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Author

Hawkins, Grace

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Wharton's Allegory of the Cave:
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Cautionary Tale

Grace Hawkins

Wharton's Allegory of the Cave: *The Age of Innocence* as a Metafictional Cautionary Tale

Grace Hawkins



Abstract: This paper examines the conflicting realities in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* using the allegory of the cave found in Plato's *The Republic*. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton's metafictional warping of reality can be confusing to the reader, and her disappointing ending can leave the reader wondering what the novel's point was if Newland doesn't choose Ellen in the end. But when one considers Wharton's presentation of realities through the lens of Plato's cave allegory—with the New York Reality, Newland's Reality, and Ellen's Reality representing the statues carried in front of the fire, the shadows cast on the cave wall, and the world outside—one comes to understand how Newland's Reality was more real to him than Ellen's Reality. This revelation disconcerts and scares the reader, transforming the novel into a tale of warning. The already established metafictional nature of *The Age of Innocence* provokes the reader to critically consider reality in the context of their own lives and to individually find true meaning and purpose both inside and outside of the novel.

Keywords: *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton, Plato, Allegory of the Cave, Metafiction

In *The Republic*, the Greek philosopher Plato demonstrates the malleable nature of reality with an allegory that details an imaginary scenario wherein several prisoners in a cave are chained facing a wall, unable to move their feet or turn their heads. Behind them, a fire burns while men carry wood and stone figures of animals and statues that cast shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. These prisoners have been chained this way for all of their lives, and the shadows they see are their only signs of an exterior world. But, Plato asks, if one of the prisoners were to be freed and shown the real world, “will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him” (Plato Book VII)? With this rhetorical question, Plato implies that the idea of something being “real” is relative and that people can be misguided in believing that an imitation of reality is more real than reality itself. In a similar manner, Newland Archer, the newly engaged-to-be-married and highly intellectual protagonist of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, is misguided in believing that the imitations of reality he experiences in books, operas, and other forms of art are more real than the true human connection he experiences with his extramarital love interest, Ellen Olenska. In applying Plato’s allegory of the cave as a metaphor for the contending perceptions of reality within the novel, it becomes clear that Wharton has crafted a metafictional cautionary tale that warns the reader against the fatal mistake of choosing shadows over truth.

In order to prove the cautionary intent of Wharton’s drawing room drama, let us first define the contending realities within *The Age of Innocence* and their corresponding places in the metaphor of Plato’s cave. Within the world of the novel—the elite and affluent social circle of 1870s New York—the dominant reality is one “where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (Wharton 90). In this reality, people rigorously adhere to tradition and form, often repressing their true desires, motivations, and intentions. This reality, which we can refer to as the New York Reality, is embodied by Newland’s fiancée and wife, May Welland. May is the champion of Wharton’s so-called “Age of Innocence” and possesses a “resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit

that ritual of ignoring the ‘unpleasant’ that so defines May’s New York Reality (Wharton 75). May is the beautiful golden girl of New York society who was “always going to understand, [was] always going to say the right thing” (Wharton 74). She relentlessly does and says exactly what is expected of her, and, while Newland takes a “lordly pleasure” in her feminine sweetness, he comes to realize her innocence is “only an artificial product” given that “untrained human nature was not frank and innocent; it was full of the twists and defences of an instinctive guile” (Wharton 91). Her kindness and charm capture Newland’s heart early in their courtship, but as the novel progresses, it becomes apparent to him that May lives in a state not of innocence but of ignorance. May eerily reminds him of “the Kentucky cave fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them” (Wharton 121). What if, Newland asks, “when he had bidden May Welland to open [her eyes], they could only look out blankly at blankness” (Wharton 121)?

Though Newland also grew up in May’s New York Reality, Newland has an inclination toward more meaningful ways of living, surviving his rigid upbringing by becoming an avid consumer of art. The operas, paintings, and novels Newland loves and appreciates are constantly referenced throughout the novel, and these works of art allow him to escape the New York Reality and obtain glimpses of what true human connection could look like. However, Newland is “at heart a dilettante,” existing in a world where art has become an addictive substitute for living (Wharton 58). For the purposes of this paper, this world of art and imitation represents Newland’s Reality. Finally, the reality Wharton dooms Newland to try and fail in obtaining is “Madame Olenska’s ... tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” (Wharton 147). Ellen Olenska, by nature of “either ... her mysterious and outlandish background or ... something inherently dramatic, passionate and unusual in herself,” occupies a world where emotions run high and untethered, and people do and say exactly what they think and feel (Wharton 147). Ellen’s Reality contains the meaning and human connection that Newland has been looking for his whole life — of which he has only found a crude sketch in the art he so passionately adores.

In the context of Plato's allegory of the cave, Newland can be compared to the freed prisoner who has been restricted his whole life from viewing the world outside of the wall. Consequently, the New York Reality is the "fetters" that have kept him immobilized, and Ellen becomes the freeing agent who has removed those fetters and allowed him to see both the true nature of his imprisonment and the true world outside of it, which is Ellen's Reality (Plato, Book VII). Newland confesses to Ellen, "It is you who are telling me; opening my eyes to things I'd looked at so long that I'd ceased to see them" (Wharton 115). With this statement, Wharton establishes Ellen as the holder of the true reality Newland seeks. However, there remains one more reality to contend with: Newland's Reality, the tempting shadows that dance on his cave wall.

In *The Republic*, the wall shadows are cast by wood and stone figures cut into the shape of animals and other real-life objects. These wood and stone figures, which constitute the reality the cave prisoners have watched their whole lives, represent the New York art Newland consumes. Newland looks to the arts for meaning, but the plays, operas, and novels he consumes are like the shadows of wooden figures: merely imitations of imitations of what is actually real. This phenomenon is established in the opening scene of the novel wherein Newland watches the "Daisy Song" from the opera *Faust*. Of this, the narrator comments, "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 of English-speaking audiences" (Wharton 58). The tone of the narrator in this passage is noticeably ironic; the addition of the clause "of course" signals to the reader from the beginning the insincere adoption of the New York Reality mindset used to point out flaws in its traditions and culture. This tone is maintained throughout the sentence, making its final point in the phrase "clearer understanding," which communicates a clear irony. Through the voice of the narrator, Wharton establishes for the reader the fact that Newland's Reality—a life lived in the dreams of art and expression—is not only false, but it fails to even

accurately simulate the meaning and purpose found in Ellen's Reality. This fact only adds to the tragedy of Newland's downfall.

Keeping in mind the understanding of the prisoner's fetters, the shadows on the wall, and the outside world as representative of the New York Reality, Newland's Reality, and Ellen's Reality, we must now examine Newland's tragic arc within the context of these contending realities. Upon examination, it becomes evident that Newland's fatal flaw—his obsession with art—is what leads to his ultimate downfall, preventing him from truly assimilating into Ellen's Reality. In his pursuit of Ellen, instead of stepping closer to true reality as he intends, he slips deeper into a false world of his own creation. This is most easily demonstrated in his courtship of Ellen wherein he attempts to recreate fictional circumstances he has perceived as meaningful, but he consistently fails to achieve the desired result of meaning and purpose. The most obvious instance of this is when Newland emulates the scene from *The Shaughraun* where Harry Montague kisses the ribbon of Miss Dyas' dress as a final farewell without her knowledge of him being behind her. Newland brings this moment into his own life when he encounters Ellen at the end of a pier, looking out on the ocean, and chooses not to call out her name because she did not turn around to see him. Ellen later reveals to him that she “didn't look round on purpose” because she went to the pier “to get as far away from [him] as [she] could” (Wharton 242). This is an exemplary instance of Newland missing the opportunity to, metaphorically, walk out of the cave and have a genuine interaction with Ellen. This self-sabotaging behavior is also seen when Ellen confesses a reciprocative love for Newland, and, in response, he bends down and kisses her shoe. This distant, symbolic gesture shows that as much as he may want to, he is not living in Ellen's Reality even in this pinnacle moment of their romance. Newland's romantic inclination to live in the shadows of art obstructs him from achieving true reality with Ellen, and, while he is able to denounce the New York Reality in his love for her, he is never able to fully remove himself from His Reality. Like the freed prisoner, he “fancies that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him” (Plato, Book VII).

We have established that Newland's tragic downfall is due to his inability to overcome his misperception of His Reality as more real than Ellen's. However, to understand the cautionary nature of *The Age of Innocence*, we must explore the final act of Newland's tragedy, wherein we find he has settled for an uneventful life amongst his dreams and shadows. This is revealed to the reader suddenly in the last chapter, which jumps forward in time to Newland's middle age, at which point he is the 57-year-old widower of his wife, May. As the scene opens in his library, the narrator states, "It was the room in which most of the real things in his life had happened" (Wharton 326). Newland's memories of reality center around the location of his library, hinting to the reader that experiences are real to him because he is able to view the New York Reality, his marriage and life with May, through the lens of His Reality—the books in the library that literally surround his familial life. In this chapter, the reader is hit with the sudden jump of several decades into the future, and, more importantly, with the news that Newland chose not to leave May. The reader is left confused, frustrated, and possibly heartbroken over the loss of what could have been: Newland abandoning His Reality for Ellen's. As the chapter progresses, the reader becomes increasingly frustrated when Newland is presented the opportunity to meet with Ellen in his old age but does not take it. This proves that it was Newland's own predisposition that kept him from running away—not May, nor his mother, nor his firstborn son. Wharton purposefully chooses not to satisfy the reader, and her ending provokes the reader to examine how and why Newland failed. She gives us the final clue to this puzzle in Newland's last spoken line, "It's more real to me here than if I went up [to meet Ellen]" (Wharton 340). This statement confirms that Newland cannot escape the brainwashing of his cave shadows; he has lived his entire life in his imagination, and, even when looking out of the mouth of the cave into the real world, he finds the shadows on the wall to be more real than reality. Wharton's choice to provide a "bad" ending—an ending that is different from or the opposite of what the reader desires—transforms the novel into a parable. Wharton chooses for Newland to fail in achieving purpose in his life in order to drive the reader to examine how they can keep

themselves from making the same mistake.

Not only does Wharton warn the reader against making Newland's mistake, but she implements the use of metafictional elements in the novel in order to help it surpass its role as a story and have an effect on the reader's own perception of reality. Though the term "metafiction" was not popularized until the 1960s, *The Age of Innocence* is undeniably "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). Wharton's references to the specific books, plays, and operas Newland consumes remind the reader that they too are reading a novel, and the events unfolding in the novel itself are not real though they may at times seem to be so. This purposeful separation of the reader from the world of the novel allows the reader to reflect on how they can use the novel to inform their own lives. Wharton's use of metafiction continues when May exclaims to Newland, "We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?" (Wharton 131). This statement, coming from a character that the reader knows is actually a person in a novel, provokes a strong metafictional reaction: are we all characters in novels? How can one distinguish between life and an imitation of it? Wharton also uses a third person limited narrator to keep the reader guessing at the true reality of the story itself. We are left to our own devices to figure out, for example, at what point in the narrative May discovered Newland's affection for Ellen and what specifically provoked Ellen to abandon her husband and move back to New York. The limited third person narrative keeps the reader in a constant state of critical thought, forcing them to be active rather than passive and priming them to consider the novel's implications on their own lives. With this in mind, *The Age of Innocence* becomes a metafictional cautionary tale: a false reality constituted by a story in a novel that warns the viewer not to be fooled by false realities like itself. This phenomenon further provokes the reader to not only examine the New York Reality, Ellen's Reality, and Newland's Reality (and consider similar realities that may exist in the reader's own life) but also to weigh the reality of the story itself against reality outside of the novel. In coupling her use of metafiction with her

“bad” ending, Wharton reminds the reader of the falseness of the story itself, asking them to step away from the simulacrum of reality within its pages and consider which realities in their own lives are true and false. Like Newland, can the reader denounce a society that represses expression and truth? Can the reader, unlike Newland, escape the shadows of imagination and achieve true reality?

Lastly, Wharton cements her intention of the novel as a metafictional cautionary tale in her choice of title: *The Age of Innocence*. In the novel, Wharton describes “innocence” as a defining characteristic of New York Reality, writing: “Ah, no, [Newland] did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (Wharton 171). It is precisely this “Age of Innocence” that doomed Newland from the start. Though he possessed a natural inclination toward meaning and truth, the circumstances of his upbringing made it impossible for him to, metaphorically, exit the cave and live in the real world. Instead, like his fellow New York dwellers, he is “gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irrefragable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death” (Wharton 96). With this in mind, it becomes clear that Wharton’s novel is not about the “Age of Innocence” as much as it is about the price of innocence. This expanded scope of consideration provokes the reader to consider what kinds of societies they wish to support or condone, deepening the impact of Wharton’s cautionary tale.

The Age of Innocence has a long history of being misunderstood. In 1921, the year Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for the novel, one newspaper notice commended it for being “the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood” (Nowlin 11). Though both literary scholars and the public have advanced in their understanding of Wharton’s work since then, no one has yet identified *The Age of Innocence* as a cautionary tale nor clearly articulated the three contending realities I have outlined in this paper. Under the guise of a riveting love story, Wharton has both

rewritten and built off of the same existential themes explored in Plato's allegory of the cave, yet scholars of her work fail to see this. *The Age of Innocence* is more than great prose, compelling characters, and a smart criticism of women's roles in society. It is also an exploration of the universal truth of relative reality and a warning to the reader about the danger of believing false realities. This was clearly understood in Plato's *The Republic*, but why not in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*? Perhaps because Wharton was a woman author writing about love affairs in "polite" society, rather than a male philosopher penning his own monologue for an imaginary audience — no one thought to look for universal truths in Wharton's work. However, as shown in both *The Republic* and *The Age of Innocence*, true reality will always exist despite one's inability to recognize it. Wharton's contending realities and cautionary intent are clearly demonstrated within the pages of her novel if only one cares to look and see.

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