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Studies in the Novel

27 December 2009

**Themes of Mortality and Immortality in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence***

There are many themes in Edith Wharton's "The Age of Innocence". Some of these themes are very evident and can be discovered from the first glance and some are implied and need some attention and concentration. One of the implied themes is the theme of immortality versus mortality. Most of New York upper class members are heartless, unsympathetic and cold. Therefore they are referred to as immortal by describing them in a way that shows that they keep their youthful looks and never age. On the other hand, there are some exceptions in this society who show more love and sympathy towards others. Accordingly, they are described as mortal and the signs of growing old are made more obvious in them. What Wharton wants to say is that if a person does not care about others, he loses his/her human qualities and become more like a mythological God who never dies or gets old. In her opinion, it is the expressing of emotions and sympathizing with others that make a person human and consequently mortal as all normal human beings.

The most important families in the immortal circle are the van der Luyden’s, the Mingotts, the Archers, the Wellands, and the Leffertses.  These families are like the gods of the New York society.  There are many passages that show the immortality of Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden, Mrs. Beaufort and May Welland. Wharton is often making it seem that these characters are not aging or are in some way defying death.  The mortals would be people like Ellen Olenska, Ned Winsett and the regular common people.  These people age, have flaws, are alive, and are acordingly left out of the scheme of the great New York society. However, there are two characters that experience these two conditions. Catherine Mingott, once belonging to the society of Goddesses, falls out from it and becomes more human and so mortal. Mr. Archer Newland, on the other hand has immortal characteristics and he experiences being mortal only in the company of Ellen. However, he does not have the courage to go down from his god-like status and join Ellen in her humanity.

First of all, Mr. van der Luyden has the quality of being alive but dead. His home is like a place for the living dead: "As Archer rang the bell, the long tinker seemed to echo through a mausoleum; and the surprise of the butler who at length responded to the call was as great as though he had been summoned from his final sleep." (Wharton 129) Even his butler is shown in a state of living in death. This is another technique that Wharton uses to represent the state of her characters. Also, van der Luyden's home always, "loomed up rather grimly; even in summer." (Wharton 129) In his grim state of being alive but dead he is a sort of immortal. His immortality is made even clearer when, later, Mr. van der Luyden is described as Ellen's "protecting deity." (Wharton 119) Everything about this ruling family of New York society seems to insist upon their life-in-death nature, or their immortality.

Furthermore, Mrs. van der Luyden's "portrait by Huntington", "though twenty years had elapsed since its execution, was still 'a perfect likeness."" (Wharton 49) The comparison between Mrs. van der Lyuden and her portrait is a smart way to stress the fact that signs of age never appear on her even after twenty years of drawing her portrait. Wharton further emphasizes this point: "Indeed, Mrs. Van der Luyden . . . might have been the twin sister of the fair and still youngish woman drooping against a gilt armchair [in the painting] . . ." (Wharton 49) In fact, Mrs. van der Luyden's youth is so supernatural that, "She always, indeed, struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death." (Wharton 50) Here Wharton emphasizes the idea of life-in-death. She lives in an airless atmosphere that lacks freshness and liveliness. Again when Wharton describes her in an irreproachable existence, she asserts her immortality and goddess-like existence. However, this seemingly beautiful and attractive look is only apparent; it is frozen in a way that keeps its shape but takes its soul. It is because Mrs. van der Luyden lives a dead life, she is never affected by the passing of years and as a result seems to be immortal.

The immortal image is extended to most of the New York society. Mrs. Beaufort is a part of this image .When Wharton mentions that she is "growing younger and blonder and more beautiful each year" (Wharton 17), she in fact stresses this image. Instead of growing alder and uglier, Mrs. Beaufort goes in the opposite direction. As she progresses in age, she becomes more beautiful and young. Again, it is because of her personal characteristics that she is described as being immortal. As a result of her carelessness, hypocrisy and selfishness she is presented as never aging and therefore immortal.

The most important member of the immortal society is May Welland. Her youth is also described as the youth of the other immortals, first in her entrance to the Beauforts' ballroom, "in her dress of white and silver with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, she looked like a Diana just alighting from the chase." (Wharton 62) Here, Wharton compares May to Diana, a Greek Goddess, which is another way of asserting her immortality. She wants to say that May is as beautiful, young and immortal as a Greek Goddess is. Moreover, When Newland visits May in St. Augustine, May, "walks beside Archer with her long swinging gait; her face wears the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete." (Wharton 141) Despite her beauty and attractiveness, she is more like a marble in her coldness and flatness. In both instances, May is described as an immortal, something beyond human. Later, Newland tries to understand what makes her seem so immortal. He guesses that "perhaps the faculty of unawareness was what gave her 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." (Wharton 189) Here Wharton expresses frankly that May is goddess-like. May is, to a certain extent, the most immortal of the immortals, since even on her honeymoon she is as icy and frozen as ever: "She looked handsomer and more Diana-like than ever. The inner glow of happiness shined through like a light under ice." (Wharton 194) Later, when May suggests that Ellen would be happier with her husband than in New York, Newland condemns her suggestion saying, "Watching the contortions of the damned is supposed to be a favorite sport of the angels; but I believe even they don't think people happier in hell." (Wharton 281) Here he suggests that May is like an angel watching Ellen suffers. There is a stark contrast between her innocent appearance and hidden intentions. Furthermore, the archery tournament is the most obvious example of May's godliness. When she comes out of the tent to the tournament, "She has the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ballroom on the night of her engagement." (Wharton 211) Wharton is repeating this comparison between May and Diana to emphasize her belonging to the world of goddesses. Also, she, like Mrs. van der Luyden is able to defy the aging process: "In the interval not a thought seemed to have passed behind her eyes or a feeling through her heart; and though her husband knew that she had the capacity for both he marveled afresh at the way in which experience dropped away from her." (Wharton 211) Another attribute of her godliness is that May never shows pain; we, as readers, suspect her having any: "[Archer thinks] if May had spoken out her grievances (he suspected her of many) he might have laughed them away; but she was trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile." (Wharton 296) May is always young; she is always innocent and without visible pain. Her death, which is supposed to show her mortality, is used by Wharton to further emphasize her immortality; she lets her die quickly and mysteriously of pneumonia after she weans her second child.

On the other hand, Ellen's mortality stands out in stark contrast to May's immortality. Ellen ages, cries and feels. Also, she is a big fan of all kinds of lively arts which is another indication of her humanity and so mortality; "Like the opera singers, the artists that engage Ellen's attention embody passion, creativity, and imagination. On stage, these performers take the artifice of a drama and breathe life into it". (Skaggs) Another evidence of Ellen's mortality is the appearance of the aging signs on her. Early in the novel, "It was generally agreed that Ellen had lost her looks." (Wharton 65) Even Archer agrees that her "early radiance is gone. The red cheeks have paled; she is thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty." (Wharton 58) Her mortality is emphasized by the fact that she ages; the effect of the years is shown on her which distinguishes her from the people around her who never age. Further, Ellen is the only character (besides Newland) who cries. Her first sadness is revealed when she explains to Newland her frustration of "the real loneliness," which is "living among all these kind people who ask one to pretend." (Wharton 75) Her inability to adapt with the New York society shows her difference from them. Her humanism and sympathy for others is also exceptional. Ned Winsett points out that Ellen bandaged his little boy: "My little boy fell down chasing his kitten, and gave himself a nasty cut. She rushed in bareheaded, carrying him in her arms, with his knee all beautifully bandaged, and was so sympathetic and beautiful that my wife was too dazzled to ask her name." (Wharton 121) Ned, another mortal, is the first to recognize Ellen's beauty. No one among this society recognizes her beauty except Newland, of course, and Catherine after her stroke. Ellen's aging, sympathy and humanism distinguish her as a mortal amongst the immortals of New York.

Wharton's themes of mortality and immortality are illustrated best with two complex characters; Catherine Mingott and Archer Newland. Early on we recognize Catherine Mingott’s immortal qualities, such as the elusion of wrinkles on her very old body; Her “immense accretion of flesh” in some way “[presented] to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh” (Wharton 25). In spite of Catherine’s very old age, she manages to escape wrinkles, which is a sign of immortality. Catherine is well aware of her high position in the New York society and accordingly speaks like a god, condemning Ellen to her fate: ""And now it's too late; her life is finished." She spoke with the cold-blooded complacency of the aged throwing earth into the grave of young hopes" (Wharton 153). She insists that Ellen returns to her husband and uses Archer Newland to convince her although she knows very well that this will make Ellen miserable. The only thing she cares about is to keep their name even if that involves the misery of her family members. Her ability to judge, condemn and bury alive is seen in her treatment of Ellen and then later Mrs. Beaufort.

Nevertheless Catherine is the only one among the gods of New York that abandons her immortal state. Soon after her rejection of Mrs. Beaufort, Catherine suffers a stroke. She is the first character in the novel to really become ill and almost die; in this sense, she is the first of the immortals to fall from godliness. Her body, which once never aged, is weakened now and starts to show physical signs of deterioration. She "looked paler with darker shadows in the folds and recesses of her obesity." (Wharton 301) In consequence, her temper has changed from being the cold, insensitive goddess to a more understanding, sensitive and so mortal human. Wharton describes this change in Catherine by saying that: "The growing remoteness of old age, though it had not diminished her curiosity about her neighbors, had blunted her never very lively compassion for their troubles; but, for the first time, she became absorbed in her own symptoms and began to take a sentimental interest in certain members of her family to whom she had hitherto been contemptuously indifferent." (Wharton 282) This statement summarizes Mingott's condition. After her carelessness and harshness towards her own relatives, she begins, for the first time, to feel for them and offer her sympathy. These sentimental changes along with the physical changes indicate Mingott's transformation to mortality.

There are many positive consequences for Catherine's change. The first thing she does is bringing Ellen back home. Although previously she had been the first to condemn Ellen and deny her the allowance when Ellen insisted on divorce, she suddenly identifies and sympathizes with her. Something has changed in Catherine and made her more mortal. Her awareness of Archer's and Catherine's love toward each other lets her invite Archer alone to her home without May. Also, when Archer tells Catherine that she is handsome, she immediately gives the complement to her granddaughter and says, "Ah, but not as handsome as Ellen." (Wharton 301) So, she is the one of the few members of New York society to see beauty in Ellen. She also resolutely decides that Ellen must stay with her and receive her allowance: "The minute I laid eyes on her, I said: You sweet bird, you! Shut you up in that cage again? Never." (Wharton 302) Before her stroke, Mingott is conscious of Ellen's misery with her husband but her vanity prevents her from helping her. That is why immediately, after Mingott wakes from her faint, she promises Ellen not to take her back there. It seems that Migott's awakening is spiritual as well as physical. A clearer indication of this change is her own realization that she has finally become human. Catherine says, "She hadn't been here five minutes before I'd have gone down on my knees to keep her ­ if only, for the last twenty years, I'd been able to see where the floor was!" (Wharton 302) This statement is highly ironic because literally she has not been able to see the floor because of her extreme obesity. But the implied meaning is that her previous existence was not well balanced on the floor because of her immortal status. Now, after this change, she becomes mortal and so is able to balance herself on the floor as any normal human. Through Catherine we realize that it is possible for someone to reject immortality and choose a mortal existence.

Another complex representative of the theme of mortality and immortality is Archer Newland. He, too, is immortal in his perfectness, loneliness and life-in-death. For example, he, like the van der Luydens, often senses that he is alive but dead. In a conversation with May, he thinks to himself, "I've caught my death already! I am dead. I've been dead for months and months." (Wharton 298) In another scene, Wharton describes Newland as "absent from life," as though he is dead. By being godlike like May and at the same time alive-in-death like the van der Luydens, Archer is an immortal and fits in well in New York society.

Nonetheless, after meeting Ellen Olenska, Newland recognizes through the contrast between her and New York that he, like her, is different from his surroundings. He starts to find in himself some mortal characteristics such as sensitivity, warmness and imperfectness. Despite his immortal characteristics, his mortality is clear, especially when he is with Ellen. From the beginning of the novel, Newland sees marks of his mortality first in the literature that he reads. "Unable to wrench himself free from the binds of convention, Newland retreats to the aesthetic pleasures of books, art, and opera to experience passion and imagination." (Witherow) When May and Mrs. Welland insist he go from family to family announcing his engagement, he feels like he is a "wild animal cunningly trapped" and he supposes that his readings from anthropology are what influence his views. (Wharton 66) Another indication of his mortality is his agreement with Ellen's opinions. On their first meeting in her home, she suggests that the van der Luydens are powerful and exclusive only because they "receive very seldom"; thus, she dares to criticize the most powerful people in their society. Newland, in his turn, "laughed and sacrificed them." (Wharton 73) This shows that Newland is able, like Catherine, to see the faults of his society and so become mortal. But, unlike Ellen, he lacks the boldness to do it without her. It is only with Ellen that he can view New York "as through the wrong end of a telescope." (Wharton 74) But the moment he leaves her company, "New York once again becomes vast and imminent and May the loveliest woman in it." (Wharton 77) Newland's mortality is expressed more openly by the Marchioness Manson: in jest, she says while referring to Dr. Carver, "How merciless he is to us weak mortals, Mr. Archer!" (Wharton 158) Although this sentence is said as a joke, Wharton used the word "mortal" in purpose to emphasize Newland's mortal qualities.

Accordingly, Archer Newland possesses the characteristics of the mortals and immortals. However, he is unable to fall from immortality as Catherine did; he lacks the courage to publicly announce his love to Ellen. Despite the fact that there is a possibility for him to abandon the immortal circle, Newland never chooses to contradict or go against the rules of the immortal society. Instead, he lives double a life that is full of pretensions and seems to be happy at the surface but at the same time involves the sufferings of the mortals. He suffers because he chooses to give up his true love in favor of his reputation among his society. It is ironic that Newland, the most critical character of the society and the apparent seeker for freedom is denying himself this right and uphold to the rules of his society. His lack of boldness makes him "miss the flower of life." (Wharton 350) He can never freely choose the life he wishes to live. His condition is best described by Witherow when he says "Newland misinterprets as real the symptom of society, never able to escape its symbolic code. At the same time, Newland takes as real his imaginary construction of Ellen within the framework of society." In short, Newland possesses both mortal and immortal characteristics. Although he enjoys being mortal, it seems impossible for him to leave his immortal circle and join his beloved.

In conclusion, the contrast of mortality and immortality in *The Age of Innocence* is a very creative and intelligent technique of illustrating the true nature of New York society. Most of the members of this society are described as immortals such as Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden, Mrs. Beaufort and May Welland. Their insensitivity, apparent innocence and coldness help to stop the signs of aging in them and make them seem immortal. On the other hand, Ellen Olensla, who comes from Europe, is mortal. Because of her human and sympathetic nature, the signs of aging appear clearly on her. Catherine Mingott who used to belong to the immortal circle falls from it and join Ellen in her mortality. Newland, the hero of the novel, is a complex case because of his struggle between these two circles. Perhaps Wharton places Newland in the middle position between mortality and immortality intentionally. This in between position enables Newland to see the inside of his society while at the same time criticizes it. However, this state, as described by Allen, makes him "over the years dwindles into a sad sort of half-person."

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