



The Expression Of Material Details In Edith Wharton's '*The Age Of Innocence*'

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Abstract:

'*The Age of Innocence*' was written by Edith Wharton in 1920, and became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for this novel. The novel offers a panoramic view of the polished outward manners of powerful families in 1870s New York.

The novel focuses on the conflict between social and individual fulfilment and the manners of old and new elite families. Edith Wharton expresses the manners of these families through the description of material details. New elites were those who had gained their money in recent years and entered the upper crust of the social pyramid of New York. The upper crust of New York were respectable families who had improved their social status by marrying into one of the ruling clans. These three families, the Dagonets of Washington Square, the Lannings, and the Van Der Luydens, were direct descendants of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan.

The relationship between the house as a physical space and its relationship to its inhabitant's character and emotions is the dominant aspect of the novel. This paper deals with material and graphical details used in Wharton's '*The Age of Innocence*' and the reason behind the usage of those material details.

Index Terms- Elite Families, upper-crust, social pyramid, material details, upper-class,

Introduction:

Edith Wharton is one of the brilliant writers of social consciousness. Her novel '*The Age of Innocence*' provides considerable attention to the effect of social class on the behaviour of the mind, especially that of the upper-class elite people. Edith Wharton possesses the ability to attract her readers' attention through her skilful writing. Her novels are admired for their vivid setting through which she criticized double standards in upper-class society. There is one interesting feature of Wharton's writing that is she describes small material details. These details are integral parts of the setting and narrative of her novels. Material details attempted to present society as it is.

This paper explores Wharton's expression of the material details of '*The Age of Innocence*'. Description of Tiny material details is her skilful tool through which the readers experience and explore the New York upper class with a concrete vision. This visionary quality engrossed readers in the historical era of the novel which proves helpful in understanding the sociopsychological behaviour of the characters. These material details add pictorial quality to her description which separates her from Henry James and other writers of her era.

Expression of Material details in 'The Age of Innocence':

Edith Wharton wrote *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) in collaboration with Ogden Codman. In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton artistically presented scenery, landscape, interior, and the way people were dressed. She is interested in architecture and uses her skills in writing. This writing style made the novel unique. Wharton persisted on the structural relationship between the private inside of a home and its public facade. In her work *The Decoration of Houses* she mentioned that the houses of her characters are decorated concerning the feelings of her characters. Windows, thresholds, libraries, halls, dining rooms, ballrooms, Opera Houses, and music academy play a vital role in understanding the socio-psychological behaviour of characters in *The Age of Innocence*.

In the opening scene of the novel readers find a description of material details. The opening scene of the novel takes place at the Academy of Music in New York. Though a new and grander opera house is going to be built, New Yorkers still come to the academy due to sentimental clung to it for its historic associations and musical for its excellent acoustic.

In the third chapter of the novel Wharton describes Beaufort's house in the following words:

“The Beauforts’ house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ball–room (it antedated even Mrs. Manson Mingott’s and the Headly Chiverses’); and at a time when it was beginning to be thought “provincial” to put a “crash” over the drawing–room floor and move the furniture upstairs, the possession of a ball–room that was used for no other purpose, and left for three–hundred–and–sixty–four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag; this undoubted superiority was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past”
(TAI., Book 1, Ch.1, P.17).

The Beauforts' house, with its exclusive ballroom, compensates for any scandalous history. The author further describes it as follows:

“The Beaufort house was one that New Yorkers were proud to show to foreigners, especially on the night of the annual ball. The Beauforts had been among the first people in New York to own their own red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen, under their own awning, instead of hiring it with the supper and the ball–room chairs. They had also inaugurated the custom of letting the ladies take their cloaks off in the hall, instead of shuffling up to the hostess’s bedroom and recurling their hair with the aid of the gas–burner; Beaufort was understood to have said that he supposed all his wife’s friends had maids who saw to it that they were properly coiffees when they left home. Then the house had been boldly planned with a ball–room, so that, instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to it (as at the Chiverses’) one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing–rooms (the sea–green, the crimson and the bouton d’or), seeing from afar the many–candled lustres reflected in the polished parquetry, and beyond that the depths of a conservatory where camellias and tree–ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo”
(TAI., Book 1, Ch.3, P.18).

The New Yorkers' eagerness to display the Beauforts' house and customs to foreigners implies a feeling of inferiority towards Europeans. It seems that they feel the need to demonstrate that they are also affluent and socially refined, which could be a result of their insecurity. This sense of insecurity might be one of the reasons behind their unfriendliness towards foreigners.

Protagonist Newland Archer is always portrayed in his library as:

“A vigilant hand had, as usual, kept the fire alive and the lamp trimmed; and the room with the rows of books, its bronze and steel status of 'The Frances' on the mantelpiece and its many photographs of famous pictures, looked singularly home-like and welcoming”

(TAI., Book 1, Ch.6, P.37).

These details suggest Newland Archer's passion for reading. The description clearly shows that the house owner is a passionate reader and educated man. Then, photographs of the famous people on the wall articulate Archer's high taste. Archer belonged to the upper-class society and libraries were symbols of elite constraints of that time.

The diverse and unique finishing in Ellen Olenska's New York apartment is described through Newland Archer's eyes when he visited her, the maid led him through the narrow hall into a low firelit drawing room, where he saw her apartment

“some small slender tables of dark woods, a delicate little Greek bronze on the chimney-piece, and a stretch of red damask nailed on the discoloured wallpaper behind a couple of Italian-looking pictures in old frames”

(TAI., Book 1, Ch.9, P.60).

Wharton described her apartment in a way that the reader easily gets a clue that the person living there is special and different from other characters in the novel. Wharton clearly distinguishes Ellen from the other characters in the novel. Ellen is different and free from the so-called superficial norms of society. Wharton conveys this fact to her reader through details of her apartment by giving it a touch of particularity and specificity.

The description of Van der Luydens' drawing room is very typical of her architectural details style of writing. She describes the drawing room as

“high-ceiling white-walled Madison Avenue drawing -room, with the pale brocaded armchairs so obviously uncovered for the occasion, and the gauze still ceiling the ormolu mantel ornaments and beautiful old carved frame of Gainsborough's "Lady Angelica du Luc.”

(TAI., Book 1, Ch.7, P.45).

Mrs. Van der Luyden is known for being a quiet and kind person to those she favours. However, her silence can create an uneasy feeling in the sophisticated drawing room. A portrait of her hangs on the wall next to that of one of her ancestors. Despite the portrait being created twenty years prior, Mrs. Van der Luyden looks the same.

These examples indicate Wharton's extensive use of architectural details in literary writing. These details reveal the material wealth of New York elite families in the novel.

Psycho-Sociological Aspects of Wharton's Material Details

Edith Wharton opens a novel with a scene in which everyone is dressed in their best clothes. The fact that lady from the upper class of New York kept their dresses, ordered from the most prestigious shops in Europe, untouched in their wardrobes for over one year shows the sophistication and attitudes of those people. These details prepare readers for the dramatic setting of the novel. Wharton does not talk clearly about the psychology of her characters, but the reader learns about them from the description of the place and how they are dressed.

The narrator at the opening of the novel talks about an Opera House envisioned with splendour and costliness that could match even those of great European capitals. The following passage illustrates the social aspects of characters that are described by material details:

“Though there was already talk of the erection in the remote metropolitan distance “above the Forties” of a new Opera House which should complete in costliness and splendour with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still contend to resemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy”

(TAI., Book 1, Ch.1, P.1).

The readers came across the fact that the address of the house i. e. Fifth Avenue reflects social status and simply a person having an opera seat spoke loudly about her/his status. The description of Ellen's clothes depicts her personality. She is always in flowing and dark-coloured clothes in contrast to clothes worn by May Welland.

The readers find the best-ever discussion of clothing between Newland Archer and his wife May when they are on their wedding-tour in London. Again, the expression of material detail and its psycho-social relation is highlighted in the following scene:

"It's all very well for you, Newland; you KNOW them. But I shall feel so shy among a lot of people I've never met. And what shall I wear?"

Newland leaned back in his chair and smiled at her. She looked handsomer and more

Diana-like than ever. The moist English air seemed to have deepened the bloom of her cheeks and softened the slight hardness of her virginal features; or else it was simply the inner glow of happiness, shining through like a light under ice.

"Wear, dearest? I thought a trunkful of things had come from Paris last week."

"Yes, of course. I meant to say that I shan't know WHICH to wear." She pouted a little.

"I've never dined out in London; and I don't want to be ridiculous."

He tried to enter into her perplexity. "But don't Englishwomen dress just like everybody else in the evening?"

"Newland! How can you ask such funny questions? When they go to the theatre in old ball-dresses and bare heads."

"Well, perhaps they wear new ball-dresses at home; but at any rate Mrs. Carfry and Miss Harle won't. They'll wear caps like my mother's—and shawls; very soft shawls."

"Yes; but how will the other women be dressed?"

"Not as well as you, dear," he rejoined, wondering what had suddenly developed in her Janey's morbid interest in clothes.

She pushed back her chair with a sigh. "That's dear of you, Newland; but it doesn't help me much."

He had an inspiration. "Why not wear your wedding-dress? That can't be wrong, can it?"

"Oh, dearest! If I only had it here! But it's gone to Paris to be made over for next winter, and Worth hasn't sent it back."

(TAI., Book 2, Ch.20, P.164,165)

Archer and May have been socializing all their lives in New York. But they have no clue about socializing in England. They think that England is vastly different, and they cannot simply let their cultures mingle. Instead, they feel the need to behave like British people. Through this description, Wharton also suggests that the elite families of that time lived outside the world's reality. They are unaware of the changes in the future.

Conclusion

Material details in Wharton's novel *'The Age of Innocence'* establish historical accuracy and differentiate Old New York and the Modern World. Her excessive use of material details in the novel provides the reader panoramic view of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American social life. Through the expression of material details, Wharton brings to life the social world of wealthy people during that time for the reader. Material details reaffirmed the role of architecture and clothes in the social life of old and new elite families of New York. Wharton leads the reader toward the future of New York. Wharton effectively utilizes architectural features in her writing, enhancing her ability to present detailed information and promoting literary research, making her novels more complex and fissionable. Wharton skilfully employs material details to vividly describe the natural, material, and psycho-social facets of life. The present paper extensively discussed and analyzed the use of material details in Wharton's novel and found that the novelist skilfully used them to express the sociopsychological behaviour of old and elite families in New York during the turn of the nineteenth century.

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