TRAVELLING IN EDITH WHARTON'S WORLD

Oana Alexandra Alexa
Assist. Lecturer, PhD., „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: Travelling is inevitably an enriching experience, but for Edith Wharton's late 19th century New York leisure class, going to Europe was a ritual to be performed with the utmost attention to form. Wharton's characters travelled east to Europe for a number of reasons: from the customary honeymooning and the annual trips to Paris to order one's wardrobe, to the initiatic tours for young men and the serious business of finding an aristocrat husband willing to overlook a girl's 'new money' which the leisure class was so keen on rejecting back home.
This paper aims to discuss the issue of Americans visiting Europe as they are pictured in several of Wharton's novels, by emphasizing what they lost and what they gained during this experience. It will show that, no matter the reason, travelling was a powerful instrument for the rich in the game of social conventions and that a trip to Europe could sometimes make or break one's fortune.

Keywords: travelling, east, Europe, Edith Wharton, leisure class

Introduction

Edith Wharton was born into a milieu which regarded travelling, much as anything else, as an obligation within the social game. Their income permitted them to prolong their stays abroad for months and sometimes years on end, not necessarily because they took the opportunity to visit as many places as possible – as we might do today - but due to the fact that social norm required them to remain in Europe for a certain amount of time (divided into 'seasons'). And customs were rarely something to be tampered with, especially by "leisure class" (Veblen 2007: 33) Americans who, as Wharton suggests at some point in *The Buccaneers*, were perceived as trying too hard to observe tradition, even long before their European counterparts had moved on to new social habits.

Why, how, when and with whom the members of the leisure class travelled were just as important matters as the choice of people one wanted to be associated with, or the area one picked in order to establish his/her permanent residence. This paper aims to discuss the particularities of the American leisure class' travels abroad by starting with her autobiography and then looking at several of Wharton's novels: *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Buccaneers* (1938) and *The Reef* (1912).

Wharton's Travelling Guidelines

According to *A Backward Glance* (1934), Old New York "was in continual contact with the land of his fathers." (Wharton 1998: 36) London, Paris and Rome were mandatory destinations, and the travellers enjoyed the scenery, ruins and historic sites most, together with shopping in the big cities.

BDD-A29710 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:52 UTC)

To Wharton, New Yorkers "were never so happy as when they were hurrying on board the ocean liner which was to carry them to new lands." (*A Backward Glance* 1998: 36) Thus, she is almost shocked to find that the Bostonians she met through her husband were so sedentary, "seemingly too lacking in intellectual curiosity to have any desire to see the world." (*A Backward Glance* 1998: 36)

However often Old Newyorkers might have travelled, they always made sure to follow the social norms dictated by such situations. Both "artistic and intellectual advantages of European travel" and the "social opportunities" it provided were ignored, in favour of the above-mentioned norm-approved activities: sight-seeing and shopping. (*A Backward Glance* 1998: 36)

> It was thought vulgar and snobbish to try to make the acquaintance, in London, Paris or Rome, of people of the class corresponding to their own. The Americans who forced their way into good society in Europe were said to be those who were shut out from it at home; and the self-respecting American on his travels frequented only the little colonies of his compatriots already settled in the European capitals, and only their most irreproachable members! (*A Backward Glance* 1998: 36)

The same idea is echoed in *The Age of Innocence*:

> In all the rainy desert of autumnal London there were only two people whom the Newland Archers knew; and these two they had sedously avoided, in conformity with the Old New Yoek tradition that it was not 'dignified' to force one's self on the notice of one's acquaintances in foreign countries. Mrs. Archer and Janey, in the course of their visits to Europe, had so unflinchingly lived up to this principle, and met the friendly advances of their fellow travellers with an air of such unpenetrable reserve, that they had almost achieved the record of never having exchanged a word with a 'foreigner' other than those employed in hotels and railway stations. Their own compatriots – save those previously known or properly accredited – they treated with an even more pronounced disdain; so that, unless they ran across a Chivers, a Dragonet or a Mingott, their months abroad were spent in an unbroken tête-à-tête. (*The Age of Innocence* 2010: 157)

With this amount of solitude, one would think that their time was occupied with other enjoyable activities. But sightseeing itself was not "cultivated," remarks Wharton. People were following the same itineraries recommended by early 19th century travellers, without really discerning between what was interesting to others and to their own person and without an understanding of what was really in front of them. Travelling, as many other things, was not a matter of personal taste, but rather a custom that simply required following. It was as much of a ritual devoid of true meaning as their social lives were:

> What these artless travellers chiefly enjoyed were scenery, ruins and historic sites [...] Public ceremonials also, ecclesiastical or royal, were much appreciated, though of the latter only distant glimpses could be caught, since it would have been snobbish to ask, through one's Legation, for reserved seats or invitations. (*A Backward Glance* 1998: 36)

BDD-A29710 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:52 UTC)

Long-distance travelling is such an expensive and strenuous affair that Wharton's characters prefer to limit themselves to two or three times in their lifetime: the quest for an European husband, the honeymoon, their children's initiatic tour and, if necessary, a self-imposed exile.

Honeymooning in Europe is, in many of Wharton's stories, one of the meaningless rituals that New York society requires of its inhabitants. To Boston residents, travelling abroad is actually limited to it: "married couples, after a brief honeymoon abroad, were expected to divide the rest of their lives between Boston in winter and its suburbs, or the neighbouring sea-shore, in summer." (*A Backward Glance* 1998: 55) So when Wharton and her husband plan a Mediteranean cruise, their families are shocked at the prospect.

Newlyweds May and Newland Archer from *The Age of Innocence* are certainly far less adventurous in terms of breaking travel customs. They go on the customary European honeymoon, "a three months' wedding tour" following more or less the footsteps of so many other leisure class newlyweds. *(The Age of Innocence* 2010: 157) It includes ordering the bride's clothes in Paris and the groom's in London, alongside some popular sightseeing in Italy and Switzerland. There is not much room for spontaneity.

> They had not gone to the Italian Lakes [...]. Her own inclination (after a month with the Paris dressmakers) was for mountaineering in July and swimming in August. This plan they punctually fulfilled, spending July at Interlaken and Grindelwald, and August at a little place called Etretat, on the Normandy coast, which some one had recommended as quaint and quiet. (*The Age of Innocence* 2010: 159)

As a perfect exponent of her social circle, May Welland is not keen on travelling, not even for her honeymoon. As soon as the customary destinations had been ticked, and "they finally got back to London (where they were to spend a fortnight while he ordered *his* clothes) she no longer concealed the eagerness with which she looked forward to sailing." (*The Age of Innocence* 2010: 160)

After the honeymoon, May goes to Europe one more time, for her oldest son's initiatic tour: "After Dallas had taken his degree, she had thought it her duty to travel for six months; and the whole family had made the old-fashioned tour through England, Switzerland and Italy." (*The Age of Innocence* 2010: 285) After that, she settles back into her undisturbed routine of New York in the winter and Newport in the summer, because "she could imagine no other motive for leaving the house in Thirty-ninth Street or their comfortable quarters at the Wellands' in Newport." (*The Age of Innocence* 2010: 285) Travelling outside the established leisure class circle has a negative effect on Newland's wife, who is so keen on following the rules that finds herself at a loss whenever he takes her out of her comfort zone: "If, now and then, during their travels, they had fallen slightly out of step, harmony had been restored by their return to the conditions she was used to." (*The Age of Innocence* 2010: 169)

For many of Wharton's women characters, the rest of the world was almost completely unknown, and they automatically associated it with uneducated people. The British upper-class look down on American 'new money' and tend to feign geographical ignorance in order to maintain their perceived superiority: "Lady Brightlingsea sighed at this new call upon her powers of concentration. 'I hear of nothing but Americans.' [...] 'Is she from the same part of the States – from Brazil'?" (*The Buccaneers* 1994: 79)

BDD-A29710 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:52 UTC)

Travelling to these remote places insured a new beginning in society, since most people tended to forget the reasons for one's departure as long as their return was accompanied by a substantial amount of cash. Julius Beaufort from *The Age of Innocence* went to South America to escape scandal in New York and returned even richer, Madam Olenska went back to France in order to avoid interference in the Archers' marriage, while Lily Bart planned a double-purposed getaway to Alaska, "which had at least the negative advantage of removing her from the fiery centre of criticism and discussion." (*The House of Mirth* 2012: 274)

Travelling as an escape is a recurrent theme in Wharton's world. It is supposed to clear one's head, remove a person from compromising situations and provide a fresh start (the longer the absence the cleaner the slate upon return). But this only works if the traveller is willing to accept societies' conventions upon return, that is if the journey had resulted in coming back to their senses and doing the right thing. In the case of Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth*, not marrying the right person and compromising herself during her trip abroad did not result in a fresh start but rather sank her reputation even further, to the point that her return home was only the beginning of her tragic end.

On the other hand, Miss Jacqueline March from *The Buccaneers* stayed in London rather than returning to the States after her failed engagement with an English nobleman and had become a true life coach for "transatlantic pilgrims in quest for a social opening." (*The Buccaneers* 1994: 80) With her help, and even more so guided by their savvy governess, Laura Testvalley, 'new money' Virginia and Annabel St. George both marry very well and make their way up the British aristocracy, though both their marriages prove to be unhappy in the end. On the surface, however, their trial of "a London season" (*The Buccaneers* 1994: 86) proves to be immensely successful because the only thing that the English aristocracy could not refuse was a huge infusion of American capital that would save their titles from extinction and a complete loss of dignity.

In Wharton's world, few things are more worth it to dedicate one's time and finances than travelling to Europe in the quest for a husband with an aristocratic title. Although most Americans wives soon find the old-fashioned British society suffocating, they maintain a certain reverence towards its ancient rules. Anna Leath, the heroine of *The Reef*, much like her mother-in-law, Madame de Chantelle, had married a Frenchman because she was subdued by his old world charm:

> Every word, every allusion, every note of his agreeably-modulated voice, gave Anna a glimpse of a society at once freer and finer, which observed the traditional forms but had discarded the underlying prejudices; whereas the world she knew had discarded many of the forms and kept almost all the prejudices. (*The Reef* 1996: 53)

The same fascination towards Europe's rich history leads young Annabel St.George to marry an English duke, whom she does not love but who is an exponent of everything that America's newness cannot provide.

Once married, American wives must strive to navigate the numerous social conventions that they so much admired from the outside (mainly because of their authenticity, as opposed to the American rules which were barely immitations), but they never quite manage to do so:

> Life, to Mr. Leath, was like a walk through a carefully classified museum, where, in moments of doubt, one had only to look at the number and refer to one's catalogue;

BDD-A29710 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:52 UTC)

> to his wife it was like groping about in a huge dark lumber-room where the exploring ray of curiosity lit up now some shape of breathing beauty and now a mummy's grin. [...] She did not adopt her husband's views, but insensibly she began to live his life. (*The Reef* 1996: 55)

It's as if life both begins and ends for Wharton's characters with a 'good' marriage. As long as her characters enter the right circle, their happiness is not questioned. Even if things don't work out, most of them choose to stay in Europe, as a return to the States would be a sure sign of defeat. Countess Olenska from the *Age of Innocence* makes the mistake of leaving her husband after years of living in France and returns to New York, hoping to divorce him with her family's support. But, in the end, they rally against her and she is forced to go back to France because the *right* marriage is not to be given up to in favour of *feelings*.

Conclusions

For Edith Wharton's characters, travelling East, was a ritual. Like everything else in the world of the leisure class, it was to be performed with the utmost attention to form, while any slip-ups were sanctioned immediately and drastically. From the timing of the trip to the destination, means of transportation, accommodation, the chosen company, the choice of attire and leisure activities, travelling was as much of a statement as the performance of social conventions back home. Too much travelling, however, would have meant losing touch with the social norms back home, and that was not somethimg to be desired. It would equate to an act of rebellion or would raise suspicions as to the reason for distancing oneself from society, and 'foreignness' was perceived as something negative within the leisure class. Thus, being away from society for too long was better avoided and travelling was better kept to a minimum outside the customary time and destinations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Veblen, Thornstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography*. New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. London: Harper Collins, 2010.

Wharton, Edith. *The Buccaneers*. Completed by Marion Mainwaring. New York: Penguin, 1993.

Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. London: Penguin, 2012.

Wharton, Edith. *The Reef*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

BDD-A29710 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:52 UTC)