

# A PLETHORA OF LITERARY VOICES

in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

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Early critics of Edith Wharton's most famous novel often lamented its alleged fascination with mere superficialities of taste, conduct, and culture. But just as protagonist Newland Archer radically misreads the apparently unknowing May Welland, so the novel's early reception mistook representation for endorsement. In the essay that follows, Katie MacDonald goes a long way toward redressing the notion that Wharton's many literary references and allusions evince a habit akin to her characters' ceaseless name-dropping. Though Newland may believe that he "controls May's access to literature," that May chooses the work of Robert Browning over the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the latter tellingly penned by the poet's future wife and recommended by May's future husband, suggests an independence of thought Newland lacks; as the author argues, Newland may be a wide reader intrigued by new knowledge, but his views seem non-existent without the support of a John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, or Countess Olenska. In this and other ways, Wharton's "plethora of literary voices" challenges a reading too-long shaped by the woman behind the work, revealing instead an author more critical of than complicit in *The Age of Innocence* she represents.

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Many rhetorical effects can be achieved by implementing allusions in a text. But in order for an allusion to be effective, it is often believed that a reader must be able to identify the original text and contextualize the reference. In *Reading Poetry: An Introduction*, Tom Furniss and Michael Bath define intertextuality as a “politically enabling concept for writers from marginalized groups,” because the reader must only be “alert to the range of discourses which animate our contemporary culture” (410-11), meaning that the simple awareness of an allusion heightens a reader’s understanding. This notion of reader awareness is essential to the development of themes in a literary text because individual readers can be active participants in the text, altering the intended perception depending on the extent of their literary backgrounds. In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton paints a portrait of individuals living within a highly structured society. Wharton alludes to numerous literary and artistic works, but it is her allusions to works of fiction that enhance and complicate the notion that individuals are not necessarily reflections of society.

Throughout most of the novel, Newland Archer sees his fiancée, May Welland, as a reflection of their society. To Newland, May does not have agency. She is referred to

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as a “young creature” and as a “terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in” (Wharton 35). As far as Newland is concerned, May is a mirror image of New York society. Wharton feeds this perception of her as Newland acts as May’s mentor. The reader learns that “she had advanced far enough to join him in ridiculing the *Idyls of the King*, but not to feel the beauty of *Ulysses* and the *Lotus Eaters*” (37). Wharton’s allusions to these texts are beneficial because, through them, the reader understands that Newland controls May’s access to literature and that, at that point in the narrative, he shares the same views as the rest of New York. In this instance, it is not essential that the reader has read these texts. Readers can conclude that Newland limits May’s understanding because they know that Newland is well read, yet he only allows May to read certain pieces of literature. Because female characters seem to have limited educational resources, the notion that individuals can exist within a given environment becomes complicated. It is, however, noteworthy that May does not have the “time to do more than look at the little vellum book that Archer had sent her the week before (the ‘*Sonnets from the Portuguese*’); but she was learning by heart ‘*How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*’” (116). May shows little interest

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in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love poems, yet she takes the time to try and memorize Robert Browning's poem about a journey. Juxtaposing these two pieces of literature, written by two poets who eventually marry one another, provides insight into May's state of awareness, which the narrator does not divulge explicitly, because the narrative is told from Newland's perspective. The reader knows that Newland provides May with both pieces of literature, yet her interest in Robert Browning's poem indicates her potential awareness of Newland's desires for life outside of New York.

While literary resources for May are limited, Wharton has a multitude of resources at her disposal with which she can define her characters. Upon entering Ellen Olenska's home, Newland discovers many interesting works of art. Based on Ellen's home décor, the reader can assume that Ellen is a reflection of her society. Having spent most of her time in Europe, her tastes and mannerisms result from her environment. The reader knows that Ellen sees New York as "heaven" (15), yet she cannot seem to adapt to its social standards, as shown through her clothing, which "many people . . . were disappointed . . . was not more 'stylish' - for stylishness was what New York most valued" (50). While Ellen is aware that she is a reflection of her

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upbringing, Newland becomes less and less aware of his lack of individuality. He observes Ellen not through his own eyes, but rather he draws his conclusions through texts he has read: “Newland Archer prided himself on his knowledge of Italian art” because “he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee’s ‘Euphorion,’ the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called ‘The Renaissance’ by Walter Pater” (57). Based on these references, the reader can determine that Newland is a product of his upbringing; the art “bewildered him” (57) because he did not have the voices of these experts telling him what to think.

Newland, however, is also able to distance himself from New York society through literature. The narrator reveals that “literature and art were deeply respected in the Archer set” (83) and, by alluding to certain texts and authors, makes clear to the reader that only a specific type of literature is valued by the Archer household. The reader discovers that “Mrs. Archer was always at pains to tell her children how much more agreeable and cultivated society had been when it included such figures as Washington Irving, Fitz-Greene Halleck and the poet of ‘The Culprit Fay’” (83). Mrs. Archer’s generation clearly values American literature, and she raises her children to

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appreciate it as well. Newland differs from his environment in that he is not only aware of other ways of life but also “had often pictured to himself what it would have been to live in the intimacy of drawing-rooms dominated by the talk of Mérimée . . . , Thackeray, Browning, or William Morris” (84). Through these examples of European writers, the reader can conclude that Newland actively educates himself on life outside of New York. Newland is interested in Ellen and her neighbours partly because they value - and can help expand his awareness of - these works reflective of societies beyond his own. The reader learns that Ellen’s choice of fiction “whetted Archer’s interest with such new names as those of Paul Bourget, Huysmans, and the Goncourt brothers” (84). Archer’s interest in the new and unfamiliar increases his interest in Ellen because he has the opportunity to learn with her. He does not feel that May has anything to teach him, because he believes that he must educate her.

One of the last references to fictional texts occurs during Newland and May’s honeymoon, after Newland decides “there was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free” (160). Newland attends a dinner in London, without May, where he meets the tutor M. Rivière - the essence of all

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that Newland desires to be. M. Rivière “frequent[s] the Goncourt *grenier*, [is] advised by Maupassant not to attempt to write (even that seemed to Archer a dazzling honour!), and . . . often talk[s] with Mérimée in his mother’s house” (164). This instance of allusion reveals much about Newland’s failings: he cannot see that absorption of culture does not guarantee a fulfilling life. He is envious of the tutor, but the tutor does not make any major contributions of his own. Rivière’s environment has also shaped him, and he has merely interacted with those whom Newland admires. Newland simply desires what he does not have; it is unclear whether or not a life like M. Rivière’s, or a life with Ellen, will actually satisfy him. Newland has the freedom that he believes his wife does not have, but he has no idea how to exercise it.

Wharton refers to many works of art in *The Age of Innocence*, creating a realistic environment for the reader to analyze, but it is her use of works of fiction that emphasizes the complex relationship between individuals and their environments. On the one hand, readers can observe May’s limitations through her controlled access to literature, but they can also see that she has a strong understanding of the texts she reads in that she emphasizes the importance of certain texts over others. On the other

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hand, readers must analyze Newland's complex relationship with literature. He has access to a wider range of texts, but he has a hard time identifying himself within the context of these works. Wharton uses works of fiction to create a dichotomy between European and New York societies, and Newland is never quite sure where he fits, which could suggest to readers that it should not be a dichotomy at all - the individual exists within a given environment.

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