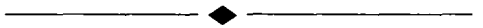
The Age of Innocence

EDITH WHARTON

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE



Edith Wharton

Introduction and Notes by
STUART HUTCHINSON

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton (1862–1937) was born in New York, the only daughter of parents who already had two much older sons and who belonged to a wealthy social élite described by Wharton herself in 1933 as a 'little aristocratic nucleus. . . . a society in which all dealers in retail business were excluded as a matter of course' (*Backward*, 1.3).[1] A continuing theme of her work is the demise of this society: 'the really vital change is that, in my youth, the Americans of the original States, who in moments of crisis still shaped the national point of view, were the heirs of an old tradition of European culture which the country has now totally rejected' (*Backward*, 1.2). As *The Age of Innocence* (1920) confirms, it was

1 To facilitate reference to different editions of *A Backward Glance* figures in brackets indicate chapter and part number.

never 'totally rejected' by Wharton herself, even though in this novel and others she can portray it as a stifling and anaemic inheritance. She continued to believe that 'the small society in which I was born was "good" in the most prosaic sense of the term, and its only interest, for the generality of readers, lies in the fact of its sudden and total extinction, and for the imaginative few in the recognition of the moral treasures that went with it' (*Backward*, 1.3). Here Wharton restates Newland Archer's conclusion in *The Age of Innocence* that, 'After all there was good in the old ways' (p. 219). Both claims inevitably cause us to question what 'the moral treasures' or 'the good' were, and whether Wharton's presentation of them persuades us to join her 'imaginative few'. Why did the manners and values of Wharton's formative years have such a hold on her, so that looking back across the chasm of the First World War she would want to recreate them in *The Age of Innocence*? Her own explanation suggests a merely escapist motive. She recalls her spirit 'heavy' with 'losses' after the war and how she wanted to express her feelings in the war novel *A Son at the Front* (1923), 'but before I could deal objectively with the stored-up emotions of those years, I had to get away from the present altogether'. She continues:

> I found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America, and wrote 'The Age of Innocence'. I showed it chapter by chapter to Walter Berry; [2] and when he had finished reading it he said: 'Yes, it's good. But of course you and I are the only people who will ever read it. We are the last people left who can remember New York and Newport as they were then, and nobody else will be interested.'
>
> I secretly agreed with him as to the chances of the book's success; but it 'had its fate', and that was – to be one of my rare best-sellers!
>
> [*Backward*, 14.4]

Wharton was nothing if not verbally exact, and 'childish memories' rather than 'childhood memories' is an arresting phrase, suggesting an embarrassment by, and even a dismissal of, the novel she had written.

2 Born in 1859, Walter Berry grew up in Albany and graduated from Harvard in 1881; Wharton's lifelong friendship with him began when she was twenty-five. A specialist in international law, he was her literary advisor and counsellor, and a model for characters such as Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and Newland Archer. 'All my life goes with him,' she wrote on his death in 1927. 'He knew me all through' (*Letters*, p. 504). Wharton is buried in the town of Versailles at the Cimetière des Gonards in a double plot she had bought near the grave of Berry.

None the less it sustained her high reputation and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in May 1921.[3]

Most of the reviews must have pleased her and, if the novel is accepted on its own terms, their appraisals leave later critics with little to add, especially as Wharton's omniscience in this and other novels makes most things explicit. *The Age of Innocence* opens with Newland Archer about to marry May Welland and settle for what he suspects are the sterile complacencies of his New York world, just as he and they are to be passionately challenged by the Europeanised Ellen Olenska. Excited by Ellen and committed to her cause Archer seems ready to cut loose from a heritage to which he has always fancied himself superior. May, however, whatever her blankness in other respects, at least has a determination not to lose out. Events conspire against Archer and Ellen, who themselves become resigned to the impossibility of any life they might envisage together. What can the novel do, therefore, but circle back on itself and present old New York as an admirable haven against an imputed collapse of standards. Despite her own career, Wharton's deterministic case is that men of Archer's generation could not have reached beyond its confines, no matter how interested they were in the new art, literature and ideas of their time. The very materiality of old New York is resistant to change, and it is indeed recorded by Wharton in impressive detail, prompting the reviewer William Lyon Phelps to declare, 'I do not remember when I have read a work of fiction that gives the reader so vivid an idea of the furnishing and illuminating of rooms in fashionable houses.' Turning to the blighted fate of those who inhabit these rooms, he continues:

> The absolute imprisonment in which her characters stagnate, their artificial and false standards, the desperate monotony of trivial routine, the slow petrifaction of generous ardours, the paralysis of emotion, the accumulation of ice around the heart, the total loss of life in an upholstered existence – are depicted with a high excellence that never falters . . . The love scenes between [Archer] and Ellen are wonderful in their terrible inarticulate passion . . . So little is said, so little is done, yet one feels the infinite passion in the finite hearts that burn.

Wharton could hardly have wished for a more sympathetic acclaim of her achievement, and it is complemented by Carl Van Doren, when

3 Actually the jury had chosen Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), only to have its verdict overruled by the trustees of Columbia University, the sponsors of the prize, because *Main Street*'s satire of American life was deemed offensive.

he observes that Archer's and Ellen's 'particular tragedy' is their 'sacrifice' to May Welland, who is 'virtuous because she is incapable of temptation, competent because she is incapable of any deep perturbation . . . The unimaginative not only miss the flower of life themselves but they shut others from it as well.' Van Doren, however, broadens the debate and indicates an essential limitation in Wharton (spectacularly ignored by feminists over the last twenty years) when he comments that she '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'. He concludes with an incisive recognition of her dilemma which is realised in her presentation of Archer: 'Mrs Wharton's triumph is that she has described these rites and surfaces and burdens as familiarly as if she loved them and as lucidly as if she hated them.'

In other words, whatever Wharton's satire of old New York, whatever the results of her autopsy over its corpse, she has no other world to turn to, and this is why Archer must concede and marry May. Referring to the novel's end, Katherine Perry, a third reviewer, writes: '. . . in the closing scene [Wharton's] pen dwells lingeringly on the Paris she loves, rich in that warm atmosphere of beauty and art which New York of the '70s so crudely and coldly lacked'. Again this comment registers Wharton's concluding intention, but in doing so it points to Europe as an aesthetic escape and not as the source of radical challenge initially, it seemed, offered in the person of Ellen.

That it was such an escape for Wharton herself, in her several French houses, is hardly disputable. In fact, as my opening quotation from *A Backward Glance* makes clear, Europe and the culture it originally inspired in America were essentially conservative reference points for Wharton. In *The Age of Innocence*, therefore, Wharton sees to it that Ellen offers only the pretence of a challenge to old New York. At the beginning she is allowed a sexy dress, but in the end her passion is all for a compromise allowing *The Age of Innocence* to remain unruffled. Even she becomes a defender of the old New York the novel affects to be mocking: 'under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate' (p. 152). What these things are, or where their life-enhancing qualities might be, we never discover, just as we never know 'the abominations . . . and all the temptations' (p. 154) Wharton crudely conjures up as a threat from Europe so that she can justify New York. Nothing in the novel engages with a future (she 'has never ranged herself with the prophets'), so that the closing scene described by Perry betrays no awareness, even from the perspective of 1920, of what was really happening in the creative arts in Europe during the

transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Were it capable of change, therefore, Wharton's old New York would only return to some version of an idealised European past, a Europe sentimentalised, as in the novel's conclusion.

This moribund conservatism on Wharton's part exasperated Vernon L. Parrington who gave *The* Age *of Innocence* its most disparaging review:

> But when one has said the craftsmanship is a very great success, why not go further and add that it doesn't make the slightest difference whether one reads the book or not, unless one is a literary epicure who lives for the savour of things. What do the van de Luydens matter to us; or what did their kind matter a generation ago? Why waste such skill upon such insignificant material? There were vibrant realities in the New York of the seventies, Commodore Vanderbilt, for example, or even Jay Gould or Jim Fiske. If Mrs Wharton had only chosen to throw such figures upon her canvas, brutal, cynical dominating, what a document of American history – but the suggestion is foolish. Mrs Wharton could not do it. Her distinction is her limitation. She loathes the world of Jim Fiske too much to understand it. She is too well bred to be a snob, but she escapes it only by sheer intelligence. The background of her mind, the furniture of her habits, are packed with potential snobbery, and it is only by scrupulous care that it is held in leash.

Parrington questions the very relevance of the novel to anything that matters. Not only does it point to no future, it also trivialises the past. 'The Age of Innocence' is a preposterous description of an 1870s New York which was just emerging from the Civil War (unmentioned in the novel), in which many of the city's young men would have been killed and maimed. In reality there would not have been much innocence of any special kind around, especially as vast fortunes were about to be made in the rampant wheeling and dealing of the personalities Parrington alludes to. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner capture some of these energies in *The Gilded Age* (1873), and while historians adopt their title to describe the post-Civil War period, none would adopt Wharton's. In proposing it, therefore, Wharton is inviting us to indulge a falsification, a self-serving manipulation of the past by a writer who in previous works had already proved herself reluctant to question her own assumptions. On Wharton's part the innocence is at worst an inexcusable ignorance at best a wilful blindness, for example in the conclusion to the jaundiced comment she makes on the Wellands' arrangements in Florida: 'Mrs Welland was obliged, year after year, to improvise an establishment partly made up

of discontented New York servants and partly drawn from the local African supply' (p. 91). In a novel written in 1920 about a world which, fifty years earlier, had just emerged from a Civil War over black slavery, 'the local African supply' is a nasty phrase too utterly unresponsive to the realities of the age the novel purports to address. As for the innocence of the characters themselves, seen in their unquestioning submission to their old New York rituals, it is an ingredient enabling Wharton always to remain superior to them. So positioned, she can condescend and sentimentalise, manipulating her characters according to irony of circumstance, as in the case of May's pregnancy. Rarely in her fiction do we have the irony of self-recognition in which, as in the case of George Eliot and James, author and readers identify with the characters' inevitable humanity.

In the words of Katherine Mansfield's review, the characters in *The Age of Innocence* 'are human beings arranged for exhibition purposes'. Initially Mansfield commends Wharton's equilibrium of irony and romance: ' . . . to keep these two balanced by all manner of delicate adjustments is so much a matter for her skilful hand that it seems more like play than work'. Soon, however, her impatience with the novel erupts:

> But what about us? What about her readers? Does Mrs Wharton expect us to grow warm in a gallery where the temperature is so sparklingly cool? We are looking at portraits – are we not? These are human being arranged for exhibition purposes, framed, glazed and hung in the perfect light.
>
> Is it – in this world – vulgar to ask for more? To ask that the feeling shall be greater than the cause that excites it, to beg to be allowed to share the moment of exposition (is that not the very moment that all writing leads to?) to entreat a little wildness, a dark place or two in the soul?

Mansfield's response to what is missing from *The Age of Innocence* ought to have prevented Judith Fryer's glib likening of the novel to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) (*Felicitous*, p. 129). *Mrs Dalloway* has plenty of wildness and dark places in the soul. Bearing in mind Woolf's essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), in which she mocks novelists who give 'us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there' (*Collected Essays*, I, p. 332), we can see that it was written to render obsolete novels such as *The Age of Innocence*. Its streams of consciousness and reflexive self-questioning exemplify twentieth-century deconstructions amid which Wharton's complaisant omniscience is a presumptuous anachronism.

The dead end her authorial voice expresses is especially apparent whenever she is dealing with an incipient twentieth-century America:

> The next morning, when Archer got out of the Fall River train, he emerged upon a steaming mid-summer Boston. The streets near the station were full of the smell of beer and coffee and decaying fruit, and a shirt-sleeved populace moved through them with the intimate abandon of boarders going down the passage to the bathroom.
>
> Archer found a cab and drove to the Somerset Club for breakfast. Even the fashionable quarters had the air of untidy domesticity to which no excess of heat ever degrades the European cities. [p. 144]

Elizabeth Ammons sees Wharton conducting an 'argument with America' on behalf of women, but her only significant argument with her native land was with its emerging demotic energies, and it was to escape these that she settled in her various French enclaves. In the later twentieth century, no one offers a better account of her case than V. S. Pritchett:

> Again and again we find that novelists who have attacked the conventions because they stultify the spirit, who attack the group for its cruelty to individuals, will end by pointing the virtues of submission. Mrs Wharton may have hated old New York, but she hated the new New York even more. She disliked the prison of silent hypocrisy, but she drew in her skirts when candour came in. Especially after her long life *en grande luxe* in Europe. What indignation denounces creeps back in the name of sentiment. [Pritchett, p. 490]

How much Wharton regretted the liberations of the twentieth century, even though in her personal life she had a passion for consumerism equal to that of her character Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), is evident in *A Backward Glance* when she commemorates the 'ancient curriculum of house-keeping which . . . was so soon to be swept away by the "monstrous regiment" of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilised living. . . . Cold storage . . . has done far less harm to the home than the Higher Education' (*Backward* 3.2).

A conservatism so impervious to the ambitions of young women hardly provides a pedestal on which to erect Wharton as a radical feminist icon, while acclaiming her fiction as 'A Feast of Words', 'An Argument with America' or 'Letters from the Underworld'. In this

recent reconstruction of the author it has been customary to assume a Wharton so generally unfulfilled by her upbringing and so particularly oppressed by her mother, that she might have voiced the first line of Larkin's 'This Be The Verse': 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad.' Admittedly, her autobiography confesses to an 'agonizing shyness' when she was young (*Backward*, 6.3), but it also remembers wonderful trips to Europe in the company of 'my handsome father, my beautifully dressed mother, and the warmth and sunshine that were Doyley [her nurse]' (*Backward*, 2.2). Until her father died, in her twentieth year, there were frequent stays in Europe with her parents. Meanwhile in 1878, when she was sixteen, her mother had paid for the private printing of her first volume of poems and, as far as reading was concerned, 'by denying me the opportunity of wasting my time over ephemeral rubbish . . . [had thrown] me back on the great classics, and thereby helped to give my mind a temper which my too-easy studies could not have produced' (*Backward*, 2.3). Elsewhere she described her mother's action over her poems as a 'folly' ('Life and I', p. 1090) but the intention could hardly have been to discourage literary ambition. As she remembers her parents, she is aware that her father 'was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained' (*Backward*, 2.4). Even in reflection, however, there is no exploration of this matter, just as in the novels there is minimal probing beneath the immediate vitality of a Lily Bart (*The House of Mirth*), an Undine Spragg or a Newland Archer. The discretion which might prevent exploration in her father's case becomes superficiality in the case of her characters.

At least the feminists are trying to take criticism of Wharton into a new direction. Male critics in the later twentieth century hardly advance beyond the reviewers. Among the best of them, Geoffrey Walton is characteristically judicious. Believing *The Age of Innocence* to be 'manifestly the product of a distinguished creative mind', he finds in it 'a pervasive nostalgia for the past'. Its events are 'pathetic – and sometimes absurd – rather than tragic, and the elaborate moral situation and the epilogue rather heavily sentimental'. Wharton is 'more concerned to recreate a past age than to say something she thinks important about life', and the whole story (remember Phelps' review) is 'especially fully visualized in terms of clothes and interior decoration, and documented with accounts of manners, customs and social history' (*Critical Interpretation*, pp. 137–8). In contrast to these blandishments Cynthia Griffin Wolff proposes a new view of Archer's 'inner life' and its 'dangerous vitality'. As she sees Archer, 'his considerable passion, finding no satisfactory outlet, has been sublimated into extraordinary palpable

fantasies (old New York gave men like Newland little else to do with their passions)'. These fantasies 'have been nourished by the rich passional needs channelled into them [and they] slip quietly back into his perceptions of the actual world, distorting these perceptions and deluding his expectations' (*Feast*, p. 315). To make her case Wolff employs a prescriptive determinism, matching Wharton's own, and all too evident in the parenthetical assertion about old New York. How could Wolff know that this statement about men is true? Where, moreover, does she find in *The Age of Innocence* 'a dangerous vitality in this inner life' and 'rich passional needs'? Such energies (which Katherine Mansfield believed the novel lacked) are surely the last things Wharton wants to cope with, and it could be argued she identifies Archer as a 'dilettante' (p. 4) precisely to keep them out of her novel. Wolff's own fantasy about Archer is an attempt to convince herself that he is being placed by Wharton, and that readers are invited to have a larger view than his of the novel's events. Only he, she argues, has 'a reductive vision of empty, unknowing, unsoiled virginity' in May (*Feast*, p. 322). Were this reading accurate, it would make the novel altogether more interesting. As it happens, however, Wharton repeatedly endorses Archer's view of May, for example in the opening scene (pp. 4–5) at the opera. Later Wharton tells us that as May 'walked beside Archer with her long swinging gate her face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete' (p. 90). When she and Archer meet M. Rivière, whose intellectual and literary life Archer envies, Archer reflects that 'May would certainly have called him common-looking'. Within a page May obliges: 'The little Frenchman? Wasn't he dreadfully common?' (pp. 126–7). Like the very different Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, she is another young woman Wharton too easily labels 'Diana' (p. 42), in order to contain her potential sexuality and have her 'disturbed, and shaken out of her cool boyish composure' (p. 91) when Archer gives her a kiss on the lips. *The Age of Innocence* could not engage with a May who had sexual force, for she would then prevent Wharton's simple formula for contrasting her with Ellen. May has an irrelevant nobility when she offers to surrender Archer to the woman she thinks is still his lover, and she has tenacity when she manipulates Ellen into surrendering Archer. These qualities aside, she is killed-off in terms that would invite feminist opprobrium if written by a man: 'so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth . . . she went contentedly to her place in the Archer vault . . . where Mrs Archer already lay safe from the terrifying 'trend' which her daughter-in-law had never even become aware of' (p. 220).

Developing Wolff's approach, Elizabeth Ammons asserts that Ellen arouses in Archer and his fellows a 'sexual fear . . . both deep and

serious' (*Argument*, p. 143). In fact Ellen is thoroughly conscience-stricken and insistently compliant, therefore, with Wharton's anaemic moral scheme. How could Wharton be critical of Archer's sexual fear, as Ammons suggests, when she disapproves of, and does not creatively face, what his sexual courage might have brought about? Reflecting on his life with May, Archer, without qualification from Wharton, concludes: 'it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites' (p. 219). In this facile opposition between 'dignity of a duty' and 'ugly appetites', sexuality is again degraded by a Wharton who in her previous fiction had repeatedly ascribed it to characters of a different race and lower class than her own. Sim (Simian) Rosedale, the sexualised Jew who, in *The House of Mirth*, is financially and socially advancing himself into old New York, anticipates the even more sexualised Julius Beaufort, the duplicitous banker in *The Age of Innocence*. While Beaufort is not identified as Jewish in the novel, he is revealed by Lewis (*Edith Wharton*, p. 431) to be based on a Jewish original, and one reason his race is not confirmed in the novel might be because his daughter will eventually marry Archer's son. These sexual and racial phobias of Wharton's are not illuminated by Carol J. Singley's likening of Ellen to Aphrodite and Socrates and affirming her 'dual role as lover and philosopher' (*Matters*, pp. 172–3)! A wish for hemlock seems the only response to such observations.

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