



## **Class and Gender Negotiations in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Ethan Frome***

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores particular aspects of cultural identity in 19th- and 20<sup>th</sup> century America as represented in the novels of Edith Wharton. Issues involving the leisure class, gender, family and personal choices greatly affected the lives of American citizens. My argument is that Wharton's account of American culture in her fiction reflects deep and complex interactions and negotiations of class and gender.

These negotiations are reflected in her characters' conflicts between personal choices and social conventions and expectations. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen three of Wharton's works: *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Ethan Frome*. These novels are representative of American society and culture during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

**Keywords:** Culture, America, Social Class, Gender Roles, Edith Wharton, Social Conventions



## مستخلص البحث

تستكشف هذه الدراسة جوانب معينة من الهوية الثقافية الأمريكية في القرنين التاسع عشر و العشرين من منظور إيدث وارتون الروائي. قضايا مثل الفئة المترفة، الجنوسة، العائلة، والقرارات الشخصية أثرت بشكل كبير على حياة المواطنين الأمريكيين. توضح الدراسة أن تعامل وارتون للثقافة الامريكية في رواياتها يخلق مفاوضات عميقة بين الطبقة الاجتماعية ونوع الجنس. هذه المفاوضات تولد صراعات داخلية بين الخيارات الشخصية والأعراف الاجتماعية/التوقعات لدى الشخصيات. وقد اخترت لغرض الدراسة ثلاثة أعمال لوارتون: عصر البراءة، بيت المرح، وإيثان فروم. هذه الروايات بالتحديد تناقش ثقافة المجتمع الأمريكي في القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الجنوسة، مجتمع، أمريكا، الطبقة الاجتماعية، وارتون، العائلة

## Introduction

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was a major figure in American literature and art at the turn of the 20th century. Her novel *The House of Mirth* gained her widespread fame. *Ethan Frome* is considered one of the greatest tragic stories of its time, and *The Age of Innocence*, written in 1920, won the Pulitzer Prize. Generally, her writing provided valuable insights into the American world. During Wharton's life, she published more than 40 pieces including short stories, poems, fiction and non-fiction.

This paper emphasizes significant cultural concepts in the representative novels, such as leisure class, gender, family, and personal choices, especially in matters of love and marriage. I will draw upon the insights of two cultural critics, John Fiske and Pierre Bourdieu. This article will enrich and expand the literature on Wharton in a number of ways. Obviously, none of the previously reviewed studies demonstrate Wharton's views on late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20th century American society in the three novels selected for this paper.



Moreover, no previous studies have examined the negative impact of traditional gender roles and rigid social norms on both men and women in the three novels.

In her fiction, Wharton shows that the conflicts and negotiations of class and gender in America during the 19th and 20th centuries limit the potential of men and women and control life choices in love, marriage, and relationships. Therefore, she creates characters who clash with the dominant society into which they do not fit.

Finally, it is my purpose to examine the effects of class and gender on the personal choices of main characters and to trace the way in which Wharton's progressive interpretation of socio-economic conditions in America shapes her fiction.

### *1. The Negotiation of Cultural Practices in Wharton's Novels*

Prior to the late 1960s, the notion of culture was related to specific artistic fields, such as music, architecture, theatre and literature. Nineteenth-century humanist and English poet, Matthew Arnold (1869), links culture to idealist terms. He views culture as related to an ideal of individual refinement. In his book *Culture and Anarchy*, he perceives culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matter which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Preface xi).

During the 1970s, culture became a concept with a broad meaning consisting of high and low culture. High culture is obviously associated with wealthy educated elites. On the other hand, low culture is associated with common and less-educated people. Neil C. Campbell and Alasdair Kean, professors in American Studies (1997), give culture the broadest meaning. They define culture as “a way of life” (p. 17) and “the ensemble of social processes by which meanings are produced, circulated and exchanged,...and all these ‘social processes’ can be ‘read’, interpreted, and contested as texts” (p. 12).



John Fiske adds a deep meaning to culture. In his book, *Popular Culture*, Fiske (1989) asserts his belief that culture making is based on the distribution of power in society. He also reveals that culture making causes tension in society because there is inequality in the possession of power and authority by one group of individuals over another. Fiske's interpretation of the notion of culture is essential in Wharton's works.

*The House of Mirth* is the first of Wharton's novels to reflect the cultural life of late-19th and early-20th century America. Wharton's novel portrays examples of society members of different classes. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart modifies turn-of-the-century New York. She moves downward from riches to poverty. The community in the novel is viewed as unthinking, conservative and powerful. Similar to Wharton's other heroines, Lily is active and somewhat disconnected, yet she is committed to social values. The novel revolves around Lily's struggle to reconcile her spiritual and material needs. Therefore, early in her life, Lily understands that a rich lifestyle and social class are life choices and seeks to live this way.

*The Age of Innocence* is the second of Wharton's novels to show the shallowness and hypocrisy of America society. Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this novel, which reflects aspects of American culture, especially its social customs and conventions. Carol J. Singley (2003) states that Wharton uses a "narrative technique, which includes slow pacing, elaborate visual detail and framed scenes that contribute to the impression of experiencing a 'slice of life' or a moment frozen in time" (p. 497).

The title, *The Age of Innocence*, is the same as that of Sir Joshua Reynolds's famous painting. It tells the story of a beautiful five-year-old girl. Similar to Wharton, the painting reveals the true age of innocence. The title is clearly ironic in a sense that there is nothing innocent in the "age" or the period of the novel. The late 19th century was marked by intolerance, conspiracy, and cynicism. Innocence is an appearance and not a reality.



The people in *The Age of Innocence* “dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than ‘scenes’ except the behavior of those who gave rise to them” (Wharton, p. 338).

Because *The Age of Innocence* is about New York's elite, Wharton uses members of the upper class as her dramatic personae. The novel revolves around Newland Archer, whose first appearance is at the opera. He arrives late for no reason except that New York is a “metropolis” (p. 2), or a big city, and people do not usually arrive early at the opera. This idea plays a major role in Newland's life. He represents the rigid upper-class New York society.

Wharton begins the novel by asserting the importance of hierarchy. She describes people going to the opera in a “Brown coupé,” which is an “honourable way of arriving” (p. 1). Pierre Bourdieu is interested in the study of culture and art. He relates taste in art to social class. He states that one's social status determines one's interest in art. In his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu (1987) connects cultural tastes and social conditions. He examines the life and the taste of the French élite. His study concludes that people who have a high taste in art, music, or painting belong to a high social class and vice versa.

Unlike *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Frome's* characters are not society's elite. They are low- and middle-class people. In *A Backward Glance*, she (1934) notes:

My two New England tales, ‘Ethan Frome’ and ‘Summer,’ were the result of explorations among villages still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence, and sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians. (p. 153-54)

Wharton's character Ethan represents isolation in the novel. Despite his interest in engineering and the opportunity to study at a technological college, his sick mother's condition prevents him from moving from Starkfield.



The narrator (1911) explains that “Somebody had to stay and care for the folks. There warn’t ever anybody but Ethan. Fust his father; then his mother; then his wife” (p. 11). Ethan is trapped by both his social class and his familial obligations.

## 2. *The Negotiation of Class and Gender Roles in Wharton's Characters.*

Because this chapter focuses on the gendered treatment of each novel’s main characters, it is important to define gender. In *The Sociology of Gender: Theoretical Perspectives and Feminist Frameworks*, Linda Lindsey (2005) defines gender as “the social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts. Sex makes us male or female; gender makes us masculine or feminine” (p. 4). Lindsey shows that sex and gender are closely related, yet they are different.

In short, sex is biological whereas gender is social. Gender refers to the roles and practices one performs in his/her society. A role in society is “the expected attitudes and behaviors a society associates with each sex” (p. 4). Therefore, the social behavior performed by the individual is usually measured by social standards.

Lily Bart, the central character in *The House of Mirth*, is a representative of the negotiation of class and gender in American society. Within an atmosphere of satire, she reflects Wharton’s mockery of New York’s aristocracy—those who love and seek pleasure. Money and social class control the minds of those people. Through Lily's tragedy, Wharton shows the futility of the existence of that social group. Carl Van Doren admires Wharton for presenting a clear image of American society. Doren (1920) states that “Mrs. Wharton has never ranged herself with the prophets, contented, apparently, with being the most intellectual of our novelists and surveying with level, satirical eyes the very visible world” (p. 1).



*The Age of Innocence* analyses Old New York society in relation to class and gender. Wharton investigates events and employs fresh and realistic characters. William L. Phelps (1920) describes *The Age of Innocence* as “a novel whose basis is a story. The characters are introduced naturally every action and every conversation advances the theme” (p. 10). The novel concentrates on Newland Archer’s class, relationships, and social duties. Carol J. Singley (2003) claims that the novel focuses on Archer's "real and imagined differences from Old New Yorkers; his struggles to reconcile conflicting attractions to May and Ellen; [and] his opportunities to escape New York social codes" (p. 498).

The influence of class and gender roles in American society is represented in the suffering of the title character of *Ethan Frome*. As I mentioned earlier, this novel includes a male narrator and a primary male character, Ethan Frome. Ethan's dilemma reflects the rigidity and repression of the society of Starkfield.

Ethan finds no relief in his life now especially with a nagging and a pessimistic wife in Zeena. His past carried no good memory for he had had an ill father and mother and an unproductive plantation. Mattie's presence brings him brief pleasure. However, his relationship with her leads him to wish for death. He is fully aware that he must face the consequences. The misery of the conditions before violating the rules of society is less painful than the conditions that come after the act. Judith Fryer (1986) states:

Wharton was not interested in sin, but she was interested in the effect of sin upon a person's emotional life. Ethan Frome suffers from a deadening isolation in the cold world of the unloved and the unloved inner emptiness—a world of depression, loneliness, and slow starvation. (p. 69).

The characters in the novella represent social and personal conflict in American society. Social class and prescribed gender roles control the lives of the characters, mainly Ethan



Frome. He is not able to fulfil his desires by simply ignoring the conventions of society. Gossip and scandal are destructive factors in New England's society. This marriage seemed to have sealed Ethan's fate.

## **Conclusion**

The study investigates Wharton's complex and multifaceted view of 19th and 20th century America. It focuses on two aspects of American society that are revealed in her novels. First, Wharton emphasizes the idea that traditions and social constraints control people's lives and affect their judgment in making personal choices in marriage and romance. Second, it discusses the socio-economic issues of 19th and 20th century America and the importance of financial security in attaining power and social position.

Although this study focuses on social status and gendered roles in 19th- and 20th century America in detail, as a result of time constraints, we were not able to study other significant factors that affected the lives of American citizens such as religion. Further studies would exhibit aspects of religion and spirituality in Wharton's fiction. How does Wharton view Christianity and spiritual beliefs within modernity? What place does the Divine has in her writings? It is crucial to examine the interactions between Wharton's novels and religious texts, mainly the Bible. We welcome studies of Wharton's novels in relation to Christianity and the religious movements in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America.





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