BETWEEN 'THE PRESENT SELF' AND 'THE SELF TO BE'

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Abstract: This study contains interpretations of the existential conflict in Edith Wharton's novel The Age of Innocence. It is an important conflict in the book, as it includes all the others: the social, moral, erotic, psychological, of mentality and the internal conflict. It also reflects the significance of the title. All three main characters represent different 'ages' and stages in the evolution of human conscience and in society. The male character is in-between two '(st)ages', therefore he can be considered an exponential one. 'The Journey', 'the Gorgon' and 'the Light' are archetypal symbols that lead the reader to a deeper level of knowledge.

Keywords: existential conflict, conscience, stages of evolution, Wharton, The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920) represents an important contribution to and a notable exploit of the 20th century American literature. The modern narrative techniques mingle with a social-realistic vision in a refined style endorsed by an elaborated symbolical structure. The multiple layers of significance reveal a complex perspective on reality based on the writer's cultural education and emancipating life experiences. The discourse impresses by a balanced narrative formula: the social dynamics are presented with an objective eye, while the characters' destinies are designed with feminine intuitive subtlety; the passages of reflection and analysis give fluidity and depth, while the plot and the conflicts give dramatic tension and emotional implication. Due to its complexity, the novel offers the possibility of many critical approaches: feminist, archetypal, biographical, narratological, social or psychoanalytical. But whatever path it follows, it leads to the presence of an existential crisis revealed within the text by an existential conflict.

An existential conflict would be between '*what a person is'* and '*what the person feels (s)he is about to become'*; between '*the present self'* and '*the self to be'*. This situation implies a change, sometimes a critical one and, in this case, an existential crises. According to Richard K. James, "an existential crisis is a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether this life has any meaning, purpose, or value" (6). Sarri thinks that a crisis arises from an event that is "unpredictable and uncontrollable. The nature of the event changes values and priorities, and indeed changes everything." (qtd. in James 7) From another point of view, "a crisis is a loss of psychological equilibrium or a state of emotional instability that includes elements of depression and anxiety which is caused by an external event with which individuals are unable to cope with at their usual level of ability." (Kleespies, qtd. in James 8) An important aspect of an existential crisis is that it represents, at the same time, a threat to an old state of things and also an opportunity for a great change. Hence, it implies an evolutionary process. The conflict is even stronger when the individuals realize that they must always define their own lives through the choices they make. The moment is quite dramatic as the desires seem to tear the person apart. Consciously or unconsciously made, these choices generate new social and existential paradigms.

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In this novel, the conflict affects more characters, but the male protagonist is an exponential one. In Newland Archer's case, the unexpected arrival of Ellen Olenska in his social circle represents the event that generates an existential crisis, because her way of being and the strong feelings he starts having for her questions his traditional ideas about life, love, marriage and happiness. Newland witnesses his transformation from a man in harmony with a conventional life-style (social status, profession, love, engagement) into a man who desperately needs to break the boundaries, widen the horizons and transcend, in any aspect, the limits of his present existence. A travelling enthusiast, he sets off on an existential journey (27 years long!) in the 'more absent than present' presence of a fascinating woman he develops a passion for. The end of the book concurs with the end of what he acknowledges to be "a pilgrimage". An existential conflict implies five major themes: *innocence*, *love*, *marriage*, *journey (quest)*, *knowledge*, emphasized in this book by five symbols: *lilies-of-the valley*, *yellow roses*, *rings*, *the road (trip)*, *the light*.

The first step in analyzing this conflict is to determine the main coordinates of the three protagonists' identities. They are more than typical characters. They are symbols of the human condition and of its evolution, from an ontological and social point of view: May - unquestionable conformity to social rules (childhood – an apparent age of innocence seen as ignorance or lack of experience), Newland - questionable conformity to social rules followed by their transformation (teen age – a turbulent age of dilemmas and personal dramas) and Ellen - unconformity followed by an independent solitary living (maturity – the true age of innocence achieved after overcoming many hardships and understanding the true moral meaning of life). The existential conflict is found in Newland because he represents the middle (st)age, he is in between two phases and the other two feminine characters represent the previous and the next evolutional level.

Newland Archer is an intelligent young man from the rich American upper class of the late 19th century society. At the beginning of the novel he is a 29-year-old lawyer, freshly engaged to Miss May Welland, a beautiful 18-year-old young lady from a very respectable and well-viewed family. They seem to be the perfect match for each other: they belong to the same class and to the same social group, with common standards and principles, therefore they share the same traditional moral values: dignity, family duty and solidarity, generosity, fidelity, integrity; she is young and innocent, but very tactful and wise, thanks to her education; he is a true gentleman, cultivated and refined, but more sophisticated because, being a man, he "has been permitted both emotional experiences (he has had a brief affair with a married woman two years before) and an intellectual range not available to a young woman, but nevertheless conditioned and relatively unquestioning" (Lively, IX). They "care" for each other greatly and their feelings are based on appreciation, respect and trust. Everything seems to be perfect in their lives, until the moment May's cousin appears and her unconventional way of being questions the cornerstone of their life-style.

The Countess Ellen Olenska is the favourite granddaughter of Mrs. Catherine Mingott, the Matriarch of the Mingott's family, an old respected and rich American family, whose power is outrivaled and enhanced by the old woman's personality. Ellen's parents passed away when she was only a little child and she was raised by an eccentric aunt who lived mainly in Europe. Even as a child, she was considered "a brilliantly pretty little girl who "ought to be painted". […] She was a fearless and familiar little thing who asked disconcerting questions, made precocious comments, and possessed outlandish arts, such as dancing a Spanish shawl-dance and singing Neapolitan love-songs to a guitar" (Wharton, 66). She spent her teenage years in Europe and married "an immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame" (Wharton, 67). At the beginning of the book, she had recently returned home to New York, after her marriage had ended in disaster, to "seek rest and oblivion among her kinsfolk" (Wharton, 67). The problem – one that she is not firstly aware of – is that her family shows her sympathy out of a

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solidarity principle, when they actually feel uncomfortable with Ellen's unconventional way of getting away of her marriage. The American society of the late 19th century is ruled by very strict moral rules and conventions. "It was a complacent and philistine world, but one with inflexible standards, those of "scrupulous probity in business and private affair" as Edith Wharton herself described it in her memoir *A Backward Glance.*" (Lively, V) The idea of her divorce is considered to be an offence against the conventional mores and a threat to the family security. In the American mentality, a woman's duty was to maintain the family unity and its integrity at any cost. All Ellen's relatives try hard to convince her not to file for divorce and, as she is very determined, they use Newland's influence on her and his law expertise to make her understand that it is in her best interest not to do it (actually, it is in theirs). She changes her mind and she doesn't hide she did it because of him, but it is revealed later in the book that her reasons were different from those exposed to her by him. She renounced her social freedom not for her own benefit, but in order not to hurt her family, the family to which *he* was supposed to belong through his marriage with her cousin May. The strong affection that grows between Newland and Ellen along the novel is based on the similar personality they have: they are cultivated minds, reflective natures and sensitive souls. They both yearn for profound, authentic experiences (such as reading, travelling or love) that would allow them to expand their life horizons. The affinity between them quickly turns into attraction and finally into passion. Newland's transformation becomes more visible as he is the reflector character, the one through whose eyes the story is told and the American society presented. According to Henry James's artistic conception, the reflector has an important part in a story. "The reflector does not tell the story — that is the role of the narrator. He is one of the characters, but one privileged by the writer: he is the one who sees, and through whose eyes we see. In great novels, the reflector can be a powerful device to help the reader to enter the fictional world and to get nearer to the characters' mental universe."(Goyet) The influence of Henry James's artistic vision on Wharton's work is well-known (the same as their friendship) and it is evident in the narrative technique of this novel. Newland's emotional transformation is representative for the social change in the world around him, mentioned by other characters (Mrs. Archer) and confirmed by the author in the last chapter.

The three main characters are representative human types and symbols at the same time. Newland, as his name suggests, is the new man that announces the dawn of a new era in America: cultivated, curious, open-minded, emancipated, intellectually independent, but honest and devoted to family and society. He doesn't have the courage to denounce and to stand up against the rigid old-fashioned conventions, but he has the insight to observe them, the intelligence to create new cultural values and the integrity to offer a role model. "You're the kind of man the country wants, Archer. If the stable's ever to be cleaned out, men like you have got to lend a hand in the cleaning." These are the words told by the Governor of New York to Newland one night and from then on he became involved in most of the social and cultural achievements of the city, as a municipal counselor and a writer in one of the reforming weeklies that were trying to shake the country out of its apathy. "He had been, in short, what people were beginning to call "a good citizen." In New York, for many years past, every new movement, philanthropic, municipal or artistic, had taken account of his opinion and wanted his name." (Wharton, 291) His surname, Archer, in connection with his first name, suggests that he is a new type of person who 'aims' for new life standards and values. In connection with the theme of love, his name reminds of Cupid, whose bow was lost unfortunately ("Cupid who had lost his bow and arrow but continued to take ineffectual aim", Wharton, 195)

On the other hand, May Welland embodies "the rigidity and implacable self-righteousness of the society itself – a kind of innocence, but a dangerous and eventually self-destructive innocence." (Lively, VIII) She is the symbol of an age in the American history that is comparable to childhood, when candor is beauty, righteousness is virtuosity, but where if it

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lacks imagination (like in May's case), it lacks "the flower of life." (Wharton, 291). Her name suggests a world based on the moral principles of Good (Well) and Bad, like in a fairytale world, like in the mind of a simple child. She is 'Well'-educated in respecting the social rules and conventions and she is only capable of following 'Well'-worn grooves or the two main human basic instincts: procreation and self-preservation. Her creativity is limited, versatile and devious; the moment she realizes that her husband is on the verge of leaving her for her cousin, she manages to attract all the family on her side and elaborates very subtle schemes to eliminate her elegantly but firmly. She uses the strongest argument a woman can invoke, the oldest trick to manipulate people: pregnancy. She makes the principles she apparently obeys to obey the imperatives of her 'Well'-being.

Ellen Olenska represents the superior spirit, capable both of understanding everything and sacrificing her personal happiness for a greater good. She works "like a charm" for Newland, like a muse which brings him enlightenment. She is like a lighthouse which shows him a new path to follow. The name comes from the Greek *Helene*, probably the feminine of *helenos*, "the bright one" (Online Etymology Dictionary) or torch, which suggests both the idea of enlightenment and the one of passionate love she inspires to Newland. She is a true virtuous woman because she follows the rules not out of the fear of being an outcast, but out of her conviction, wanting not to harm the ones who helped her, not to betray the ones who trusted her. Her conscience raises her above the rules and gives her a dramatic beauty that comes out of her power of understanding everything and everybody.

The interpretation of the existential conflict would be much more suggestive if referred to a concrete situation in the novel, reflected by an illustrative quote:

> "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress - since I can't be your wife?" she asked. […]
> "I want - I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that-categories like that-won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter."
> She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. "Oh, my dear-where is that country? Have you ever been there?" she asked […].
> He had never heard her speak in such a tone, and he remembered the phrase she had used a little while before.
> "Yes, the Gorgon *has* dried your tears," he said.
> "Well, she opened my eyes too; it's a delusion to say that she blinds people. What she does is just the contrary-she fastens their eyelids open, so that they're never again in the blessed darkness. Ah, believe me, it's a miserable little country! " (Wharton 247)

The excerpt is from the XXIXth chapter of the thirty-four the book has and presents the second-but-last alone meeting between Newland Archer and the Countess Ellen Olenska. There are only seven scenes in the whole novel where the two meet alone and they are all very short, always interrupted by unpredictable events or reactions. Even though nothing actually happens between the two, the scenes are very full of tension due to the nature of their conversations, their looks, the reflections of the male protagonists and mostly because of the many conflicts that lie within the pages, more or less explicitly stated: the social, moral, psychological, mentality, interior, erotic and existential conflict. It is on this last one we want to dwell on in the following lines.

The quote shows Newland and Ellen in his wife's brougham, on their way to her very ill grandma's house, coming from the train station where Ellen had arrived from Washington.

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He has been very anxious to meet her and talk to her about them. He knows his life is miserable in her absence and he wants to have a discussion with her, hoping to find a solution for them to be together (in spite of the fact that they are both married and that the idea of a divorce would ruin many people's lives). As there doesn't seem to be another possible solution except to become his mistress, Ellen asks him that, but with a tone that startles him. His answer refers to the idea of eloping to an ideal world, to a 'New-land' free of preconceptions, where their love wouldn't be a threat to the social conventions: "Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other" (Wharton 246). Her answer shows him the futility of his dream world. The tone of her voice reminds him of another time she used it, a tone that reflected her skepticism born out of her experience and her knowledge of life. The myth of the Gorgon is reinterpreted by her wit, showing its true significance: "she opened my eyes; it's a delusion to say that she blinds people. What she does is just the contrary-she fastens their eyelids open, so that they're never again in the blessed darkness" (Wharton 247). The theme of knowledge is tightly correlated here with the theme of love. True love opens people's eyes. Paul Diel considers that the Gorgone symbolizes the deformed image of one's self which paralyzes the person in order to make him/her conscious of a state of facts; but the revelation is possible only if the person looks in a detached, objective way, without any feeling of culpability or vanity (qtd. in Chevalier & Gheerbrant 105). This detached perspective over facts allows Ellen to see the only possible reality for them: "We're near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise, we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them." (Wharton 247). This is why they remained, finally, separated, for the rest of their lives. They stayed "far from each other", literally and symbolically. She moved on to another level of knowledge, because she was not paralyzed by the Gorgon's look. Medusa symbolizes the spiritual and evolutive forces deformed by guilt or pride. But Ellen didn't surrender to the promiscuous temptations risking the happiness of the people she loves and let these spiritual forces propel her to a superior level, far from "the blessed darkness". Newland remained at the same level, being paralyzed by guilt or weakness. However, he found the strength to make some changes inside it, improving it. If Ellen becomes a victor at the consciousness level, Newland is a victor at the social level.

The existential conflict lasts from the second chapter until the last one (the XXXIVth). After 26 years of devoted family life and prolific professional experiences, Newland Archer sits in his library and muses about his numerous accomplishments and admits that there is only one thing he has missed: "the flower of life". If life was a lottery, he missed the first prize; the chances have been against him. Ellen Olenska has become "the composite vision of all that he had missed." (Wharton 291) What gives him comfort is that he has done his duty with dignity, even though marriage was a dull duty. He honors his own past and also mourns for it. The existential conflict is still there but very feeble. Newland seems to be at peace with himself but he is only resigned. Suddenly, the phone rings and a surprising opportunity to visit Paris (the city where Ellen lives) comes up. His elder son, Dallas, insists on spending their last holiday together as father and son, before his wedding. On their way to Ellen's house, Dallas reveals to him the fact that her mother told him on her deathbed about Newland's feelings for Ellen and that she had appreciated his sacrifice and his devotion to the family. He is impressed, but even stronger emotions seize him when he realizes that he will see Ellen again and that there is nothing now to keep them apart: "It was not too late for a quiet harvest of friendship" (Wharton 300). But the moment they arrive in front of the house, he does not feel anymore it is right to go in. He remains outside on a bench and gazes at the awninged balcony of her apartment. He thinks: "It's more real to me here than if I went up". He stays there until a light shines through the windows and a servant draws up the awnings and closes the shutters. As if it has been a signal, he gets up and walks back alone to his hotel. The last words of the book end the conflict

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in an abrupt and allusive way. The awnings might symbolize that Ellen represented some kind of protection for him from the strong light of knowledge, which prevented him from getting blinded by the Gorgon's eyes. Still, with her 'awnings' and 'shutters' closed, Newland remains alone into the darkness. He hasn't had the strength to face a new reality, to give it a chance. He has been too afraid to become a different person or too afraid to see what he might have become, or maybe he was only indecisive, as always, and waited for a sign… What would have happened if *she* had appeared on the balcony and the awnings had remained drawn down?

In conclusion, at the end of the novel, in one way or another, the existential conflict is solved. Even though Newland hasn't come out a winner in the battle with the destiny, his son has: "he had the facility and self-confidence that came of looking at fate not as a master but as an equal."(Wharton 300) The author's message is that there are always sacrifices to make in the evolution process and some generations have to pay more for the next generations to win, but this doesn't make anyone less important or worthy. The book is a tribute paid to all generations and to all the Ages in the history of humankind. The true Age of Innocence is the one of rediscovering one's self, overcoming any existential crises with love, faith and understanding.

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