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EDITH WHARTON
The Age of Innocence

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Edith Wharton

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History of Collins

In 1819, millworker William Collins from Glasgow, Scotland, set up a company for printing and publishing pamphlets, sermons, hymn books and prayer books. That company was Collins and was to mark the birth of HarperCollins Publishers as we know it today. The long tradition of Collins dictionary publishing can be traced back to the first dictionary William published in 1824, *Greek and English Lexicon*. Indeed, from 1840 onwards, he began to produce illustrated dictionaries and even obtained a licence to print and publish the Bible.

Soon after, William published the first Collins novel, *Ready Reckoner*, however it was the time of the Long Depression, where harvests were poor, prices were high, potato crops had failed and violence was erupting in Europe. As a result, many factories across the country were forced to close down and William chose to retire in 1846, partly due to the hardships he was facing.

Aged 30, William's son, William II took over the business. A keen humanitarian with a warm heart and a generous spirit, William II was truly 'Victorian' in his outlook. He introduced new, up-to-date steam presses and published affordable editions of Shakespeare's works and *Pilgrim's Progress*, making them available to the masses for the first time. A new demand for educational books meant that success came with the publication of travel books, scientific books, encyclopaedias and dictionaries. This demand to be educated led to the later publication of atlases and Collins also held the monopoly on scripture writing at the time.

In the 1860s Collins began to expand and diversify and the idea of 'books for the millions' was developed. Affordable editions of classical literature were published and in 1903 Collins introduced 10 titles in their Collins Handy Illustrated Pocket Novels. These proved so popular that a few years later this had increased to an output of 50 volumes, selling nearly half a million in their year of publication. In the same year, The Everyman's Library was also instituted, with the idea of publishing an affordable library of the most important classical

works, biographies, religious and philosophical treatments, plays, poems, travel and adventure. This series eclipsed all competition at the time and the introduction of paperback books in the 1950s helped to open that market and marked a high point in the industry.

HarperCollins is and has always been a champion of the classics and the current Collins Classics series follows in this tradition – publishing classical literature that is affordable and available to all. Beautifully packaged, highly collectible and intended to be reread and enjoyed at every opportunity.

Life & Times

Wharton and Class

Many novelists use their prose as a means of expressing their frustrations with the contradictions and hypocrisies of human behaviour, often because they themselves do not adhere particularly stringently to the rules of etiquette that exist in their society. Of course 19th century societies in Britain and the USA were prone to formalizing polite society as a way of distinguishing the haves from the have-nots. Edith Wharton was born into a privileged American family, but she was equipped with the sensibilities to notice the contrasting absurdity with which many of her class went about their lives in public and in private. Like many other novelists before her, Wharton saw that people were people wherever they happened to fit in the hierarchy of society. They were equally capable of honourable and dishonourable behaviour; it is just that the upper class tended to cover up the latter and exaggerate the former for the sake of keeping up appearances. Wharton was not vitriolic though, for her writing is imbued with humour even though it criticises between the lines. *The Age of Innocence* is essentially a story about vanity, pride, judgement, temptation and prejudice in the well-to-do cohort of late 19th century US society. Underpinning the tale is the double-standard.

The Age of Innocence

The Age of Innocence is fundamentally about a gentleman who is engaged to be married, but allows his affections to stray toward another woman who is separated from her husband and about to divorce. In today's occidental society the plot would barely raise an eyebrow, but in its period it would have been viewed as an absolute scandal. Wharton published the book in 1920, some 40-odd years after the time in which the story is set, but she was 58 years old and very familiar with the subject matter as she had been born and raised in the environment she describes. Even in the first quarter of the 20th century divorce was considered something of a taboo,

so the book caused quite a stir. Wharton had, herself, been in a loveless marriage for almost three decades and had experienced a nervous breakdown following her divorce in 1913, so writing *The Age of Innocence* must have been therapeutic as well as a vessel through which Wharton could show the world her views. The basic premise of her story was that if you belong to a society that will trap you in marriage, you better be very sure that you are marrying the right person.

In society today, the finger of judgement is no longer pointed at those who do not succeed in marriage. As a consequence, many contemporary readers have an interest in Wharton's genre. While they see that an overly formalized society can make marriage oppressive and generate double-standards, they also see that a lack of formality leads to a society where marriage is entirely devalued.

Wharton's masterpiece is about as personal as one can get as a writer. The central character, Newland, still goes ahead with his marriage despite his obsessive feelings for the other woman, Countess Ellen. His wife, May, is consequently destined for a life of betrothal with unrequited love. So too is he of course, such is his sense of honour in being seen to do the right thing in the eyes of the society he belongs to. Following the marriage Newland cannot desist from courting Ellen and is on the verge of leaving his wife when he discovers that May is pregnant.

Ellen emigrates to Europe and Newland remains in America to feign happiness with May for the sake of their unborn child. A full quarter of a century later, Newland travels to Europe with his son, following May's death. He has an opportunity to meet Ellen again, but realizes that he can never restore the past, so he walks away.

From Wharton's point of view, all three characters are tragic in their own way. May lives through a marriage without real passion; Newland is tormented and then disappointed; Ellen is exiled by her family and never reunited with Newland even though the opportunity arises. It isn't clear where Wharton places herself necessarily. Perhaps there is something of her in all three personalities, perhaps not, but the overall theme certainly echoes her own situation. Critics were so impressed by the book that Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1921.

The title of the novel is supposed to be satirical, a comment from Wharton on the way polite society wished to be viewed. Wharton had, in 1905, published a forerunner to *The Age of Innocence* in the form of *The House of Mirth*. The earlier book, as its title suggests, had been far more vitriolic and mocking in its condemnations and Wharton had apparently wished to redress and make amends with the later book. By the time *The Age of Innocence* was published the world had witnessed the Great War (World War I) and people's attitudes had altered. Equality and egalitarianism were taking over from elitism and etiquette. In addition, in 1919 congress bowed to the pressures of suffrage and gave US women the vote. All in all, the USA had changed markedly in the 15 years between Wharton's two novels and it was now ready to recognize and celebrate the importance of her work.

In some respects Wharton's theme belongs to the same stable as those addressed by Jane Austen a century earlier in England. Austen's stories, like Wharton's, work within a behavioural framework of etiquette which is no longer relevant. Nevertheless, the drama, romance and tragedy is consequently heightened as a result of the limiting strict societal rules.

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

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BOOK I

CHAPTER 1

On a January evening of the early seventies, Christine Nilsson was singing in Faust at the Academy of Music in New York.

Though there was already talk of the erection, in remote metropolitan distances "above the Forties," of a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendour with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy. Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the "new people" whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to; and the sentimental clung to it for its historic associations, and the musical for its excellent acoustics, always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music.

It was Madame Nilsson's first appearance that winter, and what the daily press had already learned to describe as "an exceptionally brilliant audience" had gathered to hear her, transported through the slippery snow streets in private broughams, in the spacious family landau, or in the humbler but more convenient "Brown *coupé*." To come to the Opera in a Brown *coupé* was almost as honourable a way of arriving as in one's own carriage; and departure by the same means had the immense advantage of enabling one (with a playful allusion to democratic principles) to scramble into the first Brown conveyance in the line, instead of waiting till the cold-and-gin congested nose of one's own coachman gleamed under the portico of the Academy. 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.

When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the club box the curtain had just gone up on the garden scene. There was no reason why the young man should not have come earlier, for he had dined at seven, alone with his mother and sister, and had lingered afterward over a cigar in the Gothic library with glazed black-walnut bookcases and finial-topped chairs which was the only room in the house where Mrs. Archer allowed smoking. But, in the first place, New York was a metropolis, and perfectly aware that in metropolises it was "not the thing" to arrive early at the opera; and 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.

The second reason for his delay was a personal one. He had dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realisation. This was especially the case when the pleasure was a delicate one, as his pleasures mostly were; and on this occasion the moment he looked forward to was so rare and exquisite in quality that—well, if he had timed his arrival in accord with the prima donna's stage-manager he could not have entered the Academy at a more significant moment than just as she was singing: "He loves me—he loves me not—*he loves me*!" and sprinkling the falling daisy petals with notes as clear as dew.

She sang, of course, "*M'ama*!" and not "he loves me," since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole.

"*M'ama . . . non m'ama . . .*" the prima donna sang, and "*M'ama*!", with a final burst of love triumphant, as she pressed the dishevelled daisy to her lips and lifted her large eyes to the sophisticated countenance of the little brown Faust-Capoul, who was vainly

trying, in a tight purple velvet doublet and plumed cap, to look as pure and true as his artless victim.

Newland Archer, leaning against the wall at the back of the club box, turned his eyes from the stage and scanned the opposite side of the house. Directly facing him was the box of old Mrs. Manson Mingott, whose monstrous obesity had long since made it impossible for her to attend the Opera, but who was always represented on fashionable nights by some of the younger members of the family. On this occasion, the front of the box was filled by her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Lovell Mingott, and her niece, Mrs. Welland; and slightly withdrawn behind these brocaded matrons sat a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers. As Madame Nilsson's "*M'ama*!" thrilled out above the silent house (the boxes always stopped talking during the Daisy Song) a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee, and Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly. He drew a breath of satisfied vanity and his eyes returned to the stage.

No expense had been spared on the setting, which was acknowledged to be very beautiful even by people who shared his acquaintance with the Opera houses of Paris and Vienna. The foreground, to the footlights, was covered with emerald green cloth. In the middle distance symmetrical mounds of woolly green moss bounded by croquet hoops formed the base of shrubs shaped like orange-trees but studded with large pink and red roses. Gigantic pansies, considerably larger than the roses, and closely resembling the floral penwipers made by female parishioners for fashionable clergymen, sprang from the moss beneath the rose-trees; and here and there a daisy grafted on a rose-branch flowered with a luxuriance prophetic of Mr. Luther Burbank's far-off prodigies.

In the centre of this enchanted garden Madame Nilsson, in white cashmere slashed with pale blue satin, a reticule dangling from a blue girdle, and large yellow braids carefully disposed on each side of her muslin chemisette, listened with downcast eyes to M. Capoul's impassioned wooing, and affected a guileless incomprehension of his

designs whenever, by word or glance, he persuasively indicated the ground floor window of the neat brick villa projecting obliquely from the right wing.

"The darling!" thought Newland Archer, his glance flitting back to the young girl with the lilies-of-the-valley. "She doesn't even guess what it's all about." And he contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessorship in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity. "We'll read Faust together . . . by the Italian lakes . . ." he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honeymoon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride. It was only that afternoon that May Welland had let him guess that she "cared" (New York's consecrated phrase of maiden avowal), and already his imagination, leaping ahead of the engagement ring, the betrothal kiss and the march from Lohengrin, pictured her at his side in some scene of old European witchery.

He did not in the least wish the future Mrs. Newland Archer to be a simpleton. He meant her (thanks to his enlightening companionship) to develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular married women of the "younger set," in which it was the recognised custom to attract masculine homage while playfully discouraging it. If he had probed to the bottom of his vanity (as he sometimes nearly did) he would have found there the wish that his wife should be as worldly-wise and as eager to please as the married lady whose charms had held his fancy through two mildly agitated years; without, of course, any hint of the frailty which had so nearly marred that unhappy being's life, and had disarranged his own plans for a whole winter.

How this miracle of fire and ice was to be created, and to sustain itself in a harsh world, he had never taken the time to think out; but he was content to hold his view without analysing it, since he knew it was that of all the carefully-brushed, white-waistcoated, buttonhole-flowered gentlemen who succeeded each other in the club box, exchanged friendly greetings with him, and turned their opera-glasses critically on the circle of ladies who were the product of the system. In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old