

## CHAPTER III

### SOCIETY IN THE NOVEL

#### III.1. General View about Society in the Novel

In Mastering English Literature, Richard Gill states that when we study a novel, we should pay attention to setting, because it can make a contribution to the book. A successful setting is one which is appropriate to the section of the novel in which it appears and also, possibly, to the book as a whole. The way an author handles the setting includes questions about the manifestation of mood and emotions, situation and the personality of the characters and also the manifestation of the theme of the book (106-07).

Elizabeth Langland, in her book Society in the Novel stated that we can not make a generalization in defining society, but must define it novel by novel. Sometimes the word *society* refers merely to high or fashionable class, or in a wider sense it refers not only peoples and their classes but also their customs, conventions, beliefs and values, their institutions--legal, religious, and cultural--and their physical environment. Society remains potentially everything we have seen it to be norms,

conventions, codes, background, places, people, institutions; but its particular manifestation in a novel will be dictated by its role within the work. How a writer uses society depends both on the relationship it has to his characters and on the overall role it plays in a developing action (6-7).

It is further stated that a writer may include social details and beliefs that are not essential to a particular novel's ends, because of the fact that he is a member of society. *Historical society* is society as a work by virtue of the novelist's own social existence, his own investment in certain social issues, and *fictional society* is the society that has some extrinsic inclusions which are created and included by a novelist in achieving certain artistic ends (Langland 20). In the novel The Age of Innocence, we can find these two aspects of the society in the novel, historical and fictional. The historical aspect can be found mostly from Edith Wharton's description about the physical setting, for instance the way people dressed, the buildings and the detail ornament inside, and also from the artifacts used by the people. Moreover, the historical aspect can also be seen from the society's conventions and the appearance of social stratification and the influence of the upper class to the lower class. The description about these things can show

us about Edith Wharton's mastery and careful examination in creating a complete unity about New York society in 1870s and all of its aspects.

The fictional aspect of the novel can be found from the character and his conflicts, in this novel represented through Newland Archer's character and conflicts. The conflicts occur because Newland has his own values and enough knowledge which enable him to see other possibilities in life other than the determined old norms and convictions which bind people in the society tightly. Besides, Elizabeth Langland has explained in Society in the Novel that when critics discuss novels of which the society is depicted as inevitably destructive of human possibility, as the way Edith Wharton has depicted society in The Age of Innocence, they find they are not reliable social documents. The constitution of the society, once a work is started, is largely dictated by formal conditions of the evolving work itself. In The Age of Innocence, the historical and fictional aspects are perfectly mixed together so that they can build such interesting story.

Elizabeth Langland also states that society in the novel is an idea (22). Based on this statement, it will be useless to judge this novel from historical point of view. Although the society that Edith Wharton has created can be said as a historical society, but there is not any

importance to explore the relevance of the given description in the story and the historical facts. Even if the description is true, it does not give any contribution to the story. However, it is understandable that the society she put in the novel is the society that she knew well, in where she lived, that was New York society during her time.

### III.2. Society in The Age of Innocence

The Encyclopedia Americana volume I, gives some description about the story in The Age of Innocence: "The theme of the novel deals with a clash of values and loyalties wholly within the small circle of fashionable New York society during the 1870s, in the course of which a genuine love relationship, based upon compatibility of intelligence and taste, is sacrificed to the conventional code of the time and locality. The social insecurities of marital separation and divorce are important elements beneath the surface of the action" (235).

From the very beginning of the story, the society in which Newland Archer lives is described to have so detailed and strict control over its member, even includes their appearance and artifacts to be used:

...such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part

his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole (3).

By using the word "duty" the author emphasizes the force of the society to its member to obey the customs and the added information between brackets "preferably a gardenia" gives the impression how detailed the custom is applied in the society. In such society, it seems that each of its member doesn't have his own will (even to choose what flower to be used in the buttonhole).

The author created the society to be men's world, which is so decided and homogeneous about their appearance as one criteria of gentility in old New York. From this, the author has presented a kind of society which regards a man based on his appearance. The group of men which fulfill such criteria of gentility, then have strong influence towards their surroundings to decide or create doctrine called moral:

since he knew it was that of all the carefully-brushed, white-waistcoated, buttonhole-flowered gentlemen who succeeded each other in the club box, exchange friendly greetings with him, and turned their opera glasses critically on the circle of ladies who were the product of the system...and the habit of masculine solidarity

made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral (6).

From the quotation above we can also get the inner qualities of those men that "turned their opera glasses critically on the circle of ladies who were the product of the system" which means that instead of really enjoying the opera, their main attention is only to find and attract young ladies present at the opera. From the phrase "ladies who were the product of the system", we can also get the information that in this kind of society, women are only viewed as objects, so that their existence as individuals, who may have different personality from one another, who may have different quality from one another, who may have different wants and needs from one another, or in short their existence as human, is ignored by group of people, which have no more qualities than just human like themselves, but regard themselves as the authorized group to make such doctrine which are called (and believed as) moral.

Among other things, old New York's opinion about divorce is the strictest one, which seems to us now to be unreasonable. From Ellen's statement: "I'm a Protestant - our church does not forbid divorce in such cases", it is clearly described by Edith Wharton that New York people at that time regard social customs even more respectfully

than their religion's teaching. Actually, neither religion nor the law forbid divorce. The only thing that forbid it, is the old custom that seems still bind people tightly. We can see this from Newland's statement:

'Our ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favours divorce - our social customs don't' (71).

For the society, divorce is a shameful incident, especially for women; no matter what the reason is and no matter that the wife is innocent, the society will still blame her. In this novel, Ellen Olenska, May Welland's unhappy cousin, has to bear the prejudice and unfair judgment from the society, although from the rumors people know that this woman is just the victim of an unhappy marriage. No matter that her husband is definitely a real villain and keeps her practically a prisoner, as noticed by Newland Archer, the society will still judge her unpleasantly. Moreover, it is the custom of the society that a divorced woman must be expelled from social relationship. In this story, Ellen Olenska's family doesn't expel her, but rather they give her their support, even they take her in public, such as the opera. This fact seems odd to the society, even to Newland Archer:

Archer entirely approved of family solidarity ... but to receive Countess Olenska in the family circle was a different thing from producing her in public, at the Opera at all places, and in the very box with the young girl whose engagement to him, Newland Archer, was to be announced within a few weeks (8).

Society in The Age of Innocence is a kind of a close society which still maintains so strong kinship that everyone is not judged individually, but the family's name will be included in every affair. For example if one member of a family does something improper, it will defile the whole family's reputation. In other words, if one member of a family does something wrong, the effect will have to be borne by the whole family. This is why Ellen gives up her idea to get divorced, because she wants to spare her family and also Newland's from notoriety which will be caused by her divorce. This can be seen from Ellen's explanation to Newland Archer about why she gives up her idea to get divorced:

'Isn't it you who made give up divorcing ... and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal? And because my family was going to be your family - for May's sake and for yours - I did what you told me, what you proved to me that I ought to do ...' (108).



Although Ellen's family gave her their support to be back to New York society, but in the case of divorce, they do not have different opinion with the society's. They, too, still disapproved about the idea. Even Ellen's grandmother, Mrs. Mingott, although in one way or another she is rather controversial; she states her disapproval by exclaiming:

'Silly goose! I told her myself what nonsense it was. Wanting to pass herself off as Ellen Mingott and an old maid, when she has the luck to be a married woman and a Countess!' (75).

From the quotation above we can draw a conclusion that the society, in this case represented by Mrs. Mingott's opinion, that their consideration to judge divorce to be a disagreeable action is only based on the status. For them, it is simply a *silly* thing to be an old maid, without considering another possibility that sometimes it is much better to be an old maid than to be a nobleman's wife but find no happiness in life. Although we all know that happiness could not be found in the status one possesses; no matter how rich and powerful he is, his possession and power can't buy happiness. In this case, it is proved by Ellen Olenska's experienced. Although she has the status as a countess and used to live in luxuries and excitements, but she has learned that these all could not

alter the misery caused by her husband's behaviour and could not bring happiness for her.

When Newland has to talk to Ellen to do the obligation the family counts on him: to make her give up her idea to get divorced (eventhough it is against his heart and willingness), he admits to Ellen that for the society they live in, the individual is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest. People cling to any convention that keeps the family together, to protects the children if there are any (72). Actually Ellen's family do not only disagree, but also they force Ellen to return to her husband. When she definitely refused to go back to her husband, they "punish" her by reducing her allowance although they know that by refusing to return to her husband consequently she has to give up the money settled on her when she married.

For the society, freedom to be one's own personality and to gain happiness, seems to be an exclusive possession of men, and it is described that for most women, they don't even think or want to have such freedom like those of men's. This thought comes passing through Newland's mind one night after he, his mother, his sister and Mr. Silleron Jackson had dinner together in his house:

'Women should be free - as free as we are',  
struck to the root of a problem that it was

agreed in his world to regard as nonexistent. 'Nice' women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant,... (28).

For Newland Archer, marriage in such society will be like: "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (29). Apparently Newland draws this opinion from his examination about the custom of the society which considers an individual as an object who must bow to its convention, regardless of the fact that each individual has his own personality and necessities. For instance, for the people May Welland suits their ideal about how a woman should be. She is described as a beautiful girl who belongs to a family with respectable social status and has perfect manners; which on the eyes of the people she will be a perfect bride for Newland. But Newland believes that the most important thing to judge an individual, especially the one to be his bride, is her true personality. It is more respectable to be one's self, to be brave enough to express honest opinion based on experience and freedom of judgment, which for the society in where Newland lives is not allowed to be possessed by women. Through May Welland's character, Edith Wharton has made a clear example of the society which has destructive power of human possibilities, in this case possibilities

of self-seeking and self-determination. Even if May is given as much freedom as men have, she wouldn't know how to use that freedom. This fact is not only May's, because she, and all women in this time are only a continuing generation of what has been applied for generations, like described in this following passage:

It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? (53).

The passage above clearly explains why May become the way she is. She has been taught not to ask anything which her ancestress did not have and ask for, or even think about. This matter has been applied for generations, so that May's character is not particularly hers but it is a general characteristic of most women in New York society at that time.

Beneath the surface that looks peaceful, actually there are many scandals happen; for instance secret love-affairs. Newland Archer himself once experiences a secret love affair with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth before he gets married. Newland's secret love affair may not be the only one happens, because we are told by Edith Wharton

that "the affair, in short, had been of the kind that most of the young men of his age had been through ..." (62).

The fact that there are many scandals happen beneath the surface which looks peaceful by people which looks perfectly mannered clearly shows the hypocrisy of the society. They are hypocrites because they seems to fear of scandals, but actually they also do improper things secretly. The hypocrisy can also be seen from their rejection to the idea of divorce. From Newland Archer's exclamation: "I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury a woman of her (Ellen's) age if her husband prefers to live with harlots" (27), we are shown that for the people it would be better to maintain a broken marriage and do a secret affair than to get a divorce so that it is possible for one to *properly* look for happiness. In Ellen Olenska's case, although she is decidedly to be improper, but actually most of the men secretly pay attention and are interested in her. This is described by Edith Wharton in this following passage:

She (Ellen Olenska) had Beaufort at her feet, Mr van der Luyden hovering above her like a protecting deity, and any number of candidates (Lawrence Lefferts among them) waiting their opportunity in the middle distance (77).

All of Newland Archer's recognition about New York society, has made him finds some dissatisfactions regarding its so strict and old-fashioned norms and traditions that no longer based on logic, but still has so strong influence on its member. These dissatisfactions have caused conflicts in him because besides he is a member of the society, who is expected to apply its value and conventions, he has his own value and opinion based on his own experience and imagination, which sometimes does not run along together with the society's norms and traditions. These inner conflicts of Newland Archer are to be analyzed in chapter IV.

