

Edith Wharton

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Newland Archer is sure he wants to marry the lovely May Welland. Then he meets May's cousin, the beautiful Ellen Olenska, and Newland becomes caught in a battle between duty and mystery, between tradition and the power of love.

In this reader you will find:

- Background information about this novel
- A short biography of the author, Edith Wharton
- Culture and society in 1870s New York
- Glossary of difficult words
- Comprehension and grammar activities including B1 style exercises
- Final test

Tags

Romance Society History

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Edith Wharton

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

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Young Adult

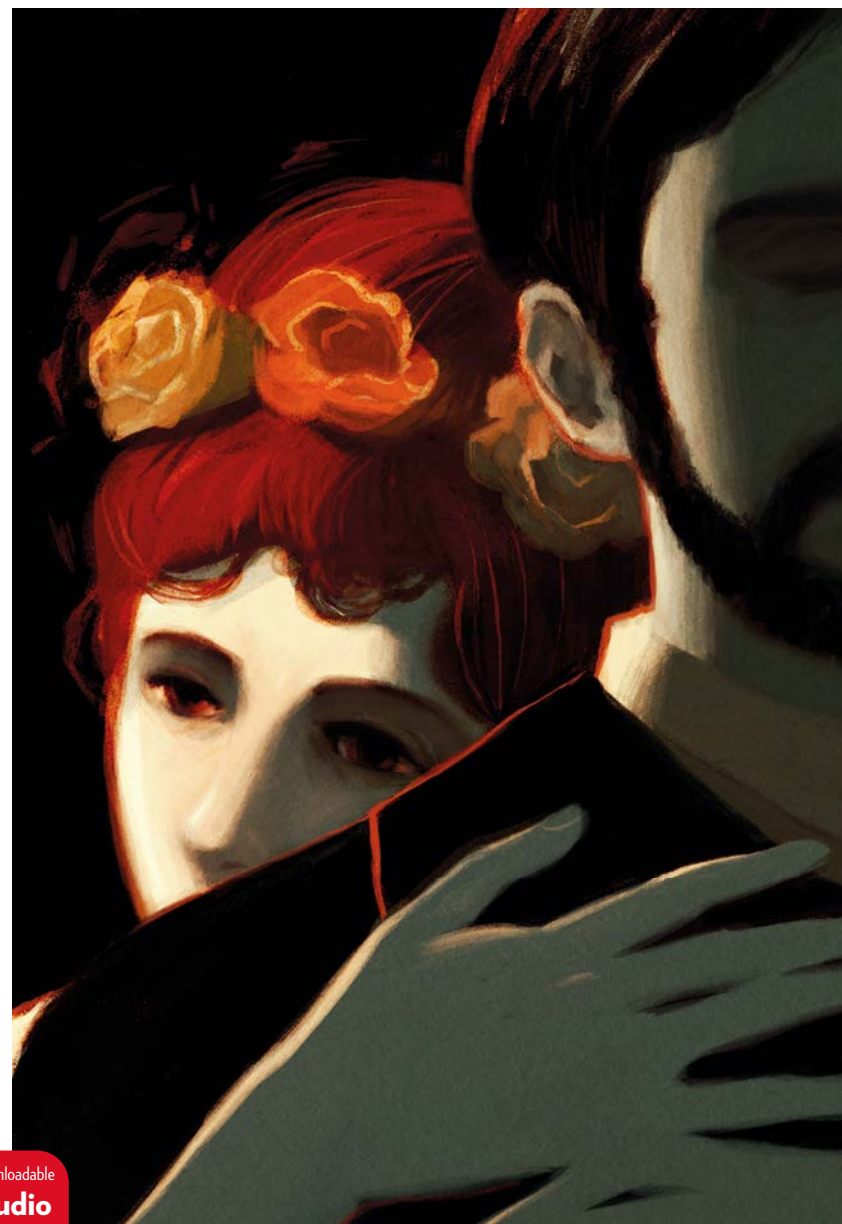


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THE AGE OF INNOCENCE



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Book brief

- 1 *The Age of Innocence* is the 1920 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by American author Edith Wharton.
- 2 The novel is set in the 1870s, in upper-class New York City and gives us a vivid picture of the lives and society of these very rich people during the “Gilded Age”.
- 3 It tells the story of Newland Archer, a young lawyer, who’s engaged to marry a typical girl of his social class, May Welland, who behaves exactly as expected by society.
- 4 Then Archer meets May’s cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who’s totally different from any other woman he’s ever met, and his quiet, boring life is turned upside down.
- 5 One of the main themes is trying to win personal freedom over the values of the upper class society that include protecting the family name, marriage, and appearance.

Edith Wharton

The Age of Innocence

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For Review Only

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Main Characters



The story's protagonist, he's a young, popular, successful lawyer, engaged to May Welland.

*Newland
Archer*

May's cousin and Mrs. Manson Mingott's granddaughter, she comes back to New York after leaving her husband in Europe.

*Ellen
Olenska*



May Welland

*Engaged to Newland
Archer, May always
behaves exactly the way
society expects her to.*



Mrs Catherine Manson Mingott

*She controls the powerful
Mingott family and is May
and Ellen's grandmother.*



*Mrs. Manson Mingott's daughter and
May's mother, she's taught her daughter
to behave like an upper-class lady.*

Mrs Augusta Welland



Before you Read

Writing

21st Century Skills

- 1 In *The Age of Innocence*, we're in New York in the 1870s. The people in this story come from the rich, old families of New York. Answer the following questions with your own ideas.

1 Imagine you're walking down the streets of New York in the 1870s. What differences would you see compared to modern New York?

.....

.....

2 What kind of clothes did rich people wear then?

.....

.....

3 What kind of things would these people do in the evenings?

.....

.....

4 How did people from these families behave?

.....

.....

5 What do you think was important to them?

.....

.....

6 Would you like to live in New York now? Why / Why not?

.....

.....



Vocabulary

- 2 There are lots of words for family relationships in this story. Read the following paragraph then fill in the gaps using the words in the box.

Newland Archer is getting married soon. The girl he's engaged to is called May. Her mother is Mrs Welland, and her aunt is Mrs. Lovell Mingott. Mrs. Welland's mother is called Mrs. Manson Mingott. May also has a cousin, called Ellen Olenska.

daughter • daughter-in-law • granddaughter • grandmother • husband • mother • niece • wife

- 1 May Welland is the of Mrs. Manson Mingott, the of Mrs. Welland, and the of Mrs. Lovell Mingott. She'll soon be the of Newland Archer, who will be her
- 2 Mrs. Manson Mingott is the of Mrs. Welland. Her is Mrs. Lovell Mingott. She's the of May Welland and Ellen Olenska.

- 3 Can you put these words into the correct word family?

annoyed • dancing • pleasure • embarrassed • innocent • interesting • nervous • perfect • shocked • singer • slim • stage • surprised • theatre • young

Entertainment	Feelings	Appearances

Engaged

- 2 On a January evening in New York during the 1870s, Newland Archer arrived at the theatre. The theatre was old, but New York's best families loved it. You could hear the music better than in those new theatres, they said, and they didn't want it to change.

This period of great economic growth, from the 1870s to about 1900, is often called "the Gilded Age".

Newland arrived late because it wasn't fashionable to arrive early, but also because he liked to wait for his pleasures, and he was sure the entertainment was going to be particularly good this evening.

When he opened the door to the box* that he and his friends used, he saw he'd arrived at exactly the right time. The woman on stage was holding a flower and singing with great energy. Standing in front of her was a man, trying to look* innocent*.

"He loves me!" she sang.

Newland stood at the back of the box, and looked across to the other side of the theatre. Opposite, was the box of old Mrs. Manson Mingott. She, of course, had become too large to come to the theatre, in fact she never left her house. On this evening, when old New York families wanted to be seen in public, she sent her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Lovell Mingott, and her daughter, Mrs. Welland. Behind these two ladies sat a young girl in a white dress, watching the lovers on stage. As the words "He loves me!" filled the theatre, her face turned*

box (here) small private "room" in a theatre
look seem

innocent (here) as if he's done nothing wrong
turn (here) become

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a warm pink. She looked down at the flowers she was holding and smiled.

“My beautiful girl is so innocent!” Newland thought to himself, while he watched her, “She doesn’t even guess what this story is all about.”

Only that afternoon May Welland had told him she “cared” (the word used by the young ladies of New York to tell a young man they loved them). He imagined himself with her, after they were married, sitting by the Italian Lakes.

“May and I will read books together, then,” he thought. “I’ll educate her about the world.” Newland agreed with the modern view that women should know enough to be able to talk at dinners and parties. He wanted May to be beautiful and interesting to other men, but, of course, she’d always make sure everyone understood she was *his* wife. He wanted May to be as full of life as that married woman he’d been in love with for those two years, in fact she’d be better than that unhappy woman. While he was imagining this picture of a perfect wife, the other men arrived in the box and began to examine the audience.

In 1870, most men thought that women were too weak to be able to study for a higher education.

“I don’t believe it!” said Lawrence Lefferts, suddenly. Newland followed where he was looking. He was surprised to see that a slim young woman had come into the Mingott box. She had expensive jewels in her hair, and was wearing an unusual dress of dark blue. She didn’t seem to notice that people were watching her. Mrs. Welland stood up and went to sit next to her daughter May. With a polite smile, the new woman sat in her place at the front of the box.

The men turned to Sillerton Jackson, who was one of the great old men of New York. He kept them waiting, watching them for a



moment, and then he said simply, “I didn’t think the Mingotts would let her come *here!*”

Newland felt more and more embarrassed. The men were all staring* into the box where May was sitting. He didn’t recognize the lady in the strange dress, and he didn’t know why everyone was so shocked to see her. Then suddenly he realized who she was, and he began to feel annoyed. Why had the Mingotts let her come to the theatre?

The person they were staring at was May’s cousin, the Countess* Ellen Olenska, who had arrived from Europe a day or two before. He knew that May had been to see “poor Ellen” – a private visit was right, of course – but it was quite another thing to bring her to the theatre!

Old Mrs. Manson Mingott, the head of the Mingott family, had always done what she wanted. Her husband had died when she was 28, and when she eventually* got her hands on his money, she’d built her house well outside fashionable New York. She’d lived in Europe, and two of her daughters had married “foreigners”, an Italian count and an English banker, but this time, Newland was sure that she’d made the wrong decision.

Everyone was watching the Mingott box now, but Mrs. Welland and her sister-in-law looked as if nothing unusual was happening. Only May’s face had gone a little red, while Countess Olenska herself watched the stage. Her face was pale and serious, as it should be, but her dress didn’t even cover her shoulders!

Newland was worried. Countess Olenska didn’t seem to understand that people were shocked to see her out in public, and he didn’t think she was a good example for May.

stare look for a long time at someone or something

countess/count type of lady/lord of an important, old family
eventually in the end



“So what happened?” asked one of the young men in his box.

“Well, she left him,” replied Lawrence.

“He was a terrible man, wasn’t he?” asked the young man.

“Yes, the worst sort. But she left with his secretary.”

“Oh I see,” said the young man, looking serious.

“They didn’t stay together long,” continued Lawrence, “six months later she was living alone in Venice, and was very unhappy. That’s when Lovell Mingott brought her back to live with her grandmother, old Mrs. Manson Mingott. That’s all right of course, but letting a woman like that come to the theatre is not!”

“It’s certainly strange that Miss Welland is here too,” one of the men said, looking at Newland.

“Oh, I expect old Manson Mingott wanted her here,” said Lawrence. The men agreed this was probably true.

The first part of the evening’s entertainment finished, and everyone stood up. Newland had to show New York that he was with May in this difficult situation. He left his friends and walked round to her box. She knew he’d come to help her, and he was pleased she understood why he was there.

“Have you told your cousin we’re engaged?” he asked her.

“You can tell her yourself,” May said with a smile, moving out of the way so he could get past. Newland sat with the Countess at the front of the box where everyone could see them.

“We played together as children,” she said, “you were a horrible little boy. You kissed me once, behind a door, but I was in love with your cousin!”

Newland was surprised to hear her talking like this.

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“Oh, I’ve been away such a long time,” she went on, “that I think I’ve died and God has sent me to dear old New York.”

At that moment, Mrs. Regina Beaufort, a niece of Mrs. Manson Mingott, walked into her own box. She gave a big party once a year – her arrival told everyone it was about to start. She came from an old American family without much money. Twenty years ago, she’d married Julius Beaufort, who’d recently arrived from England and had plenty of money. Some said that the international bank Beaufort worked for had “helped” him to leave England, but everyone soon forgot that story.

The Beauforts had one of the most fashionable houses, and New York was proud to take its foreign visitors there. You walked into the Beauforts’ house on their own red carpet, into an entrance hall where servants* stood ready to take your coat, past rooms of expensive furniture and paintings by famous artists, to the ballroom*, and further on, to a garden room made of glass, that was filled with rare plants.

Newland arrived late, and he was feeling nervous. He believed you should help members of your family if they needed it, but he was worried the Mingotts might send Countess Olenska to the Beaufort party. New York would see that as a very serious mistake.

He found May and her mother in the room nearest the ballroom. Through the door he could see couples already dancing. May was surrounded by a group of excited young men and women, and was telling them that she’d just got engaged to Newland.

That night at the theatre, Newland and May had agreed to announce their engagement* at the Beauforts’ party. It wasn’t what

servant person employed to work for a family in their house
ballroom large room for important parties and dancing

engagement when two people have agreed to marry each other

he wanted, it was too noisy and public for such happy news, but now that Ellen Olenska had arrived, he had to protect May. Her cousin's shocking behavior might damage May's position in society. He couldn't let that happen.

He took May onto the center of the ballroom floor, put his arm round her and they began to dance. "Now we won't have to talk," he said, smiling into her innocent eyes. "Dear!" he said, pulling her closer. What a wonderful life he'd have with this beautiful, shining woman at his side.

When the dance ended they left the ballroom and went into the garden room. Newland checked that they were alone and kissed May quickly on the lips. He felt that the world lay at their feet, like a sun-filled valley.

"Did you tell my cousin Ellen?" May asked after a while*.

"No, I didn't have the chance," he said, but that wasn't quite true. When he'd sat next to that strange, foreign woman at the theatre, he'd suddenly felt unable to tell her he was engaged to May. "Of course I'll tell her," he said. He was still worried she might come to the party. "I haven't seen her, is she here?" he asked.

"No, at the last minute she decided not to," May answered. "She's fond of dancing, but said her dress wasn't right for a fashionable party."

Newland and May both knew this wasn't why Ellen wasn't there.

"May knows as well as I do," he thought, "the real reason she stayed away, but I'll always behave as if there's no shadow over poor Countess Olenska."

The next day, the engagement visits began. First, Newland Archer,

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his mother and sister visited Mrs. Welland. Then he and May went with Mrs. Welland to see old Mrs. Manson Mingott, who was May's grandmother. Being too large to go upstairs, the old lady waited downstairs for New York to come to her; her visitors were always surprised to see through an open door to her enormous bed.

When they arrived, Mrs. Mingott was sitting in a large chair wearing a huge black dress. Her face was almost completely hidden in fat, and her tiny hands looked like two white birds on a sea of black.

"You must get married soon, before I get ill and die," she said happily, "I want to give the wedding breakfast here!"

They were in the middle of thanking her, when the Countess Olenska arrived with Julius Beaufort.

"Oh, sit down, sit down, Beaufort!" said old Mingott, forgetting her other visitors, "Tell me who was at the party!"

Mrs. Welland and May were in the hall, putting on their coats. Newland saw the Countess Olenska looking at him.

"Of course, you know already – about May and I," he said, with a shy laugh.

"Of course I know, and I'm so happy." She held out her hand to him. "Goodbye. Come and see me some day," she said.

After they'd left, Mrs. Welland said, "It was a mistake to go out in public with Julius Beaufort."

"Yes," thought Newland, "and she should also know that a man who has just got engaged doesn't visit married women!"

Reading Comprehension

1 Answer the following questions.

1 Where's May at the start of this chapter?

.....

2 Where's May looking, while Newland is watching her?

.....

3 Where's Newland when he first sees Ellen Olenska?

.....

4 Where does Newland go after the Countess arrives?

.....

5 Where does he sit?

.....

6 Where's Mrs. Manson Mingott?

.....

7 Where does May announce her engagement to Newland?

.....

8 Where in Beaufort's house does Newland kiss May?

.....

Writing

21st Century Skills

2 Answer the following questions.

1 Why do you think Mrs. Manson Mingott wanted Ellen to be at the theatre?

.....

.....

2 Why did Newland go to May after Ellen arrived?

.....

.....

3 Why didn't Newland tell the Countess about his engagement?

.....

.....

Grammar

3 Put these verbs into the correct form in the past.

The person they (1) (stare) at was May's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who (2) (arrive) from Europe a day or two before. He (3) (know) that May (4) (go) to see "poor Ellen" – a private visit (5) (be) right, of course – but it (6) (be) quite another thing to bring her to the theatre!

Pre-Reading Activity • Chapter Two

3 Listening BI Preliminary

4 Listen to the start of Chapter 2 and choose the correct answer, A, B or C.

1 Mrs. Archer

- ☐ A loved the excitement of going out.
- ☐ B lived with her husband.
- ☐ C liked to hear news about the old families of New York.

2 Sillerton Jackson

- ☐ A sometimes had dinner at the Archers' home.
- ☐ B had a large collection of butterflies.
- ☐ C was in love with Mrs Archer's daughter.

3 When Sillerton came, Newland

- ☐ A left him alone with his mother and sister.
- ☐ B wanted to hear what he had to say.
- ☐ C felt embarrassed because he was now part of May's family.

4 Mr Sillerton starts by talking about

- ☐ A Countess Olenska.
- ☐ B Mrs. Lemuel Struthers.
- ☐ C The Beauforts.

5 When asked about Countess Olenska, at first

- ☐ A Mr Jackson talks about the cold fish.
- ☐ B asks Newland about his grandfather.
- ☐ C serves himself some more food.

6 When they talk about the Countess, Newland

- ☐ A defends Countess Olenska.
- ☐ B agrees with his mother.
- ☐ C says the Countess's secretary was a bully.