

# The Age of Innocence Study Guide

## The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton

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# Introduction

Already a successful novelist in 1920 when she completed *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton anticipated best-selling status for her new novel. *The Age of Innocence*, set in late nineteenth-century New York society, did indeed become a best-seller and won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. Wharton was the first woman to receive this high literary honor. The novel is both nostalgic and satirical in its depiction of old New York, with its often-stifling conventions and manners and its insistence on propriety. Wharton had written about old New York before in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, but in *The Age of Innocence* she is less caustic in her criticism of its culture. Having worked diligently in relief efforts during World War I, Wharton recalled her formative years in New York society as a time of stability, even though that stability was the product of strict adherence to accepted rules of conduct.

Because of similarities between Wharton's style and that of her friend Henry James, *The Age of Innocence* is frequently compared to James' writing, especially his novel *A Portrait of a Lady*. Serious students are often encouraged to read the two titles in order to compare James's point of view to Wharton's distinctly feminine sensibility.

*The Age of Innocence* is regarded as a skilled portrait of the struggle between the individual and the community. It is also a work that explores the dangers and liberties of change as a society moves from a familiar, traditional culture to one that is less formal and affords its members greater freedom. The novel's staying power is generally attributed to its presentation of such universal concerns as women's changing roles, the importance of family in a civilized society, and the universal conflict between passion and duty.

## Author Biography

Edith Newbold Jones was born to a wealthy family in New York City on January 24, 1862, and soon learned the manners and traditions of society life that would characterize her fiction. Because her family lived in Europe for much of her childhood, she was educated abroad and privately. She enjoyed travel and reading from a young age, and while her parents supported these interests, they disapproved of her ambitions to become an author. Her lifelong love of books, foreign places, and nature would figure into her successful career as a writer. Biographers depict her as a lively, congenial woman who made friends easily. This may account for her friendships with such notable men as author Henry James and Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1885, she married Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton, a banker who was thirteen years her senior. They lived in New York City; Newport, Rhode Island; and Lenox, Massachusetts; and traveled to Europe often. As she became more serious about her writing, Wharton designed and built a home in Lenox, called "The Mount," as a writer's retreat. From 1900 to 1911, she often went there to escape social pressures and immerse herself in undistracted writing. Her marriage was unhappy, however, and because Teddy had numerous affairs, embezzled her money, and struggled with mental illness, Wharton divorced him in 1913. Wharton was independent and never remarried, although rumors persist about two important men in her life who may have been her lovers.

Published in 1905, *The House of Mirth* was Wharton's first critically acclaimed novel. By this time, she had become a good friend of Henry James, and she followed in his footsteps and became an expatriate in Paris, enjoying extended stays beginning in 1907. When she sold *The Mount* in 1911, she made Paris her permanent residence. Her talent responded well to the new environment, and she published volumes of short stories and novels, which earned her a faithful following, critical acceptance, and a Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence*. In addition to being the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, Wharton was the first woman to be awarded the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She also received an honorary degree from prestigious Yale University in 1923, one of the few occasions that brought her back to the United States.

Wharton died of cardiac arrest in France on August 11, 1937.



# Plot Summary

## Book 1: Chapters 1 - 9

The book opens as members of old New York society gather at the opera. Although they have not come to the opera together, Newland Archer rests his gaze on his fiancée, May Welland. He considers her innocence and how he will educate and enlighten her, so that she can become his ideal woman. A stir is created when May's cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, arrives in the Wellands' box. She married a Polish Count and lived in Europe until she left her husband, reportedly with his secretary. By inviting her to their opera box, the Wellands knowingly risk becoming the subject of gossip.

Newland thinks about the Welland family matriarch, Catherine Mingott, who is a powerful figure in New York society. Catherine is an enormous woman, whose weight prevents her from leaving her house. Still, she is a respected and animated member of her community.

During intermission, Newland visits May in her family's box, as a show of support in light of the scandalous appearance of Ellen. He suggests that they announce their engagement right away to restore dignity to the Welland family. After a brief conversation with Ellen, Newland is intrigued by her lack of regard for the rules and conventions of New York.

Regina and Julius Beaufort host a ball after the opera, where Newland and May announce their engagement. The newly engaged couple visits Catherine to seek her blessing, and as they are leaving her house, Ellen arrives with Julius Beaufort. Newland concludes that Ellen's European experience has rendered her unaware of the social impropriety of her behavior.

May's parents plan a dinner to be held as a formal introduction of Ellen. When almost everyone refuses to attend, the van der Luydens, an elderly, aristocratic couple, respond by inviting Ellen to their home for a formal reception. Because they are role models of propriety, New York society follows their lead. At the reception, Newland again talks to Ellen and is drawn to her. He visits her the next day and she admits her loneliness. Newland is sympathetic toward her and aware of being anxious in her presence.

## Book 1: Chapters 10-17

As a lawyer, Newland is asked to help convince Ellen not to divorce her husband. Despite his opinion that she should be free to do as she wishes, he agrees and explains to her that although the law may support her divorce, New York society will not. While she may be happier divorced, her happiness will come at a cost to her family. Resigned, she agrees not to pursue the matter.



May and her family go to St. Augustine for the winter, and Newland sees Ellen at the opera. Soon after, he discovers that she has gone away with the van der Luydens to Skuytercliff, so he follows her. Once there, he finds Ellen and they speak in private until, to their surprise, Julius arrives. Newland realizes then that Julius is pursuing Ellen romantically, and he returns to New York. When Ellen sends a note asking to see him, he instead leaves for St. Augustine.

Newland asks May to move up their wedding date. May suggests that he is only asking because he loves another woman and is impatient to do the honorable thing. She adds that if he does truly love someone else, she will step aside for his sake. Newland denies loving anyone but her.

Returning to New York, Newland visits Catherine to persuade her to allow the wedding to be hastened. She agrees.

Newland visits Ellen the next evening. He tells her that she is the woman he should be marrying, if it were possible. They kiss, but when Newland offers to leave May, Ellen will not hear of it. She has learned from him that it is wrong to gain happiness at the expense of others.

## **Book 2: Chapters 19-26**

May and Newland marry and go to an estate near Skuytercliff for their wedding night. While in London on their honeymoon, Newland meets a French tutor, Monsieur Rivière, who inquires about opportunities in New York. Newland sadly realizes that there is nothing for an intellectual like Rivière in New York.

After returning home, Newland hears that Ellen has gone to Boston, so he lies about a business trip in order to see her. She is surprised to see him and explains that she has just met with her husband's emissary. Although he offered a great deal of money for her to return, she rejected it. Newland and Ellen go to lunch, where he bemoans the fact that he married May because Ellen told him to do so. She agrees to stay close as long as they never do anything that would hurt May.

Back in New York, Newland runs into Rivière, who reveals that he was the emissary sent by the Count to speak to Ellen. After a very tense discussion, the men realize that neither of them thinks it is in her best interest to return to Poland. Newland secretly wonders if Rivière is the secretary with whom Ellen was reported to have run away.

At Thanksgiving, everyone discusses rumors of Julius' financial problems. Next, they gossip about Ellen, who has gone to Washington. When Sillerton Jackson suggests that Ellen is being "kept" by Julius, and therefore will be in dire straits should he lose his money, Newland becomes enraged. At home, Newland tells May that he has business in Washington. She assents to his leaving, adding that he should be sure to see Ellen while he is there, thus letting him know that she is aware of his real reason for making the trip.





## Book 2: Chapters 27-34

Julius faces financial ruin and public scorn. His wife visits Catherine, the head of her family, to ask for help, but she is rejected. Catherine then suffers a mild stroke, after which she sends for Ellen. Newland cancels his Washington trip and offers to pick Ellen up from the station. In the carriage, he speaks openly of how he longs to find a way for them to be together. When she responds with talk of reality rather than dreams, he gets out of the carriage to walk home.

Catherine's condition improves, and she sends for Newland. She explains that Ellen has agreed to stay and take care of her, and she wants Newland to defend Ellen to the family. Thinking that Ellen has agreed to stay in order to be closer to him, he agrees.

Newland and Ellen meet at a museum. They talk of their helplessness in their situation, and Ellen insists that they not fall into the common trap of having an affair. That night, May is in good spirits and tells him that she visited Catherine and, while there, had a nice talk with Ellen.

A few nights later, Newland prepares to tell May about his feelings for Ellen. May interrupts and tells him that whatever he has to say makes no difference, since Ellen has decided to leave for Paris. Newland decides that he will follow her.

May hosts an elaborate going-away dinner for Ellen. Although Newland does not have the opportunity to talk to Ellen privately before she is driven home, he resolves to go through with his plan. After the guests have gone, he tells May that he has decided to travel. She responds by telling him that she will be unable to go with him because she is pregnant. She admits that two weeks before, when she reported having such a good talk with Ellen, May had told Ellen she was pregnant, even though she was not yet sure of it.

The novel's last chapter takes place twenty-six years later. May has given Newland three children (two boys and a girl) and has died of pneumonia two years previously. Newland has lived an honorable life, all the while harboring memories of Ellen. Called to Paris on business, Newland's older son, Dallas, insists that his father accompany him. There, Dallas arranges for a meeting with Ellen. In a frank conversation, Dallas admits that he knows something of his father's past with Ellen, as May had revealed to him that Newland had given up the thing he wanted most in favor of his family.

When Newland and Dallas approach Ellen's building, Newland tells Dallas to go in without him. Dallas asks what he should tell Ellen, and Newland responds, "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough." As Newland sits outside the building, he imagines the meeting going on inside and ultimately determines not to go in. He walks back to his hotel.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The story takes place in the early 1870's. It is January, and the setting is the Academy of Music in New York City during a production of *Faust*. The press, for that season's showing of *Faust*, had been very good. Scenes from the musical are described throughout this chapter.

The author explains the hierarchy of transportation that the "who's who" of New York society had available to them. There are private broughams, family landau, or brown coupes. The advantage of having a private coupe is that its owner is able to bypass a crowd to make a quick exit.

We are introduced to Newland Archer, a young man who was raised to abide by the rules of society. He arrives fashionably late to the musical after dining with his mother and sister, whom he lives with.

Newland contemplates the significance of his arrival coinciding with the character in the opera proclaiming her love. He looks at the opera box of Mrs. Manson Mingott filled with her family members. Mrs. Mingott rarely appears in society as she is an obese woman and unable to walk long distances or climb stairs. Respect for the woman, however, is so great that people earnestly visit her home in the unfashionably northern part of the city. The family member who most interests Newland is his fiancée, and Mrs. Mingott's granddaughter, the young and beautiful May Welland,. Suddenly, there is much commotion in the Mingott club box. The opera audience reacts to the arrival of a new, controversial family member.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 sets up all background information for the reader. It is winter in New York City during the late 19th century. The story is told through the eyes of Newland Archer, a wealthy young man of good social standing, who has just decided to marry a young woman from comparative social standing and wealth. This chapter also sets up a shocking, unusual occurrence, which is the new arrival in the Mingott opera box.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Newland Archer does not welcome the sudden attention directed at the box in which May sits. He, as decent manners dictate, does not care to draw negative attention towards them or do anything to invite gossip. The new arrival, Countess Ellen Olenska, has already created much gossip, and he does not want any additional marks against the family he was to marry into. Ellen is May's cousin. She married a foreign French Count, but had recently left him and returned to America to take refuge with her family. It is said that Ellen's husband was an awful man, who treated her very badly. It is also said that Ellen ran away with his secretary.

Fleeing with her husband's secretary was an unforgivable act. Additionally, it is not acceptable that this woman not return to her husband, for a married woman is obligated to stay with their husband, no matter what the circumstances. Newland Archer knows that the Welland family will put up a united, public front in support of Ellen, but even he is surprised that they allowed her to come to the opera.

Newland then thinks of old Mrs. Mingott and how she must be handling this. He describes her unusual cream colored house situated north of the fashionable part of town. He then envisions her home. It's laid out upside down, with the parlor and bedroom located on the main level, as her obesity does not allow her to traverse stairs. But, she is such a New York institution that no one refuses an invitation.

Newland is brought back from his thoughts by the vocal musings of the gentlemen surrounding him. As they exchange rumors and gossip, he leaves the gentleman's club and enters the Mingott's box. He whispers to May, asking if she had told her cousin about their marriage plans. She answers no, but tells him he may do so himself. As Newland and Ellen were childhood friends, she greets him familiarly. She recalls their childhood escapades and even confesses that she'd had a childhood crush on one of his cousins. Newland is stunned at her informal nature.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 explains the new arrival of Countess Ellen Olenska, and the unusual circumstances surrounding it. The most important event in this chapter is Newland and Ellen's first meeting since they were childhood friends. Although Newland finds Ellen's frank speech very unladylike, he is also intrigued by her unusual mannerisms.

It's also made clear that stirring up rumors and calling too much attention to oneself was considered extremely unsavory in New York society. When faced with a negative situation, well-bred individuals kept a united, family front and pretended all was well. Newland, being a gentleman who has lived his whole life in high society, knows

immediately what he must do. He will announce his engagement to May that night. The announcement will hopefully take away some of the attention from Ellen's arrival.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

It's the night of the annual Beaufort ball. The Beaufort's have one of the few proper ballrooms in New York, and it's considered a luxury to have such a large room that is only used once a year. Mrs. Julius Beaufort was once Regina Dallas, a descendant of a prominent family, but herself poor. Julius, her husband, was a foreigner from England. Within two years of coming to America and making the unlikely match with Regina, he became a prominent member of society, accumulating much wealth and inhabiting one of the grandest residences. That had been over twenty years ago. While Beaufort was not well liked by most, they did look forward to the annual ball. It was well-known that he was the one that ran the household, not his wife, which was the norm. It was also well-known that Beaufort kept a mistress. Either his wife did not know or had resigned herself to the fact.

Newland Archer, for the second time that night, arrives fashionably late to the event. Instead of joining the other young men of his standing at the club, he spends the time between the opera and the ball walking the streets of New York, thinking. Specifically, he thinks that the Welland's have taken their family solidarity too far in bringing Ellen to the opera. He hopes they don't bring her to the ball.

Upon entering the ballroom, Newland's eyes quickly rest upon May. Surrounded by a group of young people, she gleefully announces her engagement. Newland wishes the announcement could have taken place under happier circumstances. He joins the group and takes his fiancé out to the dance floor. Newland is happy that his soon-to-be bride understands the need to announce their engagement that night. He believes that he and May always knew what the other was thinking, and this will make their marriage ideal.

After the dance, Newland leads May out to the garden where they find a secluded bench. Newland steals a kiss from May; only their second. They discuss whether or not Newland has told Ellen about their engagement. When Newland confesses that he hasn't, May urges him to do so, as she's already made a public announcement. Newland agrees and wonders where she is. He soon learns that Ellen had planned to come, but decided at the last minute that she was not dressed for the occasion.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The Beaufort ball affords the author a way to explain the Beaufort's standing in society. New York did not take kindly to foreigners without a high social standing. Also, no one knew exactly where Mr. Julius Beaufort came from. Although Mrs. Beaufort is a cousin of both May and Ellen, the Beaufort's are widely recognized as common people who happen to be extremely wealthy. To make up for this, they throw grand balls to please New York society and gain favor.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The next day, the traditional betrothal visits commence. First, Newland takes his mother and sister to visit Mrs. Welland. After, Mrs. Welland accompanies the young couple as they call on family members and other important people in society. The first visit is, of course, to old Mrs. Mingott, May's grandmother. They make the long trip to her eccentric house and visit in the front parlor attached to her bedroom. Mrs. Mingott's immense size and rolls of flesh are described. May shows her grandmother her engagement ring and is rewarded with approval. Newland begins his campaign to get May's family to agree to a shorter betrothal, so they can marry as soon as possible. Sighting strong, young love, Mrs. Mingott agrees. May's parents are Newland's only obstacle.

In the middle of their visit, Ellen arrives with Julius Beaufort. After meeting in Madison Square, Mr. Beaufort walked Ellen home. Mr. Beaufort pulls up a chair and is soon engrossed in conversation with Mrs. Mingott. Ellen draws Newland, Mrs. Welland, and May into the hallway. Seizing the opportunity, Newland asks Ellen if she knows about the engagement. She does and offers her congratulations.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 explains the ceremony and duties of an engaged couple of the late nineteenth century in New York. These include a formal schedule of social calls, and a long engagement lasting at least a year.

This chapter also introduces the beginning of Newland's quest to convince May's parents to shorten their engagement. He reasons that they will be even happier once they are married and shouldn't wait. Some, such as Mrs. Mingott, believe that it is love and passion causing Newland's haste. However, there is no sign of a passionate relationship between May and Newland. They're only two people who grew up in the same world, and who get along with one another. At this point, Newland's reasoning is hard to believe.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

The night after the ball, Mr. Stillerton Jackson dines at the Archer's house with Newland, Mrs. Archer, and Janey, Newland's sister. Mr. Jackson is known as a good storyteller and gossip. He is also the person one invited to dinner, when they wanted to know the inner goings of society. Inevitably, the talk turns to the arrival of Ellen Olenska. They talk about the fact that it looks as if the Mingotts and Wellands are putting on a brave, united front, as to squash any further negative comments. Mrs. Archer does not sympathize with Ellen's situation and believes her to be in very bad taste. Mr. Jackson tells them that Ellen plans to find a house in town. Janey heard that Ellen plans to get a divorce. Newland speaks up by saying that he agrees that she should get a divorce. This shocks everyone at the table.

Newland tells the group that he has heard that the secretary, who Ellen ran away with, was merely helping her escape her husband. Mr. Jackson tells him he heard differently, and that Ellen was found living with her husband's secretary a year later. Newland, again, supports Ellen. He says that women should be as free as men. Ellen's husband was seen with a number of women, and it would be hypocrisy if she wasn't allowed the same freedom. It is mentioned that perhaps Ellen's husband feels the same way as he has not tried to get her back.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The conversation at the dinner table is the first instance of Newland championing Ellen's cause, and not just for the sake of family unity.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

After dinner, Newland Archer retires to his study. He sits at his desk and studies a picture of May Welland, his intended. She looks so beautiful and innocent. He is feeling unsettled because the arrival of Ellen Olenska has stirred up feelings he would rather not think of.

Newland had longed believed, against society, that women should be as free as men. As they entered into marriage, his wife was to forget about his past with other women, and he was supposed to be secure in the fact that his new bride had no past at all. But, he was aware of their many differences. May was not brought up with a love of literature and travel as he was. Of course, Newland was trying his best to teach her so that they may have stimulating conversations. She was also not nearly as advanced as he in philosophy.

Given her life inexperience, May will bring no opinions of her own to their conversations. Neither will she hold his attention with her own stories of travel, adventure or life experience, for she has none. She was raised to defer to her husband on all manners. The rules of society seemed to create a situation where their union would harbor no true passion. Instead it was a marriage of convenience and similar situation. Even still, Newland simply believed it was time to settle down.

Three days later, the Lovell Mingotts send out invitations to a dinner with express purpose to introduce the Countess Ellen Olenska to society. The guests had been carefully selected, yet within two days, every guest refuses the initiation except for the Beauforts, Mr. Jackson and his sister. As New York society was a small group, it was clear that the guests were against the idea of welcoming Ellen Olenska into their inner circle. Once Newland Archer learns of the events, he pleads with his mother to make the case to her cousin, Lousia van der Luyden, whom, with her husband, was at the top of the social pyramid.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 builds upon the conversation of the previous chapter. Newland is not only championing Ellen's cause, but that of all women who deserve the same freedom allowed to men. This is quite a liberal idea in the nineteenth century. Newland's beliefs arouse unsettling thoughts about his wife having not been able to enjoy all the freedoms he has. She will be entering their marriage with no history, no stories or opinions of her own. It would be his job to teach her that she doesn't have to be the docile creature she was raised to be. As Newland desires a wife who he could have lively, challenging conversations with, he convinces himself that he can change May.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Henry and Lousia van der Luyden listen to both Newland and Mrs. Archer's explanation of the events. Although they prefer to stay home, rather than socialize, they enjoy the power they have over the small, tight-knit New York society. They dislike how everyone has so rudely refused the invitation to meet Ellen Olenska. The Henry van der Luydens agree to include the Countess at a dinner they are throwing in honor of the visiting Duke of St. Austrey. The inclusion of Ellen Olenska at this premier event will surely send a message to all who refused the earlier dinner invitation.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 merely shows the power the van der Luyden's hold over society, and how close Mrs. Archer and son are to that power.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

A week later, Newland Archer nervously watches Ellen Olenska enter the van der Lyden drawing room. She needs only to present herself tonight, in order to be accepted into New York society. Newland notes that Ellen looks a little older than her age. She's paler, and some of her youthful vibrancy was gone. However, there was still something so mysteriously beautiful about her.

After dinner, Newland Archer watches Ellen Olenska talk with the duke. Apparently, they met each other in Europe while Ellen was with her husband. Then, the unthinkable happens as Ellen suddenly crosses the room to speak with Newland. It was custom for a lady to remain seated and wait for a gentleman to come and speak with them. Ellen Olenska seems to be unaware or unconcerned about this rule of social norm.

Ellen approached Newland to decipher whether or not it was a love match between him and her cousin May. Newland convinces her that it was so. Upon leaving him, she announces that she expects him to call on her the next evening, although there was no mention of it in their conversation.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 shows Newland's fascination with Ellen growing. He believes her beautiful in an unconventional way, and although he is shocked again by her unladylike behavior, he finds that she is able to hold her own in a conversation. Equally enticing, Newland is always surprised at what she thinks of next. At the end of their conversation, Ellen, in her own way, sets up their next encounter, inviting him to call on her the next evening.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Newland isn't sure why but he goes to Ellen Olenska's house the next evening. She lives in an unfashionable part of town, an area populated by writers and artists. When he arrives, he is informed that Ellen is out and should return shortly. Newland is astounded that she had asked him to come over, only to make him wait. After Ellen finally arrives, they talk about the dinner at the van der Lyden's and other subjects. He is pleasantly surprised that she has her own opinions and is not afraid to voice them. She makes astute observations that he has never noticed. Ellen challenges him and makes him laugh.

Just as Ellen tells Newland that she's very lonely among people who make such an effort to keep up appearances, the Duke of St. Austrey interrupts. He is accompanied by Mrs. Struthers, a woman who had not been invited to the dinner, but who wanted to meet Ellen. Mrs. Struthers invites Ellen to her house on Sunday, and offers an eclectic, more informal type of amusement that was often lacking in society.

On Newland's way home, he stops at the florist. Every morning, he sent a bouquet of lily of the valley to May, but for some reason, he had forgotten to this morning. Instead of rectifying his mistake, he impulsively sends them to Ellen Olenska without an accompanying card.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

In this chapter, Newland furthers his relationship with Ellen. He likes talking to her. She has opinions of her own, probably coming from the fact that she has a history. She has traveled, lived in Europe and developed an interest in the arts. Newland is beginning to see that Ellen has enjoyed the freedoms that he believes women should have. The act of recognizing a type of flower that he thinks Ellen may like and sending it to her, further exemplifies his fondness.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

The next day, Newland takes May for a walk in the park. He mentions that he had sent roses to Ellen and asks if that was alright. May thinks it a lovely gesture. Newland then begins to press May on getting her parents to agree to a shorter engagement. May is reluctant to push her parents and believes that they surely know what is best. A long engagement was the norm for a couple in their social standing.

Newland begins to wonder when someone of May's upbringing would decide to make decisions for herself and not just listen to either her parents or her husband. He again reassures himself with the belief that it is his duty to make sure she cultivates her own opinions and learns how to express them.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 builds upon Newland's desire to help May learn about the world around her and form her own opinions.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

A couple of weeks later, Newland Archer, sitting in his law office, is asked to speak to his superior. Ellen Olenska has filed a petition for a divorce, and the senior partner wants Newland to take care of it. Mainly, he wants him to persuade Ellen to cancel the divorce request, as was her family wishes. Newland protests, citing it was unfair as he was practically family. However, the senior partner insists that for just that reason he was perfect for the job. Newland agrees to look over the papers.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 introduces the fact that Newland will be taking care of Ellen's divorce papers. This chapter also alludes to the inner conflict that Newland is having over such a request. He believes both that women should stay with their husbands, but also that Ellen is right in asking for a divorce as her husband treated her poorly. On the other hand, he is to be a part of May's family, and they wish for Ellen to drop the case.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Newland arrives at Ellen's house that evening, as agreed. He is immediately angered that Julius Beaufort is already visiting with Mrs. Olenska. After some pleasantries are exchanged, Beaufort takes his leave. Newland reminds Ellen that if she pushes for a divorce from her husband, awful public accusations will ensue. Newland is, of course, referring to the rumors that she had run off with her husband's secretary. Ellen does not understand what more harm this could possibly cause her. Newland asks if there is anything that she can do to prove that the accusations are untrue. Ellen offers no proof. Newland is disappointed; he had secretly hoped the rumors were false.

Newland does not understand why Ellen wishes to go through with the divorce. What would she gain? She responds by saying that she would regain her freedom. Newland again tries to convince her to stop the divorce petition. Abruptly she agrees, telling him that she will not ask for the divorce, because it is what Newland wants.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

In the course of discussing the matter of Ellen's divorce, the subject of the secretary came up. When pressed, Ellen neither confirmed nor denied the rumors that she had lived with said secretary after she left her husband. Miserably, Newland believes that by not denying it, it must be true. He secretly hoped it was only a rumor, and that she was an innocent party to her husband's cruelty. Suddenly, Ellen tells Newland that she will drop the case, because it is what he wishes. This is the first instance where Ellen backs down from her position for anyone. It is also curious that she does so for Newland. This is perhaps her first open gesture of fondness for and trust in him.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Ellen's family is pleased with Newland for convincing Ellen to drop the divorce.

Once again, the chapter leads us to the ballroom. This time, however, Newland is in the Mingott family opera box. Ellen tells him that she knows he is the one sending the yellow roses, once after their meeting, and once after their divorce discussion. The two are clearly flirting with each other.

At the same time, May and her family leave for their annual vacation at their Florida house. It is believed that the warmer Florida air is beneficial for Mr. Welland's poor health.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

This is the first instance where Ellen and Newland openly flirt with each other. Their liking of each other is increasing.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

The morning after the opera, Newland searches florists for yellow roses, but finds none. He sends a note out to Ellen but doesn't receive a response for three days. On the third day, a response comes from Skuytercliff, the van der Luyden's country estate. In the note, she tells Newland that she "ran away" to "think things over." He wonders what Ellen means. What was she running away from?

Newland had planned on spending the weekend with a box of new books, but he instead accepts a previous invitation from Mrs. Reggie to spend the weekend at the Reggie's estate, conveniently located near Skuytercliff.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter shows an increase in the drama surrounding Ellen and Newland. His willingness to abandon his plans to follow her upstate is a gesture that betrays his feelings. The mysterious circumstances in which Ellen "ran away" add to the suspense.





# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Newland finds Ellen walking in the snow, on the way back from church, with Mrs. van der Luyden. She knew that he would come and tells him so. Newland wants to know what she is running from. In the moments that pass, Newland imagines Ellen walking up to him from behind and throwing her arms around him. He is prepared and full of anticipation, as she walks up to him and slides her hand in his. Suddenly, he sees Mr. Beaufort from the corner of his eye. Ellen did not look happy to see Mr. Beaufort. Newland believes that Ellen was expecting Mr. Beaufort and not himself as she said. He calls out to Beaufort and leaves the two of them alone.

When Newland is back in New York, Ellen sends a letter asking him to call on her the following night. Then, she would explain everything. Instead, Newland packs his bags and leaves for an impromptu visit with May and her family in Florida.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

In Chapter 15, the reader is clued into the fact that Ellen has run away to escape the feelings she has developed for Newland. Newland believes this at first, too, and waits in anticipation for her to confess it. Then, upon seeing Beaufort, he misinterprets the situation and makes his exit.

Upon returning to New York, he ignores Ellen's request to explain. Instead, Newland runs away under the guise of visiting his fiancé and her family.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

During Newland's visit, he pushes May to convince her parents to let them marry soon. May is reluctant and asks Newland if the reason that he is pushing to shorten their engagement is because there is someone else. May suspects that Newland is still in love with the married woman he had once had a known affair with. Newland adamantly denies these allegations, and May is satisfied that Newland does wish to marry her.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Chapter 16 reveals the first indecision May has over marrying Newland. She has suspicions that Newland is still in love with a woman he had once had an affair with. In her questioning, she gives Newland a way out of their engagement, although he does not take it. He successfully convinces May that he had no ulterior motive behind shortening their engagement.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Back in New York, Newland calls on old Mrs. Mingott, who asks him why he did not marry her Ellen. Newland presses on with his reason for the visit. He asks Mrs. Mingott to use her influence to try to convince the Wellands to allow him to marry May sooner.

On his way out, he asks Ellen, who has stopped by, if he can see her. They agree that he will call on her the following evening.

When Newland arrives at Ellen's the following evening, he is surprised that she has other guests, including his friend, Ned Winsett, a Dr. Carver, and the Marchioness Medora Manson, Ellen's aunt. Ellen is not in the drawing room. The Marchioness Manson thanks Newland for counseling Ellen to drop the matter of the divorce. She hopes that he will be of service once again by helping to convince her to return to her husband. Newland replies that he would rather see her dead.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Newland continues his quest to marry May sooner than the long engagement would allow. While at Mrs. Mingott's, she jokes, as she often does, that Newland should have married Ellen. This comment, as always, makes Newland uncomfortable.

Newland also continues championing Ellen. He goes as far as to say he would rather see her dead than back in the arms of her husband. This is a strong statement that reveals that he must have powerful feelings toward her.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Ellen finally joins her guests. Her aunt points out the fact that someone has sent her a bouquet. She takes one look at it and orders her maid to take it away. The flowers had come from the Count. The guests take their leave. Newland and Ellen are alone.

Newland tells Ellen of his visit to Florida, and May's suspicion that he is in love with someone else. Newland tells Ellen that May was half right. He was in love with another woman, just not the one that May suspected. He sits next to Ellen and tells her that she is the woman he wishes to marry if it was possible. She tells him that it was he that made it impossible, for she dropped the matter of the divorce only after his insistence. Newland promises to rectify everything. He can still break his engagement to May and help her get her divorce. Just then, a telegram arrives from May. In the short note May tells her cousin that her parents have finally agreed to let her marry Newland very soon.

Newland arrives home to find a telegram from May containing the same news. He tells his sister that he will be married in a month.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Ellen's immediate refusal of the bouquet of flowers shows her intense distain towards her husband. After the other guests leave the tension between Ellen and Newland come to a head. They reveal their feelings toward each other. Newland is confident that they can be together. He will cancel his engagement and help her get a divorce. Ellen does not want to hurt May. Just then a telegram arrives ending his hopes of canceling the wedding, not when he has succeeded in getting the wedding moved up.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Chapter 19 begins book two of The Age of Innocence. Newland marries May in what is rumored to be the event of the season. Ellen does not attend the wedding. The couple spend the first few nights as Mr. and Mrs. in the old Patroon house, thanks to the van der Luydens.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

This chapter simply describes a New York society wedding during this time period. The couple's first honeymoon destination is also revealed as being the house in which Ellen first tried to confess her feelings for Newland.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

Months later, Newland and May Archer are dining in London, having traveled through Europe on their honeymoon trip. They had agreed to a dinner invitation from an old family friend of Mrs. Janey Archer. May is reluctant to go, citing that she does not know what to wear or what she will say. Newland wonders if May had always been so preoccupied with clothing and so unsure of herself in new social situations. Throughout their honeymoon, Newland has finds himself disappointed in his new wife. She dislikes travel, or even conversation for the sake of conversation. Despite his efforts, she does not want to look about her own world and taste her freedom.

The dinner party is very small. May's attempt at conversation is poor until the men finally stop engaging her. Newland meets a Mr. Riviere, whom he enjoys conversing with. May, on the other hand, feels the guests are overly common.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Newland begins to realize that May is not all he thought her to be. She does not like to travel nearly as much as he does. In addition, he did not know how preoccupied she was with clothing and looking just right. Finally, her conversational abilities are greatly lacking.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

The next summer, Newland and May Archer are summering in Newport, as people of their standing do. Archer tries to convince May to spend the summer on a remote island off the coast of Maine, but to no avail. May and her family always summered in Newport. May is very athletically inclined and enjoys archery and a new game called tennis. Newland recalls to himself the house in the city that May and he settled into upon their return from their honeymoon.

After an archery contest in which May wins, the couple visit old Mrs. Mingott before dinner. Mrs. Mingott asks Newland to fetch Ellen, who is staying with her, from down by the shore. Newland does as he is asked and sees Ellen staring into the water. He plays a game telling himself that he will call out and fetch her if she turns around by the time a boat reaches a point in the distance. He waits and the boat sails by. Ellen never turns around, so Newland makes his way back to the house.

On their way home, May remarks that she wishes she had seen Ellen, but then again, Ellen had changed so much. She sold her home in the city and was living a fairly remote life. Ellen wondered out loud whether she would be happier back with her husband. Her husband told her that it was a cruel thought. That night, as he lay beside his wife, Newland remains awake, thinking of Ellen.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

Newland and May settle into married life, as they have been expected to do. They are also summering in Newport, as they are expected to do.

While at Mrs. Mingott's, Newland has a chance to see and talk to Ellen. This was his first chance since marrying May. Instead, he plays a game with himself and does not engage in a conversation he wishes he did.



## Chapter 22

### Chapter 22 Summary

With the Welland's off at a luncheon, Newland has the day to himself. He tells the family that he will drive out to look at a horse available for purchase. His real plan is to find Ellen afterwards. First, he takes a quick look at the horse, which proves to be not what he was looking for. Then, he reaches the house that Ellen Olenska is said to be staying in, only to hear that she has gone to Boston to attend to a business matter. Newland decides to make the trip to Boston the next day.

### Chapter 22 Analysis

Again, Newland travels to visit Ellen. He lies to May to do so, yet his trip proves unsuccessful when he finds she has gone to Boston. He goes even further by spontaneously choosing to follow her there.





# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

Newland arrives in Boston via the morning train. He decides to have breakfast and then sends a note to the hotel Ellen is staying at. His messenger returns and tells Newland that she is out. Newland can not believe this and suddenly sees Ellen sitting on a bench. Ellen informs him that her husband has offered her a huge sum of money to return, but she has refused. Newland convinces her to spend the day with him. They take a boat out on the bay and eat lunch on a private balcony.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

In Chapter 23, Ellen is surprised to see Newland, but decides to spend the day with them. They both agree to be friendly and not bring up the feelings they have toward one another.



# Chapter 24

## Chapter 24 Summary

Over lunch, they talk about each other's lives since their last meeting. One of them finally brings up what they had been avoiding all day. They both confess that they have been miserable without the other. She promises him that she will not go back to her husband as long as they keep their relationship with one another decent and proper.

## Chapter 24 Analysis

The two cannot avoid the very subject they promised not to discuss. Newland still wants to be with Ellen, but she does not want to hurt May.



# Chapter 25

## Chapter 25 Summary

Once they depart, Newland sits in the library to review the hours he spent with Ellen. He decides that if Ellen felt tempted in anyway by Newland, then that would be the only reason she would return to her husband.

Upon returning to New York City, he bumps into Mr. Riviere, the man he met in London on his honeymoon. The two agree to meet later that day at Newland's office. During their meeting, it is revealed that Mr. Riviere is the messenger sent by the Count to convince Ellen to come back. He tells Newland that he takes his mission seriously, but knows that Ellen is better off without her husband. In fact, he is the very one who originally helped her escape. Mr. Riviere knows that he is the only one in the family that does not agree that Ellen should return to her husband. He tells Newland to do his best to prevent Ellen's return to her husband.

## Chapter 25 Analysis

Coincidentally, the man that Newland had met in London is none other than the messenger sent by the Count. Throughout their conversation, Newland switches from being angry at Mr. Riviere, to thankful that he understands why Ellen cannot go back to her husband.



# Chapter 26

## Chapter 26 Summary

Mr. Jackson is having dinner with Mrs. Archer, Janey, Newland and May. They talk of how the rules of society have changed. Mrs. Archer thinks they've changed for the worse. They also speak of the rumors that Mr. Beaufort has committed some sort of unlawful business transactions and will soon lose all of his money. When Newland and Mr. Jackson are alone, the talk turns to Ellen's refusal to accept her husband's newest offer. Mr. Jackson insinuates that Beaufort has been supporting Ellen, but his impending bankruptcy will surely prompt her return to her husband. Newland is quite adamant that she will not return.

Later that night, Newland tells May that he will soon have to travel to Washington for business. Coincidentally, Ellen has been living in Washington. For a moment, May questions the business in Washington. However, she accepts the trip.

## Chapter 26 Analysis

With Mr. Jackson, Newland makes the mistake of defending his belief that Ellen will not return to her husband. Mr. Jackson is a known gossip. Newland continues his quest to see Ellen by again lying to May. The author suggests May suspects that Newland is not telling the truth. She even mentions that perhaps he can call on Ellen while he is in Washington.



# Chapter 27

## Chapter 27 Summary

At the office the next day, Newland hears that the case in Washington has been postponed, but he decides to continue with his trip plans. He is delivered a message from his wife. Her granny, old Mrs. Mingott, had a small stroke the night before. Newland leaves right away for Mrs. Mingott's house. It appears that her stroke was caused by the stress of hearing that the rumors concerning Beaufort were indeed true. His wife, a relative of the Mingotts, visited her the evening before and asked for help. Mrs. Mingott told her that she married Mr. Beaufort and must stick with him through his disgrace. Ellen is telegraphed and asked to return to New York immediately.

## Chapter 27 Analysis

Chapter 27 sets the stage for the next series of events concerning the Mingott, Archer and Welland family.



# Chapter 28

## Chapter 28 Summary

Ellen is to arrive twenty-four hours after receiving the telegram. Now, the question is who will pick her up across the river in Jersey City? The family looks at the predicament as just another instance where Ellen has caused them an inconvenience. Newland offers to pick her up. He tells his wife that his trip has been canceled.

## Chapter 28 Analysis

Ellen's family now only recognizes her as an inconvenience. She is someone who exists only to make their life more difficult. Newland offers to meet Ellen at the train station. Doing so not only fulfills his family obligation, but also allows him time alone with Ellen. May is again outwardly suspicious at Newland's sudden announcement about his trip cancellation.

# Chapter 29

## Chapter 29 Summary

Newland meets Ellen, with his wife's carriage, at the train station in Jersey City. She is surprised to see him there. He tells her that he had made plans to travel to Washington to see her. He kisses her palm, and she moves away and begins to talk of May. Ellen tells him that this thing between them cannot go on. She will not have an affair with him and hurt May. Newland wishes to go away, far away, where they can be together. Ellen points out the folly in this plan. They come to no resolution and Newland stops the carriage. He gets out in the snow and admits it was a mistake to come.

## Chapter 29 Analysis

The time that Ellen and Newland spend together in the carriage is simply a repeat of what happened in Boston. Neither of them denies their feelings toward one another, but while Newland is willing to leave May, Ellen will not hurt her cousin.



# Chapter 30

## Chapter 30 Summary

A few days later, Mrs. Mingott asks for Newland to visit her. Mrs. Mingott asks for his help in convincing the family that Ellen should remain in New York and help care for her. Mrs. Mingott knows that Newland is on her side, because his name is never mentioned in the family's arguments to her.

## Chapter 30 Analysis

In Chapter 30, Newland is first made aware that the family is purposely excluding him from discussions concerning Ellen. They all know that Newland is on the side of Ellen and does not share their wishes.





# Chapter 31

## Chapter 31 Summary

Newland thinks over what Mrs. Mingott has told her. Why had Ellen agreed to stay in New York as Mrs. Mingott seems to be getting better? As he arrives early for his visit with Mrs. Mingott, he had meant to inquire as to when she was leaving to go back to Washington. Then he plans to get on the same train and travel with her, wherever she wants to go. He would have left a note for May.

On his way home, he walks past his own house to avoid May. He notices Mrs. Mingott's carriage waiting outside Mr. Beaufort's house. He waits there for Ellen to finish her visit with Mrs. Beaufort. He tells her that they must be alone, and they agree to meet the next afternoon at the art museum in the park.

The next afternoon, they meet at the museum and wander into an empty exhibit room. He asks her if she decided to stay in New York because she is afraid of him coming to Washington. She tells him yes. Here, she believes they will be safer from hurting others, from doing harm they cannot reverse.

She asks him if she should come once to him and then return to her husband. He is excited at the possibility of being with her, but not of her returning to her husband. He then agrees to her coming over once, the day after the next. He hopes that at that time he can persuade her not to return to her husband after all.

## Chapter 31 Analysis

Newland confesses to himself that he was planning on leaving May when Ellen traveled back to Washington. While meeting with Ellen she tells him that she had guessed as much and thus decided to stay. She did not want May to get hurt. Neither of them wishes for Ellen to become Newland's mistress. They want to be together, but there is no way. Upon parting, they agree that she will come to him only once before going back to her husband. Newland, however, does not believe that will be the end. He thinks that he will either convince her to stay or run away with her for good.



# Chapter 32

## Chapter 32 Summary

Newland, his wife, mother, sister and Mr. Jackson are dining at the van der Luyden's home before the opera. Talk inevitably turns to the Beaufort bankruptcy and Ellen. No one at the table can understand how Ellen thought it would be okay to call on her cousin, Mrs. Beaufort. They think that she has odd tastes and no sense of propriety. They reason that her behavior is a result of living in Europe for so long.

In the middle of the play, Newland tells his wife that he has a headache. The couple leaves. At home, he sits May down and tells her that he has something to tell her. He continues by saying Ellen's name. May is impatient, saying that she does not understand why they need to talk as Ellen is leaving. Newland is confused. May explains that it was settled that morning. Granny agreed to allow her to keep her allowance and move back to Europe, but stay independent of her husband. May reveals that she had a long talk with Ellen the day before, and this morning, she had received a note from her announcing her plans. May then excuses herself, claiming that she has a headache.

## Chapter 32 Analysis

Chapter 32 emphasizes the contempt that people in society feel towards Ellen and her abnormal ways. This chapter also shows Newland's first attempt to talk honestly with his wife. It seems that once again, Newland is purposely left out of any family talk concerning Ellen. Newland is confused as to why Ellen suddenly decides to leave for Europe.



# Chapter 33

## Chapter 33 Summary

The occasion for Newland and May Archer's first truly large affair at their new house is a going away dinner for Countess Ellen Olenska. Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer and May prepare for every aspect of the event. Newland agrees to play his part for the evening, but he has thought it over, and by leaving for Europe, nothing prevents him from following Ellen. As the evening progresses, it becomes apparent that all of New York society, including May, believes that he and Ellen are lovers. This is May's way of coming out on top and sending Ellen off.

After all the guests have left, Newland asks to speak with May. Newland tells her that he needs a break and needs to go far away. May tells him that he will have to bring her with him, but she does not think the doctor will let her as she is pregnant. Newland is surprised. He asks if anyone else knows. She answers that her mother, his mother and Ellen know. He asks May when she told Ellen. May tells him that she told Ellen when they had had that long talk. Newland expresses his confusion as that was over a week ago. Why had May told him that she had just found out that day? May confesses that she had told Ellen that she was sure, even though she was not.

## Chapter 33 Analysis

It seems as if the joke was either on Newland or the dinner party guests. All already believe Ellen to be his lover, yet they never were. Newland has only planned to go through the guise of the party and then leave May to join Ellen. It is only after the party when he tries to speak to May that she tells him that she is pregnant. Furthermore, she confesses that she told Ellen more than a week ago. The reader and Newland are lead to believe that May had suspicions that her husband may leave her for Ellen, and telling her cousin she was pregnant would force Ellen to do the right thing. Ellen did not announce her intention to move back to Europe until after May told her she was pregnant.



# Chapter 34

## Chapter 34 Summary

It is twenty five years later and Newland Archer sits in his library. He thinks about how his life has gone, and how many things have changed. After May told him she was pregnant, he abandoned any thought of leaving her for Ellen. They raised three children; Dallas, who favored art and design and was very close to his father, Mary who was athletic and so much like May, and Bill who had caught pneumonia at a young age. Bill had recovered, but May had died nursing him back to health nearly two years before.

Archer tried his hand at politics, spending a year in the State Assembly, but was mostly known for being a good citizen. He was someone whose opinion was highly regarded and sought after.

Just then, he receives a call from Dallas in Chicago. The architect firm that he works for wants him to make a trip to Europe, and he asks his father to accompany him. He will soon be married to Fanny Beaufort, daughter of former outcast Julius Beaufort, and this will be their last chance to get away with each other. Newland agrees to the trip.

Dallas and Newland are in their hotel in Paris nearing the end of their trip. Dallas casually mentions that Countess Ellen Olenska will be expecting them that evening. Newland had never mentioned Ellen to Dallas and is quite surprised. Fanny had promised Dallas they would visit Ellen who had been such a good friend to Fanny when she was living in Paris. Dallas asks his father what Ellen was like, and if it were true that Ellen used to be to Newland what Fanny is him. It takes some convincing, but Dallas can see no reason why they should break their engagement with Ellen.

They arrive at Ellen's house that evening. Newland tells Dallas to go on up before him. Dallas asks what he should say and when his father will join him. Newland does not answer. Dallas enters the house, and Newland sits outside on a bench by himself. He estimates how long it will take Dallas to go upstairs. He imagines all the people introducing themselves to his son. He thinks to himself that Ellen, that everything was more real to him simply imagining it. Just then, someone comes to the balcony and closes the shutters. As if it were his signal, he stands from the bench and walks back to his hotel.

## Chapter 34 Analysis

Newland thinks over his life with May and their three children. He was a faithful husband in a boring marriage of convenience.

Society had changed drastically. Instead of going into predictable professions, such as law, young men of his children's age were striking down their own path and choosing



careers that truly suited them. His own firstborn had chosen architecture. The closed society that had once harbored such resentment toward a new comer, like Ellen, had welcomed with open arms young women with a previous scandal, such as Mr. Beaufort's daughter Fanny, who was now engaged to Newland's son.

When he is finally presented with the option of seeing Ellen again, both free through the deaths of their spouses, he ultimately decides that the fantasy of what he had, of what he imagined in his mind all those years, would be better than the reality. He never sees Ellen again.



# Characters

## Janey Archer

Janey is Newland's unmarried sister. She lives with her mother and Newland. She and her mother grow ferns, do needlework, and seek out the latest gossip.

## Mrs. Archer

Mrs. Archer is Newland's widowed mother. She and her daughter share a room upstairs so Newland can enjoy having more space to himself downstairs. Mrs. Archer follows social rules and manners to the letter, and tries to protect her grown daughter from certain topics because she is unmarried.

## Newland Archer

The main character of the novel, Newland Archer is a young man who has grown up in New York society. He lives with his widowed mother and his unmarried sister, and is engaged to May Welland. Seeing her as an innocent, he imagines that he will educate her and show her the ways of the world. Because he reads a variety of books, he fancies himself erudite and well-educated, not realizing how much his own thoughts and experiences are limited by his immediate environment. In Chapter One, Wharton writes:

In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number.

Newland has a position as a lawyer, but is not at all serious about his career. This is common in the society depicted, among young men whose families are wealthy.

When he meets Countess Ellen Olenska, Newland is drawn to her mysterious and unconventional ways. She helps him see the artifice of old New York, as he helps her understand the complex demands of decorum. He falls in love with her, but their love is doomed by propriety and responsibility. His struggle is essentially between his individual desires and the good of his community and family.

Newland chooses to stay with his wife, who is pregnant with their first child, but holds onto his memories and fantasies of what might have been. He creates a pleasant life for himself and his family, and even dabbles in politics at the insistence of Theodore Roosevelt. Twenty-six years later, he is a widower and finds himself in Paris, where Ellen is living. Faced with the opportunity to meet her and possibly renew their romance, he decides not to see her.



## Julius Beaufort

Julius was not born into New York society, but is accepted because he has married into a respectable family. The details of his past are shady, a fact which is overlooked once he is a member of high society. His importance in the social arena is strengthened by the fact that he and his wife have the only private ballroom in their community. The annual ball becomes a major social event, and this is where May and Newland announce their engagement. For a short time, Julius pursues Ellen to be his mistress, but she is not interested.

When Julius' unscrupulous business dealings become public knowledge, he and his wife are quickly shunned by society. At the end of the book, Newland's son Dallas is engaged to marry the daughter of Julius and his second wife. The narrator notes that although Julius' ruin was a major event in its time, years later it is barely remembered.

## Regina Beaufort

Regina is a relative of Catherine, head of the Mingott-Welland family. She marries Julius for the unconventional reason that he has recently become a millionaire. Because Regina's husband is considered an outsider, her peers take a little time to accept him.

Regina is beautiful but indecisive, and ignorant of her husband's financial decisions. When Julius' business dealings cause their ruin, Regina visits her mother to ask for help, but she is refused. Catherine tells her that a wife's place is with her husband, in honor or dishonor.

## Sillerton Jackson

Jackson is a bachelor who lives with his sister, Sophy. He has an incredible memory for old gossip and New York families. He is uniquely able to understand how all the pieces of history fit into the sprawling family trees of the upper class. Because he is caught up in gossip, he fails to recognize the goodness and decency in his fellow New Yorkers.

## Lawrence Lefferts

Lefferts is New York's expert on good taste. He often lectures on the virtues of marital fidelity, even though everyone knows about his numerous affairs. Like Jackson, he prefers to focus on negative gossip than on the positive aspects of their social culture.



## Medora Manson

Medora is Ellen's eccentric aunt, who took care of her orphaned niece throughout Ellen's childhood. Medora has been repeatedly widowed and her resources are almost spent, which has no effect on her lively and engaging spirit.

## Catherine Mingott

Formerly Catherine Spicer of Staten Island, Catherine is the Mingott-Welland family matriarch. Widowed at the age of twenty-eight, she lives in a slightly unconventional house, which she never leaves because her obesity will not allow it. Despite her tendency to thumb her nose at established rules, she holds a great deal of social power in her family. The most important thing to her is the integrity of her family, and she is vocal in her criticisms and blessings. Unlike the rest of the family, Catherine likes Ellen very much, and is sympathetic to her.

## Countess Ellen Olenska

Ellen is May's mysterious cousin, who arrives in New York and creates a stir merely by attending the opera. After marrying a Polish count and living in Europe for a number of years, she has determined that her husband is too much of a scoundrel to bear. She has left him, apparently with the help of his secretary, and has returned to New York to seek a divorce. In light of the rules of propriety, her situation is scandalous and risks the good name of her family. In contrast to May, Ellen represents sophistication, worldliness, and tragedy.

Having lived outside the New York milieu, Ellen has acquired "Bohemian" tastes, and she has become an independent woman. Her disregard of New York rules of conduct intrigues Newland, who is sent to talk her out of pursuing the divorce. They begin to spend time together, and realize they are passionately in love with each other. Ellen is unwilling to bring pain to her cousin May, however, so she refuses to run away with Newland. When May tells her she is pregnant, Ellen decides to go to Europe and cease being a distraction to Newland.

## Monsieur Rivière

Newland meets Monsieur Rivière, a French tutor, while he and May are traveling in London on their honeymoon. Later, Rivière shows up in New York, telling Newland that he was sent by Ellen's husband to try to convince her to return to Poland. It is an odd twist of fate, but Newland is most interested to know if Rivière is the secretary with whom Ellen was reported to have run away. The answer is never made clear.





## **Mrs. Thorley Rushworth**

A few years prior to the events of the novel, Newland had an affair with Mrs. Rushworth, a married woman. While the affair in no way marred his reputation, public knowledge of it tarnished her good name. The narrator describes her as "silly" and imagines that she was taken more with the secrecy of the affair than with Newland's charms.

## **Louisa van der Luyden**

Louisa and her husband are the last of the true aristocrats living in New York. Their roots are European and their influence is great, despite their lack of socializing. When Ellen has been disgraced, Mrs. Archer pleads her case to the van der Luydens, who come to her rescue and encourage the other members of society to accept her.

## **MayWelland**

May is the sum of her New York society upbringing. She is beautiful, proper, and innocent. Although she enjoys "masculine" activities, such as sports, she is determined to be a perfect wife to Newland. May seems childlike and carefree, but the reader soon realizes that she is more knowledgeable about the complexities of relationships than Newland is. She knows that he will conform to the dictates of their community, and she uses this to manipulate him. Afraid of losing him to Ellen, her cousin, she tells Ellen that she is pregnant, knowing that Ellen is a decent and honorable person who would never allow herself to be the reason Newland left his wife and baby. She reveals her pregnancy to Newland just as she senses he is preparing to leave her.

May and Newland eventually have three children together. May dies of pneumonia after caring for their son, who recovers from the illness. After her death, Newland discovers that she knew of his love for Ellen and had told their older son that Newland had given up the thing he most wanted for the good of the family. As was proper, however, she never brought up the subject with her husband.

## **Ned Winsett**

A friend of Newland's, Ned is a poor journalist who provides Newland with intelligent conversation and new ideas. Ned encourages Newland to go into politics, but Newland finds the idea laughable until he is much older.

# Themes

## Propriety and Decorum

*The Age of Innocence* is a detailed portrayal of social conventions and respectability in late nineteenth-century high society. Newland has grown up in this environment and has internalized all the manners that dictate behavior in old New York. Even intimate matters are subject to rules of etiquette, as when May lets Newland guess that she cares for him, which is the only declaration of love allowed a young unmarried woman. Gossiping is completely acceptable, yet members of society strive to uphold, above all things, their own reputations. Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts are held up as experts on New York's family trees, proper form, and good taste.

Every event in old New York is subject to ritual. When May and Newland are engaged, they must make a series of social calls. On his wedding day, Newland wonders what flaws Lawrence Lefferts will find in the event. As Ellen prepares to leave for Paris, May hosts a formal dinner in her honor. As May and Newland's first occasion for entertaining on such a scale, the dinner is a milestone for them. At the same time, it serves an important social function, as Wharton writes in chapter 33: "There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe."

The novel's conclusion shows Newland refusing to see Ellen, even though they are both free to be together at last. Some critics argue that Newland's sense of decorum is so deeply ingrained that he cannot bring himself to realize the fantasy he carried around for so many years. James W. Tuttleton, writing in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume Twelve: American Realists and Naturalists*, states that Newland forgoes the chance to have a romantic relationship with Ellen "out of respect for the memory of his marriage." Even as a widower, and even as the strict rules of conduct are passing out of style, Newland cannot bring himself to make decisions outside the parameters of propriety that have governed his life. It seems that things are as they were in chapter 1, where the narrator remarks that "what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago."

## The Role of Women

The contrast between Ellen and May is sharp. May is the pure and beautiful product of old New York and all of its elements. After she and Newland are married, he often observes how she is quickly becoming a younger version of her mother. May represents traditional womanhood in the New York social system. On the other hand, Ellen has been absent from New York for quite some time, and her time in Europe has changed her. She relies on Newland to help her navigate the treacherous social waters in which



she finds herself upon her scandal-ridden return. She is mysterious and exotic, yet accessible. Unlike the other women in the community, Ellen has had experiences that are hers alone, not shared by an entire social set. She views herself differently than the other New York women view themselves, and as a result, she is seen as a completely different kind of woman.

In his introduction to the novel, Paul Montazzoli observes that a reader may approach the novel not as a romance, but as a "feminist thesis novel." He remarks:

That May is mentally too lumpish a companion for Newland (at least according to his perhaps too-flattering self-image) he acknowledges as the fault of the old New York patriarchy that formed her. Ironically, Newland himself is a pillar of this patriarchy, with a few cracks here and there through which the charms of Ellen gain entrance. That rumors of an affair in Ellen's past damage her socially, while equivalent rumors about Newland damage him not at all, strikingly illustrates the double standard.

In the novel's setting, women, though their roles are slowly expanding, are still subject to such double standards. In chapter 7, Newland expresses his view that women should be as free as men are. Wharton adds:

"Nice" women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous-minded men like himself were therefore - in the heat of the argument - the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them.

## The Individual and Society

Newland desperately wants to follow his heart and be with Ellen, but his society would never accept such a decision. He is divided, but ultimately cannot abandon the conventions and expectations of the only society he has ever known. When he decides to run away to Europe with Ellen, May announces her pregnancy, and he knows that this turn of events seals his fate. He would never be such a cad as to abandon his wife and baby, so he learns to accept the life that is laid out before him. For the good of his family and social acceptance, he sacrifices his passion for Ellen. In his introduction to *Edith Wharton: Modern Critical Views*, noted literary scholar Harold Bloom observes that "Newland's world centers upon an idea of order, a convention that stifles passion and yet liberates from chaos."

Similarly, Ellen returns to New York at the beginning of the novel, expecting to file for divorce. She discovers, however, that New York will shun her unless she stays married to the count. Newland is sent to advise her, and he explains that her happiness must be secondary to the consequences that will be felt by her family if she disgraces them by divorcing. She unhappily agrees to stay married, even if she does not return to her husband.



## Artifice

The reader soon learns that in old New York, reality is less relevant than appearance. In chapter 6, Wharton writes, "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs." Careful phrasing, wearing appropriate clothing, and maintaining the illusion of a happy marriage are all examples of the habits adopted by members of New York society. As long as Julius keeps up the appearance of being financially responsible (even when everyone knows there are questionable details of his past), he is accepted, but as soon as his shady dealings become public, he and his wife are outcasts. Lawrence Lefferts, meanwhile, waves the banner of marital faithfulness in public, despite the fact that everyone is aware of his numerous love affairs. In her book *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, Carol Wershoven comments, "It is therefore not marital fidelity that is a value in New York, but rather the appearance of it."

Newland realizes after May's death that, in carrying out her role as wife, she maintained her own facade. He never knew that she understood the sacrifice he made in not following Ellen, and he is touched that she was sympathetic. Early in their marriage, May's interactions with Newland reveal a degree of artifice. She is fully aware of her husband's love for another woman, but rather than admit this openly, she pretends to be unaware, while at the same time saying seemingly innocent things to him that are understood by both parties as challenging. When Newland tells her he is going to Washington for business, for example, May knows he is going to see Ellen. When she tells him to be sure to see Ellen while he is there, they both know she is communicating that she knows why he is going and expects him to behave honorably.

# Style

## Setting

The setting is so dominant an element in *The Age of Innocence* that it almost becomes a character. Through detail and lush description, Wharton brings to life the social world of the wealthy in 1870s New York. The environment is so critical to the work that Wharton opens the novel with the grand scene in which everyone is dressed in their finery for the opera. This immediately alerts the reader to the novel's dramatic setting. Because the modern reader is unfamiliar with the "trappings" of old New York, details of the carriages, visiting practices, and attire provide a much-needed context for the story. James W. Tuttleton in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume Twelve: American Realists and Naturalists* comments, however, that modern readers are less interested in the details of daily life in old New York than they are in "the spiritual portrait of the age," which is another component of the setting.

The society depicted is closed to outsiders and revels in its elite membership. Carol Wershoven in *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* notes that the elimination of "undesirables" from the social circle is the product of a fear of reality. In this closed community, matters of reputation, manners, and decorum are valued highly, and the dignity of one's family name is of extreme importance. Every event, from a wedding to a night at the opera, is subject to the rigors of propriety. When May and Newland announce their engagement, they are expected to make a series of social calls because the "New York ritual was precise and inflexible in such matters." Subtleties of dress, gesture, and word choice can have enormous consequences, and gossiping is considered acceptable. This is the environment in which Newland has been reared and educated, and while he is comfortable in it, he regards it as stifling and narrow-minded.

## Imagery and Symbolism

Throughout the novel, Wharton employs certain images to provide subtle cues to the reader. May's mud-stained and torn wedding dress clearly represents the problems in her marriage to Newland. Anthropological terms such as "clan," "tribe," and "totem" draw parallels between the strictly regimented social system of New York and less formal cultures of the past.

Newland's selection of flowers for May and Ellen provides insight into how he views the two women. To May, he sends pure white lilies-of-the-valley. They represent innocence and simplicity, which are traits he sees in May. On the other hand, he sends intense, fiery-yellow roses to Ellen, which reveals that he sees her as vibrant, sexual, and passionate. When Ellen and Newland are together, the narrator almost always mentions fire. Whether Newland lays his head on the mantle, a log in the fireplace snaps and flares, or memories burn in Newland's heart, the image of fire emphasizes their smoldering passion.



## Humor

Known for her sharp wit and subtle use of irony, Wharton is equally capable of using outright exaggeration for the sake of humor. In her description of Catherine Mingott, one of society's most respected members, the narrator observes in chapter 4:

The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman with a neatly-turned foot and ankle into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. ... [In the mirror she saw] an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the center of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation.

Explaining Mrs. Archer's delight at her son's upcoming marriage, Wharton writes in chapter 5 that Newland is entitled to marry someone like May, "but young men are so foolish and incalculable - and some women so ensnaring and unscrupulous - that it was nothing short of a miracle to see one's only son safe past the Siren Isle and in the haven of a blameless domesticity."

## Irony

Wharton uses irony in *The Age of Innocence* to reveal the hypocrisies she sees in New York society. When May and her parents go to St. Augustine for the winter, Mrs. Welland arranges for a group of servants to help them make the best of it. As they all sit down to a sumptuous breakfast, Mr. Welland tells Newland, "You see, my dear fellow, we camp - we literally camp. I tell my wife and May that I want to teach them how to rough it." Later, in chapter 26, Mrs. Jackson condemns the vanity of wearing extravagant new dresses, when the proper thing is to buy dresses and wait a few years to wear them. She then describes another woman's dress that she remembers from the previous year, and how a panel has been changed to make it look new. She apparently cannot see that such minute attention to and memory of what ladies wear is exactly what feeds the vanity she berates.

Wharton also uses irony to make her main character, Newland Archer, especially tragic. Early in the novel he is sent to talk Ellen Olenska out of pursuing a divorce. Although he believes she should be allowed to make her own decisions, he agrees and explains to her that by getting a divorce, she would be buying her happiness and freedom with her family's pain. Later in the story, he falls in love with Ellen, but she is unwilling to be with him because doing so would deeply hurt Newland's wife. Newland has taught Ellen not to pursue happiness at the expense of others, and that lesson returns to haunt him. It is also ironic that Newland is pressured by May's family to approach Ellen about her divorce and support her. It is because of May's family that he gets to know Ellen, and it is because of her and her family that he cannot have a romantic relationship with Ellen.

Irony is used for comedy as well as tragedy. In the midst of a dramatic scene between May and



Newland in chapter 10, Newland is trying to convince her to move up their wedding date, and she flippantly remarks that maybe they should elope. When he responds favorably to this idea, she responds, "We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?" Of course, they *are* people in a novel, and this is Wharton's use of tongue-in-cheek comic relief in an otherwise tense scene.

# Historical Context

## Wealth in the North

After the Civil War (1861-1865), the South was in ruins, economically and structurally, but the

North flourished. While wealth in the South declined by sixty percent, wealth in the North increased by fifty percent. As a result, there was a growing class of wealthy New Yorkers in the 1870s. This trend is represented by the character of Julius Beaufort, who has become a millionaire. Although the tight social circle of New York does not favor outsiders, he is allowed in by virtue of his marriage to Regina Mingott, a member of a very respectable family.

As people in the North gathered wealth, New York became especially showy. The upper class enjoyed attending the theater and the opera and hosting extravagant parties. A woman named Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish held a dinner party in New York City to honor her dog, who arrived at the party wearing a \$15,000 diamond collar. In *The Age of Innocence*, this lifestyle is depicted in the lavish parties and luxuries the wealthy enjoy.

As the century came to a close, there was a growing lower class as most of the wealth was concentrated in the upper class. Forced to labor in sweatshops, factories, and mills, the underprivileged resented the lifestyle of the wealthy. Strikes and riots broke out and political corruption became rampant.

## High Society

*The Age of Innocence* takes place during the last breath of New York high society, although its members did not sense the dramatic changes coming to their world. They gathered at the opera house, and they relied on an accepted canon of rules and conventions to direct their behavior. They flaunted their wealth and talked behind each other's backs, but remained respectful of convention. There were strict expectations regarding appropriate attire, events, home decor, and marriage.

## Women

Although powerful in social terms, society women were dependent on men to provide for them. If a woman came from a wealthy family, she might be fortunate enough to have a sum of money to contribute to the marriage, but women expected their husbands to take care of all of their material needs. Women were expected to behave in certain ways, especially in the upper class. They were to master domestic skills, such as needlework, and they were never to challenge men or be unpleasant. A virtuous woman was one who was pretty, elegant, and compliant. In *The Age of Innocence*, May





represents the New York society ideal, while Ellen hints at the strides being made for female independence outside the tightly knit New York community.

In 1869, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton formed the National Woman Suffrage Association. Even before the Civil War, women had begun to assemble and demand to be heard. At the time Wharton's novel is set (1872), the women's movement had begun, although it had not reached the closed system of New York society. In fact, in 1872, Anthony went to the polls in Rochester, New York, demanding to be allowed to vote. Clearly, change within the traditional New York system was imminent.



## Critical Overview

At the time of *The Age of Innocence's* publication, Wharton was already a well-respected author. Her readers and critics expected much of her, and they were generally impressed with her new novel. They found the characters realistic and interesting, and Wharton's ability to capture the details, mood, and rigors of New York society life was praised by readers and literary critics alike. In a 1920 *New York Times Book Review*, William Lyon Phelps applauds the novel, noting, "I do not remember when I have read a work of fiction that gives the reader so vivid an idea of the furnishing and illuminating of rooms in fashionable houses as one will find in *The Age of Innocence*." He adds, "New York society and customs in the seventies are described with an accuracy that is almost uncanny."

Besides providing a vibrant piece of social history, Wharton's novel told a compelling story complete with universal themes and comments on the complexities of human interaction. Margaret B. McDowell in *Twayne's United States Authors Series* writes that the novel is "at once a masterful evocation of a milieu and a masterful delineation of human beings caught between renunciation and passion." In *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work*, Grace Kellogg-Griffith remarks, "Mrs. Wharton portrayed the society of her young womanhood with a clarity and a firmness of outline that have given them life and permanent importance. *The Age of Innocence* is a flawless piece of artistry." Equally enthusiastic was Phelps, who concludes that "Edith Wharton is a writer who brings glory on the name America, and this is her best book." The critic went on to comment that this novel lacks the flaws typically found in Wharton's novels, such as relentless witticisms, unbelievable coincidences, and seemingly rushed scenes. Critics noted that Wharton depicts New York with a sympathetic yet scolding tone that is wholly appropriate. One of Wharton's contemporaries, Carl Van Doren, author of *Contemporary American Novelists 1900-1920*, observes:

From the first Mrs. Wharton's power has lain in the ability to reproduce in fiction the circumstances of a compact community in a way that illustrates the various oppressions which such communities put upon individual vagaries, whether viewed as sin, or ignorance, or folly, or merely as social impossibility.

Critics such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff of *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume Nine: American Novelists, 1910-1945* described *The Age of Innocence* as a *bildungsroman*, which is a novel that depicts a character's growth from adolescence into adulthood. Wolff argued that it is Newland whose growth into maturity is witnessed in Wharton's novel. She added that his experience is unique because of the narrow environment in which he matures. As a result, the restrictive setting can be viewed as meaningful, providing necessary structure to everyday life and to Newland's passage into manhood.

Some critics found notable flaws in *The Age of Innocence*. In fact, two of the members of the Pulitzer Prize committee thought the prize should have gone to another author in 1921 instead of Wharton. They believed the book to be overly specific to a time and place. As a result, they argued, the book lacked universal relevance. Other critics took



this stance a step further, adding that the book is limited because it is about a community of people who were far removed from the norm, even in their own time and place.

Arthur Mizener in *Twelve Great American Novels* comments that *The Age of Innocence*, while "very nearly a great novel," is weakened by heavy-handed cleverness. He found the worst example to be May's muddied and torn wedding dress as a "crude and even sentimental symbol for the novel's feelings about Newland's marriage." Mizener is quick to add that, despite its flaws, the novel's depiction of the love affair between Ellen and Newland is "beautifully vivid and convincing," adding, "It would be hard to overpraise the dramatic skill and economy with which she brings these things [their love and frustration] about." Mizener was not the only critic voicing a mixed reaction. Blake Nevius, in the book *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her*

*Fiction*, writes, "*The Age of Innocence* is not Mrs. Wharton's strongest novel, but along with *Ethan Frome*, it is the one in which she is most thoroughly the artist. It is a triumph of style."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



# Critical Essay #1

*Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she examines New land Archer's divided self and the three major decisions he faces in The Age of Innocence.*

Edith Wharton's protagonist in *The Age of Innocence* is the ineffectual Newland Archer. He is a typical young man who is frustrated and angst-ridden and wonders if there might be more to life than what he sees. He is a product of the social world of old New York, and it is in this milieu that he is most comfortable. He fully understands and upholds the rules of etiquette and the essential artifice that make up his social reality.

At the same time, he feels stifled by New York society's strict conventions that dictate behavior and decision-making. There is no room for individuality or trying new things. The society is so narrow that its members do not welcome intellectuals, artists, or writers, as they may bring with them disturbing new ideas and opinions. And money alone is not enough to win entrance. Newly minted millionaire Julius Beaufort is allowed into the circle only because he marries a woman who comes from a respectable family. His position in New York is cemented because he and his wife have the only house with a private ballroom, which makes them socially significant. While Newland fancies himself well-educated and a "man of the world," he cannot shake the feeling that there is a reality beyond the bounds of this insular community.

Countess Ellen Olenska and May Welland represent the conflicting forces in Newland's psyche. May is demure and proper, the golden daughter of old New York; Ellen is mysterious and scandalous. May is described in chapter 21 as "one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York" and "one of the sweetest-tempered and most reasonable of wives." On the other hand, Ellen's experiences in Europe with the Polish count exemplify what Newland imagines he is missing in life. His neat, absolute categorizing of May and Ellen is evident in the flowers he sends them. Every day, he sends May a box of lilies-of-the-valley, which are pure white and signify innocence. In contrast, he sends brilliant yellow roses to Ellen, which demonstrates that he sees her as passionate, alluring, and sensual. That Ellen is leading the life he can only imagine heightens his attraction to her. In chapter 13, Wharton writes of Ellen's

mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience. . . . The exciting fact was her having lived in an atmosphere so thick with drama that her own tendency to provoke it had apparently passed unperceived.

Newland thinks that if he can be with Ellen, he is sure to have exciting adventures. In fact, his thinking is borne out, as his pursuit of her throughout the novel provides his most stimulating experiences. By being in Ellen's orbit, Newland is able to have some excitement without having to create an exciting life of his own.



Newland's first major decision in the novel comes when he resolves to leave May and follow Ellen to Europe. He is motivated by his unwillingness to imagine his life without Ellen, especially when he is left with May, who is becoming more and more like her mother (and all the other society women, for that matter) every day. He is captivated by Ellen and completely bored with May. To be fair, the reader must realize that May is essentially the same person she has been all along; she is the woman Newland fell in love with. After meeting Ellen, though, Newland begins to compare the two and finds May lacking. Ellen knows this and tries to enlighten him in chapter 29, when he picks her up at the train station in the carriage.

Newland tells Ellen he wants to run away with her to a place "where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter." She responds with a laugh and says, "Oh, my dear - where is that country? Have you ever been there?" She knows what he does not - that they can never be together the way he wants them to be.

Whether or not Newland might have followed through with his decision to pursue Ellen to Europe is a question little considered in criticism of the novel. A strong argument can be made that Newland would not have gone under any circumstances. Newland does follow Ellen to Skuytercliff and Boston, and these relatively nearby destinations represent the lengths he will go to in order to be with her. While these trips are somewhat thrilling in their clandestine nature, they also are quite safe for Newland. He can easily fabricate reasons for the trips. His home life carries on as usual while he sneaks off to see the woman he loves. On the other hand, actually following her to Europe would be a monumental act. Newland would be forced to wholly give up his safe and comfortable existence in New York, become an outcast, and bring shame on his entire family. He has seen firsthand what becomes of people who are evicted from "the clan," and, he would not really be able to put himself (and Ellen) in that terrible position.

Newland never tells Ellen he plans to leave May and go with her to Europe, which is another indication that he was not really prepared to go. It is exciting to think about and makes him feel alive, but if he were truly committed to taking action, surely he would have at least mentioned his intentions to Ellen. He hints, as when he tells her goodbye and adds, "[B]ut I shall see you soon in Paris!" Ellen responds, "Oh, if you and May could come - !" Newland never tells Ellen of his plans for two reasons. First, he needs to keep available the option of backing out, and perhaps knows all along that when the moment comes, he will not go. Second, he realizes that if he tells Ellen, she will not react with the delight he hopes for, but rather with outright refusal. She may even tell him that she never wants to see him again because the arrangement they made was that they would never do anything to hurt May.

As an interesting aside, it should be noted that early drafts of the novel showed Newland running away with Ellen. Wharton was unable, however, to figure out a way to create happiness for the lovers. With so little in common, and so few shared tastes, Newland and Ellen would be unable to find enough common ground to have a meaningful and lasting relationship. This demonstrates how, once characters are



created, even the author cannot force them to be happy and satisfied in ways that are inconsistent with who they are.

When May tells Newland she is pregnant, he makes his second major decision. He knows that he cannot abandon May and the baby while he follows his passion to Europe. Just as Newland realizes what May is telling him, Wharton writes, "There was a long pause, which the inner devils filled with strident laughter." Newland knows that his decision has essentially been made for him, that he has been drawn back into his inescapable destiny as a society man in New York. Although he could technically still go to Europe, his sense of propriety and responsibility prevents him from doing so.

Once Newland realizes he is fated to be a family man in New York, he resigns himself to it and makes a pleasant life for himself and his family, carrying through his decision to stay with May. Rather than live a life filled with bitterness and resentment, he enjoys family life and enters politics for a short while at the insistence of Theodore Roosevelt. Reflecting on his life, he muses, "His days were full, and they were filled decently. He supposed it was all a man ought to ask." Perhaps the pleasant quality of his life indicates that Newland was relieved that he did not have to make the choice between the life he actually led and the life he might have led if he had chased after Ellen. Had May not given him the news of her pregnancy, he would have been forced to either go to Europe or talk himself out of it by conjuring up a compelling reason to stay.

In the last chapter, Newland makes his third and final major decision. Now a mature man, he makes this decision not from a sense of fancy or obligation, but from wisdom. He and his son are in Paris, and they are about to meet with Ellen, whom Newland has not seen for twenty-six years. His decision not to see her - and, therefore, not to see if there is still something left of their mutual passion - is confusing for many readers. On thoughtful reading, however, his reasons become clear.

At the age of only fifty-seven, the widowed Newland is fully aware that he has time for another romance in his life, which leads many readers to expect that love will triumph for Newland and Ellen after all. He kept her memory alive even as he grew to love May. In Paris, he walks through the city, seeing it as a context for Ellen's life. He imagines her walking here and visiting people there. For these reasons, a happy and romantic ending seems inevitable. So, why does Newland decide not to see her?

Newland is much wiser than he was twenty-six years ago, and he knows that the reality of a relationship with Ellen will never approach his longstanding fantasy. He has lived enough to understand what Ellen understood years ago - that people must live in the world of reality, not in the world of dreams. Wise enough now to grasp the difference, he chooses to preserve his dreams from the harshness of reality. Sitting outside her building, Newland imagines his son going in and meeting her, and he thinks, "It's more real to me here than if I went up." His fantasy far outshines anything reality can offer him, and he chooses not to risk losing it. This is by far his most courageous decision because it is one that he makes for himself willingly and realistically.

**Source:** Jennifer Bussey, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following overview of The Age of Innocence, Hynes explores Wharton's treatment of a changing society.*

*The Age of Innocence*, a reminiscent but satiric account of the time, place, and society in which Edith Wharton grew up, won for the author a 1921 Pulitzer Prize and was a best-seller when it appeared. Wharton had earlier taken up the topic of the society of the old New York, in which her wealthy parents played important roles, in novels such as *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. But, written after Wharton had experienced the horror and destruction of World War I, in a time during which old systems of beliefs and customs seemed to be collapsing, *The Age of Innocence* looks back to a time of apparent stability - a time in which the forms and conventions were understood, if sometimes repressive. The novel is typically read as a discussion of the conflict between the individual and society, and between the safety and order of old, familiar ways and the possible chaos and uncertainty of new ways. Thus the conflict is crystallized in Newland Archer's choice between May and Ellen, a choice that represents the split between the society of old New York in which his family holds a respectable place and that of the newly wealthy invaders of his society that were rising to prominence after the Civil War. Because *The Age of Innocence* subtly censures the values and actions of both respectable old New York society and the fashionable newcomers, it is generally considered among Wharton's finest works.

Although the title of the novel literally refers to a 1788 Sir Joshua Reynolds portrait of a little girl, the title can be interpreted in several ways. The innocent age might be the condition of New York society in 1872, the year in which most of the action of the novel takes place. This is a society that refuses to discuss any of the unpleasant facts of life, such as divorce, extramarital affairs among its members, or the possibility of marriages made for financial gain. At the same time, society insists upon the absolute innocence, purity, and ignorance of all sexual matters in its unmarried women. Newland's spinster sister Janey is the monstrous outcome of this insistence - an adult who is perpetually forced to pretend a childish innocence.

May Welland is another product of such an upbringing, and even her husband-to-be believes in her complete innocence; when observing his fiancée watching the seduction scene in the opera *Faust*, Newland boasts to himself that May "doesn't even guess what it's all about." But while May participates in presenting herself as an innocent maiden, she shows by her actions later in the novel that she understands the facts of life that motivate men and women - both in operas and in real life. Newland begins to suspect that his bride is not as shallow as he had suspected when he finds that she has lied to Ellen about being certain of her pregnancy in order to keep her marriage intact. Later, Newland finds that May has told their son on her deathbed that Newland gave up the thing he wanted most (Ellen) when May asked him to. "She never asked me," Newland recalls.





But the title *The Age of an Innocence* could also refer to Newland's own youthful belief that love between a man and a woman is all that is needed to secure their happiness. When he voices his desire to Ellen that they might live happily outside of all social constraints, Ellen replies that such a life is not possible since too many other people would be hurt by their actions. Newland's process of coming to terms with the realities of relationships is an education of irony. When he is called upon by his family to counsel Ellen not to seek a divorce, he states the case in terms of family responsibility: "The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together - protects the children, if there are any ... It's my business, you know, to help you to see these things as the people who are fondest of you see them. The Mingotts, the Wellands, the van der Luydens, all your friends and relations: if I didn't show you honestly how they judge such questions, it wouldn't be fair of me, would it?" But, ironically, it is these same reasons that Ellen forces Newland to consider when he later urges her to leave the stifling New York society to live in a world where such ugly designations as mistress and adultery do not exist. "Oh, my dear - where is that country? Have you ever been there?" Ellen asks Newland, attempting to make him realize that his dream is impossible.

May and Ellen represent different types of women to Newland. Even before becoming involved with Ellen he becomes interested in "the case of the Countess Olenska" rather than in Ellen as an individual. Since he is unaware of the depth of May's mind, Newland sees his fiancée and Ellen as contrasts, with May representing all that is safe, secure, and known in his society and Ellen all that is unknown and exotic in European society. May and Ellen can be read as the traditional light and dark heroines of literature, since Wharton portrays May as a wholesome blonde and Ellen as a seductive brunette. Newland thinks of May as representing "a Civic Virtue or a Greek Goddess"; her skill at archery reminds Newland of the goddess Diana. He notices May's eyes repeatedly as being transparent, serious, pale, limpid, and blue - all reminders of the extreme innocence he believes she possesses. In contrast, Ellen plays the role in Newland's mind as an exotic, European femme fatale who represents the threat of disorder that is descending upon old New York society. Her hands, described as being fragile and decorated with rings, are one of her most attractive attributes to Newland. The most sensual scene between Ellen and Newland is the one in which he takes off her glove in the carriage to kiss her hand. Newland learns few actual facts about Ellen's unhappy marriage and subsequent life, but is attracted by her mystery. Ellen is unconventional because of her desire to get a divorce from her cruel husband, her scandalous and shadowy past, her choice to live in a Bohemian section of New York, and her open friendships with men who are married or engaged. But while Newland mistakenly sees only the roles he ascribes to both May and Ellen, they are actually much more complex than these simple characterizations.

Although Wharton was perhaps more like Ellen than any other character in the novel (both are at once inside and outside of fashionable New York society, divorce their husbands, leave America to live in Paris, and greatly value stimulating conversation), the novel is more Newland's story than either May's or Ellen's.



Just as Wharton did, Newland becomes interested in anthropology and is able to view his own society as an outsider and think critically of its rules and values. Wharton describes in detail the tribal rites that go on prior to a marriage between old New York families; May and Newland's schedule of prenuptial visits to relatives and friends follows a specific pattern. Even the decision to move up their wedding date must be approved by the family matriarch, Granny Mingott. In the opening scene of the novel Wharton refers to both Lawrence Lefferts, old New York's authority on form, and Sillerton Jackson, old New York's authority on family. But we see the hypocrisy of society since even Lefferts, a crusader for morality, has extramarital affairs. As Newland takes up the study of anthropology and begins to see such incongruities in his own society, he feels the impulse to break free from what he sees as stifling and meaningless conventions. However, Ellen's actions to save her cousin's marriage, May's maneuvers to keep Newland with her, and Newland's own inertia keep him from acting against his family's traditions.

By the end of the novel, when Newland's respectable son is about to marry the illegitimate daughter of Julius Beaufort, it is obvious that time and the invaders of old New York society have caused changes. Although little is mentioned of the twenty-six years between Newland's engagement to May and the closing scenes of the novel, we understand that he and his family have benefited from his (forced) decision to give up Ellen. Wharton depicts both the good and the bad sides of renunciation; the family is made stronger although the individual suffers from wondering what might have been. But since society has changed in spite of Newland's actions to maintain the old standards, it is clear that the suffocating old ways could not last.

**Source:** Jennifer A. Hynes, "*The Age of Innocence: Overview*," in *Reference Guide to American Literature*, 3d ed., edited by Jim Kamp, St. James Press, 1994.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Walton explores Wharton's nostalgic treatment of "Old New York" in *The Age of Innocence*.*

Although Walter Berry prophesied that nobody else except themselves would be interested in the New York of her childhood, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920, was serialized in *The Pictorial Review* and was, almost inevitably, awarded the Pulitzer Prize and has become one of Edith Wharton's most widely read and admired works. It has all the ingredients of a historical best-seller, a richly detailed period setting, an emotional situation that the modern reader can flatter himself, or more important, herself would work out more happily at the present day and, combined with the appeal to critical superiority, a pervasive nostalgia for the past. It is, with all its faults, manifestly the product of a distinguished creative mind, if in a consciously relaxed mood, and it does not suffer from the wholly untypical rawness and nerviness of feeling, the uncertainty of tone and attitude that characterize *A Son at the Front*, which was being planned at the same time. The Puritanical element in the New York tradition comes out in *The Age of Innocence* much more strongly than in any part of *The Custom of the Country* and, remembering that Edith Wharton there uses the name Marvell, one is reminded in this later novel of *A Definition of Love*. There is, of course, no ground for supposing that she consciously took her theme from that poem, but the relationship between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska has an air of being

. . . begotten by Despair Upon Impossibility. Everything in the situation is against them, the whole weight of a social and moral tradition. Nevertheless, as with the situation in *The Reef*, one finds it pathetic - and sometimes absurd - rather than tragic, and the elaborate moral solution and the epilogue rather heavily sentimental. The social conflict, of the individual against the group, is comparable to that of Lily Bart with a later New York Society, but it is muted and muffled by the mass of period upholstery. It is not merely that the age enthroned "Taste," that far-off divinity of whom "Form" was the mere visible representative and vicegerent; the whole story on both sides is especially fully visualized in terms of clothes and interior decoration, and documented with accounts of manners, customs, and social history. As in the case of the fully historical *Valley of Decision*, Edith Wharton is, to put it simply, more concerned to recreate a past age than to say something she thinks important about life. There is a lack of emotional pressure and ironic tension; elegant as the writing undoubtedly is, it lacks the hard precision of the best earlier books. After all, the stimulus to such writing was not there in the chosen subject matter, except on one or two occasions.

The New York world is re-created in full and fascinating detail. This is the genuine old New York of the 70s, before the millionaires of *The House of Mirth* had built their mansions on

*Fifth Avenue. We are given illustrative examples to those early paragraphs in *A Backward Glance*. Book One brings before us the moral and emotional situation in relation to that wealthy but in every way thoroughly provincial and middle-class*



*community, which is perhaps most strikingly and fantastically epitomized by the fact that women imported dresses in the latest fashion from Worth and then kept them for two years before wearing them. The pattern of this little "Society" had come to seem part of the order of nature, incredible as this may seem:*

New York, as far back as the mind of man could travel, had been divided into the two great fundamental groups of the Mingotts and Mansons and all their clan, who cared about eating and clothes and money, and the Archer-Newland-vander-Luyden tribe, who were devoted to travel, horticulture and the best fiction, and looked down on the grosser forms of pleasure. . . .

Edith Wharton's use of the words "clan" and "tribe" is deliberate and recurring. The people who actually wrote books and painted pictures did not belong to either group. They did not want to, and Society was never sure whether they were really "ladies" and "gentlemen." One moves on to note the finer distinction between the van der Luydens and two other families of aristocratic origin and the rest and, complicating the situation, the independent positions of old Mrs. Manson Mingott, a comic figure of monstrous obesity, and of Julius Beaufort, the rich financier, who is blatantly vulgar and openly disreputable. Two characters have a kind of choric function as representatives of the social spirit: they are Lawrence Lefferts who

. . . was, on the whole, the foremost authority on "form" in New York. He had probably devoted more time than anyone else to the study of this intricate and fascinating question; but study alone could not account for his complete and easy competence. One had only to look at him, from the slant of his bald forehead and the curve of his beautiful fair mustache to the long patent-leather feet at the other end

of his lean and elegant person, to feel that the knowledge of "form" must be congenital in anyone who knew how to wear such good clothes so carelessly and carry such height with so much lounging grace. . . .

and old Mr. Sillerton Jackson, the authority on "family":

He knew all the ramifications of New York's cousin-ships, and could not only elucidate such complicated questions as that of the connection between the Mingotts (through the Thorleys) with the Dallases of South Carolina, and that of the relationship of the elder branch of Philadelphia Thorleys to the Albany Chiverse (on no account to be confused with the Manson Chiverses of University Place), but could also enumerate the leading characteristics of each family. . . .

It was an inflexible social pattern and it is very suitable that we should get our first panorama of it as Newland Archer, the hero, surveys the audience at the opera, an institution where all the traditional European social rituals were assiduously imitated. Ellen Olenska is conspicuous because her dress, though elegant, is not quite conventional. The Archer family, although belonging to the more intellectual section of Society, are shown as weighed down with conventional habits, and the implications of Newland Archer's gestures of rebellion are not always fully understood even by himself;



sometimes he sees his marriage "with a shiver of foreboding becoming what most of the other marriages about him [are]: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other." But he is "sincerely but placidly in love" with the "frankness" and "freshness," based of course on utter ignorance, of his bride, May Welland, and looks forward to guiding her vague cultural gestures. One can see that they are in fact predestined to become a typical New York couple, if of slightly wider interests than the majority. Newland Archer is too gentlemanly, too committed to the regime of doing the right things, of avoiding unpleasantness of all kinds and, especially, of ignoring the loose living of many of his associates.

Presumably, in order to make life viable at all for a relatively small, wealthy, and leisured community, the moral atmosphere had been allowed to settle down in this way; only dishonesty in business or flagrant sexual irregularity was condemned. Yvors Winters sums up *The Age of Innocence* by saying that it illustrates an ethical tradition more ancient than Calvinist Puritanism, though modified by it:

... the characters are living in a society cognate and coterminous with those principles; the society with

its customs and usages, is the external form of the principles. Now the customs and usages may become unduly externalized, and when they appear so to become, Mrs. Wharton satirizes them; but in the main they represent the concrete aspect of the abstract principles of behavior. He goes on to discuss the relationship of Archer and Ellen Olenska in terms of their having to abandon a way of life that they in fact find satisfying and admirable, if they decide to rebel openly against its moral principles. This indicates the situation in the long run.

In the short run everything possible is done to absorb the Countess Olenska into Society and neutralize her possibly disturbing influence. Even the aristocratic van der Luydens are moved to lend her their prestige. Ellen Olenska, though a cousin, is a foreign and, at least potentially, a revolutionary force. She settles in a street between the purlieus of Society and Bohemia, has unusual decorations and unwittingly compromises herself by entertaining doubtful company - old New York snobbery did not extend to an English duke for his rank alone. The charm of Ellen Olenska is made very real. She is beautiful, smart, intelligent, original in her taste, generous and guileless; she is not a mere "made-over" version of the Baroness Munster, though the general idea of the book is, of course, related to that of *The Europeans*. The contrast between her and May Welland is brought out again when May goes so far as to cut church to walk with Archer in the Park, but causes him to say:

"Original! We're all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We're like patterns stenciled on a wall Can't you and I strike out for ourselves, May?"

But Archer's subjection to convention comes out in his advice to Ellen to avoid a divorce with its risks of scandal and one reaches the point at which he has let his engagement to May go forward because he is not quite sure of Ellen's innocence and Ellen feels, "I can't love you unless I give you up"; in other words, she feels that she must accept the



conventions of New York because its narrow minded community has after all made her feel happy and, paradoxically, even free. Fate has crowded itself betwixt them in the double guise of social convention, with its whole lineage of moral principle, and of family solidarity and generosity which, if they take effect a little slowly and grudgingly, nevertheless manifest themselves in very solid and material forms. The worst and best of old New York are inseparable. Everyone is too "nice" for the heights and depths of passion to have scope. The mere humbugs and the absurder customs are satirized, but in the rest of the picture Edith Wharton is resurrecting the historical types and evoking the scenes she remembered without her customary play of irony. The central situation is presented in all solemnity without seeming tragic; from Edith Wharton one would have expected something analogous to the wit of Marvell's poem.

Newland Archer's two relationships now develop rapidly. The fashionable wedding is described with much detail of dress and behavior, and, after this, his disappointing honeymoon in Europe, which shows up May as scarcely more cultivated than Undine Spragg is shown to be in similar circumstances, followed by a Newport season with all its archaic ritual. It is therefore inevitable that Archer should drift back toward Ellen A curious relationship is established depending on

. . . the perfect balance she had held between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves that had so stirred and yet tranquillized him; a balance not artfully calculated, as her tears and her falterings showed, but resulting naturally from her unabashed sincerity. It filled him with a tender awe, now the danger was over, and made him thank the fates that no personal vanity, no sense of playing a part before sophisticated witnesses, had tempted him to tempt her. . . .

This relationship, with all the magnanimity it implies - it is a kind of "magnanimous despair" leading to a love of "divine" ideality - is offered for our unqualified admiration. May's conventionality and unsuitability as a wife for Archer are made painfully obvious; his throwing open a window on a cold evening symbolizes his feeling of clausturation. Ellen's moral superiority to everyone around her becomes equally obvious in her demonstrative kindness to Mrs. Beaufort after the bank failure - old New York's human worst side was plainer than its commercial best on such occasions. Her clear-sightedness sees the frequent dinginess of the lives of unmarried couples where Archer has only his own sort of conventional romantic visions. But the alternative she offers of love in separation - "in reach and yet out of reach" or, at the most, "Shall I - once come to you; and then go home?" - lacks, for all the gratitude and generosity towards the feelings of her friends underlying it, a certain fundamental humanity. It is not in the context tantalizing and coy, as might appear in quotation, but very idealized. Her fineness has some of the rarefied quality of Anna Leath's, though none of the meanness, and she certainly does not suffer from Lily Barf's vein of frivolousness.

Despite her past experience, she will not or cannot face the consequences of a break with social conventions. As Winters says, a formal social order, with all its restrictions, seems to her to provide a more satisfactory way of life than freedom in isolation. The situation is wound up with the most meticulous regard for old New York conventions. Ellen Olenska has decided to return to Europe - we learn afterwards that May has





precipitated this by a piece of deceit; the Archers give the farewell dinner, and the hypocrisy is an occasion for some magnificent satiric conclusions in Edith Wharton's most trenchant manner - here the writing really comes to life:

There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe. There was nothing on earth that the Wellands and Mingotts would not have done to proclaim their unalterable affection for the Countess Olenska now that her passage for Europe was engaged.

It was the old New York way of talking life "without effusion of blood"; the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scenes," except the behaviour of those who gave rise to the to them . . .

Archer is made conscious of all the irony and the suspicions and of his helplessness in the grip of the genteel tradition, and we are shown a bitterly satiric picture of the victory of the two petty tyrants of Form and Family.

Nevertheless, the final solution can only be taken as a sentimental endorsement of the tribal code. Archer settles down as a model husband - he and May "compromise" by ignoring awkward realities to the end. In the epilogue he reemerges as a public-spirited citizen who has worked with Theodore Roosevelt, but he refuses the chance of a reunion with Ellen when it comes thirty years later. Though Archer has become a more active representative of old New York than Selden or Marvell, one is asked to reverence the persistence of tradition rather than admire its flexibility. The possible pointer toward the later chapters of *The Buccaneers* is not sufficiently followed up to make it truly significant. Edith Wharton apparently endorses both old New York and Ellen Olenska's and Archer's renunciation of each other, which indeed, in its idealism, also belongs to old New York; Ellen Olenska is not completely foreign after all. This is a rather sugary version of the kind of conflict that leads to Lily Bart's tragedy. To compare it with the brilliantly conic interplay of values and foibles that James creates in *The Europeans*, where the Baroness after doing so much to aerate the atmosphere of New England lets herself down with a fib, is to realize how leisurely and lacking in vitality *The Age of Innocence* is as a whole. One cannot help also realizing, however, that in its nostalgic escapism, which she admits to in *A Backward Glance*, is also personal to the author in other ways. One recalls, in connection with Ellen Olenska's attitude, Mrs. Wharton's exclamation quoted by Percy Lubbock, "Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty, of any love that lies outside of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!" These words, dating from about 1912, the year of her separation, and about two years after the end of her affair with Morton Fullerton, might have been spoken in the novel and one feels that, in creating Ellen Olenska and giving her human vitality and definition in a world of wax works, Edith Wharton may have been projecting an idealized vision of herself into the Society of her youth, where one knows she was in fact a rather colorless participant. Now that we know how far Mrs. Wharton in fact differed from Ellen Olenska, we see both the pathos and the irony of such an idealization. Anna Leath and, later, Rose Sellars are comparable, though older, types of elegant austerity; but they are



more austere and also much more critically presented. Edith Wharton is surely in all three, partly idealizing and partly criticizing, in various combinations, her own complex nature, her refined puritanism, inherited and temperamental, and her sometimes concealed, sometimes repressed, capacity for human warmth and passion. It would be impertinent to speculate any further until more documentary evidence is available, but one also feels that the identification is supported by her creation of comparable types of elegant austerity in Anna Leath and, later, Rose Sellars. It is difficult to say how far this represents a vein of Puritan tradition and how far a temperamental compulsion, insofar as these could in any case be separated.

In the *Old New York* stories, 1922 to 1924, Edith Wharton goes back into reported history, beginning with the forties; their chief interest is social. *False Dawn* demonstrates how very middle class indeed the manners of the top layer of New York Society had been within the lifetime of Edith Wharton's older contemporaries, and *New Year's Day* gives us a very seamy picture of the age of innocence; Edith Wharton presents a situation of considerable pathos and implies a further and even more damning criticism of the pettier conventions of the time. The series brings to an end Mrs. Wharton's concern with the uneasy position of the individual in a closely integrated and exclusive social group where ordered and polished appearances are the expression of moral ideals and principles and the divergencies of errant reality may be not only ridiculous but also shocking.

**Source:** Geoffrey Walton, "Old New York," in *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970, pp. 137<sup>6</sup>.



# Adaptations

*The Age of Innocence* was adapted as a silent film by Olga Printzlau, produced in 1924 by Warner Brothers. In 1934, Margaret Ayer Barnes, Victor Heerman, and Sarah Y. Mason adapted the novel as a film in a production by RKO Radio Pictures, Inc. Most recently, in 1993, Martin Scorsese directed a Columbia Pictures adaptation of the novel by Scorsese and Jay Cocks. The film starred Daniel Day-Lewis as Newland Archer, Michelle Pfeiffer as Countess Olenska, and Winona Ryder as MayWelland.

A well-received stage adaptation was performed on Broadway in 1929.

Numerous audio adaptations have been made for listeners to enjoy the story on tape. These include releases by Books on Tape, 1982; Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1992; Bantam Books-Audio, and Random House, both 1993; Big Ben Audio, Blackstone Audio, Dove Entertainment (read by Joanne Woodward), and Penguin Audiobooks, all 1996; Bookcassette and Brilliance Corp., both 1997; and Audio Partners Publishing Corp., 1999.



## Topics for Further Study

Compare Wharton's depiction of New York society life with what you know about tribal societies, past or present. Do you think that Newland Archer's use of anthropological terms to describe his community is justified? If so, what can you conclude about human nature? If not, why do you suppose Newland thinks of his environment in this way?

Compare and contrast Countess Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* and Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Consider the novel's title, and make a case for why you believe Wharton chose it. Do you find that there are multiple meanings, or does the title refer to one specific character or event in the novel?

Do you think Newland would have followed Ellen to Europe if May had not announced her pregnancy?

Research three different psychological theories (i.e., behaviorism, gestalt, rogerian, etc.), and make a prediction based on each one.

At the end of the novel, Newland muses on how things have changed between his generation and Dallas' generation. Research American history at the turn of the century to get a better idea of what major changes took place at this time.

Draft a new ending for the novel in which Newland decides to meet with Ellen in Paris. As you imagine this turn of events, do you gain appreciation for the skill of novelists?



# Compare and Contrast

**1870s:** The United States is recovering from the Civil War and is not yet a world power. As a result, Americans focus on internal issues and resources, and tend to identify themselves in regional terms.

**Today:** The United States has a major world presence, both economically and militarily. Americans are interested in both domestic and foreign issues and events. While people often retain a sense of pride in their regional culture, citizens of the United States generally think of themselves as Americans.

**1870s:** The society described in *The Age of Innocence* strives to preserve itself against unpleasantness. Members of this society will not even consider allowing intellectuals, artists, or writers into their circle, as they are likely to bring with them new ideas and points of view.

**Today:** "Unpleasantness" is not only pervasive, but is often sought out by average Americans. Movies and songs containing violent and profane content are routinely consumed by the American public. Individuals and families - not society - are responsible for censoring what they are willing to see or hear. Many parents

make the effort to install blocking devices on their home computers in order to protect their children from the controversial material that is so readily available on the Internet.

**1870s:** After dinner, wealthy men often retire to their private libraries to enjoy cigars together. In such comfortable surroundings, they are free to speak of sensitive issues and business matters that are not appropriate in mixed company.

**Today:** Cigars have regained popularity, and bars, restaurants, and other social venues have become cigar-friendly. Just as in the past, people enjoy cigars and conversation together. The difference is that since the late 1980s, the number of women who smoke cigars has grown significantly.

**1870s:** Women are expected to wear their wedding dresses at special events for up to two years after their weddings.

**Today:** Some women spend thousands of dollars to buy an elaborate wedding dress that they will wear only once. After the wedding, women often have their dresses preserved to prevent damage, in hopes that one day the dress will be worn by another member of the family

## What Do I Read Next?

Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is the story of Isabel Archer, a young American woman who comes into wealth and leaves for Europe, where she will test her mettle. This novel is considered by many to have been an inspiration for *The Age of Innocence*.

Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) vies with *The Age of Innocence* as Wharton's best work. Like *The Age of Innocence*, this novel is set in late nineteenth-century New York; here, however, she portrays Lily Bart's fall from social grace.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a classic novel of manners. Featuring one of literature's most memorable heroines, this novel depicts the struggles of romance in a time dictated by manners and class structures.

Published in 1995, *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, edited by Charles W. Calhoun, is a collection of essays about the United States between 1865 and 1898. Topics include politics, women, law, and the African-American experience.



## Further Study

Bell, Millicent, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

This book contains essays by established and new scholars evaluating Wharton's fiction. It is intended for readers who are new to Wharton's work, as well as for scholars of her writing.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Edith Wharton: Modern Critical Views*, Chelsea House, 1986.

Noted literary scholar Bloom reviews and evaluates

Wharton's writing career.

Davis, Joy L., "The Ritual of Dining in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*," in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Summer 1993, pp. 465-81.

Davis demonstrates how the dining scenes in the novel serve to represent the larger action of the plot. At the dining table, the characters are able to assert their positions in the social hierarchy.

Godfrey, David A., "The Full and Elaborate Vocabulary of Evasion: The Language of Cowardice in Edith Wharton's Old New York," *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Autumn 1988, pp. 27-44.

Godfrey examines Wharton's use of language and shows how it relates to norms of conduct and behavior by members of old New York society.

Hadley, Kathy Miller, "Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in *The Age of Innocence*," in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 262-72.

Hadley describes the three different plots Wharton considered for *The Age of Innocence*, and examines the reasons for the chosen story line.

Hopkins, Viola, "The Ordering Style of *The Age of Innocence*," in *American Literature*, Vol. XXX, No. 3, November 1958, pp. 345-57.

Hopkins provides a thorough review and explanation of Wharton's use of imagery in the novel.

Wharton, Edith, *A Backward Glance*, Appleton-Century, 1934.

This is Wharton's autobiographical work in which she considers her life and career. Critics of her work often refer to this important publication for contextual information about her work.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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