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The Language of Flowers in the *Age of Innocence*

In nineteenth century high society New York, public expressions of feelings, whether they were directed towards another person or internalized dispositions, were simply not encompassed by the societal standards set in place. Since social customs deemed it inappropriate for such feelings to be expressed, flowers became a means of representing unspoken sentiments. Presenting flowers to others in a time of need for sympathy or during a courtship seemed, on the surface, a merely hospitable and neighborly act; but when approached with a keen eye, it can be discerned that all flowers have different meaning and thus were sent, or personally presented, as silent messages. A large deal of socialites would even keep resource books in their houses on this language of flowers to ensure that their communication was of the proper significance. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, various flowers are associated with specific characters to highlight their differences, mainly the way society sees them versus the way the novel's protagonist, Newland Archer, sees them. The flowers then are used to illuminate Newland's true, honest feelings that commonly contradict the customary societal standard of New York's socialites without his own cognitive realization.

The Age of Innocence is split into two sections – Book I and Book II. Both "books" begin with elite events on New York's social calendar, the Opera in Book I and Newland's wedding in Book II. During Faust at the Academy of Music, Newland enters the Opera as "the curtain had just gone up on the garden scene" (1) and what Newland refers to as the "Daisy song," (3) .This

immediate introduction of the organic world and flowers in particular signify to the reader their impending importance in the text to come. As Newland's eyes draw upon his newly betrothed May Welland in her Opera box, he fixates his attention upon "the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee," (3). Lilies-of-the-valley, in the nineteenth century, were commonly known as the "May lily" and were not just a natural symbol of humility, but Newland recognizes their reflection of May's "abysmal purity," (3). He imagines their honeymoon and their lives together based solely on the connotations initially presented by the lilies-of-the-valley that his fiancée carried exclusively. "She carried no other bouquet," (18) foreshadowing the static and unchanging qualities of her character; she would forever be pure, chaste, humble and innocent. Newland recognized, and initially appreciated, her fitness for societal grace and appropriateness for matrimony, but despite the lilies-of-the-valley's aesthetically appealing visage, all parts of the flower – the blooms, the leaves and the stem – are poisonous, and Newland begins to see May's innocence and her consistent conformity in the fact that "her views has always been the same," (182) as a detrimental thing to his eventual desire to live his life outside of what society had deemed acceptable for him.

Book II begins with Newland and May's wedding, where the bouquets of lilies-of-the-valley are in such abundance that they became sickeningly overpowering to him. As "the scent of the lilies on the altar [and] the vision of cloud of tulle and orange-blossoms float[ed] nearer and nearer," (168) Newland no longer appreciated his wife's disposition or the wedding itself as an amalgamation of two separate lives melded together through a consuming love for one another; he compares his own wedding to the Opera and views the event primarily as a "formality" to the "path he was committed to tread," (163). His marriage to May was something society expected of him and even required from him in order to be accepted as a member of it and Newland's

eventual realization that "conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost his second nature," (295) was a disconcerting recognition at that. Although he longed to rid May of her innocence, he was never able to achieve his aspirations so that she could become, in his eyes, a true thinking, feeling human being, completely separated from the cultural standards. May, and Newland's relationship with her, "became the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences" (177) and once he found that there was more to his life than just what society wanted him to do, that he was capable, and even deserving, of more thought and feeling than simply being clumped into association with the rest of his cultural peers and blending in to the crowd, May and her lilies-of-the-valley both became a poisonous substance in his world.

Newland would have been made aware of his discontent with May and the life she became representative of without the entrance of her cousin and his love interest, Ellen Olenska. Moving to New York with her grandmother after a stint in Europe and a separation from her husband, Ellen was heavily isolated by society and viewed as a detrimental and corruptive force in their community. Her abrupt introduction at the Opera in Book I was highly controversial and she was the pivot point that guided Newland to recognize his desire to have more in his life than meaningless, trivial aspects to his life merely because they were up to par with the societal standards. However, Newland did not come to this cognitive realization without impulsively purchasing a bouquet of yellow roses to Madame Olenska and sending them to her anonymously after their first private encounter. Newland stopped at a flower shop on the street to buy lilies-of-the-valley to be delivered to May as he always did, but as his eye was caught by the intriguing yellow roses – just as his eye was caught by Ellen and the Opera – "his first impulse was to send them to May" in place of her usual lilies. "But they did not look like her – there was something to rich, too strong in their fiery beauty," (72). In other words, there was something to raw, honest

and real about Newland's attraction to the yellow roses that was not in accordance with May's disposition and her lilies-of-the-valley, just as his attraction to Ellen was not in accordance with the social customs and expectations of New York. Sending flowers to someone in the nineteenth century was thought of by society as a traditional and "pretty custom," (74) but the act as purely a customary one is discredited when the meaning of yellow roses is taken in to consideration. In Europe, yellow roses were a symbol of infidelity and the roses were also commonly referred to as being representative of jealousy and a decrease of love. Although Newland sent a bouquet to Ellen without a great deal of thought was arguably insignificant and simply a polite social custom, the fact that the flowers he chose to send were yellow roses were the first inkling of his socially inappropriate feelings for her, not just because of who she was but also because of his acceptable relationship to May. Without having ever been unfaithful to his betrothed, Newland's love affair with Ellen was more of an emotional nature. As he wanted May to be rid of her innocence, rid of her lilies-of-the-valley, Ellen entered the New York society and "gave [Newland his] first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment asked [him] to go on with a sham one," (218). Ellen and her yellow roses, a flower he had never yet before taken any notice of, allowed Newland to realize the existence of a fulfilling life that was not caught up in the public's thoughts. The yellow roses were Newland's first indication that he aspired to live a life for himself and his own happiness regardless of whether those aspirations were achieved or not. His jealousy for Ellen's life of not being accepted by society and not having it affect her actions, his emotional infidelity to, and his decrease of love for, his fiancée and later wife were all entirely encompassed by the yellow roses.

By associating these two contrasting flowers with specific characters in *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton is able to successfully convey Newland's conflict between ignoring

his true feelings for Ellen and remaining with May because of society's approval and the "dignity of duty" (319), or going against the grain of what was deemed acceptable by the whole of the community in order to feel a sense of elated joy in knowing that their love was real and honest. Before Newland was even aware of his desire to contradict the societal customs set in place for everyone to abide by, the lilies-of-the-valley and the yellow roses indirectly led to his awareness that just because society decides that one thing is right and another is wrong does not mean that it is necessarily accurate or applicable to every member of the community – an idea that is suggested by the subtle and unspoken language of flowers.