

From the new Postscript to Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*:

From Europe, at the height of her career, Edith Wharton looked back on her native land with tenderness as well as irony. Like Ellen Olenska, she must have once wanted nothing more than to belong. Like Newland Archer, over a lifetime, she devoured works of anthropology and ethnology, looked, questioned, wondered; more than him, she put her own society under a magnifying glass and beckoned others . . .

For conversation or contemplation:

1. How does Edith Wharton feel about “her” New York? Is she writing about a paradise or a hell? Both? Is satire opposite to nostalgia or are they kin?
2. At first, Newland Archer disapproves of Ellen Olenska’s attitude toward New York society. At what point does his own thinking change and how? What might have primed him for this transformation?
3. Does Newland Archer seek to marry May Welland because he loves her? What does he come to feel for Ellen and how does it change his understanding of love? Does Ellen love Newland? What does the story have to say about what it means to love someone?
4. What are the rewards and drawbacks of the clear social roles assigned to the people in Wharton’s world? What kind of rebellions are permissible? Who is an outsider and under what circumstances might they be invited into the fold?
5. Art and ritual loom large in these lives. How does art serve society? How does it prompt Newland and Ellen to look beyond the lines? Does art have the same effect on the two of them?
6. What do you think Edith Wharton is trying to say about who holds power in this society with the character of Mrs. Manson Mingott? What about May Welland? Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland? What kind of influence do women exercise in comparison to the men?
7. Is Julius Beaufort a Bernie Madoff type? Why do you think someone like Ellen Olenska seems drawn to him? What does he represent to Newland Archer? What does his fate say about New York society?
8. Ellen Olenska returns to New York with the desire to belong. Did she fail? Is there anything she could have done differently that would have led to a different outcome? What is her attitude to power and how does she wield it?

Recommended Reading:

Edith Wharton
Hermione Lee