

Edith WHARTON, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), incipit

Proposition de commentaire

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, written in 1920, towards the end of her career, takes a retrospective look at the years 1870, which for Wharton represented the height of a certain traditional New York elite, one of which her own family was a supreme example. The novel depicts a society on the verge of events that shall change it for ever: when she writes in 1920, the rise of capitalism – of what she called “new money” –, the first World War, have definitively altered the face of the American society, and in particular of the fashionable circles of “Old New York” (the expression Wharton used to describe this world, and which became the title of her most famous collection of short stories).

In the beginning of this novel, Wharton introduces us from the outset to this society: the novel starts by describing an evening at the Opera, in which a performance of Charles Gounod's *Faust* is given. From a general perspective, the text then focuses more precisely on a young man, Newland Archer, who is the hero of the novel. Starting a novel by an operatic performance might be said to be a particularly spectacular beginning: just as “the curtain rises” on the stage of the Opera House, it seems to rise on the story and to give it, from the start, a dramatic tone. This setting is also a particularly fitting one for the themes of the novel: an evening at the Opera is the most sociable and fashionable event possible, and it gives Wharton the occasion to cast a satirical look on the society in which the novel is going to take place. The Opera, with its conventions, theatricality and role-playing, becomes, then, an accurate metaphor for this world, in which everything seems indeed ruled by such conventions and appearances.

I shall first see, then, how this evening at the Opera is a way for Wharton to describe an enclosed, but threatened society, a small world that protects itself from outside influences, and on which Wharton throws a “backward glance” (the title Wharton will give to her autobiography). I shall then study the look Wharton throws on her characters, which she describes as purely social subjects, obsessed by conventions that seem devoid of meaning. Finally I shall focus on the pervading metaphor of the Opera, which throws a particularly ironic light on the budding love-scene between Newland and ‘the young girl in white’, and questions the theme of innocence present in the title.

The beginning of the text offers a spatial and social geography: Wharton describes how this society is protecting and enclosing itself against outside influences.

The second paragraph shows how the separation between different worlds is clearly inscribed spatially: the old Academy of music is opposed to the project of a new Opera House, which should be built “above the Forties” – meaning above Fortieth Street in New York. The city of New York is then given a clear geographical structure. The expression “remote metropolitan distances” shows the ironic look Wharton throws on this spatial separation, which, although very small, literally speaking, is endowed with an almost sacred character by the elite: it would be degrading indeed to venture outside the circle reserved for this society. The New York elite definitely prefers being uncomfortable in the “shabby red and gold boxes of the old Academy” than risking mixing with the wrong people, albeit in a brand new Opera House. The image of the “boxes” seems to illustrate the way they are literally boxing themselves up to preserve their world.

The text makes it clear whom this elite is trying to keep out: “Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to” (l. 7). These “new people” are clearly the *nouveaux riches* produced by the new economic conditions of the period that followed the Civil War in America: a period of great economic expansion enabled some entrepreneurs to build enormous fortunes, through industry or the Stock Exchange (cf. Carnegie, Rockefeller, JP Morgan). Often rising from nothing, these people did not have the connections of the New York elite, they were not part of the great families which had been established there for decades, and which were beginning to build an aristocracy, with its inherited wealth and codes. Edith Wharton's novels are very much concerned with the interaction between “old New York”, the world of these wealthy families, and these “new people” who disrupt the social pattern of the city with their energy, their money, and who are scorned for their ignorance of the social codes.

The text, thus, describes how America, supposedly a democratic country, is actually ruled, just like Europe, by social hierarchies that look like aristocracies: the narrator even shows the scorn these people have for democracy, which becomes the subject of a joke: using a “Brown *coupé*” gives them the impression of being like the people – “(with a playful allusion to democratic principles)”, l. 15. And the novel shows a world that is both, as we have seen, “boxing itself up”, and threatened by these “new people”, to which it is “drawn to”: like in Proust’s *A La recherche du temps perdu*, Wharton describes this typical social phenomenon of aristocratic snobbery, gradually transformed by the rise of the moneyed classes, the bourgeoisie.

The text, then, clearly focuses on a certain group of people, whose habits the narrator describes. The tone the narrator is using is interesting here: he/she describes the customs of this society from the outside, with a detached, almost scientific look, like an anthropologist looking at a lost civilization. The portrait of Newland Archer makes him appear, in this context, as the perfect embodiment of this society ruled by conventions.

Everything, indeed, points at the irrelevance and absurdity of the conventions that rule the life of those people: the ironic tone of the narrator’s description of those conventions, such as the use of “two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel” (l. 39), is very clear. The distancing of the narrator can also be seen through its use of quotation marks to refer to the society’s habits. These quotation marks are recurrent in the text, and include the voices of this society, while at the same time putting them at a distance: “above the Forties” (l. 3-4), “Brown *coupé*” (l. 13), “not the thing” (l. 25). What is interesting is the way Wharton opposes what, for these people, and for Newland Archer in particular, seems perfectly “natural”, part of their personality, but which, seen from the distance of fifty years, becomes completely outdated and arbitrary.

From a general, panoramic depiction of this social elite, the narrator indeed focuses on a character making its entrance in the Opera when “the curtain had just gone up on the garden scene” (l. 21): Newland Archer. The second part of the text thus offers an internal focalisation, adopting the point of view of Archer, notably to describe what he sees in front of him (last paragraph).

Archer’s portrait is ambivalent: the narrator seems both to distinguish him from the rest of his class and to show him as a prisoner of the conventions and rules governing it. Newland is presented as the perfect dandy, with extremely refined tastes and an insistence on the idea of pleasure: “subtler satisfaction”, “delicate”, “rare and exquisite” (l. 29-30). His attention to the slightest details of his dress are just an example of a world of luxury, whose beautiful and sophisticated objects are described at length by the narrator (“glazed black-walnut bookcases”, “finial-topped chairs”, “silver-backed brushes”: notice the recurrence of compound words that convey an idea of extreme refinement and fastidiousness). Ultimately, though, despite the privileged light the narrator throws on Newland, the latter only appears as the perfect product of the society he lives in: all the gestures of Newland seem to be dictated by social conventions he unwittingly complies with – as expressed in the sentence “this seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the conventions on which his life was moulded”.

In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton has explained this feeling of arbitrariness that took hold of her when she realized that the society in which she had been raised was falling into desuetude: “Social life, with us as with the rest of the world, went on with hardly perceptible changes till the war abruptly tore down the old frame-work, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the pharaohs.” (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 1934)

This last quotation enlightens another reference in the text: “what was or was not ‘the thing’ played a part as important in Newland Archer’s New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago” (l. 26-27). There are several ways of interpreting this passage: comparing this society’s rules of conduct to the customs of some primitive tribe seems a way to point, again, at their futility, and at the shallowness of this society. But it is also another way of de-realizing these conventions, of making them appear as foreign to a modern reader as those of a lost ancestral civilization: by this historical reference, Wharton wants to make the reader aware of the passage of time, which tends to make all that seems important at a given time fall into oblivion.

The whole passage, then, conveys an impression of superficiality and shallowness: this world is extremely beautiful, obsessed by outward beauty, as illustrated by the abundance of objects, materials,

present in this text – the flowers, the jewels (“enamel” l. 39), the rich clothes (“brocaded” l. 50, “tulle” l. 54). But the impression given by the descriptions of the end of the text is that this world is one of superficial, material beauty, which fails to go deeper under the surface.

This impression is of course enhanced by the theatrical metaphor that pervades the text: by setting the first page of her novel in an Opera House, Wharton uses what is almost a literary *topos*: the theatricality of the stage, in which everything is *acted*, ruled by conventions and unnatural, is a fitting image of the society Wharton wants to describe. Like other writers before her (one can think again of Proust, and the Opera scene in *Le Côté de Guermantes*), Wharton clearly implies that the real performance is not the one that is taking place on the stage, but rather the one that takes place among the audience. Like in Proust’s novels, this fashionable elite does not come to hear the music for which it does not have any taste: it only comes to show itself and be part of the fashionable event. The little importance given to the meaning of the *Faust* opera is clearly expressed by the description of the Babelian jumble of languages, l. 35-37: “She sang, of course, ‘*M’ama!*’ and not ‘he loves me’, since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding English-speaking audiences”. The meaning of *Faust* clearly has little importance for these people, who only deign to be quiet during a single song.

This ignorance for the content of the play they are attending makes the choice of this play even more ironical. By setting the beginning of her novel against the backdrop of Gounod’s *Faust*, Wharton gives it an undertone of darkness and tragedy that sharply contrasts with the lightness and futility in which these people live. The parallels between the play and what takes place in the audience are numerous, like the use of flowers. The description of the seemingly innocent “girl in white” also echoes the theme of innocence that is present in the play (the “modesty” of the girl echoing the character of Daisy, described as “pure and true”). But it is here that the irony of the comparison is clear: the “young girl in white” is ecstatic about these two lovers on the scene, without realizing that theirs is actually a tragic story, and that Daisy’s innocent love will be crushed by Faust. Through the portrait of this young girl, too lovely and modest to be true, a real cliché of innocence, Wharton seems to denounce a whole society that is too optimistic, too sure of itself, and unable to face the real depths and truths of life. This young girl seems more ignorant than innocent, turning a blind eye on the depth of *Faust*’s story. The tragic backdrop of this story, with its metaphysical questioning of the notions of good and evil, serves then as a warning for the reader not to take the budding love between Newland Archer and the young girl for granted, and is an anticipation of the rest of the novel, which will describe Newland’s discovery of true passion, but his tragic impossibility to give way to it because of his inability to break with the mould of his conventions. Through Newland Archer’s failure to live his true love, Wharton describes a whole society that only lives on the surface, and fears to go deeper into feelings: one can quote here the commentary the narrator will make about Newland Archer later in the novel – “Better keep on the surface, in the prudent old way, than risk uncovering a wound he could not heal”.

The beginning of this novel, introducing from the start the reader to the society in which the book will take place, and enhancing the artificiality of the life it leads, seems a first way to question the “innocence” of the book’s title. Just as the innocence of the “young girl in white” described here has an ironic tone, Wharton describes New York City in the 1870s as a society of innocence, in a negative sense: it is an innocence that verges on a condemnable ignorance. It worries about its futile social codes—wedding details, the season, rituals, and rules—passing its time in total ignorance of what is to come. This is an age of innocence for a society—existing in its own niggling concerns—that cannot conceive of the devastating war that will change all life and history, and sweep away this innocence forever.