**The Age of Innocence**

CONCEPT/VOCABULARY ANALYSIS

**Literary Text:** *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton

**Organizational Patterns**

The novel, written in third person omniscient, follows the thoughts, choices, and movements of Newland Archer in his late nineteenth century New York high society. In 34 chapters, each ranging from 6-10 pages in length, Wharton depicts the ideals, social pressures, expectations, and double standards of the “golden age” of New York’s aristocracy. Most of the story and its action centers around Newland Archer and his personal awakening to the hypocrisy and false reality that his society creates and maintains, and through his struggle between duty in this society and his own desires. The novel begins with Archer’s observations and delight as he sits in a crowded theater box among the New York elite. The last chapter of the novel begins 26 years later, as Archer sits alone on a bench, lost in his personal reflections. In the end, he walks home alone.

**Issues Related to this Study of Literature**

**THEMES**

- *Societal Customs & Expectations:* Much of this novel is a depiction of a society that is now lost to America of our day. Social dinners, parties, customs, and events are described in detail. The expectations that the New York Aristocracy places on its members is made clear through Newland Archer’s interactions and personal reflections, and through Ellen Olenska’s newness in the society and her constant disregard for social norms.

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**Missed Opportunities:** Much of the action, conflict, and irony in the book is a result of Newland Archer's missed opportunities. Several times in the novel, Archer is unable to fulfill his desires or his responsibilities merely because he misses his chance to fulfill them or circumstance prevents him from performing them. In the end, he loses his final opportunity to be with Ellen Olenska because he, himself, chooses not to go down that path.

**Romantic love versus Respectable/Dutiful Love:** This theme permeates the novel through Newland Archer's relationships with his society wife, May Welland, and the woman that he loves, Ellen Olenska. Throughout the text, Archer must make decision after decision based on whether he should remain loyal to his wife and their society and family or follow the strength of his desires by forming an attachment with the woman that he loves.

**Reality versus Perceived Reality:** These themes could be discussed extensively as there are many examples of characters and their different perceptions of people and situations. For example, in the beginning of the book, Archer believes May to be innocent, docile, naïve, and a perfect fiancée and future wife. By the end of the book, it is obvious that the reality is that Archer is unsatisfied with May as a wife, and that she is not as innocent and naïve as he believed her to be. She, in many ways, is actually more aware of reality than Archer, himself. Ellen Olenska, throughout the text, believes that she is being welcomed into her old society with kindness, love, and affection. The reader, however, sees how people only welcome her because they are told to by Mrs. Van der Luyden, the “queen” of their society—and when they do admit her, it is with pre-judgments and condescension. Another example of this is the differences in how Archer and Countess Olenska perceive their relationship.

**SETTING**

The novel takes place in New York City during the 1870’s. This time in New York is known, by many, as the “golden age” of New York. Apart from the old, aristocratic families that ruled the social world of that time, the “nouveau riche” such as Henry Clay Frick, Jay Gould, and Cornelius Vanderbilt, began to rise and create a class of their own. This novel deals primarily with, and is a picture of the upper, wealthy, mobile, social...
class of New York.

**FORESHADOWING**

“We’re near each other only if we stay far from each other” (p. 203).

These words voiced by Ellen Olenska are one of several moments in the novel when future circumstance is hinted at and foreshadowed. This particular sentence that is spoken in the 29th chapter of the book becomes one of supreme significance because ultimately, Archer and Countess Olenska remain separated from each other for the rest of their lives. Foreshadowing in the text occurs mainly through Archer’s actions (such as the lilies he purchases for May and the yellow roses he sends to Ellen concurrently), and through the voices of the women in the novel. May Welland and Ellen Olenska are often the ones who foreshadow what will happen later in the story.

**POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE**

The story is told in third person omniscient. Though much of the story is told through Newland Archer’s perceptions and involvement with other characters, the reader does from time to time, gain access to other characters’ thoughts and motives through the all-knowing narrator. The manner in which the author narrates the story allows the reader to see the minute details and helps them become aware of the bigger picture as they follow Newland Archer from scene to scene and from person to person. In this way, the reader sees Archer’s actions, as well as viewing his inner thoughts, intentions, and motives that compel him to act.

**TONE**

The overall tone of the book is a somber and grim tone. It is ironic that a novel engulfed with a flurry of parties, dinners, dances, gardens, weddings and society can produce such a melancholy atmosphere for its reader. Edith Wharton, through her style and characters, is able to portray in detail the spectacles and lavishness of society, while muting much of the splendor and color her descriptions produce through Archer’s meditations and the hopelessness of his and Ellen’s situation. “Archer had no heart to go on pleading with her; he was too much disappointed at the vanishing of the new being who had cast that one deep look at him from her

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transparent eyes. May seemed to be aware of his
disappointment, but without knowing how to alleviate it; & they stood up and walked
silently home” (ch.16). Passages such as this one create the somber tone of the novel.

**IRONY**

Irony is defined as the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal
meaning or an outcome of events contrary to what was, or might have been, expected.
Throughout the book, the author uses irony as a tool to create conflict and show Archer’s
heightening awareness of social hypocrisy and his inability to fulfill his desires. The
following scenes are important examples of irony:

- A telegram from May arrives agreeing to hasten their wedding, shortly after Archer
  confesses his feelings for the Countess Olenska.
- Archer becomes aware that Countess Olenska is leaving because May told her that
  she is with child.
- May decides that she and Archer will throw the Countess a farewell party.
- Archer, after 26 years, is a free man and can go to Ellen Olenska but he chooses not
to.

**Affective Issues Relating to the Work**

- **Societal/Peer Pressures:** Much of the novel deals with social pressures and which
  students can easily associate with the expectations and pressures that they feel from
  peers, parents, and teachers. During high school, individuals often feel the need to
  “fit in” to a group or to a mold that they are expected to be. Ellen Olenska
  throughout the book expresses similar concerns and it would be easy to relate her
  concerns about society to the students and their high school/teenage environment.
  The following quotes may be useful: “Original! We’re all as like each other as those
dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We’re like patterns stencilled on a
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Jenson, 2007

wall. Can’t you and I strike out for ourselves, May?” (Ch. 10). “Archer reddened. ‘You’ll never be like everybody else,” he said. [Ellen] raised her straight eyebrows a little. "Ah, don't say that. If you knew how I hate to be different!” (Ch. 12). This particular issue is a wonderful tool for connecting the text to students from diverse backgrounds who daily face the dilemma of “fitting in” or trying hard to stand out.

**Cause & Effects of Choices:** Another way that students can identify with this particular text is by tracing the characters’ choices and the motivations behind them and the results that transpired from them. The teenage years are a time when critical choices are made on a daily basis that will shape an individual’s life. It would be useful to trace a character like Newland Archer’s decisions. Because the reader is allowed inside Archer’s head, he/she is able to see the motivations behind his actions and better comprehend who Archer is at the end of the story.

**Vocabulary Issues/Background Knowledge**

The language and diction in the novel should be comprehensible for most literate 11th and 12th grade students. The author uses rhetorical devices and uses imagery to illuminate her story, but her sentences are not too complex or tedious. To prepare students for language and vocabulary in the book, you can extract advanced words and use them as vocabulary practice. Here are some examples of words from chapter sixteen: limpidity, vehemence, insuperable, prudent, contrive, conniving.

Another way to prepare students for this novel is to give them background information on the pop culture of New York during that time period. The author, when writing *The Age of Innocence*, extensively researched the important people, books, and situations of the time period and inserted various pop culture that is foreign to today’s society. Being able to present students with information, like the phrases and words found in the book below, would help them in their reading of the novel.

**Mr. Luther Burbank’s...prodigies**
—students of Luther Burbank (1849–1926), an American plant breeder and horticulturist.

**chemisette**
—a detachable shirt front formerly worn by women to fill in the neckline of a dress.

**Josephine look**
—a gown in the style of the first French Empire (1804–1815) named after Napoleon’s wife, Josephine, empress of France (1804–1809); with a short waist, decollette bodice, flowing

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skirt, and short, puffed sleeves.

**Gender Issues**

Within the novel, the two women in Archer’s life, May Welland and Ellen Olenska, are the ones who drive the plot and his choices and progression throughout life. It is their interactions with him and with each other that lead him to where he is in the last chapter, 26 years after the book begins. Women are driving forces in the novel. Much can be said about the perception of women during the 1870’s in America. Women, at that time, had specific societal and familial roles that they were expected to perform, while men were more at liberty and more mobile in the society. Women’s rights and roles in society play a large part in the novel.

However, the book is about Newland Archer and it is his thoughts and movements that the reader follows throughout the story. The questions can be asked, “Why does Edith Wharton, choose to use a male protagonist to move her story along? How would it change the novel if the story was mainly about Ellen or May? Is Wharton effective at telling the story through a man’s perspective?”

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue**

The central question and enduring issue in the novel is the individual’s struggle to fulfill personal desires versus their responsibility to society, to family, to reputation, and to self.

**Research Issues & Project Ideas**

**OLD NEW YORK AND THE NEW YORK OF TODAY:** Students can research what New York was like during the late nineteenth century and tie in their research to what they read in the novel. Then, students can compare the old New York society to New York City and culture today. They can write a paper on the topic, do a presentation for the class, etc.

**SYMBOLS & NAMES:** As students read the novel, they can pull out important symbols and discover the significance of the characters’ names in the text. An Archer, for instance, is one who strives to hit a target and either hits it or constantly misses it. The name Ellen means light or bright one. Students could research these meanings and find other symbols or motifs in the story and discuss why Wharton used them and how they illuminate the story and text.

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MAKING A MOVIE OUT OF A CLASSIC: For this project, after reading the text, students will view the recent film version of the novel in which Winona Ryder and Michelle Pfeiffer play the primary roles. They will discuss the process of making a book into a movie and evaluate the effectiveness of the movie. They will offer suggestions on what could have been done differently and what parts of the text were portrayed effectively and others that were ineffective.

WRITE IN THE STYLE OF EDITH WHARTON: Students will write in the style of Edith Wharton. You can do this in a variety of ways. You can have students write a “lost scene” from the novel where they create a particular conversation that is consistent with the story but offers new insight into the characters or the story. You could also have the students write about a particular situation in their own experience and with their own society in the style of Edith Wharton.

Information/Functional Texts

BIOGRAPHIES OF EDITH WHARTON:


PEOPLE OF OLD NEW YORK:

Henry Clay Frick, Jay Gould, Cornelius Vanderbilt, J.P. Morgan

OLD NEWSPAPER ARTICLES FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

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