

**Of Furs and Lace: Sexual and Social  
Standing in Edith Wharton's *The Age of  
Innocence***

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In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton uses clothing as one of many ways to alert the reader to a character's personality and worth in society. She calls attention not just to what the women are wearing, but to the *type* of woman that wears a particular piece. Fur and lace are treated in the same way that comparative love triangles are in many Wharton novels, meaning, Ellen Olenska and May Welland are dichotomized, and represent two sharp philosophical and social contrasts. Their depictions in fur and lace, respectively, are metaphorical stand-ins for their wide differences. Ellen, whose reputation is drenched in marital scandal, is constantly portrayed as wearing exotic, lush furs. The animalistic, predatory nature implied by fur is seen as threatening, just as Ellen's nontraditional lifestyle and sexual liberty are a threat to societal rules. By contrast, May, like most of her peers, appears predominantly in lace. The flat, delicate clothing is the required uniform for any member of the tribe, and May's habitual obedience to wardrobe norms guarantees her acceptance in society. Thus, social standing is inherently intertwined with sexual standing: a woman that is invited to parties and is married to the right family is one whose reputation - and virginity - are intact; this woman wears lace. Ellen's past indiscretions (and, importantly, her capability to *continue* to transgress) destabilizes her reputation and makes her a target for ejection from society. Ellen's wearing of fur is a constant reminder of her lack of care for the values of those around her. Thus, fur and lace transcend their utility and become representations of the women that wear them, allowing each item to either ostracize or initiate the woman in New York society.

Ellen Olenska is an exotic specimen who embodies all of the European traits and eccentricities that are anathema to the rigidity of New York custom. Having spent much time abroad and thus adopting attitudes of sexual liberalism frequently associated with the continent,

Wharton places Ellen in a geographical space which allows the author to focus on dissecting the connection between foreign habits and socio-sexual promiscuity. This is done by highlighting the donning of animal skins by those affiliated with locations other than New York. Ellen is relegated to outsider status due to her inculcation of the European value system in favor of that of New York's; her wearing of fur speak to this rejection. Wharton writes, almost anthropologically, that Ellen can no longer "speak [the] language" (1120) of this habitat. Cementing the link that binds Europe to sexual expression (as opposed to American repression), Wharton ensures that Ellen is not alone: others that are marred by ill-repute, such as Julius Beaufort and Mrs. Struthers, wear fur, and are also linked to European mores. Beaufort and Struthers are barely tolerated by upper-class New Yorkers, as they are oriented outwards and refuse to take off their furs.

The first time Ellen is seen in fur, she is "half-reclined...her wide sleeve leaving the arm bare to the elbow" (1099). Even before the fur is mentioned, her body is placed in a position that implies a readiness for intercourse, and her exposed skin is suggestive of an inherent readiness to show *more* skin: thus, part of the eroticism of fur on skin lies in its potentiality. Furs, while often sought after for the conspicuous wealth they display, were also presumably chosen for their comfort and - most importantly - pleasure. Fur is soft and sleek and, most tellingly of all, loosely worn by Ellen. The appeal of fur stems from its texture and feel, and the implication is that a woman in fur is subconsciously asking to be touched. Wharton writes a heady, descriptive passage that illuminates the juxtaposition between the wearing of fur and more conventional forms of dress:

It was usual for ladies who received in the evenings to wear what were called “simple dinner dresses”: a close-fitting armor of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band. But Madame Olenska, heedless of tradition, was attired in a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur...There was something perverse and provocative in the notion of fur worn in the evening in a heated drawing-room, and in the combination of a muffled throat and bare arms; but the effect was undeniably pleasing (1099).

Ellen appears to wear fur purely for self-enjoyment. Its perversity, in Newland Archer’s thinking, is its lack of necessity. Fur worn “in a heated drawing room” makes the clothing lose its function, and it instantly becomes something outside of the norm: it is a means of self-expression rather than something worn to please others or to fit in. Ellen’s bare arms and dark furs are a visual reminder of her resistance to socio-sexual norms. The carnal undertones of her clothing are “heedless” to the veneer of innocence championed by her community. Newland’s attraction and repulsion to the fur encapsulates both his desire to escape his society and his ingrained inability to do so. The physical space in which she presents this self - intimate and private in her haphazardly decorated sitting room - emphasizes how the fur becomes an extension of personality and a signifier of opposition. By establishing her own dress code and choosing that which is suggestively tactile, she *defines herself*, which puts her at risk of becoming shunned by her community.

It is May Welland who fits the description of one of those women who only “uncover[s] just enough wrist.” Indeed, the phrase “just enough” from the passage shows that there is a limit to how much can be shown - and that Ellen exceeds it. The stiffness of the “tight sleeves” and stifling “lace ruffles” that Ellen rejects is an enforcement of physical and emotional restriction, an almost literal form of bondage, which allows the lace to become a manifestation of societal

conformity. Without it, there cannot be intra-species identification. Society can recognize its own - it can recognize who is in the tribe - by the presence of lace. The role society plays in defining people comes partly from the coded language of fashion, and May allows herself to *be defined* by what she wears. The “old lace” (1271) of May’s wedding dress, worn in a public space, is meant to communicate to the world her obedience to tradition. Its value comes from its display, and May, outfitted in the wardrobe becoming of members of her society, follows the status quo by attiring herself in acceptable, confining ensembles that treat skin as something to be hidden. When Ellen gives May yet another piece of “old lace” (1165) as a wedding gift, she is subtly indicating to the newly married couple their official status as members of the tribe. Ellen’s gift can be interpreted as an ironic gesture to Newland of his traditional choice of bride, and her decision to wear fur in private - rather than May’s public wearing of lace - can be read as an act of moral hesitance. Her ironic gesture is almost self-hating, and is just as ambiguous as Newland’s own feelings towards the fur he seems to abhor and desire all at once.

Lace is also attached to other female characters, underscoring the extent to which lace has infiltrated the collective psychology of New York society. Newland’s sister and mother, like May, are so entrenched in the ideology of their culture that lace becomes something not only worn but *made*. Janey and Mrs. Archer “squeeze themselves into narrow quarters...[where they make] macrame lace...” (1042). Just like their wardrobe, their living quarters are also tight and restricted, and the craftwork makes them arbiters and participants in making and upholding social rules. Lace, considered to be a valuable family heirloom, is passed down through the generations, just as rules and behaviors are. Janey and Mrs. Archer unwittingly create the lace that will serve as other wedding gifts for other traditional brides. This circularity ensures a

continuance of tribal authority and shows the degree to which lace is something that is acted upon: no longer a passive presence on the dresses of women, it becomes a pursuit in which women play an active role in their own subservience. The connection between generational conformity and lace extends itself to other novels of Wharton's, particularly *The Reef*, where Madame de Chantelle, the aging matriarch that resides in the ancestral estate of Givré, outfits herself and her surroundings with lace accoutrements. Her "little velvet tables edged with lace" (179) mirror the "lace handkerchief" (180) that she holds in her hand. The connection between object-world and personage parallels the lace that the Archer women make and wear. Madame de Chantelle's physical clinging to lace speaks to the way in which older generations adhere to outdated mindsets; these mindsets are transplanted onto the younger generation, in the form of heirloom lace, of which May is its literal and metaphorical recipient. However, because Madame de Chantelle is not *directly* outfitted in lace, she is not completely prone to old-fashioned ideas.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the *actual* wearing of lace versus the *possession* of lace begs for interpretation; indeed, her hesitancy at her grandson marrying outside of their class is changed by Anna Leath's interference, and she ultimately concedes to the engagement, which allows one to consider the differences between lace worn and lace owned. The tension between tradition and the risqué is presented in her characterization, and *The Age of Innocence* weaves some of these ideas into the contrast between fur and lace.

The sexual and social exoticism of Ellen is sharpened even further when she meets Newland at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The space, rigid in its careful attention to

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Madame de Chantelle and Ellen both share the title of "Madame," which binds them securely to Europe and thus to its propensity towards the outré. It is not only in *The Age of Innocence* that Wharton makes the connections between Europe and disobedience, lace and conformity.

categorization and collection, is infiltrated by Ellen's insistence on defying the rules of fashion and conduct. Newland describes her as "girlish even under [her] heavy furs, [and] the cleverly planted heron wing in her fur cap...[were] details that made her herself and no other" (1262). The wing surreptitiously invokes the idea of flight, but when paired with fur, it creates a conflict between movement and the static. Indeed, fur can be read as a *lack* of movement; as something once belonging to an active animal, its presence invokes the idea of fixedness and stagnation. Just like Ellen, this image is contradictory and encompasses her reaction to the New York environment: torn between deference to an unchanging, traditional society and her desire to move freely of her own volition, she combines two exotic pieces that separately suggest resistance but together underscore her indecision.

Emily Orlando argues in *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* that Newland's observations that depict Ellen as a piece of art, rather than as a person, makes him "more comfortable...than the reality of Ellen Olenska" (185). Newland's unwillingness to grasp Ellen's complexity and artistry places him firmly within the tribe, and his comparison of her to other works of art strips her of autonomy, and mimics the reactions of the rest of his society. He focuses on her exteriors - her fur and heron wing - which reveals a lack of interest in discerning Ellen introspectively. In his eyes, she is a mannequin atop which the sexual associations Newland's milieu places upon fur are laid bare. But Ellen Olenska is not a mannequin, and the "reality" of this truism dooms the pair. While the animals she dons *do* connote a certain eroticism, making Newland's sexual interest justifiable, Orlando returns Ellen's autonomy back to her by stating that "*Ellen* is in fact the artist" (185). Any relish that Newland gains from watching Ellen in her furs comes from Ellen's own innovation, not his. He vicariously lives through her opposition yet cannot bring

himself to copy it. Her intrusion into the realm of tradition - including his own household, where she wears a typically foreign “green monkey muff” (1136) while his female family members sit close by in lace - is what he enjoys the most about her. It is this fetishization of the animal in and on her that drives his lust. A large part of the breakdown of their relationship is due to their inability to reconcile their desires for freedom and for tradition. Ellen’s fur and May’s lace represent the ability of New York society to exclude those that cannot bring themselves to follow the rules and to include those that can.

Whether or not lace or fur appears in the dress of women in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* depends on their relative associations with the dominant hierarchy. In this case, that dominance comes from the upper-class society of New York, where May Welland and Ellen Olenska represent the anxiety that arises from choosing between two disparate lifestyles. May, characterized as untarnished and intimately associated with the right people, subscribes to the roles dictated to her, making the lace an emblem of her acceptance of social rules. The lace is not just a reminder for her, but for the people around her, and has a greater meaning when worn in public. Ellen, with her dark hair and blunt mannerisms, associates with those whose sexual reputations are questionable, and ties herself to authorities outside of New York. Her dark furs and animalistic clothing communicate that she is not willing - or is unable - to adapt to her environment. Her eventual retirement to Europe could perhaps be Wharton’s way of broadcasting that unauthorized behaviors cannot survive in the geographical landscape of Gilded Age New York. The distance between the two wardrobe choices becomes a microcosm of how two such distinct types of women can either prosper or suffer in the constraints of Wharton’s society.

### Works Cited

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