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# Gender, Fantasy, and Misogyny in *The Age of Innocence*: A Character Study of Newland Archer

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Gender, Fantasy, and Misogyny in *The Age of Innocence*: A Character Study of Newland

Archer

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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*The Age of Innocence* is a 1921 Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Edith Wharton that closely examines the path of three characters in upper-class New York society—Newland Archer, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska. The story initially appears to be about a tragic, yearning romance between Archer and Ellen, with May acting as a cruel obstacle between them. In reality, though, the novel is far more complex. More than a romance, *The Age of Innocence* is an examination of the gendered dynamics between men and women in this twisted society. The novel is written in limited omniscient third person, with the narration maintaining a delicate balance between an objective view and Archer's perspective. The reader is able to follow Archer's thought process while still remaining outside of it, allowing us to watch him watching May and Ellen. Essentially, the reader gets to look into the thought process of a man and see how he sees women, exposing his misogynistic and fantastical outlook. It quickly becomes clear that Archer is building a false narrative for himself, believing himself to be a kind of Byronic hero and chasing after the idea of living out a grand romance. He distorts the women around him into flat, false characters to fit this narrative and plays out his fantasy using their lives. But May and Ellen are real, complex people beyond his twisted view, with distinct strengths, weaknesses, and personality traits that he refuses to see.

In this thesis, I'll be examining Archer's thoughts and fantasies through a feminist lens. I will expose his misogyny and prove how his warped view of women reflects the larger gender dynamic of our society. To establish this, I'll study who Archer is as a whole, looking at his actions, his view of himself, and his view of the women around him. I'm going to explore the way he treats the women around him because of these fantasies, and consider who they actually are behind these fantasies. To fully understand

both the novel and these larger dynamics, it's vital to see how May and Ellen have to exist as women in the world, and how they are constrained and easily ruined by the whims of men like Archer.

Several literary scholars have discussed the narration and feminist implications of *The Age of Innocence*, as well as the basic relationship between the three main characters. In Sevinc Elaman-Garner's article, "Contradictory Depictions of the New Woman: Reading Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* as a Dialogic Novel," she notes that "during the 1970s and 80s, feminist scholars offered a new way of reading *The Age of Innocence* [...] focusing on the way Wharton constructed a feminist social realism in its narrative" (1). Margaret Jay Jessee has also explored the novel through this viewpoint, discussing much of this in her article, "Trying It On: Narration and Masking in *The Age of Innocence*." She remarks that "May and Ellen [are cast as] representatives of opposing female stereotypes, [so] the novel creates a series of binaries between old and new, virgin and whore, and fair and dark." Jessee also brings up the fact that "[these] binaries [are interrogated] by repeatedly throwing into question distinctions between what is actual and what is Newland's misperception" (38). Despite the narration and these relationships being called into question by other scholars, none have focused specifically on Archer and his fantasies and how those fantasies affect the women around him. These fantasies are important to examine—the combination of delusion, dehumanization of women, and inherent patriarchal power is both extremely dangerous and incredibly common. The narration of the novel has given readers a rare opportunity to be inside this kind of thought process, looking into the head of a mediocre misogynist while maintaining enough of an external view to analyze him. This thesis is intended for both the literary

and feminist discourse communities, as it is both a close textual analysis of *The Age of Innocence* and an exploration of feminism both inside and outside the novel.

The novel begins with Archer's engagement to May, at which point he is deeply enamored of her. She is a young and beautiful socialite who is considered the catch of the season and the "perfect" type of refined woman. Archer is a wealthy lawyer with a love of books, and sees himself as a brilliant, standout man from the rest of society. He is extremely excited at the prospect of marrying May, fantasizing about shaping her into his ideal woman—imagining their "prospective honeymoon" and "hazily confusing the scene of [it] with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride" (Wharton 6). This thought sets up Archer's characterization for the rest of the novel and gives us a basic understanding of his character from the start. He is a man who fails to understand the difference between fantasy and reality, and his ideas about romance and women are grounded in fiction.

Initially, he focuses on May as his perfect muse for his illusions. But he's soon reintroduced to May's cousin, Ellen Olenska, and their whole dynamic quickly changes. Ellen has recently returned from Europe, escaping from her abusive husband and seeking comfort in the familiarity of her childhood city. She's unconventional and intelligent, and she quickly finds it difficult to conform to the stifling requirements of New York high society while still desiring to be a part of it. Archer reacts to Ellen with disdain, but his attitude changes fast and he begins to find her intelligence and her divergence from society fascinating, and her mysterious past makes her a perfect target for fantasy. Archer becomes increasingly infatuated with her, and it starts to become clear that their feelings are reciprocal. Their relationship becomes more complex when Ellen is trying to divorce

her husband, leading to a possible scandal. Ellen's family is distinctly against this, and they ask Archer, as a lawyer, to talk to her and convince her against it. At first, he decides not to push her to do so, but once he realizes that the reason that she might want a divorce is to marry another man, he gets angry and aggressively dissuades her from the divorce that she desperately wants.

May is a perceptive person, and she starts to understand that something is changing in her relationship with Archer. When Archer asks her to move up their wedding in a desperate attempt to ignore his feelings for Ellen, May catches on to this motivation right away, asking him if he loves someone else. She magnanimously offers him the chance to break their engagement, not wanting to cause anyone pain or enter a loveless marriage. Rather than take this opportunity, though, Archer vehemently denies it, and convinces May to go ahead with hastening their marriage.

Shortly before their wedding, though, Archer confesses his love to Ellen and tells her about the chance that May has given him. Ellen refuses this opportunity to be together, remarking that he's made it impossible due to preventing her divorce. Archer pushes back, actually realizing for a moment that moving forward with this marriage will only lead to unhappiness—but Ellen is too frightened to be with him after everything that has happened. After Ellen rejects this idea, Archer decides to go ahead and marry May.

The rest of the novel is essentially about dealing with the repercussions from these choices. Archer feels trapped in his marriage, blaming May for his unhappiness and the way that things have turned out. He still longs for Ellen, and once it turns out that she still has feelings for him, they begin an intense emotional affair, seeing each other infrequently and passionately. Archer treats May with a cruel detachment and thinks she

has no idea about his affair, even with May doing what she can to prevent some of their meetings behind the scenes. At the end of the novel, Ellen agrees to consummate their affair, which Archer knows might lead to them running off together. However, before they can, May tells Ellen that she's pregnant (despite being unsure of it at the time), so Ellen goes back to Europe. She later informs Archer about this pregnancy, and so he ends up staying with her and their future children.

The novel ends with a flash forward to 26 years later. Archer is an established society man at this point, and May died two years ago. He regards May fondly now, if still condescendingly, and is largely happy with his life. He has two children who he loves—a son who is “the pride of his life” and a daughter that he thinks of affectionately but describes as “no more intelligent [than her mother]” (292, 290). He still complains that he “missed the flower of life” by not getting to be with Ellen, and still thinks of May as completely imperceptive (288). But his son tells Archer that May knew what had happened between him and Ellen, and Archer is shocked. In the last pages, he also finally has a moment where he understands himself and his relationship with Ellen. He has the opportunity to see her in Paris, and is standing right outside her building—but after imagining Ellen, he decides not to see her, saying to himself: “‘It’s more real to me here than if I went up’” (313). He has finally come to terms with who he is, how he misunderstood May, and the way that he prefers fantasy to reality—however, he is far too late to do anything about it.

Based on the narration and the story beats, *The Age of Innocence* has as a clear feminist message. The narrator frames Archer's negative thoughts and actions around women with disdain. Sevinc Elaman-Garner discusses this phenomenon, noting how the

novel “reveal[s] [the] tension between the surface and counter narrative (Newland’s specious attitude toward women’s freedom and then his fear of the consequences of this freedom), the text successfully exposes his ambiguity, and its feminist critique of male hypocrisy” (9). This is the tension that allows us to see the truths behind Archer’s dehumanizing fantasies. It immediately allows the reader to see the twisted way that he sees women, as well as the larger issues with the gender dynamics within New York society.

We see how the agency afforded to Archer as a man essentially gave him the ability to wreck the lives of the women around him with impunity while they lacked the same choices. The novel is also intensely critical of marriage, something that is directly tied to feminist theory—and the exact scenarios that come up in the novel are often brought up in feminist writing. None of the characters in the novel have happy marriages. The tensions in the novel occasionally stem from controlling and snobbish wives, but most of the time the problem is the men, who treat their wives badly and usually cheat. Women are trapped in unhappiness and perpetual servitude, and husbands have the power to live exciting lives outside their marriage. Simone De Bouvier describes this role in *The Second Sex*, noting:

Man marries to anchor himself in immanence but not to confine himself in it; he wants a home but also to remain free to escape from it; he settles down, but he often remains a vagabond in his heart; he does not scorn happiness, but he does not make it an end in itself; repetition bores him; he seeks novelty, risk, resistance to overcome, camaraderie, friendships that wrest him from the solitude of the couple. (485)



Archer creates a “home” and a place of basic comfort by marrying May, but he’s constantly looking elsewhere for stimulation. He is bored, and he seeks “novelty, risk, and resistance to overcome” in his affair with Ellen. He wants to “wrest [himself] from the solitude of the couple”, but May is stuck within that solitude, more alone than ever. Unlike Archer, May could never escape this solitude and walk away from their marriage, as her status and her lifestyle are completely dependent on him. De Bouvier brings up the fact that women are often forced into this kind of situation, observing that they are “assigned the role of parasite [...] she needs the male to acquire human dignity, to eat, to feel pleasure, to procreate” (653). May is in an extremely precarious position, and would lose her whole life if Archer leaves her—which he’s constantly teetering on the edge of doing.

The novel closely examines the expectations that are pushed on women. In a speech that Virginia Woolf gave at the National Society for Women’s Service, “Professions for Women”, she describes a set of expectations that May has clearly been raised for. She’s supposed to be “intensely sympathetic [...] immensely charming [and] utterly unselfish [...] in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace” (285). Woolf calls this role “The Angel in the House,” and while she sees it as something that haunts her, she remarks that there are depths in the women who conform to the “Angel” persona. She notes that these women have tailored and constructed themselves to be “Angels” rather than having these traits be part of their natural disposition. Women learn to “be sympathetic; be tender; flatter;

deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure” (285). These are the expectations for women, and May embodies these traits perfectly.

May uses femininity as a tool both to thrive as a debutante and later to survive in her circumstances, as she has very few other ways to keep herself from being tossed away by Archer and subjected to the scandal of divorce. Pregnancy and children—things that are tied to the idea of domestic, traditional womanhood—are her ultimate weapons in this pursuit, and the way that she uses them keeps Archer from leaving her. In contrast, Ellen is unable to conform to the laws of decorum and stuffy requirements of New York society and ends up rejected by it. But May knows that both her survival and her overall success in New York society are tied to the skills of being a demure woman—an “Angel in the House.”

Even after being limited by their circumstances and rigid expectations, women are still expected to go beyond that and be whatever their husbands’ desire. In *A Vindication of The Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft brings up May’s predicament exactly, noting that, “After thus cramping a woman’s mind, if [a man] has not made it quite a blank, he advises her to reflect, that a reflecting man may not yawn in her company, when he is tired of caressing her” (70). Archer, seeing himself as a “reflecting man” initially wanted May as an “Angel in the House” and enjoyed the idea of her innocence and purity. But he quickly gets bored with her—or rather, his idea of her—and switches directions. Archer sees Ellen as someone who can match up with his intellect and be generally interesting, seeing himself as a rational man who needs to be challenged.

Archer is a man who thinks of himself as perfect. He constantly brings up his intelligence, progressiveness, and general nobility; he never seems to find any faults in himself. In reality, he is a hypocritical, conventional, and egotistical man. Archer constantly compliments himself and never has a lasting moment of self-recrimination—despite constantly making mistakes with life-altering ramifications. He has been spoiled by the society around him, getting special treatment from his family simply because of his gender:

Mother and daughter adored each other and revered their son and brother; and Archer loved them with a tenderness made compunctious and uncritical by the sense of their exaggerated admiration, and by his secret satisfaction in it. After all, he thought it a good thing for a man to have his authority respected in his own house, even if his sense of humour sometimes made him question the force of his mandate.” (Wharton 30)

As Archer discusses his home life, the root of both his inflated ego and his views on women become increasingly clear. His family “reveres him” and when he mentions he loves them, he loves them in a “compunctious and uncritical” way. However, we see that this love is not based on a simple familial bond, instead springing from the fact that they admire him, and because their admiration satisfies him. Archer has several layers of justifications and lies already in his head that allow him to maximize his self-regard while maintaining his position of power, a pattern that he constantly repeats throughout the novel. He rationalizes the decision of requiring reverence by describing it as an implicitly virtuous thing, treating the reason that he keeps this order as entirely unselfish. This is the kind of attitude that allows him to not think twice about letting himself have an entire

upper floor of his house as “the two women squeezed themselves into the narrower quarters below” (29).

Even though Archer sees himself as a unique Romantic hero, his inner monologues show him to be a shallow, self-serving man who fits perfectly into the society that he thinks himself better of:

[He] was content to hold his view [on marriage] without analysing it, since he knew it was that of all the carefully-brushed, white-waistcoated, button-hole-flowered gentlemen who succeeded each other in the club box, exchanged friendly greetings with him, and turned their opera-glasses critically on the circle of ladies who were the product of the system. In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number. Singly they betrayed their inferiority; but grouped together they represented "New York," and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral. He instinctively felt that in this respect it would be troublesome—and also rather bad form—to strike out for himself. (6-7)

Archer likes to see himself as a different kind of person than the “carefully-brushed, white-waistcoated, button-hole-flowered gentlemen,” but he follows all their conventions to a tee. Only a moment earlier, at the same opera, Archer describes how “the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole”

being “as natural to him all the other conventions on which his life was moulded” (4). Archer is fussy enough to request a specific flower in his buttonhole, yet treats the other society men as inferior because they all seem overly concerned with appearance and dress in the same manner. He refuses to see that he acts exactly the same way, and does so because it feels natural to him to stick to the conventions that his life was shaped by. Archer has an unflinchingly high opinion of himself, calling himself “superior” and saying that he “thought more” than any other man in New York society; then he immediately comments that he “accepts their doctrine” and presents a reticence to strike out for himself. Archer fails to see any irony or hypocrisy in this statement. Moreover, he remarks that he acts “instinctively” instead of rationally, and he specifically chooses not to analyze his behavior. Archer cannot fathom the idea that the way that he lives might be wrong, so he doesn’t care to question or examine any of it, despite imagining himself to be a critical thinker.

The basis of his intellectual superiority is so tenuous that he cannot even make a definitive statement about it. He can only say that he has “probably” engaged in more academic pursuits, and we’re never shown any concrete evidence that supports this statement. Archer also likes to set himself apart from his peers with ideas of intellectual and cultural superiority, but he acts in exactly the same manner and finds comfort in emulating their habits and behavior. He’s happy that these standards allow him to see women and marriage in the same way as the men around him—as “products of the system” to be engineered, examined, and sold.

Archer continually presents himself as distinct from the other members of his social circle due to his supposed worldliness. However, in *Edith Wharton*, Margaret

McDowell brings up the fact that “Archer never fully recognizes his own conventionality. Considering himself capable of teaching May the value of music, he nevertheless has little interest in learning about the great world outside his own circle” (97). Indeed, when Archer begins to align himself more with Ellen, he inadvertently demonstrates how little he actually understands worldly culture and his larger lack of overall knowledge:

He knew that there were societies where painters and poets and novelists and men of science, and even great actors, were as sought after as Dukes; he had often pictured to himself what it would have been to live in the intimacy of drawing-rooms dominated by the talk of Merimee (whose "Lettres a une Inconnue" was one of his inseparables), of Thackeray, Browning or William Morris. But such things were inconceivable in New York, and unsettling to think of. [...] He was reminded of this by trying to picture the society in which the Countess Olenska had lived and suffered, and also—perhaps—tasted mysterious joys. (87)

While mentioning the world outside of New York that he “knows”—Ellen’s world—he also accidentally tells the reader that his connection with cosmopolitanism is simply imagined. He has no true experiences with other cultures, choosing to picture himself talking with foreign intellectuals about books rather than actually having done it. He even brings up how much actually doing so would unsettle him. This lack of actual comprehension does not stop Archer from continuing to portray himself as an expert, both of the world and of Ellen.

The way that Archer treats women highlights much of Archer’s hypocrisy. This can clearly be seen in Archer’s parallels to Lawrence Lefferts, a serial adulterer and extremely conventional man. Lefferts has deep ties to tradition, and is a man who is “the

foremost authority on ‘form’ in New York” (7). Archer looks down upon Lawrence and his cheating, seeing it as rather slimy behavior—but he still follows his conventional example. Archer lives in parallel to Lefferts, even if he doesn’t see it. Before his own marriage, Archer describes traditional society marriage with both fear and desire, with Lefferts’ marriage as an example:

With a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other. Lawrence Lefferts occurred to him as the husband who had most completely realised this enviable ideal. As became the high-priest of form, he had formed a wife so completely to his own convenience. (38)

This marriage Archer is imagining is exactly the one he gets, at least on his own side. Even though May isn’t actually ignorant, he sees her as such, and the rest lines up perfectly. Archer ends up in a classically conventional society marriage, and although he describes it as “foreboding,” he’s also excited by it. Despite seeing himself as subversive, he describes Lefferts’s deeply conventional lifestyle with great admiration, calling him the “high-priest of form” and observing that he shaped his wife into whatever he wanted to—something Archer calls an “enviable ideal.” He sees himself as superior and different from Lefferts, but he largely isn’t—particularly when it comes to his attitude towards women. Archer lives out the same kind of life as Lefferts. He treats May as a wife of convenience, he is hypocritical and cruel, and most of all, he cheats on her. He rationalizes his own behavior as something else, commenting:

In his heart he thought Lefferts despicable. But to love Ellen Olenska was not to become a man like Lefferts: for the first time Archer found himself face to face with the dread argument of the individual case. Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else's, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment.

(254)

The main difference between Archer and Lefferts is not that Archer is some Byronic hero, it's that Archer is delusional. His fantasies allow him to justify anything, to avoid analyzing the things around him, and to replace the truth with falsehoods of his choosing. He makes an argument for himself based on the "individual case" and that both he and Ellen are so special that they aren't subject to basic morality. He finds that he has little-to-no remorse for cheating on May, and any thoughts of regret that remain are easily waved away:

He was even ashamed of the ease with which [plotting to meet Ellen] had been done: it reminded him, for an uncomfortable moment, of Lawrence Lefferts's masterly contrivances for securing his freedom. But this did not long trouble him, for he was not in an analytic mood. (190-1)

Once again, Archer, who prides himself on his logic and brilliance, runs away from reality and frees himself from the judgment of his own analysis. Archer pretends to have an objective view of things when it suits him, but he cannot face reality when it comes to himself. He has one "uncomfortable moment" where he realizes what he's actually doing in cheating on his wife, but it quickly passes, because he simply "isn't in an analytic mood." This lack of introspection is a core characteristic of Archer's personality, and



helps maintain his sense of fantasy. If he actually had to look at himself and the reality of his actions, he would start to see his own faults and his fantasy would begin to collapse.

Archer is a man who does not understand the lives of women and is not interested in finding out more, instead choosing to use them as receptacles for his own wants and feelings. They are not real to him, and thus he can easily worship or hate them depending on his emotional state—in this case using all women as scapegoats for his own discontent:

[He] felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow. (39-40)

This passage is incredibly indicative of the larger attitude that Archer has towards women, and this mentality acts as the foundation upon which he builds his fantasies. In discussing the “conspiracy” of a created society “manufactured by women,” he decides that it is the fault of women that he has the right to “exercise the lordly pleasure” of “smashing” their artificial identities “like an image made of snow.” The way he phrases this as something that is “supposed to be what he wanted” also makes him sound as though he resents this ability, while at the same time he describing it as “lordly” and “his,” making no real effort to distance himself from it. This paragraph also acts as an outline of Archer’s path through the rest of the novel, as he “smashes” the lives of May and Ellen with “lordly” and emotional violence entitlement. Archer’s basic idea that women created a system to elevate men to a lord-like status so that they can destroy

women isn't logical at all, especially in a patriarchal society—but Archer almost never operates based on logic, particularly with women.

In “The Drama of Gender and Genre in Edith Wharton’s Realism”, Regina Martin describes how Archer twists the base realism of *The Age of Innocence* with his mindset, noting that: “if realism as a mode of representation presupposes an autonomous plane of meaning and existence, in *The Age of Innocence* that reality, represented in Newland’s imagination, exists only on the plane of fantasy” (597). To be able to act out this fantasy, Archer must remove the autonomy and meaningful traits of the women around him. He cannot maintain the image of himself as a Romantic hero without other roles to play off of, so he pushes false characterizations onto May and Ellen that they cannot escape. May acts as a stifling Madonna, a vapid and unintelligent woman who only exists as an obstacle. Ellen is framed under the whore archetype, an independent, strong, and cosmopolitan woman with sexual experience. Archer completely refuses to acknowledge or view them as people beyond that, as it would shatter the comfortable way that he sees the world and his vision of himself as a Romantic hero.

In “The Cult of Passion in *The Age of Innocence*,” Lloyd M. Daigrepoint writes that both Archer and Ellen are caught up in a “cult of passion” that perfectly fits this false Romanticism:

Lovers in the tradition of the cult of passion perversely seek hardship, conflict, and separation, for it is thus that the sought after passion—each lover’s true object—is sustained and enhanced, whereas the familiarity of the harmonious union would tend to diminish passionate intensity. [...] Sustained desire becomes an enticing

preoccupation charged with exquisite anticipation of future meetings, never to be diminished by the lovers' true knowledge of one another. (5)

Archer and Ellen's relationship clearly falls under this fictional Romantic narrative. They rarely meet, find themselves utterly consumed by each other, then break apart in an increasingly dramatic fashion. What stands out, though, is how little they actually know each other.

Archer's motivations for "love" seem to come down to knowledge; or rather, lack of it. During one of their trysts, he tells Ellen he "'hardly remember[s] her'" (Wharton 237). This leads Archer to realize "[h]ow little they knew of each other, after all." He fails to see that not knowing your partner might actually detract from the idea of deep love—instead, he sees the yearning that comes from it as a key aspect of their love, something that sets them apart from others and releases them from the true culpability of their affair. He fantasizes about a great love between them and fetishizes their roles as star-crossed lovers to the point where the "renunciation [of each other] assumes a seemingly moral and even spiritual demeanor; a form of self-deception that enhances ardor even as it masks it" (8).

Archer also wishes to possess these women, or at least possess the idea of them. Their agency as people is destructive to his ability to fantasize, and so he must own them to create his narrative. In "'A turmoil of contradictory feelings': money, women, and body in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*," Takahiro Sakane notes the way that Archer treats Ellen and May as a type of fetishized currency, seeing May as a hoarded property and Ellen as liquid currency with a value that is also hoarded by Archer but still

remains in circulation. He desires the wealth of both, but is unable to support the cost of each. They are commodities, things for him to own, use, and play with.

Because this sense of possession is key to his goal of creating fantasy women, it defines his relationship with May and Ellen. When Archer cannot put May and Ellen in their fantasy roles (owning them) he sees them as worthless and becomes angry, to the point where he actively desires their deaths. When someone describes the possibility of Ellen going back to be with Count Olenski to him, he “[cries] violently” that “[he] would rather see her dead” (135). The second that she no longer exists in the realm of his life and ends up in a romantic/sexual relationship with another person—contradicting his narrative and following a path other than the one that he desires for her—he wants her to die. Ellen’s sense of free will makes Archer both long for her and loathe her, and May’s sense of conformity makes him outright hate her. When thinking about his marriage, he imagines telling May:

‘I’ve caught [my death] already. I AM dead—I’ve been dead for months and months.’

And suddenly the play of the word flashed up a wild suggestion. What if it were SHE who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! The sensation of standing there, in that warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling.” (243)

Archer chose to marry May, but he's no longer satisfied with her or the role she plays in his life, thinking of her only as an obstacle to his happiness. The joy and exhilaration that he expresses at the possibility of his wife dying demonstrates Archer's utter lack of empathy and possible sociopathy. May is far less than a real person in his eyes, and is completely disposable. Archer doesn't wish that May was dead with any type of remorse or even real conflict, only excitement. He never expresses regret or shame over these thoughts, simply continuing to bemoan his own circumstances for the rest of the novel. Rather than being willing to take responsibility for his own mistakes, he continually puts the onus on May, directing the consequences of his actions onto her. Archer truly has no one to blame except himself for his current situation; when May offered him the chance to end his engagement and he refused, he set up an unhappy life for both of them. Even knowing that he didn't love May, he decided to marry her—but he still acts as though it's her fault. Archer has ruined any chance that May had for love and a happy marriage, and yet he still sees himself as the victim. Archer never sees himself as culpable, and simply moves onto longing for May's death, describing it as a "possibility" that he actively hopes for.

While we only see May through Archer's eyes, the narrative manages to slip hints of who she really is behind his perspective. One of the main ways that the narrator does this is by describing her appearance, a key aspect of May's personality and larger societal strategy that Archer largely fails to notice. There's a particularly clear example of this in the way May's eyes are described, a phenomenon that Evelyn E. Fracasso discusses in detail in her article "The Transparent Eyes of May Welland in Wharton's 'The Age of Innocence.'" When dancing with Archer at a ball, her eyes are described as "candid" and

“[floating] away on the soft waves of the Blue Danube,” an image that Fracasso remarks is “the epitome of helpless femininity” (44). After Archer announces their engagement at the same ball, Fracasso notes that her face eyes begin to reveal more, as “[May’s] lips trembled into a smile, but the eyes remained distant and serious, as if bent on some ineffable vision” (Wharton qtd. in Fracasso 44). Fracasso comments that through this change, Wharton is “[intimating], through a direct reference to May’s eyes, that there may be more depth and complexity to this young girl” (44). And yet, Archer still “sees nothing profound in May’s eyes and persists in a narrow view of his betrothed” (44).

Moving beyond May’s facial expressions, her appearance as a whole is also key to understanding her. May knows that her clothing matters to those around her, and she chooses what she wears with consideration and intention. After their marriage, Archer has a short moment of insight about how May presents herself.

‘It’s their armour,’ he thought, ‘their defence against the unknown, and their defiance of it.’ And he understood for the first time the earnestness with which May, who was incapable of tying a ribbon in her hair to charm him, had gone through the solemn rite of selecting and ordering her extensive wardrobe.

(Wharton 164)

May is meticulous about the way that she dresses—she understands the way that the world sees her, and she knows that her clothes are a vital part of that. She knows that she needs the “armour” of beautiful clothing to successfully navigate the world as a woman, and uses her wardrobe to both defend herself from a fickle society and resist any idea of being scorned by it. While Archer refuses to find her charming no matter what she wears,

May still recognizes that much of her life depends on what she wears, and has carefully chosen what she needs to curate her image. Jessee observes that the “Old New York dictates of fashion produce the binary code in which women are fair innocents or dark temptresses in the novel” (44). Ellen, who dresses on the dark temptress side of the binary, “never achieves acceptance, a status highlighted by her clothes” (45). On the other hand, May’s clothes are “always appropriate and acceptable by Old New York Society, carries none of the sexually charged language that Ellen’s does. Instead, May’s clothes are decorous and usually white, evoking images of innocence, purity, and blankness” (46).

May clearly understands how to be a woman in New York society, and despite Archer’s image of her, is also an intelligent and interesting individual. Fracasso points out that May is “neither ‘her class’s ideal of helpless humanity’ nor ‘a cardboard stereotype,’ but instead, she is a perceptive, strong willed, and determined woman who develops into ‘a person of greater depth. than Newland Archer could ever have imagined” (43). McDowell echoes this sentiment, noting that “[Archer’s] egocentric temperament, which limits his imagination, prevents him from seeing May as a woman rather than a stereotype. He never sees that what he calls ‘her abysmal purity’ is a myth largely of his own formulation—one that underestimates her intelligence and the extent of her worldly knowledge” (98).

May is generally skilled at the things she pursues. She easily wins first prize in a society contest, with Lefferts commenting that “‘not one of [the other women] holds the bow like she does’” and Archer’s narration mentioning that “‘not one had the nymph-like ease of his wife” (175). Archer describes her as “[bending] her soul upon some feat of

strength” when she shoots, a clear indication of who May really is. She’s also traditionally intelligent, despite Archer’s constant assertions to the contrary. When Archer is in the phase of trying to “teach” May things, he comments that she “[Had a] grace and quickness at games, and [a] shy interest in books and ideas that she was beginning to develop under his guidance. (She had advanced far enough to join him in ridiculing the Idyls of the King, but not to feel the beauty of Ulysses and the Lotus Eaters)” (39). May seems to have a natural cleverness, being “quick” with games, and even though she was raised in a household that has never valued any kind of book learning, she seems to have picked it up with ease. She initially just parrots Archer’s own opinions (which he enjoys), but we see how she continues to learn and gains her own interest in books as the novel progresses.

He had taken to history in the evenings since May had shown a tendency to ask him to read aloud whenever she saw him with a volume of poetry: not that he disliked the sound of his own voice, but because he could always foresee her comments on what he read. In the days of their engagement she had simply (as he now perceived) echoed what he told her; but since he had ceased to provide her with opinions she had begun to hazard her own, with results destructive to his enjoyment of the works commented on. (245)

May enjoys poetry, and has formed her own opinions on it to the point where she asks Archer to read it out loud so she can engage with it. Archer’s reaction to this is to stop reading poetry altogether. Even though he normally seems to like reading out loud because he gets to hear the sound of his own voice (another sign of his inflated ego) he actively avoids doing so because he doesn’t want to hear any of May’s thoughts. He’s



annoyed when he realizes that her previous opinions weren't genuine and simply followed his line of thought, but dislikes the fact that she gives him authentic opinions now, calling them "destructive to his enjoyment."

Before their marriage, Archer saw it as "his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world," and described himself as being worried that May would be like a "Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness?" (69). Once they are married, though, it becomes clear that Archer has no interest in actually having an educated wife. It was just another fantasy, with Archer enjoying the thought of himself as a kind of educator-savior. However, when he's faced with the reality of a wife who actually wants to learn and have opinions, he becomes upset and starts to do everything he can to avoid it. Archer previously claimed to want May to think independently, but it's clear that the only thing that he actually ever wanted to hear from her was agreement. He's unable to deal with or process anything beyond that, so he refuses to see any signs of intelligence or depth in May.

Archer's imagined version of May can never grow beyond his initial fantasy of her as an "Angel in the House," because starting to see her as a more nuanced person would completely shatter his belief system. The more familiar he becomes with May, the more likely this is to happen, so he completely withdraws his attention and affection. Once he loses interest in the fantasy of the "Angel" that May has carefully cultivated for him, he discards her and moves on to his new fantasy of the cosmopolitan Ellen.

Ellen is perhaps the most complex character in the story and full of contradictions. She's seductive on an individual level, but innocent with the larger scale of society. She desires the comfort of conformity while loathing the requirements of it. She wants a closer relationship with her family in New York, but has an affair with her cousin's husband. She is spirited and weak; delusional and direct; both a victim and a victimizer. The pieces of Ellen that slip past Archer's narration give the reader a chance to see how interesting she is—but we still largely see her through the eyes of Archer, limiting the access that we have to her character. Daigrepoint notes that Ellen is a perfect receptacle for his fantasies: "from the beginning [,] Newland Archer evinces a romanticism that causes him to expect transformation through passion and thus renders him susceptible to Ellen's exotic and scandalous allure" (2). It's exactly what Archer wants—but it's far from the full picture of Ellen, and what Archer wants is not necessarily what Ellen wants.

Ellen is actually a rather weak person. This is not necessarily through faults of her own; she's extremely unsteady after coming out of an abusive marriage. She comes to New York not looking for excitement, instead trying to find comfort and stability. However, she completely fails to navigate New York, and ends up essentially exiled from society because of her affair with Archer. Despite her seeming independent at first glance, Ellen desires love and security, searching for kindness and stability through men. She seems to find some kind of reassurance through being around them, and she clearly understands how to play to their desires and wants, securing the attention of several men soon after arriving. The heavy implication that she ran off with her husband's secretary demonstrates a possible pattern of her seeing protection in being around men and/or sex. Regardless of the origin of it, though, Ellen seems to find a kind of security in seduction.

Ironically, this behavior makes her much less likely to find love and her social position far less safe. She doesn't realize what society expects of her, which she finds deeply upsetting, and she asks Archer to explain things to her. But as she starts to catch onto the fact that she needs to conform to survive, she resists. Even though Ellen came to New York for a sense of stability, Archer sees her as an opportunity to create a thrilling romance—literally describing being in her house as an “adventure,” and refuses to see what she actually wants (Wharton 60). In *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals*, Susan Goodman observes that “[Archer] never really hears [Ellen's] need for the values that he is preparing to cast aside” (99).

Archer is both intrigued by and terrified of Ellen's freedom. He wants Ellen to be both a virginal damsel and a free, bohemian woman, and enters into a juvenile anger whenever that impossible image is contradicted. The possibility of Ellen's relationships with other men outside of her previous marriage is left ambiguous, something that Archer hates. Her interactions with Beaufort drive Archer into a jealous, tantrum-like inner monologue, and he rants about Ellen's sexual past and anyone who might come near her. When Archer sees that Beaufort is in Ellen's house in the late evening, he reacts with intense anger, to the point of thinking about storming out and leaving his card instead of keeping their appointment. After Beaufort has left, Archer awkwardly probes Ellen about her adulterous past, trying to get Ellen to give him a concrete answer—which she never does.

The next time he sees an interaction between Ellen and Beaufort, he convinces himself that Ellen dislikes and is avoiding Beaufort. “Little as he had actually seen of Madame Olenska, he was beginning to think that he could read her face, and if not her

face her voice, and both had betrayed annoyance, and even dismay at Beaufort's sudden appearance" (115). It's important to note that the first thing that he says here is that he doesn't truly know her that well. However, he quickly moves to a tentative belief that he understands Ellen by her facial expressions and/or her voices, and decides that she doesn't actually want to see Beaufort—the exact thing that he wants her to want. But then, second guessing himself, he remarks that maybe Ellen does like Beaufort based on Beaufort's similarities to Ellen's abusive husband. He casts her in the role of a woman completely without agency, commenting:

She might believe herself wholly in revolt against it, but what had charmed her in it would still charm her, even though it were against her will. Thus, with a painful impartiality, did the young man make out the case for Beaufort, and for Beaufort's victim. A longing to enlighten her was strong in him; and there were moments when he imagined that all she asked was to be enlightened. (116)

He describes himself as looking at a possible romantic relationship between Beaufort and Ellen with a sense of impartiality, and then immediately starts making judgements. He knows that Beaufort likes to pursue women, but he has no idea of Ellen's intentions. Regardless, she is now the victim in Archer's mind, and therefore free from any judgements that he may have made if he had seen her as an active, participatory person in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Archer then places himself as her savior through the idea of knowing more than she does and then creates a fantasy of her where she asks for this help.

Much of the strife in Ellen and Archer's relationship (and in Ellen's life in general) comes from the fierce pressure that Archer puts on her not to get divorced.

Ellen's sexual past and relationships with men make Archer afraid of what Ellen would do with the freedom of divorce—namely, possibly marry another man—so he terrifies her back into the cage of her marriage. He tells her that if she gets divorced, the newspapers will publish terrible things full of “vileness” about her, that her life might be “infinitely disagreeable and painful” and that she would be “sacrificed [by society] for the sake of the collective interest” (94). He follows this up with telling her that he's trying “to help you to see these things as the people who are fondest of you see them” and that “if I didn't show you honestly [...] it wouldn't be fair of me, would it?” (94). It's perfectly executed manipulation, and it makes her give up on the freedom that she was previously so determined to get. Archer fully succeeds in taking away her agency here, and Ellen is never quite the same in the rest of the novel. Elaman-Garner describes this exchange as “break[ing] her spirit” (12). When Ellen refuses to run away with Archer before his wedding because she isn't divorced, it's not only because of the scandal or the difficulties of officially divorcing—it's because he's made her frightened of the world outside of her marriage, while still expecting her to leave it for him. Ellen, once a daring, excited person, has lost so much of her strength and humor through the way that men have kept her down.

However, Ellen is not simply a victim. She is weak and ignorant at times, but she still has some of her innate strength and a kind of clarity that no one else in New York society has. At one point, when Archer assures her that they will end up with each other no matter what, saying that he has a “vision in my mind” that he “quietly trusts to it to come true” (240). Ellen calls him out on the ridiculousness of this statement, asking him to “look not at visions, but at realities,” and Archer counters by saying “I don't know

what you mean by realities. The only reality to me is this" (240). It's a prime example of Archer living in a fantasy world, and Ellen is pushing back against it and throwing truths at him in this conversation, replying "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress—since I can't be your wife?" (240). Archer is shocked by "the crudeness of the question", and has trouble countering it, simply saying that "I want to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—don't exist" (240). Ellen is still not having it, though, sighing and laughing at the thought. He says that he's beyond the current categories of their world, and she tells him, "No, you're not! You've never been beyond. And I have" (241). Ellen is living in the real world here, and yet Archer is still stuck in his fantasy. He thinks it's "crude" that she named the actual situation that he desires of her as his mistress, unable to see things in real world terms. Ellen is able to see things as they are, a rarity in New York society, and no one else throws reality at Archer in the same way.

Ellen is also much more complex than May in a moral sense. No matter how much she describes being conflicted about the situation, she is still having an affair with her cousin's husband. And we see no real reason why she chose Archer to be with, as she barely knows him—other than to chase the "cult of passion" at the extreme expense of May. In one of her last conversations with Archer, Ellen says that she won't run away with Archer because she "can't stay here and lie to the people who have been good to me" and that she doesn't want to do "irreparable harm" to them (259). Later in the same conversation, though, she agrees to consummate their relationship. It's unclear if she's in denial about it or just past the point of caring, but it's rather obvious that Ellen has already done irreparable harm to the people who have been good to her. Not only that,

but in moving forward with having sex with Archer, she's clearly willing to continue to do so. Daigrepoint describes the denials she makes as "self-indulgent; by insisting on love based on renunciation, she continues to enjoy a [...] devotion that would be lost through either complete abnegation or the familiarity of connubial relationship" (12).

Still, none of this characterization makes much of a difference to Archer, who easily flattens her down into an archetype. Considering Archer's overall attitude towards women and the inevitable disappointment of Ellen not matching up with the false persona that he's created for her, there's a serious question as to whether he actually likes Ellen better than May, or if he's simply able to sustain the fantasy of her. A perfect vision of Ellen is clearly going to be able to beat out the real, human May, but that might not be the case if he actually got to know her as an actual person.

Interestingly enough, Edith Wharton wrote two alternate endings to the novel, and in both, we see a possible outcome to that scenario—neither of which spell success for the two of them. In "The Composition of Edith Wharton's: The Age of Innocence," Alan Price transcribes the notes that she wrote. In one ending, Archer still chooses to marry May, and settles down with her for a while. May is pregnant, but he and Ellen decide to secretly run off together to Florida anyway. However, "both get tired—she the idea of living in America, he of the idea of a scandal & a dislocation of his life. He cannot live without New York & respectability, nor she without Europe & emotion" (26). Their affair remains completely secret—when they return, May is very happy and has a baby boy, and Ellen is going back to Europe.

In the other ending, Archer chooses to break his engagement with May. May is at first “very bitter & reproaches Ellen” (24). But when Archer and Ellen officially get engaged, May is “heroically generous & is among the first to bring her good wishes to her cousin” (24). Archer then pressures Ellen into a quick marriage, but once Ellen realizes that she’ll be stuck in the conventions of New York high society for the rest of her life “her whole soul recoils” (24). They separate, Ellen returns to Europe, and they see each other “occasionally” (24). At the end of all of it, May has married someone else, Ellen is “very poor & very lonely, but has a real life” and “[Archer] returns to live with his mother & sister [&] nothing ever happens to him again” (24).

Even though these endings were not ultimately chosen, the possibilities of using them tell us a lot about these characters. Archer would never be able to actually be with Ellen in any scenario, as Wharton shows how his conventionality will always contrast too much with her free spirit. If they ran away together, it would not last, and they would come out the other side disliking each other. May would be in something of the same situation—married to a man who does not love her—but might be happier in not knowing the truth. If Archer got to live what he considered his “ideal” situation and he and Ellen got married, she would end up poor and lonely and Archer would be completely alone. May, who has fully escaped from a life with Archer, has gotten to marry someone else. The woman who Archer chooses to marry ends up with a worse fate than the woman who doesn’t, a clear indicator of Archer’s inability to carry out a relationship.

Examining the differences between these endings and the real one is not only useful for the purposes of understanding the characters, it also makes it clear that the



ending that Wharton chose is the perfect reflection of the characters. In her book, “The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton,” Carol Wershoven points out:

It is inevitable that [Archer] will abandon Ellen and choose May [...] Ellen cannot fit into Archer’s world; he can only imagine her as a fantasy woman, someone he could have had if circumstances had been different. In fact, Archer could make this fantasy into reality, he could break his engagement to May, but the key to Archer’s nature is given in the first pages of the novel: ““thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization.”” (85)

Through these alternate endings, we can see that there is no world in which Archer can actually be with Ellen, and the ultimate ending shows that he is too stunted and afraid to even try. Despite the fact that Archer sees May as trapping him, she has saved him from a life where he couldn’t truly survive, where he would end up deeply unhappy. Ellen would never fit in his life, and in every ending, ends up back in Europe. Archer has damaged her in all of them, but she is able to live a real life away from him. The true tragedy of the novel lies with May, a woman who could have had a happy life had she escaped Archer.

In the end, the women in Archer’s life are the ones who pay for his mistakes. Ellen comes out of the other side of her relationship with Archer in an almost certainly better position than May, although we are never quite able to see what became of her. But Ellen’s expulsion from New York society and ending of her relationship with Archer has moved her to live out the rest of her life in Europe, an environment which is far less toxic than the one in New York. She has also escaped Archer, a man who would definitely make her unhappy. However, she hasn’t escaped unscathed. Archer brought extreme

chaos to her life in New York, breaking the bonds she had with her family and encouraging her to engage in scandalous behavior, something that she explicitly wanted to avoid. He pushed her away from the comfort that she desperately wanted, instead choosing to take advantage of her neediness, desire for male protection, and yearning for love. By discouraging her to get a divorce, he took away her freedom to find love in a more legitimate and lawful way and kept her under his control. While she is an active participant in their affair, which is morally dubious at best, it's important to note that the dynamic has largely been designed by Archer. He set up their current positions with his poor decisions and manipulations, and did everything he could to remove her agency. Ellen is able to flee back to Europe in the end and establish a life, which is certainly a victory. But Archer ends up being yet another man who tried to dominate and constrain Ellen for his own purposes, undoubtedly leaving her with another layer of pain.

May is easily the person who suffers the most because of Archer. She loses any real chance of a good marriage because Archer felt entitled to use her as an object in his false Romantic narrative. He constantly describes himself with self-pity once they're married, even though he's simply dealing with the consequences of his own actions. May is suffering far more than he is, stuck in a loveless marriage and trapped in "an existence of dullness and emptiness" and suffers through it without complaint (87). She learns to live with the consequences of Archer's actions in a way that he never seems to. At one point, Archer tells himself, "whatever happened, he knew, [May] would always be loyal, gallant and unresentful; and that pledged him to the practice of the same virtues" (Wharton 163). He's correct on one part—May does exhibit this behavior, even if he never does. May can never leave this marriage, or let him leave her, otherwise she will be

subject to scandal and extreme humiliation and forced to live at the corners of society. Archer places her in a position where she has to fight for survival and needs to constantly manipulate him out of ways to see Ellen. She will do anything to stop her from leaving him, because if she doesn't, she will be ruined.

McDowell points out that by the end of the novel, May has “borne three children and died after twenty-five years of marriage in which she was ‘generous, faithful, unwearied’” (93). May is even thankful to Archer for staying with her, commenting to her son on her deathbed that Archer had “‘given up the thing [he had] most wanted’” (Wharton 296). Archer, on the other hand, was resentful, angry, and cruel to May. She ends up living a kind of half-life, where she is cut off from the truths of the world and her family. After the time skip, Archer describes how:

[May’s] incapacity to recognize change made her children conceal their views from her; as Archer concealed his; there had been, from the first, a joint pretense of sameness, a kind of innocent family hypocrisy, in which father and children had unconsciously collaborated. And she had died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own. (289)

Archer even taught his children to join in on a kind of ostracization of May, creating a home life where she was stuck in a psychological web of lies by her entire family. He justifies this under the idea that he is protecting his silly, ignorant wife—a woman who thought her household was “loving and harmonious” and that the world was, in blanket terms, a good place. But as Wershoven puts it, “she had [actually] been spared little

disillusionment and had become a kind of tolerated burden to her whole family, a child to her own children” (90). It’s a dark fate, and it’s all because of Archer.

Archer is clearly a man who has no regard for women’s lives other than how they can serve his purposes. He is obsessed with creating a narrative for himself, and he has no problem wrecking the lives of women to do so. From the very beginning, Archer’s egocentric temperament and constant justifications allow him to treat others around him without a second thought, always putting himself first. Archer is not unique, though, and he was clearly socialized into being the person that he is. We see how he is elevated above women from the very beginning of his life, automatically allowed to take up a large amount of space in his home as his female family members squeeze into smaller rooms. The men around him cheat on their wives with impunity, as it is the normal thing to do in their society. Archer is an extremely conventional man, and not a particularly unique thinker. He cannot exist outside of New York society, but he likes to imagine he can due to the books, art, and culture that he reveres. Archer wants to be a hero of a Romantic novel, but does not truly have the substance or the strength of character to do so. So, he instead creates a fantasy narrative to put on his conventional actions, getting to live in both worlds at the expense of the women around him. Under the guise of his Romantic novel, Archer is the wounded and infallible protagonist, trapped by a cruel wife and yearning for a noble love—but none of that is actually based in reality. In real life, he’s more akin to Lawrence Lefferts, a slimy man who runs around cheating on his loyal wife. In the end, Archer is just another mediocre man who reflects his patriarchal and misogynistic society, with his life built on entitlement and easy dehumanization of women. As Goodman puts it, in many ways “Wharton’s real target is not Archer[.] It is

the society that insists on treating its women as children even after marriage has supposedly plunged them into the real business of living” (99).

As a novel about very rich, very white society people written at the turn of the 19th century, *The Age of Innocence* might not initially stand out as a particularly relevant feminist text. However, Archer makes this novel extremely topical. Standing alone as a character, Archer would not feel particularly special—as Sarah Blackwood aptly puts it in the introduction to the novel, Archer “is one of a long line of Men Who Explain Things to us” (xxv). But with the narration that allows the reader to look at the way he thinks on a closer level, we are given a rare insight into male fantasies and the way that men see women. Archer acts as an extremely destructive force in the lives of the women around him because of the mixture of his ego, his fantasies, and his patriarchal power. In his mind, Ellen and May are reduced to flat roles and thus are consistently treated less like humans and more like playthings. This is not a unique dynamic by any means. These all these traits are still common in men, and the men with these traits will still wreak havoc on women. Archer’s thoughts and behaviors are perfect examples of the false narratives that men tell themselves about their lives and the justifications of their behavior towards women. While Archer can rationalize away all of his actions, not even his fantasies can hide his entitlement and deep ties to patriarchal convention. Archer might play at being a Romantic hero, but in the end, he is nothing more than another mediocre misogynist.

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