

**RECEPTIVE ORIENTATION BEHAVIOR BY MAY WELLAND  
IN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* NOVEL:  
AN EXISTENTIALIST PSYCHOANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE**



**PUBLICATION ARTICLE**

Submitted as a Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Getting Bachelor Degree of Education  
in English Department

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**2015**



UNIVERSITAS MUHAMMADIYAH SURAKARTA  
FAKULTAS KEGURUAN DAN ILMU PENDIDIKAN

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Judul Skripsi : RECEPTIVE ORIENTATION BEHAVIOR BY MAY WELLAND IN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* NOVEL: AN EXISTENTIALIST PSYCHOANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE

Naskah artikel tersebut, layak dan dapat disetujui untuk dipublikasikan.

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Surakarta, Juni 2015

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AN EXISTENTIALIST PSYCHOANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

*This research paper aims to know receptive orientation behavior of the May Welland in The Age of Innocence novel. The objective of the research is to analyze the novel by using an existentialist psychoanalysis theory. The type of this research is descriptive qualitative research because there is no calculating data in this research. The data sources of the research are (1)the primary data of the research is The Age of Innocence novel by Edith Wharton, (2)the secondary data of the research taken from any information related to the novel such as biography of author, literary books, journal, and references from internet related with the study. The method to analyze this data is descriptive analysis. The result of this analysis is that May Welland's character is dominant as the receptive orientation behavior. She has 12 aspects as the positive and negative aspect of the receptive orientation behavior by Fromm's theory.*

*Keywords: An Existentialist Psychoanalysis Perspective, Receptive Orientation Behavior, The Age of Innocence Novel*

**A. Introduction**

*The Age of Innocence* is one of the controversial novels that many accept the pros and cons by the community, especially America in the 1870s. This novel is a special work of Edith Wharton's novel because the novel is able to achieve a Pulitzer in 1921. Edith Wharton is a novelist, short stories writer, and designer who was born in 1862 near Washington Square. In her work entitled *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton seeks to criticize the social changes that occurred in New York City during her life. (George and Barbara, 1994:1230). I think she wanted to show how women on life in America at the time. America at the time is illustrated filled with hypocrisy and discrimination is very noticeable. Hypocrisy every

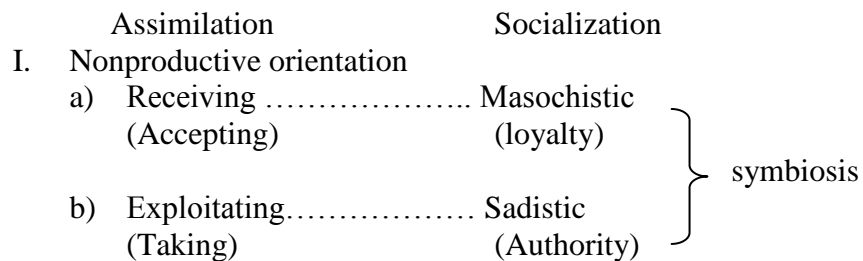
character portrayed was seen in some chapters, she showed that freedom will lose with pride and dignity that has become a “character”. I mean that everything can be used as a label, but it does not apply to Ellen Olenska. On the other hand, Edith Wharton also describes each character in the story in very detail, especially the costume.

There are some researchers having analyzed. One of them is Nir Evron, a student of Stanford University in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, entitled Realism, Irony and Morality in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*. Second is by Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Fatemeh Shahpoori Arani, from University of Isfahan, entitled Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*: A cultural Studies reading. The aim of this research is to show some cultural concepts dominant in *The Age of Innocence* novel: high art, capitalism, city and citizenship, family, and marriage. Third is by Sarah Kozloff a student of Vassar College with her title Complicity in *The Age of Innocence*. Last is by Michael Nowlin entitled Edith Wharton’s Higher Provincialism: French Ways for Americans and the Ends of *The Age of Innocence*.

In my paper, I outline some of the uniqueness of the content of this novel, they make me take this topic. Firstly, this novel reveals some real conflict in human life, such as sex deviation, divorce, and discrimination between upper and lower class so, the reader can imagine the conflicts in their life. Secondly, this novel deals explicitly with themes of sexuality, taboo for women to do sex deviation at that time, especially in New York culture. Thirdly, this novel delivers some values of life. The implicit values are moral values, moral choices, and hypocrisy in the story. The last, a behavior that becomes the topic of this novel is reflected. The major value of this novel is about an existence of characters as human nature. The author shows that each person’s behavior has meaning, especially May Welland. Then, in my paper I put May Welland as a character who receives state to show the meaning of existence. This is one of literature works the author used to convey her expression and criticism on the reader, so the reader is able to describe how the state of American society at the time was.

**B. Receptive orientation behavior**

Acceptance of the state in theory of Erich Fromm, in his book *Man for Himself* (1947) refers to any human being who has the nature to expect what they expect capable obtained, such as love, happiness and knowledge. Humans like this are very dependent on others and feel that their will not be able to face their world of they are alone without a help from others. They felt unable to do anything without help from outside. This is an example of the character of recipient communities practicing exploitation to others. Receptive orientation classified in the form of nonproductive orientation. Nonproductive orientation is unhealthy personality according to Erich Fromm. In his book, receptive orientation is a form of assimilation with submissive and masochistic. It means, if I put someone who is strong, so he will give all that I need. The description can be explained in chart below:



**C. Research Method**

In my paper, I use a descriptive qualitative method in this study to analyze the data, because this kind of research does not need numeral data. The object of the study is *The Age of Innocence* novel by Edith Wharton first published in 1920. The writer analyzes it using existentialist psychoanalysis perspective. The types of data source are the primary data and secondary data. The primary data of the study is *The Age of Innocence* novel by Edith Wharton. The main data is obtained from words, phrases, and sentences from the novel. The secondary data of the study is other information related with the novel. The secondary data is the supporting data which is taken from other sources related with the primary data such as biography of author, literary books, journals, and references from internet related with the novel.

The technique of collect the data are reading novel repeatedly, reading some related references to observe the data and theory, taking notes and classification some part from the novel about the topic and theory, arranging the data, analyzing the data and arranging conclusion based on the analyzing data. The method to analyze of this data is descriptive analysis, because the writer concerned with providing descriptions of phenomena that occur naturally.

#### **D. Finding and Discussion**

##### 1. Finding

From the analysis of the data, it can be concluded that, there are eighteen aspects that respond the personality of May Welland, namely; accepting, devoted, idealistic, sensitive, optimistic, trusting, tender, passive, opinionless, submissive, spineless, gullible, self confident, rash, imperturbable, possessive, and childish.

##### a. Accepting

May is a woman who is able to accept the situation and reality in her life. She never asks her husband to love her wholeheartedly. She knows about the reality between her husband and Ellen, but she is silent and still enjoys her life. She never asks her husband to love her wholeheartedly.

*“If May had spoken out her grievances (he suspected her of many) he might have laughed them away; but she was trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile.” (p.223).*

May is able to accept the situation because she was trained to be able to hide her problems.

##### b. Devoted

May is a woman who devotes and is loyal to her parents and her husband. When her parents ask something to May, she always obeys. She follows her father wherever her father goes. Togetherness between May and her parents or between May with Newland is the form of the desire to live together rather than alone.

*“May was still, in look and tone, the simple girl of yesterday, eager to compare notes with him as to the incidents of the wedding, and discussing them as impartially as a bridesmaid talking it all over with an user.” (p.143).*

Thus, creating a relationship with the team, she easily relies on others and takes the right side. She is whole life dedicated to the harmonious relationship in her life. She respects the meaning of marriage and how May keeps the relationship with Newland.

c. Idealistic

May is able to unite the ideals and hopes for her new family with Newland. She wants to show Ellen that she is a wife of Newland, and shows to the world that she has a brightly side too. However, May Welland receives only a false hope from Newland and he makes May disappointed. May wants to show Ellen that before Ellen come to May’s life, May is happy and now she is ready to build happy family with Newland.

*“It was in the library that he and May had always discussed the future of the children; the studies of Dallas and his young brother bill, Mary’s incurable indifference to “accomplishment” and passion for sport and philanthropy, and the vague leanings toward “art” which had finally landed the restless and curious Dallas in the office of a rising New York architect.” (p.260-261).*

d. Sensitive

She is not a naïve woman like Newland thinks. She has high intuition and can guess if someone is lying or when seeing something that is not true, especially things that happened between her husband and Ellen. Sometimes, May can be easily carried away and feel worried. May is doubt about the reason given Newland to go to other city because of his job; May thought it was a way to meet Ellen without her knowledge.

*“On business?” she asked, in a tone which implied that there could be no other conceivable reason, and that she had put the question automatically, as if merely to finish his own sentence.” (p.202).*

e. Optimistic

May is the type of woman who is optimistic, she always hopes what happened in her life is a truth. Everything she does is right, her hope and her real life. She has a shape that evokes confidence.

*“Her eyes fled to his beseechingly, and their look:”remember, we’re doing this because it’s right.”(p.17).*

On the other hand, she always tries and prepares something that she dreams becomes real. She calmly faces difficulties and rarely complains, she is convinced that later on what is expected is achieved. She does not look great save trouble in her life.

f. Trusting

May Welland still believes in Newland Archer, although she is aware that a lot of things that she feels before she married with him. Therefore, May Welland is a woman who is easy to believe in other and even to strangers whom she does not know. May also trusts the people around her, especially her parents and her husband.

*“May roused herself from one of the dreamy silences into which he had reared so many meanings before six months of marriage had given him the key to them.” (p.153).*

But, her husband is doubt on his relationship with May but May does not know yet and still trusts in him.

g. Tender

The concept of marriage of May and Newland is running cold, complicated and without concern is the crisis that occurred in May’s life and because of soft feelings for him, May does not make it as a gossip and unthinkable. Supposing that insults will come in May’s life, innate dignity and her family will always keep her, because her dignity is as the strength of its own.

*“But with the conception of marriage so uncomplicated and incurious as hers such a crisis could be brought about only by something visibly outrageous in his own conduct; and the fineness of her feeling for him made that unthinkable.”(p.149).*



So, May Welland is introduced as a shy, tender and innocent woman, who does not know anything about the world outside of the sheltering surroundings of her family clan and she has never had experiences with men in relationship.

h. Passive

May is a perfect example of the innocence and form that is fundamental to the perpetuation of the upper-class culture and society. From the perspective from Newland, May is expected to be passive participants in a marriage merely reflecting her husband. Newland also views May as innocent woman in a more intangible sense because of May's passivity and lack of initiative.

*"She would probably go through life dealing to the best of her ability with each experience as it came, but never anticipating any by so much as a stolen glance." (p.144)*

i. Opinionless

She has always needs the part of the person she thought strong, like her parent. May is tending to be passive and afraid to reveal something she wants, she is just waiting for the reaction of the people around her, and she has opinionless attitudes.

*"It looks when she was not able to be herself; she became another person or duplicating other people's lives. She was not able to show who she really is, not able to express what is in her heart. Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and mysteriously, by the process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland." (p.224).*

j. Submissive

She is obedient with her husband although she is strong and has good physic.

*"She was not a clever needle-woman; her large capable hands were made for riding, rowing and open-air activities; but since other wives embroidered cushions for their husbands she did not wish to omit this last link in her devotion." (p.223).*

The little freedom May has will be sacrificed when she stands on the altar as a form of adoration of her husband as a wife, she will remain obedient to Newland.

k. Spineless

May is a weak and coward woman. In the story, for a few months of her new life after marriage, May just is spineless woman. Weddings between May and Newland is just as cold wedding without any openness between them. She only can ask her husband why her husband why he does not take responsibility of her and being wavered by her cousin.

*“For a moment she remained motionless; then she raised on him eyes of such despairing dearness that he half-released her waist from his hold. But suddenly her look changed and deepened inscrutably; “I’m not sure if I do understand,” she said. “is it-is it because you’re not certain of continuing to care of me?” (p. 111).*

l. Gullible

She is a woman who adores her husband, though her husband does not love her like she does.

*“Ellen says that May is a woman who is easy to be used as slaves for men, while May’s husband tries to lie on. And May adores you- and yet you could not convince her? I thought her too intelligent to be the slave of such absurd superstitions” (p.127).*

In the story, Newland was frustrated by the reality that he is being forced to pretend in his relationship with May. In fact, Newland tells to May that he has job in another city, but in fact he lies. He actually goes to met Ellen.

m. Self-confident

Before her death, May always hopes and feels confident that her little family life will be always full of love and harmony. She is able to imagine herself with family in a better state of the environment.

*“And she had died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own, and resigned to leave it because she was convinced that, whatever happened, Newland would continue to inculcate in Dallas in turn (when Newland followed her) would transmit the sacret trust to little Bill.” (p.263).*

n. Rash

Since knowing there are awkwardness that occur in Newland, May Welland expressed a desire after finding an answer to the question in her heart and

she wishes to marry as soon as possible, in April after the Easter. She is rush.

*"He could not picture May Welland, in whatever conceivable emergency, hawking about her private difficulties and lavishing her confidences on strange men; and she had never seemed to him finer or fairer than in the week that followed. He had even yielded to her wish for a long engagement, since she had found the one disarming answer to his plea for haste." (p.72).*

She is too hurry to take her decision, she wants the people know about her engagement with Newland, when they are in opera, when her cousin back to America although her parents are agree with May's decision.

o. Patient

She is very patient to face her husband. However Newland's attitude, May is very patient though she was hopeful that her husband does not treat it like. It was Newland show his attitude even after marriage who have long lived.

*"She was still extremely pale, but her face had a curious tranquility of expression that seemed drawn from some secret inner source." (p.245).*

p. Imperturbable

She is imperturbable to face her problems.

*"She was still extremely pale, but her face had a curious tranquility of expression that seemed drawn from some secret inner source." (p.245).*

She knows the other woman is Ellen, Newland's love; May just does not disclose that she knows what's going on and has the proper composure to conceal what she knew.

q. Possessive

May always controls Newland's life, she manages each activity before their marriage. Newland does not respond well, and then May requests approval to hurry the marriage to her parents and she sends the news by telegram to Ellen and Newland.

*"It was dated from St. Augustine, and addressed to the Countess Olenska. In it he read: "Granny's telegram succesful. Papa and*

*Mamma agree marriage after Easter. Am telegraphing Newland. Am too happy for words and love you dearly. Your grateful May.” (p.132).* Before May and Newland married, May has been trying to possess Newland, she wants to show that what she already should not be lured by others.

r. Childish

This novel depicts the marriages between May and Newland run cold, there is no openness between them. After marriage they talked for a honeymoon abroad, May is a woman who is childish to talk about the honeymoon.

*“May was enchanted at the idea of going to the country, and childishly amused at the vain efforts of the eight bridesmaids to discover where their mysterious retreat was situated.” (p.143)*

In fact, Newland goes as far as to view her wife as childish and helpless. Newland feels that he cannot get away from the fact that his wife will show that there are things that are more suitable to find a way for them.

2. Discussion

May Welland is one of some of major characters in this novel. May Welland is woman who are able to receive her condition. She is the protagonist in the story. She illustrates as shy and innocence women and remains a loyal wife even after she suspects that Newland is having an affair with her cousin, Ellen. On the other hand May Welland describes as a perfect wife; she follows and perfectly obeys her husband and her parent. The plot of the story consists of exposition, complication, climax or turning point and resolution. The point of view is third person, because the author is omniscient or knows everything and she does not involve in the story, recognizes her as character and makes her free to enter in all events and knowing situation about the story. The theme of the story is that “women who have receptive behaviors are more likely to accept the situation.” The character of May also has a high tolerance to the situation that happened.

Existential psychoanalysis aspect appears in the novel showed from some aspects in explanation above. An existential psychoanalysis shows that character’s human in their life. This theory tries to determine the original choice

of the desire person. This is choice to face the world, it decides one's attitude when confronted with logic, principle and desires. Erich Fromm is theorist who states that when a person feels lonely because separated by nature and their people around him. He explains about the existential needs as they stem from the conditions of his existence. He also explains about social and cultural conditions that influence the development of a unique personality. Human's character is divided into two, namely nonproductive and productive orientation. Nonproductive orientation as a healthy personality is divided into four, they are; receptive orientation, exploitative orientation, marketing orientation, hoarding orientation and marketing orientation.

The positive and negative aspects of receptive orientation behavior of May Welland in the novel are show from that description. The points from a to l are positive and negative aspects of receptive orientation behavior. Then, other numbers are example of other aspects of Fromm's theory of personality. May Welland has receptive orientation behavior, who has characteristic to get what she wants, love, knowledge or pleasure. May is passive towards others and not able to create and build or giving love. In her life, she is an innocence woman, always accepts her condition, but the negative aspect is passive. Then she is an idealistic and optimistic to face her life. But, the fact she is easy to gullible by her husband. So, the conclusion is women who have receptive orientation behavior are more likely to accept the situation.

#### **E. Conclusion**

Based on the existentialist psychological analysis, it can be concluded that in *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton illustrates a psychological phenomenon of a receptive orientation behavior. The receptive orientation behavior is characterized by the following qualities: accepting, devoted, idealistic, sensitive, optimistic, trusting, tender, passive, opinionless, submissive, spineless, and gullible.

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