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February 19, 2014

***Thinking Gender* 2014 Conference Paper**

Edith Wharton's Novel as Historiographic Metafiction: Revealing the Postmodern Construction of Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*

Abstract

Edith Wharton's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), has long been regarded as a pre-feminist and realist 'novel of manners' by academics. The immutable temporal and historical localization of postmodernism and feminism has excluded Wharton from the canon of postmodern feminism. This study attempts to modernize prevalent literary conventions by reclaiming Wharton as a postmodern and feminist author. It examines the manner in which Wharton constructs and represents cultures of femininity (specifically, that of Ellen Olenska) within regimes of discourse in the text. To this end, it draws upon postmodern scholarship: Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality, and Gilles Lipovetsky's writings on aesthetics as a representational avenue for self-expression. In addition, the study references Katherine Joslin's thesis on women's dress in Wharton's novels to present a textual interpretation of fashion materiality employed in the production of Ellen's gendered and styled body and identity. In doing so, the analysis establishes Wharton's text as a work of historiographic metafiction – a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to denote the postmodern genre of reflexive (i.e. self-regarding but not necessarily self-conscious) fiction concerned with the writing of history.

Introduction

As a consequence of the immutable temporal and historical localization of postmodernism and feminism, literary convention has excluded Edith Wharton from the canon of postmodern feminism. Indeed, critics have long regarded her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), as a pre-feminist and realist text. My study attempts to modernize prevalent conventions by reclaiming Wharton as a postmodern and feminist author. I examine the manner in which she constructs and represents cultures of femininity (specifically, that of the female protagonist Ellen Olenska) within regimes of discourse in the novel. I present a textual interpretation of fashion materiality employed in the production of Ellen's gendered and styled body and identity. In doing so, my analysis establishes the text as a work of historiographic metafiction – a postmodern genre of reflexive (i.e. self-regarding but not necessarily self-conscious) fiction concerned with the writing of history.

The Age of Innocence is most often described as a 'novel of manners,' i.e. a story that presents the social conventions of a particular class in a distinct place and time, invariably positing a character's personal ambitions against the establishment. This represents a fair description of Wharton's novel, as the reader accesses the narrative through the vantage point of the male protagonist, Newland Archer, who struggles to negotiate his desires within the prevailing societal context. However, the story's structure reveals a more complex underpinning introduced through the figure of the heroine, Ellen Olenska. Further, Wharton employs the fashion apparatus to produce Ellen's femininity

(gendered and styled identity[1]) in such a manner that it subverts the very conventions that the narrative appears to uphold in a self-reflexive, metafictional manner.

Metafictional Logic in *The Age of Innocence*

Orphaned at a young age and raised by a nomadic aunt (Medora Manson), Ellen grows up in a world saturated with eccentric and bohemian influences – one that shares nothing in common with her privileged relatives in conservative New York. After her marriage with the wealthy Polish Count Olenski collapses as a result of his repeated infidelities, she returns to New York where she hopes to find solace in her family's company. However, Old New York[2] finds her disregard for convention, rebellious spirit, and bold sensuality too transgressive to accept, and she eventually returns to an independent life of intellectual and cultural freedom in Paris.

Ellen Olenska as Wharton's New Frenchwoman

Ellen's affinity for the Old World and its socio-cultural maturity is reminiscent of Wharton's Francophilia. Wharton articulated her lifelong intimacy with French culture in her 1919 collection of essays *French Ways and Their Meaning*. In the article titled, "The New Frenchwoman," she draws comparisons between the naïve American woman and the more liberal and culturally sophisticated Frenchwoman (*French* 120). It is evident that Wharton's 'new Frenchwoman' is based on her personal predisposition, and further predicts the construction of Ellen. As a consequence of this intimate relationship between the author and her heroine, I argue that the underlying narrative message of alienation

1 The styled identity is a form of selfhood that is constructed and represented through the fashion apparatus, which includes material elements and regimes of discourse associated with self-presentation.

2 Old New York is a metonym for the elite conservative society of Gilded Age New York City.

from New York Society represents a conscious reference to the story's creator, and is therefore an example of metafiction within the novel.

Metafiction in Wharton's Construction of Ellen

Edith Wharton opens the novel at an operatic performance of *Faust* in the *haut monde* Academy of Art, where Ellen's arrival in her grandmother's (Mrs. Mingott's) box shocks the elegantly attired audience. Lawrence Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson, self-appointed societal arbiters of "form" (*Age* 6-8[3]), are the first to condemn her for they find the public parading of a woman estranged from her husband as irreverent and transgressive. In addition, Ellen's choice of dress exacerbates her scandalous appearance at the opera.

Wharton dresses Ellen in a diamond headdress and a dark blue velvet Directoire-styled gown, "theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp" (*Age* 7). Katherine Joslin explains that Ellen's *Directoire* style gown is modeled after the *Directoire Era* in French political history (1790-1820) when it first gained popularity through the patronage of Empress Josephine, Napoleon Bonaparte's wife. This Neoclassical Greco-Roman inspired design championed loosely flowing, draped garments made with soft and luxurious fabrics so that the clothes were gathered below the bosom rather than the waist, allowing freer movement and greater comfort, while accentuating the chest in a sexually provocative manner.

In the early-twentieth century, the avant-garde French couturier Paul Poiret revived the *Directoire* era style in his women's dress designs, calling it the *1811 Gown*.

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3 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence: Authoritative Text, Background and Contexts, Sources, Criticism*, Ed. Candace Waid, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003). All subsequent references are to this edition.

At the same time, the British retailer Liberty and Company also designed a similar dress labeled the *Josephine*, advertising it as the apparel for the modern, independent, and stylish woman. The 'Josephine look' was thus popular in both the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Joslin 181), and was not worn by American women or Parisiennes in the 1870s. Consequently, Ellen's velvet empire-style gown is retro-vogue and also avant-garde, as she both adopts and predicts French style. The anachronism of the dress thus serves as a reflexive reinforcement of literary artifice, which in turn dramatizes and asserts the presence of the author as artist (Magalaner 738). Moreover, a certain level of diegetic self-consciousness, with regards to the gown's peculiarity, is invoked in Ellen's assertion that "her dress was not smart enough" for the Beaufort's annual ball following the opera (*Age* 17).

Signifying Deviance through the Fashion Apparatus

Ellen's atypicality is evidenced in her choice to live questionably among bird-stuffers and "people who wrote," the peculiar Oriental décor of her living quarters with the "vague perfume of Turkish coffee, ambergris and dried roses" (*Age* 43-45), and her strange Francicized inflection of speech. However, Wharton frequently emphasizes Ellen's unconventional clothing fashions to establish the latter's status as an outsider to Old New York.

In donning a gaudy red cloak (*Age* 82), or wrapping several rows of amber beads around her neck (*Age* 199), Ellen's personal style never conforms to New York's "dictates of Taste" (*Age* 11). Upon a visit to the Archers, Ellen dresses in a "black polonaise with jet buttons and a tiny green monkey muff" (*Ag*e 132). Her outfit consists of a "puffed, looped, and draped" polonaise skirt (a French haute couture design popularized by Marie

Antoinette in the eighteenth century) with a black velvet jacket styled to look like a man's cavalry jacket (Joslin 128-129). Therefore, this retro-chic and transgressive gown (for its avant-garde appropriation of menswear designs) is another literary device that reveals the author as artist or metafictionality within the text.

Wharton's use of non-conforming fashion in the material-discursive production of Ellen's femininity, i.e. her gendered, styled, and sexualized body and identity is pertinent. Gilles Lipovetsky writes that "avant-garde fashion can only be respected in a society that concedes individual agency to its citizens – agency to change the way they organize the world, modify values and customs, and alter the definition of aesthetics" (19). Such individual autonomy is absent in Old New York – a world that privileges conformity over creativity and does not tolerate criticism of the grand narratives of its mythic past.

The "consecration of aesthetic initiative, fancy, and novelty," along with the celebration of the present and the future constitute the ethos of experimental fashion – a system that is heedless of tradition and empowers individuals with the singular and capricious power to disrupt the order of appearances (Lipovetsky 19, 34). Llewellyn Negrin describes this quality as an emancipatory potential that fashion can afford (34). Consequently, the highly individualistic and avant-garde fashion system is wholly incompatible with Old New York, and thus serves as an effective device in demonstrating Ellen's estrangement from the latter.

Metafiction in Wharton's Representation of Ellen

Wharton's representation of Ellen (the manner in which Old New York perceives her) unveils the latter's omnipresent and disciplinary 'male' gaze. Both male and female citizens of Old New York participate in its system of doxification, or the institutional

normalization of social behavior (Hutcheon *Politics* 3). On the one hand, Archer is "shocked and troubled" by the way Ellen's opera gown, without a tucker (a lace-covered neckline), revealed more shoulder and bosom than New York custom dictated (*Age* 10-11), and on the other hand, his sister (Janey Archer) ridicules Ellen's opera gown as "perfectly plain and flat – like a nightgown" (*Age* 26). Archer's mother (Adeline Archer) pronounces the final judgment on the eccentric outfit by invoking the memory of Ellen's black satin debutante dress[4] declaring, "What can you expect of [such] a girl?" (*Age* 26) Thus the materiality of Ellen's clothing and accessories entwines with the discourse surrounding it to establish her brand of femininity as deviant.

Red Velvet and Black Fur: Archer's Erotic Gaze

The enduring image of a bizarre and gypsyesque young Ellen dressed in "crimson merino and amber beads" (*Age* 38) in Old New York's collective memory is further complicated by her adult sensuality. In addition to viewing her as eccentric, the novel's prominent male characters – Archer, Lefferts, and Julius Beaufort – also find her sexually arousing. Consequently, the patriarchal establishment of Old New York comes to serve the "phallic economy of desire" (Sawchuk 54).

Wharton portrays Archer's voyeuristic spectatorship[5] when he visits Ellen with the intention to discourage her from pursuing a divorce. He is immediately surprised by the unconventionality of Ellen's attire. Her "long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down in the front with glossy black fur" appears shockingly unlike the simple

4 Debutantes traditionally wear white as a symbol of their purity.

5 In the longer version of my paper, I deconstruct Archer's erotic desire for Ellen, realized through his fetishization for her ungloved hands, using Emily Orlando's (2007) study on the intertextuality between *The Age of Innocence* and Pre-Raphaelite Victorian art and Laura Mulvey's (1999) thesis on the male gaze.

dinner dress that New York women usually wore while receiving evening visitors (*Age* 66). He is titillated by the unusual contrast of her fur-covered and muffled throat with her bare arms in the heated drawing room, finding the exhibition before him "undeniably pleasing" (*Age* 67). Thus the narrative exposes Old New York's sexuopolitical hierarchy that divides visual pleasure into active/male and passive/female. As a consequence, the man is afforded the power to deterministically gaze (substituting his eyes as phallus) at the woman whose appearance is reduced to a spectacle "coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey 837).

Conclusion

Edith Wharton's material-discursive creation of Ellen Olenska's transgressive femininity, through the fashion apparatus, draws attention to the author as artist and thus displays implicit narrative reflexivity. The intra/extra-diegetic referential relationship between Ellen and Edith Wharton further evidences the novel's self-regarding nature. Wharton shows herself to the reader through the character of Ellen when the latter questions the monologic rhetoric and judgment of Old New York's patriarchy. Thus the novel at once "creates a fiction and then makes a statement about the creation of that fiction;" the simultaneous construction of fictive illusion and the laying bare of that illusion fulfills the definition of metafiction (Waugh 6).

Wharton's desire to recreate a carefully detailed historico-cultural account of New York City in the 1870s accounts for the novel's historiographic nature. Invoking Linda Hutcheon's statement that metafiction is a recognizable manifestation of literary postmodernism (xiii), I conclude that *The Age of Innocence* can be defined as a work of historiographic metafiction, revealing reflexive attributes that evoke a postmodern ethos.

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