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WOMAN AT HOME, WOMAN IN EXILE IN EDITH WHARTON'S THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

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Abstract. In her novel *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton (1996) presents two contrasting female characters, Ellen and May, while depicting New York's high society in the 1870s. This paper focuses on the concept of domesticity and how Ellen and May deal with it. The most important virtue of True Womanhood in the nineteenth century was domesticity, and women could exist only within the family, bound to the domestic sphere of the home. However, a domestic sphere can also signify the unity of a nation in opposition to foreign threats. Although both Ellen and May can be viewed as victims of forced domesticity, their positions differ considerably when the domestic sphere is read as New York, or America itself. While Ellen fails to become a domestic housewife as a runaway Countess, she is again alienated and expelled as a foreigner. On the other hand, May tries her best to fit into the domestic sphere, but she also plays a major role in preserving the domestic land, which is New York, from the contamination of European foreignness that Ellen brings. Nevertheless, in the end, Wharton (1996) seems to point out the narrowness of the womanhood that is unable to understand women as individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

By 1900 in America, the "new woman" emerged who had college education and challenging ideas towards traditional conventions. The characters in women's writing in the twentieth century were under continuous courses for independence and liberation. Women writers in this era reflected women's position in America through their texts, and Edith Wharton was one of them (Becker, 1999). In her Pulitzer-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton (1996) depicts upper-class New York society of 1870s with both nostalgic and satirical sense. She especially portrays female characters in relation to American womanhood, illustrating how society produces a generation of women (Becker, 1999).

This paper focuses on the concept of domesticity not only in terms of separate spheres as Barbara describes, but also in opposition to foreignness as Kaplan (1998) suggests, by comparing and contrasting two female characters in *The Age of Innocence* who are May and Ellen. While May conforms to become a good wife and a mother, Ellen rejects the idea of domestic housewife. However, when the domestic sphere extends to society or country, May becomes responsible for the banishment of foreignness/foreigner, which mainly refers Ellen. Although they have different attitudes towards domesticity, and are positioned differently as American and foreigner, both of the women are imprisoned in the frame of domesticity.

True Woman's Domesticity

How domestic woman was viewed and worshipped during that time is illustrated in Welter's (1983) essay *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*. Welter (1983) examines virtues of true woman in the nineteenth century by reviewing women's magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of that time which represented women as "hostage in the home." (Welter, 1983) In order to be judged as true woman by her husband, her neighbors and the society, one was required to have four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Domesticity was the most prized virtues to which other three could be related. True woman with domesticity remained at her assigned position, which was daughter, sister, especially wife and mother. Home was considered to provide security from outside world and any kind of errors (Welter, 1983, p. 233). The primary role of woman at home was to comfort and cheer her husband, brothers, or sons. Besides nursing and needle work which were exemplary domestic activities (Welter, 1983, pp. 234-235) the most appropriate way to exercise woman's domestic virtues was through marriage, becoming a wife with security and status. Marriage was viewed as natural, perfect sphere for women, which also increased her authority (Welter, 1983, p. 239). The wifehood was followed by motherhood, with more usefulness and prestige entailed.

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Together with being wife, becoming mother “anchored” the woman even more tightly to the home (Welter, 1983, p. 240). While many of the female characters betray domesticity in *The Age of Innocence*, it is May Welland who strives the most to qualify for American girl and true woman of nineteenth century. May steadily follows the steps of domestic woman with marriage and childbirth. According to *True Womanhood*, nursing was part of woman’s comfort she provided, as wife and mother (Welter, 1983, pp. 234-5). May worrying about Archer’s health when he opens the window stand for domestic nursing (Wharton, 1996, p. 207), together with her sacrificing death for her child, Bill. May died of pneumonia which she got infected through Bill while nursing him. Her death is romanticized when Archer describes it: “having snatched little Bill from the grave, and given her life in the effort, she went contentedly to her place in the Archer vault in St. Markss...(Wharton, 1996, p. 244)” May had not only been a generous wife, but sacrificing mother both of which were ideal in nineteenth century. Wifehood and motherhood enhances her authority as Welter claims (Welter, 1983, pp. 239-40), which she uses against Ellen by announcing her pregnancy. (Wharton, 1996, p. 240)

The cult of domesticity is prevalent in New York society where May belongs to. The duty of wife is especially accentuated throughout the novel. However, it has not been easy for May to become a perfect American housewife. May’s struggles to fit into the category of “nice woman,” or “domestic housewife” are apparent. For instance, she tries hard to do embroidery which is a symbol of domesticity for its elegance, in spite of her talent and interest in outdoor activities such as riding, archery, and rowing (Welter, 1983 pp. 235; Wharton, 1996, p. 206). Although her large hand is more appropriate for sports, she still endeavors to be classified as domestic wife. Nevertheless, she struggles the most to hold tight to her marriage even though she is perfectly aware of Archer’s affair with Ellen (Wharton, 1996, p. 187). Although her side of the story is never told to the reader, it is considerably possible that May is aware of Archer’s obvious ignorance and indifference. While she should have been hurt, she is desperate to keep the marriage intact. In New York, it is best for a wife to stay with her husband, no matter what failure or disgrace he faces, or how monstrously he treats her. In New York society where women are believed to be perceptible only in relation to men, it seems reasonable for May to hold tight to her marriage (Knights, 1995, p. 33). It would be more appropriate to argue that May “tries” to be domestic, rather than is domestic.

In contrast, Ellen becomes a threat to domesticity as a runaway wife from Europe, who is also childless. For Archer and rest of the New Yorkers, it is unusual for woman to desire inde-

pendence for its own sake despite financial risk, since they believe women need marriage and home for dependence and happy life (Welter, 1983, p. 242). However, Ellen not only willingly disconnects herself from domestic sphere, but she also displays no sign of suffering that is supposed to be caused by the separation from her husband. Rather, she suffers more when domesticity is forced upon her. She is a runaway wife and is also childless, both of which states make it impossible for her to be a good wife or a good mother that domesticity requires. Ellen even refuses to live with her grandmother, Catherine Mingott who represents the whole family, which is an alternate shelter for woman besides her husband. By buying her own house apart from her family, she succeeds in pursuing ultimate independence (though not financial). When she outwardly says that she loves being alone back in America, and that she had to be free even from her own family, Ellen suggests the possibility of living on as an independent woman without domesticity (Wharton, 2008 p. 52; 54). Her very existence is quite a threat not only because she is satisfied even though she is not domestic, but also because the very reason why she seems content is due to her rejection to domesticity.

Not only must her position as a runaway wife, but also her love for art have been considered un-domestic. Art rather belong to public sphere, exclusively for men to enjoy and participate in. While Mrs. and Miss Archer are fond of scenery, architecture and art are preserved for Archer who is considered to be more intelligent and learned (Wharton, 1996, p. 24). Archer does not plan to share “his artistic and intellectual life” with his wife, May and decides to keep his cultured life outside domestic sphere (Wharton, 1996, p. 137, italicized by me). Thus, Archer’s neglect and disrespect on the Blenkers’ is not surprising. The Blenkers consist of a mother and daughters, and they invite writers, actors, editors and critics to their house (p. 72). Archer’s disdain for the event at Blenkers’ can be attributed to the belief that domestic sphere should not be provided for public matters. Archer enjoys meeting artists, but the place he meets them are not his or someone else’s house but the Century or musical and theatrical clubs (p. 73). Moreover, the fact that the Century Club was exclusively for “men with artistic learnings” (p. 260) implies that he also despises the Blenkers because they are enthusiastic women who covet intellectual sphere which is only permitted to men. Just as Archer becomes annoyed once May begins to speak aloud her own ideas on literature (p. 206), he simply regards the Blenkers and Mrs. Struthers as weird women for actively appreciating, consuming art and even in control of the meetings.

In society where women were more than often excluded from artistic and intellectual life, Ellen eagerly searches for places

to meet artists and appreciate arts. While true women were supposed to be busy with housework since it was considered inspirational (Welter, 1983, p. 235), Ellen finds her inspiration through arts and literature, which adds to her un-domesticity. Even as a kid living in New York, she was provided actual and practical education on art (Wharton, 2008, p. 42). Later on, she was surrounded by rich European culture, associating with artists, singers, actors and musicians back in Europe (p. 75). Furthermore, Ellen herself is an artist. When young, she was once a pianist (p. 55). After she comes back to New York and decorates her own house, she is praised for her artistic sense of arranging flowers (p. 63), with fictions scattered around in her drawing-room, (p. 73). Ellen is a woman who is intelligent, artistic, and independent whom people have never met before (Joslin, 1991, pp. 96-97). Nonetheless, Ellen's lack of domesticity and full of artistry makes society uncomfortable (Orlando, 1998, p. 73), since she proposes the emergence of new woman who is not domestic, but can be as much as aesthetically sensible and artistically intelligent as men, or even superior to them.

Domesticity against Foreignness

On the other hand, Kaplan (1998) figures out how domesticity can be perceived in different sense in "Manifest Domesticity." The term domestic obtains another meaning when family and the nation is combined, and oppose to everything outside of "home" in both geographic and conceptual sense (Kaplan, 1998, p. 581). In contrast to domestic home, external world is understood as alien and threatening (p. 582). At the same time, foreign being is necessary in order to draw lines between home and the foreign and to secure, define the domain as one nation. In opposition to foreign threat, women who were once separated in "domestic" sphere become ally with men as a united nation to fight over foreign influence together. The dividing criterion becomes racial difference not gender. Kaplan (1998) considers domesticity as the process of domestication, in which the alien must be tamed and conquered (p. 582). Thus, domesticity not only borders home and foreignness, but also monitors the foreignness within borders, at home. Domesticity is not a fixed concept and the conception, definition of the foreign, or the borders dividing nation and the other is also unstable, changing in different context (Kaplan, 1998, pp. 582-583).

In Kaplan (1998) sense, New York Society in The Age of Innocence naturally becomes domestic sphere, since society consists of families who are related through intermarriages. For example; Mrs. Archer and Mrs. van der Luydens are cousins, while May, Ellen, and Regina Beaufort are cousins as well. Old New York Society itself then becomes the very domestic sphere where family dwells, and members are conscious of external threats.

New Yorkers seem almost xenophobic when they implicitly and explicitly express disgust or distaste towards foreigners. Mrs. Archer considers the French Sunday obscene (Wharton, 1996, p. 62), Mrs. Archer and Janey do not socialize with local people at all during traveling unless the situation is emergent and Archer as well refuses to associate with "queer Europeanized Americans" in Europe, whose activities he considered was eccentric (pp. 137-138). However, what annoys New York people the most are the foreigners residing in the very same place with themselves, whose presence induces them to monitor since they represent the foreignness within the border in Kaplan (1998) point of view (Kaplan, 1998, p. 583). Besides Ellen, Beaufort is infamous foreigner who contaminates America with his doubtful origin and financial scandal along with sexual one. He is constantly gazed at, listened to, watched and talked about by people of New York, who feels threatened by his foreignness. Archer himself discloses his dislike of both the emigrant and the idea of emigration, asserting that "gentleman cannot abandon his own country" when Winsett proposes emigration (p. 89). According to Bauer (2005), there did exist fears of American against immigrants and their influence, which might blur the boundaries between them (Bauer, 2005, p. 73).

As her last name Olenska suggests which is very rare and unusual in high society of New York, she already possesses certain foreignness (Wharton, 1996, p. 193). Ellen is perceived to be foreign in many ways such as her origin, use of language, her cultural background, and her lifestyle. Ellen is an orphan of "continental wanderers," and had been under another wanderer aunt Medora's care, which left certain foreignness and oddity in her (p. 41). Ellen's foreign accent, or mixing English with French grammar all contribute to "Frenchness in her English" (p. 99) which is visible demarcation for people in New York. Her marrying an Eastern European Count and living in Europe especially "Europeanized" her (p. 102). Additionally, Ellen's closeness to her Sicilian maid in New York again adds to her Mediterranean foreignness (Bauer, 2005, p. 76). Her life style including bohemian neighbors and acquaintance with "odd people" such as Julius Beaufort, Blenkers, and Mrs. Struthers exhibits Ellen's foreignness as well. However, when Ellen's foreignness attracts Archer and jeopardizes his matrimonial union, Ellen not only threatens May and Archer's domesticity, but also the whole society by disintegrating it with her contaminating foreignness.

What is interesting in Kaplan's (1998) idea is the role of women in relation to domesticity. When domestic sphere, once occupied by women is extended to a nation, women then play major role in determining borderline and preserving home-nation, as the main agent in the house (Kaplan, 1998, p. 582). In The Age

of Innocence, it is women's responsibility to border and protect the domestic land, mostly May's. While May, Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland define Ellen as a foreigner, May is the one who plans, organizes exile of Ellen. Above all, she wisely and timely tells Ellen her pregnancy ahead, which becomes the direct reason for Ellen's leave (Wharton, 2008, p. 241). Moreover, Archer becomes excluded from family discussions concerning Ellen's divorce after a short conversation with May, when he responds to May's speculation that Ellen might be happy with her husband back in Europe, with laughing at her idea, calling it cruelty of her (p. 152). As it turns out, her remark was to see which side Archer was on (p. 176). It is inferred that May has been conscious of Archer's remark and shared it with Mingotts, resulting in Archer's exclusion from family discussion on Ellen Olenska's return to her husband (p. 176). May controls the discussion by deciding who will participate and who will not. May's authority extends even further when she decides to give a dinner party which turns out to be a farewell party for Ellen. May strongly expresses her will to do so when she says she "mean[s] to do it," and that she and Archer ought to do it (Wharton, 1996, p. 233). May is clearly playing major role in banishment of a foreigner with support from her family. Archer and May are standing as Newland Archers, united as a New Yorker couple to expel Ellen, as in Kaplan's (1998) idea of man-woman alliance (Kaplan, 1998, p. 582). This party for Ellen is organized by mainly May, but also with help from her mother and mother-in-law which suggests female solidarity against foreigner (Wharton, 1996, p. 230). May sitting between Mr. Van Der Luyden and Mr. Selfridge Merry, described as "enthroned" between two gentlemen, alludes to her authority in this ritual (p. 235). The victory of domesticity is clearly manifested when May, the leader of this war sheds tears of joy during the dinner and after the guests have gone back to their home (p. 238, 241). After the banishment which was masked as benevolent party followed by May's notification of her pregnancy to Archer, the united "Archers" lead on peaceful and domestic life, free from foreign threat in New York.

The Frame of Domesticity

By far two contrasting characters in *The Age of Innocence* were examined in relation to domesticity in two different but connected senses. While every action and every woman is judged by whether they are domestic or not, Wharton (1996) seems to question why women are forced to belong to either side of the binary system. She does not idealize any side of them; rather, she has sympathy for both Ellen and May who struggle in a society too limited and narrow to accept diverse womanhood. Neither May nor is Ellen perceived as individual,

not even by their own family, but both are judged and classified in male-dominant society where men hold their opera glasses to examine and assess women as product of society (Wharton, 1996, p. 6). In such society it is impossible to encompass and represent different womanhood, such as Catherine Mingott, Medora Manson, Mrs. Struthers, and the Blenkers, while it is these odd female characters that bring energy and give dynamics to New York society (Joslin, 1991, p. 104). People in America thus fail to see these two women outside the frame of domesticity, forbidding themselves from knowing who Ellen or May really is, as individuals. Female characters in *The Age of Innocence* cannot speak for themselves, and are analyzed and spoken by Archer who represents masculine New York. This limited narrative suggests that women are always misinterpreted and oversimplified under the restricted frame of womanhood that is forced by patriarchy. Archer often simplifies his understanding of Ellen and May, so that it would not be necessary for him to face the completeness of a self (Wolff, 2005, p. 116). Although May succeeds in banishing the foreigner, it only results in reinforcement of existing patriarchy of New York society. May is the perfect domestic housewife in the eyes of New York and her artificial domesticity blinds others to see her true "self." As Archer himself confesses, he views May as "a type rather than a person." (Wharton, 1996, p. 132) May's girlishness, boyishness, virginity, and innocence to Archer's eyes all contribute to a certain image, rather than a genuine self. Indeed, to become a "true woman," one had to completely erase herself, since the very womanhood could only be established by denying women as individuals (Papke, 1990, p. 17). The way Archer understands May is based on her innocence and domesticity which he believes she possesses, erasing her individuality and fluidity. Even when May seems to be aware of Archer's affair with Ellen, she is described to hide her feelings under "Spartan smile" (206). He does not try the least to understand what is beneath her smile. Even after years of marriage May is still that innocent May Archer has known (p. 244). Archer describes May as still lacking in imagination, incapable of growth and totally blind after all, when in fact May knew Archer's feelings towards Ellen all along (p. 250).

Archer's ignorance is most apparent when he is touched by his own wife's "pity" towards him. Archer confidently calls it pity by understanding May as typical domestic housewife, unable to see her as "May." He is only concerned with his feelings, failing to feel sympathy for May who has lived with a man who does not love her. May was never May Welland or May Archer to him and to the rest of the people as well, but a True Woman, and the American girl imbued with domesticity who will always understand him, and say the right things on behalf

of him (Wharton, 1996, pp. 17). When May says, “You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices one has one’s feelings and ideas,” she seems to address to everyone else that she is an individual and should be treated as one (p. 105).

Under the judgement based on domesticity, Ellen is evidently a rebel and a threat. On the other hand, New York society is both startled and fascinated by her foreignness as Archer’s double impression on the painting in Mingott’s drawing room suggests (Wharton, 1996, p. 20). More than often Ellen is objectified and romanticized through eyes of Beaufort and Archer. Archer especially only objectifies Ellen as an ideal, rather than truly loving her (Papke, 1990, p. 152). While Ellen does ask for guidance and help from Archer in her attempt to belong to somewhere again, he is more than eager to beautify her suffering, making her a tragic heroine as an outsider. Archer sees Ellen in an “exposed and pitiful figure, to be saved...from further wounding herself...” (Wharton, 1996, p. 68) Archer’s misreading of Ellen is exposed when the pink parasol Archer was so sure of belonged to Ellen turns out to be Miss Blenker’s (pp. 158-159). After all, Archer restrains himself from meeting Ellen in reality when 26 years have passed, only to keep her in his memory and imaginary. Archer refusing to real encounter with Ellen suggests that he was never curious about the “real” her, but was fond of her mystic image as foreigner. Archer’s Ellen cannot be Ellen herself, since she is perceived only as “an aura of European mystique” (Hadley, 2005). In the end, Ellen becomes part of Archer’s memory of youth that reminds him of the old days of New York to which he cannot go back, and a beautiful foreign image that encompasses everything that is not American.

Nevertheless, it is very interesting that only Ellen and May are the ones who seem to understand each other. Ellen sees intelligence and brightness in May which Archer fails to witness (Wharton, 1996, p. 45). Ellen also tries not to hurt May and the rest of the family for what they have done for her, when Archer seems careless even about his own wife May. Similarly, May understands Ellen better than Archer does. Archer’s perception of Ellen is always related to her relationship with other men such as the Count Olenski, Julius Beaufort, and M. Riviere. He even pushes Ellen back to Beaufort at Skuytercliff, out of

jealousy, even when he speculates that Beaufort is the one from whom Ellen runs away from. While Ellen still clings to his arm, he moves away from her to “[throw] open the door” for Beaufort, saying “this way! Madam Olenska was expecting you.” (p. 96) Archer is more concerned about possibilities of Ellen’s engaging with other men than her actual plight.

On the other hand, May does see Ellen as she is: a lonely outsider. For instance, even when it seems obvious to readers Ellen’s reason for going to Mrs. Struther’s Sunday evening is to enjoy art and meet people like her, Archer assumes her reason to be meeting Beaufort there (Wharton, 1996, p. 110). May notices that Ellen is not as much as interested in New York society as other family members believe her to be, and additionally May is conscious of Ellen’s enthusiasm for art (p. 85). Moreover, while Archer appeals to Ellen that he understands her when he is only romanticizing her, May knows better, and admits that nobody actually understands her (p. 182). Though it might be ironic, May understands Ellen’s loneliness and feeling of being lost in New York as an outsider. The conversation between Ellen and May is untold to the reader, but it invites us to speculate about their story.

CONCLUSION

In Consequence, Wharton’s (1996) feminism is known to be complex, subtle, and implicit. She often presents two contrasting female characters in her works, one of who is conventional, and the other confronting social expectations (McDowell, 1974, p. 521). May stands for Old New York with her true womanhood and domesticity, while Ellen challenges social expectations with her lack of domesticity. Moreover, May plays major role in banishment of the foreigner with domesticity when domestic sphere is extended to the whole nation. Ellen on the other hand is twice marginalized as un-domestic woman and a foreigner. Wharton (1996) does not seem to argue that domesticity is evil; rather, she problematizes society’s short sightedness and its limited frame to perceive women which prevents people to view women as individuals. It can be inferred that Wharton (1996) implicitly hoped for progressive, dynamic society where women can have leading roles and become active individuals (p. 538).

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— This article does not have any appendix. —