Newland Archer and the Courtly Love Structure in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

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Abstract

This article argues that in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence *Newland Archer is stabilized in his marriage with May Welland through his passionate fantasies about her cousin, Ellen Olenska, and that this corresponds to a courtly love structure as it has been described by Jacques Lacan in* The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. *Accordingly, Newland Archer's passion is determined by the extent to which the object of his passion, Ellen, is prohibited from him. Ellen is thus in the position of being the Lady for Newland's quest. In accordance with the courtly love structure, she can only function in this position insofar as she remains unreachable for him so that the greatest threat to Newland's passion would be the attainment of his desire. Incapable as he is of directing his affective investment to May, his investment in Ellen—as an unattainable object—serves to stabilize his relationship to May, though at the cost of his capacity to enjoy that marriage. Ultimately, therefore, Newland's actions show that his priority is to sustain his passion for Ellen, rather than to have a relationship with her.*

Keywords

passion, psychoanalysis, role-playing, fantasy, inaction

Introduction

In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer is caught between two women in a triangle he cannot seem—or, perhaps, does not want—to escape. Indeed, we know from geometry that a triangle is one of the strongest shapes and Newland, positioned at the top, is perhaps distributing his psychic energies

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across the other two corners where we find May Welland and Ellen Olenska. Ellen receives Newland's passion (experienced through fantasy) while May receives his dutifulness (experienced as unfree action). He thinks he wants to escape this structure through turning his fantasies into reality in free choice, but he never concretely pursues this. To do so would destroy the stability of this triangle. And this goes both ways. Just as he cannot concretely pursue Ellen and only maintains her as his fantasy woman, so too is he unable to see May as anything more than a reminder of his duties as a son of the old New York upper crust. Newland is in a stable structure held together by duties and fantasies that he can only experience as tantalizing him with a freedom he will never truly have since these very fantasies that appear to consume him so much never lead to any real action. His real actions are only ever connected to the duties he believes he must fulfill but never seems to experience as chosen by him. Accordingly, Newland experiences his life as not really his and his actions as not entirely his own, and so sees himself as someone stuck in something they cannot quite escape, in part, because this escape is something they cannot really imagine.

This characterization of the structure of *The Age of Innocence* resonates with those already established by numerous other critics such as Helen Killoran, who describes the novel as "reflect[ing] Newland Archer's building of his own trap" (9), or William E. Cain, who says that Newland "*can* fall in love with Ellen *because* a relationship with her is not possible once he has proclaimed his intention to marry May" (102; my emphasis). What these interpretations often focus on is Newland's internalization of old New York conventions together with his overabundant fantasy life as determined by his exposure to art and literature. Ekaterini Kottaras, for instance, says that Newland "lives in his imagination, which is ruled by deluded melodrama and conventional inhibitions" (15), while Jessica Levine describes Newland as a "a male Emma Bovary, whose fantasy life has been formed by his reading of sexually exciting works of European romanticism and realism" (149). Formed in this way, what Newland ultimately seeks, without full awareness, are images and visions. As John Arthos describes it, "The subject of the novel is the *image* that takes shape in a person's mind and subsequently directs that person" (8). It is, therefore, no surprise that Newland finds himself, while reading Rossetti's *The House of Life*, to be "pursu[ing] through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska" (87).

Accordingly, Newland's obsession with fantasy images has been mentioned often in the critical literature, with Emily J. Orlando summarizing the contradiction that "because he reads Ellen as this 'vision,' she therefore can never be for him a reality" (59). But what is the source of this issue, and could it have been

surmounted? Many critics would agree with Jennifer Rae Greeson's characterization of *The Age of Innocence* as "an ethnography of 'Old New York'" where "social forces rather than psychological preferences became the driving force" and "Wharton's theme became the cost to individual self-fulfillment of tribalistic social reproduction" (419–20). But there are those who would contest such a reading that would put the preponderance of the blame upon old New York society. Indeed, as James Phelan notes, "Wharton's progression still emphasizes psychological preferences—and the ethical choices of its three main characters" (84). The question remains of whether Newland could have done otherwise.[1]

It is not, then, that *The Age of Innocence* is *not* an ethnography of old New York as well. Its theme, however, is sufficiently complex to avoid being reduced to a binary conflict between the individual and society in a way that would presume one clear victor over another. There is too much entanglement. Nevertheless, it is in such a binary mode that the conflict presents itself, even if the entanglement between the individual and their community militates against a straightforward answer. As Levine summarizes the key question of the novel: "[W]ho is to blame for Archer's seeming paralysis—Archer himself or the community that restrains him?" (150). For Greeson, in her analysis of Wharton's outlines of the novel, the answer became the community, after having been the individual, which she explains by saying that "with the consummation of the affair between Archer and the Countess in each of the plans, Wharton determined that her New York heir and Europeanized countess would be divided by their own fundamental incompatibility–not kept apart, as they are in the novel, by the social strictures of 'Old New York'" (418). As she continues, this led to "the thwarting of a seemingly ideal romance, a tragic sense of unfulfilled longing, and a certainty that two lives have been forever subordinated to the rigorous demands of an all-powerful 'Old New York'" (420). However, what the alternate outlines make clear is that, even if we should like to blame old New York for the thwarting of their romance in the published novel, what was thwarted was an *illusion*. Indeed, it is precisely through the thwarting itself that Newland's fantasy was permitted to continue living on. And precisely because what Newland needs is the fantasy of Ellen—rather than the person—their consummation could not but end in disappointment. This is what the outlines confirm.[2] As Cain has said, "Having sex with Ellen would have been a fantasy for Newland even if it had actually occurred" (103).

Thus, as Levine explains, "if we read the novel as tragedy, we are being too much like Archer, overly invested in the romantic scenarios that have directed his desires and visions" (177). But if it is not wholly old New York's fault, neither is it wholly Newland's fault, at least insofar as part of his problem is that he has

been *too* well-bred into the society of old New York. The conflict is an internal one precisely because the strictures of old New York have been so well assimilated into his being. This is why, as a contrast, we have numerous examples of rule breakers, even among the elites represented in the novel, such as Emerson Sillerton, Catherine Mingott, and the Duke of St. Austrey.[3]

Rather than *The Age of Innocence* changing from a psychological novel in these outlines to a novel of manners in the published version, it is perhaps better and more simply characterized as a *modern* novel according to the definition Wharton gives it—a *combination* of the novel of manners and the novel of psychology (*Writing* 61). Indeed, throughout *The Writing of Fiction,* Wharton repeatedly refers to novels of "character and manners" as if they were one type and goes so far as to say that what distinguishes the novel form from others is the production of a "sense of the lapse of time" and "the gradual unfolding of the inner life of its characters" (42). In *The Age of Innocence*, due to the narration, we are engaged with the inner life of Newland Archer. Shari Goldberg even says that "*The Age of Innocence* is unflinchingly a story about consciousness—about the development of Newland Archer's awareness of his relationship to his environment" (100).[4] In him, we are, through this complex admixture, dealing with a person made by old New York who imagines he could be—and wants to be—otherwise, and who attempts to—or believes he is attempting to—escape these strictures that, so fundamentally within him, he cannot. But his not being able to do so, though aided and abetted by the apparently external prohibitions of old New York society, would seem to be more a function of his *not wanting to do so*, but, as this contradicts his stated purpose, he cannot admit this to himself and must continually lean on others whom he can blame for his failures.

It is the goal of this paper, therefore, to clarify and formalize this psychological structure of Newland Archer by using a courtly love framework, as described by Jacques Lacan, that helps to explain certain features of Newland's characterization and behavior (or lack thereof) in *The Age of Innocence*.[5]

While many other critics have, as previously noted, described some of these same behaviors and obfuscations of Newland, what I add is an overarching formal description of it that helps to clarify the stakes of Wharton's novel since, in the end, what Wharton shows us (which even the Pulitzer Prize committee missed)[6] is the power of self-deception to mask reality with visions that separate us from it.[7] This is a key psychological insight with broad application. While Wharton's novel may appear, on its surface, to be a nostalgic and quaint period drama about the lives of an extinct class of wealthy people with whom contemporary audiences have nothing in common, the unfolding narrative's significance derives from the fact that Newland's plight is a common one that

has always been around, though in varying contexts. Indeed, the very fact that a structure taken from medieval poetry can apply to it already implies this. Fundamentally, it is about an obfuscating structure of desire that would satisfy itself with a fantasy image in lieu of the risk of taking any real action that would threaten the collapse of that fantasy. And what it reveals, with such poignancy in *The Age of Innocence*, is that such an orientation can produce an alienation from one's actual life in favor of an imagined one. This produces a trap where one would forever keep oneself dissatisfied with the apparent poverty of an experience that would never be regarded as chosen as one's own, though one has indeed chosen it. Accordingly, Lloyd M. Daigrepont can say that "Newland Archer is a man who has had a life and does not know it" (11). Or as Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it, "Ironically, the danger that his life will be insignificant lies not so much in the probability that he will fail to fulfill these fantasies as in the more immediate possibility that, having failed to fulfill them, he will lack the capacity to give *any* aspect of his life authenticity" (310). Indeed, for Newland, it is fantasy itself that is the most real of all, having so thoroughly detached himself from the concrete experience of his actual life.

What I argue, then, is that Newland stabilizes himself within his marriage with May precisely through funneling his passion into a fantasy of her cousin, Ellen. Furthermore, his desire for Ellen cannot be consummated because Newland only wants Ellen to function as a fantasy and not as a real person with whom he might have a relationship. In the way that Newland behaves, he consistently demonstrates his inability to perform any actions that would bring him closer to leaving May (at first, his fiancée, and then, his wife) for Ellen as he supposedly so desires. Indeed, he often does things that only make this possibility more remote. This pattern corresponds well with the description of courtly love given by Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. In this sense, we might consider Newland as a sort of knight or troubadour on a quest for his Lady Ellen, a quest that not only will never end, but should never end. Thus, as the possibility of consummation appears, Newland finds ways to produce obstacles to protect himself from this.

Courtly Love and the Position of the Lady

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan develops his Freud-derived notion of *das Ding* as a part of his heterodox formulation of the meaning of ethics within psychoanalysis. This concept comes originally from the "Remembering and Judging" section of *Project for a Scientific Psychology* where Freud explains that

any perceptual image that is not absolutely new will have one part which is comprehended and one part which is not (331). The uncomprehended part will stay together *as a thing* (or *das Ding*, since Lacan retains the German from Freud) and motivate an aimless activity of memory and judgment that can reach no closure. Crucially, he explains that this happens through our relationships with others since it is they who first appear as perceptions of interest that also puzzle us.

Das Ding comes to be described as a necessarily unincorporable thing that coheres a system by being its outside. As Lacan explains, "[A]s soon as we have to deal with anything in the world appearing in the form of the signifying chain, there is somewhere . . . which is the beyond of that chain, the *ex nihilo* on which it is founded" (212). This beyond is what provides the *driving force*. Hence Lacan also says that it "has . . . to be identified with . . . *the impulse to find again* that for Freud establishes the orientation of the human subject to the object . . . [and] since it is a matter of finding it again, we might just as well characterize this object as a lost object. But . . . the object indeed has never been lost" (58; my emphasis). This object sought, which has never been lost, establishes that *das Ding* is in a null position; it is nothing. It has never existed. The "lost" object we seek is only a fantasy cohered through the formation of a system. It is the outside that forms itself only once the inside has been established. Since it is nothing, anything can represent it and take its charge. Indeed, Lacan defines sublimation as the raising of an object to the dignity of *das Ding* (112).

In *The Age of Innocence*, we can see how this relates to the structure of dutiful marriage that Newland experiences himself as being stuck inside of. After all, his desire is first stoked for Ellen *after* the announcement of his *engagement* to May. As he begins the process of entering the formal symbolic pact of marriage, Ellen begins to appear as a representation of its thither side with the intensity of his passion seeming to increase in conjunction with his approach toward, and then consummation of, his marriage. Since his position within old New York society is all that Newland knows, Ellen must become an inaccessible fantasy object, for he cannot really conceptualize his being outside of this context nor her being inside of his.

Herein lies the explanation for his lack of follow-through with his actions as they relate to Ellen but, also, the infinite delay in reaching the supposedly desired object that we find in courtly love more broadly. Insofar as one believes that this object will finally give them full satisfaction, one must believe that it will also annihilate them. It is the endpoint. The approach cannot be allowed to complete itself. Hence, Lacan speaks of a courtly love in which the Lady (having taken the position of *das Ding*) is never arrived at intentionally. As he says,

"The techniques involved in courtly love . . . are techniques of holding back, of suspension, of *amor interruptus*" (152). This is what the troubadour's *amor de lonh* means: to love from faraway, the love of the faraway, love from the faraway. The point is to understand *amor de lonh* according to its structural operation, which resists the collapse of distance.

If the object were to be grasped—since it is nothing—it would only reveal its emptiness—that it is a ruse—which is also unacceptable.[8] Emptiness itself is, therefore, covered over with a fantasy object that is displaced into an inaccessible site. On the one hand, then, there is the feared annihilation of total satisfaction. On the other hand, there is the feared revelation of an overwhelming void of absence. These work together to maintain this structure where fantasy sustains the closure of the system by covering over its null outside with an imagined fullness contained within an object held aloft by always being absent—imagined to always be in a different time than the present (or a different place than the here).

As this desired thing seems to approach and become attainable, there must, therefore, be a pushing away. And when something previously desired is grasped, there may be a collapse into dissatisfaction or a new displacement onto another object of fantasied fulfillment. This is why Lacan explains that, in courtly love, "[t]he Lady is never characterized for any of her real, concrete virtues" and that, ultimately, "the feminine object is emptied of all real substance" (150, 149). In the end, as he characterizes it, "the element of idealizing exaltation that is expressly sought out in the ideology of courtly love . . . is fundamentally narcissistic in character" (151). The poet does not seek a relationship with the Lady but with himself.[9] As we will see, it is exactly this structure that we can use to further understand how Newland Archer relates to Ellen Olenska and why, despite how passionate he is about a potential relationship with her, he never takes any concrete steps to pursue it. His behavior undermines his stated goals. He does not want her so much as he wants to pursue her.

The Marriage Announcement and Stoked Desire

The Age of Innocence opens with an annual ritual of old New York society. It is the attendance of the Faust opera at the Academy of Music at the start of winter. This annual occurrence is timed and choreographed. Newland is to arrive late because "it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera; and what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers

thousands of years ago" (4). Here we see how much Newland imagines himself to be regulated by the social customs of New York. Although "[t]here was no reason why the young man should not have come earlier," he does not come earlier because that is what is expected of him (4). And he connects this fact to a deep and immemorial history through the evocation of "totem terrors" as if to say two things: (1) that this is a contingent, socially determined expectation and (2) that, nevertheless, it has great significance and cannot be violated.

Indeed, from this very first scene, we begin to see how Newland perceives himself as both different from all others and yet incapable of separating himself from them and their influence. As it is said there:

> In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number. Singly they betrayed their inferiority; but grouped together they represented 'New York,' and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral. He instinctively felt that in this respect it would be troublesome—and also rather bad form—to strike out for himself. (6)

Newland sees himself as superior to the individuals that compose this New York gentility, and yet he cannot escape them as a group and gives in to their moral doctrine. But the reasons he gives are strangely deflationary. He thinks it would be "troublesome" and "rather bad form" to strike out for himself. His susceptibility to their moral judgment is displayed almost immediately afterward with the appearance of Ellen Olenska in Mrs. Mingott's opera box. Ellen, although of old New York stock, has had an unconventional childhood. Her parents traveled and, later, when she was orphaned, she was raised by an eccentric aunt and finally married off to a Polish count. Her appearance back in New York is the result of her "returning home to seek rest and oblivion among her kinsfolk" (38) in the aftermath of a disastrous marriage from which she has taken flight. In other words, she was in no condition to be displayed in public and this is precisely why Sillerton Jackson, described as an authority on "family" (7) exclaims, after looking at Ellen's unconventional appearance in her Josephine dress through his opera glass, that he "didn't think the Mingotts would have tried it on" (8).[10]

This daring display of Mrs. Mingott's, which creates an immediate contrast with Newland's timid fear of striking out for himself, induces in Newland a "strange state of embarrassment" since May, his betrothed, is in that box

and thus in the place attracting all this negative attention (8). Although he, of course, "entirely approved of family solidarity, and one of the qualities he most admired in the Mingotts was their resolute championship of the few black sheep that their blameless stock had produced," he nevertheless felt that "to receive Countess Olenska in the family circle was a different thing from producing her in public, at the Opera of all places, and in the very box with the young girl whose engagement to him, Newland Archer, was to be announced within a few weeks . . . [so that] he felt as old Sillerton Jackson felt; he did not think the Mingotts would have tried it on!" (9).

Newland's moral judgment of the situation, despite his high minded "approval" of a family solidarity that would not dare to extend as far as public appearances, simply repeats that of the New York gentility he has just described. And its appearance here is less that of someone giving in to a position being forced upon them than as a true believer. For Newland, it is truly "bad form" for them to have brought Ellen out in public. Despite his fantasy of his own uniqueness, Newland falls precisely in line with this "masculine solidarity" of old New York. And it is precisely because of this that he then acts in the way that he does.

Knowing that Newland is a predictable result of old New York rearing and that he will, therefore, render the same judgment on the appearance of Ellen that all the rest of masculine New York will render and that he will, therefore, feel embarrassment knowing that his betrothed is associated with this scene of unwanted attention, it is obvious that Newland would then feel "impelled to decisive action" to save the reputation of himself and his future wife (11). As Cain puts it, "Newland hence acts on a noble impulse that May knew he would act upon even before he did" (99). Suddenly, he has "[t]he desire to be the first man to enter Mrs. Mingott's box, to proclaim to the waiting world his engagement to May Welland, and to see her through whatever difficulties her cousin's anomalous situation might involve her in" (Wharton, *Age* 11). The wedding engagement, previously unannounced, will now be announced as the act through which Newland will be able to bolster his future wife's family to better weather the storm embodied by Ellen's "anomalous situation."

What is significant about this process is the way in which, as Killoran has said, "[t]he action becomes the first in a series of impulsive acts by which Newland traps himself in a predictable life" (94). The wedding announcement that had not yet been made is now, suddenly, impulsively, made for the sake of this social reason. Indeed, at the ball, he will think that "[i]t was at his express wish that the announcement had been made, and yet it was not thus that he would have wished to have his happiness known . . . he wished that the necessity of their action had been represented by some ideal reason, and not simply

by poor Ellen Olenska" (Wharton, *Age* 16). At the same time, as mentioned, this first act that begins the sequence of his own entrapment will also be that through which his romantic fantasy of Ellen will flourish. The same acts that ensure he will marry May also ensure that he will desire Ellen in a way that will foreclose any consummation of that romantic fantasy. If it had not been for Ellen appearing in Mrs. Mingott's opera box, the wedding announcement tying him to May would not have been made so soon. At the same time, without the announcement of his engagement to May, Newland would not have come into proximity with Ellen. As Cain says, Newland "has made public that he is May's husband-to-be, and hereafter he will be blocked from having a relationship with Ellen even as his passion for her intensifies. Ellen's arrival on the scene clinches Newland's marriage to May . . . [yet] if Ellen had remained unhappily in Europe, Newland might have married someone else" (99).

The narrative progression of the novel, beginning from this first impulsive, yet predictable, act of Newland that sets off the sequence of events, whereby his desire for Ellen will increase as the possibility of consummating that desire decreases, moves forward like a finger trap. It is as if in his increasingly frantic desire for Ellen and his struggle against May, he only winds up binding himself ever more tightly to May. But it is also important to note here that what Newland perceives as a contingent restriction (his marriage to May) upon the fulfillment of his desire may, in fact, be causative. His desire for Ellen grows precisely as the real possibility of being with her decreases—that is, as the desired object recedes from the realm of possibility, the desire for it, precisely because of this recession, becomes more ardent.

Fantasy and the Arrest of Action

Although Newland sees himself as more intelligent and well-read than the rest of his set—as somehow more special, unique, or different—this never translates itself into any real action. As we saw in the example of the first scene, Newland satisfies himself with thoughts of his difference from others and of his approval of "family solidarity," but, in the end, the only concrete action he takes is precisely what would be expected of any man from his social set. He does not break the mold at all. He can *imagine* his breaking of the mold and, in the end, this is enough for him. This happens quite often throughout the narrative. Newland spews empty words that produce no effect, such as his seemingly bold declaration that "[w]omen ought to be free—as free as we are," immediately undermined in the narration as his "making a discovery of which he was too irritated

to measure the terrific consequences" (27) leading to the description that "[s]uch verbal generosities were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern" (28). But if Newland's disguise is fooling anyone, it is primarily himself.

This is one of Cain's key points in "Edith Wharton and the Second Story"—that is, that Newland is deceiving himself constantly. Indeed, as we've established, in much of the critical literature on *The Age of Innocence*, there is consensus over the fact that Newland is a naïve, self-absorbed old New York gentleman whose enjoyment of art and literature provides him with fodder for his passionate fantasies, which, however, never produce any real action no matter how much he believes that they should. He has an image of who he thinks he would like to be that is not the same as who he actually is or could be. And it is precisely this lack of self-knowledge and this alienation from himself that drives the plot, insofar as his belief in a fantasy of what his life could be like is constantly undermined by his repeated lack of real action. He is, after all, in reality an old New York gentleman who would be unhappy in the fantasy life he imagines. He never actually wants any of the things he thinks he wants, he merely wants to enjoy wanting them. But for this enjoyment to function, he has to truly believe that he wants them.

Accordingly, Newland constantly finds himself in a sequence of approach and withdrawal. As he gets closer to Ellen, he must withdraw lest his fantasy of her be shattered. As Cain describes it, "He hungers for a relationship with Ellen that is a non-relationship, one that is futile, that cannot exist. May knows that Newland really seeks a life with her, but because his own self-knowledge is limited, she will have to make do with him as he is" (101). This pattern is consistent throughout the novel and is perhaps first revealed in the description of his enjoyment of a cigar where it is said that "[h]e had dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization" (4). Throughout the novel, this "thinking over a pleasure to come" seems to be Newland's primary way of experiencing satisfaction, especially with respect to pleasures that never come, many of which could have come. Given the choice between imagining a thing and having a thing, Newland seems to always choose the former.

This appears clearly in a few key incidents that occur between him and Ellen. For instance, after having publicly pledged himself to marry May, Newland, whose occupation is the law, is called upon to assist the family in convincing Ellen *not* to divorce in order to avoid scandal. At this point, Newland has already begun to feel throbbings of desire for Ellen. He has gone to see Ellen, without telling May, and has begun to anonymously send Ellen yellow roses.

Nevertheless, in this legal meeting with Ellen, he gives in to the demands of the family even though they ensure Ellen's unavailability to him and, also, contradict his feminist platitudes. Newland does not really care about freedom for women. Or, at least, he cannot understand what it would mean. In trying to make sense of Ellen, he can only think of her sexual purity, feeling "the specter of Count Olenski's letter grimacing hideously between them . . . the vague charge of an angry blackguard. But how much truth was behind it?" (70).[11] Even though the letter is vague and thus gives off the whiff of falsehood, Newland is *still* obsessed with its truth value to such an extent that he finds himself "intensely hoping for a flash of indignation, or at least a brief cry of denial. None came" (70). Instead, he comes up with his own story that the charges must, at least, be partially true if she isn't vehemently denying them and that, therefore, she must want a divorce to marry her partner in adultery. This is what he imagines after posing the question to her of "what should you gain that would compensate for the possibility—the certainty—of a lot of beastly talk?" and then receiving the answer, "But my freedom–is that nothing?" (70). Newland is incapable of imagining a woman's freedom to mean anything more than freedom to be possessed by another man. And if there is, indeed, another man that Ellen would like to marry, it is him. All his actions do is ensure that any possible marriage between them is now impossible.

And yet Newland does not seem to understand even this. Later in the novel, he will tell Ellen that she is "the woman I would have married if it had been possible for either of us," to which she will reply, with justified astonishment, "And you say that—when it's you who've made it impossible?" (105). For the reader, and for Ellen, this is quite obvious. For Newland, it is apparently not, as he then "stared at her, groping in a blackness through which a single arrow of light tore its blinding way" before finally saying "*I've* made it impossible—?" (105). Unlike Newland, whose speech is always dissimulating, Ellen can speak plainly, saying to him, "Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing . . . I did what you told me . . . I've made no secret of having done it for you!" (105). Only at this moment does Newland finally recognize that, in fact, Ellen wanted to be free *just* to be free. The vehement denial he sought before arrives here: "I had nothing to fear from that letter: absolutely nothing! All I feared was to bring notoriety, scandal, on the family" (105). Although, here, he will say, "Nothing's done that can't be undone. I'm still free, and you're going to be" (105), he will proceed to do nothing to back up these words.

In another example, after having gone through some considerable effort to visit Ellen at Skuytercliff, Newland becomes distressed at the appearance of his rival, Julius Beaufort, despite what appears to be its wholly unwanted nature,

noting, "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; and both had betrayed annoyance, and even dismay, at Beaufort's sudden appearance" (86). Nevertheless, Newland doubts himself and becomes jealous. Later, when Newland receives a letter from Ellen simply telling him, "Come late tomorrow: I must explain to you. Ellen," he rereads it multiple times only to ignore it and take a trip down to St. Augustine where May is vacationing with her parents to request that the marriage date be brought forward (87). He has sought Ellen out and she has now requested his company and, instead of going to her, he ignores her and works towards a contrary purpose.

After the seeming failure of his trip to have any effect on the marriage date, he will meet with Ellen again and have the aforementioned conversation where he realizes that her desire for divorce had no ulterior motive, just her freedom. There, he will continue to speak of his romantic fantasy saying, for instance, "We've no right to lie to other people or to ourselves. We won't talk of your marriage; but do you see me marrying May after this? . . . It's too late to do anything else" (106). But Ellen will, once again, see through him and respond with a precise characterization of Newland's fundamental way of being: "You say that because it's the easiest thing to say at this moment—not because it's true. In reality, it's too late to do anything but what we'd both decided on" (106). This two-pronged statement precisely describes the contradiction that Newland keeps living. He says things that are easy to say, he imagines things that are nice to imagine. He is a daydreamer and a fantasizer. He prefers "thinking over a pleasure to come." In reality, however, it is too late. He will do something else. He will adhere to the system that has made him.

After this conversation with Ellen, precisely what had already been decided on bears fruit. Newland's entreaty to bring forward the date of the marriage has been successful, and this is first communicated *to Ellen* through a telegram in a *yellow* envelope. As Cain points out, this telegram is a knowing gesture from May. Like the roses anonymously sent to Ellen by Newland, the envelope is yellow. And the message, sent to Ellen, is really being sent to Newland, who is with Ellen. As Cain puts it, "May telegrams Ellen . . . [since] she knows that Ellen is her rival, and she sends the news to Ellen even before she sends it to Newland," yet "[h]e does not pause to consider what this might indicate about May's power of perception" (102).

In all these places, and in many others, Newland is constantly working against his purported interest. It is as if where his interest actually lies is in keeping Ellen prohibited so that she can remain a fantasy for him. When he can help her divorce, he convinces her to stay married; when she calls for him, he goes

down to Florida to try and get married sooner; when he finally appears committed to blowing up his engagement to be with Ellen, a telegram announcing that *his request* has been granted spoils this effort. Later, he will try to speak to May on several occasions with the intention of telling her he wants to leave her for Ellen only to be, each time, thwarted by her speech that either announces or delays. Ready to finally speak, Newland will be thwarted by the announcement that Ellen is going back to Europe. Ready to finally speak, Newland will be thwarted by the announcement that May is pregnant.

Although Newland could, of course, *still* speak even after receiving these announcements from May, he does not do so since his experience of his own agency is fundamentally reactive as well as sensitive to his social code. Multiple times, he describes himself as being permitted to act only because of something someone else has done. He cannot seem to act on his own. Immediately before receiving the telegram that the marriage date will, in fact, be brought forward, he tells Ellen, "She's refused; that gives me the right—" (107). Because he imagines that May has refused to grant his request, he suddenly has been granted permission to pursue Ellen. Previously in the novel, after the early wedding announcement that he suggested to May, Newland will try to take away his agency in order to justify an occult visit to Ellen, telling himself that "but for the Countess's arrival, he might have been, if not still a free man, at least a man less irrevocably pledged. But *May had willed it so*, and he felt himself somehow relieved of further responsibility—and therefore at liberty . . . to call on her cousin without telling her" (44; my emphasis). Newland has been absolved of responsibility because May has supposedly willed it even though, as we noted previously, he had originally conceived of this decision as "his express wish." The starkest example of this is his fantasy of May's death:

> What if it were *she* who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! The sensation of standing there, in that warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling. Yes, May might die—people did: young people, healthy people like herself: she might die, and set him suddenly free. (178)

Newland is incapable of doing anything except wishing for things to happen a certain way; he cannot take any initiative. As Kottaras describes him, "He lives

in a language of deception. He has been caught and will be caught forever in the language of metaphor, in his deluded fantasy where he makes nothing happen, where instead, things happen to him" (16).

This agential position of Newland—wherein the only actions he ever takes are ones in accordance with the social code that has produced him and where everything else is relegated to chance and fantasy—speaks to his utter self-alienation. He believes he could act, if he wanted to, and yet he never acts to achieve the things that he supposedly wants, which belies his wanting of them. All that Newland seems to want, in the end, is fantasy. Indeed, he often compares his reality to the plays he has seen or the novels he has read as if to imagine his reality as a poor substitute for the fiction on which he is modeling it. He comments on how Mrs. Mingott's home "recalled scenes in French fiction" (19) and even responds to May's question "We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?" by repeating, "Why not—why not—why not?" (53). He often goes to see *The Shaughraun* for the sake of a single scene: "On the threshold he paused to look at her; then he stole back, lifted one of the ends of velvet ribbon, kissed it, and left the room without her hearing him or changing her attitude. And on this silent parting the curtain fell" (72). This model for romance Newland will repeat on multiple occasions, such as when, after a long absence (and after his marriage), he is sent by Mrs. Mingott to fetch Ellen from a pier where "he watched, remembered the scene in the Shaughraun, and Montague lifting Ada Dyas's ribbon to his lips without her knowing that he was in the room. 'She doesn't know—she hasn't guessed. Shouldn't I know if she came up behind me, I wonder?' he mused; and suddenly he said to himself: 'If she doesn't turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light I'll go back'" (132).[12] Something similar will happen later when "he caught sight of something bright-coloured . . . and presently made it out to be a pink parasol . . . [which] drew him like a magnet: he was sure it was hers. He . . . looked at its carved handle . . . [and] lifted the handle to his lips" (138). He stands on the threshold, watching her, and then turns back. He kisses what he thinks is her parasol while she is absent.

Newland makes art the model for life and is disappointed when things don't turn out according to his fantasies. Indeed, his entire life seems to be organized around different forms of art. While fiction provides the material for his plots and drama for his performances, it is through *images* that he understands others. As Ayşe Naz Bulamur explains, "Living an imagined life, Newland thinks of both his wife and lover as pictures rather than agents" (154). As pictures, he does not relate to them but to himself—that is, to the visions he has of them.[13]

He wants things to simply work out for him; he cannot make anything happen. The arrest of his agency is perhaps best demonstrated by a conversation he has with his journalist friend, Ned Winsett:

> His conversation always made Archer take the measure of his own life, and feel how little it contained; but Winsett's, after all, contained still less, and though their common fund of intellectual interests and curiosities made their talks exhilarating, their exchange of views usually remained within the limits of a pensive dilettantism. "The fact is, life isn't much a fit for either of us," Winsett had once said. "I'm down and out; nothing to be done about it. I've got only one ware to produce, and there's no market for it here, and won't be in my time. But you're free and you're well-off. Why don't *you* get into touch? There's only one way to do it: to go into politics." Archer threw his head back and laughed. There one saw at a flash the unbridgeable difference between men like Winsett and the others—Archer's kind. Every one in polite circles knew that, in America, "a gentleman couldn't go into politics." But, since he could hardly put it in that way to Winsett, he answered evasively: "Look at the career of the honest man in American politics! They don't want us." "Who's 'they'? Why don't you all get together and be 'they' yourselves?" Archer's laugh lingered on his lips in a slightly condescending smile. It was useless to prolong the discussion. (78–79)

What becomes clear here is that Newland is not and will never be Winsett. For Winsett, there is *absolutely nothing* holding Newland back from any action he might wish to take. Newland does not have to go into politics, but he could if he wanted to. What Winsett does not understand about Newland is that, as a dyed-in-the-wool old New York gentleman, his range of possibilities are limited for him by that which has given him his being and made him who he is. As Pamela Knights puts it, "The suggestion of the unfolding narrative is . . . that without the shape, the social mold, there may be no self at all" (21). For Newland, this social mold is from old New York. And since he knows that Winsett will not understand this as an excuse, he answers evasively. He knows that, from Winsett's perspective, he restricts himself for no reason and that telling him that "a gentleman couldn't go into politics" would fall on deaf ears as an explanation. Winsett can function as a part of Newland's distractions but does not constitute a model for a life he could pursue.

Indeed, there is no such model that Newland is capable of posing as an alternative to his old New York life. His wish to escape this life (connected

to his desire for Ellen) is reactively formed. As David A. Godfrey explains, Newland "never develops an adequate vision of an ideal culture. Instead, he wishes to flee his *milieu* and escape from society altogether" (37). However, such a reactive fantasy of escape is incapable of articulating a real alternative. Accordingly, Godfrey goes on to say that "[h]is vision of what he would like life to be like is patently escapist and infantile," which corresponds to the fact "he can articulate no realistic vision of a life with her [Ellen]" (37). Ellen, like Winsett or the French tutor, is a stimulating distraction. As Carol Wershoven explains, "Ellen has a place in Archer's life, in the area where his books, his intellectual friends, his cultural interests reside. All these are an escape from the mediocre life of New York, but they are not an integral part of *real* life" (85).

This point is made even more starkly at the novel's end. Moving forward almost twenty-six years, we find Newland in Paris with his adult son, Dallas, who has arranged for them to have dinner together with Ellen. May has died and so has Ellen's husband. There is now literally nothing that would stand in the way of Newland being with Ellen except, of course, for the fact that Newland is who he is. He has no excuse that he can come up with until his son figures it out for him: "I shall say you're old-fashioned, and prefer walking up the five flights because you don't like lifts," to which Newland replies, "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough" (217). As Nir Evron has suggested, Newland's "words in the novel's final scene . . . need to be taken in their most literal sense. . . . What he realizes at that moment is that the cultural stuff out of which he was fashioned, and which continues to inform his desires, beliefs, norms and tastes, belongs wholly to the past" (39). What he has been, an old New Yorker, despite the changes wrought by time, is what he will continue to be. Or, perhaps more to the point, who he has been, this Newland Archer determined by the ways of old New York with a rich and passionate fantasy life of things that will never come to pass, is who he shall remain. Accordingly, instead of going up, what Newland does is, once again, repeat the scene from *The Shaughraun*. He decides that he will instead linger before the threshold to the place where Ellen is, and then leave:

> Archer remained motionless, gazing at the upper windows as if the end of their pilgrimage had been attained . . . [and] sat down on the bench and continued to gaze at the awninged balcony. . . ."It's more real to me here than if I went up," he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other. He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length

> a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters. At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel. (216–17)

The shutters are drawn—like the curtains falling on the scene from *The Shaughraun*—and, at this signal, it is time for Newland to once again withdraw. For him, Ellen is only real as a fantasy, an idea, a shadow, and that is all she will remain for him. She has become invested with too much to be ruined by seeing her again: "[S]he had become the composite vision of all that he had missed. That vision, faint and tenuous as it was, had kept him from thinking of other women. He had been what was called a faithful husband" (208). Through his fantasy of Ellen, he had been able to maintain himself in the mold of his society.

Ellen's Other Country

As we have already seen, Ellen is quite different from Newland and provides a useful contrast. From the very first scene, she scandalizes, not only through her situation but also through her fashion. The Josephine dress she wears is, for New York, "unusual." And on many occasions, she contravenes social convention without realizing it, such as at the dinner with the Duke of St. Austrey where "the Countess rose and, walking alone across the wide drawing room, sat down at Newland Archer's side" even though "[i]t was not the custom in New York drawing rooms for a lady to get up and walk from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another. Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side" (41). Ellen walks freely and thinks it is her right to do so. She does not realize she is meant to be immobilized in a single position. She is also unaware of the social hierarchy at play and associates with people like Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, who provides her with the enjoyment of the arts that she craves while not realizing that such an association is socially unacceptable to such an extent that Newland's sister feels justified in chastising him for not stopping Ellen from attending one of Mrs. Struthers's Sunday parties, telling him, "You knew she meant to—and you didn't try to stop her? To warn her? . . . Newland—don't you care about Family? . . . about what cousin Louisa van der Luyden will think?" (55). Indeed, Ellen is described as being "completely Europeanized" (90).

It is this position of being an outsider with respect to this New York society that also gives Ellen the power to speak plainly, as we have seen. Newland will always, despite his best efforts, live within what is described as "a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (29). But Ellen will dare to speak things clearly and, in the process, challenge Newland's romantic yearnings. This happens perhaps most clearly when Newland goes to pick up Ellen in May's brougham to bring her to see Mrs. Mingott after her stroke. On their way back, he cannot help but to effervesce romantic phrases in response to Ellen's plain speech. He speaks of his romantic vision of them, and she bursts into a "sudden hard laugh" (174). He implies that the only reality for him is their love while she responds, asking, "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress—since I can't be your wife?" (173). And that word, "mistress," stings him. Here is a saying of the real thing that he cannot accept. He can only understand her question as "crude" since "the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic," as if to say that it is perfectly alright to have an adulterous affair so long as one has the decency not to call it that (174). He flounders after this moment and then picks up his romantic speech again, saying, "I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter" (174). But Ellen, once again, deflates his fantasy, telling him, "Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo—and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous" (174–75). What Newland is confronted with is, as Godfrey puts it, the basic fact that "[d]espite his attempt to see an affair with Ellen as unique or exceptional, and therefore as justifiable, Archer finally recognizes what is tautologically true: he can have an affair with Ellen only by having an affair with Ellen" (35).

Although this other country of Newland's fantasies does not exist, there is another country of a different sort.[14] Throughout the novel, there has been a contrast marked between America and Europe and, as we have seen, Ellen's outsider position in New York is the result of her European ways. She has come to New York to be with family, to escape her husband, and to get a divorce, but her style and preferences keep reaching back to Europe. Given the impossibility of her relationship with Newland and the accord she is able to strike with

Mrs. Mingott allowing her to be independent of her husband, even without a divorce, Ellen decides to return to Europe (194). As she says in a letter to May, "I have at last made Granny understand that my visit to her could be no more than a visit; and she has been as kind and generous as ever. She sees now that if I return to Europe I must live by myself, or rather with poor Aunt Medora, who is coming with me. I am hurrying back to Washington to pack up, and we sail next week" (195).

When May shows this letter to Newland, he is surprised and upset by it although he shouldn't be. Ellen has already relayed the message to Newland that she is leaving. After their meeting at the art museum, Ellen proposes to Newland, "Shall I—once come to you; *and then go home?*" (187; my emphasis). After his joy at hearing the first half of this sentence, Newland questions the second half, saying, "Go home? What do you mean by going home?" (187). To this the reply is unambiguous: "Home to my husband" (187). The only surprise for Newland (besides the fact that she will not be returning to her husband after all) is *not* that Ellen is leaving but, rather, that this moment of consummation where she would "once come to him" will not happen due to May's announcement of her pregnancy to Ellen. As Godfrey points out, Ellen is, ultimately, *not* pushed out of New York by the Family but, rather, has already chosen to leave when they propose the farewell dinner.[15] As he puts it, "Old New York sees itself as eliminating Ellen from the tribe, but Ellen has already willingly decided to return to Europe, not for the reasons her family believes, but because the obtuse and persistent Archer has made her continued stay in New York an impossibility" (40). Ellen makes her own choice but allows old New York to believe in its own power: "[S]he has already decided to leave America. Ellen, then, willingly submits to the ritual banishment so as not to destroy the social illusion, solidarity, and coherence that result from its enactment" (41).

Ellen leaves New York for Paris. She leaves this place about which she once lamented that "[t]he real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!" (Wharton, *Age* 50). She will no longer have to pretend anymore.

After Ellen leaves New York, but before Newland realizes that May is pregnant, he thinks to himself that "she was going to Europe, and she was not returning to her husband. Nothing, therefore, was to prevent his following her; and once he had taken the irrevocable step, and had proved to her that it was irrevocable, he believed she would not send him away" (197). He thinks there is nothing keeping him now from following Ellen to Europe until the moment when, as he muses to May (in the midst of what he is torturously trying to make into a confession of his love for Ellen) about how he would like to travel,

perhaps as far as India or Japan, she surprises him with her pregnancy saying, "As far as that? But I'm afraid you can't, dear . . . Not unless you'll take me with you . . . That is, if the doctors will let me go . . . but I'm afraid they won't. For you see, Newland, I've been sure since this morning of something I've been so longing and hoping for—" (205). May doesn't finish her sentence, Newland understands. And with this, the chapter ends. The next chapter picks up almost twenty-six years later, as if, with this announcement, this storyline has ended. Newland will be a father; he has become immobile. He will not leave New York. This is felt by Newland as a sort of last nail in the coffin, although, without the pregnancy, he almost certainly would *still* have done nothing to follow Ellen.

Conclusion

What *The Age of Innocence* presents, through Newland Archer, is the way in which fantasy can function as a support for one's position within a social system. All of Newland's frustration with this system are dealt with through his capacity to fantasize. He has social contact with painters and journalists, like his friend Ned Winsett, in order to identify himself with their position in life, which he imagines to be more cultured and more exciting than his own. After meeting with a French tutor, for instance, it is described how "[h]is hour with M. Rivière had put new air into his lungs" and that he looked on him "with a sort of vicarious envy at this eager impecunious young man who had fared so richly in his poverty" (123, 122). Just as Ellen becomes the composite image of all that he missed in his life and sustains him in the position of being a faithful husband, so do these identifications with other individuals help to sustain him in his position as a gentleman. Newland's fantasies are never truly challenged because they are never truly approached in a way that could reveal that their underlying basis is nothing. This is why Newland's arc is one where he simply stays in his social milieu and becomes fully ensconced there. He cannot truly pursue anything that will take him outside this position since this outside can only be annihilation, so fully is his being tied up with his society. For him, "if social role seems constriction, declassification is loss of being" (Knights 35). Given such a choice, it is better to be constricted than to lose one's being. Newland stays put, thanks to his fantasies.

As for Ellen, she can return to Europe and live out her life in Paris, away from her husband, away from New York, and, thanks to Granny Mingott, materially independent. But she has seen beneath fantasy. She has punched holes in Newland's illusions, but, despite this, Newland has managed to always return

to them since, in the end, he needs them in order to accept his life—the only life to which he is suited. Rather than taking any actions to change a life that he fundamentally believes is unchangeable, he instead only imagines the ways in which he would like to change it and the only actions he engages in are preparatory at best.

Although this is a common pattern in many domains of his life, it is particularly evident in his dealings with May and Ellen. Indeed, in the very description of how Newland had been a faithful husband to May, Ellen is featured, since it is his vision of her that "had kept him from thinking of other women." Newland's fantasy of Ellen functioned as a support for his marriage with May. And it is in these lines that we thus find the greatest resonances with the aforementioned courtly love structure. If Ellen is, first of all and primarily, a vision for Newland, one wonders how much he really knows Ellen. Indeed, throughout the novel, their interactions seem limited and incidental, and it is perhaps precisely through these limited contacts that he can invest an image of her with all his passion. Insofar as Ellen is a symbol, a fantasy, or a vision for Newland, however, she does not seem to be a person. To retain the intensity of this investment would seem to require keeping Ellen distant and prohibited, which is precisely what Newland actually does despite what he thinks he wants to do.[16]

In the process, he has what is, on the surface, a successful marriage with May. But this marriage has functioned as it has through an emptying out of passion into his fantasy image of Ellen. One is left wondering if Newland's marriage to May could have worked out without Ellen. Given Newland's character, perhaps he would always require a fantasy woman to pour his passion into. Indeed, how May and Ellen function for Newland is according to a common virgin/whore binary structure. As Jessee explains, "Newland plac[es] masks onto May and Ellen. . . . Those masks—fair virgin / dark whore—are a result of the 'tribe' creating a distinction through their codes of decorum" ("Trying It On" 50). He needs these two sides and, here, we might recall that, before May, Newland had been with a woman who appeared to serve the same role that Ellen took up, Mrs. Thorley Rushworth. His self-alienation and reactive subjectivity would seem to preclude the possibility of his *choosing* to commit to a relationship with May, or anyone else for that matter. Instead, he might always need to be *between* these two binary roles.

Thus, rather than choosing a life, Newland feels caught in a situation. And this situation, ultimately, is that of chasing a fantasy he will never, and should never, have. And so long as he can keep that fantasy going, he can accept the rest of his life as a sort of given fate. Accordingly, everything he does happens so as to maintain this structure. Thus, if he ever were to have Ellen, he would

have to find some other, distant woman to invest his passion into. Indeed, one imagines that perhaps the only way that Newland might be passionate about May would be through her loss. If Newland had left May for Ellen, no doubt he might then start fantasizing about the now distant May. All of which is to say that Newland has unwittingly become a troubadour who can only experience *amor de lonh*.

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Notes

1. By this, I do not mean exactly whether or not he could have taken different actions. While Wharton's other outlines of the novel demonstrate other possibilities for action, they do not actually show us a Newland Archer who could grow in any significant way. And this is the point. Newland is stuck between false choices for freedom. Would he ever have been capable of becoming self-aware enough to exit this? This seems questionable as the following analysis will show, although some critics remain cautiously hopeful, such as Phelan, who says that Newland's "genuine feelings for May and his capacity to recognize at least some of his own vanity give him the potential to outgrow or revise these attitudes" (91). But this potential is not realized, which is why Godfrey calls Newland "immature" (34) and Cain says that "[t]he choice to be this man was made for him, yet he also made it for himself" (105), thus foregrounding this other possibility Newland does not take. It is only at the end of the novel when we *might* say Newland achieves some degree of self-awareness. After he gives up going to see Ellen in Paris despite the clearing of all obstacles between them, he finally, as Wolff puts it, "can acknowledge that Ellen will always be an unattainable dream for him; he accepts it with nostalgic sentiment, and in this recognition, he confirms the value of his own life as he has led it" (325).

2. In the first one, Newland and Ellen get hastily married despite Ellen's misgivings about making sure "he is not making a mistake" yet "when they come back from their honeymoon, & she realizes that for the next 30 or 40 years they are going to live in Madison Ave. in winter & on the Hudson in the spring & autumn, with a few weeks of Europe or Newport every summer, her whole soul recoils . . . She flies to Europe, & Archer consents to a separation . . . & nothing ever happens to him again" (qtd. in Greeson 415). In the second outline, Newland and Ellen consummate their affair to arrive at disappointment. After going to Florida to have a secret tryst, they "[b]oth get tired–she of the idea of living in America, he of the idea of a scandal & a dislocation of his life. He cannot live without New York & respectability, nor she without Europe and emotion" (qtd. in Greeson 416). In all of

these, what is clear is that Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska's characterizations have not changed. They have made different choices but have remained the same people. What these failures demonstrate, therefore, is their fundamental incompatibility and that, ultimately, as Bulamur says, "he is in love with his vision of Ellen, not the actual Ellen" (155). Indeed, if we should like to maintain that Newland wants to change his life, this fantasy of change would have to include within it a wholesale replacement of himself with a different person since, to continue being whom he cannot help but be, and yet pursue his fantasies, could not but end in the ways that Wharton demonstrates in her outlines. Rather than considering how he might grow and change, however, Newland is content to dream about a different life he would never actually enjoy.

3. See Singley for an insightful discussion of this topic.

4. See Goldberg's "Newland Archer's Doubled Consciousness" for an interesting psychological description of the free indirect discourse that views the ironic narrator as a part of Newland Archer he does not have full access to.

5. For a more explicitly Lacanian interpretation of *The Age of Innocence*, see Witherow. While less focused on just *The Age of Innocence,* Salecl also discusses it in similar terms. Although without reference to psychoanalysis explicitly, Daigrepont engages in a related analysis.

6. While the 1921 award had originally been slated to go to Sinclair Lewis for *Main Street*, as Wagner-Martin explains, "some jurors protested that Lewis's work was troubling, [so] the prize went to Wharton's novel because it could be considered 'uplifting' to American morals." Learning of this, "Wharton wrote to Lewis that she was in despair about the circumstances–and about her fiction's being thought 'uplifting'" (7).

7. This is one of Jessee's key points in "'Trying It On" where she writes that "Newland places onto May and Ellen what he believes are their appropriate masks. He separates them into their respective roles, ones he misinterprets as the 'real thing' beneath their outward appearance" (38). What is tragic about *The Age of Innocence* is not that Newland and Ellen's love is supposedly thwarted but that Newland's self-absorption means that he never gets to know either Ellen or May. For updated commentary on this essay, see Jessee's "'Trying It On' Again as Affect."

8. As previously noted, this is precisely what happens in Wharton's alternate plans for the novel.

9. Daigrepont arrives at a similar point, saying that "*The Age of Innocence* depicts not only the tumult but also the insidious self-absorption of passion mistaken for love" (1). Since what Newland needs is passion, rather than relationship, Daigrepont goes on to say that "the plot of *The Age of Innocence* largely consists in a pattern of lovers' meetings that invariably conclude with separations marked by intense emotions. . . . Sustained desire thus becomes an enticing preoccupation charged with exquisite anticipation of future meetings, never to be diminished by the lovers' true knowledge of each other" (5). Similarly, Witherow explains, "If desire wanes, anxiety occurs, in which case we must reproduce the lack that constitutes desire. . . . Newland and Ellen, as prisoners of the circularity of desire, are never able to close the gap" (170).

10. As Jessee notes, to "try it on" means "two things at once: a benign trying something on to see if it fits, and a more sinister putting something over on someone, deceiving" ("Trying It On" 39). Ellen's appearance in the opera box thus has a double meaning. It is "an experiment to see how it will go over and a simultaneous attempt to deceive the audience, to pretend her past does not prohibit her present and future acceptance into society" (39).

11. This moment also demonstrates the ambiguity of Newland's desire. As Jessee notes, "Newland here fears an abyss of Ellen's potential sexual experience and wants to cover

it. . . . Ironically, Newland wants to cover Ellen with innocence, to make Ellen more like May" ("Trying It On" 42). Just as Newland fears May is *too innocent*, he also fears that Ellen might be too scandalously experienced. Newland needs them both so that he can maintain himself in the center between them. He wants innocence *and* experience.

12. Through this very scene, Newland turns this moment of his life into a stage performance emphasizing the primacy of art over life. As McCarthy notes, the scene feels almost choreographed since "the longer the wait, the more Ellen's prolonged fixation on the sea exceeds that of a normal, unaffected interest, and the more Ellen's obliviousness was just an act to excuse turning around. Only once this test lasts to a point suggesting Ellen's performance (which she later admits) does Newland then complete his own performance" (132).

13. According to Kirilloff's computational analysis of verbs in *The Age of Innocence*, the most common verbs for Newland include both "looked" and "saw," as if to emphasize his reliance on vision (70). And, although Newland is also associated with knowing ("knew"), he is not in the habit of answering, even though, for both May and Ellen, "asked" is one of the most common verbs (70). This all serves to support how little Newland actually knows them both, despite his belief in his knowledge. Indeed, while Newland might force May and Ellen into particular roles that he needs from them, both characters are far more similar than he realizes. As Godfrey notes, "Ellen . . . does not represent an escape. . . . In fact, she represents the same values and the same way of life May does" (39). The images Newland plasters over these women misguide him, something already suggested by the fact that *The Age of Innocence* takes its title from an idyllic painting of a young girl by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

14. More specifically, this country is France. For an analysis of the contrast drawn between France and New York, see Ricard.

15. This is a crucial point that demonstrates how, as Phelan puts it, "In every scene, Wharton shows that the chief obstacle to the fulfillment of Newland's and Ellen's love and desire is not, as Greeson suggests, the power of the tribalism of Old New York but rather Ellen's own ethical judgments" (99). Ellen is leaving because *she has decided to leave*. But how she does it means that old New York will be allowed to continue believing in its power. Similarly, one might say that Newland's incapacity to make choices is something that he does to himself but, thanks to old New York's expectations, he can blame them—at least until the end when, without obstacle, he must admit to himself that his fantasy is what is most real to him and that he has chosen it. Once again, however, it is important to note that it is not even Ellen's ethical judgments that form the chief obstacle to their romance but Newland's actions, since it was Newland, after all, who first convinced Ellen not to divorce.

16. This is why Newland will often treat the possibility of touching Ellen as almost something dangerous. As Orlando notes, "Ellen Olenska in the flesh problematizes Archer's fantastic image of her; to touch her would be to disrupt his fantasy world" (66).

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