

# Interpreting *The Age of Innocence*: Unmasking Its Deception and Hypocrisy Through Zizek's Psychological Criticism

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**Abstract**—Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* displays vividly the social landscape of the upper class in Old New York and thus she is listed as a realistic writer. However, sensitive readers could recognize the characters' artificial innocence and exquisite pretense behind the realistic depiction. This paper would reveal and unmask its deception and hypocrisy through Slavoj Zizek's psychological criticism. The aim is to expose the purposes of Wharton's writing — a calling for returning to the nature, the essence of reality.

**Keywords:** The Age of Innocence, deception, unmasking, Zizek's critical theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton writes "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by an arbitrary sign" [1]. Wharton, following Henry James as a member of Realism, depicts every aspect of Old New York society from courtesy to interrelationship, from ethic to morality, and from apparel to taste. Through this kind of verisimilitude, the "Gilded" Age of America has been constructed and portrayed, and only when "looking awry" (a concept borrowed from Slavoj Zizek), the covert of hieroglyphic world could be removed and the essence of reality could be exhumed, leaving the emergency of Wharton's ironic devices — signifiers are not fixed on signified. Thus, this paper would point out the deceptive and hypocritical features in the so-called upper class in *The Age of Innocence* by deconstructing "hieroglyphics", through analyzing the characters' psychological mechanism. It would open with an overview of Zizek's idea, then the paper divides the analyses into three parts: things losing use value, inextricable the big other and the "sublimity" undertaken by imaged-self. Then it reaches to the hypocrisy and fragility of the upper class's sublimity, which unveils the moralizing function of a realistic text — Wharton's calling of a return to original simplicity, human nature.

## II. A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO ZIZEK'S PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

It is difficult to reveal and testify deception and hypocrisy of a group or a single person, under the mask of sublimity and elegance so it could resort to explore the network among self, other, inner mind and outside world in the text. Jacques Lacan uses semiology based on Saussure and post-structuralism to further interpret process of human psychology. In his theory, he insistently purports the idea of three orders — the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real — rather than traditional binary opposition. Additionally, the unconsciousness, in Lacan's famous slogan, is structured like a language. The meaning of the language, that is to say, is a network of differences. There is a perpetual barrier between signifier and signified [2]. Zizek, as a successor of Lacan, his psychological criticism is based on that core so that there is no definite opposition between subject and object. The relationship between subject and object must be interrupted by a mediator, that is, desire, the big other, or fantasy. In this circumstance, the recognition of the outside world is not as simple as one to one correspondence, from signifiers to signify directly. Thus, what we see on the surface in daily life is no more than dissimulation of the real world and the realness should depend on the inner mind. More importantly, as American literary has a tendency to explore inward since its creation; this paper would reinterpret *The Age of Innocence*, through psychoanalysis mainly on the basis of Zizek's Lacanian theory in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. With regard to *The Age of Innocence*, nobody is completely innocent as all the characters disguise in the type of "innocence" or "highbrow" to sustain the precarious traditional morality and interests.

## III. THINGS LOSING USE VALUE TO REALIZE THE CHARACTERS' DESIRE

According to Zizek, "the way an everyday object destined to satisfy some of our needs undergoes a kind of transubstantiation as soon as it is caught in the dialectic of demand and ends up producing desire" [3]. That is, for a

certain person or group, things lose its "use value", driven by desire (a sort of unconsciousness), and would become the embodiment of "exchange value", which indicates the fluidity of signifiers. This chapter would disclose the desire, an interloper between subject and object.

For the upper class in *The Age of Innocence*, elaborations of rooms, furnishings, clothes, ornaments, menus, parties, pastimes, visits, opera going, even the guest list ticked off with Mrs. Archer's sharp gold pen or spouses all lose the function of use value, which turns into the container of its master's rivalry and vanity, an embodiment of desire. In the text, Wharton depicts Archer as a gentle possessing his box at the opera house, using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, wearing white-waistcoats and fresh gardenia in his buttonhole [4]. Although he believes that he is far more superior than his appearance since he "had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world" [5]. He would not abandon those pretentious baubles as they together represent New York. By emulating the fashion prompted by Lawrence Lefferts, the foremost authority on "form", Archer realizes his desire to keep connection with Old New York, in which vanity is at gamble all the time. Furthermore, even literary creation could not elude the destiny to serve for people's desire. Ned Winsett, an acquaintance of Archer, was a pure man of letters but the world he was born in needs no letter but commodity so after publishing one volume of brief and exquisite literary appreciations that almost no one reads, he took a position in a women's weekly, where "fashion-plates and paper patterns alternated with New England love-stories and advertisements of temperance drinks" [6]. The popularity of fashion magazine taking place of pure literature means desire encroaching people's spiritual consumption.

The object cause of desire, the object of a surplus of jouissance (enjoyment in English) is called "objet petit a" (small object in English) by Lacan. The objet petit has no representation as it lacks a specular image and will forever hinder the efforts of the most determined photographer [7]. The process of Archer's crush on May explicates how invisible desire plays between subject and object. In this relationship, May plays the role of settlement of Archer's desire as it is said in the beginning of the novel, when contemplating her absorbed young face, he arouses "a thrill of possessorship" and "satisfied vanity" in which his own "masculine initiation" [1] could be displayed completely. Moreover, what he loves and needs is not an individual of flesh and blood, but an actualization of his desire for a perfect wife. It gives a description that "it was undoubtedly gratifying to be the husband of one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York, especially she was also one of the sweetest-tempered and most reasonable of wives" [1]. In his view, marriage is only an indispensable component of his life which should be in line with conformity, so it seems that May is perfect to realize his desire.

People's behaviors in *Old New York society* are mingling with desire so what appears on the surface is not as simple as it seems like. Only if we are able to understand the mechanism

of desire between subject and object, could we see deception and hypocrisy of the upper class. Likewise, as Lacan states, "desire is the desire of the other" [4] for desire is projected to the others rather than inside our self [5]. It points out that our desire actually belongs to others as we try our utmost to realize the desire in order to attain others' recognition. Like Mr. Beaufort, the new money in the society, buys a large property to complete his desire for recognition from the old aristocracy. In human beings, the satisfaction of necessities, of life itself, goes through a system of symbolic exchanges, through a discourse and a social bond induced and commanded by the big other [4].

#### IV. INEXTRICABLE THE BIG OTHER TO SUSTAIN THE SUPERFICIAL "INNOCENCE"

"The big other" is referred as symbolic order — "the field of etiquette, social rules and manners" [3] and it designates precisely the agency that decides instead of us [3]. Regarding to *The Age of Innocence*, Old New York becomes a sort of Lacanian fantasyland governed by unrelenting and underlying symbolic order, the big other that both controls and is sustained by its members.

May is bred up and shaped with social protocol as Wharton affirms that "she has been such a successful creation of factitious purity so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers, aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" [1]. That is to say, her innocence is deceptive, a disguise which Old New York asks her to be in. In the text, May's cheek flushes several times — "a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek" when she sees the lovers on the stage [1]; "Miss Welland's face grew rosy as the dawn" when hearing Archer's request to announce their engagement at the ball [1]; After being kissed by Archer, the blood rose to her face [1] again. The big Other asks a lady to be shy and restrained at certain circumstance so May conceals her nature and acts like that, which would lead her to wear a mask constantly.

The culmination of the characters' subjugation to the big other comes when talking about the superficial ideal marriage between Archer and May. The background of the story is set in the late nineteenth during which thoughts and ways of Victorian age has been profoundly rooted in people's mind even in American upper class. According to Victorian norms, the big other at that time, people are conservative about sexuality. Men, who categorize themselves into the genteel class, are too "upright" to reveal sexual desire while women, as an incarnation of "angels at home", are supposed to have little, or better no sexual desire. As it depicts in the chapter 8, Ellen touches Archer's knee lightly with her plumed fan as if a caress thrilled him [1]. That lascivious flirting action takes place in Beaufort's dance room, a public place. In this way, for Archer, Ellen symbolizes a kind of sexual desire which he dares not face straight or his society will not allow him to. Contrarily, May, as mentioned before, is "pure" and "innocent", and through marriage with her, Archer feels safe to "ally himself with one of his own kind" [1]. Moreover, his mother, Mrs. Archer, considers some women are ensnaring and it is blessing to see her son past the

Siren Isle and enter into blameless domesticity [1]. Hence, that is why Archer chooses to maintain the engagement with May even he knows Ellen is his actual love, which manifests that the system of ideas of his class takes full charge of Archer's mindset and makes the grim separation between Eros and collective morality [6].

As for May, symbolic order also prevents her from debunking Archer's deception and renders her to endure monogamy without love. More precisely, "in the prudent old New York way", it is better to "keep on the surface" [1], not uncover a scandal to cause unpleasure. Therefore, more than 30 years later, Archer just realizes May knows his love affair with Ellen from their son, Dallas. Susan Goodman notes that as if only a lifetime of inarticulation can maintain the type of innocence necessary to sustain traditional regulations such as "fidelity" and "morality" [7]. Worst of all, at the end of the story, choosing not to reunite with Ellen manifests his passion is reduced to nothingness. Union with Ellen, once prohibited by commitment of marriage, now is prohibited by the big other, which confines and defeats him completely.

Dissimulation controlled by the big other has resulted in an ideal female image, a refusal of desire as well as a successful marriage [8]. From the fact that the big other is just an illusion masking the radical contingency of the real, that we could simply suspend this "illusion" and "see things as they really are" [3].

#### V. THE "SUBLIMITY" UNDERTAKEN BY IMAGED-SELF IN OLD NEW YORK

By "pretending to be something", by "acting as if we were something", we assume a certain place in the intersubjective symbolic network, and it is this external place that defines our true position [3]. That idea can date back to Lacan's Mirror Image. When a baby looks at himself in the mirror, he could not recognize himself from his mother at the first stage. Moving to the second stage, he realizes the image is himself but identifies it with fantasy and then causes a misunderstanding (alienation) — mix him with the imaged-self. To explain it easily, Zizek says a king is not inborn to be a king but the title makes him to be.

Thus, everyone in Old New York is undergoing a role play every day. The final deception is that social appearance is deceitful, for in the social-symbolic reality things ultimately are precisely what they pretend to be [3]. Take Archer's taste, in the name of "highbrow", as an example, he just beckons that a man like him should equip with taste such as literature, music and fashion. The imaged-self which he creates with fantasy is equivalent to his real-self. Likewise, he claims repeatedly that "Women should be free — as free as we are" [1]. Such claim was in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together to the old pattern [1]. He thinks a man like himself should bestow such a chivalrous argument, but in his heart, he denies that idea. Similarly, before Archer and May's wedding, the family is worried about the mob of newspaper reporters fighting to get near the bride, May and therefore, May's photo will be printed on the newspapers next day.

However, Mrs. Archer claims that the "aristocracy" is a journalistic invention, wealthy society needs the press to represent it is exclusively to the outer world [9]. The newspapers printed May's photo next day—in a white wedding dress, pure, decent and beautiful—that is, the big family is actually afraid of photos showing embarrassed and inappropriate behaviors to break the divine images they have created in front of the public. If the photos are compatible with their imaged-self, they will not refuse to make them public.

More importantly, people from the upper class identify themselves with god instead of human-being, which leads them to wear a mask of deity every day. For most ladies, they place themselves on the position of divine and inviolability and immerse their imaged-self on the altar. Only Ellen, the expatriate, as well as Beaufort, the new money, reveals their human nature. May is an incarnation of Diana (her Greek name is Artemis), dressing up in "white and silver" [1], with "Diana-like aloofness" [1], "a look of indestructible youthfulness made her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure" [1]. Artemis, a word derived from *artemēs*, which means uninjured, healthy and vigorous, is like her twin brother, Apollo, unmarried, never conquered by love [10]. In the text, May resembles a marble statue never showing grief, gleaming with awesomeness and sublimity, rendering Archer to doubt that "niceness carried to that supreme degree were only a negation and the curtain which he had never lifted dropped before an emptiness" [1]. Throughout his life and marriage, he fails to explore what is behind the mask of goddess, the mask of created elegance.

What impressed he most is that through the discrepancy between Ellen and others in the pantheon, Archer feels that he is a human-being, who is inescapable of emotion, passion, aging and death [11]. It is Ellen's word — "For their great influence; that they make themselves so rare" [1] — that points out the essence of stately van der Luydens, resulting in the collapse of van der Luydens' deity and inaccessibility at a stroke. It illustrates Archer's epiphany that people should have returned to human nature for the imaged divinity shrouds realness and brings about hypocrisy. With the means of this irony between deity and mortality, Wharton subverts the heroic narrative, further disrupting the "sublimity" of Old New York.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Some critics see *The Age of Innocence* as a naturalist novel as they are discouraged by the thought that all the frankness and innocence was only an artificial product. The characters' personality is never frank and innocent; "it was full of the twist and defenses of an instinctive guile" [1]. However, different from definite hopelessness and helplessness, *The Age of Innocence* offers the audience a relief at last, making them believe the world would be better. The new order is being constructed and taking place of the old one, which could get from the marriage between Dallas, Archer's son and Beaufort's daughter. Since all the way through, Beauforts are outcast from Old New York. Their squeeze into the upper class depends on capitals rather than

ancestors. Also, Mr. Beaufort is unable to hold back his sexual desire, leaving many love affairs. That blemishes the family name. Archers' family would be willing to accept a Beaufort, which indicates the influence of the big other is weakening and the superficial sublimity is fading. It is a realistic text that would prefer to show the function of moralization. Moreover, realism would display the superficial details through irony, which gives the audience an opportunity to explore the realness behind the role play of elegance.

Thus, by understanding the text from a realistic writing, it is easier to recognize its power of revelation. As a member from the upper class, Wharton has a kind of nostalgia for the old day on the one hand; she is also critical of the pretentious elegance among her people. It may expose the purposes of Wharton's writing — a verisimilitude depiction of the world in her childhood and more importantly, a calling for returning to the human-being. Due to the impact of romanticism, human-beings immerse themselves in a sort of idealism that equals themselves to pure, impeccable and invincible idols. It makes the society adorned with deception and hypocrisy. Wharton, driven by the vocation of a realistic writer, expresses realistic novels' function of moralization on the audience, by pointing out that do not takes the position of deity and return to the human nature, the essence of reality.

In conclusion, as American literary has a tendency to explore inward since its creation, this paper interprets the realistic novel, *The Age of Innocence*, from factors which influences and interrupts self. By introducing the concept of desire, it illustrates the mental activity of the characters clearly. On the one hand, the desire of rivalry and emulation results in their exquisite physical appearance. On the other hand, women become an agent to settle masculine charm and desire. Then the big other helps maintain the marriage between May and Archer, making the latter escape from the embodiment of sexuality, Ellen. Furthermore, characters are alienated by the imaged-self, which makes them lose their nature. By the dialectical opposition between deity and mortal, Wharton shows her attitude of anti-heroic narrative. In these three perspectives, the deception and hypocrisy of the genteel class are shown incisively. In other word, *The Age of Innocence* is never an age of innocence. The characters are complicated and scheming as it says in the novel "everything may be labelled- but everybody not" [1].

As McParland says, *The Age of Innocence* speaks of human society throughout time and beckons us to think through, suspense disbelief by which we imagine and experience another time [12]. More precisely, it leads us to reflect the age of ours. Only when looking away, the spot covered on the things can be removed and we could learn the work of self and other is influenced by desire, the big other and fantasy. The deception and hypocrisy could be able to be disclosed and behind it, that is the realness.

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