

SOCIAL AND MORAL CONFLICTS IN EDITH WHARTON'S LATE XIXTH AND EARLY XXTH CENTURY AMERICA

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ABSTRACT:

THIS PAPER AIMS TO DESCRIBE THE SOCIAL AND MORAL BACKGROUND OF LATE XIXth AND EARLY XXth CENTURY AMERICA, A PERIOD IN WHICH EDITH WHARTON PUBLISHED HER NOVELS OF MANNERS. AFTER DEFINING THE CONCEPTS OF SOCIETY, MORALITY, AND CONFLICT, I HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DEPICT THE HISTORICAL FACTS WHICH LEAD TO CONFLICT SITUATIONS AT THE TIME. THIS WAS ACHIEVED THROUGH THE ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS OF INFORMATION COMING FROM BOTH FICTIONAL AND NON FICTIONAL SOURCES.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION HAD BROUGHT ABOUT SIGNIFICANT CHANGES ON BOTH THE SOCIAL AND MORAL LEVEL. AS A RESULT, THE CLASS DYNAMICS SHIFTED, THE MORAL CODES SUFFERED MUTATIONS AND CONFLICTS ON BOTH LEVELS ARISED. THEY ARE ALL REFLECTED IN THE LITERATURE OF THE TIME, AND EDITH WHARTON'S PERSPECTIVE IS UNIQUE IN THE FACT THAT SHE WAS A MEMBER OF THE UPPER CLASS LIVING ABROAD FOR THE MOST PART OF HER LITERARY ACTIVITY. IT CAN BE SAID THAT, ALTHOUGH CHANGE WAS DEFINITELY PRESENT, SOME CATEGORIES OF INDIVIDUALS STILL STRUGGLED WITH THE SOCIAL AND MORAL CUSTOMS OF THE PAST WELL INTO THE XXth CENTURY.

KEY WORDS: *SOCIAL CONFLICT, MORAL CONFLICT, EDITH WHARTON, LEISURE CLASS, TURN OF THE CENTURY AMERICA, CHANGE*

INTRODUCTION

Judging by Edith Wharton's success as a writer, the fascination for her characters equals the interest of her readers for the American society in the late XIXth and early XXth centuries. Most of Edith Wharton's critics have qualified her as a novelist of manners, and

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indeed she is one. But she is also a novelist of morals, as Carol J. Singley has stated.² Wharton illustrates the social and the moral conflicts of her time, and this gives us a far deeper insight on her work.

This paper is meant to offer a glimpse of the social and moral aspects which shaped the American society at the turn of the XXth century, a time of profound changes throughout the world. Edith Wharton was one of the writers to depict the social and moral conflicts of the time inherent to such a significant mutation and this research was designed to create the background of a future in-depth analysis of her work from this perspective.

Society and morality come hand in hand. People would not have the concept of morality if they lived alone. They both suffer changes in time and they generate conflicts. They also depend on rules and misconduct is sanctioned. But their relationship gives us the image of what it was like at a given time in our history, it describes the world as we know it. Therefore, this research is meant to create a comprehensive historical background of the social and moral events of the time, using both fictional (the works of the writers of the time, like Edith Wharton herself) and non-fictional resources (like Thornstein Veblen's study on the leisure class.)

The issues of social inequality, class conflict in the capitalist cities, moral relativism and contrasting attitudes towards change within the modern society which characterized the turn of the century are still very much present today, and this is what makes Edith Wharton's work relevant and interesting for the Romanian audience nowadays.

MORALITY AND SOCIETY – DEFINITIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Defining these two terms is important before going further with this research because the notions of moral and social conflict derive from the existence of societies and their own moral codes as such. Since morality cannot exist outside society/a social community, a definition of the term must only be formulated in relation to the human as a social being.

Morality enables us to differentiate the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. But this is not an inherent capacity of the human being. The question of the moral and social development and the relations of cultural contexts to individuals' thought and actions require a broad discussion. A lot has been said on their defining features, how they are formed during childhood and adolescence, the role of judgments and emotions, and

² Carol J. Singley, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

relations of individuals within society. In the early part of the XXth century, some of the major social scientific theorists, including psychologists like Jean Piaget and Sigmund Freud, addressed the issues of morality and its development in different ways.

From an early age, we are taught how to make this distinction, and this is how society intervenes. Children's moral development has its roots in the reciprocal interaction with the others, adults and peers. Piaget goes on to show that individuals and society are also in a reciprocal relationship, the reason being that individuals make judgments which are both attuned to the respective society's traditions and accepted practices and which can potentially transform those traditions and practices.³ Moreover, what we think is right or wrong can change with time. People are not always led by rational considerations when modifying their moral views. In fact, they may choose to do so for totally subjective reasons. „Attitudes are modified by factors such as the desire to conform with one group or do not conform with another – the groups themselves not being chosen in the light of moral reasons, but rather determined by the individual's situation and needs.”⁴ More often than not, in contrast with the view of morality as involving a fixed set of traits which reflect the incorporation of traditional values, individuals prove to make complex moral, social and personal judgments that often require taking into account the context of their particular activities. Also, people consider the circumstances of a particular situation in the process of weighing and struggling with competing moral considerations, while trying to balance non moral with moral considerations.⁵

Morality can be a source of moral harmony since it concerns how people should relate to each other. Social arrangements, norms and cultural practices embody ways for people to relate with each other in terms of mutual respect and fairness. However, more often than not, they embody ways which allow for injustices and can be detrimental especially to those situated on the lower positions of the social hierarchy. In this context, morality is a source of conflict because people make judgments about the inequalities and injustices which are part of the social system.

In turn, society can be defined in relation to the existence of a moral code generally accepted by its members. „There are limits to the degree of ultimate disagreement that can

³Apud Elliot Turiel, *The Culture of Morality: Social Development, Context and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

⁴Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18.

⁵ Elliot Turiel, *The Culture of Morality: Social Development, Context and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002,) 15.

exist within a society (for without some degree of moral homogeneity it would not be a society); but there are no limits, at least of that kind, on disagreement between societies.”⁶ It may be said that conflicts and tensions arise mainly when people have not adequately acquired the morality of their culture.

In Freud’s terms, we may say that social norms place severe restrictions on biological needs and instincts and so, even if there are “natural” propensities, as Durkheim calls them, for individuals to become attached to social groups (which, as a consequence, leads to a mainly harmonious social life), conflicts will arise.

Thus, a society shares a general code of moral values just as much as it shares the same dominant cultural expectations and geographical territory. And, inevitably, a society has a certain stratification pattern into subgroups. Social classes are part of a model of social stratification in which people are grouped into a set of hierarchical social categories, the most common being the upper, middle and lower classes. The notion of class is defined by the existence or the lack of property and power. According to Max Weber, class is not a community, in contrast to status groups. Both propertied and propertyless people can belong to the same status group, if they share a specific style of life. Thus, while classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods, status groups are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life. Therefore, classes exist within the economic order, while status groups exist within the social order, the sphere of the distribution of honour.⁷

Every generation may find itself at some point when, in light of the events they are witnessing, there is a feeling that “things are not what they used to be,” usually with the implication that the younger generations do not have the same respect for the traditional order and strong moral code. Going through major changes in the social sphere (culminating with armed conflicts) may even accentuate this feeling. This leads people to believe that the society is in decline and faces a serious moral crisis stemming from the failure of the younger generations to adequately incorporate the moral values and ideals of the community they live in. More important, in my opinion, is the fact that this apparent abandonment of traditional values is paired with the existence of long-standing social injustices concerning racial discrimination, the rights of women and economic inequalities.

⁶ Williams, *Morality*, 19.

⁷ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946,) 186-194.

It seems that precisely the division of society into classes, the disparities and discrimination resulting from this stratification is the most powerful source of social conflict. People are in search of power, be it economical or social (prestige) and they want to move from one class to another. This is „the chance of a man or of a number of men to realise their own will in a communal action, even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.”⁸

SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN OLD NEW YORK: THE WORKING VERSUS THE LEISURE CLASSES

Wharton’s perspective on the events and characters depicted in her novels is unique in that she is a female writer from the upper class who writes most of her work looking back in time on the America of her youth, while living abroad. But her depiction is by no means inaccurate.

In 1900, the shift from farm to city, mainly as a result of the industrial revolution, occupied a central place in the development of the USA as a nation. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner warned: „A new national development is before us, without the former safety valve of abundant resources open to him who would take. Classes are becoming alarmingly distinct...”⁹

It may be said that the lower class was the one to take the major shock coming together with the industrial revolution. The upper-class still had enough money and privileges to continue their lives undisturbed, while still benefitting from the modern inventions. But that was not the case for the majority of the population. On the one hand, workers were uprooted from their homes in the country-side and moved to the city, where they found work but were soon struck by low incomes, the long hours in the factories and the huge expenses for even the most basic accommodation and food. On the other hand, with the new advances in science and technology, it seemed that the mentality would change as fast as the new lifestyle. In reality, most of the workers were trapped by debt and could only live a promiscuous and destitute life in the city, which dehumanized and ultimately defeated the individual.

⁸ Weber, *From Max Weber*, 186.

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920) apud John T. Matthews, ed. *A Companion to the Modern American Novel. 1900-1950* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.

In sharp contrast to the labourers, the upper class in late XIXth and early XXth century America was indeed, in Thornstein Veblen's terms, a leisure class, where leisure connotes the „non-productive consumption of time.”¹⁰ Despite all the changes brought about by the industrial revolution, this caste of wealthy people remained very much closed, true to their principle that change itself was not respectable to accept and promote. This is mainly due to the fact that, given their wealth, the members of the upper class are not constrained to yield to the general demand for innovation. Also, despite of the constant preoccupation for what was fashionable and appropriate, the leisure class still lived by old rules.

Many writers, including Edith Wharton, have remarked that the American society, and the leisure class in particular, was very much keen on displaying its wealth in the same way in which displaying good manners was an indisputable indication that the respective person was part of the non-working class. What the Americans lacked in historical significance they tried to recreate with the help of new money.

New money (earned through the explosion of consumption) stood at the core of the social conflicts in America. All the city newcomers were encouraged to spend the little money they produced by any means. And the upper-class was the perfect example of what money could buy, hence the continuous drive to spend enough so as to become one of them. This was as much as a driving force for the advancement of the country as it was something to be rejected in the eyes of the leisure class. From marriages to invitations to dinner, nothing was to show that new money and those who earned it deserved to be respected or included. The paradox is that the leisure class needed money to maintain what was considered a respectable style of life but refused to be associated with its production. The leisure class was defined by conspicuous consumption, not by production. „The relation of the leisure (that is, propertied non-industrial) class to the economic process is a pecuniary relation – a relation of acquisition, not of production; of exploitation, not of serviceability.”¹¹

Besides the general principles of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption, its members cultivate an entire standard of living, completed with very specific canons of taste. Moreover, since each class envies and emulates the one next above it in the social scale, while it rarely refers to those below, it is precisely for the wealthy to determine what

¹⁰Thornstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 33.

¹¹ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 138.

scheme of life the community will accept as decent or respectable. And so, the accepted standard of expenditure in the class, which is usually as high or even higher than their earning capacity, largely determines what the standard of living will be.¹²

Following this pattern, we may find that what is considered honorific expenditure by this standard of living can transcend the canons of moral conduct. Similar mutations lead to the conviction that anything that is expensive enough is also beautiful. This standard of beauty is applied in great detail and it is best exemplified in articles of dress and household furniture. Articles of clothing are designed specifically to show that the respective person is unable to engage in any kind of productive labour that is considered undignified, stressing thus the fact that he or she belongs to the leisure class. The choice of dressing attire is also a clear indication of the status of women, which has not changed much from the previously inferior one. „The homely reason for all this conspicuous leisure and attire on the part of women lies in the fact that they are servants to whom, in the differentiation of economic functions, has been delegated the office of putting in evidence their master’s ability to pay.”¹³

Edith Wharton’s autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934) offers a valuable first-hand perspective of the author on the places she writes about and is really the most useful tool in understanding the social and moral context which lies at the basis of her works. Even though Wharton speaks about her ancestry as being “purely middle-class,”¹⁴ her family exhibits all the characteristics of the upper-class, since, as she goes on, “It was a society from which all dealers in retail business were excluded as a matter of course” and “my father and uncles seemed to have allowances permitting them to lead a life of leisure and amiable hospitality. The customs of the day were simple, and in my father’s set the chief diversions were sea-fishing, boat-racing and wild-fowl shooting.”¹⁵ Indeed, the making of money was considered uninteresting, it was not a polite subject of conversation and children were taught not even to think about it. She confesses that “for the most part of my father’s contemporaries, and those of my brother’s also, were men of leisure – a term now almost as obsolete as the state it describes. [...] The group to which we belonged was composed of families to whom a middling prosperity had come, usually by the rapid rise in

¹² Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 70-71.

¹³ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 120.

¹⁴ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography* (New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1998), 9.

¹⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 15.

value of inherited real estate, and none of whom, apparently, aspired to be more than moderately well-off.”¹⁶

Wharton undoubtedly admires the principles governing the life of the leisure class and thinks its value lays in the upholding of the two standards “of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs.”¹⁷ This tells the reader a lot about the moral environment of the old New York.

Conflict is directly related to change. Whenever the state of affairs is modified (either by one from inside a community, or by an outsider, or even by evolution itself), it is inevitable that conflict should arise between the old and the new orders. The industrial revolution brought such a profound change that the American society (just as anywhere else) suffered tremendous mutations. One half of the American population suddenly moves to the city and the society subsequently divides. While for those people remaining in the country-side life continues with its almost unchanged pace, most of those who have chosen the city have done so in order to become labourers in the newly built factories all over the country. As for the upper-class, the place to see and be seen was also the city, where living was becoming increasingly comfortable with the new inventions. This shift from farm to city occupies a central place in the developmental theories of economists and the developmental histories of nations. It is also a significant source for social inequality, which in turn is accentuated by the birth of consumerism.

While the lower class workers formed quite a compact group of overly-exploited and poorly-paid city newcomers, their bosses, as the new factory owners, increased their wealth rapidly and turned their “new money” into an infusion of capital which changed the appearance of the cities. However, they did not represent the upper-class, and the latter made a big statement out of their rejecting the nouveau-riche. Thus, while there was a constant conflict between the labourers and their exploiters on grounds of working conditions and poor payment, there was also a conflict between the newly-risen middle class and the closest thing to European aristocracy America could pride on.

Becoming a part of the leisure class involves the knowledge and performance of all the rituals which characterize its members. Accession may be denied at any time if there is any slight suspicion of inconsistency. On the other hand, however, if a powerful member

¹⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 33.

¹⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 33.

of the caste decides to promote someone from a lower class (even if not out of conviction but for a vested interest), the others will most likely follow the example. This can tell the reader quite a lot about the moral environment at this level.

It has already been mentioned that the affiliation to a certain social class is defined to the smallest details, from ancestry to the style of the curtains hanging in one's house. The same is valid for the inclusion into one of the tribes. Whoever doesn't belong to the elite is part of the tribe of 'outcasts' (someone like Lily Bart, who has the skills and the knowledge to be part of the elite but cannot convince herself to break her moral principles), or of 'buccaneers' (like Undine Spragg or Simon Rosedale, who break every moral principle in order to turn their new money into an access key to the elite club.) While America was going through major political and economical transformations, within the leisure class, change was surprisingly limited.

Class conflict was associated with the new economic status, which also led to conflicts within the same social group. Women were becoming increasingly eager to study, work and become independent and in doing so they found new ways of crossing the class barrier. The right to vote or even to use birth control were no longer a privilege of the wealthy. Class differences deepened but also grew thinner in some respects.

MORALITY - WHAT HAD CHANGED?

With all the changes the industrial revolution had brought, the inhabitants of early XXth century America still lived by old moral standards and observed strict social customs. In the works of Edith Wharton, morality is closely connected to social form, conformity to standards and "niceness."

The United States economy was expanding rapidly. Because large cities were centers of intense economic activity, people looking for work converged to them. There was such a great need for labor that not only men, but also large numbers of young, unmarried women entered the work force. However, although single women were now freer to move around, they were still subject to the conventional rules that governed their relationships with men and, at the same time, social groups rarely mixed. Basically, not very much had changed.

As for the upper class, they had always made sure that nothing disturbed their carefully knit outward appearance of respectability and harmony. From the inside, however, things appeared quite different. Some members of the leisure class stopped at nothing in order to retain their status. The sheer discrimination against anyone who couldn't keep up to their lifestyle standards and the readiness with which they excluded one or the other from their circle gives us a lot to think about in terms of their moral principles. Keeping up the appearances and the hypocrisy accompanying their social rituals speak about their moral hollowness. Paradoxically, the lack of education, in general, and of moral education in particular (and especially in the case of women, who are not traditionally formally educated at a higher level) shows on all levels of society, from the poor to the immensely rich. And while the labourers have the lack of money as an excuse for their limited moral horizon, the rich have their own explanation: men do not have to engage in any sort of labour and the women's ultimate goal is to find a good husband.

Ultimately, it can be said that even though everyone tried to keep up a screen of respectability and moral probity, the new era, based on the principles of consumption, could no longer guarantee their application, since individualism and materialism are incongruous with the principle of common good.

CONCLUSION

The scope of this research is a broad one, since it aims to cover two types of conflict: the internal conflict which appears when Edith Wharton's characters find themselves in a situation which challenges their moral code and the external conflict which illustrates the constant struggle for economical power and prestige within the American society of that time. In this quest, the characters' moral imperatives may shift dramatically.

By defining the terms of morality and society, and illustrating with examples the conflicts and realities of the time (in terms of the social groups involved, their defining principles and the economical events which led to their interaction), this paper shows that change started among the working class but went all the way up to the privileged groups, who, in their struggle to keep up to the traditions of the past, lost their moral superiority and finally mixed with the *nouveau-riche*.

Through its concern with the general concepts of social and moral conflict, the research has an echo in the societies today and a potential for future analyses, while, at the same time, bringing the works of Edith Wharton to the attention of the Romanian public.

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