

The Artistic Characteristics of Feminism in Edith Wharton's Novels

Jie Chen*

College of Foreign Languages, Bohai University, Jinzhou, China
547831259@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *Edith Wharton, as one of the representative writers in the American realistic literature school at the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, described the life of aristocratic women with delicate psychological descriptions and precise language, and explored the fate and status of upper-class women from a unique perspective. Through the study of the artistic characteristics of feminism in Edith Wharton's novels, it is clear how Wharton reflects real life and expresses ideas by shaping characters, telling stories and describing the environment. Through "The Age of Innocence", the female consciousness is explored from many angles. Through "The Reef", this paper studies the conflict between traditional ideas and personal desires revealed by tragedy. Through "Ethan Frome", the strong naturalistic is studied. Through "The Summer", "The Letters" and "The Excuses", this paper studies the narrative method of epiphany.*

Keywords: *Edith Wharton; Feminism; Artistic Characteristics; Female Consciousness; Naturalism; Narrative Method*

1. Introduction

At the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, American realistic literature rose and prospered, and a large number of outstanding realistic novelists emerged, among which Edith Wharton was a very famous woman writer. Wharton was born in a wealthy family in New York. She lived in Europe with her parents when she was young, and returned to the United States at the age of 11. She was educated under the guidance of a tutor and she was deeply influenced by European culture since childhood. She loved literature when she was a teenager. She read a lot of classic literature in her father's library, started writing poems very early, and then practiced writing short stories. Wharton is good at depicting the influence of society on personal character and destiny, as well as the daily life of different people in the upper class of old New York and the social problems reflected. At the same time, as a female writer, Wharton also has a deep concern and understanding of the fate and status of women, and is a pioneer in thinking about women's issues in American literature [1].

Through the study of the artistic characteristics of feminism in Edith Wharton's novels, it is clear how Wharton reflects life and expresses ideas by shaping characters, telling stories and describing the environment. The modernist color displayed in Wharton's novels subverts the stable, reliable and authoritative narrative mode in the literary tradition, and makes the narrative text show the modernist characteristics of uncertainty. The protagonist's epiphany in the works is instantaneous and eternal, and the true meaning of life is finally realized through a new understanding of himself and the world around him.

2. Exploration of Female Consciousness from Multiple Angles

Feminine consciousness is the product of women's self-awakening, which means that women position themselves as a natural person with independent personality on the premise of their gender identity. Usually, women with female consciousness have the ability to think independently, and they will think, discriminate and accept the gender characteristics and responsibilities imposed on them by society selectively. In short, female consciousness means that women have their own set of ideas and reflections on everything and things outside, and the typical important symbol of female consciousness is to strive for women's independent status. In the novel, Edith Wharton pays attention to women's living conditions, examines women's psychological feelings and expresses women's life experiences

from the perspective of women. At the same time, for the male-dominated world, it is manifested in refusing to accept the traditional definition of women in male society and questioning and subverting male power. In the novel, Wharton describes women's feelings and experiences in the society, and expresses her aspiration of trying to break through the bondage imposed on women by social traditions. It is the externalization of female consciousness that women break the traditional restrictions, get rid of the shackles of patriarchal values and strive for spiritual and personality independence and equality. Among the works exploring female consciousness, "The Age of Innocence" is the most representative.

Edith Wharton published her most mature work "The Age of Innocence" in 1920. The author took the upper class in New York as the object of creation, and described the conflict between the old social order and structure in the late Victorian period and the coming modern social civilization, and the impact on the seemingly calm and harmonious upper class. The author compares the upper class in New York at that time to a small pyramid, and it is difficult to gain a foothold on it. Both the hero and heroine in the works show the tendency of women's self-awareness awakening [2]. "The Age of Innocence" tells the love story between the protagonist Newland Archer and two women. One is May Welland, his wife, but he doesn't love her. The other is Ellen Olenska, whom he deeply loves, but who is someone else's wife and his wife's cousin. Newland Archer couldn't choose between these two women. After several struggles, he finally succumbed to fate, gave up Ellen Olenska, whom he really loved, and married May Welland, who he didn't love.

In "The Age of Innocence", Edith Wharton criticizes the torture and oppression of women in the traditional patriarchal society at that time by describing the ugliness of New York's upper class and the actions of those so-called nobles [3]. In such a society, women have low status, no freedom, no self-pursuit and development, and no sense of self. The only way out is to marry a good husband and rely on him to achieve life satisfaction and social recognition. While describing women's sorrow, it reveals the rebellious voice of these women who are unwilling to be reduced to sorrow, as well as the increasingly awakening female consciousness, which has aroused widespread concern and thinking in society. At that time, in a society where men were superior to women, Ellen Olenska did not submit to her husband's evil deeds and passively accept the unfortunate fate, as most women did. Instead, she always wanted to change the harsh laws that were unfair to women with her own behavior, bravely fight against these unreasonable social phenomena, and challenge the patriarchal social system, hoping that she would no longer be an appendage of men, but become an independent woman full of self-esteem and self-improvement consciousness.

Literary works are a mirror of social life and the background of the times. The characters, events and contradictions in literary works and related social values are all related to the society or the writer's own experience at that time. The description of Ellen in "The Age of Innocence" is, to a great extent, a true portrayal of the author herself [4]. Like Ellen, Wharton's road to love is also very bumpy. When she was young, she did not escape the fate path drawn up by the "old New York" society for every woman. As a woman, she never received formal education, and her mother and family also opposed her pursuit of literature, and tried to block her literary writing with the bondage of marriage. Out of dissatisfaction with the patriarchal society and tradition, Wharton, like Ellen, went to Europe, hoping to get rid of the old artistic atmosphere, express her sense of loss to her homeland through her creation, and express her dissatisfaction with the patriarchal society as a woman. The experience of freedom in Europe has cultivated Wharton's active thinking and keen insight, and most importantly, she has his own thoughts. She is different from others, breaking the inherent lethargy of the upper class in "old New York" and showing contempt for the rules and regulations that bound women's freedom with her own behavior. As Wharton described in her autobiography, in order to choose her role and lifestyle freely in a male-dominated society, she fought for a long time and finally succeeded after paying great efforts and costs. In Wharton's life and writing career, she has never stopped fighting against the male-dominated social tradition, and has been pursuing her own dream of creation and self-awareness and self-worth as a woman and a female writer.

3. Revealing the Conflict between Traditional Ideas and Personal Desires through Tragedy

Edith Wharton moved to France in 1907 and became close friends with Henry James, deeply influenced by her aesthetic thoughts. The novellas "Madame Tremet" and "The Reef" published in 1911-1912 described the love story between French and American women, and revealed the conflict between traditional ideas and personal desires with tragic endings. Another novella, "Ethan Frome", published at this time, also showed the pain of people's feelings being suppressed by social customs and norms in the form of a love tragedy.

"The Reef" is known as "Henry James-style etiquette novel", which tells the story of a high-class woman looking for happiness and self. Through the comparison between Anna and Sophie, this paper reveals the family ethics and social ethics in the cultural conflict between Europe and America from the end of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century, and shows the differences between the traditional values of Europe and America and the values of a changing society. Anna, an American lady in "The Reef", married in France. After the death of her husband, Mr. Liss, she planned to get married with her first lover, diplomat Dairou. She tried to help her stepson Owen marry Sophie, a tutor who was not suitable, but found the romantic history of her fiance Dairou and Sophie in Paris [5]. She wanted to know the truth and help Owen get true love. After a complicated and intense mental journey, she gave up her marriage. Anna's final abandonment is the result of various contradictions and conflicts. Anna, with latent rebellious psychology in her heart, has multiple ethical identities and is the spokesperson of traditional moral concepts.

Although the character Anna in the novel is not sympathetic, it is very difficult to find true self and spiritual independence by portraying this character and successfully revealing the self-centered and class-biased person. Women in the same class as Anna are bound by traditional culture, and the patriarchal society requires them to suppress themselves and become ideal images in men's eyes or decorations in real life. However, class discrimination among women cannot be ignored. To some extent, Anna is both a victim and an accomplice of the patriarchal society. Women must unite to eliminate the oppression of male-dominated society, but Anna did not make friends with Sophie. Anna's social prejudice and selfishness against Sophie are obstacles for them to establish friendship, but also for Anna to find her true self [6]. The novel aims to show that to establish a true self, we must first eliminate class prejudice and treat others equally. Secondly, we should avoid being self-centered. Only in this way can Anna have her true self and find inner peace. Only in this way can Anna and Sophie become real sisters and work together to fight against the social environment that is not conducive to their growth.

4. Strong Naturalism.

Naturalism is a tendency in literary and artistic creation. As a creative method, on the one hand, it excludes subjective factors such as romantic imagination, exaggeration and lyricism. On the other hand, it despises the typical generalization of realism to real life, pursues absolute objectivity, advocates simple description of nature, focuses on recording the superficial phenomena of real life, and attempts to explain people and human society with natural laws, especially biological laws. Naturalism is a major school of American literature in the late 19th century and early 20th century. American naturalist writers mainly describe the sufferings and misfortunes of the lower classes and pay attention to the influence of social environment and natural factors on people. In the face of harsh environment, heredity and other powerful external factors, the characters they portray usually appear helpless and insignificant, and any form of struggle will inevitably lead to failure or destruction, which often makes their works show pessimism.

Edith Wharton's literary creation is in the period of the formation and development of American naturalism movement, and some of her works are strongly naturalistic. "Ethan Frome", a novella published in 1911, is a representative work of naturalism literature. Around the story between the protagonist Ethan, his wife Xina and his wife's cousin Marti, the work shows Ethan's tragic life under the influence of unfavorable environment, heredity and contingency.

Wharton successfully created a gloomy, desolate and isolated naturalistic environment by using a series of images such as isolated and backward towns, winter, ice and snow and dilapidated houses. The most direct impact of such a harsh environment on residents is material poverty and spiritual loneliness, which are intertwined, mutually causal and aggravated, suppressing and destroying Ethan and the people around him, which is an important factor causing Ethan's life tragedy. Economic distress has not only become a heavy shackle for Ethan to pursue a better ideal, but also made Ethan's desire to escape go up in smoke [7]. In fact, poverty is the shadow that Ethan can't escape in his life, and it is also the heavy shackles that he can't escape from his depressed life. Ethan's withdrawn and depressed character is the deepest sorrow in his life tragedy, and it is also an important internal cause of his life tragedy [8]. The depressing atmosphere of silence has been deeply immersed in the generations of Frome family. Ethan is not the only one who has endured the pain and his fate is the same as that of Frome from generation to generation. No matter the tragedy caused by accidental factors or the predetermined fate, the characters can't avoid the dilemma in naturalistic determinism. No matter how they struggle, the characters can't get out of the shadow of failure, which casts a cruel and dark veil on

the works and embodies Wharton's profound pessimistic consciousness of naturalistic literature.

The reason why Wharton arranged for Xina to become strong at the end of the novel reflects Wharton's positive naturalism view to some extent. People can succeed in the struggle of life as long as they have the belief of living. For Xina, great spiritual strength comes from her deep love for Ethan, and strong love makes her stand up again in life. Wharton's naturalistic tendency has distinctive characteristics. As a representative work of Wharton's naturalism, "Ethan Frome" not only emphasizes the important role of environment and other factors in determinism, but also expresses the pillar role of positive spiritual power in life, which embodies Wharton's profound determinism consciousness and her unique naturalism concept. As a drop in the bucket in the universe, as long as we have a positive life belief and attitude, we can finally break through the shackles of various difficulties and obstacles and face life proudly, which is also the enlightenment of the positive naturalism tendency embodied in "Ethan Frome" to human life.

5. Adopting the Narrative Method of Epiphany

Epiphany is a common narrative technique in modernist literary works, which was originally a Christian term, pointing out the Jesus's sudden appearance in front of the three saints of the East. Epiphany refers to a sudden mental feeling, which can be triggered by common language, common gestures or a memorable state of mind. Wharton's application of epiphany in her novels is also a positive reaction and interaction to modernist literary thoughts. As a female writer, Wharton adopts the narrative method of epiphany, which is not only used to promote the development of the plot, but also to construct the growth of the characters in the novel, especially the spiritual growth of the female characters. Wharton's works rarely have grand political and historical narratives, and often focus on the marital life and emotional situation of female characters in the upper class. Through the epiphany, which has existed since ancient times and has been updated by modernism, the spiritual growth of women in the leisure class is highlighted. The protagonist's epiphany in Wharton's works is characterized by instantaneity and eternity. Usually, taking a moment and using a very ordinary object, a word or a trivial matter of life cause the protagonist to suddenly realize human nature and emotion, re-recognize herself and the world around her, and finally realize the true meaning of life.

"The Summer" describes the emotional process of the heroine Cherity and two men, and shows her growing process from temptation, rebellion and escape to test, confusion, epiphany and self-awareness. Cherity found out that she was pregnant and could use it as a bargaining chip to save her lover, but she knew that her lover would not come back. Therefore, she was no longer as naive and impulsive as before, but took the initiative to write to her lover and gave up her feelings. At this time, Cherity began to have an epiphany, chose to compromise and grew up after recognizing the reality. Cherity decided to find a decent family to raise her children, but her personal experience made her rationally examine the current situation, weigh the pros and cons, and compromise with reality again. At this time, the epiphany made her grow up again. She was no longer the Cherity who was full of fantasy and desperate for love. She wanted to return to everything she was familiar with, but the image of a lover had become a memory far away. Cherity's mind keeps maturing, constantly comprehends the reality, gradually loses her innocence, knows herself, recognizes the reality and can make rational judgments. Her final choice is enough to explain the internal growth and change. She is no longer the ignorant and confused young girl at the beginning. After growing up, she knows what she really wants, so it is not a simple growth [9].

In "The Letters", Lizzie West happened to find that the letter she wrote to her husband many years ago had never been opened. These dusty letters instantly exposed the love lies that her husband once weaved, and made Lizzie recognize the economic motivation and hypocritical and greedy nature behind his proposal. The seemingly ordinary letters suddenly awaken the protagonist and give her a brand-new understanding of love, marriage and human nature. The instant epiphany had a profound impact on Lizzie's real life and emotional cognition [10].

The novel "The Excuses" tells the story of Margaret Ransom, the protagonist, from longing for love to giving up fantasy, and finally returning to reality after experiencing spiritual epiphany. The sudden epiphany made Mrs. Ransom bravely face the aging true self, give up the self that still has illusions about love, and face the cold reality again. Mrs. Ransom's epiphany is of great significance in the novel, which is not only the climax of the novel, but also the end of the story, which promotes the integrity of the novel structure and text narrative. It constructs the growth of female characters in the novel, making them walk out of the lonely and closed emotional world and face the social reality bravely. It also

expands the connotation of the story, so that readers can penetrate the essence of things through complicated appearances. Wharton uses the modernist narrative technique of epiphany, which not only promotes the progress of the story, but also leads readers to understand the emotional world in the depths of women's hearts, showing the process in which they gain a new understanding of themselves and the world around them through an instant epiphany, and finally realize their self-growth.

6. Conclusions

Edith Wharton, as a famous writer in the history of American literature, has caused widespread controversy. Her life is a play, which is no less wonderful than her works. The biography written by Lewis for her wins the Pulitzer Prize for Literature that year, which is undoubtedly the highest recognition of her "dramatic life". The study of Edith Wharton has experienced a process from prosperity to decline to re-emergence, and her works have stood the test of time and regained the classic crown. The research in China is in the ascendant, which will surely add a wonderful chapter to the study of foreign literature.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by social science fund project of Liaoning province (L21BWW001): The lasting charm and time value of feminism in Edith Wharton's novels.

References

- [1] J. Y. Xu. *Analysis of Feminine Consciousness in Edith Wharton's The Old Maid*[J]. *Journal of Pingxiang University*, 2016, 33(01): 54-56.
- [2] X. Zhan. *On Edith Wharton's Feminine Consciousness through The Age of Innocence*[J]. *Chinese & Foreign Entrepreneurs*, 2013, 30(17): 263+265.
- [3] R. G. Xie. *The Female Tragedy in the Pyramid of America: On Edith Wharton's Novel The Age of Innocence*[J]. *Foreign Language and Literature Studies*, 2006, 23(03): 203-206+170.
- [4] J. H. Zhang. *Female consciousness in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence*[D]. Jiangsu: Nanjing Normal University, 2005.
- [5] W. Guo. *The "Reef" of Ethics: The Literary Ethical Criticism of the Reef*[J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2012, 34(06): 144-151.
- [6] J. Li. *On Edith Wharton's Novel The Reef*[J]. *Journal of Peking University(Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 1999(S1): 148-153.
- [7] D. L. Ye. *On Edith Wharton's Naturalism from the Perspective of Ethan Frome*[J]. *Journal of Henan Radio & TV University*, 2010, 23(04): 54-55.
- [8] C. N. Li. *An Interpretation of the Naturalism in Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome*[J]. *Masterpieces Review*, 2011, 32(21): 65-66.
- [9] F. L. Dai, F. Sun. *An Analysis of Edith Wharton's Summer from the Perspective of Growth*[J]. *Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology(Social Sciences Edition)*, 2017, 24(09): 61-62+91.
- [10] Y. G. Hu. *On the Modernistic Features in Edith Wharton's Short Story*[J]. *Journal of Qiqihar University(Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, 2020, 49(09): 101-105.