A NEW HISTORICAL APPROACH TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW WOMAN IN
EDITH WHARTON’S \textit{THE AGE OF INNOCENCE} AND ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S
\textit{A FAREWELL TO ARMS}

A Thesis

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Alison Rossetto Moore

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Department of English
Abstract

of

A NEW HISTORICAL APPROACH TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW WOMAN IN
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This thesis project is concerned with the construction of the New Woman in both
Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence and Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms.
The project seeks to inform of the significance of such constructions in relation to gender
roles in the settings within the novels as well as the settings in which the novels are
produced. Therefore, the project uses a theoretical framework of New Historicism in
order to reveal the complexities of the construction of the New Woman as represented by
the female characters in both Wharton and Hemingway’s novels. The project finds this
type of theoretical approach vital to the study and interpretation of literary texts and to
the study of literature as a discourse in which multiple meanings and constructions
constantly influenced and shaped by multiple social environments.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Susan Wanlass

_______________________
Date 

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To my first reader and mentor, Susan Wanlass. I cannot begin to thank you enough for your care and guidance with this project. Ultimately, it is your belief in me that has gotten me to where I am today. I am forever grateful to you for that alone.

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Walsh. You know why.

This project is dedicated to my family, who has seen me through my entire education.

To my dad: If not for your relentless determination to push me to be the best version of myself, I would not be where I am today. I love you and thank you.
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Chapter 1: Historical Contextualization for Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*

**Introduction**

Anne Wright’s *Literature of Crisis* states, “Crisis is expressed as the fracturing or dismantling of personal relations, of social institutions, of civilization” (3). Wright specifically relates this to post-World War I America. The social environment of the 1920s was greatly influenced by the aftermath of the war. Mass production and death became economic and social norms. Such dynamic shifts in this environment subsequently caused the redefining of people’s roles in society, specifically men and women’s expected roles. Each began to take from the other, thus breaking down and creating an exposure to the blending of gender roles like never before. Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* are both novels that deal with crisis in the form of “fracturing” traditional gender roles.

This type of “fracturing” is first seen in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton’s novel, while set in the 1870s, was published in 1920 post-World War I America and depicts the struggles found in society between old traditional values and new modernized society. Newland Archer is caught in this struggle as he realizes that he has a desire to exist within both societies although he can only truly exist in one. He desires both the traditional and the modern woman. For Newland, May Welland represents the romantic and ideal state of American society prior to war, whereas Ellen Olenska represents the modern state of society. However, in the end, Newland’s conflicted desires cause him to lose Ellen. The dismal effects of war have had a lasting
impact on society and how manners, gender roles, and relationships function within it. *The Age of Innocence* illustrates how the conflicts surrounding the construction of gender roles in the 1870s are still present in the construction of gender roles when the novel is published in 1920. However, the significance lies in examining this in a New Historical lens. In doing so, the interpretation of the text is given multiple perspectives. The year 1920 marked the beginning of a period of significant transition and challenge to the traditional construction of gender roles in American society. Thus, *The Age of Innocence*’s publication in 1920 works as a novel that presents the conflicts of a past era to a society in which those same gender conflicts exist, yet are beginning to be challenged. Additionally, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* takes place during World War I and is published in 1929; therefore, there are multiple time periods that illustrate the same struggles within the two novels: the setting of *The Age of Innocence* in the 1870s, its publication year of 1920, the setting of *A Farewell to Arms* during World War I, and its publication date of 1929.

In *The Age of Innocence*, both May and Ellen fall victim to this challenge to gender roles in their relationships with Newland. The gender conflicts that are present in the social setting of the novel are still present in 1920 when the novel is published; however, those traditional notions of gender are beginning to be challenged after the impact that World War I had on how men and women operate in society. The construction of May and Ellen’s character reinforce Wright’s idea in that both of their relationships with Newland “fracture” because they are all involved in this moment of crisis. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic and Catherine are exposed to the harsh realities of
war when thrust into in the environment of World War I Italy. Ultimately, it is the exposure to such an unforgiving and relentless environment that leads to the “fracturing” of their relationship and the challenging of traditional gender roles. Frederic is left alone to take on the unknown post-World War I society with its new morals and gender constructions. Just like Newland’s struggles with his relationships with May and Ellen, Frederic and Catherine’s romantic notions of what make up relationships and morals in society are no longer able to survive and sustain people in a post-World War I, modern society. Both novels are deeply interwoven in a period of immense social transformation in America. A New Historical lens looks for an examination into all of the environments in which both *The Age of Innocence* and *A Farewell to Arms* exist. It allows for further insight into what links together all of the time periods associated with both novels. By examining both novels in a New Historical framework, it illustrates the impact of one event’s ability to force the reconstruction of gender from that time on: World War I.

The inclusion of all of these time periods and the corresponding ways in which women’s roles are constructed allow a New Historian to engage in an in-depth examination of how gender roles are constructed during each time period, and how the challenges to such constructions transcend each era. Ultimately, it is the 1920s era in which these changes to gender roles become most apparent. This transformation comes to light most vividly in the aftermath of World War I. It is the female characters in these novels that reflect the impact of World War I on American society in the 1920s because it is they who challenge traditional gender roles and become the dominant force behind the sustainability of relationships. Both Wharton and Hemingway’s novels illustrate how gender roles are
challenged in the times in which the novels are written through the construction of their female characters and how these changes have a lasting impact on how relationships between the genders function in a post-war, modern society.

At first glance, the pairing of a Wharton and Hemingway novel may seem an odd connection of authors and texts. However, both Wharton’s and Hemingway’s texts share is that each consists of strong female characters who are constructed in ways that respond to the changing gender roles in early twentieth-century American culture. Wharton’s novel takes place in 1870s America, but is published in 1920. Therefore, it offers a unique commentary on the construction of gender roles during both the 1870s and the current state of that construction in 1920, two years after the end of World War I. *The Age of Innocence* speaks to the current population, exposing the contradictions and restrictions still placed on gender in 1920 despite the immense amount of social change demanded by the war. By examining the historical contexts of all time periods in which these novels take place, it is possible to also examine social influences that may otherwise be overlooked.

**The 1920s Society**

Frederick Lewis Allen’s text *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* offers a variety of insight into social and economic events that change the social environment of 1920s America. The 1920s represented a shift in gender roles from the Victorian to the more modern. Allen’s text discusses events such as women’s skirts becoming shorter, households become smaller, women going to work, smoking cigarettes, new expression of sexuality, and how such things relate to the construction of
the New Woman (76-105). The “New Woman” referred to the woman who was comfortable expressing her individuality. The construction of the New Woman extends over several decades, from the setting of *The Age of Innocence* in the 1870s to *A Farewell to Arms*’ publication in 1929. However, the New Woman of the 1920s made her own decisions and exhibited control over her own life in more substantial ways mainly because of the increasing acceptance of sexual expression brought about by the popularity of Freudian psychoanalytical theory. The New Woman was no longer limited to the role of mother and wife, and this shift allowed women to have more control over how they chose to live their lives. Such changes to gender roles are significantly seen in *The Age of Innocence* with the construction of its two main female characters, May and Ellen, and in *A Farewell to Arms*’ Catherine Barkley. Each female character works as a reflection of the struggles that come with these changes to “manners and morals” in a post-World War I era, and each ultimately shows how women are changing during the time and the effect that these changes have on women’s roles in relationships.

**Sex, Freud, and More Sex**

This revolution in manners and morals set forth by Allen is closely linked to the conversations and literatures that discussed the human psyche and explored human sexuality published in the early nineteenth century, particularly the works of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Allen writes,

Like all revolutions, this one was stimulated by foreign propaganda…Sigmund Freud had published his first book on psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century, and he and Jung had lectured to American psychologists as early as 1909,
but it was not until [after the war] that the Freudian gospel began to circulate to a marked extent among the American lay public. (85)

It is interesting that Allen notes how influential “foreign” concepts are in bringing about change to an environment since Freud’s studies did just that to American society. The post-war, industrialized economy had shifted women into closer interactions with men and subsequently created an entirely new social dynamic in the public sphere where men and women were no longer distinctly segregated.

Sexual instincts became the basis of explaining human behavior and its intrusion into open discussion in society marked a change for the construction of gender in terms of self-expression. Allen continues,

Sex, it appeared, was the central and pervasive force which moved mankind. Almost every human motive was attributed to it: if you were patriotic or liked the violin, you were in the grip of sex—in a sublimated form. The first requirement of mental health was to have an uninhibited sex life. If you would be well and happy, you must obey your libido. Such was the Freudian gospel that imbedded itself in the American mind. (85)

The 1920s marked an end to the Victorian era in which sexuality was definitely practiced, but not openly discussed and demonstrated; it remained behind closed doors. The addition of Freud’s psychoanalytical research and its acceptance into mainstream discourse simultaneously complicated gender roles as sex became an open topic of discussion that involved both men and women. The more conservative and Victorian voices and influences of the nineteenth-century were now forgotten and openly criticized
as ideas that belonged in the past: “New words and phrases began to be bandied about the
cocktail-tray…inferiority complex, sadism, masochism, Oedipus complex…clergymen
who preached about the virtue of self-control were reminded by outspoken critics that
self-control was out-of-date and really dangerous” (Allen 86). The inclusion and
acceptance of sex as a driving force for human behavior made it part of the common
discourse and a part of social interactions from which it had previously been ousted.

John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in
America also sheds light on Freud’s influence on American society:

Whatever subtlety or complexity his theories possessed took a backseat to the
concepts that infiltrated the middle-class imagination: the notion of infantile
sexuality, the drama of sexual conflict in the family, the case histories of female
patients who seemed to suffer from the denial of their sexual desires, the idea that
the sexual instinct permeated human life and might change the course of
civilization. Above all, Americans absorbed a version of Freudianism that
presented the sexual impulse as an insistent force demanding expression” (223).

The importance of sexual expression and the freedom to do so was no longer something
that could be denied by the American public. Freud’s studies offered an additional
explanation for and acceptance of human behavior. More specifically, his studies allowed
women to openly display sexuality because it started to become a healthy and expected
characteristic of the female gender.

Sexuality began to describe not only reasons for male behavior, but female
behavior as well. The addition of Freud’s work into the mainstream social setting of
1920s American society exposed a duality of gender roles previously unseen. John Forrester’s text *The Seduction of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, and Derrida* provides a deeper examination of Freud’s concepts and their influences on the 1920s. He discusses how Freud’s papers on “hysteria,” a term commonly associated with female behavior, consistently mentions how women “[are] always adding new complexities, new modes of displacement and identification to the structure of fantasy that underlines hysterical symptoms—their characteristic of multiple identification and in particular their near-universal bisexuality” (51). Hysteria, then, indicates what psychoanalysis reveals about gender roles: their interaction with and dependence on one another. Freud’s “bisexuality” is not in relation to women’s sexual interest in other women rather, it relates to women inherently possessing masculine and feminine qualities. One gender is not constructed in isolation from another. The ever-changing social environment subsequently impacts human behavior. Discussing sexuality and being allowed to be seen by society as sexual beings initiated a blurring of previously distinct gender roles.

Sexuality becoming an openly accepted characteristic of both male and female genders offered an investigation into how sexuality affected the construction of human identity. D’Emilio and Freedman note, “The modern regime of sexology was taking sex beyond a procreative framework, beyond, too, its role in fostering intimacy between husband and wife. In doing so, some writers emphasized the social character of sex… More commonly, theorists attributed to sexuality the power of individual self-definition” (233). Freedom of sexual expression allowed individualism to develop like never before. Men and women were now able to develop roles for themselves outside of biology and
domesticity. The absence of male presence in the household and workforce as an effect of World War I also contributed to women’s ability to develop identities outside of the home.

**Breaking Away from Domesticity**

The early part of the 1920s and the lingering aftermath of World War I marked the beginning of changes in women’s roles in American society. The first noticeable change to gender roles came to the domestic sphere. In his chapter “Revolution in Manners and Morals” Allen discusses “the effect of woman’s growing independence of the drudgeries of housekeeping…Much of what had once been housework was now either moving out of the home entirely or being simplified by machinery…Electric washing machines and electric irons were coming to the aid of those who still did their washing at home” (83). World War I forced advancements in technology and industry that ultimately created changes in the lives of Americans.

The transition to a much more industrialized society forced women out of their previous seclusion in the home and into the everyday workings of society:

The housewife was learning to telephone her shopping orders, to get clothes ready-made and spare herself the rigors of dress making, to buy a vacuum cleaner and emulate the lovely carefree girls in the advertisements who banished dust with such delicate fingers. Women were slowly becoming emancipated from routine to ‘live their own lives’. (Allen, 83)

This industrialization from the war inadvertently sent women out into the public sphere, a realm previously dominated by men and also allowed for sexual expression: “Labor for
wages allowed more and more men, and women, to detach themselves from a family-based economy and strike out on their own; the anonymous social relations of the metropolis gave them the freedom to pursue their sexual yearnings” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 227). With such new freedoms, women were able to explore their identities in entirely new lights. This ability to participate in the public sphere led to self-reflection and self-expression for women in ways previously kept behind closed doors: the freedom of sexuality.

Men and women were breaking down previous separations between the domestic spheres, resulting in changing family dynamics. The emergence of such sexual freedoms allowed contraceptives to infiltrate American society in the 1920s. Birth control meant men and women could have sexual encounters not for the sole purpose of reproduction: “These views implied an end to the delicacy, purity, and domesticity that characterized the nineteenth-century model of femininity. [Women’s] successors would leave the private sphere of the home to fill a place in the public world of work and politics, bringing that equality to affairs of the heart” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 229). Freud’s ideas surrounding sexuality as a driving force for human behavior sparked changes to various aspects of women’s lives and introduced new ways in which women were able to gain control of their own individuality. Birth control “signaled a profound shift in the sexual norms that had reigned supreme among the middle class for half a century… As birth control became more widely available and used, it also broadened the roles women might chose, as biology proved less and less to be destiny” (233). Motherhood and seclusion to the home were no longer the only options for women. They were beginning
to have a choice in the matter of what they wanted to become in life. The freedom to express themselves sexually, participate more equally in the public sphere, and exhibit behavior not typical of the nineteenth-century mother led to much more modernized gender roles.

Changes in Women’s Appearance and Dress

With women’s emergence from the domestic sphere and the new acceptance of sexuality, changes to their overall appearance and dress also began to shift from the Victorian image of limitless cloth and corsets that highlighted femininity. Prior to the 1920s, women’s appearance consisted of long hair with corresponding lengthy dresses. However, Freud’s impact on society in terms of sexuality now transferred into more arenas than simply discussion. Physical appearance, and femininity, began to mirror such freedom of expression. Allen writes, “With the short skirt went an extraordinary change in the weight and material amount of women’s clothing. The boyishly slender figure became the aim of every woman’s ambition…The flesh-colored stocking became as standard as the short skirt…women sought, too, the freedom of short hair” (90). It is interesting that the inclusion of women as participating members in the previously male-dominated public sphere merited such changes in terms of perception of femininity to reflect a more male image. Femininity was no longer defined in a voluptuous, Victorian sense. It now reflected male characteristics previously not associated with an expression of female sexuality: “During the early years of the decade the bobbed head…became increasingly frequent among young girls, chiefly on the ground of convenience…and for a brief period the hair was not only bobbed, but in most cases cropped close to the head
like a man’s” (91-92). The image of the “flapper girl” now became part of the dominant and accepted culture of the 1920s. It helped to redefine and combine the traditional conceptions of gender with the new, modernized ways of social behavior.

The Social Environment of *The Age of Innocence* and *A Farewell to Arms*

The traditional gender roles of the 1870s in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, the issues surrounding patriarchy, and the challenge of the modern woman complicate the ways in which relationships develop and are sustained in the novel. Since it is published in 1920, *The Age of Innocence* is able to look back and comment on how gender roles have been constructed over the last fifty years and examine how the same issues are still prevalent. In the novel, May Welland and Ellen Olenska appear to stand as the representations of the traditional and modern woman of early twentieth century America. However, a New Historical lens allows for the examination of multiple social influences that work to develop the female characters in Wharton’s novel. Considering the progression of the New Woman over the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, there is more evidence for how May and Ellen exhibit conflicting characteristics of gender. Neither May nor Ellen exist solely in the traditional or modern, and this reinforces how gender roles begin to change during this time. What is even more interesting is the connection of the female characters of May and Ellen in *The Age of Innocence* to the character of Catherine Barkley in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. All three female characters are constructed in ways that are a reflection of women’s changing roles at the turn of the twentieth-century. With the aftermath of World War I and the new reality of women exiting the domestic sphere, the traditional gender roles and separation
of genders into a different male and female sphere begins to breakdown. It is May and
Ellen, along with Catherine, who give significance to the equality and ability of women
in the sustainability of relationships in a post-World War I, modern era.

These same challenges to traditional gender roles are seen in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* with the construction of Catherine Barkley’s character. Frederick Lewis Allen’s text reveals the social changes taking place in post-World War I American society. In his chapter entitled “The Revolution in Manners and Morals,” he discusses the changing and evolving world of gender roles in post-WWI American society: “A whole generation had been infected by the eat-drink-and-be-merry-for-tomorrow-we-die spirit which accompanied the departure of the soldiers to the training camps and the fighting front” (81). This is true as seen through the crises that Frederic and Catherine encounter in *A Farewell to Arms*. Ultimately, Catherine takes the superior role in her relationship with Frederic by giving him the tools to go on in life and future relationships after she is gone. In addition, Allen’s chapter discusses how “The winning of the suffrage had its effect. It consolidated woman’s position as man’s equal” (83). This observation works to further support the new expansions in the construction of women’s role present in the post-World War I era. Therefore, a new historical lens allows further examination of the transcendence of the “fracturing” and “dismantling” of gender roles in the form of crisis, as Anne Wright implies. Again, this conflict arises as a direct result of World War I and its call for a new and modernized society.

During the fifty-year time span between the setting of *The Age of Innocence* and publishing of *A Farewell to Arms*, this conflict erupted about what types of women
society wanted: the more restricted traditional woman or the modern, independent New Woman. In her section on feminist criticism from *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson discusses traditional gender roles in society. She states, “Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (85). Men and women, then, must fit into these categories, or risk being ousted from society in general. Traditional gender roles also have certain implications for society. Tyson writes, “Patriarchy is thus, by definition, sexist, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men” (85). This definition helps to illustrate how the limitations placed on gender are incredibly unrealistic.

Society tells men and women that they must fit into these predetermined roles; however, what if there are men and women who exhibit characteristics of both genders? Tyson continues, “The whole idea that there are only two genders is based on the idea that there are only two sexes. However, researchers from a variety of fields have revealed that such is not the case: biological sex does not fit neatly into two separate, opposite categories” (112). Tyson points out what Freud’s studies allude to in the construction of gender as well. Freud’s examination of “hysteria” and “bisexuality” directly to Tyson’s distinction that the male and female gender to do not exist separately from one another, but that they take from one another. Freud and Tyson’s analyses are essential to understanding the conflicts that arise within both Wharton and Hemingway’s novels. In the society in which these female characters exist, traditional gender roles are highly
regarded. However, the aftermath of World War I forces a necessary change to traditional gender roles.
Chapter 2: New Historical Framework for *The Age of Innocence* and *A Farewell to Arms*

Given the complex social atmosphere of both *The Age of Innocence* and *A Farewell to Arms*, a New Historical approach to interpretation is necessary. New Historicism can be viewed as a direct response to the New Criticism that became popular in the middle of the twentieth-century. New Criticism theory focused on the study of a text by itself. New Critics believed that any and everything needed for an accurate interpretation of a text could be found solely within the text, leaving out any analysis of outside cultural factors. However, New Historicism argues for an interrogation of texts that greatly depends on the culture from which a given text emerges. The New Historicist is interested in what is happening in the social environment of the text, what influences the author has been exposed to, and how all of those factors that exist outside of the text work together to form an understanding of how and why a text works in the way that it does. More significantly, New Historicism seeks to include those factors typically left out of the mainstream discourses of a certain era. This type of literary lens is of particular importance to and interpretation both Wharton and Hemingway’s novels. It allows for an examination of multiple events and social factors that works their way into the interpretation and analysis of their texts, such as World War I and the many changes to women’s gender roles that were previously viewed in society as “taboo” and only discussed behind closed doors.

The use of a New Historical lens has important beginnings in the workings of psychoanalysis and understanding human behavior through sexuality and language. New
Historicism allows for the consideration of multiple conversations in addition to the mainstream discourse. The New Historicist believes there is no ultimate explanation for behaviors and actions during a certain time period. Taking a New Historical lens to a text offers an anti-New Critic interpretation of texts by looking outside of the text itself and into the culture in which it is produced. The same lens extends to Freud and Lacan’s studies with psychoanalysis, sexuality, and assigning meaning through language to human behavior. Their studies assist in the understandings of how and why gender roles began to change for women in 1920s American society.

Both Freud and Lacan’s ideas lend to concepts about interpreting texts in a New Historical frame. In John Forrester’s *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis* he mentions Lacan’s position on constructing meaning: “Gone is the time for understanding the moment to conclude, now’s the moment to conclude the time for understanding. Because otherwise this time will lose meaning” (97). This emphasizes the importance of understanding how meaning comes from multiple perspectives. Lacan stresses the significance of avoiding the attempt to comprehend meaning through a singular lens. A given moment can never be ultimately understood because any given moment draws from such a variety of influences based on why and how meaning is being constructed. Understanding how language works depends on an understanding of what is going on in the environment in which it is produced.

Taking this into consideration, then, shows the limits of a New Critical interpretation of a text. If the construction of language is based in multiple meanings, how then can the written language of a text be interpreted solely by itself? Forrester
continues, “Why is language most efficacious when it says one thing through saying another?” (141). Comprehending, understanding and contributing to the construction of language and meaning making relies heavily on the social construction of knowledge. Thus, including an examination of motivations behind human behavior proves essential to analyzing and interpreting a literary text. In addition, Lacan’s theories work to connect Freud’s concepts of psychoanalysis to Foucault’s concepts of New Historicism. Lacan’s studies are based in how human behavior is determined by how one constructs his or her own identity through meaning making and language. Moreover, Lacan emphasizes how language enriches meaning and the development of an individual’s identity of which gender is a part. Lacan’s ideas reinforce the need for taking multiple forms of language to create meaning, just as New Historicism lends an eye to the inclusion of non-mainstream discourses into exploring and understanding a text in a given experience and era in society.

Philosopher and historian Michel Foucault’s studies build from that of Freud and Lacan and, more significantly, contribute to the necessity of understanding writing through a social and historical lens. Forrester explains,

It was clear that Foucault’s archaeology as he began to call it, was an unrivaled, unprecedented attempt at organizing systems of knowledge in a historical account which respected both systemic coherence and explanatory force and depicted the profound transformations of such systems, transformations which might well turn around seemingly ‘surface’ events. (287)
Foucault discusses how a variety of factors in an environment contribute to how and why meaning is made and behavior is carried out. Making the connection from Freud and Lacan to Foucault incorporates more discussion of how important it is to examine what is happening in a particular time period. Using Foucault’s “archaeology” as an analytical tool helps to eliminate universal interpretations of language and written texts by emphasizing the need for the inclusion of multiple popular and underground discourses in the discussion of literature.

Forrester’s examination of Foucault’s archaeology and Lacan’s interpretations of the role of language lends further to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and the power that comes with ignoring the blending of how language is constructed in relation to gender. Foucault explains, “To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounces itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed. Do not appear if you do not want to disappear” (84).

Foucault’s study relates to Freud and Lacan on several levels. First, it emphasizes how those who have power are in power because they have learned how to control and manipulate language; thus, constructing a dominant discourse. Second, the power of controlling language allows for the dictation of interpretation in a given social environment and omits the possibility of other discourses contributing to such interpretations of language. However, both Freud and Lacan explain how gender and language do not exist separately from one another. Therefore, there is complication in
determining meaning from a dominant discourse. These contradictions in determining
meaning lay the foundation for reading and analyzing literature in a New Historical lens.

While Foucault’s concepts begin to lay a foundation for the importance of New
Historical interpretations of texts, Clifford Geertz’s essay “Thick Description: Toward an
Interpretive Theory of Culture” discusses what makes up the concept of culture and
cultural criticism. He indicates that he believes that cultural influence is a construct of
man’s own doing, and thus creates a web with numerous constructions and meanings.
However, he also emphasizes that culture is in fact something that is accessible to the
public and not restricted inside one’s own private thoughts. He further claims that it is
because culture is public, perceived by oneself, and by others that people conform their
behavior to ideas that exist within said culture. For Geertz, this is simply a matter of
acceptance. Furthermore, he emphasizes that culture is not public simply because it takes
place within and is exposed to society and its inhabitants, but he also claims that meaning
is public. It culture is public and meaning is public, then comprehension of such
meanings is also a public and social process.

Considering all of these elements of culture, Geertz then seeks to analyze, like
Foucault, how anthropological techniques can be useful to cultural criticism. He explains
how one main focus of anthropology is “the enlargement of the universe of the human
discourse” (14). It is this that leads to the needs for examining the customs present in
cultures more closely and not simply writing them off as coincidence. It is the ability to
see the context in which concepts and ideas are derived that allows for more
interpretations. Lastly, Geertz looks at theory and how culture fits in to reading literature:
“Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study…they are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems” (27). Geertz’ analysis helps to solidify the importance of the discourses that interact with a literary text during a specific time period, and further extends the researcher’s argument that analysis must look outside a text to find and create new interpretations and meanings that may have previously been overlooked.

Building on Geertz’s ideas, Stephen Greenblatt’s “Culture” discusses the important ways in which the concept of culture applies to reading literature. He examines how it is essential to look beyond authorial intent and the text in order to avoid limitations. He stresses that when authors begin to disappear, so do their texts. However, if readers look at how a text is influenced by its cultural surroundings and how the effect that a text has on the culture of its time, it allows the text to stay alive long after the author because of its constant interactions within society. He also emphasizes that, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to recreate the culture in which the text was produced. This type of examination leads to two things: an elevated level in comprehension of the literary work and an elevated level in comprehension of the culture that constructed the work. Geertz also illustrates how this works in Shakespeare and Dickens’ works by demonstrating how their works pull from various cultural elements in order to recreate the situation of the time. Another point he makes is that culture involves a method of exchange. On the one hand, he notes that culture operates on an exchange of commodities, but also through institutions acted out by people. The ways in which a culture’s traditions are carried out has a direct influence on the narratives produced
within the culture. He stresses that this allows writers to be catalysts for their cause in the sense that, through the language of a culture, texts can produce meanings that may be withheld if cultural influence is not examined. Lastly, Greenblatt uses the example of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to illustrate that cultural criticism is to examine the dominant power as well as the oppressed present in order to fully interpret and comprehend a text. Greenblatt elaborates on the importance of looking beyond a text and its author, and into the culture in which it exists. A text can survive long after its author if its effect on the culture in which it is produced is taken into consideration. Lastly, cultural criticism seeks to look at all groups of people and discourses present at a given time.

In the same ways that Freud and Lacan discuss the multitude of creating meaning and explaining human behavior, Louis Montrose’s “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture” calls attention to the shift in literary analysis from strictly theory-based to a more historical and cultural base because analytical terms were redefined. It is this transformation that has also lead to a change in the interpretation of the meaning behind “ideology.” In a theoretical sense, ideology refers to the “system of ideas, values, and beliefs common to any group” (585). However, a historical view changes ideology to “the processes by which social subjects are formed, re-formed, and enabled to perform” (585). Like Foucault’s approach to examining history archaeologically, New Historicists look beyond the individual psyche of a text’s characters and beyond the structure of the text, and into the social world in which the text is derived. Montrose mentions that the most common problem with this approach to literature is that is calls for a literary text or literature itself to be viewed and interpreted
as its own discourse within a society. However, he goes on to explain that New Historicists cannot alleviate such concerns that may present problems, but that this theoretical approach seeks to include how other discourses interact with literature as a discourse so that alternate meanings and interpretations can be included in the discussion.

Lastly, Eric Sundquist’s “Melville, Delany, and New World Slavery” reiterates the importance of understanding that an isolated situation is not universal. That is, there is not only one way to experience a situation for everyone. Further, he explains how it is critical to look into the many different influences that are present during a time and in doing so expose the marginalized discourses that are normally left out of historical study. The example that Sundquist uses is slavery. He particularly focuses on how experiences in slavery are varied across continents. He states, “The recognition that slavery was hemispheric and that its fullest literary representation as well as its fullest political critique required a view that embraced several cultures, several nations…In each case the contemporary racial crisis could be shown to derive from historical forces of great complexity and sweep…” (622). In addition to no one universal experience of slavery, the second focus of his essay is to also incorporate how the inclusion of marginalized discourses provokes action in such society. While a text is influenced by its cultural context, it also influences that same culture. Sundquist specifically examines Melville’s *Benito Cereno*.

This connection between how texts are influenced by their surrounding culture, but also how texts have influence on their surrounding cultures is of extreme importance to why texts should be read from a New Historical lens. Stephen Greenblatt writes,
“Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (More from Shakespeare, 5). Like Sundquist, Greenblatt emphasizes the importance of historical contextualization and analysis in order to avoid a limited interpretation of literary texts. A New Historical lens leads to a very important chain of signifiers relevant to the allusions and interpretations surrounding the construction of May Welland, Ellen Olenska, and Catherine Barkley’s characters in Wharton’s The Age of Innocence and Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms.
Chapter 3: A New Historical Lens to *The Age of Innocence*

The Social Environment of Edith Wharton

The importance of examining the social and historical settings of texts allows consideration of Wharton’s own experiences and how they offer insight into and reflection on the challenges to traditional gender roles during the 1920s. In Wharton’s autobiography *A Backwards Glance*, she offers several explanations of the perceptions of society during the time when she is living and writing, and also draws connections to such perceptions and the impact of World War I on the construction of gender. She writes, “For instance, social life, with us as in the rest of the world, with hardly perceptible changes, till the war abruptly tore down the old framework, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs” (6). Wharton recognized, as did many other writers of the era, the significant role that World War I played in forever changing and shaping new gender and social roles in American society when the novel was published in 1920.

Wharton is also able to connect this moment of impact to the shift from traditionally constructed gender roles in society to a modern one: “The really vital change is that in my youth, the Americans of the original states, who in moments of crisis still shaped the national point of view, were the heirs of an old tradition of European culture which the country has now totally rejected. This rejection has opened a gulf between those days and these” (7). Wharton’s own reflections mirror Allen’s descriptions of 1920s American society. Advancing technology, expansion of the public sphere, and freedom of sexual expression did just what Wharton describes, placing further separation
between the traditional gender roles of the past and the modernizing gender roles of the present.

Wharton’s perception of how gender roles were beginning to change and evolve is directly related to her own upbringing. She was able to see, firsthand, the shift in “manners and morals” that Allen discusses: “I believe their value lay in upholding two standards of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and ‘of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs…I well remember the horror excited by any irregularity in affairs, and the relentless social ostracism inflicted on the families of those who lapsed from professional or business integrity” (21-22). Having come from an aristocratic family herself, Wharton was able to incorporate her own experiences into her writings. The dynamic of upper class New York society in the novel reflects the struggle between the old and new generations and their respective values, as Wharton explains: “At any rate I should say that the qualities justifying the existence of our old society were social amenity and financial incorruptibility, and we have traveled far enough from both to begin to estimate their value…The weakness of the social structure of my parents’ day was a blind dread of innovation, and instinctive shrinking from responsibility” (22-23). According to Wharton, her parents’ generation feared change and placed immense value on tradition. Thus, the impact of World War I, and the industrialization of society and transition into modernity caused much anxiety throughout society. In addition, the struggles with morals and women’s places and roles in the home as well as in society present in the novel are closely related to Wharton’s own struggles: “…In old-established and powerful societies originality of character is smiled at, and even encouraged to assert
itself, but conformity is the bane of middle-class communities” (22-23). Wharton’s personal reflection gives further insight to the challenges to traditional gender roles that both May and Ellen encounter in *The Age of Innocence*.

In her book *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York*, Maureen Montgomery discusses the desire for women to be traditional and innocent in order to gain respect in society. She discusses how women’s behaviors were informed through etiquette manuals distributed in society. These etiquette manuals instructed women in what was considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior in society. She writes, “Purity was power. It was both an allurement and a protection. For this reason young women were being asked to commit themselves to premarital celibacy at a time of heightened sexual interest and tension in their lives” (54). In early twentieth century society, young women were programmed to act and exhibit certain behavior in order to function appropriately in society. If they did not follow what society expected of them, then they were seen as a threat and risked exclusion from the elitism of high society. Montgomery continues, “The unmarried woman occupied a marginal status and was therefore herself a potential threat to society. Unless carefully controlled, she might endanger her society and the high values it placed on monogamy and female chastity” (54-55). The consequences for not falling in line with these “etiquette manuals,” as Montgomery points out, placed a distinct barrier between traditional and modern roles for women and constricted them from participating in both realms.
The Social Environment of *The Age of Innocence* and Publication Date of 1920

Reiterating Stephen Greenblatt’s theory that “Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 5). Examining the construction of Wharton’s female characters in *The Age of Innocence* in connection with how gender roles are constructed in the societies in which the texts take place and in which they are produced offers a more in-depth reading. This conflict between how women are expected to act and how some women act in reality lays the foundation for the issues that arise amongst the female characters in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*.

The social conflicts within *The Age of Innocence* are very much relevant to its publication date of 1920 despite its setting of the 1870s. Both time periods are reeling with the aftermath of war and the longing for society to be as it was prior to war. Considering Greenblatt’s ideas of analyzing a text in connection with the environment out of which it is produced, it is necessary to include the novel in the conversation about the ways in which women’s roles were constructed in the 1870s and how the challenges to such constructions come to light in 1920 with the onset of World War I. *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920, two years after the end of World War I, and is representative of the redefinition of gender roles happening at the beginning of the decade. In her biography *Edith Wharton*, Hermione Lee writes, “The title of her most famous novel tells us she is going to look back. It is what she is best known for:
providing a retrospect on a vanished ‘age,’ a retrospect that as the word ‘innocence’ suggests, is going to be at once ironical and tender” (565). Not only does the novel reflect on a time that has now since passed, but it also portrays a longing for a time that has passed. This nostalgia for the past comes through at the end of the novel when Newland chooses not to go up and see Ellen Olenska, giving his son Dallas a message to give her instead: “‘Tell her I’m old-fashioned: that’s’ enough’” (376). This longing for the past and resistance to social change are reinforced by the technique of using male voices as opposed to female voices as the medium in which characters are perceived. Ultimately, all of these elements present in the novel stem from the forced changes to the traditional values and morals in a post-World War I social environment.

This technique illustrates the restrictions for women and the traditional gender roles they are not capable of escaping. It offers a very limited view of the women characters in the novel, which is expanded to imply society’s limited view of women in America. Lee continues, “[The novel] also suggests a connection between the America of fifty years ago and the America of the present, which she so often complains about for its infantilism, naïve optimism, and parochialism” (566). The same narrow-mindedness that Newland Archer exhibits is also reflective of American culture at the time. Newland’s limited perspective ties directly into the relentless patriarchal view of society and renders him unable to see past such constructions. In addition to Lee’s remarks on the novel, Judith Fryer’s essay “Purity and Power in The Age of Innocence” accurately describes the central conflict present in The Age of Innocence:
The two problems which Wharton investigated in this novel are related: one is the moral issue of the needs of the individual versus the claims of family, tradition, and community; and the other is the nature of that community. Or, to put it another way, Wharton, confronted with engines of technology that had wrecked havoc on France in World War I, was much like her contemporary Henry Adams, who, standing in front of the Corliss Engine at the Paris exhibition of 1900, saw two kingdoms of force which he called ‘Virgin’ and “Dynamo,” the one having inspired all the great works of art and the other responsible for the new era of technology—and between them an ‘abysmal fracture.’ (103)

Fryer’s essay points out the prominent conflict found within the novel: the relationship of the period in which the novel takes place with the period in which the novel is published. *The Age of Innocence* is caught between the social roles expected in the past and the new roles taking shape in the present. The connection that Fryer makes to both is seen when examining the construction of the novel’s main female characters: May Welland and Ellen Olenska. Fryer’s use of Henry Adam’s comparisons of “Virgin” and “Dynamo” is expanded to represent the traditional, innocent woman of the past contrasted with the vibrant, experienced new woman of the present. Fryer’s analysis also allows further investigation of the challenges and changes to gender roles happening in the novel and in 1920. May and Ellen show characteristics of each of these categories. Neither exists solely in one construction. They both operate in the traditional and modern roles of women. Considering these statements, the technique of using male voices that support patriarchal ideals in the novel works to reinforce society’s desire for traditional roles for
women. May and Ellen suffer from this limiting perception of women’s roles. In *The Age of Innocence*, May is subjected to Newland’s and society’s narrow-minded views of her, and this traps her in a role in which she does not necessarily desire or belong. As Foucault outlines in his *History of Sexuality*, “To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounces itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed. Do not appear if you do not want to disappear” (84).

May is very much aware of the negative effect that a decision to challenge social norms will have on her. Therefore, May is not only trapped in this role, but she makes the choice to stay in such an oppressing position in order to avoid the societal scorn that awaits her if she steps outside of that traditional role.

Newland participates in the desire for a patriarchal structure in society through his perceptions and portrayal of the women in the novel. He is engaged to May Welland, a woman from an upper-class New York family. From the beginning of the novel, Newland recognizes the ways in which May falls into the role of the traditional woman. The first description of May is as follows:

A warm pink mounted to the girl’s cheek, mantled her brow to the root of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee, and Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly. He drew a breath of satisfied vanity and his eyes returned to the stage. (26)
Right away, May is cast into the traditional female role in the sense that she embodies many of the images associated with innocence and purity. Images of the color white, flowers, and pink cheeks surround her. While these descriptions are not spoken by Newland, the last line speaks to his assurance of her image and suggests his satisfaction with May’s falling into the socially acceptable role. He is comfortable with the ways in which he perceives her. One of his first descriptions of May as a wife reinforces the traditional role: “He did not in the least wish the future Mrs. Newland Archer to be a simpleton. He meant her (thanks to his enlightening companionship) to develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular married women of the ‘younger set,’ in which it was the recognized custom to distract masculine homage while playfully discouraging it” (Wharton 27). This is an example of male-defined gender at work within the novel. Here, May has no control over defining herself, and is only defined by Newland. This concept is reiterated in “The Transparent Eyes of May Welland in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* by Evelyn Fracasso:

> Archer sees nothing profound in May's eyes and persists in a narrow view of his betrothed. Even when he studies a photograph of ‘the frank forehead, serious eyes and gay innocent mouth of the young creature whose soul's custodian he was to be,’ he perceives her only as a young woman who knows nothing of the world. (44)

Newland is quick to label May as innocent, proper, and unaware of the ways in which the world operates. His perceptions of May’s opposite, Ellen, only further places her on the pedestal of perfection.
Ellen Olenksa is May’s cousin and has just arrived in New York from Europe after separating from her husband. Newland’s first impressions of Ellen are very different from those of May. In fact, it seems as if he wishes for May not to be associated with her at all:

Madame Olenska’s pale and serious face appealed to his fancy as suited to the occasion and to her unhappy situation; but the way her dress (which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders shocked and troubled him. He hated to think of May Welland’s being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste. (35)

The very thought of May coming into contact with a woman so unconventional actually worries him. Ellen’s dress does not following the traditional expectations for women in the novel’s setting. Newland’s resistance to Ellen’s appearance reflects how the novel reflects on the challenges to gender roles that began to peak in 1920. Women’s appearance and dress started to change substantially in 1920 when the novel was published. This description of Ellen is in response to May’s initial image of innocence and purity found in the first few pages of Wharton’s novel and further works to illustrate how both appear to be binary opposites in relation to gender, yet more about their characters is revealed when examining the social environments that influence *The Age of Innocence*.

Newland is afraid of what Ellen represents, and definitely does not want May to be influenced by this other kind of woman. This is also seen when Newland notices Ellen’s eyes. In fact, Newland observes the exact opposite in Ellen’s eyes as he does in
May’s. Her eyes appear to him to hold information to another world: “It frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes” (82). This unknown experience in Ellen’s eyes alludes to the knowledge and experience behind them and illustrates Newland’s uneasiness, as well as patriarchal society’s uneasiness with women being knowledgeable and powerful in society. With these initial perceptions of May and Ellen, the technique of using male voices in terms of describing female characters is very much working to place the two women as exact opposites. In doing so, it seems that the novel attempts to place May with the traditional and Ellen with the modern, new image of the New Woman. However, this initial weariness toward Ellen begins to fade. Much like American society in 1920, Newland becomes increasingly intrigued by this new type of woman that she represents, and even begins to question what it is that he actually wants in life.

After spending more and more time around Ellen, Newland begins to think that she may have a more well-rounded approach to life. He observes Ellen continuously defying social norms, and appearing to have no remorse for doing so. She does not live her life and make decisions based on how society responds. According to Hermione Lee, “To Newland’s shocked delight, she is constantly deflating the society’s pride in its rituals and seeing them as childish and imitative” (577). What was once cause for much concern for Newland now becomes the main reason that he is drawn to Ellen. This illustrates Newland’s desire for women to be more like Ellen, and less like May. He starts to believe in this idea of the New Woman, and that it is something that society must be able to accept: “Women ought to be free—as free as we are,” he declared, making a
discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences” (61).

Newland is aware of his desires for Ellen and the new possibilities she represents, yet he is still reluctant to fully move forward with them. A new historical lens allows for the inclusion of societal struggles in the interpretation of May and Ellen. The innate desire for traditional social norms keeps Newland drawn to the safety of being with a woman like May. It is this reaction that sends Newland into a fury about the idea of marriage altogether. Newland reflects on what the idea of marriage must be like in May’s view:

He perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess; and 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.

(63-64)

Here, Newland is beginning to abandon all hope for a blissful marriage with May based on how he perceives she will be in the relationship. What Ellen’s influence has brought to his attention is what a woman is capable of being. The New Woman is not afraid of societal repercussions. The complex construction of the New Woman as seen in both the setting of the novel and in 1920 when it is published allows Newland to see how May and Ellen are not distinct opposites. It is still interesting to note that, despite this discovery that Ellen brings about in him, Newland is unable to give May the same credit, leaving her to continue to be subjected to the traditional and entrapping rules dictated by an old society.
However, May Welland is a more complex character than Newland gives her credit for being. As the novel progresses, it becomes more and more clear that May does have an awareness of what is going on around her. When Newland and May are discussing when to get married and in what fashion, May reveals more depth to her character. Newland says to her, “‘Don’t you understand how I want you for my wife?’” (165). He is attempting to reassure May in his desires for her despite his growing feelings for Ellen and what she represents to him. This is a question to which the omniscient narrator, not Newland, responds: “For a moment she remained motionless; then she raised on him eyes of such despairing clearness that he half-released her waist from his hold. But suddenly her look changed and deepened inscrutably. ‘I’m not sure if I do understand,’ she said. ‘Is it—is it because you’re not certain of continuing to care for me?’” (165). This moment in the novel is crucial because when May begins to assert that she is very much aware of her surroundings, it is the narrator that describes her in doing so. This further enforces the technique of using male voices in the novel to describe the female characters. It is never Newland who describes May in this way, only the narrator. The description of May being aware of the connection between Ellen and Newland, and of her voice being heard, is evidence that she too is capable of existing within both the traditional and modern roles for women. As their conversation continues, May says, “‘You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and notices—one has feelings and ideas’” (166). May is bringing to Newland’s attention all of the qualities that he believes she lacks. If anyone is a victim in the novel, it is May, for her upbringing has taught her to remain silent and fall in line with respectable society and
not allow her voice to be heard; these are things for which both society and Newland condemn her. Thus, while she exhibits more complexity than the traditional woman does, she is still unable to break through the patriarchal structures at work and she chooses to stay in the role of which society approves and not risk societal oppression.

Ultimately, Newland concedes to tradition and a life with May that he feels will be uneventful and very routine. After returning from their honeymoon, Newland has completely gone back to the familiarity of a traditional life:

Archer had reverted to all his old inherited ideas about marriage. It was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice the theories with which his untrammeled bachelorhood had dallied. There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free; and he had long since discovered that May’s only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration. (214)

Newland has gone through with the marriage despite his continuing unhappiness with May and the life that she represents for him. However, May’s triumph comes toward the end of the novel when she reveals to Newland that she is pregnant.

May only suspected that she may be when she told Ellen, and this is what prompts Ellen to leave; she does not want to come between them any longer. The narrator describes how “her colour burned deeper, but she held his gaze. ‘No; I wasn’t sure then—but I told her I was. And you see I was right!’ she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory” (359). May, left without many options other than to marry Newland, has
constructed a plan to be free of Ellen and emerge victorious. This awareness that May exhibits at the end of the novel alludes to the fact that Newland’s perceptions of her are naïve. Furthermore, if May is mainly supposed to represent this “traditional” female character, the fact that she is the one whom Newland ends up with simply reinforces the desire for the old, patriarchal society to prevail and exile women such as Ellen who attempt to challenge such norms.

At the end of the novel, Ellen has moved to Paris where she can function more as a representation of the New Woman since American society is still on the threshold of change in 1920. Thus, she is still an unsuccessful representative of the New Woman as she is only allowed to exist outside of the society in which she is produced. Instead of May and Ellen working in opposition of one another, they are actually working together to show how the construction of gender is being redefined at the turn of the twentieth century. Neither May or Ellen stand as distinct representations of the traditional or modern women; they operate as images of the transformation of gender roles prior to and after World War I. However, Ernest Hemingway’s novel *A Farewell to Arms* offers a female character that becomes the essence of the construction of the New Woman: Catherine Barkley.
Chapter 4: A New Historical Lens to *A Farewell to Arms*

The Social Environment of *A Farewell to Arms* and Publication Date of 1929

As with Wharton’s novel, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* addresses the conflicts within the text and how those conflicts relate to the social environment in which it is produced and published. The social setting of *A Farewell to Arms* takes place in Italy during World War I, yet Hemingway did not publish the novel until 1929. The significance of these time periods is that they work in the same way that Wharton’s novel does: as a commentary on the past and how those struggles are influencing the present. By reconsidering Greenblatt’s ideas of analyzing a text in connection with the environment out of which it is produced, it again becomes necessary to include the novel in the conversation about the ways in which women’s roles are constructed during World War I, how those roles are challenged in the environment of Wharton’s novel and its publication of 1920, and where those same conflicts stand in Hemingway’s novel’s publication in 1929. Thus, examining the novel in connection with Wharton’s becomes crucial to understanding Greenblatt’s concepts about not only how texts operate within and outside of each other, but also to how significant the impact of World War I was in bringing about changes to gender construction. Furthermore, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* operates as the culminating work of commentary on the conflicts and struggles to gender roles of the 1920s with the construction of its main female character, Catherine Barkley.

In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell describes the misconceptions that surround the idea of war. Fussell states, “Every war is ironic because
every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends” (7). World War I greatly changed how people interacted amongst one another in American society. Fussell continues, “But the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. It was not until eleven years after the war that Hemingway could declare in *A Farewell to Arms* that “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the number of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates” (Fussell, 21). The battle on the Somme, the very battle in which Catherine Barkley’s fiancé is killed in *A Farewell to Arms*, only further leads to the realization that the war may possibly never end: “By the end of the day both sides had seen, in a sad scrawl of broken earth and murdered men, the answer to the question. No road. No thoroughfare. Neither race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won, and would go on winning” (13). It is this type of statement that sets the scene for Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. The characters in the novel are constantly surrounded by death and seemingly left with no way out. However, the only character fully aware of the reality of the war from the very beginning is Catherine Barkley.

Fussell continues, “But the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable” (21). The key word that Fussell uses here is *appeared*. These values and meanings only appeared to be dependable. However,
considering the implications that Freud and Lacan discuss in regard to the bisexuality and blending of gender and language, this observation of Fussell’s is key to understanding how Hemingway’s novel also displays conflicts present within gender construction before, during, and after World War I. The roles of men and women in society prior to World War I were much like the social environment of Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*; however, the realities of war drastically changed those expectations for each gender in society. As Frederick Lewis Allen mentions, women took on more masculine roles of providers and supporters of their families by going into the workforce in place of their spouses. The same is true for Catherine’s character in *A Farewell to Arms*. The war environment has forced her to be the sole source of stability, a stability she eventually transfers on to Frederic.

**Significance of Social Environment for Catherine Barkley and Frederic Henry**

Catherine is the only character who has directly experienced the devastating results of war and, therefore, is best equipped to deal with its effects. It is through the character of Catherine Barkley that Hemingway demonstrates the importance of finding ways to sustain life during the most dismal times. Catherine’s tragic loss causes her to construct a new identity and reality in order to cope. Her use of this method demonstrates her role in the novel as a mentor to Frederic so that he might be able to survive once she is gone. And, in doing so, Catherine’s character challenges preconceived notions of traditional female gender roles by utilizing the modern woman’s freedom of choice in her own life, becoming the most successful version of the New Woman, for she is the one who gives Frederic the tools necessary to survive in a world without her.
When Catherine Barkley and Frederic Henry first meet at the beginning of the novel, Frederic is an outsider to the war. He has enlisted as an ambulance driver for the Italian army, is not a soldier, and has yet to see any of the devastating effects of war. He has an outsider’s perspective on the war, and this comes through when he sends postcards back home: “I sent a couple of army Zona di Guerra post-cards, crossing out everything except, I am well. That should handle them. Those post-cards would be very fine in America; strange and mysterious. This was a strange and mysterious war zone” (36). Like the post-cards, the war is also “strange and mysterious” to Frederic and he operates based on ill-informed assumptions. He has yet to grasp any of the harsh realities associated with the war and therefore does not have a solid foundation for what is actually taking place. Ultimately, Frederic feels invincible and thinks, “Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies” (37). In addition, Frederic has spent his nights in a casual and carefree manner, and is not affected by the fighting. It is because of this self-constructed invincibility that he initially perceives his and Catherine’s relationship as merely a playful game: “I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. Nobody had mentioned what the stakes were. It was all right with me” (31). At this point in the novel Frederic lives in an ideal world which the war has yet to penetrate. However, Catherine is not naïve to the realities of war.
Unlike Frederic, Catherine has experienced the devastation that can come with war. Prior to meeting Frederic, Catherine had been engaged to a soldier in the war. She decided to become a nurse because of her fiancé. She tells Frederic, “I started when he did. I remember having a silly idea he might come to the hospital where I was. With a sabre cut, I suppose, and a bandage around his head. Or shot through the shoulder. Something picturesque” (Hemingway, 20). Catherine had envisioned an ideal life that she and her fiancé might live out, but all of that goes for naught when he is killed in battle during World War I. It is then that Catherine makes the drastic decision that she must construct a new reality and identity in which she can live. Just as Ellen Olenska chooses to accept the aftermath of a failed relationship, so, too, does Catherine leave her traditional gender roles behind and begins to exhibit characteristics of the more independent and self-sufficient New Woman initially seen in the female characters in the *The Age of Innocence*.

For Catherine, Frederic is an essential part of this new identity she has created for herself. He seems to take the place of Catherine’s dead fiancé. She even goes as far as having Frederic act out the role she had imagined between her and her fiancé. She provokes him, “Say, ‘I’ve come back to Catherine in the night’” and Frederic complies. She responds with, “Oh, darling, you have come back, haven’t you?” (30). At this point, Catherine associates Frederic with her lost fiancé. Sandra Whipple Spanier’s essay “Hemingway’s Unknown Soldier: Catherine Barkley, the Critics, and the Great War” states, “Catherine has come to their relationship painfully wiser to the world than is the young man who happens into the war thinking it has nothing to do with him” (85). It is in
this same way that Ellen chooses to deal with her failed relationship. Like Ellen, Catherine is aware of her realities and chooses to make decisions that lead to her happiness despite the demands of the world around her.

To Catherine, Frederic represents the chance for the life she always imagined. With him, she can construct a new reality in which she can successfully sustain some semblance of a life. This is how Catherine begins to transform from the traditional to modern woman. Spanier’s essay also supports this concept when she writes that:

[Catherine’s] willingness to submerge herself in a personal relationship, far from being a sign of female spinelessness, is an act of will. A model of courage and stoic self-awareness, Catherine is determined to forge a meaningful and orderly existence—if only temporarily—in a world in which all traditional notions of meaning and order have been shattered. (76)

Spanier notes the significance Catherine’s choice to take part in this relationship is, in fact, just that: a choice. Catherine, like May and Ellen, chooses her role. However, it is not like May’s choice because Catherine’s choice, as Spanier notes, is not to be trapped in submission. Her decision is much more like that of Ellen’s since both make decisions that conflict with how their surrounding environments are constructed. Ellen exists in a world where she is ostracized for her decision, while Catherine exists in a world stricken by war. This choice is what lays the foundation for Catherine and Frederic’s relationship. It is because of her past that Catherine resorts to the construction of a reality in which she can simply sustain life. As a result of her loss, Catherine has new perspective of how to live in a war environment and eventually brings Frederic into that world as well. Like
Ellen Olenksa’s controversial divorce, Catherine’s loss of her fiancé influences the decisions she makes in the present. Both instances illustrate how Ellen and Catherine choose to take control of their own lives and to no longer participate in a strictly submissive feminine role, thus each begin to exhibit characteristics of the modern, New Woman.

It is in this sense that Catherine Barkley most represents the role of the New Woman because of her role as educator and mentor for Frederic. In another article by Spanier, “Catherine Barkley and the Hemingway Code: Ritual and Survival in A Farewell to Arms,” this comes across in the idea that Catherine Barkley embodies the role of a “code hero” in the novel. A “code hero,” according to Spanier, is, “that person already initiated into the cruelties and absurdities of life, who has devised practical means to cope, a way to live ‘holding tight’” (133). There are several ways in which Catherine is successful at coping throughout the novel. First, she puts her entire faith in Frederic and their relationship. When Frederic tells her that he only wants to be married “for her,” she is quick to dismiss his words: “‘There isn’t any me. I’m you. Don’t make up a separate me’” (115). Catherine places herself as one with Frederic and this allows her to no longer feel alone and deserted in such a cruel world. There is no separation of gender at this moment. Catherine is determined to show Frederic that they will be able to survive if they recognize that they are stronger together than separate from one another. For both Catherine and Frederic, isolation and solitude in the environment of World War I only gets in the way of survival.
Catherine’s insistence of the need for Frederic to see no separation between the two of them reflects Freud’s, Lacan’s and Tyson’s theories behind the bisexuality of gender and the blending of language: “The whole idea that there are only two genders is based on the idea that there are only two sexes. However, researchers from a variety of fields have revealed that such is not the case: biological sex does not fit neatly into two separate, opposite categories” (112). In order to accurately examine language and gender, it is necessary to first understand its complex construction. Freud’s theories about “hysteria” and “bisexuality” are represented in Catherine’s character at this point in the novel. On the next page she continues, “’You’re my religion. You’re all I’ve got’” (116). It is clear that Catherine has committed so completely to their relationship in an attempt to suppress the trauma that she has experienced. She has determined that it is the only way that her life can move forward. In constructing this relationship with Frederic, Catherine starts to blend together the traditional notions of gender roles. She and Frederic are not separate; they are part of one relationship that works toward the same mission: sustain life amidst despair. She starts to become the strength and foundation of the relationship, not Frederic.

Considering this definition and the examples of her behavior, it is hard to argue that Catherine does not fulfill the role of the Spanier’s code hero in the novel. Therefore, Catherine’s character demonstrates how Spanier’s ‘code hero’ becomes the New Woman by illustrating how the realities of war have greatly influenced her need to construct alternative ways in which she can sustain her own existence given that American society has dramatically change with the onset of World War I. Catherine does this by
challenging what is expected of women during the time and uses her relationship with Frederic to do so. The code hero is very much the New Woman in Catherine’s case as her ability to choose her role allows her to encompass both masculine and feminine characteristics while giving Frederic the skills needed to continue on even after the war is over.

Unlike Catherine, the Frederic Henry at the beginning of the novel is detached from the negative effects of the war. It is only once he is injured by enemy fire that his perceptions of the war begin to change. Prior to his injury Frederic did not place much value on his relationship with Catherine and viewed it mainly as some type of playful game; however, his injury and the death of his friend Passini have initiated him into a new world where bad things happen to good people. The first evidence of his changing perception comes when he first sees Catherine enter the hospital in Milan. He thinks, “She looked fresh and young and very beautiful. I thought I had never seen anyone so beautiful…When I saw her I was in love with her. Everything turned over inside of me” (91). This is far from how Frederic initially describes their relationship as some type of game to be played. He continues, “‘God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with anyone. But God knows I had’” (93). With his injury, Frederic has transitioned from someone outside and uninvolved in the war to someone who has directly experienced its ruthless capabilities. This realization Frederic experiences is reminiscent of an essay by Samuel Shaw, “Hemingway, Nihilism, and the American Dream.” In it, Shaw describes how “Hemingway reflects a stark, often rhetorical nihilism with some of the angry tones of Midwestern populism. In America,
after the disillusionment with the war to save the world for democracy [World War 1], it was impossible to use moral verities. The underside of American life was exposed for examination” (75). This “underside” of American society relates back to Allen’s discussion of Freud’s “foreign” influence and how it brought about change. Exposing those influences under the surface is crucial to interpreting how a text operates in its own setting and the setting in which it is produced. The environment of World War I showed people that life as they were accustomed to living was no longer a possibility. Much as the workforce of World War I American society relied on the inclusion of women in order to function, once Frederic is exposed to the actual happenings of the war, he becomes dependent on the one person who can show him how he may possibly survive: Catherine.

In addition, Catherine not only finds way to simply get by, she also adheres to a carpe diem lifestyle. This can be seen when she and Frederic are immersed in a conversation regarding cowards and the brave. Frederic insists that nothing will happen to them because Catherine is “too brave” and that someone said, “the coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one” (139). Catherine then refutes this claim: “Who said it? He was probably a coward. He knew a great deal about cowards but nothing about the brave. The brave dies perhaps two thousand deaths if he’s intelligent. He simply doesn’t mention them’” (140). With this statement Catherine acknowledges her new approach to life. If she is really one of the brave as Frederic implies, she appears that way because she does not show her fears. In his essay “A Focus on the Immediate and the Human in A Farewell to Arms,” Jay Gellens writes:
Hemingway’s solution throughout *A Farewell to Arms* has been neither to succumb to the war’s paralyzing morbidity nor to undertake to resist directly its violent catastrophe. It has been, rather, to focus on what is immediate and dense, and unequivocal and human in the narrator’s experience of it. The novel’s achievement is in its determination to exploit, if sometimes too painstakingly, the ground on which, if it is ever possible again, a meaningful vision of the human condition [can] be constructed. (113)

This is exactly what Catherine Barkley does throughout the novel. She does not allow herself to get caught up in the things she deems petty and insignificant. She tries to make the most out of every situation, live in the moment, and not dwell on the past.

Another important consideration is the fact that Catherine Barkley is not the only Hemingway character that has been constructed in this way. Many critics have been quick to write off Hemingway’s women characters as simple-minded and as carrying little value to the overall meaning of his writings. It is important to note how Hemingway wrote certain male characters as well when considering how to read and interpret the construction of female ones. For example, Nick Adams in the short story “Big Two-Hearted River” shares some of the same characteristics of Catherine Barkley. Instead of constructing a new identity and reality through a relationship, Nick focuses his attention on returning to nature. The narrator describes how Nick sets up his campsite:

Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had
been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He
was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. (139)
The last line of this description is reminiscent of the role that Catherine takes in *A
Farewell to Arms*. Like Catherine, Nick is comfortable, safe, and happy in a world of his
own devising. He finds comfort in something he is able to create as opposed to being
forced into a certain environment. Unlike May’s submission to social pressures in *The
Age of Innocence*, Catherine constantly constructs ways in which she can maintain life
despite her traumatic loss by investing so deeply in Frederic. Nick Adams also invests
deeply in an alternate reality in which the routine of fishing helps to keep him going and
not thinking about the war.

It is in the dark dampness of the swamp in the river that Nick is reminded of the
war, and thus he knows to avoid it because he is not willing to entertain any of those
negative thoughts yet: “Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against
deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places
impossible to land them…In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want
it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today…There were plenty of days
coming when he could fish the swamp” (156). Here, Hemingway’s novel reflects
Frederick Lewis Allen’s chapter on manners and morals in the sense that Nick Adams
now knows that there will be another day for fishing. However, as Allen states, as the
reality of war sets in to those on the front, they realize the instability of the days to come,
but also know that they must find ways to continue their lives. Thus, this places a new
significance on daily activities including the relationships people have with one another
and further shows the significant impact that Catherine and Frederic’s relationship has on Frederic’s ability to again feel emotions despite his detrimental experiences with the war. Furthermore, the similarities found in both Nick and Catherine’s characters gives further significance to the “bisexuality” of gender that Freud discusses. In the wake of World War I, both men and women are forced to reconstruct their ways of sustaining meaning in their lives and their relationships and this leads to a necessity for the acceptance of blended gender roles.

Toward the end of the novel, there is even more change in Frederic’s character, and this directly relates to the impact that Catherine’s carpe diem approach to life has had on him. He even acknowledges that he avoids thinking too much about the devastation he has encountered in order to not become depressed: “That’s why I never think about these things. I never think and yet when I begin to talk I say the things I have found out in my mind without thinking” (179). Frederic has adopted the same coping mechanism that Catherine uses. In order to live each day to its fullest, they must not focus solely on the negative. Catherine has been successful in educating Frederic on one way in which people can continue on despite the horrible situations they might have experienced. It is also apparent that though their relationship, Frederic, like Catherine, has been able to avoid the reality of war; they have been able to avoid it together. It is once they reach the hotel in Stresa that this becomes apparent when Frederic reflects,

We went up to the hotel and into the bar. I did not want another drink so early in the morning so I went up to our room. The maid had just finished doing the room
and Catherine was not back yet. I lay down on the bed and tried to keep from thinking. When Catherine came back it was all right again. (256)

Just as Frederic allows Catherine to avoid the reality of her past and losing her fiancé, Catherine allows Frederic to escape what has happened to him in the war as well. He begins to find meaning again through his relationship with her. Both Catherine and Frederic are able to repress their feelings of the effects that the war has had on them as individuals, yet both are also able to genuinely feel true emotions again through their relationship with one another.

On the next page, Frederic tells Catherine, “‘My life used to be full of everything. Now if you aren’t with me I haven’t a thing in the world…I’m just so in love with you that there isn’t anything else’” (257). It is no longer only Catherine who realizes the importance of this relationship in terms of sustaining both of them through this time of war. Catherine has allowed Frederic to turn his former numbness and laissez-faire attitude toward life into the ability to feel real emotions. In this moment, Catherine transfers her softer, more feminine characteristic of feeling emotions to Frederic. Catherine is the one in control of the relationship, which is a trait more commonly associated with masculinity. As Frederick Lewis Allen discusses, prior to the war men were viewed as the sole providers of their families and as the heads of their households. Women, as seen in May’s character in *The Age of Innocence*, were expected to be docile and submissive to their husbands whereas women like Ellen are outcast from society for not fulfilling those roles.
At this point in the novel Catherine works as a culmination of both May and Ellen’s characters. She desires the traditional female gendered roles of wife, yet she has to be the stronger, more dominating force in her relationship with Frederic so that he can survive. Constructing a new identity and reality with Frederic allows Catherine to ultimately be happy and to equip Frederic with the tools necessary to attempt to survive without her. Like Ellen, she makes the choice to construct her relationship with Frederic in the way that she does. Catherine’s ability to choose her path is what separates her from May and makes her more like Ellen. However, it is her death that has the most lasting impact on Frederic. Like so many others who lost loved ones in the war, including Catherine, Frederic must now try to find ways to go on without her, and Catherine has shown him how he can attempt to do so.

Despite the numerous examples of Catherine’s role as educator to Frederic and the importance of their relationship in terms of helping them to survive, many people may still dismiss the significance or even existence of such a role because she dies in childbirth at the end of the novel. Catherine is successful in achieving a new identity and reality before she dies. Shortly before going into labor she says to Frederic, “I just woke up thinking about how I was nearly crazy when I first met you. I’m never that way anymore. I’m grand now. I’m just very, very, very happy” (300). In this sense Catherine has successfully created a new identity by finding multiple ways to sustain their relationship in an unconventional manner. World War I forced a reconstruction of gender roles because of the necessity for men and women to socially and economically exist.
where they had not before. Even in her death Catherine is able to show Frederic the importance of finding things to hold on to and believe in, especially in desperate times.

It is also necessary to trace the progress that Frederic Henry has made in his journey. At the beginning of the novel, the priest tells Frederic, “‘When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve’” (72). Frederic responds with, “‘I don’t love’” and the priest says, “‘You will. I know you will. Then you will be happy’” (72). At this point Frederic has not experienced any negativity regarding the war and has yet to find any sustenance in the world around him. Later on, Count Greffi asks Frederic what he values most and Frederic tells him that it is someone that he loves. He assures Frederic, “‘Then too you are in love [like me]. Do not forget that is a religious feeling’” (262-63). By this time in the novel, Frederic has gone through some devastating experiences involving the war and has turned to Catherine for comfort.

In the end, when faced with Catherine’s death, Frederic turns to religion in an attempt to sustain her life and his as well:

> Everything was gone inside of me. I did not think. I could not think. I knew she was going to die and I prayed that she would not. Don’t let her die. Oh, God, please don’t let her die. I’ll do anything for you if you won’t let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don’t let her die…You took the baby but don’t let her die. That was all right but don’t let her die. Please, please, dear God, don’t let her die. (330)

Frederic has come a long way from the numb, emotionless man from the beginning of the novel, and this is due to Catherine’s influence. Frederic feels an immense love for
Catherine and, just as the priest said in the beginning, “‘When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve’” (Hemingway, 72). Here, Frederic is praying and telling God that he will do anything for him if he lets Catherine live. Catherine has allowed Frederic to turn his former numbness and laissez-faire attitude toward life into the ability to feel real emotions. In doing so, Catherine reiterates Hemingway’s emphasis on the importance of relationships in times of great despair. Moreover, in this emphasis also lies the significance of the ability of both genders to work together and depend upon one another, to blend. Constructing a new identity and reality with Frederic allowed Catherine to ultimately be happy and to equip Frederic with the tools necessary to attempt to survive without her.

The last pages of the novel again show Frederic in a state of despair as Catherine goes through childbirth and eventually dies. He cannot get away from what the war has shown him: “They killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you” (Hemingway, 327). Here, Frederic concludes that there is no escaping the death that surrounds their environment. He struggles to find any purpose and meaning in life with Catherine’s impending death. However, Catherine’s words to Frederic provide a stark contrast to the seemingly dismal future. She tells him, “‘Don’t worry darling. I’m not a bit afraid. It’s just a dirty trick’” (331). Catherine tells Frederic that she is not afraid and with her words allows Frederic to not be afraid. Throughout the end of the novel, she remains upbeat and positive, which can be written off as an effect of the pain medicine, yet she refers to her situation as a “dirty trick.”
*A Farewell to Arms* is set during World War I, yet it is not published until 1929, over a decade after the fighting came to an end. Considering these factors, Catherine’s comment at the end of the novel about it all being a “dirty trick” becomes significant commentary about a decade that underwent significant changes in regard to traditional notions of gender roles within society. Catherine’s death alludes to society’s movement away from the traditional woman and transition toward the acceptance of the New Woman at the end of the 1920s. Catherine’s death reiterates the importance of being able to move past the destruction of the war and the changes in society because such things will always be present. However, her death is still a “dirty trick” because Hemingway’s novel illustrates the importance of finding ways to sustain life despite the negative circumstances that surround you. Her death, then, is simply a dirty trick. Just because she dies, it does not mean that the New Woman dies with her. It is the New Woman’s influence on the opposite gender that allows Frederic to survive.
Conclusions

Catherine’s influence on Frederic, even though he again appears numb at the end of the novel from the impact of her death, still gets him through and allows him to be able to sustain himself in a new society. World War I brought about a period of industrialization that caused significant changes to gender roles. Catherine is successful in breaking and bending traditional gender roles by exhibiting characteristics of both genders. In doing so, she becomes the symbol for the New Woman by instilling in Frederic the strengths of both genders that will allow him to survive in a more modern reality. Frederic, along with the rest of the patriarchal society, has to be able to live in a new, modernized society in which traditional social norms are no longer successful. This is why Catherine is the most successful version of the New Woman in Wharton and Hemingway’s novels. She has given Frederic what he needs to continue into the future. Unlike May, Ellen and Newland who remain trapped in society’s notions of what women should be, Catherine’s influence on Frederic gives him the chance to continue on in a new and unfamiliar world, even without her.

The changing social environment of the 1920s heavily contributes to the construction of the female characters in both The Age of Innocence and A Farewell to Arms. The massive movement of the post-World War I society into a fast-paced, industrialized, and modernized society brought about necessary changes to how women participated and behaved in their own relationships and within society. May Welland, Ellen Olenksa, and Catherine Barkley are the embodiment of the struggles between the traditional gender roles of the past and the modern women of the future. Without their
strength, the male characters in both novels remain trapped in the past without the ability to take on the present and prepare for the future.

Exposing and interpreting a literary text is no small task. It is an impossible task if the setting of the text is the only environment given consideration in finding meaning. There are a multitude of factors that go into writing and composing a text, so it is imperative that those same factors are investigated when attempting to find meaning in the themes and characters of literature. This allows concepts about the purposes and motivations behind the construction of a literary text to be considered in addition to what only takes place in a text. Including discussion of the work of Freud, Lacan, and Foucault in connection with New Historian only further illustrates the significance of examining the social context that exists within a literary text and the social context in which a literary text is produced. Without an examination of the social influences surrounding Wharton and Hemingway’s novels, the interpretation of the texts would fall short. May Welland would be written off as docile and complacent, Ellen Olenksa would be viewed as merely a deserving outcast to American society, and Catherine Barkley would be the epitome of the traditional woman whose death only symbolizes crushing defeat.
Works Cited


