

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton

## Book Information

Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence

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318 Pages

Book Level: 8.8

Interest Level: UG

New York society in the 1870s is portrayed, where money counted for less than manners and morals.

**Topics:** Behavior, Manners; Community Life, Ethics/Morality; Community Life, Money; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; U.S. States/Regions, New York

## Main Characters

Countess Ellen Olenska May's cousin, with whom Archer falls in love

Julius Beaufort a known philanderer and shady businessman

Lawrence Lefferts a married socialite, the epitome of "form"

May Welland a young society woman, Newland's fiancé and later, his wife

Monsieur Riviere Count Olenski's secretary

Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden a private, revered couple at the very top of the social pyramid

Mr. and Mrs. Welland May's parents

Mrs. Catherine Manson Mingott May and Ellen's grandmother, the family matriarch

Newland Archer a wealthy socialite attorney who marries May Welland

## Vocabulary

**dilettante** a lover of the fine arts; a connoisseur

**Gorgon** Greek mythology, any of the three sisters Stheno, Euryale, and the mortal Medusa who had snakes for hair and eyes, that if looked into, turned the beholder into stone

**landau** a four-wheeled carriage with front and back passenger seats that face each other and a roof in two sections that can be lowered or detached

**Papist** (offensive) a Roman Catholic

**penury** extreme barrenness or insufficiency

**valetudinarian** a sickly or weak person, especially one who is constantly and morbidly concerned with his or her health

## Synopsis

Amid the strict rigors of manners of New York society, Newland Archer's engagement to May Welland is announced at a reception to welcome May's cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska. The countess had just fled her husband, a Polish count and had come back to the States to live. Her contemplation of a divorce action and her rather bohemian lifestyle challenges the Welland's propriety. Newland Archer finds himself attracted to Ellen. In the days following the reception, he calls on her and sends her flowers, telling himself he was making his fiancée's cousin feel welcome.

He begins to find himself defending Ellen when the rest of their societal circle is criticizing her, and he despises Julius Beaufort, a married philanderer, for paying attention to her. Archer is torn by his growing feelings toward Ellen and goes to visit May, who is vacationing with her parents in St. Augustine. Although he is coolly aware of May's conventional ways, he is charmed by her beauty and asks to advance the date of their wedding. His request is refused, as the required preparations can not be completed in time.

Newland returns to New York, and while trying to nurture the intimacy of his relationship with Ellen, she reads him a telegram from May telling him that their wedding date will indeed be advanced. He receives a similar telegram himself when he returns home. He feels he is now protected against Ellen and himself.

The wedding follows the societal conventions, and the couple takes an extended European

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honeymoon. Upon their return, May falls into the role of the dutiful and conventional wife. Newland feels unfulfilled and trapped in these surroundings. He sees Ellen and asks that they go away together. Ellen refuses, pointing out the problems with the plan and proposes that they could love each other without a consummation. Shortly thereafter, he urges her not to divorce the count. She agrees and moves to Washington, D.C.

A family crisis occurs when Julius Beaufort's firm faces failure due to shady financial deals. The predicament causes old Mrs. Mingott to have a stroke, and the family gathers around her. She summons Ellen, always her favorite granddaughter, to her side. Newland again begins to see Ellen. Ellen suddenly announces she is going to Paris after May privately tells her she is expecting a baby. May hosts a going away party for Ellen at the Archer home. At the party, Newland realizes that May and the other guests know of his interest in Ellen. The dinner proves to be polite society's way of showing that May has won the battle for Newland's heart. Ellen leaves, and Newland stays with May and becomes the dutiful societal husband and father.

As the years pass, the tight circle of New York's upper crust changes. Other professions besides law and business become acceptable, and Archer becomes involved in politics. When his children are young adults, May dies. Archer grieves her passing. Before his son Dallas is to be married, he calls Archer and proposes a European trip together. When in Paris, Dallas tells his father that he knows of his relationship with Ellen Olenska and has arranged for them to visit her. When they arrive outside her apartment, Newland urges his son to go ahead of him and says he will follow shortly. When her servant appears on the balcony to close the shutters, he returns to his hotel without seeing her.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Why is Ellen Mrs. Mingott's favorite granddaughter?

*They can relate to each other, for they share a similar attitude toward artists, Europeans, and Papists. Although now too old and obese to go out in public, Mrs. Mingott was a widow at twenty-eight years of age and had to find her way in a society that was distrustful of her maternal lineage. She continues to ignore convention for practicality. Ellen does the same.*

### Literary Analysis

What message does Edith Wharton hope to convey about the upper circle of New York Society through this book?

*In adhering to the conventions of the society, one gives up a certain freedom of spirit and lifestyle. Life becomes scripted and predictable and desires unfulfilled.*

### Inferential Comprehension

May tears her wedding dress while stepping out of their carriage one night after leaving the opera early. It is also emphasized that when Newland borrows her Brougham to pick up Ellen, it still has the wedding varnish on it. What does this imply?

*The Archer marriage, though still young, is torn in spirit and beginning to unravel. It also indicates that May is aware of the lack of passion between Archer and herself.*

### Constructing Meaning

What is meant by the passage, "It was the old New York way of taking life 'without effusion of blood:' the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease..."

*It shows the way in which society quietly corrects those who stray too far from the path. Problems are handled privately, with the strong-arm of family present. Word is not leaked to others on the outside. Screaming, hitting, or creating a scene would be vulgar. Society reprimands its own.*

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## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Edith Wharton writes from a limited point of view, i.e. most of the action is funneled and commented upon through one character, Newland Archer. How does this contribute to the rising action of the story? How does it affect the reader's sympathetic response?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** We all grow up surrounded by expectations. The expectations of the people in the upper echelon of society are often unseen by those who are not in that circle. From dress, to male-female interactions, to courtship rituals, to vacation destinations - much of life is mapped out. Procure a book of etiquette. Read about proper manners for several given situations. Report your findings to the class. Include ways of greeting people, setting tables, responding to invitations, etc.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The author goes to great lengths to explain the genealogy of the various families and how they are interrelated. Genealogical research has come into vogue in recent years. Oftentimes, local libraries have books to get someone started on creating their family tree. Church records are also good resources. Have the students create their genealogical history.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Examine and describe the characters of Newland Archer, Lawrence Lefferts, and Julius Beaufort. Lawrence is viewed as the man to emulate for his social form and taste. Beaufort is despised for his flagrant philandering and scandalous business pursuits. Newland has strong feelings about both of them. How is Newland like them? In what ways was Newland a hypocrite? Look at today's society. In what ways have the values changed since the 1870s? How are we still hypocritical?