The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton

Edited by Candace Waid

A Norton Critical Edition

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Edith Wharton
THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS
SOURCES
CRITICISM

Edited by

CANDACE WAID

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

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Introduction

In 1919, as the Allied forces plotted the future by remaking the map of Europe, Edith Wharton seemed compelled to plot the past, in particular the world of her own past located in the exclusive and excluding society of her childhood. Wharton returned to her life as a writer by drafting several outlines for what would become her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), using "Old New York" as her working title. Aside from her brief and passionate novel, *Summer* (1917), and war-driven work such as editing *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), Wharton spent her days organizing institutions to feed, clothe, and shelter the refugees who were pouring into Paris. A permanent resident since 1909, Wharton's service to France was acknowledged when she was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1915, the highest honor that can be bestowed on foreign-born heroes. In *Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915), Wharton described her many trips to the battlefront through the death she had seen along the roadways. Recognizing the threat to the communal body in a city that was likened to a "disemboweled corpse," Wharton mourned "the destruction of the obscurist human communities." Faced with "exposed interiors": "house fronts sliced . . . clean off," Wharton conveyed the poignancy of photographs still attached to exposed walls and "bundles of letters laboriously written and just as laboriously deciphered" lying in the ruins. To Wharton, these objects torn from their human settings were "the thousand and one bits of the past" that had once given "meaning and continuity to the present."[1]

While she would speak of the writing of *The Age of Innocence* as a retreat "to childish memories of a long-vanished America," a manifestation of her desire for "a momentary escape,"[2] Wharton characteristically escaped to a past that allowed her to critique America as she grieved over a fallen Europe. Less an escape to a distanced past than a return to the present, Wharton's novel set in the decade following the Civil War draws a great deal of its emotional force from the sense of loss associated with the Great War. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton created a novel distinguished by its almost surgical accuracy, composing an elegy for a lost world that is both a tribute to and a cutting analysis of the realm of her childhood. Piecing together her elegy for the shattered past, Wharton reflected on her own experience of history. In this "backward glance," Wharton did not see the "well traveled

1. Edith Wharton, *Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort* (New York: Scribner's, 1915), pp. 153, 158.
2. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 369.

roads" promised by Whitman; she saw instead a cataclysmic abyss, an irrevocable divide between "the pathetic picturesqueness"[3] of the America of her childhood and the unsettling modernity of a post-war world that had become "a roaring and discontinuous universe."[4]

Wharton's decision to write *The Age of Innocence* during the months following the armistice was driven by the same forces that later compelled her to publish a personal memoir: "If anyone had suggested to me before 1914, to write my reminiscences, I should have answered that my life had been too uneventful to be worth recording." Indeed, as Wharton would confess, it was "not until the successive upheavals which resulted in the catastrophe of 1914 had 'cut all likeness of the name' from my old New York did I see its pathetic picturesqueness."[5] By writing *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton evoked the era of her own childhood, documenting the customs she had observed when she returned in 1872 at age ten after six years in Europe to face the strange and estranging society of her origins. Wharton, who watched the models for her character, May, unveil themselves to draw back the bow in the newly fashionable sport of archery, also writes of a hidden realm in which the "Dark Ladies," the African American "artists," prepared feasts for these pale goddess figures.

Like May, as R. W. B. Lewis points out in his biography, Wharton knew what it meant to be sacrificed to an ideal that required women to suffer from what her protagonist Newland Archer reveres and condemns as "abysmal purity"(6).[6] The twenty-four-year-old Edith Jones had approached her wedding day with increasing horror because she still did not know where babies came from. Sexually ignorant, the young woman who would become Edith Wharton had long lived amid a social and familial ethos of silence, a world in which a hint of sexual scandal could cause a man's name, and by implication the story of his fall, to remain unspoken.

A few months after publishing her novel that begins by invoking "the early seventies" (3), Wharton wrote to her publisher justifying her decision to draw her "allusions rang[ing] from, say, 1875 to 1885. Any narrower field of evocation must necessarily reduce the novel to a piece of archeological pedantry instead of a living image of the times."[7] While Wharton chose to change some things, altering details that were not integral to her story, the fact that she chose to leave other questioned details as they were suggests that her position on the temporal latitude that was necessary for the writing of strong historical fiction was much more than a retrospectively conceived defensive posture. Indeed, the second manuscript plan for the novel documents the time frame for the novel as being from "1875–1885" while the

3. *Backward Glance*, p. 6.
4. Edith Wharton, "Preface," *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Popular Library, 1976), p. 9. Originally published as the preface to Edith Wharton's *Ghosts* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1937).
5. *Backward Glance*, pp. 5, 6.
6. References to *The Age of Innocence*, as well as to other selections included in this volume, will appear as page references in the text.
7. Letter from Edith Wharton to Rutger Jewett, Feb. 7, 1921, quoted by Julia Ehrhardt in "To Read These Pages is to Live Again," p. 411 in this edition. See also Greeson.

third manuscript outline that simply gives the year, "1875," confirms that the novel was always being located just beyond the time alluded to vaguely as "the early seventies" in the opening sentence of the published work. Wharton's novel has its most personal origins in 1872, the year "the young hawk" returned home to realize that she was "in exile in America."[8] In the most intimate of terms, this was the moment that the young Edith realized (without ever having "seen one in the flesh") that she wanted to become "an author."[9] At the age of fourteen, this aspiring writer of the mid-seventies worked in secret to complete her first novella, "Fast and Loose," the tale of a young woman who agrees to a mercenary marriage rather than marry the man she loves. This doomed female protagonist then dies an appropriately early and sentimental death, leaving her unrequited lover obsessed with her grave. Demonstrating her awareness of the consequences of publication, the precocious Edith wrote a series of scathing mock reviews. Penning a brutal assessment that she pretended had been published in *The Nation*, the astute writer turned critic concluded: "It is false charity to reader and writer to mince matters. The English of it is that every character is a failure, the plot a vacuum, the style spiritless, the dialogue vague, the sentiment weak & the whole thing a fiasco." Castigating the writer of "Fast and Loose" (to whom she had given a male pseudonym) for being "very, very like a sick-sentimental school-girl,"[1] the girl who would become Edith Wharton laid the groundwork for her future opus by writing a novella that established the decade of the seventies as a fertile location for a novel about failed marriages, sacrificial deaths, and the problem of uncongenial marital alliances with foreign aristocrats. In many ways, Wharton's *Age of Innocence* is most autobiographical because the very act of writing such a novel was in itself a return to her own primal scene as she spirited away paper to complete her secret novella in 1876.

Taking its title from Sir Joshua Reynolds's evocative portrait of the daughter of his favorite niece, *The Age of Innocence* is not the novel of a young girl. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, invoking Wharton's reference to Henry James, it is not a novel concerned with drawing *The Portrait of a Lady.* Instead of focusing on a female figure such as James's Isabel Archer, Wharton's novel centers on the fate of Newland Archer, a man who is described as "the portrait of a gentleman" (79). While the central events of the novel take place in the period from the "early seventies" through the historical decade that closes in the mid-eighties, the concluding section describes the intervening years from the perspective of an aging Newland Archer who has remained a faithful father and husband, has contributed to the growth of institutions helping the needy, and has made a brief foray into politics after being

8. R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975), p. 431. Edith Wharton, "Life and I," Wharton Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, p. 20.
9. *Backward Glance*, p. 76.
1. Edith Wharton, "Fast and Loose," in *Fast and Loose and The Buccaneers*, ed. Viola Winner Hopkins, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), p. 117.

encouraged by his prominent friend, Wharton's actual friend, Theodore Roosevelt.

In the closing scene, modeled on the end of Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), Newland Archer, who is fifty-seven, the same age as Wharton herself when she began writing *The Age of Innocence*, sits on a park bench in Paris looking up at the window of the Countess Olenska. After walking through a series of sites known for their fallen monuments and places that recall fallen reigns, Newland Archer chooses to remain with his memories of the past he has lost and the past he continues to experience. Wharton, who was fond of saying that she and Teddy Roosevelt were "self-made men," clearly identifies with her male protagonist. Refusing to introduce her past to her present, Wharton has her character Newland Archer decide to remain with the memory of his Ellen rather than look into the eyes of the powerful, expatriot woman whom Wharton had in many ways become. The Countess Olenska may not be the "Gorgon" who has the power to blind those who look on her, but this mysterious American woman is a figure who has lived in "the golden light . . . the pervading illumination" of an art-infused life "spent in this rich atmosphere that [Newland Archer] already felt to be too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs" (215).

The Age of Innocence is set in a time of great change and the entire novel is written with a consciousness of what this world is destined to become, from the anticipation of technological advances in travel and communication to the shifting mores in marriage and money. Despite its elegiac tone, this novel finally is not defined by a sense of nostalgia. Like Wharton's other works describing New York society, *The Age of Innocence* offers a profound critique of the world it describes, even as it finds value in the sacrifices made to ensure the stability of the quietly violent ranks of the "New York four hundred." This exclusive group, defined by the limits of Mrs. Astor's ballroom and the closest thing to an aristocracy that America had ever known, was the closely guarded world into which Wharton was born; her writing, despite her own repeated and explicit disclaimers, was from the outset assumed to have the force and authority of a social exposé. It was thought, and not without reason, that Wharton's society novels might be read as an insider's guide to what had long been an inaccessible realm of mysteries and manners. As Wharton's autobiographical writings suggest, the novel emerged from her intimate knowledge of the world that she (like the Countess Olenska) had to leave in order to fulfill herself through art.

For Edith Wharton, Old New York was an airless world she escaped to experience the ecstasy of breath she found in literary creation and the seductive call of words themselves. If art from the outset was part of a forbidden world for Wharton, her writing long continued to be her only means of understanding the power of erotic passion. (Wharton, who discovered sexual passion late in life, may never even have consummated her twenty-six year marriage to Teddy Wharton. The couple's efforts at sexual intimacy seem to have ceased after the har-

rowing experiments of the first three weeks of marriage.) Divorced in 1913, Wharton had reason to critique her culture's fetish of the ideal of female innocence, a life-blighting ignorance that she later argued "did more than anything else to falsify and misdirect my whole life."[2]

Known for her critiques of New York society in her first bestseller, *The House of Mirth* (1905) and in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) (both of which depicted the destruction of the society of Old New York as it was consumed by the appetite of a soulless materialism), Wharton from the outset had included participant observers in her novels. Aware of the forces of change, whether technological, economic, or sexual, these observers comment on the acts of carnivorous pleasure or passive denial that threaten to destroy this rigidly ritualized and moribund society. The denizens of Old New York, surrounded by change, inhabit what the ill-fated Ralph Marvell of *The Custom of the Country* calls "the 'Reservation'."[3] Educated through his passion for his wife's cousin, Newland Archer, who reads the new treatises on "Primitive Man," becomes the most sophisticated critic of the rituals concerning female purity and the brutal acts of purification that insist on the exclusion of foreign contaminants and the sacrifice of women. As *The Age of Innocence* suggests, female sexual experience itself is tainted with foreignness. Through her sexual attractiveness alone, the estranged Countess Olenska constitutes a threat to the sanctity of the tribe not only by giving the lie to the supposed inviolability of marriage, but also by embodying the possibility of female sexual desire and female sexual agency.

The Age of Innocence catalogues the ways in which Old New York divides the society of men from that of women. The cost of this story of sexual separation, the devastation that can be traced to a type of "factitious" and calculated innocence that takes the form of infantilization, is presented in Wharton's early story, "The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems," as well as in her essay, "The New Frenchwoman," in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), a group of cultural essays published as a book the year before *The Age of Innocence* appeared. Included in the "Sources" section of this edition, these evocative pieces suggest the ways in which Wharton drew on a life-long concern to articulate the pointed critique of female innocence she sets forth in her novel.

The modern critical essays included in this edition provide a variety of lenses through which to view Wharton's novel. In *The Age of Innocence*, as Nancy Bentley argues, the novel of manners must be understood by examining its connection to the ethnographic case study. Wharton's novel is obsessed with rituals of purity and the necessity of sacrifice, with the threat of contamination and the fierce (if bloodless) violence of being excluded from what is called the "tribe." Indeed, the

2. Quoted in Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, p. 54, from Wharton's "Life and I" in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
3. Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 74.

contaminating foreignness that enters the novel in the form of the "kinswoman" (200), the Europeanized, experienced, and therefore corrupted Ellen Olenska, must be read in the context of the novel's informed and incisive disquisition on the problem of culture. The Countess Olenska represents at once the return of the repressed, an embodiment of art and sexuality that, as Elizabeth Ammons insists, must be exiled; and as Anne MacMaster and Dale Bauer conclude, this woman is a dark figure, an embodiment of otherness who in her evocation of "fear and desire" is both vulnerable and strangely powerful.

Indeed, the question of blood itself was a problem in this age of American isolationism, in which race- and class-based claims insisted on the ideal of a "factitious purity" (30), and were bred by values that insisted on breeding a stultifying sameness. Purity has other meanings here as the elite pursue an illusory whiteness at the core of what might be called the age of eugenics. While Newland is at once the primary figure articulating the novel's critique of female innocence and his culture's obsession with the ideal of female purity, he also, as Brian Edwards argues, occupies a walled world that insists on the harem-like separation of men and women. This ethos of the harem has international implications as Newland Archer becomes an increasingly impotent figure who represents American isolationism and the United States' reluctance to enter World War I.

Newland Archer's story of temptation and renunciation, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, makes this hesitant gentleman the protagonist of Wharton's most impressive *Bildungsroman*. He is a man whose life is finally determined by the unannounced collaboration between the surprisingly innocent Ellen and the paradoxically experienced May. As Jennifer Rae Greeson argues, these categories of innocence and experience wavered for Wharton as she mapped out plans for the novel that was to be her parable of American culture.

The Age of Innocence reflects Wharton's growing obsession with an anthropological perspective. As Wharton delved into the complex layers of her social and material past, she wrote a historical novel that was not only an ethnographic *tour de force*, but also the recreation of a living structure, what R. W. B. Lewis calls "a strenuous act of revivification."[4] For Wharton, this historical novel could only be written through the unearthing of shards of memory, gathering pieces in a writing process that came to resemble an archaeological expedition. Writing about her desire to discover and recover the past through fiction and memoirs, Wharton concluded: "The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and, its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it."[5] As Julia Ehrhardt's account of the novel's generation reveals, not only Wharton, but her readers and reviewers were obsessed with the idea of historical accu-

4. Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, p. 430.
5. *Backward Glance*, p. 7.

racy, an accuracy that became more difficult to achieve with each added layer of cultural allusion.

Wharton's desire to bring the past to life through the accretion of words on the page, as well as her obsession as an artist with art and culture, is evoked again in Brigitte Peucker's analysis of Martin Scorcese's late-twentieth-century translation of the novel into film. Recalling the story of Galatea (the mythical statue who is brought to life in the arms of her creator, Pygmalion) and the still moments of the novel, Peucker suggests the ways in which Scorcese's film alludes to layers of film history and that medium's incorporation of the paradoxical aesthetic of motion and stillness. In Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, characters are framed in momentary stillness before being brought to life on the page itself, a transformation that is bodied forth even more forcefully through the medium of film.

Classified by Edmund Wilson as "[t]he poet of interior decoration,"[6] Wharton proved in *The Age of Innocence* that there is indeed life, and perhaps poetry, in the description of the objects that furnish and recreate a lost world. This poetry ranges from the archive of colonial history found in the list of place settings and serving plate used by the van der Luydens to the sense of the past conveyed through a list of types of carriages (including the vis-à-vis familiar to readers of Jane Austen) that were still to be seen in the fashionable resort town of Newport in the 1870s. Like everything about the novel, including the icon of female purity embodied in the complex figure of May, interiors of *The Age of Innocence* are finally not innocent. As the extensive notes to this edition demonstrate, the novel is comprised of layer upon layer of allusion that, taken together, create a world of great complexity where objects themselves—such as the seemingly inert books lifted at random from a table in Archer's study—are included to tell a story. Rich in the lyric poetry of sounds and lists, *The Age of Innocence* can be read without understanding the significance of objects mentioned on the page, but these details (histories of places, events, and objects) carry part of the deeper meaning of the narrative and, in many ways, function as keys to the interior and living world of the novel. Asked to read the manuscript, Wharton's close friend Walter Berry insisted, "Yes; it's good. But of course you and I are the only people who will ever read it." By "read,"[7] Berry may have meant that he and Wharton would be the only ones to understand the power of her creation and the meaning of the myriad allusions that she had hoped would bring art to life. The notes in this edition are designed to serve as a guide to the past world of Wharton's childhood, a world Berry felt might be lost even to the modern reader of 1920.

The Age of Innocence is a parable of America and its relationship to the Old World. While Newland seems compelled to marry one of "his own kind" (21), part of what he recognizes as "real life" (148, 159) is embodied in his love of art and books, a love that has the other

6. Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," in *The Wound and the Bow* (New York, 1947), p. 163.
7. *Backward Glance*, p. 369.

woman, the exiled countess, as its muse. Although Ellen Olenska has separated permanently from her husband, she remains married to the Old World that this Polish count represents. Appreciative of the hope, if not ignorance, that lies in the joining of a "Newland" with a "Welland," the novel underlines the cultural significance of the Countess Olenska whose ties with an "old land"[8] have long been heard in the resonant syllables of her married name. As Wharton returns to the scene of her own first effort to write a novel, she creates in stunning detail the world she had seen nearly a half century earlier when her own eyes, sharpened by exile, had lost their innocence. If Ellen Olenska must be driven out of New York society, Newland and May remain to sacrifice their lives to the orderly world of family and tradition that forms the matrix of the insular and (as the novel already knows) doomed society of Old New York. Wharton's novel is a profound refiguring of her own escape through the writing of a work that is itself obsessed with sacrifice and preoccupied with the problem of return.

Likening the lost world of her childhood to "the lowest layer of Schliemann's Troy," Wharton writing in her autobiography insists that "[n]othing but the Atlantis-fate of Old New York . . . which had slowly and continuously developed from the early seventeenth century to [her] own childhood" has made "that childhood worth recalling."[9] Wharton concludes:

> Even negatively, these traditions have acquired with the passing of time, an unsuspected value. 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; and I should like to atone for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance.[1]

Finally, *The Age of Innocence* must be read as the powerful rendering of a paradox in which exile is represented as essential to the preservation of a culture while the recreation of the author's Old New York becomes desirable or perhaps even possible only after that enclosed world has been violated and shattered. The same Edith Wharton who became an artist through exile felt compelled to recreate the broken world that once had had the power to destroy her. Returning through imagination to the world of her childhood, Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence* to reverse time, to bring the past to life by recounting history from the intimate distance of art.

8. R. W. B. Lewis in conversation, New Haven, Connecticut, 1979.
9. *Backward Glance*, p. 55.
1. *Backward Glance*, p. 5.

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