

The Application and Adaptation of the Writing Process in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

by

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Abstract

The field of literary criticism is rich in analysis of a writer's final product. The process that a writer implements is often disregarded or overlooked. By neglecting the steps taken during the writing process, researchers limit their study to one, polished form of a text. Without examining the text in each phase of composition, it is difficult to understand a writer's intentions, motivations, and methods. In this project, Edith Wharton's social-satire, *The Age of Innocence*, was examined in its various stages of composition to define a structured approach to the process of creative writing, something highly debated in the academic community. Additionally, the research will provide a detailed review of a methods approach to literature, prioritizing the development of Wharton's fiction as the substance of the final product, rather than the influence of context in her writing.

Introduction

The primary focus of literary analysis regards the context of the period, culture, form, and body of thought in which a text is written. An alternative to this approach is textual scholarship. This criticism regards the "(...) process (the historical stages in the production, transmission, and reception of texts), not just product (...)." (1) In scrutinizing the points of revision and origin of a text, a researcher gains a solid understanding of how the finished product came to be and how rhetorical modes are adapted in composition. This approach, however, is limited by a lack of available documents and primary sources. American writer Edith Wharton stands as an exception to this rule. In this project, Wharton's social-satire, *The Age of Innocence*, was examined in its various stages of composition to define a structured approach to the process of creative writing, something highly debated in the academic community. Additionally, the research will provide a detailed review of a methods approach to literature, prioritizing the development of Wharton's fiction as the substance of the final product, rather than the influence of context in her writing.

The research was grounded in textual scholarship. D.C. Greetham, author of *Textual Scholarship: an Introduction*, defines this form as "all the activities associated with the discovery, description, transcription, editing, glossing, annotating, and commenting upon texts" (1). The focus of this kind of literary scholarship is the process in which the text was created, rather than the outcome of that process. A unique feature of Wharton's writing career is her careful preservation of the manuscripts and typescripts for many of her novels and short

stories; the availability of these materials at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library facilitated the study of her craft.

I developed a defined set of steps to conduct textual scholarship regarding Wharton's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence*. Familiarization with the text in its published form, in addition to reviewing critical essays found in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Age of Innocence*, was the first stage. I proceeded by gaining access to the corrected, partial manuscript of the novel located in the Edith Wharton Collection at the Beinecke Library. I obtained a reproduction of the typescript from the University of Indiana's Lilly Library. Prior to studying the Yale collection, I reviewed literary criticism included in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Age of Innocence*.

Upon accessing the collection, I examined the volume of personal and professional correspondences between Wharton, her publishers, and her sister-in-law to gain insight into the novel's composition and publication. Though the scrutiny of these letters, it was determined that constructing a timeline of materials was necessary to illustrate the process Wharton underwent to finish her novel in time for release serially in *The Pictorial Review*, a woman's magazine popular in the early 20th century. I then examined Wharton's personal notebooks, which included chapter outlines and a synopsis for *The Age of Innocence*.

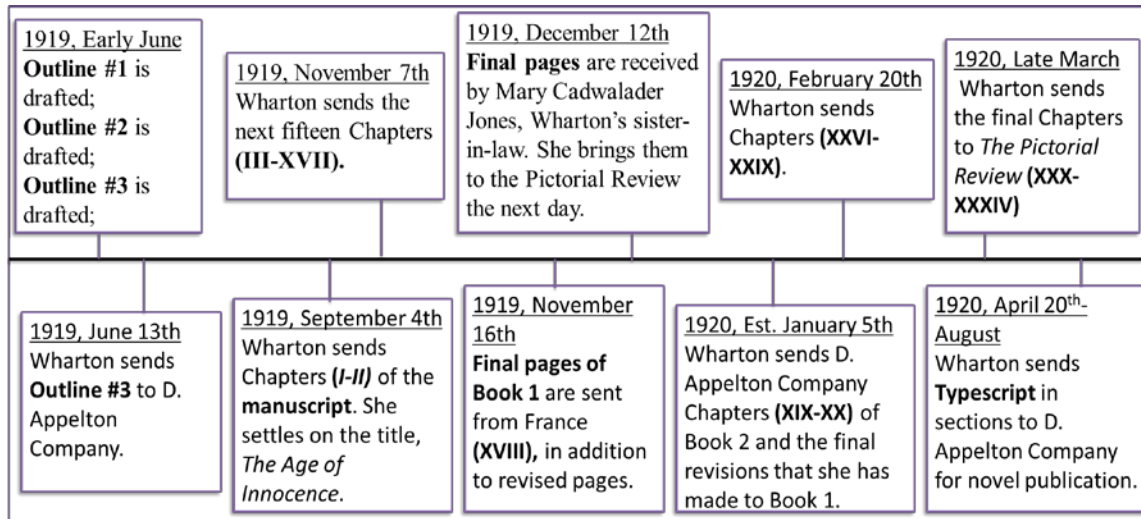


Figure 1. Timeline of Materials

The principle stage of analyzing Wharton’s process was the comparison of the corrected manuscript, the typescript, and the published version of the novel. In this step, I read the texts side by side, and noted the changes made from one to the other. I then read Wharton’s non-fiction book titled *The Writing of Fiction* (6), in which she discusses the development of craft in terms of her own writing and that of others.

By conducting research in the form of textual scholarship, I was able to draw together my observations and analyze them as a whole. The framed conclusions clearly define Wharton’s approach to writing and yield significant outcomes in the study of creative writing as a field founded in both craft and creativity.

Observations and Discussion

The substance of the research lies in the examination of Wharton’s manuscript (2) and typescript (3). Revision was seen in the different stages of composition. Each type of revision or edit made was completed for a specific purpose, and falls into one of many categories that include: changes made to word choice, deletion of language that is excessively descriptive, changes made for the purpose of adding symbolism, elimination of repetitive wording, additions made to exposition, grammatical revision, addition of imagery, changes made to enhance historical accuracy and atmosphere, changes made to sentence structure, changes made to overall division of the two-book structure, and changes made to wording for the purpose of clarification.

An example of revision made to inject symbolism is seen in the flowers held by the bridesmaids at May Welland and Archer Newland’s wedding. In the manuscript, Wharton writes that the flowers were “blush pink roses and lilies of the valley” (2, pp.300). In the typescript this line was changed to “white lilac and lilies of the valley” (3, pp.168). Kate Greenway, in “Language of Flowers”, explains that white lilacs symbolize “youthful innocence” (4, pp.366). While “blush pink” roses are not named, Greenway does describe the similarly colored “bridal rose” as symbolizing “happy love” (4, pp.370). May Welland is portrayed to be the vision of youthful innocence, projecting naivety on matters of adulthood before and after her marriage to Newland Archer. She is the antithesis of Archer’s lover Ellen Olenska, whom he frequently sends yellow roses that symbolize “jealousy” and “decrease of love” according to Greenway; Ellen’s affair with Archer is laced with jealous emotion and eventually crumbles. An important observation to note is that Wharton made the revision after the initial composition of the manuscript and before submitting the typescript to the publishers, suggesting that her thoughts on symbolism came later in the process.

Wharton also makes numerous changes to the text in order to eliminate repetition. Her narrative style is consistently elegant in the final version, but is slightly inconsistent throughout the manuscript. In Chapter XIX, the line “Archer made the gesture which he had seen so many bridegrooms make: with his ungloved right hand he felt in the pocket of his dark gray waistcoat,

and assured himself that the little gold circlet (engraved inside: Newland to May, April --, 187--) was in its place; then, resuming his former attitude with his pearl-gray glove with black stitching and his tall hat grasped together in his gloved hand, he stood looking at the door of the church" (2, pp.301) was altered for this reason. The second section of the line differs in the typescript and final publication as "resuming his former attitude, his tall hat and pearl-gray gloves with black stitchings grasped in his left hand, he stood looking at the door of the church" (3, pp.168) (4, pp.110). Not all first-draft prose flows smoothly, even though the final product comes out sounding rather polished and concise. To see these differences between the manuscript and typescript removes some of the mystery behind the construction of prose. While Wharton is clearly a seasoned writer, the revision process is a part of her technique. Her craft matures as she writes. Revision is necessary to perfect the articulation of the story, and Wharton isn't an exception. While her writing grows out of a creative thought process, the composition of the polished, publishable piece is an accomplishment of Wharton's structured craft that undoubtedly took her entire life to perfect.

While focusing on revision in the *The Age of Innocence* provides wonderful insight into Wharton's desire to meet a standard, the correspondences between herself and her sister-in-law, Mary Cadwalader Jones, reveal her concerns for the novel in regards to historical accuracy. She gave Jones the chore of "fact-checking" specific scenes and elements, including details of New York opera, traveling to St. Augustine, Florida by railroad, and public scandal of the late 1800s. According to the letters from her sister-in-law, Wharton originally planned to set the novel in 1875. She would have been thirteen years old, and the memories of entering the adult world as a young woman may have left a lasting impression on her. The 1870s found Wharton spending her winters in New York City and her summers in Newport, RI. With this knowledge, it would be a clear assumption that Wharton's setting was directly inspired by her own experiences as a young girl. Just as she did in her own life, Wharton's protagonist Newland Archer vacationed in Newport. It is apparent that the place and time of her novel was extremely important to her, so much so that she struggled to fit people and events into scenes rich in "local colour" (5). She eventually opted to remove 1875 from the novel altogether, instead dating her opening scene "On

a January evening of the early seventies (...)" (4, pp.3).

The atmosphere of her novel, while characterized by Wharton's interpretation of her personal history, is also defined by clever use of language. During the revision process, she meticulously rewrote entire paragraphs that lacked the standard of eloquence she strived to reach. That eloquence harmonized with her vision of "Old New York"; the prim-perfect conversation, the attitudes of superiority, and the taste of wealth are felt through Wharton's carefully chosen words. She most noticeably refers to her protagonist throughout the novel by his full name "Newland Archer", a quality of the novel that sets it apart from generic literary conventions.

Finally, the most interesting part of Wharton's process in the physical sense is the method in which she put together her manuscript. Writers in the digital age expect a printed manuscript to be comprised of a stack of single, typed pages. Wharton's manuscript is quite different. It is reasonable that her manuscript is handwritten; while Wharton owned a typewriter that she used for letters and the typescript, she might have written more quickly. Writing also would have made quick revisions easier. The unusual element of her manuscript is actually the pages. Each page is made up of five to six strips of paper, all glued together. In addition, most of these strips had writing on the back, suggesting that this was her method of "rewriting" or "scrapping" text she did not want to use. This technique may have been implemented to save time and paper. Although the method does not influence the text itself, it is important in noting how Wharton preferred to write.

Conclusion

Through the observation of Edith Wharton's approaches to the elements of fiction, a structured approach to the writing process is clearly defined. No single chapter is void of serious revision, and the majority of *The Age of Innocence* was subject to planning or outlining. By researching her process, one can gain an alternative understanding of the novel that is absent from traditional literary analysis. The product of this method also indicates that the writing of fiction is not solely a creative process. With the evidence presented in this research, one may argue that writing is as equally founded in craft as it is in vision. This notion is highly debated in the academic community because a

methods approach to analyzing process is often viewed as secondary. The result of this project, however, proves that such a notion is highly invalid. With an adequate amount of original documents available, a research study in textual scholarship is possible. Manuscript and archive collections are the foundation for this type of analysis. They provide numerous opportunities for study in the composition of fiction. This refreshing approach is a significant prospect that offers a new course of research analysis for the literary community.

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Biography

Cara A. Petitti is a senior at the University of New Haven majoring in English Literature and Writing. She is the current President of the University's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. She plans to attend graduate school to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, and hopes to continue research in Edith Wharton studies in the future.

In addition to her love of literature and writing, Cara is also passionate about photography. In her free time, she enjoys photographing landscapes and historic buildings in Southern Connecticut.

