The Influence Of The Rules Of Society In The Age Of Innocence

« Modern Fiction really began when the ‘action’ of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul. » — Edith Wharton

Wharton’s quote is an excellent definition of modern literature, it shifts the emphasis from outer reality to reality as something lived and experienced as having repercussions on the characters in life. That’s why modernism in literature laid the emphasis on consciousness, thoughts, emotions, what might be called ‘the life of the soul’.

The Age of Innocence was published in 1920 and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1921. The story of the reception of the book shows that it was read differently throughout the years. In the 1920s, it was mainly read as a novel of manners, that is to say as a novel about a culture that was being destroyed, under attack from various forces including modern life. If we look at the reception in the 1990s, the book is usually read as the story of a culture that mutilated women. It is read from a feminist point of view. More generally speaking, it is a little more complex than just about mutilated women because it is about characters who fails personal dilemmas, characters who have to make hard choices and can not make them. Edith Wharton’s life (1862-1937) covers realism and modernism. She came from the upper- classes of New York aristocracy that she describes in her novel. She settled down in Paris after her divorce and France has a huge importance in that novel.

It took her about fourteen months to write The Age of Innocence (1919-1920). The novel captures a moment in time, New York in the 1870s, a period frequently referred to as the Gilded Age. It is a plunged into New York’s past just after the Civil War, which did not raffle the aristocratic life, and her own past.

It is a post-modern tribute to Henry James who died in 1916. They were friends and developed complex relationships, he liked to think that he was a tutor to her, but she did not need one. She claimed he never was a primary influence. However, the name of the protagonist shows that she wrote a tribute to him; Newland Archer seems to be very close to the character named Christopher Newman in The American and his surname « Archer » is reminiscent of Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady.

The centre of consciousness came from James, it is a narrative principle that he theorized in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady. The aim is to « place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness ».

When she returned to New York she found the city appear rootless and overwhelming. In the 1970s, New York society was apparently unaffected by the great event which moved America: the Civil War. The lack of reaction made her realize that this culture was collapsing on itself, it was not under attack from the outside. In The Age of Innocence, she describes a culture under attack from within.

We are going to study how the rules of society dictate every aspect of the characters’ lives in

The Age of Innocence?

I. A culture under attack from within, rather than from without

A. A classical love story?

- By the end of chapter 1 the reader already knows that it is going to be a story about one man and two women.
- It is an apparent marriage novel but the announcement is made in chapter 3 in a curious manner: during the announcement at the ball given by Julius Beaufort, Newland Archer is not in the picture, totally excluded from the breaking of the news.
- Serious comments on marriage and a counterpoint given by Newland's ironical comment on what he calls « this nursery parody of life ». It is like a parodic performance by children which reduces the adults to immature children.

B. A comedy of manners?

- The comedy of manners is a kind of domestic story which involves parents and children and relating the vicissitudes of lovers (such as in Molière's plays) made to denounce prudish behavior or hypocrisy.
- Here, Newland Archer is not made to marry May but he chooses to (unlike in Molière). Even if the choice is contrived by the codes of their society, he chooses to.
- It is a novel of manners only to a certain extend: the manners, the social customs, conventions, traditions and folk ways play a dominant role in the lives of the characters and even control their lives, their thoughts and behaviour. What Wharton shows is that those elements can be used to control people. The novel of manners is about that. It is an European form that she adapts to American conditions.

C. A modern story

- Wharton contributed to the modernist novel by transforming the classic realist form to psychological realism.
- Book 1 in the novel focuses on Newland Archer's point of view and thoughts. Something that we had been familiar with since the beginning of the 20th century with Virginia Woolf. Book 2 which opens on Archer's cynical introspections during their wedding, makes it clear that this is a novel about the characters' self-discovery, self-exploration and maybe « buildingsroman », a novel about the growth of the protagonists within their society.
- When she wrote that « each character must be the product of particular or social conditions », it almost sounds like something coming from a Marxian analysis, describing the characters as determined by social conditions. Newland Archer's self-denial is determined by his loyalty to the pledge, to May's family, to his class, the results of his education.
- Given what she wanted to show, the choice of a right beginning was very important and Newland Archer is introduced as a conformist observer of social comedy. He is described as a well- satisfied male siding with the Family and his feelings are clearly the legacy of his class and gender.

II. Wharton’s anthropological vision in the The Age of Innocence: a society or “taking life without effusion of blood” (ch. 33)

A. Old New York’s tribe

- the word 'tribe' is recurrent in the novel = emphasize the functioning of the tribe even more
- 'the manners and customs of his little tribe had seemed to him fraught with world-wide significance' ? the adjective 'little' increases Newland Archer’s attachment to his tribe. The pluperfect tense shows that it is over
- Wharton uses the outsider to pass judgments of the tribe ? the outsider is M. Rivière, a second character, an outsider, an European.
- The functioning of the tribe is best described in the Farewell dinner in chapter 33 ? 'the kiss-off' as it is a ritual of elimination
- 'A small and slippery pyramid' (chapter 39) ? 'small' means exclusive and 'slippery' means dangerous, hard to climb but easy to slip from.
- Two clans can be distinguished in this upper-class:
    - The clan who cared about eating, clothes and money = the Mingotts and Mansons
    - The more educated clan, the group who were devoted to travel and looked down on the grosser form of pleasure = the Archers and Van der Luydens
- this view is placed in Newland Archer’s universe who distinguished this fissure between the two clans
- Codes = this novel suggests that this class had a non-linguistic language but there is the language of etiquette.

B. Rituals

- Opera ? not in order to see the performance but to see people and to be seen
- Dinners ? The first dinner is a dinner of inclusion, Ellen is introduced in the family whereas the second dinner in chapter 33 is a dinner of exclusion, it takes Newland Archer a long time to realize that he is no longer including in the family plot.
- Weddings ? they are undone by death. The central marriage is between May and Newland to which he is resigned because it is a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history.
- Holidays and tours ? going to Europe was fashionable at the beginning of the 20th.
- The archery contests ? May is compared to Dianne and a ridiculous Apollon statue. This is perceived as being ridiculous by Newland who will discover later that she did planned her arrows into him.

C. Sacrifices: “taking life without effusion of blood”

- Sacrifices without blood but sacrifices nevertheless ? idea of scapegoats
- The scapegoats do not have to be guilty of anything ? the main function of scapegoat is to be expelled in order to preserve the cohesion of the community
- the final sacrifice has been prepared by Edith Wharton throughout the book, it begins with 'the carnivorous' metaphors ? Catherine is introduced in chapter 5 as 'the carnivorous old lady'. The characters belonging to old NY are introduced as cannibals:

Sillerton Jackson is said by Newland to wish to 'finish his meal on Ellen Olenska' = cannibals
- Marriage is also described as a primitive ritual (chapter 6) 'the savage bride is described as being dragged with shrieks from parents' tent'
- 3 obvious scapegoats: Julius Beaufort, Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska III. Men and women: “women ought to be free — as free as we are” (ch. 5) The title of the novel which is borrowed from a painting by Reynold entitled 'The Age of Innocence', it shows a very young girl illustrating the idea of innocence, it suggests that women are always considered either as goddess or children because they were always painted, seen, considered as such.

Wharton develops her political and social critics of those codes throughout the novel starting in chapter 16 where she immediately suggests that there is a floor in the relationship between Newland and May locating the young couple in a 'ruinous garden' in Florida. The conversation between the two is located in a ravage garden of Eden to suggest that the marriage is doomed.

A. Women seen through the filters of male vision and judgement

- The opening opera scene ? those who are seen are women and those who see are men. From the very beginning women are subjects and men are agents.
- Double standard (imposing male rule) = a bride must be sexually inexperienced, a young woman must appeal to men, must be attractive but must discourage men (May Welland perfectly fits that definition).
- Like all men in his class, Newland considers that women needs guides, girls shift from their father’s protection to their husband’s protection. This conception of female education (or non- education) leads to disasters, not only for women but for men, as well.
- Marriage is described as a training in concealment

B. Women as objects belonging to the leisure society

- Another double standard concerning men and women ? the narrator manages to suggest that Newland has an affaire with a married woman, that Laurence Lefferts is known as well for having love affairs, but hiding behind the system of conventions. Julius Beaufort is also a womanizer but at least he does not pretend not to be. Newland reflects that the system is adamant concerning women but much more flexible for men. Married man who have affairs are considered foolish, married women who had love affairs are considered criminals 'it was foolish of the man, criminal of the women' (chapter 11). The woman who betrays will be considered a criminal and will be 'outlawed', the woman who is betrayed will be pitied like Regina Beaufort. In any case, women are considered as weak creatures.
- It is repeatedly said that Ellen needs guidance that she had not when she was young due to her parents’ early death. She had an incoherent education, an education which does not make sense to them.

C. The failure of Fathers (patriarchal figures)

- Fathers seem to fade in the background, if we examine the patriarchal figures:

    - Mr Van der Luyden is described as someone who flies away from social obligations
    - Mr Welland is almost non-existent, he is a man of habits who is reduced to being served by his wife and daughter, almost a 'nobody'. In chapter 16, he calls himself 'an old invalid'.
    - Mr Archer is long-forgotten.
    - The next patriarch could be Newland but precisely he is going through a personal crisis which prevents him from being the next one.
- Men are associated with the law in the novel ? men are writing the law, Newland works in a law firm, his boss incarnates the rigidity of the law which is embodied but the Van der Luydens in chapter 7
- Relationships between mothers and daughters ? The older generation has a tendency to repeat the same. May is one step further, she does not have a body adapted to needle-work 'she was not a clever needle-woman, her larger capable hands were made for riding' but she makes a point of respecting conventions. She carries out her duty like a devoted wife. May does not have the body for needle-work but she does it nevertheless. In spite of those physical changes, she does not break away from the tradition. Unlike her daughter who will be much more modern. It will take two generations for women to emancipate themselves from these female activities.
- There is another figure connected to May and related to vision: the figure of a young woman with a bandage on her eyes. Like justice who is supposed to be fair. The reflection is changed because it is placed in Newland’s thoughts, May was characterized as having transparent eyes, she was completely transparent.
- The image has changed when we come a few chapters later, Newland realizes that in fact she has a bandage on her eyes (chapter 10). He finds this frightening because it make him think of animals who lose abilities and skills. There is a kind of reflection on the evolution of species. He compares his wife to species not using certain skills and thus losing them, 'cave-fish which had ceased to develop eyes because they had not use for them'.