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BOURDIEU, WHARTON AND CHANGING CULTURE IN THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Abstract

Although critics often attribute the failure of Edith Wharton’s characters to achieve happiness to dichotomous, even mutually exclusive causes – that is, to deficiency of character or to force of circumstance – the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu help to illuminate the more complex cultural and literary project at the heart of Wharton’s work. Bourdieu’s notions of field, habitus and capital speak to the dynamic rather than static nature of social relations in The Age of Innocence, Wharton’s penultimate novel about conflict between stultifying social conventions and imagined but seldom realized escapes from such restrictions. Bourdieu’s work helps us to see how Wharton embraces fluid rather fixed notions of culture in both her fiction and life. Vacillating throughout the novel between love for May Welland and for Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer stands at a crossroads between the fields of marriage and romance – between social convention and individual desire. Pulled by the competing demands of these fields, he progressively loses capital in both. Wharton documents the process by which Archer becomes constrained by a habitus shared with May; she also demonstrates – through multiple examples of cultural transformation – the degree to which he creates his own experience of having missed ‘the flower of life’. Archer’s problem, then, is not only the field in which he operates but his acceptance of the narrowness of this field. In contrast, through the character of Ellen Olenska as well as minor figures such as Catherine Mingott, Bob Spicer, Julius Beaufort, Emerson Sillerton and Dallas Archer, Wharton affirms the processes of social change and shows that, although one cannot help replicating social hierarchies and taste, one can participate in the constructing one’s social destiny.
Keywords

Edith Wharton; Pierre Bourdieu; *Age of Innocence*; culture; social conventions; social change

The individual is always . . . trapped – save to the extent he becomes aware of it . . . within the system of categories he owes to his upbringing and training.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 126–7)

**Edith Wharton’s Characters** often fail in their attempts to overcome social barriers to happiness. It is tempting to attribute these defeats to dichotomous, even mutually exclusive causes, that is, to failures either of character or of circumstance – especially because Wharton’s writing participates simultaneously in the literary traditions of manners and naturalism. However, such an approach simplifies the complex cultural and literary project at the heart of Wharton’s work. Wharton’s fiction is occupied, even obsessed, with vacillating tensions between stultifying social conditions and frequently imagined but seldom executed escapes from such environments. Wharton dramatizes the hopelessness of her characters’ predicaments by positioning their entrapments against backdrops of social mobility. For example, her major fiction deploys twentieth-century motifs of location, relocation and dislocation to dramatize characters’ plights. In Wharton’s first bestseller, *The House of Mirth* (1905), myriad conveyances – train, carriage, steamer – carry Lily Bart to and fro in search of a rich husband, but all manner of travel leads only to a narrow boarding-house and a deadly dose of choral. The title character of Wharton’s 1911 novella, *Ethan Frome*, dreams of escape – to Florida, a career in engineering, a new life with Mattie Silver – but he remains as frozen in his relationships as the New England landscape itself. In *The Reef* (1912), Anna Leath, devastated by discovery of her lover’s infidelity, yearns to free herself from romantic illusions, but she can neither renounce George Darrow nor achieve the unfettered, itinerant lifestyle of her rival, Sophy Viner. Charity Royall, the heroine of *Summer* ‘hate[s] everything’ in the sleepy town of North Dormer (1917: 159), but her romantic adventure with Lucius Harney, rather than releasing her from home, only inscribes her more deeply in her childhood setting. In each of these fictions, the desire for escape is palpable, but characters find their choices limited. Only Undine Spragg, in *The Custom of the Country* (1912), whose first name derives from the Latin ‘wave’, exhibits the force of energy necessary to penetrate social barriers; but even she by the novel’s end encounters legal resistance to her relentless ambition.

Nowhere is the tension between movement and stagnation more poignantly rendered than in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), arguably Wharton’s most mature
novel, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize. I take this penultimate text as a focus of study in this essay not because it is unique – on the contrary – but because it exemplifies Wharton’s complex approach to issues of character and culture. Despite a body of criticism that views the novel’s protagonist, Newland Archer, either as trapped by social constraints or as doomed by his own personality, *The Age of Innocence* exhibits Wharton’s dynamic perspectives about the shaping forces of culture. The plight of her character and Wharton’s ambivalence toward this plight is usefully illuminated through the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s theory of social interaction allows a discussion of characters who are as hamstrung by ambivalence as Archer is without unduly privileging either character or circumstance. Adopting a ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ approach to individuals and their environment, Bourdieu shows how the two work together to shape habitus, which is in turn self-shaping. That is, individuals participate in ‘changing’ culture at the same time that they are subject to ‘changing’ culture. Bourdieu’s notion of dynamic social change helps us to answer the novel’s central question: why does Newland Archer defer his passion for the exotic Ellen Olenska and stay instead with the conventional May Welland? A fluid rather than a static model of social interaction enriches a simplistic or dichotomous view of culture and disposition – for example, that Archer is poorly equipped to strike out on his own, or that his society demands individual sacrifice for the personal good.\(^1\) Such a model also explains Wharton’s enactment of culture in her own life; that is, her remarkable ability to negotiate the ostensibly mutually exclusive realms of high fashion and serious literature, of domesticity and travel, of the USA and Europe.

Newland Archer’s character seems to develop against a fixed backdrop: that of a rigid, upper-class New York society obsessed with preservation and ritualized routine. Readers are encouraged to adopt a static perspective by Wharton’s narrative technique, which includes slow pacing, elaborate visual detail and framed scenes that contribute to the impression of experiencing a ‘slice of life’ or a moment frozen in time. Archer seems suspended in – and inextricably bound to – his world, especially from the thirty-year perspective that informs the concluding chapter. Yet a more relational view of culture better captures Wharton’s view of history and the processes by which characters respond to change and even transform themselves. As Terry Eagleton notes, culture inherits a sense of religious authority or sacredness, as shown by the fact that both ‘culture’ and ‘cult’ share the Latin root, *colere*. In the New York society of *The Age of Innocence*, adherence to convention certainly carries the weight of ‘solemn’ ritual. However, culture, which means the cultivating of natural growth, also suggests ‘a dialectic between the artificial and the natural’ (Eagleton, 2000: 2); if culture is an active tending of nature, nature also produces culture, which in turn changes nature. Culture is both something already in us and something we achieve or create. Such a view assumes neither that individuals execute their wills freely, nor that they are powerless over circumstances. Rather, it acknowledges
the power and continuity of social structures *at the same time* that it incorporates the self-interested, creative forces of subjectivity.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theories account for both these fixed and fluid qualities of cultural power. His work includes a highly theorized mode of analysis attentive to the dynamics of social life, thus negotiating purely empirical and philosophical approaches to knowledge. Linking mental and social structures in relational rather than set terms, Bourdieu develops a ‘science of practices’ or ‘third-order knowledge’ that moves beyond subjectivism and objectivism (1972: 4) and seeks to preserve both approaches without synthesizing them. By locating the ‘real’ not in social substance but in social relations (1989: 15–16), his work provides a way to understand the multiple possibilities of character in relation to culture. With Bourdieu’s active notion of culture in mind, I consider Newland Archer as both product and producer of his culture, as both victim and creator of his destiny, and I trace the processes by which – through social training and choice – he becomes ‘the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was to happen’ (Wharton, 1920: 192).

I begin with Bourdieu’s theories of social interaction, in particular, with his notions of field, habitus and capital. In close readings of the novel that follow, I analyse the ways of Old New York in relation to these terms, focusing in particular on Newland Archer’s social position and desire for change. These discussions include Archer’s real and imagined differences from Old New Yorkers; his struggles to reconcile conflicting attractions to May and Ellen; his opportunities to escape New York social codes; and the novel’s concluding commentary on temporality, social dynamics and the limits of cultural change.

**Field, habitus, capital**

Three terms critical to Bourdieu’s theory include, first, ‘field’, by which Bourdieu means not a fixed domain but a dynamic potentiality or ‘field of forces’ (Mahar et al., 1990: 8). A ‘field’ is a relational social space populated by members who share interests and struggle for positions within that field. In sociology, a field constructs the object of the researcher’s study or sets the scene for broad discussion of distinctions within the field (1979: 226), for example, higher education, holiday destinations or French intellectual life.

Bourdieu’s second key term is habitus, which refers to the features by which an individual is known and knows his place in the world. Habitus is a ‘socialized subjectivity’ defined as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions’ (1972: 72, original emphasis). Habitus produces individuals whose behaviour, or practice, is regulated not so much by codified rules as by a logic governed by the group to which they belong. Those within a certain habitus tend to behave in prescribed or predictable fashions – behaviour is thus an ‘effect’ of habitus. Habitus, then, is not something individuals take on, but something that takes them on. Through
conditioning and over time, it becomes ‘embodied’ in one’s mental and physical structure (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 126–7). Bourdieu retains the notion of agency, but not of individuals who freely choose their actions. He posits instead a set of habits and structuring practices in which people engage and which in turn affect them, others and the social structure. Habitus and practice are self-creating, reciprocal and relational. Practice is the site upon which habitus is constituted; at the same time, practices are the product of a particular habitus.

Although habitus is unique to each individual, Bourdieu finds significant commonality to derive the notion of a class habitus: for upper classes one of luxury and for lower classes one of necessity. Habitus is associated with custom, not law, and, as with things that are customary, it is flexible rather than fixed. However, habitus is also the product of specific social and historical conditions. It builds on past experiences and actions, which in turn help to structure future actions in part because they are considered normal. By this process, habitus seems to guarantee continuity and ‘regularity’; as a basis for behaviour, it is often taken for granted and misrecognized as truth when it is, in fact, arbitrary (1987: 77). So long as habitus directs strategies that are expected within a field, nothing changes, or at least change is uniform. Under these conditions of equilibrium, habitus may remain unconscious and so be experienced as universal law. In some situations, however, habitus directs strategies that are not fully adapted to the field, and upset the local balance of the field. Habitus then becomes visible even though it is never completely transparent to individuals.

Bourdieu’s third key term, capital, is defined as specific forms of ‘accumulated labor’ (1983: 241). In a capitalistic society, economic capital – that which is converted immediately into monetary form – is the most familiar and privileged, but Bourdieu observes that other forms of capital deserve equal if not greater weight. These include cultural, social and symbolic forms of capital, which have their basis in the economic and are expended or reinvested by individuals with corresponding social losses or gains. Cultural capital includes embodied and often institutionalized forms of knowledge, such as that gained from membership in an elite organization or graduation from a prestigious institution. Social capital refers to relations with others that increase one’s status. Bourdieu notes in *Distinction* that capital is valued according to the cultural and social characteristics of the habitus and can be converted into other forms, which are valued differently at given points in time. Adherence to a specific class or group depends not only on the amount, but also on the structure, of capital possessed. Bourdieu argues for a three-dimensional map of social space, whose ‘dimensions are defined by volume of capital, composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time’ (1979: 114). The effects of these structures may be symmetrical – as in the case of professionals, who combine high income and high cultural capital – or they may be asymmetrical – as in the case of intellectuals, who possess high cultural capital and relatively low economic capital, or in the case of industrialists and senior executives, who possess high
economic capital and low cultural capital. Moreover, the social value of various forms of capital responds to historical change. For example, the post-World War II schooling boom made education a key determinant in class relationships, affecting job qualifications and prospects. As women and members of the middle class entered the educational system, the dominant class had to invest more in educational capital, resulting in ‘inflation’ in the educational market and ‘devaluation’ in educational qualifications. This devaluation had the paradoxical effect of increasing the importance of inherited social and cultural capital. Additionally, with a larger number of qualified graduates, the importance of a network of personal or family acquaintances increased dramatically, as did a ‘sens du placement’, which allowed members of the dominant classes to know when to ‘pull out of devalued disciplines and careers and to switch into those with a future’ (1979: 142).

According to Bourdieu, however, the most powerful form of capital is symbolic. Less stable than other forms, it is also the most potent because it confers the power to name or identify others, to represent common sense and to create official versions of the social world. Individuals who possess symbolic capital are seen as prestigious, legitimate and authoritative. Their possession of symbolic capital allows for what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’, the ability to control individuals through labels that are determined and supported by media, institutions and individuals. Although those with symbolic power may use physical force, simply naming someone or something has the power to judge and dominate.

Bourdieu uses the metaphor of ‘game’ (1972, 1980) to describe the subtle but profound ways that social attitudes and behaviours ‘play’ upon each other in social interactions. The field is the site of struggle and strategy upon which the game is played. Habitus – inherited and learned attitudes and behaviours – are trump cards played in the game. None of these interactions or values is fixed; rather, they dynamically interrelate: ‘just as the relative value of cards changes with each game, the hierarchy of the different species of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) varies across fields’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). For example, it is not simply that money confers social power, nor that lack of money erodes it. Individuals with abundant wealth may be held at a distance by society, whereas well-born characters with limited financial resources may always to have a place in it. Combining the determining aspect of class as found in Marx with the more autonomous role of status as found in Weber, Bourdieu charts the success and failure of individuals as they explore their advantages and disadvantages in various social interactions. He walks a fine line between determinism and agency, although he questions whether, among ever-readjusting social relations, change – at least of the kind envisioned by revolutionary marxism or psychoanalytic transformation – is really possible.

Several qualities of Bourdieu’s work make it useful for studying The Age of
Innocence. Broadly speaking, both Bourdieu and Wharton are interested in the dynamics of social interaction and their representation. A realist, Wharton represents what Amy Kaplan describes as ‘the dynamic relationship between changing fictional and social forms’, producing novels that offer social reality recognized ‘as the way things are’ (1988: 8). Realists, shaken by cultural change and distrustful of the significance of the social, lack confidence ‘in the capacity of fiction to reflect a solid world “out there”’. They respond to this deficiency by creating narratives that construct a coherent social world and do so ‘in direct confrontation with the elusive process of social change’ (Kaplan, 1988: 9). Wharton’s portrayal in The Age of Innocence of rigid social forms that dictate all manner of thought and behaviour is even more notable in relation to the shifting social ground upon which the novel was written in 1919. Wharton confronts a dizzying array of social changes brought on not only by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commerce, industry, immigration and urbanization, but also by the ravages of World War I; and she seeks through meticulously constructed detail to impose order on disorder.

First, then, Bourdieu, like Wharton, is sensitive to the problems of language, literature and aesthetics, a fact revealed by both writers’ critical work on French novelist Gustave Flaubert. Bourdieu, in his study of Flaubert, challenges the psychological emphasis on the writer as a solitary, romantic figure and instead places both the writer and his work in a realistic, social context. Bourdieu also questions the validity of biographical materials to provide insight about authorship and turns instead to Flaubert’s texts as case studies. Just as Bourdieu finds in Flaubert’s late work a distant, unnamed and sometimes ironic narrator that reveals Flaubert’s distancing of himself from ‘social self-awareness’ (Robbins, 2000: 77), so, too, we can infer Wharton’s personality in The Age of Innocence, in particular, in the fluctuating sentiments and confusion of her hero, who is pulled between conventional New York high society, as represented by May Welland, and a more artistic, cultured European lifestyle, as practiced by Ellen Olenska, who, like Wharton herself, attempts to follow but finally abandons the rules of the New York’s elaborately structured social game.

Second, Bourdieu’s focused observation of the ‘exotic minutiae of everyday life’ (Mahar et al., 1990: 8) and his corresponding development of a ‘microtheory of social power’ (Moi, 1991: 1019–20, original emphasis) are well suited to Wharton’s detailed style: her faithful recording of fashion and taste in 1870s upper-class New York; her accurate descriptions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century streets, homes and public venues; and her realistic representations of private and public speech and behaviour. Third, Bourdieu’s critical rather than neutral stance toward social relations highlights what Wharton’s fiction makes abundantly clear: that in everyday interactions, some individuals exercise power over others. Wharton’s writing is concerned with both the exercise of social power and the process of social change – from her depiction, in the best-selling The House of Mirth, of a ‘frivolous society which drew its
dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroyed’ to her retrospective chronicle, in *The Age of Innocence*, of ‘a long-vanished America’ (1934: 207). In *The Age of Innocence*, the most striking example of social dominance is, of course, New York’s organized exclusion of Ellen Olenska. Bourdieu shows how subtle but powerful manoeuvres such as this one are accomplished through the exercise of aesthetic categories of taste rather than through overt force (1979).

Finally, Bourdieu’s tendency toward the pessimistic – or, in a Durkheimian sense, the deterministic – parallels Wharton’s own bleak, naturalistic outlook. Wharton, no lover of sentimentality, who once noted that Americans want ‘a tragedy with a happy ending’ (1919b: 360), steadfastly refuses to grant readers their wish. Her plots lead in the worst cases to characters’ death, impairment and renunciation, and in the best cases, to resignation and compromise. She seldom rescues characters from the personal or social predicaments in which they find themselves.

**Old New York**

*The Age of Innocence* opens on a predominant field of Americanized Old World gentility, with Newland Archer, as his name fittingly suggests, its ‘arch’ representative. Wharton describes a habitus distinguished by wealth, geography, genealogy and training. She marks Archer’s social capital by his status as an eligible bachelor, his dinner invitations, his inclusion in social gossip and his anticipated marriage into a prominent Old New York family. She indicates his cultural capital by his box at the opera, preference for two hair brushes rather than one, habit of wearing fresh gardenias and arriving at performances late, club membership and Harvard degree. Wharton presents the Old New York enclave in which Archer lives as a fixed social system. Social conventions give substance and style to Archer’s everyday world; Archer likewise perpetuates these customs by following them.

When Ellen returns home after a prolonged stay in Europe, however, the habitus of this society becomes visible. As children ‘in knickerbockers and pantalettes’, she and Archer once participated in a common New York culture (1920: 26). Hoping now to recover the ‘straight-up-and-downness’ of things as she remembers them (1920: 75), she finds instead a habitus both familiar and strange. New York society, although initially and condescendingly ‘disposed to be kind to little Ellen Mingott’, distrusts foreignness (1920: 59). Ellen’s habitus – including orphancy, guardianship by an eccentric aunt, unhappy marriage to a Polish count and European culture – is alien and disruptive to Old New York ways. In response, society mobilizes forces against her, most noticeably through its exercise of symbolic power.

Characters in the novel who possess social authority – for example, Mrs
Archer, Mrs Welland, the van der Luydens – also have the ability to judge others, especially through their speech. Bourdieu notes that symbolic systems of discourse are instruments of knowledge and domination. They make consensus possible by appearing self-evident and definitive, enabling verbal dismissals to be experienced as physical attacks. As Bourdieu notes:

> If there is any terrorism, it is in the peremptory verdicts which, in the name of taste, condemn to ridicule, indignity, shame, silence ... men and women who simply fall short, in the eyes of their judges, of the right way of being and doing; it is in the symbolic violence through which the dominant groups endeavor to impose their own life-style.

(1979: 511)

Thus, even seemingly descriptive comments about Ellen have the power to condemn. New York society dismisses her by calling her ‘poor’ (1920: 21) and ‘Bohemian’ (1920: 215). Her dress is termed ‘unusual’ (1920: 19), she is said to have ‘lost her looks’ (1920: 58) and Mrs Archer declares with false innocence, ‘it was at any rate, in better taste [for Ellen] not to go to the ball’ and ‘what can you expect of a girl who was allowed to wear black satin at her coming-out ball?’ (1920: 43).

Conventional New York society seems unanimous in its outlook on Ellen. However, Wharton also suggests an underlying mosaic of shifting tastes and values within this staid, rigid world, much like Bourdieu’s proposition that social interactions are at once hierarchical and flexible. As I showed earlier, for Bourdieu, a given form of capital is valued according to the social and cultural characteristics of the habitus and can be converted into other forms of capital, which are valued differently at given points in time (1979). Among Archer’s generation, ‘an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world is that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian’ (1920: 15). But thirty years later, the mark of aesthetic sophistication involves familiarity with a different kind of music and theatre. Ellen’s own capital similarly rises and falls within the scope of the novel. Her lineage guarantees her a place in Old New York, but her position is compromised by her orphanancy, eccentric upbringing and meagre bank account. Historically and culturally specific, symbolic power derives its efficacy, as Bourdieu notes, from materiality but is often misrecognized as such: ‘symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical “economic” capital, produces its proper effect in as much, and only in as much, as it conceals the fact that it originates in “material” forms of capital’ (1972: 183). New York society follows the adage articulated by Wharton’s mother: ‘never talk about money and think about it as little as possible’ (Wharton, 1934: 57), but wealth is the backbone of this elaborately constructed society. When Ellen returns to New York, she lacks financial and, ultimately, symbolic capital; her originality, beauty, and ‘passionate honesty’
Even given these financial parameters, however, Ellen’s social and cultural capital rises when it is thought she will receive a large settlement from her husband or when she accepts the tutelage of the van der Luydens, but it falls when she follows the dictates of her own mind and seeks a divorce.

Ellen’s equivocal position in Old New York society is finally resolved when she permanently leaves for Europe, but Wharton shows how even this decision involves more than a simple victimhood and oppression. May precipitates Ellen’s departure with her premature announcement of her pregnancy, and she and other characters who wield symbolic power engineer Ellen’s expulsion from New York society, ritualized at the formal dinner party that May and Archer host. Acquiescent, Ellen seems little more than a loser in this high-stakes social game. But at the same time, Ellen 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 rises above the game.

Wharton demonstrates, then, that social position is the result of a complex interplay of choice and circumstance, and that the even the most seemingly static of societies is also dynamic, a fact apparent in Wharton’s description of New York’s leading families. The aristocratic van der Luydens, of direct Dutch ancestry, sit at the apex of a ‘small and slippery pyramid’ (1920: 50). ‘Sovereign’ rulers who pardon or punish at times of social crisis (1920: 58), they give the dinner party that affirms Ellen’s acceptance into society, and they escort her out of its ranks at the Archer dinner at the novel’s end. Revered and deferred to, the van der Luydens possess considerable social and symbolic capital, in part because of their frugal expenditure of assets: they are highly desired at social events because they rarely appear at them. But their influence is not so permanent or frozen in time as their ‘rosy life-in-death’ appearance suggests (1920: 54). The couple’s social capital is diminished by their age, lack of heirs and outmoded décor. By the time Newland and May’s children reach maturity, the van der Luydens warrant no narratorial mention at all.

Social fluidity is also evident in the large middle section of the social pyramid, occupied by Archers, Lovells, Wellands and other descendants of seventeenth-century, middle-class Dutch or Belgian merchants and bankers. Made wealthy from real estate investments, these families use their abundantly free time to travel to Newport, London or Paris, to arrange dinners and marriages with one another, and to update lists of social do’s and don’ts. They gossip about dangerous ‘trends’ and condemn women who wear Paris gowns as they arrive instead of waiting the requisite year (1920: 213). As much as these families lament loss of tradition, however, they seem oblivious to the massive social changes around them and ignore social transformations that have already destabilized their world. Old New York gentility, as Bourdieu observes of fields, is neither fixed nor ‘real’; rather, it is a relational social space occupied by individuals who act in it by virtue of the fact that they possess the properties
necessary to be effective in the field. Although Old New Yorkers continue to enjoy large financial and cultural capital, their numbers are shrinking and they occupy an ever-narrowing range of positions within an ever-constricting field under assault by the new and competing cultural and social capital of the nouveau riche, immigrants and artists.

Wharton brilliantly conveys the incremental but massive change in the valuation of a capital once monopolized by Old New York, a sheltered society on the wane as New York City as a whole is expanding. Old New York tries vainly to insulate itself from two different groups. First are newly arrived immigrants from Europe and African Americans from the South – the novel’s unnamed cooks, mulatto maids, Sicilian bootblacks and Irish vendors. Although these characters have no voice in the novel, they signal a turn-of-the-twentieth-century transformation of American cities. These new residents, who settle in the Battery and on the East Side – neighbourhoods originally occupied by the seventeenth-century settlers – start edging the aristocratic families northward or press them into protective enclaves such as those in and around Washington Square. A second group of invaders – the newly moneyed classes eagerly spending their way into social prominence – prove more difficult to ward off. Heedless of tradition, the nouveau riche shock Old New York with their relaxed manners and brash displays of wealth.

As Bourdieu notes, positions in a field are determined by the allocation of capital to individuals and by their investment and expenditure of this capital; and positions in a field, once attained, can interact with habitus to produce different positions. The unsettling effects of shifting capital are felt in the first scene of the novel. Established New Yorkers sit in their own boxes at the exclusive Academy of Music, which they have commissioned. But talk is already afoot of a larger ‘new Opera House’, the Metropolitan (1920: 13), which will open farther north some ten years later, constructed by millionaires annoyed that they cannot obtain seats at the exclusive theatre. Even as Old New Yorkers contemplate this displacement, new positions within the social field develop as a result of fresh capital. For example, Julius Beaufort, a boisterous financier with mysterious origins, has married into the reputable Dallas family and hosts an annual ball that even proper families such as the Wellands and Archers attend. Although committed to a ‘law’ of ‘absolute financial probity’, conservative New Yorkers, impressed by the ‘way [Beaufort] carried things off’ (1920: 223, 28), look the other way so long as his investments yield high profits. When Beaufort is ruined, society shuns him; however, the disgrace is barely remembered thirty years later when Beaufort has rebuilt his fortune, married his mistress and affianced his daughter to Archer’s son. Not only do positions within the field of New York society shift, new positions interact with habitus to produce entirely different fields. Wharton dramatizes this moment of change in social relationships and structures through Newland Archer’s attraction to two different women: the conventional May Welland and the captivating Ellen Olenska.
The spaces where individuals and institutions constantly struggle – Bourdieu’s fields – appear as Archer vacillates between May and Ellen and the opposing fields that they represent: of marriage and romance, of social convention and individual desire. Trapped in the gravitational pull of these competing fields, he progressively loses capital in both. Wharton not only documents the process by which Archer settles into a life with May, she also demonstrates with characteristic irony the degree to which he deludes himself about the choices that produce this outcome.

False distinction

Membership in elite New York society seems permanent and inflexible, but Bourdieu observes the fuzziness inherent in habitus: ‘the habitus goes hand in glove with vagueness and indeterminacy. As a generative spontaneity which asserts itself in an improvised confrontation with ever-renewed situations, it obeys a practical logic, that of the vagueness, of the more-or-less, which defines one’s ordinary relation to the world’ (1987: 77–8, original emphasis). Archer is representative of his class; however, he prides himself on being different from others in New York society. For example, more romantic and idealistic than his peers, he fantasizes about reading Faust with May on their honeymoon in the Italian lakes, finds himself uncontrollably moved by the sentimental ribbon scene during the production of *The Shaughraun* and utters unexpected platitudes such as ‘Women ought to be free – as free as we are’ (1920: 45). Predisposed, as few of his peers are, toward arts and letters, he enjoys conversing with Ned Winsett, an aspiring writer, and with M. Rivière, an intellectual. As he describes himself, ‘He had read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world than any other man . . . in his circle’ (1920: 18).

Viewed another way, however, Archer’s tastes and freedoms fall well within the boundaries of New York society. Like other bachelors of his set, he has latitude to attend clubs and socialize with individuals outside his intimate circle. In accordance with the double sexual standard of his class, he has an affair with a married woman, which duly prepares him to initiate May into life’s mysteries. When, in the novel’s opening scene, he gazes with knowing anticipation at his intended she responds with complementary chaste innocence, as custom requires. Even Archer’s selection of reading material marks him as the typically indulged son of a doting, widowed mother and the sophisticated brother of a timid, spinster sister. As the sole male in his family, Archer chooses books quite unlike those selected by the Archer women, who shun Dickens and Ruskin as too progressive and who favour instead Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun*, a Puritan-like romance set in the context of European art and faith, *Good Words*, a weekly religious magazine and the novels of Ouida, an Italian writer of children’s and adult romances. Archer, in contrast, ‘read[s] all the latest books’; he becomes
‘saturated with Ruskin’; peruses John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee, P. G. Hamerton and Walter Pater; talks ‘easily’ of Botticelli and ‘with faint condescension’ of Fra Angelico (1920: 69). These choices, while allowing Archer to congratulate himself on a superior aesthetic sensibility, actually reveal a taste that is, like his other preferences, shaped by Old New York standards.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu rejects theories that confer transcendental or essentialized meanings on works of art, arguing that the process of making aesthetic distinctions – both in the sense of noting difference and establishing hierarchies of difference – is engendered by the same dispositions, or habitus, as styles in fashion, food, sport or other aspects of everyday culture. Bourdieu also demonstrates that the foundation of taste is power: aesthetic ‘distinction’ is the product of an elite group whose effect is to reproduce its own symbolic and material interests. Wharton clearly implicates Archer in these dynamics of domination: ‘What was or was not “the thing” played a part as important in Newland Archer’s New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago. . . . Few things seemed Newland Archer more awful to him than an offence against “Taste”’ (1920: 14, 24). Twice described as a ‘dilettante’ rather than a serious intellectual or aesthete (1920: 15, 273), Archer avidly unpacks parcels of new books from Europe – George Eliot, Herbert Spencer, Alphonse Daudet, Dante Gabriel Rosetti – but these volumes are already part of the literary status quo, not the avant garde.

Archer’s lack of originality is most evident when considered in relation to Ellen’s aesthetic preferences. He is confused by the innovative Impressionist and proto-modernist paintings that she hangs in her ‘funny house’ (1920: 72). He can only imagine living ‘in the intimacy of drawing-rooms dominated by the talk of Mérimée’ and he is awed by the ‘new names’ of Paul Bourget, Huysmans and the Goncourt brothers (1920: 95–6). The conservative rather than liberal direction of Archer’s thought is confirmed when shortly after his marriage, having discarded poetry for history, he reaches for a book by Jules Michelet, a French historian whose nationalistic and romantic perspectives were judged, by century’s end, to be old-fashioned and *petit bourgeois*.

The novel bears out Bourdieu’s points about habitus – that it is not fixed but constrained by ‘a whole universe of ritual practices and also of discourses, sayings, proverbs, all structured in concordance with the principles of the corresponding habitus’ (1972: 167), and that it is limited by the strength of socialization, especially at early ages. Early socialization has made Archer’s tastes and behaviours more consistent with May’s habitus than with Ellen’s. However, as Bourdieu notes, a person’s habitus also has genuine constitutive power; it is not merely a reflection of ‘reality’. Possibilities for altering habitus do exist, especially at times affected by rapid change: if conditions of the social environment are different for a new generation of individuals, these conditions can inculcate new dispositions and result in an altered habitus. Demographic shifts in New York society, punctuated by Ellen’s arrival, create just such conditions
for change. From the moment Archer sees Ellen at the Academy of Music, then, his habitus is both altered and held in check by socialization. As Bourdieu notes, dispositions that constitute habitus imply subjective adjustments to that position; that is, individuals in a habitus both indicate and alter their positions within it by subtle, seemingly insignificant verbal and bodily gestures. In speech and action, Archer vacillates between the realm of social conventionality represented by May and the realm of conversation, art and beauty represented by Ellen.

His conflict first becomes evident as he watches the performance of *Faust* — a seduction scene that signals not, as Archer imagines, May’s imminent sexual initiation but his own infatuation with Ellen. Although struck by Ellen’s beauty, Archer is also annoyed by her ‘unusual’ Josephine-style gown, which shows ‘a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing’ (1920: 23). Feeling ‘impelled’ to defend May against this hint of promiscuity, he joins her in the family box (1920: 25). The bodily gesture aligns Archer with Old New York, even though Ellen remains on his mind. He next arranges to visit Ellen alone but afraid of his feelings for her, he presses for an early announcement of his engagement to May, ‘thank[ing] heaven he was about to ally self with his own kind’ (1920: 37). He twice sends Ellen yellow roses but never signs the gift card. He arranges an intimate meeting with Ellen at Skuytercliff, but rushes afterward to St Augustine, where he pleads with May to advance their wedding date. His wish granted, he even thinks of Ellen as he repeats wedding vows at Grace Church.

Ambivalent, Archer loses ground with both May and Ellen. Ellen invites him to Mrs Struthers’ musical soirées, but he hesitates because society scorns the indecorous Sunday evening entertainments hosted by the wife of a shoe polish magnate who slipped into society one winter during a chicken-pox epidemic. However, these events increasingly garner social and cultural capital from attendance by such men as Julius Beaufort, who brings the finest artists to them. When Archer declines the invitation, he foregoes a chance to see Ellen and relinquishes her to his rival. Archer also loses social capital in the field of law, which he practices according to custom in a dilatory, gentlemanly way: no one, least of all he, ‘was deceived by his pretense of professional activity’; ‘the green mould of the perfunctory was already perceptively spreading’ over him and other young members of the firm who go through the motions of work (1920: 113). Archer’s profession puts him at the forefront of the transformation of divorce codes that allowed couples to dissolve incompatible unions and he is on record for espousing liberal views on marriage and defending Ellen against her ‘outcast’ marital status (1920: 44). When Ellen asks for help obtaining a divorce, he has an opportunity to put these platitudes about women’s rights into action. However, Archer’s social capital depends upon his alliance with his family, who are opposed to divorce and its scandal. He advises against divorce, reciting rote-like that ‘the individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest’ (1920: 103). Ellen would reject marriage
codes that require women to stay with their husbands regardless of circumstance, but Archer, following convention, reinforces the habitus that now restrains him.8

Archer’s vacillation continues. He pursues Ellen on summer vacation and disapproves of her staying in a dilapidated summer house rented by the ‘frivolous’ Blenkers family. But he also regrets the endless monotony of his own Newport summers in the Welland cottage – ‘What am I, a son-in-law?’ he wearily laments (1920: 184). He has ‘a haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same hour’ (1920: 80), but he can find no alternative: ‘How little practice he had had in dealing with unusual situations! Their very vocabulary was unfamiliar to him, and seemed to belong to fiction and the stage’ (1920: 101). After one particularly ‘exciting talk’ with journalist Ned Winsett, he wistfully thinks that ‘the only way to enlarge either [his conventional world or the intellectual one] was to reach a stage of manners where they would naturally merge’ (1920: 96), but he cannot imagine how such a transformation can be accomplished.

In each case, Archer struggles to reconcile conflicting positions – as spokesperson for his genteel society and as individual pursuing his passion regardless of risk. In private conversations – in Ellen’s house on West Twenty-third Street, at Skuytercliff, in Boston, and at the Metropolitan Art Museum – Archer and Ellen achieve a harmony reflective of a new, mutually developing habitus; but in more public venues, Archer reverts to an old habitus. The possibility of a life with Ellen thus becomes more fantastic than real. With only a ‘vision’, he pleads with Ellen ‘to get away . . . into a world where words like that – categories like that – won’t exist’, but he has no idea how to find such a world. When Ellen replies with frank honesty, ‘Where is that country?’ and speaks explicitly about the illicit nature of their relationship, the ‘crudeness’ of her term ‘mistress’ shocks him (1920: 234). He is mystified years later, when his son – with full social approval – marries Fanny Beaufort, the bastard daughter of his rival, and enjoys the kind of life of which Archer only dreams.

Although habitus is never fixed, Archer’s experience bears out Bourdieu’s observation that ‘field structures habitus’ through conditioning (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). Archer allows Old New York conventions to defeat him. When May announces her pregnancy, he accepts the news with the resignation of a man practiced in futility. Now excluded from ‘family councils’ (1920: 218), he sits passively through the choreographed dinner that bids Ellen goodbye. As much the victim of symbolic violence as Ellen is, he views the ‘harmless-looking people’ at his dinner table as ‘dumb conspiroirs’. Knowing that family members believe he and Ellen are already lovers, he feels like ‘a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp’ (1920: 264–5). Metaphors of death and ennui convey Archer’s loss of vitality, from his ‘colourless voice’, to his observation about the ‘deadly monotony of their lives’ to his pained exclamation as he throws open a window, ‘I am dead – I’ve been dead for months and months’ (1920: 184, 236–7, 238).

Constrained by the habitus of Old New York, Archer helps to create his experience of missing ‘the flower of life’ (1920: 274). Because he responds to
some cultural signs and ignoring others, he concludes that change is not possible.
In fact, change is possible, for the social boundaries separating insiders and outsiders have always been more fluid than he realizes. Wharton says as much in her depiction of the free-spirited Duke of Austrey, whom Old New Yorkers take pains to entertain. A member of the European aristocracy, the Duke represents everything that New York society seeks to emulate. Yet, when abroad, the Duke eschews convention and simply goes ‘where he’s amused’ (1920: 85).

**Escape**

Wharton demonstrates that Archer’s problem is so much the field in which he operates as the narrowness of his interpretation of this field. Other characters just as conflicted as he have found solutions to their personal dilemmas. One such instance of societal transgression and escape is found in the story of Catherine Mingott’s family. Her father, Bob Spicer, not more than a year after his marriage, left his wife and children after falling in love with a Spanish dancer. The gentleman and his lover escaped ‘mysteriously (with a large sum of trust money)’ to Cuba and were never heard from again (1920: 20). By inscribing within the main plot a narrative about a man who does manage to break away from society, Wharton shows not only the restrictiveness of Old New York conventions, but also Archer’s slavish devotion to these formalities.

Where did Mr Mingott meet his Spanish dancer? Not at the staid Academy of Music where Archer first sees Ellen Olenska, but at Castle Garden, a centre for popular entertainment from the 1820s through the 1850s. Bob Spicer’s daring escape demonstrates the flexibility of field and habitus; Archer, in contrast, is tied to the Academy of Music and its conventional ways. Wharton emphasizes the narrowness of Archer’s world — with its fear of outsiders — by associating Bob Spicer’s intrigue not only with lighthearted, popular entertainment, but also with a history of social transformation. By the 1870s, when the novel takes place, Castle Garden, no longer a theatre, was used by the US government as the east coast federal immigration centre, a precursor to Ellis Island. It was literally a site of national diversity, a processing centre for the same immigrants who alarm families like the Archers, Lovells and Wellands. Mr Spicer boldly pursues his heart’s desire, even when it leads outside Old New York’s borders. Archer does not claim this latitude. ‘Held fast by habit’ (1920: 277), he can escape with Ellen only in fantasy.

Bob Spicer’s colourful story also illuminates Mrs Manson Mingott’s relationship to Archer. Like her namesake, Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, Mrs Mingott wields real and symbolic power. However, she also carries the legacy of her non-conformist father and she rules New York society without relinquishing the sense of independence that her father’s example taught her. Aside from the maverick location of her residence, her ‘fearless’ accomplishments include
having married her daughters to Europeans ‘in heaven knew what corrupt and fashionable circles, hobnobbed with Dukes and Ambassadors, associated familiarly with Papists, [and] entertained Opera singers’. She keeps a first-floor boudoir, speaks her mind and provokes others to do the same. Although *The Age of Innocence* seems predicated on assumptions that social class is fixed and that breaches bring peril, Catherine Mingott’s life story testifies to the permeability of social class boundaries – and the myriad ways that power relations constantly reconfigure themselves.

Catherine Mingott is the reigning matriarch of New York society, but her commanding presence is paradoxically based on principles of individualism and non-conformity. She constructs a mansion near Central Park – ‘an inaccessible wilderness’ to established New Yorkers – and challenges her family to exceed the limits of conventionality, pronouncing them too ‘scared’ to venture north of Fortieth Street (1920: 22–3, 133). Daughter of rebellion, Catherine Mingott also provides a blueprint for Archer’s insurrection. Every bit a Spicer, she elaborates on the lack of initiative in the Mingott line, concluding with the novel’s central question:

Ah, these Mingotts – all alike! Born in a rut, and you can’t root ‘em out of it. When I built this house you’d have thought I was moving to California! Nobody ever had built above Fortieth Street – no, says I, nor above the Battery either, before Christopher Columbus discovered America. No, no; not one of them wants to be different; they’re as scared of it as the small-pox. Ah, my dear Mr Archer, I thank my stars I’m nothing but a vulgar Spicer; but there’s not one of my own children that takes after me but my little Ellen. . . . Now, why in the world didn’t you marry my little Ellen? (1920: 133)

With a twinkle in her eye, Mrs Mingott urges Archer to flaunt convention, but she never simply grants freedom to others. They must want it badly enough to claim it for themselves. Archer proves ambivalent.

Other models of resistance present themselves to Archer, such as the Emerson Sillertons. Despite impeccable social standing, Sillerton, whose first name alludes to that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, is an individualist. He was a ‘thorn in the side of Newport society; and a thorn that could not be plucked out, for it grew on a venerable and venerated family tree. He was, as people said, a man who had had “every advantage”’. Sillerton’s social crime is pursuing a vocation: ‘Nothing – as Mrs Welland had often remarked – nothing on earth obliged Emerson Sillerton to be an archeologist, or indeed a professor of any sort, or to live in Newport in winter, or do any of the revolutionary things that he did’. Sillerton not only engages in serious work, but also fills his house with ‘long-haired men and short-haired women’, gives a party for a black man and explores ‘tombs in Yucatan instead of going to Paris or Italy’ – and he does so with a wife
'who submitted so tamely to [his] eccentricities’ that she dumbfounds New York society (1920: 186). His ‘crime’ of non-conformity not only goes unpunished, but it is also rewarded with freedom to go wherever intellect and imagination lead him.

Archer, in contrast, finds dreams of travel curtailed. The honeymoon he envisions with May in the romantic Italian Lakes region becomes a practical hike in the Swiss Alps; the vacation in Mount Desert, Maine, is replaced by predictable sojourns in Newport; and a planned trip to Japan is cut short by May’s announcement of her pregnancy. Archer is filled with wanderlust, but he rehearses only circumscribed routes, whether they be strolls with May in Central Park, round-trip visits to St Augustine or predictable European grand tours. Wharton hints that Archer may have been planning an exotic escape with Ellen like the one Bob Spicer made with his dancer. When he and Ellen meet in Boston, he is carrying a newspaper, The Commercial Advertiser. Since Boston had no newspapers by this name, it may be a New York paper: possibly the daily New York Commercial Advertiser — or, more likely, a weekly originally called the New York Spectator and Weekly Commercial Advertiser, which changed its name in 1876 to the Weekly Commercial Advertiser. Mainly concerned with mercantile issues, the paper included information about the availability of commodities. It also included lists of arrivals and departures of freight and passenger steamships. Was Archer hoping to leave with Ellen on a passenger ship? If so, he settles instead for a ferry ride in Boston Bay, a day’s excursion that returns him to his point of departure.

Effects

Fearful of appearing indecorous, Archer renounces the love of his life, and in so doing, he demonstrates the strength and vagaries of the mysterious force Wharton calls “Taste,” that far-off divinity of whom “Form” was the mere representative and viceregent’ (1920: 24). Archer and Ellen’s last meeting takes place, appropriately enough, in an art museum, where the effects of taste are everywhere evident. A museum, as opposed to the opera or theatre, Bourdieu observes, ‘admits anyone . . . at any moment without any constraints’ (1979: 272). In contrast to other settings in which they are observed and judged, the museum grants Archer and Ellen welcome freedom and anonymity.

The museum is not free of cultural hierarchies and values, however. Indeed, the history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art — and of the Cesnola collection, in particular, where Ellen and Archer wander — is one of change, including dramas of imperial conquest, financial risk, ego and altruism. Although it is now only ‘a queer wilderness of cast-iron and encaustic tiles’, Archer senses the museum’s imminent rise to prominence: ‘Some day, I suppose, it will be a great Museum’. 12 Bourdieu’s argument that all judgments of taste, including aesthetic
ones, are governed by habitus rather than pure idealism or materialism is anticipated in the couple’s conversation in the nearly deserted room where the “Cesnola antiquities" mouldered in unvisited loneliness’. Contemplating artefacts once used by people as alive as they are, Ellen ruefully observes that these once ‘useful’ and ‘necessary’ items now lay moribund in their glass cases. ‘It seems cruel’, she comments, ‘that after a while nothing matters’ (1920: 247–8).

Ellen’s remark suggests the dynamic processes by which times, people and customs change and become obsolete – the inevitable movement of history that alters not things themselves but the function and significance of things. The Cypriot artefacts that Archer and Ellen view have themselves undergone radical transformations: once everyday items, they then became spoils of war in an imperialistic conquest that led to their importation to the west and they now are art objects installed for leisurely viewing by patrons of the newly established Metropolitan. Like the items they gaze upon, Archer and Ellen are also ‘artefacts’ in the making. Ellen demonstrates her understanding of temporality and the complex forces that make up cultural relations by placing the couple’s situation in the context of a larger history – ‘after a while nothing matters’. However to Archer, who gazes at Ellen from within a typically timeless, romantic bubble, ‘it seemed incredible that this pure harmony of line and colour should ever suffer the stupid law of change’ (1920: 248).

Change, of course, occurs. Ellen returns to Europe, befriends Beaufort’s daughter, Fanny, and presumably basks in Parisian art, culture and conversation. Hers is a habitus at once lively, enriched and enriching – the same habitus Wharton created for herself when she left the stifling New York society of her youth to become a successful, independent artist.13 Archer, in contrast, remains in New York, a ‘good citizen’ (1920: 273). Still ‘by nature a contemplative and a dilettante’ (1920: 277), he is constrained by a habitus simultaneously sedentary and given to flights of fantasy. Whereas Ellen presumably participates in dynamic processes of change, Archer sits on a bench – first in the Champs-Élysses ‘while the stream of life rolled by’ (1920: 281) and then outside her apartment. Because the imagined Ellen is ‘more real’ than an actual one, he waits in the waning daylight, watches her shutters close and walks back to his hotel alone (1920: 285).14 As always, Archer vacillates between Old New York and Ellen, then chooses the habitus of his youth.

Wharton portrays a society so frightened by change that it denies the passage of time altogether – and a character so much society’s product that he, too, ossifies. At the end of the novel, Archer has become to his son Dallas, who marvels at codes of propriety that once ruled his parents’ lives, a kind of museum specimen, a curious and endearing relic. Principles for which Archer has renounced his passion no longer apply to this new generation, so radically have the terms of cultural capital shifted. Dallas’s buoyant optimism is fuelled by an expanding economy, a new professionalism and relaxed social rules. In contrast, Archer is still deadlocked in ambivalence: ‘there was good in the old ways. . . .
There was good in the new order too. An inveterate traveller and sightseer herself, Wharton often associates travel with her most self-actualized characters. Archer has sadly ‘lost the habit of travel’ (1920: 276).

Circumstances surrounding Wharton’s construction of the novel in 1919 partially account for her focus on Archer’s ambivalent sense of loss. Wharton writes in this fiction not just about lost love, but also about a profound grief triggered by the devastation of World War I and by deaths of close friends such as Henry James and Howard Sturgis, all of which left her painfully aware that an era had ended. Ultimately, however, Archer’s resignation is not Wharton’s own, nor is her fiction as unproblematically reflective of static social convention as readers may think. On the contrary, *The Age of Innocence* pulses with life, affirming, as Bourdieu notes, a dynamic interplay of cultural relations. Dallas and his generation enjoy freedoms unthinkable thirty years earlier.

This is not to say that the new social order is free of norms. Habitus and practice, always mutually reinforcing, work toward their own solidarity, with fresh arrangements creating different versions of domination and subordination. A new ‘right thing’ emerges in Dallas’s time, and he is as caught up in it as anyone else. For example, an architect, he follows the latest trends by basing the design of his latest client’s house on the eighteenth-century palace of Versailles. He also visits Paris having promised his fiancée that he will find the latest ‘Debussy songs’ and attend the Grand-Guignol Theatre (1920: 280) – *de rigeur* cultural practices for the smart young set. His fiancée, Fanny, likewise exhibits a culturally sanctioned nostalgia when she accepts a gift of emeralds and seed-pearls once worn by Archer’s mother and comments that, wearing them, ‘she should look like an Isabey miniature’ (1920: 278).

Wharton describes the self-replicating, imposing processes of culture that Bourdieu later derives through sociological analysis. But while she works through issues of cultural reproduction and stasis, her writing – on one level as bleak as Bourdieu’s is sanguine about radical change – offers a possibility that Bourdieu’s does not: Wharton does imagine escapes from stifling conventionality that may, in times of cultural change, make possible other choices within a habitus and may even accelerate the changes in valuation of capital within fluctuating fields. Archer, ‘bent and bound’ by his narrow world, takes society’s rules too seriously and sees the ‘deep rut’ into which he has sunk (1920: 277). Others may fare better. Dallas, with ‘self-confidence that comes from looking at life not as a master but an equal’ (1920: 282) and Ellen, immersed in European art and history, both struggle to change culture rather than just ‘keep up’ with it, as Archer does (1920: 100). Envisioning the possibility of Archer’s escape – which Wharton, like her character Catherine Mingott, will not grant him unless he seeks it – we feel pity for his acquiescence to a stultifying and deadening existence. But mindful of the dynamics of social practice and the reinforcing powers of habitus, we also understand why he can do no better.
Although critics vary in their assessment of the novel’s outcome, analyses often reflect binary perspectives on character and culture. For example, focusing on ‘psychological determinism’, Robinson writes that ‘escape with Ellen was never a realistic possibility for a man of Archer’s background and personality’ (1975: 1). Gargano, noting parallels with the play, The Shaughraun, attributes the novel’s theme of ‘restraint and renunciation’ to Archer’s nature and to circumstance (1987: 2). Fryer similarly writes that the ‘moral claims of family and of the individual are held in perfect tension’, with Archer trapped ‘both by his own limitations and by forces he does not understand’ (1984: 157, 161). Kekes, citing custom as a necessary guide to life, argues that ‘it is psychologically and morally impossible’ for Archer to break with society (1984: 247). Critics who focus on character alone include Tuttleton, who praises Archer for meeting ‘institutional, familial, and social responsibilities’ (1972: 570), and Woolf, who writes that the novel is ‘about the development of a viable adult “self”’, which leads Archer to ‘the moral value of choosing uncorrupted integrity’ (1976: 641, 642). Less laudatory, Godfrey finds that Archer, ‘representative of his class as a whole’, ‘suffers from stunted development and a bad case of cowardice’ (1988: 42, 31). Critics who stress the novel’s dynamism often focus on May or Ellen, not on Archer as I do here. See, for example, Hadley (1991), who argues that Wharton draws attention to the untold stories of May and Ellen through an ironic use of the male bildungswoman; and Mayné (1997), who enlists Bataille to describe Ellen as a lively, uncontained outsider, a heterogeneous individual who exceeds homogeneous boundaries of her society. Taking an approach close to mine is Bentley (1995), who analyses Wharton’s depiction of manners in relation to changing views of culture proposed by ethnographic, anthropological and psychological theorists of the time.

In Bourdieu’s view, subjectivism, based in phenomenological knowledge and expressing our direct experience of the world, ignores social structures and presumes too much agency on the part of the individual. Objectivism, on the other hand, unduly focuses on the structures surrounding the individual, viewing them rather than the individual as responsible for social action; the individual appears as an automaton whose actions are merely executions of rules. Bourdieu believes that his third model yields a better kind of scientific knowledge because it recognizes that both perspectives inform theoretical knowledge and illuminate one another (1972: 1–34; 1980: 25–7).

As Bourdieu writes, individuals ‘fall into the practice that is theirs rather than freely choosing it . . . because the habitus . . . becomes effective and operative when it encounters the conditions of its effectiveness’ (1987: 90).

Literature, along with fashion and art, constitute three distinct areas of cultural analysis for Bourdieu. His literary criticism and sociological work are linked in that both lines of inquiry explore, as Derek Robbins notes, ‘the relationship between the meanings of texts as products of the trajectories of

Guillory suggests that American readers ‘refuse’ Bourdieu because of his ‘apparent reduction of social action to self-interest . . . and, further, his implicit foreclosure of any action that transcends individual interest or has progressive social change as its end’ (2000: 20). In Collins’s view, Bourdieu resembles Durkheim by posting ‘an essential socio-logic, a logic of “how things are” ultimately derivable from material social conditions’, but he differs from Durkheim in his insistence on the dialectic of social spaces and their representation (1993: 124). On Durkheiman theories of suicide in Wharton’s fiction, see Spangler (1979).


The pressure for social change is evident in the contrasting histories of Catherine Mingott and Ellen Olenska. When Catherine Mingott’s father disgraced himself with unscrupulous financial practices – ‘losses at cards, or signing a note for somebody’ (1920: 223) – social convention dictated that his wife follow her husband out of society. As a result, Catherine was raised in the Hudson River countryside until she was sixteen years old. A generation later, Ellen breaks the rule that ‘a wife’s place was at her husband’s side when he was in trouble’ (1920: 224) by leaving her husband. New York, however, hopes to limit the extent of cultural change by denying Ellen legal freedom through divorce.

Castle Garden appealed to the masses just as the Academy of Music appealed to the elite. It is best known for P. T. Barnum’s presentation of singer Jenny Lind there in 1850. Located off the Battery, a public park at the southern tip of Manhattan, Castle Garden also offered easy access to middle-class pleasures — and to the New York harbour and freedom beyond.

Between 1855 and 1890, nearly eight million immigrants entered the USA through this round former fort with eight-foot walls. Castle Garden then became an aquarium when Ellis Island opened as a new receiving station. It was a popular tourist attraction from 1896–1941.
The fact that Mrs. Mingott employs a ‘mulatto maid’ at a time when the number of domestic positions available to African Americans was shrinking due to competition from groups of Irish, German and Italian immigrants, might further illustrate her willingness to depart from social norms.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was one of many museums founded after the Civil War by a handful of artists, writers, merchants, lawyers and financiers inspired by a combined love of the arts and sense of civic responsibility. Incorporated in 1870, it opened in Central Park in 1880 (Wharton’s novel, set in the mid-1870s thus anachronistically places her characters there). The Cesnola collection, named for Luigi Palma di Cesnola, an Italian-born, Civil War Brigadier-General, consisted of some 6,000 Cypriot objects that he acquired while serving in the Turkish consulate after the war. The collection was purchased by the museum in 1872 and was placed in the grand hall. Cesnola was the museum’s first director.

Wharton documents her enthusiasm for French culture in *French Ways and Their Meaning*. She notes, in particular, the French sense of ‘taste, and of the standard it creates’, ‘the exercise of beauty and . . . critical intelligence’ and the highly evolved, ‘interesting’ relations between men and women (1919: 43, 71, 103).

Wharton foreshadows Archer’s substitution of the imagined Ellen for the real one in chapter 12. At the Blenkers’ cottage, he is not sure that he wanted to see the Countess Olenska again; but . . . he had wanted . . . to follow the movements of her imagined figure as he had watched the real one in the summer-house. . . . [H]e was not conscious of any wish to speak to Madame Olenska or to hear her voice. He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty.

(1920: 189)

Benstock writes that Wharton ‘felt a deep sense of loss in the postwar years’. By January 1920, the list of the deceased close to her included not only James and Sturgis, but her brother Frederic; her Paris physician, Isch Wall; the manager of one of her charities, Renée Landormy; and friends Eliot Gregory, Robert Minturn, Edith Fairchild and Margaret Rutherfurd White (1994: 374).

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