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# Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*: Trans-Atlantic Currents and the Redefinition of Self

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## Abstract

The long history of Edith Wharton as expatriate writer living in France is well-documented. An observer of and participant in both American and French societies, Wharton is well-versed in French culture and complexities, and writes about them with authority. Her own border crossings, the subject of much of her fiction and non-fiction, finds full expression in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), her Pulitzer Prize winning novel which Hermione Lee claims "makes a kind of autobiography" (567). My paper, "Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*: Trans-Atlantic Currents and the Redefinition of Self," addresses the social, emotional, and psychological impact of the trans-Atlantic links between Wharton's worlds in several ways: first, it explores the cultural clash between the parochial values of Old New York of the 1870s and the cosmopolitan ways of Europe, which are embodied in the character of Ellen Olenska; second, it charts the journey of Newland Archer, whose views of his social world and notions of selfhood are transformed, in part, by the influence of the Countess; third, it applies as a frame for discussion Simone de Beauvoir's famous thesis, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283), to analyze female gender identity as a social and political construct, and its role in forming American-European relations. *The Age of Innocence* illustrates border crossings as they shape the character of Newland Archer, an Old New York insider as well as spectator of its customs, traditions, and intrigues. His knowledge of and attraction to European culture makes him susceptible to the charms of the Countess Olenska. She is the catalyst for the expression of his new perspective on both Old New York and on May Welland, who, thanks to Ellen, he now comes to view "through the wrong end of a telescope" (Age 49). The Europeanized Ellen also ignites in him the universal male psychological drama, which, according to Beauvoir, has anchored all men to a shared experience since the Neolithic Age. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explains that man's need to survive is driven not only by economic necessity but also by the psychological imperative to transcend reality. By conquering and re-creating his environment, man transforms himself. Beauvoir claims that his ordeal, however, has meaning only if woman, "the absolute other" (160), is present to witness his triumph. For Newland, Ellen both triggers and reflects this symbolic transformation because her foreignness opposes "the tyrannical trifles" (Age 133) that bind him, and forces him into a new way of seeing and being. For this reason, Ellen is the critical component of both border crossings and is "precious" to Newland in the sense that "woman is precious to man" (Beauvoir 193). Even though Newland ultimately fashions a viable life as father, husband, and dilettante/philanthropist, the conflicts that have dominated his life remain. Similarly, Edith Wharton's struggle to reconcile her identity as an American and as a resident of France persists, unresolved and fraught with contradictions. In more ways than one, *The Age of Innocence* is autobiographical.

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