

CHAPTER IV
NEWLAND ARCHER'S CHARACTER AND THE INFLUENCE OF
THE SOCIETY ON HIM

IV.1. Newland Archer's Character

Newland Archer's character is different from other characters in the novel because of his rich and deep characterization, by means of Edith Wharton's complete description about him from the outside, about his speech and thoughts and also clearly reveal about his feelings and needs. He is the only character whose thoughts, feelings and innermost feelings are shown to the readers. Besides, he experiences development and change as the story goes on, so that he often surprises the readers by his actions.

From the very beginning, the readers can feel that in certain ways Newland Archer is different from other members of the society. The difference between Newland Archer and the society in which he lives, is presented to be "in matters of intellectual and artistic", and Newland Archer feels himself superior for these matters because he has "probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world than any other man" (6). However, Newland does not mind to obey society's

conventions. Unfortunately this is not because of reason, but just because the conventions have become a habit to be applied, which are no longer important to be questioned. This is clearly shown from this passage:

... and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral. He (Newland Archer) instinctively felt that in this respect it would be troublesome--and also rather bad form--to strike out for himself (6).

From the quotation above, especially from the phrase "*the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine...*", it is clear how Edith Wharton described the influence of the society on Newland Archer; but the next phrase gives us an explanation that it is actually not merely *habit*. In some instance, the habit has a forceful power to make him accept it; or else, it can make some kind of trouble for him.

Despite the difference and his superior feeling, Newland Archer still considers the conventions of the society to be natural. In fact, not only that he can accept his society and all its conventions to be natural, but also he feels fortunate to be a New Yorker. This can be seen from the phrase:

And, in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind (21).

At the beginning of the story Newland Archer is only a silent critical observer of the society. He never intends to change or fight against New York society although he already knows about its narrowness and hypocrisy. The difference that Newland has from the society, is then sharpened by the arrival of the Countess Olenska, whose role in the story is as the comparison from the society, especially to be contrasted with May Welland's character. Inspired by Ellen's character; Newland, whose most character is rich in initiatives and adventurous, then begins to experience change and development in his character. Newland, who at first prefers to keep silent, then encourages to speak up for what he thinks, and make critical statements about the society. For instance, he explicitly utters his opinion about Ellen Olenska's case at the night he has dinner together with his mother, his sister and Mr. Sillerton Jackson, one of the most influencing person of the society:

Newland reddened. 'Living together? Why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she

hadn't? I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots.'

He stopped and turned away angrily to light his cigar. 'Women ought to be free - as free as we are,'... (27).

When he openly states that he hopes Ellen Olenska will ask her husband for a divorce, considering her husband's bad treatment to her; his statement has created such effect which is described by Edith Wharton as : "like a bombshell in the pure and tranquil atmosphere of the Archer dining-room" (26). From this phrase we can get to know how much Newland can surprise people. They get surprised because of his uncommon statement and it can be also because he had never acted that way before.

Newland is very upset to the way people talk about Ellen. He gets the impression that whatever she does, it will be judged bad by the society. It seems to him that nobody in the society--except Ellen's family and himself--tries to understand her, get pity on her and view her as a victim of a broken marriage. Everything that has been done by Ellen will always be considered improper by the people.

From the passage above we can get to know something about Newland Archer's mental quality. In contrast with

the society's provincialism, he is tolerance and reasonable. He is tolerance because he seems to understand that no matter what has been done by Ellen Olenska, he believes that it is her effort to seek her own happiness; and he is reasonable because he believes that no woman should be treated badly, even by her own husband. If he does, she should not just keep silent and let her husband *bury her alive*. Newland directly point and call the society as hypocrite, which prefers to let a woman suffer from her husband's bad treatment than to give her freedom for her own happiness. For Newland, freedom belongs not only to men, but also to women as well.

It is made clear by Edith Wharton that what Newland wants from a woman, especially the one to be his wife is a true companionship based on knowledge and experience, so that he can share things he really cares for with her. Newland's wish to have a wife who has a broad mind content with initiative and experience can be seen from his thought:

Ah, no, he did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience! (93).

Beside the uncomfortable feeling that he begins to feel about the society, Newland is forced to do things

that the society expects although it may contradict with his own will. In the case of Ellen's idea to get divorced, actually Newland agrees with this idea. On the contrary, the family, and the society in general, still considers that divorce is an improper thing. Newland can not escape from the obligation to persuade Ellen to give up her idea, because people know that he is the only one who can do that, for Ellen has made it clear that Newland is the one Ellen can really pay respect.

IV.1.1. Newland Archer's View about May Welland

The process of taking a real good look to the society that seems to him to be natural before, includes his re-examining his relationship with May Welland. Newland Archer is described to be: "sincerely but placidly in love" (29). May Welland can be said as a perfect product of the society because everything she says, does and possesses never draw controversy to the society's conventions. For Newland, May's inner quality which he defined as "frankness and innocence" were only an artificial product, which has been "cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses". This thought seems to be Newland's reason to think her as a "terrifying product of the social system".

Although May is society's ideal figure, but Newland examines her more critically, because he is the one who will give and bind his life to her in a marriage. May's behaviour may be perfect, but for a wife Newland needs much more than just perfect behaviour. After he gave a deep thought about his relationship with May Welland, Newland realizes that actually he doesn't know anything about her true personality. For Newland, she is no more than just a product of the society. Despite all the perfectness that she possesses, May is: "the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything" (28). This is why Newland Archer is not so sure about his marriage anymore. When he reviews his friends' marriages, he makes a conclusion that a marriage will need "the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment," which unfortunately, "she has been carefully trained not to possess" (29).

In short, what Newland wants from a girl to be his wife is her true personality, her courage to become what she really is, to speak for herself. He wants her to be a real companion, which means she has to be able to give honest opinion and commentaries, or even criticism, for everything he says and does on the things he really cares for.

In the case of May Welland, it seems that Newland

has been desperate to change her, to *open her eyes* to become her own personality. Beside all the conventionalities Newland finds in May, May herself seems not to want to broaden her personality by paying any attention to the new things or looking for new experiences. It seems that May doesn't have idea and desire of her own than what has been set by society's norm and custom. For instance, when Newland uttered his desire to travel with her after their marriage, she made an answer that disappointed him. We can see this from this following passage:

His heart sank, for he saw that he was saying all the things that young men in the same situation were expected to say, and that she was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make even to the point of calling him original (53).

So desperate Newland is, that he begins to think that even if May is given as much freedom as himself, or in general as men have, she would still not know what to do with that freedom. In this novel Edith Wharton described this matter by using so cynical comparison:

He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which

has ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness? (53).

Despite all his doubt to marry May, the situation has made it impossible for him to cancel his marriage. All his fears come true, his dissatisfaction to May continues after their marriage. On the one hand he realizes that she has fulfilled what he expects: "she had represented peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an unescapable duty" (131). May can satisfy reasonable reasons to be chosen for a wife. May has a good social reputation, so that it can give a contribution on Newland's social life. Newland realizes it, so that he does not blame May for his uncomfortable feeling.

From the phrase "unescapable duty" the writer observed that Newland is so in despair that for him now, his marriage is only the way to attain an obligation as a decent member of New York Society. On the other hand he feels that his life will be in monotony, like his term: "a voyage on uncharted seas" (28).

May Welland's character in the story is to represent the old conventionalities of the society. Her character is static, never experiences change and development.

IV.1.2. Newland Archer's View about Ellen Olenska

Although Ellen Olenska is different from people in the society, but actually her character is not complex. Ellen often surprises people but she never surprises the readers, because from the very beginning the readers are told about her difference, and also about the reasons that make her the way she is. Her character is static: if in the beginning of the story Ellen is unconventional, she remains that way until the end of the story. Her role in the story is as a representative of unconventionalities which is sharply contrasted with May Welland's character.

Newland Archer starts to feel uncomfortable with the society in the way the society has judged, thought and and talked bad about Ellen Olenska. Although he can accept most of the norms that is applied in the society, but the way Ellen has bent and ignored them has made him brave enough to say and do what he thinks right, no matter that it will seem harsh and disobeying the old narrow conventions that the society believes. This matter has been described by Edith Wharton through this following passage:

The case of the Countess Olenska had stirred up old settled convictions and set them drifting dangerously through his mind (28).

Actually Ellen does not intentionally ignore old New

York conventions, but rather it is because she doesn't know about them. As a matter of fact, Ellen realizes that she is different from the society, and she does not enjoy this. Ellen openly says this matter to Newland Archer: "If you knew how I hate to be different!" (69). Although Ellen says that she wants to become like everybody else in the society, but she still needs to question about the importance of the society's conventions. This matter can be seen from this passage:

'I felt there was no one as kind as you; no one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard and - unnecessary (110).

The passage above can give an illustration that instead of blindly accept the conventions, Ellen needs reasons to obey them. It seems that she believes in the possibilities in choosing what to be accepted and what not to.

Newland's sympathy to Ellen Olenska starts when he had a chance to make a conversation with her; despite the prejudice, negative judgement, and rumors about her spread in the society, on the contrary she views New York as heaven. This is why, despite whatever society has judged her, Newland admires her, and is willing to defend Ellen from the society's unfair judgement, and then as the

story goes on, he starts to be in love with her. For Newland, Ellen can satisfy his intelligence and taste about what kind of a woman he wants to be his wife. Ellen can give a true companionship, because there are things that Ellen and Newland have in common. This can be seen from May's letter to Newland, to ask him to accompany Ellen during May's family trip to St Augustine:

... And I (May Welland) can quite see that New York must seem dull to her (Ellen Olenska), though the family won't admit it ... Granny can't understand her wanting anything but lots of dinners and clothes but I can see that you're (Newland Archer) almost the only person in New York who can talk to her about what she really cares for" (77).

In contrast with what Newland feels about May, he pays respect and admires Ellen for she has spirit to stand and to speak for herself. No matter that she is considered disagreeable about her appearance, attitude and interests by the old society's tradition, but one thing she possesses that it seems to be typically hers, to be compared by most women belong to New York society, is her independence and freedom. Newland understands that to live among his people means that Ellen has to lose all that she really cares for, because they could not be found in New

York society.

Her different values from the society's, are also shown from her insisted to get divorced from her husband, although if she does, it means that she has to lose all the luxuries she has used to live in. But Ellen does not care about these all because she prefers to have her freedom. Ellen explicitly states this matter on the occasion she talked about her desire to get a divorce from his husband with Newland: "'But my freedom - is that nothing?'" (72).

Actually, at first Newland just gets pity to Ellen Olenska, but then he finds that his attention to her is more than just pity and respect. Newland knows that although from the outside Ellen she looks tough, but actually she is lonely and unhappy. Then, this becomes one of Newland Archer's inner conflict; because his feeling to Ellen gradually grows more and more, until eventually he realizes that he falls in love with her. Too bad, Newland realizes this feeling after he announced her engagement to May Welland, Ellen Olenska's own cousin.

IV.2. The Relation between Newland Archer and the Society

To get to know better about the relation between society and the character, as has been stated in the introduction, sociological approach will be used to

support the analysis, especially to explain the possible effects from the relation between society and its member, in this case represented by Newland Archer.

In From Man to Society, there is an idea concerning human nature which states that: "The whole of man's behavior is determined by the principles of cause and effect. In this view man never acts; he reacts. He does not create; rather, he is created by his society" (Acuff, Allen, and Taylor 56). Based on this theory, we can see that this theory suits Newland Archer's experience. What has happened to him, merely is his reaction against society, which he considers to be unfair. Newland was an obedient member of the society before, until Ellen Olenska comes and then, with all that happens to her and her strong personality to face all of her problems, opens Newland eyes to have a real look to the society.

The theory above is supported by Elizabeth Langland's statement in her book Society in the Novel which says that characters reveal their perspectives and values through action, speech and thought; but they need a medium in which to act and reflect. Although not always, but often that medium, is the society to which they respond and in which they exist whose set of values distinct from that of the characters.

His decision to announce his engagement to May

sooner than his plan, is also as his reaction to protect May from every possible difficulties which may be brought by her cousin:

Suddenly Newland Archer felt himself impelled to decisive action. The desire to be the first man to enter Mrs. Mingott's box, to proclaim to the waiting world his engagement to May Welland, and to see her through whatever difficulties her cousin's anomalous situation might involve her in;... (11).

The close relation between society and individuals, are represented by New York society in general and specifically by Newland Archer, May Welland and Ellen Olenska. The story perfectly suits the theory about the relation between society and individuals. Newland Archer represents a character who is in conflict with the society; Ellen Olenska represents the second possibility of the relationship: the potential negative effects of society are not fully realized in the characters' lives; the third possibility: society as unavoidably destructive of human possibility is represented by most New York society in general and specifically by May Welland. Unfortunately the society that has been created by Edith Wharton in this novel doesn't have the fourth possibility: society which is flexible enough to provide the full

realization of individual possibility, so that the relationship between character and society may be one basic harmony. In the story, everyone actually is the victim of the society, no one lives in harmony because of society's so strict and old-fashioned norms and convictions. The story of The Age of Innocence represents the formal role that society plays: antagonist to individual protagonists. New York society in this novel is antagonist to the characters' growth and self-realization, which is clearly represented through May Welland's character.

In The Age of Innocence we can see the description of values and norms that is applied in New York Society created by Edith Wharton. Materialism seems to be the dominant value of the society, which is in contrast with the intellectualism which is believed by Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. The intellectualism value here, can be seen from Newland's dissatisfaction to the unreasonable old conventions but still applied so strictly among the people. Although Newland can not do anything to replace those old conventions, but at least he realizes that they are unreasonable. He doesn't blindly accept and apply those unreasonabilities in his life although on the other hand he can not escape them. The description about his character that he has "probably read more, thought more and

even seen a good deal more of the world" clearly shows his intellectualism value. Moreover, this can also be seen from his interest in literature, which for most people is considered to be useless.

The intellectualism value can be seen even more clearly in Ellen Olenska's character. Among other things, her choice to gain her own happiness although she has to divorce from her husband so that consequently she has to give up her status as a countess and her family allowance; and also her interest in literature are the strongest proofs of her value which contradicts with the society's values.

The theory states in From Man to Society: Introductory Sociology says that value conflicts arise if the individual adopts values apposed to the primary values of his social group or if he rejects the values of the group and the group influence. Furthermore, the theory states that: "the assertion of one value often limits and contradicts the assertion of another, either between different groups of society, or within an individual" (111), can explain why different values that people believe can cause conflict between them. In the story, Edith Wharton has created value conflicts in Newland Archer's character. Although Newland and Ellen Olenska have different values from the society's; but we can see

that the value conflicts arise in Newland even more than in Ellen. Furthermore the theory says that: "They must allocate times of assertion and times of restraint, and both must accept limitations on the application of their basic values" (111). But in the story it seems that there isn't any possibilities for an individual to have different values, because the different values are not only limited but they are rejected. It is true that: "Each value must be limited in systematic relationships with many other values. The necessity for temporizing leads to a sense of inadequacy and insufficiency, because no values can ever be fully satisfied in a real-life social system" (111). But in Newland's case there isn't any "systematic relationships" between his values and the society's, so we can understand that "inadequacy and insufficiency" that he feels appears so strong. It is much better to have values which are not fully satisfied than to have them impossible to be satisfied.

In The Age of Innocence we find a clear description about contrast between "group values" and "the personal values of the individual". Group values are imposed as restraints on group members, and represent the continuing requirements of society. The provision of stability and security for the group may imperil the stability and survival of the individual (Acuff, Allen, and Taylor

111).

Although Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska believe in the same value, but it is more interesting to analyze how this value can arise in Newland Archer. It is a small wonder that Ellen Olenska has a different value, considering that she had left New York when she was only eighteen years old and had been taken care of by her aunt, Medora Manson, which is also viewed to be different by the society. Moreover, she has lived in a different culture, in this case Europe, for many years. But Newland, he has never lived abroad (if he has been abroad, it is only for a short journey), he has been arisen by a decent family and used to accept the society's conventions. This matter is similar with Andre Hardjana's description about Indonesian literature in 1920s which says that at that time there was a tendency for young people to question and compare the old conventions with the new social system that they learned in school. For those young people, besides society's custom they had new possible alternatives in their life (71). In The Age of Innocence the young people who know other possibilities other than society's old custom and convictions is represented by Newland Archer.

In From Man to Society: Introductory Sociology there is an explanation about socialization process, which says

that "socialization is a form of adaptation, which is a dominating feature in early life, but which becomes intermittent and less a matter of direct concern in adulthood" (84). This theory seems to contradict with the condition of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska: both of them had spent their childhood and grew up in New York, but in fact they are different with most people in the society. This matter is explained by further theory:

It is apparent that the socialization experienced in childhood cannot prepare him for all the roles he will be expected to fulfill in later years.... Changes in the demands upon them (people in society) arise from their mobility, both geographic and social, and from the customs of their society which may vary during their life time (84).

From the above theory, we can find an explanation regarding both Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska's difference with the society. Although both of them had grown up in New York but the experiences during their life time play the most determining role in shaping their personality. Newland's "read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world than any other man" is a clear explanation about the way he is. People cannot say that he is unsocialized because despite his being

different, on the other hand he is perfectly mannered. In Ellen Olenska's case, her experience in living abroad for so many years so that she has already used to the new custom explains the cause of her being different. Moreover, the fact that she had left New York when she was only a teenager, the period when somebody is still in the process of growing up, can answer the question why the difference appears even stronger in her than in Newland. As a matter of fact this is why she, although not on purposedly, can influence Newland's behaviour. This matter is supported by the theory which says: "The influence of others is the basic force of socialization for each individual" (Acuff, Allen and Taylor 85). Moreover, it is stated in the book:

The one who is being socialized is not a passive agent. He is constantly sifting, choosing and discarding that which is presented to him for acceptance (85).

The theory above can explain the conflicts experienced by Newland Archer. On the one hand he has used to accept the old conventional norms of the society, but he doesn't accept it passively. He can still look for the possibility in choosing which to be accepted and which is unnecessary and unreasonable. From the very beginning of the story Newland has already had this quality. He gets a

wider perspective from some new things he finds in Ellen Olenska, who is a sharp comparison with people in the society, which is perfectly represented by May Welland. The theory above can also explain why Newland and May have different perspective in seeing the society's old conventions. May is not as active as Newland in the socialization. She always regards that what has been settled by the society is the only thing to be followed, no other choices, no other possibilities. She seems never to question whether the conventional norms are necessary or not, reasonable or not. This difference between Newland and May is caused by the sexism applied in the society. Lucky for Newland, he lives in a *men's world* that makes him possible to have wider possibilities than May, who belongs to the opposite gender.

It is so ironic to say that Newland is lucky for having wider possibilities than May, because in the end he has to learn that the more possibilities he has, the more the society will limit them. Although May is also a victim of the society just like Newland, but she doesn't suffer from having values conflicts which is experienced by Newland Archer. May doesn't suffer from any contradictions, because she has nothing to be contradicted. She wholly accepts the old conventions that have been settled by the society; there aren't any other

possibilities. On the other hand, Newland that has possibilities in seeing a wider world to broaden his knowledge and experience has to suffer even more because of the impossibilities of assertion to some new values that he has got from his experience.

IV.3. Newland Archer's Inner Conflicts

It is interesting to analyze why Edith Wharton has parted the novel into two sections. The first section tells about Newland's life before his marriage, and the second part tells about his life after his marriage. The first section of the novel ends just at the climax of the story, at the very moment he has to make up his mind, whether to choose May Welland so that his marriage will be socially approved and he fulfills his obligation as a decent member of society; or to choose Ellen Olenska, a woman who is decidedly disagreeable by the society, but to whom he is really in love. It should have been possible for Edith Wharton to end the story here and let the readers to figure out the end of the story by themselves, based on their own values and convictions. But Edith Wharton had chosen to continue the story and made the decision for Newland and for the readers as well. Newland was made to choose May Welland.

It seems that the second section of the novel was

made to make an even clearer descriptions that Newland is a victim of society, by emphasizing on Newland Archer's suffering. His suffering begins right at his wedding ceremony:

... all these sights, sounds and sensations, so familiar in themselves, so unutterably strange and meaningless in his new relation to them, were confusedly mingled in his brain (117).

From the passage above, we are told about Newland's feelings. Even at his own wedding ceremony, he does not fully realize about what is going on. He is there, but not his mind. It seems that everything goes beyond his consciousness.

For Newland it seems that the incompatibility between him and May goes more and more so that he himself is beginning to fear his tendency to dwell on the things he dislikes in her" (128). But Newland tries to comfort himself by thinking that "the first six months are always the most difficult in marriage. He ensures himself that the compatibility may only occur in six months, the period when they are still in the process of getting to know each other better. But on the other hand, he also feels that May's pressure has been "bearing on the very angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep (129).

On the one hand he cannot say that his choice is a

mistake, because he realizes that May has fulfilled all that he has expected:

It was undoubtedly gratifying to be the husband of one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York, especially she was also one of the sweetest-tempered and most reasonable of wives; and Archer had never been insensible to such advantages (131).

But on the other hand the remembrance of Ellen is still so strong in his mind, that whenever Newland hears the two syllable (Ellen) "all his carefully built-up world would tumble about him like a house of cards" (118).

After months of his marriage, nothing seems to change; either May's personality or his love and desire to Ellen Olenska. For Newland now, he has lost the spirit of life. He is alive, but his life means nothing to him:

'Catch my death!' he echoed; and he felt like adding: 'But I've caught it already. I *am* dead - I've been dead for months and months.'

There is time when Newland gets so frustrated that he ever once wishes May dead, so that he can be free:

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! ... He simply felt that chance

had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling (187).

From those passages above, we are shown how much Newland has suffered, so that he now can think of a rude thing that seems not possible for a man like him to possess, because he had never been rude before. We can see that Newland has changed, from a fully spirited young man who once thank Heaven for his opportunity to have May for himself, to a half-dead man who even wishes his wife to die.

Newland's life after his marriage, his suffering from his remembrance about Ellen and from his dissatisfaction to the society is clearly shown from this following passage:

He had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she (Ellen Olenska) throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities ... Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room (166).

If in the end Newland has to give up his values and desire to satisfy the old conventionalities of the society, it can be explained by sociology theory. The illustration given in From Man to Society: Introductory Sociology can explain this matter:

No child can escape his community. He may not like his parents, or his neighbors or the ways of the world. He may groan under the process of living and wish he were dead. But he goes on living in the community. The life of the community flows about him, foul or pure: he swims in it, drinks it, goes to sleep in it and wakes each new day to find it still about him: it nourishes him or starves him, or poisons him: it gives him the substance of life. And in the long run it takes its toll of him and all he is (61).

From the sociology theory above we can conclude that Newland has experienced exactly like what the theory says. The old conventionalities applied in the society has been rooted in him, without he realizes it. His knowledge and experience has made him reject the unreasonable old conventions, but the custom that has been planted in him from his socialization has made him accept the conventions without questions. In Newland's case the influence of the

society has played more dominant role in his character. Society in The Age of Innocence has succeeded in taking all of Newland, so that he, in the end of the story, becomes a solid product of the society.

