

EDITH WHARTON

THE AGE  
OF INNOCENCE  
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# NEW YORK SOCIETY IN THE 1870s

- **apprehensive:** cautious; unsure
- **bohemian:** socially unconventional and usually artistic
- **codes:** (here) rules
- **chandeliers:** elegant lights that hang from the ceiling
- **elite:** (here) rich, powerful and well-educated
- **heritage:** (here) culture and traditions
- **influential:** having a lot of power to affect things or people
- **posed:** presented; formed
- **quarters:** areas in a city
- **silverware:** dishes and cutlery made of silver



New York society in the 1870s was a very organized system. It was structured like a pyramid with the most influential• and powerful families on the top, the fashionable elite• just under and the newcomers on the bottom. The old families were apprehensive of the new people as they had new values and rules and posed• a threat to the former's authority. The new families often lived according to different rules or had become rich too quickly, like the Beauforts in the novel.

## THE 400

At that time an estimated 400 people belonged to the most fashionable circle of New York families. The name comes from the Astor family's ballroom, which was big enough for 400 guests. These families, for example the Astors, the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts were also called New York High Society. They became powerful either because of their British, Dutch

or French heritage•  
or thanks to their  
investment in growing  
businesses. Their  
wealth was always  
on display. There  
were chandeliers•,  
silverware• and  
artworks shown at  
every social occasion  
such as weddings,  
dinners and balls.  
The women wore  
luxurious dresses with  
satin, velvet, feathers,  
and expensive jewelry.



## THE CODES•

In the novel, the customs and traditions of these families are described as 'rituals' and the families as 'tribes'. If someone broke the rules of society, they were punished. These rules or codes controlled every aspect of people's lives from matters of social status through annual routines to everyday behavior. For example, divorce was unacceptable; balls, opera nights and other social occasions were standard fixtures everyone was expected to attend and going out on Sunday was not fashionable.

## THE PLACES

New York's elite could be seen in a number of socially acceptable places such as the opera house or private ballrooms and dinner parties. Balls and dinners were obviously more private events while the opera houses were more public. Having one of the eighteen opera boxes at the Academy of Music was an important status symbol. The most fashionable areas in the city were found between 3rd and 6th Avenues, and most upper-class families did not move north of Central Park. Old families

lived on Washington Square and in its neighborhood. When they left the city, their destinations were typically Newport and Rhineback.

## THE REST OF THE SOCIETY

There were artists and writers, who could not afford to live in the rich areas of the city. They lived in the bohemian• quarters• of the city. The poor working classes lived in badly constructed and overcrowded apartment buildings. Six or seven people often had to share a bedroom without windows or a bathroom.



# The Age of Innocence





May Welland

Julius & Regina  
Beaufort

the van der Luydens

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Mrs Mingott &  
Mrs Welland

## 1 The opera

1 On a January evening in the early 1870s, the most elegant families of New York gathered at the Academy of Music. They happily filled the blue and gold boxes of this small and uncomfortable building, very much loved by conservative New Yorkers. When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the box he shared with his friends, the opera had already begun. He was not worried about his late arrival. It was not “the thing” to arrive early at the opera, and what was or was not the thing was important to Newland Archer. Directly opposite him was the box of old Mrs Manson Mingott. Although the old lady had grown too large to come to the theatre, her daughter, Mrs Welland, and daughter-in-law, Mrs Lovell Mingott, were there. With these two ladies sat a young girl in a white dress with the bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee. She was May Welland, his sweetheart, the future Mrs Newland Archer. Newland looked at his future wife, thinking of the books they would read together and admiring her innocence. He wanted her to be clever and witty and charming. And if he were honest he wished her to be as interesting as that married woman he had been in love with for two years, without any of that woman’s unhappiness of course.

### THE OPERA



Discuss what you know about operas with a partner.  
Can you name any operas?

• **gathered:** met

• **lilies-of-the-valley:**



• **witty:** funny and clever

Newland Archer thought of himself as superior• to the other men in the New York upper class. He had read more, thought more and seen more of the world than any of them. However, he didn't want to appear different, so he agreed with their moral values on all things.

As Archer was standing there thinking about these things, the other men in the box were talking about the lady who was sitting with May and her family. Archer realized they were talking about May Welland's cousin, the "poor Ellen Olenska", who had just returned from Europe. She was the black sheep• of the family, and it surprised Archer that the Mingotts presented her in public at the opera. It was obvious that old Mrs Mingott, the head of the family, dared• to do anything she wanted. Still, Archer hated to think that his fiancée could be seen with a woman who had just left her husband, even if that husband was a brute•. They also said that Countess Olenska had run away with her husband's secretary and then lived alone in Venice. Listening to all this gossip, Newland Archer suddenly wanted to sit with the ladies and show the world that he was engaged to May and that he supported her family.

## ELLEN OLENSKA

What is the gossip about Ellen Olenska?

How do you think she feels?

- **black sheep:** someone who is different from a family or a group and seen as bad
- **brute:** rough and violent person
- **dared:** was brave enough
- **superior:** better; more important



## 2 The engagement

2 It always happened the same way. After the first night of the opera there was a ball at the Beauforts'. Their house was one of the few in New York with a ballroom. Both their house and their lifestyle were luxurious, and this compensated• for their shameful• past. Mrs Regina Beaufort came from an honorable• but now poor family in the South, and her husband, Julius Beaufort, was an agreeable hospitable• Englishman with mysterious secrets. His marriage to Regina brought him acceptance in New York society, but it did not bring him respect.

After the opera, Archer did not go back to his club with the other young men, but he walked along Fifth Avenue before turning back in the direction of the Beauforts'. Archer was nervous. He was afraid that the Mingotts would bring Countess Olenska to the ball.

When Archer arrived, May Welland was standing at the side of the ballroom, holding her bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley in her hand. She was surrounded by a group of happily laughing friends, who were all delighted to hear about her engagement.

### SOCIETY

In 1870s New York society, wealth and family are very important.

Is it the same today?

Why? Why not?

- **compensated:** had something good to reduce the bad effects of something
- **hospitable:** friendly with guests
- **shameful:** causing shame or disgrace
- **honorable:** that should be respected

Newland walked over and led• May onto the dance floor. Then when the music was over they went into the conservatory• together.

‘You see I did as you asked me to,’ she said.

‘I wish it hadn’t had to be at a ball.’

‘Yes, I know.’ She glanced at him understandingly. ‘But after all, even here we’re alone together, aren’t we?’

‘Oh, dearest, always!’ Archer cried.

‘Did you tell my cousin Ellen?’ she asked.

‘No, I didn’t have the chance,’ he lied.

She looked disappointed. ‘You must, then, for I didn’t either.’

‘But I haven’t seen her yet. Has she come?’ Archer asked.

‘No. At the last minute she decided not to. She said her dress wasn’t smart enough for a ball, so my aunt had to take her home,’ May answered.

Of course, Archer knew the real reason for her cousin not coming to the ball. However, he didn’t want his fiancée• to know that he was aware of poor Ellen Olenska’s bad reputation•.

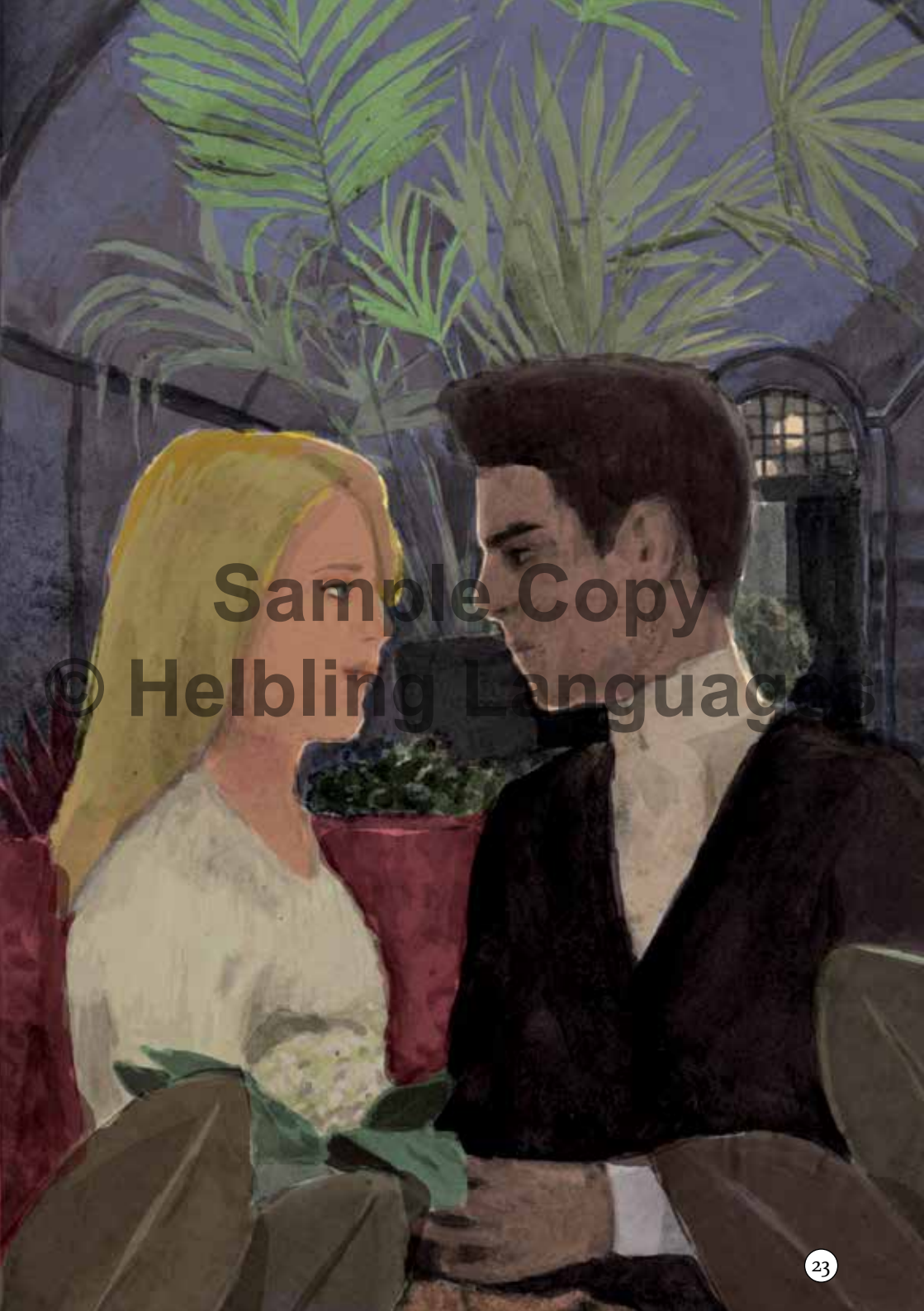
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## MAY AND NEWLAND

Are they happy together?

What makes you think so?

- **conservatory:** glass room for plants attached to the side of a house
- **led:** took by the hand and moved forward
- **fiancée:** girl who is engaged to be married
- **reputation:** opinion that people have about someone



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The next day, the young couple made the first of the usual betrothal• visits. Mrs Manson Mingott was a respected old lady and most of the New York families were related to her. It was her honor to be the first to give the couple her blessing•.

Mrs Mingott lived in a cream-colored stone house near Central Park. As she got heavier, it became impossible for her to go up and downstairs, so she decided to sleep on the ground floor of her house. It was unusual to see into someone's bedroom from the sitting room, but her visitors were fascinated by this arrangement. She spent most of her time by the window of her sitting room, watching calmly for life and fashion to arrive at her door.

‘And when is the wedding?’ asked Mrs Mingott, looking at the couple.

‘As soon as possible, if you support me,’ replied Archer.

‘We must give them time to get to know each other a little better, mamma,’ said Mrs Welland.

‘Know each other? Nonsense! Everybody in New York has always known everybody. Get married before Lent•! And I want to host• the wedding-breakfast.’

The visit was ending when Countess Olenska arrived with Julius Beaufort. The Countess looked at Archer with a smile.

‘Of course you know already about May and me,’ he said.


‘Of course I know; yes. And I’m so glad,’ she answered, holding out her hand. ‘Goodbye. Come and see me some day,’ she said, still looking at Archer.

- **betrothal:** engagement to get married
- **blessing:** (here) approval; agreement

- **host:** act of entertaining people at one's home
- **Lent:** the period of forty days before Easter



## AFTER READING VOCABULARY

- 1  In the story people don't always say how they are feeling, but their body language helps us to understand. Look at the words in the box and find examples of how they are used in the story. Then act out their meanings with a partner.

gaze   glance   nod   redden   sigh   stare   tremble

- 2 Complete the sentences from the story with words from Exercise 1. Write them in the correct forms.

- a Neither Archer, nor Ellen moved, and for a long moment he stood on the bank, ..... at the sea.  
b Newland Archer ..... and laughed.  
c Ellen did not say a word, she just .....  
d Archer started ..... and checking his diary.  
e She ..... at him understandingly.  
f Archer continued to ..... at his son.  
g 'Well, then, this is better, isn't it?' she .....

- 3 Match the words and the definitions.

- |                                    |                                     |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a <input type="checkbox"/> admire  | d <input type="checkbox"/> despise  |
| b <input type="checkbox"/> adore   | e <input type="checkbox"/> persuade |
| c <input type="checkbox"/> consent | f <input type="checkbox"/> pretend  |

- 1 love someone very much  
2 respect someone very much  
3 hate someone and have no respect for them  
4 give approval; agree to do something  
5 make someone agree with you  
6 behave in a way to make someone believe that something is true when it is not

# Land of the Free?

The **Constitution of the United States** was written in 1787 following the American Revolution and the First Amendment<sup>•</sup> defined a number of civil liberties<sup>•</sup> to protect the rights and freedom of the citizens. However, almost 100 years later, in the New York of *The Age of Innocence*, social codes and expectations<sup>•</sup> greatly influenced the personal freedom of both men and women. The question of freedom is introduced in the novel through a number of different situations in a variety of contexts. For example, Ellen Olenska cannot simply divorce her husband and live on her own in the area of New York that she chooses.

The opinions of her family and other influential families are more important than her own wishes. She depends on her family financially, and she cannot have a job like the men around her to support herself. Although Newland Archer is a powerful man from a respected family, he is also limited in his personal freedom. He is expected to marry someone who his family approves of, whether he loves her or not.

The characters' personal freedom is somewhat limited in their everyday lives and they are expected to follow unsaid rules that dictate where and when to go out, how to dress or who to speak to. Women in particular are more limited in their choices.

Civil liberties defined by the First Amendment to the US Constitution include freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, right to assemble • and right to petition.  
Which other freedoms and rights have been added to the Constitution?

## Magna Carta (1215)

*Magna Carta* is Medieval Latin for “The Great Charter” • and is the first legal document defining civil rights and liberties in England.

Today most clauses • from the *Magna Carta* have been rewritten or repealed •, but a few original principles • remain in key • constitutional documents around the world, including: the United States Bill of Rights (1791), the English Bill of Rights (1689), the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950).

- **charter:** (here) written contract
- **civil liberties:** rights or privileges protected by law
- **clauses:** (here) parts of a legal contract
- **expectations:** beliefs that someone should do something
- **First Amendment:** update to the US Constitution in 1791

## Personal freedom today

A lot has changed since the nineteenth century, but change and development do not occur at the same rate in every social class, cultural context or country. Personal freedom is protected by law in most countries. However, not everyone feels that they possess the civil liberties necessary to make them free individuals. Sometimes this is due to religious conflicts, and in other cases political decisions.

The age of the internet has shown old problems of personal freedom in new contexts. Freedom of speech, privacy issues and data protection are hot issues today. The spread of social media has raised new questions in personal freedom. How can you ensure that your identity is protected? How is freedom of speech affected by social media?

From a different perspective, personal freedom is also an individual, psychological question. Can we really be free of the expectations of others and the codes of our own society? What does personal freedom mean to you?

- **key:** (here) very important
- **principles:** facts or ideas that are the foundation of something
- **repealed:** officially ended
- **right to assemble:** right to form associations and gather publicly

EDITH WHARTON

# THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Adapted by Nora Nagy

“Poor Ellen, she is so different from us.”

Newland Archer does everything that is expected of him in the New York society of the 1870s. He is a respected lawyer, he socialises with all of the most elegant families and he is engaged to May Welland: a beautiful, innocent and wealthy young woman. It is a perfect match.

But then Newland meets May's cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska who has arrived in New York with a bad reputation. Soon the couple fall in love. But what about May? And more importantly: how can they avoid a scandal?



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