



# ELS-JISH

ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies on Humanities

Volume 2 Issue 1, 2019

ISSN (print) : 2621-0843

ISSN (online) : 2621-0835

Homepage : <http://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/jish>

## Marriage in The Late of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reflected in The Age of Innocence

Hasnani <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [hasnani.helmy@gmail.com](mailto:hasnani.helmy@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The Age of Innocence presents marriage woman in sociocultural background of upper-middle class woman in the late of 19th century. This research aimed to describe marriage in the late of 19th century reflected in The Age of Innocence. The researcher used qualitative method. The data were analyzed by using the Sociological theory in order to describe marriage in the novel. The sociological theory is used to analyse the sociological background of marriage woman at that time. The results of the research shows marriage in the late of 19th century that describe in two parts; woman as fiancée and woman as a wife. The Age of Innocence represent the marriage women are still patriarchy and in the domestic sphere*

**Keywords:** Marriage, Sociological Approach, Woman.

**How to cite:** Hasnani. (2019). Marriage in The Late of 19th Century Reflected in The Age of Innocence. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2 (1), 14-23.

### 1. Introduction

Upper middle class of American women called the "new woman". In the last quarter of the 19th century, women began joining social organizations. The women tried to join to public sphere, and had greater opportunities for education and community involvement, either works or campaigns for social change such as the struggle for suffrage, campaign for a better life and child care, and issues relating to their rights of reproduction. Women were trying to find ways to extend their life.

At the end of the nineteenth century, educated women increased and more women attended to high school, women college attendance also began to increase at the turn of the century. They realized that political decisions affected their daily lives. When passed in 1920, the nineteenth amendment gave women the right to vote. Surprisingly, some women didn't want to the vote. According to Benner in his article *A New Women Emerges* states that A widespread attitude was that women's roles and men's roles did not overlap. This idea of "separate spheres" held that women should concern themselves with home, children, and religion, while men took care of business and politics (Benner, 2004: 1).

In Eastern area of the United States particularly New York 1870, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was called the Gilded Age. At the time, the wave of new-moneyed multimillionaires poured into New York followed by others waves during the second

<sup>1</sup> Mega Rezky University, Indonesia

industrial Revolution, in which accumulated extraordinary wealth through the commercialism, and stocks technological advances.

As one of the consequences of the new phenomena, the population in New York is divided into several social strata including the rich people. New York high society was a private, exclusive organization, used space to maintain society's exclusivity and to distinguish themselves from outsiders, particularly the social climbers that wanted to enter into society. Women high class focused on their class in society. In this period, many of authors also produce great literary work, Edith Wharton, one of the authors present literary work *The Age of Innocence* that related to social condition at the time. The researcher focuses in the eastern area; New York society tended to seclude themselves into a particular group called the high society as the setting of Edith Wharton's novel.

Edith Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence* when she was in her late 50s. *The Age of Innocence* became the first novel written by a woman to win a Pulitzer and concentrates on the American, precisely on New York society. American society is mainly differentiated into three classes; upper, middle, and lower. Wharton concentrates on the upper middle class New York society whom has high social stratum and much money. Wharton shows how class controlled all aspects of life of Americans, as is also stated by Pessen that *The Age of Innocence* shows the conflict of transition before and after World War I, with a main theme being the right people, following the correct rule, and marrying into the acceptable families. The characters, interiors, clothing, manners, settings, and attitudes reflect with the era of 1870s of her childhood and young-adult life among the old rich of New York (Pessen, 1990: 273).

*The Age of Innocence* is more concerned about society itself, and portrays of being single women and different characters. Both women main characters in the novel; May Welland and Ellen Olenska are young. However, one of them, May Welland, is thought to be innocent and representing American ideal. The other one, Ellen Olenska, is experienced, gaining her experience through her marriage in Europe, her integration to American society seems to be impossible. Olenska is forced to leave the society, although, she feels in love there. *The Age of Innocence* presents marriage women in socio-cultural background of upper middle class women at the time.

### **Sociology of Literature**

The first social scientist who used the term of *Sociology* was a Frenchman, by the name of August Comte who lived from 1798-1857 (Doda, 2005: 3). As coined by Comte that Sociology combines two words. The first part is *socius* that may mean society, association, togetherness or companionship. The other word is *logos*, which means *to speak about or word*. The literal definition of Sociology is the word or the speaking about Society (Doda, 2005: 4). Before going any further, the clear definition of Sociology of literature is also showed by Swingwood in his book *The Sociology of Literature* said that Sociology is the essentially the scientific, objective study of man in society, the study of social institutions and of social processes; it seeks to answer the question of how society is possible, how it works, why it persist (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972: ii).

Based on some articles, the Sociologists agree that sociology is very essential to interpret literary work, sociology is strongly linked to society. Sociology of literature focuses on problem of human being. Literature and human's life influence each other, because literature talks about the struggle of human being from time to time. According to Laurenson and Swingewood (1971), there are three perspectives of sociology of literature:

the first is literary works as a mirror of age, so that literature becomes a reflection of a situation when literary work was written. The second is social situation of the writer; it deals with the social background of the author where he lives. The third is sociology of the readers; this is dealing with the readers in understanding and accepting a literary work (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972: 17-21).

### ***Women in Marriage***

According to Robert G, marriage is the union of a man and women who make a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other of the type that is naturally fulfilled by bearing and rearing children together (George, 2010: 1). While Christianity regards marriage as an obligatory process and a contract that could only expire by death. Marriage is attributed to the many basic social and personal functions it performs, such as procreation, regulation of sexual behavior, care of children and their education and socialization, economic production and consumption, and satisfaction of personal needs for social status, affection, and companionship.

Perkin Joan lists three reasons for marriage: the protection of children, the avoidance of the sin of fornication and the contribution to form a mutual society, so that both husband and wife help and comfort each other to live in prosperity (Joan, 1989: 20). Most “upper-class women married men of whom were approved their families and who were considered ‘suitable’ for them” (Joan, 1989: 20). Parents chose a partner for their daughters to ensure for them a good reputation and opportunity by being associated to families of high rank.

Marriage was not always issued from love of the partners: often financial matters or social status led them to marry. Women are shown in many different roles; as single, proposed to, married, widowed, and also as mothers. Remaining single was not differentiated, and girls were brought to the ‘marriage’ as soon as they reached marriageable age. Many of the characters are invented by the authors, but many of them portray either the author himself/herself or someone they knew or who was close to them. The researcher would like to depict the position of married women and of mothers, as they are described in the two chosen novels as fiancée and women as wife, and then compare them with reality or what happened in the era of the related time.

### ***Women in Social Life***

After America’s civil war (1861-1865), New York was acknowledged as “Great Good Place” (MacColl-Wallace, 1989: 15) because hundreds of newly wealthy oil and stockbroker barons came to New York City with one purpose, they wanted to become part of society. In the 1870s, New York high society consisted of small set of families collectively referred to as the “knickerbockers” whom usually use short pants (MacColl-Wallace, 1989: 7), Many of noble families from Netherlands were immigrating to New York in seventies century accumulating moderate fortunes in trade or through real estate investment.

The high class society of New York is divided into two parts; the old-money and the new-money people. Old money people, based on The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (online, accessed on 26 November 2014 ), is the inherited wealth of established upper-class families or a person, family, or lineage possessing inherited wealth. The term typically describes a class of the rich who have been able to maintain their wealth over multiple generations, which for historical reasons lack an officially

established aristocratic class. The American of upper east side is associated with old money. According to Goldberg that new-money people, Nouveau rich, is a term for people who made or earned their wealth on their own accord, they were not born into a wealthy family or grew up in wealthy culture (Goldberg, 2008: 1). Sometimes used disparagingly. The equivalent English term is the new rich or new money. Sociologically, *nouveau riche* describes the man or woman who previously had belonged to a lower social-class and economic stratum within that class; and that new-money which is upward social mobility or wealth allowed and provide a means for conspicuous consumption, purchase of goods and services which indicates membership in the upper class. The new-money which constitutes his or her wealth allowed upward social mobility and provided the means for conspicuous consumption, buys and services the expensive goods that signal membership of upper class.

Women New York High Society distinguished themselves by obeying codes of speech, body language, and dress that were the expressions of their cultural capitals. Women's dress, speech, and body language signified their social position; the length of a sleeve in the ballroom could signal that they were either 'in' or not 'in' society.

Although men high classes were expected to obey rules of dress when around their wives in the ballroom or opera house, they could excuse themselves from participating in social practices without compromising their identity or power. Their husband possessed economic capital and they possessed cultural capital. There were a few women who had inherited wealth from fathers, husbands, or from divorce settlements. Their husband might leave social responsibilities in the hands of wives to go off to their jobs or yachting, gambling and whoring.

## 2. Method

This research uses descriptive qualitative method. Descriptive qualitative method provides an accurate portrayal of characteristics of a particular individual, situation, or group. This research means of discovering new meaning, describing what exists, determining the frequency with which something occurs, and categorizing information.

In this study, the method is used to describe and to understand the position of women that reflected in the novel *The Age of Innocence*

### **Source of the Data**

Primary data; the source of data are *The Age of Innocence* of Edith Wharton's Novel, Harper Press, 465 pages, 1966. Secondary data; from other books, journal articles, internet and other sources that are related with this research.

### **Method of Collecting Data**

The method of collecting data that the researcher reads repeatedly the whole or part *The Age of Innocence* of Edith Wharton's novel. biography of the authors to understand the content of both novels and identify then analyze them. Collecting and studying some of the relevant theories to the theme of research. The research collects some data from books, journal articles, internet and other sources that are related with this research. Take notes and analyzes all the important quotations of the data accordance with the problem. In this research, the researcher will analyze the data by using sociological theory. Sociological theory analyzes the social cultural data in the novels.

### 3. Results

The researcher will describe the position of women in marriage; women as Fiancée and women as a wife.

#### ***Women as Fiancée***

Women as fiancée represent by May Welland because she is the only one in this position in *The Age of Innocence*. May is presented as adapting her mother behavior; by denying the existence of passion, even in her own relationship with Newland Archer. When she tries to be the perfect fiancée, May ironically seems boyish rather than feminine, because she is too innocent. When Archer kisses her for the second time she resists, and "he saw that she was disturbed, and shaken out of her cool boyish composure" (Wharton, 1920:120). Her beauty, combined with the portrayed boyish behavior, indicate that her strength in New York is directly related to her innocence. In the beginning of the novel, Newland Archer arrives fashionably late. He enters the club box of seats reserved for young, wealthy, important men like him. Archer gazes across the room in May. Just that afternoon, he and May had become engaged. Unlike Archer, May lacks romantic experience. As he proudly watches May watching the opera, he begins dreaming about their future together. Archer imagines that:

And he contemplated her own absorbed young face with a thrill of possessorship in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity (Wharton, 1966: 13)

Archer contemplates that he can guide the May Welland, Archer proud as a man who will introduce new things to his 'abysmal purity' fiancée. Archer adds more:

'We'll read Faust together . . . by the Italian lakes . . .' he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honeymoon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride (Wharton, 1966: 13).

As Archer's daydreams at the opera, he imagines a traditional type of marriage in which he will teach her fiancée in literature, art, and anything that will improve her fiancée knowledge. Archer will be a 'teacher' for May Welland. The next day when Archer visits Ellen, Archer looks at Ellen's room, he imagines the rest of his life with May in the house they will own:

The young man felt that his fate was sealed: for the rest of his life he would go up every evening between the cast-iron railings of that greenish-yellow doorstep, and pass through a Pompeian vestibule into a hall with a wainscoting of varnished yellow wood. But beyond that, his imagination could not travel (Wharton, 1966: 63).

Mrs. Welland has finally convinced the wavering May that a long engagement would be considered best in the eyes of society. Archer looks forward to having so much innocence and purity at his side, and after their engagement has been announced at Beaufort's ball, he thinks "What a new life it was going to be; with this whiteness, radiance, goodness at one's side! (Wharton, 1920: 24).

He knows that when they are married, he will have the responsibility to open May's eyes. The responsibility scares him: "What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open (her eyes), they could only look out blankly at blankness?" (Wharton, 19: 71). Upper-

middle-class women are comfortable with their position in society; they are just busy improving their social status, regardless of their position with men.

### **Women as Wife**

The position of women as wives is represented by some of the women characters in *The Age of Innocence*. Such as; May Welland, Ellen Olenska, Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Van der Luyden. May Welland is presented a very young woman. May is a 'product of the system', she is a product of old New York's society. She is always concerned to do the right thing in the eyes of society and as a wife and mother. Archer's impression of his intended wife goes back to the stereotype of the unformed 'virgin as an outline on a canvas', ready for her husband to fill the image with the color of experience to create her fully mature portrait.

Before their engagement, Archer meditates on the role as a husband that he would like to play in educating May "He did not in the least wish the future Newland Archer to be a simpleton. He meant her "...to develop a social tact and readiness of wit" (Wharton, 1920: 10). Because Archer shares the habits and expectations of social behavior within the narrow borders of Old New York society, he defines May according to that context's expectations about what a wife, housewife, and mother should be like. May has been thoroughly conditioned by her family and she behaves exactly as an upper-middle-class woman and wife should. Archer sits by himself in his study. He gazes at a photograph of May:

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; and once more it was borne in on him that marriage was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas (Wharton, 1966: 41)

May Welland do hope that she will get everything that she wants in a marriage. In marriage, May is very happy to be the wife of Newland Archer that has a high status in society. May imagined all the new things after the wedding, she will control the household well and satisfy her husband. Archer realized that May does not have knowledge of anything, but she hopes many things. May performs duties as a wife based social code among the upper middle class. She does not realize that her ignorance makes her be 'terrifying product'. Her lack of passion is most obviously clear to Archer just after their wedding when they are traveling to the train station. The narrator describes:

She was alone for the first time with her husband, but her husband was only the charming comrade of yesterday. There was no one whom she liked as much, no one whom she trusted as completely, and the culminating "lark" of the whole delightful adventure of engagement and marriage was to be off with him alone on a journey, like a grownup person, like a "married woman," in fact. (Wharton, 1966: 158-159)

Previously, she had been introduced to society as a maiden debutante, and in old New York, she has no power whatsoever until she marries. May is excited to share her new identity with the man who has thus empowered her, but Newland has no idea why she is more interested in the wedding journey than on the wedding night. He does not understand how important it is to May that her new role gives her status in their society.

Archer and May are in England, on their way home from a traditional three months' wedding tour through Europe. Archer has begun to realize the difficulties he will experience in his marriage. May's ability to communicate with Newland without speech reveals both how well they pay attention to one another and how simple their relationship is the narrator comments:

The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer together than any explanation would have done. (Wharton, 1920: 18)

Archer receives a dinner invitation from Mrs. Carfry, an acquaintance of his mother and Janey from an earlier trip through Europe. May is reluctant to go; New York society does not consider it proper to visit friends while traveling, and May worries about what she will wear. Even though May does not want to go to have dinner but she must follow her husband to go to a dinner invitation. May cannot imagine why Archer wants to associate with a man she considers common. She is so horrified by the idea, that Archer quickly changes his mind. May Welland does not express her unsatisfied feeling to Archer, she just keep silent in that situation.

In the evening, Archer and May sit together in their library. As he looks at his wife, Archer feels trapped by their marriage.

She had spent her poetry and romance on their short courting: the function was exhausted because the need was past. Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and mysteriously, by the very process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland (Wharton, 1966: 234).

While Archer is as for being regretting his marriage to May, his wife was not expected because she is just like a replica of her mother that emphasizes social status than the happiness of the household. Archer regrets of his traditional ideas about marriage that:

There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free; and he had long since discovered that May's only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration (Wharton, 1966: 159).

May tries to be like the wife in the upper-middle-class women, she tries to be a good wife for Archer but based on social codes of the upper middle class. When Archer opens the window for fresh air to clear his mind, May tells him to shut it: "You'll catch your death!" Archer longs to tell her that he has felt dead for months. His imagination suddenly runs wild, and it occurs to him that May might die. If she died, he would be free. As if Archer that May Welland will die as soon as possible.

The position women as wives displayed quite different from the character of **Ellen Olenska**. Ellen Olenska has been married to Count Olenski in French, but Ellen was not happy with him and he returned to New York and met with Newland Archer. Ellen and Archer love each other when Archer suggests that they should have a relationship. Ellen's answer is:

'Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress – since I can't be your wife?' she asked. The crudeness of the question startled him: the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic. He noticed that Madame Olenska pronounced it as if it had a recognized place in her

vocabulary, and he wondered if it had been used familiarly in her presence in the horrible life she had fled from. Her question pulled him up with a jerk, and he floundered. (Wharton, 1966: 242).

Olenska's opinion of marriage is different from May Welland, she is a little bit independent than May Welland. Olenska thinks that the wives in New York are like a mistress, they must do everything based on the social codes in upper-middle-class society. While May Welland thinks that wife is a mistress and do the activity based on the social codes in society.

Ellen loves Newland Archer and they have planning to announce their feelings to the public, but suddenly May Welland arranges the special dinner for Ellen. May wants to ask Ellen that she is pregnant, May thinks that it is the only way to separate Ellen Olenska and her husband. After having special dinner with all the aristocrat families, Ellen realizes that it is impossible for her to live together with Newland Archer, she does not want to break her cousin's marriage.

When May suspects that Archer and Ellen might be having an affair, she tells Ellen about her pregnancy even before she is certain. Ellen decides to leave in order to give a chance for happiness to the new family. May is the one who has the power to drive Ellen away from Archer (Wharton, 1966: 423-438). Leaving New York as soon as possible is the best choice for Ellen.

The Newland Archers, since they had set up their household, had received a good deal of company in an informal way. Archer was fond of having three or four friends to dine, and May welcomed them with the readiness of radiant as her mother has set her an example of conjugal affairs. May's stabs at the embroidery canvas silently to protest Archer's suspected disloyalty in their household. May is afraid Archer is having an affair with her cousin, Ellen Olenska. Marriage, however, is surrounded by a set of double standards, and it is expected that May gives up a part of her identity. She may not blame her husband for failing to love and respect her, and she may not openly accuse him of being in love with Ellen.

May recedes into the background after her wedding, until the farewell dinner. Her gradual removal from the plot partly reflects her decreased individuality after marriage. This is again a type of behavior that she has learned from her mother, who does the same in her marriage to Mr. Welland. It is part of the social role of the wife, but it is not May's natural type of behavior. The text seems to suggest that, given a choice; May would rather be riding or rowing, than playing the hostess or sewing.

The narrator adds: "but since other wives embroidered cushions for their husbands she did not wish to omit this last link in her devotion" (Wharton, 1966: 246). May's imposed social roles deny her activity, physical life which is suited to her, and chain her to fix the patterns of her behavior. The narrator suggests that her good nature and seeming passivity irritate tragically Archer so much, rather than appreciating that May is trying to perform the roles she has learned to be perfection, Archer only sees his own suffering.

Somehow Ellen learns that May is pregnant, she considers the damage of her cousin marriage if she could not do something to Newland's marriage and leaves for Europe; Newland meditates his life without Ellen and decides to follow her to Europe, Newland considers seeing Ellen again after thirty years and decides to leave the past in the past.



For Ellen, however, a happy marriage is nothing more than a limitation. She appreciated her own freedom, and she will ask for a divorce when her marriage does not work in the right way, even though divorce is not favored by social customs. Ellen always wanted to go from social restrictions, and to get the world with full of art and pieces of music. She hoped for a social circle where she could exchange her ideas with friends sharing that have the same interests. Although she had to make some sacrifices to reach her ideal life, she still has her intellectual freedom.

#### 4. Conclusion

Women in marriage is represented in *The Age of Innocence* novel, either women as fiancée or women as wife. In *The Age of Innocence*, women as fiancée shows their good attitude, their beauty and their capability in the household to their fiancée based on the rule in the society and women will try to lure their fiancé in the engagement period. Women as wife in *The Age of Innocence* focus to be a good housewife or stay in domestic sphere. They will follow their husband's will even though the women disagree about the problem, women as wife and housewife will keep silent whatever should something happened in their household. As May Welland does in her early of her marriage, May was born and grew up to meet the demands of a patriarchal world; she believes that she is entitled to obtain the ideal life that she misses. It is natural for her to have any expectation to become the happy wife and build a stable family. As a newly married bride, she is waiting for her husband to put priority on him and the family that they are about to build. She hopes that her husband will present her a happily ever after life. Also, May performs her duties in a small family perfectly. Newland makes much effort to transform his wife, but she has chosen to live by the rules that society has set for women, because it is what she knows and does accordingly. She understands the old code of New York perfectly because "she has the power of classical goddess".

Based on the data in the result, some of socio-cultural aspects of upper middle class women reflected in *The Age of Innocence* that the researcher presents are namely women in marriage that consists of two parts; woman as a wife and woman as fiancée. Based on the socio-cultural aspects, it can be concluded that married woman in the novels *The Age of Innocence* and was still patriarchy or was in inferior position than men at the time.

#### References

- Benner, L. (2004). *A New Women Emerges*. North Carolina Museum History. Tar Heel Junior Historian 43:2.
- Doda, Zerihun. (2005). *Introduction to Sociology*. Ethiopia Public Health Training Initiative: Debu University.
- George, R, Girgis, S & Anderson, R.T. (2010). *What is Marriage?* Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy vol. 34. Online. (<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/marriage/what-is-marriage.html> accessed on 29 November 2014).
- Goldberg, M. (2008). *New Money*. (Online) (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=new+money&defid=3560216> Accessed on 25 November 2014).
- Joan, P. (1989). *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth Century England*. London: Routledge.

- Laurenson, D & Swingewood, A. (1972). *The Sociology of Literature*. United Kingdom: Paladin.
- MacColl, Gail & Wallace, Carol McD. (1989). *To Marry an English Lord*. New York: Workman Publishing.
- McCrum, R. (2004). *The 100 best novels: No 45 - The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton (1920)*. (Online) (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/28/100-best-novels-age-of-innocence-edith-wharton-robert-mccrum>). Accessed on 10 December 2014).
- Pessen, E. (1990). *Status and Social Class in America. Making America. The Society and Culture of the United States*. Ed Luther S. Luedtke. Washington: United States Information Agency.
- Wharton, E. (1994). *The Age of Innocence*. Hertfordshire: wordsworth.