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## **THE STRUGGLE OF THE TWO FEMALE CHARACTERS, ELLEN & MAY AGAINST SOCIETY, “THE AGE OF INNOCENCE”- EDITH WHARTON**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Age of innocence, Edith Wharton’s best-known novel introduces to the reader an open view of the New York society in the late 19th century. The two main female characters Ellen and May represent two different struggles of the individual, in this case women against this old-fashioned world. This study will mainly focus on the continuous confrontation of these women towards society. May was raised up to be the obedient daughter and wife, whereas Ellen shows signs of intellectual freedom. This paper reveals the struggle of May and Ellen who represent the obedience of an innocent Edith Wharton and the awakening of a mature author and woman. Qualitative research used in this study, based on literary books and different articles aims to give a clear image and a deep analysis of the novel’s two female characters and their difficulties to overcome the rough society. The end of the paper transmits the message that the female characters, as Edith herself failed to be happy in their arranged marriages, affected by the old- fashioned society.*

**Key words:** *Struggle , Women, Society, E. Wharton*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Women throughout history have attracted the attention of playwrights, poets and novelists. They have been attributed the qualities of a goddess and on the other hand have been suppressed. Edith Wharton, a female writer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize, examines the way women were treated by society in the novel 'The age of innocence'. Edith Wharton, herself an aristocrat, writer and woman tries to give a detailed description of how community strives to fabricate obedient daughters and wives. This society acts as a whole tribe which regulates relationships, guides marriages and tests the outfits through unwritten rules. "In reality they all lived 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." (Wharton, 1986). Both genders are being supposed to obey to these regulations but women are the ones who suffer the hypocrisy of their fathers, husbands and community in general. E. Wharton's war is represented by two characters: May, the well-disciplined one who fights a silent war and Ellen, the rebellious and astute of the family.

### **1. THE OLD-FASHIONED AND JUDGMENTAL NY SOCIETY**

#### **1.1 The Suffocating NY Society**

In the novel 'The Age of innocence' the author Edith Wharton presents a wide picture of upper-class New-York society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The story is presented through references to the families and their activities as tribal. The society is facing a transition between the Victorian Age and WWI and it is seen throughout the book as a single, terrifying tribe which sets trends and makes rules. It is highly judgmental and never forgets the personal past of its members. Any hint of scandal could affect the entire family. Marriages are arranged and there is no freedom of choice.

The Age of Innocence builds a sustained comparison between New York City in the 1880s and such ancient civilizations as Pompeii or Troy (Trumpener & Nyce, 1988). Despite the century they were living in, the behaviors and attitudes of the New York high society were primitive and similar to the ancient people of Pompeii or Troy.

#### **1.2 The Monotonous Lifestyle**

The book is opened with the scene at the Opera that almost everyone in good society attends. This is a place where the local people parade to see and to be seen, to judge and to be judged. It is here where the latest gossip is spread and the people are judged for what they wear. Individuals should have acceptable tastes in fashion and manner. An unusual dress might indicate lack of taste and of moral values. Firstly, E. Wharton considers and uses the character of Larry Lefferts as 'the foremost authority on form'. Another description from Wharton is given through the Silverton Jackson. He is seen as an archivist from whom one can learn the history of every family. Not only does he know all the marital relationships, he also spreads every family's scandals. This character is the first one that vitalizes the event, where everything is so predictable and boring. Rituals are performed in the same way: families do come late, they sit with the same sex in boxes and carriages wait for them at the entrance. Wharton is very accurate in her



knowledge of the building, the seating order, and the patrons' behavior. Because members of old New York society use the Academy of Music as a marriage market to reproduce their class and facilitate marriages within their ranks, they seat debutantes modestly near the rear of boxes (Cliffsnotes.com, 2017).

### **1.3 Characters Trying To Survive**

Edith Wharton uses the scene at the Opera to reveal the main characters. Newland Archer is a lawyer and aristocrat. He catches view of his fiancée May and dreams on how his life to her will be. All this monotony will be broken by the entrance of May's cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska. She returns to America after thinking of divorcing "her husband, a corrupt Polish count" (Strout 1990). The countess shocks the New York aristocracy not only with her presence at a public place like the opera, but also with her carefree manners and revealing clothes. Rumors that she is guilty of adultery and that she will get divorced from the count spread all over. In this delicate moment Newland Archer decides to go and sit near his fiancée May and her guilty cousin Ellen as a sign of support for the family.

There are individuals like Larry Lefferts and Silverton Jackson who communicate to the public the latest gossip. These characters are used by the author to restrain individual's actions. Then the entrance of the free-spirited Ellen Olenska causes great outrage. It seems that this character shows signs of independence, something not acceptable and not welcomed. The NY society tries to suffocate this character, similarly as the other ones, by imposing strict and ridiculous rules and dogmas. Ellen Olenska's participation at the opera shows the desire of an excluded women to be part of the society again. Newland Archer reveals firstly to himself and to others his intentions of deliberating women and himself from the asphyxiating and ridiculous hypocrisy and human isolation. For Wharton, the lives of her characters, as well as her own life, are portioned off into moments that pulse with felicity and fraternity, but these moments always end, leaving the character, as well as the author, herself, with an acute awareness of the condition of human isolation (Cahir,1999). "The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!" (Wharton, 1985).

## **2. THE OBEDIENT MAY AND THE UNCONVENTIONAL ELLEN**

In a society full of rules and norms, we are presented to two different female characters. May is Archer's fiancée and then his wife. She is the perfect result of what a hypocritical society can do to an individual. She is beautiful, delicate but with an innocent mind. May was raised up to be an obeying daughter and wife .She had to accept rules ,to obey to her parents and not to question anything .She was programmed to perform only one thing `obedience`. May had all the qualities that a man of the 19<sup>th</sup> century New York might want to look for in a young woman. She was beautiful, aristocratic and fashionable.

Her movements through the book seem to be planned and programmed by others. Her character resembles a silhouette .Her actions are mostly missing as she continuously agrees on everything without showing the slightest desire to be free or to oppose inequality. May may be



timid, but she is determined to marry her fiancé and uses all the power of New York society to bring him to heel (McCrum, 2017).

“It was that of a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. The suggestion of this headdress, which gave her what was then called a "Josephine look," was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp.” (Wharton, 1985)

On the other hand, Ellen represents all what is opposite to May. She makes the difference from the clothes she wears, which are revealing, to her continuous presence in public. Ellen wants to break some rules and deliberate herself from an unhappy marriage. Having suffered a betrayal, she is in search of liberty, inner peace and then happiness. Mrs. Olenska is considered to be a failure of what the society has prescribed for her. She wants to break rules by leaving her husband because the Count has betrayed her. She says she wants Newland Archer to help her understand New York society, but she's already making him look at it differently (Greider, 2017). Ellen is given as a vivid character who expresses her thoughts openly. Ellen will respect the stability of May's and Newland's life and will refuse to get in an affair with him (Strout, 1990).

### **3. THE SILENT AND NOISY CONFRONTATION OF WHARTON REPRESENTED BY MAY AND ELLEN**

E. Wharton was born into a strongly controlled society, where women were discouraged from achieving anything. They were considered inferior to men and with the only duty to be obedient daughters and wives. E. Wharton was born as the third child of a wealthy New York family.

Wharton was raised up in a very comfortable environment. No money was lacking to her and she could travel around the world. By virtue of inherited income of Edith's father, who was never obliged to work, they lived very conveniently (Wolff, 1977).

In the first years of her life she was the obedient daughter and the females she saw around were either her relatives or the servants. The first ones were sitting all day, whereas the second ones were serving them. No roles requiring an intellectual or mental process was assigned to them. This was the environment where Edith Wharton grew up. She silently observed her family and the community around her. Just like May she stood in the background of life waiting for others to take decisions for her. In this period of her life Edith Wharton, just like the young and immature May lets others around her decide. She remains silent and observant. The men of the family are the ones who take decisions. They arrange journeys, balls and control money.

There is a sign of awakening when she tries to let her thoughts free and she writes poems at the age of 16. This sign of arousal will be underestimated by family members. "She got very little encouragement and support to read and none at all to write" (Salmi, 1991). In this period of her life, Wharton's continuous attempts of awakening fail with the acceptance of social codes and rules. Similarly to May, she accepts an engagement at an early age. She was engaged to a man



she dated for two years, but she ended the engagement before the wedding. Edith Wharton, here an immature and innocent May, obeys again to what the society has programmed for her.

Later she married Edward Wharton who was 12 years older than her. They were very incompatible as a couple. Edward was an attractive and kind gentleman, but did not share the artistic and intellectual interest of Edith's. ``Their relationship was not happy: "... Teddy was not a literary man. Like Edith's father, he was a man with no vocation ..."(Salmi, 1991).

This period of Edith's life can be related to Ellen Olenska. They were both trapped in bad relationships. Ellen tries to get divorced from the Polish Count. There is a continuous attempt from members of society who try to convince and also force Ellen not to divorce as this will bring scandal to her family. Ellen's continuous struggle to find happiness, similarly to Edith, encounters the ferocious assault of society.

#### **4. THE LOST BATTLE**

Edith lost her battle as May. The obedient daughter could not let herself free. The immature child could not find a way to develop herself into a more secure and intellectual person. Edith lost her battle even as Ellen when the circumstances forced her to surrender and give up her love for Archer.

Edith lost her battle even as Edith, when an attempt to break the marital relationship ended up in a divorce. The effort to find true love will be simply an affair. These characters force themselves continuously into a path where obstacles come from the people they love most: fathers, husbands and even their mothers and aunts. They all contribute to the rules and restrictions imposed to the individual by the tribe called society.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Living in a man's world seems to have been difficult for both the author Edith and her female characters: May and Ellen. The continuous struggle to express themselves and the cruel strive of the society to limit their independence appears to be present throughout the novel. It is a battle that produces victims on both sides. Females are wounded in their desperate desire for liberty, independence and happiness. May was raised up to be victimized, continuously obeying to others and not really having the ability to even think of how it is to be free and happy. Ellen was victimized when she lost the ability to let herself free from an unhappy marriage. Edith surrendered to find a way and have a happy marriage. On the other side, a society dominated by man is lost in despair, suffocated by hypocrisy and pretense. Thus, it loses its battle to maintain balances in offering equal rights and possibilities to their daughters and wives. Loneliness, unhappiness and insincerity are what win in the end.



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