

# THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

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EDITH WHARTON

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Maureen Howard*

George Stade  
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS

NEW YORK

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## FROM THE PAGES OF *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

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Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against “Taste,” that far-off divinity of whom “Form” was the mere visible representative and vicegerent.

(page 14)

The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than any explanation would have done.

(page 16)

“If we don’t all stand together, there’ll be no such thing as Society left.”

(page 43)

He always came away with the feeling that if his world was small, so was theirs, and that the only way to enlarge either was to reach a stage of manners where they would naturally merge.

(page 86)

“I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past.”

(page 90)

“I felt there was no one as kind as you; no one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard and—unnecessary. The very good people didn’t convince me; I felt they never been tempted. 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.”

(page 141)

“It’s worth everything, isn’t it, to keep one’s intellectual liberty, not to enslave one’s powers of appreciation, one’s critical independence?”

(page 164)

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.

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(page 185)

In the rotation of crops there was a recognized season for wild oats; but they were not to be sown more than once.

(page 249)

It was the old New York way, of taking 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 behavior of those who gave rise to them.

(page 272)

The worst of doing one’s duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else.

(pages 284-285)

He had to deal all at once with the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime.

(page 289)

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# EDITH WHARTON

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Edith Newbold Jones was born January 24, 1862, into such wealth and privilege that her family inspired the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses.” The youngest of three children, Edith spent her early years touring Europe with her parents and, upon the family’s return to the United States, enjoyed a privileged childhood in New York and Newport, Rhode Island. Edith’s creativity and talent soon became obvious: By the age of eighteen she had written a novella, *Fast and Loose* (as well as with reviews of it) and published poetry in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

After a failed engagement, Edith married a wealthy sportsman, Edward Wharton. Despite similar backgrounds and a shared taste for travel, the marriage was not a success. Many of Wharton’s novels chronicle unhappy marriages, in which the demands of love and vocation often conflict with the expectations of society. Wharton’s first major novel, *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, enjoyed considerable literary success. *Ethan Frome* appeared six years later, solidifying Wharton’s reputation as an important novelist. Often in the company of her close friend Henry James, Wharton mingled with some of the most famous writers and artists of the day, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, André Gide, Sinclair Lewis, Jean Cocteau, and Jack London.

In 1913 Edith divorced Edward. She lived mostly in France for the remainder of her life. When World War I broke out, she organized hostels for refugees, worked as a fund-raiser, and wrote for American publications from battlefield frontlines. She was awarded the French Legion of Honor for her courage and distinguished work.

*The Age of Innocence*, a novel about New York in the 1870s, earned Wharton the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1921—the first time the award had been bestowed on a woman. Wharton traveled throughout Europe to encourage young authors. She also continued to write, lying in her bed every morning, as she had always done, dropping each newly penned page on the floor to be collected and arranged when she was finished. Wharton suffered a stroke and died on August 11, 1937. She is buried in the American Cemetery in Versailles, France.

# THE WORLD OF EDITH WHARTON AND *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

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- 1862** Edith Newbold Jones is born January 24 in New York City, the last of three children. Her parents are wealthy and socially well-connected.
- 1866** The Jones family leaves for Europe, where they will live for the next six years.
- 1870** In Germany, Edith falls ill with typhoid fever and for a time hovers between life and death. When she recovers, the family moves to Florence. Edith begins writing stories, which she recites to her family.
- 1872** The Joneses return to America, where they live in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island.
- 1877** Edith finishes a novella, *Fast and Loose*, which will be published a century later, in 1977. Henry James's novel *The American* appears.
- 1878** Edith's mother pays to publish a collection of Edith's poems, *Verses*.
- 1879** Edith is presented to society in New York City.
- 1880** A wealthy young man, Henry Leyden Stevens, proposes to Wharton. The *Atlantic Monthly* magazine publishes five of Wharton's poems.
- 1881** Henry James's novel *Portrait of a Lady* appears.
- 1882** Edith's father dies in the south of France. Edith and her mother return to the United States to find that Henry Stevens's mother disapproves of the engagement. It is broken off, and the Jones women return to France.
- 1883** While summering in Bar Harbor, Maine, Edith agrees to marry Edward Wharton, an independently wealthy sportsman from Massachusetts.
- 1885** Edith and Edward wed and over the next several years divide their time between Europe, New York, and Newport.
- 1889** Wharton's poems appear in *Scribner's Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.
- 1891** Wharton's first published story, "Mrs. Manstey's View," appears in *Scribner's Magazine*.
- 1897** *The Decoration of Houses* appears; it is a nonfiction work on interior design written by Wharton and architect Ogden Codman, Jr.

- 1898** Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is published.
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- 1901** The Whartons begin to build The Mount, their summer home near Lenox, Massachusetts. Edith's mother dies in Paris.
- 1905** *The House of Mirth* is published. The novel quickly becomes one of the best-selling books of the year; its popularity solidifies Wharton's reputation as a major novelist. Wharton and Henry James develop a close friendship. George Bernard Shaw's play *Major Barbara* is performed in London.
- 1908** Wharton publishes *A Motor-Flight through France*, in which she recounts her travels with her husband, Edward, and Henry James. She meets Morton Fullerton, an American journalist living in London who is a friend of Henry James, and the two begin a passionate though short-lived love affair.
- 1911** Wharton's *Ethan Frome* is published; it was inspired by the bleak New England setting the author witnessed near her home in Lenox.
- 1912** Wharton begins a friendship with art historian Bernard Berenson.
- 1913** Edith and Edward divorce. Wharton moves to France, where she will spend most of the rest of her life. Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* is published.
- 1914** Wharton travels to Tunisia and Algiers, then undertakes relief efforts during World War I. She finds homes for hundreds of Belgian orphans and raises money for refugees.
- 1916** Wharton receives the French Legion of Honor award for her war relief activities. Henry James dies.
- 1917** T. S. Eliot's book of poetry *Prufrock and Other Observations* appears.
- 1918** Willa Cather publishes *My Ántonia*.
- 1920** *The Age of Innocence*, a novel about New York society, is published to great success.
- 1921** Wharton becomes the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, which she receives for *The Age of Innocence*. Eugene O'Neill's play *Anna Christie* opens in New York City.
- 1922** T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is published.
- 1923** Yale University awards Wharton an honorary doctorate. Edna St. Vincent Millay receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.
- 1924** Wharton publishes a collection of novellas and short stories as *Old New York*.
- 1925** Sinclair Lewis publishes *Arrowsmith*, which he dedicates to Wharton. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is published. Gertrude Stein publishes *The Making of Americans*. Virginia Woolf publishes *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**1926** Ernest Hemingway publishes *The Sun Also Rises*.

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**1928** Edward Wharton dies. Poet Carl Sandburg's *Good Morning, America* is published.

**1930** Wharton is elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She continues to write, although her health is failing. Robert Frost's *Collected Poems* is published.

**1933** Wharton publishes *Human Nature*, a collection of short stories.

**1934** Wharton publishes "Roman Fever" in *Liberty* magazine for the then-astronomical sum of \$3,000; one of her best known short stories, it is based on her travels in Italy. She continues to write and publish stories and novels. *A Backward Glance*, an autobiography, is published.

**1936** *The World Over*, a collection of short stories, is published.

**1937** After a severe stroke, Edith Wharton dies on August 11. She is buried in Versailles, France.

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# INTRODUCTION

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*The Age of Innocence* is Edith Wharton's most romantic novel, yet our expectations for her lovers Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, are disappointed at every turn. Wharton's genius lies in offering the pleasure of a romance, then engaging the reader in a stunning exploration of boundaries between the demands of society and personal freedom, illicit passion and moral responsibility. In this novel of bold design, we are the innocents unaware of the more demanding rewards to come, just as the readers of the *Pictorial Review* were as the monthly installments appeared in 1920. Luring us with the high comic tone of the opening chapters, Wharton admits us to Newland Archer's dreamy certainty about love and marriage, all that lies ahead in an ordered universe, his little world of fashionable New York in the 1870s.

The strict rules of that society are rendered in detail—the moments when talk is allowed during the opera, the prescribed hours for afternoon visits, the lilies of the valley that must be sent to Mrs. Welland, the untainted girl who is about to become Newland's fiancée. In the opening scenes there are two observers, Wharton and Newland. The novelist is full of historical information about the city of her childhood and the customs of her privileged class. New York, constructed out of memory and verified by research, is not a discarded back-lot affair of an old Hollywood studio, but a place that must come alive for the writer as well as her readers. This lost world, lavish with particulars of dress, food, wine, manners, is weighted with an abundance of reality, all the furnishings of excessively indulged, overly secure lives. But as the writer calls up her New York of fifty years earlier, Newland Archer also instructs us in the mores of the best of families and the questionable behavior of flashy intruders on the rise. This dual perspective is playful: the novelist assessing her man, placing him in a rarefied world that he too finds narrow and amusing, though all the while he is a player in it.

Wharton's education of the reader continues as each character comes on stage. Newland is a self-declared dilettante, May an innocent thing, Countess Olenska an expatriate with a problematic past, Julius Beaufort, a freewheeling climber, may be the scoundrel of the piece. The novelist is knowingly leading us into melodrama, the dominant mode of the popular theater of the age she recreates, theater of plays in which good and evil were clearly sorted out, not tainted by moral ambiguity or shaded feelings. As we read what has so often been praised as an historical novel, we must bear in mind the year it was composed, 1919. *The Age of Innocence* calls upon history to inform the present and Wharton portrays a cast of clueless characters who could not conceive the slaughter of World War I or President Wilson's ill-fated proposal for the League of Nations. Turning back to the untroubled era of her childhood, she entertains with a predictable old form that is a lure, even a joke, but not one that the reader. We are drawn by the broad humor at the outset of the novel to the discovery of a darker story without the simple solutions of melodrama. Edith Wharton had a gift for comedy that has often been obscured by a reverence for the elegant lady novelist or probing for feminist concerns in her work.

The opening chapters of *The Age of Innocence* are given to caricature and sweeping mockery. In fact, Wharton mentions Dickens and Thackeray, whose comic exaggerations she must have had in mind. Newland Archer, superior and instructional, is foolish in the romantic projections of his



marriage to May: “ ‘We’ll read Faust together... by the Italian lakes...’ he thought, somewhat hazily, confusing the scene of his projected honeymoon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride.” An understanding of *Faust*, the most popular opera of the nineteenth century, with its unbridled passion and soul-selling contract, will presumably improve May: “He did not in the least wish the future Mrs. Newland Archer to be a simpleton” (p. 8). Meanwhile, Nilsson, the great diva, sings gloriously in the tacky garden scenery of the opera house. Early on, we suspect there will be no paradise and little innocence as the next months’ installments of the novel unfold. May, corseted in virginal white with a “modest tulle tucker” over her bosom, is too good to be true. It may be difficult for a contemporary reader to find Ellen Olenska, fated to be May’s rival, shocking in that revealing Empire dress, “like a night-gown,” according to Newland’s sister.

As they set the scene, Wharton and Newland are gossips who have the scoop on who’s in and who’s out, and on intricate family histories—the Chiverses of University Place, the Dallases of South Carolina, the Rushworths, Mrs. Manson Mingott, with two daughters married off to Europeans. We begin to hear the difference between Newland Archer’s view of his set, for it is his more than even with his engagement to May Welland, and Edith Wharton’s parody of society tattle recreated from memory and notched up a bit. Old Sillerton Jackson, the expert on family, is a cartoon figure, one of the many minor characters who make up the closely worked tapestry of the novelist’s old New York. There’s Lawrence Lefferts, with his prissy attention to correct social form, and the newcomer Mr. Lemuel Struthers in “her bold feathers and her brazen wig,” but it is in the portrait of Mrs. Mingott that Wharton creates a true grotesque. “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” (pp. 24–25). She is immobile, though far more flexible in her views than those who seek her approval among them Newland’s mother and May’s.

Mrs. Mingott, larger than life, breaks whatever rules she pleases. In depicting the matriarch as an original, Wharton sets her apart from the proper society she can observe from above, quite literally, by building her house uptown (uptown being above Thirty-fourth Street in those days). And it is Mrs. Mingott, in her pale stone house with frivolous foreign furniture, who, with largesse of spirit, takes “poor Ellen Olenska,” upon her return to America with bright, somewhat girlish hopes of freedom while still entangled in the disasters of a foreign marriage. In book one of *The Age of Innocence* the two exotics are housed together, women who understand liberty and its limits. There is a good deal of Edith Wharton’s independence of mind in Mrs. Mingott and of her troubled memories of New York in Madame Olenska’s return to the city of her childhood. Wharton composed the first installments just after the Great War, writing each installment in France, where she had lived during the war, and where she would settle for the rest of her life. In 1913 she had been through a difficult divorce from her husband, Edward Wharton—society fellow, sportsman—whom she married in haste after her first engagement was broken, a wounding business. Her marriage to Teddy Wharton was a washout from the start, yet the tribulation and scandal of their divorce remained. Her passionate love affair with Morton Fullerton—journalist, charmer, lady’s man—was long over.

All of this personal material can be detected in the novel, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, but the autobiographical material is transformed. In the lives of her characters freshly imagined, the historical novel becomes immediate in its themes. Wharton had received the Legion of Honor for her work in France with refugees, and many of her close friends had died in combat. Her mentor and friend Henry James, having renounced his American citizenship in 1914, died soon after. As R. W. F.

Lewis, Wharton's biographer points out, she found this renunciation deeply disturbing. Edith Wharton was committed to her American heritage, and when her publisher informed her that the public had lost interest in war stories, she chose to look back, to rediscover the past with an historical accuracy that never admits to nostalgia. *The Age of Innocence* ends just before the Great War. In the novel Wharton questions if her country had already lost its innocence before this first European conflict, if American innocence was mythic, like "the fresh green breast of the new world" that F. Scott Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, eulogizes at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton asks who are these people I came from? Were they really so class-ridden and dismissive of those who did not belong to their insular tribe? Was Europe no more than a tourist site featuring the roman past, a shopping mall for art and exquisite gowns, a setting in which to observe the charming, perhaps the unsettling, morals of foreigners? Did the swank Americans in her novel travel simply to test their allegiance to all that was admired as acceptable in what was left of Society in New York? That is all Mrs. Wharton was asking we would be reading, these many years later, a delightful novel of manners. The power of *The Age of Innocence* lies in her transcendence of that genre, in dramatizing more urgent questions of allegiance and national identity, questions that concern many writers today in dealing with the hyphenated themes of race and ethnicity.

Ellen Olenska, who has lived much of her life abroad, questions old New York's claim to American identity and its imitation of European class and culture. "It seems stupid to have discovered America," she tells Newland, "only to make it into a copy of another country.... Do you suppose Christopher Columbus would have taken all that trouble just to go to the Opera with the Selfridge Merrys?" (196). We can read this witty complaint as Wharton's, yet Ellen, like the novelist, is conflicted, bridling at the fact that she is considered exotic, judged as "foreign." She longs to be free of the past, though in one of her most telling exchanges with Newland Archer—its as close as they come to a full-blown love scene—she tells him, petulantly: "I don't speak your language." His language is at once too simple and too romantic—too simple in its claims for a life free of duty and honor, too romantic in presuming that love conquers all. Madame Olenska refers to deep cultural rifts, untranslatable experience that is more complex than his impassioned love-talk. If Newland was merely a young man viewing the world through rose-colored glasses, his fate would not hold our attention, but he is aware that Ellen speaks "from depths of experience beyond his reach." His self-excoriating thoughts portray an inner man possessed of feelings that are beyond the knowing young suitor we first encountered in the performance of *Faust*. He is aware of this failure even as he sets up an assignation with Ellen: "It seemed to him that he had been speaking not to the woman he loved but to another, a woman he was indebted to for pleasures already wearied of: it was hateful to find himself the prisoner of this hackneyed vocabulary" (p. 251). Yet that is exactly how he speaks when proposing that they flee to a place where they will be "simply two human beings who love each other...." She replies with a laugh: "Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?" (p. 235).

The depth of his attraction to Ellen is not to be doubted, but his self-doubts are a burden, particularly his knowledge that the freedom he proposes is impossible. Newland is a man trapped between two women: the Countess, who understands how cruel the world can be to those who believe they can be loose from obligations, and May Welland, who enforces the boundaries of what her husband knows to be honor and decency. When Newland urges a short engagement, simple May, holding to custom, delivers one of Wharton's most telling lines: "We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?" Which is precisely what the three principles in this love triangle do. His reply: "Why not—why not—why not?" suggests his longing for a plot more compelling than May's conventional story line.

their future marriage. May, the boyish American girl who turns their honeymoon into a sporting holiday, never gains any emotional depth, but she exacts what is her due. With sleight-of-hand deceptions, she outplays both her husband and her “foreign” cousin in the game plan that carries the novel forward. At each turn when Newland is about to declare his love for Ellen Olenska, May trump him. Wharton echoes May’s manipulations in drawing us into the love story only to cut off the possibility of freedom. We may gasp at the end of a chapter in which Newland’s wife wins another round: more melodrama, but without the easy solution of that genre which would render May demonic: She is a realist with a healthy desire for self-preservation. Looking at May’s mother before their marriage, Newland “asked himself if May’s face was doomed to thicken into the same middle-aged image of invincible innocence. Ah no, he did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience!” (p. 125). This cautionary thought becomes a prediction in the course of the novel. Though he may contemplate “poor May’s” limitations, his efforts to deceive her are naive in comparison to her strategies to hold him.

If Newland is unable to speak Ellen’s language, he is also at a disadvantage with his wife, often unable to reply to her cheery or mocking views, driven to “inarticulate despair.” The scenes of the marriage in which they talk past each other are chilling. In one painful instance, Newland opens the window in his library.

The mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing other houses, roofs, chimneys, of getting the sense of other lives outside his own, other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, cleared his brain and made it easier to breathe.

After he had leaned out into the darkness for a few minutes he heard her say: “Newland! Don’t shut the window. You’ll catch your death.”

He pulled the sash down and turned back. “Catch my death!” he echoed; and he felt like adding: “But I’ve caught it already—I *am* dead. I’ve been dead for months and months” (pp. 240-241).

The important words here are “felt like adding.” He is driven to silence, to inner thoughts, betraying himself with a gentleman’s kindness, perhaps even the niceness he deplores. At times Newland is in a study in pent-up anger at the life he has accepted—one of “habit and honor,” to put the best light on it, but also one of irreparable loss. It is the life that Wharton turned from, but the portrayal of his future surely recalls her pain, suffered in the stultifying atmosphere of old New York, and her inability to speak the same language, if speak at all, to her husband. As we read of Newland’s suffering and alienation, it may be appropriate to recall that he is a man without a calling. He is a great reader, like Wharton, but the novelist had the salvation of her work and her devotion to it.

In this novel of emotional infidelity, of duty to family and to the social standards of old New York, Edith Wharton incorporates a tale of money, which at bottom is what made the whole system of the endowed society work. Money is not window dressing. It is the substance of who her characters are, what they claim to be. Newland does not work with much diligence at his law office. Ellen is something of a financial hostage to her Polish husband, Count Olenski. Inherited money is more desirable than riches got by the sweat of the brow or by recent grubby acquisition. The manufacture of shoe polish provided Mrs. Struthers with her tasteless costumes and arty entertainments. As for Julius Beaufort, who would he be were it not for the power of his extraordinary wealth? Wharton makes it perfectly clear that old New York was a commercial society, whatever its pretense to aristocracy. Only the van der Luydens

generous yet stiff with moral rectitude, can trace their line to Dutch heritage. Colonial heritage, is the aristocracy? Henry van der Luyden is still patroon of their vast estate at Skuytercliff, up the Hudson. Wharton does not leave their heritage at that; with great wit she invents the van der Luyden connection to royalty through the patroon's wife, who had been a Dagonet. In a highly amusing construction of a family tree, she stretches branches to English nobility and to the Duke of St. Austre who comes to visit in America. The Duke is less pretentious than the stuffed shirts of New York society who put on an elaborate show for him. The Duke is a charming fuddy-duddy, perfectly happy to attend Mrs. Struthers's salon, which is scorned by the proper people.

Throughout the novel Wharton entertains with a cast of somewhat raffish characters, including Medora Manson, a marchioness no less, who has made unfortunate foreign marriages and is a champion of Ellen's. It's faddish Medora who introduces Dr. Anthony Carver into the novel, in a stroke of comic relief Dr. Carver's Valley of Love in Kittasquattamy, New York, is a reference to the many nineteenth-century sects that broke with traditional religion and advocated free love. Dr. Carver's program against marriage comes at a most distressing time in the negotiations of the Olenski divorce proceedings, a light note in Wharton's moving examination of that honored institution that may hold, or trap, Newland Archer to the end. Carver is a curiosity, not a major disturbance. Medora passes on to the next enthusiasm, but Wharton has worked her theme of freedom and responsibility with a light touch.

Less swift, indeed dwelt on at length, is the overabundance of delicacies served at the dinners in *The Age of Innocence*. They are gluttonous, costly, but price tags are seldom in evidence—Archer, Wellands, Lefferts, Chiverses, well aware of who wears last year's gown, who lives on the incorruptible street, have a convenient amnesia about the source of their money. What we might read as the Beaufort plot is integral to Wharton's themes of false innocence and the false security of old New York. The financial system, built on credit, was fragile. In an era without market regulations, Beaufort was dealing with borrowed money. He's a speculator, not a crook; but when he fails the whole market is sold down, bringing with it the holdings of the Mingotts and the Sillertons, all of the establishment. Their presumption—that they are above risk, not connected with the commercial interests of an outsider like Beaufort—is ill founded.

The real outsider is Ned Winsett, a journalist—and when finances permit, a serious writer—who Wharton uses to develop the theme of the value of work. Newland, always the voyeur, looks on with envy at Ned's world of working artists and writers, a bohemian set that seems to him free of the duties that bind him. Edith Wharton, dedicated to her writing life, kept strict account of her earnings. Amazingly prolific, she was always conscious of how far she had traveled from her beginnings as a proper little girl whose mother disapproved of her storytelling. The imprint of what she was supposed to become, as a woman of her class, can be detected in May, but that was too easy. In Newland she drew the portrait of the dilettante she feared she might become. Unlike the novelist, he never buckled down, never cuts free. In a poignant scene that takes place in Newport, the summer resort of these very rich New Yorkers, he breaks away to see Ellen Olenska, who is staying in a simple cottage. When he finds her standing alone at the end of a pier, he simply looks on from a distance. He is audience to Winsett's dedication to work and to Ellen's fight for independence, only occasionally finding a role for himself in their stories.

The tone of the novel has become more somber with Beaufort's failure, with Ellen's intricate divorce proceedings, with the Archers settling into the misfit of their marriage. Wharton goes back to the opera, to a repeat performance of Gounod's *Faust*, no doubt having in mind the dramatic

announcement of the heroine, Marguerite, that she is to bear a child. All references in *The Age of Innocence* are constructed with exacting care; all details are relevant, enriching each scene, each step in the progress of the story. Reading it today we need not know that Faust will run off when given the news that he is about to become a father, but many of Wharton's readers in 1920 would have seen the cruel wit of May announcing she was about to have their first child just as her husband was to declare his love for her rival. Newland Archer is no Faust. His romantic nature, crippled by honor, dictates that he cannot spend one illicit night with Ellen, never mind sell his soul to the devil. As the curtain comes down on his prospect of freedom, May's eyes are "wet with victory."

The story is not over: In a masterful final chapter the tone modulates once again, from the dramatic entrapment to sympathetic reverie, from then to now. Many years later, Newland Archer reviews his life. Here Wharton's voice works in close to Newland's, becomes one with a self-assessment that is both personal and historical. In an age-old storyteller's device, she reveals the afterlife, what happened to her characters. Do they live on in the present? In a sympathetic portrait, May, dead after many years of marriage, is memorialized by her husband as energetic mother and devoted wife. Newland has found work as a useful minor player in public life, accepting his nature as "contemplative and a dilettante." Now Wharton asks her readers to consider Newland as a survivor, suggesting that there is something near heroic in his accommodation to the inescapable facts of his life, to living out the duties and pleasures. He treasures his love of Countess Olenska, knowing she was most fully realized in memory. The false rhetoric of freedom, the hackneyed phrases of that romance no longer come to mind. He speaks to himself as he always has when he is most truthful, most self-revealing. The show is not quite over; there is one more scene, elegiac and surprisingly dramatic. Newland Archer frames his view as he has from that first night at the opera. He stands apart as he did that day in Newport when Ellen appeared at a distance on the pier. He is fifty-seven years old as he looks up at her window in Paris, treasuring the past, possessing their love in imagination. His perspective is no longer innocent. He remains a dreamer, but a dreamer self-aware.

Edith Wharton amused her readers with the portrait of a society that was self-indulgent, ignorant of the coming end of its reign. She wrote of loss and heartbreak, staged thwarted passion, and went beyond to tell of Newland Archer's accommodation to an honorable life. In her memoir *A Backward Glance*, which for the most part is far less revealing, less personal than *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Newbold Jones Wharton wrote: "Habit is necessary, it is the habit of having habits, of turning a track into a rut, that must be incessantly fought against if one is to remain alive ... one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in the big things, and happy in small ways." This is not an accurate description of the novelist who led an adventurous life of the mind, who forged her life with difficulty, who found her salvation in work; but it might be a description of Newland Archer, a man of necessary habit, who steered clear of the rut, was happy in small ways.

Moving beyond her readers' expectations of a romance, Edith Wharton portioned herself out to realize Newland's coming of age in his assessment of the past, Ellen's depth of emotional experience, and the unimaginative May, the woman she refused to become. Her publisher advised against a work of fiction, but looking back to discover the flawed innocence of an era, she informed the present days through her writing in 1919. *The Age of Innocence* can be considered with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (both 1925) as novels that deal with the aftermath of war, an inquiry into the passage of time and dramatic change in the social order. From her distance in Paris, Wharton upset the idea of American innocence and insularity. Moving from satire to sympathy, the

novel, perhaps her greatest, makes us contemplate false security and the nature of national identity while witnessing the mysterious transformation of her experience into art.

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**Maureen Howard** is a critic, teacher, and writer of fiction. Her seven novels include *Bridgeport Bu*, *Grace Abounding*, and *Expensive Habits*. *A Lover's Almanac* was the first novel in a quartet of the four seasons, followed by *Big as Life*, *Three Tales for Spring*, and *The Silver Screen*, the summer season which will be published in 2004. She has taught at Yale, Amherst, Princeton, and Columbia. She is the editor of *The Collected Stories of Edith Wharton* from Library of America. Her critical works include introductions to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Willa Cather, Three Novels*, and an essay on Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Her reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *Yale Review*. Maureen Howard was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. A former vice president of PEN, she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in New York City with her husband, Mark Probst, a novelist and financial consultant.

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# BOOK ONE

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ON A JANUARY EVENING of the early seventies, Christine Nilsson<sup>a</sup> was singing in *Faust* at the Academy of Music in New York. Though there was already talk of the erection, in remote metropolitan distances “above the Forties,” of a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendor with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy. Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the “new people” whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to; and the sentimental clung to it for its historical associations, and the musical for its excellent acoustics, always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music.

It was Madame Nilsson’s first appearance that winter, and what the daily press had already learned to describe as “an exceptionally brilliant audience” had gathered to hear her, transported through the slippery, snowy streets in private broughams, in the spacious family landau, or in the humbler but more convenient “Brown *coupé*.” To come to the Opera in a Brown *coupé* was almost as honorable a way of arriving as in one’s own carriage; and departure by the same means had the immense advantage of enabling one (with a playful allusion to democratic principles) to scramble into the first Brown conveyance in the line, instead of waiting till the cold-and-gin-congested nose of one’s own coachman gleamed under the portico of the Academy. It was one of the great livery-stableman’s most masterly intuitions to have discovered that Americans want to get away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it.

When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the club box the curtain had just gone up on the garden scene. There was no reason why the young man should not have come earlier, for he had dined at seven, alone with his mother and sister, and had lingered afterward over a cigar in the Gothic library with glazed black-walnut bookcases and finial-topped chairs, which was the only room in the house where Mrs. Archer allowed smoking. But, in the first place, New York was a metropolis, and he was perfectly aware that in metropolises it was “not the thing” to arrive early at the opera; and 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 second reason for his delay was a personal one. He had dawdled over his cigar because he was by heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization. This was especially the case when the pleasure was a delicate one, as his pleasures most were; and on this occasion the moment he looked forward to was so rare and exquisite in quality that—well, if he had timed his arrival in accord with the prima donna’s stage-manager he could not have entered the Academy at a more significant moment than just as she was singing “He loves me—he loves me not—*he loves me!*” and sprinkling the falling daisy petals with notes as clear as dew.

She sang, of course, “*M’ama!*” and not “he loves me,” since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed so natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was molded: such as the du



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