

The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton

Discussion Questions

Choose 1 or 2 of the following questions to discuss

1. Did you think the first sentence of this book was effective? Why do you think the author started with that sentence?
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 May Welland and Ellen Olenska?
3. Does the narrator of *The Age of Innocence* condemn 1870's 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?
4. What do you make of Newland Archer's assertion – and of his later regret for the assertion – that “women should be free – as free as we are”? Do you think Wharton, who believed in many of Old New York's values, among them the importance of family, might have agreed with him? Do you think any aspects of Old New York's double standard for men's and women's conduct still hold sway in today's society?
5. 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? What ways are they similar?
6. How do you feel about the book's pacing? Where there parts you wished the author slowed down and explored more? Where there parts that lagged?
7. In what ways has American society evolved, and in what ways does it still seem similar to the particular American subset Wharton wrote about? In what arenas does a significant pressure to conform still exist? Do you think there are places today where Contess Olensak might receive the same sort of reception she received in Old New York? Do mainstream American values still differ from European ones when it comes to sex, divorce, and marital fidelity? *Group question and answers....!*
8. Did the ending surprise you? Why or why not?

Extra Credit

- If you could ask Edith Wharton one question about the book, what would it be?
- Which character did you feel the most sympathy for?

Sources: teachervision.com, mfah.co, penquinrandomhouse.com, Dana's Book Club, Blog at WordPress.com