

## From "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse"

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*The Fruit of the Tree*, published thirteen years before *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton first offered extended comment on the American girl in the character Bessy Westmore, who is vivacious, ignorant, brave, and, Wharton emphasizes, pathetically shallow. Bessy has energy but no knowledge, imagination but no depth. For all her robust self-confidence, she is an extremely limited creature. As Wharton has an attractive older woman ruefully observe, Bessy is "one of the most harrowing victims of the plan of bringing up our girls in the double-bondage of expediency and unreality ... and leaving them to reconcile the two as best they can, or lose their souls in the attempt." This description could as easily apply to Isabel Archer as to Bessy Westmore, with the major difference that, where James is fascinated to see how the reconciliation will be attempted, Wharton is disgusted by the problem's even existing. She does not see the American girl as America's noblest creation, the nation's most interesting contribution to modern civilization. She sees her as the nation's failure, the human victim of a deluded obsession with innocence.

May Welland is Wharton's rarefied version of the stereotype. Unsoiled by life, May is always connected with white: her virginity, mentally and emotionally, cannot be touched. She is permanently pure. Likewise, Wharton implies, she is permanently juvenile. She has a fresh "boyish" quality that brings to mind the "invincible innocence" of her middle-aged mother, and suggests that May too will go through life sexually unaware and armed in innocence. To be sure, she is vigorous physically—she rides, rows, plays lawn tennis, wins archery competitions—but even this healthiness is deceptive, for the allusions Wharton surrounds May with are lifeless. She walks beside Archer and "her face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete"; at another point her smile we are told, is "Spartan." Elsewhere and most pointedly, Wharton says, the "faculty of unawareness was what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess." The goddess Wharton associates with May is Diana, virgin deity of the hunt. Wearing a "white dress, with a pale green ribbon about the waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat," May wins her archer/ match with "Diana-like aloofness." Later she enters a ballroom "tall and silver-shining as a young Diana." Similarly, at the van der Luydens' reception for Ellen Olenska, "in her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just alight from the chase." In May, Wharton takes selected virtues of the American girl: her innocence, her physical vigor, her cheerfulness and vivacity, her wholesomeness and self-confidence, and links them to a forever virginal goddess of death. Newland, with a shiver, wonders of May: "What if 'niceness' carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?" May Welland is empty. She is, in addition, living at the pinnacle of American society, America's Dream Girl.

Wharton insists that innocent May is both ancient and artificial. In spite of her athletic freedom and bright modern cheeriness, she is as old as patriarchy itself. Newland is depressed as he tries to imagine a comradesly marriage with the Wetlands' daughter: "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." He realizes further that, because "of this elaborate system of mystification" to which girls are subjected (which might well come from one of "the books on Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read"), May has no depth: "she was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew nothing to be on her guard against." Yet Newland knows that "untrained human nature was not frank and innocent: it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile. And he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity," which, ironically, has been manufactured solely for his pleasure.

In Wharton's version, the American girl is not spontaneous. She has been taught to be frank and self-assured as proof of her innocence (which is simply the ancient patriarchal value of virginity served up, of course, in nineteenth-century language). She is as manufactured an image of femininity as any other. She may look, in the guise of Isabel Archer or Daisy Miller, like a brand new independent creature; but take away James's infatuation with the American girl's illusion of freedom [and that is all Isabel or Daisy has, of course; the illusion of independence], and we have May Welland. The innocent American girl was a pernicious ideal, Wharton, looking back on the nineteenth century, felt compelled to say.