

LEARNING GUIDE

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

BY EDITH WHARTON

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY
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ON THE FICHANDLER STAGE
FEBRUARY 28 – MARCH 30, 2025

"Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!"

— Countess Ellen Olenska, *The Age of Innocence*



The Play



New York City lawyer **Newland Archer** arrives at the opera and sits in the box across from his new fiancée, **May Welland**. It's 1876, and the young couple are the embodiment of New York high society: wealthy, polite, and perfectly uninteresting. Their exclusive community of elite families is governed by a strict set of rules that dictate how every aspect of life should be conducted. Newland and May are eager to inform their families of their engagement when May's cousin, the **Countess Ellen Olenska**, enters the opera house.

Ellen has just returned to New York after leaving a tumultuous marriage to a Polish count. This is not how a respectable woman behaves! Judgemental whispers flutter through the audience as patrons exchange rumors about Ellen's arrival, prompting Newland to walk over to May in the lady's box to show he stands by her family, particularly her "fallen cousin," Ellen.

Ellen's return, however, changes the trajectory of Newland's life. Suddenly, Newland starts to question the rules that raised him and, as he looks at the Countess, something comes over him that stops him from discussing his engagement entirely. Although he can't quite define it, meeting Ellen again reawakens something within him that could lead to the undoing of his good reputation.

Shereen Ahmed (Ellen), A.J. Shively (Newland), and Delphi Borich (May) for *The Age of Innocence*. Photo by Tony Powell.

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT

Karen Zacarias

Karen Zacarias is a Mexican-born, DC-based playwright. She began her writing journey when she was six years old and saved up her allowance to purchase a plastic typewriter. She would write short pieces for her and her cousins to perform at family holidays. Zacarias has won multiple awards for her plays including *The Book Club Play*, *Mariela in the Desert*, and *Legacy of Light*. She is also known for her plays and musicals for young audiences like *Frida Libre* and *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans: A Salsa Fairytale*. Another of her

musicals, *Chasing George Washington*, was adapted by Scholastic into a book with a foreword by First Lady Michelle Obama.

In 2012, Zacarias was named Arena Stage's first playwright-in-residence. In addition to her writing success, she is also the founder of Young Playwrights' Theater (YPT), a company that partners with DC Public Schools to teach playwriting to local students. YPT was recognized by the White House as one of



Photo by Beverlie Lord Satsung

the most innovative arts programs in the nation, earning them the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award in 2010.

FROM THE Director's Notebook



"When we started talking about [*The Age of Innocence*], having it in the round felt so right for a story that really deals on a fundamental level with the eye of society and the structures, the rigor, and the damage that the society can do to the inner life of a people."

– Hana S. Sharif, *The Age of Innocence* director and artistic director of Arena Stage



Photo by Cheshire Isaac

THE AUTHOR OF THE NOVEL

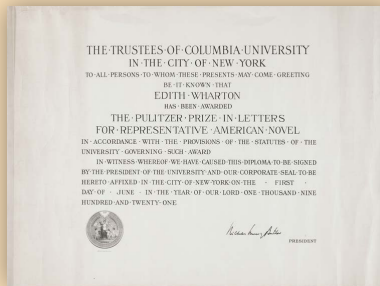
Edith Wharton

Novelist Edith Wharton was born as Edith Newbold Jones in 1862 to one of the wealthiest families in New York. She spent much of her childhood in Western Europe learning languages, architecture, art, and literature. She returned to New York in 1872, five years before the events of *The Age of Innocence* take place. Her first volume of poems, *Verses*, was privately published in 1878 when she was just 16.

At 17, Edith Jones made her debut, or formal introduction, into New York's high society; the same society whose rules and customs she would later criticize in her literature. She didn't marry until she turned 23, which was late for the customs of the time. While she and her husband Edward Robbins Wharton didn't share much in common, they kept up the public appearance of a happy marriage. Professionally, Edith Wharton was known as an interior designer, publishing her first major book, *The Decoration of Houses*, in 1897.

She began to distance herself from New York and designed her own home in Lenox, Massachusetts, where she and her husband lived from 1901 to 1911. It was there that Wharton wrote some of her most successful works, *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*. Following a divorce from her husband in 1913, she permanently moved to France.

World War I came to Wharton's doorstep in Paris which she captured in her war novel, *A Son at the Front*. Her editor, however, warned her that the American public was tired of war novels and asked her to instead write a story similar to her previous successes. Wharton then published *The Age of Innocence* in 1921, three years after the end of World War I. Despite its criticism of old New York society, the novel was well received by contemporary audiences and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, making Wharton the first woman to receive the award. She went on to publish nine more novels before she died in 1937 at 75. She is buried in Versailles, France.



— Wharton's historic 1921 Pulitzer Prize came with controversy as the jury had selected *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis as the winner. The choice was overruled by the Pulitzer board who awarded it to *The Age of Innocence* instead. When Wharton learned of the controversy, she said "disgust was added to despair."



— Portrait of Edith Wharton and her dogs.
Source: E. F. Cooper & Yale University



— This two-piece walking dress is a historical example provided by the Fashion Institute of Technology of what was considered proper attire for an aristocratic lady in the 1870s.



— Ellen's dress when she returns to New York. Rendering by *The Age of Innocence* costume designer Fabio Toblini.



ACTIVITY: STORYTELLING THROUGH *Costuming*

Compare and contrast the different dress styles pictured here.

What does Ellen's costume design tell the audience about her character?

SCAN HERE
to explore 1870s fashion:





A FORMAL INTRODUCTION TO SOME OF

New York's Elite

Julius Beaufort

A new-money British banker who pursues an affair with Ellen. Beaufort is accepted by society, but is generally considered untrustworthy.

Ellen Olenska

May's cousin and Granny Mingott's granddaughter. She just returned to New York to escape her abusive husband. She is a mysterious woman and the subject of many rumors.

Granny Mingott

Ellen and May's grandmother and matriarch of the well-respected and influential Mingott family. Granny Mingott pushes the boundaries of society's politeness. She also serves as the play's narrator.

May Welland

Newland's fiancée and Ellen's cousin. May is the model of what is expected from an aristocratic lady.

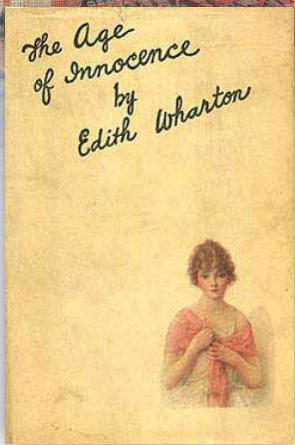
Newland Archer

May's fiancé. Newland is a young, successful lawyer who is held in high regard in New York's society.

Paolo Montalban (Beaufort), Shereen Ahmed (Ellen), Felicia Curry (Granny Mingott), Delphi Borich (May), and A.J. Shively (Newland) for *The Age of Innocence*. Photo by Tony Powell.

— Aerial view of 1870s New York City.

Source: *Currier & Ives*



— The title *The Age of Innocence* was a critique of the selfish and extravagant aristocracy of 1870s New York. The ironic use of "innocence" cunningly places blame on the wealthy elite for the banking crisis known as The Panic of 1893.

Source: D. Appleton & Company

THE
Gilded
AGE

In 1873, author Mark Twain coined the term 'The Gilded Age' in his novel by the same name. The term "gilded" refers to something that appears shiny and expensive on the outside, but dull and low-quality underneath. Twain used this term to illustrate that, from 1870 to 1900, the United States was characterized by excessive wealth with corporate greed and political corruption beneath.

According to historian Nell Irvin Painter, the top 1% of families in the U.S. held 51% of the national wealth by 1890. John D. Rockefeller, for example, is estimated to have made over \$300 billion (adjusted for inflation), approximately 2% of the country's gross domestic product, through his oil business. His wealth was extremely influential, allowing him to manipulate prices to stifle competition and

bribe politicians to look the other way. Investigative journalists like Ida Tarbell exposed Rockefeller's corruption and political influence, eventually leading to the dismantling of his Standard Oil Company.

Culturally, the Gilded Age aristocracy cherished materialism and status. Cities, like New York, were still small enough that upper-class families all knew one another and gossip spread quickly; social status was determined by one's obedience to a code of behavior. This code was outlined in books such as *Our Department*, *Polite Society at Home and Abroad*, and *Gems of Department*. Any deviation from the societal norms could result in social exile and financial ruin. These social practices created a culture of surveillance where appearing wealthy could be more important to success than actually attaining wealth.

THE RULES OF *Courtship*

1. *The Debut*

Once a lady finished school, typically around age 17 or 18, her family would throw a debut party to formally introduce her into adult society and indicate they were ready to consider interested suitors for marriage.

2. *The Introduction*

If a gentleman had interest in a lady, he would ask a member of her family, usually a matriarch, for a formal introduction. Gentlemen were not allowed to introduce themselves to young ladies directly.

3. *Calling*

Once the introduction had been made, the gentleman would be invited to call upon the young lady. These house visits were always supervised by the lady of the house. If the gentleman proved trustworthy, the young couple might participate in activities like horseback riding or carriage rides through the park. Courtships were short, with a proposal expected within nine months.

4. *Proposal*

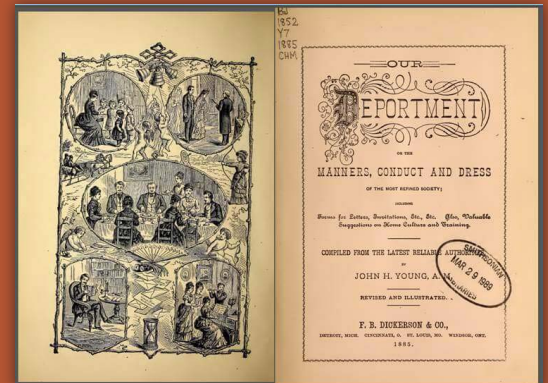
If a gentleman wished to propose, he would first ask permission from the lady's parents or guardians. The proposal itself was a private affair just between the couple. If the proposal was accepted, the families would be the first to be informed of the news. Next to be notified were close friends, and finally a formal announcement of the engagement would be printed in the newspaper.

5. *Engagement*

Once a gentleman was engaged, it was usually inappropriate for him to entertain other ladies without his fiancée present. Engagements were much longer than courtships, typically lasting a few years. The courting period was for couples to gauge if they were interested in one another, while the long engagement period was meant to give couples a chance to test out their compatibility and commitment. A short engagement was highly unusual.



— *The Courtship*
Painter - Charles Green



— Books like *Our Department* by John H. Young described the etiquette all members of society were expected to follow.
Source: The Frick Pittsburgh

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1. *When are the rules of society helpful and when are they harmful?*
2. *What similarities are there between the world of the play and today?*
3. *How does the audience being on all sides of the stage highlight the themes of the play?*

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience.

To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- **Arrive early.**
- **Visit the restroom before the show starts.**
- **Sit in the seat indicated on your ticket.**
- **Ushers are there to help you!**
- **Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms, and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.**
- **Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games, pictures, or recording.**
- **Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry, and gasp. However, don't distract the performers onstage.**
- **There is no food allowed in the theater.**
- **Intermission is the best time to discuss the show and visit the restroom.**
- **If you must leave during the show, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.**
- **Be sure to applaud at the end! During a musical, audiences sometimes clap after a song or dance. If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.**

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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

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(Front Cover) Shereen Ahmed (Ellen) and Delphi Borich (May) for *The Age of Innocence*. Photo by Tony Powell.



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