

# *On the Perspective of Marriage in “The Age of Innocence”*

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**Abstract**—Edith Wharton’s novels are famous for the real reproduction of the life of American upper class society at the end of the nineteenth century. As one of the best works of Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* is considered to be the most concentrated expression of the author’s perspective of family and marriage, which is of great enlightenment and practical significance for contemporary women.

**Keywords**—*The Age of Innocence*; the perspective of marriage; real marriage

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Age of Innocence*, a novel by Edith Wharton, an American woman writer, is indeed a masterpiece that helped her win the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for literature. Wharton’s novels are not limited to the subtle exploration of the characters’ thoughts, but involve the influence of the material and spiritual power of the society on the inner world of the characters. Her novels reveal the hypocrisy of the upper class with moral insight and high aesthetic value. Her style is elegant, bright, natural, neither obscure nor ambiguous. Her reputation once fell after her death; but in recent years, with the rise of the feminist movement, it has been on the rise. Some critics think she deserves a higher evaluation.

*The Age of Innocence* focuses on New York society at the end of 1870s and the beginning of 1880s, a story about a young aristocrat Newland Archer and two women—May Welland and her cousin Augusta Welland. The young lawyer Newland grew up in Confucian edification, looking forward to get married with May, a beautiful lady who is of the same class to him and planning to announce their engagement at the welcome banquet for May’s cousin—Ellen. Ellen married an aristocratic descendant. She was unwilling to pretend to be a vase of the husband’s living room and a live sacrifice of a loveless marriage. She resolutely decided to divorce and returned to her hometown. Her behaviors did not meet the social customs regulations and was regarded as heretical by friends and relatives. However, Newland was so attracted by free and unique view of Ellen. But due to great power of social traditions, Newland held a wedding with May. Afterwards Newland felt caught in the trap of traditional marriage, therefore he often dated Ellen and planned to elope with her. But the news of May’s pregnancy let Ellen decide to break up with Newland’s emotional entanglements and left Paris. From

then on Newland faithfully fulfilled his responsibilities to his family and the society. Many years later, May died of a certain disease. The eldest son asks his father to visit Ellen when in Paris. In front of Ellen’s home, Newland lost courage of entering. Having sat on a park bench downstairs for a long time, he went back to the hotel alone.

## II. ENGEL’S PERSPECTIVE OF MARRIAGE

Human beings went through the communal marriage, pairing marriage and monogamy since ancient times. As Engels once pointed out, “these three main forms of marriage are generally adapted to the three stages of human development. Group marriage is consistent and compatible with the age of ignorance, pairing marriage with barbarism, monogamy with civilization, supplemented by adultery and prostitution. Though Engels said, “if only marriage based on love is moral, then only the marriage that keeps love is moral.” However, persistent personal sex in different people, especially among men, is not the same. If the feeling indeed has disappeared or has been the passionate love of exclusion, it would make the divorce for both. This will save people from divorce proceedings. If the feelings do disappear or the new passionate love has been squeezed out, it will make it a blessing for both parties and for the society. But this is a different premise which cannot be generalized; otherwise all couples can use bad feelings or relationships as the reason of divorce. In the patriarchal society, as in capitalist society: women do not participate in social labor, cannot achieve economic independence, and have to rely on their husbands, from whom obtain resources for their own survival and development. The unbalanced ownership of the resources often becomes the fuse of marriage crisis. The unbalanced power in a class society will lead to revolution, and in the family, the result is a divorce. Secondly, as the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, there is an insurmountable gap in the relationship between men and women in marriage, from the beginning to the end. That is, the society has always been advocating that the female is subordinate to the male. The concept of absolute domination creates an inequality in fact, that men take control and women are controlled in position. One party tried to maintain the control while the other side is trying to get rid of this. As a result, there is a tension in marriage, which reaches a certain extent and ends with the separation of both sides. So, in the future society, with the continuous progress of the society, the

family model and marriage mode will also change, what will be replaced? It can only be determined when a new generation is growing up: this generation of man's life will never use money or other means of social power to buy women's lives; and women will never again be committed to men for considerations other than love. If we want to get the final freedom of marriage, we can achieve universal realization only after eliminating the bundling of capitalist production and its property relations.

### III. TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF MARRIAGE

*The Age of Innocence* was written in the background of the beginning of the 1870s and early 80s, which may be the gentlest age in the history of the United States. The society is not in every hour and moment tokenism, holy and righteous to protect and decorate their every action. And they are most concerned about their own social status, turning a deaf ear to the misfortunes of others. Another feature of this elegant tradition is the regionalism. Fear and avoidance of unrefined things will inevitably bring fear to new unknown things. Therefore, those who pay attention to reputation will form isolated closed communities, so as to exclude all so-called "external" influences. At the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, marriage between the rich lady and the old aristocratic family in the continent was a very fashionable thing. Behind this fashion is the imprisonment and suppression of the patriarchal society toward women. For a long time, women have been involved in unspiritual activities without subjectivity, playing the role of dolls. The relationship between the sexes is the relationship of possession and subordination; marriage is the social product of realizing and safeguarding the relationship, and it is also the combination of material and social interests. In the novel, May is a typical "angel in the home". She is beautiful and pure and energetic. More than once, Mrs. Wharton compares her to Diana, the goddess of the moon in Greek mythology, "wearing a silver and white dress, a wreath of silver and white flowers on her head, the tall girl (plum) looks like the Diana goddess of a hunting return." In the eyes of Newland, May is a perfect lady model trained by the New York society: "as a product of his return and the social system, the young lady knows nothing, but expecting to get everything." Her combination with Newland was praised by both sides of the family and their social class, which really could be called "Golden fate God bestows", and was destined to have a perfect ending fairy tale. She is the product of the traditional social etiquette training. She is "beautiful, pure, and always speaks appropriate words". She is recognized as a good girl in the upper class of New York. As a famous female in the aristocracy, she regards social norms as the code of conduct and regards marriage as the only choice for happiness. Before marriage she has restrained the excitement, listened to her elders, made a perfect wife for her husband, willing to do embroidery and read books for her husband, fulfilling her responsibilities and obligations as a wife. But they lack soul communication. Her husband did not fully understand the spiritual world, or truly happy marriage. Newland said: in addition to pure elegance, May seems to be empty. With a sense of intellectual superiority, he categorized May as a superficial and narrow old woman. Until she told Ellen in advance the news of her pregnancy, she had

successfully exiled Ellen, and she was labeled as "strategic". In old time New York, women have been sheltered by men, unable to be financially independent, or they will face the dilemma of survival.

### IV. NEW PERSPECTIVE OF MARRIAGE

From the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century was the transformation period of the American society. In such an era, the author's growth experience and creation process were deeply marked by the time. When people study Wharton's works, it is not difficult to find that women writers who are rich and bold in their personal lives and unhappy in marriage are actually inclined to integrate their lives and love into plot. As one of the most important women writers after the American Civil War, Wharton described women's pursuit of personal and emotional entanglements in male-dominated society with feminine and delicate brushwork and keen observation. In the upper class society, there were two forces of the old and new. One was a noble bourgeois aristocratic, another was the rapid rise of the emerging bourgeoisie after the civil war, the former conservative and declining, fear of new things, and had to make a compromise and passive acceptance; the latter to forge ahead, with strong financial power, began to break into the nobility. The conflict and integration between the declining aristocracy and the new power was reflected in the article. In this paper, Beaufort rose to the upper class with strong financial resources, but he was in violation of established business rules of New York, and was finally swept out. At the same time, with the infiltration of bourgeois thought, people's thoughts are liberated and more and more concerned about their own feelings.

Women, in particular, began to resist the oppression of patriarchy. Ellen's return to New York was the pursuit of freedom. She was eager to start her new life in New York, "as straight as the fifth street... All in a good world with honest labels, starting from the beautiful world, breaking away from cruel and domineering imprisonment of her husband, being oblivious of all unspeakable hardships, and becoming a thorough American in the warmth of family members. She ignored the dominant male patriarchy, insisted on divorcing her husband with immorality, and refused to play the role of women being bound by their husband or being a vase. She was not willing to lose her dignity and to become the mistress of Newland living around him. In a male-centered society at that time, women had no economic status, and their role was only ornamental, having no means of making a living. But she dared to revolt against the patriarchal creed, restrictions and fetters, dared to break through the self and patriarchal society. Typical examples are the decoration of the house, the unacceptably exposed clothes, or her final return to Europe alone. Ellen eventually pursued a marriage that was free, without any economic interest, to pursue his personal freedom.

### V. CONCLUSION

With the increasingly important role of women in modern society and the gradual awakening of women's self-consciousness, more and more women are unwilling to act as a male appendage, nor do they want to trap themselves in

marriage. "How to get a free marriage" rose by Marx and Engels is a question we have to think about.

First, enhance the self-consciousness of women in the ideological field. The emancipation of women lies in the awareness of women themselves. Although the social development provided a prerequisite for women's liberation, there are still some old social thought hindering the development of human beings. Achieving the liberation of women should start from liberation of self-consciousness. If you neither keep pace of the time nor accept new knowledge and ideas, you are heading for self-destruction, hence in a certain degree lost independent personality and dignity. In contemporary society, the inequality between men and women is everywhere. Women must have the spirit of self-respect and self-reliance, keep learning constantly, continuously improve themselves and actively participate in social activities.

Second, optimize the social and economic environment and realize the economic independence of women. Economic independence is a prerequisite for women to gain dignity and freedom. Men have been educated to be strong, responsible and independent, so they will be strong, undefeated and financially independent. On the contrary, women are regarded as a weak side and educated to be gentle, quiet, dignified; they are men's accessories, all relying on men to survive. Therefore, women must participate in social production activities to be independent and initiative.

Third, liberate the productive forces and obtain the final freedom of marriage, which can be universally realized only

after eliminating the bundling and consideration of capitalist production and its property relations and economic interests.

Fourth, the emancipation of women in the all-round development of human beings - the liberation of all mankind. The emancipation of women is only an inevitable stage of human liberation, and women's liberation makes women free. We cannot deny that there are physiological differences in natural men and women. To eliminate gender discrimination, women can obtain the social status of women's liberation and equality. However, it does not mean destroying the feminine temperament, but to give full play of femininity under the premise of independent personality. Only in that way can women obtain real freedom, achieve comprehensive human development and create gender harmonious society.

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