

ANALYSIS

The Age of Innocence (1920)

Edith Wharton

(1862-1937)

“Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence* (1920) neither lose nor seek an established position within the Manhattan mandarin as it existed in the seventies of the last century. They belong there and there they stay, but only by the sacrifice of instinct and happiness. They go through their drama like troubled puppets; they observe taboos with dread but with respect. They are the victims of the innocence of their generation, and of a formalism which persisted after them.... In *The House of Mirth* she had touches of the grand style, as if she accepted the authority of the formal world. These hardly appeared in *The Age of Innocence*, as if she had come to question that harsh authority.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 276, 278

“In the highest circle of New York social life during the 1870s, Newland Archer, a young lawyer is the fiancé of May Welland. Before their engagement is announced, he meets May’s cousin Ellen Olenska, the wife of a dissolute Polish count, from whom she is separated although she does not divorce him because of the conventional taboo. The taboo extends so far that she is nearly ostracized by her former friends, and only the efforts of Archer and his mother save her position.

She wins the toleration of her grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, but even then she is distrusted. Archer’s taste and intelligence distinguish him in this dogmatic society, and he discovers in Ellen the companion spirit he has sought but not found in May, who is the product of her strict, formal environment. The two fall in love, but it is too late for Archer to withdraw from his engagement. He marries May but is dissatisfied with their convention-bound relationship. Ellen moves to Washington, then returns to care for her grandmother, and her relation with Archer is rekindled. When May reveals to Ellen that she is pregnant, the situation becomes intolerable for the Countess, who goes to live in Paris. Archer is never sure how much his wife knows until after her death, many years later, when he visits Paris with his son, Dallas. Ellen invites them to visit her, but at the last moment Archer sends Dallas alone, feeling that although they are now free to marry, he prefers his ideal vision on Ellen to the reality.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature
(Oxford 1941-83) 12

“In 1920 came one of Mrs. Wharton’s fine achievements, *The Age of Innocence*, in which she managed to give a nostalgic picture of fashionable New York in the 1870s and at the same time to satirize it. The stability of society, which is more important than the happiness of any individual, is successfully upheld by May Archer, who does not even scruple to save her husband from running off with Ellen Olenska by whispering that she is about to bear his child. But the emancipated Countess, whom an unhappy European marriage had made an off-color member of the Newland clan (at the same time freeing her from most of the prejudices of the time) would have taken care of the matter, if necessary, quite without May’s help, for she knows that honor is much more important than love, and that a human being cannot build on the pain of others and survive herself.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 259

“A satirical picture of social life in New York during the 1870s, it describes their marriage of Newland Archer to May Welland, bound by the tribal code of the elite, and his attraction to her unconventional

cousin, Ellen Olenska, from which he can never derive satisfaction because they are both too obedient to the code.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 11

“The New York in which Mrs. Wharton was born in 1862, the New York of the first dozen years of her life, was still in many ways a small town.... The urban society to which her family belonged was a timid and conservative one, with a prevailing spirit well expressed by the sober brownstone in which its members enshrouded themselves. Few of the men even engaged in business.... Painting and literature were viewed with the same suspicion accorded to scandal or adventure.... It was this Philistinism, more than anything else, that was ultimately to drive her abroad.... She confessed in her memoirs: ‘When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate’.... It was in this mood of apology that she wrote *The Age of Innocence*, the finest of her novels....

The only vigor shown by the male characters of *The Age of Innocence* is in their domination of the female. Mr. Welland is a querulous hypochondriac, with no opinions but many habits, and his wife has to find her fulfillment in being his slave.... Such is the background from which Newland Archer springs. Like a Thackeray hero, he wears all the protective coloration of his times. He may be the best of his world, but the best, we feel, is none too good. He is burstingly complacent, delighted with his own fine, vigorous youth, with his promising but not taxing law practice, with the adoration of his widowed mother and old maid sister, and the love of his beautiful but unimaginative fiancée. He is equally delighted with his own taste for books and his eye for pictures; he prides himself on his ability to talk with artists and writers in the Century Club as well as to hold his own with the aristocratic young bloods in the Knickerbocker. And he is delighted, too, that he has sowed his wild oats, that his desultory affair with an married woman has prepared him to cope with his future bride’s assumed ignorance in all matters of sex. Newland Archer, in short, is about as fatuous a young man as one could conceive of, the roundest possible peg in the roundest possible hole.

Yet everything might have been all right for him had it not been for the arrival of Ellen Olenska, the beautiful disenchanted cousin of his fiancée, who has fled home from a titled Polish brute of a husband. Ellen sees the New York society that to Archer is brilliant, fluttering, even formidable, as a quaint, innocent refuge from the black storms of her European life. ‘I’m sure I’m dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven,’ she tells him on their first meeting as she gazes about at the boxes at the Academy of Music. It is of the essence of Mrs. Wharton’s plan that only the gentle pin prick of Ellen’s half-intended sarcasm is needed to burst the overblown balloon of Archer’s self-satisfaction. Indeed, so insecure are the walls of the society which has produced him that they tremble before the first puff of an irreverent breath. For the rebellion of Ellen Olenska, in the last analysis, boils down to little more than that she has brought home with her a bit of the sophisticated simplicity of an older civilization. It is symbolized, like everything else, by the decoration of her drawing room....

Her effect on Archer is immediate and catastrophic. Not only does he learn about love; he learns that his whole life has been premised on a false hypothesis. His discovery of himself and re-evaluation of his household gods form the principal topic of a story which is one of the very few in which Mrs. Wharton confined herself to a single point of view. In this respect it resembles James’s *The Ambassadors*, where we follow the re-education of Lambert Strether entirely in Strether’s mind. Mrs. Wharton, however, deviates from the strictness of James’s method in that she peers over Archer’s shoulder to point out aspects of the New York scene that his imagination is too limited to encompass. This is necessary because Archer, before he has developed into the sensitive and likable man of the later chapters, is too egregious an ass to be able to tell us anything really significant about the society that he uncritically admires. Paris stretches Strether’s imagination without in the least altering his character, but Ellen Olenska turns Newland Archer from a stuffed shirt into a man.

Archer's emancipation ultimately carries him too far, for in the end he is ready to ditch his wife, tear himself up by the roots, and flee to Europe in search of Ellen, and May can hold him only by the time-honored expedient of announcing her pregnancy. He is thus trapped for life in a New York routine, the satisfactions of which have been permanently soured. Yet neither he nor Ellen nor their creator regard the sacrifice as a sterile one. Had he followed Ellen to Europe, *The Age of Innocence* might have become *Anna Karenina*, and Ellen might have ended as badly as Tolstoy's heroine. The only way that she and Archer can convert their love into a thing of beauty is by renunciation."

Louis Auchincloss
Introduction
The Age of Innocence
(New American Library/Signet 1962) v-ix

"In many ways, this was Wharton's...salute to the new age and a memorial to the age departed; but most of all, it was a study of the complex, intimate connections between social cohesion and individual growth... Never tainted by sentiment, most of Wharton's narratives explore the uncertain terrain between two opposite dangers. At one extreme there is anarchy, the eradication of all systems of order. Wharton's first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, a saga of Napoleonic uprisings in Italy, had depicted the chaotic results....

At the other extreme there is stifling, suffocating repression; well-known masterpieces like *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome* depict the potentially fatal consequences. Yet if both of these extremes are lethal, the territory between them is filled with uncertainty, and it can never offer more than partial answers to our human problems and mortal woes. Edith Wharton consistently held that the notion of 'perfect' happiness—like that of 'perfect' freedom—is nothing but an alluring phantom that leads us to inevitable destruction; and virtually all of her prewar fictions center upon the individual dilemma of discovering and accepting some form of partial (and necessarily *imperfect*) happiness....

This piece of fiction is an urgent, encouraging appeal for its readers to abandon unrealizable fantasies for the actual, deep pleasures that 'real life' can afford. *Newland Archer* is Wharton's quintessentially American hero, recalling, perhaps, Christopher *Newman* in Henry James's novel *The American*. Like many of James's heroes, Newland Archer can learn about himself and his native land only after an encounter with the perversions of ancient European civilizations—an encounter that is provided in *The Age of Innocence* not by a journey abroad, but by a series of negotiations with a foreign visitor, Ellen, wife of the depraved Count Olenska....

What Wharton could see, with charity and utter clarity, is that Newland and Ellen *both* perceive the other primarily in terms of some romanticized personal need. Thus, although Ellen Olenska may indeed seem the fulfillment of Newland Archer's *dreams*—representing 'freedom,' mystery, and the unknown world of art and intellect—she is an actual woman with whom he has little or nothing in common. Similarly, although Ellen, in her vulnerable and weakened situation, is drawn to Newland—who represents safety, order, and protection—it is the security and honor he seems to embody that she 'loves,' and not the particulars of his personality. (Actually, Ellen consistently finds Beaufort's sophisticated companionship more engaging than Newland Archer's.)

The core of the novel is Newland's quest for real happiness, a quest that coincides with the pursuit of maturity. One uncompromising fact constrains this quest: the deepest and most indelible components of Newland Archer's nature have been formed and nourished within the narrow confinements of the very world against whose strictures he frets. He may be capable of improvement, of growth—even of achieving wisdom and contentment. However, he will never be capable of some fundamental transformation. Insofar as he can find happiness, the nature of his satisfactions will always, necessarily, be limited by the kind of person he is.

Because of Newland's shortcomings, it is important to realize how much of the story is told from his point of view. It is even more important to recognize how often his judgment is seriously mistaken, especially throughout the opening portions of the novel. When we first encounter him, Newland is decent and honorable enough—so long as these virtues require very little beyond good manners. The most

appalling possibility presented by the novel is that Newland might never grow beyond this smug, limited understanding of his duties in the world and his relationships within it, that he might become a kind of carbon copy of Larry Lefferts and his friends. The opening chapter hints clearly at such a possibility. Wharton's rendering of the young man's inventorial appreciation of his young fiancée and his plans for her future—'He meant her (thanks to his enlightening companionship) to develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular married women of the 'younger set'—captures nothing so forcefully as the potential fatuousness of the young man's personality. Such opinions are anything but an informed or reliable index to the moral and emotional possibilities of actual situations; a wary reader must be mindful of the severe limitations of the romantic, self-serving, visionary tendencies that becloud Newland's perceptions of his world.

By contrast, May and Ellen are both uncompromising realists; ironically, at every point in the novel, they may both know more than Newland does about what is 'actually' happening. Wharton's study of *The Golden Bough* just before she wrote *The Age of Innocence* had taught her about the ruthless power of the Cult of Diana—a force used to protect mothers and children—and May, who becomes an 'Archer' when she marries, embodies the single-minded vigor that is represented by this protector of the domestic realm. In order to call her readers' attention to this suggestion, Wharton fills her narrative both with allusions to ancient cultures and classical mythology, and with references to the various forms of combat that might be associated with this militant goddess and her Olympian peers.

May is far from ignorant, a fact that she attempts to disclose to Newland without success. (Indeed, it is an interesting exercise to peruse the novel and take note, at each crucial moment, of what May probably knows—despite Newland's consistent belief in her ignorance and 'innocence.')

Moreover, she can be capable of great generosity; even after the engagement, she knows that Newland has become emotionally involved with some other woman, and she offers him his freedom when he appears to want it. Yet once she and Newland had entered into a binding commitment, she becomes as fierce in her protection of home and hearth as the goddess Diana herself. May has no knowledge of the dark, depraved world in which Ellen has suffered and from which she has recently escaped; yet she does understand many of Newland Archer's limitations, and she agrees with Ellen about life's necessities—particularly those pertaining to loyalty and honor.

Paradoxically, then, May and Ellen often voice similar sentiments. When Newland rashly proposes an elopement, May sensibly punctures his romantic scheme: 'We can't behave like people in novels.' Much later in the novel, when Newland proposes to Ellen that they escape to a place where they can be perfectly free, she dismisses his scheme with weary skepticism: 'Where is that country?' Moreover, Ellen is, in her own way, surely as 'innocent' as May; throughout much of her visit to America, Ellen allows herself to suppose that in New York she can find a world where people are uncomplicated and, in some simple way, merely 'kind' and 'generous.' Despite the dark initiation of her marriage, she has evidently failed to acknowledge two intractable facts; that dangerous, primitive passions are everywhere because they lurk at the core of humanity itself, and that it is principally the rituals that have been designed to control and contain the violent expression of those feelings which vary from culture to culture.

What Ellen does appreciate, even to the center of her being, is that everyone—everywhere—needs the security that only a structured society can offer. In the end, part of May's generosity (and a signal indication of Old New York's 'kindness') is the family's willingness to offer Ellen precisely the 'tribal' protection and support that she will require if she is to have a contented and relatively free existence once she returns to Europe.... There was a distinct possibility that this steady process of evolution would ultimately produce a new kind of society, one that retained the admirable qualities of Old New York and combined them with more enlightened practices. Most important, there was hope that this commingling of moral rectitude with more generous freedoms would create a stronger community and a culture whose values could endure.

The Age of Innocence, then, is a patient, compassionate novel. It never argues that Old New York was an idyll to which hectic modern society should return (instead, it lays bare the flaws of Old New York with ruthless precision). However, neither does the novel suggest that the world of the inheritors is ideal. Instead it offers growth and balance and tolerance. And in the case of Newland Archer, it presents the

unforeseeable, incomparable gift of middle-aged self-respect: 'There was good in the old ways.... There was good in the new order too'."

Cynthia Griffin Wolff

Introduction

The Age of Innocence

(Penguin 1996) vii-viii, xxii-xxvii

Michael Hollister (2015)