



The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton, Maureen Howard (Introduction)

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Winner of the 1921 Pulitzer Prize, *The Age of Innocence* is **Edith Wharton**'s masterful portrait of desire and betrayal during the sumptuous Golden Age of Old New York, a time when society people “dreaded scandal more than disease.”

This is Newland Archer's world as he prepares to marry the beautiful but conventional May Welland. But when the mysterious Countess Ellen Olenska returns to New York after a disastrous marriage, Archer falls deeply in love with her. Torn between duty and passion, Archer struggles to make a decision that will either courageously define his life—or mercilessly destroy it.

The Age of Innocence Details

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Lizzy says

‘The longing was with him day and night, an incessant undefinable craving, like the sudden whim of a sick man for food or drink once tasted and long since forgotten. He could not see beyond the craving, or picture what it might lead to, for he was not conscious of any wish to speak to Madame Olenska or to hear her voice. He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty.’

There was never getting away from their circumstances for Newland and Ellen, the protagonists of The Age of Innocence. As I weep for them and their unrequited love, I realized it was not meant to be. Edith Wharton depicts masterfully New York’s traditions and judgmental airs, which were from the start against them. This elite group within which they existed had very rigid rules of behavior, social rituals, fashion, and clear censures for those that violated them. There is a clear hypocrisy in their life that existed behind their conservative moral exterior.

“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.”

As I started reading Edith Wharton’s crisp prose and witty dialogues, I got to know Newland Archer, May Welland and Ellen, Countess Olenska. What was inescapable from the outset is that they were a product of New York society of their time.

As Newland meets Countess Olenska, he is not prepared for her worldly persona. Thus it is that May and Newland make their engagement public right away, to ease the acceptance of Ellen into their social pack. May is considered the perfect model of what a young wife should be: young, beautiful, soft, obedient, pliant, conventional, and with no opinions on anything of importance. We would consider her boring, but those were different times.

Newland starts out pretty much the same; he's a young lawyer, used to his luxurious and idle style of living; all in accord with the strict rules of society. Yes, both are good persons with many amiable qualities, but they simply are not exceptional. They were clearly not in love, just following rituals that defined that a young man should marry a nice girl with a good family. *‘There was no better match in New York than May Welland, look at the question from what point you choose. Of course such a marriage was only what Newland was entitled to...’*

Newland and Ellen’s love story is nevertheless magnificent because it is the changes and character growth of both lovers that make it endearing and wonderful. When we first meet Newland Archer he could not have been more in tune with New York society’s status quo:

But Newland Archer was too imaginative not to feel that, in his case and May's, the tie might

gall for reasons far less gross and palpable. What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a "decent" fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal?

If Newland Archer seems indecisive and hesitant, it's in part because he is conflicted with his values and desires. He even starts defending new ideas, "*Women ought to be free – as free as we are*" Nevertheless, it is easy to note how typical Newland Archer was when we first meet him, how judgmental, how hypocritical:

There was nothing mean or ungenerous in the young man's heart, and he was glad that his future wife should be restrained by false prudery from being kind (in private) to her unhappy cousin; but to receive Countess Olenska in the family circle was a different thing from producing her in public, at the Opera of all places, and in the very box with the young girl whose engagement to him, Newland Archer, was to be announced in a few weeks. No, he felt as old Sillerton Jackson felt; he did not think the Mingotts would have tried it on!

Could he have been more traditional? '*He hated to think of May Welland's being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste.*' Yes, in the beginning, he hated the idea of his innocent fiancé being contaminated by the worldly Countess.

Nevertheless, Newland's careful and predictable world is flipped completely upside down when he meets and really gets to know the intriguing and intrepid Countess Olenska. As the plot moves on, we discovered all is not as we first envisioned. Newland is changing as he falls deeper in love with Ellen. He soon starts to show signs of rebelling against his previous ideals, begins transforming himself. A conversation with Ellen's grandmother and family matriarch is particularly revealing:

"Poor Ellen—she was always a wayward child. I wonder what her fate will be?"

"What we've all contrived to make it," he felt like answering. "If you'd all of you rather she should be Beaufort's mistress than some decent fellow's wife you've certainly gone the right way about it."

But his transformation is not fast or deep enough, he is not able to entirely free himself from the constraints imposed on him by society and his own upbringing. He is not courageous enough?, you might ask. '*His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen.*' But there is much more at play here. He soon realizes how restrictive his marriage was, how loveless and lonely his life would be:

'There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free; and he had long since discovered that May's only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration.'

And much more,

'He perceived with a flash of chilling insight that in the future many problems would be thus negatively solved for him; but as he paid the hansom and followed his wife ...he took refuge in the comforting platitude that the first six months were always the most difficult in marriage. "After that I suppose we shall have pretty nearly finished rubbing off each other's angles," he reflected; but the worst of it was that May's pressure was already bearing on the very angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep.'

Even after understanding what his marriage would make of his life, he cannot escape.

"Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent—that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there."

He cannot break up from convention, although he dreams of going as far as Japan with Ellen:

"Archer had fancied that his path was clear before him. He had meant to have a word alone with Madame Olenska, and failing that, to learn from her grandmother on what day, and by which train, she was returning to Washington. In that train he intended to join her, and travel with her to Washington, or as much farther as she was willing to go. His own fancy inclined to Japan."

Even if the story is told through Newland's point of view, we cannot forget how much Ellen suffered. Probably even more than him, since it seems she had no choice:

"Oh, I know—I know! But on condition that they don't hear anything unpleasant. Aunt Welland put it in those very words when I tried.... Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!" She lifted her hands to her face, and he saw her thin shoulders shaken by a sob.

We also soon discover that May is not so innocent. Although all her fight seems to be enforced to defend her marriage, its survival, and in that she would never change. What she learned with her mother she would repeat in her marriage '*Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and mysteriously, by the very process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland*'. No, she was never weak just limited.

"I told her I was afraid I hadn't been fair to her—hadn't always understood how hard it must have been for her here, alone among so many people who were relations and yet strangers; who felt the right to criticise, and yet didn't always know the circumstances." She paused. "I knew you'd been the one friend she could always count on; and I wanted her to know that you and I were the same—in all our feelings."

But Newland was still dreaming of breaking away from everything, of being with Ellen. He tells May he needs to get away, but she was ahead of him. Not an innocent at all:

“I want to take a break—“

“A break? To give up law?”

“To go away, at any rate – at once. On a long trip, ever so far off – away from everything—“

He paused, conscious that he had failed in his attempt to speak with the indifference of a man who longs for a change and is yet too weary to welcome it. Do what he would, the chord of eagerness vibrated. “Away from everything – “he repeated.

“Ever so far? Where, for instance?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. India – or Japan.”

“As far as that? But I’m afraid you can’t, dear … Not unless you take me with you. …That is, if the doctors let me go …but I’m afraid they won’t. For you see, Newland, I’ve been sure since this morning of something I’ve been longing and hoping for—“

“Have you told anyone else?”

“Only Mama and your mother. …That is – and Ellen. You know I told you we’d had a long talk one afternoon – and how dear she was to me.”

“Ah—“ said Archer, his heart stopping.

What I concluded is that Newland might be rebellious while May is until the end tradition itself. This pattern we witness endlessly, and when Newland ponders what their marriage and family life had been like it is all summed so clearly:

‘This hard bright blindness had kept her immediate horizon apparently unaltered. Her incapacity to recognize change made her children conceal their views from her as Archer concealed his; there had been, from the first, a joint pretense of sameness, a kind of innocent family hypocrisy, in which father and children had unconsciously collaborated.’

For one thing, his life as a man allowed him more freedom even to circumvent social customs for he was not as closely watched. Not that it was easier for him, for he struggles between social conformity and honesty to one’s emotions. And not that May would want to change. She was set on her role without any uncertainty.

And often we see him contradict himself. Despite his transformation, we realize he will always be a 19th century man, as we witness him saying things such as *“What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a “decent” fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal?”*, while later he will dream of running away with Ellen.

The essence of Edith Wharton’s novel is whether Newland and Ellen ever had a chance? Not at their time. And Ellen recognizes reality: *“Ah, my poor Newland – I suppose this had to be… You’re engaged to May Welland; and I’m married”*. And Newland replied, *“It’s too late to do anything else”*. To apart mean a return to their old respective life patterns, but to be together would mean going against what they both loved the most in the other. *I can’t love you unless I give you up*. Being together would mean breaking too many rules, hurting loved ones, and carrying a guilt that would ultimately separate them if not physically for certain emotionally.

"But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world outside tugging at one with all its golden hands—and yet you hated the things it asks of one; you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before—and it's better than anything I've known."

This great work is a bittersweet love story at the mercy of society's morals and ethics, with conflicting values that prevents them from realizing their most ardent desire to be together. I'd say this is the strong and beautiful point of this classic.

The idea that he could ever, in his senses, have dreamed of marrying Countess Olenska had become almost unthinkable, and she remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts.

Even more heartfelt:

The long was with him day and night, an incessant undeniable craving, like the sudden whim of a sick man for food or drink once tasted and long since forgotten.

The characters are forced to adjust and readjust to their changing life, but that is still not enough. At least it was not in their lifetime. The changes they go through are not deep enough to allow them a happy ever after. How painful to live through this changing times; and how dreadful to accept their fate. I can just imagine and suffer for them, and weep for them. Here lies the greatness of *The Age of Innocence*.

Their fate was to be apart, and so nothing rests for them but to keep their memories intact. It's what we lost and our memories that stay with us. If he had gone up to meet her, it would be another story.

’"It's more real to me here than if I went up," he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other.'

Oh, I have to repeat myself: there is nothing more heartbreak than unrequited love. So I weep again for them.

My first impressions:

“I can't love you unless I give you up.”

Oh, Vessey, I just finished *The Age of Innocence*! And I have to tell you that the last 10% conquered me. It made it me think that it had to be. They were set on their way before Ellen arrived and Newland and Amy made public their engagement. And I believe it had to end as it did. Suddenly, I discovered it deserved 5 full stars. It's what we lost and our memories that stay with us. If he had gone up to meet her, it would be another story.

I loved how it analyzed his marriage with May, the old costumes that are no more. That hypocritical society that held him down is finally fading. But too late for Ellen and Newland.

Well, it is all still too new to me, and the only thing I can say is that it touched me deeply. Maybe more because of my age, since I know enough of life and remember all that I lost and could never simply be revisited.

"It's more real to me here than if I went up," he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other.

There is nothing more heartbreak than unrequited love. So I weep for them.

kohey says

I know that this novel has been played often by Takarazuka Ballet, the all-female Japanese musical theater troupe, so it must be more of a sugary, insipid typical love triangle. Yes, it is a love story, but it is much more than that.

The main plot is a tragic love story, but with the conflict of values and ethics in life and society. I'd say this is the strong and beautiful point of this classic. Through the culture clash between Europe and America (here I mean New York), and the rise and fall of the then old families, the characters are forced to adjust and readjust to their changing life, stick to the old values or must accept new ones. How painful the process and how dreadful the fate must be!

Most values depicted here are almost universal, and can apply in modern times, so their decisions are all the more touching.

This great work is a modern bittersweet story at the mercy of ethics and morals we share today and different times.

Steven Godin says

Myself and the Pulitzer prize have previously not always seen eye to eye, but Finally, I have read one worthy of giving top marks to. This golden oldie captures the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood from a bygone era, where modern ideas are resisted and tradition overcomes compassion. The inhabitants of this hothouse of New York society is built on wealth, life is lavished, easy and comfortably cushioned, but this world may just as well have been covered in a blanket of cobwebs, as the lives are so sedate and uneventfully dull, despite their opulent surroundings, they appear colourless and motionless. It is ultimately a tragic tale that Wharton weaves, and yes, as with a lot of classic fiction based around love, it's told with air of melancholy because this love is one that doesn't really get off the ground. For Newland Archer, the leading male character, there is an imagining of an alternative existence to the one that convention has pressed upon him, he has built within himself a kind of sanctuary for his secret thoughts and longings. Within these walls are his bride to be, May Welland and Countess Olenska,

who would change his whole world.

"The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend"

Archer is a perfect product of Old New York, a member of one of the most prominent, historic families, he lives in the obligatory sumptuous brownstone on Fifth Avenue with his mild mannered mother and spinster sister, and languidly pursues the law as most gentlemen of his age and inherited wealth do. He is engaged to the young, beautiful, and equally impeccably bred May Welland, who is sweet sweet natured but naive. After twelve years away returns the Countess Ellen Olenska, May's cousin, who through no fault of her own upsets the balance of Newland's life. She is beautiful, vivacious and intelligent, whose long period of living in more liberal European surroundings has made her innocent of the nonsensical, unspoken rules of the society she has reentered, and incapable of maintaining the shallow facade of her female relatives. Newland feels a life of quiet misery lies ahead, and despairs over Olenska as they grow closer and closer, because he is forced, by his own realisation, to know how Ellen will be treated if she dares to divorce her husband, and advises against it, even though he is devoured by love for her.

Wharton mesmerizes with the sheer depth of emotion, pain, and frustration bearing down on Newland's shoulders, he really is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Through thwarted dreams, despairing disillusionment, unbearable regrets and the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience, Newland and Ellen share a secret love that enables each of them to be the best people they can be, fulfilled intellectually, emotionally and socially, and the fact they can never be together in harmony is just as unbearable for the reader as it is for the characters, and this is where Wharton excels with people you truly believe in. For May, she is neither clever nor truthful, and only rarely shows a spirit that reveals a depth of feeling in the face of convention and social expectations. In telling the story of how Archer and Olenska, against all the strictures and taboos of their society, fall in love, Wharton seems to be siding with the individual in this universal tug-of-war. But I don't think it's ever that simple. Certainly, New York's upper society in the 1870s was one of grandeur, but it is described in Archer's thoughts and Wharton's observations as a prison of the mind, one where the cells are sprinkled with gold dust.

The finale, of many years later, moved me immensely, I thought of all that went before, a story that in terms of characterisation was searing on every page with the intensity of this doomed love affair. A stunning novel, impeccably told. And I think it's unfair to simply label this as old fashioned 'chick-lit' because it's about so much more than what appears on the surface. Her tone is sardonic and to some extent cynical of the social world into which the reader enters, and she portrays this society, its conventions and traditions, through the unforgettable vivid characters whose behaviour and thinking were moulded in time.

Henry Avila says

Appearances can be deceiving, as this superb classic novel reveals...Newland Archer, has the perfect life, rich , young, and good looking, a member in excellent standing, of New York's High Society of 1871, during the Golden Age. These people feel not like prisoners but brave members of a group, keeping back the barbarians at the gate. Newland is engaged to a beautiful, charming girl, May Welland, also in the exclusive association, who loves him. But then her mysterious cousin arrives, from Europe, Countess Ellen Olenska, married to a brute, a Polish nobleman, who repeatedly degrades her, showing contempt for their marriage, by parading lowly women, in front of the Countess. Not trying to hide his transgressions, letting the world know it. The fleeing woman, is a childhood playmate of Mr. Archer, and he can still remember her, as she, he. First seeing the fugitive again, at the Opera, with his future bride and family, in their box. May loves her cousin

and Ellen, loves May... The Countess causes quite a stir, with the audience, men look approvingly, at the attractive lady, women more critical. Poor Ellen, as the relatives call her, living with an unconventional grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, so obese, she needs help to get up, nevertheless the lady is the head of the family and people listen, even though she has strange ways, then again, very rich, but... stingy. There is an unstated, powerful attraction, between Archer and Ellen, still duty prevents anything unsavory from happening, besides Newland, believes in the proper way of doing things. A self described dilettante, who goes through the motions of being a lawyer, in an office where he has little to do. Archer lives with his widowed mother, Mrs. Adeline Archer, she is forever saying that everything is changing, for the worse, in the city, and spinster sister, Janey, they look so alike, the two, could be sisters, both depend on each other, for companionship. He's a secret fanatic, a bookworm, receiving the latest editions from London, staying in a room reading, that's when the gentleman, is happy. Mr. Archer has no close friends, the only person he can feel comfortable with, be himself, is Ned Winsett, a penniless, struggling journalist, but of the lower class, with a sick wife. Newland wants his wedding to happen earlier than is the established custom, hoping temptations will end, if he is married to May. Even traveling to St. Augustine, Florida, on a surprise visit, where May is vacationing with her family, for that purpose, his boss is not elated. Mr. Archer is wrong, clearly the gentleman loves the Countess and she returns the sentiment. The boorish banker Julius Beaufort, vastly wealthy, a foreigner, (married to a New York society woman) with a propensity to break all the rules, is chasing the skittish Ellen, she needs to get away. They meet clandestinely, in Boston, the Countess and Archer, away from the prying eyes of everyone, the two hope, just to hold each other... At a family gathering in Newport, Rhode Island, Newland, is told to fetch Ellen, he goes down to the beach, sees her on the pier, passionately stares for a long time and retreats back to the house, it would not be proper, he thinks. An elegy saturates the whole book, from the first page to the last.

Emily May says

“We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?”

A few years ago, I read *The Age of Innocence* and thought it was okay. It has something of an Austen-esque feel - criticisms of middle/upper middle class society, paired with a subtle and clever humour and a love story (here deliciously scandalous). But it's taken me a few years to come back to this novel and appreciate the magic Wharton has brought to the table.

This little book is so clever. Everything about it from the damn title to nearly every piece of dialogue is perfectly-placed and often ironic. Things that didn't hit me fully the first time around became so much more important in this reread. Wharton knows 1870s New York City like the back of her hand; she knows its habits, its traditions, and its expectations of people. She creates a rich, twinkly picture of parties and social standards that is both delightful and ultimately ridiculous - then she throws a spanner in the works.

Never has a love triangle been so welcomed by me. This isn't the modern affair we're used to, where a girl must choose between hot guy #1 and hot guy #2. Nope, in this story, Newland Archer is torn between the stability, comfort and duty he can be offered by the socially-favoured match with May Welland... and his passionate, all-consuming love for the unconventional, rebellious and ostracized Ellen Olenska.

“Each time you happen to me all over again.”

It's as important as it is beautifully written. Wharton casts an eye over this society, both disdainful and affectionate. Incorporating issues of female emancipation into the story, never has the idea of a woman

enslaved by marriage and convention seemed so unattractive from a male perspective. Newland Archer is full of modernity and the call of new ideas, but finds that any freedom he poses to May she would receive only with the intention of pleasing him. Though, it should be said, I believe May is far more than she seems.

It's hard to read the ending of this book without feeling emotional, but the exact emotion may differ with your interpretation. Ambiguity reigns supreme as this novel finds its close and even the coldest of unromantics will surely have their hearts pulled along for this... *ride*. One of my favourite tragic love affairs.

“Only, I wonder – the thing one’s so certain of in advance: can it ever make one’s heart beat as wildly?”

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Jason Koivu says

Yeah, you *could* call this *The Age of Innocence*. On the other hand, a more suitable title might be *Anna Karenina Revisited*. Here are a few similarities off the top of my head:

- It's a novel based on societal etiquette.
- A lovely woman is plagued with an unloving husband and somewhat ostracized from said society due to divorce.
- A young man rushes to marry his fiancé before troubling thoughts of cheating overtake him.
- The fiancé is a virtuous, virginal airhead.
- And finally, the adulterous woman comes equipped with a very Anna Karenina-esque European flair. Their sensibilities are remarkably similar.

Did Edith Wharton steal everything but the title? I don't know, but if you told me she read and admired Tolstoy's book, I wouldn't be surprised. However, let's set the accusations aside.

This is a damn fine novel. It's poignant. It's well-plotted. It's funny. The characters pop to life. New York society of the 1870s is set as well as any Broadway stage.

Deficiencies? Perhaps there's a little too much telling over showing, but I'm not complaining.

Indeed it's difficult to fault Wharton on any point. This is a solid novel.

Beyond the novel, it's difficult to fault Wharton even if she did pilfer the plot. Yes, she came from a very wealthy family and much of her time was spent penning novels from the comfort of her luxuriant bed, dropping completed pages upon the floor to be collected and collated by a servant. But looking deeper you discover all the good she did during the Great War. And when you learn how she put herself in danger by reporting from the front, well, you can't help but admire the woman. She's got true grit, even if it is gilded grit.

PS: Here is my video review of *Age of Innocence*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8gD8...>

Cheryl says

The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing.

Just when I think a classic unlikely to give me pause, it surprises me with relatable themes. After reading Wharton's short story, "The Muse's Tragedy" (one of the supplemental reads I'll be teaching this Fall), I knew I had to visit one of her longer forms. So rewarding it was, to be wooed by elegant prose and positioning; a plot that moves in practiced laps; a story that could be yours, mine, theirs; a setting that will always be known for both its vibrance and austerity.

Wharton is a writer of words nestled in conscious rhythm, the director of a play that centers around societal distinctions like class and gender, yet still embodies universal themes of love, betrayal, and self-actualization. Wharton writing from a male's perspective reminds me of Cather, in *My Ántonia*: they do it so well, so authentically. She had Henry James as a mentor, and yet I prefer her books to his (although I see a resemblance to my favorite James book to-date: *The American*).

His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen.

Countess Olenska is not just a woman ostracized in 1920s New York Society: she is symbolic of New York on the verge of change, the cusp of a new era; she is love and beauty and complications; she is pain, consolation, a new life which uncovers an insipid way of living. The Countess represents fresh ideas, a new way of thinking, a society that doesn't place class and materialism before all else, a bohemian way of being. The Countess is hope.

I realize I'm taking an unorthodox stand, seeing as how the Countess also represents infidelity and betrayal, and the uproot of normalcy. Yet knowing Newland's choices when he meets Ellen, one knows that in the end, he'll make a decision forced upon him by his society. In the end, we see his gratitude for life, and the regrets from his choices, which once again, reminds us of the complications of life. Wharton leaves us with an ending rife with speculative contemplations, and as readers, we become just like her characters.

Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery.

Conventional New York was not ready for the Countess. The city had not yet formed itself into the diverse

structure it now is, with a roadway tunnel that traverses the Hudson river, and a train station that connects you with New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In fact, conventional New York City was also unprepared for The Harlem Renaissance, taking place only a few blocks away, in the same decade and the same world, yet separate and forgotten--like Ellen Olenska.

But then you come; and you're so much more than I remembered, and what I want of you is so much more than an hour or two every now and then, with wastes of thirsty waiting between, that I can sit perfectly still beside you, like this, with that other vision in my mind, just quietly trusting it to come true.

Kalliope says

[Mrs Manson Mingott, Sillerton Jackson, Mrs Struthers, Henry Van der Luyden (hide spoiler)]

Paul Bryant says

Yes indeedy, what could be more jejune than another early 20th century novelist choosing as her subject the problematic relations between the sexes amongst the idle rich? D H Lawrence and Henry James do the same, the first like a big dog gnawing at a bone and finding something it mistakes for God in the marrow, and the latter in his infinite cheeseparings putting the whole thing into the form of a three-dimensional chess game played by sardonic French subatomic particle physicists who you suspect own *little dogs*, the kind you want to step on and *squish*. And many other novelists great and small dance about on the same subject.

Well, Edith Wharton starts off like she is trying to get at something very interesting in *The Age of Innocence*. Here is the young man contemplating his future marriage:

What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a 'decent' fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal? ... He reviewed his friends' marriages - the supposedly happy ones - and saw none that answered, even remotely, to the passionate and tender comradeship which he pictured as his permanent relation with May Welland. He perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgement, which she had been carefully trained not to possess; and with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were : a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other.

Much later the young man sadly muses thus:

There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free

- apart from making you think "**how very rude!**" this begs the question what liberty, exactly, did this proto-feminist man suppose could be accessed by upperclass females in the 1870s in New York? Edith Wharton's clear intelligence makes me think that ambiguity clouds these various musings only because she fears she's

already been too bold. So this compelling theme gets lost when she subtly changes gear. Still, there are enough zingers to keep you reading and relishing - for instance -

What if 'niceness' [in a wife:] carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?

Hmm, what if indeed. Or, concerning the rigours of class in New York,

It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it into a copy of another country - nice one, Edith.

There's no getting away from it, Edith is indeed Henry James in drag, and this novel is kissing cousins to the early HJs like Washington Square, The Bostonians and The Portrait of a Lady. These idle rich, they're dull buggers you know - indeed Edith goes on and on about just how boring their lives are as she describes the dining, the travelling, the frittering, the spending, the ladylike sports the ladylike ladies did (archery - no, not nude mud wrestling, what large sums would I not pay to read Edith Wharton describing such a scene), the families, the clans, their history, their posh houses, their posh horses - oh please spare us - half way through you really wish that the fabric of space and time should rend asunder and a scary bunch of Sendero Luminoso guerillas break into the great ballrooms and dining rooms and haul the whole pack of them off to the sweaty jungles of Colombia for some serious political indoctrination. Plot spoiler : this does not happen. Instead, this book is a study of circumscription and circumspection, of people (the hero, the heroine and the wife) not getting what they want. And as such, when we are able to skirt round the pages of orotund description (*A winding drive led up between the iron stags and blue glass balls embedded in mounds of geraniums to a front door of highly varnished walnut under a striped verandah-roof; and behind it ran a narrow hall with a black and yellow star-patterned parquet floor upon which opened four small square rooms with heavy flock-papers under ceilings on which an Italian house-painter had lavished all the divinities of Olympus*" - did you get all that Mr Set Designer?) the heart of this tale is sad and almost beautifully done. But really mimsy with it.

**

PS - I saw the movie too which was as elegant as all get-out, apart from the dodgy Enya-like song splodged in the middle. That Michelle Pfeiffer - cor, blimey. I wouldn't kick her out of bed. Still and all, the movie is a 100-minute argument as to why you should read the book instead, because what's missing is Edith Wharton's mind, which is a great place to dally in. You get voice-overs in the movie which only serve to remind you how literary adaptations, however spiffily dressed-up (and aren't they all?) are not the real deal, they're the unreal deal. These movies are like aides memoires on gorgeous notepaper written with a ten thousand dollar pen. The note says : read the book.

Shovelmonkey1 says

Before writing this review I decided to find out a bit more about Edith Wharton. Turns out that she is actually a lot more interesting than some of her books. If you turn to the Wikipedia page (not exactly hardcore research, I know but I'm not in a position to march off to the library and start wading through Wharton's presumably numerous biographies) you'll be faced with a picture of a timid and pretty dour looking lady with two disagreeable looking Paris-Hilton porta-dogs plonked on her knee.

Don't let appearances fool you ladies and gentlemen, for Wharton was a regular social and creative dynamo;

designer, socialite, writer, Knight (Chevalier of the legion of honour for her work in France during the war) there was no stopping this woman.

So back to The Age of Innocence. What's it all about? Mostly about how being young, rich and desirable and mixing with the cream of society isn't all it is cracked up to be. Why? Well because high society is actually incredibly dull. Really? Yup. In order to set themselves apart from the grubby minions who do the dishes, drive the coaches and actually work for a living, "society" set about creating a set of hideously constrictive rules and moral guidelines which sap the joy, happiness, fun, freedom of expression and general day to day life out of everyone involved.

It is incredibly ironic that everyone then strives to get accepted into this set when everyone who's already there is so damned miserable most of the time. Most of Wharton's principal characters are unhappy with their lot and lead a treading-on-eggshells existence because they're terrified out of their wits about any kind of scandal. Obviously scandal of sorts does ensue but everyone deals with it very nicely, calmly and diplomatically without any mud slinging or calling in Piers Morgan.

Clearly a lot has changed... now massive scandal can be a potentially lucrative money earner if you have the right press connections and in certain cities (Lets pretend I don't live in one of them) people set out to bed a sleb (celebrity) and then launch a modelling/music/TV career based on the back of some good quality kiss and tell anecdotes.

The best thing about this book for me was the names of the main characters. Not satisfied with a range of traditional names (you will find no James, Johns, Matthews or Mikes here reader) Wharton presented me with a barrage of people with names like Newland Archer, Manson Mingott, Sillerton Jackson, Emerson Sillerton and Dallas Archer. Eek! Perhaps the silliness of the names mirrors Whartons' own slightly mocking perspective on the society she herself inhabited.

If I had been brought up in high society I would have probably had to kick off my satin slippers and throw myself under the wheels of the first passing horse and carriage as soon as I entered adulthood. Who would want to live in such constrained times? Not I.

Florence (Lefty) MacIntosh says

Heading for a hospital stay I decided to treat myself to a pleasant historical novel with a dash of romance. BIG mistake, if this is romantic take me to the nunnery....Okay, the ugliness of the story is offset by the beauty of the writing, and it is gorgeous, I'd read this author again - but still. This isn't so much a review as an attempt to purge this pile of hooey from my subconscious.

1st off the main protagonist Newland Archer is a **celebration of hypocrisy**. A man who makes a CLEAR choice (view spoiler) to reap the benefits of marrying well "*After all, marriage is marriage, and money's money—both useful things in their way ...*" then wastes his life and the lives of the women who share it by spending it lamenting his decision. "*His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen.*" Throw in the proverbial '**vapid**' ball and chain of a wife "*There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free.*" Add to the mix unrequited love, the lust for another woman. Goes without saying that in stark contrast to the wife she's intelligent and utterly fascinating. "*poetry and art are the breath of life to her.*"

Pen the above in gorgeous prose, set in high society New York, shake & stir and voila! Pulitzer prize for fiction.

Cons: So predictable, and except for Newland's the characters are shallow, undefined and stereotypical. How it took the Pulitzer is beyond me.

Meanderings: Huge sigh of relief when I FINALLY finished this. Needed a break from 'escapist' fiction so followed it with Eels: An Exploration, from New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Mysterious Fish Loved it (review to follow). Eels are slimy, ugly and refreshingly uncomplicated! So obviously I'm a bit weird. Just to be clear my dislike for this novel isn't because I over-empathized with the wife. I've never married and I don't think I'm vapid:) No, I'm probably just pissed that I've been fooling myself for years, believing my like or dislike of a novels characters didn't impact my appreciation for a book.

Wrong...Newland Archer made me eat my words.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

726. The Age of Innocence, Edith Wharton

The Age of Innocence is a 1920 novel by the American author Edith Wharton. It won the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, making Wharton the first woman to win the prize. The story is set in the 1870s, in upper-class, "Gilded-Age" New York City. Newland Archer, gentleman lawyer and heir to one of New York City's best families, is happily anticipating a highly desirable marriage to the sheltered and beautiful May Welland. Yet he finds reason to doubt his choice of bride after the appearance of Countess Ellen Olenska, May's exotic and beautiful 30-year-old cousin. Ellen has returned to New York from Europe after scandalously separating herself (per rumor) from a bad marriage to a Polish count. At first, Ellen's arrival and its potential taint on the reputation of his bride-to-be's family disturb Newland, but he becomes intrigued by the worldly Ellen, who flouts New York society's fastidious rules. As Newland's admiration for the countess grows, so does his doubt about marrying May, a perfect product of Old New York society; his match with May no longer seems the ideal fate he had imagined. ...

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Catie says

The title of this book is now one of my favorites of all time. At first glance, it seems so dry, so suggestive of sweeping historical detail. It made me think of the fond memories of an age gone by – how quaint, how rosy-hued and idealistic it all was. Summoning the vague ideas that I had about 1920's New York, I pictured smoky clubs and laughing ladies in fur-lined cloaks and peacock feather hats.

I'm not sure that I've ever come across another title so seemingly innocuous, yet so absolutely loaded with darker meaning. Shouldn't there be some quotation marks or italicizing in there? Shouldn't she have warned us?

But she doesn't, and this book is all the more devastating for it. The beginning had me laughing along with how ridiculous it all was – the gardenia in the buttonhole, the fashionably late arrival, the opera translated within an inch of its life, the fiancé waiting in all her cosseted "perfection". She lured me in with these little witty and darkly humorous asides. How silly! And then, just when I was getting comfortable, she twisted all those details into something stifling and malevolent and tenacious. She's violent with her readers, but her blows aren't passionate or frenzied. Rather, they are given out systematically, calmly, and with absolute precision.

This is how to write a love triangle. My god! I honestly don't think I will ever read a more vivid and lacerating portrayal of the guilt, inner conflict, and yearning of it all. These three characters are so fully realized and exposed to the reader, yet within the world of these pages, they are neatly sectioned. They are sequestered inside of their own thoughts and feelings. They do not see each other at all. We are given the best/worst seat in the house, and it's painful, but always absolutely compelling.

May is sheltered and grown in a tiny space, like some sort of delicacy. She is preserved and wrapped, like a present, for Archer to unwrap – an offering to his male vanity. But is that all that she is? Archer constantly assumes that she is child-like and vacant, with no hidden depths. But then, she has unexpected moments of shrewdness and lucidity. I think that she has more insight than he knows. (view spoiler)She is very much a product of her environment and she has learned to navigate its roads. She has learned to succeed in her role.

Unlike May, Ellen is given experience and perspective in childhood. Her eyes have been opened by her eccentric upbringing and the bad marriage that she's run away from. She's realistic to the point where she's almost lost the ability to be romantic. Does she love Archer? I still don't know. She sees the reality of their relationship so much more clearly than he does, and I think that holds her back.

Archer is given center stage in this drama and so he is the most visible to us. In the beginning, he is the favored son, almost worshipped by his mother and sister. His every need is cared for; his whole life set out before him. But when Ellen arrives – a color photo in a sea of black and white – he suddenly begins to see his society as an outsider. Without even intending to, she jars him out of his set course. She makes him examine his own thoughts. But his transition isn't instantaneous and complete: he regresses to his earlier state of complacency when she's not around. Or at least, he tries to. He's idealistic and romantic in his innocence, hoping for impossible things.

And then there's a fourth main character: *society*. Acting as a single, terrifying tribe, they collude to set trends, make rules, and excise bad elements. They are a "*society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant*," but as a result they also eschew learning, experience, and perspective.

The ending is *intense*, and made me question my own much touted love of sad and ambiguous endings. Quite a feat. I think that it can be interpreted in a couple of ways. If you've read this book, please comment because I'd love to have a discussion about it.

(view spoiler)

This is some of the most breath-stealing, gorgeous writing I've ever read and I am now very happy that I have an old, battered, highlighted and written-in copy from a library book sale, because I dog-eared the life out of this thing.

Perfect Musical Pairing

Mendelssohn – Wedding March (from A Midsummer Night's Dream)

Joyous, grand, lively, triumphant...structured, traditional, confined, false...I'll never hear this damn song the same way again.

Jr Bacdayan says

"Each time you happen to me all over again."

Imagine that person you love most in this world, right within your grasp, but somehow out of reach. An invisible thin wall keeping you apart. Apart but not away from each other. Together yet not with each other. This is the worst form of torture, a torture of invisible chains and soundless screams. Constantly seeing each other, constantly being reminded of what cannot be. Constantly falling in love yet constantly falling apart.

The urge, the love, the longing constantly growing, engulfing you until you cannot bear to live. Every part of your body numb and unaware of the realities around you. Because for you, only the pain you feel is real. The only truth you know is that everything is a lie.

Edith Wharton paints a very delicate picture that resonates elegiac waves and enraptures its readers to the very bone. One can't help but succumb to this level of desire, of emotion and empathize because of the atmosphere that Wharton has created. Her prose is crisp, straight and true. One might say that her prose is a reflection of her New York socialite self. (Wharton was born with quite a few gazillion silver spoons stuck somewhere on her buttocks.) Aside from that, with such a dazzling foray of words, she evoked such emotion in me that I was afraid I might like her Facebook page at some point. So with that in mind, I vowed to refrain from using Facebook until I've finished reading this book. Well, it worked fine for me. On another note, I was really impressed with her depiction of the 1870s New York. Based on a little research I did, her canvas of the place was just spot on splendid.

"It was the spirit of it -- the spirit of the exquisite romantic pain. The idea that the mere touching of a woman's hand would suffice. The idea that seeing her across the room would keep him alive for another year."

That sort of a relationship, that unique communication between two people savagely drawn to the other like moth to a flame is of a different level than all the other types of communication. This communication between them is that of the deepest kind. A communication that needs not one of the five senses. This communication of feeling, of intense knowing, of mutual understanding, this unity of the mind, this shared consciousness is the effect of a love that knows no bounds, strengthened to an insane proportion by the fact that it was never meant to be.

"The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!"

"What's the use? You gave me my glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one."

But what really struck me the most was that irony that these two people enlightened to be different from the "pretend people", who revile them and mockingly laugh at their trained innocence and hapless practices were to be subjected to a pretend relationship as well. "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." They that were above that "Innocence" were cruelly placed upon a circumstance in which they have to feign Innocence as well, as the only way to sustain their love for each other. "I can't love you unless I give you up." This has led me to believe that such innocence can only be a result of circumstances beyond their powers. That altogether this Innocence is merely through the progression of unstoppable forces not necessarily known to the person it affects. Such is also the case with the New York Society. These people did not choose to succumb to this veiled innocence, it was mercilessly hurled at them. They were raised in these circumstances, in a society where conformity is the norm and to question this conformity would be self-abdication. Thus, these people will die by this code.

This Age of Innocence reflects a view in which Newland Archer is also an innocent victim. He thinks his wife too much of an "innocent being" that he is surprised in the end and utterly moved when he finds out that she is not so innocent at all. And the lifting of this veil seemed a wake-up call to him at the very end, when he was about to meet the Countess Olenska with his son, that he realizes that he has lost this innocence. She had become the symbol of everything that could have been, all his hopes and dreams. She was the unreachable star. In the end, he was afraid that all that sustained his love was that invisible shackle, that

sense of longing, that feigned innocence. And that the innocence was all that kept him to Ellen, and without it, he cannot bear to face her.

"And you'll sit beside me, and we'll look, not at visions, but at realities."

"I don't know what you mean by realities. The only reality to me is this."

The dream has become a reality and the reality a dream.

"'It's more real to me here than if I went up,' he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other."

Amanda says

Part of why I love *The Age of Innocence* so much is for the very reason my students hate it--the subtlety of action in a society constrained by its own ridiculous rules and mores. In Old New York, conformity is key and the upper-crust go about a life of ritual that has no substance or meaning. Both men and women are victims in this world as both are denied economic, intellectual, and creative outlets. All the world's a stage in Wharton's New York and everyone wears a mask of society's creation. Such is the norm until Newland Archer.

Symbolically, Newland represents an America on the cusp of modernization, the awkward period of transition between the Victorian era and World War I. At first a devout member of New York aristocracy, Newland is awakened as one from a trance with the arrival of Countess Ellen Olenska. Ellen decides to separate from her abusive husband, Count Olenski, and is rumored to have escaped the Count by having an affair with his secretary--a scandalous circumstance that brings her back home to her native New York. Vibrant, intellectual, and free-spirited when compared with the dowdy and restrained women he's known, Ellen's predicament is a revelation to Newland. As he himself has just ended an affair with a married woman and knows the ease with which society forgave his indiscretion when contrasted with Ellen, Newland begins to acknowledge the inequality amongst the sexes. However, there's a serious roadblock to Newland ever being with the captivating Ellen: Ellen is the cousin of May Welland, Newland's fiancee.

Wharton writes with cutting wit about the hypocritical and ludicrous customs of blue blood society and cunningly plots events to work against Newland, the archer whose target is a "new land" in which he and Ellen can be together. The pity is that, ultimately, May proves to be the more cunning huntress who cleverly stalks and traps her quarry in the labyrinth of society.

Cross posted at This Insignificant Cinder
