

## Literature and Culture Workshop II

### Summary of Discussions

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Particularly since the publication of *The Cultures of United States Imperialism* edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, there has been a growing call for scholars to examine American empire-building, not only through the study of the United States' military, political, and economic expansion but also the cultural expressions of the nation's imperial ideology.<sup>1</sup> This has generated an exciting body of scholarship on the intersections of the political and the cultural manifested in various cultural forms and texts, e.g., literature, film, material culture, performing arts. Among this body of work are those that pay particular attention to the role of gender in the U.S. empire-building. Some scholars have looked at the gendered discourse that drove the United States' imperial ventures; others have analyzed the role of American women in facilitating or resisting such ventures.<sup>2</sup> All such works illuminate how women and gender function as potent vehicles that at times reinforce, and at other times redefine, the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign.

Through the triangular relationship among the three main characters, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* depicts a complex picture of the changing contours of America's national identity at the turn of the century. Professor Arai's paper, "Turn-of-the-Century Empire-Building and the Icon of the American Girl: Edith Wharton's Critique of Americanness in *The Age of Innocence*," focuses on the typology of the American Girl to examine the novel's two female protagonists. Professor Arai contextualizes these characters by tracing the depictions of the American Girl from Henry James's *Daisy Miller* to the iconic popular illustrations of the Gibson Girls in the 1890s.

At first glance, the contrast between May Welland and Ellen Olenska appears clear and simple. May is the "fair lady," an embodiment of virgin goddess and civic virtue, whereas Ellen, physically and figuratively the "dark lady," represents a deviance from the social, cultural, and sexual norms. In other words, May is the American Girl and Ellen the foreign Other. In this dichotomy, May, who is willfully oblivious to the meanings beneath the surface and the changes taking place around her, is the symbol of the innocence of Old New York. However, Professor Arai demonstrates that Wharton's portrayal of the boundaries between America and the Other is not so clear cut. May turns out to be a far more perceptive and manipulative character than Archer assumed. More importantly,

Professor Arai argues that Ellen's true "foreignness" lies not in her surface appearance and lifestyle but rather in her belief in America as the land of freedom and independence. Describing Ellen's idealistic faith in American freedom as "Jamesian," Professor Arai suggests that it is Ellen, not May, who embodies innocence. Thus, according to Professor Arai's reading, the tension that drives Wharton's narrative is not so much between the American Girl and the foreign lady but rather between two conceptions of innocence.

Professor Nabae supplements and historicizes Professor Arai's reading and further questions what "innocence" means in the text. By focusing not on the two female characters but on Newland Archer, Professor Nabae shows that Archer was indeed the "cave-fish" in the novel: he is unable to comprehend neither the rules of the society he lives in nor the social and economic conditions of the world beyond his environs, and he is oblivious to the changes taking place around him. While May turns out to be an astute, calculating, and daring player who successfully raises her children for the new era, Archer is the one who dearly holds onto a romantic notion of the world beyond the confines of Old New York without seeing that the "foreign" is already infiltrating his own world in many ways. In other words, perhaps it is Archer who remains "innocent." Professor Nabae also foregrounds the historical context for the novel. Written in 1920, when Wharton was becoming increasingly concerned with issues of mothering and childcare after witnessing the devastations of WWI, the novel ends with Archer becoming involved in municipal reform and philanthropic activities. Textual references to Theodore Roosevelt point to Wharton's complex view of Progressive America, an era in which the United States' expansionism went hand in hand with progressive reforms in national and local politics. Professor Nabae urges us to consider Wharton's ideas of women's "freedom" by situating the American Girl in the historical and political context of Progressivism and women's suffrage.

The questions and comments from the floor fell into three main categories. The first had to do with the interpretation of Wharton's text itself. For instance, a question was raised as to how to understand Archer's change--or lack thereof--in the "New" New York at the end of the novel. Archer's involvement in politics and social reform, and his failure to be reelected, pose ambiguous readings of his ability to adapt to the new model of American manhood as the "good citizen."

The second set of questions had to do with intertextual readings of the novel. While Professor Arai contrasts Wharton's portrayals with James's romanticization of the American Girl, it was suggested that James's women--whether it be Daisy Miller or Isabel Archer, both of whom are infused with various elements of "foreignness" themselves--are not wholeheartedly idealized but rather construed as subjects of James' critique, hence there may be more similarities than differences between James' and Wharton's treatment of the American Girl. It was pointed out that another useful intertextual comparison would be between *The Age of Innocence* and Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*, in which the characters of Miriam and Hilda present a contrast similar to that between Ellen and May. It would be

interesting to consider why, in Wharton's text, the juxtaposition of the two characters actually takes place in America instead of Europe as in Hawthorne's romance.

The final discussion centered around the historical significance. Audience members called for further consideration of the timing of the novel's publication in 1920 in relation to the text's historical setting in the 1870s. Both in the socio-political and cultural context in which the United States was moving from the Progressive Era to the Jazz Age, and in the context of Wharton's life where her interest was increasingly directed to the issues of motherhood and childrearing, what was the significance of Wharton's retrospective portrayal of the American Girl in Old New York?

These lively discussions sparked by Professor Arai's presentation and Professor Nabae's comments further deepened our understanding of Wharton's rich and complex portrayal of the turn-of-the-century America.

## Notes

1. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994)
2. Some such works include Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 [2005]); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire and the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).