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The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton · *1920 · original English text*

On a January evening in the early 1870s, New York's old families gather for Faust, and Newland Archer, about to marry May Welland, sees her cousin Ellen Olenska at the opera. Wharton's Pulitzer novel is a study of a tribe that calls itself innocent and a man who almost leaves it.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is the cost of a correct life, and can a forbidden love remain real if one never goes up to claim it?

"It's more real to me here than if I went up,"

Newland Archer · The last scene, a bench below Ellen's balcony in Paris

The book is complete in two books (Book I and Book II) in this hosted text, PG #541. Archer's engagement, his brief courage, the family's silent machinery, and a long, respectable marriage are the plot. At the end he sits in the thickening dusk and will not go upstairs. The line is exact in this text, including the contracted "It's." Teach the social comedy and the moral cost together. This is for older students: a marriage, a passion unacted, a life measured in what was refused.

KEY CHARACTERS

Newland Archer
The young lawyer who almost chooses a different life, and then lives the one he accepted.

May Welland
His fiancée and wife, more knowing than he first believes.

Ellen Olenska
The cousin who has lived in Europe, and who offers him a reality he will not finally claim.

Old New York
The families, drawing-rooms, and silent rules that do the work of a plot.

MORE REAL HERE

> *"It's more real to me here than if I went up,"*
> **Newland Archer** · The last scene

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

An Opera, and a Tribe

BOOK I, THE OPENING

New York's Academy of Music, a January evening of the early seventies, and the tight world of the Archers, Wellands, and van der Luydens. Ellen Olenska's return disturbs the pattern.

- The first sentence is this text's wording: a January evening, Christine Nilsson in Faust.
- The 'innocence' of the title is a social style, not a moral fact.
- May is not a simple girl; the tribe has taught her well.

> *"On a January evening of the early seventies, Christine Nilsson was singing in Faust at the Academy of Music in New York."*
> Book I, chapter I

02

May, and a Duty

THE ENGAGEMENT

Archer means to be a modern husband and still does what the family requires. The wedding moves closer as his mind moves toward Ellen.

- The comedy of dinners and boxes is also a system of surveillance.
- Archer's 'advanced' ideas are tested by a real choice.
- Countess Olenska is not a mere temptation; she has a history and a need.

03

The Family's Hand

THE MIDDLE OF BOOK I INTO BOOK II

Advice, a postponement, a trip, a quiet closing of doors: the tribe knows how to protect a marriage without making a scene.

- Book II is present in this file; the book is not a Volume I fragment.
- Watch how kind people can be while they close a life.
- Archer's courage comes late and is already half-compromised.

04

A Marriage, and Years

BOOK II, THE MARRIED LIFE

Time passes. Children are born. The old passion is not gone, but it has fewer rooms to live in. A death and a later freedom arrive together.

- The later chapters are the book's real test, not only the first glamour.
- May's last gift to him is more complicated than a simple victory.
- Do not rush to the Paris ending without this long middle.

05

A Bench in the Dusk

THE CLOSE

In Paris, years later, Archer sits below Ellen's balcony. He will not go up. The fear of losing even the shadow of that reality keeps him in his seat.

- The line is exact: "It's more real to me here than if I went up."
- He sits a long time in the thickening dusk; a servant comes out; he walks away.
- The ending is a refusal, not a reunion. Teach it as such.

A Tribe's Innocence | Duty and Desire | Marriage | A Love Unclaimed | Time

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is Edith Wharton's original English (Project Gutenberg #541), complete in Book I and Book II (not a Volume I fragment). Quote this page.
2. The last line of Archer's decision is exact: "It's more real to me here than if I went up," (contracted It's). He then sits a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk.
3. The novel is a 1920 work about a marriage, an unacted passion, and the social machinery of 1870s New York. It is for older students.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #541, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/wharton-the-age-of-innocence/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.