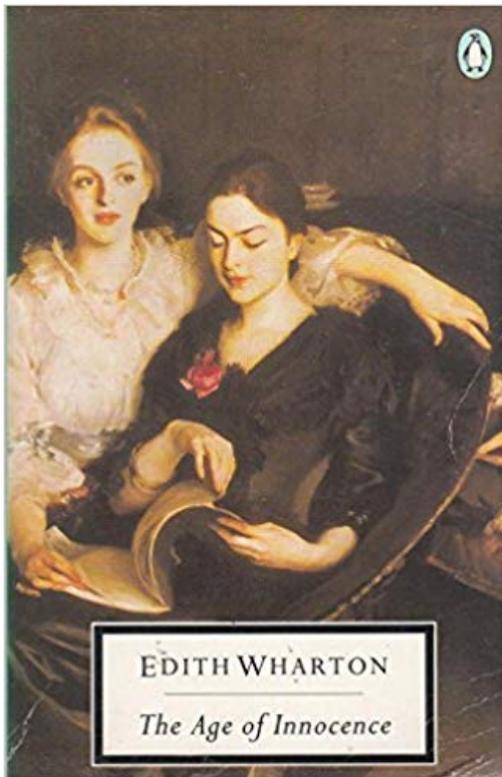


The Age of Innocence (Twentieth Century Classics) by Edith Wharton



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Reviews of the The Age of Innocence (Twentieth Century Classics) by Edith Wharton

Jia

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Although this is a love story on many levels, *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton, is, also, a documentary of a culture- in this case, the elite rich society of New York in 19th century America- who buries its own dreams and deepest desires behind the greater need to be accepted and approved by one's own 'reference group.' The book hinges on the words people are "chained to separate destinies," and proceeds to illustrate how this is true of rich and poor alike.

This star-crossed love story centers on a love triangle. Rebellng against a long-time, smothering

tradition, a young, idealistic man, Newland

Archer, marries his loving and sweet-natured-but, boring and traditional- wife, May, under pressure from friends and family. The complication comes when he falls head over heels in love with his wife's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who has recently come home. To the disapproval and shock of her family and New York society she has deserted her husband, a rich, albeit unsavory French Count.

The Countess is a beautiful Bohemian 'outcast' central to the story because she dares to have the courage to reject that which is destructive to her true nature, making her misunderstood by her family and friends. However, her integrity, compassion, and joie de vivre make her a sympathetic and irresistible character to all who know her, especially the men, who fall under the spell of her charms and are depicted as being in a much better position to flout the chains of society in contrast to the women of the time.

Archer loves the Countess Olenska because she possesses the attributes he most wants himself, and she is a metaphor for freedom of choice in that she defies the expectations of her sex and the confines of society in exchange for being true to her own ideas of integrity and proper behavior.

A heart-wrenching story of unrequited love, it depicts the forces that band together to bring the protagonists to heel and keep them chained to separate destinies. Their personal desires are squelched by family and friends in the name of dutiful honor and expectations amidst the rigid judgment and hypocrisy of their unyielding, self-righteous social class.

Edith Wharton was a master at evoking the social mores and confines of the society she grew up in, and is often a society that she seems to condemn for its snobbery and hypocrisy.

Even though the book depicts New York's upper crust of the 19th century, it is 'everyman's story,' because it's a reminder to us all that, although we can exist in a world to which we may not want to belong, our choice to remain there may come at the steep and personal price of dream walking through life. This story is so beautifully written and is evocative of human nature which demands that men and women put duty, honor, and pride above all else regardless of individual liberty and personal happiness.

In the concluding pages, the reader has an epiphany that one comes to terms with the sweet fragileness of our memories by consciously choosing to reject choices that may expose and destroy perceived perfection in order to maintain the dream of what might have been. So, it is with Archer. He, at last, accepts that he gave up something dear to him for the greater good. And, as he moves into mid-life, fate helps him to accept that it may have been the right decision, after all.

The Age of Innocence is a story that will resonate with anyone who suffers and pines over the one that got away in the blush of youthful love. It remains a story for the ages and serves as reminder that we cannot always direct the course of love, because love takes many forms, and often wounds us. But, a life lived fully requires understanding and accepting love's many manifestations.

Dishadel

It was a glittering, sumptuous time when hypocrisy was expected, discreet infidelity tolerated, and unconventional ostracized.

That is the Gilded Age, and nobody knew its hypocrisies better than Edith Wharton.... and nobody portrayed them as well. "The Age of Innocence" is a trip back in time to the stuffy upper crust of "old New York," taking us through one respectable man's hopeless love affair with a beautiful woman -- and the life he isn't brave enough to have.

Newland Archer, of a wealthy old New York family, has become engaged to pretty, naive May Welland. But as he tries to get their wedding date moved up, he becomes acquainted with May's exotic cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, who has returned home after dumping her cheating husband. At first, the two are just friends, but Newland becomes more and more entranced by the Countess' easy, free-spirited European charm.

After Newland marries May, the attraction to the mysterious Countess and her free, unconventional life becomes even stronger. He starts to rebel in little ways, but he's still mired in a 100% conventional marriage, job and life. Will he become an outcast and go away with the beautiful countess, or will he stick with May and the safe, dull life that he has condemned in others?

There's nothing too scandalous about "Age of Innocence" in a time when starlets acquire and discard boyfriends and husbands like old pantyhose -- it probably wasn't in the 1920s when it was first published. But then, this isn't a book about sexiness and steam -- it's part bittersweet romance, part social satire, and a look at what happens when human beings lose all spontaneity and passion.

Part of this is due to Wharton's portrayal of New York in the 1870s -- opulent, cultured, pleasant, yet so tied up in tradition that few people in it are able to really open up and live. It's a haze of ballrooms, gardens, engagements, and careful social rituals that absolutely MUST be followed, even if they have no meaning. It's a place "where the real thing was never said or done or even thought."

And Wharton writes distant, slightly mocking prose that outlines this sheltered little society. Her writing opens as slowly and beautifully as a rosebud, letting subtle subplots and powerful, hidden emotions drive the story. So don't be discouraged by the endless conversations about flowers, ballrooms, gloves and old family scandals that don't really matter anymore.

In the middle of all this, Newland is a rather dull, intelligent young man who thinks he's unconventional. But he becomes more interesting as he struggles between his conscience and his longing for the Countess. And as "Age of Innocence" winds on, you gradually see that he doesn't truly love the Countess, but what she represents -- freedom from society and convention.

The other two angles of this love triangle are May and Ellen. May is (suitably) pallid and rather dull, though she shows some different sides in the last few chapters. And Ellen is a magnificent character -- alluring, mysterious, but also bewildered by New York's hostility to her ways. And she's even more interesting when you realize that she isn't trying to rebel, but simply being herself.

"Age of Innocence" is a subtle look at life in Gilded Age New York, telling the story of a man desperately in love with a way of life he hasn't got the courage to pursue. Exquisite in its details, painful in its beauty.

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