"Every One Knew"

Epistemologies of the City in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

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Abstract

New York looms large in much of Edith Wharton's work, maybe never more so than in The Age of Innocence. *The city is not just the space in which the stories unfold or the social context which frames the central drama. Rather, "New York" serves as the central source of knowledge for characters and readers alike. Whether in the form of private gossip or society journals, news travels fast, judgement is swift, and knowledge about everyone's intimate affairs is ever present.* The Age of Innocence *is hence marked by the stark distinction between the reticence of its main characters—who live in an "atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies," share "mute message[s]," and rely on "silence to communicate all [they] had to say"—and the eloquence of the city. By detailing this contrast between the novel's main characters and its setting, this article addresses gossip and other forms of communal, networked, or anonymous knowledge not only as an element of plot, but as narrative strategy in* The Age of Innocence. *It thus combines an exploration of Edith Wharton's distinct style with an analysis of New York's central role in her writing.*

Keywords

gossip, narration, New York, rumor, The Age of Innocence, The Writing of Fiction

New York looms large in Edith Wharton's work, maybe never more so than in *The Age of Innocence*. Her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel of 1920 famously opens on a scene at the opera, where all its major players are introduced in the quintessential literary depiction of New York's elite going out to "see and been seen." Newland Archer arrives late, not—as the novel emphasizes—for any compelling reason, but because "in the first place, New York was a

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metropolis, and perfectly aware that in metropolises it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera" (1). As the subject position shifts from Newland to New York, the metropolis is personified as an entity with not simply influence, but "aware[ness]." The novel continues to explain that "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" (1–2). Wharton's anthropological or ethnographic take on the New York of her youth has received much (deserved) attention; the terminology of these disciplines is as present as the elegiac theme of the city's (or rather its high society's) doom and decay.[1] New York's contradictory status as the plot's lively propeller of action, in contrast, has yet to be fully explored.

In this article, I want to argue for a closer look at New York as more than the setting or the spatial and social backdrop of *The Age of Innocence* and read it instead as a key player and central "angle of vision" (Wharton, *Writing* 64) on whose knowledge and point of view the narration repeatedly relies. With this shift in focus, I also suggest that we read *The Age of Innocence* not as a novel of manners, but as a novel of networks. The former classification invites us to focus on a "culture's hum and buzz of *implication* . . . the whole *evanescent context* of its explicit statements" (Trilling 12, emphasis added). New York's intersecting networks of knowledge creation and dissemination, however, rather create a "buzz" of *explicit* statements which contextualize and drive its central (domestic) drama. Gossip, rumor, and innuendo abound, as they do in much of Wharton's fiction, yet here they are decoupled from specific members of society. Shifts in perspective between individuals and abstract entities[2] further compound the impression of a multitude of voices that cannot be securely distinguished. As such, the city in *The Age of Innocence* emerges as an anonymous yet highly connected source of information, frame for character's action, and character in its own right.[3]

Setting the stage for this focus on knowledge networks, the novel introduces anonymous groups of New Yorkers before it touches on any member of the Archer, Welland, or Mingott family: "there was already talk" of a new opera house, while "Christine Nilsson was singing in *Faust* at the Academic of Music in New York" (1). Since the Academy was cherished by "the world of fashion," neatly divided by the narrator into "[c]onservatives," "the sentimental," and "the musical," readers are left to speculate who would frequent the new place and who was talking about it. The third paragraph then announces yet another facet of the city's network of information, "the daily press," which had just "learned" to "describe as an 'exceptionally brilliant audience'" those

in attendance for Nilsson's performance. While the press "learns" and the city "is aware," Newland Archer is introduced as "dawd[ling]" and "thinking over a pleasure" rather than realizing it (2). This contrast between the buzz and eloquence of the city on the one hand, and the Newland Archer's inaction and reticence on the other, structures much of the novel. Newland is one of the "the carefully-brushed, white-waistcoated, buttonhole-flowered gentleman" who "grouped together . . . represented New York" (6). Despite his perfect fit with the mold[4] he aspires to, he often seems curiously out of touch with the collective he is supposed to be representative of.

Contrasted with Archer are the social experts Lawrence Lefferts (on "form") and Sillerton Jackson (on "family"), whose pronouncements and predictions are as eagerly awaited by Archer and his social set, as by the readers whom they "instruct . . . in social placing" (Knights 24). As such, readers not only learn that Sillerton Jackson "knew all the ramifications of New York's cousinship" (7), but they also get a detailed summary of all the family histories he "could . . . elucidate," even as this "elucidation" remains only a possibility on the story level. Interspersed in this supposedly unique knowledge, the phrase "as everybody knew . . ." (7) suggests that such knowledge is not exclusive to the social expert. "Every one" in fact becomes an increasingly relevant foil to Newland, as the novel progresses and vastly different forms of knowledge are pitted against each other.

Newland's knowledge is primarily one of tacit assumption, innuendo, and guesswork. As he himself acknowledges, he lives "in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies" (11). He prides himself on being so well adapted to this environment that he can communicate with May only by looking at each other all their complicated thoughts on the presence of Countess Olenska in Mrs. Mingott's opera box. Yet this description of "the persons of their world" is belied by the conversation immediately preceding Newland and May's silent exchange. As the various (mostly nameless) gentlemen gather around Mr. Jackson, Newland overhears snippets of their conversation in which they debate in explicit terms "just *what* happened" to cause Ellen's return to New York. Newland (and the reader) learns that she was married to "an awful brute," who was willing to pay "any price" for women, and that Ellen herself "bolted with his secretary," before she went to live alone in Italy. Lovell Mingott, who traveled there to return her to the US, is quoted in this anonymous exchange as describing Ellen as "desperately unhappy" (11–12, emphasis in the original).

The contrast between the openness of others and Newland's perception (and adherence) to rules of muted references and silent suggestions is continued in

chapter 5, when Mrs. Archer invites Sillerton Jackson for dinner, as "she liked to be well-informed as to [society's] doings" (21). Mrs. Archer and Mr. Jackson, slightly taken aback by Newland's unexpected presence, exchange pleasantries about Mrs. Struthers first, in which much of the talking is done by the gaps and ellipses (e.g., "After the police broke that up, they say she lived—" and "Anyhow, he—eventually—married her," 23–24). The scene introduces, in Clare Virginia Eby's terms, "silence and silencing as old New York's means of social control, particularly for maintaining a constricting definition of 'the feminine'" (94). The description of the dinner escalates the importance of silence by going from Sillerton's hints to the Archers' unspoken communication and assumptions about each other. "All this Mrs. Archer felt, and her son knew she felt, but he also knew . . ." (24), "Newland knew (and his betrothed doubtless guessed)" (24), and finally the explanation that "it was against the rules of their codes that the mother and son should ever allude to what was uppermost in their thoughts" (24). Chapter 5 thus also exemplifies Ekaterini Kottaras's argument that the characters in *The Age of Innocence* "do not honestly or directly communicate with one another; instead they try to read each others' behaviors . . . like actors on stage" (10). In Eby's account, to overlook the power of silence means to overemphasize the agency of the novel's women. In Kottaras's, the novel is so plagued by deception that it exemplifies that "Wharton proves [Austin's] speech act theory by showing its reverse: what happens when 'the thing' is not said at all" (11). Yet even this chapter—in which Mr. Sillerton avoids offending the sensibilities of Mrs. Archer's unmarried daughter, Mrs. Archer avoids criticizing Newland and his future wife, and Newland avoids showing his own investment in the fate of Ellen Olenska—silence and deception are pitted against the eloquent clarity of the city. "[T]he whole of New York" saw Countess Olenska "walking up Fifth Avenue" with Mr. Beaufort and had no qualm sharing this information so that it can reach the secluded dining table of Mrs. Archer within the span of a few hours. Society's constraining influence is thus introduced early in the novel as a matter of silence as much as a matter of abundant talk.

As Hildegard Hoeller emphasizes in tracing the theme of scandal from *The Age of Innocence* to the *Old New York* novellas (1924), there is an abundance of talk that the novel only hints at because it happens in Newland's absence, and thus the "scandalous versions of the novel [are buried] in Newland Archer's limited point of view and range of actions" (139).[5] The central talk, which enters the novel not by representation, but solely by its traces (in conversations between May and Newland) and results (in Ellen's departure), is May's premature revelation of her pregnancy to her cousin (Hoeller 144–45). Yet various other scandals

are, in fact, discussed in Newland's presence. Even as Newland fashions himself to be disinterested in gossip and rumor, as expressed by his "tendency to weigh [Sillerton's] evidence" (21), he listens attentively to every minute detail shared by Sillerton, be that about Ellen Olenska or Julius Beaufort. This way, the entire backstory of the novel's main events is shared as unverified hearsay—subtly endorsed by Newland who is never shown to actually "weigh the evidence" of any private information or speculation that reaches him. For Newland (and the novel), it makes little difference whether this hearsay is packaged as gossip, that is unverified information made trustworthy by the gossipers (imagined) intimacy with each other; or rumor, which "is distinct from gossip in that it generally has no traceable origin" (Champagne and Tobin 54).

When Jackson Sillerton, for example, summarizes the events of Ellen Olenska's past for Mrs. Archer (who was not present when Newland first learned of this version of events at the gathering of gentlemen at the opera), Newland is initially ready to make light of the rumors concerning the role of Count Olenska's secretary. "I hope there isn't a man among us who wouldn't have done the same in such a case," he explains and surprises himself by decrying "the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age" whose husband was cheating on her (27). At Sillerton's addendum that "somebody met 'em living at Lausanne together," Newland nonetheless "reddened" (27). He neither questions who this "somebody" might be nor how that "somebody" might have relayed the information to Sillerton, nor ever suggests that this piece of information might simply not be true. Instead, this conversation becomes the seed of Newland's growing conviction that Ellen did indeed have an adulterous affair. The refusal to address the delicate issue directly and explicitly is thus effectively limited to his exchanges with Ellen herself. Outside of their muted private conversations, the matter is treated as common knowledge.

The same holds true for the retrospective account of how New York was kept informed about the fate of young Ellen:

> For some time *no more was heard* of [Medora Manson and Ellen Mingott]; then *news came* of Ellen's marriage to an immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame, whom she had met at a ball at the Tuileries, and who *was said to* have princely establishments in Paris, Nice and Florence, a yacht at Cowes, and many square miles of shooting in Transylvania. She disappeared in a kind of sulphurous apotheosis, and when a few years later Medora again came back to New York, subdued, impoverished, mourning a third husband, and in quest of a still smaller house, *people wondered*

> that her rich niece had not been able to do something for her. *Then came the news* that Ellen's own marriage had ended in disaster, and that she was herself returning home to seek rest and oblivion among her kinsfolk. (39, emphasis added)

This excerpt from all the things that "passed through Newland Archer's mind" when Ellen enters the van der Luyden home for the dinner organized to shield her from public disapproval, is a striking reminder of how well New York's structure of surveillance works—regardless of geographic distance. The passive constructions ("was heard") and anonymous references ("people") package the revelations as facts—a seemingly neutral summary of events primarily included so readers develop the necessary understanding of the past to follow the action in the present. Crucially, however, these "news" items pass through Newland's thoughts and are filtered through his perception as the result of his willingness and interest to listen to other people's unverified gossip. At the same time, the stories about Ellen's life abroad seamlessly follow his own recollection of his childhood friendship with Ellen—and are thereby put on the same level as these personal experiences in terms of their truth claims. They are thus doubly coded as reliable, when they are anything but. Newland might consider himself once again set apart from his surroundings and their value judgements, when he "rejected the general verdict on her looks" (39) and later "smiled at . . . his old New York" (40). New York's knowledge, however, he accepts at face value. When his law firm's senior partner, Mr. Letterblair, approaches him about Ellen Olenksa's plans to seek a divorce—a story he had hitherto supposedly "dismissed . . . as unfounded gossip" (60), the papers provided to him in confidence "did not tell him much in fact" (61). How could they, if Ellen's every move had been up for public discussion? Somewhat surprisingly, Newland is nonetheless "plunged . . . into an atmosphere in which he chocked and spluttered" and rushes to confront Ellen "rather than let her secrets be bared to other eyes" (61). This reaction might fit Newland's view of himself as one of the men eager to save a woman in peril (27) and of his environment as so averse to the unpleasant that it kept "New York air so pure" by refusing to talk about "human vileness" (61). Yet the several strands of rumor which the novel has by this time combined through Newland's reaction to them make clear that few of Ellen's actions could be considered secret. When after his talk with Ellen, Newland "plunged out into the winter night bursting with the belated eloquence of the inarticulate" (73), the "narrative irony" (Hoeller 144) results not from the distance between narrator and focalizer, but between Newland's insistence on keeping up appearances

in the face of everything that has already been revealed to him, to New York society, and to the reader.[6] This discrepant awareness remains itself inarticulate, but its effect is no less striking. Confronted with information about Ellen, about Leffert's affairs, or even Beaufort's financial trouble, Newland becomes the main supporter of "the ritual of ignoring the unpleasant" and thus of the hypocrisy he so vividly decries.[7]

Regardless of Newland's awareness of the influence of gossip and rumor on his (in)actions, he is firmly embedded in the city's knowledge exchange, and the ever-widening network that supports it. Readers, for example, are implicated in the novel's knowledge networks not only via the information they receive filtered through Newland's perception, but also via the subtle evocation of direct address. Several passages of free indirect discourse include phrases which might represent dialogue among characters, but which are only loosely framed as such. The resulting ambiguity invites readers into the supposedly exclusive "world of fashion" in which the story takes place.[8] The defiant claim that "[t]here was no better match in New York than May Welland, look at the question from whatever point *you* chose" (24, emphasis added) is only clearly attributed to Mrs. Archer, when the subsequent sentence establishes Newland's mother as the passage's focalizer ("one's only son"). In another instance of Mrs. Archer's observations occasioning such a break in the novel's form of address, her exclamation "you couldn't expect the old traditions to last much longer" (32) is presented only as a hypothetical—something, she *would* say—and as such not directed at anyone specifically. Such ambiguity is raised even when a dialogue is clearly established. During Newland's exchange about men's usefulness in society with journalist Ned Winsett, the paragraph shifts from the impersonal "one could" in one sentence to "[b]ut you couldn't make a man like Winsett see that" in the next (80–81). The modification from indefinite to personal pronoun extents the conversational tone beyond the characters to include readers. They are thus subtly admitted within a community that, as a gossip network, "cement[s] the boundaries . . . by separating itself by a shared pool of knowledge" (Milne-Smith 94). At other points, dialogue is interrupted for lengthy interjections of family histories, tales of former scandals, and salacious suggestions that serve as a kind of "aside" to events currently unfolding (e.g., 38–39, 54). These structural gossip elements stress the talkative, rather than muted character of the social network at the novel's center.

The boundaries of this shared pools of knowledge, while opened to readers, are—at least superficially—carefully guarded in other ways, namely regarding the press. Far from the overt engagement with the tabloid papers provided in

The Custom of the Country as an examination of the "accelerating changes to print culture" (Ohler 34), *The Age of Innocence* reflects its more high-brow (and dated) setting by presenting "the daily press" (1) as, at first glance, unobtrusive. It is introduced in a patronizing manner ("has learned") as a middle-class vehicle, which only recently gained the relevant social knowledge to navigate New York's elite circles. Mrs. Archer, accordingly, dismisses the information contained in its pages as "all this modern newspaper rubbish about a New York aristocracy" (32), which she can correct with her detailed knowledge of families across generations. The press nonetheless remains a constant presence—and threat—throughout the novel. Newland warns Ellen to "[t]hink of the newspapers—their vileness!" (72), while Mrs. Welland is convinced "that if the horrible business [regarding Ellen's divorce] had come out in the newspapers it would have been my husband's death-blow" (93). It continues to fall to Mrs. Welland, arguably one of the most conservative characters in the novel, to uphold such a dramatically adversarial stance toward the press. When planning Newland and May's wedding, Mrs. Welland opposes the public presentation of wedding gifts by liking it to "turn[ing] the reporters loose in my house" (115). When the removal of the awning is considered (to allow Catherine Mingott to enter the church), Mrs. Welland exclaims, "Why, they might take a photograph of my child and *put it in the papers!*," an "unthinkable indecency" from which finally, and under her influence, "the clan recoiled with a collective shudder" (116, emphasis in the original).

Beyond this figurehead of Old New York values, however, the press is treated in a much more matter-of-fact manner, which not only points to its increasing importance in the late nineteenth century, but also adds another facet to the novel's depiction of New York as connected by various networks of knowledge and information. Strikingly, Newland's only (it seems) relevant social contact outside of his "tribe" is Ned Winsett, a failed writer turned journalist who now writes for the women's weekly *Hearth-fires* (78–80). Despite his warning against vile newspapers only a few days earlier (and in stark contrast to the stance of his mother-in-law), Newland has no qualms about sharing Ellen's name and a suggestive explanation of her circumstances with the journalist who inquires about his new neighbor. Given Newland's prior explanation, that he and other men of his class mingle with such "clever people" at the club on a regular basis, there thus remains little question about how newspapers could garner information for their society pages. The porosity of the boundaries between Newland's Old New York and the potentially more democratic New York of journalists, however, goes both ways.

Just as Newland (and, potentially, other club goers like him) talk to the press with little inhibition, *The Age of Innocence* emphasizes that they in turn also consume newspapers on a regular basis. Mr. van der Luyden, who with his wife leads a "secluded existence" (36), sets time apart each day to "reading the newspaper" (34). When asked by Mr. van der Luyden if he had also "read this morning's *Times*," Newland replies in the affirmative. The narrator contextualizes this by adding that Newland "usually tossed off half a dozen papers with his morning coffee" and that he often continued reading newspapers at work (81). Nor are the two men alone in their habit. As the Beaufort scandal is slowly building up to its public crescendo,[9] we as readers learn that society women, too, were following public reports. As it is decided that a telegram should be sent to inform Ellen of Mrs. Mingott's stroke, "May rose from her seat and went to gather up some newspapers that had been scattered on the floor" (173). The next chapter then states "[t]hat afternoon the announcement of the Beaufort failure was in all the papers. It overshadowed the report of Mrs. Manson Mingott's stroke" (175). While the parallelism of financial and social news reached its peak a decade after the time in which the central events take place, with the establishment of *Town Topics* in the late 1880s (see Knight 51–53)—the Beaufort/Mingott combination reflects that the mixture of Wall Street and Fifth Avenue news was not unusual even a decade earlier.

Considering this thematic variety of newspapers and the extensive reading habits of both Mr. van der Luyden and Newland, the novel suggests that they, too, consume a fair share of society news. The *New York Times*, the one paper which they admit reading, established itself in the 1870s as the serious alternative to an already crowded newspaper scene in New York, just as the US was embarking on its "love affair with the super-rich" (Homberger 16). Beginning in the 1880s, newspapers would see the professionalization of society pages in various publications which "maintained a record of daily events" (17, see also 205–6). *The Age of Innocence* is thus set precisely at the moment, when "newspaper publicity became an integral part of life for those active in high society" and a vehicle for readers to enter into a "'imagined community' . . . by informing them about the lifestyle of the leisure class" (Montgomery 141). For Patricia Spacks, society journalism "debases the social functions of [oral] gossip" (67) as a mode of communication often connected to the creating of intimacy and group cohesion (e.g., Adkins 216, White 79).[10] Her definition of public gossip's epistemological value nonetheless summarizes how such newspaper references strengthen the novel's evocation of the ubiquity of knowledge. Spacks claims that gossip journalism "making public what it insists is private, promulgates

the illusion of being in the know" and that in reading it "one gains a temporary conviction of possessing inside knowledge: the pleasure associated with gossip in all its forms" (67). This pleasure thus extends far beyond Newland's "tribe" to a reading public spread across different spaces and social strata of the metropolis.

In addition to the role of newspapers in the story and the stylistic modifications to include the novel's readers within an "imagined community," *The Age of Innocence* stresses the expansive circulation of knowledge also in far less subtle ways: the narrator bluntly and repeatedly asserts that "everybody knew" (7). While such a phrase might emphasize the comprehensive body of tacit knowledge about etiquette in Newland's set, its use within the novel is restricted to people's awareness about social events and personal developments. Mrs. Mingott's exclamation that "Everybody in New York has always known everybody" (19) implies that personal acquaintance and a tight-knit social community would explain why, at various moments, "everybody knew" about certain things. Even the narrator's explanation that "New York society was, in those days, far too small, and too scant in its resources, for every one in it (including livery-stable-keepers, butlers and cooks) not to know exactly on which evenings people were free" (31) bases the premise of mutual knowledge on an understanding of New York as small.[11] Such qualifications, however, become sparse even as the novel continues to abound with variations of "as everybody knew" (7).[12] "[E]verybody knew," for example, "that the Countess Olenska was no longer in the good graces of her family" (164–65) and "[e]very one had heard the rumours" about Beaufort's speculation (163), so that even the novel's most prominent gossiper, Jackson Sillerton, "scorned to confirm [the] tale that was already common property" (163). How "every one had heard" is left intentionally vague via the passive construction "[t]he ugliest things were being said of Beaufort's dastardly manoeuvre" (170). The context is as well established as the facts of the case, as "every one remembered the social extinction visited on the heads of the firm when the last event of the kind had happened" (163) and "every one was aware" that Beaufort and his wife would be expelled from polite society (169).

It is clear that the knowledge of "every one" does not solely depend on newspaper accounts, as might be argued for Beaufort's public scandal, since comparable expressions are also used in the characterization of less high-profile transgressions. Some of these add the dimension of swift transmission, as when "two hours later, every one knew that the great C-spring barouche . . . had been seen at old Mrs. Mingott's door" (37). Newland's own secrets—inconsequential

as they are for a larger public—are no exception either. Ellen Olenska knows of the anonymously sent yellow roses (75), and his affair with a married woman prior to his engagement is commonplace even for his mother and fiancée. In one of the few instances in which Newland is directly confronted with his misconceptions about May's naiveté, she tells him that "every one was talking about [his affair] two years ago at Newport" (95). In a similar moment of retrospective disillusionment, it dawns on Newland during Ellen's farewell dinner that their clandestine meetings had been well known and widely discussed (211–12). Ellen had hinted at this outcome much earlier, when she complained that "One can't be alone for a minute in that great seminary of a house, with all the doors wide open, and always a servant bringing tea, or a log for the fire, or the newspaper! Is there nowhere in an American house where one may be by one's self? You're so shy, and yet you're so public" (85). In terms of its effects, it is of little importance whether the general understanding of Newland and Ellen as lovers is accurate. Rumors, as Cass R. Sunstein highlights, "have credibility not because direct evidence is known to support them, but because other people seem to believe them" (4). Just as Newland had believed the rumors about Ellen because they fit his version of her as the exotic projection space for his sexual desires and fantasies of personal freedom, "every one" considers the allegations of them being lovers credible because Newland is a New York gentleman, and New York gentlemen, such as Lawrence Lefferts (with whom Newland compares himself throughout the novel), were *known* to have extramarital affairs.

The collectivizing iterations of "every one knew" and "every one . . . was agreed" (9) within New York society set the stage for the ways in which *The Age of Innocence* personifies the metropolis itself. In expressions such as "New York knew" (14), the city becomes more than simply a synecdoche for its inhabitants and instead acts as another character and "angle of vision." This issue of the personified metropolis is where *The Age of Innocence* diverts most clearly from Wharton's other New York fiction.[13] In *The House of Mirth*, for example, gossip and rumor are ever present and deeply disconcerting, yet relatively clearly connected to specific persons—most notably Bertha Dorset and Grace Stepney. New York is a specific place, even a space of possibility ("She could not have remained in New York without repaying the money she owed to Trenor," 153), or a mood ("inclemency of the New York spring," 147; "barrenness of a New York August" 185), but not an agent. In *The Custom of the Country*, gossip is more clearly spread across the "New York press," *Town Talk*, and the *Radiator*. Beyond this, however, the city—though sometimes the place of "sweet enough . . . . anonymous approval" (62)—functions most prominently as the anchor

for Undine's travels. Additionally, both novels focus in their opening scenes on their central characters, Lily and Undine, giving them ample space for dialogue and thus for voicing their respective difference from the set to which they wish to belong or at least wish to be not to be expelled from. Selden, too, as the earlier novel's central focalizer is allowed to reminisce at length about Lily. *The Age of Innocence*, as detailed at the beginning of this article, focuses instead first on the acts and knowledge of the (anonymous) city. *The Old Maid* opens in a way quite similar to *The Age of Innocence* with lengthy explanations of family trees, the value of ancestry, and the specific contours of New York's elite society. Yet as the novella progresses, New York fades into the background behind the central maternal drama. Few instances, such as "It was said—Dr. Lanskell was understood to have said . . ." (128), hint at the relevance of people beyond the immediate circle of the Ralston family (even *The Age of Innocence*'s Sillerton Jackson must content itself with a short cameo). In contrast, Newland's New York, among others, "was beginning to dread" new people (1), "looked indulgently on her eccentricities" (38), "most valued" stylishness and "had expected something a good deal more resonant" (40), "tolerated hypocrisy in private relations" (163), "managed its transitions" (164), "observed the etiquette of hospitality" (167), "was inexorable in its condemnation of business irregularities" (169), and, finally, "believed [Newland] to be Madame Olenska's lover" (214).[14]

This characterization of the city as lively and dynamic stands in stark contrast to Wharton's depiction of the New York elite as a soon-to-be redundant relic of the social past, as much as it clashes with the reticence of its individual main characters, primarily Newland.[15] The city instead connects the novel, despite its seemingly quaint setting in the 1870s, with Wharton's contemporaries, who made urbanity the ultimate modern experience. Matthew Beaumont, for example, describes the metropolitan street as the "site where private and public experiences intersect" and where therefore "the dialectics of exterior and interior that are structural to the everyday conditions of modernity . . . are constantly dramatized" (222). Wharton does not explore the city as a similarly immersive, physical experience. Nonetheless, the same dramatization plays out in *The Age of Innocence*—only here on the level of epistemology, as individual private experience becomes collective public knowledge and levels of interiority and exteriority increasingly merge.

The "conflict between the individual and society," which according to Carol Singley defines many of Wharton's novels (*Edith Wharton* 65), is therefore not only one between individual freedom and societal norms. Instead, this conflict is also (maybe even more) between a longing for privacy and individuality in

contrast to surveillance and "the suggestion . . . . that without the shape, the social mold, there may be no self at all" (Knights 21). Newland, for example—as much as he feels himself set apart from (and superior to) his social set—is not only controlled in his (in)actions by the "the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions, and mores" of his family and peers (what Tuttleton considers the hallmark of the US American novel of manners, 10), but in fact is directed by the extent and limits of their knowledge. In its depiction of an intricate web of overlaying networks of intimate gossip, anonymous rumor, and mediated information, the novel therefore invites a shift in attention from the individual to the collective identity of the modern city, which—as the agent with the most knowledge—becomes the most active social force.

The Age of Innocence thus adds a crucial facet to Wharton's depiction of the disciplining influence of society, as it presents the explosion of knowledge rather than oppression through silence as society's main power of surveillance and influence. The novel presents the accumulation of untraceable information, chitchat, and widely held assumptions as the countervailing force to the few highly personal and revealing conversations which stay "hidden in the ellipses and dashes" (Hoeller 143). It thus offers a treatise on the genesis of knowledge, the travel routes of information, and the parameters of their reliability that goes far beyond its concern solely with the "worth of information . . . about sexual matters" (Wahl 13), even as monetary concerns motivate several subplots and are generative of gossip and rumor. *The Age of Innocence* presents the ubiquity of knowledge in manifold ways via illustrating Newland's dependence on rumor, the increased relevance of newspaper accounts for several characters, the implication of readers within its communication network, or the shifting sources of information (and decisions) from individuals to "every one" and New York instead. The general profusion of talk throws the hesitance and hypocrisy of Newland and other characters into sharp relief. It furthermore invites our attention to their society's periphery—the people and places that remain vague and anonymous—as an important site of action and locus of insight.

With its plot and narrative style equally defined by a reflection on various forms of communal, networked, or anonymous knowledge, the novel stresses individuals' embeddedness in a complex social context that is dynamic rather than static: Old New York's rituals may be long-standing, but the city's avenues of inquiry and transmission are fresh, fast, and efficient. By thus broadening the narrative perspective presented to its readers, the novel deviates from Wharton's other New York fiction. It instead emerges as a stylistic exercise that connects its 1870s setting with its moment of creation in the early 1920s and anticipates

her book of literary criticism published five years after *The Age of Innocence*. In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton acknowledges that "a state of omniscience and omnipresence [on the part of the visualizing character is] likely to shake the reader's sense of probability." She nonetheless recommends "to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at the most three) angles of vision . . . to preserve the unity of impression" (64). *The Age of Innocence* offers an inventive solution to this problem at the heart of (realist) novel writing by shifting at least one angle of vision to New York and "every one" in it.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Bentley on how *The Age of Innocence* reflects Wharton's interest in "primitive culture" (47–48), Ammons on Wharton's use of "anthropological terms" (143–44), or Kassanoff on the "rhetoric of archeology, anthropology and antiquarianism" (154–55).

2. I am referring here exclusively to diegetic entities (e.g., city, society) rather than Wharton's use of free indirect discourse to blur the lines between Newland's biased accounts and the narrator's perspective, which has been discussed in detail by Margaret Jay Jessee. My reading will instead focus on changes in subject position or the reversal from active to passive phrases, which conflate Newland's "personal [reasons]" and thoughts, and those of New York. This is the aspect which, I argue, sets the novel most clearly apart from its representation in other New York novels and novellas by Edith Wharton.

3. A look at the history of the novel's composition and revision reveals New York's central role for the action as the constant amid a flurry of changes, especially regarding the agency (and names) of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. Yet even it its first outline, the story hinges on what New York knows: "*Reports* of his debaucheries had come home; but *it was also said* that she had been 'fast,' & 'talked about.' *Vague rumours* were current, & some embarrassment was felt when she came home . . ." (Price 23, emphasis added).

4. Newland uses the term "mould" to explain his wife's strict adherence to social expectations: "but he had long given up trying to disengage her real self from the shape into which tradition and training had moulded her" (206).

5. Kathy Miller Hadley makes a similar point when she claims that "Wharton simultaneously obscures and reveals narratives in the interstices of the tale, narratives below the surfaces seen by the center of consciousness, each of whom has compelling reasons for not seeing other people clearly" (4).

6. Even after his marriage to May, Newland continues to engage with Ellen via hearsay, an uncertain knowledge that he accepts as reliable facts. A chance meeting with Medora Manson at Newport prompts him to consider how he "*had heard* the Countess Olenska's name pronounced often enough during the year and a half since they had last met, and *was even familiar* with the main incidents of her life in the interval. *He knew* that she had spent the previous summer at Newport, . . . during the winter, he *had heard* of her (as *one always heard* of pretty women in Washington) as shining in the 'brilliant diplomatic society' . . ." (135–35).

7. In her study on gendered uses of language in Wharton's fiction, Elsa Nettels makes a similar observation when she states that men are often the seemingly more "reflective observers, but that "those who most vividly imagine states of entrapment seem least able to escape them" (91).

8. Sarah Tomsyck offers a slightly different take on the implication of the reader. Focusing on the effect of narrative gaps and elisions in *The Age of Innocence*, she argues that "the significance of the implied in the hieroglyphic world that is 1870's New York is mirrored by narrative devices which reinforce reader implication in the world of the novel" (1). This "leads us as readers to ask questions about what Wharton's narrative strategy necessarily omitted, and what perhaps simply did not happen" (4).

9. Though beyond the scope of this article, "scandal" would be another form of knowledge dissemination worth considering in Wharton's text. Like gossip, scandal is based on the publication of supposedly secret information (often via gossip), yet its effect goes beyond that (like gossip's creation of social boundaries often trumps its epistemological value). Instead, William A. Cohen argues that a "scandal's success is measured not by its accuracy but by its popularity" (9). Furthermore, it "has public effects regardless of a final determination of its truth or falsity, and it captures public attention only to the extent that such a determination is deferred" (9).

10. Louise White, in contrast, argues that gossip about strangers can have the same effect as gossip about people close to oneself and one's community, because "it is the very process of gossiping that creates the intimacy." Even gossip about celebrities and other people not personally known to oneself would therefore "bind gossipers together in an imagined community of shared values" (79).

11. Emphasized by the description of New York as a "*small* and slippery pyramid" (31–32, emphasis added) two paragraphs later.

12. We could add to this list such variations as "people were agreed" (14) or "it was generally agreed" (38).

13. Another noteworthy contrast in Newland's perception is evoked by the disembodied descriptions of his servants, such as "A vigilant hand had, as usually kept the fire alive" (28), which stand in stark contrast to personified social structures, and the role of servants in them: "New York society was, in those days, far too small, and too scant in its resources, for every one in it (including livery-stable-keepers, butlers and cooks) not to know exactly on which evenings people were free" (31).

14. This is only an incomplete list of New York–verb combinations in the novel.

15. It also qualifies to a certain extent Carol Singley's observation that the novel's "narrative technique" is defined by "slow pacing" ("Bourdieu" 497).

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