adamant in their promotion of the in their eyes ‘ideal’ female. This female would function as a religious reminder of purity and goodness. By ‘enshrining’ the female in such a manner the Victorian angel-woman became “her husband’s holy refuge from the blood sweat that inevitably accompanies a “life of significant action” as well as, in her “contemplative purity,” a living memento of the otherness of the divine” (Gilbert 24). Newland Archer apparently realizes the inauthentic nature of such a simplified representation of his future wife because he comments that such a creation is inherently “of fire and ice” (5). However, throughout the narrative he

¹ Interesting to note is the apparent connection to the imagery of May Welland as specifically a ‘Greek goddess’ and the concept of gaze. Robert Hardy points out that: “The skyline of Edith Wharton’s New York of the 1890s, (…), was presided over by both a “Civic Virtue” (the Statue of Liberty) and a “Greek goddess” (Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ “Diana” atop the tower of the old Madison Square Garden) which reflected this Greek ideal” (11).
continues to compare her to “a type rather than a person” (189). Newland Archer’s image of May as an ‘angel in the house’ therefore does not seem to waver throughout the narrative. Gilbert and Gubar observe a subtle but definite change in this representation of Victorian femininity. The virtues such as selflessness which are praised to such a great extent create an “alienation from ordinary fleshly life, (…) not just a memento of otherness but actually a memento mori (…) an “Angel of Death” (24). The focus upon the aesthetic feminine connected with the figure of the angel obliged “genteel” women to “kill” themselves into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose “charms” eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead” (Gilbert 25). Wharton bluntly refers to this concept of dead femininity when she lets Newland Archer describe May in the narrative, “the blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element; yet her look of indestructible youthfulness made her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure” (189). The denial of self is the most vital part in the creation of this lifeless form of femininity:

Whether [the angel in the house] becomes an objet d’art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this act that dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, (…) is really a life of death, a death-in-life (Gilbert 25).

Newland Archer observes May Welland’s innocence as a suggestion of her incapability of being an active storyteller. Her role typifies her in Archer’s eyes as unchangeable and a construct of old society. This invariably connects the imagery of the virtuous feminine to the lifelessly observed feminine. This is especially notable in the light of my previous discussion of Laura Mulvey’s ‘narrative halts’ when considering the female spectacle. Archer comes to consider his fiancée as a “duty (…) never consider[ing] her beyond her social roles of wife, housewife and mother (Muda 167). By placing May in a role of ‘objet d’art’ Newland Archer locks her into place and views her, not only as a product of society’s control, but also as a living symbol of the constraints associated with this society.

In much the same manner, Newland Archer also appoints a simplified role for Ellen Olenska. However, unlike May who seems to embody the epitome of innocence, Ellen is framed as the dark and mysterious European lady. Newland Archer often speculates within the narrative about her possible origins and perhaps even sinful experiences, as he tries “to
picture the society in which the Countess Olenska had lived and suffered, and also--perhaps--tasted mysterious joys” (102). An image which arises simply from his own deductions because “she had hardly ever said a word to him to produce this impression, but it was part of her, either a projection of her mysterious and outlandish background or of something inherently dramatic, passionate and unusual in herself” (113). He has simply “pegged Olenska in the role of vixen, a femme dangereuse” (Orlando 65). Ellen also embodies a new world, a new manner of thinking by which Archer seems simply fascinated. She, unlike May, is the actor in her own life, separate from the social spheres that constrict him: ‘Because she doesn’t care a hang about where she lives—or about any of our little social sign-posts,’ said Archer, with a secret pride in his own picture of her” (my emphasis, 121). Both women are categorized by Newland Archer in their own roles as separate, one confined and the other unconfined through societal pressure. In the text these roles are continuously related to stationary characteristics creating the impression that women can be viewed as objects.

However, the roles which Newland Archer has appointed to both of the female characters seem rather ill-suited. Newland’s image of May as simple-minded and purely an ‘angel in the house’ becomes the source of dramatic irony within the narrative. Archer may assume that he is the all-knowing leader in his household; however, May is the largest contributor to the ending of his relationship with Ellen Olenska. She effectively regains her husband by informing Ellen Olenska of “her condition (…) during their long conversation two weeks prior to when her pregnancy was confirmed” (Fracasso 47). Newland Archer’s image of May prevents him from viewing her in any other way than “a vacuum a blank for him, the white page of convention, asexual, infantile, boyish, solid, cold and suffocatingly present” (Knights 31). However, many scholars have pointed out that throughout the narrative she blatantly refuses to fit into these preconceived categories. Margaret McDowell characterizes May’s persona in the novel as having a “toughness and a tenacity of purpose” (99). She excels in sports and is repeatedly compared to the Diana the goddess of the hunt. After their marriage she becomes the one who suggests how he should spend his days, “May began to show a natural solicitude for his welfare” (223). When he decides to visit Ellen Olenska he attempts to fool his wife into thinking he is going on a business trip, but she hastily corrects him:

I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington (...) I wish you to do so with my
May immediately discovers his pretenses and daringly points at the reality of the situation which is a move rather uncharacteristic for the seemingly naïve and innocent child-woman. She points towards the impossibility of authentic communication but bluntly acknowledges that she knows of her husband’s overzealous interest in Ellen Olenska. Archer continues to deliberately misinterpret or ignore many signs that May is not actually as naïve as he first assumed. She even goes as far as to warn him not to underestimate her intelligence, “You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices – one has one’s own feelings and ideas” (147). Newland Archer initially points out that an ideal wife is an impossibility and that she would be a, “terrifying product of the social system” (40). However, instead of addressing his earlier intents to enlighten his fiancée by reading literature to her, Archer mentions wishing to “exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing [this masquerade] like an image made of snow” (42). The narrative points towards significant amounts of violence related to Newland Archer’s view of May. In the simplified role he has appointed her she represents the constrictive nature of society.

Archer felt irrationally angry. His host's contemptuous tribute to May's "niceness" was just what a husband should have wished to hear said of his wife (…). What if "niceness" carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness? As he looked at May, returning flushed and calm from her final bull's-eye, he had the feeling that he had never yet lifted that curtain (212).

The narrative deliberately raises the question whether May’s naivety and niceness is actual or merely used as a veil to hide her true motives. This issue is especially interesting in the context of the previously-mentioned concept of gender masquerading, in which a woman situates her femininity on the presumed desire of another, since this, “elicits the potential fear that her masquerade covers over blankness or emptiness” (Jessee 49). The curtain can metaphorically be viewed as May’s possible pretense and we as readers wonder why Newland Archer is so reluctant to ‘lift the curtain’. Is it truly the possibility of emptiness behind his wife’s pretenses that deters him or the confrontation with her possible intelligent awareness? Newland Archer is repulsed primarily because of May’s inherent capability of exposing his own blindness and inability to follow through on his initial intentions to educate her. Newland
Archer’s characterization of his wife as a static construct of society and its constraints ultimately leads to the underestimation of his wife.

In much the same manner, Ellen Olenska is also incompatible with the role Newland Archer has created for her. He perceives her as unconfined and free from society’s gaze, “Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else’s, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgement” (310). Newland Archer prefers to believe that the tribunal of society is not of any relevance to Ellen Olenska. Even though Ellen turns out to be enamored by Newland Archer she is, in fact, very aware of the constraints of society. She actively subverts the category Newland Archer places upon her. When he asks her to be his mistress he is surprised by the blunt manner of her reply: “‘Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress – since I can’t be your wife?’ (...) The crudeness of the words startled him: the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic” (292-3). To his utter amazement she refuses him and instead reminds him of the social categories in which they all are encaptured:

For US? But there's no US in that sense! We're near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them (294).

Ellen Olenska defies the role which Newland Archer has created for her by forcing him to acknowledge that she is also restricted by the guidelines that society places on her. Wharton evidently proves how great the gap is between “Olenska as a woman and Olenska as imaged woman” (Orlando 60). The real problems commence when Newland Archer cannot acknowledge her in such a manner “Newland has not loved Ellen Olenska for her individuality but merely as another objectified ideal” (Papke 152). Within the narrative this ‘ideal’ of Ellen Olenska is represented as something almost holy. For example, Newland Archer describes her hand as “a relic” (288). Ellen Olenska subverts the role appointed to her by defying the ‘ideal’ which Newland Archer has appointed to her. This is especially noticeable when considering the books the characters are reading within the novel. It is suggested that Ellen Olenska is very well-read and well versed in both music and art. She reads books of the founding fathers of French naturalism Edmond and Jules de Goncourt which are generally known for their “refusal to idealize experience and an aim to paint life as
it is” (Orlando 66). It is remarkable that these writers all have a couple of particular features in common “knowledge of life, interior and exterior and a refusal to live in fantasy. Naturalism, unlike the escape we find in romanticism, provides a harsh depiction of reality, capturing the bleakness of the human experience” (Orlando 66). In contrast to Archer who only seems to read writers based in romanticism, Ellen acquires a stark picture of reality through her literature. Her reading list is also compiled of J.K. Huysmans and Flaubert who both also aligned themselves with the teachings of naturalism (Orlando 66). The particular work of Huysmans mentioned in the text is considered to be a picture of disillusionment with the natural world and according to some “fetishizes the female body with (…) violence” (qtd. In Orlando 66). By referring to these works of literature, Wharton intends to enlighten the reader that unlike Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska is in fact interested in the subtle observations of reality. Wharton indicates that Ellen Olenska is aware of this fetishization. The character seems to have a great understanding of human psyche emphasized by the enormous amounts of naturalist writers mentioned within the narrative. Ellen Olenska not only defies the ideal Newland Archer has created for her she also literally (and literarily) faces ‘reality’ and becomes a force of change within this society even while acknowledging the restrictions it places on her.

The dynamic between the observer and the subject of observation is gendered within the novel. However, it is somewhat subverted by the presence of Ellen Olenska as a character. As mentioned previously it is significant to note that Olenska is aware of the fetishization of the female form within the narrative. Through the character of Ellen Olenska Wharton subtly criticizes the role of the male observer and hints towards the possibility of a female observer. In comparison to Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska’s power of gaze and agency is much less apparent. Only by paying close attention to minute details can Ellen Olenska be viewed as a respondent observer. Wharton uses the iconic significance of hands in this discussion of fetishization and observation². The mentioning of hands becomes symbolic of power and agency within the narrative. These references give us a rare insight in not only the role of Ellen Olenska as the observed but also as a respondent observer in her own right. Newland Archer encounters Ellen Olenska nine times within the narrative. All of these encounters are characterized by an atypical fascination in the placement and movement of the Countess’s hands. For instance, at the reintroduction of Newland Archer to Ellen Olenska at the start of

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² Orlando points towards the significant resemblance of the constant references to hands in relation to Carolus-Duran’s painting *La dame au gant*. She also connects it to objectification of females in the narrative of *The Age of Innocence* (Orlando 179).
the novel it is explicitly mentioned that their hands do not meet, “her pale-gloved hands clasped on her huge fan of eagle feathers” (14). Their attachment to one another is practically non-existent, Ellen Olenska’s clasped and gloved hands seem to symbolize disengagement. At their second meeting the situation has slightly altered, the Countess is late and hastens into the room while “one hand [was] still ungloved, and fastening a bracelet around her wrist” (58). Her apparent lack of decorum is further emphasized when she refuses to follow etiquette which prescribed “that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side” (61). Her hands also seem to convey her increased interest in Newland Archer when she indirectly touches him: “just touching his knee with her plumed fan. It was the lightest touch, but it thrilled him like a caress” (63). Wharton chooses to focus upon the fetishization of Ellen Olenska’s hands. Her hands are described as ‘thin’ and when she holds them close to the fire “a faint halo shone about the oval nails” (74). The text evokes references of a religious nature.

Even though both Ellen and Newland seem very inclined to like one another, Olenska’s hands seem to tell a different tale. When Newland Archer attempts to comfort her and pull down one of her hands from her face she “freed herself” in merely a “moment” (76). She refuses his attempt to comfort her when he proceeds to grab her hand: “clasping and chafing it like a child’s while he murmured reassuring words” (76). She declines his affections physically even though her speech is quite amiable. It can even be suggested that Ellen Olenska is aware of Newland’s fascination and fetishization. The narrative seems to hint towards this in their third meeting. She wears a robe which leaves her hands and arms conspicuously exposed, “her wide sleeve leaving the arm bare to the elbow” (103).

When Newland Archer becomes increasingly interested in Ellen Olenska and her bohemian nature, the narrative seems to respond by focusing on her use of her hands to ‘clasp’ and ‘screen’ (Wharton 106-8). When the couple decides to discuss their feelings for one another, Ellen Olenska’s hands are symbolically “drawn from her muff” (131). In this discussion she verbally attacks Newland and she shows how deluded his view of the world actually is. Through this discussion her hands come to symbolize her power of agency. After their confrontation Archer responds rather differently towards the image of her hands: “his eyes fixed on the hand in which she held her gloves and fan, as if watching to see if he had the power to make her drop them” (168). He wishes to remove her power of agency and action. Rather than viewing Ellen Olenska’s hands as relics, ideal pictures of femininity, he now wishes to make them powerless. Even going as far as, “taking her hand, softly unclasp[ing] it.
So that the gloves and fan fell on the sofa between them” (169). Ellen Olenska responds to Archer’s attempt to limit her power of movement by clasping her hands and extending her arms when he attempts to embrace her which “kept him far enough off to let her surrendered face say the rest” (246). At their next meeting as if to say farewell she “waves her hand in obscurity” (311). Ellen Olenska once again displays her skills of observation when she successfully predicts their separation. At their last encounter she seems to have regained her power of agency, symbolized by the fact that she holds “her cloak and fan with one hand [and] held out the other to him” (344). The fetishization and movement of hands of Ellen Olenska within the narrative gives us insight in her role as a female observer. Analyses of these actions give us a rather different picture of the character. She is not only aware of Newland Archer’s motives she also actively subverts and deludes him. Newland Archer treats both women as static constructs and attempts to place them within a simplified role. The narrative acquires an extra layer when Ellen Olenska is considered as as a possible independent observer. This further emphasizes Wharton’s interest in societal and gendered gaze and its consequences.
Chapter 3: Newland Archer as a failed observer

Newland Archer creates simplified roles for the female characters within the narrative on the basis of his own observatory skills. However, his objectifying male gaze can be characterized by its inability to analyze, as suggested by his simplified characterization of May Welland as an ‘angel in the house’ and Ellen Olenska as a ‘femme dangereuse’. The protagonist can consequently be viewed as being a victim of his own limited vision. When viewing, for example, Ellen Olenska he initially describes her as wearing a velvet gown rather “theatrically” in combination with the fact that she is “quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting” (7). Emily Orlando argues that Wharton consequently deliberately lets Newland Archer contradict his own statements later on in the narrative: “But there was about her the mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the least theatrical, struck his as highly trained and full of a conscious power” (my emphasis, 58). Newland Archer is exposed as an incapable observer who is unable to “pin down a single, valid reading of Olenska” (Orlando 61). His interpretations turn out to be inconsistent and Archer slowly turns into an unreliable narrator. As a character, he is extremely suitable for the performance of an array of roles. This is mostly caused by his ever changing attitude or as Joseph Warren Beach points out, “Newland Archer is one of the palest and least individualized characters ever offered to the public by a distinguished writer of fiction (Beach 302). In the beginning of the novel he is usually described as naïve as a young child, satisfied with his manner of looking at things in quiet acceptance:

He had never taken the time to think out; but he was content to hold his view without analyzing it, since he knew it was that of all the carefully brushed, white-waistcoated, buttonholeflowered gentlemen who succeeded each other in the club box (my emphasis 5).

His general sense of looking at the world is repeatedly characterized by “happy indifference” (23). He deems critical examination of New York society’s rules and oppressive gaze as unnecessary3. His manner of viewing society is characterized by his failure as an observer and

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3 On several occasions, he is provoked by old-fashioned patriarchic figures in the novel to make radical statements such as when he encounters his employer, “this selfish, well-fed and supremely indifferent old man suddenly became the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant” (Wharton 97). He argues in favor of divorce even though he was an hour prior to meeting Mr. Letterblair: “in full agreement with [his] view” (Wharton 97). The narrative continuously points out that his declarations are not
he becomes an unreliable narrator. The superficiality of his existing niche in society is described as a, “hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (42). It has left Newland Archer with a chronic inability to view society in any other manner:

But these pictures bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) (…), also, his powers of observation were impaired by the oddness of finding himself in this strange empty house, where apparently no one expected him (my emphasis, 68).

He is simply not accustomed to observing and therefore distinguishing and correctly analyzing the matters at hand. He initially realizes his lack of observational skills and attempts to correct the situation.

He views Ellen Olenska as the key figure in teaching him on how to observe, “It’s you who are telling me; opening my eyes to things I’d looked at so long that I’d ceased to see them” (73). His static manner of gazing is affected by Ellen’s influence and he believes her to be the key to a new and improved manner of viewing. Within her presence Newland Archer believes that he is able to construct a truthful image of New York:

She was rendering what might prove the first of their mutual services by making him look at his native city objectively. Viewed thus, as through the wrong end of a telescope, it looked disconcertingly small and distant” (73).

Significant is the use of the ‘wrong end’ of the telescope. Instead of critically and objectively examining New York society, Archer literally uses the device he has been handed incorrectly. Close scrutiny is obviously needed, but Archer decides to literally ‘zoom out’. This action is highly symbolic in light of his continuing ignorance. New York becomes a symbol for the general nature of New York’s society. Consequently, Ellen groups him together with the rest of New York society and accuses him of not wanting to face the true image after all: “‘Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!’” (75). The continuous pretense is what Archer refuses to observe. He does not realize the significance of May’s appearance in this image of New York, “far down the inverted telescope he saw the faint white figure of May Welland –

motivated by ethical reasoning but seem mindless: “he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences” (Wharton 29).
in New York” (76). She is metaphorically connected to the pretense which is so interlinked with the image of New York. Therefore it is not surprising that he is blatantly refused when he attempts to convince her to defy convention, “We’re like patterns stenciled on a wall. Can’t you and I strike out for ourselves, May?” (81). Archer does not seem to realize that May might not want to break out of the confines of New York society and prefers simply playing her ‘part’. Her position within the ‘image’ of New York is inextricable. But her refusal seems to confirm his preconceived fantasy that she is not unwilling but unable to acquire ‘true vision’, like the “Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them” (81). Ellen’s attempt at influencing Archer’s male gaze can be characterized as a failure. Even though he believes in the illuminating nature of Ellen’s gaze he uses her influence in an incorrect manner. Instead of being inspired to “know the truth”, he continues to uphold the charade (75). His chronic inability to view society’s pretenses in a critical manner leaves Newland Archer in an even more delusional state.

This delusional state is characterized by Archer’s internal belief in his own ‘new and improved’ view of reality. Even though he is guilty of placing both May and Ellen Olenska in a simplified role, he himself becomes a victim of the societal pressure which seems to lie at its foundation. He continuously criticizes the monotony of existence, “haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same hour besieged his brain” (82). His new insights in combination with the realization that his old principles used to be ‘elementary’ in comparison to his current state of mind greatly disturb him (94). His imaginary superior vision is based on his belief that he has transcended the pretense of society. He believes he is using his newfound skills in a correct manner. It is through this vision of the world he constructs an alternate version of society. In light of Ellen’s influence Archer starts to impose his vision once more, “Little as he had actually seen of Madame Olenska, he was beginning to think that he could read her face, and if not her face, her voice” (136). He becomes increasingly interested in matching the actual world to his vision, “she had a grey silk sunshade over her head--how could he ever have imagined her with a pink one” (232)? His own notions are repeatedly accompanied by tales in which he provides suggestions and commentary like an editor in the first draft of a novel “it occurred to him that it would have been more “feminine” if she had instantly read in his eyes why he had come” (140). Newland Archer’s perceptions even go as far as him actually reimagining particular scenes. Such as the instance where he is most profusely disappointed in not locating Ellen Olenska in a spot which seemed so suited to her,
He glanced about him at the unpruned garden, the tumble-down house, and the oakgrove under which the dusk was gathering. It had seemed so exactly the place in which he ought to have found Madame Olenska; and she was far away, and even the pink sunshade was not hers . . . (228).

His imagination suddenly plays a major role within the narrative. Newland Archer even goes as far as wishing “to enlighten [Ellen Olenska] was strong in him; and there were moments when he imagined that all she asked was to be enlightened” (137). He is certain that unlike May who is unable to acquire ‘true vision’ Ellen is the perfect focus for enlightenment. Newland Archer’s view is seriously hampered by his own analyses and observations. The narrative focuses upon the imaginative capabilities of Newland Archer when he becomes a victim of his own lack of observation.

Newland Archer’s overconfidence is almost ironically depicted as it becomes a source of dramatic irony within the narrative, emphasizing Archer as a victim. At his marriage to May Welland the clues directing him to the spectacle of theatricality are overwhelming. The marriage is repeatedly compared to the performance of an opera, “‘How like a first night at the Opera!’ he thought, recognizing all the same faces in the same boxes (no, pews)” (Wharton 181). However, the perspective of Newland Archer seems have slightly shifted. Instead of merely focusing on the male perspective Archer sympathizes quite literally with the female view in the form of his sister, “‘Poor Janey!’ he thought” (181). He laments her placement in the church since she cannot see the crowd itself “only the people in the few front pews; and they’re mostly dowdy Newlands and Dragonets” (181). Even at a wedding the main concern seems to be being seen and observing others. People are “scrutinizing” and “staring” and Lawrence Lefferts is once more present mounting “guard over the invisible deity of “Good Form” who presided at the ceremony” (182). However, unlike the last opera performance, Archer seems unable to immerse himself into the proceedings. He feels distant from the male scrutiny which seems so widespread in New York society when he comments, “how many flaws [would] Lefferts’s keen eyes discover (…) then he suddenly recalled that he too had once thought such questions important” (182). He is so enamored with his own superior view and his ‘poor’ sister that he does not realize the enormous pretense which has led to his marriage to May Welland.

Archer’s grip upon reality becomes less firm because of his difficulties with his social position and his unfounded confidence in his new ‘vision’. Consequently his performance
seems to take on the qualities of the static and passive status which the male gaze projects upon the female object. His thoughts trail away as he lingers upon the agitations and sheer trifles mentioned before the wedding, “And all the while, I suppose,” he thought, “real people were living somewhere, and real things happening to them” (182). He even seems slightly confused by the role he consequently has to play in the events. Once more the narrative suggests his inability to observe that he is also a part of the performative actions of society. Even though he perceives himself to be separate from the proceedings because of his newly acquired vision, this is apparently not the case. Wharton ironically depicts a character who wishes to separate from society but cannot escape it. This is best portrayed by the fact that he literally has to be dragged back into reality by his best man who reminds him that his bride is present: “Newland – I say: she’s here!” (185). His position is society is reaffirmed to as the ‘bridegroom’ and the text continues to display a sense of detachment: “he went through the bridegroom’s convulsive gesture” (186). The essence of this role playing lies in the fact that “his life embodies the family design, and the novel takes form around it (…) Archer’s identity is always positional: he is a son, brother, part of an affianced couple (…) (Knights 23). The pressure of spectatorship has a disturbing effect on Archer’s capabilities as an individual.

As this individual, Archer initially experiences problems with how he observes the world around him. These difficulties in performative actions are most clearly brought out by the passive and disconnected manner in which Archer is consequently described in the narrative. The wedding can therefore be viewed as the tipping point within the narrative. It is interesting to note that Wharton (arguably accidentally) opened the wedding scene in the first printing of the tale with the words of a burial service (Lewis 430). Newland Archer increasingly becomes a victim of his own failed observation. This can be viewed as a metaphorical death of reality. Several references such as Archer’s heart which ‘stopped beating’, an ‘invisible deity’ and the mention of an ‘apparition’ seem to suggest that Archer comes apart and is strangely detached from the normal world. Even after the wedding when Archer is brought into contact with even the idea of Ellen Olenska he is shaken: “Archer stopped at the sight as if he had waked from sleep” (216). Ellen seems to return him to his previous state but he subsequently reminds himself of his role and returns to a sense of detachment, “What am I? A son-in-law—“Archer thought” (217). When he is sent out to fetch Ellen he descends into an imaginative play act of a scene in Shaughraun where “Montague lifts Ada Dyas’s ribbon to his lips without knowing that he was in the room” (217). His long wait for a ‘sign’ seems to suggest his inability to act out. When this sign is not provided he
leaves and returns to his fiancée’s family house. The narrative can once more be described as distanced when Archer is depicted as “The young man” who “followed his wife into the hall” (218). The brute force of societal pressure comes down upon Archer with his return:

(…)there was something about the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observances and exactions, that always stole into his system like a narcotic. (…) But now it was the Welland house, and the life he was expected to lead in it, that had become unreal and irrelevant, and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, halfway down the bank, was as close to him as the blood in his veins. (219)

The fine line between reality and imagination becomes diluted and Archer seems almost drugged, watching the world through a haze of obscurity. The text suggests a different kind of discourse in which “mimetic mode of realism, where detail metonymically holds it in the larger scene, seems to feel beneath it other pressures, as the novel of manners shifts into the fantastic” (Knights 35). The imagery of death returns when Archer describes how Ellen Olenska is cut away from his memory,

The idea that he could ever, in his senses, have dreamed of marrying the Countess Olenska had become almost unthinkable, and she remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts. But all these abstractions and eliminations made of his mind a rather empty and echoing place (208).

She has literally become a ghost, an apparition in Newland Archer’s mind. A sense of ‘strangeness’ seems to appear within the text as Archer feels disconnected to the rest of society, “busy animated people on the Beaufort lawn shocked him as if they had been children playing in a grave-yard” (208). His outlook creates an eerie sense of disengagement from the actual world; he views others as being out of place. Archer becomes strangely divided between his ‘inner self’ which he describes as a “kind of sanctuary in which she [Ellen Olenska] throned among his secret thoughts and longings” (265). Feelings which slowly seep out into “the scene of his real life” in combination with his intellectual activities “his judgments and visions” (Wharton 265). Not surprisingly these feelings cause him to have a progressively more difficult time in his ‘actual life’ wherein:

He moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on
bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent--that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there (265).

He becomes uninvolved and unconcerned for society’s usual reservations as he ‘blunders against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view’. There is a “break of continuity” in his life which seemed to “suddenly (...) slam a door between himself and the outer world” (209). It seems strangely reminiscent of Ellen Olenska’s mocking remark “I don’t speak your language” (131). Archer now truly does not speak society’s language his words sound like “a strange language” (231). Communicating with others who do occupy this social order becomes almost impossible, “Archer continued to stare through her as though she had been transparent” (228). The passive and static qualities are once again featured heavily within the narrative and suggest a downfall of the character into nothingness. This collapse further emphasizes the negative effects of Newland Archer’s inability to observe beyond the male gaze.

The disillusionment associated with Archer’s view of the world also seeps through in his view of himself and how he experiences his own identity. Newland Archer becomes completely absent and strangely obsolete because of the “empty and echoing place” which his mind has become (208). From this state Archer falls into an illusion as he slips “through the meshes of time and space” (231). Almost as an apparition he describes himself as floating “somewhere between chandelier and ceiling, wondered at nothing so much as his own share in the proceedings” (338). The text juxtaposes these “violent figures of racking bodily disturbance which run against the composed detail to which the social world is narrated” (Knights 36). This bodily disturbance is most vividly described when he meets Ellen Olenska for the last time at his own dinner party, “talk swept past Archer like some senseless river running and running because it did not know enough to stop. He saw, on the faces about him, expressions of interest, amusement and even mirth“(342). As if to replace the world he lost, Archer becomes totally spellbound by his own imaginary world. Wharton leads us into the realms of fantasy as Archer reminiscences about his childhood repeatedly, especially in relation to the times he met Ellen Olenska. He mentions planning on traveling to Japan on his own “fancy” (307). Critics such as Pamela Knights have viewed the episode in which Archer and Ellen meet in the Patroon’s house as an epitome of Archer’s “fantasy and escape” (Knights 37). This particular scene takes place in the original Dutch governor’s cottage which represents the guarantee of “leisure-class power itself” (Chandler 171). The scene almost
suggests that Archer and Ellen can return to their childhood and not only escape the social
categories in which they are so firmly placed but also “escape from their history and begin
again” (Knights 37). This section of the narrative suggests that Newland Archer not only
wishes to escape reality but also escape the strict confining male gaze that society imposes.

The ultimate escape to fantasy is achieved in one of the last scenes within the narrative
wherein Newland Archer encounters Ellen Olenska. They meet in a house which looks like
something out of a fairy tale where they are placed in a “secret room” and Archer exclaims
that there is a “miracle to come” (133). The narrative becomes characteristic of Archer’s
imagination and completely ignores the factual. The imaginary world becomes so visible to
Newland Archer that he is shocked when they are interrupted by the apparition of Beaufort.
As a character Beaufort seems to represent “lust and impropriety but [is] also a figure
fascinating for its difference” (Knights 38). Beaufort can be seen as arising from Archer
himself as a near mirror image or a “strange externalization of his guilt, projected onto the
snow in the shape of his dark rival” (Knights 38). He is drawn back to reality by the very
character that ignores the proprieties of New York society. Beaufort is a financial
troublemaker is consequently thrown out of ‘proper’ society. This starkly highlights the
impossibility of Archer’s situation, he cannot move out of his constricting social boundaries.

In the instances where Newland Archer attempts to affect the world around him he
becomes paralyzed, frozen like a puppet without strings. This friction is caused by the
impossibility of Archer thinking “beyond the limits of his society” (Knights 39). Both Ellen
Olenska and Beaufort are expelled from New York in the narrative because of their inherent
threat to the structure of its society. With their departure Archer returns to his old frozen
identity. He also restructures Ellen Olenska in a static image, “when he thought of Ellen
Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book
or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed” (350). The text
also returns to its original shape “holding to known forms the text, too, lets go of other modes
of representation and comes home to the bounds of realism” (Knights 39). This experience
returns even more starkly in the final scene of the book when Archer has the possibility to be
reunited with Ellen. Instead of confronting his former love interest he prefers to sit outside
waiting for a final theatrical ‘signal’: “‘It’s more real to me here than if I went up,’ he

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4 The notion of ‘escaping history’ seems to refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about habitus, that society is
constrained and constructed by “a whole universe of ritual practices and also of discourses, sayings, proverbs, all
structured in concordance with the principles of the corresponding habitus,” and that it is in most almost all cases
next to impossible to escape the strength of socialization especially as a child (Bourdieu 167).
suddenly heard himself say” (364). His romanticized gaze “trained by the conventionalities of his society, provides him with more of a reality than experience itself” (Hardy 15). It signifies his unwillingness to plunge once more into the disturbance of social order.

Newland Archer seems unable to escape his fate, doomed from the very beginning by his own lack of observational skills. In her critique of the book Katherine Joslin alludes to this state of being by relating it to the protagonists of naturalist or determinist novels in Wharton’s days: “Wharton’s heroes and heroines are figuratively ‘manacled’ to their fate, beyond rescue” (Joslin 39). In her essay “Confessions of a Novelist” the author responded to the people who disapproved of her tendency to condemn her protagonists:

It is necessary to me that the note of inevitableness should be sounded at the very opening of my tale, and that my characters should go forward to their ineluctable doom (…). From the first I know exactly what is going to happen to everyone of them; their fate is settled beyond rescue, and I have but to watch and record (Confessions of a Novelist).

There is a definite sense of coldness in Wharton’s approach. She rewrites the American story of “limitless opportunity and inevitable success” (Joslin 39). The protagonist is hampered by society in every step he takes, instead of inevitable success there seems to be an unavoidable barrier at every turn. In rewriting the American narrative Wharton uses an objective tone, “in order to tell it without the sentimentality of female domestic novelists, Wharton sought and borrowed the “objective” tone and jargon of the male scientific discourse of her day” (Joslin 39). A manner of approach described by Pamela Kaplan as the appropriation of male discourse: “Rather than simply reject the conventional female realm of domesticity, Wharton appropriates the conventional male discourse of architecture and brings it into the interior space that had consigned women to decorating themselves as one among many ornaments” (Kaplan 444) Newland Archer as the protagonist but also May Welland and Ellen Olenska cannot go against the coercions of New York society. Joslin points out that Wharton is strikingly different in her depiction of the individual versus society in comparison to most American fiction. Many of her compatriot writers did not deny their characters the “romantic, illusory, or idealistic escapes”, which Wharton seems to abhor (Joslin 40). Survival depends upon the community because one cannot untangle oneself from the relationships and expectations of the all powerful society. Newland Archer in this case seems to be the epitome of this tension between society and the individual. As I have argued, Wharton believes that an
attempt to extract oneself from society is to annihilate or eliminate the self. Wharton forcibly explains to her reader that not only female but also male nature is embedded and inextricably linked to society.
Conclusion

The downfall of Newland Archer as a tragic hero within *The Age of Innocence* is surrounded by a narrative criticizing the objectification of females in the eyes of the male observer. By expounding upon the roles which Archer assigns to both May Welland and Ellen Olenska, the narrative challenges the projection of such simplified roles upon women in society. Edith Wharton deglamorizes New York high society and reveals the great transition concerning social conventions. Wharton questions the possibility of being in complete harmony with society’s demands but also exposes the impossibility of escaping the constrictions it places upon the individual. Newland Archer is the most characteristic example of this struggle because he takes center stage in Wharton’s critical examination of the static and passive status which the male gaze projects upon the female object. By subverting the roles of women as objects and exposing Newland Archer as a poor reader, Wharton indicates that we as readers should be able to recognize the inauthentic and theatrical nature of male gaze and female display. This is depicted in the novel by the manner in which he objectifies May Welland since she embodies the collective rules of society. But it also reveals the impossibility of simply extracting the individual from society, as embodied by the character of Ellen Olenska. Even though Ellen Olenska cannot not be seen as an observer on an equal level as Newland Archer she does display power of agency. As an outsider of New York’s society she is aware of Newland Archer’s fetishization and simplified male gaze. This knowledge allows her to actively subvert and delude him also presenting Wharton’s interest in the possibility of an independent female observer.

Wharton chooses to symbolize the consequent male victimization of this dynamic by the resulting mental anguish which Newland Archer experiences. The masculine point of view, although initially seen as an advantage, turns out to be as misleading for its owner as it is for the matters upon which it is projected. Newland Archer’s inability to become actively aware of the firm structures of power in society creates dramatic irony within the narrative. Gaze and observation are the driving forces behind Wharton’s novel of surveillance. The possibility of change, through the bohemian and foreign character of Ellen Olenska, is offered but quickly retracted. Newland Archer and the reader are quickly reminded that such change is actually impossibility under the pressure of society’s gaze. Newland Archer’s constant attempts to place both women in the roles he has assigned to them ultimately has a negative effect upon himself. The novel embodies the interest of Wharton in gaze and the necessity of assessing society in a critical manner. In my view Wharton gives the reader a new view of
New York high society around the 1870s. Through her dialogue of theatricality she points out the inherent problems concerning the dynamic between male gaze and female display. By doing so she defies the romantic notions usually related to that period of time and exposes the destructive power of categorizing women as either respectable or fallen. But most importantly she also points out that the detrimental consequences of the male gaze not only have an effect on women but also on men.

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5 Hermione Lee, in her recent biography about Edith Wharton connects the author’s critical vision not with her perspective on gender but also with American society in general: “The whole novel has exposed the damaging limitations of an inward-looking, defensive and parochial American history, which Newland”s love for Ellen made him struggle to reach beyond” (581).


Backgrounds and Sources, the Author on the Drama, Contemporary Reactions,


Hardy, Robert. “'Walter Pater's Renaissance and Edith Wharton's Age of Innocence.'


Jessee, Margaret Jay. "Trying It On: Narration and Masking in *The Age of Innocence.*"


Knights, Pamela. "Forms of Disembodiment: The Social Subject in the Age of Innocence."

*The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton.* Ed. Millicent Bell. Cambridge


