

# The Enduring Charm and Age Value of Feminism in Edith Wharton's Novels

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**Abstract:** *Edith Wharton has always been the focus of foreign academic circles. In the new century, Wharton's research has also shown a new development direction. This study will break through the limitations of domestic research and study the enduring charm and age value of feminism in Edith Wharton's novels from a comprehensive perspective. This study studies the enduring charm of Wharton's novels, absorbs creative wisdom and provides reference experience for literary creation. The enduring charm is embodied in the following five aspects, namely, searching for women's self-identity, broadening women's living space, exploring the fate of new women, surpassing women's perspective and breaking through the shackles of traditional ideas. Wharton breaks through the traditional ideological shackles, creates an ideal female image, pays attention to women's growth, especially spiritual growth, and advocates pure and beautiful love, which is of great value to women's growth and development today. The age value is embodied in the following five aspects, namely, cherishing pure and beautiful love, highlighting positive women, profoundly criticizing money worship, praising the greatness of moral power and shaping the ideal female image.*

**Keywords:** *Edith Wharton's Novels; Feminism; Enduring Charm; Age Value*

## 1. Introduction

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 lives of aristocratic women with delicate psychological descriptions and precise language, and explored the fate and status of upper-class women from a unique perspective. This paper analyzes the feminist connotation of Wharton's novels, and reveals the subordinate position of women in the patriarchal society, their rebellious voice and increasing female self-awareness through the profound description of the experiences of these aristocratic women and their misplacement in the social environment. Through the analysis of feminism in Wharton's novels, this paper further explores its historical and social background, the influence of literary and artistic thoughts at that time, and its connection with the author's own life experience. This paper attempts to show Wharton, an outstanding writer, the social and cultural features at that time and the enduring charm and age value of her works from more perspectives, so as to provide reference for Chinese feminist literary creation.

## 2. The Enduring Charm of Feminism in Edith Wharton's Novels

Many of Wharton's works are characterized by subtle "stage satire". Growing up in the upper class before the First World War, Wharton became one of the most sensitive critics of the social system. Wharton combined her insight into the upper class with her own talent for intelligence and humor, and wrote 85 short stories and some novels. Her works are humorous and profound, and many of them have been put on the screen many times. This paper studies the enduring charm of Wharton's novels, absorbs creative wisdom and provides reference experience for literary creation.

### **2.1 Searching for Self-identity of Women: Awakening Women's Passivity and Helplessness in the Face of Marriage Fate and Advocating Independent Choice.**

Women's self-identity refers to the behavior of women's self-judgment and evaluation in different social environments, treating different images of their own physiological gender and social gender. In

the ideal context, women should no longer be treated as housekeepers, procreators, nurturers and housewives, but should have equal social rights, job opportunities and social status as men and become social contributors as men. In the "Age of Innocence", Mei Welland, a traditional female image with noble and virtuous personality, is portrayed as a man-centered and willing to be a male ornament [1]. She is not sensitive to women's self-identity, or has no need for women's self-identity at all. She is a woman who is deeply influenced by male chauvinism and loses her personality, free thinking and self-value judgment. The discussion and admiration of women's self-identity is conducive to enhancing the accuracy of women's value judgment and social orientation, promoting women's introspection and self-reliance, promoting women's healthy development and enhancing women's self-confidence.

### ***2.2 Broadening the Living Space of Women: Guiding Women to Escape from the Golden Cage of Patriarchy and Having Independent Personality, Dignity and Value.***

Women's living space refers to a limited area or place designated for women's survival. In thousands of years of human history, women have been isolated in the narrow "female space" set for them by the patriarchal society. Friedan mentioned in "The Mystery of Women" that "women are like slaves in prison at home, where they are oppressed. At home, they feel lonely and helpless, and their lives are stagnant". Wharton shows great concern for the living conditions of women in her works, and understands the fate of women in the upper class in old New York with a unique perspective and keen observation[2]. "The House of Joy" is Wharton's famous work, which successfully creates Lily Bart, a beautiful, pure, kind and elegant unmarried woman. She has awakened female consciousness and lofty moral concept, and wants to change her situation with her beauty and wisdom in a "happy house" centered on men and money. When she recognizes the essence of the patriarchal society, she chooses to escape from the social cage and seeks the independent living space for women, so as to awaken the awakening of the majority of women.

### ***2.3 Exploring the Fate of New Women: Flouting the Rules and Regulations that Bind Women's Freedom and Liberating Women from the Cage of the System.***

Edith Wharton lived in a time when women tried to have equal political rights with men. However, the patriarchal social atmosphere has not changed, and women are still vassals, playing angels at home. Nevertheless, women have begun to choose their own social orientation and desire for self-development. There is a complex and contradictory relationship between Wharton and feminist ideology [3]. On the one hand, she pays attention to the situation of women and discusses the problems faced by women in that era in her novels; On the other hand, she holds a conservative attitude towards the social and political feminist movement. She shows a number of female images with female characteristics in her works and puts forward her own views. Wharton's female consciousness has gone through the whole process from awakening to resistance, and then to self-liberation, and gradually evolved from outside to inside, from shallow to deep, from weak to strong. The new women created in the works and the traditional male images living around these women express Wharton's concern about the difficulties faced by women living in that period, as well as her exploration of the ideal social order and the fate of new women.

### ***2.4 Surpassing the Female Perspective: Surpassing the Narrow Female Perspective and Paranoid Female Position, There Being a more Rational Feminist Dimension.***

Looking at Edith Wharton's works from the perspective of women, we can find a series of vivid female images. Men often become a huge obstacle in the process of female identity authentication, and always write female images with sympathy and appreciation [4]. In "The Age of Innocence", Ellen dares to give up her nominal marriage and falls in love with Archer in defiance of secular pressure. Finally, she chooses a reasonable way out and gains physical and mental liberation. Through the image of Ellen, Wharton shows that women's liberation is not achieved by seizing men's power, but by making men "more reliable friends" and working together to create a new Eden. Wharton's successful portrayal of mature women shows that her writing has gone beyond the narrow female perspective and paranoid female position, and has a more open and rational feminist dimension.

### ***2.5 Breaking through the Shackles of Traditional Thinking: from Loss to Awakening, and then to Free Sublimation, which Implies Wharton's Search for Ideal Women.***

Wharton holds different attitudes towards the traditional ethical value system before and after the

First World War. The works before the First World War reflect the individual ethical needs to get rid of the shackles of the traditional value system and the social hierarchy. The works after the First World War reflect that the individual ethical demands for establishing ethical subjectivity have not changed, but they still miss the stable structure of the traditional ethical value system. Ellen in "The Age of Innocence" pursues the independence of personality and thought, and does not regard marriage as the belonging of women's happiness. She dares to run counter to social customs and challenge the tradition of patriarchal society with her own strength. In the end, she successfully chooses her own lifestyle and becomes a new woman with independent personality and self-improvement consciousness. Ellen leaves her husband and lover, chooses her own life circle in a foreign land and enjoys the rich and colorful European culture [5]. Ellen, who achieved spiritual independence, is Wharton's ideal new woman, and she has many similarities with Wharton herself.

### **3. The Age Value of Feminism in Edith Wharton's Novels**

Self-realization is an important theme in Wharton's novels, which shows that women are suppressed by social forces. Women's rebellious consciousness to the negative components of social self, constant adjustment to ideal self and mutual support between men and women are the key components to self-realization. Wharton breaks through the traditional ideological shackles, creates an ideal female image, pays attention to women's growth, especially spiritual growth, and advocates pure and beautiful love, which is of great value to women's growth and development today.

#### ***3.1 Cherishing Pure and Beautiful Love: Pursuing your Own True Love, and more Importantly, Understanding each other and Fitting Your Heart.***

Edith Wharton herself is a victim of the traditional marriage system in the old New York society. Wharton has been tortured and troubled by a loveless marriage for more than 20 years, which once made Wharton's spirit almost collapse and brought her a serious psychological shadow. Ellen in "The Age of Innocence" is the embodiment of Wharton to a certain extent. Her independent personality and civilized thoughts, like her room, exude the charm of dim elegance, which is different from other familiar rooms. Even when her grandmother interrupts her source of life, she still lives in the slums with strong optimism, insisting on the pursuit of true love and the struggle for freedom of marriage. While pursuing the freedom of marriage, Ellen is also trying to awaken other sleeping women compatriots and set an example for women's liberation and self-reliance. It is the great spirit of pure love that supports her, so that she can abandon all material fame and fortune and refuse to return to her husband under the suffocating pressure of her relatives and friends and society, and finally achieve self-liberation successfully.

#### ***3.2 Highlighting Positive Women: Beautiful and Kind Angels on Earth with Pure and Noble Moral Sentiments, and Full of Youthful Vitality.***

Edith Wharton created mostly positive female images. They are beautiful and kind angels with noble moral sentiments and full of enthusiasm and vitality. Although they have been under the oppression of the traditional patriarchal system, they are full of self-confidence, make constant efforts and persist in tenacious struggle with the patriarchal society. The understanding of self is never perfect to perfection, never mature to maturity, and finally escapes from the barrier of patriarchal society, successfully realizes self and finds true freedom. Lily Bart in "The House of Joy", though frustrated everywhere in the male-dominated society, persistently fights against the patriarchy through the continuous enhancement of self-awareness [6]. Even if she is misunderstood and framed, she will not retaliate, but will only bear the burden of humiliation in lofty morality; even in the face of the temptation from material fame and wealth, as well as all kinds of social pressures, she will firm her goals, go forward bravely to overcome patriarchal oppression, and win the final victory. She set an example for women in traditional society and opens up a shining road for women's liberation.

#### ***3.3 Deeply Criticizing the Money Worship: Criticizing the Money Worship and Pleasure Worship under the Social Background of Measuring Success by Money***

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States is an era of replacement of the old and the new, and the old strict hierarchy is being broken by money. On the one hand, a relatively reasonable upward flow mechanism is gradually established, and people can change their birth class through hard

work; on the other hand, the only support for this change is money, which leads to money worship becoming the highest criterion. This upward mobility excludes women, and it is difficult to make money like men in a patriarchal society. They can only survive by becoming vassals of men. Women are either bound by money or by marriage and love, and the alternation of the old and the new intensifies the situation of women being materialized [7]. Lily Bart in "The House of Joy", though always pursuing an elegant and honorable life and hating financial difficulties, pays less attention to money, and pays more attention to the working women at the bottom. After learning their miserable fate, she does not hesitate to donate money to help them. Therefore, although Lily, a female image, loves money, she doesn't worship it, which also shows Edith Wharton's attitude towards money.

### ***3.4 Praising the Greatness of Moral Power: Defending Moral Principles Worthy of Respect based on Profound Moral Meaning.***

"The two most important things in the world are the bright starry sky overhead and the morality in the heart". Morality plays an important role in both individuals and society, guiding individual success and social development. The upper class in old New York was a closed group, and moral norms were like solid barriers, affecting everyone, and everyone scrupulously observed the moral concepts and standards of the extended family. Therefore, Wharton also firmly defends the morality that should be cherished and respected in the old New York society, and emphasizes the binding role of moral principles on people. Wharton is very concerned about the fate of women in the upper class, and puts women's problems on the moral level, focusing on the opposition and conflict between personal morality and social customs, thus promoting the greatness of moral power. Many of Edith Wharton's works praise the social moral values embodied in the heroine, and express her complex feelings about the society in which she lives and her desire for an ideal moral state. Everyone should abide by certain social order, overcome emotions with reason and avoid contradictions and conflicts.

### ***3.5 Creating an Ideal Female Image: Simple and Kind, the Combination of Emotion and Reason, the Perfect Combination of Eve and Maria.***

Wharton deeply understood the essence and origin of religion and integrated this understanding into literary creation. The perfect woman in Wharton's mind is Ellen in "The Age of Innocence". She is the perfect combination of two women, Maria and Eve, in the Bible. Eve only left women's gender characteristics, limited to the physical and material level, without the soul and spirit level; Maria has the spirit of sacrifice and piety, which is limited to the spiritual level, but has no physical and material level [8]. Ellen has feminine charm like Eve, and her inner feminine qualities are inadvertently revealed, which comes from the Virgin Mary. Ellen is a combination of emotion and reason, a perfect combination of Eve and Maria, and an ideal woman in Wharton's works. In the depiction of female characters, Wharton believes that women should pursue independence, equality and freedom, and that perfect women should have both spiritual sentiment and feminine characteristics, and integrate the characteristics of spiritual and material aspects. This is Wharton's view of women formed by critically accepting binary opposition, and this view is also perfectly blooming in her works.

## **4. Conclusions**

A profound understanding of feminism in Edith Wharton's works is to summarize Wharton's creation and its rich cultural connotation, so as to provide the necessary cultural resources for the construction of socialist literature and art with China characteristics. This study aims to guide the literary creation in the new era and improve the level of creation and appreciation of female literature by excavating the enduring charm and age value of feminism in Wharton's novels.

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