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Fire and ice in *The Age of Innocence*

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Fire and Ice in *The Age of Innocence*

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Fire and Ice in *The Age of Innocence*

Alisa M. DeBorde

Abstract

This study will explore the dichotomy of culture and psychological landscape in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. To lay the foundation for this study, I first consider how Ms. Wharton often employed dichotomy in her own life: her role as socialite and author, woman of old New York and European maverick, and her life as spouse or beloved. Compartmentalizing her life's roles prevented her from having to compromise the distinct qualities of each paradigm. Similarly, in *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen and May are completely opposite representations of life and culture in the 1870's who cannot happily coexist together. Wharton draws this contrast by painting their psychological landscapes, relying heavily on the motifs of water and fire, elements that if combined are mutually destructive. Ellen is unpredictable, uncensored, and exotic—even Promethean; Wharton uses images of fire to convey this mindset. Conversely, May's character is often cold, controlled and pale; she is a sculpted product, not a creator. In rare moments, May is "radiant," even warm, but she never approaches Ellen's heat. Wharton emphasizes then that there is no true bridge between Ellen's and May's ways of living through Newland Archer who fails to cross from his world to Ellen's even though his love for her is true and enduring. My writing will argue that Newland fails to consummate his love for Ellen because Wharton has drawn a character who lacks the

ability to choose. Although he admires the “fire” he sees in Ellen, it is something he must do from afar, for he is a man ultimately made of water.

Introduction

“In some divine transcendent hush
Where light & darkness melt & cease,
Staying the awful cosmic rush
To give two hearts an hour of peace...”
(Wharton, “*Senlis*” lines 13-16)

In this excerpt from “*Senlis*,” a poem found in Edith Wharton’s love diary, *A Life Apart*, Wharton reveals her longing for a place where two opposites, light and dark, dissolve into each other. Of course, the specific reference here is to her desire to be alone with her paramour, Morton Fullerton, with whom Wharton enjoyed a brief period of intellectual and physical passion in the summer of 1909¹. Still, Wharton’s acknowledgement of and grappling with dichotomy was a common theme in Wharton’s life and writings. Wharton frequently divided her life into phases and roles that, in her estimation, could not merge and still maintain their discrete values; thus, in “*Senlis*,” a place where opposites “melt” and “cease” is divine and transcendent. It is a heavenly place, one not experienced on earth.

In several ways, Wharton’s life informs her tendency to dichotomize her characters and their situations. Edith’s mother, Lucretia Jones, did not plan the birth of Edith Newbold Jones. In fact, Edith’s unanticipated birth, eleven years after her youngest

¹ The dating of the exact timing of this affair varies. Cynthia Griffin Wolff dates their meeting in 1907 and the ending of the affair in 1910 (186). Linda Wagner Martin dates the affair from 1908 to 1910 (xiv). Shari Bernstock cites the passionate affair as the summer of 1909, but acknowledges that the exact chronology of the affair is speculative (226).

brother, created the suspicion that Edith's mother had had an affair with her brother's tutor or a Scottish nobleman. Thus, from the very beginning Edith was viewed as a sort of outsider and even as an embarrassment to her family (Singley 5). The decade-plus gap between her brothers and her naturally led to a "striking difference in sensibility between Edith and her clan" (5). Furthermore, Edith's early interests in literature, languages, and art alienated her from her peers and from her family. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton articulates the sense of division she felt from her social circles. She recalls her closest companions were "the great voices that spoke to me as I read books." Ms. Jones was "devouring" "Faust," the *Old Testament*, and the works of Keats and Shelley (70) while not one of her peers "had any intellectual interests" (89) and her parents were "far from intellectual," for they "read little and studied not at all" (48). R. W. B. Lewis records that "She was clothes-conscious and money-conscious, but she was also addicted to books and ideas and the world of the imagination. A growing sense of that fact deepened her sense of loneliness and gave her an air of unpredictability" (35). Clearly, her love of words and imagination sequestered Ms. Jones.

Edith's parents viewed this love as a deterrent to potential suitors; thus, to hasten her marriage, they introduced her to society at the age of 17—one year earlier than the customary debut (Wharton, *BG* 78). Indeed, her husband, Teddy Wharton rarely partook in her literary endeavors for he was greatly fond of the elite social life, and while Wharton's literary outpouring stalled for the first few years of their marriage, marriage was not a lasting impediment to her writing. When Wharton did achieve some literary success, no family member except for a distant relative ever spoke of her work (Singley 5). Wharton openly comments on her family's indifference:

My literary success puzzled and embarrassed my old friends far more than it impressed them, and in my own family, it created a kind of constraint which increased with the years. None of my relatives ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame—they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, [...] the subject was avoided as if it were some kind of family disgrace. (Wharton, *BG* 144)

Thus, Wharton's family first introduced her to the need for compartmentalization where her earliest roles contrasted those of young socialite and burgeoning writer.

As an adult, Wharton continued to experience the tension between her contrasting roles. For years, she maintained the social schedule expected of her class while also writing regularly; however, Wharton did not mix high society with the literary and artistic. Grace Kellogg labeled Wharton's writing life, her "parallel life" (225).

"[Wharton]," Linda Wagner-Martin notes, "carefully compartmentalized her time so that she continued to lead what appeared to be a busy social life even during her most intensely creative periods" (23). In *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton*, Kathy Fedorko provides a potential reason for this separation: "Writing is a fearful, naughty thing to do for it involves honesty of feelings, assertiveness, and noticing and talking of things not polite to acknowledge" (5).

Wharton well understood this tension between the honest and the socially acceptable. A telling anecdote from her youth involves her describing her dance teacher as an "old goat." Her mother chastened her for this unkind portrait, which threw young Edith into a conundrum: her mother had emphasized God's standard of honesty, yet here her mother was scolding her for speaking just so. Wharton's recognizing the

impossibility of simultaneously meeting God's standard of honesty and her mother's standard of politeness left Ms. Jones feeling desolate" (Fedroko 3). Wharton was not able to successfully navigate between social convention and her creative expression until in 1899, at age thirty-six, when she published her first work, a collection of short stories, *The Greater Inclination*. Still, even after that publication, Wharton expressed that her literary pursuits separated her. She recalls feeling lonely, even denied "encounters of all [social] pleasure" until her novel *The Valley of Decision* was well received in the literary community. Those friends encouraged her writing and for the first time, Wharton found herself in communication with a company of people "who shared her taste." Yet, while this communion penetrated Wharton's "agonizing shyness," it did so by enlarging her literary world; it did not merge her social circle with her literary set.

Compounding the angst between socialite and writer was the opposition between educated, independent woman and submissive, dependent woman. Wharton was "critical of the old mores that restricted women's freedoms," but she was also "skeptical of new dispensations that left women without secure boundaries" (Singley 9). She valued the order that supported, even cared for women, but disparaged a code that undervalued her sex's intelligence and strength. This was a true paradox for a woman who thwarted convention by divorcing her husband and by choosing to live as an expatriate for much of her life. Wharton recognizes these conflicting expectations of women in *The Age of Innocence* where two strategies for women's survival are presented: false innocence, resulting in inclusion in a female power network or honest expression, leading to exclusion from society. May Welland plays the "innocent," but she is actually calculating. On the other hand, Ellen Olenska "reveal[s] her own subjectivity," her own

thoughts, “at the cost of exclusion for the symbolic system” (Davis 7). May conforms; Ellen creates. Wharton herself felt caught between these two ways of living and saw no easy blending of the two, for while a convergence was desirable, much would be lost in the union; hence, it could be argued that like Ellen, Wharton generally chose a life excluded from the female power network. Wharton recalls only meeting three women in her life of whom she respected their conversation and indeed, the majority of her close friends were men (Wharton, *BG* 134).

Wharton dichotomized her life in many other areas. Indeed, much could be said about her American and European personas, her penchant for distinguishing between the public and the private, or her allegiance to the values of the New York of her parents’ day versus her need for the acceptance and creativity of a new order; however, one other dichotomy most clearly illuminates the love triangle of *The Age of Innocence*: The Edith Wharton before and after romantic love. Wharton herself recorded that before Morton Fullerton, she had “never in [her] life known what it was to be happy [...] even for a single hour” (Wharton, *LA* 672). Cynthia Griffin-Wolff estimates that the “ultimate effect of Wharton’s encounter with Fullerton was a more complete understanding of human experience than she had even had before,” (185) accounting for the clear distinction between the writings of the Wharton who married out of obligation and the Wharton who engaged in a love affair for personal satisfaction. Even though Wharton found immense pleasure in her relationship with Morton Fullerton, because she was still married at the time of the affair and because of Fullerton’s engagement (and his ever-changing and eclectic sex life), the pair enjoyed only a temporary union. Again, any lasting convergence of Wharton’s two worlds was impossible. Many critics argue that Wharton

was a passive recipient of Fullerton's parting, but Shari Benstock in her biography *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Wharton* proposes that Wharton chose to enjoy what she knew was ephemeral satisfaction because Wharton would not risk her reputation, literary work, or marriage for Fullerton (226). This view on the Fullerton-Wharton break-up aligns with Wharton's desire to keep many of her "worlds" separate.

In Wharton's fiction, much of the plot involves characters trying to reach the idealized world by merging opposites. In *Ethan Frome*, Wharton aligns Ethan, the novel's main character—a man captive to the eternally snow-covered Starkfield—with a winter landscape and Ethan's desired love, Mattie, with heat and summer. Ethan dreams of consummating his love for Mattie, yet his dream is the very thing that imprisons him, keeps him from ever realizing the divine union of summer and winter. In *The House of Mirth*, Lilly Bart is intrigued by Seldon's "republic of the spirit," yet she cannot reconcile the cultural expectations of her day with Seldon's self-created standards; thus, the republic of the spirit is never reached. Similarly, in *The Age of Innocence*, Newland pins his hope on a place where "categories...—won't exist. Where we shall simply be two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other, and nothing else on earth will matter" (251). Wharton draws Newland as a character who desires convergence but instead needs to choose between two very distinct ways of thinking and of living. However, because of his social conditioning, he is incapable of making that choice; thus, Newland broods over the imagined while by default he dutifully performs in the real.

The two worlds that Newland fails to combine are represented through Ellen Olenska and May Welland. It must be noted, however, that the representations of Ellen

and May are conveyed through Newland's perspective. The narrator is a limited omniscience who gives us only the thoughts and motivations of Newland—it is *Newland's* thinking about May and Ellen that we are privy to, so it is his view of these characters that we come to understand. Newland's view becomes increasingly significant to an understanding of Wharton's dichotomies when one considers that critics, including R.W. B. Lewis, often interpret Newland as a male Wharton and that as Newland's choices, May and Ellen symbolize Wharton's dialectical ways of thinking about culture and relationships (431). They are, as Judith Fryer interprets, Archer's "two ways to deal with reality" (109). These "two ways" can be better examined by exploring the opposing psychological landscapes of her main characters, May Welland, Nelwand Archer and Ellen Olenska; in them, Edith Wharton defines the changing culture of her pivotal age and reveals that the worlds of Ellen and Newland are as incompatible as fire is to ice—even to the extent of one destroying the other.

An Operatic Division

“I felt for the first time that indescribable current of communication flowing between myself & someone else—felt it, I mean, uninterruptedly, securely, so that it penetrated every sense & every thought...& said to myself: ‘This must be what happy women felt...’ (Wharton, *LA* 673)

Surely when Wharton cast the opening to her novel in an opera, she did so while remembering the above moment—taking place in an opera box—between Morton Fullerton and her. It is significant that Wharton first felt a real “communication” with another in the opera box. The sensations of this communion rendered the lack of passion in her life as a rule-abiding socialite even more pronounced. In the first scene between Newland and May, Wharton demonstrates how the standards of her society often precluded authentic communication and emotion.

The opera required elite New Yorkers to observe many conventions: arrive a bit late, sit only with one’s same sex, dress appropriately, and feign complete engagement with the story line while one is actually mesmerized by the “story” of the social season. Newland is the “poster child” of the opera patron, for he does “the thing” and arrives late, he wears the appropriate dress—complete with flower in his lapel— and as soon as he is in the club box, “he turn[s] his eyes from the stage and scan[s] the opposite side of the house” (5). Carmen Skaggs saw the division operatic expectations would create in a viewer: “The artifice of opera allows its participants to express their imagination and passion; however, the artifice of the conventional behavior of the elite stifles its

conformist” (2). The many expectations of opera “performance” truncated, even completely cut off any real communication between Newland and May. Newland’s inability to merge these two operatic realms—convention and imagination—shifts the choice to his real life. By contrasting the opera—where the “artifice of form collaborates with the creativity of the artist” (4) to transform convention into originality—to the patterned, strictly conventional behaviors of the old New Yorkers, Wharton subtly divides: Ellen and the stage performers—who create real emotion—are authentic; May and her clan know only artifice for form’s sake. Because Newland cannot merge the realms of imagination and convention, he tries to bridge them.

The opera house itself also suggests several other reasons for dichotomizing. First, upper class society of the 1870s was strongly divided concerning the building of a new opera house (Skaggs 2); hence, the site of the story’s beginning is imbued with an emotional conflict that well prefigures the class conflict of the plot. Secondly, Wharton’s readers knew that simply having an opera seat spoke loudly about a person’s social status. The Academy of music, where *Age*’s first opera scene occurs, only boasted thirty very coveted opera box seats (2). When Lawrence Lefferts the novel’s moderator of form, exclaims, “Well—upon my soul!” (7), “My God!” (8), and “I didn’t think the Mingotts would have tried it on” (10), he is voicing the thoughts of Wharton’s readers: How did an outsider, dressed “unusually,” acquire one of these coveted seats? Lefferts is the first to draw these lines of class, but his male company quickly concurs.

The Newland-centered narrator immediately notes Ellen’s dress. He describes her brown hair as “loose curls” and her “dark blue velvet gown” that is caught up “theatrically” by a “large old-fashioned clasp” (8). This description of Ellen’s

appearance, of course, strikingly contrasts the description of May's clothes and hair. May's fair hair is braided and her dress is made of "tulle tucker" (5). Ellen's clothes depict her personality—they are flowing and dark. May, however, has painstakingly followed the convention and done all to appear completely innocent. She wears white, her hair is firmly in place and she even blushes at the appropriate moments in the libretto. Furthermore, May's attire is proper and draws just the "right" amount of attention for someone of her class. Ellen, however, innocently departs from the dress code by wearing her simple, dark dress and jeweled headpiece. In the eyes of Larry Lefferets and his entourage, Ellen's flair for the different, for unique adornment reveals her "otherness."

Finally, that Wharton begins specifically with the opera *Faust* perhaps most importantly emphasizes the idea of division and of choice. John Dizicks in his *Opera in America: A Cultural History* explains that *Faust* "marked the end of the second period of American operatic history and opened the next" (175). Faust the character and *Faust* the opera stand between two worlds (Skaggs 3). The connection to Newland's placement between the two worlds of May and Ellen cannot be ignored. Clearly, Wharton is placing Newland in a *Faustian* position. Even Newland's entrance is accompanied with song that when translated to English foreshadows his vacillation: "He loves me—he loves me not" (4). However, unlike *Faust* who was willing to *choose* at the cost of facing eternal perdition, Newland never demonstrates such backbone. Why? Wharton positions Newland to choose, but creates a character who cannot. She uses his choices—May and Ellen—to heighten the sense of irreconcilable worlds—old and new New York. If, in the end, Newland is more old New York than new, he not only lacks the individuality of thought necessary to make an unconventional choice, but by his nature, who he is cannot

“live” if his life blends with Ellen’s. Thus, the novel’s operatic opener affords readers their first window into the division of 1870s New York, preparing them for the dichotomized presentation of character to come.

May Wellan's Sculpted Identity

“And now the sea is between us, & silence & long days, & the inexorable fate that binds me here & you there.
It is over, my Heart, all over!— “ (Wharton, *LA* 681)

Wharton's details are not simply cultural or age markers, but they are “culturally significant objects and interactions” in order to let her “work convey a stable moral message (Wagner-Martin 41). Critics often give attention to Wharton's use of detail in architecture as a means of revealing character. Jill M. Kress asserts “Edith Wharton uses cultural possessions such as houses [...] to build the interior life of particular characters. [...] Wharton erects houses as definitive representations of the self and its place in society; that is Wharton produces a concept of the self through metaphors of drastically interiorized structures and perfect enclosures” (132). Yet, few critics have commented on the elemental motif Wharton employs to develop her characters' psychological landscapes. Specifically, the elements of water and fire create character depth in three ways: in physical description, in character situation, and in the character's thoughts and actions as revealed through the Newland center of consciousness. To begin, an analysis of the New York elite's alignment with the water motif will lay a foundation to compare Wharton's three main characters.

Gina Taglieri urges the *Age* reader to see “each of the key figures as representative symbols, often in conflict with one another,” and that as a symbol “May represents the apotheosis of the 19th-century uppercrust domestic virtue” whose

“behavior often reveals her as subtly canny and calculating [...]” (229). To develop May’s symbolic role as this controlled socialite, innocent, yet conniving, Wharton connects her and her clan to the water. Why water? The symbolism of water works on several levels with May and her social group.

Water, one of the four elements essential to life in western philosophy, frequently represents life, cleansing, and cohesion but it can also represent destruction as in flooding, eroding, or drowning. Water is powerful enough to abrade even the densest of stones and flowing water often represents change (Brown, Smith, and Jaffe). Water in *Age* often reveals characters who are caught in a “current”—in this case, the current of aristocratic convention. While this water does provide support, even life, it often indicates a character’s being drawn into a suffocating vortex. Its swirling waters ensure the white, clean, innocent appearance of New York’s elite. Also, ice imagery frequently identifies the older socialite set of late nineteenth century New York. Their water is no longer fluid; change, for them, is impossible. Finally, water appears in *Age* as a muffler of sound. A strong character trait of old New York is the ability to communicate without speaking. When characters, even Ellen—the embodiment of European ideals and new New York’s acceptance of such—are near water, they seek to communicate tacitly.

As arbiters of the old guard, the van der Luydens are clearly depicted as characters who have been in the water for too long, and they are all that May has been and is being sculpted to represent. In chapter 7 Newland visits the van der Luydens as an advocate for Ellen. The narrator shares Newland’s impression about the pair: “[Mrs. van der Luyden] always indeed, stuck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies

caught in glaciers keep for years [...]” (45), and when Mr. van der Luyden enters the room minutes later, Newland notes that he has “the same look of frozen gentleness in eyes that were merely pale grey [...]” (47). Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden are completely frozen—perhaps, here, in time. They will cling to the ways of the 1900s because the way “it’s been done” is the only acceptable course. It is because of this that Newland is easily able to convince them to invite the Countess over for dinner. Larry Lefferts shall not be permitted to intervene because, under Mr. van der Luyden’s rule, “This kind of thing must not happen in New York; it shall not, as long as [he] can help it,’ [Mr. van der Luyden] pronounced with sovereign gentleness as he steered the cousins to the door” (50). Mr. van der Luyden’s firm, “sovereign” words mirror his frozen state. He is the one in control in this scene and after pronouncing Larry’s conduct inappropriate; he closes the meeting by “steering” Newland and his mother out. Wharton’s diction recalls, “steering a ship,” and places Mr. van der Luyden’s in the captain’s seat.

As a young woman shaped by the ideas the van der Luyden’s champion, “the terrifying product of the social system” (36), May is frequently described in terms of water. When looking into her eyes, Newland and she figuratively float “away on the soft waves of the Blue Danube” (20). In fact, early in the novel, Newland postulates that life with her promises to be “a haven of blameless domesticity” (32). Later Newland mentions her “swimming blue” eyes: once before he leaves for Jersey city and again in chapter 31 after she has tried to explain her family’s negative feelings toward Ellen to Newland. In this moment, she looks “paler than usual,” and “she trembles” when she hugs him. Wharton commonly connects May to water by describing her in terms of pale, snow-like colors. The invocation of water as snow or ice can accounts for the “tremble”

she feels in this scene, but it also serves a dual purpose, as do the other images of May. Each of these pictures of May is a brief glimpse into her mind afforded by a self-centered Newland consciousness. Yes, she is part of the elite—she has been raised in the water—but here the imagery shows her pain or even her struggle with having been so shaped. Compared to Newland’s own indulgent expressions of his grief, May’s watery eyes seem nearly irrelevant. Indeed, it is easy to read the novel and forget that May is the betrayed party. Yet, Wharton doesn’t allow this. She artfully utilizes May’s descriptions as, at once confirming her sculpted upbringing and revealing her pain. Her eyes are “swimming” because they are teary. She feels Newland’s attraction to Ellen and it causes her to quaver. Through these glimpses into her struggle, Wharton reveals that she is not vapid or thoughtless, as Newland has falsely interpreted her to be. The water has superficially cleansed her, but she is “deep” nonetheless.

Still, Wharton presents moments when May seems to be “trying out” the other side. Where May is characteristically associated with water and cold, Ellen is conspicuously associated with fire and heat, even electricity; thus, descriptions that employ both heat and cold to describe May complicate her character’s dichotomy. The day after Newland first orders yellow roses for Ellen, when he is taking an afternoon walk with May, the weather is [calling] out her radiance, and she [burns] like a young maple in the frost” (71). Later after their engagement, Newland finds that kissing his fiancée is “like drinking at a cold spring with the sun on it [...]” (123). In both of these instances, May has a surface quality of warmth, but underneath that veneer lies, a cold maple, perhaps her family tree, and chilled water, drawn from the family well. The narrator paints a woman who is full of contradiction: May is either not yet “iced” enough

to be statuesque or perhaps her love for Newland is encouraging her to try to be warm, yet her upbringing make this impossible to sustain.

Wharton's ambivalence about the age May represents may illuminate these lukewarm descriptions. Jean Witherow argues that Wharton was "familiar with the repressive characteristics of old New York" though she was still nostalgic for the strict integrity found in business and private (2). Judith Fryer 's locates Wharton's ambivalence toward May in her own sense of identity: "While Wharton recognized the inconsistencies in old New York, she championed its fundamental order as essential (129)." She was "well aware of the repression of the self in the old ways and the fragmentation of the self in the new" (129). Additionally, in *A Backward Glance* Wharton captures this duality: "When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savored by a youthful palate; and I should try to atone for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance" (5). May and her class are surely part of that fragrance.

Miss Welland may "try on" fire, but in the end she is much more water. After arriving home from his mother's Thanksgiving dinner where Ellen has been pejoratively discussed, Newland senses tension between May and him; still he has decided to meet Ellen in Washington. He calls May to his study, and immediately bends "over to lower the wick." With a gesture that appears wifely and concerned, Wharton symbolically reveals May's power to decrease the influence of Ellen. Throughout the nearly silent scene, May's hand remains on that wick. With a small pinch, she can smother the flame at any moment. Archer thinks he is control of the situation. He

imagines that he is secretly planning to skirt off to Washington for a liaison with Ellen; however, May knows—she holds the “flame.” The strength of her position is heightened by her last action in this exchange:

Her hand was still on the key of the lamp when the last work of his mute message reached him. She turned the wick down, lifted off the globe, and breathed on the sulky flame. ‘They smell less if one blows them out, she explained with her bright housekeeping air. On the threshold, she turned and paused for a kiss. (232)

Archer misses it completely, but Wharton has made clear that May dislikes and fears the fire and that she is far more in control than Newland realizes. Similarly, right after May informs Newland of Ellen’s intention to return to Europe, “A lump of coal [falls] forward in the gate” and May immediately rises to push it back. She will not allow the fire to cross into her arena. Her words even have the power to “extinguish”(72) communication. In Newland’s eyes she is the enemy of fire; May’s vigilant patrolling of her circle’s boundaries effectively prevent Newland from foraying into Ellen’s world.

If May and her set fear fire, they are drawn to the cooling safety of the water. The Wellands vacation in St. Augustine and the van der Luydens take refuge from New York at Skutercliff, their “Italian” home on the Hudson River. In these locations, it seems that water muffles or distorts communication and emotion. When Newland, here a representative of May’s stratum, visits the Chiverses’ (also on the Hudson), the talk is superficial until a young lady “professes herself broken-hearted” at having her engagement announced. This secret is tellingly delivered as the pair chats “in the corner of a firelit hall” (112) Wharton uses fire to draw out communication and water, here

snow, to stifle it. . Likewise, when Newland catches up with Ellen at Skutercliff, he finds her walking in the snow, dressed in a red cloak, and refusing to tell him “what she was running away from” (114). As if Ellen’s feet cannot abide the cold, she races across the snow (Newland follows) and serendipitously finds a fire flickering in the old patrol house. Fire embodies the qualities of Ellen and her ability to speak freely. In the presence of the “shining firelight” with a “big bed of embers still [gleaming], Newland resists the temptation to say more, but his urge to speak honestly to Ellen nearly wins: “I shan’t be here long’ he rejoined, his lips stiffening with the effort to say just so much and no more” (116). Newland nearly utters his pent up words, the fire nearly melts his resolve, but, he “stiffens,” he freezes again, just in time to maintain his watery silence.

In the same scene, while Newland entreats Ellen to tell him who she was running away from, his eyes remain “fixed on the outer snow.” Archer cannot even make eye contact—the heat is too hot for him, so his gaze rests on the symbol of his American, old New York identity: the snow. In this moment Newland also breaks from the reality of the situation. He imagines Ellen embracing him, but the connection with the cold effectively stifles his ability to live in the moment and to openly communicate.

Ellen Olenska's Psychology of Fire

“I have drunk of the wine of life at last, I have known the best worth knowing, I have warmed through & through, never to grow quite cold again till the end” (Wharton, *LA* 680).

In these lines from *A Life Apart*, Wharton likens her affair with Morton Fullerton to an agent able to warm her “through & through.” Prior to her affair, even though she did not realize this until Fullerton and she parted, she was unfeeling and empty (Wharton, *Life Apart* 672)—she was May, but after Fullerton, she was Ellen; she had been enlivened and warmed by their passion. Several critics acknowledge this referential connection between Wharton and Ellen. Linda Wagner-Martin explains that if May is the youthful Wharton—a pre European Wharton even, it follows then that Ellen is the more sophisticated, Europeanized, adult (67). Gina Taglieri observes that “Ellen strongly resembles the worldly and droll Wharton” (screen 1), R. W. B Lewis calls Ellen “a sketch of the intense nonconformist self, the ‘young hawk’ [...] that had escaped –though only into a miserably unhappy marriage” (431), and Judith Fryer labels Ellen the “European kind of threat” to the “‘official innocence’ of May” (113). Newland neatly categorizes these contrasts; simply, if May is water, Ellen is fire.

In chapter 8, the narrator's brief biography of Ellen, prior to Newland's second meeting with her, establishes her connection to fire, which is often invoked by shades of red. As a child, Ellen had “dusty red cheeks” and wore “crimson beads”—in a period of mourning nonetheless. Then in adulthood, she married the Polish nobleman and

subsequently she “disappeared in a kind of sulphurous apotheosis” (52). Sulfur is used to make gunpowder. Here Ellen seemingly disappears in its smoke and takes on a god-like, legendary status. This unorthodox behavior of her youth is consistent with her behavior at the van der Luyden dinner given in honor of the Duke. There she converses with the guest of honor before he has spoken with the elderly ladies present and to Newland’s “shock” (56), she crosses the room to initiate conversation with a man. However, Newland’s shock soon gives way to awe, for Ellen’s comments “illuminate” (56) his New York aristocratic peers. Through her careful diction Wharton imbues Ellen with the characteristics of fire.

Relating Ellen to fire draws on several symbolic meanings. Fire is known to warm and illuminate, and while it is often the symbol of hell and damnation, it is also a source of purification. Freud saw fire as a symbol of hidden passions and many cultures view fire as a sign of enlightenment, of wisdom and knowledge. Fire is the only one of the four elements that man is able to produce on his own (Brown, Smith, and Jaffe). This ability to create fire, of course, recalls the myth of Prometheus, the man who was not afraid to create or to share. Finally, fire is also largely uncontrollable and free; its direction is unpredictable. Ellen was an illuminator who inspired passion and truly created her own unpredictable path.

Wharton often situates Ellen near fire when she and Newland are to broach private matters. When Newland first meets Ellen at her home, he is led “through the narrow hall into a low firelit drawing room” (60), and while he waits for Ellen, he “stretches his feet to the [burning] logs,” and communicates with Ellen’s maid in language “put together from a phrase out of Dante” (61). Ellen calls New York heaven.

Considering these descriptions of her home then and the idea that she is the opposite of all concerning New York, it is not implausible to read her home as a type of Hades; Newland traveled a narrow hall to arrive in the room lit by fire and once there, he is understood only when he speaks the language of Dante, the author most famous for his depictions of the inner strata of hell. Ellen's dark and oriental home is Hades in the sense of a Greek afterlife, of an Isle of the Blessed or Elysian Fields. It is a rest for the banished, those on the periphery of society, and Newland has arrived in obedience to her previous day's pronouncement that she will expect him at her house the following day after five.

Newland finds that the "fiery" environment of Ellen's house causes his "self-consciousness" to "vanish in the sense of adventure" (61). When Newland is with May, form not adventure prevails, yet in this moment, when Ellen "[sits] down near the fire" (64), Newland is so relaxed that he calls the countess Olenska by her first name. This social faux pas is "burnt into his consciousness" (68). The Newland-centered narrator continues to be "impressed" with Ellen's fiery qualities throughout the scene where Wharton repetitively empowers Ellen with fire: Ellen "smokes" (57), "glows" (56), and emits "electric shocks" (63). However, the power of Ellen's fire is truly ephemeral. As soon as Newland exits her home, he is met with a "wintry night" and "New York again [becomes] vast and imminent, and May Welland the loveliest woman in it" (69). Upon entry into the chilled night, Newland's thoughts of warm Ellen vanish. Newland is back in his natural environment and there fire does not long survive.

Newland meets with Ellen at the fire again when he visits to advise her to divorce the count. At this meeting she sits at "a right angle to the chimney," wearing a "red velvet

robe” (91). Directly after Newland admonishes her to remain married to a man who was obviously beastly, a log symbolically “[breaks] in two and [sends] up a shower of sparks” (96). It is as if Ellen’s fiery spirit is being crushed by his words. The symbolism continues, for near the end of Newland’s counseling session, right before Ellen announces that she will comply, “the fire [has] crumbled down to greyness, and one of the lamps [makes] a gurgling appeal for attention” (98). Newland’s trying to force Ellen into the mold of his society douses her vim. Even Ellen’s hands have become “cold and lifeless” (98) now that she has consigned herself to obey the pack. The reader wonders if Ellen’s “fire” would be completely extinguished if she had indeed followed all of Newland’s advice.

Finally, Wharton informs the pair’s most passionate moment, the only time they kiss, with a firelit environment. “She sank down on the sofa again, [...] and the young man by the fireplace continued to gaze at her without moving [...]. Looking at her, he saw the same burning flush creep up her neck to her face” (147). As with the other moments where Ellen and Newland are near fire, the conversation is forthright even taking unexpected turns. Newland here has the courage to ask Ellen about her husband’s insinuating letter—an indelicate question he would not normally pose, yet the fire of Ellen melts Newland’s rigid need for propriety. In the novel’s end, Newland is not able to live with Ellen’s fire, but his final image of her is couched in the glow of flame: sitting beneath Ellen’s apartment, in the light of her window, Newland imagines Ellen “sitting in a sofa corner near the fire, with azaleas banked behind her on a table” (313). Because fire cannot survive in his world, it will live only in his memory.

Newland Archer's Impossible Departure

“Even so, my soul would set a light for you,
A light invisible to all beside,
As though a lover's ghost should yearn & glide
From pane to pane, to let the flame shine through.
Yet enter not, lest, as if flits ahead,
You see the hand that carries it is dead. (Wharton, “*Ame close*” Lines 10-15)

Wharton's naming her hero Newland Archer significantly relates to his being the failed bridge between May's and Ellen's worlds. Understanding the name's symbolism requires knowledge of the antiphonal relationship between Henry James's Isabel Archer and Wharton's male, center of consciousness. To begin, the very title of Wharton's novel invokes a well-known portrait of a young girl—it is, in essence, a portrait of a lady—the very title of Wharton's favorite James novel. Thus, by her title alone, Wharton begins the dialogue between her novel and James's. Cynthia Griffin Wolff clarifies that the invocation of James's work is not a coincidence: “There is no mistaking her intention, for at the same time that she converted the working title of ‘Old New York’ into the ‘Age of Innocence,’ she also changed the name of her hero to ‘Newland’ Archer, an American who elects to remain at home in the New World only to have Old World temptations and knowledge come to him” (304).

The similarities between Isabel and Newland begin with their last name: Archer. Both characters have been said to be “an *arch*, a bridge between American and European values” (Mosely 160). Newland would like to be this nationalistic bridge by marrying

Ellen who inspires in him the “illusion that freedom, love, and art can be found abroad” (160). These similarities do not imply that Isabel and Newland are exact counterparts in any fashion, but rather that Wharton plays on Isabel Archer’s experiences to “[convey] a sense of moral seriousness and a similarity of concern” (Griffin-Wolff 304).

Additionally Archer’s first name, “Newland,” adds another layer to his characterization. When interpreting his character phonetically, one finds a new land archer—a man who arches, bridges to a new land. In *Age* this new land could be the “transcendent” merging of opposites, his and Ellen’s world, or it could simply be the world that Ellen represents. In either case, Newland’s “arching” is a failure. At the opera, when Newland admiringly observes May, he recognizes that what he desires in his future marriage is “a miracle of fire and ice,” yet he has no idea how such a situation was to be created and sustained. In fact he has held this view “without analysis” (7). From the beginning, Newland desires what is a scientific impossibility—fire and ice do not coexist. May, a daughter of water, cannot be infused with fire and in the end, Ellen, the hot European, will not allow her purity to be tempered. Thus, Archer is at first painted as an impractical dreamer, a dreamer who thinks he can combine elements, a dreamer who thinks he can embody both elements and survive.

Why does Newland entertain this idea, the coexistence of fire and ice? Because Wharton has fashioned him part fire. In chapter fifteen, Newland clearly finds delight in Ellen’s “fireness.” When Ellen races across the snow, Newland looks on, “delighted by the flash of a red meteor across the snow” (114). Ellen is the meteor—and to Newland she is exotic and passionate, something beyond his normal trajectory: a solar body. Again in chapter eighteen, Newland reveals his kinship with fire. Newland confronts Ellen

about her husband's accusations while he is leaning against a chimneypiece. Then, he moves to hold her hand, but Ellen rebuffs him, symbolically moving to the other side of the hearth (146). Momentarily, she keeps the fire between them, perhaps because she knows that Newland cannot cross to the other side or perhaps because she is stronger than he and wants to save him from going "beyond" to the place where the Gorgon dries one tears" (252). In fact, in this scene Newland and Ellen reverse roles briefly. When Ellen breaks down in tears, Newland is stock-still; he remains stationed at the fireplace. His intense desire for Ellen at this moment makes staying in her world seem possible; however, Ellen has learned from Newland. As Griffin-Wolff phrases it, she has learned from the good man he will become even if he is not yet that man (324). Because of Newland's prefigured example, she will not allow her happiness to be bought by "disloyalty and cruelty" (149). Not only does this scene reveal the bit of fire in Newland, it depicts Ellen as a woman on water's edge. When Newland holds her face to kiss her, he sees "a wet flower" (148). This description, one hardly romantic, temporarily includes Ellen in May's word; consequently, Ellen momentarily plays the rigid character; she will be the one to enforce society's code.

Still as much as Archer desires to be free, he is largely a man of solid ice. He is clearly drawn to Ellen, but in an ambivalent fashion. Her fire, by its sheer novelty, compels him. Ellen's ways at once mesmerize him and repel him. He enjoys her honesty, but when she takes what he feels is a flippant tone about old New York, likening it to a place where "Being [there] is like—like—being taken on a holiday when one has been a good little girl and done all of one's lessons" (64), he dislikes it. Later when she wears a fur inside, Newland finds it "perverse and provocative [...] with an undeniably pleasing

effect” (91). Newland’s ambivalence toward Ellen can be accounted in the elemental motifs—if he enjoys Ellen too much he will either evaporate or melt.

For in the final measure, Newland is “old New York,” so much so that his very thoughts are expressed in terms of water. His convictions about Ellen “drift” dangerously through his mind (36), his feelings “dampen” when he thinks of his faraway wedding day (59), his work “plunges him” into a mood where he “chokes and sputters” (82), he keeps his thoughts on the “surface” in the “old New York way” (83), a “wave of compassion sweeps” over him when he thinks of Madame Olenska’s plight” (97), a vision is as soothing as a “lazy blue river”(123), his imagination spins “like a vortex” (211), and he feels that Ellen’s heart is a “full cup” he might spill (270). In each of these instances, Wharton aligns Newland with old New York, with characters in the van der Luyden vein. Newland cannot bridge the worlds because he is not bridge material. He cannot join Ellen’s for her world would destroy him. He is left with one recourse—to endure the “best” society has to offer.

Conclusion

Wharton structures a plot that seems to be all about choice between extremes: It opens with an opera about choice, develops the mindset of characters who either waver on the “abyss” or submit to their culture’s sculpting, and ends with “new age” characters who will marry without a thought to whose worlds are uniting, the novel is not so much about bridging two worlds as it is about recognizing that true growth is accepting what is good—marriage and two children—instead of demanding the impossible—the combination of fire and ice, in Newland’s case, adulterous love that does not leave Newland wishing for the honor and structure of his past. Growth for Newland occurs when he faces his responsibilities, ceases trying to mix water with fire. Wharton is comfortable with the outcome of Newland’s “choice” because she too had her fire and ice. If Wharton indeed saw each part of herself as being in diametrical opposition to the others, as having the power to cancel each other out, her physical placement of the characters makes great sense. Ellen is abroad in Europe far away from the dousing influence of America, May is safely harbored in the family sea, and Newland sits in the “light” of his lost love—he saves his fantasy. Each “quality” lives—and perhaps it is not “divine” and “transcendent,” but as Wharton found as she aged, she was above all else a member of society and there, settling, not transcending is often the order of the day.

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