

The Space of Dreams in *The Age of Innocence*

In Edith Warton's *The Age of Innocence*, dreams of self-fulfillment lie in contrast to the context in which the characters exist—the time, the place, the society. This context is eminently important to the denouement of the plot and is deterministic of the fate of these characters. Throughout the novel, the narrator is a voice from the future, so that the portrayal Old New York does not just exist insularly, but in reference to a potential, to impending and sometimes unthinkable change. For this reason, the last chapter is crucial to our understanding of unrequited dreams. In her portrayal of fate, Wharton suggests that the dreams of Newland and Ellen can only continue to be dreams within the context and time of their New York social circle, but for the next generation, the romance of Newland and Ellen would have had no restraints in a new world order. The world of the last chapter, particularly Paris is, in a way, the potential space of the dream of Newland and Ellen's love, but there is a sense that passing time and a life already lived makes this era the domain of the new generation.

Newland and Ellen's romance is shaped by their dreams, by the fantasy of their future together. When asked if he wants Ellen for a mistress, Newland responds "I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist. Where we will be simply two human beings who love each other…and nothing else on Earth will matter" (238). He wants a space devoid of context, not only without expectations and conventions to follow, but entirely without categories to qualify love. The idea that "nothing else on Earth will matter" is an ideal, a space in which the two of them can be the sole inhabitants, an idea of Eden or a personal utopia. They find this space separate from "anything else on Earth" for mere moments during the story: in her house the first time he visits, in the house of the old Patroon, on the boat in Boston, in the carriage coming back to New York. But

the moments are fleeting, and, when they end, they still have no action or plan to assure a life together. It is a rare occurrence that they find each other in these solitary moments, and the possibility of such a rapport outside of these spaces does not exist. Similarly, the promises made during these interactions do not endure; on the boat, Ellen promises that "I won't go back", a promise we want to believe (201). But, it becomes shattered when taken outside of the realm of their space apart; such a promise cannot exist when there are such duties to others, when there is a society in which they must fit themselves.

When Archer goes in his wife's chariot to bring Ellen back to New York, he envisions a dream of her: "he pictured Madame Olenska's descent from the train, his discovery of her a long way off, among the throngs of meaningless faces…her clinging to his arm as he guided her to the carriage…in the motionless carriage, while the earth seemed to glide away under them, rolling to the other side of the sun. It was incredible, the number of things he had to say to her…" (234). The dream is detailed, with a series of seemingly ordinary images, but then the language tips into the realm of fantasy, in which even the movement of the earth bypasses them, "seem[s] to glide away," and the carriage remains motionless. His dream is, essentially, a wish for a halt in time, in which a carriage is simply a space in which they can converse, not a vehicle in which society must always be heading somewhere. In his dream, the earth and sun are no longer relevant in their time-keeping. But even as he says after he sees her in reality that "it all happened as he had dreamed", the dream must always end (235). In this case, it ends when Archer asks Ellen "Then what, exactly, is your plan for us?" and she replies "For us? But there is no us in that sense! We're near each other if we stay far away from each other. Then we can be ourselves" (239). This suggests that these moments of intimacy in which they are honest in their love cannot persist if they are two people in the world together; the microcosm of an ideal that they create in

these small spaces, like in the carriage, exist within themselves. This microcosm cannot be externalized. The carriage stops to let him off, but continues moving; Archer does not stand but begins walking home. Real life and the inevitable progress of time continues; his walk home is a return to a familiar context.

In the final chapter, "the flower of life" that Archer misses is, in one way, this same dream, one which could not grow in the stifling environment of his youth, before he has a child (286). Fanny Beaufort is portrayed as a likeness of Countess Olenska, but at once not Countess Olenska, because she has not felt the sting of being ostracized or having to re-imagine herself for the sake of others. New York society "instead of being distrustful and afraid of her, took her joyfully for granted...Nobody was narrow-minded enough to rake up against the half-forgotten facts of her father's past and her own origin" (290). The conventions that once dictated and bound Archer to a life of duty—the importance of keeping up a façade in having a clean record and a good family, the absolute crash of the social structure around Archer when Beaufort was found to have defaulted on his finances, the ostracism of him and his apologetic wife—are forgotten by this new society. Fanny Beaufort is the descendant of these same Beauforts, yet it would be hard to tell simply by her interaction with the world. She seems completely separated from the Beauforts of the rest of the novel; if she is Countess Olenska, she is a perpetually happy one, accepted "joyfully", taken for her accomplishments. Wharton stresses the parallel of Fanny and Dallas' love and that of Newland and Ellen's, but there is such little conflict between the personal and the social in Fanny and Dallas' engagement that this resembles the dream-world Newland once longed for, the one in which they are "simply two human beings who love each other." Wharton urges the reader to consider this prospect by saying "There was nothing now to

keep [Ellen] and Archer apart—and that afternoon he was to see her" (294). Nothing keeps them apart in terms of spousal obligation, but, yet, something does end up keeping them apart.

Archer's conception of Ellen in this last chapter is like a dream: "When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed" (286). Ellen was an ideal and an escape in his youth; she is, in his old age, a symbol of all his regret for not having been able to pursue his own passions. Whereas she was a real, tangible lover in his youth as well as a dream, she exists now, after so long, only as a dream. In the closing scene of Archer on the doorstep, he says to his son "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough" (297). It is long past the time when he can pursue dreams; he is old-fashioned, the entirety of his life defined by a time long past. On the doorstep, his notion of her is, again, a dream: "Then he tried to see the persons already in the room—for probably at that sociable hour there would be more than one—and among them a dark lady, pale and dark, who would look up quickly…" (298). He has internalized her, and even the very vivid daydream is not the neutral space he once wished for; they cannot be alone in the dream, for there "would be more than one." There is no person left who will keep them apart, but his fantasy has been so long internalized, his entire life lived without the "flower of life." His inaction is at once a retreat into dreams, and a realization that he cannot externalize the dream; the only course for a man who has seen his life pass by him without passion is, as it was when he got out of the carriage, to walk home, to proceed with the tide of time.

We understand the impossibility of Ellen and Archer's love from the fleeting moments in which they are alone; each time they must return, the promises and hopes they have of one another no longer apply in the greater society and time. And so, their dreams are internalized

and never expressed in the context of the greater society. The end of the novel describes a more progressive, more open time, rife not only with the potential of politics and technology, but with the potential of the individual; Dallas and Fanny's unsurprising engagement is what Ellen and Archer's might have been, had they both been born into this era. But Dallas and Fanny are not Ellen and Archer; they were not brought up in the 19th century. What marks Archer as an outsider to this modern society is his inability, ultimately, to pursue the individual, self-fulfilling life, in which Ellen is a central figure. Archer is irrevocably bound to what has come before; he has lived the majority of his life denying his dreams, and, ultimately, the dreams are more real to him than his pursuit of them. The potential space of their consummated romance is defined by their experience, their ties back to a context in which they could not live happily; although the society has changed, Archer's life is bound by the commitment he once made and cannot unmake.