

MFAH Book Club

The Age of Innocence

By Edith Wharton

Spring 2010 MFAH Book Club Selection

Discussion Questions

(written and adapted from various sources)

1. Edith Wharton's original title for *The Age of Innocence* was "Old New York." Which title do you think is more fitting? Why?
2. The novel is told entirely from Newland Archer's point of view by an unnamed omniscient narrator. How does this shape the reader's understanding of May Welland and Ellen Olenska?
3. At the beginning of Chapter 6, Newland suddenly realizes that marriage is "not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas." What does he mean?
4. Flowers are important symbols throughout *The Age of Innocence*. Discuss how Wharton uses them. For example, every morning during his engagement, Newland sends lilies-of-the-valley to May. Compare them to the bouquet of yellow roses that he sends to Ellen after he first visits her home. What do these flowers symbolize?
5. Compare and contrast Newland to other men in old New York, as presented in the novel, particularly Julius Beaufort. How does Newland view himself compared to these men?
6. It may be easy to forget that Ellen is not especially beautiful. Why are men like Newland and Julius so drawn to her?
7. In contrast to her artistic European cousin, May Welland is an accomplished athlete. What does her skill in archery reveal about her character? How else does she differ from Ellen? In what ways are they similar?
8. What is revealed about Ellen's life in Europe? What is concealed? What kind of cruelty did Ellen endure as the wife of Count Olenski? What kind of cruelty does she experience in America?
9. Throughout the novel, Wharton references a number of artistic works—the opera *Faust*, the Cesnola Antiquities at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Chippendale furniture in the Lannings' home, to name a few. How do such works relate to the story, and why does Wharton draw on them?

10. Does the narrator of *The Age of Innocence* condemn 1870s New York society as it's presented in the novel, or does she merely describe its hypocrisies? How would you describe the tone—sarcastic, ironic, mocking? Why?

11. Newland's relationship with Ellen leads him to see "how elementary his own principles had always been." Which principles, in particular, does she challenge? In what ways?

12. Playwright David Ives once stated that the novel is "an extraordinary portrait of the villainy of innocence." What does he mean? Is there an innocent character in this novel? Is there a villain?

13. Did the ending surprise you? Why or why not?

If you liked this book, you might also like:

The Charterhouse of Parma (1839) – Stendhal

Madame Bovary (1856) – Gustave Flaubert

The Portrait of a Lady (1861) – Henry James

The Man of Property (1906) – John Galsworthy

A Lost Lady (1923) – Willa Cather

The Great Gatsby (1925) – F. Scott Fitzgerald

Want to host a Movie Night for your book group?

Well, get out the popcorn! *The Age of Innocence* has been adapted to film three times: first as a silent film in 1923; second, starring Irene Dunne in a 1930 adaptation; and in 1993 by director Martin Scorsese. Scorsese's version stars Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Winona Ryder, and is narrated by Joanne Woodward.