

An Interpretation of the Love Tragedy in *The Age of Innocence* from the Perspective of the Topographical Level

Mingyu MAO^a, Jing YAN^{b*, a}

^bjyan@tnstate.edu

^aSchool of Foreign Studies, Nanjing Forestry University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210037, China.

^bCollege of Engineering, Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN, 37027, USA. *Corresponding Author

Abstract

Based on the topographical level of Gabriel Zoran in *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative*, this paper regards the protagonists' love tragedy as the research subject and content analysis is the main research method. Through the analysis of the content of the novel, the paper is divided into several specific spaces from the topographical level to study the love tragedy of the protagonists. Space presents multidimensional attributes and assumes a clearer narrative context than time. Therefore, from the perspective of the topographical level, it can also be a window to understand the novel and the social situation of the United States at that time. The spatial images of Old New York and surrounding cities in the novel are no longer simply topographical level icons in the fictional world of the text, but participate in and promote the development of the love tragedy of the protagonists. Through the examination of topographical level, this paper uncovers the underlying reasons behind the love tragedy in the novel. The topographical level become metaphors for societal norms, individual desires, and the conflict between tradition and personal freedom. In sum, this paper demonstrates that a topographical level enriches our understanding of the love tragedy within the novel, making it a crucial dimension of analysis for Wharton's masterpiece. And it can provide some new ideas and perspectives for readers to understand the novel more deeply and also enrich the research of contemporary literary works from the topographical level.

Keywords: Edith Wharton; love tragedy; *The Age of Innocence*; topographical level

1. Introduction

Edith Wharton was one of the best female American novelists at the turn of the 20th century. She was born in the upper class of New York. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her representative work, *The Age of Innocence* and she was the first female writer to win the honor of this reputation. The turn of the 20th century is the transformation period of American society. Living in such a transforming era, Wharton's growth experience and creation process have been marked with a profound imprint of the times. As a female writer in the 50 years after the American Civil War, Wharton used her keen observation to reveal the spirit of Old New York and the pulse of the times, which had a great impact on people's lives and values. She describes women's personal pursuits and emotional entanglements in the male-dominated upper classes society, especially women's dilemma between traditional marriage and personal freedom, with delicate brushstrokes and keen observations. *The Age of Innocence* not only presents different living conditions of the characters, but also expresses Wharton's deep humanistic concern for individuals and society.

The Age of Innocence takes the upper class of Old New York as the background, and thoroughly portrays the oppression of individuals caused by the unique social customs of Old New York. It reveals that in the face

of the powerful machine of Old New York, where those people fear scandal more than disease, and any behavior that violates its norms eventually leads to self-destruction. It eventually leads to the tragic love affair between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska.

The space theory used in this paper is developed after a long time of evolution and perfection. Traditional space has long been seen as a tangible, real, and stable geometrical object. Many philosophers examine the space problem in terms of the conventional understanding of space. Modernist novelists express their objects as a whole, and the unity of their objects exists not in time relations, but in space relations. It is this unified spatial relationship that leads to the occurrence of spatial forms. American scholar Joseph Frank systematically put forward the theory of spatial form of novel for the first time, pointing out that the so-called spatial form is the corresponding literary supplement to the development of plastic arts. He provides a new theoretical model for modern novel theory from the two aspects of creation and acceptance of spatial form, and opened a theoretical precedent for the spatial “turn” of modern novel. Michel Foucault asserts, “Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, and the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic”. However, the idea of space has altered and advanced quickly with the growth of modern society and industry. The *Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre is released in 1974. He questions conventional notions of space. As one of the most widely influential views on space, his theory offers readers a very different perspective on the universe.

Although Frank has made pioneering contributions to the spatial narrative theory, Gabriel Zoran’s work *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative* has the most in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the spatial structure of narrative texts. In the vertical dimension, he proposed three levels of spatial representation in narrative (Gabriel Zoran, 1984): topographical level, which refers to space as a static entity; chronotropic level, namely, the spatial structure of events or actions and textual level, which is the spatial organization of symbolic text. Zoran’s narrative space theory is by far the most practical and highly theoretical model. His discussion of space is based on the fictional world of text and emphasizes that space is a construction process in which readers actively participate.

At the same time, for the deeper level of literary research, in order to improve the ability of college students to independently analyze the content of literature books, novel and flexible teaching modes are of great significance and inspiration to higher education (Yan et al, 2018; Yan & Howard, 2019; Zheng et al, 2019; Yan et al, 2019; Ding & Yan, 2023). Yan’s articles (Yan & Sun, 2022; Yan & Li, 2023; Yan et al(a), 2023; Yan et al(b), 2023) are of great inspiration for this paper to interpret the protagonists’ love tragedy from the perspective of topographic space. Therefore, this paper comprehensively and thoroughly analyzes how the topographical level significantly affects the love tragedy of the protagonists. This paper can provide some fresh insights and new viewpoints for readers to fully comprehend the novel through the analysis of the protagonists’ love tragedy on the topographical level and can also enrich the research of contemporary literary works in the topographical level.

2. Old New York

Edith Wharton’s New York is a flowing feast full of rules and etiquette. The aristocrats in the upper class of New York are still the puppets of this gorgeous city, bound by rules and traditions. If someone breaks them, they will be ostracized by the society and spiritually isolated.

In *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin sums up Old New York as follows: “It is a lifeless social class, where everyone is ultra-conservative, deeply serious, afraid to speak out, far from scandal and innovation. The atmosphere here is stifled, not conducive to intellectual and cultural development, and even the mere entertainment becomes a mere formality (Alfred Kazin, 1942).” Wharton’s particular upbringing and familiarity with the upper classes of Boston and New York makes her uniquely qualified in the writing of

American local literature, and she creates a series of novels set in New England and New York. Wharton's complex affection for New York is both a source of nourishment and all her emotions, especially after the First World War, when New York becomes a place of refuge for her lost spirit. In her work, Wharton painstakingly portrays the realities of Old New York society in the 1870s. She focuses on the feminine and explores the fate and status of women in the class in which she lives from a unique perspective, shedding light on their plight in terms of social status and the institution of marriage. Unfortunately, Wharton herself belongs to the old gentry of the upper class, so she always had a feeling of regret when she attacks the snobbery and corruption of the society. But on the other hand, the evils of New York's upper class are an abomination to her, and in *The Age of Innocence* she still deeply reveals the hypocrisy of Old New York and the social inhibitions on women's development: "The people of Old New York fears scandal more than disease" (Edith Wharton, 1942), but she focuses more on emphasizing women's obligations and the virtue of taking the overall situation into consideration. This is still in line with Wharton's consistent creative philosophy: emphasis on order, pay attention to the moral code of human behavior constraints. In a sense, *The Age of Innocence* is the fullest reflection of Wharton's writing philosophy.

Newland Archer had been brought up in "Old New York" society, the standard gentleman it produced, and he had a deep insight into the narrowness, hypocrisy, ignorance, and conservatism of New York society. Although he was well versed in the customs and fashions of Old New York society, the power of the individual could not compete with the powerful machine of society, so he was assigned to the role he must play in life. He longed for freedom, happiness, and to live an equal and harmonious life with the woman he loved. However, the reality was cruel to him. The conventions of New York society did not allow him to pursue Ellen, who had escaped from Europe, as it would lead to a tarnished reputation for him and his family. In order to protect his family's interests and adhere to the tradition, Archer was left to struggle with pain and contradictions.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen said that she was sure she was dead and buried, and that this dear old place was heaven. Newland Archer thought this was an even more disrespectful way of describing New York society. The multiple topographical level of Old New York, in the work, no longer serve as a backdrop and foil to the love tragedy, but as a separate dimension that develops alongside the plot of the narrative. It has an irreplaceable role in the progression and thematic deepening of Archer and Ellen's love tragedy.

2.1. *The Fifth Street*

The Fifth Street was functionally both exclusive and public, public because a street was supposed to be tolerant, a place where anyone could move freely in and out. In Old New York, however, the Fifth Street was branded with ideology. Mrs Lovell Mingott immediately asked the coachman to take her home when she met the notorious Fanny Lynn on the Fifth Street, which showed the exclusivity of the Fifth Street.

The Fifth Street was the place where Wharton actually lived, her childhood home was located in this most important location, and Wharton had written about it many times in her works. In *The House of Mirth*, the bustling Fifth Street is where Lily struggled to live, and her transition from Fifth Street to the dilapidated Sixth Street residence was also a manifestation of her marginalization. In *New Year's Day*, years later, the spinsters were still talking about the dirty relationship between married Lizzie Hazledean and Henry Priest, who used to meet at the Fifth Street hotel. As the Fifth Street of the upper class, Lizzie's extramarital affair was such an ethical challenge that years later, Fifth Street and Hazledean were remembered only for their moral blemishes.

The Fifth Street remained a topographical level that cannot be ignored in *The Age of Innocence* because of its openness and also as a place to keep an eye on people who go against convention. When Ellen and the

disreputable Beaufort openly stroll down the Fifth Street, this caused an uproar among the upper classes, and thus set the stage for their later expulsion of Ellen.

In Wharton's works, the Fifth Street was also a dramatic place, where people can peek into the secrets of others. The Fifth Street was not only a platform for social diversity, but also for sex scandal hidden in the darkness. It was only under the cover of darkness that Beaufort and Fanny Lynn's affair can be glimpsed for the reader. At the same time, this disorderly and fortuitous nature of the street is quietly changing the fate of the characters. The evening encounter between Ellen and Newland in the Fifth Street was met by two young men, who were tacitly walking away from it. This hypocrisy of the upper class was revealed by Newland's remark, "It was a principle of masculine solidarity which he himself had always practiced, though at the moment he was sickened by their acquiescence (Edith Wharton, 1942)." It was also indicative of Newland's inner rebelliousness against the Old New York society, where there were no secrets, and which foretold that their meeting in the Fifth Street would be the tabloid fodder of the upper class. The Fifth Street was a place of corruption and depravity from which no one can escape. Consequently, Ellen and Newland's love was destined to be tragic.

2.2. Ellen's Dwelling

A house is often a good place to learn about a person's personality and values. In Old New York, a house was not merely a place where people lived, but it also revealed the social and economic status of its owner. It referred to the owner's spiritual tastes and values. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton gave us a vivid and detailed description of the domestic space in Old New York. As one of the most important physical spaces, Ellen's Dwelling is not merely the narrative environment and space chosen by the narrator, but also the basis for the structure of the spatial narrative. In the novel, the main narrator was Newland Archer, who described Ellen's living space in terms of "Madame Olenska's own dwelling", rather than a house or home. This is because a house is a building for a person to live in, usually a family, while a home is a flat where one lives, especially with one's family, but a dwelling is a flat where one lives. Ellen's dwelling was very different from other upper-class people. It was located in West 23rd Street and was not flashy in appearance. Newland Archer lived in an affluent residential area. However, Ellen's dwelling was located at the end of the West 23rd Street. When Newland Archer first saw the street, he thought it was a meanly street. Ellen's dwelling was just like the other houses on this poor street.

In this area, her neighbors were all considered to be the lower classes of Old New York society. In fact, this area could be described as a slum. In the novel, one of her neighbors, Winsett, said that it was incredible that a rich and noble countess could live here (Edith Wharton, 1942). So it was clear to see that Ellen was not a traditional woman. Moreover, Ellen's dwelling represents her quest for independence and freedom. This is why Newland Archer often visited her dwelling and was completely fascinated by her.

When Newland was invited to visit Ellen for the first time, he was captivated by the exotic atmosphere of her room. On entering her room, he found it very different from any he had ever known before, as she had brought with her from Europe some belongings such as a few slender dark wood tables, a delicate little Greek bronze, a stretch of red damask and a few Italian-style paintings in old frames. Newland began to have a good impression of Ellen instead of being irritated with her "poor taste" at the opera house. Later, Ellen returned and communicated with Newland for a long time, and in the process, Newland discovered that she was different. It was Ellen's exotic decorations and insightful comments about Old New York that inspired Newland to have a nice impression on her, prompting him to embark on a journey of self-realization. After leaving Ellen's dwelling, Newland anonymously send her a bouquet of yellow roses which symbolized cherished blessings as well as of lost love.

Newland was not yet fully aware of the resistance to the Old New York society, nor even of the attachment he was nurturing for Ellen. So when he came to Ellen's dwelling for the second time to persuade her to abandon her divorce from her husband, Count Olenska, he took the position of the whole family, lest she should bring an unpleasant scandal to the whole Mingotts and the Wellands family. Especially when Ellen insisted on her own freedom, Newland told her that the individual was almost always sacrificed for the so-called collective interest. It was a sign that Newland grew up in the thrall of the rules and regulations of New York upper class. He chose to abide by these unshakable rules rather than break them in his actions. Ellen was willing to break free from the confines of traditional society and wanted to choose a special place away from the wealthy families of the upper class. In this special place, she could be away from the endless strife and the suspicion and contempt of others. Her dwelling could reflect her quest for happiness, freedom, courage and independence.

When Newland was ready to muster the courage to confess his love to Ellen on his third visit, he succumbed to the burden of duty and honor when May's telegram stated that she had agreed to bring forward their wedding. As can be seen, the conflict between ideals and reality forms the bulk of this love tragedy. Constantly tormented by conflicting desires, Newland wanted to escape the barriers of the world, but was powerless against the powerful machine of Old New York.

Ellen was a romantic, attractive and independent woman who defied so-called tradition and status from the perspective of her dwelling. At the end of the novel, Ellen left New York in search of her freedom. Ellen never stopped fulfilling herself and becoming a "new woman", she played a great pioneering and symbolic role in realizing her dreams and changing the values of Old New York. She did not surrender to social power, old values and conservative order. She was always full of courage. Namely, she was a true rebel of this patriarchal society. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen's dwelling was described in several chapters. The scene was closely connected with time and events and integrates into an organism. The entire experience of Ellen's personality was condensed into a depiction of a dwelling, from which the entire history of her life, her unruly past, her freedom-seeking present, and her foreseeable future can be seen. The dwelling played an important role in the development of the storyline. Ellen's dwelling, as a hotbed of affection between Ellen and Newland, had shaped the love course of them to some extent, and foreshadowed their love tragedy.

2.3. May's Brougham

May's Brougham was one of the important transportation vehicles in this novel. May's Brougham, as a space with an omen of fate, had an ironic meaning. It was Newland's wife, May, who owned the Brougham in which Ellen and him seldom met in private; In people's daily life, transportation vehicle played an important role in the old group at that time, and it appeared constantly in the text as an image, owning a Brougham independently symbolized certain social status, and it also served as a tool to identify characters, especially in an era when almost all upper-class people travelled by it. May's dark blue Brougham was a symbol of her noble status, and the fact that she used to drive her brougham, reins in hand, with Newland sitting at her side, showed that the person who owned the brougham was in some way in control, as well as in love.

Throughout the novel, May's Brougham was like an invisible bond that connected her to Newland. May always let Newland use her four-wheeled Brougham to pick up Ellen. From this point of view, May could be considered very clever and cunning. In May's Brougham, Ellen and Newland felt uncomfortable when they tried to do something out of place. In a way, the carriage was May's embodiment. May used the Brougham to influence Newland at all times, making him afraid to do anything other than what is morally right.

There was a great irony that the Brougham was privately-owned by May and at the same time as a topographical level for the development of Ellen and Newland's love. While waiting for Ellen, Newland imagined in his mind a scene in which he met Ellen, they would be together in a stable Brougham, moving

toward the dream of his heart. The real scene, however, is one in which the Brougham "pushed its way out of the chaos of the station and they sputtered down the slippery slope towards the docks, worried by rattling coal wagons, frightened horses, messy expresses, and an ethereal car"(Edith Wharton, 1942), a reality that contrasted sharply with Newland's imagination, and the image of the ethereal car itself had some fate enlightenment, which implied the doomed love and separation of Newland and Ellen. As the topographical level where the two protagonists met in *The Age of Innocence*, its constantly moving nature also implied their unintelligible love destiny. Meanwhile, in this scene, their conversation, especially Newland's words, had a kind of utopian color, and their love was just an illusory dream.

The cramped nature of May's Brougham allowed for Ellen and Newland's close contact, and desire made them lost and delirious and then they kissed each other, but their love was only expressed briefly under the cover of darkness, and when a light suddenly shined through the window, they fell back into silence. But it was only in this brief space of individual freedom that Newland was given the impulse to elope with Ellen. But the reality was, as Ellen had said, that such a place did not exist, and that if they eloped, the place they reached would only become more sordid as well as more depraved. The disagreement between them in May's Brougham also foreshadowed their tragic love destiny.

2.4. The Art Museum

The Art Museum was another topographical level where Newland and Ellen have their secret rendezvous. It can be seen from the description of The Art Museum in the novel that this was a place neglected by the mainstream society at present. As upper-class people who attracted popular attention, they can only have a chance to meet each other briefly in this marginal place. Indeed, it was not only the last place where they had a secret rendezvous, but also the last place where Newland bravely fought for their love, even though he failed to realize his dream of eloping with Ellen. Moreover, in The Art Museum, the irreconcilable conflict between Newland and Ellen was fully exposed, which meant that their love was doomed to be a tragedy.

The Art Museum was also known as The Metropolitan Museum. There were a large number of small broken objects, such as almost illegible household utensils and ornaments. The objects that had been forgotten by time caught their attention. The objects were the necessities of life, but in the rolling of history, only the debris remained. Indeed, Newland and Ellen's love had experienced so many setbacks that it was like the broken objects that can only be enjoyed in the glass cabinets by people and lose its original value once taken out.

In fact, Newland had been tormented by this conflicting desire, especially when he arranged to meet Ellen again at The Art Museum outside the Beaufort home. He looked after her, his heart full of contradictions. At the same time, in the process of their communication in The Art Museum, they were constantly interrupted by extraneous people from the outside world, suggesting that their love was constantly influenced by outsiders and that the journey of love was not a smooth one.

On the surface, Wharton described the very limited time that Newland and Ellen spent with each other at The Art Museum, but in reality, she gave the reader a hint that their love was as easily broken as the antiques that, although they seemed useful in the past, were easily forgotten in the corner of an empty room. When Ellen sensed Newland's desire to have sex with her, she hesitated because she didn't want to hurt someone who had been good to her, and if she did agree to do something like that, she would have to leave Old New York and return to her unfaithful husband. And since Newland could neither cross that forbidden line between himself and Ellen, nor could he bear the thought of Ellen returning to her husband, there was no perfect solution to the irreconcilable conflict between them. It was not surprising that their sincere and pure love eventually turned into a tragedy. The existence of The Art Museum as a topographical level actually paved the way for the disillusionment of Newland and Ellen's love.

3. Skuytercliff

Skuytercliff, where Newland and Ellen met privately after leaving New York, was not far from New York. The place itself had no significance as an urban space, but it was the site of Van der Luydens' magnificent Italian villa, and in the perception of the New York upper classes, all of Skuytercliff was equivalent to this villa. With a noble determination to save Ellen, the Van der Luydens invited her to spend the weekend in the Italian villa. Newland was particularly keen for Ellen to be there with him. This place was also the symbol of passion climax of Newland and Ellen.

3.1. An Italian Villa

The Italian Villa was as lifeless and dreary as its owner, Van der Luyden. The Italian Villa was rather gloomy, and even in summer it was bleak, dreary and scary. But the Stone House of the old patroon, however, was a place full of warmth. The juxtaposition of this cozy Stone House with the solitude of Van der Luyden's Italian Villa had serious implications, suggesting that Newland and Ellen were destined to be subjected to the supervision of the outside world even in their brief moments of warmth together.

In addition, as a historical heritage, the owner of the Stone House was Van der Luyden. This small place was in sharp contrast to its owner's majestic Italian Villa, and the difference in importance can be seen from the position of the two.

3.2. The Stone House of the Old Patroon

Wharton sketched the location of Stone House, a four-bedroom Stone House in a valley in Skuytercliff, adjacent to Van der Luyden's Italian Villa on the site. The significance of the Stone House to Van der Luyden was not so much in its residential value, but in the historical magic power endowed by Stone House itself, which is a sacred place to preserve the long history. In an Old New York that valued history and pedigree, possession of the Stone House was an unassailable symbol of Van der Luyden's status.

The Stone House was built by Dutch colonists in 1612, indicating that it was treated historically and aesthetically by its owners, and served as the focal point of the passion climax of their love affair. It described how the sweet little stone house suddenly appeared, as if conjured up by a magician to greet them. This enclosed, small and cozy room was undoubtedly a huge paradise for Newland and Ellen, a place that transcended the reality of space. The privacy and inclusion of this house allowed Newland and Ellen to return to the primordial temptations of affection.

The light of the great fire shone through the house, making the gloomy house seem warm and cozy. There was no one else in the house but Newland and Ellen. Ellen bravely expressed her thoughts and love to Newland, and she even put her arm around Newland's waist from behind. So Ellen was a woman who dared to love and hate. The Stone House provided Ellen with a place to show her true feelings. She ignored the red tape and just wanted to live a happy and free life. So she was indeed a "new woman". Inside the house, Ellen and Newland's conversation was full of a tacit understanding. However, the romantic existence of the house, and the brief encounter between them in it as a temporary illusion, also drove the tragic course of their love affair.

4. Boston

Boston was the other city Newland and Ellen spent time with in private, apart from Skuytercliff, and it was not far from New York, but it was as far as Newland and Ellen could go together. In addition, the reality of

Boston was worse than that of New York, the streets adjacent to the station smelled of beer, coffee and rotting fruit, and the casually dressed residents walked through them with the affectionate indulgence of passengers heading for the bathroom in the aisles. The people who lived in this city were as conservative as those in the upper classes of New York or even more conservative, and everyone had such a similar face and mental state. Here, the boat and the small hotel provide a brief reunion away from the real world, where they experienced the freedom, happiness and emptiness of each other's company.

Wharton knows that it is difficult for Newland and Ellen to get a chance to be alone in the heavily guarded Old New York, so in order to promote the development of their relationship, she has to arrange their encounter in a suitable space, which shows the uniqueness and independence of the topographical level.

4.1. The Boat

The boat, like the Brougham, this nature of the motion gave Newland and Ellen a kind of psychological escape. "Boat" always means turbulence and wandering, but it also means spiritual liberation, and this freedom gave Newland a false illusion that Ellen and he were fleeing to a faraway place, a sense that they were sailing and never return.

In addition, the landscape around the boat contrasted with the messy, dreary reality of Boston on shore. In this temporary space of freedom, Newland's mind went into turmoil. He subconsciously dreamed of leaving New York with Ellen, the place that bound him, but deeply understood the impossibility of reality, and this contradiction almost drove him into a void. If the freedom of the boat allowed Newland's mind to collide, Ellen was more at ease in the boat, not dazzled by the fleeting illusion but seeing it as a frank, enjoyable journey. Although she enjoyed their rare moments of complete privacy, Ellen needed to be more aware of the gap between reality and ideal. From the communication of them on the boat, Newland and Ellen's love affair was destined to be a tragedy that failed against reality.

4.2. A Tryst at the Parker House

In *The Age of Innocence*, the subsequent meeting at the Parker House brought them together to an agreement about their future. The Parker House's function should be that of a bustling place where people of all kinds gathered, but here, the Parker House was a public space that was temporarily transformed into a private space, symbolically becoming a rendezvous place for Newland and Ellen.

The private room opened on a long wooden veranda, a simple but cool room with a dining table covered with a rough lattice tablecloth, a bottle of pickles and a box of purple jam fruit tarts. The novel said it was immediately obvious that the small room was a sanctuary for lovers' trysts. Ellen's equanimity made Newland lose his worldly prejudices, and they enjoyed the moment to the fullest. The special atmosphere of the private room allowed them to open their hearts, and Newland's conflicting struggles, Ellen's restraint, and her high morals were revealed.

For Ellen, Newland was her true love, her emotional enlightenment, and her hope in a closed and conservative Old New York society. Newland was her soul saver. But her noble moral sense, from the inherent friendship between women, prevented her from breaking up May's marriage, and the best compromise for them was to live respective lives in the same world.

In contrast to Ellen's stamina, Newland revealed himself to be impulsive and weak, reflective yet easily consumed by his circumstances. The private room inspired his inner rebellion, but on the other hand his inability to get rid of the stereotypes of Old New York that shaped him.

On this topographical level, in the presence of Ellen, Newland often felt a sense of detachment, which showed the depth of the suppression of the human spirit by the social traditions of Old New York. At the

same time, the promise of living around each other was in contrast to the development of their complete separation later, and this psychological gap added tragic aesthetic effect.

5. Conclusion

Space is a theme that had been constantly written throughout the history of American literature, and it also witnesses the changes of American literature in different periods. “Space” has become a vivid metaphor for survival in the American psyche. Similarly, Edith Wharton has a literary space of her own, and “New York” has become one of the areas where she constantly wrote. While recalling and searching for the past, Wharton also uses it to express her thoughts on civilized freedom, social and personal values. *The Age of Innocence* is not only a love story about the protagonists, but a great work about the awakening of human freedom.

To sum up, this paper attempts to examine Wharton’s art from the perspective of topographical level, exploring how the topographical level led to the tragic love between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska.

The topographical level described in this paper plays a crucial role in the formation of love tragedy. The conflicts between public morality and ethics and the tragedy of love include Newland Archer’s submission to public morality and ethics, Ellen Olenska’s choice between reason and sensibility. Old New York as a topographical level, plays an important role in limiting the scope of the characters’ activities. With its unique regional and economic characteristics, it has a great impact on the formation and transformation of personal values. The Fifth Street, Ellen’s Dwelling, May’s Brougham, The Art Museum, Skuytercliff and Boston are closely intertwined with the tragedy of love. The Fifth Street reveals that people were locked into the Old New York social hierarchy; Newland is attracted by the “exotic” nature of Ellen’s house, and it is here that they expressed their love for each other; May’s Brougham provides a private space for their intimate contact, and Newland expresses a strong desire to elope with Ellen to the other world, but Ellen sensibly refuses his wish out of consideration for May and their family; Both Skuytercliff and Boston are the scene of a deep psychological struggle between Ellen and Newland over the reality and future of their love; The Art museum is the last private place for them to meet, which also reveals the fading of their love under the pressure of the cruel reality.

Based on the above analysis and interpretation, Newland Archer, as a member of the patriarchal society in Old New York, is a man who clung to traditional values. He wants to change his life for his dream and freedom, but he lacks the courage to get rid of the feudal influence. So in the end he was bound by social conventions. But Ellen is a brave and independent woman who ignores traditional values and norms for her feelings and dreams. As a “new woman”, she has been living with dreams, freedom and self-identity. This is not really an “age of innocence”, but an age of constraints and complexity. In this patriarchal society, everyone should challenge or rebel against tradition for the sake of self-identity, freedom, independence and a colorful life.

Through analysis of the protagonists’ love tragedy on the topographical level, this paper can provide some new ideas and new perspectives for readers to understand the novel deeply and can also enrich the research of contemporary literary works on the topographical level. But the research in this paper has some limitations as well. First and foremost, there are various spatial narrative theories, but this paper only adopts the topographical level elaborates by Gabriel Zoran in *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative*. In addition, this paper only studies the love tragedy between the two protagonists, ignoring that other forms of misfortune can also be explained through the theory. Therefore, future studies can also analyze other elements in the works from a more comprehensive perspective.

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