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‘And I am a Material Girl’: How Aesthetics and Material Culture Fashion Femininity in Edith
Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, from Text to Film

By

Avery Novitch

* * * * *

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department English

Union College, June 2016

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ABSTRACT

NOVITCH, AVERY 'And I am a Material Girl': How Aesthetics and Material Culture Fashion Femininity in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, from Text to Film. Department of English, June 2016.

ADVISORS: Patricia Wareh, Jenelle Troxell

This thesis explores the role of aesthetics and material culture in Edith Wharton's 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* and in Martin Scorsese's 1993 film adaptation. In Wharton's Old New York, material opulence is arguably the most essential aspect of culture. Newland Archer is the primary authority on fashion and taste within the narrative, and is thus charged with enforcing standards of socially constructed Victorian femininity with regard to his two romantic interests, May Welland and Ellen Olenska. Scorsese's film uses mise-en-scène to echo the detail-rich design aesthetic found in Wharton's prose; however, the film's abandonment of Newland's distinctly masculine perspective in favor of a female narrator restructures the power dynamics found in Wharton's narrative. Both the novel and film highlight society's fetishizing of material culture, a systematic obsession rooted in the oppressive qualities of the Victorian social climate. For both the novel and the film, material opulence is powerful within society because it is the only form of self-expression and individual agency that the characters have access to given the standards of repression, especially for women. Materials can only represent identity and experience and are therefore meaningless. Wharton and Scorsese use their works to criticize the tyranny of materialism during the Victorian period.

Acknowledgements

Ironically, I cannot explain in words how grateful I am to the Union College Department of English for preparing me for this opportunity and the support it offered me along the way.

I would like to thank Professor Brittney Belz for introducing me to the study of fashion and costume history. Her History of Fashion and Dress class opened my eyes to a whole world of beauty that I have absolutely fallen in love with. She has helped me to create opportunities to explore this unique academic sphere, and because of her dedication I was able to study what I am passionate about in ways I never anticipated.

I would like to thank Professor Jillmarie Murphy for her continuous love and support. In the past four years, she has become far more than my academic advisor. She has been an my inspiration and guardian angel.

I would like to extend my most sincere thanks and congratulations to my comrades in arms: my fellow English thesis writers, who listened to me talk about dresses ad nauseam. Thank you to Abigail Hollander, Emily Bistrong, Elora Weil, Dorothy Hazan, and Sydney Paluch for reading my drafts and facing hard times with me. Thank you to Cara Peterhansel for being a primary responder for my thesis, offering me advice and support with every draft. Many thanks to Katelyn Billings not only for being a primary responder, but also for sharing my love of fashion and encouraging me throughout the entire process. Thank you to Erin Wade, who began this journey with me freshman year in Introduction to Literature: Fiction and began excitedly planning thesis topics with me far too early. Thank you all for the laughs, the tears, but most of all, for sharing with me the love of the language.

Thank you to Professor Jenelle Troxell for providing me with tremendous support and advice throughout my writing process. Her guidance helped me to tackle film analysis, an area of study I am just beginning to explore.

Thank you mom and dad for encouraging me to do my best and be proud of it no matter what the outcome. Thank you also for the late night phone calls listening to me explain all the crazy ideas I had about Edith Wharton.

Thank you Professor Patricia Wareh for keeping me sane. Thank you for letting me laugh and cry in your office. Thank you for challenging my ideas and my writing while always remaining my biggest supporter.

Finally, thank you to the one and only Edith Wharton. From the time I was sixteen years old, she has been an inspiration to me. Thank you Edith for giving me a beautiful book to love. Most of all Edith, thank you for being a role model as a woman of fashion and of letters. You, Edith, were living proof that intellectual women can also love fashion.

Edith Wharton's most famous novel, *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920, tells of a place that she names Old New York, where wealth, society, and fashion suffocate its residents. The word 'fashion' appears in *The Age of Innocence* on fifty different occasions. Wharton uses fashion to refer to trends in clothing and interior design, but furthermore, an entire mindset that includes behavior, interactions, and personal relationships. Wharton constructs a rigid social system and an authoritative male protagonist, Newland Archer, that demand that aristocrats rely on material culture as a form of expressing power and identity in response to the oppressive nature of the time period. While one may think that the relevance of this discussion has decreased since Wharton's time, questions about the power of material culture to dominate society have in no way disappeared. Martin Scorsese is the most recent of several filmmakers to adapt Wharton's influential novel. Scorsese's 1993 film *The Age of Innocence* is highly dependent on mise-en-scène, or all the objects located in front of the camera, to create its own version of Wharton's aesthetic discourse.

The Age of Innocence follows Newland Archer, an aristocratic lawyer living in Manhattan in the early 1870s through his engagement and marriage to debutante May Welland, society's darling. However, Newland's socially appropriate courtship is derailed with the return of May's cousin Countess Ellen Olenska, who arrives in Old New York mired in scandal and seeking a divorce. The text grapples with Victorian gender ideals through material culture and expressions of power.

To dive into a conversation about the material culture Wharton creates for *The Age of Innocence*, we must first understand materialism itself. Elizabeth Morris discusses the relationship between people and objects in her 1917 essay "The Tyranny of Things." Morris's essay, published three years before *The Age of Innocence*, sheds light on female perspectives

regarding material culture. Morris's piece, published after the height of the Victorian American Gilded Age in which Wharton's novel is set, establishes the value of material during this time in history. She writes, "we all go through a phase when we like things best; and not only like them, but want to possess them under our hand."¹ Morris criticizes society's obsession with material opulence because the stifling nature of excess clouds the mind to meaningful expression. Morris encourages people to relinquish the abundance of things that they possess: "Then as we breathe more freely in the clear space that we have made for ourselves, we grow aware that we must not relax our vigilance, or we shall once more become overwhelmed."² Morris's characterization of material opulence as an empty form of individual expression is crucial in examining the role of material culture in *The Age of Innocence*.

Old New York's system of gender dynamics that Wharton sets up in *The Age of Innocence* also enacts Judith Butler's model of gender performativity. For this discussion, we will define female and male as the indicators of biological sex and feminine and masculine as the two social constructs of gender. Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" seeks to answer the looming question of whether femaleness makes one inherently feminine. Does belonging to the female sex demand the landmarks and characteristics of the socially constructed feminine experience? Butler claims, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."³ This definition of gender removes all permanence from it. Grappling with Simone de Beauvoir's works, Butler explains:

¹ Elisabeth Morris, "The Tyranny of Things, 1917," *Quotidiana*, ed. Patrick Madden (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

² Morris, "The Tyranny of Things," 1.

³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

To be female is... a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility.⁴

Gender, like a theatrical role, must be acted and performed. It is not created directly by nature, language, or the patriarchy. In order to examine the power dynamics in *The Age of Innocence*, we must understand that the source of Wharton's femininity and masculinity is Old New York itself. As a society, Old New York has constructed rigid parameters of behavior for each gender. While I agree with Butler's assertion that the patriarchy is not responsible for constructing gender,⁵ I argue that in the case of *The Age of Innocence*, it is responsible for enforcing it. If the patriarchy is responsible for overseeing and evaluating female performances of gender in the novel, and male and female performances of gender later in the film, then their tool of surveillance, the distinctly masculine gaze, is perhaps the most integral component of gender-based constructions of identity. It is through the male gaze, that Newland, as a representative of the patriarchy, monitors the aesthetic and behavioral conformities of other characters as a vehicle for perceiving and judging the success of their performance of gender.

This distinctly masculine perspective, which aids in the external construction of female consciousness in the novel and both male and female identities in the film, is an archetype of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. Although the male gaze a phenomenon traditionally used in cinema, it is even more prevalent in Wharton's novel text than in Scorsese's film adaptation. The male gaze traditionally is created through the use of specific filming techniques and narrative structures in the cinematic display of female characters, ultimately transforming these women into objects for the possession of the dominating male characters. Mulvey asserts, "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his

⁴ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522.

⁵ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 531.

like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”⁶ According to Mulvey, it is the individual who bears the male gaze who holds the primary narrative authority because he is the figure that is bonded most closely to the viewer or, for this thesis, the reader. The power of the archetypal male protagonist, the internal representative of the patriarchal force, is rooted in the authority of his gaze to control the narrative and the other characters. The dominance of this gaze is compounded by the privileged connection between the male protagonist and the viewer/reader, a relationship that fosters the shared spectatorship. Mulvey recognizes the extent of patriarchal power saying that the “split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one forwarding the story, making things happen,”⁷ while female figures are forced in passive submission. The male gaze appears in Wharton’s narrative structure through Newland distinctly masculine perspective and then in Scorsese’s adaptation through the application of traditional cinematic practices to all residents of Old New York, regardless of gender.

The frameworks of Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze are relevant in understanding *The Age of Innocence*, both Wharton’s original narrative and Scorsese’s cinematic adaptation. Negotiating the role of these two theories in *The Age of Innocence* and how they feed one another sheds light on why ‘things’ are so important to Wharton’s work. Material culture serves as a physical manifestation of the ‘repeated stylized acts’ that, according to Butler, provide the visual and behavioral framework from which each gender is constructed. While Butler’s claim, that society, not the patriarchy constructs gender, is true in *The Age of Innocence*, I maintain that the patriarchy, represented by Newland Archer, is

⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 838.

⁷ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 838.

responsible for enforcing the successful performance of gender. Mulvey's theory exposes the source of patriarchal authority, revealing how Newland's male gaze becomes the dominating perspective within both Wharton and Scorsese's narratives. Newland uses his distinctly masculine perspective to oversee performances of gender in Old New York, acts symbolized visually and tangibly through interactions between characters and material culture, and with his privileged patriarchal authority evaluates the success or failure of these performances.

While scholarship has certainly acknowledged the importance of fashion and design in *The Age of Innocence*, it has failed to recognize precisely why 'things' have any power in Old New York. I argue that the repressive social climate of aristocratic Victorian Old New York has confined the opportunities for expression amongst its residents, the women in particular, strictly to physical and material objects. Newland Archer explains, "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 a set of arbitrary signs."⁸ The emotional and intellectual repression created by the rigid Victorian social system invited the Gilded Age's 'tyranny of things.' In *The Age of Innocence*, society gives 'things' the power to serve as signs for real feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The 'hieroglyphic world' permits objects, physical and visual, to symbolize greater meanings. Fashion, created through aesthetics in the novel and the film, is the 'set of arbitrary signs,' a collection of symbols that 'represent' action and expression. Within these works, there is a substantial contrast between the intricately embellished, vibrantly adorned aesthetics and social perceptions of the characters as intellectually muted and emotionally indistinct.

In this thesis, I will first examine Edith Wharton's practice of fashion and design in her personal life in order to establish a foundation for the system of aesthetics, conformity, and power within the original narrative. I will then analyze the text of *The Age of Innocence*, looking

⁸ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1998), 64.

both at Newland's role within the narrative structure, and at May Welland and Ellen Olenska, whose aesthetic presences, practices of fashion, and performances of gender are more intensely scrutinized than those of any other characters. Finally, I will move to Scorsese's film, to negotiate how, through cinematic techniques and *mise-en-scène*, it emulates Wharton's narrative aesthetic and reconstructs her Victorian social system. Ultimately, I intend to expose how Wharton and Scorsese criticize the fact that material culture and the practice of fashion can only simulate significant expression, meaningful communication, and profound creation of consciousness, thus revealing how the Victorian social matrix stymies its members by confining their experiences to a purely artificial realm.

Chapter I
‘I’m So Reckless When I Rock My Givenchy Dress’: Using Wharton’s Life to Mock Up
Material Culture in *The Age of Innocence*

Edith Wharton was a designer, a debutante, a gardener, a traveler, an architect, and author, publishing nonfiction travel and design books as well as novels, novellas, short stories, and poetry. Her novels include works such as *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Buccaneers*, and *The Age of Innocence*. Her passion for design is obvious in her works of fiction, especially those that are set in Gilded Age aristocratic Manhattan, a location she names Old New York. Wharton, born Edith Newbold Jones on January 24, 1862, to parents George Frederic Jones and Lucretia Stevens Rhideland was no stranger to the trappings and privileges of Old New York. As a member of one of New York’s wealthiest and most prestigious families, Wharton was born in a Manhattan brownstone home quite similar to those in which many of her characters reside. Dressing in many of the same fashions as her characters, she also struggled to navigate Old New York. Wharton’s loves of fashion design, interior design, and architecture appear in her literary works, especially within the prose of her 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence*, and it is through these passions that she negotiates whether material culture is a mode of individual expression or a platform for blind conformity.

From her upbringing in aristocratic Old New York, through which she was exposed to the trappings of material opulence, luxury, fashion, and tradition, Wharton developed a sense for the power of aesthetics in self-expression. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton claims in the inaugural pages that material culture played an integral role in shaping her identity. Wharton describes her earliest memory, saying, of herself, “The episode is literally the first thing I can remember about her [Wharton], and therefore I date the birth of her identity from that

day.”⁹ As Wharton sets a scene of herself as a little girl walking with her father, she illustrates her clothing with great detail:

The bonnet...was of white satin, patterned with a pink and green plaid in raised velvet. It was all drawn into close gathers, with a *bavolet* in the neck to keep out the cold, and thick ruffles of silky *blonde* lace under the brim in front. As the air was very cold a gossamer veil of the finest Shetland wool was drawn about the bonnet and hung down over the wearer’s round cheeks like the white paper filigree over a Valentine; and her hands were encased in white woolen mittens.¹⁰

Wharton’s meticulous recollection of the clothing she wore during this distant memory sheds light on the extent to which she valued her garments as essential to her own experience. If this is her first memory, we can assume that Wharton was quite young at the time of this reminiscence, making her precision even more meaningful. She does not merely tell the reader what she was wearing, but rather she shows the reader, using incredible details regarding color, texture, and shape to illustrate an image of her ensemble. Her specificity in describing her accessories is shocking given her ambiguity regarding her physical self and personality.

The unique quality of Wharton’s attitude toward fashion lies in the tension between her understanding that dress remedies the generic nature of her identity through its intricacies and her feeling that this understanding distinguishes her identity in and of itself. She experiences this revelation as she walks with her father:

It was always an event in the little girl’s life to take a walk with her father, and more particularly so today, because she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful (and so becoming) that for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as the subject of adornment—so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine *me* in the little girl’s vague soul.¹¹

Wharton claims that this moment when she ‘woke to the importance of dress’ was one of the fundamental moments of her young life. However, Wharton also wakes to ‘herself as the subject

⁹ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Incorporated, 1934), 1.

¹⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 1.

¹¹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 2.

of adornment.’ Her epiphany clarifies not only the value of dress, but also the truth that her physical self is a blank canvas awaiting decoration. Wharton’s belief that from this moment came ‘the birth of the conscious and feminine *me* in the little girl’s vague soul,’ creates an interesting contrast between the qualities of this recognition as intrinsically feminine and distinct to Wharton herself. She acknowledges that her aesthetic awakening has made her a self-aware individual through her transition from third-person ‘she’ to first person ‘me.’ Furthermore, she colors this epiphany as distinctly feminine, suggesting her belief in womanhood as dependent on aesthetic and material awareness. Interestingly enough, this revelation elevates Wharton’s soul from ‘vague,’ to a higher stage of individual development. She explicitly wakes to herself as the ‘subject’ for adornment as opposed to the ‘object’ of adornment. Through this language, she refuses to relinquish her agency by asserting a sense of discretionary authority in the way she will adorn herself. Wharton states, “This is my earliest definite memory of anything happening to me, and it will be seen that I was wakened to conscious life by the two tremendous forces of love and vanity.”¹² These two forces, ‘love’ and ‘vanity,’ balance each other as she is brought into a deeper consciousness. The more meaningful implications of her newfound ability to love counteract the superficial implications of her vanity. Furthermore, her developed consciousness points to degree of self-knowledge and introspection that confirms the depth of her character. Through this recollection Wharton suggests the complexity of the relationship between materialism and individual expression. Wharton is only able to control her vanity because of her awakened consciousness, and in this sense she is different from many of her emotionally repressed and intellectually stymied female characters.

Wharton maintained her commitment to achieving the standards of fashionable dress throughout most of her life; however, her ideas about the definition of a properly decorated and

¹² Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 3.

well-kept home were not quite as mainstream as her ideas about clothing. Throughout her life, Wharton maintained complex relationships with various aspects of socially approved material culture. According to a number of sources, when a relative asked young Wharton what she wanted to be when she grew up, she responded, “The most fashionable woman in New York.”¹³ Yet looking at Wharton’s treatment of fashion throughout her life reveals different attitudes than looking at her approach to home décor. As she designed, built, and decorated her estate, the Mount, she followed many of the interior design philosophies that she and her architect Ogden Codman Jr. encouraged in their 1897 book *The Decoration of Houses*; however, she did not in any way limit herself according to these design concepts. Wharton’s design philosophies become suggestions more so than demands, as she ultimately urges her readers to design and decorate their homes in ways that will make them happy. Her attitude towards home design was so flexible that Wharton claims, in her autobiography: “I was often taxed by my friends with not applying to the arrangement of my own rooms the rigorous rules laid out in ‘The Decoration of Houses.’”¹⁴ She, of course, implemented many of the ideals in her book, including the sentiment that one’s personal desires, not society’s standards, are the most significant aspect in designing a successful home. What can we learn from analyzing how Edith Wharton abided by the strict fashions of her time but rejected the strictness of décor? Understanding the ways in which Wharton perceived the value of material culture and systems of aesthetics in aristocratic society’s construction of concepts of gender are crucial in properly analyzing her novels.

Wharton’s love and knowledge of fashion were integral not only to her writing of *The Age of Innocence*, but other works as well. Scholar Kimberly Chrisman claims that, “As an adult, Wharton used her innate fashion sense and firsthand knowledge of the couture business to create

¹³ Kimberly Chrisman, “‘The Upholstery of Life’: Clothing and Character in the Novels of Edith Wharton,” *Dress* 25, no. 1 (2013): 17.

¹⁴ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 110.

vivid, complex, and convincing fictional characters, simultaneously providing a minute record of the clothes she wore herself.”¹⁵ Wharton, with her unique experience as both a debutante and an intellectual, was able to catalogue her wardrobe within her literary works. Some scholars argue that the lives of Wharton’s characters, especially the female characters, revolve around fashion,¹⁶ and I believe that although Wharton shared this interest in dress, it did not inhibit her meaningful intellectual expression, as it did for her characters. While Wharton shares, with her characters, an obsession with dress, she surpasses them in her ability to express her individual complexities, as shown through her fluid and personal approach to interior design. However, to accept Wharton’s characters as superficial is to accept the one-dimensional artificial identities that society constructs for them as the reality. Old New York society’s systematic materializing of gender results in a polarization of femininity, in which women can either be the ideal or the other. Society’s dependence on this rigid dichotomy forbids the characters from exercising discretion within their lives, limiting their capacity to express complex identity and experience. One of Wharton’s most powerful critiques of Old New York is that society, due to its entrapment within the ‘tyranny of things,’ allows objects to sign for personality and experience, when in reality, material possessions can only scratch the surface in expressing a person’s identity.

‘Trapped in the Closet’: Evaluating Edith Wharton as a Fashion Icon

Photographs of Wharton, both portraits and candid shots, reveal her commitment to fashionable dress throughout her life. These photographs display Wharton’s wardrobe within the aesthetic context of the historical periods in which they were taken, and ultimately show the degree to which she achieved the standards of fashion. Understanding the role fashion played in

¹⁵ Chrisman, “‘The Upholstery of Life,’” 17.

¹⁶ Chrisman, “‘The Upholstery of Life,’” 17.

Wharton's life sheds light on the value of fashion and other socially mandated systems of material culture function within *The Age of Innocence* and how these aesthetic systems physically embody representations of the rigid social constraints for successful gender performance. Figure 1, taken in the 1890s, shows Wharton with her much-adored dogs. Wharton's ensemble in the portrait is incredibly fashionable for the time period in which the photograph was taken. Wharton's garments achieve the hourglass shaped silhouette that Keith Eubank and Phyllis G. Titora claim defined 1890s women's fashion.¹⁷ In the portrait, she sports carefully tailored garments, suit-like in their aesthetic. She wears a typical two-piece dress, called a tailor-made,¹⁸ which consists of a matching bodice and skirt. Her attire displays all the major landmarks of traditional tailor-mades, which often stylistically emulated tailored men's suits. The hourglass silhouette begins with the broad shoulders, an image created through her enormous sleeves, puffed at the shoulder and more fitted towards the wrist. The fact that Wharton's bodice has these leg-of-mutton sleeves, a standard tenet of 1890s women's apparel,¹⁹ shows how fashionable it is. Additionally, her shirtwaist, with its front panel and exaggerated buttons, incorporates a masculine aesthetic in the same way as the tailoring of her bodice. With these aesthetic details, Wharton's portrait achieves the standards 1890s fashionable dress. Although this silhouette is a substantial departure from styles of previous eras, like those of the Bustle Period, Wharton obeys the tenets of fashion.

Wharton exposes her view of fashion as particularly detrimental to women through Newland Archer's growing disdain towards May for her obsession with dress in *The Age of Innocence*. Newland perceives in his fiancé an unwavering obedience to fashion: "He was struck

¹⁷ Keith Eubank and Phyllis G. Titora, *Survey of Historic Costume: A History of Western Dress* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2010), 397.

¹⁸ Eubank and Titora, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 399.

¹⁹ Eubank and Titora, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 397.

by the religious reverence of even the most unworldly American women for the social advantages of dress.”²⁰ Through the mentioning of ‘religious reverence,’ Newland defines fashion as a cult that women feel compelled to follow. Fashion is an entity to which women are inherently devoted. He continues, “‘It’s their armour...their defense against the unknown and their defiance of it.’”²¹ This reflection identifies the ‘social advantages of dress,’ as a form of ‘armour,’ or protection that shields the wearer from social otherness. Dress, as an entity that appears to the public, serves as a mechanism that allows women to attempt to express their identities in the public. Wharton’s obedience to fashion in this formal portrait, a staged image meant for display, suggests that participated in the relationship between women and dress that Newland defines in the novel. By upholding the standards of dress, Wharton reveals the degree to which fashion is visual manifestation of society’s power to publically control women.

Wharton’s commitment to fashion was not limited to her formal appearances, and ultimately transcended the barriers of her public image to reach her private life. She followed fashion throughout her life, even during her more solitary moments. Figure 2 is another photograph of Wharton taken in the early 1900s; however, this image is candid as she sits at desk at the Mount. Unlike the previously mentioned portrait, this photograph was likely not staged, yet Wharton’s ensemble represents yet another example of fashionable attire for the time period. The dress she wears is a prime example of the fashionable S-shaped silhouette of the early twentieth century, which was created, according to Eubank and Totoro through “high-boned collars, full, pouched bodices, and skirts that were flat in the front and emphasized a rounded hipline in the back.”²² The use of white and beige lace indicates that it was perhaps a lingerie

²⁰ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1998), 216.

²¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 216.

²² Eubank and Totoro, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 425.

dress, a fashionable garment styled after female undergarments.²³ The dress displays what Eubank and Totoro classify as the decorative cornerstones of the period, including “tucking, pleating, lace insertions, bands of applied fabric, lace, and embroidery.”²⁴ The dress’s snug fit at Wharton’s hips, juxtaposed to its wide circumference at the hem shows evidence of traditional goring, a method of garment construction which requires a skirt to have many panels so that it is fitted to the body at the hipline and flares outward at the hemline. The fact that Wharton wears fashionable garments in the privacy of her own home shows just how powerful an entity it is.

Wharton expresses the tension between her commitment to and her resentment of institutionalized stylish dress through her characters’ awareness of fashion’s supremacy. She writes in *The Age of Innocence*, “When he [Newland] fulminated against fashionable society he always spoke of its ‘trend’; and to Mrs. Archer it was terrifying and yet fascinating to feel herself part of a community that was trending.”²⁵ While Newland, as a man, protests against the rigid constructs of society, his mother, Mrs. Archer views ‘trend’ in a different way. She is somewhat captivated by the authoritative nature of Old New York society, believing that it is simultaneously ‘terrifying’ and ‘fascinating.’ This tension speaks to the fetishistic value of fashion as a sampling of the power held by socially approved systems of material culture. Wharton’s obedience of trends, represented by her respect for dress within the privacy of her own home, reveals her commitment to fashion as simultaneously positive and negative. This tension between pride in her successful achievement of fashion and fear of her obsessive devotion to dress seems to be the source of the fear of materialism in *The Age of Innocence*. The way that Wharton interacts with fashion suggests that she holds the same fascination with fashion as Mrs. Archer; a sense of awe rooted in the way that women submit willingly to the

²³ Eubank and Totoro, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 425-426.

²⁴ Eubank and Totoro, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 425.

²⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 274.

power of dress. It is perhaps her instinctual commitment to fashion that makes Wharton even more intrigued with it, and furthermore, compelled to negotiate its power within her literature.

Homegirl: Edith Wharton's Designing of the Mount as an Expression of Self

Wharton's experience designing her own home, the Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts, reveals the intricacies of her perspectives on architecture and preferences with regard to interior design. Throughout her life, Wharton lived in a variety of places within the United States, including New York City, the Berkshires, and Newport, Rhode Island, as well as a number of locations abroad. Although she was raised in urban Manhattan, she claimed, "It was only at the Mount that I was really happy."²⁶ This tenderness for a life outside of Old New York appears in *The Age of Innocence* when Countess Ellen Olenska speaks of the Patroon House at Skuytercliff, saying, "it's the only house she's seen in America that she could imagine being perfectly happy in."²⁷ Wharton built and designed the 113-acre Lenox property from the time she purchased the land in 1901.²⁸ When describing her own design style, Wharton preferred "'simplicity,' 'fitness' and 'homogeneity.'"²⁹ In her creating the Mount, she implemented philosophies from *The Decoration of Houses*, aspects of traditional design and practices that were distinct to Wharton's personal preferences. Scholars who research the home explain that the Mount's aesthetics and décor are in keeping, primarily, with English, French, and Italian interior design traditions, while mechanics and technology have a certain degree of American pragmatism;³⁰ however, she did not claim that other homeowners should adhere strictly to the taste displayed in her home or the

²⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 149.

²⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 209.

²⁸ "Edith Wharton at The Mount," edithwharton.org. Accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.edithwharton.org/edith-wharton/>.

²⁹ Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 124.

³⁰ Richard Guy Wilson, *Edith Wharton at Home: Life at The Mount* (Lenox: The Monacelli Press, 2012), 54.

philosophies expressed in her book. She instead encouraged a much more flexible approach to interior design, and the Mount is evidence of this.

While Wharton's home represents a departure from the Victorian interior design aesthetic that she incorporates into *The Age of Innocence*, she did not simply advocate for the abandonment of ornamentation, but instead the development of a design aesthetic that suits the individual home owner. Wharton explains the importance of designing a home that is practical and sensible for its inhabitants:

Before beginning to decorate a room it is essential to consider for what purpose the room is to be used. It is not enough to ticket it with some such general designation as 'library,' 'drawing-room,' or 'den.' The individual tastes and habits of the people who are to occupy it must be taken into account; it must be not 'a library,' or 'a drawing-room,' but the library or the drawing-room best suited to the master or mistress of the house which is being decorated.³¹

While Wharton certainly engaged in this practice while decorating the Mount, her statement presents a substantial deviation from the understanding of homes in *The Age of Innocence*. Here, Wharton encourages her readers to construct their spaces based on their individual needs and preferences. Newland Archer tends to enforce a more standardized approach to homes and interior design. Wharton's line of thought provides a more tolerant attitude towards home design, while abandoning the model of a singular and universal style. Her attitude relies heavily on the individual and furthermore, her awareness of her own desires for her home promote not only individual expression but also the accessing of those personal desires.

Wharton expresses her overwhelming preference for symmetry in *The Decoration of Houses*, but the fact that this characteristic manifests in the design of the Mount is demonstrative of how important aesthetic balance is in successfully making her house into her ideal home. She writes, "If proportion is the good breeding of architecture, symmetry, or the answering of one

³¹ Ogden Codman Jr. and Edith Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978), 17.

part to another, may be defined as the sanity of decoration.”³² This emphasis on symmetry is evident when looking at the Mount’s exterior, where non-functioning window frames balance functioning windows. For certain spaces, such as mechanical rooms and closets, windows would not be appropriate, and so Wharton demanded purely decorative window frames, with permanently closed shutters, to maintain the home’s symmetry. While this design choice may not seem ‘practical,’ it was quite sensible for Wharton, as it allowed her to meet her own standards of taste fully and effectively. Her choices allow her to achieve the simplicity, symmetry, and balance that her satisfaction with her home are dependent on. Wharton’s positive view of the amalgamation of aesthetics and styles at one’s personal discretion remains visible throughout her home.

Wharton did not encourage the arbitrary abandonment of all facets of traditional aesthetics, but instead urges her readers to conserve or discard custom at their own discretion. The Mount’s aesthetic, which was certainly not minimalistic, created, in Wharton’s view, simpler rooms with more directed décor. Her home in no way relinquishes all ornamentation, but its aesthetics, layout construction, and décor expose Wharton’s periodic departures from standard stylistic practices and tenets of traditional interior design. Wharton speaks to homeowners’ blind obedience to aesthetic traditions:

But it must never be forgotten that every one is unconsciously tyrannized over by the wants of others,—the wants of dead and gone predecessors, who have an inconvenient way of thrusting their different habits and tastes across the current of later existences. The unsatisfactory relations of some people with their rooms are often explained in this way. They still have in their blood the traditional uses to which these rooms were put in times quite different from the present.³³

She attempts to awaken her readers to the strict system of Victorian aesthetics under which they are ‘unconsciously tyrannized.’ It is rigid Victorian mentality that perpetuates antiquated design

³² Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 33.

³³ Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 18.

and lifestyle customs. Wharton believes that blind conformity to aesthetic tradition and the dismissal of advancements in society, history, design in the lives of individuals yields people's dissatisfaction with their homes. Even so, she advocates for careful and personal consideration in the treatment of tradition:

To go to the opposite extreme and discard things because they are old-fashioned is equally unreasonable. The golden mean lies in trying to arrange our houses with a view of our own comfort and convenience; and it will be found that the more closely we follow this rule the easier our rooms will be to furnish and the pleasanter to live in.³⁴

In *The Decoration of Houses*, she also discourages impulsive abandonment of all accepted conventions of home design. There are indeed aspects of the Mount's spatial layout and superficial style that reveal Wharton's preservation of aesthetic traditions and design customs. According to Wharton, the key to designing one's ideal home is self-awareness. One can only reconcile convention with her individual desires and ultimately achieve comfort, if she is able to access and express her wants and needs. Wharton writes, "[People] have still in their blood the traditional uses to which these rooms were put in times quite different from the present. It is only an unconscious extension of the conscious habit which old-fashioned people have of clinging to their parents' way of living."³⁵

Wharton expresses her individualized, discretionary approach to home design and decorative customs through Newland Archer's disapproval of May Welland's blind conformity to standards of aesthetic tradition. Her distaste for blind conservation of design between generations appears in *The Age of Innocence* when Newland imagines what his home with May will look like:

His mind wandered away to the question of what May's drawing-room would look like...She submitted cheerfully to the purple satin and yellow tuftings of the Welland

³⁴ Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 18.

³⁵ Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 18.

drawing-room, and to its sham Buhl tables and gilt vitrines full of modern Saxe. He saw no reason to suppose that she would want anything different in her own house.³⁶

Newland is disturbed as he anticipates his future home to be a product of antiquated aesthetics. The language that May ‘submitted cheerfully’ implies her weakness in eagerly and blindly conforming to aesthetic traditions. His tone is certainly one of condescension as he articulates the stylistic burden of May’s aesthetic compliance on their future home. This moment in Wharton’s work further reinforces her belief that the biggest mistake one can make in designing her home is blatantly ignoring her own desires in favor of traditional tastes established by society.

The Mount serves as a physical manifestation of the flexible approach to home design that Wharton expresses in *The Decoration of Houses*. Her personal tastes favored an aesthetic that was pragmatic, but still ornate. The Mount contains a traditional galley, which according to Wharton should “display the art-treasures of the house.”³⁷ The gallery features light hues, clean lines, large mirrors, and expansive windows. These features capture light and give the illusion of an even more spacious interior. The gallery’s simple aesthetic in conjunction with its sparse furnishings create an ideal template for the visually demanding art pieces. Wharton exercised her personal preference for rooms whose forms followed from their functions in spaces like the dining room. This room was equipped with large windows because of Wharton’s belief that “natural light [was] important to digestion”³⁸ and embellished with thematically appropriate, food-related décor. One wall holds a painting full of livestock and produce, while other walls display plaster engravings of fish, birds, fruits, and vegetables. Scholars claim that Wharton’s boudoir, one of the most elaborately decorated spaces in the Mount, was complete with embellishments that were both ornate and delicate, to fulfill her personal tastes while maintaining

³⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 91.

³⁷ Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 138.

³⁸ Wilson, *Edith Wharton at Home*, 84.

a good proportion with the smaller scale of the room.³⁹ Additionally, scholars discuss the possibility that Wharton used wall coverings in her bedroom, a practice that she discouraged in *The Decoration of Houses*.⁴⁰ The Mount represents Wharton's departure from and preservation of both aesthetic tradition and her own philosophies. Ultimately, through her house, Wharton embodies one of her most important beliefs: that one's house should meet her needs on all levels so that it can serve as her sanctuary. Wharton's home displays her dynamic attitude towards home design by melding styles and aesthetics, making practical adjustments to meet her needs and achieve her desires, and never deferring arbitrarily to the standards of others.

A Crime of Fashion: Exploring Wharton's Belief that Victorian Society is So Last Season

Wharton's interactions with fashion and home design shed light on her negative views towards society as a whole. Wharton writes, "It seems easier to most people to arrange a room like someone else's than to analyze and express their own needs."⁴¹ With this statement, she addresses the concern that it is highly challenging for homeowners to understand their wants and design a home that will fulfill these desires. As a result of this obstacle, they defer to socially constructed or approved practices and customs as if they are 'one size, fits all,' and as a result, deprive themselves of the opportunity for meaningful individual self-expression. Why then, does Wharton's sense of individualism end with her designing and decorating of the Mount? Her interior design style is different from the home aesthetic in *The Age of Innocence*, but she displays the devotion to fashionable dress that many of her characters practice. The contrast between her preservation of fashionable dress and more progressive approach to home design is perhaps another example of her own philosophy that one's treatment of tradition should be based

³⁹ Wilson, *Edith Wharton at Home*, 89.

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Edith Wharton at Home*, 93.

⁴¹ Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 17.

solely on her own discretion and desires. Perhaps this tension in her conforming to fashionable dress but branching away from fashionable design is an application of the individual expression that she encourages. Wharton writes, “The crowding of room with furniture and bric-à-brac is doubtless partly due to an unconscious desire to fill up the blanks caused by the lack of architectural composition in the treatment of the walls.”⁴² If extrapolated to the experiences of those characters from *The Age of Innocence*, this statement is highly valuable to the issues I will explore throughout this thesis. People feel the need to fill empty space, created by the lack of deeper architectural imagination in the foundation of the home. This type of spatial void represents the sort of intrinsically vacant consciousness that populates Wharton’s Old New York. Her characters, like the aesthetically invaluable walls, seem to have no real substance, and as a result subconsciously beg for decorative adornment or material excess, to simulate meaningful expression of identity. Material opulence, or things, are only representations of real thoughts, practices, or emotions, and seek to equate abstract self-worth with concrete monetary worth. Fashion and design in *The Age of Innocence*, at the core, serve as simulations for actual experiences and imitations of personal identity.

⁴² Codman and Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, 65.

Chapter II
Sew Hot or Sew Not?: How Edith Wharton Designs Aesthetics, Materialism, and
Femininity in *The Age of Innocence*

Edith Wharton's 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* chronicles a society enslaved by material culture. The detail-rich design aesthetic that Wharton uses to 'decorate' *The Age of Innocence* is representative of the complicated and ornate society within which her characters function. Within the novel, Wharton designs her highly gilded Old New York to simulate the rigid social systems of traditional, aristocratic Victorian America. Although the characters in the novel are undoubtedly as elaborate as the fashions that they wear and the homes in which they reside, Wharton camouflages many of their complexities under layers of 'material' in order to successfully criticize constructions of gender and dynamics of power in the same Victorian society in which she herself was raised. To create this simulation, Wharton casts Newland Archer as the protagonist and source of the masculine perspective, opposite May Welland and Ellen Olenska as the female objects of his controlling gaze. Initially, it seems as though Wharton offers her readers an androgynous view of the women of Old New York; however, I assert that Wharton uses Newland's over-powering voice to reveal the authority of the masculine perspective in constructing female identity and policing gender performance. With the prevalence of Newland's narrative voice, the reader understands his claims and beliefs to be absolute truths. His obsession with the material opulence that surrounds May and Ellen reveals the power society gives to 'things' for establishing women's identities and the degree to which men are obligated to police their performance of these identities. While Newland does not develop standards for gender on his own, he does relay these norms to the reader, while using aesthetics to interpret female achievement of fashion and behaviors to monitor female conformity to social ideals. By emphasizing the domineering nature of Newland's male

perspective, Wharton conveys the extensive influence of patriarchal authority in the construction of the female consciousness. While it is the social matrix that establishes standards of gender behavior, it is the patriarchy that assesses female relationships to aesthetics and interactions with material culture in order to enforce strict adherence to these socially mandated gender ideals. The ways in which May and Ellen interact with material culture indicate the success or failure in their performances of Victorian ideals of femininity. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton focuses on external social perspectives and the power they arbitrarily perceive in aesthetics. The fact that this authority ultimately strip women of their agency demonstrates the inherent emptiness in material culture as a method of individual expression.

Wharton sets *The Age of Innocence* in the early 1870s in Old New York, a period known to fashion historians as the Bustle Period. Keith Eubank and Phyllis G. Titora explain that the Bustle Period was named for the structured undergarment that helped achieve the period's fashionable full-backed female silhouette.⁴³ During this period, women's clothing included "heavy draperies and long trains, encumbering bustles, and the tight corseting necessary to achieve the fashionable silhouette."⁴⁴ The tenets of Bustle Period fashion were physical manifestations of various spheres of influence at play in aristocratic Victorian America. This design aesthetic, notorious for its strict standards, provides Wharton with a visual foundation for the rigid society of Old New York. Wharton incorporates the Victorian understanding that visual and material stylishness signifies successful performance of social ideals. Wharton uses this dynamic in the novel to create a place where fashionableness is integral to society's construction of women's identities. By ignoring May's and Ellen's distinct characteristics and small acts of rebellion, Old New York's social matrix and Newland's patriarchal gaze rob them of the agency

⁴³ Keith Eubank and Phyllis G. Titora, *Survey of Historic Costume: A History of Western Dress* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2010), 379.

⁴⁴ Eubank and Titora, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 385.

to articulate their own identities. Old New York's 'tyranny of things' permits fashion, the socially accepted material culture, to physically and visually symbolize deeper human personality traits. As a result of this dependence on regimented superficial aesthetics and tangible entities to simulate character, the social matrix and patriarchy limit women to occupying a standard generic female consciousness. The consequence of this systematic repression is the rigid polarization of femininity, a dichotomy of opposing one-dimensional female natures. It is this Victorian system that ultimately blocks May and Ellen from articulating their own profound identities and shields the reader from the reality of their intellectually capable and emotionally complex genuine characters.

The Fashion Police: Examining Newland Archer's Role as the Enforcer of Fashion, Femininity, and Material Culture

In *The Age of Innocence*, Old New York society understands conformity to fashion as an effective indicator of women's achievement of socially mandated ideals of femininity, and Newland, whose masculine perspective dominates the narrative, oversees and evaluates the success of women's performances of gender. Newland explains, to the reader, the significance of fashion as he continuously translates aesthetics, offering their 'actual' meanings. Newland claims that, "stylishness was what New York most valued."⁴⁵ 'Stylishness' is essential to how society, especially the men, judge the conditions of the female characters in *The Age of Innocence*. Newland's obsession with style extends beyond the wardrobes and drawing-rooms of his two romantic interests, becoming perhaps the most important factor in how he evaluates May and Ellen, and ultimately how the reader understands the two women. With the prevalence of Newland's male gaze, style and its preservation move to the forefront of the narrative. Old New

⁴⁵ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1998), 81.

York comes to define its female residents through the material objects that they possess.

Newland's role in Old New York is twofold as he is both a member of the society that constructs the standards of femininity and a representative of the patriarchy that oversees patterns of female conformity and enforces the socially mandated conditions of gender. Wharton recreates this Victorian system through the development of his distinctly masculine narrative. By awarding Newland the narrative authority, Wharton offers a critique of gender-based power dynamics during this time period.

Wharton establishes this distinctly masculine narrative gaze, a symbol for patriarchal authority, through a third person limited omniscient point of view. Although Newland does not narrate the story in the first person, his voice is still the most prevalent throughout the novel because the external, unnamed narrator has access solely to Newland's internal consciousness. With restricted access that exposes only Newland's thoughts, feelings, and opinions, the reader is forced to defer to him as the narrative authority. As a result of Wharton's narrative structure, Newland is the individual charged with interpreting and judging the other characters that reside in Old New York. He shapes and defines the objects of his male gaze, namely May and Ellen, rewarding and punishing them through the power of his masculine perspective. Wharton writes, "Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against 'Taste.'"⁴⁶ While he acts as if 'taste' is an entity understood by all people, the reader only learns the parameters of appropriate social behavior from Newland himself.

Newland relays to the reader the socially mandated standards of female interactions with material culture:

It was usual for ladies who received in the evenings to wear what were called 'simple dinner dresses': a closefitting armour of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with

⁴⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 35.

lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band.⁴⁷

Newland lays out the guidelines for female dress despite his distance from women's fashion. His choice to describe this type of dress as 'simple' is almost entirely contradictory given the intricate and elaborate image he then illustrates. The meticulous details represent the rigidity of the standards to which women are held, by society, but also by Newland. While this 'closefitting armour' initially seems like it would protect women, it, in reality, restricts female agency and expression of individuality. I argue that Newland is one of primary players in constructing this rigid armour, and later declaring it to be fashionable. Wharton writes, "He did not mind being flippant about New York, but disliked to hear any one else take the same tone."⁴⁸ As a member of the patriarchy and a bearer of the gaze, he assumes the power to pardon and condemn women for their offenses against fashion and the society that creates it. This assumed authority, based in his ever-changing personal agenda, becomes increasingly important as Newland struggles to reconcile his role as the gender police, and its implications for his life. As Wharton deprives the reader of a female voice and offers only the male perspective, the reader is left to value May and Ellen through the patriarchal lens, a view that relies directly on the authority of material culture to signify the female identity.

Like a Virgin: Constructing May Welland's Identity Through her Aesthetic Obedience

In order to criticize Victorian society, constructions of gender, and the tyranny of material culture, Wharton builds a simulation of the system within her novel. With May Welland, Old New York's ideal woman, and Newland's subjugation of her consciousness, oppression of her self-expression, and reconstruction of her identity, Wharton exposes the

⁴⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 123.

⁴⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 93.

dangers that the system poses to women. Wharton uses Newland Archer's masculine perspective to illustrate the young debutante through her surrounding aesthetic and materials, and interpret her as the living embodiment of fashionable Victorian femininity. At the opening of the novel, Newland sits contently at the Opera in anticipation of the formal announcement of his engagement with May, the most suitable woman in Old New York. He guides the reader's first glimpse of May as he gazes across the audience to a private box on the opposite side of the theatre:

On this occasion, the front of the box was filled by her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Lovell Mingott, and her daughter Mrs. Welland; and slightly withdrawn behind these brocaded matrons sat a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers. As Madame Nilsson's 'M'ama!' thrilled out above the silent house... a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia... Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly.⁴⁹

May's costume is significant not only because of its overt color symbolism, but also because of how fashionable it is for the Bustle Period. May's virginal white costume stands out visually amongst the garments of the 'brocaded matrons.' The brocades, or thickly woven, heavier textiles,⁵⁰ exaggerate the whiteness of May's gown. Through Wharton's language, whiteness transcends the boundaries of May's garments, coloring her physical form, and ultimately dominating her entire aesthetic. Her paleness is made more profound with the image of her 'fair braids,' in conjunction with her white gown, white gardenia, and white gloves. May's 'tulle tucker' becomes a symbol of fashionable modesty. Tulle, a finely woven translucent textile commonly used to construct wedding gowns and veils, gives May's ensemble a bridal aesthetic. The tucker worn around the top of the bodice⁵¹ preserves her pure and innocent appearance by

⁴⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 26.

⁵⁰ "brocade, n." OED Online. March 2016. Oxford University Press.

⁵¹ "tucker, n.1". OED Online. March 2016. Oxford University Press.

concealing her bare skin. It is Newland's perspective as the bearer of the look that establishes May as figure of admiration. His approving gaze is the force that conveys to the reader that these qualities of her appearance are fashionable, and therefore desirable. This masculine possessive gaze constructs May's identity, one of a charming and subservient trophy, and identifies her as the ideal Victorian woman, aiming throughout the novel to preserve this guise at all costs.

Newland perceives May Welland's wardrobe, consisting primarily of pale hues and delicate fabrics, as a sign of her fashionableness, innocence, and extreme chastity, ultimately establishing her as the ideal Victorian woman. Throughout the novel, she consistently wears angelic clothing that Newland validates as fashionable. When she arrives at a dinner party, Newland describes her "dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair."⁵² The unmarred white and silver, her signature colors, are highly evocative of her chastity. Following his observations on her ensemble, Newland comments that, "the tall girl looked like a Diana just alight from the chase."⁵³ This scene is the first of many in which Newland compares his fiancée to the Roman goddess Diana. The fact that Newland associates May with Diana, known for her chastity, reveals that he does not perceive her to be in touch with her sexuality. Oddly enough, Newland's infantilized view of May persists beyond the date of their wedding, an event that signals the loss of her virginity. During their European honeymoon, Newland comments that she "looked handsomer and more Diana-like than ever. The moist English air seemed to have...softened the slight hardness of her virginal features."⁵⁴ If May is no longer a virgin, and perhaps not terribly 'Diana-like,' then Newland's continued insistence on her chastity is confusing. Despite the fact that she has had sex, he does not perceive any kind of sexual awakening within her, crediting the 'softening of her virginal features' to the change in climate,

⁵² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 84.

⁵³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 84.

⁵⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 211.

rather than the change in her body. His use of ‘hardness,’ a word that connotes materials, in describing her physical body transforms her into an object. Newland’s continued belief in May’s unfounded innocence and purity demonstrates the degree to which he understands her clothing, and the aesthetic that it creates, as a sign for these socially approved qualities.

Newland uses his masculine perspective to forcibly preserve May’s identity, characteristically girlish and innocent, throughout her maturation. He continues to assign to May qualities of superficiality, youth, and virginity, based on her aesthetic appearance well beyond her transition to womanhood. At an archery tournament in Newport, he describes his wife, “In her white dress, with a pale green ribbon about the waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat,” claiming that, “she had the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ballroom on the night of their engagement.”⁵⁵ May’s white aesthetic persists beyond the loss of her virginity; however, Newland takes these visual details as signs of her youth and purity. Within her ensemble, Newland perceives her ‘aloof’ demeanor, a quality that he claims has persisted through her sexual maturation. It is his point of view that gives May’s habits in dress implications of fashionableness and virtue. Her donning of her “bridal satin” after the wedding prompts Newland to “compare her appearance with that of the young girl he had watched with such blissful anticipations two years earlier.”⁵⁶ He remains obsessed with her innocence, despite the fact that he is the one to deflower her. Newland allows the “blue-white satin and old lace of her wedding dress”⁵⁷ to subdue the reality of her sexual maturity. This reveals the value of aesthetic images and material surroundings in the construction of identity, and Newland’s role in establishing these connections demonstrates the power of the male gaze. May, as a woman, can

⁵⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 228.

⁵⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 336.

⁵⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 336.

only gain agency with Newland's approval of her aesthetic, because his masculine perspective monitors her compliance with socially constructed ideals of femininity.

The concrete physical restriction that May endures as a result of her achievement of the fashionable Victorian silhouette is representative of how domineering society's constructs of ideal femininity are as well as how suffocating the patriarchal gaze truly is. May's commitment to achieving the standards of Victorian fashion proves to be damaging to her physical self. Wharton writes that May "seemed larger, fairer, more voluminously rustling than her husband had ever seen her."⁵⁸ On the surface, Newland's observation suggests her achievement of the fashionable Bustle Period silhouette. May's 'voluminous rustling,' is likely due to her large bustle, multiple layers of petticoats, and overskirt decorated with ample embellishments, such as trimmings and ruffles. With this statement, the reader understands her clothing to be physically burdensome, growing to the point that it engulfs her. In a later scene, Newland observes that she "had put on the low-necked tightly laced dinner dress which the Mingott ceremonial exacted on the most informal occasions...and her face, in contrast, was wan and almost faded."⁵⁹ Although Newland recognizes May's exhaustion, he understands her proper attire to be a sign of her resolute persistence to successfully perform fashionable customs. Presumably this 'low-necked' and 'tightly laced' dress, which makes May look noticeably weary, is not the most comfortable of pieces. The garment, whose rigid structure physically restricts her movement, is 'exactd by the Mingott ceremonial,' revealing the degree to which this female confinement is socially mandated.

Newland obsessive attention to the rigidity of May's achievement of the fashionable silhouette, shown by his role in relaying these standards to the readers, exposes his crucial role

⁵⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 216.

⁵⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 309.

within the patriarchy to police female interactions with the approved system. At the end of the novel, Newland comments on the generational changes between his daughter and his late wife: “Mary Chivers’s mighty feats of athleticism could not have been performed with the twenty-inch waist that May Archer’s azure sash so easily spanned. And the difference seemed symbolic; the mother’s life had been as closely girt as her figure.”⁶⁰ Newland ultimately comes to recognize the symbolic nature of the system in which he participated. May’s ‘twenty-inch waist’ indicates the presence of a corset, further reinforcing her obedience of the fashionable Bustle Period silhouette. The corset, a rigidly boned, tightly-laced undergarment which was designed to confine and reshape the body, symbolizes the stifling nature of Victorian society. Her life was ‘as closely girt as her figure,’ because of the manner in which society allowed materials and objects to fabricate her identity, and the patriarchal gaze to enforce her adherence to it. With society’s permission, material culture dominates the construction of her consciousness, and simultaneously Newland, with his masculine authority, monitors her practice of social standards. By representing May as confined through dress, Wharton criticizes the Victorian social systems for suffocating women through the preventing of their self-expression.

Wharton compounds the fashionable implications of May’s physical garments with her participation in socially approved fashionable practices to further establish her identity as the ideal woman. By monitoring her interactions with dress, Newland confirms May’s commitment to achieving the standards of Victorian fashion, and consequently, of femininity. Newland hates “to think of May Welland’s being exposed to a young woman [Ellen] so careless of the dictates of Taste.”⁶¹ The fact that Newland perceives Ellen as such a tremendous threat reveals the degree of social achievement he discerns in May. Ultimately Newland is the individual that monitors

⁶⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 364.

⁶¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 35.

May's treatment of fashion, and relays to the reader how her strict observance of dress amplifies her charm. On his European honeymoon, he "understood for the first time the earnestness with which May...had gone through the solemn rite of selecting and ordering her expensive wardrobe."⁶² By addressing this practice as a 'rite,' Newland speaks to the sacredness of fashion in Old New York. It is Newland who observes May as she partakes in this custom, and perceives in her the 'earnestness' that indicates her commitment to this solemn practice. During the European honeymoon, she responds to her husband's suggestion that she wear her wedding dress to an event, saying, "But it's gone to Paris to be made over for next winter, and Worth hasn't sent it back."⁶³ By 'name-dropping' Charles Frederick Worth, head of the House of Worth, one of the Period's most iconic couturiers, May legitimizes her achievement of fashion. When Worth does return her wedding dress, she eventually wears it to the annual performance of Gounod's *Faust*, because, "It was the custom, in Old New York, for brides to appear in this costly garment during the first year or two of marriage."⁶⁴ Newland understands May's repeated wearing of her bridal gown to be sign of her commitment to fashion. In his eyes, obedience to fashion and custom are the sole forces that motivate her participation in this practice, and he consequently excludes all other possible personal incentives. The one-dimensional manner in which Newland evaluates May's interactions with material culture is demonstrative of the authority that the masculine perspective has to interpret women's obedience to social standards of material opulence.

By designing the interior spatial settings that May inhabits as a visual reflection of her physical practice of dress, Wharton intensifies the distinct aesthetic, extending it to the point that her character is completely immersed in it. The extension of this aesthetic literally and

⁶² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 216.

⁶³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 212.

⁶⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 336.

figuratively builds a barricade around May that restricts her movement, preventing any flexibility in her character. The rooms that she occupies maintain the aesthetic developed through her dress. The first space that she visually dominates is Beaufort's grand ballroom, where she becomes the centerpiece from the buzz over her engagement, and furthermore through her undeniable resemblance to the room itself. Wharton writes that "the light of the wax candles fell on revolving tulle skirts, on girlish heads wreathed with modest blossoms, on the dashing aigrettes and ornaments of the young married women's coiffures, and on the glitter of highly glazed shirt-fronts and fresh glacé gloves."⁶⁵ Although this space is not May's personal home, she is the center of attention as her peers surround her watching her dance with her fiancée. In her pristine white dress from the Opera, she visually blends with the space. The 'tulle skirts' match May's modest tulle tucker, while the 'modest blossoms' resemble the single gardenia that fastens this tucker, and as result evoke the same fashionable modesty. The opulence of the 'glittering ornaments' and 'glacé surfaces,' represent her highly embellished and intricately decorated aesthetic. Finally, through the 'girlish heads,' which conjure the same youthful image as the chaste and innocent May, the reader is reminded how each aspect of this aesthetic contributes to her identity as the ideal Victorian woman. By expanding the set of objects and materials that give society the superficial impression of May's consciousness upon which it bases her identity, Wharton reveals the danger in awarding power to these types of physical signifiers, which maintain their restrictive authority even as they become increasingly far from the individual.

Through Newland's masculine perception of the shared aesthetic between May and her residences, Wharton shows how the way in which society and the patriarchy objectify her and spatially confine her ultimately restricts her individual development. The Welland's vacation

⁶⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 42.

home in Newport, Rhode Island contributes to the aesthetic on which society bases May's identity, and Newland evaluates her performance of gender:

On each side of the shiny painted steps was a large blue china flower-pot on a bright yellow china stand. A spiky green plant filled each pot, and below the verandah ran a wide border of blue hydrangeas edged with more red geraniums. Behind him, the French windows of the drawing-rooms through which he had passed gave glimpses, between swaying lace curtains, of glassy parquet floors islanded with chintz poufs, dwarf armchairs, and velvet tables covered with trifles in silver.⁶⁶

With terms such as 'shiny' and 'bright,' Wharton designs May's home as a further extension of her whiteness. The fabric of the 'lace curtains' calls to mind a number of pieces in her wardrobe, which is primarily made up of pale hues and ethereal textiles. The delicate 'blue hydrangeas' and 'red geraniums' reassert May's dainty youthfulness. The language of the 'dwarf armchairs' and the 'trifles in silver' compound her assumed characteristic immaturity and superficiality. The French windows serve as a symbol for May's eyes, which are "pale in their youthful limpidity."⁶⁷ These windows are not only the objects of Newland's 'glimpses,' but also maintain the same transparency and lack of substance as May. As the amount of material that surrounds May increases, the superficial veneer of her identity, which is as external to her consciousness as the objects that imply it, becomes more fully developed for the reader, consequentially obscuring her genuine character. The way that May becomes spatially engulfed by material cultural pigeonholes her as the ideal Victorian woman, regardless of her authentic consciousness.

By using the visual appearance of May's home with Newland to illustrate the same qualities of innocence and femininity as her dress, Wharton reveals the degree to which she is restricted by the aesthetic-based identity that society has constructed for her. The physical boundaries of the Archer home represent the more abstract boundaries of socially constructed femininity. May's drawing-room is complete with all the visual landmarks that contribute to her

⁶⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 222.

⁶⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 159.

air of fashionable girlish innocence. With the language that Wharton uses to describe this central room, it would seem that May is the perfect accessory to complete the space:

The tall lamps were all lit, and Mr. van der Luyden's orchids had been conspicuously disposed in various receptacles of modern porcelain and knobby silver. Mrs. Newland Archer's drawing-room was generally thought a great success. A gilt bamboo jardinière, in which the primulas and cinerarias were punctually renewed, blocked the access to the bay window...the sofas and armchairs of pale brocade were cleverly grouped about little plush tables densely covered with silver toys, porcelain animals and efflorescent photograph frames; and tall rosy-shaded lamps shot up like tropical flowers among the palms.⁶⁸

Much of the décor in the room aesthetically harkens back to her physical appearance and styles of dress. The 'tall lamps,' 'modern porcelain,' and 'knobby silver' call to mind the home's mistress, who is "Tall and silver-shining as a young Diana."⁶⁹ The cut flowers are significant given the fact that they are living objects taken and arranged for decorative display. Beyond these plants, the room is cluttered with 'pale brocades,' 'plush tables,' 'silver toys,' and 'porcelain animals,' bric-à-brac that not only aligns with the aesthetic that signifies her childish and innocent identity, but also fills the space, entrapping her within it. Wharton reaffirms social authority and the power of the patriarchal gaze through the image of the 'bay window,' a structure that simultaneously reaffirms May's assumed transparency while acting as a lens that permits Newland's gaze. This window serves as a vehicle for surveillance, which symbolically enables him to police her performance of femininity. By aesthetically binding May to her home, Wharton conveys the degree to which the barriers of socially constructed femininity and threat of the watchful patriarchy suffocate her and stymie her voice.

While Newland, as the bearer of the gaze, does enforce concepts of femininity, he is not solely responsible for generating the parameters of gender. Old New York society mandates the aesthetic practices and 'stylized acts' that serve as the framework for ideal Victorian femininity.

⁶⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 348.

⁶⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 322.

The information that May succeeds in performing the standards of femininity according to Old New York should legitimize her desirability to Newland. Mrs. Archer says to her son, “It’s just my old-fashioned feeling; dear May is my ideal.”⁷⁰ May’s achievement of social ideals transcends her wardrobe and home décor, and includes her behavioral identity. Mrs. Archer, as a representative of the ‘old-fashioned,’ approves of May, a fact that compels Newland to reward his fiancée. The extent to which he feels obligated to applaud her reveals his entrapment within the social matrix. She gains her power from society’s perception that she is able to function within the parameters of her gender. Her handling of ‘things’ indicates to society that she has mastered propriety. Ellen says to Newland, “May is a darling; I’ve seen no young girl in New York so handsome and so intelligent.”⁷¹ From her observations that May is a ‘darling’ and ‘handsome,’ Ellen arbitrarily assigns to her a sense of intelligence. These first two relatively superficial qualities cannot indicate the extent of May’s mental capacity. While these characteristics are not represented through materials, they follow the same line of thought, that external and superficial traits have the authority to define one’s identity. In the midst of society declaring her as its ideal woman, May is never afforded the opportunity to voice her sense of self. Old New York’s social matrix establishes the parameters of ideal femininity, and with help from Newland’s patriarchal perspective, constructs her identity based on the implications of her aesthetic, possessions, and behaviors. The old-fashioned representatives of society do not require more meaningful evidence of May’s ideal womanhood to cast her in this role, because they are appeased by her superficial adherence to the standards that they have outlined.

While the other aristocrats never doubt their view of May, Newland as the enforcer of society’s standards of gender rather than the creator, struggles to consistently support these

⁷⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 170.

⁷¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 83.

externally developed traditional ideals of femininity. Wharton laces her prose with considerable irony as Newland internally over-compensates for his issues adhering to the demands of his socially prescribed role. This role, as the male overseer, mandates his admiration of May for her achievement of Victorian femininity. Early in the novel, Wharton writes, “There was no better match in New York than May Welland, look at the question from whatever point you chose.”⁷² This statement, expressed by Wharton’s unnamed third-person narrator, is linked to Newland’s consciousness, and is thus ironic because even though May is superficially a perfect match for him, on a deeper level she is not his ideal wife. With the phrase, ‘look at the question from whatever point you chose,’ Wharton mocks Newland, the bearer of the male gaze, because he will suffer from these social practices perhaps as much as May does. Despite his position as the patriarchal monitor of gender performance, he struggles to fully internalize the implications of the system he is meant to enforce. He later reflects on his marriage:

He could not say he had been mistaken in his choice, for she had fulfilled all that he had expected. It was undoubtedly gratifying to be the husband of one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York, especially when she was also one of the sweetest-tempered and most reasonable wives; and Archer had never been insensible to such advantages.⁷³

Newland attempts to internally justify his marriage and the traditions that led him to it by reasserting continuously that his wife is the ideal Victorian woman. His efforts, however, are relatively transparent as he explains how she meets his expectations of social propriety, but fails to explain how she satisfies any more profound needs. He claims that she ‘had fulfilled all he had expected of her,’ mentioning her handsomeness, popularity, sweet-temper, and reasonable disposition. While May does master these fairly superficial traits, Newland gives no sign that the two have developed meaningful emotional and intellectual connections. This failure is through

⁷² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 56.

⁷³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 225.

no fault of May's, as these artificial qualities were all that he expects of her. Through the irony of Newland suffering as a result of his successful performance of his role, Wharton highlights the inherent flaws and consequential detriments to all parties of the Victorian social matrix.

As Newland continues to struggle to internalize the implications of his role and the Victorian gender system, he redirects his approach to policing femininity, ultimately condemning May when she is too successful in her performance. While he does lose faith in the merit of socially approved femininity, he maintains the aggressiveness with which he monitors May's behaviors and practices, and punishes her for the meaningless identity he has helped society construct for her. Although he initially reveres May for her commitment to fashion and propriety, he eventually refers to her as, "That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything."⁷⁴ By calling her a 'product,' he objectifies her, while characterizing her as generic. He comes to fear this social system for its creation of generic and indistinct 'things,' like May. Although he has recognized that she is somewhat of a monster created by society with his help, he does not acknowledge that this externally constructed consciousness is indeed a falsehood. Even with this revelation, he continues to perceive her as the 'young girl who knew nothing and expected everything,' revealing the extent to which he understands this artificial veneer to be May's true identity. After some years of marriage, he "had long given up trying to disengage her real self from the shape into which tradition and training had moulded her."⁷⁵ Newland fails to take any responsibility in the external construction of May's identity. He blames it entirely on 'tradition and training,' and while the practice of femininity certainly contributes to the veneer of her innocence, Newland, as the patriarchal enforcer, is integral in 'moulding' her 'shape.' The language presents an

⁷⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 62.

⁷⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 343.

interesting contradiction because he condemns the superficiality of her experience, while claiming authority to ‘disengage’ her. Newland’s assumed ownership over her condition deprives her of agency as he criticizes her passivity. With this, Wharton reveals to the reader the extent to which Newland is trapped within the same Victorian social system that he traps others in, because his revelations do not prompt him to relinquish his patriarchal authority. Through Newland’s failure to discredit May’s externally constructed consciousness, Wharton conveys that his individual thinking is limited by and confined within the system despite his masculinity.

Wharton makes one of her most explicit criticisms of Old New York’s systematic ‘tyranny of things’ through Newland’s recognition that the detriment of May’s externally constructed consciousness, built from mainstreamed superficial facets of material culture, lies in the consequentially generic nature of the identity she inherits. Wharton exposes that the artificial veneer of May’s assumed identity is not unique whatsoever and is instead a slight variation on the theme of Victorian femininity. Newland’s perception of the homogeneity between her consciousness and her mother’s reveals that adherence to fashion and obedience to tradition create women that indistinct from each other. He grows increasingly critical of May’s assumed ideal Victorian femininity, and is scared at the thought of her aging to become Mrs. Welland:

He could picture the sudden decomposure of her firm placid features, to which a lifelong mastery over trifles had given her the air of factitious authority. Traces still lingered on them of fresh beauty like her daughter’s; and he asked himself if May’s face was doomed to thicken into the same middle-aged image of invincible innocence. Ah, no, he did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience.⁷⁶

In observing Mrs. Welland, he perceives a glimpse at May’s superficial future. He understands her ‘firm placid features,’ to be a sign of her apathetic passivity. With Mrs. Welland’s ‘mastery of trifles’ and the ‘air of factitious authority’ that it creates, Newland acknowledges one of

⁷⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 163.

Wharton's central criticisms in the novel: that interactions with 'things' only simulate meaningful experiences and emotions. His sense of this impending 'doom' at May's transformation into an 'image of invincible innocence' conveys, to the reader, his recognition of the dangers posed by the system, mainly, the threat of living a life devoid of substance. His recognition that this quality 'seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience' acknowledges the detriments of the system that he has helped to perpetuate. Because of society's reliance on material culture, the female consciousness can be nothing more than an artificial veneer. In an age that values innocence, women are forced into passivity, and permitted only to simulate meaningful self-expression and valuable communication. The 'set of arbitrary signs' that is fashion can only symbolize a generically superficial identity, for which Victorian femininity is the accepted model; thus women are blocked from profound articulation of self, in that society does not allow their attempts to express uniqueness or individuality to influence the external perception of their identities.

Wharton reveals the degree to which the social matrix and Newland's patriarchal gaze externally construct May's identity by integrating various deviations from fashion through which she attempts to aesthetically express herself. These subtle rebellions expose how powerful the Victorian social system is because it ignores May's dynamic and discretionary approach to fashion. One of the ways that she expresses her individuality is through aesthetic rebellions that expose the veneer of her fashionable innocence as a falsehood. Katherine Joslin aptly observes that May's clothing covertly alludes to practices of female dress reformers, asserting that, "Dress reformers advocated various styles that brought the unstructured comfort of a nightgown or wrapper, even the soft textures of lingerie, into public spaces."⁷⁷ While May does not exclusively

⁷⁷ Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009), 123.

appear in garments that allude to dress reform, Wharton does include various ensembles that debunk her reputation as the fashionable Victorian woman. Newland's comparisons between May and Diana suggest not only her virginity, but furthermore, the aesthetics of Classical antiquity. Newland claims at an archery competition, "not one [woman] had the nymph-like ease of his wife."⁷⁸ May's 'nymph-like' appearance alludes again to a more natural and fanciful aesthetic, but 'nymph's' multiple relevant meanings further expose the artificiality of her identity. Firstly, the understanding that a nymph is a divine or mythical female figure addresses the sublimity of May's achievement of feminine social ideals. However, the suggestion of her otherworldly perfection is compounded by implications that this type of figure is supernatural and imaginary. The term nymph can also refer to a prostitute or female object of sexuality,⁷⁹ calling into question the legitimacy of her virtue. Lastly, a nymph can refer to, "An extravagantly dressed Frenchwoman of the period of the Directory."⁸⁰ This understanding points to the aesthetic of the Directoire Period, an era quite distinct from the Bustle Period, in which fashion was marked by unstructured column-shaped, Greco-Roman style dresses. If May's appearance conjures an image of Diana or a nymph, then her clothing likely displays some Greco-Roman influence, presenting a substantial stylistic departure from the tightly corseted and voluminously bustled aesthetic that was fashionable during the period. The inconsistency of May's obedience to aesthetic practices exposes her fashionable reputation to be predominantly independent of reality. This disconnect becomes representative of the larger discrepancy between May's externally constructed identity and her genuine character.

Through Newland's ignorance of May's aesthetic rebellions against fashion, Wharton exposes the degree to which he pigeonholes his wife as the ideal Victorian woman through the

⁷⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 229.

⁷⁹ "nymph, n.1". OED Online. March 2016. Oxford University Press.

⁸⁰ "nymph, n.1". OED Online. March 2016. Oxford University Press.

significance he assigns to her superficial obedience. May dons loose-fitting garments on a number of occasions, including a “dove-colored travelling cloak”⁸¹ as she leaves her wedding and a “sky-blue cloak edged with swansdown”⁸² on her honeymoon. With these ensembles, May abandons the approved silhouette of Bustle Period fashion, while at other times she rejects customary practices of dress. Wharton writes, “It struck Archer that May, since their return from Europe, had seldom worn her bridal satin.”⁸³ Newland questions May’s reluctance in wearing her wedding dress; however, he fails to fully consider the meaning of her behavior. When she finally revives the dress, he observes that, “Though May’s outline was slightly heavier, as her goddess-like build had foretold, her athletic erectness of carriage and the girlish transparency of her expression remained unchanged.”⁸⁴ He seems to ignore the implications of her prolonged resistance against tradition, focusing instead on her ultimate concession. His acknowledgment of her weight gain suggests that the garment does not fit and is likely uncomfortable. Despite his recognition of her physical development and the truth of her maturation, he asserts that the ‘girlish transparency of her expression’ remains, showing the power of an object like wedding dress to serve as a sign for human qualities, like chastity and innocence. After May accidentally rips the dress, she walks away, the “torn and muddy wedding dress dragging after her across the room.”⁸⁵ The way that the dress overwhelms her body shows how burdensome the standards of fashion are, and suggests that her submission to these tenets is not so willing. May’s inability to gracefully and comfortably wear the garment demonstrates her struggle with the conditions of dress, consequentially discrediting her externally produced identity as the ideal Victorian woman. Newland’s ignorance of her opposition to the practices and styles mandated by fashion,

⁸¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 205.

⁸² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 216.

⁸³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 336.

⁸⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 336.

⁸⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 332.

unveils just how irrelevant May's views and desires are to the way she is perceived by Newland and society as a whole, because material culture, given its inherent lack of profundity, can only faintly imply a person's distinct consciousness.

Wharton exposes the degree to which Newland stymies May's profound articulation of self by showing the juxtaposition between his internal views of her and her own attempts to vocalize her unique sincere and compassionate perspective. Because Newland's means of understanding his wife is confined to his perceptions of concrete aesthetics, he readily reads her consciousness as a reproduction of a generic standard: socially approved femininity. Her illustrates a specific image of her persona, while failing to include concrete evidence of her character:

The result, of course, was that the young girl who was the center of this elaborate system of mystification remained more inscrutable for her very frankness and assurance. She was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called 'the facts of life.'⁸⁶

Newland makes his appraisal of May as he gazes upon a photograph. His regard for her as the 'center of this elaborate system of mystification,' exposes how the intricate ornamentation of Old New York's social matrix shrouds meaningful communication and identity. Because of the authority of his perspective, the reader is led to believe that May embodies every quality mandated by New York's society. However, it is in a two-dimensional iconographic representation of May, that he perceives her 'frankness and assurance.' It is from Newland, and his claim of her blissful ignorance, that the reader grasps her intellectual vapidness and emotional superficiality. While Newland believes in her characteristic candidness and naiveté, it remains to be seen how 'impenetrably innocent' she truly is. He claims that she is unfamiliar with 'the facts of life,' but the reader has yet to see the true extent of May's obliviousness. Wharton creates

⁸⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 64.

discrepancies between his perception of May's aesthetic and the realities of her practice of fashion, and with these moments of interpretation, Wharton lays the groundwork to devise similar conflicts between patriarchal assumptions of May's character and her actual attitudes.

To expose the falsity of the artificial veneer of May's consciousness, Wharton juxtaposes external impressions of her repressed affect and innocent disposition to moments when she expresses an incredible breadth of compassion. May is one of the only characters in the novel that acts out of genuine empathy, and furthermore, through means that directly undermine Old New York's social customs. When Newland arrives in St. Augustine, she offers him the opportunity to call off their engagement. She explains, "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and notices—one has one's feelings and ideas."⁸⁷ May's dialogue shatters the myth of her innocence, revealing the shocking extent of her intuition. She asserts the value of her intellectual and emotional capacity despite her femaleness. From her acknowledgement that notions of girlish naiveté stem from parents, the reader understands May's awareness that the social matrix is the source of ideal femininity. Moreover, as she discourages Newland from internalizing this notion, she addresses his role as the patriarchal enforcer who perpetuates these socially approved mentalities. When May confronts her fiancée with the offer to call off their engagement, she does so with genuine kindness:

I've wanted to tell you that, when two people really love each other, I understand that there may be situations which make it right that they should—go against public opinion. And if you feel yourself in any way pledged...pledged to the person we've spoken of...and if there is any way...any way in which you can fulfill your pledge...even by her getting a divorce...Newland, don't give her up because of me!⁸⁸

It is her overwhelming sense of tenderness and empathy that motivates her offer to release Newland from the engagement. This is a radical moment for May because she makes this

⁸⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 166.

⁸⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 167.

proposition despite the potential for public humiliation, but additionally because her plea presents a direct threat to social standards. May's proposal is revolutionary on a number of levels, as she proves the magnitude of her intuition through her precise measure of Newland's feelings, while actively exercising authentic human compassion. With her statement, which definitively proves her intellectual worth, emotional breadth, and willingness to reject social customs, Wharton exposes May's innocent consciousness to be an externally constructed guise that bears no meaningful relationship to her genuine character.

To compound the reality of May's emotional profundity, Wharton unveils her capacity to perform masterful manipulations in order to demolish her reputation for fashionable innocence. May's successful exploitation of both Newland and Ellen undermines the legitimacy of her externally constructed consciousness. At the Archer's inaugural party, a farewell dinner for Ellen, Newland finally realizes that all of Old New York, including May, believes them to be lovers. He admits to his assumption that "the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin."⁸⁹ He is so limited by his patriarchal perspective that he remains completely oblivious to May's awareness. After the dinner party, she reveals to Newland that she is pregnant, a fact she claims to have only learned that morning. As she explains that she has confided in Mrs. Archer, Mrs. Welland, and Ellen, Newland realizes that she would have had to inform her cousin two weeks prior to day she claims to have confirmed the pregnancy. To his inquiry about the actual timetable of when she confides in Ellen, May responds, "No; I wasn't sure then—but I told her I was. And you see I was right!"⁹⁰ By telling Ellen that she is pregnant before it is confirmed, May fabricates the one excuse that will simultaneously force her cousin out of the picture and demand Newland to

⁸⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 351.

⁹⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 359.

remain at her side. May's actions, carried out with "blue eyes wet with victory,"⁹¹ initially seem harsh; however, she had given him the option to end their engagement a long time ago. It is with complete honesty that she claims before the marriage: "I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong—an unfairness—to somebody else."⁹² She affords him the opportunity to find happiness, but ultimately takes action to ensure that he honors the commitment he consented to. Her actions reveal an uncanny ability to measure others, because they achieve both of her goals. With Newland's deficient male gaze, he fails to recognize May's intellectual capacity. Wharton incorporates her performance of this masterful manipulation to expose May's keen insightfulness, ultimately debunking all myths of the intellectual naiveté that her innocence signals.

You Lost Control of Your Life So You Bought Some Sweatpants: How Ellen Olenska's
Aesthetic Rebellions Brand Her as a 'Glamour Don't'

Through Countess Ellen Olenska, Wharton illustrates a foil for May and a female experience that exists on the opposite end of the social spectrum. While Old New York society and Newland identify May as the ideal Victorian wife, they classify Ellen as the ruined woman, condemning her as the embodiment of social otherness. Like her cousin May, Ellen has a distinctive aesthetic, from which Newland extracts details for interpretation and evaluation. The qualities that society and Newland perceive in May are fashionable innocence, respectful traditionalism, and intellectual passivity, while Ellen's externally constructed identity is the antithesis of ideal Victorian femininity. Just as the artificial veneer of May's perfection is impenetrable, the fabricated guise of Ellen's deficient femininity is unassailable. Ellen's concrete rebellions against the norms of fashion, in her practices of dress and design of the home, signal

⁹¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 359.

⁹² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 167.

her rejection of all major aspects of social decorum. According to the standards of Old New York society, Newland perceives Ellen to have failed in performing the ideals of Victorian femininity, and as a result she is destined to live, without redemption, as a figure of scandal.

It is in the novel's inaugural scene, during which both Newland and the reader first meet the Countess that Wharton begins to establish the aesthetic in which society perceives Ellen's social otherness. She makes her first public appearance at the Academy of Music since her return to America from Europe, a transition she undertakes with the hopes of obtaining a divorce from her abusive husband. At this performance of *Faust*, Newland finds himself distracted from the Opera because of his compulsion to scrutinize her appearance:

Newland Archer, following Lefferts's glance, saw with surprise that his exclamation had been occasioned by the entry of a new figure into old Mrs. Mingott's box. It was that of a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. The suggestion of this head-dress, which gave her what was then called the 'Josephine look,' was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom with a large old-fashioned clasp.⁹³

The aesthetic that Wharton designs for Ellen presents an abundance of visual details in which Old New York perceives her social otherness. The propriety of her debut is eclipsed by the offensiveness of her "unusual dress."⁹⁴ Newland's distaste for her regal 'narrow band of diamonds' is rooted in American superiority, born out of the democratic disgust for antiquated, distinctly European monarchies. He acknowledges that it is this headdress that 'suggests' her 'Josephine look,' a style whose implications are crucial to the perception of this ensemble and also her aesthetic as a whole. It is through the 'cut of her dark blue velvet gown,' in which its 'Josephine-style' silhouette is rooted, that Ellen's sexually provocative aesthetic is created. This style of dress, named after Empress Josephine, dominated fashion during the Empire Period and

⁹³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 29.

⁹⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 29.

presented a substantial visual and stylistic departure from the fashions of the Bustle Period. The stylistic landmarks of this aesthetic include the straight column silhouette, empire waistline, low neckline, and Greco-Roman influence.⁹⁵ Her gown is completely distinct from others at the Opera, especially May's modest dress, given the fact that the Empire dress "exposes a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing, at least in ladies who had reasons for wishing to pass unnoticed."⁹⁶ In the risqué and ostentatious aesthetic of her garment, Newland perceives her to be active in her ostentatious defiance of fashion. Through his masculine gaze, Newland interprets the visual signposts of Ellen's ensemble for use in constructing her identity, marked by social otherness, and questions continuously whether to pardon or condemn her 'failure' to perform femininity.

In Ellen's wardrobe, which includes darker, richer colors, and heavier fabrics, Newland perceives the negative qualities that contribute to her scandalous reputation. The distinct colors and textures of her wardrobe serve as a visual parallel to the eccentric attitude that society understands in her, one marked by her rejection of fashion, abandonment of tradition, and awareness of sexuality. Newland permits details of her garments to represent her mysterious past, emotional profundity, and intensity of character. During their first private encounter, Newland describes her as "attired in a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur."⁹⁷ He is shocked by the colors of her robe because of their rich intensity. The velvet and fur, characteristically warmer and heavier textiles, depart from the delicate girlish aesthetic within which May is trapped. His view of her ensemble as stylistically deviant contributes to his idea that she is an outsider. He explains that, "There was something

⁹⁵ Eubank and Totoro, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 315.

⁹⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 34.

⁹⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 123.

perverse and provocative in the notion of fur worn in the evening in a heated drawing-room.”⁹⁸ It is through the aesthetic details of her clothing, which disobey the tenets of fashion, that Newland understands her characteristic eccentricity and social defiance. He comments, “Her face looked pale and extinguished, as if dimmed by the rich red of her dress. She struck Archer, all of a sudden, as a pathetic and even pitiful figure.”⁹⁹ The juxtaposition of the ‘rich red of her dress’ to her face subdues the vitality of her countenance, sparking his perception of her as a ‘pathetic’ and ‘pitiful’ individual, because of the nontraditional color scheme of her aesthetic. Ellen is not permitted to exercise the amount of agency required for Newland to understand her identity, and instead it is he who evaluates the implications of her aesthetic based on its adherence to socially constructed ideals of femininity.

The physical mobility that Ellen experiences as a result of her continuous rejection of the fashionable Victorian silhouette represents her loose morality and disrespect for structure, exposing the magnitude of the power that society allocates to fashion as well as the authority of the patriarchal gaze to condemn individuals who fail to perform femininity. The majority of Ellen’s garments maintain the Josephine-style silhouette introduced with her Empire dress at the Opera. It is the in the cut of her gowns that Newland perceives her failure in performing femininity. During Newland’s first visit to her house, he recalls “on his last visit to Paris, seeing a portrait by the new painter, Carolus Duran, whose pictures were the sensation of the Salon, in which the lady wore one of these bold sheath-like robes.”¹⁰⁰ Ellen’s robe, which fails to display structural landmarks of American Bustle Period fashionable dress, reminds him of a French painting’s female subject, an unflattering comparison given the American understanding of European inferiority during the time period. With its unstructured cut and shapeless fit, the

⁹⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 123-4.

⁹⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 127.

¹⁰⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 123.

sensual aesthetic of Ellen's 'bold sheath-like robe' is the antithesis of more prudish American Victorian fashion. It is the cut of her gown that prompts Newland to associate her with an imagined woman whose French identity connotes moral debauchery and sexual perversion in the view of American public. Newland's perception of this resemblance forces Ellen to absorb these unfavorable qualities, which are rooted solely in the implications of her garment and have no basis in her genuine character.

Newland understands Ellen's refusal to conform to Victorian standards of fashion to be a direct threat to the authority of the aesthetic mandated by social matrix, and the ideals of femininity that they symbolize. During one visit, Newland is incredibly taken aback when Ellen enters the room in a ball gown: "Everything about her shimmered and glimmered softly, as if her dress was made out of candle-beams; and she carried her head high, like a pretty woman challenging a room full of rivals."¹⁰¹ The language with which Wharton illustrates the construction of the gown, loosely woven from 'candle-beams,' implies that it, too, is devoid of the rigid structure of a fashionable Bustle Period dress. The gown, which 'shimmers and glimmers softly,' lacks the tightly-laced corset, whale-boned bodice, and sizable bustle that May often appears in. However, the dress, despite the gentleness of its silhouette, is perceived as a rather harsh threat to the supremacy of fashion because of the extent to which Newland finds it alluring. The fact that he regards her as a 'pretty woman' despite her 'challenging [of] a room full of rivals,' reveals the degree of temptation her ensembles sparks. The threat she poses is so significant because her appearance does not automatically elicit distaste in the patriarchal overseer. Through the seductive quality of Ellen's standard silhouette, which renders Newland powerless, Wharton exposes that the threat of social otherness lies in Ellen's use of her sensuality to evade patriarchal punishment.

¹⁰¹ Wharton, *The Age Innocence*, 180.

Wharton compounds the magnitude of the threat Ellen poses to New York society through external assumptions of her sexual promiscuity that endanger the established veneer of ideal feminine sexual innocence. Wharton alludes to the emerging hazard of Ellen's sexuality through her moments of undress. Regarding Ellen's debut at the Opera, Janey Archer comments that her dress was "perfectly plain and flat—like a night-gown."¹⁰² The 'plain and flat' silhouette of the gown overshadows the definitively formal aesthetic that the blue velvet creates. Her Empire dress repulses Janey, a representative of New York's social matrix, mandating Newland's patriarchal disapproval. This dress, however, presents a more substantial threat than Ellen's other ensembles that fail to display the rigid structure and back fullness of Bustle Period fashion as shown through Janey equation of it to a 'night-gown' a physically revealing and sexually intimate garment. Ellen's undress exposes her sexual awareness, thus hindering Newland from fashioning for her the same guise of innocence that he constructs for May. The unstructured silhouette of her clothing, which exposes her physical body, simulates her loose morality, leading his interpretation of her consciousness to be sexually explicit. When she rises during one scene, she looks "down at the tip of the little satin boot that peeped from her long draperies."¹⁰³ The classification of her garment as 'long draperies' signals the absence of a bustle, while her visible boot conveys that the floor-skimming silhouette replaces the fashionable voluminous train. The view of her satin boot beneath her clothing serves as a symbolic state of undress, and Newland's sharp attention to this aspect of her ensemble reveals the danger that sexual provocation poses to the patriarchal regime.

Wharton conveys that the threat of Ellen's constant state of undress is rooted in the anxiety over female sexuality and the destruction of ideal girlish innocence. This visually

¹⁰² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 59.

¹⁰³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 126.

triggered sexual tension arises when Newland and Ellen declare their love for one and other: “He sat bowed over...staring...at the tip of the satin shoe that showed under her dress. Suddenly he knelt down and kissed the shoe.”¹⁰⁴ While the satin boot is not an inherently risqué object, it engenders the same degree of provocation as an undergarment because its exposure replicates the intimacy of undress. It is the sight of the shoe, and the shock of its visibility, that inspires Newland to kiss her. The romantic and sexual implications of the shoe’s reveal are rooted in the creation of an uncustomary vulnerability between the two. Ellen’s wardrobe, which deviates from the Bustle Period silhouette while imitating a state of undress, signals her rejection of fashion while symbolizing her failure to perform the ideals of femininity. This deficiency, which threatens to contaminate even the patriarchy, motivates Newland’s construction of her social otherness, a mystique that simultaneously elicits his resentment and fascination.

Old New York society, Newland included, understands Ellen’s concrete disobediences of fashion to symbolize her foreignness, a quality that contributes substantially to the external perception of her social otherness. By establishing Ellen’s childhood as unusual, Wharton distinguishes her from the rest of New York society. Medora Manson raises young Ellen, the orphan of two “continental wanderers” who subjected their daughter to a “roaming babyhood.”¹⁰⁵ With regard to Medora, society “looked indulgently on her eccentricities,”¹⁰⁶ but Ellen is not extended the same courtesy. With society’s permission, Newland perceives a substantial correlation between her unconventional practice of fashion and ambiguous nationality. It is Newland who relays to the reader the signals of young Ellen’s social otherness, which are, of course, the objects and materials with which she interacts. He recalls an image of

¹⁰⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 189.

¹⁰⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 78.

“little Ellen...in crimson merino and amber beads like a gypsy foundling.”¹⁰⁷ It is the nontraditional aesthetic of her ‘crimson merino’ garments and ‘amber beads’ that motivates his comparison of her to a gypsy, a member of an ethno-cultural group that has endured substantial prejudice and anxiety. Mrs. Archer asks, with regard to the baring of Ellen’s exotic and unconventional upbringing on her behavior, “What can you expect of a girl who was allowed to wear black satin to her coming out ball?”¹⁰⁸ New York’s social matrix perceives considerable distinctions between itself and Europe regarding the concrete cultural practices that constitute fashion. This notion of cultural opposition is evident in Mrs. Archer’s rhetorical question, which recognizes Ellen’s black satin as a sign of her foreign upbringing. Additionally, this question addresses how, in the eyes of Old New York, her garment symbolizes her inability to comprehend the tenets of American fashion, and represents, on a larger scale, her impending failure in performing the behavioral practices of socially constructed Victorian femininity.

In order to augment the aesthetic notoriety Ellen’s clothing earns her, Wharton emphasizes the eccentricity of her practice of fashion, solidifying her status as a social other. With his patriarchal gaze, Newland supervises her interactions with fashion, assessing the degree to which her behaviors regarding clothing adhere to New York’s customs. When the van der Luydens throw a dinner party, Ellen arrives, “rather late, one hand still ungloved, fastening a bracelet about her wrist; yet she entered without any appearance of haste or embarrassment.”¹⁰⁹ Newland perceives a disregard for propriety in Ellen when she enters a formal drawing-room in what he views as a state of undress. She is segregated from society because of her conspicuous arrival, but also because she enters before she is ‘fully dressed.’ Although her standard silhouette similarly simulates a state of undress, her donning of especially provocative garments is largely

¹⁰⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 59.

¹⁰⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 80.

confined to her home. On this occasion, her state of undress, established through her ‘ungloved hand’ and unfastened bracelet, transcends the boundaries of the domestic space and enters the public sphere. Wharton compounds the vulgarity of this action through Ellen’s obliviousness to the magnitude of her faux pas. Her improper entrance, marked by her unapologetically incomplete ensemble, symbolizes her failure to practice fashion successfully.

Ellen’s blatant disregard for the indecency of her state of undress represents to Newland her active defiance of customary propriety in regard to her other unconventional practices of fashion. During a visit to Ellen’s house, he judges an interaction between the Countess and her servant: “It was not usual, in New York society, for a lady to address her parlour-maid as ‘my dear one,’ and send her out on an errand wrapped in her own opera-cloak.”¹¹⁰ He perceives a substantial degree of impropriety in Ellen’s abnormally close relationship to her maid, Nastasia. Her initiation of platonic intimacy with her servant offends Newland, because it conveys her abandonment of formality and tradition. Additionally, this woman, to whom she refers by a term of endearment, shares her clothing. Given the standard feminine ‘religious reverence’ of dress, Newland understands Ellen to be breaking a sacred rule through her seemingly generous action. By sharing her garment, Ellen relinquishes to Nastasia a facet of her identity while abandoning the distinctly feminine spirituality of dress. The ruthlessness with which Newland judges Ellen’s practice of fashion reveals the authority of the patriarchy to decipher the meaning of female interactions with material culture.

Wharton expresses the impenetrability of Ellen’s social otherness through both the extension of the physical aesthetic of her wardrobe to the visual character of her home and Newland’s compulsion to judge harshly what intrigues him. While the interior of Ellen’s home does not physically embody distinctly negative traits, it does extend the aesthetic of her

¹¹⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 181.

wardrobe, characteristically foreign, peculiar, and unfashionable, to the space that she inhabits. The drawing-room of her “strange empty house”¹¹¹ visually extends the aesthetic from which society constructs her consciousness and Newland assesses her success in performing gender:

What he saw... was the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known. He knew that Countess Olenska had brought some of her possession with her—bits of wreckage... and these... were represented by some small slender tables of dark wood, a delicate little Greek bronze on the chimney-piece, and a stretch of red damask nailed on the discolored wallpaper behind a couple of Italian-looking pictures in old frames.¹¹²

He initially appreciates the décor for its uniqueness; however, his visual interest comes from the room’s ‘faded shadowy charm.’ While the room does not harken back to Ellen’s most damning assumed qualities, such as her sexual promiscuity, it does reinforce some of the unfavorable qualities that society and Newland perceive in her. If this drawing-room is an extension of her physical self, then Newland’s liking of it, despite the absence of fashion, is representative of his complex feelings for the Countess, in spite of her scandalous reputation. Wharton establishes this important tension within the room, through the contrast between the space’s lack of style and Newland’s inexplicable fondness for it. His claimed unfamiliarity with the characteristically European aesthetic serves as a visual allusion to her foreignness. Her dilapidated European ‘bits of wreckage’ symbolize Ellen, who returns to New York a ruined woman because of her scandalous divorce suit.

Wharton reveals the degree to which the standards of Old New York’s social matrix are ingrained in Newland’s consciousness through need to judge Ellen’s social otherness despite his interest in her. Like her wardrobe, the drawing-room is marked by darker, richer hues. The ‘tables of dark wood’ and ‘red damask’ create the same intensity and warmth as her garments. Newland is struck by “the way in which Medora Manson’s shabby hired house... had, by a turn

¹¹¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 89.

¹¹² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 89.

of the hand, and the skillful use of proprieties, been transformed into something intimate, ‘foreign,’ subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments.”¹¹³ Ellen’s presence in the home elevates the allure it holds for Newland. However, he does not relay his intrigue without also specifying its unfashionable qualities. Newland’s mention of the space’s ‘intimacy’ and ‘foreignness’ undermines his substantial interest in it. The room seduces him, but it does so through traits that he has relayed as unfashionable to the reader. This aesthetic consumes Ellen trapping her within the externally held understanding of her social otherness, an identity she receives because of her failure to achieve the ideals of femininity. The fact that he judges her for her rejection of fashion in the design of her home despite his romantic and sexual interest in her demonstrates the dominance of the social matrix. The parameters of New York’s social system are so deeply ingrained in Newland’s consciousness that he is not free to fully approve of Ellen at his own discretion. As a result Ellen’s externally constructed consciousness remains fairly impermeable because Newland’s compulsion to judge her performance overshadows his attraction to her.

Through his capacity to internally construct the frameworks and decorate the interiors of the spaces in which Ellen resides, Wharton conveys the power of Newland’s patriarchal perspective while exposing, through his pleasure in fantasy, the degree to which he is seduced by social otherness. Beyond her drawing-room, Wharton does not offer precise illustrations of Ellen’s residences within her prose, and instead the majority of the interior spaces that she inhabits are complete figments of Newland’s imagination. He is largely deprived of the sight of the private spaces in which she resides, limiting the access of his gaze in perceiving her aesthetic. As he approaches the Blenker house, he illustrates a vivid image of Ellen inside: “He stood irresolute, wishing suddenly to see the inside of the house, so he might picture the room that

¹¹³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 90.

Madame Olenska sat in.”¹¹⁴ Newland’s desire to see inside of the house stems from his longing to envision the room in which Ellen would sit, rather than the impulse to imagine her. His excitement is rooted not in the delight of gazing upon her physical body, but the pleasure gained from viewing objects, the furnishings, the décor, the bric-à-brac, that represent the different facets of her identity. During one of their longest separations, Newland pictures her home in Washington: “Since there had been no farther communication between them...he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings.”¹¹⁵ The fact that the two fail to maintain interpersonal communication does not inhibit his ability to satisfactorily imagine her home. In fact, it seems as though her concrete absence enhances his authority to completely internally construct and design the spaces within which she is confined. Newland’s private preference reveals the fetishistic quality with which he views material culture for its power to build a ‘sanctuary’ within which Ellen will remain ‘enthroned.’

The fact that Newland is continuously romantically satisfied by fantasies of Ellen throughout his life exposes the degree to which he prefers the authority in imagining her to physically seeing her. When Newland travels to Paris at the end of the novel, he fantasizes outside her apartment building: “by some queer process of association, the golden light became for him the pervading illumination in which she lived.”¹¹⁶ He acknowledges the irregularity and impropriety of his vivid fantasies when he refers to his ‘queer process of association,’ but ultimately the temptation in creating a space for her is too powerful. The ‘pervasiveness of this illumination,’ the space that is constructed for Ellen’s confinement, reveals the power of Newland’s masculine gaze to internally create identity. Even as he begins to defect from New

¹¹⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 242.

¹¹⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 280.

¹¹⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 374.

York's social matrix, he maintains his patriarchal authority to freely use material culture in the manipulation of the female consciousness.

Society perceives Ellen's defiance of fashion in dress, home design, and practice as a sign of her failure to achieve its standards of ideal femininity. Mrs. Archer resentfully wonders, "why Newland's engagement should be mixed up with that Olenska woman's coming and goings I don't see?"¹¹⁷ Through her dehumanizing of Ellen, Mrs. Archer, an ardent supporter of May, deprives her of any possible agency. She fails to recognize Ellen's first name, ultimately detracting from her identity. Mrs. Archer, a representative of the old-fashioned, excludes Ellen from society through attacks on her nomadic tendencies and the scandal she brings with her upon her invasion of Old New York. With his mother's disapproval of the Countess and declaration of her irrelevance, Newland has all the evidence he needs to convict Ellen for her failure to perform the ideals of Victorian femininity. Mrs. Archer makes no attempt to mask her distaste for the Countess when Janey claims that she should have adopted a more Polish name: "It sounds more conspicuous; and that can hardly be what she wishes."¹¹⁸ With this judgment, Mrs. Archer reveals the extent to which she views Ellen as completely distinct from the other women who live in Old New York. She believes that Ellen is aware of her status as an outsider and should be actively conforming to society in order to diminish the magnitude of her failure. She freely criticizes the Countess even though she has yet to verbally communicate with her, making harsh judgments of Ellen's character despite the fact that the two are complete strangers. With Mrs. Archer's arbitrary critiques, Wharton exposes that her disapproval stems from Ellen's poor performance of the ideals of Victorian femininity, a reality she perceives in Ellen's failure to adhere to fashion and interact appropriately with material culture.

¹¹⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 57.

¹¹⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 59.

It is through society's disapproval of Ellen's behaviors that Newland feels obliged to monitor her practices and ultimately punish her, and it is through his condemning of her performance that he causes his own suffering. As the bearer of the gaze and the patriarchal overseer of gender performance, Newland feels compelled to suppress his attraction to Ellen. However, as the narrative progresses his attempts to convince himself that Ellen is his worst possible match become more desperate. When Newland explains to Janey that he did not warn Ellen about Beaufort's advances because he not engaged to her, "The words had a fantastic sound in his own ears."¹¹⁹ With this statement, Newland fails to exercise agency. He does not take ownership of this passive assertion of distaste for Countess Olenska and allows his words to hold the agency in this moment. Because the words 'sound fantastic in his ears,' there is an implication that they did not originate within his own consciousness, and are instead externally generated for his use. The superficiality of this sentiment, which resonates only in an exterior part of his body, exposes the opposite idea that he has some deeper desire to be around Ellen. Her later attempts to validate his decision to reject Ellen in favor of his engagement with May:

As for the momentary madness which had fallen upon him on the eve of his marriage, he had trained himself to regard it as the last of his discarded experiments. The idea that he could ever, in his senses, have dreamed of marrying Countess Olenska had become almost unthinkable, and she remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts.¹²⁰

He attempts to justify his choice to abandon Ellen by internally insisting that she is the antithesis of the ideal Victorian woman. In his attempts to legitimize this action, he unintentionally reveals that on a deeper level, Ellen is his ideal romantic partner. Newland seeks to belittle his affection for Ellen by qualifying it as 'madness.' While he uses this term in the hope of invalidating his feelings, it presents substantial irony because he was not crazy to love Ellen, but rather to reject

¹¹⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 104.

¹²⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 225.

her on principle even with May's permission to romantically pursue her. Revealing that he 'trains himself' to regard her differently exposes the degree to which he polices his own adherence to the social matrix. His claim that she resides in his consciousness, 'plaintively' and 'poignantly,' reveals the profundity of his feelings while corroborating the emotional depth of their bond, truths that identify Ellen as his truly ideal wife. Through the pain that Newland endures as a result of his commitment to succeeding in his role as the patriarchal enforcer and his performance ideal masculinity, Wharton critiques the Victorian social matrix for its mandated repression of meaningful emotional expression.

As Newland questions New York's social matrix and his function as its perpetuator, he modifies his attitude towards enforcing Victorian ideals of femininity, pardoning Ellen for her failure to perform gender. Although he does abandon the parameters of socially approved femininity and perceives in Ellen a degree of agency, he does not relinquish to her his authority to interpret her consciousness. Newland appraises her character during one of their first encounters, arbitrarily assigning to her meaningful qualities: "But there was about her a mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of her head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the least bit theatrical, struck him as highly trained and full of a conscious power."¹²¹ He understands her to have certain unconventional traits that depart from those permitted by ideal femininity. The fact that he is responsible for allocating to her seemingly favorable characteristics undermines the reality of her 'authority' and 'sureness' because she does not actively articulate or express these traits. His masculine gaze affords him the privilege to be 'struck' by different aspects of her appearance. Her sense of 'conscious power' is invalidated by his role its assignment to her. Ironically, Newland's praise of Ellen's emotional depth and sense of self is devalued because he deprives her of agency in identifying

¹²¹ Wharton, *The Age Innocence*, 80.

these qualities. Newland exercises similar control over Ellen's identity when he decides that it is her eccentric passion that excites him: "She had hardly ever said a word to him to produce this impression, but it was a part of her, either a projection of her mysterious and outlandish background or of something inherently dramatic, passionate and unusual in herself."¹²² Newland articulates Ellen's character excluding her concrete active expression. Although he admits to 'producing the impression' of her identity, he fails to acknowledge its falsity. Newland remains insistent that the traits he assigns to her are 'inherent' to her authentic self. His recognition of her positive and admirable qualities is meaningless because he maintains the power to relay them to the reader. Through his continuous robbing of Ellen's agency to articulate her own identity, Wharton further exposes the extent to which Newland remains confined within the rigid social matrix regardless of his masculinity and patriarchal position.

Wharton's critique of Old New York's social matrix reaches one of its greatest climaxes when Newland abandons his revelation of the dangers in constructing the female consciousness from material culture upon his mistaking of the veneer of Ellen's identity to be her genuine character and regards this artificial guise as the object of his love. Looking at the generic guise of May's identity, Newland finally realizes how the system permits women only to simulate self-expression through an 'arbitrary set of signs' and the 'repetition of stylized acts.' However, he proves to be unmoved by this new awareness when it fails to influence his treatment of women, especially Ellen, who strives to achieve active expression and meaningful communication. Witnessing her unconventionally spirited way of life, he "through all his deeper feelings, tasted the pleasurable excitement of being in a world where action followed on emotion with such Olympian speed."¹²³ Newland is internally satisfied by the thrilling sincerity of correlation

¹²² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 133.

¹²³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 181.

between her emotions and her actions. His ‘pleasurable excitement’ in viewing authentic and profound expression reveals the extent to which it is unfamiliar given his role in stymying this type of behavior. However, he struggles to internalize this approach to the female consciousness a truth that Wharton exposes when he exercises his authority over Ellen’s consciousness far beyond the point of these epiphanies:

Archer, remaining seated, watched the light movements of her figure, so girlish even under its heavy furs, the cleverly planted heron wing in her fur cap, and the way a dark curl lay like a flattened vine spiral on each cheek above the ear. His mind, as always when they first met, was wholly absorbed in the delicious details that made her herself and no other.¹²⁴

Newland claims to love Ellen for her genuine character and those qualities that are completely distinct to her consciousness; however, the ‘delicious details’ he mentions belong to the external realm of material culture. His love for her is dependent on the artificial veneer of her identity, simulated by the objects that veil her physical body. It is the guise of her social otherness that becomes the object of his obsession because of how it bewilders and excites him. With this interpretation of Ellen, Newland once again deprives her of agency, blocking her profound articulation of self in spite of his awareness of the dangers of systematic female repression and his claim to desire profound communications.

Wharton reveals the extent to which Ellen’s identity is externally constructed by the patriarchal gaze through subtle allusions to her sporadic adherence to socially approved parameters of fashion. The fact that Newland is ignorant of the implications of her successful practice of fashion exposes the artificiality of her identity. When the Archers discuss Ellen’s reasons for not attending the Beaufort ball after the Opera, Newland says, “I don’t think it was a question of taste with her. May said she meant to go, and then decided that the dress in question

¹²⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 325.

wasn't smart enough."¹²⁵ Ellen's decision to skip the ball is not rooted in her lack of taste, but rather her desire to wear a dress suitable for that particular occasion. This choice corroborates her knowledge of customs, propriety, and fashion. Although it is Newland who relays Ellen's line of thought, he fails to consider this occasion when he continuously judges her to be completely unfashionable. Even some representatives of the old-fashioned acknowledge Ellen's capacity to adhere to fashion. When describing one of the Countess's ensembles Janey says, "She had on a black velvet polonaise with jet buttons, and a tiny green monkey muff; I never saw her so stylishly dressed."¹²⁶ Janey explicitly concedes Ellen's achievement of fashion. Her donning of a Polonaise, a popular style of gown during the Bustle Period, demonstrates her ability to dress both in accordance with fashion and her own unique preferences. Newland's disregard for her capacity to obey fashion leads to his one-dimensional understanding of her aesthetic practices. Ultimately, Ellen's discretionary adherence to style prompts him to automatically condemn her as an unfashionable social other despite the reality of her more complex tastes. The consequence of the limited masculine perspective that Newland uses to evaluate Ellen presents, just as it is for May, substantial inconsistency between her aesthetic reputation and actual practice of style. This relationship is representative of the disparity between Ellen's externally constructed identity and authentic identity.

Wharton juxtaposes Newland's perception of Ellen's European exoticism to moments during which she is distinctly American, in order to expose concepts of her foreign social otherness as falsehoods. As we have seen, Ellen's unsuccessful practice of fashion signals her foreignness, a quality that is crucial in Newland's disapproval of her performance of femininity, and ultimately, in the external construction of her consciousness. Old New York society

¹²⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 59.

¹²⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 169.

continuously regards her as European, a characteristic that aids in its perception of her as an inferior outsider. During a debate about Ellen's desire for a divorce, Mrs. Welland states, "I'm afraid Ellen's ideas are not at all like ours. She was barely eighteen when Medora Manson took her back to Europe... and since then she has never been to America. No wonder she's completely Europeanized."¹²⁷ New York's belief in America and Europe's mutually exclusivity blocks Ellen from maintaining two ethno-cultural identities. It is society's establishment of significant discrepancies between the cultures that ultimately limits her capacity to conform. Wharton reveals the degree to which Newland internalizes this view of Ellen through his continuous acknowledgments of her foreignness and obvious distaste for it. At the Opera, as Ellen reminisces about living in New York, Newland remains distracted by "her trailing slightly foreign accent."¹²⁸ Her mild vocal affectation, a physical sign of her ethnic ambiguity, sparks, in him, a measurable degree of confusion. With her liminal ethno-cultural identity, she is understood, through her return, as attempting to be simultaneously American and European. As a result of her social invasion, Newland's confusion regarding her ethnic identity transforms into resentment. Newland explains his reasons for keeping the news of his engagement from Ellen, claiming, "Some invincible repugnance to speak of such things to the strange foreign woman had checked the words on his lips."¹²⁹ Her exoticism offends Newland, and deems her unsuitable for the discussion of proper marriage. The fact that her 'strangeness' and 'foreignness' provoke his reluctance to have this conversation reveals the perceived connection between her exoticism and unconventionality. Ultimately, his resentment of her foreignness is rooted in the fact that it concretely distinguishes her from the rest of society, and it is this conspicuous position that signals her inability to comprehend Old New York's customs and traditions. Ellen's imminent

¹²⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 162.

¹²⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 37.

¹²⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 44.

failure represents her inability to successfully perform Victorian American femininity, and ultimately contributes to her externally constructed social otherness.

Wharton juxtaposes Newland's recognition of Ellen's sexual awareness, the trait that most clearly represents her failure to perform ideal femininity, to moments that expose her intellectual profundity and emotional breadth in order to further demolish the veneer of her social otherness. When Ellen accuses Newland of attempting to take her as a mistress, he understands her question to as a sign of her understanding of sexuality:

The crudeness of the question startled him: the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic. He noticed that Madame Olenska pronounced it as if it had a recognized place in her vocabulary, and he wondered if it had been used familiarly in her presence in the horrible life she had fled from.¹³⁰

With no concrete evidence, Newland internally perceives the extent of Ellen's sexual awareness. He mistakes her bravery in uttering the word 'mistress,' a term that the other women of Old New York evade at all costs, for familiarity. He understands her tone, inflection, and pronunciation as signs that she is conscious of sexuality through her husband's extramarital affairs with both men and women, but also her rumored affair with Count Olenski's secretary. The arbitrariness of his perception reveals the limitations of his gaze and the authority he holds to create for her an entire life. While he does succeed in acknowledging the substantial misfortune that she has endured, he still makes cruel assumptions regarding her immorality and tolerance of sexual debauchery, assigning her a degree of awareness that jeopardizes her identity. In spite of her desire for acceptance and eagerness to conform, Newland insists to her, "You'll never be like everybody else."¹³¹ The definitive nature of his proclamation demonstrates the extraordinary degree to which her authentic identity and true behaviors are irrelevant to the consciousness that is

¹³⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 306.

¹³¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 126.

constructed for her. Wharton uses the unfounded nature of Newland's perception of her experiences to contrast with the realities of her identity in order to establish the discrepancies between patriarchal interpretations of Ellen's consciousness and her genuine character.

As Newland internalizes Old New York's anxieties over foreignness, he blocks Ellen from joining his community despite her attempts to conform to the society to which she once belonged. The fact that Newland preserves the guise of Ellen's foreignness indicates his blatant disregard for her desire to integrate herself into Old New York society. Upon returning to New York from her mysterious past in Poland, she states, "I want to forget everything else, to become a complete American again."¹³² The significance of this statement is twofold because it firstly demonstrates her readiness to conform to the culture of Old New York. Secondly, she explicitly declares that she wants to join society 'again,' reaffirming her prior belonging to his community. It is through her expressed desire to conform to the society of which she was previously a member that the reader learns that Ellen is not as exotic as society believes she is. With her intense desire, Ellen displays her readiness to abandon the European culture in favor of American ideals. Newland explains the ideological rationale that leads the Countess to New York for the pursuit of her divorce: "But European society is not given to divorce: Countess Olenska thought she would be conforming to American ideas in asking for her freedom."¹³³ Ellen, believing in America's ideological superiority, views the country as a refuge whose philosophical framework of freedom supports her personal desire for freedom. This understanding of the United States' ideological tradition is the source of her enthusiasm for social conformity. Her eagerness to rejoin American culture not only debunks all myths of her contagious exoticism for the reader, but also exposes the magnitude of her intellectualism

¹³² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 84.

¹³³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 162.

through the display of her conceptual quest for freedom. With these realities, which discredit Ellen's social otherness, Wharton expresses the detriments the social matrix and patriarchal gaze pose to unique articulation of self.

Wharton critiques New York's social matrix for its perpetuation of the 'tyranny of things,' which permits material culture to simulate artificial generic veneers of female identity, through Ellen's denunciation of fashion. The fact that she vocalizes disdain for arbitrary compliance with standardized constructs of material opulence, aesthetic tradition, and social customs reveals the absurdity of allowing such superficial 'things' to symbolize her identity. She is incredulous following Newland's explanation that her family perceives her neighborhood to be unfashionable: "Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one's own fashions?"¹³⁴ She dismisses fashion as a source of authority within society, pushing for the freedom of the individual to design her own aesthetic. She seems to believe that abolishing the rigidly repressive system would make way for a social framework in which women could exercise agency without having to abandon material culture completely. It is not the owning of 'things' that Ellen objects to, but "the blind conformity to tradition."¹³⁵ She critiques fashion because of the way in which it demands women to relinquish jurisdiction over their aesthetic practices to society. She encourages, with her own behavior as a model, the conscious exercising of personal discretion when approaching fashion. She does sometimes conform to social expectations of fashionable dress, but only when she actively and independently chooses to do so. Regarding material opulence, Medora Manson tells Newland that Ellen "cares nothing for all these! Art and beauty, those she does care for, she lives for, as I always have."¹³⁶ She longs to express herself meaningfully, because material objects do not have the capacity to communicate

¹³⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 93.

¹³⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 258.

¹³⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 178.

the more profound and intangible entities in life, such as art, beauty, and love. With her reluctance to accept such a rigid, one-dimensional system of fashion and validate its ability to represent identity, Wharton reveals just how misguided Newland truly is in believing that Ellen's material possessions have any serious relationship to her identity.

Wharton fully demolishes the artificial guise of Ellen's scandalous reputation, through juxtapositions of external assumptions about the negative qualities that signal her social otherness, her moral inferiority, sexual awareness, and foreign eccentricity, with moments that display genuine compassion and selflessness. Despite her position as the recipient of most of the harsh criticisms, ostracism, and abuse in the novel, she values the wellbeing of her loved ones more than she values her own. She demonstrates the sincerest of human compassion when she reveals to Newland her reason for abandoning her divorce suit:

Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing—give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage...and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal? And because my family was going to be your family—for May's sake and for yours—I did what you told me, what you proved to me that I ought to do...I've made no secret of having done it for you!¹³⁷

With her confession, Ellen reveals that she has, to a certain degree, internalized the socially mandated standards of propriety. In this moment she defies Newland's expectations for her social otherness through her graceful conformity to Old New York's social customs and successful performance of Victorian ideals of femininity. Although Ellen seeks a divorce to escape her physically and emotionally abusive husband, she abandons her 'selfish' and 'wicked' endeavor to protect Newland and May. Even though her divorce suit is perhaps the most justified offense against social conventions in the novel, she discontinues her efforts out of affection and tenderness for Newland. Her choice confuses him because her complexities prevent him from

¹³⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 186.

fitting her within either of society's rigid polarized categories of feminine identity. As we have established, Ellen does not condone blind conformity to tradition, therefore her obedience to social customs indicates that she perceives a deeper significance in abandoning her divorce. The desire to protect Newland and May motivates her conformity. It is because she loves her these two individuals that she sacrifices her pursuit of freedom. Ellen's genuine selflessness is completely contraindicated by the identity that society constructs for her. With this action she demonstrates not only that she is capable of respecting social customs, but also the extent of her authentic human compassion and significant emotional breadth. Wharton incorporates the completion of the ultimate act of selflessness to expose Ellen's emotional profundity and genuine altruism in order to undermine the guise of moral inferiority that her scandalous reputation symbolizes.

Chapter III
B*tch Stole My Look: Evaluating the Adaptation of Aesthetics and Power in Scorsese's 'Knock-Off,' *The Age of Innocence*

In 1993 Columbia Pictures released an adaptation of Edith Wharton's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence*. Martin Scorsese, the film's director, was charged with adapting a literary work equipped with an intricate aesthetic. When Scorsese signed on to direct *The Age of Innocence*, he was agreeing to bring to life Wharton's "intimate portrait of the enclosed world of 1870s upper-class New York."¹³⁸ Scorsese identifies the novel's highly developed aesthetic as one of the most significant factors in his desire to pursue the project:

What was also very interesting to me was Edith Wharton wove a tapestry of detail throughout the book, so that you're almost reading an anthropological study at the same time as the story. You wonder at times why she's discussing certain types of flowers, certain types of rum and punch, different courses of food at dinners. But as the book progresses, you realize it's all these elements which are keeping Newland Archer in his place in society.¹³⁹

With this statement, Scorsese acknowledges the significance of Old New York's 'tyranny of things' to Wharton's narrative. Through his discussion of this 'tapestry of detail,' Scorsese makes a similar move to those Wharton makes throughout her prose: the materialization of Old New York society. Scorsese's fascination with *The Age of Innocence* stems, in part, from its complex identity as a novel, which is simultaneously anthropological and literary. He understands, from delving into the narrative, that the material opulence that surrounds Newland Archer represents the unspoken social parameters of tradition, custom, and propriety that confine him within the boundaries of his role as the patriarchal enforcer and bearer of the masculine gaze. Wharton establishes a detailed aesthetic for *The Age of Innocence* in her prose; however, Scorsese does not defer to the original text in all visual aspects of the film. The liberties that Scorsese takes in adapting *The Age of Innocence* more directly expose Newland's entrapment

¹³⁸ Ian Christie and David Thompson, ed. *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: Faber and Faber Inc., 2003), 176.

¹³⁹ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 178-179.

with in Old New York's social matrix. Through narrative voice and close attention to Newland's aesthetic, Scorsese reveals that Newland has inherited the same type of externally constructed identity as May and Ellen receive in Wharton's original text. The incorporation of a female narrator removes the distinctly masculine quality from the narrative structure. While Newland does maintain his position as the patriarchal enforcer, the reality that he functions within a realm chronicled by a woman exposes his role as a spectacle for a female spectator. With a female narrator, portrayed by Joanne Woodward, in an observational role, she assumes the authoritative position as the bearer of the gaze. The film's utilization of a female narrative perspective gives a distinct feminine quality to the construction of identity and framing of material culture.

Although Scorsese's film presents many stylistic departures for Wharton's original novel, the discretionary deviations do not compromise *The Age of Innocence's* integrity as a cinematic adaption. Fidelity is one of the biggest sources of controversy regarding discussions of film adaptation. Many critics have proved to be preoccupied with fidelity to the extent that they dismiss adaptations that have made too many 'unnecessary' modifications to the original text upon which it is based. Scholar Ake Persson addresses the critical conversations surrounding the majority of literary to film adaption:

Until relatively recently, discussions of film adaptations of literary texts have focused on what is usually called 'the fidelity issue.' In other words, comments on adaptations have almost exclusively dealt with how far the adaptation is 'true' to the original source or if it strays from it, and if it departs from it, whether it can still be 'true' to 'the spirit of the literary text.'¹⁴⁰

Because literature and cinema are two completely distinct forms of art and modes of expression, comparing the two often gives precision of fidelity too much value in assessing the success or failure of an adaptation. While many critics argue that there is no way to create a successful

¹⁴⁰ Ake Persson, "The Mafia in the Drawing Room: Martin Scorsese's Film Adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*," *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 7, no. 2 (2008): 40.

adaptation, others critics seek to evaluate these films independent of their source. Persson asserts that “the differences between the two media are so great that they cannot be bridged,”¹⁴¹ an understanding that allows for the assessment of film adaptations devoid of meticulous attention to fidelity. Prioritizing strict fidelity in the exploration of an adaption often obscures the artistic merit of material valuable to analysis. Viewers often become too focused on what is ‘wrong’ in the adaptation, limiting their abilities to consider the film as its own entity. According to Persson, “it seems constructive to first examine the director’s overall achievement, particularly the main themes, conflicts and concerns represented in his work in order to come closer to an understanding of his adaptation.”¹⁴² In order to analyze the film adaptation most effectively, I will explore the ways in which the film deviates from the novel in order to explore how Scorsese achieves in expressing criticisms of Old New York’s social matrix, its ‘tyranny of things,’ and Victorian systematic repression, revealing ultimately the extent to which his modifications to the text enabled the film’s successful expression of Wharton’s original narrative.

It is Scorsese’s discretionary approach to adapting *The Age of Innocence* that enables the film to simultaneously honor Wharton’s text and communicate its own distinct message. Although Scorsese’s film only incorporates some elements of Wharton’s narrative style, the liberties taken allow it to tell a unique story. The modifications made in the adaptation process reflect Scorsese’s individual experience and perspective. Ian Christie and David Thompson assert, “Given Scorsese’s previous excursions into the world of impossible relationships, as well as his intense curiosity about social and tribal codes as previously displayed in the Italian-American criminal sector, it was perhaps not so surprising that he should be fascinated by what

¹⁴¹ Persson, “The Mafia in the Drawing Room,” 40.

¹⁴² Persson, “The Mafia in the Drawing Room,” 44.

is arguably Wharton's greatest novel."¹⁴³ Christie and Thomas specify Scorsese's interest in 'impossible relationships' and 'social and tribal codes,' two of the most crucial aspects of Newland's experience with the narrative. As the center of the story's 'love triangle' and overseer of social conformity, Newland, with his abundant complexities, was perhaps responsible for sparking Scorsese's intrigue. His past projects do not compromise his ability to adequately salute Wharton's text, rather it is his distinct critical lens that enables him to tell a story that exposes the sad truth that Newland Archer is trapped even deeper inside Old New York's social matrix than May and Ellen are.

Who Wore It Better?: Contemplating the Gendering of the Narrative Voice in Scorsese's Adaptation

By using a female narrator to chronicle the events of Old New York, Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* strips Newland of all sense of narrative authority he holds in the novel, thus depriving him of agency despite his masculinity. Scorsese's decision to make the gender of the narrator explicit has been one of the most controversial debates in regard to the film. While this voiceover does maintain the same third person limited omniscient point of view as Wharton's narrator, it deviates from the original narrative voice through its assignment of a gender to an originally gender ambiguous narrator. Because the narrator from Wharton's novel remains anonymous, the voice of protagonist Newland Archer emerges at the forefront of the narrative. In the novel, the reader is only permitted access to Newland's internal thoughts and thus his perspective becomes associated with that of the narrator. Scorsese explains that he decided to include a female narrator to maintain Edith Wharton's sense of authorship by giving her a voice in the film:

¹⁴³ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 177.

Above all, I wanted on film to give people the impression that I had when I finished reading the book, to have some of the literary experience along with the visual experience of the picture. So we decided to use a voice-over narration from the book, in which the narrator seems to be standing apart and observing events. But Edith Wharton writes the book from the point of view of Newland Archer, so that you don't realize what others are doing until later on when he realizes it.¹⁴⁴

The voiceover, provided by Joanne Woodward, brings a distinctly feminine quality to the film's narrative through the gentleness with which she delivers her dialogue and her apparent empathy toward the characters. Although Scorsese made this decision in order to maintain the story's literary integrity, Woodward's voiceover frames a narrative that is fairly distinct from that of the novel. Without the definitively masculine perspective, the film's narrative is less judgmental of the patriarchy specifically, while communicating substantial critique of Old New York's social matrix.

Joanne Woodward's occupation of the narrative voice diminishes the degree of agency that Newland is able to exercise, because it reintegrates him into Old New York's population. As Newland becomes a spectacle and an object of obvious scrutiny, his voice loses its degree of narrative authority. When the film was released in 1993, Vincent Canby wrote in *The New York Times*, "The soundtrack narrator (Joanne Woodward), who is presumably Edith Wharton, spells out so many of his thoughts, amid her own observations, that he often appears to be acting out instead of doing for himself."¹⁴⁵ Many critics argue that Daniel Day-Lewis's Newland does not hold a fraction of the authority that Wharton's Newland possesses in the original text. Day-Lewis's Newland seems to be on the receiving-end of the film's plot. Similarly, Persson writes, "The voice-over comments on and clarifies the visual images and thus becomes an authority in

¹⁴⁴ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 185.

¹⁴⁵ Vincent Canby, "Review/Film: *The Age of Innocence*; Grand Passions and Good Manners," *The New York Times*, September 17, 1993, accessed January 20, 2016.

the film.”¹⁴⁶ By extension, Persson’s statement indicates that evaluation of obedience to fashion, or the physical embodiment of the ‘repeated stylized acts’ that comprise ideal gender, is no longer a masculine obligation, but a feminine one. Woodward’s occupation of the role of interpreter undermines the patriarchy, robbing its members of narrative authority. Critic Deborah Thomas explains how Woodward’s voiceover gives the narration a sense of ‘explicit femininity’:

Though the narrator who speaks these words may be taken to be more or less equivalent to Wharton’s narrator in the novel...the fact that it is Joanne Woodward who supplies the voice not only makes her femaleness explicit, implying perhaps a merging with Wharton herself, but colors her ironic tones with considerable warmth and compassion, especially in later stages of the film.¹⁴⁷

Woodward’s distinctly feminine voiceover conflates not only with Wharton’s voice but additionally those of society’s matriarchs, such as Mrs. Mingott, Mrs. Archer, Mrs. Welland, and Mrs. van der Luyden. As a result, the film delivers significant criticisms on Old New York’s old-fashioned social matrix as a whole while sparing the patriarchy, Newland specifically, because of its diminished liability. The film exposes his entrapment within society, and while the novel does reveal his social confinement, the narrative does not absolve him of all responsibility for his role in perpetuating Old New York’s systematic repression. Newland is one of the film’s primary victims and is perhaps the most pathetic of all because the socially constructed parameters of gender performance are ingrained so deeply in his consciousness that he fails to achieve all of his personal goals and satisfy any of his unique desires. The system of spectatorship in Scorsese’s film bonds all characters, regardless of gender, to the trappings of material culture, and designs for Newland a more precise aesthetic presence. It is the film’s inverted system of spectatorship that deprives Newland of his agency, and Scorsese establishes the protagonist’s role as a

¹⁴⁶ Persson, “The Mafia in the Drawing Room,” 53.

¹⁴⁷ Deborah Thomas, “*The Age of Innocence*: Martin Scorsese, 1993,” *CineAction* 62 (2003): 25. 22-33

spectacle through specific filming techniques and compositions traditionally reserved for female characters.

To explore how Newland Archer loses his power in Scorsese's film, we must first explore the technical and thematic strategies that filmmakers traditionally use to empower or weaken characters. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explains her theory of the male gaze. She aims to explore "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form."¹⁴⁸ Mulvey asserts that the masculine perspective is perhaps the most profound influence on narrative structures within the American film canon. In Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland operates as an embodiment of the patriarchy that monitors the success and failure of female gender performance. As the male protagonist, he has the authority to reward and condemn his romantic interests for their failure or achievement of Victorian ideals of femininity. Mulvey writes, "As an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure looking."¹⁴⁹ This would cast Newland as the primary spectator in that uses his patriarchal gaze to gain pleasure from looking at women, and ultimately possess them. Mulvey explains that spectatorship involves, "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze."¹⁵⁰ Mulvey states that this dominating patriarchal perspective comes to fruition through "the process set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify."¹⁵¹ Wharton incorporates the concept of the male gaze in the novel, through the construction of Newland's distinctly male perspective. Mulvey argues that, "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he

¹⁴⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833.

¹⁴⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 834.

¹⁵⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 835.

¹⁵¹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 838.

projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”¹⁵² Although it would seem that Day-Lewis in his portrayal of Newland fits the role as Mulvey’s ‘male bearer of the look,’ he is forced to balance acting as both the spectator and spectacle. I assert that Wharton’s novel uses the male gaze in the traditional manner more often than the film. Scorsese’s film instead uses the male gaze nontraditionally, allowing it to transcend gender barriers.

Critics have long debated the film’s genre because certain classifications such as costume drama by nature fetishize dress in the same way as the novel while others such as romance permit the characters to exercise substantial emotion and agency. Scorsese has said publicly that he considers the film a romance, stating, “The most interesting part of it for me was that they couldn’t consummate their relationship.”¹⁵³ However, many would classify *The Age of Innocence* as a costume drama, a genre for which material objects, specifically clothes, are integral in establishing setting, character, and dynamics of power. Maura Spiegel argues, “Adornment—and the very idea of fashion—is tied in a number of ways to issues of sexual expression, sexual selection, and gender.”¹⁵⁴ Spiegel defines the value of material culture in the analysis of gender hierarchies within costume drama. Costume, within this genre, communicates many of the same issues that dress does within Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*. Stella Bruzzi asserts similarly that the costume dramas “focus specifically on the fetishistic value of history and historical clothes.”¹⁵⁵ Bruzzi’s statement confirms that the costume drama inherently recognizes the degree of power material opulence has held throughout history’s ‘tyranny of

¹⁵² Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 838.

¹⁵³ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 177.

¹⁵⁴ Maura Spiegel, “Adornment in the Afterlife of Victorian Fashion,” in *Fashion in Film*, ed. Adrienne Munich (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 183.

¹⁵⁵ Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), 35.

things.’ Classifying *The Age of Innocence* as a costume drama acknowledges the authority that material culture, rather than any character, wields power within the film’s narrative structure.

The New Look: Dressing *The Age of Innocence* for the Silver Screen

In order to recreate Old New York’s ‘tyranny of things,’ the film adopts a highly ornamented aesthetic. Through the detail-rich mise-en-scène, the film achieves a level of visual complexity that rivals the astounding intricacies of Old New York’s social matrix. There is a definitive urgency with which the film establishes the degree to which Old New York worships the material culture that enslaves it. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser asserts with regard to mid-twentieth century melodrama, “If it is true that speech and dialogue in the American cinema lose some of their semantic importance in favor of their aspects as sound, then conversely lighting, composition, and décor increase their semantic and syntactic contribution to their aesthetic effect.”¹⁵⁶ Within domestic melodrama, there is a genre-wide preference for visual expression over verbal expression. Elsaesser’s continues, “This is the justification for giving critical importance to the mise-en-scène over intellectual content or story value.”¹⁵⁷ Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* enacts domestic melodrama’s revitalization of aesthetic dominance. Beginning with the film’s title sequence, Scorsese delivers images densely packed with reference to materialism. This title sequence consists of images of flowers, a motif that appears throughout Scorsese’s film. These blooming flowers are overlaid with faded images of different lace fabrics both white and black of different patterns. With this Scorsese incorporates into his film’s aesthetic, the all-powerful material culture than Wharton pays homage to throughout the novel.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, “Tale of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 443.

¹⁵⁷ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 443.

Although the way in which Wharton's novel treats the masculine gaze lays significant groundwork for cinematic adaptation, Scorsese's film does not precisely reproduce the text's system of spectatorship, and instead opts not to exclude any character, based on gender, from the phenomenon of the male gaze. While the film certainly deviates from traditional approaches to creating the male gaze, Scorsese, like Wharton, does allocate some authority to the patriarchal perspective through a model of theatrical performance of the opera *Faust* at the New York Academy of Music. In the inaugural scene of her novel, Wharton introduces the reader to Madame Nilsson, who performs for the aristocrats of Old New York society. In the novel, Newland describes Madame Nilsson singing on stage "in white cashmere slashed with pale blue satin, a reticule dangling from her blue girdle, and large yellow braids carefully disposed on each side of her muslin chemisette."¹⁵⁸ Using his gaze, he visually deconstructs Madame Nilsson's costume, transforming her from person into an object for himself and the other patrons. The pleasure of viewing her spectacle is rooted not only in her song but also in satisfaction of interpreting her aesthetic appearance. Wharton's emphasis on the details of her costume facilitates Madame Nilsson's transformation into a textual accessory on display within the novel's aesthetic. Scorsese emulates this first scene at the Opera introducing a similar system of pleasurable objectification. As the film's narrative plot begins, the camera fades a shot of a large bouquet of yellow daisies and shows a hand as it reaches into the frame to pluck a flower. The camera pans up the length of this unidentified arm, revealing an opera singer, Madame Christine Nilsson, performing in a grand theatre. The following frame is entirely black, but as the camera pans sideways, it exposes the subject to be the lapels of a man's tuxedo jacket, accessorized with a white gardenia. Shifting upward, the camera displays the face of Newland Archer, fragmenting his physical body in the same way as that of Madame Nilsson. The camera then displays images

¹⁵⁸ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1998), 27.

of the audience members, presenting the patrons through fragmented images of their bodies. Mulvey explains in regard to traditional constructions of the male gaze in narrative cinema, “The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look.”¹⁵⁹ Scorsese’s film, however, deviates from the standards of the gendered system of spectatorship through the application of these techniques to all Opera patrons. The film offers the viewer fragmented shots of the New Yorkers, showing images such as a man’s lapels, a woman’s brooch, a woman’s earrings, and a woman’s hairpiece. By showing the patrons through isolated shots of bodies ornamented with an opulent possession, the film fragments and thus dehumanizes each New Yorker, transforming them into objects for display. With this emphasis on the presence of objects at the Opera, masculinity is powerless to exempt male characters from the male gaze, ultimately establishing for the film a ‘tyranny of things’ similar to the one found in Wharton’s novel.

Scorsese organizes this revised system of spectatorship through the construction of a modified aesthetic that adapts Wharton’s original ‘tyranny of things’ for the film. Scorsese’s film uses these first scenes to establish a schema of visual signs and symbols that simulate the material culture and system of fashion of Wharton’s Old New York. The viewer first looks at the Mingott women when Larry Lefferts looks into the family’s box across the theatre. As Lefferts settles on the Mingott box, Ellen enters, her iridescent cobalt dress rich against the red velvet upholstered walls. Ellen exposes the front of her gown as she steps into the box, showing the viewer her fitted three-quarter sleeved, scooped neck bodice. As she turns profile to sit down, Ellen reveals a voluminous bustle. This dress presents innumerable aesthetic departures from the Josephine-style Empire dress from Wharton’s novel. Scorsese discusses the design of Ellen’s all-

¹⁵⁹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 841.

important blue dress: “I settled on that effect because I saw how you began to notice people, with the glitter of their jewelry, and then this incredible woman appears in a blue dress, and the blue is very different from what everyone else is wearing.”¹⁶⁰ While the film preserves the blue color of Ellen’s gown from the original text, it adopts for this dress a fashionable Bustle Period silhouette.

Wharton’s original passage emphasizes that the source of Old New York’s shock at the Opera is rooted in Ellen’s rejection of the fashionable Bustle Period silhouette rather than solely her interesting color palette:

It was that of a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. The suggestion of this head-dress, which gave her what was then called the ‘Josephine look,’ was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom with a large old-fashioned clasp.¹⁶¹

Ellen’s antiquated and foreign Empire style distinguishes her from the other female Opera patrons. People reading Wharton’s novel around its time of publication likely would have understood that the Ellen’s gown is many decades out of fashion by the early 1870s. Many viewers watching *The Age of Innocence* in 1993, however, probably would not have comprehended how unfashionable and foreign an Empire style gown would appear to aristocrats during the Bustle Period. In the film, the symbolic value of her gown is rooted in the visual contrast between its intense cobalt hue and another color shown in the scene. Scorsese’s blue dress excludes many of Wharton’s original details, such as silhouette and the regal narrow band of diamonds that, to Newland and Old New York society, serve as signs for Ellen’s personality traits. With modifications like those made to Ellen’s first gown, Scorsese primes the

¹⁶⁰ Christie and Thompson, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, 187.

¹⁶¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 29.

viewer for the types of visual signs and aesthetic relationships that create Old New York's social matrix, which suit the cinematic narrative despite being distinct from those in the novel.

Through its modified aesthetic, the film develops its own distinct symbolic system of feminine ideals by visually prioritizing certain emblems and images within the *mise-en-scène* that deviate from those in the novel but still communicate the rigidity of the Victorian social matrix. In the short moments that the camera first displays the Mingott box, an image brought to the viewer through the point of view of a character other than Newland Archer, May remains somewhat invisible due to Ellen's visually overwhelming presence. When Newland first steps into the Mingott box, the camera, from his point of view, begins in May's lap, focusing on her bouquet of lilies, panning upwards to expose her torso and face, allowing the viewer to gaze on and appreciate her aesthetic. His gaze then moves, with the camera, to Mrs. Welland, and eventually to Ellen. Julianne Pidduck discusses Scorsese's Opera scene: "[Newland] talks fondly with his fiancée, May (clad in virginal white), and is soon introduced to the exotic Ellen, who wears a shimmering blue dress."¹⁶² When Newland finally does gaze upon Ellen, the shot displays only the top half of her ensemble, prioritizing the color of the gown over its silhouette. In Wharton's novel, it is the antiquated European cut of Ellen's gown that jars Old New York, but as Pidduck observes in regard to Scorsese's Ellen, her exoticism is expressed through the stark cobalt color of her dress:

Part of what sets Ellen apart from her demure cousin May is the 'inappropriate' flashy blue dress she wears to the opera. Discourses of costume and comportment foreground seething undercurrents of corporeality and sexuality, for 'if a dress is a social form, as surrogate for the body it also partakes of the body's relation to psyche and desire... In the opening scene, Ellen's iridescent blue dress announces Pfeiffer's star presence and accentuates her character's suspect sexuality.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 47.

¹⁶³ Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, 48.

While the cobalt color of her dress distinguishes her from the other Opera patrons, the other stylistic components, those of cut, silhouette, and style are relatively inconspicuous. Her gown adheres the tenets of fashionable Bustle Period dress. The juxtaposition of Ellen to May creates a visual contrast whose power lies in the aesthetic opposition between pure angelic white and bold rich blue.

Scorsese's film establishes a modified system of spectatorship through the diminishing of Newland's point of view in monitoring May and Ellen, a narrative strategy that detracts from the dominance of his gaze, and ultimately limits the authority of the patriarchal perspective. In the novel, the reader sees the Mingott box when Newland "turn[s] his eyes from the stage and scan[s] the opposite side of the house."¹⁶⁴ In regard to the film, the viewer gains access to the first image of the Mingott box at the Opera through the eyes of Larry Lefferts as he gazes through his opera glasses. When Lefferts passes the opera glasses to Sillerton Jackson, his gaze provides the viewer with a substantial image of all three women in the Mingott box, Ellen, May, and Mrs. Welland. Newland's abrupt departure from the box, a response to Lefferts's and Jackson's insensitive gossip, prevents his verbal communication. Furthermore, the lack of a shot designated from Newland's point of view excludes him from the conversation, forbidding him from supporting or combating these criticisms of Ellen. Scorsese's protagonist is denied the opportunity to vocalize his perspective. While Wharton's Newland articulates similar judgments, Scorsese's Newland, who internalizes his thoughts, remains somewhat passive. This decision detracts from the authority of his masculine gaze in reading May and Ellen in a moment that is crucial in the novel to the reader's understanding of the power of Newland's patriarchal perspective.

¹⁶⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 25.

My Dinner With Archer: Exploring Old New York's Insatiable Appetite for Material Culture

Scorsese's film uses the experience of dining to simulate the performance of Old New York's socially mandated traditions and customs. Dining is significant in Scorsese's film because the formal meals expose characters' behavioral conformity in a highly material setting. With a formal dinner comes an arsenal of objects, both food and table wears, that physically embody the Victorian social framework that traps all New Yorkers, especially Newland, within the boundaries of socially approved ideals of gender. Dining becomes an ostentatious display of wealth and custom, decorating the film's mise-en-scène with objects that are not bound to one gender, but instead mandate fashionable practice from all New Yorkers. The film's emphasis on dining is certainly rooted in Wharton's original text, and gains a powerful visual presence through adaptation while providing a new and different aesthetic dimension of material culture. The practice of formal dining is both universal and communal, fostering Scorsese's modified system of spectatorship through its service as a display of behavior and material during which both the feminine and masculine are spectacles. The film elevates cuisine from a set of utilitarian objects to the physical tools for a theatrical and aesthetic presentation of social identity. Joy L. Davis explains that the ritual of dining supplied Victorian Americans with "an acceptable mode of expressing personal desires; [and] conversely...provided in its traditional social and ethical code a framework for repressing those desires."¹⁶⁵ She asserts that in Wharton's novel, "Their manners afford glimpses of their pretensions, proprieties, and insecurities. Their table conversation reveals, conceals, distorts their thoughts. Crystal, china, centerpieces, silverware advertise their affluence, their cultural heritage, and their aesthetic taste."¹⁶⁶ In both the novel

¹⁶⁵ Joy L. Davis, "The Rituals of Dining in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*," *The Midwest Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1993): 465.

¹⁶⁶ Davis, "The Rituals of Dining," 466.

and film, dining is, as Davis calls it, a ritualistic experience, but Scorsese's scenes of dining incorporate the practice into the rigid aesthetic that represents Old New York's suffocating social matrix and its systematic confinement of the individual.

The film's uses the theatrical practice of dining to represent the socially sanctioned performance of Old New York's gender ideals, standards of fashion, and parameters of behavior. Scorsese establishes the social significance of dining through Mrs. Mingott's venture to introduce Ellen to Old New York at an opulent formal dinner. According to the narrator, "Such an occasion demanded the most careful consideration. It required the appropriate plate. It also called for three extra footmen, two dishes for each course and a Roman punch in the middle."¹⁶⁷ The film shows the Mingott household as it prepares for this dinner through a long string of dissolves beneath the narrative voiceover, during which images of objects, such as food and table wears dominate the shots, emphasizing the importance of 'things' to dining and furthermore to social acceptance. When Old New York society declines to attend this dinner, symbolically rejecting Ellen, Newland convinces the van der Luydens to invite her to a dinner they are holding in honor of the Duke of St. Austrey in order to rescue her reputation. As Ellen ascends the grand staircase in the van der Luydens' home, the narrator explains, "The occasion was a solemn one and the Countess Olenksa arrived rather late. Yet she entered without any appearance of haste or embarrassment the drawing-room in which New York's most chosen company was somewhat awfully assembled."¹⁶⁸ The narrator expresses the inherent solemnity of the formal dinner, exposing the ritualistic quality of the practice. Following two brief shots of Ellen tardy entrance into the van der Luydens' drawing-room is a series of slow dissolving shots that display the opulent table and extravagant meal. The way in which the camera pans slowly over fragmented

¹⁶⁷ *The Age of Innocence*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1993; Chatsworth, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

¹⁶⁸ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

images of vibrant platters, ornate dishes, and stunning centerpieces is highly sensual. Linda Williams asserts, “Critics of fifties family melodrama delighted in the way the repressed emotions of the characters seemed to be ‘siphoned off’ onto the vivid colors and mute gestures and general hysteria of the *mise-en-scène*.”¹⁶⁹ Williams’s claim regarding characters of domestic melodrama fit the characters of Scorsese’s Old New York. There is substantial tension between the vibrant excess of the ornate dining table and the subdued polite conversation carried out by the characters. During Scorsese’s scenes of dining, the table overwhelms those who surround it, even those characters that held authority within Wharton’s novel. The visually overpowering dining rooms of the film continuously engulf Newland, providing clutter and physical barriers that prevent flexibility in his attitudes and behaviors. These intricately embellished aesthetics crush Newland’s true consciousness under their incredible weight. With the suffocating vibrancy of excess, the film’s dining rooms confine Newland, representing the way in which Old New York society pigeonholes him as the patriarchal authority figure. Newland inherits this externally constructed identity just as May and Ellen do. By allowing society to identify Newland as one type of polarized generic masculinity, Scorsese exposes that he becomes the patriarchal authority figure as a result of his successful performance of ideal Victorian masculinity.

‘If You Like It then You Shoulda Put a Ring On It’: How Scorsese’s Imagery of Hands Simulates the Expression of Passion

Within Scorsese’s film, hands serve as one of the narrative’s most significant images through their capacity to simulate meaningful expression and facilitate a degree of action. A hand, for a woman, is the place of her engagement ring, a material object that, during this time period, symbolized her becoming the possession of a man. Furthermore, hands, specifically those

¹⁶⁹ Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Reconfiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 44.

of Madame Christine Nilsson, are the first human body part to appear in the film. While this evidence might indicate that the imagery of hands solely represents feminine repression, closer examination reveals that it is Newland Archer whose expression is most profoundly limited through this visual trope. After the Beauforts' ball, the camera cuts to a close up shot of a woman's hand adorned with a large sapphire engagement ring, then dissolves, revealing Mrs. Mingott examining May's hand. Mrs. Mingott turns to Newland and asks, "But it's the hand that sets off the ring, isn't it my dear Mr. Archer?"¹⁷⁰ Her question presents substantial irony because, thus far, in both Wharton's novel and Scorsese's film, the narratives have assured the reader and viewer the exact opposite: that material possessions are the sole authority in signing for a character's identity. While this moment appears to focus on the degree to which May is limited by Old New York society, the exchange exposes a great deal about the extent of Newland's social confinement. Mrs. Mingott makes her claim, while calling on Newland for support. Her dialogue, which masquerades as a question, serves to remind Newland of his role within society as the patriarchal overseer, who understands these social standards and perpetuates them. Mrs. Mingott's forceful language, in conjunction with Newland's failure to respond, exposes his lack of authority. He supposedly wields the power to make decisions through his masculine privilege, but in reality he is bound to the repressive system of materialism more than any other character, even his trophy fiancée. Mrs. Mingott says to her guests, "My hands were modeled in Paris by the great Rochee. He should do May's."¹⁷¹ She recounts an occasion during which her physical form was rendered from material, and by encouraging May to do so as well she simultaneously objectifies her granddaughter while pushing Newland to do the same. She refers to May's hand

¹⁷⁰ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁷¹ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

as “tempered,”¹⁷² a term that describes the hardness or elasticity of materials, dehumanizing her in the process. This conversation comes to fruition during a montage of the Archers’ European honeymoon, where a series of slow dissolves shows images of May posed for an artist. As she sits displayed on a pedestal, he sculpts her hands and forearms. This moment certainly renders May as a spectacle and reduces her to an object; however, through the camera’s focus on the image of Newland standing in the studio watching his wife, he also becomes a spectacle. While the image of May’s feminine display indeed reduces her agency, Newland’s enslavement to this sight exposes his lack of agency, transforming him into the object of the viewer’s spectatorship.

Scorsese uses the imagery of Ellen’s hands to challenge Newland’s capacity to freely understand meaningful emotions and express his desires. Ellen’s somewhat aesthetically provocative presence triggers in Newland desire and passion that trivialize her own assumed deviations from Victorian gender ideals. His romantic awakening, sparked by images of Ellen’s hands, threatens to derail the success of his social performance. Kimberly Chrisman writes regarding Wharton’s novel, “Ellen’s wedding ring...is the most important fetish object, though it does not actually appear in the text.”¹⁷³ Wharton writes that Newland “had time to imprint on his mind the exact shape of her other hand, the one on her knee, and every details of the three rings on her fourth and fifth fingers; among which, he noticed, a wedding ring did not appear.”¹⁷⁴ While this ring is similarly excluded from the film’s narrative, Scorsese successfully conveys the ring’s incredible significance through interactions between Newland and Ellen. Scorsese uses hands as a visual motif to fetishize the engagement ring, implying the value in its presence or absence and power to suggest a woman’s marital status and sexual availability. The fact that

¹⁷² Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁷³ Kimberly Chrisman, “‘The Upholstery of Life’: Clothing and Character in the Novels of Edith Wharton,” *Dress* 25, no. 1 (2013): 128.

¹⁷⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 128.

Newland is enslaved by an object that does not even appear in the novel detracts from his agency. Scorsese first emphasizes Newland's obsession with Ellen's hands during his first visit to her 'odd little house,' when the camera cuts to a close up shot of her hands immediately after she serves him tea. The script reads, "She detaches a small gold cigarette case from one of her bracelets, holds it out to him. He takes a cigarette and she removes one for herself before closing the case."¹⁷⁵ This close up displays only Ellen's hands, adorned with the gold bracelet and an unidentified ring, fragmenting her body while Newland attempts to read her jewelry. The viewer understands the extent of his emotional limitation through his reliance on physical objects to indicate her romantic and sexual availability. Moments later, when she begins to cry, Newland reluctantly takes her bejeweled hand, addressing her as 'Ellen' for the first time, as opposed to 'Madame Olenska.' The intimacy of this moment is two-fold; through touch, Newland attempts to comfort her physically, while through the abandonment of her formal title, he seeks to console her emotionally. This shot includes only the hands while excluding the faces, the most expressive part of the body, in a moment of tremendous physical and emotional intimacy. By fragmenting the bodies and emphasizing the hands, Scorsese exposes Newland's dependency on an external appendage in emotionally connecting with another character.

By restricting Newland so that he is able to initiate romantic and sexual action towards Ellen solely through hand-to-hand contact, Scorsese reveals the degree to which Newland's capacity for expression is confined to the superficial realm. During a scene at the Patroon House in Skuytercliff, he fantasizes that Ellen leaps from her seat to embrace him. The camera cuts to a shot of him closing his eyes, zooming in while decreasing the depth of field, so that he is the only figure in focus. The next frame shows Ellen's hands in her lap, following them as she approaches him from behind, sliding her arms around his torso so he can lay his hands on top of

¹⁷⁵ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

hers. As Newland is ejected from his fantasy, the viewer understands that his hands are his sole mechanism for communicating his innermost desires. The fact that the actual physical intimacy in his fantasies is so limited reveals the extent to which his most personal desires are repressed. His ability to internally simulate intimacy is so dependent on the hands because the external, polite, and withdrawn touch is the only form of expression that society permits him to understand. His reliance on the power of the hand appears again when he attempts to finally express his love to Ellen. As he tries to explain his feelings to her, he grabs her hands, prompting her response, “Don’t make love to me. Too many people have done that.”¹⁷⁶ Ellen’s demand elicits some degree of surprise because viewers watching Scorsese’s film in 1993 would likely understand the phrase ‘make love’ to imply sexual intercourse. While Wharton’s use of this phrase in the novel probably alluded to mere flirtation, Scorsese seems to visually exploit the more contemporary definition of the saying within his adaptation. Through the pattern that Scorsese works to establish in other scenes, the viewer comprehends that it is the touch of the hands that simulates the intimacy of making love. Newland fails to actually say the word ‘love’ to Ellen, and he instead only implies it claiming, “There is another woman. But not the one [May] thinks.”¹⁷⁷ It is the physical contact of the hands, a part of the body that signals sexual availability, that gives expressive substance to Newland’s subtle implication of romantic affection.

Scorsese stages one of his most substantial critiques of Old New York’s social matrix when he reveals that Newland is repressed to the extent that he can only artificially simulate one of the most meaningful expressions of passion and desire: sexual intercourse. Imagery of hands is crucial to the scene of Newland and Ellen riding in May’s carriage. Ellen places her hand over

¹⁷⁶ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁷⁷ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

Newland's, prompting a sequence of slow dissolves. Following a close up of her gesture are shots of Newland slowly removing his own glove, his hands as he tenderly picks up her hand and turns it over, his fingers slowly unfastening the gold buttons of her glove, his fingers as he parts each seam of the glove, and his head as he kisses her bare wrist. This final shot allows for a transition to the grand climax of the two kissing passionately as the music swells dramatically in the background. Her touch becomes the sexual advance that invites Newland to begin this sensual interaction. The way that the sequence is shot is highly reminiscent of love scenes deepening Scorsese's criticism of the repressive Victorian social climate. The voluptuous slow pans and melting dissolves create the erotic languidness of a passionate seduction. By using the touch of the hands to simulate intercourse, Scorsese reveals how limited Newland is in his expression of sexuality, and furthermore, any emotions or desires that deviate from the ideals of Victorian masculinity.

Paint Me Like One of Your French Girls: Scorsese's Displaying Narrative Actions through Two-Dimensional Images of the Visual Arts

Scorsese uses montaged shots of two-dimensional pictures to perform a great deal of the film's narrative action to convey the characters', mainly Newland's, submission to the 'tyranny of things,' and ultimately deprive them of agency. By representing the actions and events of the narrative through visual and decorative objects, Scorsese forces the characters into passivity. The emphasis on two-dimensional images is crucial in conveying the extent to which the characters are permitted to physically enact the events of the narrative. When the viewer first enters the Beauforts' home, the camera cuts to a shot of the foyer and pans up the staircase towards the hostess, Regina Beaufort. The camera, however, passes over her body and settles instead on her portrait, which hangs directly behind her on the wall. By using Regina's portrait to represent her,

Scorsese dehumanizes her, and consequently forces the viewer to objectify her. The camera comes to value a two-dimensional depiction of Regina as more informative to viewer than her physical self. Scorsese constructs a similar dynamic in the scene of the first obligatory engagement visit to Mrs. Mingott, during which the narrator speaks as the camera pans throughout her drawing-room and up her grand stairwell, displaying her vast collection of paintings. Although the narration gives brief context on Mrs. Mingott and her role in Old New York society, the camera does not feature her, and instead displays the items in her crowded home. The narration quickly moves away from Mrs. Mingott's personal life towards an analysis of her home: "Though brownstone was the norm, she lived magisterially within a large house of controversial pale cream-colored stone, in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park."¹⁷⁸ The narrative conflates Mrs. Mingott's identity with her belongings, demonstrating that the objects decorate her home represent her personality more 'precisely' than her own voice could. The script reads, "Camera moves freely around the Mingott house, showing us rooms and giving an impression of secure wealth and unquestioned power."¹⁷⁹ Paintings are one types of décor emphasized most powerfully during this sequence. The camera shows portraits of dogs, scenes of drawing-rooms, stunning outdoor landscapes, and scenes of violence, rather than Mrs. Mingott herself. This narration describes her home and how other Old New Yorkers react to it; however, the images that the camera provides to the viewer are those of two-dimensional scenes. Scorsese's chosen narrative structure certainly conveys how material culture limits women's opportunities to actively communicate, echoing the harsh polarization of femininity that Wharton's criticizes in her novel. The film, however, uses the visually imposed limitations on

¹⁷⁸ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁷⁹ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

female expression to lay the groundwork for the degree to which Newland is confined to passivity by the power of material culture.

Scorsese's utilization of paintings throughout the film to represent Newland's actions ultimately detracts from his agency and exposes the reality that his patriarchal authority is a socially constructed guise. By allowing decorative pictures to imply Newland's actions, Scorsese reveals to the viewer how little the protagonist actually does beyond silently and statically gazing upon the other characters. Scorsese excludes scenes of the Archer wedding from the film, electing instead to imply the occasion through other images. With this decision, Newland is forbidden from exercising any authority in the communication of one of the most important events of his life. The sequence begins as the camera dissolves to a shot of an antique camera's viewing glass, zooming out on the image of May, upside-down, posing in her wedding dress. This shot then dissolves to an image of her reflection in the camera's front lens, then, showing the photographer, setting up the portrait as she poses, and once more to a shot of Newland watching in front of a three paneled mirror, where her figure is reflected in each section. By representing the Archer wedding through a series of artificial images, during which Newland is utterly stationary, Scorsese removes the intensity of his character. The scene initially indicates the degree to which May is an object on display; however, Newland is rendered a passive spectacle for the viewer's gaze in his service as the patriarchal overseer. His authority within the film is a façade as he spends the majority of the film watching Old New York. As he continuously fails to carry out meaningful action, the viewer understands that he has even less agency than the film's female characters, like May and Ellen. By developing plot through visual simulations of actions, Scorsese exposes that the most overwhelming externally constructed identity in *The Age of Innocence* is the guise of Newland's patriarchal authority.

‘I Be On My Suit and Tie’: Undressing Victorian Masculinity through Newland Archer’s
Aesthetic Entrapment

Through specific filming techniques and carefully designed mise-en-scène in *The Age of Innocence*, Scorsese detracts agency from the female characters while recreating the overpowering interior aesthetics from Wharton’s novel. The film’s highly ornamented mise-en-scène allows the cinematic spaces to swallow their female occupants. With this visual focus, Scorsese ensures the viewer’s understanding of the powerful connection between female characters and their possessions. However, Scorsese’s film has the ability to display to the viewer Newland Archer, a figure who lacks an aesthetic identity in Wharton’s novel because of his position as the protagonist. Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* offers the viewer the privilege of seeing Newland, and as a spectacle he, like the women, is visually bonded to his surrounding mise-en-scène, and consequently his consciousness is made to be reliant on the aesthetic standards of fashion and Old New York’s systematic materialism.

By consistently melding women with the aesthetics of the interior spaces in which they inhabit, Scorsese visually engulfs the female characters, detracting from their agency and dehumanizing them. In order to conflate women with their interior surroundings, Scorsese dresses them in costumes that are visually indistinguishable from the surrounding mise-en-scène. During the scene of Newland and May’s first obligatory engagement visit to Mrs. Mingott, Scorsese transforms the female characters from individual people into pieces of decorative bric-à-brac in the matriarch’s drawing-room. According to Wharton, Mrs. Mingott is unable to physically move throughout the novel because, “the immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava in a doomed city had changed her from a plump little active woman...into something vast and august as a natural phenomenon.”¹⁸⁰ Her

¹⁸⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 47.

obesity renders her completely stationary, therefore spatially confining her within her home. With her characteristic passivity, she becomes another furnishing within the drawing-room that imprisons her. During this inaugural appearance, she wears dress constructed from a pink thick, brocade textile. Her voluminous garments, embellished with ruffles, trims, and flounces weigh down her body, further stymying her physical movement. Throughout this conversation with Newland and May she reclines in a large chair upholstered with richly wrought darker pink fabric, surrounded by pink brocade pillows with white lace overlays and rustic tassels. Because of her obesity and her seated position, Mrs. Mingott is already relatively indistinct in the eyes of the viewer and her costume only furthers blurs the lines between her physical form and the objects that surround her. As Scorsese objectifies her, the dress becomes her personal upholstery. With her intricate embellishments, she visually blends in with the decorative pillows and chair that surround her. By eliminating the boundaries of Mrs. Mingott's physical body, Scorsese visually unites her with the drawing-room so that ultimately she serves as decorative object for display like the crystal lamps, picture frames, silver tea sets, vases, plants, paintings, and other pieces of bric-à-brac in the room. Although the narratives of both the novel and film recognize her as one of the most powerful figures in Old New York, she loses agency as the room's aesthetic engulfs and confines her, transforming her into a spectacle within the material clutter of her home.

Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* extends the systematic repression of Wharton's Old New York to the male characters, specifically Newland, binding them to the socially approved parameters of ideal Victorian masculinity just as the female characters are; a matrix that pigeonholes them as generic polarized feminine identities based on their practices of fashion and success in gender performance. In Scorsese's film, even their roles within the patriarchy do not

exempt male characters from the rigid confines of gender performance. The men of the film are trapped within the boundaries of New York's social matrix to the same extent as the women, and Newland is perhaps more so than anyone else a slave to society and tradition. Scorsese's aesthetic presentation of the male characters reveals that degree to which their expression of self is also limited by the parameters of superficially and externally constructed identities. By creating a rigid aesthetic for masculinity within the film, Scorsese exposes that the authority gained from membership in the patriarchy is in reality, no more than a socially constructed artificial guise that simulates authentic agency.

Just as Wharton and Scorsese establish the reliance of feminine consciousness on external interpretations of female characters' aesthetic presences and practices of fashion, Scorsese allows male characters' material possessions to sign for their identities. When Newland visits Ellen at Mr. Letterblair's request to discuss her divorce suit, he is enraged upon discovering that Julius Beaufort is already visiting her. As he enters the foyer, the camera performs a series of quick dissolves from Newland's point of view that zoom in to an extreme close up on a man's hat, scarf, and staff. The final close up shot reveals the initials 'J.B.' embroidered into the fabric of the scarf. He does not immediately see Beaufort and instead uses the distinct monogram to identify the owner of accessories. The fact that Newland is able to interpret the objects as indicative of Beaufort's presence conveys the power of material possessions in signing for the identities of male characters. By using Beaufort to establish this relationship between personal possessions and masculine identity, Scorsese primes the viewer for the aesthetic imprisonment of Newland within Old New York's repressive material culture.

Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* distinguishes itself from Wharton's novel through the illustration of a rigid masculine aesthetic for Newland Archer, a character who has no visual

presence in the novel because of his roles as both the protagonist and the bearer of the male gaze. The film affords the viewer a chance to see him, and this visibility provides Scorsese with the opportunity to exploit Newland's image in order to effectively stage his critique of the repressive and materialistic Victorian social climate. Scorsese begins to design an aesthetic for Newland from the very first scene of the film at the Opera. The camera shows him sitting in a box with the other gentlemen of Old New York; however, he is visually indistinguishable from his peers, such as Larry Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson. The gentlemen wear nearly identical costumes of traditional tuxedos with white ties, making this ensemble the uniform of masculinity in Old New York. When Newland enters the Beauforts' home for the Opera ball, he 'checks' his personal effects with a servant, who place his white gloves, with his ticket, on a table that holds dozens of pairs of gloves that look exactly the same. With this image of innumerable identical gloves, the viewer comprehends the strictness of men's fashionable dress. Newland remains visually indistinguishable from the other male characters of Old New York for the majority of the film.

Scorsese does not limit the aesthetic in which Newland is trapped to the film's male characters, and instead allows it to extend to many of the female characters as well. It is through this visual unification of Old New York that Scorsese suffocates Newland, confining him within the boundaries of his socially approved identity as the patriarchal authority figure. When Sillerton Jackson dines at the Archer home in the beginning of the film, Scorsese uses the limits of New York's uniform aesthetic to more broadly represent the restraints of society's systematic repression. The camera pans around the Archers' dining room, showing Mrs. Archer, Janey Archer, Newland, and Sillerton Jackson, while exposing each character's costume, all of which consist of garments that are black and white. While the similarities between the costumes of Newland and Sillerton Jackson are perhaps not so shocking, given the standards of men's formal

wear historically, the fact that the costumes worn by the female characters share the same color palette visually amplifies the degree to which Newland is bonded to his peers. The ensembles worn by Janey and Mrs. Archer, black dresses with white accents around the neck and wrists, adapt the tuxedo's traditional color scheme. There is tension between the universal aesthetic born out of these similar costumes and Newland's verbal opposition against the representatives of the old-fashioned. In response to the conversation that consists primarily of critical judgments of Ellen, Newland angrily asks, "Why shouldn't she be conspicuous if she chooses? She made an awful marriage but should she hide her head as if it's her fault? Should she go slinking around as if she disgraced herself? She's had an unhappy life, that doesn't make her an outcast."¹⁸¹ A version of this quotation appears in Wharton's novel as well; however, the film, through the power of its *mise-en-scène*, is able to fully capture the dissonance between the uniform aesthetic and Newland's resistance. The representatives of the old-fashioned first answer Newland's questions with uncomfortable silence. After a moment, Jackson responds: "I'm sure that's the line the Mingotts mean to take."¹⁸² With this remark, Sillerton Jackson attempts to subdue Newland's verbal rebellion. The uniform aesthetic present within the dining room further limits his argument, visually mandating his conformity. Elsaesser asserts that, "An acute sense of claustrophobia in décor and locale translates itself into a restless and yet suppressed energy surfacing sporadically in the actions and behavior of the protagonists."¹⁸³ Through his outburst at the dining table, Newland exhibits this 'acute sense of claustrophobia,' as the sameness of the characters' appearances figuratively force him into submission, so that ultimately his criticisms dissipate, failing to make a meaningful impression on his peers. Old New York's overwhelming

¹⁸¹ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁸² Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁸³ Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 444.

aesthetic and the repressive social climate that it represents are successful in suffocating and finally stymying Newland's attempt at individual expression.

By establishing the extent to which society limits Newland's articulation of self, Scorsese exposes the rigidity of Victorian masculinity, and furthermore the way it confines his unique consciousness to the parameters of an externally constructed veneer as the patriarchal overseer. After the Archers' first dinner party, the male characters drink brandy and smoke cigars in the library, gossiping about the scandalous Julius Beaufort. One male guest states: "Society has a history of tolerating vulgar women after all,"¹⁸⁴ and in response, another asserts: "Up to a point but once it tolerates men of that kind, the only prospect is total dissolution."¹⁸⁵ This conversation exposes that Victorian masculinity is equally as suffocating as Victorian femininity in the film. Newland suffers perhaps more than any other person in Old New York because the parameters and expectations of society are too deeply ingrained in his character. Scorsese's film certainly captures the degree to which Newland is imprisoned within society, illustrating immense pressure to conform to mandated customs and approved traditions. Through his continuous passing of judgments, monitoring of gender performance, and constructing of feminine identity, Newland is not intentionally malicious, but rather struggling to survive through attempts to perform the ideal of Victorian masculinity. Newland has, like May and Ellen, a generic artificial veneer for an identity. While May is the innocent and Ellen is the other, Newland is falsely the patriarchal judge, revealing moreover, that his sense of power is a component of this socially approved guise. The male gaze only simulates for Newland genuine agency. Ellen insists to Newland that he is emotionally distinct from other members of society: "They never knew what

¹⁸⁴ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

¹⁸⁵ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

it meant to be tempted. But you did. You understood.”¹⁸⁶ Scorsese sheds light on the extent to which Newland is enslaved by society through his awareness of his own temptation and the threat that it poses. His role in the patriarchy masks his profound individual complexities, shielding society and the viewer from the reality of his desire to express himself. The fact that the potential detriment in rebelling is what prompts him to repress his authentic character and instead perform ideal Victorian masculinity reveals how little agency he actually has despite his ‘patriarchal authority.’

¹⁸⁶ Scorsese, *The Age of Innocence*, DVD.

‘We Are Living in a Material World’: Can We Have Freedom When We Live in the
‘Tyranny of Things?’

Throughout Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer’s patriarchal masculine perspective not only pigeonholes many women as generic archetypes of femininity, but in doing so, furthermore transforms them into material objects themselves. The highly material language of Wharton’s prose exposes the extreme consequences of his continuous objectification of the women who reside in Old New York. While he does occasionally exclude Old New York from the category of “Rich and idle and ornamented societies,”¹⁸⁷ his language often suggests that society itself is material object. Wharton establishes within the novel the notion that Old New York is itself a fragile and precious object through characters’ contemplations of the “disintegration of society.”¹⁸⁸ If the society is a material object, then Old New York is, at its core, a decorative entity, and therefore a method of display. Wharton writes, “society, if it could be said to exist, was rather a spectacle.”¹⁸⁹ With this, Old New York becomes theatrical performance and a mechanism for display, rather than a community that provides its residents with meaningful interpersonal relationships and communication. Old New York’s intense materialism pervades the lives of the characters, transforming them into object through its superficial social climate

Through the pleasure Newland experiences in objectifying and possessing May, Wharton conveys the extent of Victorian society’s fetishizing of material culture, ultimately revealing the detriments of the ‘tyranny of things.’ Newland continuously describes May using the language of material, calling her a “young marble athlete.”¹⁹⁰ This language dehumanizes her, assigning to her the characteristics of an object, such as texture and hardness. By illustrating her as a statue,

¹⁸⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 115.

¹⁸⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 103.

¹⁸⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 274.

¹⁹⁰ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 159.

he transforms her into a stationary ‘thing,’ passive with an inherent lack of distinct consciousness. Wharton writes, “Archer was proud of the glances turned on her and the simple joy of possession cleared away his underlying perplexities.”¹⁹¹ The pleasure Newland experiences in objectifying May is rooted in his ability to possess her. The satisfaction he achieves in asserting ownership over May is substantial enough to justify their engagement despite their lack of genuine romantic love for one and other.

Newland becomes increasingly aware of the detriments of Old New York’s systematic repression and materialism as he mistakes the artificial veneer of May’s innocence for her lack of genuine emotion and meaningful experience:

Perhaps that faculty of unawareness was what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess. The blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element...In the thick of this meditation Archer suddenly felt himself looking at her with the startled gaze of a stranger.¹⁹²

He views May as completely devoid of emotional and intellectual depth. He believes that she represents ‘type’ rather than a ‘person’ because she is totally generic as a result of her achievement of ideal Victorian femininity. He fails to perceive in her any sense of unique humanity, understanding her to be so repressed that she is as one-dimensional as a ‘Civic Virtue’ or ‘Greek goddess.’ With blood that is not a ‘ravaging element,’ she lacks, in Newland’s eyes, profound desires and impulses. With his realization that he looks at May with ‘the startled gaze of a stranger,’ Wharton reveals Newland’s belief that he does not truly know his fiancée at all. By exposing this unfamiliarity between the two, Wharton critiques the extent to which Old New York’s materialism limits people from communicating and forging meaningful relationships.

¹⁹¹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 100.

¹⁹² Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 207.

Wharton further criticizes repressive Victorian materialism through Newland's continuous attempts to objectify Ellen, a woman with whom he claims to be deeply and passionately in love. He often describes her using language of material, conveying his efforts to dehumanize her and confine her to passive ideal femininity. In regard to Ellen, he recalls that, "people had said that she 'ought to be painted.'"¹⁹³ This act of rendering her as a one-dimensional entity for display transforms her from an individual being into a material object, detracting from her agency. Ellen is continuously made to be a spectacle for others to gaze upon. During a long absence, Newland explains that she "had become a less vivid and importunate image."¹⁹⁴ He internally extinguishes her human vibrancy, reducing her to a muted 'less vivid and importunate image.' Finally, at the closing of the novel Wharton writes, "When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed."¹⁹⁵ She becomes an object that represents to Newland the imaginary possibility of realizing his most personal desires. If Ellen serves a symbol for the profound fulfillment of meaningful expression, then he fantasizes about her to simulate meaningful emotions and experiences. Ironically, in order for Newland to use Ellen as a sign for authentic humanity, he must objectify and ultimately dehumanize her.

The characters of *The Age of Innocence* struggle to distinguish themselves in Old New York's "atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies."¹⁹⁶ Newland Archer perceives in New York's social matrix "a deathly sense of the superiority of implications and analogy over

¹⁹³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 78.

¹⁹⁴ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 111.

¹⁹⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 362.

¹⁹⁶ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 36.

direct action.”¹⁹⁷ By prioritizing representations of emotion over authentic emotion, Old New York forbids its residents from having meaningful experiences and fulfilling lives. New York’s acute materialism stems from the value of fashion as a physical manifestation of social conformity or rebellion. In *The Age of Innocence*, fashion is crucial to the performance of gender because it serves as a visual framework for the ‘repeated stylized acts’ that comprise femininity and masculinity. Society’s systematic repression of identity results in a polarization of both masculinity and femininity, where characters can either be the ideal or the other. These gender-based dichotomies pigeonhole the characters into generic identities, masking their individual complexities. Newland reveals to May the extent of his exasperation with the superficial ‘cookie-cutter’ society in which they live: “We’re all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We’re like patterns stenciled on a wall.”¹⁹⁸ Throughout the novel, Newland realizes that Old New York deprives them of their humanity. As society allows material objects to sign for identity, those who reside within it are permitted only to be superficial imitations of unique self-aware people. The Victorian social climate uses the ‘tyranny of things’ to compensate for its suffocating systematic repression. Material culture holds the authority to simulate individuality and self-knowledge; however, objects, given their inherent superficiality cannot convey authentic character and meaningful experiences. Wharton criticizes Old New York for believing that possessions can accurately account for genuine identity, because in reality material possessions can only scratch the surface in expressing the true depths and complexities of human consciousness.

In adapting *The Age of Innocence*, Martin Scorsese may have understood a dimension to narrative of Wharton’s novel that many critics have failed to recognize. As we established, many

¹⁹⁷ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 351.

¹⁹⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 102.

scholars criticize Scorsese's film for the addition of a distinctly feminine narrator, a decision that abandons the authoritative masculine perspective thus deviating from Wharton's novel. Critics of the film argue that Scorsese's Newland Archer, with complete passivity, watches his life happen. However, who is to say that Wharton's novel is actually narrated by Newland? The novel uses an androgynous third person limited omniscient narrative point of view. While the voice is nameless and genderless, it has limited access to the mind of one character: Newland Archer. It is because of the traditions of narrative structure that the reader identifies and sympathizes with the male protagonist, and ultimately understands the novel to be from a masculine point of view. Wharton tricks her readers into believing that Newland tells the story, when in reality, the mysterious narrative voice in the observational role could be female just as easily as it could be male.

The title, *The Age of Innocence*, values the external setting over one particular character. The fetishizing of innocence is linked to the age, not to Newland. He is enslaved by Old New York's social matrix perhaps more so than any other character. In the end of both the novel and the film, May succeeds in keeping her family together and Ellen obtains her freedom and moves to Paris, but what does Newland achieve? One could argue that he ultimately achieves nothing, failing continuously to understand his own desires and take action to fulfill them. In the novel Wharton exposes the extent to which he is confined to the boundaries of his artificial identity:

He felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactures by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow.¹⁹⁹

He recognizes the oppressiveness of the Victorian social matrix in allowing a superficial representation of Old New York to masquerade as real life. It is not Newland, but rather the matriarchal representatives of the old-fashioned that are responsible for creation of this artificial

¹⁹⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 65.

‘factitious purity.’ His patriarchal authority, which only simulates genuine agency, is yet another socially constructed guise. The reader is made to think that he has control over the narrative, but it is society that offers him patriarchal dominance. The fact that this authority is ‘supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to,’ exposes his lack of agency because he is not capable of using this power according to his own personal discretion. Elsaesser’s discussion of melodrama fits the critiques of materialism found in both Wharton’s novel and Scorsese’s film:

The banality of the objects, combined with the repressed anxieties and emotions, forces a contrast that makes the scene almost epitomize the relation of décor to characters in the melodrama: the more the setting is filled with objects to which the plot gives symbolic significance, the more the characters are enclosed in seemingly ineluctable situations.²⁰⁰

Wharton, through her detail-rich prose, and Scorsese, through his highly ornamented mise-en-scène, create similar ‘tyrannies of things.’ The authority that material culture claims in determining identity using its ‘banal objects’ confuses the characters from both versions of *The Age of Innocence*. It is the clutter of material that suffocates the characters, clouding their minds to richer lives and more meaningful experiences. Elsaesser continues:

Pressure is generated by things crowding in on them, life becomes increasingly complicated because it is cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade the characters’ personalities, take them over, stand for them, become more real than the human relations or emotions they were intended to symbolize.²⁰¹

Wharton’s and Scorsese’s characters suffer throughout the narratives as ‘obstacles and objects...invade [their] personalities.’ Society forces the characters to relinquish their agency to inanimate ‘things,’ compromising their understandings of self-worth. As objects ‘become more real than the human relations or emotions’ that they exist to represent, the characters devalue their humanity. When objects hold the power to express identity, material culture renders people

²⁰⁰ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 455.

²⁰¹ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 455.

worthless, because they begin to lose faith in the merit of their own genuine personalities, desires, and complexities.

Can people truly be free when they live in the ‘tyranny of things?’ Wharton and Scorsese use their works to rescue the public from the detriments of acute materialism and the repression it encourages. *The Age of Innocence* novel and adaptation provide the readers and viewers with knowledge of socially approved threats to the individual. If one is aware of the system, then she is no longer a slave to it. Ignorance affords beautiful ‘things’ the power to stand for humanity; however, if one is aware of the threat that material culture poses, then she, liberated from the system, is free to aesthetically appreciate objects. Wharton herself is a prime example of an individual free from the confines of repressive material culture. Her success in exercising discretion in all aspects of her life, including fashion, design, writing, allowed her to freely voicing every dimension of her genuine identity. In her writing and publishing, Wharton created an outlet for self-expression, intellectual stimulation, emotional exploration, and self-reliance. Through her work and her life, she was able to express her individual complexities and claim human authority to articulate the most profound depths of her consciousness despite the society in which she lived.

Appendix:

Figure 1

“Edith Wharton with Chihuahuas,” *cambridgecanine.com*, last modified March 25, 2012, http://cambridgecanine.com/2012/03/shaggy-muses-book-review/edith_wharton_with_chihuahuas_1890/.



Figure 2

Abbott, Kate, "From high society to trench warfare: Book puts new light on Edith Wharton's World War I Dispatches," *hillcountryobserver.com*, last modified November 2015, <http://hillcountryobserver.com/2015news/nov2015ewharton.htm>.

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