Quest Journals
Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science
Volume 11 ~ Issue 4 (2023) pp: 36-40
ISSN(Online):2321-9467
www.questjournals.org

Research Paper

Irony in Edith Wharton's the Age of Innocence

Mashael Al-Juaid

Received 18 Mar., 2023; Revised 01 Apr., 2023; Accepted 03 Apr., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.
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Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence is an American master piece written in 1920 about the upper-class community of New York in the late nineteenth century. In the novel, Wharton discusses a lot of issues regarding this community and gives us as readers a clear image with detailed descriptions of what the society is like in that era. The most significant points that Wharton exposes are the hypocrisy of this exclusive society, how they deal with the idea of change, and how they exclude and alienate anything or anyone different. The work can be described as a novel of manners because it presents the social life of a particular class in a distinct time and place. It mainly focuses on the issue of personal ambitions that clash with the more powerful and capable establishment's values. The novel is characterized with a creative narrative mode, highly ironical tone, and unique motives. However, the most noticeable literary device in the work is irony. In general, irony is a figure of speech used to indicate the differences or contradictions between appearance and reality. In the novel, irony can be detected in the speeches, actions, and even in the private thoughts of the characters. The novel is mostly known for its ironic presentation of the way the society acts with one another and with outsiders.

The Age of Innocence's events revolve around New York's very exclusive and strict upper-class community. It stands as Wharton's "most self-conscious and ironic work" (Evron 37). The novel criticizes and mocks this community by using irony which starts with its title. Wharton uses the term "innocence" in the title to describe the self-centered and oblivious members of the aristocratic community. As individuals they live and interact only with people from the same exclusive social circle and care only about what happens within this circle. While the exclusive community is caught up in their luxurious life style, America's politics and economics were on the verge of a serious collapse. This community is extremely innocent for not being able to see the threats of the coming changes with the First World War. Ironically, they manifest a great amount of their time and effort to maintain their manners, traditions, and appearances hoping that they will protect them from any possible changes. Their naivety can be witnessed in the characters' conversations that mainly consist of showing off their possessions or criticizing others from the same social circle. In other words, they keep themselves occupied with their expensive possessions, pointless gossip, and social gatherings in order not to confront themselves with the changes evolving around them. They are so addicted to their life style to the point of living in an illusion about their social and financial stability. Those acts of ignoring indicate "their active suppression and denial" (Eby 97). Moreover, the term "innocence" is ironical because it comes from the fact that it describes a shallow society that is obsessed with appearances and easily deluded by them. An example for that is the society's views of Countess Ellen Olenska as a sensual woman and her cousin May Welland as an innocent girl are mostly based on their appearances. The society aims to reflect an image of innocence and morality about itself by alienating women like Ellen and criticizing men like Julius Beaufort occasionally. Ironically, such society that appears to be very innocent is in fact very cruel and judgmental. In other words, the elite and aristocratic community of New York is not as nearly as innocent as one would assume it would be.

As readers, we are introduced to this society and its members through Newland Archer's point of view. Archer is the protagonist of the novel and its main narrator. As the novel progresses, the narrative mode shifts between the objective point of view that belongs to the omniscient narrator and Archer's point of view. However, the omniscient narrator's view is associated with Archer's view and perspective of people or events around him. This narrative mode is known as the limited-omniscient narrator. Throughout the text, the limited-omniscient narrator's tone is highly critical and sarcastic in describing the ironical contradictions in the upper-class community. The first scene in the novel is in the opera house where most of the high-class families gather. This scene is ironical for because going to the opera, which is entertainment or amusement, seems as a kind of duty or burden for them. Those people come to the opera not for the sake of fine arts, their purpose is to brag about their possessions, show off their fashionable clothes, and maintain their social status. The limited-

omniscient narrator sarcastically describes how the society feels about such sophisticated events and how they: "want to get away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it" (8; ch.1). In the opera, Archer who considers himself an unconventional man is completely thrilled with May's innocence and naivety. He likes the fact that May does not understand the acts of seduction performed on the stage. As everyone else at the opera, he shows off his soon to be wife purity like the other typical men there who show off their wives' chastity and fancy jewelries. Archer seems to enjoy the idea of being the superior and more experienced one in the relationship, the one who will introduce this naïve virgin to the world of passion and excitement. The irony here is that Archer who considers himself an unconventional man is proud of his soon to be wife for possessing all the qualities of a good and suitable girl according to the society's ideological standards. The limited-omniscient narrator ironically exaggerates describing Archer's typical reaction while observing May: "He drew a breath of satisfied vanity and his eyes returned to the stage"(9; ch.1). Archer sees May as an innocent girl because of her appearance and that innocence is one of the main reasons that made him choose her to be his wife. On the other hand, he sees Ellen as a threat that may affect May's pure image. In the opera, the high-class community judges and criticizes Ellen for her scandalous appearance including "the free-thinking Archer" (Wagner 33). One of Ellen's fierce attackers is Lawrence Lefferts who is known for his affairs with several women behind his wife's back. At the same time, Lefferts is seen in the elite and moral society as "one of the monitors of social code" (Wagner 33). He usually talks about morality and manners at every chance he gets. Therefore, he sees Ellen's appearance at the opera as a great opportunity to show off his manners and plays his favorite role as the values' monitor. It is extremely ironical that a man as Lefferts criticizes Ellen for her attempt to leave her husband or the possibility of having an affair with her husband's secretary while he is certainly having affaires behinds his wife's back. Archer's friends also criticize Ellen for making such an appearance, and it seems that Archer "does not disagree with his friends" (Wagner 34). Although Archer admires Mrs. Manson Mingott's independent thinking and strength, he looks down at Ellen, when he sees her for the first time, for having the same traits as Mrs. Mingott. A significant ironical point is Ellen's attempt to seek support and consolation from such a cruel and judgmental community which reflects her innocence. Although Ellen might be the most innocent character in the novel, she is the one who is being marginalized and criticized by the upper-class society. For example, no body attends the party that Mrs. Mingott arranges to introduce Ellen to their social circle. However, the same people seem to not have a problem in attending another party with a similar purpose just because it was thrown by the most powerful and wealthy family in the aristocratic community, the Van Der Luydens. The fact that their principles and beliefs can be changed and mellowed according to the circumstances reflects the hypocrisy and shallowness of their community. The limited-omniscient narrator ironically indicates that Louis and Henry Luyden as individuals do not possess the characteristics that qualify them to be the leaders of the most prestigious and powerful community in New York. They are shy and quiet, and: "they would so much rather have lived in simplicity" (56; ch.7). They are considered the leaders of the aristocratic society only for their wealth and their bloodline: "mouthpieces of some remote ancestral authority which fate compelled them to wield" (56; ch.7). Another example for the upper-class community hypocrisy is the way they see Julius Beaufort. Although the moral and innocent society knows about Beaufort's past and his involvement in illegal activities, they have no problem ignoring all that and accept him for his wealth and the luxurious parties he throws. As long as his past and his illegal activities are kept a hidden secret, he will always be welcomed. However, their hypocrisy was exposed when Beaufort's secrets were revealed because they immediately excluded him and moved on. The irony here is that the same man with the same criminal background is being accepted or excluded according to the circumstances around him and not for his morality or immorality.

The community's relationship with characters like Beaufort and Leffort shows the ironical contradiction between their social codes and their behavior. In addition, it exposes the irony in the society's double standard views of those who are involved in affairs. To explain, the society marginalizes and judges Ellen because they suspect that she had an affair with her husband's secretary, but they accept men like Beaufort and Lefferts who are known for their affairs. Both sexes are involved in the same thing, but only one of them deserves to be punished according to the society's values. The society sees the men as foolish and women as criminals because "only the woman can break the law" (Eby 101). Archer is the only member of the society that objects to such double standard treatment by stating that: "women are ought to be free-as free as we are," (43; ch.5). The limited-omniscient narrator ironically exaggerates in commenting on his statement by describing it as a discovery that he courageously declared without considering the consequences first. It seems that Archer is just as innocent as the rest of the aristocratic society because he cannot see that the real world is changing and women are becoming more and more independent every day. However, his statements contradict his actions because he is the one who said: "I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury a live woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots" (43; ch.5). But when he meets Ellen privately for the first time, he asks her to return to her husband. The irony here is that Archer, just like any other member of the society that he criticizes, tries to convince Ellen to give up the idea of divorce and return to her husband for the sake of the family's reputation. He argues that the individual's desires should be sacrificed for the sake of the community:

"The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest"(107; ch.12). The limited-omniscient narrator comments on Archer's attempt to change Ellen's mind to show his "betrayal of the idea of free women" (Eby 100). On the other hand, Archer describes women who are willing to have affairs with married men as harlots, and despises men like Ellen's husband, the Polish Count, for having affairs. Ironically, when Archer is married to May, he persuades Ellen to have an affair with him. However, Ellen explains to Archer how she feels about the hypocrisy of the upper-class community and expresses her appreciation for her friendships with Beaufort and Archer. The fact that she sees both Beaufort and Archer as good friends who want to help and support her reflects "a sense of Ellen's innocence" (Wagner 35). To explain, she cannot see that Beaufort only wants to have an affair with her, and Archer starts to meet her in order to stop her from reclaiming her independence and to save his fiancé's, Ellen's cousin, reputation. The meeting between Archer and Ellen is the beginning of a series of ironical incidents in the novel. For example, when Archer starts to develop some feelings for Ellen, his first reaction is to convince May to push forward their wedding date. It seems that Archer wants to commit to May in a serious relationship in order to forget about his attraction to Ellen. Archer admits to Ellen that he loves her and that he will end his relationship with May to be with her. The whole situation is ironical because Archer is the one who persuaded Ellen to give up the idea of divorce and that her desires should be sacrificed for the family's sake. Irony continues when Archer finally admits his love for Ellen, May sends him a telegram in the same day informing him about their new wedding date. In fact, "The wedding itself is an extremely ironic occasion" (Hadley 267). It happened even though May was suspicious of Archer's feelings towards her, and Archer was more interested in another woman.

Archer and May's wedding is one of the most ironical events throughout the whole novel for several significant reasons. First, someone's wedding is supposed to be one of the happiest moments in one's life. However, some of Archer's most unpleasant moments in the novel are when received the telegram about his wedding date and the wedding itself. While any groom in his wedding day will be mesmerized by his bride, Archer completely ignores his bride's presence and keeps on looking for Ellen in the middle of the ceremony. In short, irony exists in the fact that a man in his wedding day is thinking of a woman other than his bride. It seems that Archer's wedding ceremony is a burial ceremony in disguise, as he is obligated to bury his dreams and desires to satisfy the family and the society. Another ironical point about the wedding is that when Archer and Ellen discussed marriage in the Van Der Luyden's party, he corrected her immediately with pride that they do not allow arranged marriage. However, the fact that he feels obligated to marry May for the sake of the family and the society contradicts with his statement: "in our country we don't allow our marriages to be arranged for us?" (64; ch.8). To explain, Archer must marry someone who is pure, conservative, and from the same social status in order to please his family which is in many ways like an arranged marriage. If Archer was really free in choosing his life's partner as he declared earlier, he would have the courage to call off the wedding and publically announce his love for Ellen. The ultimate irony is that the house where the bride and the groom spent their first night at is the same house where Archer told Ellen about his feelings towards her. Another significant and interesting point is that the wedding occurs in the middle of the novel and not at the end as usual to indicate a happy ending. It shows that the structure of the novel is different from the typical and ideal structure where the lovers reunite and a wedding occurs at the end. This means that weddings are not always happy occasions as one would assume, and they do not necessarily mean a happy ending just because they occurred at the end. It seems that Wharton "writes beyond a traditional nineteenth century ending by ironically undermining the structure of the novel" (Hadley 262). In addition, readers may think that the novel is about a man and his struggle with social codes in the late nineteenth century because the protagonist is a man, but in fact it is about women's untold stories in that era. The novel's unique structure "ironically invites the reader to speculate about Ellen's story by focusing on Newland's obsessive curiosity about it" (Hadley 266). Even during their honeymoon, Archer seems to have no interest in his wife's past or present, he is completely obsessed with Ellen and her story. It looks like he "prefers the potentially scandalous past of another woman even to the present of his own wife" (Hadley 268). Ironically, the innocence that was once one of the main reasons behind Archer's attraction to May is what to irritates him about her now, and he thinks of it as a sing for shallowness and naivety instead of purity: "the curtain dropped before an emptiness?" (199; ch.21). The ironical thing about May and Archer's marriage is that those two have a serious issue when it comes to exposing their true feelings to one another. Marriage in general is a sacred bond based on trust and sincerity, but May and Archer's marriage is mostly based on lying and keeping secrets. For instance, Archer lies to his wife about going to Washington for work where in fact he is going to see Ellen, and May acts all innocent and suggests that he should meet Ellen even though she knows that he is going only for that purpose. This scene shows how conventional May and Archer are because just like the rest of the society they have a problem with truth and like to keep secrets hidden. Their conversation can be described as verbal irony because each one of them is saying something but means something else.

Ellen returns to New York to take care of Mrs. Mingott where she reunites with Archer again. They meet at the museum to discuss their future together where she agrees to only have an affair with him instead of moving to Japan as he suggested. However, this scene is very important because it narrows the aim of the whole

novel. They meet at the antiquities section where the artifacts are marked by tags that say "Use unknown". There is an indirect comparison in this scene between the previous or primitive cultures and the current aristocratic society of New York. To explain, the primitive societies must have sacrificed a lot to maintain their authority and keep their traditions and morals a live, but they eventually collapsed and vanished and the only things that survived are those artifacts. In addition, things like freedom, passion, and desires must have been sacrificed for things that are no longer relevant or significant. The similarities between those cultures and the aristocratic society are undeniable. The irony is that the innocent members of the aristocratic society are unable to learn from the previous cultures about the insignificance of such customs and social codes, and they keep on following the same path like those who collapsed before them. Wharton wants to show that the things the society cares about and cherishes the most are nothing but trifles which are doomed to vanish eventually. After learning that May is expecting a baby, Ellen decides to return to Europe and her cousin May throws a farewell dinner for her. The farewell dinner is another ironical event for it may looks like a nice gesture, but in fact it is completely the opposite. It is a sacrificing ceremony where they will get rid of Ellen or sacrifice her in order to maintain their innocent image, authority, and social status. They will end Ellen's dreams of independence and freedom by sending her back to the prison she escaped from while they are smiling and wishing her a life full joy and happiness. Another ironical point about the farewell dinner is that everyone thinks that Archer and Ellen are having an affair when they are not: "to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense" (314; ch.33). Their relationship ended before it even started and there was no physical connection at all, yet "Ellen is labeled as his mistress" (Eby 101). Ironically, Ellen's farewell dinner is the first social gathering that May and Archer arrange as a married couple, but in the gathering "Archer felt like a prisoner in the center of an armed camp" (314; ch.33). It is as if he is being forced to celebrate the departure of the woman he loves.

Irony mostly exists within the three main characters, Archer, May, and Ellen, and how they are perceived by the elite society. Throughout the novel, Archer struggles to fulfill his personal desires that contradict with the society's social code. First of all, he presents himself as an unconventional man who believes in equality between the sexes and criticizes the society for its social code and double standard values. However, he attends the upper-class social gatherings or events, works in a profession that the society approves of, dresses in a way that reflects his social status, follows the social code, and finally marries a woman who the society considers as someone who is worthy of being his wife and the mother of his children. Moreover, the way Archer sees Ned Winsett, who is Archer's friend, shows the irony in his personality. Although he admires Ned's independent thinking and his opinions on the aristocratic community, he also looks down at him for not being a member of the high society and working as a journalist. In addition, he declared that Ellen is the woman that he truly loves, yet he got his wife pregnant and missed many opportunities to be with Ellen. It seems that he also has a problem with confronting truth like the rest of the society: "Does no one want to know the truth here" (76; ch.9). Therefore, he gets irritated when Ellen describes their relationship as an affair and herself as his mistress: "I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that-categories like that-won't exist" (236; ch.25). The most significant and ironical incident related Archer and Ellen's relationship is that even after May's death and the mellowness of social codes, Archer misses the opportunity to be with Ellen again. He deliberately misses the chance in order to preserve the image of the beautiful and free-spirited woman that he fell in love with when he was a young man. On the other hand, he is seen by the society as the bad guy who would support a woman like Ellen and cheat on his wife with her. However, Ellen and Archer might be the only innocent characters in the whole novel. To explain, Archer and Ellen did not know how they are being seen by the society until the farewell dinner and they both were easily fooled by May's innocent and dull appearance. Ironically, Archer sends white lilies, which symbolize innocence and purity, to May every day without knowing that she will be the one who keeps him from being with Ellen. Moreover, he describes May as Kentucky cave-fish, which do not develop eyes because it had no use for them. Although May reflects an innocent and naïve image by the way she dresses and acts, but she is the only one among the three who is witty enough to understand how the society works and uses that for her advantage: "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine"(141; ch.16). For example, when she feels that Archer is developing some feelings towards another woman, she pushes up their wedding date which is something against the social code. In addition, she knows that her cousin Ellen is in fact a good woman, so she lies to her about being pregnant in order to make her leave Archer. It seems that May has the insight to feel or know what Archer is planning to do and manipulates him to change those plans according to hers. "Rather than him being in control of events, it is his young wife who is aware-and armed" (Wagner 39). In contrast, Ellen is probably "the most naïve character in the book" (Dekker 267). She turns to the wrong place and community for help and fails in understanding the intentions of the people around her. Ironically, she is being seen as the loose and rebellious woman who is willing to ruin her cousin's marriage by becoming her husband's mistress. In short, ironies exist in the contradictions between the characters' appearances and their inner psyches. Ellen's carefree acts and bold French style contradict with her inner innocence, and May's conservative style and dull acts do not reflect her cleverness and strength.

In conclusion, Wharton in this work exposes the reality of what is thought of as the decent and honest community which is in fact a hypocritical and judgmental one. She uses irony to mock the superficiality and naivety of the aristocratic community of New York by presenting and discussing the issue of individuals' struggles against the establishment's code. The novel is highly ironical for the contradictions between the externals and internals in the community as a whole and in the characters as individuals. Wharton shows that the society's code is so complicated to the point of pressuring individuals to say things that contradict with the things they do, and dress in a way that reflects an opposite image of their inner psyches to avoid judgment and alienation. Her ironic approach to such issues is so charming and engaging in a way that makes the reader delves deeper and deeper into the meanings of the novel and comes out with a greater understanding of its mockery.

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