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The New World and the Old
– **Class, Gender and Manners in Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* and Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence***

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Introduction

The novels *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by Henry James and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) by Edith Wharton both portray transatlantic high society in the latter part of the 19th century. Both set in the 1870s, they portray on one hand the old aristocracy of Europe, and England in particular, and on the other hand the more recently rich American social and economic elite. With the economic changes of the recent centuries being disadvantageous for the old landed classes of Europe, at the same time as the newly rich Americans were in want of titles and the social prestige that comes with them, these two groups were bound to mingle with each other. This exchange and the effects of it is one of the major themes in these two novels, written by Americans, and in them we get a sense of American innocence which is contrasted with European vice. Both novels, in their own separate way, depict American women of the upper class who go to Europe with romantic dreams of the Old World inhabited by sophisticated aristocrats, *grand dames* and great artists, but instead encounter deceit, debauchery and hypocrisy.

Henry James and Edith Wharton were Americans by birth who came to live most part of their lives in Europe. James travelled around all of Europe and lived in many of the major capitols. Paris and London were the cities in which he took up most residence, and in the latter part of his life he settled in London where he took on British citizenship (Wrenn 310). Wharton grew up and lived in and around New York, but took many travels to Europe. She settled in Paris in her middle age (Benstock 19-20). The cosmopolitan life they led allowed them a broad and clear view of the American and European cultures, especially of the American east coast and the European metropolises. A large part of their fiction is concerned with the differences of these two cultures.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer, a young and beautiful American socialite, travels to Europe to visit relatives and to see the Old world. She arrives in England accompanied by her aunt who introduces her to her wealthy but invalid husband Mr Touchett and their son Ralph, Isabel's uncle and cousin, who live the aristocratic life in a stately house in the country. There Isabel is met with much love and admiration and receives proposals by distinguished gentlemen, which she declines. When her uncle dies she inherits a great deal of money. She sets off to Italy where she is

taken in by the older and sophisticated American Gilbert Osmond, whose proposal of marriage she accepts. Their marriage does not, however, turn out the way she had hoped, due to Osmond's material and unromantic motives for the marriage. Isabel traveled to Europe in search of adventure and romance, which is why she turned down the first marriage proposals. She wishes to see the world and gain experience, to marry for love and romance instead of the traditional reasons for women to marry: economic, political and conventional.

This raises the issue of gender and the female role in 19th century Europe and America; a woman who wishes to be free and to marry on her own terms is at odds with the conventions and values of the time. We can also see the contrast of the rather innocent Isabel and the deprivation in the European upper-class as represented in the Europeanised Osmond. Isabel's romantic ideals are shattered when she finds out her husband's hidden plots and schemes for her fortune. An interesting aspect of the novel is its depiction of American expatriates, the American trying to become European by acquiring its manners and culture. These characters are the villains of the novel. The picture of Europe as decadent and corrupt is ambiguous. Is the European influence corrupting the Americans, or is it the American image of European vice that these characters have adopted?

The Age of Innocence is set in New York and the American East coast in the 1870s and depicts the upper-class circles of the city. Newland Archer, a member of one of New York's most prominent families, is to be married to the beautiful May Welland of another wealthy New York family. The marriage is most advantageous to both parts and Newland seems happy with the prospect of it until he meets May's cousin from Europe, Countess Ellen Olenska, who arrives in New York after a scandalous separation from her husband, a Polish count. Ellen's running away threatens to damage the family's reputation and should she attempt to divorce her husband the disgrace would be permanent. Newland, who is a lawyer, is appointed to settle the affair so that she remains married to the count, but in the process he falls in love with her. The novel deals with issues of gender and the female role through Ellen's independent ways and outspokenness, which is contrasted with the conventional female role of May. We find the theme of American innocence and European vice in Ellen Olenska's marriage to the depraved count, her running away and her expectations to be accepted in New York

society. Her hope to be accepted in New York is crushed when she finds a far more judgmental society than the European she had left behind. Here the idea of American innocence is questioned, even the title of the novel seems ironic.

The picture of American innocence in contrast to European vice is dealt with and put into question by both authors in their respective novels. By comparing the American ways with the European, the authors are able to reveal power structures related to class and gender in the respective cultures, and to point out the different ways in which they confine the lives of people. My investigation concerns this image of cultural division, American innocence and European vice: where it derives from, how it is manifested in the novels and how the authors discuss and question it. The image is manifested in the depiction of class, gender and manners in the two cultures.

Class and manners in *The Portrait of a Lady*

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James depicts the transatlantic high society in the second half of the 19th century; the community of American expatriates mingling with the European aristocracy and the American high society in contact with these. James analyzes and compares the two cultures by exploring the different manners and notions of class in them. However, this is not only a simple comparison of two different cultures but also an analysis of the conceptions and prejudices that these cultures have of the other. Almost all of the characters in the novel are Americans who live in or visit Europe. The native Europeans make up a small portion of the list of characters in the novel. Thus, the focus of James' analysis is not mainly on the culture differences per se, but on the notions of "Americanness" and "Europeanness" that these characters embody or try to appropriate.

Gilbert Osmond's refined taste and leisured living are part of his striving to become a "true" European, that is, to be a part of the idle aristocratic society. This involves cultivation of manners, collecting art and precious objects and to stand above the mundane, "vulgar" aspects of life. This way of life, without having the means or title for it, requires a great deal of cunning, which explains Osmond's deceptive behavior. The role he praises highest is that of the connoisseur; having good taste and knowledge of great art. This is described in the book through his accomplice Madame Merle's

presentation of him to Isabel: "One shouldn't attempt to live in Italy without making a friend of Gilbert Osmond, who knew more about the country than anyone except two or three German professors. And if they had more knowledge than he it was he who had most perception and taste - being artistic through and through" (221). Everything in Osmond's life revolves around good taste and perception, from his sets of antique china to his daughter whom he raises in the "old-fashioned way". His role as a connoisseur also includes having complete knowledge and mastery of the appropriate manners. This role grants him access to the cultured upper class he strives to be part of which he would not get through purely economic achievements.

This form of social climbing can be explained with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital. These terms are used by Bourdieu to describe how one group or individual in society exerts power over another. Cultural capital can be described as one's cultural achievements and the knowledge one has accumulated. These may be based on the cultural products one consumes (art, literature, food etc.) and institutions and organizations one is or has been involved with. Social capital is the status that comes with associating with prestigious groups or individuals. These forms of capital derive from economic capital but do not necessarily accompany it, neither are they dependent on it (Singly 499). Osmond possesses high cultural and social capital, through his knowledge of art and literature and through the people he associates with, but relatively low economic capital. These forms of capital are the means by which Osmond is able to gain access to the European high society.

The refined, studied manners of Osmond are contrasted with the frankness and bluntness of Caspar Goodwood, the enterprising, self-made American who of all the characters in the novel most represents the image of that country. He is described as a manly leader-type with square features and a bad sense of clothing (114-115), in stark contrast to Osmond's fine features and a beard and moustache that "suggested that he was a gentleman who studied style" (208-209) and who sometimes reminded one of a "prince in exile" (212). Osmond belongs to the group of American expatriates in Europe which is referred to by Madame Merle as a "wretched set of people"; the cosmopolitan set unable to fully settle anywhere. As that same character points out when referring to their situation: "If we're not good Americans we're certainly poor Europeans; we've no natural place here" (180). This is discussed by Christopher

Wegelin who claims that Osmond's refinement and cultural snobbery is a form of cultivating traditions, traditions which he has accumulated. Wegelin refers to another critic on the novel to make his point: "Philip Ravh has pointed out the significance of Osmond as 'a cultural type', as a portrait of the American intellectual, in whom a 'residue of 'colonial' feeling' betrays itself by a tendency 'to take literally' what his European counterpart is 'likely to take metaphorically and imaginatively'" (Wegelin 56). This further illustrates the point made above of Osmond's striving to become "European", which his collecting of fine objects and cultivation of manners and tradition is part of. Wegelin also makes an interesting point about the cultural differences of Europe and America which is present throughout the novel; the heavy history and tradition of Europe, present everywhere and a natural part of life for the native Europeans, and the "colonial" feeling of a lack of those in America. Wegelin further illustrates this point:

[...]Osmond's corruption is of course not the result of his being an American. What it illustrates is the danger which Europe exposes Americans to...It is the danger typical of Europe, where the past lingers not only in the form of ruins and associations but in the form also of institutions which tend to perpetuate themselves even when their reason for being if not their meaning is antiquated.
(57)

Thus, Europe in itself does not corrupt the spirit but rather the uncritical adoption of its fading or obsolete institutions and systems which the native Europeans have learned to have a distanced and skeptical relationship to. This also illustrates the complex view of the two cultures which James presents in the novel. There is no clear cut distinction of "good" and "bad" between the two, both have their good qualities and their drawbacks. The novel is an investigation of these two cultures coming into contact and the effects of it.

This cultural comparison is further described by Wegelin in his discussion of the significance of the perhaps most European character of the novel, Lord Warburton, whom he contrasts with Caspar Goodwood, representing America, who lacks the cultivation of the former but exceeds in vitality. Warburton is the perfect product of his

class; a well-bred, highly cultivated gentleman and lord, with a fashionable ironic attitude towards his position. He connects this to a previous discussion of the distinction of moral and cultural (or aesthetic) values in James' novel, in which America has been seen as morally superior and Europe culturally. He, however, rejects this clear-cut distinction claiming that James perceives these values as "mixed and interchangeable" (Wegelin 58). However, the two cultures can be said to represent these respective values on a superficial level in the novel, or rather, it is these stereotypes and images James is playing with and discussing. Manners and class are put into the foreground in this process of cultural inquiry, especially those of the in-between group of American expatriates. The manners, as well as the taste, are a ticket into the idle high society of Europe. The money, which is of course needed, has to be earned in secrecy which is what Osmond does by marrying Isabel. Thus, the European vice is represented both in the high taste and deception of Osmond as well as in the old institutions and noblemen such as Lord Warburton in whom tradition and history cling but without the corrupting effect it has on the American.

Gender in *The Portrait of a Lady*

One of the major aspects of James' novel is gender and the female role which ties in with the theme of European and American manners and class through James' comparison of the female roles of the two cultures. The main protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer, and her voyage through the drawing rooms and palaces of Europe is very much an exploration of the limits of the female role in the trans-Atlantic high society in the Victorian era. Her inheritance is given to her so that she may be independent, but instead it makes her the victim of male fortune-hunting, tying her to a tyrannical husband. The men in Isabel's life, Ralph Touchett, Gilbert Osmond, Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, represent different aspects of the patriarchy. Even though Ralph's intentions for persuading his father to give Isabel an inheritance might be benevolent, he contributes to her victimization in that he does this without Isabel knowing it and thereby unknowingly plays a part in the conspiracy against her, which is something Budick points out in her essay on the novel (41). The

passage towards the end of the novel ,where she finds out from Madame Merle of her cousin's part in her inheritance, illustrates this point: "He imparted to you that extra lustre which was required to make you a brilliant match. At bottom it's him you've to thank" (James 484). On hearing this, Isabel realizes that Ralph, along with Osmond and Madame Merle, has used and deceived her. Ralph exercises patriarchal power over her by gifting her with his father's inheritance without her knowing. Gilbert Osmond's part in the oppression is more obvious: he takes advantage of her young naivety, seducing her into marriage to get at her fortune. It is ,however, to some extent Isabel's own choice to marry him even though she has been greatly pushed in his direction; she does it out of (what she thinks is) love. It is not for economic or social reasons that she marries him, in these aspects she is the loser in the bargain. She thinks him a free-thinking man. Unlike her previous suitor Lord Warburton, he is not part of an age-old system which confines the roles for women. Wegelin points to this in his essay: "...she regards his [Warburton's] proposal somehow as the design of 'a territorial, a political, a social magnate' to draw her into a 'system', the system of which his sisters are such charming but such ominously pale products" (Wegelin 57). The expatriated Osmond seems to Isabel not to belong to either of the two cultures. He represents an alternative male role and she sees herself as his redeemer and expects to maintain her own identity in their marriage (James 373). She later finds, however, the exact opposite to be true: "The real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his - attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park" (James 377). Osmond exercises supreme power over her by right of matrimony and deems her his possession along with his collection of exquisite objects.

Caspar Goodwood proposes to her out of love and he perhaps is the one with the most progressive ideas of all her suitors. However, Isabel refuses him because she wishes to remain independent: "If there's one thing in the world that I'm fond of...it's my personal independence" (James 151). He too represents the patriarchy, confining her independence. Unlike Osmond, Caspar is wealthy and well-respected by her relations. Marrying him would be to subordinate herself to the traditional female role as the loving and oppressed wife. It would, as Wegelin claims in the case of Warburton's proposal, "draw her into a 'system'"(Wegelin 57). The system which Caspar represents and is the perfect product of is not very different from the one which Warburton

represents. Her marrying Osmond can be seen as motivated by her wish for finding a husband and partner who is her equal; she gets to provide for him economically. Here we can see how the issue of gender and the female role in the transatlantic Victorian high society is connected to the discussion of European and American culture. Both cultures are oppressive and controlling towards women and the protagonist of the novel seeks an alternative society, which she thinks she has found in the community of American expatriates.

The question of gender and the female role is brought up in the novel through the comparison of the European and American culture. Isabel can be seen as playing the role of the naïve American girl with high ideals of life and love, and Madame Merle the cynical, depraved European woman for whom manners and appearances are everything. These roles are, however, not fixed and we learn that both these women have been put into them by their patriarchal societies. Madame Merle acts the way she does for the sake of her daughter's well-being and to sustain herself and Isabel's naivety is a result of her exclusion from the practical world, leaving her to learn about life through encyclopedias in her library until she is let out to society.

Class and Manners in *The Age of Innocence*

In *The Age of Innocence* American and European manners are contrasted through New York high society and the Europeanised Countess Olenska. The focus is set on the former and the latter is used as a contrast to illuminate it. New York high society is shown to be dictated by rigid social conventions which its members follow meticulously. This is illustrated in a telling way in the first scene of the novel, which takes place in the New York opera house, where the spectators are observing and examining each other's manners and "form" through their opera-glasses (4-5). The lives and choices of the main characters are determined by these conventions, with Newland Archer's engagement to May Welland as perhaps the best example. Newland is so indoctrinated into the conventions of his society that he believes he is in love with May, when really it is her perfect conformity that he loves: "Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual

of ignoring the “unpleasant” in which they had both been brought up” (16). This passage illustrates Newland’s and May’s conformity to the conventions and manners of their society. The manners and conventions are part of the moral code which the members of society have to live by in order to sustain the family’s reputation and honor. Any deviation from this code would result in disgrace, which is why Countess Olenska’s marriage and her behavior in society are such precarious matters for her family and relations. Apart from the story of her breakup from her husband, which is well known in New York society, her ways of interacting with other people, her clothing and her personality in general, cause great worry to her family who fear a scandal. Her socializing with married men in public, her evening wear at the opera and her way of speaking are out of step with the manners of conduct and correctness in New York; they seem to the New Yorkers “foreign” and “European”.

As Newland remarks to himself after the incident of Ellen Olenska being seen with the engaged Julius Beaufort, a very wealthy but notorious English banker: “...’she ought to know that a man who’s just engaged doesn’t spend his time calling on married women. But I daresay in the set she’s lived in they do- they never do anything else’...he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind” (20). This passage is an example of the moral code of the New Yorkers and of their idea of the Europeans as depraved and frivolous. Newland’s reflections express the view of his society when he passes judgment on Ellen Olenska. It is also of significance that the man she associates with here is European and a notorious womanizer, adding to the picture of European vice. However, it is Ellen Olenska and her effect on the New York society which makes Newland critically reflect upon the moral code and customs of this society and he begins to realize the hypocrisy of it. The American innocence, which the title of the novel refers to, is really just a thin layer of manners and customs concealing hypocrisy and moral decay. Or to put it in another way: the superficial moral code and manners are what repress the characters of the novel, forbidding them to act in accordance to their emotions, resulting in hypocrisy. This is illustrated in the novel in the scene when Newland begins to doubt his coming marriage: “In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs...” (28). Here the significance of the manners is explained and the picture of the American innocence begins to crack.

What matters most in New York society is “form” (a recurrent phrase in the novel) which its members have to observe carefully. This means to keep up appearances under all circumstances and never talking about things that are unpleasant. This is why New York society condemns Ellen Olenska for running away from her husband and associating with other men while it refuses to acknowledge and condemn the crimes and vices of several of its members because they are done with discretion, although everyone is aware of them. It is telling of this hypocrisy that the greatest spokesman of form in the novel, Lawrence Lefferts (one of Newland’s peers), is also the greatest debauchee. The importance of form, as in manners and appearance, in New York society can be explained by the preservation of the social order which is why Ellen Olenska is such a threat to her family’s reputation. As Newland’s mother observes: “I always thought that people like the Countess Olenska, who have lived in aristocratic societies, ought to help us to keep our social distinctions, instead of ignoring them” (168). This statement expresses the anxiety New York society has for the growing instability of their social position as the privileged upper-class. This change in the social order is represented in the novel in the foreign upstart Julius Beaufort who flouts the rules of society and yet ranks high on the social scale. The New York high society is not as firmly grounded in old traditions and heritage as the European aristocracy and hence has to constantly assert its status by the careful observation of form and manners, whereas the Europeans take their position for granted and can live more as they choose. This perhaps explains the image of European vice; the decadence of the aristocracy which is represented in the Count Olenski and his society.

The social and economic change which is around the corner is what the New York society fears most and yet is seemingly oblivious to. Singley, in her essay on the novel, refers to Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital, which are described above, and also his concept of symbolic capital to describe how the New York high society tries to maintain its dominant position. Symbolic capital is the power to create the common sense and the official version of the social world. People with symbolic capital are the most prestigious and powerful in society (Singley 499-500). Form, manners and taste are crucial parts of the cultural, social and symbolic capital which the New York society possesses. They maintain their dominant position through symbolic power, reproducing their conventions and social order. This is evident in the treatment that

Ellen Olenska receives from them. She is perceived as a threat to their social order and they exert symbolic power on her through their comments and judgments. Singly describes this in her essay: “Archer, Mrs. Welland and the van der Luydens [...] have the ability to judge others, especially through their speech. Bourdieu notes that symbolic systems of discourse are instruments of knowledge *and* domination [...] Thus, even seemingly descriptive comments about Ellen have the power to condemn” (503). Ellen’s Europeanised and foreign ways are in themselves condemnable for the single reason that they are not the ways of the New York society, which she by family and background is really a part of. This is the way in which the dominant group excludes individuals who are a threat to the order and thus maintains its position. This symbolic power is also evident in the attitude towards the newly rich Julius Beaufort, who has married in to New York society. They tolerate him because of his position but talk of him in the same condescending way they talk of Ellen Olenska, and when he loses his fortune in a bad investment they turn their backs on him.

The manners and class in this novel are represented in the rigid social conventions of New York society and in the “decadent” European society which Ellen Olenska represents. The depiction of manners and class in these societies connects to the image of American innocence and European vice in the sense that New York society is seemingly more virtuous than the European, which is supposedly more decadent. The reason for New York’s strict adherence to conventions can be explained as the preservation of their class and social order based on family and old money. Behind this veneer of manners and convention, however, there is moral decay and hypocrisy which puts the image of American innocence into question.

Gender in *The Age of Innocence*

The issue of gender and the female role is present all through *The Age of Innocence*. It is dealt with in Ellen Olenska’s breakup from her cheating and abusive husband and the description of May Welland as a perfect product of her society. Ellen’s breakup threatens her family’s reputation and a divorce would be unthinkable. Her family instead tries to persuade her to go back to Europe and reunite with her husband. Ellen’s marriage to the European Count can be seen as a wish to leave the narrow-minded

environment of New York for the more tolerant and free-thinking Europe. What she finds, however, is debauchery and intolerance, and she is submitted to oppression both by her husband and his society. When she returns to New York, she finds that society to be just as oppressive only in a more subtle way. She has to choose between remaining married to her husband in order to save the family reputation or to be ostracized by her family and society as the result of a divorce. In this patriarchal society the woman is always blamed for her husband's behavior and it is she who has to bear the consequences of it. The novel points to this in a comment Newland makes on Ellen Olenska's situation: "I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots"(Wharton 26). This comment points to the gender oppression of the patriarchal system.

May Welland is in a way Ellen Olenska's opposite. She is the perfect product of her society. She plays the role assigned to her, which is to be innocent, shallow and ignorant, so well that it has *become* her. The novel comments upon this: "What if 'niceness' carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?" (136). The "niceness" is what society expects of her and which she has fully complied to. May's niceness is perhaps not so much a reflection of her real emotions as of learnt manners and the role that her society has assigned for women. The novel further comments on this in a passage where Newland reflects on May and begins to realize the artificiality and inequality of his society:

[...]he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow. (Wharton 29)

This passage makes important comments on patriarchal power structure and gender inequality. The woman's only task is to please her husband, she is not to have a will of her own or even her own personality – only the role society has given her to play. Ellen Olenska is an example of what happens to a woman who rejects this role. She refuses to play innocent and hide her experiences from the public; instead, she acts based on what

she thinks is right and true and is punished by society for it.

The gender oppression is also evident in the society's double standard by which they judge men and women. A man who is unfaithful to his wife or has an affair with a married woman is tolerated as long as that it is done with discretion and does not cause a scene. Newland's premarital love-affair with a married woman is seen as something all young men have to go through in order to prepare them for marriage. Singley points to this: "In accordance with the double sexual standard of his class, he has an affair with a married woman, which duly prepares him to initiate May into life's mysteries" (506). In a patriarchal society, the woman is to blame in such affairs for seducing the man and the man's part in it is seen more as an act of inexperience, foolish but forgivable. As is expressed in the novel: "[...]when 'such things happened' it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow always criminal of the woman"(62). Newland's love-affair even gives him "a becoming air of adventure" (62), and it teaches him to distinguish "between the women one loved and respected and those one enjoyed – and pitied" (62). In this view of women we see the fundamental patriarchal distinction of women as either saints or seductresses, as either Mary or Eve. This view permeates the New York society and it categorizes all of its women by it. Ellen is put into the latter category because of her scandalous behavior of running away from her husband and socializing with married men. The scene in the novel when she is seen in public with Beaufort shows society's tendency to judge women much more severely than men. As Newland's comment that women should not socialize with men that are engaged shows, it is Ellen who is at fault.

The novel depicts both European society and New York society as oppressive to women. However, the female role in the European society can be seen as less constraining than that of New York society. New York's reaction to Ellen's outspokenness and integrity points to this; they see her "European" ways as unsuitable for women of their class. Their ideal of women is the childish naivety and "innocence" we see in May Welland. The female role of both societies thus connects to the image of American innocence and European vice which the author critiques and discusses.

Class and manners in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Age of Innocence*

These two novels share some of their notions of America and Europe and differ on others. In *The Portrait of a Lady* an American woman travels to Europe and in *The Age of Innocence* a highly Europeanised American woman goes back to America. Both have expectations on the cultures they encounter which turn out to be wrong. Isabel seeks adventure and independence and thinks she has found it in Osmond who seems to be a free-thinker but instead she is trapped into a worse sort of prison than the one she left in America. Ellen Olenska goes back to America hoping to be welcomed into her old society but instead finds herself judged and excluded by it because of her Europeanised ways. Neither of the novels offers a clear-cut distinction of good and bad of the two cultures; instead, both question and play with the conception of American innocence and European vice. The American innocence in *The Portrait of a Lady* is represented by Isabel Archer's naivety and romantic ideals which are contrasted with the cynicism and vice of Osmond and Madame Merle. However, the vice represented in the two latter is not really representative of Europe but rather of the cosmopolite, expatriate set of Americans in Europe. It is as if the European culture when taken literally is corrupting to Americans. Europe also seems to stand for cultural values while America stands for moral values.

This theme of the Europeanised American is present in *The Age Of Innocence* as well, mostly in Ellen Olenska but also in a short description of the set of Americans in Italy which Newland encountered in his adolescence. These "queer Europeanised Americans" are described as promiscuous and frivolous; gambling all day and dancing and flirting all night (127). It is America however, and especially New York, which is the main focus of this novel. New York society stands for rigid social conventions and Europe is depicted more as a shadow of this society, on which it projects its own vices. This is the image of American innocence and European which the novel is contesting. Europe represents for the Americans the negation of their high moral standards, which are questioned in the novel through the depiction of their hypocrisy. Its depiction of Europe and the Europeans is quite rudimentary; we do not really learn much about the European aristocrats other than the New Yorkers' view of them, which is that they are

morally inferior to them. Of course, that might be the case with Ellen Olenska's husband, but in the larger view the image of European vice is based on the prejudices and conceptions of New York society. Both novels deal with conceptions of America and Europe and both find flaws in both cultures and question prejudicial images of the two. Perhaps *The Age of Innocence* is more critical of America than *The Portrait of a Lady*, which is more critical of the American expatriate community in Europe but on the whole both novels are critical of the values of the Victorian transatlantic high society.

The concept of "form", as is discussed above, is present in *The Portrait of a Lady* as well and has the same significance for the characters in that novel as in *The Age of Innocence*. Form, in both novels, is the correct manners, conventions and taste which the characters have to appropriate, or rather give the impression of appropriating. Form can also be understood in relation to content. The content is the ideals and the form is the manners and surface which only project the ideals. This is explained in *The Portrait of a Lady* in a passage where Isabel and Osmond are compared: "Her [Isabel's] notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment. But for Osmond it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude" (376). Isabel's view of the aristocratic life is characteristically ideal and naïve. She sees it as having a useful purpose (i.e. content) in society, while Osmond's view is more cynical. For him it is all about having the right appearance and taste (i.e. form) in order to gain power and position. Observing the right form is part of the cultural capital, as is discussed above, which marks class and status in society. The significance of form in *The Age of Innocence* is explained in the passage at the opera where Newland first sees Ellen Olenska: "Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offence against 'Taste', that far-off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere visible representative and vicegerent" (8-9). Ellen's clothing and appearance are, in the eyes of New York, bad "form" and therefore in bad taste. Form is the measure of taste, which is more abstract, and it is the means through which conventions are kept and followed. Hence, an offence against form is an offence against convention. Ellen's disregard for form is an expression of her call for content, that is, the ideals and values which she clings to. Ellen's supposed European vice and New York society's supposed American innocence point to the division of moral and cultural/aesthetic values, which is implied in the

novel, and they show how these values are “mixed and interchangeable” and how this division is questioned in the novel.

In both novels, form plays an important role and it is part of the more general theme of manners. We can see that form is connected both to the supposed innocence of New York society and to the vice of the Europeanised Osmond. In both, there is a tendency to overdo the observation of form. This can be explained as part of the preservation of a social system and hierarchy and as the accumulation of cultural capital. Both New York society and the Europeanised Americans, to a varying degree, lack a firm rooting of tradition. The New Yorkers are obsessed with preserving old family lineage because of the increasing number of newly rich who are gaining influence and position in society. For Osmond it is not so much about preserving a system as of gaining cultural capital in order to be part of the cultivated, idle class. This can be seen in Osmond’s obsession with tradition: “He had an immense esteem for tradition[...]the thing in the world was to have it,[...] if one was so unfortunate as not to have it one must immediately proceed to make it” (376). In his view, traditions can be consciously chosen and cultivated. It is more about aesthetics than values for him, more about form than content. Here we see the division of the moral and the cultural/aesthetic values (or form vs. content) as is discussed above which connect to the image of American innocence and European vice. Form is connected to European vice as represented in Osmond and to the supposed American innocence as represented in New York society, while content is connected to Isabel’s and Ellen’s high ideals. These are in both novels “mixed and interchangeable” and also used ironically to make a point, as we see in Wharton’s depiction of New York society.

Gender in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Age of Innocence*

Isabel Archer and Ellen Olenska share quite similar experiences of marriage and Europe. One could even see *The Age of Innocence* as an alternative sequel to the *The Portrait of Lady* which shows what would have happened if Isabel had left Osmond and gone back to America. However, Ellen leaves her tyrannical husband in Europe while

Isabel chooses to go back to hers after her trip to England. These two women are both striving to be independent and to live in accordance with their own emotions and ideals but meet forceful opposition from the power structures of their societies and the men in their lives who want to control them. Isabel's naivety, which is one of the reasons for her marriage to Osmond, can be seen as the product of her secluded upbringing, learning about life only from books (38). As a girl she is to be kept ignorant of how the world works, to remain "innocent" in order to make a suitable wife. This can also be seen in the naïve character May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*, in a passage where Newland reflects upon their future marriage:

What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty as a 'decent' fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal?[...] He reviewed his friends' marriages- the supposedly happy ones- and saw none that answered, even remotely, to the passionate and tender comradeship which he pictured as his permanent relation with May Welland. He perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess[...] (Wharton 27-28)

In this passage Newland questions marriage and the female role of his society and he offers his view of what a marriage should be like. The upbringing and training for marriage that women in his society get makes it impossible to have a marriage that is mutually rewarding. The description of the upbringing of women can also be applied to Isabel Archer to explain her naivety, which is one of the reasons for her unhappy fate. The naivety is also a part of her high ideals about life and love which are thwarted by the conventions of society, as Ralph puts it towards the end of the novel: "You wanted to look at life for yourself – but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish. You were ground in the very mill of the conventional!" (498). A woman in her society is not allowed the freedom to make her own choices in life and gain experience to learn from. We see the same kind of ideals, and similar unhappy consequences of them, in Ellen Olenska. She is punished by society for her ideals and personal integrity and she is forced to compromise them to convention. This compromise can be seen in

Isabel's choice to remain married to Osmond even though she has opportunities to escape. We can see these compromises as a form of self-sacrifice, a concept which pervades the female role in patriarchal society. Both women sacrifice their dreams and happiness to the conventions of society. We can also see this as self-sacrifice in order to save the innocence and honor of women of the conventional female role; Isabel remains with her husband for the sake of her step-daughter Pansy and Ellen gives up Newland for May's sake.

The depiction of women in these novels is, on the one hand, a depiction of strong and independent women and, on the other, a depiction of the woman as a victim of oppression and societal pressure. Both Ellen Olenska and Isabel Archer are free-spirited women but eventually they have to submit to the rules of their society. McDowell discusses this in her essay on feminism in Wharton's literature:

Wharton... condemns the rigid patterns into which society tries to fit women by dramatizing the woman's revolt against them and her growth beyond them. But in the novels even a strong woman sometimes fails to break out of the artificial molds which convention imposes on her. The prescriptive pattern which so long provided the means whereby she could attain identity impedes her when she must make independent choices. (530)

This passage illustrates how both women are unable to fully step out of the female role without being punished in some way by society. It also makes a good point about the women who comply to the female role, in this case May Welland. She too, it can be argued, is strong in her loyalty to her family and her husband and in her steadfast beliefs in the values of her society. The determination and conviction with which she plays her role can in itself be seen as strong, but still she only acts within the boundaries of society.

Beneath all of May's innocence lies a streak of cool calculating; she tells Ellen that she is pregnant, having guessed at her and Newland's affair, so that she will give him up and go back to Europe (222). Her complete devotion to the values of her society and to her family can also be seen in the way she manages to keep from her husband the fact that she is aware of his infidelities for all of her life. Newland finds out that she

knew about him and Ellen from his son after her death and he is moved by her strength and self-control. May's innocence consists in her sincere devotion to the manners and conventions which everyone else in her society only superficially adheres to and in her unreflecting acceptance of her role in society. Even though this "innocence" is extremely constraining, and is critiqued in the novel, May is one of the few characters in the novel who is not guilty of hypocrisy.

This tendency to take manners and conventions literally suggests a parallel to the tendency to take traditions and obsolete institutions literally which we see in Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle. Here we see one of the ways in which the gender aspect of these novels connects to the manners and class aspects. The manners and conventions are more constraining to women than men; women are expected to take them literally whereas men only have to have the right "form" (i.e. the appearance of following them). The image of American innocence in the gender aspect is represented in the naivety of May Welland and Isabel Archer. This "innocence" is part of the female role which the authors question and thus also question the concept of America as "innocent" when its conventions are really oppressive and based on hypocrisy. In the same way they question the vice of the European female role as we see in Ellen Olenska and Madame Merle. We learn, however, that their European vice is really caused by the men who oppress them and the patriarchal system. They are given the blame for the morally corrupt behavior of the men in their lives.

Conclusion

In these two novels, the image of American innocence and European vice is depicted and discussed, often ironically and questioning. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the American innocence is represented in the naivety and idealism of the American protagonist of the novel and the European vice in the Europeanised antagonist. The vice is not due to European culture in itself but to a complex cosmopolitanism in which manners and tradition are interpreted literally. In *The Age of Innocence*, the American innocence is ironically represented in the strict manners and conventions of old New York society and the European vice in the female protagonist and in the vague descriptions of

European high society. The image of American innocence and European vice is manifested in these novels in the depiction of manners, class and gender. The manners are means to the preserving of, or the entering into, class, and these manners often involve deception and hypocrisy. In this way the manners and class represent both the innocence and the vice. Gender is also part of how this image is depicted. By analyzing the female roles of the transatlantic Victorian society I have found that the American female role represents innocence and naivety and the European vice and cynicism. The innocence and vice of the female roles are put into question by the authors. The American innocence that the characters Isabel Archer and May Welland represent is really the constraining role given to them through their upbringing and the European vice of Ellen Olenska and Madame Merle is the vice of the depraved men in their lives, which they are given the blame for.

By studying these two novels in relation to each other we get a broad depiction of the transatlantic high society in the Victorian era and we see an image of American innocence and European vice. This image derives from America's clinging on to the traditions and customs which they lack in order to maintain the dominance of the privileged class. The Europeans, however, are firmly based in these traditions and customs and do therefore not have to take them as seriously as the Americans. This image is the backdrop and the topic of debate in the novels and it manifests itself in the manners, class and gender-roles of the characters. The Americans are the primary focus of both these novels since both primarily depict the contact of the cultures from the perspective of the Americans. It is the American high society and expatriate community these novels are mainly depicting and analyzing. Europe is mainly depicted through the Europeanised Americans of the novels. Thus, it is the American view of itself and Europe that the authors are mainly portraying and discussing with the perspective of the cosmopolitan outsider and through this they are able to reveal power structures and cultural stereotypes.

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