

Archaeological Metaphors in *The Age of Innocence*

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The Age of Innocence (1920), which is set in the fashionable New York of the 1870s, reflects Edith Wharton's newly acquired perspective on Old New York as regards "the preservation of the past."¹ Wharton gained this perspective after experiencing the effects of the First World War. In her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, in which she recalls how violently the war destroyed her familiar social framework, Wharton implies that it became necessary for her to restore and preserve the vanishing civilization before it became irrecoverably lost:

Not until the successive upheavals which culminated in the catastrophe of 1914 had "cut all likeness from the name" of my old New York, did I begin to see its pathetic picturesqueness. . . . Social life, with us as in the rest of the world, went on with hardly perceptible changes till the war abruptly tore down the old frame-work, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs. . . . The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together

¹ In this regard, Ammons remarks that Wharton, through her experience of the war, came to place more importance on "the preservation of cultural continuity" than "all individual ambitions, those of women included" (171). Haytock also observes that Wharton perceived the war as "a struggle for the survival of a treasured civilization" (126).

before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it. (6-7)

What Wharton says in this passage may hold true for her motive for creating *The Age of Innocence*. Having witnessed the collapse of traditional values, Wharton must have felt, to borrow Tuttleton's words, "an impulse to reconstruct — archeologically, as it were — the social world of her youth" and "the necessity of imaginatively preserving" it (564). In fact, Wharton brilliantly revives Old New York in *The Age of Innocence* with great historical and cultural accuracy.²

However, what I wish to illustrate in this essay is not how brilliantly Wharton reproduces the lost world but how she uses archaeological motifs in detailed descriptions of this society in the novel. In the passage from the memoir above, Wharton compares herself to an archaeologist, "the assiduous relic-hunter" and likens Old New York's mores to "the domestic rites of the Pharaohs."³ Curiously enough, she also adopts a similar kind of vocabulary in *The Age of Innocence*. Although only a few studies have thus far been carried out on the archaeological metaphors in the novel,⁴ each of them is highly thought-provoking in that this is Wharton's first postwar novel and probably the first text that reveals her acute consciousness of the importance of "preserving the past." This essay is, therefore, an attempt to

² In this regard, Nyce and Trumpener observe that Wharton structures the story using scientific perspectives from archaeology and anthropology (161). They argue that the text is "a retrospective study of a New York subculture, now extinct, an ethnography of a distinctive set of customs and a way of life which no longer exists" (162).

³ Moreover, in another section of *A Backward Glance*, Wharton again uses archaeological metaphors for Old New York: it is likened to "Atlantis or the lowest layer of Schliemann's Troy" (55).

⁴ Nyce and Trumpener's study is one of the few that focus on *The Age of Innocence*. Tuttleton and Gibson also deal with archaeological themes in Wharton's fiction as a whole. However, they seem to leave room for argument on her use of individual metaphors in this novel.

examine how individual images suggestive of archaeology are used in the text and involves a consideration of the effect of such linguistic choices.

I

Before looking into the archaeological metaphors, it might be well worth considering Wharton's use of hyperbolic expressions that make the reader associate Old New York with something ancient or prehistoric.

The reader can observe such an exaggeration at the beginning of the novel, the opera scene at the Academy of Music, in which Wharton starts introducing the social habits and customs of Old New York. In this scene, Newland Archer comes late to the theater, following the tacit rule of fashionable society:

[I]t was "not the thing" to arrive early at the Opera; and 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.
(24)

In this passage, the tribal code of Old New York is compared to that of their ancestors "thousands of years ago." Through the use of this exaggerated comparison, Wharton emphasizes not only how archaic and mysterious the values of 1870s Old New may appear to the contemporary reader, but also how unchangeable and unbreakable the social conventions being shown are in the minds of the novel's characters. In addition, by using the phrase "inscrutable totem terrors," Wharton suggests that "the thing" is a symbol of Old New York's tribal solidarity and that the reverence for and

overpowering fear of it are so deeply ingrained in the people that it appears to them that it will continue permanently.

A similar hyperbolic diction that associates Old New York's way of life with ancient times can be seen in a dining scene at Newland Archer's home:

After dinner, according to immemorial custom, Mrs. Archer and Janey trailed their long silk draperies up to the drawing-room (61)

While the gentlemen stay downstairs after dinner, the ladies go upstairs. This is also an example of "the thing" that the Old New Yorkers blindly respect. Mrs. Archer and her daughter Janey would never wonder why they do so; they just follow the custom that they believe has continued from time "immemorial." The hyperbolic word "immemorial" also seems to imply the people's belief in the permanence of their rituals. The use of this exaggerated word may underscore again the unchangeableness, or inviolability, of the tribal codes in the characters' consciousness.

Such hyperbolic expressions about time indicate Wharton's attempt to see the traditions of Old New York from the perspective of their having apparently been continuous since "ancient times." Arguably, this rhetorical device functions to emphasize the idiosyncratic spiritual climate of Old New York, and the same could be said for her use of archaeological metaphors in this text.

II

As we have already seen in the quotation from *A Backward Glance*,

Wharton likens the obsolete conventions of Old New York to “the domestic rites of the Pharaohs.” Given the context in which she uses this phrase in her memoir, Wharton’s choice of language related to ancient Egypt in this novel might be meaningful enough to dig beneath the surface of the words.

As the first example of an allusion to ancient Egypt, we will see Wharton use the word “hieroglyphic” as a metaphor for Old New York:

In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs (64)

The phrase “a kind of hieroglyphic world” seems to contain some implications. First of all, it tells the reader that even for its inhabitants, Old New York’s conventions under which “the real thing is never said or done or even thought” might be full of mysteries that they are silently approved of. Moreover, the words might represent the exclusiveness of the society, given the fact that, in ancient Egypt, only a privileged minority was able to understand “hieroglyphics” and that they were not decoded for centuries. This fact might suggest how exclusive fashionable New York was and that because of this exclusivity, its cultural heritage was likely to remain unknown for a long time after the members of this narrow society had completely vanished from the world.

In addition to the use of “hieroglyphics,” it is noticeable that Wharton compares Old New York to a “pyramid”:

The New York of Newland Archer’s day was a small and slippery pyramid, in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been

made or a foothold gained. (68)

“A small and slippery pyramid” that has almost no “fissure” or “foothold” reminds the reader not only how perfect the social strata of Old New York appears but also how extremely difficult it is for outsiders to enter this narrow world. This exclusiveness is repeatedly stressed, and at the same time, images of perpetuity are emphasized. In this case, the “pyramid” is a tomb in which an ancient Egyptian pharaoh was enshrined in order that his body and soul could be eternally preserved.

Considering this historical fact, the use of a “pyramid” as a metaphor for Old New York seems highly suggestive. Wharton’s choice of this metaphor might ironically imply a parallel destiny for the privileged elite of Old New York and the royal family in ancient Egypt. Just as most of the treasures of the Pharaohs were lost along with their bodies in the pyramids, what matters for members of the elite of Old New York would mean nothing to the people of a later age.

Thus, the words associated with ancient Egyptian archaeology connote the exclusivity of the privileged class of New York. Furthermore, Wharton’s choice of words may allow us to think that she is conscious of the possibility that the culture of Old New York will share the same destiny as that of ancient Egypt.

III

In her descriptions of characters, Wharton employs further archaeological images, such as “burial,” “excavation,” and “preservation.” These descriptions are evident with regard to three characters: Ellen Olenska, Mrs. Manson Mingott, and Mrs. van der Luyden.

Ellen Olenska is described using a “burial” image in the opera scene at the beginning, where Newland Archer meets Ellen, who has just returned to New York as a result of her unhappy married life. The following quotation is taken from Newland and Ellen’s dialogue. They are glancing down at the audience representing Old New York from the Mingott family’s box as they talk:

[H]e answered somewhat stiffly: “Yes, you have been away a very long time.”

“Oh, centuries and centuries; so long,” she said, “that I’m sure I’m dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven”
(37-38)

In this scene, Ellen calls the narrow and exclusive music hall “heaven.” She is talking as if the people there, who represent Old New York, were dead. Moreover, she expresses herself as having been “buried” for a long period of time. Notably, the length of the “burial” is exaggerated as if it had happened many centuries before, despite the fact that her absence was only for some ten years.⁵ Ellen’s exaggerated words, “centuries and centuries,” reveal how long and painful her life in Europe was for her. However, this hyperbolic diction appears to be more significant for its metaphorical meaning regarding the extremely long-term period of burial. This “burial” image can also be found in references to the other two characters.

Newland’s fiancé May and Ellen’s grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, is respected as the distinguished matriarch of the family. When she

⁵ It is also noticeable that the metaphorical phrase “I’m dead and buried” sounds like a prophecy about Ellen herself at the end of the story, when she is ritualistically buried in oblivion by the society.

first appears, old Mingott is depicted as if she were a huge site to be unearthed; Wharton describes the woman using an extended archaeological metaphor:

The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman with a neatly-turned foot and ankle into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the centre of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation. (47)

Wharton, ironically but humorously, delineates Mrs. Mingott's character: "the immense accretion of flesh" of her highly obese body is described as being like "a flood of lava," which has swept away her appearance as a young woman. Having silently received the "submergence" as a "natural phenomenon," she might be able to preserve her young soul under "an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh." Yet, as some critics have already pointed out, Wharton may be, in this passage, making an allusion to Pompeii,⁶ the ancient city that was completely buried by a volcanic eruption for many centuries. Protected by the thick accumulation of volcanic ash, the city was well preserved when it was excavated. Many buildings and their inhabitants' personal belongings remained as they were

⁶ See, for example, Nyce and Trumpener, 162.

many centuries before.

One more extended “burial” image can be seen in Louisa van der Luyden, who represents Old New York’s typical female figure. She belongs to one of the most venerable families and her husband is the foremost authority on fashionable society. Mrs. van der Luyden “preserves” her appearance for years as if she embodies the sameness of Old New York. She is described as if she were a perfectly conserved “mummy” locked in a glacier:

She always, indeed, struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death. (72)

Like the previous two characters, Mrs. van der Luyden is described in terms of having had a long-term “burial.” We can also find another similarity between Mrs. Mingott and Mrs. van der Luyden. Both of them are depicted as having been “buried” by “natural phenomena” that are beyond human control. This might be meaningful when we consider the author’s state of mind in writing this novel just after World War I.

To sum up, Wharton describes the three characters using images of “centuries of burial,” and this may suggest the author’s attempt to present her materials by using a historical perspective, as demonstrated by the examples we have looked at in previous sections. Furthermore, these archaeological images may indicate the possibility of “preservation,” which Wharton must have been keenly conscious of while structuring this story.

IV

It is in the old Metropolitan Museum scene that Wharton's consciousness of the vanishing culture and the possibility of its "preservation" are reflected the most.

Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska have their last clandestine meeting at the "Cesnola antiquities" room in the museum, where artifacts excavated at a historical site of an ancient city are displayed (325).⁷ It seems as if the archaeological images described in the earlier part of the novel have been materialized and assembled in this scene. These are the "mummies and sarcophagi" unearthed from an archaeological site (327). The archaeological exhibition room itself functions as a metaphor for Old New York.

The artifacts of a long-vanished community suggest a future image of Old New York. The objects in the room are described as "moulder[ing] in unvisited loneliness" (325), reflecting the fact that the order of the society has gradually begun disintegrating. Thus, the power of the old privileged class is shown to be decaying as a result of newly emerging forces at that time. This is made obvious in the final chapter of the novel, which is set about thirty years later, when the values of Newland Archer's days are frequently emphasized as being "old-fashioned" or "prehistoric" and are neglected by the younger generation. The Cesnola room predicts the destiny of Old New York, the loss of whose values is inevitable in the subsequent tumultuous age.

Moreover, the exhibition room appears to project an objective view of the two lovers' destiny in how its showpieces are described. The exhibits poignantly suggest that their current passions and moral struggles may

⁷ For references to "Cesnola antiquities" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see Tomkins.

disappear and be forgotten after years go by. As Margaret B. McDowell incisively points out, “The intensity of their present conflict contrasts with the passivity of the artifacts in this room” (66). Observing the “recovered fragments” through the showcases on which the lovers are gazing, we are presented with a highly suggestive and shocking sight: “Its glass shelves were crowded with small broken objects — hardly recognisable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles — made of glass, of clay, of discoloured bronze and other time-blurred substances” (325). In this scene, Wharton uses detailed descriptions emphasizing “extinction” or “loss” in order to make the destiny of the two lovers’ visible. The excavations evidently show that, in the distant past, the owners of these objects did exist physically in this world. However, shown now to spectators of a far later age, the objects appear as “hardly recognisable” wreckages of the dead, people whose real emotions or passions are now inaccessible.

The way the presentation of the objects is described suggests that, in the future, the community of Old New York will be extinct, as will the limitations of the tribal code which currently afflicts the lovers. Seeing the “deadly silent” objects in the glass case, Ellen laments possible change and oblivion in the future:

“It seems cruel,” she said, “that after a while nothing matters . . . any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: ‘Use unknown.’ ” (326, Wharton’s ellipsis)

Ellen’s lamentation for the impermanence of worldly things and for the

forgotten people in the long history of the world sounds poignantly philosophical and prophetic. The word “cruel” indicates a situation where, no matter how significant various customs appear to be at the moment, they will be unable to escape their destiny of change and loss in the great span of history. Thus, the current sacrifices being made in observation of the conventions of Old New York might ultimately come to “nothing,” like the objects they are looking at.

V

In *The Age of Innocence*, the archaeological metaphors, including images suggestive of a prehistoric time, not only have the effect of foregrounding the idiosyncrasies of Old New York but also allude to its destiny and the necessity of preserving the memory of endangered civilizations, which Wharton is attempting to consider as part of the long stream of time. As is obvious in the museum scene, her use of archaeological motifs represents her grief over the loss of tradition that, whether she likes it or not, she may have made sacrifices for, as Ellen Olenska is shown to do.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest the possibility of a further study of Wharton’s archaeological metaphors. As is well known, archaeology was highly popular at the turn of the century. Wharton was always interested in the field, and she, as Gibson’s study shows, used some archaeological motifs in her previous Old New York stories, *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913).⁸ However, Wharton’s critical tone regarding Old New York is quite different in her postwar novel

⁸ Gibson suggests that “[Wharton’s] simultaneous respect for tradition and distrust of convention gave rise to the special poignancy of Wharton’s Trojan metaphor and of all the other archaeological or evolutionary motifs Wharton chose to measure social rupture” (57).

The Age of Innocence, when compared to the prewar novels. Therefore, Wharton's archaeological motifs implicating her postwar theme of "preservation" can be seen more clearly in comparison with those in the novels written before "the catastrophe of 1914." I hope to develop this argument in the future.

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