





The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton

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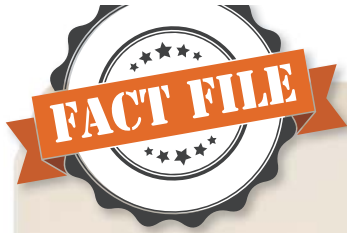
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in January 1862, into a wealthy New York family. Her family traveled a lot in Europe, and Edith spent six years of her childhood living in Italy, France and Germany.

She studied French and German, and when her family returned to New York in 1872, she was tutored¹ at home. Edith was fortunate to have access to her father's library. She read and studied a lot, and her first collection of poems was printed privately in 1876.

At age 17, she was presented to society, which meant that she could go to parties and dances in Newport and New York. She criticized² the rituals³ of this world in her novels. In 1885 she married Edward (Teddy) Wharton, who shared her love of travel.



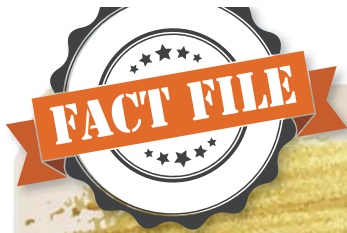


New York Society in the 1870s

New York society in the 1870s was a very organized system. It was structured like a pyramid with the most influential¹ and powerful families on the top, the fashionable elite² just under and the newcomers on the bottom.

The old families were apprehensive³ of the new people as they had new values and rules and posed⁴ 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 GILDED AGE

The period between 1865 and 1898 in American history is often called the Gilded Age. It was the time after the Civil War (1861–1865) when economic¹ and technological² development were at a height. It ended with the Spanish-American War.

The name comes from the book *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* written by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in 1873, which described the political corruption³ and the social issues of the time. The word “gilded” in the title refers to a thin layer of gold covering problems under the surface.

Economic power

This was a time of fast economic growth. Both wages⁴ and the personal wealth of bankers and industrialists were increasing quickly. The agricultural industry and coal mining were thriving⁵, but the most successful industries were the new oil, railway and steel corporations.



The Age of Innocence





BEFORE READING

- 1 Read the extract from the story and then answer the question.



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.


Does Newland Archer agree or disagree with the conventions of his friends?

- 2 Listen to Newland Archer's thoughts on his relationships then tick (✓) T (true) or F (false).

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| T F | <input type="checkbox"/> a Newland's future wife loved reading. |
| T F | <input type="checkbox"/> b Newland's future wife was innocent. |
| T F | <input type="checkbox"/> c The married woman was charming. |
| T F | <input type="checkbox"/> d The married woman was happy. |

- 3 The words on the right are used in the story to describe Newland Archer's fiancée, and then wife, May. Look up the ones you don't know in a dictionary. Are these characteristics important to you in other people? Put them in order of importance (1-8).

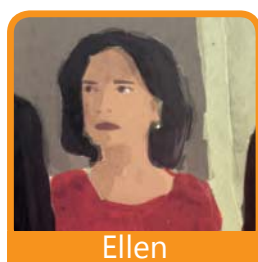
- ☐ innocent
- ☐ conventional
- ☐ beautiful
- ☐ intelligent
- ☐ popular
- ☐ reasonable
- ☐ nice
- ☐ simple

-  **4** Ellen Olenska is an important character in the story. Complete this description of her using the words below. Then listen and check.

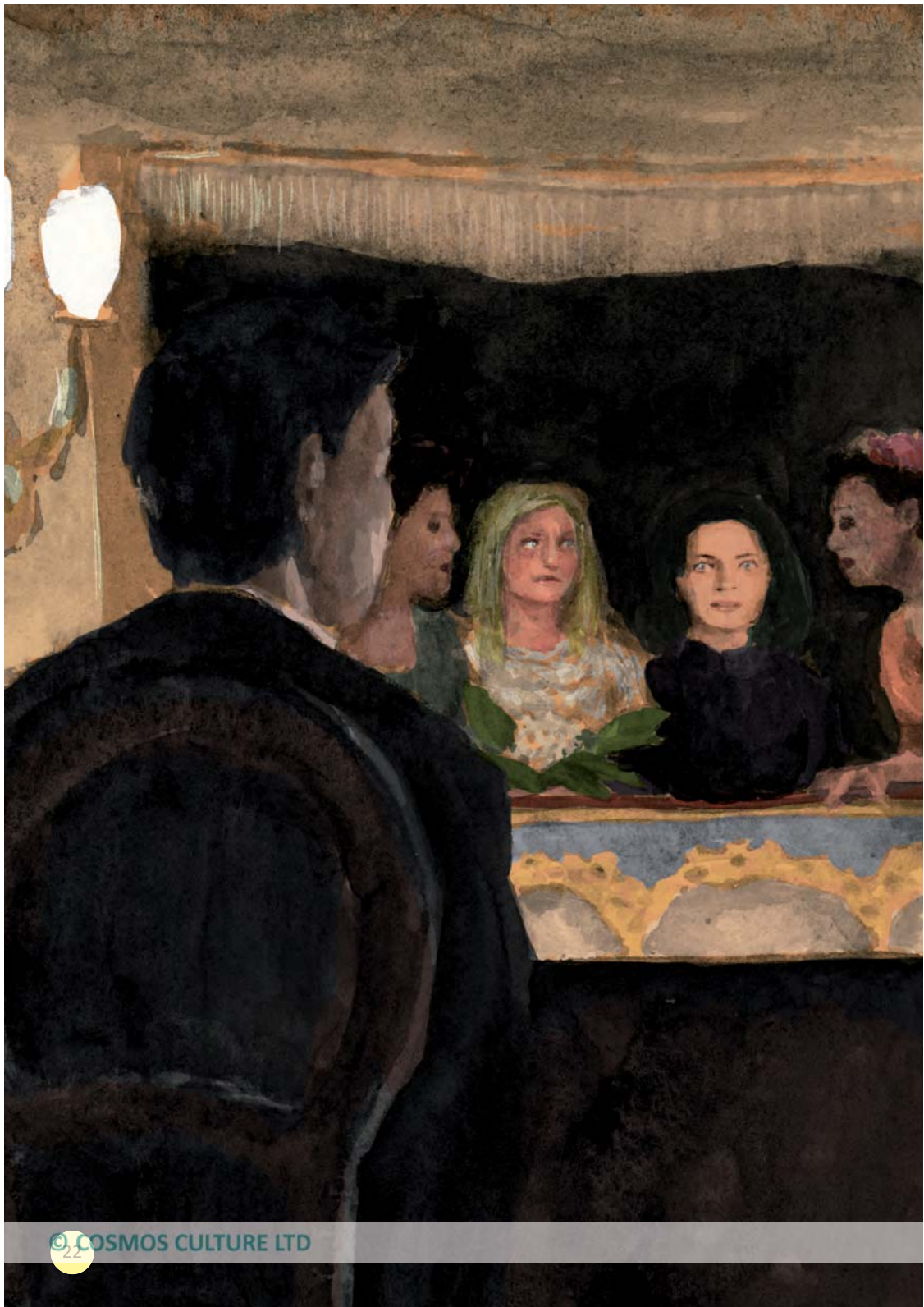
mysterious	late	drawing room
voice	simple	

On the night of the dinner, Countess Olenska arrived **a** _____ at the van der Luydens', but she entered the **b** _____ without any hurry or embarrassment. When she paused in the middle of the room, Archer noticed her **c** _____ beauty and **d** _____ behavior. She was quiet in her movements and **e** _____, and not as stylish as everyone had expected her to be.


-  **5** Look at Exercises **3** and **4** again. How do you imagine May and Ellen? Share ideas with a friend.







1. The opera

 On a January evening in the early 1870s, the most elegant families of New York gathered¹ 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 theater, 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-valley² on her knee. She was May Welland, his sweetheart, the future Mrs Newland Archer.

- ¹ gathered: met
- ² lilies-of-the-valley:





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 witty¹ 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?

Newland Archer thought of himself as superior² 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.

2. The engagement

 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 compensated¹ for their shameful² past. Mrs Regina Beaufort came from an honorable³ but now poor family in the South, and her husband, Julius Beaufort, was an agreeable hospitable⁴ 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.

