

A Compromise and Resist World

Feminism Analysis of the Age of Innocence

Hongyan Yang¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China

Correspondence: Hongyan Yang School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, Sichuan, China. Tel: 86-135-4190-8233. E-mail: 10553891@qq.com

Received: April 1, 2016 Accepted: May 6, 2016 Online Published: May 10, 2016

doi: 10.5539/elt.v9n6p141 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n6p141>

Abstract

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), a Pulitzer Prize winner, is a distinguished female novelist at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her work *The Age of Innocence* contributes much to the formation of a female literary tradition. Wharton's subversion of male discourse can be well traced in her novel *The Age of Innocence*. However, Wharton does not become a destroyer of her age due to the limitation of her time; instead, she shows an open submission and hidden resistance to the patriarchal system.

This thesis aims to analyze causes of Wharton's duplicitous voice by the means of *The Age of Innocence* textual analysis in order to reveal her special strategy of text hidden behind this contradictory attitude.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, subversion, *The Age of Innocence*, duplicitous voice

1. Introduction

Edith Wharton, one of the most important writers at the turn of the 20th century in America, she was granted an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Yale University in 1923, for being considered elevating "the level of American literature". Major critics such as Q. D. Leavis, Alfred Kazin, Percy Lubbock criticized Wharton either "for not offering any positive solution in her novels" or "for excessive concern with her old society while ignoring the poor class or the parvenu" or considered her "essentially a tribute to Henry James". (Bloom 4216--20) The upper class of old New York society into which Edith Wharton was born provides her with an abundance of material for her writing. Just as Louis Auchincloss has commented that "what was to have a much greater influence on Edith Jones as a writer, and to supply her with the subject material for her most important work was her own clear, direct, comprehensive little girl's vision of the New York Society lives." (7) Dissatisfied with social life and disillusioned with marriage, Edith also illuminates the repressiveness of American upper class and the conflict between the inner self and social convention in most of her works. She also shows her concern for the status of women and endorses female's struggle to forge their identities outside accepted social boundaries. Elizabeth Ammons has commented that Edith Wharton's fiction "is both a record of one brilliant and intellectually independent woman's thinking about women and a map of feminism's ferment and failure in America in the decades surrounding the Great War".

2. Wharton Study at Home and Abroad

In the 1970s, R. W. B. Lewis, representative of the biographical wrote an important biography on Edith Wharton emphasizing that Wharton drew upon her life for fiction and in her later years drew upon her fiction for her life. He tends to identify most of the protagonists in Wharton's novels with Wharton herself. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's work is psycho-biographical. She contends that Wharton's early fear of her mother caused repression and as a result limited her fiction of the early stage and that after her mother died and after she experienced her affairs with Morton Fullerton, Wharton was able to develop sexually and her fiction matured as well. With the development of women rights movement, Wharton's works received many feminist critics' attention. Margret B. McDowell, one of the most famous feminist critics, is the first one to analyze Wharton from the perspective of Feminism. Elizabeth Ammons acknowledges Wharton's attack on the patriarchal repression of women in her work *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. She also suggests that Wharton's progressive argument with America declined in her later novels in that she allowed her women characters to be content with domestic life. In the 1990s, Wharton scholarship continued to expand in various directions as Wharton's novels are read in

relation to other writers, to literary traditions, gender, race, class, religion, ethnology and language etc. Mary E. Papke made a parallel study of Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin, in which she views both as radical writers who articulate desires and challenge authority, but their characters gain autonomy at the cost of alienation. Elaine Showalter asserts that Wharton subverts the sentimental literary tradition by dealing with heterosexual relationship between men and women.

The abundance of Wharton criticism demonstrates the importance and the complexity of Edith Wharton as a distinguished writer. However despite the vast insightful criticism that keeps emerging, especially the prevailing of feminist perspectives of Wharton's works, the condition of the male as individual in a repressive social system that represented in Wharton's novels has not been sufficiently explored. Geoffrey Walton maintains that Wharton's central interest as a novelist remains social. Richard H. Lawson wrote that Wharton was a feminist only in a limited way because class division to her was more important than sex inequality and Wharton did not deal kindly with the members of her own sex as they appeared in her fiction. Marilyn French renounced the complaints about Wharton's ineffectual treatment of men characters by arguing that she was sympathetic to many her male characters. Julie Olin-Ammentorp claims that Wharton challenged the feminist criticism by demonstrating that the social structures of Wharton's fictional world caused male wasted as well as female. By analyzing the death of Lily, Elaine Showalter observes the Wharton developed a full cast of male characters whose dilemmas parallel those of women. But they did not observe Wharton's consistent concern about the male's living condition and their struggle for ideal existence and the failure of their struggle which is usually due to both the weakness of their own as well as the repressive society.

3. Factors Contributing to Wharton's Duplicious Voice

Between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, Edith depicted the dark world in the US. The upper class of old New York society into which Edith Wharton was born provides her with an abundance of material for her writing. Just as Louis Auchincloss has believed that "what was to have a much greater influence on Edith Jones as a writer, and to supply her with the subject material for her most important work was her own clear, direct, comprehensive little girl's vision of the New York Society lives." (Auchincloss 7) Dissatisfied with social life and disillusioned with marriage, Edith also illuminates the repressiveness of American upper class and the conflict between the inner self and social convention in most of her works. She also shows her concern for the status of women and endorses female's struggle to forge their identities outside accepted social boundaries. Elizabeth Ammons has commented that Edith Wharton's fiction "is both a record of one brilliant and intellectually independent woman's thinking about women and a map of feminism's ferment and failure in America in the decades surrounding the Great War". Virginia Woolf says, "Faithfulness to one's own experience in the texts is the best of success." (Zhang, 1998).

Wharton is exactly such a writer. From the very beginning, the novel has aroused incessant interests among critics. Among them, the most notable ones have focused on "the frustration and futility of Newland Archer's empty life caused by the weight of social inhibitions". Some criticisms have investigated the unwritten laws, the prevalence of silence and the "hieroglyphic world" of old New York represented in the novel, "where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs". Others raise issues of "Puritanism and morality": they suggest that a buried life like Newland can well contain a Puritanical element. They agree that the Puritanical aspect of the tradition of New York emerges strongly in *The Age of Innocence*. In general, we are easy to find that their attentions are put mainly on the male protagonist, the old New York society, the relationship between the male protagonist and the mores and conventions of old New York society. Few critics have cared about the female protagonists of the novel, and their social status, their psychology, their pursuit of self-identity. If we examine the novel in detail from the perspective of a female, then we will have a completely different world before us. Based on the feminine consciousness, this thesis attempts to analyze the novel through a detailed textual study and through a combination of Wharton's life and writing experience. It comes to the conclusion that there is the existence of feminine consciousness in the novel, just as Woolf clearly point out that social circumstances have a profound influence on women's writing. She says, Literature, particularly literature by women, cannot be evaluated apart from the historical, economic, political, psychological conditions which produce it. Women have always been prevented from writing and constrained from thinking by social circumstances, which deprived them of adequate education and denied them equal opportunities to publication. Such conditions have profound effects upon the psychology of women and therefore on the quantity and the quality of literature they produce.

3.1 Living and Writing with Feminine Consciousness

According to Elaine Showalter, "feminist criticism in the 1970s and 1980s has established the importance of

women's personal experience in relation to their artistic opportunities and choices". Many aspects of women's lives will affect the way they shape their literary careers, including their "childhood, relationships with mothers and fathers, sexuality, decisions about marriage and maternity, friendship with other women [and] the aging process". Therefore, combing a detailed study of Wharton's life and writing experience with a thorough analysis of the novel will help us to have a deeper understanding of the novel.

Elaine Showalter argues that the mad wife locked in the attic in *Jane Eyre*, "symbolizes the passionate and sexual side of Jane's personality, an alter ego that her upbringing, her religion, and her society have commanded her to incarcerate". Similarly, Ellen's being expelled out of the family and her expatriation to France in *The Age of Innocence* symbolize the passionate and rebellious side of Edith Wharton's personality. There are many similarities between Edith and Ellen: both are despised as alien by traditional people, both are self-conscious and independent in spirit and soul, both have unhappy marriage and have asked for divorce, both have expatriated to France in search of self, etc. In some degree, Ellen is a substitute for Edith Wharton.

Edith Wharton's life and writing experience offers excellent notations on the way women are affected by historical events, material changes and shifts in social and legal matters. Therefore, we can identify the feminine consciousness from Edith Wharton's life experience and her writing experience as well. How has she shifted from a shy and not pretty girl to a mature and independent woman with self-confidence and self-assurance, and even to one of the great female writers in American literature? This chapter tries to pinpoint the feminine consciousness and its influence on Edith's life and writing from the following perspective: Edith's awakening to the intellectual life and owning a room of her own.

3.2 Getting Out of the Confinement

Being one of the fashionable homes in Washington Square, Edith Wharton's family was "bastions of tradition but not necessarily of culture" (Showalter, 1985). The great books in their libraries often went unread, and European diversions such as music and art were not part of the fashionable life until much later. A lady of old New York, Edith Wharton was educated to conform to the social conventions, which "prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House" (Showalter, 1985). Her parents preferred that their daughter follow the convention by marrying, having children, and accepting the social responsibilities of women of her class. Instead of following the determined course, Edith Wharton lived a different life.

For a female of old New York, Edith was essentially trained to regard herself as an ornament of society. She was educated that her appearance and her grasp of the skill of adornment were most important for a female. Just as a scene described in her autobiography *A Backward Glance*:

It was always an event in the little girl's life to take a walk with her father, and more particularly so today, because she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful that for the first time she woke to *the importance of dress*, and of herself as *a subject for adornment*—so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine me in the little girl's vague (Wharton, 1975).

As a result, she also puts much emphasis on her appearance in her first two encounters with Henry James, a famous writer she had admired for a long time. Edith herself characterized their first meetings as her attempts to woo him as a woman might traditionally do to a man. Therefore, she hoped to impress this revered writer by appearing as pretty and fashionable as possible:

I could hardly believe that such a privilege could befall me, and I could think of only one way of deserving it—to put on my newest Doucet dress and to try to look my prettiest!...[because] those were the principles in which I had been brought up, and it would never have occurred to me that I had anything but my youth, and my pretty frock, to commend me to the man whose shoe-strings I thought myself unworthy to unloose...But, it [my new dress and good-looking] neither gave me the courage to speak, nor attracted the attention of the great man. (Wharton, 1996).

In their next encounter, Edith had made the same mistake: she thought once more that how she could make herself pretty enough for Henry James to notice her. Despite a beautiful new hat, their second meeting "fell as flat as the first". (Wharton, 1996) Finally, it was Edith's historical novel, *The Valley OF Decision* (1902), set in eighteenth-century Italy, accomplished what the new dress and the beautiful hat had failed to do—it captured James's attention. Doucet frocks and beautiful hats were replaced by expressions of intelligence and literary force. This book echoed both Edith Wharton's search for identity and the trauma of the twentieth century's birth into modernism. In praising her efforts with the novel, James urged her to "Do New York! The first-hand account is precious". And he expressed his desire "earnestly, tenderly, intelligently to admonish you, while you are young, free, expert, exposed..." (Lewis, 1975). This makes Edith realize that the beauty and dress are not the essentials

for a female, and the intellect is equally important to her.

Katherine Joslin notes that Edith Wharton's "awakening" to intellectual and literary life came in her contacts with her friends who shared her interests, including Henry James. The friendships have had "the stimulating and enlightening influence" on her, eliminated her "intellectual isolation" from her childhood to youth, and immersed her into an atmosphere of "the rarest understanding, the richest and most varied mental comradeship". (Wharton, 1996) With the help of her friends, she was conscious of the restrictions imposed on female by male society, and tried to condemn the tradition of teaching privileged women to be strictly ornamental beings. As implied in a parable entitled "The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems":

Once upon a time, a number of children lived together in the valley of Childish Things, playing all manner of delightful games, and studying the same lesson books. But one day a little girl...decided that it was time to see something of the world...as none of the other children cared to leave their games, she set out alone the climb the pass which led out of the valley. It was a hard climb, but at length she reached a cold bleak tableland beyond the mountains. Here she saw cities and men, and learned many useful arts, and in so doing grew to be a woman. (Fryer 99-100)

This is a story Edith Wharton would retell throughout her life. She also left "the Valley", where women were expected to be pure and innocent as children. She mapped out her own spaces, both figuratively---in her books, and literally---in her own houses in Massachusetts and in France. There, she began to build up confidence, recognize her own value, seize her own identity and create her own world.

3.3 *Having a Room of Her Own*

For a long period of time, women writers were excluded by custom and education from achieving distinction in poetry, history or drama, etc. Women's literature had been thought to be too much a literature of imitation. Like the Romans in the shadow of Greece, women were overshadowed by male cultural imperialism, just like George Henry Lewes have argued that: "If women's literature is destined to have a different collective character from that of men, much longer time is necessary that has yet elapsed before it can emancipate itself from the influence of accepted models, and guide itself by its own impulses." Therefore, women writers had a hard struggle to overcome the influence of male literary tradition, to create an original and independent art, and to write as women. Inevitably, Edith Wharton's "literary sophistication" was also thought to have a strong resemblance with that of Henry James. (Bell 4) When *The Greater Inclination*, her first collection of short stories was published, some reviewers formed "a critical chain gang" in agreeing that she was James's imitator and his literary heiress---they thought that she copied his choice of motives and even his style. She could not shake the shadow of Henry James in the eyes of reviewer until the publication of *The Age of Innocence*. The assertion annoyed Edith Wharton greatly, she once complained in a letter to Scribner's editor, W. C. Brownell: "The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can't read, much as I delight in the man) makes me feel rather hopeless".²¹ After many year's struggle, Edith Wharton has managed to break the spell, formed her own writing styles and techniques, and grew up to be an independent and sophisticated woman writer. *The Age of Innocence* has won the Pulitzer Prize for being "the American novel published during the year which best presented the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners". (Bell, 1955) From the perspective of a female, Edith Wharton offered us a fresh and profound view of the old New York society of the late 19th century.

On the other hand, Edith's intellect and her aspiration for writing made her an anomaly, even an embarrassment to her conventionally minded family and society. The conventional old New York society included no female novelists in its ranks. Indeed, the society relegated writers and artists to the margins of its world. The old New York society and her family even despised her writing as something disgraceful, and tried to stifle her literary talent. Her literary success meant little to Edith's social standing in New York. Among her relations it caused puzzlement and embarrassment, and in her own family it created constraints increasing with the years, just as she described in her autobiography:

None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame---the simply *ignore* them...the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of *family disgrace*, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten...At first I had felt this indifference acutely; by now I no longer cared, for my recognition as a writer *had transformed my life*. I had made my own friends, and my books were beginning to serve as an introduction to my fellow-writers (Wharton, 1996).

Edith Wharton's depression, frustration and her longing for being acknowledged are implied in many of her works. The most famous one is the image depicted in a short story, "The Fullness of Life" (1891).

A woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms, there is the hall through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits;...but beyond that...are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whether they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes (Wharton, 1996).

This great house reveals Edith Wharton's mentality in these years and her longing for being recognized as a female writer, and being known to the public.

Nevertheless, she never gives up her passion, and pursues her dream with fiercer determination. She believes that she can seek her self-identity as a female living in the old New York and find her own position, rather than being merely an ornament of the male-centered society. When she was thirty-seven years old, Edith Wharton published her first book of short stories. Virginia Woolf had narrated the hardships women writers had to suffer: "In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room of a sound-proof room, was out of the question...since her pin money, which depended on the good will of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed, she was debarred from such alleviations as came even to Keats or Tennyson or Carlyle...from the separate lodging which... sheltered them from the claims and tyrannies of their families."

With the same reason, Edith Wharton also craved for a room of her own, or a place to "make up" stories. And she made it. In 1901, she began to build a magnificent home, the Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts. The bedrooms on the second floor suggest considerable privacy: Edith Wharton placed herself in a separate wing, consisting of her bedroom, bathroom and boudoir, and it could be closed off from the rest of the house. It gradually became her refuge from society, even from her husband, and her spiritual haven, a sacred ground for the creation of her fiction. In her discussion of the architecture of The Mount, Sarah Luria claims that it reveals "an inwardly projected domestic order that seems determined to probe the inner life as it is to defend its sanctity". She argues that Wharton's domesticity is inseparable from her work and the design of her house made possible the space she needed to create her life's work. The Mount allows Wharton to maintain private space in her own home.

Apart from the private room, Wharton was overwhelmed by the longing to create an intellectual and literary circle of her own, full of people with the same interests. As she narrated in *A Backward Glance*, "what I wanted above all was to get to know other writers, to be welcomed among people who lived for the things I had always secretly lived for" (Wharton, 1996). Generally speaking, Edith Wharton had created her own world materially and mentally: she had possessed a room of her own, and she had established herself in a circle of cultivated and like-minded men and women who found intelligence and artistic creativity acceptable feminine attributes.

4. Conclusion

Anyway, the strategy of discourse Wharton employs helps her survive as a writer in a male-dominated society and also sets up a model for later women writers who challenge phallogocentrism. Wharton puts feminism to the fore in her works by disclosing the factors causing women's "other" status, which has been ignored by male writers, thus making contemporary women think about their marginal state and encouraging them to challenge existing cultural norms. She herself, as a victim of patriarchy just like other women, is fully aware of the hostile male literary fathers; thus she takes a duplicitous strategy to express her resistance to patriarchy: the silence and suppression of females in male-dominated society on the one hand, the awakening and fighting of females influenced by a rational tradition on the other hand. Due to Wharton's contribution, later women writers such as Charlotte Bronte can clearly put forward women's demand for equality and still later writer Mrs. Gaskell can go further by letting her heroine seek self-identity in the society. We can say Wharton also enables Virginia Woolf to discuss the factors causing women's dependent state, to claim there is a female literary tradition and to point out clearly the obstacles a female writer confronts: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Cubar say, "These women writers were confronted with the same obstacles which made them adopt similar approach to express their ideas. The similarity among them formed women's literary tradition." (Cheng, 2001) Wharton makes a great contribution to the construction of feminine literary tradition and the development of feminist literature; in many ways, she is a pre-feminist, no wonder Bell says, "Edith Wharton saw herself... as an intellectual, interested in her culture in a broad sense--in question of nationality and sociology and history as these affected all mankind, male and female." (Bell, 1955).

Reference

- Ammons, E. (1980). *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Auchincloss, L. (1961). *Edith Wharton*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Bell, M. (1955). *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Bloom, H. (1998). *Twentieth-century American Literature*. New York: Chelsea.
- Cheng, X. (2001). Angel and Demon: analysis of *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Foreign Literature.
- Hawthorn, J. (1984). *Criticism and Critical Theory*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd.
- Lewis, R. W. B. (1975). *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper&Row.
- Showalter, E. (1985). *The Feminist Critical Revolution*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Wharton, E. (1996). *The Age of Innocence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Zhang, Y. B. (1998). *Literary Theory of Feminism*. Shandong Education Press.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).