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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender Roles and Class Relations: Neurasthenic Representations in Edith Whartons' The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth

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| ABSTRACT
This paper examines the neurasthenic condition of Edith Wharton's characters, Ellen, Lily and Aracher, in The age of Innocence and The House of Mirth. Those characters show rebellious attitudes to the social values and conventions of the nineteenth century American society. Our characters showed strong desires and ambitions to change the social values, gender roles and class relations. They did not accept the modern social system; while trying to live differently, they drained their nervous energy and became neurasthenic and ended up secluded and rejected as an act of retaliation. Lily and Ellen decided that they could not fit in and refused to submit to the culture's belief that a woman should remain within the boundaries of her house. Therefore, they ended their lives. Lily killed herself and Ellen decided to live alone, in her apartment in Paris, and leave the New York society. On the other hand, unwillingly, Archer conformed to the social conventions of the time and suppressed his feelings for the sake of cultural acceptance. In fact, he remained living in his past where he fantasized a life with Ellen in a world outside New York society.

| KEYWORDS

Neurasthenia, Edith Wharton, New Woman, American Nervousness, The Gilded Age, Industrial Revolution, Agrarian Society

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Edith Wharton, in her novels *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, depicts her characters as neurasthenic and emotionally disturbed because of their oppositional stance against the societal norms. In fact, their disagreement and defiance of the difficult social conventions that compel them to live secluded and remote from other members of society. Of course, their rebellious conduct lets them live in their own fantasy, unable to establish conventional interact. Consequently, when those characters realize how these social values restrict people's freedom and autonomy, they consume nervous energy to convince people about the importance of social change. When people deplete more nervous energy than they produce, their reserve of nerve force is consumed, leading to nervous exhaustion and anxiety, which is called by Beard "Neurasthenia". Charles E. Rosenberg's preface for *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* explains that neurasthenia arises when the human body can only produce a limited amount of nervous force. Beard explains that neurasthenia is caused by the stress and strain of modern American life, embodied by the existence of modern civilization and the suppression of old and modest agrarian social values: "The chief and primary cause of this development and very rapid increase of nervousness is modern civilization, which is distinguished from the ancient by these five characteristics: steam-power, the periodic press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women" (Beard 113). These advances drive social and economic change, substantiated by the class system and new social conventions, forcing individuals to change their positions and become accustomed to the current social circumstances. In addition, it affects sensitive individuals who reject modern values, causing them to lose their peace of mind and spiritual fulfillment. Beard considers neurasthenia as hypersensitivity which leads a person to anxiety, constantly trying to solve social, political, or economic crises. The goal of a neurasthenic character is to be attentive to fellow citizens and anxiously

concerned about their welfare. Therefore, neurasthenia is primarily known to affect intellectual and civilized people, such as writers, physicians, politicians, and social workers.

This paper explores the neurasthenic state of Ellen, Lily and Archer because of their deviation from traditional social norms and failure to convince others of their feminist philosophy. They believe women should not be dependent and blindly accept patriarchal society but should actively participate in creating and determining their own lives and futures. Those characters reject stereotypes such as marriage is a woman's main goal and her only source of financial security. Women must also realize that they are not limited by their sex and can shape their characters, wit, and personal drive to become what they desire.

Back in the nineteenth century, American society underwent significant changes, including the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the middle and bourgeoisie classes. These transformational factors, as described by Fryer in his book *The Gilded Age* (1870-1900), transformed the country from a predominantly rural nation based on agriculture to an industrial, urban-dominated society that embraced leisure as a luxury. Fryer says, "These forces altered the country from a predominately rural nation based primarily on agriculture and dedicated to the Protestant work ethic into an industrial, urban-dominated society that embraced leisure as one of the best things in life" (42). The chances of becoming an equal man or woman were diminishing and growing weaker within the diversified social structure. This meant that America was no longer "God's commonwealth as the Puritans imagined, nor a republic wherein ordinary men could rise to their full and equal worth as Paine and Jefferson supposed" (Hoeller 19). In other words, America became an empire subjugated by factory and industrial enterprise leaders, with the doctrines of equality, democracy, and freedom becoming just hope and fantasy.

This shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy led to new patterns of production and a new class structure: upper, middle, and lower class. The New York upper class culture was characterized by strict social rules and conventions, living in big houses, wearing diamonds, attending operas, theatres, and lavish parties. New Yorkers established their standards and etiquette, distinguishing them from the lower class. Wealth and leisure were the main prerequisites for maintaining their upper social class and social advancement. Social values or guidelines, which dictated codes of manners, speech, dress, behavior, and decoration, shaped the late nineteenth-century New York culture. Whereas the lower-class lived-in slum houses filled with immigrant families. Moving to big cities such as New York led to fragmented traditional family units, forcing men, women, and children to seek services outside the family unit. Women were pushed from their home-based duties into a more public role which did not immediately change their ambition to have freedom and control over their lives and financial stability. For 19th century American culture, a woman's proper place was her home, subservient to her male and committed to her role as keeper of social customs. When women joined public service, they were confronted with messages from popular media and religious institutions urging them to remain the center of their homes.

Barbara Will argues that women were overly ambitious for intellectual, economic, and social achievements which led them to be overworked. Financial stability, identity and liberty were not easily gained within the late-nineteenth-century American society. The dominant patriarchal ideology of the industrialized nineteenth-century American culture depicted women as the standard-bearers of traditional values, whose status as non-wage-earning persons was considered essential to maintain the moral structure of society. Most Americans assumed that the continuation of their moral structure and values depended on traditional gender roles, where economic values gave dominance to men, who relied on the proverb, "A woman's place is in the home. For women to pursue the dream of educational and economic independence, which compelled them to challenge the social order, women became susceptible to nervous breakdown or neurasthenia.

Based on these historical facts, women started their liberation movement towards achievement of their social and economic ambition. This movement is closely portrayed in Ellen's character. Ellen experienced a pathological state because of her rejection of traditional New York social norms and her unsuccessful attempts to establish the new "women's role". Born in Europe, Ellen married a Polish Count who cheated on her and forced her to leave him. She returned to New York to integrate into the American life to reconnect with her roots again. However, she faced different social rules in New York, which clashed with the image of "true womanhood" she brought with her. New York society, at the time, was limited and narrow-minded. People were not willing to tolerate deviation from strict norms. Ellen's European upbringing exposed her to the rigid code of conduct among the upper class. In Europe, individuals lived for their own pleasure, despite the consequences. Ellen's husband, the Count, was the image of the strict American society, who treated her unfairly. Ellen left her Polish husband and lived with his secretary for a year. She returned to New York where she planned to buy a house and live independently, as she did in Europe. She had no plans to conform to the social codes of New Yorkers, who ostracized and did not welcome her. While living in New York, she adopted different and unique lifestyle that included her choice of fashion, house decorations, manners, and interactions with men. Ellen did not conform with the traditional norms; she raised societal concerns and was faced with neglect and finally got banished out of New York.

The Dress style at the time was conventional for the New York elite which represented decency and style. When Ellen violated the dress code in the opera scene, we see how Archer reacted to her choice. In the scene, Archer realizes that Mrs. Mingotts' opera box is the subject of everybody's attention, he is stunned to recognize that their focus is Ellen's exotic choice of dress: "a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing" (*The Age of Innocence 34*). Archer as well as New York elite believe that, because Ellen has been dishonored by leaving her Polish husband, she should cover more of her body. He gets annoyed to realize that his fiancée may be associated with a woman of ill reputation. He thinks that Ellen's dress is too revealing and violates the social codes of society; therefore, the Mingotts should not have brought her to the opera. On the other hand, May, Archer's soon-to-be-wife, conformed with the social norm and the dress code. In the same opera scene, May is dressed in white and carried white lilies of the valley, which was considered the perfect model and style for New York society. Of course, Ellen and May's styles of dressing show how they differ in their compliance with the conventions and societal norms at the time.

Furthermore, Ellen often goes out in public and confidently interacts with men. When Archer and May visit Mrs. Minngott, they are shocked to learn that Ellen has gone shopping with Julius Beaufort, a married man of questionable reputation. Ellen's behaviors and social conduct were not welcomed, as they were seen as inappropriate. In another scene, Ellen extends an invitation to Archer to visit her alone at her house, breaking the New Yorkers' code of conduct. This act is considered inappropriate, as it is against the New Yorkers' code of conduct. Ellen's bold behavior highlights the reason why bachelors like Archer were grateful for marrying May who shares customs and values with him. Ellen's behavior breaks the code of conduct that was diligently guarded which created a sort of an attack at everyone respected customs and values:

> "It was not the custom in New York drawing-rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentle-man in order to seek the company of another. Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side" (*The age of Innocence* 83).

This scene happens, when Ellen was invited to the Duke's reception, where she displays an offensive attitude towards the social rules. After dinner, the Duke respectfully approaches Ellen and starts talking to her. She, however, abruptly avoids him, and instead chooses to sit next to Archer and starts a conversation with him. women should not leave man's side and walk across a room unescorted to join the company of another man. This spontaneous reaction resembles Archer's late visit to Ellen's shabby house. When she arrives, she greets him casually and explains that she spent the day with Julius Beaufort looking for a new home. Ellen's behavior is considered too unorthodox for her to fit into New York society. She acted in a liberated and entitled way, which showed her as never hesitant to walk away from him during her conversation and insists on living alone in her aunt's house, Medora, despite her family's objections.

Ellen's conduct reveals the depths of misery and vulnerability, as she longs for love, social admiration, economic security, and emotional fulfillment which can only be acquired through matrimony, she's faced with hurtful rejection. Her demeanor stems from her fear that marriage would eliminate her identity and trap her free spirit. She tried to escape her cruel controlling husband and lived for a year with his secretary in Venice before returning to her family in New York. When Ellen met Archer and the Duke in New York, she believed that both men, want to take advantage of her financial and emotional weakness, but courageously enough, Ellen rejected both alternatives, believing that they were not the right fulfilment of her ambition for autonomy and freedom. This bold choice reveals the deep-seated desire for independence. She is open in her opinions regarding her relationship with other male characters and declines her passions towards them. In the midst of Ellen's contradicted and complicated relationship with Archer, she experienced the tenderness and security in his character, but she pushed him away when he was there during her emotional upheaval and depressive state. Despite establishing a remarkable romantic relationship with Archer and acting in accordance with all his desires, Ellen declines to be his mistress, as it meant to her losing her honor and giving up her dream of independence. Consequently, she sacrificed Archer's financial support and love.

Ellen's complicated choices, and the dilemma of sacrificing what she needs "love and financial support" for what she aspires to achieve "the freedom as a New Woman" led her to the neurasthenic condition that she suffered while in New York. Ellen, unsuccessful at making good choices, pushed her relatives to be happy and eager for her departure. They give her a send-off party, which serves as a rejection ceremony. Under the pressure of the societal and economic norms, Ellen ends up living alone in her apartment in Paris, secluded and neglected from others. Ellen's dilemma lies in rejecting the conventional model of womanhood and feeling the gap between cultural values and her actual desires intensifies her sense of nervousness. Her depleted nervous energy acted as the source of her neurasthenia. Thus, at the end, Ellen decides to cast aside her cruel society and live in seclusion, away from others.

Similarly, Lily Bart, in *The House of Mirth* experienced neurasthenia because she depletes her nervous energy due to her opposition of the restrictive social and economic values forced on women at that time. Upper-middle class women had little

means of earning money for they were not permitted to compete with men in the job market and were looked upon as an entertaining and sexual objects for men. Thus, women's main interest was to show off their husband's wealth by attending social gatherings and wearing costly clothes which are signs of protecting their social values. Pamela says that "women were apparently looked upon as subservient to men, women waited to get married as that was the only mean to protect themselves socially and economically." (222). On the other hand, free and independent women could not find men suitable to their sentiments and ambitions, which made them feel out of place and deprived, causing their emotional breakdown. Therefore, Lily Bart struggles because she desires to be socially successful, by getting married to a reasonably wealthy man who supports her financial stability and secure a place for her in the higher ranks of New York society whilst keeping her freedom and independence.

Lily lived a luxurious life. Yet, her extravagant wealth and leisurely life did not last forever. Suddenly, her father announced his bankruptcy, and her mother tried to hide their financial situation from their daughter then blamed her husband for ruining the family even after his death. The shame of poverty was what mostly worried and obliged her mother to hide her economic state from Lily. On the other hand, Lily's father was out of the picture most of her early childhood, so he was depicted, in the story, as a shadow who worked continuously to provide his wife and daughter with money. Her only real memory of her father was when he came back home from work stating that he was financially ruined. Her father never came back home early to give Lily the important fatherly presence and advice by which, in the future, she could use to judge other male characters. As an alternative, Lily was taught how to assess a man's value by his wealth only rather than other valuable moral characters. As such, her childhood experiences with her family, specifically her mother, left her with hatred for poverty. Lily's mother influenced her way of thinking and character, hence her respect for wealth and appreciation for a well-off suitor. So, Mrs. Bart, Lily's mother, endeavors to live beyond her accessible means to the point of making her husband feel degraded if she does otherwise. Prior to her father's death, Lily's family lived in excessive affluence and a lavish lifestyle; they had many English and French maids, spending abundantly for clothing and other material possessions, and most of their conversations were all about money: "A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was "company"... a hall-table showered with square envelopes..., and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust (*The House of Mirth* 28-29).

Therefore, when Lily heard about the stock market, she decided to invest her money, believing that it is the best way to achieve financial security and avoid poverty: "Trenor... to prove to her that, if she would only trust him, he could make a handsome sum of money for her without endangering the small amount she possessed." (*The House of Mirth122*) To achieve her goal, Lily believed that she was soliciting help from Gus Trenor who was supposed to take care of her complicated financial matters and stock market dealings. Lily was ignorant of Gus's intentions around her until she discovered that he was sexually attracted to her. Lily received a couple of thousand from Gus, as a return on her investment. To her surprise, Gus removed all boundaries between them when he called her Lily, on a first name basis. Not only that, but Lily also realized that every time he gave her a check, he expected her to pay more attention to him. Once, he pushed her to visit him at his residence in Bellomont despite her objections. Reaching his townhouse, Gus attempted to rape her, and when she tried to leave the house, he blocked her way, believing that she should be kind with him since she was kind with other men; he believed that she owed him that much.

It is obvious that the relationship between Trenor and Lily was based on materialistic and mutual benefits. Because he is lonely and unhappy with his marriage to Judy Trenor, he tries to find better companionship. Thus, it was obvious that he wants sex from Lily for the money he gives her. Right from the beginning, Trenor hoped that Lily would reciprocate the same interest, but he slowly realized that she is not interested in him except as a tool by which she can make money. He seeks to buy her sexual favors, but when she does not pay him back, he sets up a trap and planned to rape her. Of course, it seems that Lily is intentionally ignorant of her part of this mutual transaction and does not want to spend time with Trenor and be his mistress in return for the monetary favors he bestows on her. At this point, Lily's nervous and neurasthenic state affects her to the point of adopting a unstable mood. When Lily gets her check from Trenor, she feels wholly free, whereas when she feels burdened by debt, she feels enslaved. Lily needs both a decent marriage to provide her with money and freedom to provide her with a sense of independence. Thus, she rejects Trenor's romantic and sexual advances because he satisfies her financial needs but not the emotional one, which is her freedom.

On the other hand, her relationship with Seldon reflects the romantic part of her character who represents her moral side. According to Gloria C. Erlich, Lily loves a man who reflects her passions for a romantic love. Nevertheless, she looks to other men whom she does not love "to provide her the material foundations of her life" (51). Such a notion was portrayed during her conversation with Seldon when she meets him after she misses attending the church ceremony with Gryce. In their conversation, Seldon and Lily discuss the meaning of "success," which leads them to discuss the meaning of freedom. When Lily

says that success means getting as much out of life as possible, Seldon bluntly disagrees with her and confirms that success means freedom from social and all material constraints:

> "Success—what is success? I shall be interested to have your definition...It's a relative quality, after all. Isn't that your idea of it?" "My idea of it? God forbid!" He sat up with sudden energy, resting his elbows on his knees and staring out upon the mellow fields. "My idea of success," he said, "is personal freedom." "Freedom? Freedom from worries?" "From everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of spirit—that's what I call success." She leaned forward with a responsive flash. "I know—I know—it's strange; but that's just what I've been feeling today." He met her eyes with the latent sweetness of his. "Is the feeling so rare with you?" he said. She blushed a little under his gaze. "You think me horribly sordid, don't you? But perhaps it's rather that I never had any choice. There was no one, I mean, to tell me about 'the republic of the spirit.' (*The House of Mirth* 68)

As it has been noted from the previous quotation, the "republic of spirit" is the key word for Seldon's idealism. Seldon refers to this republic, as if he has Plato's The Republic in mind, as the only place where an ideal group of people commits to live freely and liberally. Those who live in Seldon's republic are deprived of their sexual instincts, the social hierarchy, race differences and material interest. Consequently, rich and married people would not be admitted to his republic, which coerces Seldon to tell Lily that she would not be welcomed in this republic since she sacrifices freedom for luxury and submits herself to boring, narrow-minded people to gain leisure time. In this respect, to compare Seldon's "republic of spirit" and Plato's republic, one finds huge resemblances between them in terms of wealth, money and moral values. Plato says:

> And such men," I said, "will desire money just as those in Oligarchies do, and under cover of darkness pay fierce honor to gold and silver, because they possess storehouses and domestic treasuries where they can deposit and hide them; and they will have walls around their houses, exactly like private nests, where they can make lavish expenditures on women and whomever else they might wish. (225)

New York elites control the entire society and continue for infinite and extreme search for wealth and money that goes beyond their desire for honor. For the upper-class American society, wealth sustains their membership in their higher society and the material interest is regarded as the basis for cultural communication and social judgments. In their conversation, Seldon endeavors to convince Lily that wealth is offensive to the ideal society because it does not guarantee social security and stability. The rich will be more affluent whereas the poor will likely end up as a beggar or criminal, which is a violation of the moral values of society. Lily felt almost unable to control her desires and constantly fluctuated between Seldon's idealism and New Yorkers. She ultimately ended up lacking the ability to discern the difference. Consequently, Seldon believes that a new chaotic generation will emerge who does not respect both money and social values and leads to an arbitrary life. At this point, Seldon, in a failed attempt, tried to give Lily a chance to leave the material world and live outside the social constraints of her society and join the ideal world of "the republic of spirit". In this setting and away from other people, both spend a few hours in the warm and romantic atmosphere of Seldon's ideal republic which makes her feel what it would be like to step outside the role dictated by her society. Lily gets closer to freedom and realizes who she could be if she were not forced to follow the instructions of her mother. For a moment, both live and entertain the thought of what they can be to each other.

In an attempt to create a close analysis of Lily's character, in terms of her relationship with her parents and the way they brought her up, we can discern that Lily's nervous and neurasthenic state grew from her failed attempts to deviate from the concept of the traditional "true women". Therefore, she is torn between her internal emotions to live independently and marry an honest man (Seldon), who represents freedom and idealism, and the social demands that lead her to be dependent and marry an affluent man and enjoy his wealth. In pursuit of this fact, Lily's neurasthenic state shows signs of arbitrariness in her conduct. Meaning, she is hesitant between choosing her love and independence, in other times she acts in terms of what is financially best for her. In other words, she wants love and autonomy, yet she acts contrary to her feelings, and she wants money and a rich husband, she ends up choosing what is best for her financial interests. According to Fedorko "Lily's arbitrariness and neurasthenic conduct, for instance, appear when she wakes up late one morning and misses the chance of accompanying Mr. Gryce to church, which might have given her a great opportunity to marry a wealthy man." (12). However, instead of doing so, she follows her heart and spends that afternoon with Mr. Seldon, even though she knows that her relationship with him is fruitless because both come from families with little wealth.

Obviously, Lily is so distracted that she finds difficulty in expressing her emotions to Seldon because her pride as a wealth seeking person prevents her from having the man she desires. Indeed, there is a constant feeling of misunderstanding as she and Seldon talk; both hide their feelings and act contrary to how they desire. Geoffrey Walton indicates that Seldon believes that Lily is "unreachable because she is expensive and he can't afford to provide her with the luxury she dreams of since she

thinks in terms of her materialistic world" (109). Her dilemma rises out of her belief that if she follows her emotions, not to care for money, she will live in desolation, and if she favors a rich man without love and attraction, she will also be miserable. In fact, both choices will bring her distress and misery, which is probably the reason behind her uncertainty and confusion to achieve her ambitions and goals. Under such a neurasthenic and depressed mood, Lily finds her solace in everlasting sleep, as an escape from her miserable condition. Ultimately, she overdosed to enable herself to rest forever.

Archer in *The Age of Innocence* challenges the social rules and shows careful care for the freedom of his fellow citizens. The beginning of novel shows Archer as a typical New Yorker who follows the typical male role for his time and believes that people in his society should adhere to the same set of strict rules and social etiquette. He believes that everybody should follow these social conventions to get the chance for honor and distinction among upper-middle class people. He dislikes women to step out of the traditional norms and behave independently, without males' supervision. As for May, he has peculiar feelings of custody over her whom he sees as his pupil: "With a new sense of awe he looked at the frank forehead, serious eyes and gay innocent mouth of the young creature whose soul's custodian he was to be" (The age of Innocence 62). Nonetheless, he later changes his attitude towards these social and economic values. He rather defies these conventions of his society and appreciates the unconventional and bohemian trends of openness and freedom brought to New York society by Countess Ellen Olenska. In fact, she opens his eyes to question the validity of his own social conventions, particularly when he realizes her unconventional taste in clothing, and negative attitudes towards social conventions. He claims that the double standard for the affairs of women and men is totally abominable, and it is time for women to be as free as men: "women ought to be free—as free as we are" (61). Archer starts realizing that Ellen's exotic conduct carries symbols of liberty. He shows aversion against the initiative that society prohibits women to be acquainted with life outside their constricted existence such as his sister Janey and his fiancée May. Hence, the change in Archer's character in the form of his indecision whether to comply with the social conventions and continue with his fiancée May or to defy them and live an autonomous life and live with Ellen brought on internal conflict.

Archer's controversial and perplexing character brought in constant change in his attitudes towards the social codes of conduct. Archer displays a hypersensitive nature that pushes him to resent the negative attitudes against these social conventions. When Archer realized the emptiness of the social restrictions, he started to dread following them. Indeed, when he realized that the people of his society did not care if they sacrifice Ellen's life for the sake of maintaining their scandal free existence, he became aware of the cruelty of these social condemnations and restrictions. Of course, when he reached the realization that social change limits people's freedom and autonomy, his nervous energy incites him to open people's eyes to their doomed social conventions:

> "He had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary… Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent—that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there" (*The Age of Innocence* 280).

As a neurasthenic character, he feels so alert and anxious for the welfare of women to the point that he never finds the real power to act. Wharton describes Archer as a "dilettante," because he is not a man of action but a man of words. He loves Ellen and dislikes the social conventions of his culture, but he can't bravely confront them. He always fantasizes himself out of New York society and lives in accordance with the other part of himself where he can be married to May but still has Ellen. Melissa Pennell, for instance, "describe[s] him [Archer] at the outset...(Who) cannot commit himself to anyone or anything with a true passion" (150). Similarly, Hildegard says "these dilettantes...are speculators and critics who try to avoid involving themselves too much in the world around them. They are men whose fine critical sensibilities and tastes render them incapable of living a full life, of recognizing female passion, and of creating art" (64). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines him as "an amateur who engages in an activity without serious intentions and who pretends to have knowledge." Obviously, he hopelessly and ineffectively depletes a great amount of his nervous energy, which is the cause of his neurasthenic state. However, he was not able to change anything. Indeed, till the end of the novel, Archer never sets himself free from the social values of his society and never succeeds in changing the social conventions. When he travels with his son, Dallas, to Paris, he fails to go upstairs and see Ellen. He prefers to stay down on the street below her apartment and chooses to visualize himself entering her apartment, believing that she is more real to him in his imagination. Such conduct affirms that Archer is still imprisoned in his past, which deters him from joining the world that belongs to his son and those like him; he believes that he is "like a relic in a small chapel" (*The age of Innocence* 249). In fact, time or age difference never inhibits his fears of the social values that he once lived and is still living. Archer's antagonism for the New Yorkers' social values is still alive in his mind, which is the cause of his seclusion and certainly the root cause of his pathological state of neurasthenia.

In conclusion, under such challenging circumstances Ellen, Lily and Archer developed neurasthenia because they believed that their society lived in a rigid atmosphere that needed thorough change, they trespassed their limits and followed their desires to change the rules of their time. Ultimately, our characters showed strength and ability to resist the conventional power of their societal rules, although the price to that retaliation was to be secluded and rejected. Of course, when Lily and Ellen confronted the conventional gender roles (New Woman) and the modern social system, they drained their nervous energy and became neurasthenic. Indeed, their desires and ambitions were in contrast with the social conventions of their time. Lily and Ellen, ending their lives tragically, both could not fit into their social cercle because they exhibited insufficient nervousness to defy their customs. Since they did not submit to the culture's belief that women should remain within the boundaries of their domestic chores, Lily put her soul into everlasting rest and Ellen was expelled out of the New York society and ended up living ostracized in her apartment in Paris. Archer, even though unwillingly, conformed to the social conventions of his culture and suppressed his real feelings for the sake of the cultural values; he remained engulfed in his past where he fantasized himself living in a world outside New York society with his love for Ellen.

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