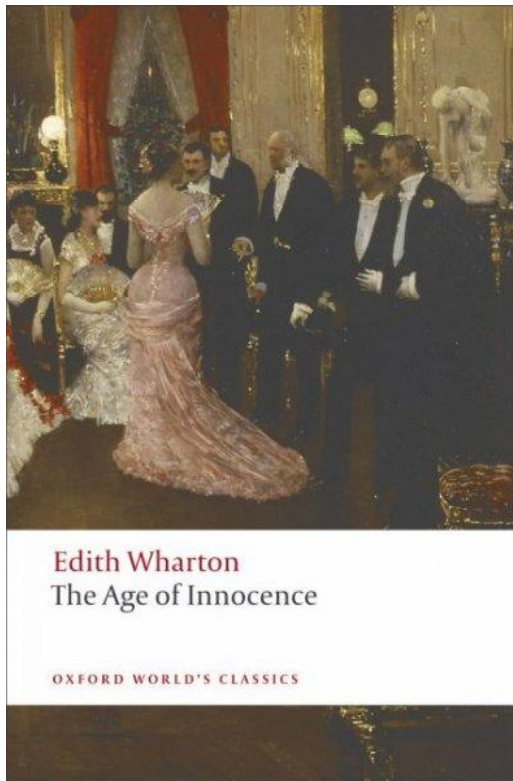


## About the book...



Newland Archer saw little to envy in the marriages of his friends, yet he prided himself that in May Welland he had found the companion of his needs--tender and impressionable, with equal purity of mind and manners. The engagement was announced discreetly, but all of New York society was soon privy to this most perfect match, a union of families and circumstances cemented by affection.

Enter Countess Olenska, a woman of quick wit sharpened by experience, not afraid to flout convention and determined to find freedom in divorce. Against his judgment, Newland is drawn to the socially ostracized Ellen Olenska, who opens his eyes and has the power to make him feel. He knows that in sweet-tempered May, he can expect stability and the steadying comfort of duty. But what new worlds could he discover with Ellen? Written with elegance and wry precision, Edith Wharton's Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece is a tragic love story and a powerful homily about the perils of a perfect marriage. -- William Lyon Phelps and E. M. Forster, [powells.com](http://powells.com)

## About the author...

Edith Wharton, one of the leading American novelists of the 1900s and 1910s, was born Edith Jones to wealthy and conservative parents who were part of New York City's high society. Wharton had the best that money could buy. She was privately tutored, traveled to Europe, and married at the age of twenty-three in 1885 to a member of her family's set, Edward Wharton. However, Wharton disliked playing the role of society matron and hostess in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island, a wealthy summer resort area. A few years into her marriage, she suffered a nervous breakdown. Her doctor suggested that Wharton, who had written and had poems published as a child, should take up writing again as a cure for her nerves.



In 1920 Wharton published what would become her best-known novel, *The Age of Innocence*. Set in the old New York City of her youth, the novel explored the European roots of traditional New York City society. Written as the world of civilized manners was giving way to the parties and gin fizzes of the Jazz Age, *The Age of Innocence* faithfully recounted the social rituals of a class now dead and buried, its attendance at the opera, its formal dinners, betrothal visits, and summers in Newport. The innocence Wharton recalled in her novel was as much about the sexual propriety and financial rectitude of her parents' age as it was about their aversion to the uglier side of life. Wharton won a Pulitzer Prize for the book in 1920.

Wharton continued her energetic writing schedule, and by 1925 was considered the grande dame of American letters. She had received an honorary doctorate from Yale University and was consistently named as one of the "twelve greatest women in America." Few reviewers gave her negative reviews, but a handful complained that Wharton had nothing

new to say. Between 1925 and her death in 1937 Wharton wrote one book of essays on the craft of fiction, five novels, five volumes of short stories, a volume of poems, and her memoirs.

-- "Edith Wharton." *American Decades*. Gale Research, 1998.

## **Awards**

1921 Pulitzer Prize Winner

## **Reviews**

Novel by Edith Wharton, published in 1920. The work presents a picture of upper-class New York society in the late 19th century. The story is presented as a kind of anthropological study of this society through references to the families and their activities as tribal. In the story Newland Archer, though engaged to May Welland, a beautiful and proper fellow member of elite society, is attracted to Ellen Olenska, a former member of their circle who has been living in Europe but who has left her husband under mysterious circumstances and returned to her family's New York milieu. May prevails by subtly adhering to the conventions of that world. The novel was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. -- *The Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*

"There is no woman in American literature as fascinating as the doomed Madame Olenska. . . . Traditionally, Henry James has always been placed slightly higher up the slope of Parnassus than Edith Wharton. But now that the prejudice against the female writer is on the wane, they look to be exactly what they are: giants, equals, the tutelary and benign gods of our American literature."-*Gore Vidal*

## Literary Criticism

Title: Critical Essay on "The Age of Innocence"

Author(s): Jennifer Bussey

Source: *Literature Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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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.

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 long-standing 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: Bussey, Jennifer. "Critical Essay on 'The Age of Innocence'." Literature Resource Center. Detroit: Gale, 2011. Literature Resource Center. Web. 13 May 2011. Available at: <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1420035542&v=2.1&u=aadl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>*

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Why does Archer neglect to tell Countess Olenska of his engagement to May Welland, despite the fact

that May has instructed him to do so?

2. Why does Archer suddenly realize that marriage is "not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas"?
3. Why does Archer feel "oppressed" when contemplating the "factitious purity" of his betrothed?
4. Why is Countess Olenska a threat to the social order that claims Archer as one of its kind?
5. Why is the neighborhood where Countess Olenska resides a "queer quarter for such a beauty to settle in"?
6. To what is Archer referring when he thinks about his peers that "over many of them the green mould of the perfunctory was already perceptibly spreading"?
7. What does Archer mean when he thinks that "it was wonderful that...such depths of feeling could coexist with such absence of imagination
8. How does Archer feel about May's talent with her bow and arrow? Why does he so often feel "cheated...into momentary well-being"?

9. When Archer, at the request of Mrs. Mingott, follows the path to the shore to fetch Countess Olenska, why does he say to himself, "If she doesn't turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light I'll go back"? (p. 177)
10. What kind of "code" exists between Archer and May? How does it work? What is its origin? (p. 219)
11. Why does May decide to host the farewell dinner for the Countess Olenska? Why does Archer think of the dinner guests as "a band of dumb conspirators"?
12. Why does Archer walk away from a potential reunion with Countess Olenska?

## **Multimedia**

### ***The Age of Innocence (Movie)***

(Call Number: DVD Drama Age)

A ravishing romance about three wealthy New Yorkers caught in a tragic love triangle, the ironically-titled story chronicles the grandeur and hypocrisy of high society in the 1870's.

### ***Rethinking Edith Wharton (Radio Broadcast)***

Biographer Hermione Lee digs into previously unrevealed letters to reinterpret the life and work of Edith Wharton.

Available at:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9603444>

## Further Reading

***Letters of Edith Wharton*** by Edith Wharton

(Call Number: 921 Wharton, Edith)

Wharton (1874-1937) was not only a prolific novelist and short-story writer but a prolific correspondent, and this selection of close to 400 letters, many never-before published, shows her at her epistolary best. Divided into seven chronological sections, each with a useful introduction, the letters reveal a woman of alert mind, broad interests, numerous moods and appealing warmth of heart. She also was endowed with a singular capacity to evoke the life around her, ranging from the exoticism of North Africa to the horrors of the World War I front. A large proportion of the letters are to her friends Henry James and Bernard Berenson, while others address Scott Fitzgerald, Andre Gide and Theodore Roosevelt's sister. The letters that show her at her most passionate, and most vulnerable, are those she wrote to her lover Morton Fullerton.

***The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*** by Millicent Bell

(Call Number: 813.07 Wh)

This volume of essays offers fresh examinations of Wharton's fiction designed both to engage the interest of the student or general reader encountering Wharton for the first time, and to be valuable to advanced scholars looking for new insights into her creative achievement. Written by a mix of established commentators on

Wharton and newer scholars in the field, the essays cover Wharton's most important novels as well as some of her shorter fiction. The Introduction supplies a valuable review of the history of Wharton criticism; a detailed chronology of her life and publications and a useful bibliography of important books for further reading are also provided.

## Read-alikes (NoveList)

*Mr. Emerson's Wife* by Amy Brown Belding

Living in the shadow of her famous poet husband, Lidian Emerson, disillusioned by marriage and silenced by social conventions, is drawn to the erotic energy and intellect of family friend Henry David Thoreau, a situation that challenges her beliefs and results in overwhelming life changes.

*This Willing Passion* by Patricia Cloud

Maeve Heron, an orphan and widow from Ireland, rises to success as an actress in New York during the 1870s. She is pursued by two different men, Captain Pearse and William Morgan. Eventually the situation explodes in violence, and Maeve faces trial for murder.

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Jay Gatsby still adores Daisy Buchanan although she has married someone else, and he risks everything to lure her back.

## **Watch-alikes**

*The Age of Innocence* – dir. Martin Scorsese, 1993  
Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis), an upstanding gentleman and partner in a lucrative and conservative law firm, is engaged to the perfect society woman, the pretty and polished May Welland (Winona Ryder). They are hoping to push forward their wedding date when Newland meets Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), May's beautiful, cosmopolitan, and scandal-ridden cousin. In adapting the classic novel by Edith Wharton, Scorsese meticulously reconstructs the elegant world of mid-19th-century Manhattan, using an onslaught of materialistic vices--including an endless barrage of sumptuous foods--to capture the elite world even more fastidiously. – jinni.com

*The Great Gatsby* – dir. Jack Clayton, 1974  
Though self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby (Robert Redford) has been in love with the spoiled Daisy Buchanan (Mia Farrow) since his days as a poor boy in the Midwest, she's now married to a boorish philanderer (Bruce Dern) and seems more out of reach than ever. Gatsby's attempts to win Daisy back result in his tragic downfall, as witnessed and narrated by his neighbor and friend Nick Carraway (Sam Waterston). Adapted for the screen from F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel by Francis Ford Coppola. – jinni.com

*Out of Africa* – dir. Sidney Pollack, 1985

This film plaintively tells the story of two troubled adults who meet and fall in love in the African wilderness. Karen Blixen-Flecke (Meryl Streep) is a modern woman, caught in the shortcomings of a practical marriage. Finch Hatton (Robert Redford) is a gallant British hunter, lonely, but unable to commit. As they two meet and begin a torrid affair, they set out on an epic adventure in the badlands of Africa--an adventure that real-life Karen Blixen-Flecke would later novelize under the pen name Isak Dinesen. – jinni.com

## **Activity**

Wear your fanciest clothes and follow the rules of decorum to a ridiculous degree for the entirety of the book group meeting. Create a list of acceptable mannerisms prior to the meeting and distribute it to guests ahead of time. Keep it fun!



Ann Arbor District Library

*Summaries from AADL.org catalog*