

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

by Edith Wharton



THE AUTHOR

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was born into an upper-class family in New York City. Her parents were very class-conscious and were determined that their daughter marry well (her mother was from the Jones family in reference to whom the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” is thought to have originated). Their attitude thwarted her first love, and at the age of 23 she married Edward Wharton, an older man of whom her family approved, but whom she did not love. They remained married until 1913, though their marriage was never a happy one. This bad marriage is generally thought to have stimulated her writing career, and one should not be surprised to see the theme of illicit passion running through most of her stories. In fact, her affair with a newspaperman brought about her divorce from her husband in 1913.

Wharton’s early writing career was undistinguished, but she produced her first successful novel in 1905 when she published *The House of Mirth*. Near the end of her marriage she moved to Paris, where she lived for the rest of her life, publishing many other works, including *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. One of her closest associates in Paris was another American expatriate, Henry James, whose writing shares similar themes with those of Wharton’s novels. Her writings raised moral questions about the relationship of the individual to society, though her perspective did not remain constant; in her early days she was considered a dangerous radical, and later was excoriated as a crotchety conservative. No matter the viewpoint, Wharton’s writing shows great insights into human psychology and emotion.

The Age of Innocence, which earned her the first Pulitzer Prize ever given to a woman, draws heavily on her youth in the upper-class society of New York City. Written in the environment of post-World War I Paris, the story also serves as an ironic and insightful dissection of a world that considered itself the pinnacle of human civilization and was determined to preserve its ways at all costs, yet by the time in which the novel was written had passed completely from the scene, to be replaced by the disillusionment and disruption that swept all before it as America entered the Roaring Twenties. The novel is thus both biographical recollection and sociological study, scrutinizing with the eye of the social scientist a world that was doomed to destruction by the coming holocaust of war.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins at the opera, where everyone is watching everyone else and paying little attention to the music. We are introduced to young lawyer Newland Archer, who is soon to announce his engagement to May Welland, a young and naive girl who is nonetheless an eminently eligible match in New York's high society. We meet other members of their circle, but soon discover that the customary routine of a night at the opera is disrupted by the appearance of Ellen Olenska, May's cousin, who a few years earlier had married a dissolute European count, had left him after he had proved unfaithful, and had run off with his secretary, only to return to New York, to the embarrassment of all concerned. After the opera, everyone descends on the home of the Beauforts for their annual ball. There May announces her engagement to Newland, but Ellen stays away, giving as an excuse that her dress is insufficient for the occasion. All are mightily relieved to be spared the awkwardness of her presence.

The next day, the couple and their families pay their respects to Mrs. Mingott, the corpulent family matriarch, who gives her blessing to the union; there they again encounter Ellen, who invites Newland to pay her a visit (such a suggestion is eminently inappropriate in New York, though it may be accepted in France). When Sillerton Jackson, who knows everything about everyone's family background, is invited to dinner at the Archer residence the next evening, they gradually turn the conversation to Ellen Olenska, and learn more of her unhappy marriage and her affair with her husband's secretary, with whom she had lived for more than a year. The meeting with Ellen causes Newland's thoughts to turn to the lack of freedom enjoyed by women compared to that of men; while men were expected to be discreet about their escapades, women were expected not to have any. While he wished this double standard did not exist, he readily admitted that he would hate to think that it would apply to his intended.

Out of a desire to reintroduce Ellen to New York society, the Lovell Mingotts arrange a dinner party for the purpose, inviting all the usual important people. In an open insult to Ellen, most find flimsy reasons for declining to attend. Newland's mother then turns to the couple at the height of the social pyramid, Henry and Louisa van der Luyden, to whom she is distantly related. Though they hardly ever open their home to guests, they are willing to hold a reception for a foreign friend of theirs, a duke visiting from Russia, and invite Ellen to join them. Since no one dare refuse an invitation from the van der Luydens, this will serve to teach a lesson to the snobs who refused to be seen in public with Ellen earlier. The dinner comes off well, though Ellen unwittingly commits several *faux pas*. She spends quite a bit of time talking to Newland, and he is impressed, both by her surprising quietness and equanimity and by her lack of concern for the niceties of New York society. She casually invites him to visit her the following evening.

After a day of making the rounds with May and her family - a duty expected of all engaged couples in society - Newland decides to drop in at Ellen's house. She is not home, but since she is due to arrive momentarily, he waits for her. She soon arrives in the carriage of the banker Beaufort, whose shady reputation has never been erased by his great wealth or popular annual opera balls. Newland and Ellen have a brief conversation, during which she again speaks of the hypocrisy of society and its standards, after which she breaks down in tears. Newland comforts her, but is interrupted by the arrival of the Russian duke. After he leaves, he goes to the florist shop to buy his usual daily flowers for May, but on an impulse also purchases yellow roses for Ellen, sending them to her anonymously. The next day while taking a walk with May, Newland discovers that Ellen had gone with the Duke to visit a woman whose standing simply did not admit

her to polite society. His mother and sister are furious, and Newland is given the responsibility of trying to patch the whole thing up with their friends; a task he undertakes very reluctantly, since he sees nothing wrong with what Ellen had done.

Two weeks later, Archer's boss calls him into his office and announces that Madame Olenska wished to seek a divorce from her husband. Because such a thing was simply not done, Archer is given the task of handling the matter, since he is, after all, almost family, and should be able to handle such a scandalous matter with greater delicacy. Newland reluctantly agrees, more to protect Ellen than anything else, and sets up an appointment to see her to discuss the matter. When he pays her a visit, he finds Beaufort already there, but the banker soon leaves. During the conversation, Newland is disconcerted to find that the gossip about Ellen is indeed true - that she did have an affair with her husband's secretary after she left her husband; so the scandal would be no lie, and she would be viewed by the members of society as bearing no less guilt than her philandering husband. He attempts to persuade her not to go through with the divorce, and she reluctantly agrees. While May is with her family on a Florida vacation, Newland goes to the opera, and sees Ellen there. She expresses her gratitude for his advice, but lets slip the fact that she knows him to be the giver of the yellow roses, which he had by now sent to her anonymously on several occasions. For his part, he is unable to get her out of his mind.

A few days later, Ellen goes to visit the van der Luydens at their country estate. Newland had been invited to spend time with friends who lived not far from there, and accepted the invitation, intending to slip away to see Ellen. The two meet in the woods, and go together to an old cottage that had been the original building on the property. There they talk, with Newland trying to draw her out on the reason for her unhappiness. Just as she is about to open up, Beaufort appears; he is obviously pursuing her in an attempt to draw her into an affair. Newland leaves, but is very frustrated that the social conventions would seem to favor Ellen becoming Beaufort's mistress rather than her divorcing her husband and marrying someone decent. Feeling a need to clear his mind of his constant thought of Ellen, he decides to beg off work and join May in St. Augustine. He is delighted to see her, but when he tries to persuade her to move up their wedding date, she surprises him by intuiting that his desire comes from an inner uncertainty on his part. She is clearly troubled, but when he convinces her to reveal the source of her fears, she relieves him by telling him that she is afraid he hasn't gotten over a married woman with whom he'd had a brief fling a few years earlier. He assures her that nothing could be farther from the truth, and she is much relieved, but Newland knows he has had a narrow escape, and realizes more than ever that his growing relationship with Ellen is causing his uncertainty about a life spent with the lovely but conventional May Welland.

When Archer returns to New York, he finds that Ellen has called on his mother and sister to introduce herself and express her gratitude for Newland's advice about her divorce. He pays a visit to old Catherine Mingott and explains his desire to move up the date of his wedding with May, then asks her to use her influence. The next night, Newland visits Ellen and finds her aunt, Medora Mingott, who had recently returned from Cuba with a message from Ellen's husband. The message was that he wished to restore their relationship - he wanted her to return to Europe so they could put the past behind them. Medora asks for Archer's help in convincing Ellen to go back to her husband, but he flatly refuses to send her back into such a miserable situation. When Ellen finishes dressing and comes down prepared to go to a party, Newland insists on speaking to her. He urges her not to return to her husband and tells her of his conversation with May in St. Augustine. He admits to her that May had been right - that he was interested in another

woman, but not the one May thought. He professes his love for Ellen and the two kiss passionately. Ellen then confesses that she loves him as well, and would have married him after divorcing her husband had he not convinced her to remain in the marriage. Now, however, she refuses to do so, for May's sake as well as to avoid the inevitable scandal that would ensue. Newland is still trying to convince her to change her mind when a telegram arrives from May, enthusiastically sharing the news that Granny Mingott's telegram had convinced her parents to move the wedding up a year, so that she and Newland could be married in a month. Newland is crushed and hardly knows how to respond now.

The wedding day arrives, and the ceremony is the highlight of the social season. Because of complications in their original plans, they wind up spending their first few nights in the very cottage on the van der Luyden estate where Newland and Ellen had spoken earlier. They then spend three months touring Europe, and by the time their honeymoon is over, Newland is beginning to realize just how utterly conventional and without imagination May really is.

A year and a half pass. During this time, Newland has not seen Ellen, and the young couple fall into an easily recognizable pattern of life established by generations of their kind before them. They vacation in Newport with all their other friends, despite the fact that Newland longs for something different. During that summer, he hears that Ellen, who had been living in Washington, D.C., was staying with friends nearby. When he and May pay a call on Granny Mingott, she tells them that Ellen is with her for the day, but when she summons her granddaughter, she is told that Ellen has taken a walk by the beach. When Newland goes to find her, he sees her in the distance standing on a dock and decides that he will approach her only if she turns and looks at him first. She doesn't, so he returns and tells May he was unable to find her. Later, he makes a vague excuse to May and goes to visit her, but finds that she has taken a trip to Boston. Unable to get her out of his mind, he then tells May that he has business in Boston and goes again to seek her out. He finds her in Boston, and the two take a boat ride together, talking very little, but clearly sharing common thoughts. She tells him that she knew he had come looking for her in Newport, but had deliberately not turned around to avoid any possible awkwardness. She also tells him that her husband wants her back, and has offered a large sum of money if she will return to him and grace his table occasionally with her presence. Archer indignantly insists that she can do no such thing. They then go to lunch together. While acknowledging their ongoing love for one another, they also agree that they can do nothing to hurt May or the family. They want to keep in touch with one another, so Ellen will remain in the States, but she clearly conveys her determination to return to her husband should their relationship at any time threaten Archer's marriage.

When Archer returns to New York, he encounters a young man he had seen outside the hotel in Boston. The man introduces himself, and Archer finally recognizes him as the French tutor he had encountered in London, Monsieur Riviere. He soon discovers that Riviere is the courier who brought Count Olenski's message to Ellen. While he had discharged his duties faithfully, even to the point of enlisting members of the Mingott family to persuade Ellen to return, he admits to Newland that he hopes Ellen rejects the offer. Newland now realizes that the family has been excluding him from their deliberations, and that everyone else, including May, wishes for Ellen to return to her husband.

Months pass, and the Thanksgiving celebrations take place. The big news is that Beaufort is in deep trouble because of some underhanded financial dealings. While the members of society can overlook his personal moral peccadilloes, they are unwilling and unable to forgive financial shenanigans, and they prepare for the inevitable denouement - cutting the Beauforts adrift from

their company, despite the fact that Mrs. Beaufort is a blood relative. Ellen, meanwhile, has returned to Washington, and is a virtual outcast because of her refusal to go back to the Count; worse yet, the rumor is making the rounds that she is living on Beaufort's money. When Beaufort indeed falls, the blow is too much for old Granny Mingott, and she suffers a minor stroke. Newland has determined to go to Washington to see her on the pretext of investigating a case before the Supreme Court and has secured May's approval despite the fact that she perfectly well knows the reason for the trip, but now Granny summons Ellen to New York. After considerable fuss in the family about who should pick Ellen up at the station, Archer volunteers, much to the relief of May's parents. May, of course, realizes that his planned trip to Washington has suddenly evaporated, and knows the reason why. During the trip in the coach, Newland and Ellen again speak of their relationship and kiss, he expresses his desire to run away with her, but she warns him that they really have no hope because of their marriages - that the world contains no place for such people to live in peace together.

For the next week Newland sees nothing of Ellen, but is continually reminded of the dullness of his marriage; May's silence about Ellen shouts loudly of the family's pact not to mention her name in his presence. He even begins to fantasize about what might happen if May were to die. Finally Granny summons him to her side and tells him that Ellen is to stay with her and nurse her rather than returning to Washington. She also enlists Newland's aid against the rest of the family in keeping Ellen from returning to her husband. On the way home from Granny's, Newland passes the Beauforts' house, where Ellen had, much to the chagrin of the family, been visiting the disgraced Mrs. Beaufort. He waits for her outside and insists that she meet him at the Metropolitan Museum of Art the following day. In the museum, he again proposes running away together. While she is relieved to know that he has no intention of making her his mistress and sneaking around behind people's backs in New York, she utterly refuses to betray the people who have meant so much in their lives. Finally she offers to come to him once, then leave for Europe and never see him again. They set the time for two days hence. When Newland gets home, May tells him that she and Ellen had a long conversation at Granny's, and that she really wants to try to understand her better.

The next night, Newland and May go to the opera with the van der Luydens, and the rest of the guests spend most of the time at dinner gossiping about Mrs. Beaufort, her inappropriate behavior in trying to retain a place in society, and Ellen's inappropriate behavior in reaching out to her. Archer pleads a headache and he and May go home early. When they get home, Archer has every intention of telling May that he is leaving her for Ellen, but before he can speak, she tells him that Ellen is returning to Europe, though not to her husband. May plans a farewell dinner for her, and, despite his best efforts, Newland finds no opportunity to speak with Ellen alone. During the dinner, he realizes that all his friends, along with his wife, believe him to be involved in an affair with Ellen, but are doing their best to avoid letting on. Before Ellen leaves, Newland tells her that he will see her in Paris; he has already told his friends that he intends to travel in Europe, and he is determined to go to Ellen and never return. Again, he tries to find a way to break the news to May, but she again preempts him, this time with the news that she is pregnant. He knows now that he can never leave her, and further comes to realize that Ellen decided to return to Europe because May told her about her pregnancy (though she did so two weeks before the doctor confirmed her condition).

The last chapter of the book takes place twenty-six years later. The Archers have produced three children, and May has died two years earlier while nursing her youngest son Bill through

a bout of pneumonia. Newland is now a well-respected man in New York - so much so that Governor Theodore Roosevelt encourages him to run for the legislature. He does, but quickly becomes bored and leaves after a year. The oldest son, Dallas, has become a prominent architect, and Mary, who is much like her mother, is now married. One day Dallas tells his father that he would like him to accompany him on a trip to Europe. Newland has traveled little since his marriage, but sees no reason to refuse. The two go to Paris, where Dallas tells his father they are to visit Ellen Olenska; he had been told to do so by his fiancée, Fanny Beaufort (the daughter of the notorious Julius and his mistress), to whose family Ellen had been very kind. Dallas surprises his father by telling him that, before her death, his mother had confided to him her knowledge of her husband's love for Ellen - something that Newland thought he had successfully concealed from her. The two men go to the street in Paris where Ellen still lives, and Dallas goes up to her apartment while Newland remains on the sidewalk below, debating whether or not to renew the love of so many years ago. After staring at the window for a long time, he simply walks away.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Newland Archer - The protagonist is a lawyer who, after announcing his engagement to the eminently eligible but colorless May Welland, falls in love with her disreputable cousin, Ellen Olenska. He chooses to remain with May after their marriage rather than pursue his passion with Ellen.
- May Welland - A naive and innocent girl, she marries Newland but soon realizes that he is in love with her cousin. To Newland she represents everything that is both beautiful and stifling about New York society - she is naive, restricted in outlook, conditioned to behave only in proper ways, and incapable of thinking an original thought. She remains with Newland, however, even when she thinks he is having an affair with Ellen.
- Ellen Olenska - May's cousin, she contracts a marriage with a Polish count, but finds that he is unfaithful, has a fling with his secretary, then returns to New York, where she falls in love with Newland. She finds the social strictures of New York society stifling, but is unwilling to allow Newland to destroy his marriage with her cousin.
- Mrs. Manson (Catherine) Mingott - The grandmother of May and Ellen, the morbidly obese matriarch of the family does as she pleases, and is one of the few who is ready to acknowledge the wild Ellen after her return from Europe.
- Adeline and Janey Archer - Newland's mother and sister, quiet women who stay to themselves but like to hear all the local gossip. They remain loyal and supportive of Newland even though they think some of his social ideas too radical.
- Medora Manson - Ellen's aunt who raised her after she was orphaned by the deaths of her parents. She is wildly eccentric in her habits, which have left her penniless, and has gone through a series of husbands. Ellen feels responsible to care for her in her old age.

- Julius and Regina Beaufort - He is an English banker of questionable pedigree and reputation, she a socialite from South Carolina; they host an annual ball attended by everyone who is anyone. His shady business dealings and the failure of his bank lead to their ejection from New York society.
- Larry Lefferts - The foremost authority on form among New York's upper crust, he is a serial philanderer, a fact known to all except his wife Gertrude.
- Sillerton Jackson - The foremost authority on family connections among New York's upper crust, he is the carrier and purveyor of all the latest gossip.
- Henry and Louisa van der Luyden - This elderly couple resides at the pinnacle of New York high society; they arrange a dinner party to introduce Ellen to their circle after she is snubbed by those who disparage her reputation.
- Ned Winsett - A journalist who is probably Archer's closest friend. Ned lives a bohemian lifestyle, and is therefore excluded from polite society, but Archer appreciates the quality of his thinking and conversation and the freedom he enjoys to do as he pleases.
- Mrs. Lemuel Struthers - A nouveau-riche widow whose husband earned a fortune selling shoe polish, she is scorned by the old aristocracy, but gradually gathers around herself a coterie of artistic types who come to her home for Sunday evening gatherings.
- Monsieur Riviere - A French tutor whom Newland and May meet in London while on their honeymoon, he asks Newland if he can find him a job in America. Later, he carries a message from Count Olenski to Ellen asking her to come back and offering money for her to do so, but he and Newland agree that such a move would be disastrous. Newland later discovers that Riviere had been the secretary with whom Ellen had run away from her husband.
- Mr. Letterblair - Archer's boss at the law office, he asks Newland to handle Ellen's divorce case.
- Dallas Archer - Newland and May's oldest son, he takes Newland to Paris after May dies, but Newland passes up the chance of seeing Ellen again after 26 years.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“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.” (ch.1, p.3-4)

“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.” (ch.1, p.4)

“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 viceregent.” (ch.2, p.12-13)

“Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the ‘unpleasant’ in which they had both been brought up.” (ch.3, p.21-22)

“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.” (ch.4, p.24)

“In spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind.” (ch.4, p.27)

“That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, looked back at him like a stranger through May Welland’s familiar features; and once more it was borne in on him that marriage was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas.” (ch.6, p.36)

“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?” (ch.6, p.37)

“It frightened him to think of what must have gone to the making of her eyes.” (ch.8, p.52)

“Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one’s own fashions? But I suppose I’ve lived too independently; at any rate, I want to do what you all do - I want to feel cared for and safe.” (Ellen, ch.9, p.61)

“It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness?” (ch.10, p.68)

“It was impossible for him to decide otherwise than he had done: he must see Madame Olenska himself rather than let her secrets be bared to other eyes. A great wave of compassion had swept away his indifference and impatience: she stood before him as an exposed and pitiful figure, to be saved at all costs from further wounding herself in her mad plunges against fate.” (ch.11, p.79)

“A longing to enlighten her was strong in him; and there were moments when he imagined that all she asked was to be enlightened.” (ch.15, p.115)

“The silence that followed lay on them with the weight of things final and irrevocable. It seemed to Archer to be crushing him down like his own grave-stone; in all the wide future he saw nothing that would ever lift that load from his heart.” (ch.18, p.142)

“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.” (Ellen, ch.18, p.143)

“It was wonderful that . . . such depths of feeling could coexist with such absence of imagination.” (ch.19, p.156)

“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 wifely adoration.” (ch.20, p.162)

“As he paid the hansom and followed his wife’s long train into the house 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.” (ch.20, p.169)

“He had married (as most young men did) because he had met a perfectly charming girl at the moment when a series of rather aimless sentimental adventures were ending in premature disgust; and she had represented peace, stability, comradeship, and the steady sense of an inescapable duty.” (ch.21, p.172)

“Archer was dealing hurriedly with crowding thoughts. 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.” (ch.22, p.188)

“It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it a copy of another country.” (Ellen, ch.24, p.200)

“At least it was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison.” (Ellen, ch.24, p.200)

“It was clear to him, and it grew more clear under closer scrutiny, that if she should finally decide on returning to Europe - returning to her husband - it would not be because her old life tempted her, even on the new terms offered. No: she would go only if she felt herself becoming a temptation to Archer, a temptation to fall away from the standard they had both set up.” (ch.25, p.204-205)

“I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that - categories like that - won’t exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.” (Newland, ch.29, p.240-241)

“He was weary of living in a perpetual tepid honeymoon, without the temperature of passion yet with all its exactions. If May had spoken out her grievances (he suspected her of many) he might have laughed them away; but she was trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile.” (ch.30, p.244)

“Catch my death! But I’ve caught it already. I *am* dead - I’ve been dead for months and months.” (Newland, ch.30, p.246)

“For the first time Archer found himself face to face with the dread argument of the individual case. Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else’s, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment.” (ch.31, p.254)

“She had disengaged her wrist; but for a moment they continued to hold each other’s eyes, and he saw that her face, which had grown very pale, was flooded with deep inner radiance. His heart beat with awe: he felt that he had never before beheld love visible.” (ch.31, p.260)

“And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers.” (ch.33, p.278)

“She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you’d given up the thing you most wanted.” (Dallas, ch.34, p.296)

“It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, some one had guessed and pitied. . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably.” (ch.34, p.296)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* was written in an era when the social sciences were receiving increasing attention. Consider the extent to which the novel reflects the influences of psychology. Choose one of the major characters in the story and discuss Wharton’s insights into his or her mental and emotional life.

2. Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* was written in an era when the social sciences were receiving increasing attention. To what extent may the novel be described as a sociological study - an examination of the folkways and mores, the norms and taboos, of an extinct culture? Consider that in the first chapter, the narrator refers to New York society with these words: "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."
3. Edith Wharton grew up in the New York society that is the subject of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Age of Innocence*. Discuss her attitude toward the society of her youth. Is her attitude more one of affection or disdain? Be sure to include considerations of style and characterization as well as plot in your assessment.
4. Discuss the use of irony in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. How does this literary technique influence the tone and message of the novel? To what extent is the irony the product of the distance from which Wharton is viewing the New York of her youth?
5. The New York society that is described in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* is one where people do not allow themselves to be known by others, yet people seem to think that they know everything about everybody. Comment on the nature of the relationships portrayed in the novel. Do people really know one another? Why or why not? Support your conclusions with details and quotations from the story.
6. The New York society that is described in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* is one where people do not allow themselves to be known by others. As a reader, how well did you come to know the characters? Did they seem like real people to you? Did you feel like you could understand their motivations and feelings? Why or why not? Support your analysis with specifics from the novel.
7. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, propriety conquers passion in the central love triangle. Do you think Newland should have refused to marry May because of his love for Ellen? Should he have left her later to pursue his true love? Was Ellen right to prevent him from doing so? Support your conclusions from the novel and from Scripture.
8. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, propriety conquers passion in the central love triangle. Assess the author's view of this denouement. Did Wharton approve or disapprove of the decisions made by Newland and Ellen? Why do you think so? Support your conclusions with details and quotations from the novel.
9. Discuss the title of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. To what does the title refer? Be sure to consider the historical context in which the author was writing the novel in giving your answer.

10. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, consider the attractiveness of the central characters from a contemporary perspective. Young men answering the question should discuss whether you found May or Ellen more attractive. What does your answer tell you about the influence of the author's perspective? About the values of the age in which we live, which would never in a million years be called *The Age of Innocence*? Young ladies should discuss whether or not you find Newland Archer attractive, and consider why or why not this may be the case.
11. To what extent is the era described in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* also an age of hypocrisy? Give examples of the hypocrisy of the high society on which the novel focuses, and discuss the damage caused by such practices. Why should these consequences be no surprise for someone who understands the Scriptures?
12. Discuss the ending of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Why does Newland Archer decide not to renew his relationship with Ellen at the end of the story? What does this tell you about him, about the nature of relationships, and about the central themes of the novel?
13. A word that easily comes to mind when reading Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* is *claustrophobic*. Why does reading the story make one feel as if he were living in a closet? Did the characters in the story feel the same way? Why or why not? How does the author create this atmosphere through her use of literary techniques?
14. Edith Wharton and Henry James became close friends after she fled to Europe to escape a bad marriage. Both writers give considerable attention to the lives of American expatriates abroad. Compare and contrast the two writers in their treatment of the experiences of these people much like themselves. In your essay, use Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*.
15. Edith Wharton and Henry James became close friends after she fled to Europe to escape a bad marriage. Oddly, Wharton frequently pictures male protagonists, while James chooses women as his central characters. Why do you think this may be? Concentrate on Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* in answering the question.
16. Edith Wharton's two best-known novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*, both tell stories of hopeless passions rendered impossible of fulfillment by the strictures of the surrounding society. The societies themselves, however, are very different, with one story focusing on high-society New York and the other on small-town New England. Compare and contrast the societies pictured in the two novels, particularly with regard to their moral codes and ways of punishing those who violate them. Be sure to use details from both novels to support your arguments.

17. Edith Wharton's two best-known novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*, both tell stories of hopeless passions rendered impossible of fulfillment by the strictures of the surrounding society. Compare and contrast the protagonists of the two novels. How are Newland Archer and Ethan Frome similar, and how are they different? Be sure to discuss the character traits of the two men and not simply point out similarities and differences in the two plots.
18. Edith Wharton's two best-known novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*, both tell stories of hopeless passions rendered impossible of fulfillment by the strictures of the surrounding society. Compare and contrast the love triangles in the two novels. To what extent are the story arcs of the relationships essentially the same? What might the author be saying through these similarities? What does she hold to be universal truths about human lives and relationships?
19. Compare and contrast the treatment of the sexual double standard in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Both novelists create settings in old-money upper-class society, though one is in the North and the other the South. Consider especially the characters of Ellen Olenska and Edna Pontellier in developing your answer, and note both the messages of the authors and the behavior and choices of the characters.
20. Discuss the treatment of the sexual double standard in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Choose three characters and evaluate the extent to which they are affected by the different ways in which the society of which they are a part views men and women. Is any character in the story *not* affected by it? What consequences does this moral perspective have for both the characters and the plot of the novel?
21. In chapter six of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer reflects on his impending marriage with these thoughts: "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?" Discuss the way the sexual double standard affects human relationships in the novel, focusing particularly on the members of the central love triangle.
22. Despite the extent to which it decries the sexual double standard, critics have often noted that Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* pictures a society dominated by women. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? To what extent are the standards of behavior and matrix of relationships controlled by the women in the story? What does this say about Old New York, or about the author for that matter? Support your assessment with details and quotations from the novel.
23. In chapter four of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, the narrator says of the protagonist, "In spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind." By the end of the book, does Archer still feel this way? Why or why not? If he has changed, what caused the change? Support your assessment with details and quotations from the novel.

24. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska returns to New York from Europe hoping to be accepted into a society she does not really understand. While she finds the customs of New Yorkers strange, she wants to be part of their world because she wants to "feel cared for and safe." Is the tightly-knit world of Old New York one that produces feelings of care and security? Why or why not?
25. In chapter ten of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer speaks of his duty to his wife in these terms: "It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness?" Discuss the implications of this quotation, both for the nature of the society described by the author and the gender roles that characterized family life in that society.
26. When Edith Wharton was writing her novels, Darwin's theory of evolution was all the rage. But World War I had brought about a significant change in the way people viewed the implications of evolution. They no longer believed that it predicted inevitable progress, but now concluded that the evolutionary process might be destructive as well. How does *The Age of Innocence*, with its description of a society that human evolution had by the time the novel was written driven to extinction, support this new view of Darwinism? Include in your evaluation Archer's comparison of his fiancée to a blind cave fish in chapter ten.
27. In chapter 18 of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska says to Newland Archer, "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." Later, in chapter 22, she says, "At least it was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison." What do these quotations imply about the values appreciated by the author? Were these values characteristic of New York society, or things that made Archer stand out from his surroundings? Support your conclusion with details from the novel.
28. Discuss the author's view of marriage in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Does she see marriage as a stifling restriction of human happiness or a safeguard against the vicissitudes of passion? Is her view in any sense biblical? Support your conclusions with details and quotations from the novel and from Scripture.
29. Do you consider the central figures of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, to be moral people? Why or why not? Support your analysis with specific details from the novel and quotations from the book and from the Bible.

30. In chapter 30 of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer says, "Catch my death! But I've caught it already. I *am* dead - I've been dead for months and months." Discuss the use of death imagery in the novel, paying special attention to the descriptions of characters central to New York society and the feelings of the protagonist.
31. In chapter 31 of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, the narrator describes the protagonist's dilemma in these words: "For the first time Archer found himself face to face with the dread argument of the individual case. Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else's, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment." The quotation implies that Archer for the first time was confronted with moral relativism in all its freeing and frightening implications. Is this true? Is the society described by the author one characterized by moral absolutes? Why or why not? Support your analysis with details from the novel.
32. In chapter 31 of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, the narrator describes the protagonist's dilemma in these words: "For the first time Archer found himself face to face with the dread argument of the individual case. Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else's, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment." The quotation implies that Archer for the first time was confronted with moral relativism in all its freeing and frightening implications. Is moral relativism both freeing and frightening? Why or why not? Support your analysis with details from the book and from Scripture.
33. Discuss the character of May Welland, the third member of the love triangle in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Is she as weak, innocent, and conventional as her husband believes her to be? To what extent and in what ways does she surprise him in the years following their marriage? How is May's character important in developing the plot and themes of the novel?
34. Discuss the extent to which the central characters in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* change throughout the course of the story. Choose one of the figures in the novel's love triangle and discuss how that character changes and why, or why the character does not change as the story progresses.
35. Discuss the concept of freedom in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Of what does freedom consist, according to the author? Are any characters in the novel truly free? If so, which ones and why? What prevents characters from achieving freedom? According to the author, is freedom worth what one would have to pay in order to achieve it? Why or why not? Are Wharton's answers to these questions biblical ones?
36. Discuss the conflict between the group and the individual in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. According to the author, should one seek happiness in supporting the values of family and society or in pursuing one's personal passions and desires? Evaluate her answer according to the principles of Scripture.

37. Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* takes place mostly in the New York of the 1870s, but the last chapter occurs around the turn of the century. She thus, at least briefly, contrasts two worlds over time. Which does she like better? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with quotations from the novel.
38. Most of the characters in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* are part of the tightly-knit circle of New York high society, but a few, most notably Ellen Olenska, are outsiders, bringing with them European values and sensibilities. The story thus contrasts two worlds. Which does she like better? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with quotations from the novel.
39. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, the two leading female characters, May Welland and Ellen Olenska, serve as foils for one another. In what ways do they help to accentuate one another's personalities and values? How do their differences make the novel more effective, and how do they serve to emphasize the dilemma faced by Newland Archer as he tries to choose between them?
40. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, does Newland Archer's choice of May Welland over Ellen Olenska mark him as a weak man or a strong one? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the novel.
41. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer chooses to remain faithful to his wife rather than running away with Ellen Olenska, his true love. Evaluate his choice in terms of its impact on his happiness and that of those around him. Was he happier in the long run staying with May, or would he have been better off ending his marriage and going with Ellen? How would a different decision have affected the happiness of the women? Support your conclusions with incidents and quotations from the book, being sure to pay special attention to an analysis of the personalities of the three members of the love triangle.
42. Discuss the theme of sacrifice in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Which character in the story most nearly epitomizes the importance of choosing a life lived for the benefit of others? Why are those choices made? Do those choices conform to the biblical idea of self-sacrificing love in either their end or their motive? Why or why not?
43. Discuss the love unconsummated love affair at the center of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. What do Newland and Ellen see in one another that causes them to fall in love? Is their mutual passion based on reality or on mere perception? In other words, do they really know one another, or are they in love with ideas that they project on one another with little sufficient reason? Support your assessment with details from the novel.

44. Assess the mode of communication commonly practiced in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. In what Dallas Archer called "a regular deaf-and-dumb show," the people of New York's high society never really said what they meant, but somehow managed to convey their thinking with great force. Choose three pivotal conversations in the novel in which this sort of communication is important and analyze the significance of what is *not* spoken directly. What does this mode of communication tell you about the society in which the characters lived?

45. A literary critic once objected to the work of Edith Wharton because it focused on "the trivial concerns of trivial people." Do you agree? Consider *The Age of Innocence*, its characters and its themes in answering the question.