Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton

With an Introduction by Wendy Wasserstein

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INTRODUCTION

by Wendy Wasserstein

HE AGE of Innocence succeeds brilliantly in what interests me most in novels and plays: the friction between personal lives and the mores of a given era. Edith Wharton exquisitely portrays both the interior landscape of her characters and the exterior world in which they pursue their lives. In her affluent New York society, personal choices are restricted by class and expectation.

I have never been a great fan of defining writers by gender. Men have created some of literature's most fascinating female characters, and women have written some of the greatest adventure stories. Edith Wharton did not win a Pulitzer Prize for the best novel by a woman; The Age of Innocence won the award in 1921 for the best novel of that year. But for women who write, there is something uniquely inspirational about this novel. As a girl growing up in Victorian New York society, Edith Wharton was well schooled in social proprieties. She knew that formal dinners like the one the grand dowager Mrs. Mingott gives in The Age of Innocence required "three extra footmen, two dishes for each course, and a Roman punch in the middle." With that privileged information, which could be disregarded as the trivial knowledge of women, she lances an entire society. She gives us a portrait of 1870s New York from both the outside in and the inside out. In other words, the mechanics of that world, the mores and manners she learned as a woman, she then used as a writer to create an acute and freshly observed work of fiction.

This isn't a feminine book, of course—I don't know precisely what would be except for perhaps an anthology of Cher's beauty secrets—but it is a book that benefits enormously from

a feminine perspective. Edith Wharton's literary mentor was Henry James. Both his Portrait of a Lady and Washington Square have female heroines, one with social aspirations and one ultimately a social recluse. Each, like Wharton's characters, is defined by her station in life, her class, and by propriety. But there is an underlying sadness, even anger, in The Age of Innocence that, I believe, could be the work only of a woman artist who suffered society's limitations firsthand. Edith Wharton endured a stifling marriage and ultimately moved to Europe, where she found, if not solace, then a purposeful life in her writing. In an age of innocence, it can be unbearable to have the insight of experience. For most women in Edith Wharton's era, that insight was either never discussed or subsumed by social obligations. Luckily for us, this author had the artistic sensibility to channel that insight into elegant novels like this one.

Reading about a recent lavish wedding at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for five hundred of the couple's closest, dearest friends, I wished Edith Wharton were still on hand to transform the particular details of the event into background material for a new novel. I would eagerly anticipate descriptions of the lilies in Egyptian vases by the current floral maestro Robert Isobel, the catering by Glorious Foods, the perfect guest list of forty percent new money and the remaining sixty percent divided equally among old money, fashion connoisseurs, gossip columnists, artists, unavoidable family, and assorted hangers-on. Most of all, unlike all the other journalists and social novelists present, Edith Wharton would capture the moment when the bride's face lit up looking at a man, not even a lover, who wasn't the groom.

Although *The Age of Innocence* is so much a mirror of a particular time, its resonance with contemporary New York is almost uncanny. Before settling down to write this introduction, I fled a literary luminary luncheon somewhere in Murray Hill, not far from the homes of the characters in this book. The party was at the right current restaurant: Tuscan, Italian. Drinks were served from twelve-thirty to one o'clock. The crowd included the recently well-married immaculately turned out in Chanel,

Armani, journalists eager to be invited and have a negative opinion on the transactions, book agents whose daily life is composed of the right conversation at the right luncheon, and a number of newly invested people deemed interesting by virtue of their newly accrued investments. All seemed completely familiar with one another. In fact, as in the daily dinners of the Archers and Wellands in *The Age of Innocence*, these luncheons defined their lives. Those assembled at the Tuscan restaurant were not born to the "A" list, but their presence there meant they had arrived. Their stake in its continuity was enormous.

The details of the Murray Hill lunch were the details of the fit and finest protocol of the present moment. Each table had a bouquet of magnificently clustered roses, no visible stems, just back-to-back pastel petals. The food was aggressively fat-free grilled shrimp and penne. The conversation ranged from surface comments like "I saw your piece..." to whispers about the woman from Texas who managed to snare a rich man from his wife. After the main course, the truly self-confident and selfmade-important departed. Those of us who veered between an obligation to remain with the host until after dessert and the insecurity of leaving early remained until time for coffee. In the world of The Age of Innocence, a financial disaster or moral scandal would permanently exile a guest from the finest dinner tables. In contemporary New York, a mere change of fashion can eliminate a place setting; therefore, the need to maintain a rigidity not of morals, but of taste, seems all the more desperate.

Taxiing home past the Morgan mansion, I imagined an annual ball in one of the remaining homes from the Wharton period and wondered at what moment each of us self-satisfied luncheongoers would deal with "the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime." Like Newland Archer, we could stave them off by filling our days with other lunches with other right people nibbling all the right grilled shrimp from all the right plates with very little of the right oil. But the sustaining brilliance of *The Age of Innocence* is that it finally demands that its characters account for their lives and acknowledge that they

missed their one small moment because the mores of the times, the customs of the tribe, seemed against it.

In the impeccable last chapter of the novel, Newland Archer concludes that "it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty." Edith Wharton has magnificently captured in this novel a world in which "the dignity of duty" can both courageously define a life and mercilessly destroy it. The inability of Newland Archer to act on his passion for the Countess Olenska demonstrates the paralysis of a man of high principles who has the underlying rectitude of a coward. His morality, much like the morality of the upper-class New York society that he dwells in, is simultaneously an admirable code of honor and a protective shield. Newland's exasperation at the restraints of his universe is ultimately caused by his clinging adherence to them. He has the temerity to feel and the timidity to absolve those feelings with acceptable manners and mores.

The late-nineteenth-century New York of the Archers, the Wellands, and the Beauforts is an inflexible one. There are rules, never codified but never broken. Change occurs slowly; it requires time and generations. This is a world in which breeding and good taste, appreciation of great art, music, and literature, are the stuff of dinner conversation. To imply any personal depth of passion or despair would be as distasteful as using a fish fork on a mutton chop. The conventionality of the tribe is far more important than the happiness of the individual. In fact, the happiness of the individual ideally should rest in perpetrating the conventionality of the tribe.

Edith Wharton is seldom sentimental in her description of this world. She is, rather, a dispassionate painter with a keen eye for detail. Each napkin ring, handwritten note, and lily-of-the-valley bouquet is a definitive stroke leading to a final portrait. The precision of the social milieu is not merely a means to demonstrate affluence or class, but rather a way to define acceptable boundaries. Dinners will be given every night at the same time, the Beaufort ball will be held annually, and Mrs. Mingott will never leave her house. Any alteration would be

deemed a heresy punishable not by shouts or silences, but by unbearable whispers.

Real life lurks just beneath this world of perfect surfaces. The genius of Edith Wharton lies in allowing us to glimpse that life without disturbing its superficial gloss. She carefully picks the moments when her characters' true intentions are about to shine through—and even more impressively, picks the moments when her characters decide consciously and unconsciously not to demonstrate anything remotely truthful. The author does not reward Newland, his wife, May, or his beloved countess. When May reveals to him that she told her cousin the countess she was pregnant before she actually knew it to be true, this small unembroidered moment irrevocably shifts the trajectory of all three lives. This is not a world of accusations and mea culpas. It is polite, restrained, and inwardly devastating. What is known is implied. What is felt is concealed. What is said is deliberate and with perfect intent. There is nothing sloppy in this world or in this novel. The neatness is stifling. The orderliness has the dullness of only the sharpest bite.

No one in *The Age of Innocence* suffers on a grand scale. These are people of means in a world of means. No one will go hungry unless he or she arrives too late for dinner. This is a novel of entitled sadnesses. Yet in the wake of those sadnesses, entire lives pass by. Newland Archer misses his moment, causing a rippling effect of sadness in which May misses her opportunity for marital happiness, and Countess Olenska misses finding that country "where two human beings who love each other are the whole of life to each other." As each of these small sadnesses comes to pass, a world passes by as well, leaving behind only the china and the place settings.

Wharton's New York will change as radically as Chekhov's bourgeois Russia. Both authors have created characters who are trapped by their societal respectability yet eager to maintain those traps at any cost. The constant friction of this dilemma creates a personal claustrophobia that can be relieved only by deep societal change. Neither Chekhov nor Wharton is a social realist or has an underlying political agenda, but both instinctively have captured worlds on the cusp of transition.

Over twenty years later, Newland Archer's son will be engaged to marry a déclassé Beaufort. In turn-of-the-century New York, Dallas Archer will live in a society where new money counts as much as old, and will have an artistic career as an architect rather than becoming a buttoned-down lawyer like his father. Through Dallas, Edith Wharton demonstrates the increasing fluidity of New York society, contrasting him to Newland, who must bear the limitations of his courage and his time.

A case can be made that the rigidity of manners, the daily rituals of proper living, can be of solace to someone who knows himself to be emotionally incapable of venturing beyond those approved boundaries. Newland Archer is in many ways more emotionally daring than his fiancée and future wife, May. However, he relies on May's unimaginative adherence to conventionality in order to enjoy a comfortable and functioning family life. After May dies, when Newland chooses not to visit the countess in Paris, it becomes clear that in his old age he is no longer merely a victim of his tribe, but rather on the board of directors. Passion can be overwhelming, and a good man can come to terms with not wanting to be overwhelmed. Newland Archer seated on a Paris bench while his energetic son blithely visits the countess is an image of perfectly complicated unsentimental sadness. She either still means too much to him or, by now, too little. Either way, he has taught himself, like other upstanding members of his society, to dodge such emotional issues, and time passes painlessly and uneventfully.

In today's New York society, Newland Archers from the best families can legally finesse exits from their marriages and move to Paris with the women they love. In fact, it's become almost an annual tradition, like the Beaufort ball. No one, at least no one I know, would refuse to receive a cousin at her dining table because the cousin had an ill-advised dalliance with a randy count. But like Newland Archer, there are still good men and women who wish to be responsible upholders of the current mores of family, responsibility, and propriety, and simultaneously find those anathema to their personal desires.

During the 1980s, I knew a man from the Midwest who bought a town house with a ballroom on the Upper East Side. I

even received a hand-engraved invitation to a black-tie dance at his home. This man seemed desperate to bring back Edith Wharton's New York. While he could buy all the superficial finery, he couldn't re-create her world of social restrictions. What seemed most like a Wharton novel to me were photos he showed me of his wedding to his then-hippie wife. That same wife was now discussing which Paris designer she would choose to make the gown for her ball. It was completely unclear if she wanted this ball or not; it was merely what society deemed a woman of her status should aspire to do.

I later found out that this man had lusted after various wives within his newfound social circle. He called some of them every day to confess his ardor. The women talked about him with one another and even pitied the wife in whispers at her parties.

Still later I received a birth announcement. The man and his wife had a new son, heralded on Tiffany stationery. Their life is moving forward. I have no idea if this man is a good man, or a sensitive man like Newland Archer, or oblivious. Mostly, I am simply quick to dismiss him. In *The Age of Innocence*, however, Edith Wharton takes the desire of one man whom most of us would simply dismiss and sees in him the lacking of an entire world. It is that insight that is the gift of a great writer and artist.

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

BOOK 1

CHAPTER 1

N 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, snowy 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 silverbacked 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 daughter, 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 liliesof-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 pen-wipers 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