

# The Exploration of Teaching Historical Narratives Through Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

LIU Zhuo, SUN Zhengyifu  
Northeastern University, Shenyang, China

Wharton's novels serve as compelling cases for understanding the complexities of late 19th-century American society. The paper uses *The Age of Innocence* as an example to examine detailed depiction of the era's social hierarchy, fashion, architecture, and the intricate social rituals that defined New York's upper class. It explores the constraints and dilemmas women faced within a patriarchal society, highlighting Wharton's personal experiences and her critical stance on the social norms of her time. The characters of Newland Archer, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska are analyzed to reveal the pressures of societal expectations and the struggles for individual desires within a rigid social structure. Additionally, the paper proposes various teaching methods, including contextual understanding, literary analysis with a historical focus, and historical research projects, to enhance students' comprehension of the cultural and historical context of the novel. These methods aim to immerse students in the narrative and promote their understanding of the Gilded Age's social dynamics.

*Keywords:* *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton, historical narrative, Gilded Age

## Introduction

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was the first female Pulitzer Prize winner in American literary history. Throughout her life, she composed many well-known short stories and novels, including *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Drawing upon her insider's knowledge of New York's high society, she portrayed the lives and morals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with remarkable realism. As a historical novelist, Wharton meticulously documented and critiqued the social and cultural landscapes of her time through her works. *The Age of Innocence*, in particular, provides rich, detailed portrayals of the social norms, customs, conflicts of her era, adding depth and authenticity to the narrative. Teaching *The Age of Innocence* from the perspective of history representation can provide students with an immersive experience of American reality at the turn of the century and a deeper understanding of the novel.

## Portrayal of Gilded Age

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, America entered the Gilded Age, which lasted from the 1870s to the early 1900s. During this time, the whole country was faced with the great transformation, which "affected

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LIU Zhuo, professor, English Department, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.

SUN Zhengyifu, M.A. candidate, English Department, Northeastern University, Shenyang, China.

politics, society, and thought, making the period the Age of the Economic Revolution” (Degler, 1977, p. 2). This period was characterized by rapid economic growth but also marked by significant social inequality and superficial glamour. In New York City, large estates were being built on 5th Avenue. Edith Wharton was born into one of the most notable families and the contrast between the traditional values of Old New York and the emerging modern sensibilities parallels Wharton’s own life experiences. She witnessed the transformation of New York society and used this contrast to explore themes of change and continuity.

During this period, rapid industrialization and economic expansion led to the United States becoming the world’s leading industrial power. There was a significant increase in wealth for industrialists and financiers, which is often displayed through their possessions and social events, highlighting the era’s culture of conspicuous consumption. In *The Age of Innocence*, there is also a clear distinction between old money and new money. Characters, such as Julius Beaufort, a wealthy banker with dubious origins, embody the rise of new money, which is often looked down upon by the old aristocracy. Wharton (2008) portrayed Mrs. Welland’s thinking: “It is a mistake for Ellen to be seen, the very day after her arrival, parading up the Fifth Avenue at the crowded hour with Julius Beaufort” (p. 27). Readers can discern that New York high society was still tribal and insular, with a rigid caste system and a strict code of behavior. In her autobiography *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton (1998) wrote about slow social changes in this way:

The first change came in the eighties, with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the lords of Pittsburgh. But their infiltration did not greatly affect old manners and customs, since the dearest ambition of the newcomers was to assimilate existing traditions. (p. 6)

Wharton’s attention to detail extends to the Gilded Age’s fashion, architecture, and interior design, all of which are accurately depicted according to the styles and tastes of the 1870s. From the opulent drawing rooms of New York’s upper class to the rustic New England countryside, the settings are not just backdrops but integral parts of the narrative, reflecting the values and lifestyles of the characters. When describing the new rich Julius Beaufort’s extravagant life and unconventional architecture, Wharton (2008) wrote:

The Beaufort house was one that New Yorkers were proud to show to foreigners, especially on the night of the annual ball. The Beauforts had been among the first people in New York to own their own red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen, under their awning, instead of hiring it with the supper and the ballroom chairs.... Then, the house had been boldly planned with a ballroom, so that, instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to it (as at the Chiverses’), one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms (the sea-green, the crimson, and the bouton d’or), seeing from afar the many-candled lustres reflected in the polished parquetry, and beyond that the depths of a conservatory where camellias and tree ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo. (p. 18)

Wharton’s satirical treatment of the shallow materialism during the Gilded Age in the novel reflects her own critical stance towards the era she was born into. In the novel, when Ellen Olenska is invited to the house of Mrs. Struthers, whom New York’s high society considers common, Mr. van der Luyden becomes very upset and asks Newland Archer to “go straight to Countess Olenska and explain—by the merest hint, you know—how we feel about certain things” (Wharton, 2008, p. 76). Thus, Wharton depicted the snobbish attitude from the top of the hierarchy and uses Newland’s decline to express her criticism.

### **Portrayal of New York Upper Class**

In *The Age of Innocence*, the upper-class hierarchy is depicted with great detail, reflecting the rigid social structures of 1870s New York high society. “The New York of Newland Archer’s day was a small and slippery

pyramid”, with “an honourable but obscure majority of respectable families” (Wharton, 2008, p. 41) at the base, the Mingotts, Newlands, Chiverses, and Mansons in the middle, and the van der Luydens at the top. Wharton meticulously depicted the world of old New York, where the aforementioned small, tightly-knit group of families dominated social life.

Wharton meticulously recreates the social milieu of New York in the second half of the 19th century, so “any observation about an individual character ... also entangles us in the collective experience of the group, expressed in the welter of trifles, the matrix of social knowledge” (Knights, 1995, p. 21). Her vivid descriptions of locations such as Fifth Avenue, the opera house, and various grand homes immerse readers in the era. She also details the elaborate social rituals of the time, such as formal dinners, opera outings, and high-society balls. These events were central to maintaining social ties and reinforcing the social order. One typical example is that when the van der Luydens hold a dinner party to welcome their cousin, the Duke of St. Austrey, Wharton (2008) wrote:

The du Lac Sevres and the Trevenna George II plate were out; so was the van der Luyden “Lowestoft” (East India Company) and the Dagonet Crown Derby. Mrs. van der Luyden looked more than ever like a Cabanel, and Mrs. Archer, in her grandmother’s seed pearls and emeralds, reminded her handsomest jewels, but it was characteristic of the house and the occasion that these were mostly in rather heavy old-fashioned settings; and old Miss Lanning, who had been persuaded to come, actually wore her mother’s cameos and a Spanish blonde shawl. (p. 52)

The novel also explores the nuances of this elite group, focusing on the characters’ adherence to social codes and the importance of reputation and tradition. As the novel’s protagonist, Newland Archer is characterized by the struggle between individual desires and societal expectations. His internal conflict highlights the constraints imposed by the social norms of the time. For him, “what was or was not ‘the thing’ played a part as important in Newland Archer’s New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago” (Wharton, 2008, p. 4). Here, “the thing” refers to the norms that the elite class is expected to conform to. Newland, though privately liberal-minded, publicly preserves conventional rules to protect the family’s interests. Facing strong pressure, he ultimately surrenders and sacrifices his true love.

Wharton was born into a wealthy and prominent New York family in 1862. Her intimate knowledge of this environment allowed her to depict it with accuracy and nuance, as shown in above paragraphs. Her keen observation of the social dynamics and pressures within her class is evident in her portrayal of characters who struggle with societal expectations. By demonstrating these conflicts and hypocrisies, Wharton suggests the elite class is governed by strict social codes and etiquette, and people are expected to adhere to these unwritten rules, which dictate behavior, dress, and interactions. Any deviation from these norms can lead to social ostracism. Thus, when Ellen Olenska’s candid personality, independent thinking and courageous pursuit of true love make her a social outcast, she has to sacrifice everything desired and leave for Paris. Wharton’s personal experiences and observations lend authenticity and depth to her portrayal of this society, making her works valuable historical sources.

### **Portrayal of Women’s Dilemma**

Concerning women’s dilemmas, Wharton’s portrayal of female characters’ desires, frustrations, and aspirations serves as a historical document of gender dynamics in a patriarchal society. *The Age of Innocence* centers around the experiences of Ellen Olenska, May Welland, and Regina Beaufort, particularly in relation to their marriage and social status, thus providing valuable historical insights into the roles and limitations faced by

women in her time. As a chronicler of society's manners, mores, and morals, Wharton depicts women's struggles for autonomy and fulfillment, though in vain.

Born Edith Jones, the author "came out" into society at age 17, making the rounds of dances and parties in Newport and New York, observing the rules of her privileged world—a world she would later satirize in her fiction. Edith learned those rules most particularly from her mother, who was well born, impecunious, savagely snobbish, and dedicated to the rules of decorum. Growing up, Edith understood the formalized world and excelled at portraying female characters in stifling social situations, with special interest in the ways that society's standards shaped women's choices within a patriarchal society. In *The Age of Innocence*, when discussing the upper class's attitude towards marriage and divorce, Newland commented that their social customs do not favor divorce "If the woman, however injured, however irreproachable, has appearances in the least degree against her, has exposed herself by any unconventional action to-to offensive insinuations" (Wharton, 2008, p. 93). This plot element comes from her own experiences in the 1910s when she was trapped in a degrading marriage to a husband who was mentally unstable, intellectually limited, and emotionally duplicitous. She knew that divorce was social suicide and saw no escape for herself because the world she lived in is cold and vapid, greedy and heartless. However, she courageously "reflects the struggles of the individual members of elite societies (particularly the female members) in their attempts to actualize themselves within the rigid behavioral mores of their class" (Tong, 2008, p. 181). From this perspective, Ellen Olenska can be interpreted as a New Woman, as Cheng Xin argues "Edith Wharton's figuration, as a successful woman writer, is what gives privileges to those ambitious, rebellious New Women in her discussion of the turn-of-the-century 'women question'" (2014, p. 31). Wharton's portrayal of New Women image demonstrated her pessimistic view towards social progress, which can be justified in the following quote:

Wharton's interest in Darwinism far exceeded that of most American writers at the turn of the 20th century. Although she was not fundamentally a naturalistic writer, her understanding and familiarity with evolutionary theory surpassed that of naturalist novelists such as Dreiser, Norris, London, and Crane. (Pan, 2017, p. 81)

That is why Ellen Olenska is expelled out of the elite circle and settles in Paris at the end of the novel.

May Welland's traditional role is portrayed as the embodiment of the ideal upper-class woman in 1870s New York society. Her character is depicted as innocent, beautiful, and dutiful, perfectly fulfilling the expectations of her social class and family, and her "highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" (Friedan, 1974, p. 43). May represents the conventional virtues of purity, modesty, and compliance, which are highly valued by the conservative society in which she lives. Her role is largely defined by her function as a suitable wife for Newland Archer, who initially sees her as the epitome of the perfect partner due to her adherence to social norms and expectations. Throughout the novel, she is often described in terms of her physical appearance and her ability to maintain the social façade required by her family and society. Her role also includes her focus on family and her determination to uphold social traditions, even at the expense of personal desires. Like most of the elite class, she sees the institution of marriage as a social contract rather than a romantic union, internalizing the view that "Marriage is an archetype of exchange and can be seen to serve the exchange function by setting up a new locus of relationships" (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 374-375). She is even portrayed as protective of her marriage and determined to preserve its appearance, displaying a quiet strength and adherence to duty that ultimately shapes the narrative's resolution.

Regina Beaufort is depicted as a victim of the patriarchal society that dominated 1870s New York. Her character, although initially portrayed with an air of sophistication and social prowess, eventually becomes a symbol of how women were often constrained and marginalized by the rigid social norms and expectations of the time. Reasons for her tragic fate are as follows: First, Regina's social standing and financial security are entirely dependent on her husband, Julius Beaufort. When his financial misdeeds are exposed, resulting in his disgrace and the family's financial ruin, Regina is left with little recourse. Her dependency highlights how women's identities and fortunes were closely tied to their husbands, leaving them vulnerable to their spouses' actions. Second, as Julius Beaufort's scandal unfolds, Regina becomes socially ostracized. Despite her previous status and efforts to maintain her social position, she is shunned by the very society that once embraced her. This ostracism underscores the harsh judgment and double standards women faced. Third, Mrs. Beaufort's lack of control over her own life and future is a clear indication of her victimization by patriarchal norms. She has no means of rectifying the situation or securing her own independence, just as what Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*: "As far back as history can be traced, they have always been subordinate to men" (2011, p. 8). Her plight emphasizes the limited options available to women, who were often relegated to passive roles within their marriages and society.

### **Methods of Teaching Historical Narrative**

Using Edith Wharton's novel of social manners, teachers can employ different methods to deal with her historical narrative. The following aspects may help students better understand culture as well as literature.

Contextual understanding is the first way that will help students grasp some essential information before an in-depth exploration of the theme. Due to the semi-autobiographical feature, a brief biography of Edith Wharton can be provided, focusing on how her personal experiences and background influenced her writing. Her position within New York's high society may inform students of how this insider perspective lends authenticity to her depictions. Then, teachers can give an overview of the Gilded Age, including key events, economic conditions, social structures, and cultural norms. Broader historical context about industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the nouveau riche will explain the significant changes taking place in America during the 1870s.

Literary analysis with a historical focus is the second step. Analysis can be conducted concerning the novel's setting in New York City during the 1870s. Firstly, the class can examine Wharton's detailed descriptions of locations, fashion, architecture, and social rituals and analyze how these elements reflect the broader social and economic context of the time. Secondly, the main characters, such as Newland Archer, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska, can be discussed, especially how their interactions and conflicts reveal the values, norms, and expectations of upper-class society. Teachers can guide students to compare and contrast different characters' views on marriage, family, and personal freedom, thus enabling students to see how the novel criticizes the social constraints of high society and their impacts on individuals, especially women with independent thinking.

Historical research and projects are also significant for students to have a good command of American reality in the past. Teachers can organize the class to compare the fictional portrayal of New York society in the novel with historical accounts and primary sources from the period. This can include diaries, newspapers, fashion magazines, and photographs from the 1870s. They can also assign research projects on specific aspects of the Gilded Age, such as the rise of industrial magnates, the social etiquette of the elite, or the architecture of New York City. Students can present their findings and relate them to themes and events in the novel, thus achieving a profound interpretation of the literary work.

By incorporating these strategies, teachers can use *The Age of Innocence* to provide students with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the Gilded Age, enriching their study of history through the lens of literature.

### Conclusion

Edith Wharton's works, *The Age of Innocence* in particular, are widely regarded as historical novels, capturing the intricacies of New York society in the 1870s with remarkable detail and accuracy. The author functions as a historian through her exquisite and authentic depictions of society, her exploration of social and cultural norms, her psychological realism, and her reflection of personal experience. She provides valuable insights into the historical context, making her an important figure in both literature and the broader understanding of American history and society. Her representation of the constraints and contradictions of this society offers readers a nuanced understanding of the period's complexities. Moreover, her exploration of themes such as societal pressure, personal freedom, and the conflict between tradition and modernity resonates with readers across different historical periods, highlighting the universality of these concerns. Thus, they are provided with a window into a specific historical moment while also gaining timeless insights into human behavior and societal norms.

Through teaching the historical narratives in Edith Wharton's novels, the customs, manners, and social structures of the periods she wrote about are studied and preserved, making her works both important cultural artifacts and unique versions of history that might otherwise be forgotten. Wharton's works have shaped readers' perceptions of the Gilded Age and late 19th-century America, extending her influence beyond literature into the realm of cultural history. Her depictions of society will continue to inform readers about the past and the present.

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