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THE MAKING OF THE EFFEMINATE MALE: NEW YORK SOCIETY'S
INFLUENCE ON NEWLAND ARCHER

An Essay Submitted to the
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By
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When Newland Archer, the protagonist of Edith Wharton's 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence*, is struggling to justify his problematic love for Ellen Olenska, he thinks, "[She] was like no other woman, he was like no other man" (Wharton 214). Archer's rationalization is anything but rational, for he is a typical New York man through and through. One can reasonably argue that if he did not fit this category, he would abandon his cocoon-like environment, leave his wife May and their tired, conventional marriage, and commit fully to Ellen Olenska. Typical New York men of Archer's time—the 1870s—would not engage in such rash, illogical behavior, however, because society declared it vulgar and unflattering. Over the course of the novel, we realize Archer must not only choose between two different women—he must also decide whether to embrace or reject a society and people that alternately please, irritate, challenge, and bore him. In the end, Archer's society inhibits him to the point that he not only fails to act on his true feelings—he often even struggles to articulate them in the first place due to living in "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" (32). The New York society in *The Age of Innocence* ultimately effeminizes Archer by rendering him unseeing, mute, and unoriginal.

Obviously, the notion that women are mute, unoriginal, and easily manipulated by men strikes modern readers as vulgar and insulting. However, the members of Wharton's old New York held these demeaning, outdated ideas to be true. Wharton repeatedly shows that women were considered inferior to men in the social context of her novel. Archer once inwardly noted, "A woman's standard of truthfulness was tacitly held to be lower [than a man's]: she was the subject creature, versed in the arts of the enslaved"

(Wharton 214). The use of the words “creature” and “enslaved” speak to the “dominant/subjugated” dichotomy that marked (or marred) a wide number of male and female relationships during the time period of Wharton’s novel.

In her book *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*, Betty DeBerg contends that Wharton did not exaggerate the distinctions drawn between men and women for stylistic effect. She illustrates how men controlled the way women were perceived in the mid nineteenth century: “Men found a foil for their own ambiguous identities through the specific and stagnant qualities they ascribed to women. Men may not have known who they were...but by insisting women had the inferior traits, they knew what they were not” (17). Kathy Fedorko asserts that, in Wharton’s view, women lacked the stability that men seemingly possessed from birth: “Power...resides in place, and...the kind of power that resides in place, in placement, seems to be male, and the power that challenges it, evades it, or that seeks place from a position of placelessness, is female” (21). While one can easily argue that Ellen Olenska provides an example of the placeless female, given that she has abandoned Europe but cannot truly call New York home, she has not allowed the loss of a familiar environment to demoralize her. In fact, she carves out a space for herself in New York by befriending artists, singers, and musicians—the type of people that May Welland terms “dreadfully common” (Wharton 141). Ellen’s eclectic company reminds her of home, and she does not suggest these new friends have to meet the rigid standards of New York society.

While Ellen stands in opposition to societal standards, May embraces them. Even when she and Archer go on vacations, she keeps them grounded in New York traditions, such as playing tennis and going rowing. May has flourished as a socialite among her

friends and family and fulfills her role as Newland Archer's partner with an easy grace. Archer, in comparison, often struggles in his efforts to preserve his masculinity, which is based "on several sets of symbols: patriarch within the family, landowner or skilled laborer, and warrior" (DeBerg 14). Archer does not willingly embrace the role of the patriarch—in fact, because he supports Ellen in her quest to obtain a divorce from her husband, the family discreetly places him at a distance from their plans. While Archer does possess an impressive homestead, it has come through an inheritance rather than his own hard work (Saunders, *Darwinian Lens* 71). Archer does not take a great deal of personal pride in his job as a lawyer. It is merely a gentlemanly pursuit, a pursuit that indicates his respectable nature. Finally, Archer fails to embrace the more modern version of the warrior—the sportsman. He prefers to reflect on literature and theater. Instead, May takes on the role of sportswoman and puts her excellent archery skill on display to earn first place in a friendly competition.

Based on these anecdotes, one can conclude that Archer does not fit into DeBerg's masculine ideals. Thus, he can be seen as placeless, and according to Fedorko, being placeless indicates one's femininity. Why, then, is Archer categorized as an effeminate character—one who attempts to actively embrace or practice masculine ideals, but struggles to do so because he possesses a timid, overly refined spirit—rather than a feminine one (Habegger 240)? Developing a comprehensive response to this question will require an examination of how society's rules affect New York's inhabitants, as well as how they interact in the framework of those rules.

As Claire Preston notes, Wharton consistently impresses the importance of societal regulations upon her audience: "In the opening scene of *The Age of Innocence*,

we are introduced to this dialectical code through a range of details, all proposed as unyielding, unexplained, communally and tacitly subscribed to as if they were natural laws” (6). Wharton’s diction reinforces the concept of society-as-authority by giving it a capital letter. When Larry Lefferts criticizes another man’s social position, Mrs. Archer laments, “It [Lefferts’ action] shows what Society has come to” (Wharton 39). Society, then, is its own entity, and stands apart from the citizens who comprise it. Wharton further illustrates this point by introducing the venerable Van der Luydens—one of the oldest families in New York—through Archer’s perspective. He “contemplated with awe the two slender faded figures, seated side by side in a kind of viceregal rigidity, mouth pieces of some remote ancestral authority which fate compelled them to wield” (39). The Van der Luydens’ prestige comes secondhand from speaking on behalf of society—at least, according to the average New Yorker. Ellen does not subscribe to their views, and is thus able to note the Van der Luydens’ influence stems from their reclusive lifestyle (53). Archer’s description of the old family and Ellen’s perceptive comment present two key characteristics of society. Its rules are long standing, and while those rules reign supreme in the minds of New Yorkers, they can be undermined by people who have not been “indoctrinated” into the city.

Although Wharton clearly illustrates that the idea of society is vital to her novel and holds great influence over Archer and his acquaintances, she does not allow it to flatten them into uninspiring archetypes. Wharton achieves this balance by offering a variety of perspectives on society and its customs. First, as an omniscient narrator and someone who grew up in New York in the late 19th century, Wharton herself gives detailed descriptions of social gatherings, such as dinner parties. Second, she allows

society to almost become a character that casts judgment on its inhabitants based on their actions. Archer also relays his thoughts about society to us. His narration often blends with the aforementioned society-as-character viewpoint. Through these various perspectives, Wharton is able to communicate the rigid and complex gender expectations that men and women must obey. For instance, when Archer warns Ellen to avoid divorcing her husband and creating a scandal, she does not show any concern for her reputation (79). Ellen's cool response unsettles Archer, for he had expected Ellen to defend her honor or deny that she had done anything improper. The fact that Archer immediately compares Ellen to the typical New York woman is telling as well: it indicates how societal regulations drive his thought process. This mindset does not affect Archer individually, but is a symptom of living in New York. Therefore, even though Ellen has momentarily disproven a stereotype about women, her actions do not produce a larger change in how society or the men in it view their "subordinates."

At first glance, it may seem counter-intuitive to claim Wharton's male characters can have power over women when they themselves are ruled by societal restrictions. However, the relationship between New York society and its inhabitants has been cemented in place for so long that questioning it would be absurd. As Archer notes, "inscrutable totem terrors" had controlled the destinies of countless previous generations of men, and their domination over women had never been questioned (Wharton 4). However, giving male characters absolute license and freedom would not fit Wharton's style, for she is fascinated "with the extremities of human oppression" (Benert 94). Thus, while the men do suffer some form of repression under society, it does not invalidate the fact that those same men can and do restrict the freedom of their female counterparts.

Maureen Montgomery confirms this viewpoint in her study of Wharton's middle class women. Montgomery acknowledges that, by cultivating proper public appearances, women like May Welland were able to develop planning and critical thinking skills (11). With those skills came some degree of autonomy. However, "women's participation in leisure activities can [also] be seen...as providing further opportunities for domination and control...the choices made by women as to which leisure activities they pursued were made within a context of gender inequalities" (Montgomery 11). Although Wharton complicates and challenges the prescribed gender roles of her time in *The Age of Innocence*, she preserves historical accuracy by creating characters who generally abide by the outdated notion that men are naturally superior to women.

While we can try to analyze some secondary characters in *The Age of Innocence* to deduce that other men can be read as effeminate, or to speculate that female characters possess masculine qualities, it is challenging to present such readings with absolute confidence because we only have a direct link to Archer. Through this link, we can easily ascertain that society causes Archer to hesitate in both speech and action—and eventually forces him to retreat into silence—when the novel opens. Archer arrives late to the opera largely because "it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera; and what 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" (Wharton 4). This reason for the delay, which is grounded in societal custom, holds more importance than Archer's personal choice to enjoy a cigar. This anecdote highlights how Archer's self is subservient to New York etiquette.

His hesitation in speech occurs because his peers criticize May's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, for her unorthodox and unexpected appearance at the opera. Archer "felt himself impelled to decisive action. The desire to . . . proclaim to the waiting world his engagement to May Welland, and to see her through whatever difficulties her cousin's situation might involve her in" (12). Yet, when he enters the box, he does not do or say anything, but converses with May through a series of looks. When Archer does tell May of his plan to announce the engagement, she says that they must persuade her mother first. Then she adds, "'Tell my cousin yourself: I give you leave'" (13). May's phrasing here holds a dismissive tone. She "signs off" on Archer's desire to inform people of the engagement and allows him to articulate it. May is not the only woman that Archer must answer to, however. He and May cannot proclaim their engagement until May's mother approves. Mrs. Welland does approve because she recognizes the announcement will deflect attention away from the link between the Welland family and the Countess. Therefore, both New York society and two of the women in it work to curtail Archer's impulse. He loses the opportunity to act upon his wish because he submits to the manufactured, society driven will of others, rather than acting on his own genuine wishes. This short interaction between Archer, May and Mrs. Welland illustrates how society quashes this particular male's desire to achieve individuality.

Even when Archer does make fantastic or thoughtful observations, they lose power once we recognize they are the product of the New York "hive mind." In response to Mr. Jackson critiquing Ellen for living with someone besides her husband, Newland declares, "'Women ought to be free—as free as we are'" (30). However, only one page later, he regains his senses and notes, "'Nice' women, however wronged, would never

claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous-minded men like himself were therefore—in the heat of argument—the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them” (31). Archer’s qualification is problematic for three major reasons. First, we see that he has begun his habit of underestimating the ability of “nice” women. Next, we can note the caveat in Archer’s declaration: it only comes about in “the heat of argument,” meaning that it did not result from a rational thought process. He dismisses his conviction, then, because it is illogical. Finally, Archer realizes that other men *like himself* have made this claim before. In other words, saying that women should be as free as men has little significance coming from Archer specifically. Scores of men have articulated the sentiment before, and only as a response to the stimulus of anger. So, like the ‘nice’ women he critiques, Archer fails to voice an opinion that stands apart from the vacuum of his society.

A bit further on in the story, we revisit how the women and society in *The Age of Innocence* subtly control Archer. He, May, and Mrs. Welland “rolled from one tribal doorstep to another and Archer...parted from his betrothed with the feeling that he had been shown off like a wild animal cunningly trapped” (48). Wharton’s diction gently pokes fun at Archer. He feels that his wife, at least, “had nothing to conceal,” but she is one of the members of the cunning party (32). However, after he lodged this complaint about the afternoon, Archer “supposed that his readings in anthropology caused him to take such a coarse view of what was after all a simple and natural demonstration of family feeling” (48). Yet, he knows that in New York, nothing is natural and simple. He previously recognized that “untrained human nature was not frank and innocent...he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a

conspiracy of mothers and aunts...” (32). Archer’s inability to see the deeper implications of the “simple demonstration” that took place over the course of the afternoon shows a failure on his part in reading society. This shortcoming means that he has fallen victim to the previously referenced factitious purity—a purity which belongs solely to women, per his own description. In conclusion, Archer possesses the supposedly feminine “unseeing gaze” that he ascribes to May.

If we are to “read” May from her betrothed’s perspective, it appears that she is not only blind, but also a puppet: she merely echoes what is said for her (58). However, when we step outside of Archer’s mind and examine the two characters side by side, we learn that May actually expresses herself more fully than Archer. When Archer tries to convince her that the two of them should either marry sooner or travel, she claims he is innovative. May’s excitement causes Archer to lament, “She was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make—even to the point of calling him original” (58). However, prior to that, Archer had considered telling May that he had called on Ellen the previous day, but “hesitated. If Madame Olenska had not spoken of his visit it might seem awkward that he should... To shake off the question he began to talk of their own plans, their future...” (57-58). Archer, then, engages in the same practice that he criticizes May for. Instinct and tradition silenced him entirely—he chokes back his original statement and instead produces one that is socially acceptable.

The tail end of the couple’s discussion reveals another of Archer’s significant character traits: he continually thinks of literature. In response to his eagerness to be different, May argues, ““We can’t behave like people in novels, though, can we?”” (59). Archer prides himself on his love for books and believes his intellectualism places him

above other gentlemen of his standing. However, Emily Orlando claims that Archer's taste in literature reveals he is a static, romantic idealist. She suggests that the books he reads offer him a "fantasy world," a snapshot of many wonderful things that could not happen in reality (57). Orlando expands on this idea to emphasize the strong link between Archer and his books by noting, "Archer wants to dwell—literally 'breathe'—in 'an atmosphere' that he finds in his books" (59). This romantic desire turns Archer into a child-like character at times. When May tells him that they can't live like characters in novels, he answers with a petulant "'Why not—why not—why not?'" (Wharton 59).

May's irritation and boredom at his insistence gives us a picture of May and Archer as frustrated mother and unhappy child, rather than as an engaged couple. Wharton concludes this section by reminding us that May is in charge, not Archer. When Archer asks his wife if she is frightened of being vulgar, she retorts, "'Of course I should hate it—so would you'" (59). May knows that any average gentleman in New York would abhor vulgarity, so she applies the generality to Archer—a shrewd move by someone who claims she is not clever enough to argue with her fiancé. Evelyn Fracasso also notes, "May is unaccustomedly assertive as she terms the idea [of eloping] 'vulgar' and arbitrarily changes the subject" (44). She steers the conversation back to the dull, petty topic of her engagement ring to make Archer more comfortable. May completes the masculine action of evading conflict by encouraging her partner to share in a discussion of "simple things." Archer, who shows but does not verbalize his displeasure at the arrangement, is left to play the role of the "mysterious and unknowable" figure—the feminine figure (Wharton 32).

Literature is not the only form of art that Newland appreciates, though. He also regularly attends operas and plays, and goes to see “The Shaughraun” one evening. The play concludes with two lovers having a sad, quiet parting. Archer “thought the adieux of Montague and Ada Dvas as fine as anything he had ever seen...in its reticence, its dumb sorrow, it moved him more than the most famous histrionic outpourings” (81). The fact that Archer appreciates this scene speaks to his character. He is like Montague, another silent man whose actions cause no tangible consequences. Wharton further critiques Archer with the phrase “dumb sorrow.” Archer’s sorrow is dumb because he is blind, as evidenced by his surprise that Ellen knows he sent the yellow roses. He describes her recognition of his gift as “sudden,” another instance of blindness or ignorance (81). May told Archer that Beaufort had sent Ellen flowers, and since those two men are the only ones to call on her consistently, Ellen most likely assumed that Archer had sent her the other package. As was the case when he classified the family visits as a “simple and natural demonstration,” Archer fails to comprehend the effects or implications of his social actions. Though he is at the center of his small world, he misses out on significant details.

As the novel develops, we learn that intricate details comprise Archer’s home, and he is not always comfortable with this arrangement. For instance, he notes, “The destiny of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observations and exactions, always stole into his system like a narcotic” (153). The drug reference lends a negative connotation to the atmosphere, and the phrase “stole into” suggests that the atmosphere is unnatural to Archer. Society has taught him that these observations and exactions are necessary for life itself. However, the niceties, such as the party invitations, the presence

of servants, and the plush carpets, prove restrictive. Archer classifies them as a “chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others” (153). These signs of respectability first created, and now preserve, Archer’s New York society. Wharton’s diction shows his displeasure with the significance of the objects. They hold great power, yet signify nothing. They could be broken or replaced by similar trinkets, and almost no one would know the difference. The terms “chain” and “tyrannical” show how society has enslaved its citizens through meaningless objects. Next, Archer recognizes that he is changing because “it was the Welland house...that had become unreal and irrelevant, and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, half-way down the bank, was as close to him as the blood in his veins” (153).

In this scene, Archer finds himself on uneven footing. He casts a critical eye on his society, but it is all he has ever known, so he cannot abandon it, even though he feels the scene on the beach took him closer to a true self. In the end, we see a divided Archer who is physically linked to May but mentally connected to Ellen. Wharton’s phrasing in the previous section, which details how an irresolute Archer could only walk half-way down to the beach, shows an inability to commit to what he truly wants on his part. The paragraph breaks also speak to the conflict, as it separates the two women on the page. This structure brings the conflict of “May or Ellen” to the forefront of the reader’s consciousness. The next chapter reveals who Archer will choose, as it begins abruptly with Mr. Welland saying, ““A party for the Blenkers—the Blenkers?”” (153). This shift in subjects shows how Archer will inevitably return or be pulled back into the “pressing” concerns of his time and his people.

Archer is not entirely obedient to the social systems of his time, however. For instance, Mrs. Welland criticizes him for “showing little foresight in planning his days” and spending long stretches of time doing nothing (155). He shows awareness of his deviation from the norm when he tells his mother-in-law he sometimes prefers to save his afternoons, rather than spend them. In response to his inaction, May suggests they go play tennis with friends or do something else. Archer answers that he had been planning to look at a horse to buy. However, this trip merely gives him the freedom to waste time without being detected. He calculates that “after looking over the horse he would still have four golden hours to dispose of” (156). He cherishes this time away from his wife and extended family and relishes the opportunity to exist as his own man, rather than one who bows to conventions.

Despite this positive move by Archer, we find that his critical thinking skills falter when “group think” does not direct his consciousness. After he went to examine the horse, he wanted to “satisfy a vague curiosity” about whether Ellen was resting at the Blenker house (156). He “could not see beyond the craving, or picture where it might lead to...he simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty” (156). Archer’s individual vision is painfully romantic and idealistic. This ethereal “sight” roots him firmly in the present, as it prevents him from imagining the future. However, even his present is cloudy, for the craving blinds Archer to all else around him. He cannot process the role Ellen plays in his life because she does not fit into a category that New York would make for her. They are not engaged, nor are they lovers in the physical sense of the word, as Archer and Mrs. Rushworth had been. He considers

the possibilities of a relationship with Ellen while on the boat in Boston, where “it seemed to Archer that everything in the old familiar world of habit was receding. He longed to ask Madame Olenska if she did not have the same feeling...but he was afraid to say it” (166). As Archer recognizes that he could cast off the protective shroud of society’s regulations, he refuses to say or do anything to complete the action. He *does* ask Ellen, “‘Haven’t we done all we could?’” (163). However, for Archer, the term “all” is regulated or defined by society, making it a limited, weak referent. The inadequacy of the word demonstrates that Archer cannot truly be original, for he still frames ideas in terms of how others in his society view them.

Archer’s ignorance—some might even say deluded self-confidence—continues to affect his perception of the world in this passage. One of the Blenker girls informs Archer that Ellen had been called away to Boston. After hearing this news, Archer takes some time to reflect, thinking, “It [the house] 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...” (159). He cannot express any reason behind his thinking because he has acted impulsively on his own feeling—there is no subscribed response available for him to use. His naiveté returns again when the boat leaves the harbor. Ellen “seemed to take their adventure as a matter of course, and to be neither in fear of unexpected encounters, nor (what was worse) unduly elated by their possibilities” (167). Wharton’s phrasing alerts us to the fact that Archer does not truly know Ellen. If he understood her, he would recognize that the “adventure” which energizes and excites him is fairly routine for her. She has already proven that she is unorthodox, from her entrance at the opera to willingly living in an unfashionable part of town and declaring that she would like to spend time

with artists and actors. However, Archer has merely typecast Ellen as the exotic foreigner, and her “otherness” is cause for excitement by itself. For instance, when Ellen touched his knee with her fan at the van der Luydens’ dinner, “it thrilled him like a caress” (46). Yet, if such a touch came from an average New York woman, it would be considered “bad form,” or simply an accidental touch. Lindberg supports this reading and claims, “The unusual becomes the foreign, and because of New York’s blending of manners and morals, the foreign is associated with the suggestive and the romantic...” (103). Archer misses out on the particulars of Ellen’s personality because he views her through a societal lens which, of course, obscures his vision.

Societal norms cause Archer to misread not only Ellen, but also May. Since he has been trained to treat any “unpleasant” scene as if it is Medusa, he cannot understand the reason behind why such scenes exist in the first place. He only looks at things on a surface level. For instance, when someone mentions Ellen during Thanksgiving dinner, May develops a vivid blush. Fracasso notes, “Archer terms [May’s blush] as ‘menacing’ but chooses to ignore the reason for its appearance” (45). Wharton’s language—her direct statement that Archer elects to ignore May’s red face—informs us that Archer *knows* he caused the menacing blush, but overlooks it because it makes him agitated. This sentence demonstrates once again how Wharton is working as both a writer and anthropologist. She captures the male-centered essence of 1870s New York society by showing Archer’s disregard for his wife. Judith Saunders notes a major problem for our protagonist in regards to this selfish tendency. Archer does not recognize how his society handicaps women until he begins spending time with Ellen (Saunders, “Artist as Anthropologist” 93). Archer cannot even consider the possibility that his wife is anything more than what

he believes she is. He dismisses the appearance of her blush as superficial, but fails to notice that he is being superficial himself. Lindberg points out, “All these ought...to be telling signs, but for Archer they are mere appearances,” devoid of any significance (106). Archer misses these signs by assuming there is nothing to miss. In addition, Archer becomes so consumed with his own issues “he ignores the set of signs between himself and May. He forgets that he can send as well as receive hieroglyphic messages” (106). The patriarchal society insists that women hold inherently limited mental capacities compared to men. Archer’s internalization of this incorrect teaching creates a gulf between himself and May by encouraging him to assume superiority and take a simplified view of his wife’s intelligence. He has become that which he fears May is—a person who goes around life with a curtain over his eyes, preventing him from looking out onto the world.

Wharton clearly offers significant evidence to suggest Archer is less perceptive than he believes, as shown in the previous paragraph. On the other hand, she also gives readers glimpses of a thoughtful, changing protagonist. As the novel progresses and he interacts with Ellen more, we see Archer beginning to critique the world around him, the world that once held a place of pride for him (Wharton 23). For instance, at his mother’s traditional Thanksgiving dinner, Archer considers the limited contact he has had with Ellen since they last met and notes that he has created a private “kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life...Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency” (184). Archer’s need to craft a sanctuary *within himself* shows an acceptance of Ellen’s observation that one cannot be truly alone in New

York. He had tried to mold his library into a place distinct from everything that surrounds him, but May's company proves oppressive, a reminder to Archer that, while he resides in New York, he cannot escape its conventions.

Although his sanctuary stands apart from society's conventions, it is still neither a clean nor a healthy place. Archer's sanctuary cannot be pure when he does not completely understand Ellen as an individual. As a result, Archer's inner life is unbalanced just like his actual, outer life. Whereas the latter is too rigid and structured, the former is a romantic dream. When Archer retreats into his own mind and imagines his meeting with Ellen, he does so with "senseless school boy happiness...It was incredible, the number of things he had to say to her, and in what eloquent order they were forming themselves on his lips..." (199). Wharton once again emphasizes the grandeur that her protagonist associates with Ellen. The use of ellipses to close the section drives home Wharton's point that Archer can never picture himself acting rationally or reasonably with Ellen, as if she is just another person.

Even when Archer's dream comes true and he can reunite with Ellen, Wharton steadfastly refuses to remove the stains of New York society from him. When Archer goes to meet Ellen, May's presence—and, by extension, New York's—still lingers. Wharton notes, "His wife's dark blue brougham (with the wedding varnish still on it) met Archer at the ferry..." (199). He cannot be truly alone with Ellen when New York looms over them as a silent, condescending judge. Archer worries as he notices Ellen's "profile grow indistinct against the snow-streaked dusk beyond the window. The precious moments were slipping away, but he had forgotten everything he had meant to say to her and could only helplessly brood..." (200). Since he cannot say the ideal words to his

ideal woman, Archer elects to not say anything at all. Ellen must move the conversation along, and after they discuss M. Riviere, Archer concludes, "Once more she had managed, by her sheer simplicity, to make him feel stupidly conventional just when he thought he was flinging convention to the winds" (201). This passage makes us appreciate the sizable gap between Archer and Ellen's respective mindsets. The passage in which Archer laments the agony of living a double life and Ellen responds that he doesn't know true pain accomplishes this goal as well. It demonstrates that he has never been anywhere to experience "real life." Her observation shows that his complaints are unoriginal. Archer bases his idea of an authentic life off of Ellen's experience, as well as what he has read in his books. His suffering, then, is vicarious. Kathy Fedorko offers an eloquent summary of Archer's problem: "Though feeling trapped, he can't dive beneath the surface of the conventional" (95). Archer recognizes the inherent limitations of his place and time. He appreciates Ellen's authenticity and even begins to develop his own identity, one that is bored by New York's obsession with frivolous wastes of time. Despite these trepidations, Archer's fear of the unknown crushes his spirit, so he retreats to the stifling safety of his society.

Unfortunately for Archer, his society eventually transforms into a perilous, unfamiliar realm. Over the course of the novel, he neglects the need to translate people's actions and omissions into communication. The wedding scene highlights how Archer has lost interest in the traditions that once commanded his undivided attention. He fails to perform the normal activities, such as observing May's arrival and taking her arm as they leave church together, so people must verbally remind him. They show surprise at needing to feed Archer these cues. According to Ekaterini Kottaras, the examples of

missed signals show how “the [hieroglyphic] communication may be effective to the degree that most characters, excluding Archer of course, function well with the symbolic language and can decode them effectively” (10). If we move back to the outset of the novel, Wharton shows Archer is hyper-aware of the minute details of his surroundings. As he travels to the Beauforts’ home for the ball, he gives a lengthy reflection on the many unique qualities of the house, and how it is extraordinarily suitable for the annual ball (Wharton 15). Archer has developed over the course of the novel, and no longer gazes upon New York with child-like wonder.

Ironically, Archer’s growth—characterized in part by his willingness to overlook every nicety of New York—makes him effeminate. It allows others to easily manipulate him, just as he thinks older women manipulate and mold May. For instance, when Mr. Sillerton Jackson claims Larry Lefferts made an inappropriate remark about Ellen, Archer retorts that Lefferts only made such a comment because he “made love to her and got snubbed for it!” (Wharton 185). Jackson pointedly asks, ““Ah—*did* he?” as if this were exactly the fact he had been laying a trap for” (185). Jackson’s line of questioning rouses Archer’s anger and causes the young man to accidentally implicate himself as Ellen’s lover. Archer even understands what is going on, but cannot escape the trap of society because he no longer responds to people correctly. “He was exactly in the state when a man is sure to do something stupid, knowing all the while that he is doing it” (185). Archer is trapped in a double bind of silence. He stays quiet because his opinions are no longer politically correct, and even if they were, he would not know how to properly frame them within New York’s communication system.

Archer's silence—a result of failing or refusing to completely subjugate himself to his society—renders him more effeminate than May. Even if his wife often says nothing or parrots the views of others, as Archer generally believes, she still employs language and works within the system to achieve certain goals. Archer, meanwhile, receives the following characterization from Mrs. Welland: “Of her sons-in-law he was the one she had most consistently ignored; and all his wife's efforts to represent him as a man of forceful character and marked intellectual ability (if he had only ‘chosen’) had been met with a derisive chuckle” (196). This section provides us with two key insights. First, Mrs. Welland shows an understanding that New York society does not want men to *use* their character and intellect to truly achieve anything. As has been mentioned before, New York is a world of appearances. May's mother knows that men of Archer's position do not have to work studiously at their jobs. The second, more significant point stems from Wharton placing quotation marks around the word “chosen.” This artistic decision signifies Wharton's awareness that there is actually a complete lack of choice for the members of 1870s New York. Society may present the illusion of choice, but it ultimately dictates what men like Archer will do.

We see that Archer cannot stop ascribing importance to society and its pressure when he holds a clandestine rendezvous with Ellen at the art museum. The two of them examine the Cesnola antiques, and Ellen remarks, ““After a while nothing matters...any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: ‘Use unknown’” (217). Of course, Ellen is speaking of her sentiments toward New York society: she realizes it will naturally change over time, as all societies do, and all traces of the 1870s

will eventually vanish. Hermione Lee claims, “The wiping-out of an entire civilization is all too possible, and the whole world seems full of ghosts” (583). Archer defends the world around him (even as it is warping into something new) by saying that it currently has some use. Ellen’s response of, “Ah, meanwhile—” reveals her understanding to us (Wharton 217). She knows Archer will never abandon his society even though it currently fails to satisfy him and will eventually transform into something unrecognizable. Archer confirms this belief and reveals his limited worldview in one line. When Ellen protests that she doesn’t want them to be like other people, Newland answers, ““What others? I don’t profess to be different from my kind”” (218). Archer shows that, despite his professions about wanting to go into a world where he and Ellen can be unlabeled individuals who love each other, he can only conceive of their relationship in terms that his society developed. Some of Archer’s previous statements support this reading. He claims that his and Ellen’s “situation resembled no one else’s, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment” (214). On the other hand, while telling May about his “business trip” to Washington, Archer “went on furnishing details with all of Lawrence Lefferts’s practiced glibness, while [May] listened attentively...” (187). This seemingly innocuous exchange is weighed down with significance. May recognizes that Newland is chasing after Ellen, and conveys this in the tone of her response. It is also important to note that Archer’s words here contradict his subsequent celebration of his and Ellen’s individuality. He engages in the same practices as Lefferts, the known philanderer. Therefore, Archer and Ellen are like any other pair of lovers in New York, despite his insistence to the contrary.

Following their departure from the museum, Wharton paints a grim picture for Archer. The sanctuary of his inner life has entirely subsumed him, and New York now appears both foreign and dead. Archer's home, in particular, is an especially dreary setting: "Darkness was falling when he let himself in, and he looked about at the familiar objects in the hall as if he viewed them from the other side of the grave" (220). The language here gives us the impression that Archer has, like Ellen, "gone beyond" New York and its conventions, at least temporarily. According to Carol Wershoven, the protagonist's growth and subsequent shunning of New York's trappings allows us to "link the image of death to the atmosphere of eternal childhood" (78). Archer can no longer stand the false realities that comprise an unfulfilling, painfully safe society. He obviously wants to be alone, to drop the act, as it were. When he enters his home, Archer feels relieved by the news that May is absent, and rushes to seek refuge in his library (Wharton 220). Yet, solitude does not grant him peace of mind. He bows to his fate "as if he hung in the clutch of doom. What he had dreamed of had been so different that there was a mortal chill in his rapture" (220). Archer becomes so uncomfortable in the death and decay of New York, the place he once cherished, that he becomes almost overwrought by a "longing to throw himself on [May's] generosity, and ask for the freedom he had once refused" (221). He begins acting on his own desires, and ignores the decorum of the opera to request that May return home with him.

Once they enter the house, Archer insists to himself that he will reveal everything to his wife—he will admit that he loves Ellen more than her. Before he can begin his confession, however, May asks, "Is it really worth while [to talk about Ellen], dear? I know I've been unfair to her...you've understood her, no doubt, better than we did...But

what does it matter, now it's all over?" (227). May's comprehension of the situation, along with the fact that she flawlessly expresses her understanding in New York's hieroglyphic language, strikes Archer dumb. He wonders, "Could it be possible that the sense of unreality in which he felt imprisoned had communicated itself to his wife?" (227). This statement implicates Archer in his society's tradition of doubting the intelligence of women. Archer is less self-contained than he believes, as evidenced by his failure to craft a lie that evades May's detection when he speaks of going to Washington on a "business trip."

Archer's surprise at May's grasp of the situation, which stems from her ability to read the signs Archer unknowingly gives off, renders him confused and mute. His sentences are fragments, and the few coherent ones he produces are mostly questions for clarification. May now has complete control over their relationship, as evidenced by her assertion that she wanted Ellen to know the Archers were the same in all their feelings (229). May stepped in and spoke for Archer to preserve their relationship. She has successfully made Archer static and unmoving precisely because he did not expect her to take on such an endeavor. He once said to himself "with a secret dismay that he would always know the thoughts behind [May's clear brow], that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea..." (207). This is one of the core teachings of Archer's society, and it has contributed directly to his own ignorance and undoing.

In the next chapter, Wharton presents Archer with more opportunities to read the messages that May presents. He continues to miss them. For instance, when May tells him of how she wishes to hold a farewell dinner for Ellen, she mentions that Mrs.

Welland thought it was a good idea. Archer then “saw before him the embodied image of Family...staring with unseeing eyes at the list of guests that she had put in his hand” (233). Archer, like other members of his society, recognizes the importance that family plays in old New York, hence why it is given the capital letter. Carol Singley notes, “Culture inherits a sense of religious authority or sacredness, as shown by the fact that both ‘culture’ and ‘cult’ share the Latin root, *colere*” (497). Despite his observation of the significance of family, Archer fails to grasp what will happen to him at the dinner. He sees only the convention of the event, and does not notice that every member of the dinner besides himself and Ellen champions the preservation of their society.

Just before the dinner begins, Archer does not sense that anything is amiss, even though there are subtle clues that he should be able to interpret. When he went to his library, it “looked at him like an alien countenance composed into a polite grimace; and he perceived that it had been ruthlessly ‘tidied’” (Wharton 230-231). Given that Archer has adopted an attitude of indifference or irritation toward the restrictions of his society, it is reasonable to suggest that the library—his private space—is a reflection of his own face. However, it does not have the distinctive features that he cherishes. Instead, it has been transformed into a space where other gentlemen can relax, a place that members of New York society can deem acceptable. In addition, the use of the word “tidied” implies that the space was dirty because of its odd, non-conforming arrangement. That which is foreign to New York must be expunged. The cleansing of Archer’s room through the removal of the foreign decor foreshadows the cleansing of New York through Ellen’s departure. Meanwhile, the fact that the aforementioned cleaning is “ruthless” speaks to the fervor that infects the members of Archer’s society when they must take action to

preserve the traditional ways. Archer, however, does not see the double meaning in the actions of his acquaintances, and merely comments, “Ah, well, it’s not for long” (231). His “confidence in the future had steadied him to play his part in the present” (231). He does not recognize the larger implications of his actions until it is too late. “Playing the part” of May’s faithful husband is enough to leave him permanently ensconced in New York. Archer recognizes the inauthenticity of his behavior, as do the other members of the dinner party, but they will not kick him out because he has been one of their own for so long. Archer unintentionally imposes limitations on himself by working from the false pretense that he is distinct from old New York.

As the dinner scene progresses, Archer comes to understand that he has been found out, and his chance for escape has been shut down. “He saw all the harmless-looking people...as a band of dumb conspirators, and himself and the pale woman on his right as the center of their conspiracy. To all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers” (235). At last, Archer transcends his own perspective and understands how his actions with Ellen have been perceived by the group as a whole. Of course, no one will actually acknowledge the scandal—the dinner has centered on “the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer’s natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin” (235). Wharton offers a criticism of this silent, almost action less world in saying, “It was the old New York way of taking life without effusion of blood: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than ‘scenes’” (235). Singley observes, “Habitus (a societal system of durable, transposable dispositions) produces

individuals whose behavior is regulated not so much by codified rules as by a logic governed by the group” (498). Society and its members continually influence and shape each other, then, and Archer’s attempt to avoid being involved in this molding relationship causes the others to send him a silent warning. After gaining “a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words,” Archer realizes he must sacrifice himself and his dream to convention (Wharton 235). In other words, society has earned its victory over Archer, for his attempts at transcending its restrictions and becoming a true individual have been stymied.

Archer’s ultimate “decision” to remain at home with May is an admirable one. Marilyn Jones Lyde terms it “not the ignominious surrender to convention...but a quietly heroic triumph over self” (96). Lyde’s analysis of Archer’s actions at the dinner scene hold merit, and the final chapter of the novel shows a mature protagonist who appears at peace with his decades old, life altering decision. However, New York’s influence still limits him, even when he and his son, Dallas, are planning a trip to Europe. As Archer thinks about past vacations abroad with the family and recognizes that he has not traveled anywhere in about two years, he “saw into what a deep rut he had sunk. The worst of doing one’s duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else” (Wharton 246). Doing his duty—remaining married to May, mourning her after her passing, and raising their children in an acceptable way—proved limiting because it was what Archer’s society had expected of him, and that society no longer exists. Larry Lefferts had once sneered that if their society was corrupted, people would eventually marry Beaufort’s bastards. Wharton emphasizes the transformation of society with the line, “[Marrying Fanny Beaufort] was just what Archer’s eldest son, the pride of his life; was

doing, and nobody wondered or reproved” (247). As Singley notes, “Archer’s problem is not only the field in which he operates but his acceptance of the narrowness of this field. Though Archer does recognize that both the old and new ways are good, he steadfastly frames current events through an outdated lens. His reading of the world hinders his ability to commit any meaningful action.

Archer’s adherence to convention surfaces over the final two pages and demonstrates why Emily Orlando terms him a “mister might-have been” in the title of her work. When Dallas asks why he does not wish to visit Ellen when he is right outside her home, the young man’s father replies, ““Say I’m old fashioned: that’s enough”” (Wharton 253). Archer passes on the opportunity to see Ellen because he has been indoctrinated in a world where appearances count for everything. This was the world of Archer when he was a young man, but it is no more. His old romantic dream for Ellen no longer lives, either: he knows “for such summer dreams it was too late; but surely not for a quiet harvest of friendship, of comradeship, in the blessed hush of her nearness” (251). Yet, when Archer has the opportunity to grasp this small connection—a much more achievable one than the romantic link he desired thirty years earlier—he resists it. Archer stays in his own mind, for his “reality” is comprised of images. He remains isolated and, as any other New Yorker of his time would do, retreats from the “rich atmosphere that he already felt to be too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs” (253).

Though Archer has mellowed and come to a clearer understanding of himself over time, he is still fundamentally the same as he was at the outset of the novel. He is at peace with his decision to shrink back into convention now, but it results in the same inaction. While we can certainly commend Archer for his growth as a character over the course of

the novel, that growth does not compel him to tangible, external change: it is only internal.

David Holbrook comments that Archer's course of action—or inaction—is “terribly poignant, and yet infuriating—because of the cowardice of the man, in the face of the promptings of his own authenticity” (120). Yet, that which is authentic for Archer is not real for Ellen: it is his imagination, not experience, which paints “that last shadow of reality” (254). He takes a “signal” that it is time to leave, and like the old New Yorker he is, obediently follows the implied command without wondering if it is conveying the truth to him (254). Despite his protestations to the contrary, Newland Archer fails to commit to action unless it is a response to a stimulus. Though he develops into a decent man over time, he cannot transcend the outdated prescriptions of the old New York society to which he belongs, and can thus be categorized as an effeminate male.

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