

Genealogy in *Age of Innocence*:  
What's in a Name?

“You've arranged it delightfully,” he rejoined, alive to the flatness of the words, but imprisoned in the conventional by his consuming desire to be simple and striking.”  
-Newland Archer, Chapter 9

The high class society in Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* rests on two pillars: How you act, and who you are. Unfortunately for most of the characters, their choices on how to act in their world are determined by what family they are born in. In this way, the two pillars—who you are and what you do— are inextricably connected. This society of bloodlines traps Newland Archer into a certain life path, a fate he originally desires but loses interest in when he sees Ellen boldly reject the same trappings. As Archer struggles under the confines and expectations of being well-born this society, the interesting and complex façade the wealthy strive to maintain in their fancy parties and customs collapses piece by piece, for both Archer and the reader, into what seem to be the pointless rituals of a barbaric tribe. I will look at the effect of this genealogical perspective in the novel as a descriptor and literary tool, a unique way to give insight into our protagonist's mind, and finally how the names change from simple labels into a personality defining characteristic.

In *Age of Innocence* Wharton uses pronouns and impersonal descriptors like family names to great effect. The most obvious of these are the monikers for her lead characters. Ellen Olenska is often referred to as the pale lady, and the antagonistic society as a tribe, or cabal of appearance obsessed whisperers. Many times Ellen and Archer are likened to “prisoners”, and their faces wear “fugitive” expressions. These nicknames and appellations can have a great effect on the visual picture of a scene, but more interestingly, these placeholders show an *emotional* picture of the scene. The repeated description of being a prisoner or fugitive succinctly connects us to Archer's sense of being trapped, a sense which is emphasized by his being surrounded by a band of conspirators. In a similar way, family names become a literary device to emphasize the elitism of the aristocracy. For example, the names of the wealthy families are often reused as first names for members of other families: Newland (Newland Archer and the Van Newland family), Dallas (Dallas Archer and the Dallas family), Sillerton

Jackson (Mr. Jackson and the Sillerton family), Thorley (Mr. Chivers and the Thorley family), Lefferts (Widow Mrs. Lefferts Rushworth and the Leffert family), and even many others. This naming convention is never mentioned outright in the novel, though even Archer follows it with his own son Dallas. For the reader not diligently parsing names, the many wealthy families can become indistinguishable. This stresses the incestuous nature of the aristocracy. Since it's only honorable to marry among one's own class or higher, after many generations the names of the wealthy have blended into an amalgamation. Even worse, the reader never hears more of some of these distant names, so many of these high class people virtually indistinguishable from the next in their personalities as well as name. Furthermore, the repetition and careless mention by Archer for these lists of names impersonalizes them. This can be seen at parties and events like the archery competition, where the guests are nothing more than their names, "the Lawrence Leffertses, Mrs. Lefferts Rushworth (the lovely widow), the Harry Thorleys, the Reggie Chiverses and young Morris Dagonet and his wife (who was a van der Luyden)." These kinds of guest lists are repeated, mixed, and remixed throughout the party scenes, and it seems natural as a reader to just skip over the lists entirely, since they are all just faceless, often characterless names; consider especially Morris Dagonet's wife in the quote above is first recognized by her family name, and then her husband's name. This family referencing is a trend of the novel. For example, the novel's start in Chapter 2 we see, "...the young enquirer, a candid Thorley,..." defending Ellen, and the novel ends in Chapter 34, "Mary (who was so like her mother), had announced her engagement to the dullest and most reliable of Reggie Chivers' many sons...". Both these instances again show what is important in this New York. The individuals are characterless, only of importance as a cog in the greater machine of their family names.

Beyond the effect on the reader, the confines of genealogy in Wharton's world are seen in how it defines characters. The reader may expect that someone's customs, traditions, and appearances at social events to be defined by their name and convention, but in *Age of Innocence* it appears a name defines one's very ability to be an individual. It defines the aspirations, motives, and nearly the entirety of one's behavior. We see this in outward ways – a gentleman can only have a select few professions, such as a lawyer, and preferably no real profession at all—and with a closer look, in more subtle internal ways. Archer's first realizations

about his fate though are seen in the outer trappings (and traps) of the high class. As he mentions, a gentleman can only take a few professions, and working hard is somewhat shameful. Those who choose professions to enjoy, such as Emerson Sillerton as a Professor and Archaeologist, are outright resented and shunned. Even Newland is surprised by the later freedom his son enjoys in becoming an Architect “The young men nowadays were emancipating themselves from the law and business and taking up all sorts of new things.” Throughout the novel, we learn it’s shameful to enjoy travelling anywhere besides the fashionable parts of Europe, as well as to build your house outside a certain area or to employ the use of certain shades of stone. These specifics are only the tip of the iceberg of the expectations Archer feels pressured to follow. However, the full realization comes when Archer sees that it’s not just customs being dictated, but his personality as well. The aristocracy around him expects him to have certain likes and dislikes, to react to the opera in a certain way, and dislike the choices of others. In fact, most horrifying to Archer, is that even his private interactions with his wife read like a script. When he begins to outwardly express his distress to May, he quickly realizes she begins to coddle him for his worrying and actions just the same way May’s mother, Mrs. Welland, treats Mr. Welland’s penchant for imaginary illness. Here he realizes that May isn’t just going through the motions that society demands, but is an active party in maintaining the façade.

The people surrounding Archer are driven by their names. The middle and upper class families, determined to break into the elite circle, are those most obsessed with the customs and form. Two perfect examples are Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts, the former as obsessed and knowledgeable about bloodlines as the latter is about proper form. These men are desperate to maintain and grow their place in the aristocracy by their absolute adherence to the customs, though their hypocrisy is equally as obvious in the affairs Lefferts enjoys and the gossip and backstabbing beloved by Jackson. Others, like the Beaufort’s, are compelled to spend grand sums on ballrooms and food to prove themselves, since Julius Beaufort’s name isn’t from the elite aristocrats, he had to buy and marry his way in. Indeed, the people that originally shun Ellen for her faux pas and taboo nature are those same upper-middle families most determined to maintain the order for their own benefit. The situation is resolved when

Archer appeals to the most elite couple, the Van Der Luydens. The Van Der Luyden's ability to determine what is and isn't couth shows that they are much more free to do what they want in their restrictive culture as a result of their status. In fact their mere association with Ellen saves her image, at least initially. We continue to see freedom by those at the top of the ladder. For example, Mrs. Mingott clearly enjoys unpopular views about social customs and house decorum without any reproach. Similarly, we meet the character of Professor Emerson Sillerton, who outright rejects the customs expected of him—He lives in Newport during the Winter!— and he is greatly resented for it, but nevertheless is begrudgingly kept in good graces solely because he and his wife are from the highest class families, “when they gave one of their dreary annual garden-parties every family on the Cliffs, because of the Sillerton-Pennilow-Dagonet connection, had to draw lots and send an unwilling representative.” Through this, we see the motives, actions, and beliefs of these characters are guided by their names, and the names of those around them. The highest born enjoy great latitude in their decision making while those below them struggle to prove themselves and strictly adhere to expected customs. We see a name in this society can define the personality of those carrying it.

In particular, the reader can glean a unique look into Archer's mind through this genealogical perspective. We can see how Archer feels about those around him in the way he chooses to refer to those characters, and we also see how Archer is struggling with the expectations about himself in this society. As mentioned earlier, Archer has a tendency to refer to many characters just by their family name. His disinterested manner and lack of concern show us his mind. These characters are impersonal to him, but they aren't *strangers*. In fact, they're part of a historical and interconnected wealth of knowledge Archer has about them and their name. He can likely guess with relative accuracy many of their hobbies, “favorite things”, aspirations, dislikes, and so forth. Even when his daughter marries, to Archer the groom is just the “dullest and most reliable of Reggie Chivers' many sons”. The dismissal of these characters in the text is more than just an author's dismissal of minor characters, instead it's of specific importance that *Archer* dismisses them and doesn't value them. The ultimate result, and a big part of what Archer tries to reject, is how much a bloodline defines you personally in this universe. In the beginning he tries to convince himself that May and the stock life that comes

with his name are what he wants, but as he falls for Ellen he realizes things could be different and grows increasingly dissatisfied with the hypocrisy around him. He begrudgingly plays along, with the help of May explaining away his increasing erratic behavior, while growing increasingly rebellious. In one of the many examples of May adapting to his growing outward display of social narcissism, we see the societal obsession with family again as well.

“Newland never seems to look ahead,' Mrs. Welland once ventured to complain to her daughter; and May answered serenely:

‘No; but you see it doesn't matter, because when there's nothing particular to do he reads a book.’

‘Ah, yes -- like his father!’ Mrs. Welland agreed, as if allowing for an inherited oddity.”

Despite his determination to escape, ultimately Archer is finally trapped by history, obligation, and most of all the unassailable determination of May. We readers see that perhaps we, as well as Archer, underestimated May all along. It seems that so much is determined by a name, and many of the characters like May are equally determined to keep their lives that way.

These characters are completely defined by their genealogy. They are often named and referred only by their genes. Their goals and aspirations, or at least freedom to chase them, can even be seen a result of their genes. Those lower born, like the Blenckers, busily maintain the expectations and dream of following Catherine Spicer’s success in climbing the societal ladder despite their births. At the extreme ends, the minor characters are even void of character, and are simply given a name. In this way it seems, they are like cattle, and their name is the brand which tells of their ownership and bloodline. In the less extreme, Archer sees that the importance of family and decorum has smothered the ability to be an individual. The stifling expectations have drowned out creativity and freedom, and in doing so have crushed the best pleasures of life. Though he realizes this, he is still ultimately trapped by obligation. His children though, marrying more free, travelling at will, and working at their chosen profession, appear to be able to enjoy all the parts of life he couldn’t. Though bloodline and obligation were the end all of Newland Archer’s New York, it seems at least, the future was already changing.

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21L.501 The American Novel: Stranger and Stranger  
Spring 2013

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