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Denying Responsibility: Newland Archer's Convenient Compliance and Blame Attribution in *The Age of Innocence*

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พิชามญชุ์ บุญช่วย [1]

บทคัดย่อ

นิวแลนด์ อาร์เชอร์ ตัวละครหลักในนวนิยาย เรื่อง ดิเอจออฟอินโนเซนต์ ของอีดิธ วอร์ตัน ที่ได้รับการตีพิมพ์เมื่อค.ศ. 1920 นำเสนอชายผู้เป็นอภิสิทธิ์ชนที่อยู่ท่ามกลางแนวปฏิบัติอันเสแสร้งของสังคมชั้นสูงในนิวยอร์กราวค.ศ. 1870 แม้ว่าอาร์เชอร์จะมีข้อได้เปรียบในชีวิตมากมาย แต่เขาไม่เคยลงมือทำอะไรเพื่อไขว่ขว้าสิ่งที่ตนปรารถนาหรือเพื่อให้มีชีวิตตามที่ต้องการอย่างแท้จริง จากการศึกษาผลงานเชิงการตีความบริบททางประวัติศาสตร์และวัฒนธรรมของนวนิยายเรื่องนี้ และบทความที่ศึกษาความเสแสร้งและความซับซ้อนทางจิตใจของอาร์เชอร์ รวมถึงนำทฤษฎีการอนุมานสาเหตุมาประกอบกัน บทความนี้นำเสนอตัวละครนิวแลนด์ อาร์เชอร์ ในมุมมองที่สะท้อนแนวโน้มอันน่าสลดใจของลักษณะของมนุษย์ที่ต้องการปลดเปลื้องตนจากความรับผิดชอบ ซึ่งเป็นลักษณะความเป็นมนุษย์ที่ยึดติดตัวเขาไปตลอดชีวิต อาร์เชอร์ยอมจำนนอย่างมักง่ายต่อสถานการณ์ต่าง ๆ และเมื่อผลลัพธ์ของการเพิกเฉยทำให้เขาคับข้องใจ เขาปฏิเสธความรับผิดชอบด้วยการกล่าวโทษผู้หญิงที่เขาอ้างว่ารัก โทษภรรยาที่เป็นคนที่สมบูรณ์แบบตามบรรทัดฐานของสังคม หรือแม้กระทั่งโทษโชคชะตา นอกจากการสร้างตัวละครแล้ว การเลือกใช้รูปแบบการเล่าเรื่องตามขนบเดิมของวอร์ตันยังสะท้อนการยอมจำนนตามความคาดหวังของสังคมของอาร์เชอร์ รวมไปถึงการที่เขาละจากสิ่งนั้นไม่ได้ไปจนตลอดเรื่องอีกด้วย

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Abstract

The protagonist of Edith Wharton's 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence,* Newland Archer, represents a man of social privilege caught in the web of hypocritical social norms that defined New York's elite society in the 1870s. Despite his many advantages, he consistently refuses to act on his genuine desires or pursue the life he truly wants. Drawing on prior interpretations of the novel's historical and social contexts and on studies of Archer's hypocrisy and psychological complexity, and incorporating attribution theory, this essay reads his characterization as a reflection of the tragic human tendency to absolve oneself of responsibility, a tendency that persists throughout his life. Archer passively, and for reasons of convenience, submits to circumstances, and when the consequences of his inaction frustrate him, he deflects responsibility by attributing blame to the woman he claims to love, the socially ideal wife he chooses to marry, and even to fate itself. Beyond characterization, Wharton's traditional narrative structure further mirrors Archer's conformity to social expectations and his inability to break free from them, even by the end of the novel.

Keywords: Attribution of Blame, Conformity to Tradition, *The Age of Innocence*

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Introduction

The 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton has been recognized as a story that reflects a microcosm of human nature. Although the novel is a retrospect on 1870s New York, its exploration of an elite society of the Gilded Age offers enduring relevance for understanding human behaviour across cultures, social classes, and historical periods. Scholarly studies of the novel have examined various aspects of the work, including its autobiographical reflection, its historical and social contexts, its characterisation and its narrative structure. In focusing on the main character, Newland Archer, critics often interpret him as a hypocrite who acts against the ideals he claims to uphold, particularly in his criticism of the arbitrary, unspoken codes of his society. However, this is not merely a result of external social pressure. Through a close reading of his actions and words and employing attribution theory, this paper adds another perspective that Newland Archer's inability to attain his desires can be read as a denial of accountability for his own life trajectory, expressed through his convenient compliance and his tendency to blame others. Wharton portrays Archer as a man whose unfulfilled romantic life is accompanied by a tendency to attribute his dissatisfaction to the two women in his life and to external forces such as fate, rather than to his own choices and agency. His perceived inability to change his fate is further mirrored in the novel's adherence to a traditional narrative structure, despite being published during the period when experiments with narrative forms were prevalent in the Modernist era.

Previous relevant works

One of the authoritative texts on the criticism of the novel is the introduction to the 2003 Norton Critical Edition of *The Age of Innocence*, which posits that the novel being a product of the view of the post-WWI era and containing modernist themes such as criticism of social restrictions and unrealized desire (Waid, 2003, pp. xiii–xx). This introduction also mentions the psychological conflicts of the main character Newland Archer as well. The characters in this novel are often discussed in terms of their actions, or lack thereof, and the intentions behind them, particularly those of the three main characters: Newland Archer, May Welland, and Countess Ellen Olenska. In the preface of *The Figure of Consciousness: William James, Henry James, and Edith Wharton,* Kress (2002, pp. xv–xvi) discusses how the character of Newland Archer is a product of social constructs; the surrounding atmosphere prohibits him from realizing his true self. Prior scholarship, however, casts a different light on the character, arguing that Archer is the

agent of his own misery. In his paper titled "*The Age of Innocence*: Edith Wharton's Weak Faust," Moseley (1959, pp. 156–159) compares Archer to Goethe's Faust, arguing that Archer's efforts, whether to rush May into an earlier marriage or to pursue a life with Ellen, are ultimately futile, unlike Faust, who uses devilish power to momentarily attain knowledge, power, and forbidden love. Ultimately, "Newland is kept within the old society's bound" (Mosley, 1959, p. 160). Another interpretation of Archer's ineptitude in taking responsibility for his own desires appears in Emily J. Orlando's paper titled "Rereading Wharton's 'Poor Archer': A Mr. 'Might-have-been' in *The Age of Innocence*." Orlando (1998, p. 57) offers a critical analysis of the character as a "lousy reader". Orlando (1998, pp. 56-76) states that Archer reads extensively, is well-versed in cultural and fashionable matters, acts superior to others in his society because of his knowledge; however, he deceives himself with the world of images he constructs, unlike Ellen Olenska and May Welland, who clearly understand the realities of their situations and make choices accordingly.

Shari Goldberg's essay, "Newland Archer's Doubled Consciousness: Wharton, Psychology, and Narrational Form," appears in *Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence: New Centenary Essays*, a volume published in celebration of the novel's 100th anniversary in 2020. In this essay, she argues that the narrative aspect of the novel also functions as a form of Archer's secondary consciousness (Goldberg, 2020, p. 108). She also asks whether Newland's mind changes from the beginning to the end of the novel. If the narration does not solely reflect Archer's consciousness, it may instead represent the consciousness of others as well (Goldberg, 2020, p. 109). Either way, the novel can be ultimately read as a mirror for Archer's mental state from beginning to end.

The Afterword of the Signet Classics edition of *The Age of Innocence* by Judith P. Saunders provides a critical analysis of the novel within its historical and cultural contexts. Saunders emphasizes the tension between individual desires and social conventions. She discusses how Archer is aware of the constraints of his society, particularly through its repression and social obligation, as well as through his contrasting perceptions of the two women, Countess Ellen Olenska and May Welland. Additionally, she reflects on Wharton's narrative technique, particularly how Archer's ruminations resemble those of an anthropologist, and ends with the novel's enduring relevance in exploring human nature and societal expectations.

Newland Archer's desire for Countess Ellen Olenska has been examined in terms of whether it represents genuine emotion or merely an indulgence in fantasy. In "The

Cult of Passion in *The Age of Innocence*", Daigrepont (2007) argues that Archer's desire for Olenska is a form of self-indulgence in a romanticized idea of Olenska rather than a true desire for her as a real person. Daigrepont (2007) contends that Archer attached to the idea of Olenska than to the reality of being with her. Similarly, in "A Dialectic of Deception: Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*", Witherow (2003) interprets Archer's intention through a psychoanalytic lens, drawing on Slavoj Žižek's reading of Lacanian theory that ideology unconsciously shapes desire and fantasy as well as in beliefs and institutions. This adds dimension to Archer's questionable desire suggesting it is ideologically driven rather than purely emotional.

In the paper titled "Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in *The Age of Innocence*", Hadley (1991) argues that the untold stories of Ellen Olenska and May Welland subvert Newland Archer's perceptions of them. This also undermines the romance plot of the story and makes the revelations ironic that both women are different from what Archer believes them to be. He, in turn, proves to be the most naïve of all, despite regarding himself as someone fully aware of how his world works. Ellen is revealed to be essentially innocent, while May is not the unimaginative girl she appears to be, ultimately acting decisively to protect her marital status. Hadley (1991, p. 267) also contends that the structure of the story reflects the irony of the situations such as how Wharton sets Newland and May's wedding around Easter, which is a symbol of regeneration, yet describes the wedding scene as funereal. She also briefly mentions the cruelty stemming from Archer's misunderstanding, whereby he views May as the agent of his misery, as follows: "Having failed to take control of his life, Newland now passively hopes for a catastrophe to change his life for him" (Hadley, 1991, p. 269).

These interpretations establish that Newland Archer is well-read, cultured, and aware of his social constraints, yet he consistently fails to act on his desires. This failure also raises the question whether his desire genuinely stems from his true emotions or merely serves his self-indulgence in upholding imaginary or societally conditioned ideals rather than expressing authentic feelings. Furthermore, as Archer fails to take responsibility for his own life, his thoughts seek external factors to explain his failure, thereby absolving him of responsibility for his life trajectory and giving him an easy way out to attain what he desires. In other words, he looks for reasons outside himself for his inaction so that he can cling to the unattempted and convince himself that his inaction is for the nobler ends, not just his own failure or cowardice.

Archer's tendency to shift blame away from himself will be examined through psychoanalysis and attribution theory. In *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, Fritz Heider (1958) proposes that people instinctively try to understand the causes of their own behavior, the behavior of others, and events in their social world by assigning attributes to those behaviors. Heider (1958) identifies two types of attribution as follows:

1) Internal attributions, which explain behavior in terms of personal factors such as motives, traits, or intentions; and
2) External attributions, which explain behavior in terms of environmental or contextual factors beyond the individual's control.

Psychoanalysis and attribution theory provide a framework for analysing Newland Archer's complicity with the very society he criticizes, demonstrating how he assigns blame to others and to fate to cope with his internal conflicts and justify his inaction.

Newland Archer's self-obliteration and passive manipulation

As mentioned above, other works have explored how Newland Archer is a character who could easily choose to live and be with anyone he wants, but who instead chooses what is socially convenient for him. When frustrated with his marriage, he attributes the cause of his misery to those around him, effectively denying his own agency or power of self-determination. Not only does he blame the people around him, his fiancée and later wife, as well as the woman he loves, but he also constantly blames fate as the dictator of his life. Reading his thoughts and actions through psychoanalysis and attribution theory, Archer becomes biased in his views of others by attributing faults to their actions, seeing these as fixed and unchangeable conditions or signals that he must follow. In his mind, this makes him a victim of others' decisions and situations beyond his control. However, this is more of a coping mechanism to absolve himself from the responsibility of choosing the course of his own life. This is, however, primarily a coping mechanism designed to absolve himself of the responsibility for choosing his own life course. This pattern of thought and behavior ultimately results in him becoming a hurtful person with vicious thoughts.

In Chapter 22 of *The Age of Innocence*, the mention of Professor Emerson Sillerton illustrates how a person of similar social status to Newland Archer can choose to do as he desires, and society will still tolerate him. Professor Emerson Sillerton is described as someone considered eccentric by this society's standard merely because he has chosen to work, despite being a gentleman, and pursue an unfashionable

profession for someone of his class, an archaeologist, and because he chooses to live in Newport, which is not regarded as fashionable. As stated:

"Nothing—nothing on earth obliged Emerson Sillerton to be an archaeologist, or indeed a Professor of any sort, or to live in Newport in winter, or do any of the other revolutionary things that he did. But at least, if he was going to break with tradition and flout society in the face, [...]" (Wharton, 2008, p. 185).

Yet, society must tolerate him; they cannot shun him because he is a descendant of several prominent families as described, "His father was Sillerton Jackson's uncle, his mother a Pennilow of Boston; on each side there was wealth and position, and mutual suitability" (Wharton, 2008, p. 185). Due to this established "Sillerton-Pennilow-Dagonet connection," the elite New York families are forced to send an unwilling representative to Professor Sillerton's annual event, often having to "draw lots" to select who must go (Wharton, 2008, p. 185).

Similarly, Newland Archer's family is well-connected. His mother, Mrs. Archer, describes her family as respectable since the settler generation played important roles in building the country, their ancestors being "respectable English or Dutch merchants" (Wharton, 2008, p. 29) and that some having "signed the Declaration, and another was a general on Washington's staff, and received General Burgoyne's sword after the battle of Saratoga" (Wharton, 2008, pp. 29-30). Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 6 and 7, they are cousins of the most prominent family of all (Wharton, 2008, p. 43). That family is described as "the van der Luydens, direct descendants of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan, and related by pre-revolutionary marriages to several members of the French and British aristocracy" (Wharton, 2008, p. 42). Therefore, Newland Archer is entitled to the same privilege of choosing to do what he wants, especially since he seems to have an interest in anthropological and archaeological matters. Saunders (2008, pp. 308-309) states in her "Afterward" for the novel that Archer often views his society through the anthropological lens. She also argues that Archer refers to his society with anthropological language such as "little tribe" and speaking of its "manners and customs" (Saunders, 2008, p. 309). This suggests that Archer might have found more interest in his life had he pursue a career in anthropology rather than the socially acceptable career of law, whose acceptability lies specifically with young gentlemen of the profession dealing with the elites' legal matters, as mentioned in Chapter 14 (Wharton, 2008, p. 106). Additionally, Archer is not interested in this profession as the novel refers to his careless practice as "his pretense of professional activity" (Wharton,

2008, p. 106). So, it can be presumed that the society might treat him similarly to how they treat Professor Sillerton if Archer had chosen an anthropological career as a gentleman. In contrast, Archer's choice of career suggests how he chooses to follow the norms of society, slightly obliterating his own interests and becoming quite passive or irresponsible with his professional life.

This insidious trait of his character becomes most apparent in his treatment of the woman he claims to love and the one he chooses to be his wife. Archer fails to recognize his responsibility for securing his own happiness, instead exhibiting bias by attributing fault to both Countess Ellen Olenska and May Welland. He blames them as the reasons he cannot live his real life or attain the freedom he associates with being with Ellen.

Archer shifts the blame to Ellen Olenska for his failure to take any further action to be with her, claiming he acts only as she suggests. He further accuses her of being other men’s mistress out of jealousy. Archer claims that he has married May because Ellen told him to do so. Yet, whenever he is asked to take action to let May go, he cannot bring himself to do it. This hypocrisy leads Archer to blame both women. To Ellen, he speaks profusely romantic words as a tortured lover suffering because of her, as if she acted cruelly toward him. However, he never takes real steps to change their situation and be with her.

In Chapter. 18, while he is still only engaged to May, both Archer and Ellen confess their love for each other. She immediately understands they cannot be together because she is not yet divorced and he is engaged to May, who is her cousin. He responds petulantly: “We won’t talk of your marriage; but do you see me marrying May after this?” (Wharton, 2008, p. 144). When asks if he would ask May to call off their engagement, he quickly dismisses the idea with: “It’s too late to do anything else” (Wharton, 2008, p. 144).

Ellen immediately sees through this excuse and replies: “You say that because it’s the easiest thing to say at this moment—not because it’s true. In reality it’s too late to do anything but what we’d both decided on” (Wharton, 2008, p. 144). Ellen appears to understand his true character: he is full of verbal passion but fundamentally unwilling to take action to change things, even for his own happiness or for hers. Prior to this event, the person who advised against getting a divorce was Newland Archer himself. In Chapter 11, he is assigned to handle Ellen’s divorce case because he is about to marry into her family, the Mingotts, the clan of Ellen and May’s grandmother (Wharton, 2008,

p. 82). Archer acts as their delegate to discourage Ellen from divorcing. Although he is aware that she has the rights to do so, he must dissuade her because it would create a scandal for her and her family as he states: “Our ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favors divorce—our social customs don’t” (Wharton, 2008, p. 93). This interaction offers a clear glimpse of his personality to Ellen: despite his words criticizing conventions or seeming to suggest actions that deviate from societal norms, he will ultimately take no steps to change them.

In Chapter 24, over a year after marrying May, Archer follows Ellen to Boston and speaks with her. In the throes of a dramatic profession of love, he declares “[...] I’m the man who married one woman because another one told him to” (Wharton, 2008, p. 204). As Jean Witherow suggests in “A Dialectic of Deception: Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*”, Archer’s passion for Ellen seems to serve more as an illusion of loving the idea of her than truly being with her. Ellen implies that she has left New York to avoid interfering with Newland and May’s marriage, saying “others may be saved from disillusionment and misery” (Wharton, 2008, p. 204). With the word “disillusionment,” Ellen reveals that she sees through Archer’s illusion about their being together and has been rejecting his whimsical idea of them uniting.

A nearly identical scenario repeats itself when Archer is implicitly asked if he would end his marriage to allow Ellen Olenska to return to New York; he refuses to let May go completely to be with Ellen. He refuses to take any risks for Ellen, while also assigning blame to her for refusing to make him happy as he says:

“Not if you staked your all on the success of my marriage. My marriage,” he said savagely, “isn’t going to be a sight to keep you here.” She made no answer, and he went on: “What’s the use? You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. It’s beyond human enduring—that’s all” (Wharton, 2008, pp. 204-205).

Attribution of blame is not the only hurtful thing Archer has tragically done to Ellen. He also accuses her of being Mr. Beaufort’s mistress after becoming frustrated with the results of his own inaction. After Archer refuses to call off his engagement with May, he sarcastically asks Ellen: “And Beaufort? Is he to replace me?” (Wharton, 2008, p. 146), followed by, “‘He’s waiting for you now at Mrs. Struthers’s; why don’t you go to him?’ Archer sneered” (Wharton, 2008, p. 146).

To Ellen, Archer assigns blame and succumbs to jealousy caused by his own failure to pursue his desires, falsely accusing her of being with someone else simply

because he cannot be with her. Conversely, to May Welland, the woman he marries but does not love, Archer initially assigns the role of perfection, conforming to the standards of the very society he finds hypocritical but nonetheless subscribes to. Later, when Archer desires Ellen, May is blamed as the cause of his suffocation. Even after her death, Archer continues to blame her as the one who never set him free.

As suggested in the article "Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in *The Age of Innocence*", Archer misperceives both Ellen and May entirely; that is, May is not merely the perfect product of New York's hypocritical society nor just a naïve girl unaware of Archer's secret feelings for Ellen (Hadley, 1991, pp. 268-269). However, throughout the story, Archer regards her only in these limited terms. At the beginning of the story, when they are newly engaged, Archer sees her as the perfect specimen of their society's ideal woman. His words often sound like an appraisal of a first prize, and he regards her with possessive pride. Significantly his feelings for her are never mentioned as love. This is shown, for instance, through the description of a photograph that she gave him:

"With a new sense of awe he looked at the frank forehead, serious eyes and gay innocent mouth of the young creature whose soul's custodian he was to be. That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, looked back at him like a stranger through May Welland's familiar features; [...]" (Wharton, 2008, p. 36).

As Witherow (2003) suggests in "A Dialectic of Deception: Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence"*, Archer's desire stems more from wanting an ideal than truly loving May as a person. However, as the story reveals in the end, May is not just the naïve girl Archer biasedly assumes her to be. He is ultimately confronted with the revelation that May is not naïve when she reveals to him that she has fought for their marriage whenever necessary. This revelation is demonstrated when May, before even being certain of the fact, informs Ellen that she is pregnant, a calculated move intended to ensure Ellen leaves New York and Newland Archer indefinitely (Wharton, 2008, p. 289).

While Archer blames May for the suffocation he feels in their marriage, May had actually given him a way out of their relationship before they were even married. She directly questions him, sensing the underlying motivation behind his insistence on an early wedding. By the end of Chapter 9, it can be read that Archer is developing an interest in Ellen. He asks the florist to send her yellow roses to Ellen, yet he acts suspiciously, wanting to keep the gesture a secret (Wharton, 2008, p. 67). In Chapter 16,

May, having sensed some differences in Newland's behavior, asked him directly, "If that is it—is there someone else?" (Wharton, 2008, p. 124).

May even suggests that going through with the marriage while Archer may have feelings for someone else could be a mistake. She explains:

"She met his protest with a faint smile. 'If it is, it won't hurt us to talk about it.' She paused, and added, lifting her head with one of her noble movements: 'Or even if it's true: why shouldn't we speak of it? You might so easily have made a mistake'" (Wharton, 2008, p. 125).

Even though, May explicitly asks him and offers him a chance to call off their engagement, Archer deflects her question, assuring her that there has no one else between them (Wharton, 2008, p. 125).

In the last Chapter, when Dallas, Archer and May's grown son, reveals to his father that before her death, May had confided in him, finally bringing the truth about the past to light. Archer learns that May had known about his feelings for Ellen all along. May's message to Dallas was intended to reassure him that the children would always be safe with Archer "[...] because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted" (Wharton, 2008, p. 300). Archer is stunned by this revelation, yet in the final reflection on May, he still blames his missed chance with Ellen on her. He replies to his son: "She never asked me" (Wharton, 2008, p. 300). This episode stands in stark contrast to the scene from Chapter 16 as described above that May explicitly asked him if there was someone else, implying that they could call off their engagement. This shows that Archer's tendency to assign blame lingers with him to the very end of the novel.

Another instance of passive manipulation regarding May occurs when Archers feels unsatisfied with his unfulfilled love for Ellen. Frustrated by his own inaction, he reaches a cruel level of unkindness by wishing for May's death, hoping her passing would clear a path for him to be with Ellen. In Chapter 30, when May asks him to close the window before he catches his death, he feels like snapping at her that he has been dead on the inside for months (Wharton, 2008, p. 249). He suddenly has a cruel wish for her to die. He feels no remorse in that thought; instead, he sees her death as his liberation from his tie to her. This scene is narrated as:

"And suddenly the play of the word flashed up a wild suggestion. What if it were she who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! The sensation of standing there, in that warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing

her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling. Yes, May might die—people did: young people, healthy people like herself: she might die, and set him suddenly free" (Wharton, 2008, pp. 249-250).

This passage can also be read as evidence that, although Archer feels suffocated to the point of desperation, he still wishes for some external cause, an accident, a cruel twist of fate to free him. This way, he would avoid having to take any action or responsibility for his own liberation.

Archer's blame attribution can also be seen in how he reflects on his life and the younger generation; even late in life, he continues to blame fate for his inactions. In the final chapter, when Archer and his son Dallas travel to Paris together, Archer ponders the difference between their views on fate. Newland observes that Dallas and his generation regard fate as an equal force, not a life's master (Wharton, 2008, p. 302). This reflection can be read as yet another tragic realization: Archer now understands that he has blamed fate for the trajectory of his life, using it as an excuse for his passivity. Yet, even with this awareness, he is unable to change. When Dallas asks Archer to visit Ellen Olenska with him, Archer still refuses. Even though both he and Ellen are now alone and have another chance to reconnect, Archer chooses instead to dwell on Dallas's revelation that May had known about his love for Ellen all along, rather than take action to reunite with her, even briefly.

Traditional narrative form as a reflection of Newland Archer's characterisation

Expanding on Goldberg's essay, "Newland Archer's Doubled Consciousness: Wharton, Psychology, and Narrational Form," Wharton's choice of traditional novel structure popular in the 19th century reflects Newland Archer's mindset, which has followed tradition and the established forms of an earlier time. This formal choice mirrors how it remains trapped within the same conventions throughout the novel, ultimately remaining unchanged. In the final chapter, Newland still lives according to the expectations of New York society (Wharton, 2008, pp. 296-297). He continues to blame May for the missed opportunity with Ellen and still fails to take action to secure his own happiness in the end. The characterization of Newland Archer is encapsulated in his final words: "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough" (Wharton, 2008, p. 304). Similarly, Wharton's use of a traditional narrative structure, despite publishing the novel during

the Modernist era known for its experimentation with form, further emphasizes Archer's entrapment in the values and conventions of the past.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of his life, from youth to old age, Newland Archer represents a man of social privilege and intellectual capacity to see through the hypocrisy of his society that restricts genuine personal fulfilment. Yet, he chooses to conform to it because it is convenient to repeat the hypocrisy than to forge a path of his own. By complying with the hypocrisy for the sake of momentary convenience, he suppresses his desire to live differently and to be with the woman he claims to love. Rather than taking agency over his own life, he passively submits to the circumstances that go against his true wishes. When frustrated by the consequences of his inaction, he shifts blame onto others, holding them responsible for past choices that led to his present misery. However, when offered real opportunities to change his course or act on his desires, he consistently deflects and retreats. His character ultimately reflects a tragic paradox of human nature: the tendency to surrender autonomy for comfort and to rationalize inaction through blame. The novel's traditional narrative form mirrors this theme, reinforcing Archer's entrapment in social conventions and his ultimate refusal to change. Wharton's portrayal of Archer transcends its historical context and anticipates contemporary psychological understandings of moral passivity and self-justification. Likewise, her narrative form enriches the intersection of literary art and the exploration of psychological complexity of human behavior.

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