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Contradictory Depictions of the New Woman: Reading Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* as a Dialogic Novel

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1. Introduction

¹ Although critical accounts of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* vary in their assessment of the novel, analyses have tended to have two overarching concerns regarding the novel's main characters: first, the analysis of Newland Archer's conflict between social convention and individual desire;¹ second, the way that the novel appears to create a series of binaries between "new" and "old" female stereotypes by contrasting the "dark," "experienced," "whore" Ellen Olenska with the "fair," "innocent," "virgin" May Newland.² With the developing critical interest in Wharton during the 1970s and 80s, feminist scholars offered a new way of reading *The Age of Innocence* and changed the understanding of Wharton's work, focusing on the way Wharton constructed a feminist social realism in its narrative. However, they have often addressed the representations of her female characters and the ways in which these figures revealed an oppressive social order for women. Furthermore, perhaps in line with the common perception that Wharton was an "innate conservative" who "never allied herself with the feminist movements of her day" (Goodman 35), feminist critics have often overlooked the celebratory and hopeful note in the novel's conclusion. According to Hermione Lee, for example, Ellen is cast away from New York society and this is seen as reflecting a typically gloomy prognosis regarding the fate of women in Wharton's work: "it is the women in Wharton who have to suffer betrayal and social punishment" (186).

² Although these points are important and contribute to our understanding of *The Age of Innocence* and the social structure in which Newland and Ellen move, there has been no

sustained critical analysis examining the dialogic properties of the narrative, in which a multiplicity of ambivalent voices and points of view on the issues of womanhood, marriage and divorce are juxtaposed. Furthermore, the following questions still need further elaboration: what does Ellen's flight, away from conventional New York—which she once referred to fondly by stating “this dear old place is heaven” (Wharton 14)—to a life in Paris, convey? Is it, as Lee maintains, an unhappy ending that shows “there is no escape” (580)? Or, as Elizabeth Ammons suggests, the “failing” of the heroine (127)? Can we go beyond these pessimistic interpretations and read the ending as an indication of the heroine's struggle for independence and agency?

³Bearing these questions in mind, this article will expand on previous critical approaches to *The Age of Innocence* by analyzing the ways in which the text delivers—through its dialogic narrative—a fragmented, ambiguous and contradictory depiction of New Womanhood. It advances two broad arguments: first, I argue that the novel displays many of the characteristics of New Woman fiction, both thematically and stylistically. Thematically, it depicts the conflict within the heroine, as Lyn Pykett has observed about the characteristics of New Woman writing, “between a fluid and changing experience of subjectivity and the fixed identity imposed by conventional social gender roles” (57). As is typical of New Woman fiction, the novel portrays Ellen's dilemma between her love for Newland and her freedom. With its treatment of the themes of womanhood, marriage and divorce, the text also displays important stylistic characteristics of New Woman fiction, in which “in place of the wise and witty sayings, and the moral and social guidance of the omniscient narrator, we find a decentered narrative, and (particularly in marriage-problem novels) a polyphonic form in which a multiplicity of voices and views on current issues are juxtaposed” (57). Secondly, building on this observation about the way that *The Age of Innocence* is presented in such a polyphonic form, I argue that, instead of reading the text as representing Ellen in the context of a “corrupting temptress” female stereotype, we can read her depiction as a “problematization and unfixing of identity” (57) that is common to New Woman fiction. I argue that like the depiction of the heroines in the New Woman novels, that of Ellen the New Woman in *The Age of Innocence* is complex, fragmented and contradictory.

⁴I begin with a brief account of the emergence and definition of the New Woman, in particular in the United States of America during the early twentieth century, and the characteristics of New Woman fiction that are reflected in *The Age of Innocence*. I explain briefly Bakhtin's analytical concepts related to dialogism (authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, and hybrid construction) and their relevance to the analysis of the text. In the close readings of the novel that follow, I analyze the ways of Old New York in relation to the issue of New Womanhood in the light of these Bakhtinian concepts. The focus of the discussions will include Newland's conflicting perceptions of womanhood, his constant vacillating throughout the novel between the fields of marriage and romance, and thus between May and Ellen. A particular emphasis will be given to the contradictory perceptions of Ellen Olenska by Old New York and her dilemma between her love for Newland and her desire for personal freedom to highlight the ambiguities of the novel regarding the image of the New Woman of the era in which the novel was written. Finally, by exploring the multiple subjectivities of Ellen, my feminist dialogic analysis of the novel shows that the novel's concluding commentary on Ellen's choice to leave Newland and go to Paris can be read as instances of the disruption of hegemonic discourses and a recognition of female voice, agency and struggle.

2. The New (American) Woman and New Woman Fiction

⁵The New Woman, as represented in fiction and in media, was an amalgam of contradictions. She was portrayed, by turns, “as either a cause or a symptom of cultural disintegration and social decline, or as the cure for current social ills” (Pykett 17). In American society, she was perceived as a radical figure, “a symptom of cultural disintegration” who “challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power” (245). Jean Matthews argues that the most popular image of the New American Woman was the so-called “Gibson Girl,” named after her creator, the artist Charles Dana Gibson, who drew her for *Life* magazine in the 1890s (13). She became an embodiment of the New American Woman, along with her youth, education and independence, and a reputation for being “highly competent and physically strong and fearless” (13). Consequently, the popular image of the New American Woman was a controversial one in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American society: a figure defined by her challenge to conventions in behavior and dress, her education and aspirations for greater public and private recognition, independence of spirit, competence, fearlessness, and a thirst for marital and sexual independence.

⁶These characteristics were also reflected in fictional depictions. According to Carol Smith-Rosenberg, the New Woman in American fiction was brought to popular attention by American writer Henry James (1843-1916), who portrayed this feminine type as a young, unmarried woman who challenges social conventions and acts independently (such as Daisy, the heroine of *Daisy Miller*, or Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*) (176). One of the defining features of New Woman fiction as a body of work was its challenge to the era's hegemonic definitions of womanhood and related prescriptions on “how a woman should be.” In an attempt to reassess the old clichés and moral codes of femininity, feminist writers began to think about the formulation of new codes of female behavior, a new morality and new sexual ethics. This made the New Woman fiction a source of controversy as it sought to unsettle conventional images and accounts of women and add momentum to the push for political and social change. The close link between literature and social reform, as Heilmann notes, was seen as the backbone of feminism and this link was essential to the New Woman writers of the fin-de-siècle who considered the novel an important tool for social reform (2). In the 1890s, a group of popular writers such as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, George Egerton and Olive Schreiner took up this cause and began to write about topics associated with New Woman fiction such as unhappy marriage, sexual transgression, divorce, death, “fallen” women, seduction, betrayal and adultery.³ Cunningham points out that, although the authors of New Woman novels were not consciously creating a distinctive category of writing, their work displays some common characteristics. Defining the fictional representation of the New Woman as an “intelligent, individualistic, and principled person,” she notes that:

[H]eroines who refused to conform to the traditional feminine role, challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, chose to work for a living, or who, in any way argued the feminist course, became the commonplace in the works of... writers [of New Woman fiction] and were firmly identified by readers and reviewers as New Women. (3)

7 Cunningham lists other important characteristics of New Woman fiction as “the education and reading [of the heroine],” “frankness about sex,” “strictures against marriage,” “heavy emphasis placed upon nervous disorder,” “disease and death” (46–49). Such features signify a questioning of domestic and social arrangements and their implications for women and indicate some of the ways in which the New Woman fiction addressed issues of marriage, sexuality, female victimization and women’s independence. The kinds of themes addressed in New Woman fiction were already common in novels throughout the nineteenth century; as Cunningham notes, “all the data of the New Woman novel were present in earlier fiction” (20). However, it was the treatment and interpretation of such themes which “so radically differed” and set New Woman fiction apart from earlier fiction (20). For instance, in earlier fiction of the mid nineteenth century, the fallen woman, Cunningham suggests, was read as a “stain” on society and her suffering and death were interpreted as her punishment. The same subject, the fallen woman, was expressed later by some of the New Woman novelists, such as Thomas Hardy, and it was suggested that “women conventionally ‘fallen’ might actually have chosen their state on moral grounds,” indicating that the death or suffering of the heroine does not always refer to her condemnation in the novel (21). Further, Lyn Pykett has pointed out that many New Woman novels challenge conventional fictional accounts of domestic reality, particularly the marriage plot: marriage, the destination of the plot of the mainstream Victorian novel, and the resolution of all of its (and supposedly the heroine’s) problems, became, in the New Woman novel, both the origin of narrative and the source of the heroine’s problems (57).

8 In the analysis of the novel, I will attempt to show that *The Age of Innocence* displays these general characteristics of New Woman fiction. I will draw on some of the above observations about New Woman fiction to explore the way in which the issues of womanhood, marriage and divorce are addressed in the text, examining the portrayal of the New Woman and assessing the extent to which the text challenges hegemonic definitions of womanhood and related prescriptions on “how a woman should be” in Wharton’s time.

3. Bakhtin and the Dialogic Novel

9 To build on such observations I have turned to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and the concepts related to it (authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, and hybrid construction) as analytical tools because they permit a reading that is attentive to the presence of different voices, ideologies and discourses in the text, as well as to the exchanges that take place between them. Drawing on Bakhtin’s ideas about the dialogic novel as being “constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 18), I approach the novel as made up of dialogues between different points of view on womanhood in a way that reveal the presence of marginal, subversive and feminist voices. These voices have the effect of challenging and disrupting the dominant, monologic and hegemonic discourses in the text.

10

Bakhtin’s concepts of “authoritative” and “internally persuasive” discourses have been particularly useful here. By “authoritative” discourse Bakhtin simply refers to

monologic, dominant and centralizing voices that assert, as Dale M. Bauer puts it in her feminist literary deployment of Bakhtin, “masculinised or rationalised public language” (2). By “internally persuasive” discourse he refers to dialogic, marginal and decentralizing voices that disrupt the narrative of authoritative discourse. Drawing on these concepts, the central concern of this article is to explore the way in which the dialogic narrative of *The Age of Innocence* orchestrates a dialogue between these two narratives of dominance and subversion through the multiple voices of its characters and narrators. These concepts greatly aided me in developing the theoretical and methodological framework through which I analyze the text. I refer to authoritative discourse and the voices that represent it as a *surface narrative* that asserts the dominant ideologies of the age concerning female roles and that attempts to delimit the New Woman and define her within fixed terms. I use the term *counter narrative* in reference to internally persuasive discourse which reveals the explicit or implicit voices of marginal feminist discourses that puncture the surface-narrative and indicate the text’s feminist critiques of hegemonic structures.

11

I draw in particular on Bakhtin’s understanding of double-voicedness and hybridization to examine Wharton’s novel as a dialogic text. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel” published in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin explores the double-voiced discourse which contains two separate voices or consciousnesses (of characters, groups or general opinion) that exist together in one utterance yet remain in tension or conflict. One voice may be stronger and may try to control or overcome the other, yet they are both present and separate, contributing to the presence of diverse voices and ideologies in the text and often allowing for the subtle commentary of one voice upon the other. The interrelationship of different voices and the existence of these voices are made manifest through shifts in tone, punctuation and other linguistic, ideological, or idiolectal markers (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 447). As Bakhtin notes:

Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized. Examples of this would be comic, ironic or parodic discourse, the refracting discourse in the language of a character and finally the discourse of a whole incorporated genre—all these discourses are double-voiced and internally dialogized. A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 324)

- 12 In this way Bakhtin’s double-voicing offers a particularly useful way to analyze the interactions and tensions between idioms, languages, or ideologies within the text in question and, in Jasinski’s words, to “help subvert various forms of monologic interpretation by leading the critic and historian to the recovery of the dialogic moments or elements inscribed in the text.” (24). Bakhtin introduces hybrid-construction as a particular form of the double-voiced discourse in a dialogic narration. When I use the term “narration” I refer to Bakhtin’s notion of hybrid-construction which Bakhtin defines as “an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two languages, two semantic and axiological belief systems” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 305–306). This means that, in contrast to one narrator, there is often a more complex polyvocality at work in dialogic texts as the voices of characters can be entwined within a passage. In addressing this feature of *The Age of Innocence*, double-voicedness and hybridization draw explicit attention to the ways in which the voice of the narrator fuses with the speech of another and places the ideology

and languages of different characters, groups, or publics in dialogue. Hybrid-construction sensitises the reader to the presence of multiple voices in a passage (and, therefore, different perspectives, ideologies or belief systems), indicated by signals such as exclamation and quotation marks; shifts in idiolect; the choice of particular words that represent a certain social group, a particular character or the voice of “public opinion”; changes in the intonation and tone of the speech or narration (ironic, sarcastic, sympathetic, critical). Further, attention to such hybrid constructions enables me to explore the complex formation of the ideological consciousness of the New Woman heroine as we see her struggling with the conventions and constraints of patriarchal ideologies. When I study *The Age of Innocence*, I will therefore pay close attention to such hybrid constructions and the range of perspectives and opinions that are brought to bear on the New Woman and her struggle for independence.

13

Because *The Age of Innocence* presents Ellen's story mainly from the perspective of Wharton's male character, a particular emphasis will be given to the double perceptions of Newland—as representing the surface narrative (or authoritative discourse, in the Bakhtinian sense)—regarding women and divorce because his narration reveals the male tendencies as depicted in the novel to create fantasies about the heroine and control her at the same time. As Margaret Jay Jessee observes, “readers are given Newland's perceptions of May and Ellen, not as who they actually are, but as his desire situates them” (49). The purpose of examining Newland's conflicting perception of womanhood is to demonstrate how the male character—Newland, as a member of Old New York society—perceives the New Woman and how biases and pressures against divorce serve to reproduce patriarchal gender relations. In addition, I will demonstrate how the counter narrative, through the presentation of Ellen's multiple subjective positions, acts as a counterpart to this male tendency by allowing the New Woman character to act within and outside patriarchal boundaries. That is, attention to the subversive counter narrative of the text (internally persuasive discourse) helps to highlight Ellen's performances of shifting subjectivities (the rebel who is seeking a divorce, the unfortunate victim of an unfaithful husband, the lover who desires a new life) and to draw out the conflict that exists within the text with the masculine monologic language of the surface narrative (authoritative discourse) that seeks to delimit the New Woman within fixed frameworks.

4. Ellen: The New Woman in Multiple Guises

14

In *The Age of Innocence*, from the opening scene at the opera, we are given Newland's perceptions of Ellen and May, highlighting the conflict between the two (authoritative and internally persuasive) opposing discourses: Ellen and May as representatives of “New Woman” and “True Woman” respectively. Newland first sees Ellen in the Mingott's opera box at the old Academy where she appears as “the lady in the Empire dress” (9) wearing a dress more daring than the dictates of New York fashion allow in that year. Noticing the attention drawn to Ellen, the divorcee and suspected adulteress, who is sitting in the same opera box with his fiancée, May Welland, Newland gets annoyed: “It was annoying... that the box which was thus attracting the undivided attention of masculine New York should be that in which his betrothed was seated between her mother and aunt” (9, my emphasis). This hybrid construction, as Bakhtin would describe it, reveals the clash of the surface

and counter narratives (the male perspective and the ironic tone of the narrator that mocks this perspective): it begins with Newland's free indirect discourse expressing his disapproval of this "lady in the Empire dress" in an irritated tone ("it was annoying") and the italicized portion of the passage is permeated with the ironic intonation of the narrator, mocking Old New York's (and therefore Newland's) "masculine," conventional perception of women. Thus, the hybrid construction has two accents (the character's accent and narrator's "ironic transmission... mimicking of the irritation of the character") as Bakhtin would put it (*The Dialogic Imagination* 318).

15

In order to highlight Newland's perception of Ellen as an "improper female" in opposition to May as a "proper" one, the novel shifts its focus to May, depicting her as a representation of a figure whom we might describe, following Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," as a "True Woman" with four cardinal feminine virtues: "piety, domesticity, submissiveness and purity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman" (Wharton 152). May's depiction evokes this traditional American womanhood as she is referred to as an "angel in the home," with "this whiteness [in dress] radiance, goodness" (Wharton 21). In other words, she is depicted as the representative of the values of Old New York and repeatedly is described as the fair, "pure," "proper," blonde "innocent" in contrast to the dark-haired, "sensual," "unconventional" female, Ellen (who, as David Holbrook puts it, is seen as an "intruder" [Wharton 13] to the conventions of Old New York). However, the novel interrogates the image of True Womanhood when we hear the text's subtle indictment of this womanhood and the enforced values on her when we read, for example, the ironic tone in the language that describes her marriage to Newland. Their marriage seems to suggest the uniting of "the two great fundamental groups of the Mingotts and Mansons and all their clan, who cared about eating and clothes and money" (Wharton 25). The sarcastic tone in this passage indicates the feminist narrator's criticism toward the material values of these two "great," "fundamental" families which are then referred to with the belittling "and all their clan." This marriage also aims to emphasize that the union of a couple in Old New York society always relies on the suitability of the match. As Mrs. Archer feels, "[t]here was no better match in New York [for her son, Newland] than May Welland" (Wharton 7).

16

The text's dialogic narrative works to re-emphasize the tension between the discourses of True Woman and New Woman, exposing further Newland's judgmental perception of Ellen. The references to Ellen's defiant characteristics (her New Woman attributes) are numerous: she is modern, creative and interested in literature, painting, dance and music. She criticizes Old New York society for its "blind conformity to tradition" (Wharton 242). She is seen "parading up... at the crowded hour with Julius Beaufort" (29), a married man, in an act described as "a mistake" for Old New York (29). All these features, her education and experience in Europe, her challenge to social norms of her society, have made her a different woman than American society has produced. But in the eyes of Old New York, she is the "black sheep that their blameless stock had produced" (10), a woman with an "unscrupulous" life (25); in short, a threat to the hegemonic social system of Old New York. For example, when she asks Newland to "come and see [her] some day" (29), Newland, a product of Old New York, finds this irritating because "she ought to know that a man who's just engaged doesn't spend his time calling

on married women” and he thinks to himself how glad he is to be a New Yorker and that his bride-to-be, May is “one of his own kind” (29), indicating his view of Ellen as “other” and “improper.” Ellen’s departure from convention is re-emphasized when, during a party, she leaves her company, (the Duke of St. Austrey) and sits next to Newland, talking to the young man. Ellen’s depiction in this episode echoes Sally Ledger’s observations on the New Woman in that “the putting-on ‘masculine’ attributes (having ‘straight talks to young men’) was thoroughly characteristic of the textual New Woman” (Wharton 13). But this action creates further tension between the internally persuasive discourse of the New Woman and the authoritative discourse of Old New York: Ellen receives comments of disapproval because “it was not the custom in New York drawing-rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another” (Wharton 60). These scenes clearly portray Ellen as the New Woman who makes her own decisions and repeatedly defies Old New York’s rules.

17

The New Woman’s defiance of the authoritative [male] discourse through which we have seen her as an “improper” female earlier in the opening scenes of the novel is demonstrated further through the impact she has made on Newland’s view of her. Ellen’s rejection of convention and her question to him had made an impression on him as she “had stirred up old settled convictions and set them drifting dangerously through his mind” (Wharton 40). He begins to question his perception of society after he had met Ellen. He thinks she brings rich European culture to the “damnably dull” Old New York society which has “no character, no color, no variety” (242). He believes “women should be free—as free as we are” (39). His feelings about May (the True Woman) also begin to change as he “felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity [May] so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestress” (34); a woman of “the sameness, like one of those dolls cut out of the same folded paper” (59). These ideas are flowing through Newland’s mind and create a constant tension between his way of thinking of old and new society.

18

Thus far, it seems that we are witnessing Newland’s perception of women being released from convention. However, through this hybrid construction above, the novel repeatedly presents counter narratives that expose Newland’s contradictory positions—and his hypocrisy. As Carol J. Singley notes, Newland constantly “vacillates between May and Ellen and the opposing fields that they represent in the eyes of Newland: of marriage and romance, of social convention and individual desire” (506). The conflict between these “opposing fields” (May (social convention) and Ellen (individual desire)) is illustrated in the passage below, this time by referring to the gender roles in marriage, revealing the dilemma and contradictions in Newland’s mind further:

What could he and she [May] really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a ‘*decent*’ fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal? ... He perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, *which she had been carefully trained not to possess*; and with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming... a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other. (41, emphasis mine)

- 19 The hybrid narration above complicates the distinction again between the character and the (feminist) narrator. The italicized passage with the use of quotation marks for the word “decent” [fellow], and its ironic tone, suggest the narrator’s (and the counter

narrative's) subtle criticism toward Newland and Old New York society (here, surface narrative) concerning the double-standard of sexual morality and of the role of men and women in marriage. The following hybrid passage exposes these ideas further in Newland's mind. When Sillerton Jackson accuses Ellen of living with M. Riviere, her former lover, Newland says: "Living together? Well, 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*.... Madame Olenska has had an unhappy life: that doesn't make her an outcast" (39, emphasis mine). The same hybridization, in Bakhtin's words, "mixing of accents and erasing boundaries" between Newland's speech and the general opinion of Old New York, is also present here. Although on the surface narrative Newland appears to support Ellen's freedom to live her life as she wishes, on closer examination he is again shown to hold conventional views of Old New York when he refers to other women who live with Ellen's husband as "harlots." Newland's assumption that he has come to represent a liberator to Ellen is then undercut in the following sentence: "'Women ought to be free—as free as we are,' he declared, making a discovery of *which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences*" (39, emphasis mine). The italicized commentary of the narrator here offers an insight into Newland's internal conflict: he adopts Ellen's claim that women should be free, but with irritation and a sense of its "terrific consequences." By revealing this tension between the surface and counter narrative (Newland's specious attitude toward women's freedom and then his fear of the consequences of this freedom), the text successfully exposes his ambiguity, and its feminist critique of male hypocrisy.

20

The novel further unmasks patriarchal hypocrisy regarding approaches to women through Newland's reflecting on his past sexual experience and his pride to be marrying a "pure" and "innocent" girl. Although he seems to be proud of marrying May, he also takes pride in his own sexual experience in a lengthy and "agitated two-year relationship" with a married woman, Mrs. Rushworth. This is referred to earlier in the text when he contemplates May and wishes that "his wife should be as worldly-wise and as eager to please as the married lady [Mrs. Rushworth]... which had so nearly marred that unhappy being's life" (5): an implication that Newland gained experience from this relationship whereas Mrs. Rushworth was left with a notorious reputation. But, for Newland, this is not that significant because:

[T]he affair, in short, had been of the kind that most of the young men of his age had been through, and emerged from... *an undisturbed belief in the abysmal distinction between the women one loved and respected and those one enjoyed—and pitied...* when 'such things happened' it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow *always criminal of the woman...* The only thing to do was to... to marry a nice girl, and then trust to her to look after him. (69, emphasis mine)

- 21 In this hybrid passage we see incorporated the "parodic stylization of the language" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 304) of Old New York within Newland's mode of thought. The shift into this style is signaled by the use of words and attitudes derived from the general opinion of Old New York society and expressed through the narrator's language with "ironic transmission" of the male perception ("good" women to love and "bad" women to enjoy; cheating makes man "foolish" and women "criminal"; marrying a nice girl to look after him). Further on—and again in the language of the counter narrator (and consequently in a different style)—the narrator's use of words here in quotation marks ("such things happened") casts a sarcastic, critical glance at this general opinion

and throws its hypocrisy into relief. For Bakhtin, “such a characterization turns out to be ‘another’s speech,’ to be taken... in quotation marks” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 303). In the following passage, we observe a similar, hybrid account of Newland’s pride in his “masculine initiation” and mastery over his bride:

He contemplated her [May’s] absorbed young face with a thrill of possession *in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity.* ‘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 57, emphasis mine)

- 22 The beginning is Newland’s mode of thought (surface narrative). What follows is the narrator’s language (counter narrative) in the form of the concealed speech of another (the italicized part) which adds a sarcastic tone again with words such as “thrill of possession,” “masculine initiation” and “manly privilege,” subtly mocking Newland’s pride in his “masculinity” and his view of May as a symbol of “abysmal purity.” We then hear Newland’s direct speech, indicated by the speech marks (“We’ll read Faust together... by the Italian lakes”) and what follows is the indignant and ironic tone of the narrator’s speech, mocking Newland’s sense of superiority and duty to enlighten his bride-to-be with “the masterpieces of literature.” The effect here is to expose Newland’s ambiguity and unmask his hypocrisy regarding the role of women and introduce a counter narrative that disturbs the male accounts of women in the novel.

23

The spaces where authoritative and internally persuasive discourses constantly struggle appear again when we observe the New Woman as the “other” and as the “victimized” woman. Discussing the perceived challenge of the New Woman to the status quo at the fin-de-siècle, Sally Ledger explains that the view of New Woman as “a threat to the institution of marriage” was one of the defining features of the dominant discourse on the New Woman (11). Similarly, by associating Ellen the character as the “other” for Old New York, the novel depicts Ellen as a threat to society, invoking a patriarchal (authoritative) discourse. The Old New York tribe rejects her as one of them because for them she is “poor” (21), “Bohemian” (215), has “lost her looks” (58) and her dress is “unusual” (19). Worst of all, “she means to get a divorce” (37). These various perceptions regarding Ellen reveal Old New York’s views of her from different voices. This allows us to listen to different points of view and observe how Old New York disapproves of Ellen’s “improper” behavior and her desire to divorce her husband. The way in which Ellen is represented from the characters’ points of view above also echoes Elaine Showalter’s account of the New Woman as a disruption to the social order, a female type against whom the voices of Old New York (or the authoritative discourse) are “united in condemnation... and in celebration of the traditional female role” (40).

24

As Singley aptly observes, for Old New York, “Ellen’s habitus—including orphanhood, guardianship by an eccentric aunt, unhappy marriage to a Polish count and European culture—is alien and disruptive to Old New York ways” (502). But Newland no longer sees her in this way: for him, “[s]he’s ‘poor Ellen’ certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage” (Wharton 37). Newland’s initial view of her as the “improper” woman turns into pity and he begins to regard her in the light of a “victim” of a cruel husband that treats a wife as one of his possessions. Despite all the negative perceptions of her, Newland supports Ellen’s desire to divorce her husband. His voice offers the only

hope for Ellen in a society where even the word of “divorce” creates the effect of a “bombshell” (Wharton 38) and where change, or more precisely women’s freedom, is beyond question. For Newland, though, Ellen is no longer the “other”: she “has had an unhappy life [and] that doesn’t make her an outcast” (Wharton 38). His perception of Ellen here suggests a feminist consciousness (and an instance of internally persuasive discourse) inviting the reader’s sympathy for the “victimized” female. Through Newland’s voice, the text appears to offer Ellen’s side of the story, implicitly inviting us to question and interpret the views on Ellen and evoking her voice as if in absentia.

25

The text, however, continues to dramatize the tension between the two opposing (authoritative and internally persuasive) discourses again through Newland’s changing perceptions of Ellen. His view of Ellen is still wavering: in the above passage, Newland seems to be stating his support of her in her decision to divorce her husband. But as the novel proceeds, we realize that Newland’s attachment to her remains only at the level of fantasy because he is a conventional man at heart. This is revealed when Ellen’s family enlists his service as a lawyer in an attempt to persuade her to remain married; that is, to keep her within the order of social norms or, to use a more Bakhtinian phrase, within the limits of authoritative discourse. Despite his feelings for Ellen, he yields to his clan: he may have “read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world” (6) than the men in his society, but “grouped together they represented ‘New York,’” and as part of this “New York,” the narrator reveals to the reader that “the habit of masculine solidarity made him [Newland] accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral.” Here, the use of “masculine solidarity,” “doctrine,” and “issues called moral” suggest the sarcastic tone of the narrator and of the text’s subtle indictment of the way in which people in Old New York are led to believe all its norms and rules in the name of “morality.” Newland, in this case, is no exception.

26

It is after this point that Ellen’s position becomes more elusive than before as she begins to oscillate between a rebellious female and submission to social convention. Newland warns her about the negative consequences that she would face if she divorces her husband. When she asks “what harm could [her husband’s] accusations... do me here?,” he answers:

[F]ar more harm than anywhere else!... New York society is a very small world compared to the one you lived in. And it’s ruled, in spite of appearances, by a few people with—well, rather old-fashioned ideas... Our ideas about marriage and divorce are partially old-fashioned. Our legislation favors divorce—our social customs don’t. (108-109)

- 27 In this episode, Ellen seems defeated, yielding to the “social customs” that do not allow her to divorce her husband. But she is also frustrated, seeking desperately a way out. Feeling as if she has been “dead and buried... [for] centuries and centuries” (14) in her marriage, Ellen finally bursts out with fear and frustration: “But my freedom—is that nothing” (110). She questions the prevalent double-standard in gender relations. Newland, on the other hand, can only resort to conventional doctrines, as in the following words to her:

Think of the newspapers—their vileness!... One can’t make over society... The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together—protects the children, if there are any[.] (110)

28 Newland's assertion on the "convention that keeps the family together" indicates a final blow that breaks Ellen's spirit and she finally yields to this doctrine with her "so faint and desolate" tone (110). This dialogue between Newland and Ellen draws attention to the mechanism of a patriarchal ideology that silences women's threat to the institution of marriage by seeking to assert the unchangeability of convention and "collective interest." It appears here that Old New York has silenced the New Woman. Ellen changes her mind to pursue divorce against her husband as the double strain of struggling to achieve her freedom while at the same time bearing the full force of family and society disapproval weakens her challenge to society. In other words, she dutifully obliges what is expected of her, transforming herself from the "victimized" female to the "self-sacrificing" female. Thus, her depiction as a New Woman is simultaneously changing, from the "other" to an "improper"; from a "challenging," to a "victimized" and a "self-sacrificing" female figure; a fragmented, ambiguous and contradictory figure that problematizes the simplistic categories that are used to define her. It is also after this point that Ellen's depiction as a "victimized" and "self-sacrificing" female (yielding to the pressure of her society—the voice of authoritative discourse—for the sake of collective contentment) becomes inconsistent with the self-reliant and independent image of the American New Woman.

29

However, the irony here is that, although it is Newland who persuades Ellen to remain married to her husband, he still wants to be with her; another indication of male hypocrisy depicted in the text. Both Ellen and Newland know that he cannot go beyond the constraints of his community that forces him to marry May; that is, forces him to remain with the boundaries of Old New York social customs by choosing the True Woman, representation of the values of Old New York. We observe Newland oscillating between these old and new ideologies (May and Ellen). He is to marry May, a suitable bride for his class, a woman who will allow him to fulfill the social expectations that he was trained to respect; yet, he is attracted to Ellen's free spirit; that is, to the New Woman, to a new community, one which lives on ideas and art, not on money and fine clothes, a community into which Newland cannot fit. Finally coming to a realization that release from the "web of customs," the words Wharton uses to refer to social customs (35) seems impossible, he tries to push Ellen to the position of another female role, one that suits his interest: "mistress." He even asks Ellen to run away with him. But Ellen has come to realize his hypocrisy, and a sense of indignation towards the constraints that Old New York places upon women is evoked when she reflects to Newland: "Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing—give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage" (122). This tension continues between Ellen and Newland, when Newland suggests that she be his mistress. He says "I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist" (293). And in response to this, Ellen asks ironically: "where is that country? Have you ever been there?" (293), demonstrating her rejection of his offer and inviting us to observe the differences between their contrasting perceptions. Although his desire for Ellen is obvious, Newland's experience here bears out Bakhtin's observation on "the struggle and dialogic interrelationship" of authoritative (here, his genteel society) and internally persuasive discourses (here, his passion) within his individual consciousness (*The Dialogic Imagination* 342). Newland still insists on making Ellen his mistress: he appears willing to challenge those patriarchal myths and "categories" that confine their identities within the authoritative discourse and suggests

running away with Ellen to escape them, yet at the same time he gives no indication that he is ready to depart his position as May's future-husband. As the narrator informs the reader at earlier points in the novel, he is still "at heart a dilettante" (5); still the "terrifying product of the social system" (36); incapable of making the sacrifices necessary for their freedom. Ellen, on the other hand, is realistic: she becomes aware of Newland's position as a "product of his society" (she tells him for example that: "You've never been beyond. And I have") (294)) and understands that there is no place free from those "categories." This also implies that she rejects becoming the object of male fantasy. Thus, the passage articulates a feminist critique of the male point of view's tendency to weave fantasies around the New Woman.

30

All the female roles that have been presented to Ellen in the novel she has rejected; in doing so, she seems to persistently defy convention, a New Woman who refuses to conform to the categories that are prepared for her by Old New York. Her rebellion against conventional obligation reaches its climax when she finally begins to search for new ways to live her life, a life that will allow her to escape from the restrictions and conventions of Old New York. She is aware of the fact that she is seen as a threat to Newland/May's marriage and she uses this situation to her advantage to convince her wealthy grandmother Catherine Mingott to provide her with money to live an independent life in Paris. She convinces her grandmother to see that "if I return to Europe I must live by myself" (234). The voice behind this sentence is adamant, suggesting her choice to rely on herself, not on the others around her. This suggests that she has chosen neither Newland nor her husband Count Olenski, who has been waiting for her to return to him, but a life in Paris. We see her refer to the city with "its splendor and its history... the riches of Paris" (363) and how it can offer a life in which she will have the chance to meet artists, musicians, writers, philosophers; a life which, for her, means "freedom."

31

In the chapters that follow, the focus re-shifts to the friction between the discourses of marriage and feminism. Newland yields to his New York clan and finally is married to May. He easily adapts to the requirement of his conventional marriage. This is indicated through the following hybrid construction in which we can explore the complex arrangements of the narrator's and the character's voices: "Archer had reverted to all his old inherited ideas about marriage. It was less trouble to conform to the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice theories *with which his untrammelled bachelorhood had dallied*" (196, emphasis mine). This hybrid construction starts with Newland's free indirect discourse and gives insight into his conversion back to his "old" and "traditional" ideas about marriage. His viewpoint here echoes the authoritative discourse of marriage suggesting that conforming to the norms of marriage for Newland is a better option not only for himself but also for the sake of others (May, Ellen, and perhaps for all his family). The italicized part, through its ironic tone ("theories with which his untrammelled bachelorhood had dallied"), reveals a counter narrative against the male discourse by implying that he has forsaken the progressive ideas of his youth and reverted, out of expediency, to a conventional approach in his treatment of May. Through this conflict between two clashing points of view, the text alerts the reader to the male's hypocrisy.

32

As always, Newland vacillates between Old New York and his desire to break away from society. In odd contrast to the image of Newland that we are presented in the above episode as a conventional husband reverting to the “old inherited ideas about marriage,” the following episode goes on to reveal his awareness that his life—and his marriage to May—is shaped and controlled by the force of his community. This he finally sees and understands: “I AM dead—I’ve been dead for months and months” (298). He proves ambivalent again. He desperately wants to break away from the restrictiveness of Old New York but paradoxically he also believes in “the dignity of a duty,” that is, one’s social duty toward society: “Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty.... Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways” (Wharton 350). The passage presents the voice of marriage as surface narrative (authoritative discourse): Newland’s duty in marriage over romantic love. We are also given a summary of the decency of his life as he sees it from within the moral frameworks of Old New York, whose conventions have gained authority in his mind again, suggesting to the reader that even if his marriage was “a dull duty,” at least he kept his “honor” and respect for “his own past” and finally asserting the superiority of “the old ways” (May and convention) over new community (Ellen and freedom from the constraints of convention). However, by depicting Newland’s constant vacillation between “new” and “old,” “romance” and “marriage,” this passage also implicates the counter-narrative that questions Newland’s slavish devotion to the restrictive customs of Old New York.

33

Near the end of the novel, we learn that Ellen has been single and living in Paris for years. Newland’s wife has been dead for several years and Newland, who kept Ellen’s memory like “a relic in a small dim chapel” (365), is now fifty-seven years old. On discovering his father’s passion for Ellen, Dallas arranges a meeting between the two of them in Paris. Dallas tries to encourage his father to go upstairs and meet Ellen but Newland refuses and sits on a bench instead. He says: “It’s more real to me here than if I went up” (259). In other words, he finally understands that he has never been able to put his so-called liberal ideas into action; instead he has lived a “shy, old-fashioned, inadequate life” (365). When Dallas asks: “But what on earth shall I say?,” Newland smiles and replies: “Say I’m old-fashioned” (365), an acknowledgment of his conventional character and a sharp contrast to Ellen’s new independent feminist role, a woman of her own, one that breaks the limits of the authoritative discourse.

34

One wonders at the end of the novel what promise Ellen’s story holds. For Hermione Lee, it is “extremely hard to read *The Age of Innocence* as a novel with a happy ending,” because it shows “there is no escape, in place or time, for the person (especially the woman) who has been stigmatized” (580). In one sense, Lee is right: the novel speaks of women who are stigmatized and seek a place to escape. But it is misleading to view the novel’s ending as necessarily a pessimistic one. By placing Ellen in such a rigid society and showing the heroine’s struggle to survive, first in an oppressive marriage, then in an oppressive and restrictive society, and finally leading her to her freedom in Paris, the novel not only foregrounds Ellen’s determination to achieve her freedom, but also heightens its power as a feminist criticism of the society that has driven her away. As Singley explains, Ellen’s expulsion from New York society “can also be said to be defying

society's rules, for in returning to Europe—that is, in refusing to play Old New York's game—she shows that she can rise above the game” (504).

35

By reading the novel as a dialogic narrative, we are given various perspectives through which we observe the New Woman's movement in the guise of Ellen Olenska, repositioning herself in relation to the voices around her, and presenting this figure in multiple guises (such as the rebel who is seeking divorce; the unfortunate victim of a brutal husband; the sensual lover) only to challenge each in turn. The Bakhtinian concepts of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses—in particular his notion of hybrid construction—help us to elucidate the subversive language (counter narrative) of the text and to situate the heroine within the multiple points of view and conflicting ideological positions that the text presents. In this way we can also observe Ellen as a New Woman who is rewarded with her freedom at the end of the novel.

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NOTES

1. For example, Cynthia Griffin Wolff refers to the restrictive effects of society upon its members and argues that the novel presents a "Portrait of a Gentleman," emphasizing Newland's conflict between his desire and the constraints of society (5). Similarly, focusing on Newland's entrapment by the values of Old New York, Fryer writes that Newland is trapped "both by his own limitations and by forces he does not understand" (161). In the same vein, Godfrey considers Newland as a representative of the Old New York class and an entrapped individual who suffers "from stunted development and a bad case of cowardice" (31). Drawing on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social interaction and structuration ("individuals and their environment work together to shape habitus, which is in turn self-shaping"), Carol J. Singley points to Newland's dilemma between May and Ellen—and "the opposing fields that they represent: of marriage and romance, of social convention and individual desire" (495). Taking an approach close to mine is Margaret Jay Jesse who argues that the novel uses "multiple figures of masking or 'trying on' of disguises," questioning the distinction between May and Ellen as representatives of opposing female stereotypes (38).

2. For example, Elizabeth Ammons suggests that the novel is a tale of the victory of the “angel” over the “dark lady”: one in which the opposing qualities of Ellen and May serve to reinforce patriarchal representations of “angelic” and “monstrous” female identities. She further argues that the novel is about the male who prefers the innocent “fair-haired child woman” (May) to the experienced, dark-haired, “sexually vibrant, passionate” one (Ellen), suggesting the theme of “male fear of mature women” (13). Referring to Ellen as the direct opposite of “innocent” May, David Holbrook also describes Ellen as “a guileless temptress” (13).

3. There are many other cogent studies of the New Woman and New Woman fiction. See, for example, Elaine Showalter, “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1989); Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997); Lyn Pykett, ed., *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-siècle Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978).

ABSTRACTS

Critical debate pertaining to the themes of gender and marriage in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) has often focused on May and Ellen as the representation of two contrasting images of female identity: “angelic” and “monstrous” respectively. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogic novel, this article offers an alternative reading. In particular, it aims to examine the previously overlooked complexities in the novel's decentered narrative, notably its dialogic form in which a multiplicity of contending voices and perspectives on women, marriage and divorce are juxtaposed. By adopting this theoretical and methodological stance, the article offers fresh analytical perspectives on the novel and argues that, by depicting Ellen's performances of shifting subjectivities (the rebel who is seeking a divorce, the unfortunate victim of an unfaithful husband, the lover who desires a new life), the novel not only undermines the dominant ideologies of Victorian womanhood but also disrupts the image of the radical, independent New Woman who challenges social conventions.

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