The Age of Innocence

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH WHARTON

Born Edith Newbold Jones to socially prominent middle-class parents (the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" refers to two of her great-aunts), Edith Wharton's literary ambitions surprised and slightly embarrassed her merchant-class family. Married off at twenty-three to Edward Wharton, a wealthy Bostonian, Wharton did not begin to write full-time and publish novels until she was in her forties, when she was living in Lenox, MA. She achieved literary celebrity with *The House of Mirth* (1905), followed by *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, becoming the first woman to achieve that distinction. Over that same period, however, her marriage unraveled. She had an affair with an American journalist living in London, and she divorced Edward Wharton in 1913. Wharton was a prolific writer, writing in total 22 novels and novellas, 87 short stories, nine volumes of nonfiction, and two volumes of poetry. In 1910 Wharton moved permanently to France, where in 1916 she was named an officer of the Legion of Honor for her wartime work on behalf of refugees.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel mostly takes place during the 1870s, which formed the beginning of the American Gilded Age, a period of rapid economic growth that earned its name by glossing over serious social problems with the appearance of great success. This dynamic proceeded in part from serious wealth inequality; *The Age of Innocence* deals solely with the very wealthy portion of society. However, Wharton wrote the book immediately after World War I, so it's influenced by this retrospective view of the 1870s. World War I obviously caused worldwide horror and tragedy, making the concerns of the coddled New York upper class seem especially foolish. At the same time, readers might have been almost wistful for this "age of innocence" in which people could afford to worry about matters of social propriety rather than about terrifying new weapons. Furthermore, Wharton's comments on Americans' views of foreigners might be influenced by the fact that the United States abstained from World War I for three years, maintaining a policy of isolationism. The American characters in *The Age of Innocence* largely distrust foreigners and are not at all keen to mix with them.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Age of Innocence is thematically connected to the novella *Ethan Frome*, one of Wharton's most famous works. Both works deal with unhappy marriages and have male protagonists who fall in love with their wives' cousins. In neither story is the affair successful; instead, the protagonist remains in his marriage and does not find the kind of happiness he longed for. Additionally, Wharton references George Eliot's celebrated Victorian novel *Middlemarch* in *The Age of Innocence*, as Archer receives a copy of that novel from London and remarks on the interesting reviews it's been getting. Like Wharton's novel, *Middlemarch* deals with unhappy marriages and the nature of success.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Age of Innocence
- **Where Written:** Provence, France
- **When Published:** 1920
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** novel of manners
- **Setting:** 1870s New York; London; Boston; Paris; and Newport, Rhode Island
- **Climax:** May telling Archer that she's pregnant
- **Antagonist:** The conventions of New York society
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Pulitzer conflicts. The 1921 Pulitzer Prize for Literature was originally supposed to go to Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, but the advisory board refused to give Lewis the award on political grounds. Only then did the award go to *The Age of Innocence*, making Wharton the first woman to win it.

A Francophile. After World War I ended in 1918, Wharton lived in France and only returned to the United States once before her death in 1937. During this single visit, she received an honorary doctorate from Yale University.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens with Newland Archer attending the opera, where New York society often gathers. Just that afternoon, May Welland has agreed to marry him. Archer notices a strange woman in May's opera box and realizes that it's her cousin, Ellen Olenska. It's daring of May's family to bring Ellen to the opera, since she has been involved in a scandal. She left her cruel husband, and it's rumored that she had an affair with his secretary. When the opera ends, Archer tells May that he

wants to announce their engagement that very night so that he can support her in any backlash that might come from Ellen's presence.

That night, there's a ball at the Beauforts' house, and May tells her friends that she's engaged to Archer. He wishes it wasn't necessary to announce the engagement in this way, but he feels very much in love with May. The next day, Archer goes with May and her mother to visit May's unconventional grandmother, Mrs. Mingott, who stays at home due to her obesity. When Ellen turns up there, Archer tells her about his engagement, and she invites him to come see her.

The next evening, Sillerton Jackson comes to dinner at the Archers'. He always knows all the latest gossip, and Mrs. Archer and Newland's sister Janey want to hear about Ellen Olenska, though they avoid talking about anything truly scandalous. All this fuss about Ellen begins to make Archer question long-held values that society has imbued in him; he's inclined to support Ellen even though society doesn't. Archer also begins to worry that the innocence that is considered proper for unmarried women will make his marriage unsatisfying, as May has little experience with the real world.

A few days later, the Mingotts send out invitations for a dinner to welcome Ellen Olenska, but almost everyone refuses the invitation; it's clear that they're snubbing Ellen due to her past. Archer and his mother go visit the van der Luydens, one of the most respected couples in New York, to ask for their help (a maneuver meant to protect May's family honor). The van der Luydens agree to invite Ellen to a dinner they're having for a visiting duke in order to send a message that Ellen should be accepted.

At the dinner, Ellen flouts numerous social conventions. She and Archer have an intimate discussion about May and about Ellen's desire to become completely American again after living abroad for so long. Archer finds himself flustered by her. He goes to visit her the next evening and finds that she has decorated her house in a very charming and romantic way. As Archer and Ellen talk, he realizes that she doesn't see how precarious her position is in society. She says she wants him to help her understand New York society, but she's already making him look at it differently.

The next day, Archer and May go for a walk and he tries to convince her to shorten their engagement, but she refuses. The following afternoon, Archer learns that Ellen Olenska went to a party at Mrs. Struthers's house with the Duke of St. Austrey and Mr. Beaufort. Mrs. Struthers's gatherings aren't considered socially proper, and Mrs. Archer and the van der Luydens are upset that Ellen went. Mr. van der Luyden arrives unexpectedly. He's been to Ellen's house to try to help her understand her social faux pas.

Two weeks later, Mr. Letterblair, the head of the law firm where Archer works, tells him that Ellen Olenska is seeking a divorce from her husband. He wants Archer to convince her not to. He gives Archer papers relating to the case, including a letter from Ellen's husband threatening to tell everyone that she had an affair with his secretary. Archer doesn't want to be involved, but he goes to talk to Ellen about it. He's angry to find Beaufort at her house, and once Beaufort leaves, Archer brings up the divorce. Ellen says she wants to be free, but her family doesn't want her to get a divorce. Archer makes her understand that there would be negative social repercussions if she divorced, and she agrees not to.

Archer next sees Ellen at a play, where a scene of two lovers parting moves them both. May has gone to St. Augustine with her family and has asked Archer to be good to Ellen in her absence. Archer wants to see Ellen again, but he learns that Ellen has gone to visit the van der Luydens at their estate, Skuytercliff. He finds an excuse to visit her there. They end up alone in a small house on the property, and Archer imagines that she'll declare her attraction to him. Instead, Beaufort appears, and Archer bitterly realizes that Ellen had come here to get away from Beaufort. Back at home, Archer can't stop thinking about Ellen. When he receives a note asking him to visit her, he instead takes a boat to St. Augustine.

Archer immediately feels stabilized when he sees May. He tries to convince her to get married sooner, but she asks whether he wants to do so because he's not confident in his love for her, and she tells him that if there's someone else, they shouldn't get married. Archer is amazed at her insight, feeling that this represents a new side of her that he likes, but he assures her there's no one else.

When Archer returns to New York, he visits Mrs. Mingott, who agrees to try to convince the Wellands to move the wedding up. The next day, he goes to see Ellen and finds Medora Manson there. She wants him to help her convince Ellen to return to her husband, but he refuses.

Left alone with Ellen, Archer tells her about his conversation with May in St. Augustine. Then he admits his feelings for Ellen and kisses her. However, Ellen says that they can't be together because Archer has taught her to see the world like a New Yorker, and New Yorkers would find their love unacceptable. Just then, a telegram arrives from May, saying that her parents have agreed to let them get married in a month.

Archer moves through his wedding in a haze, looking for Ellen, who isn't there. He and May are supposed to spend their wedding night at his aunts' house in Rhinebeck, but they learn that there's a leak in the plumbing and Mr. van der Luyden has instead prepared for them the house at Skuytercliff where Archer talked with Ellen.

Archer and May go on a long trip to Europe, ending in London. They go to a dinner at the house of some friends of Mrs. Archer's, where Archer enjoys conversation with a French tutor named M. Rivière. May, however, thinks him socially

inferior.

Archer and May spend the summer in Newport, Rhode Island, along with much of New York society, and Ellen has moved to Washington, D.C. After May wins an archery contest at the Beauforts' house, the couple goes to visit Mrs. Mingott. Unbeknownst to Archer, Ellen is also there, and he is sent to fetch her from the shore. He watches Ellen for a long time, but when she doesn't turn to look at him, he returns to the house without speaking to her.

One afternoon, Archer finds an excuse to get away from the Wellands and he travels to Boston where he heard Ellen has gone. He finds her sitting on a bench on the Common. She has come to Boston to meet an emissary from her husband who wants her back, but she has refused to submit to his wishes. Archer convinces her to take a boat with him, and they end up in a private room at an inn. Archer realizes that she feels as much anguish about their separation as he does, but she makes him promise not to do anything that will hurt May, or else she'll return to her husband.

Back in New York, Archer runs into M. Rivière and realizes that he's the emissary sent by Ellen's husband. However, M. Rivière has changed his mind upon speaking to Ellen, and he wants Archer to make sure that Ellen never returns to her husband.

At the Archers' Thanksgiving dinner, Mrs. Archer and the Jacksons lament how much society is changing. There are rumors that Beaufort's bank is going under, and Sillerton Jackson tells Archer that Ellen will be penniless if it does. Soon afterwards, Beaufort's bank collapses, and Mrs. Mingott has a mild stroke. She demands that the family send for Ellen immediately.

Archer goes to meet Ellen at the station. In the carriage ride back, he insists that they need to find a way to be together, but Ellen says that they can't. That night, Archer feels particularly oppressed by his life with May and imagines her dying. He plans to force Ellen to run away with him, but a week later, Mrs. Mingott summons him and tells him that Ellen is going to stay with her. He agrees to help convince the family of the wisdom of this plan.

Now Archer and Ellen will have the opportunity to conduct their affair in New York, but they'll have to sneak around and lie to do so, which Archer dreads. They meet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and agree that they don't want to live this way. Instead, they'll sleep together once.

The next night, Archer and May go to the opera, where everything reminds him of the first night he saw Ellen there. He decides he needs to confess everything to May and ask for his freedom, but before he can do so, May tells him that Ellen is going back to Europe the very next week. Archer is devastated.

May throws a grand farewell dinner for Ellen, which Archer drifts through, hardly aware of what's happening. He comes to think that everyone believes he and Ellen are lovers, and they're all conspiring to separate them without having to acknowledge what they believe. After the guests leave, Archer again tries to make a confession to May, but instead, she tells him that she's pregnant. She told Ellen this news two weeks earlier, even though she wasn't sure at the time that it was true.

Twenty-six years later, Archer has three children and May has died. Archer has been involved in politics and public life. His son Dallas invites him on a trip to Europe, and while staying in Paris, Dallas gets in touch with Ellen. He and Archer go to her house, but Archer sits on a bench outside rather than going in to see her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Newland Archer – Archer, a young gentleman of New York high society, is the protagonist of *The Age of Innocence*. The novel opens with his engagement to May Welland, whom he eventually marries, but he also falls in love with May's cousin, Ellen Olenska. Archer initially subscribes to the conventions of New York society without question; he has grown up with these conventions, and nobody respectable dares to flout them. To Archer, May represents the conventional and respectable New York life. However, as he falls in love with Ellen and watches how society scorns her scandalous background, Archer begins to question the rules that have governed his life. He becomes more compassionate and open-minded and he begins to perceive the hypocrisy of those around him. While knowing Ellen makes Archer begin to dread living the same dull life that he sees everyone else living, he never manages to fully break away from his conventional upbringing. He wants to desert his wife and run away with Ellen, but he ultimately lives a somewhat average life with May. All is not lost for Archer, though; while he works as a lawyer for much of the book (without love or ambition for his job), he gives in somewhat to his attraction to the intellectual life and finds fulfillment in a life of public service, despite that public service is considered to be beneath his class.

Ellen Olenska – Ellen is an independent, unconventional woman who falls in love with Archer, despite being the cousin of Archer's fiancée May. Though Ellen lived in New York for some time when she was young, she spent much of her childhood in Europe, and New Yorkers now consider her to be more foreign than American. When Ellen returns to New York at the beginning of the book, she has left her husband, the Polish nobleman Count Olenski, who has treated her awfully and been unfaithful to her. Ellen sees New York as a safe haven and doesn't realize at first that people think ill of her for having left her husband and shirking certain social rules. Ellen is characterized by her wisdom and worldly experience, which are characteristics that New York women are not supposed to

have. While Ellen's willingness to face unpleasant realities head on estranges her from New York society, it contributes to Archer's attraction to her. Conversely, Archer's influence makes Ellen see the beauty of the New York manners that have been absent from her life in Europe. This perspective, along with her natural sense of loyalty, makes Ellen resist Archer's attempts to leave May to be with her. Though she loves Archer, she can't bear to hurt other people in order to be with him.

May Welland – May is Archer's fiancée and then his wife. She is a kind, simple, and beautiful girl known for her athleticism. May is the embodiment of the female ideal in New York high society; she is pure, innocent, and unfailingly polite. However, instead of these qualities making May more attractive to Archer, Archer worries that May's innocence makes it difficult for them to relate to one another and he fears that her perfect exterior masks an emptiness inside. On several occasions, May is shown to be more complex than the innocence she performs for society: she is occasionally frank with Archer about her perception that he is not as loyal to her as he could be, and she manipulatively tells Ellen that she's pregnant before she's sure this is true. Despite these glimpses of complexity and deception, May lives her life as she is expected to, following all the conventions that Archer has come to distrust. May is often likened to the goddess Diana, who is known for her virginity and her skill with a bow and arrow. Besides the superficial similarities between May and Diana (May wins an archery contest at the Beauforts' house), comparing May to a goddess emphasizes her role as a type—an embodiment of certain virtues—rather than as a genuine and complicated woman. She is also associated with lilies-of-the-valley, a white **flower** that represents her innocence.

Mrs. Catherine Mingott – Mrs. Mingott is the elderly matriarch of the Mingott family and grandmother to May and Ellen. She has always been unconventional and she built her house far away from the rest of the wealthy families, expecting that they would follow her. She's considered to be a powerful force in society, but everyone must come to her to socialize, as she can no longer leave her house due to her obesity. She proves herself to be a good friend to Archer and Ellen.

Mrs. Adeline Archer – Newland Archer's mother. Mrs. Archer represents the staunchly traditional view of the world. She never questions society's rules and she laments the changes that she sees happening around her. Although she hardly ever goes out into society, she likes to know all the latest gossip and often invites Sillerton Jackson to dine so that he can keep her updated.

Janey Archer – Newland Archer's rather socially awkward sister, Janey has never married and seems to have no prospects of marriage. As a virgin, she must keep up appearances of innocence, and her presence in a room often causes guests to cut off their conversation just before it turns to topics not considered delicate enough for her ears. However, she often betrays her interest in these more scandalous topics and she acts as a comic element in the narrative. She is very close with—and similar to—her mother, Mrs. Archer.

Mrs. Welland – May's mother and Mrs. Mingott's daughter. Mrs. Welland holds very traditional views of the world and, as such, she trains her daughter to be unassailably innocent. Mrs. Welland wants most of all to avoid scandal and unpleasantness, and she works hard to keep her daughter from being exposed to anything that might damage her social standing or marriage prospects. The relationship between May and Mrs. Welland is meant, more generally, to represent the relationship between mothers and daughters in New York high society.

Mr. Welland – May's father. Mr. Welland is an invalid—or, at least, he believes himself to be. He focuses almost exclusively on his supposed illness and he drags his family to St. Augustine every summer for his health. He doesn't want to be bothered with anything in the least troublesome or scandalous, and, in this way, he embodies the general society policy of avoiding unpleasantness at all costs.

Dallas Archer – Newland Archer's eldest son, with whom he takes a trip to Europe at the end of the book. Dallas, born twenty-six years after Archer's affair with Ellen, represents the new generation of New York society, much less bound by convention than Archer's peers. Dallas is an architect—a profession that older generations of high society would never have pursued—and he is about to marry Beaufort's daughter, which would have been considered scandalous in years past. Dallas's life shows the new possibilities for post-Gilded Age New Yorkers, and his happiness suggests that these changes are positive.

Medora Manson – Medora is one of Mrs. Mingott's daughters and Ellen's aunt, who became Ellen's guardian after the deaths of Ellen's parents. Medora is one of the most eccentric members of society and she is considered one of the reasons that Ellen has such an unconventional view of the world. Medora has been married and widowed multiple times, and she always seems to be in danger of making another foolish marriage. She travels frequently, returning to New York periodically to buy successively smaller houses, and when Ellen moves to Washington, Medora lives with her.

Mr. Sillerton Jackson – Mr. Jackson is one of the prominent members of New York society and he prides himself on knowing everything about everyone else in New York society, particularly scandals of the past and present. Mrs. Archer sometimes invites him to dinner to learn the latest gossip. He lives with his sister, Sophy.

Julius Beaufort – Mr. Beaufort is an English banker who has frequent affairs, most prominently with a prostitute named Miss Fanny Ring. Most of society doesn't quite trust him because he's a foreigner of uncertain origin and he's prone to disregarding their rules. He tries to court Ellen, but she spurns

him, despite the fact that she feels he's one of the only people who understands her perspective on the world. Due to shady business dealings, Beaufort's bank eventually collapses, causing many of society's families to lose money and thrusting him and his wife out of society.

Mrs. Regina Beaufort – Mrs. Beaufort is married to Julius Beaufort. People would look down on her for this, but she was born into a prestigious family, and this heritage bolsters her in society no matter what her husband does. When Mr. Beaufort's bank collapses, she insists on standing by him, which many people think is foolish. Ellen, however, sympathizes with her and shows her great kindness.

Mrs. Louisa van der Luyden – Mrs. Archer's cousin. She and her husband, Mr. Henry van der Luyden, are two of the most powerful influences in society. However, they're quite shy and they prefer to remain in seclusion at Skuyterkill, their estate on the Hudson. Louisa and her husband are very similar and always consult each other before making any decisions. They like Ellen and they help bring her into society when other families are snubbing her.

Mr. Henry van der Luyden – Mr. van der Luyden and his wife, Mrs. Louisa van der Luyden, are two of the most powerful influences in society. However, they're quite shy and prefer to remain in seclusion at Skuyterkill, their estate on the Hudson. Henry and his wife are very similar and always consult each other before making any decisions. They like Ellen and they help to bring her into society when other families are snubbing her.

Lawrence Lefferts – Lefferts is considered the utmost authority on "form" in New York society. He's a fashionable, good-looking young man who likes to think that he sets an example for other young men to follow. However, his insistence on members of society following certain rules of fashion and public behavior is largely an act that he uses to cover up the frequent affairs he conducts outside his marriage. In this way, Lefferts represents the worst hypocrisy of New York society.

Ned Winsett – Winsett is one of Archer's few intellectual friends, and he is part of the artistic set rather than part of high society. Winsett tried and failed to support himself through literary writing, and now, bitter at his inability to follow his passion, he works for a women's magazine. His perspective is very different from that of most of the people Archer knows, and he suggests that Archer go into politics.

M. Rivière – A French schoolmaster whom Archer meets in London. Archer finds him intellectually engaging, but May thinks him too socially inferior for them to associate with. He's considering moving to New York for the intellectual life which he doesn't realize is nonexistent there. Later, Archer discovers that M. Rivière is also the secretary who helped Ellen escape her husband, and with whom she is rumored to have had an affair. Though Count Olenski sends M. Rivière to convince Ellen to return to him, M. Rivière begs Archer not to let Ellen do so, as he believes the Count to be a brute.

Dr. Agathon Carver – A friend of Medora Manson, Dr. Carver runs the Valley of Love community, which is a fictionalized version of the numerous experimental communities in New England in the late nineteenth century. These groups shunned the traditional values of society and even advocated free love. Thus, Dr. Carver represents an alternative to the confinements of society at which Archer and Ellen chafe. However, Dr. Carver's community is never represented as a particularly alluring or realistic option.

Mrs. Lemuel Struthers – Mrs. Struthers throws Sunday parties to which she invites intellectuals and artists. These parties aren't considered proper for members of high society to attend, and Mrs. Struthers is considered "common" because her husband made his money through the shoe polish industry. Ellen shows her lack of understanding of society's rules by attending Mrs. Struthers's parties for a taste of the artistic side of New York.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Sophy Jackson – Sillerton Jackson's maiden sister, who lives with him. She helps him gather all the gossip of society.

The Duke of St. Austrey – A British aristocrat to whom the van der Luydens are distantly related. He comes to visit them and causes a stir with his disregard for the rules of New York society. His attitude represents the relative liberalism of European society as opposed to the strictness of Americans.

Mr. Letterblair – The lawyer who is Archer's employer. He subscribes to traditional moral values and asks Archer to convince Ellen not to divorce her husband.

Miss Blenker – Archer runs into the young Miss Blenker when he goes to the Blenkers' house to see where Ellen is living in Rhode Island. Miss Blenker tries vaguely to flirt with him.

Nastasia – Ellen's maid.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

INNOCENCE VS. EXPERIENCE

As suggested by its title, *The Age of Innocence* focuses on New York society's stubborn insistence on a blinding and damaging pretension of innocence. In many ways, this performance stems from

society's avoidance of scandal at all costs, and it often amounts to characters pretending that they don't understand things that they actually understand completely.

In particular, New York society insists that women remain innocent and pure. Women have long been valued for purity and scorned when they fall from this ideal, particularly through sexual experience. In the society of the novel, innocence is a woman's foremost virtue, and May Welland embodies this ideal. She leads a sheltered life with little knowledge of the world beyond what her mother sees fit to tell her. As a result, she comes rather unprepared to her marriage with Archer, making him feel that they'll never be able to really relate to each other or have honest, meaningful discussions.

However, it becomes clear that May's innocence is partly an act. For example, Archer eventually realizes that she knows of his feelings for Ellen, and she has intentionally made it impossible for him and Ellen to run off together. Even so, May never acknowledges what she knows or what she's done; instead, she maintains the illusion that Archer has successfully concealed his affair. This is what society demands, and she never strays from its path.

Although the characters don't directly discuss women's virginity, the idea of innocence is intimately connected to it. First and foremost, in order to preserve their innocence, women can't know about topics surrounding sexual desire, marital infidelity, or divorce. May's purity of mind is represented by the **lilies-of-the-valley** that Archer always sends her; these flowers are white, a color traditionally associated with virginity. Archer perceives that women are trained to preserve their innocence so that their husbands can have the pleasure of stripping them of it, but he notes that, realistically, this doesn't make for a happy marriage either for husbands or wives.

As May's character foil, Ellen Olenska represents experience, the opposite of innocence. For one thing, she's already married, and thus she is no longer a virgin. Furthermore, she's seen far more of life than any of the other female characters of her age: she has struggled in her marriage and has escaped from it, and she has traveled widely, both of which make her wise. Although Archer is initially irritated by the negative social repercussions of Ellen's lack of innocence, it soon becomes one of the characteristics that most attracts him to her. Ellen's experience allows Archer to meet her as an equal, whereas he has to hide parts of himself to protect May and he often feels that he can't have sincere discussions with her.

Published in 1920 but set in the 1870s, this novel also comments on the supposed loss of innocence occasioned by World War I, which ended in 1918. By focusing on the rampant hypocrisy of New York society, Wharton suggests that the prewar United States may not have been as innocent as it seemed then. Additionally, the characters in this book seem particularly foolish to a world looking back to the 1870s through the lens of a devastating global war, as the characters' lives are focused on little more than keeping up proper appearances to sustain the approval of those around them. In this way, the title, *The Age of Innocence*, can refer both to a time when New York society prized innocence above all else, and to a time when society was laughably ignorant of the horrors of the more complicated world to come.

THE FAILURE OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is the central institution of New York society. It is considered to be a commercial and social bond that ensures the continuation of prominent families and their fortunes, rather than a personal arrangement that can realistically bring happiness and fulfillment to a couple. Wharton's depiction of marriage as a flawed institution that can cause misery and ruin lives is tragic in light of how much power the institution of marriage has over the lives of New Yorkers.

New Yorkers pride themselves on not having arranged marriages, as some Europeans do. However, in a society uniquely fixated on social status and making advantageous connections, the notion that a New Yorker can freely choose his or her spouse is not strictly true, as New Yorkers must choose based on an onerous list of qualifications, such as class and family reputation. Marriage is culturally almost required, and once married, couples must maintain the appearance of matrimonial harmony no matter what unhappiness or extramarital affairs may ensue. In society's eyes, it's more important to uphold the image of traditional marriage than to find realistic solutions for the many problems inherent to marriage.

Just as New York society is built around the institution of marriage, Wharton structures her novel around marriage. The story opens as Archer and May become engaged, and it moves through their wedding and subsequent experiences as husband and wife. At the beginning of the book, Archer idealizes marriage, believing himself to be thoroughly in love with his fiancée and imagining their future domestic bliss, with Archer acting as May's protector and she as his supporter. However, he quickly begins to realize that the rules of society have set him and May up for failure; since unmarried women are expected to be innocent of all worldly knowledge, May lacks the experience, flexibility, and freedom of judgment that are necessary to a successful partnership in marriage.

Ellen Olenska has a very different story of marriage to tell, one that emphasizes its prison-like quality. She wed a Polish nobleman who has ill-treated her in ways never fully described (and perhaps more terrifying for their vagueness). She has escaped her husband with the help of his secretary, with whom she's rumored to have had an affair. Clearly, marriage has failed

her, but in the eyes of society, she has also failed the institution of marriage by fleeing. Ellen flouts convention first by leaving her husband, but even further by considering divorcing him. While divorce may be legal and possible, it's certainly not acceptable to New York society, in part because it signals such an utter failure of the institution upon which everyone is expected to structure their lives. With divorce spelling social scandal, marriage truly becomes a trap from which there is no full escape short of death. In one chilling scene, Archer does consider the freedom that his wife's death would give him.

Thus Wharton presents marriage as a destructive institution premised on a lie. Because marriage is culturally mandatory, those within its grip are often forced to commit immoral acts of betrayal in order to fulfill their desires. Characters such as Lawrence Lefferts and Julius Beaufort have frequent affairs that their wives either don't know about or pretend not to know about, and because such affairs are so common, they are more or less accepted, as long as they don't become obvious enough to create a scandal. Though Archer doesn't approve of these affairs, he eventually finds himself engaging in one. He feels, as everyone does, that his case is different and somehow more excusable. The fact that so many characters resort to affairs proves that their marriages were unfulfilling. In turn, the affairs further disintegrate the marriages, as the men lie to their wives and the women feign ignorance of their husbands' disloyalty.

Even though Archer's marriage may be said, from an outsider's perspective, to be successful (he and May remain together, they have children, and Archer's affair with Ellen is never consummated), Archer's perspective shows that his marriage endures out of convenience and a respect for convention, rather than out of love. The marriage also endures because May, not as innocent as she seems, lies to Ellen to make her end her relationship with Archer; May says that she's pregnant before she knows for sure whether she is. Thus, the continuation of her marriage is based on deceit. In fact, Archer never feels entirely satisfied with his marriage, and he is stuck with the dull, uninspiring sameness of a life that he has dreaded throughout the book. Marriage itself fails the characters by trapping them in its confines for the duration of their lives, with no acceptable route by which to find happiness.

THE RULES OF SOCIETY

In this novel, New York high society is governed by a vast array of social rules that dictate almost every aspect of its members' lives. These rules almost always go unspoken, and generally, the need to actually spell them out means that someone has shamefully transgressed them (as Ellen Olenska does). New York society wants, above all, to avoid scandal and the headache that goes along with it, and these rules aim to safeguard all people from any unpleasantness.

As Wharton describes it, the social code revolves around "form," "taste," and "family." "Form" spans questions of fashion and it dictates that everyone in high society conform to certain standards of action and dress so that no one particularly stands out from the crowd. However, form seems to explicitly deal only with outward appearances; it is unconcerned with any hypocrisy flourishing underneath.

"Taste" is regarded as presiding over and dictating "form." Taste seems to deal more broadly with what it is and isn't proper to do, particularly in matters involving sexual relations. Taste relates to the society's obsession with innocence; characters cannot let on through any action or way of dressing that they are not perfectly ignorant of everything regarded as taboo. For example, Ellen wears a dress to the opera that is judged to be in bad taste because it's too low-cut.

"Family" acts as a unifying principle in New York, as people are expected to exhibit loyalty to their relations above all, and the families frequently intermarry, which consolidates loyalties and connections. Families must do their best to keep their members in line with society's rules, but they must also present a unified front when one of their members does transgress "form" or "taste"—in other words, in the face of scandal. For example, though the Wellands and the Archers don't entirely approve of Ellen's way of life, they band together to help her when other families socially reject her.

At the beginning of the book, Archer lives unquestioningly by society's rules and he even prides himself on his knowledge of how to navigate them. If he has toyed with transgression, as in his affair with the married Mrs. Rushworth, he has done so in the socially accepted way and he has never gone too far, nor rejected the system as a whole. However, throughout the course of the story, Archer begins to doubt the wisdom of these rules. He realizes that they set men and women up for failure in marriage, and that they prevent people from interacting with each other in any sincere or honest way. Overall, social rules make his life dull, monotonous, and dissatisfying. Archer also questions society's rules in a way that can be considered feminist. He pronounces that women should be free to do as they like without fear of estrangement, and he comes to see the value of divorce. He perceives that society doesn't allow women to develop as whole people, but instead carves them into its stilted ideal.

Ultimately, Archer is forced to fall back into line with society in order to avoid being a complete scoundrel by abandoning his pregnant wife. Once Ellen leaves, he lives a more conventional life than that he had hoped; he watches society change around him, but mostly declines to participate in these changes. In the last chapter of the book, however, Wharton shows that in Archer's older age New York society has loosened up, and the new generation is constantly acting in ways that would have been considered unacceptable in Archer's youth. Wharton suggests that social rules aren't correct just because they're

traditional, and neither are they set in stone, even if they seem to be. Sooner or later, progress will wipe away the most foolishly constricting customs, even if change comes at the price of innocence.

AMERICAN VS. FOREIGN

Although Edith Wharton was American, she spent the majority of her last twenty-four years living in France, and *The Age of Innocence* presents a strong critique of the way Americans thought of Europeans prior to World War I. The New Yorkers in this book are generally quite suspicious of Europeans, who embody American fears about loose morals and cultural decadence. Americans think it's a shame when their own people marry foreigners, they're quick to judge Julius Beaufort because he's British, and—even though Ellen Olenska grew up in New York—high society regards her as a foreigner since she's lived abroad for so long.

Ellen does, in fact, act more like the American stereotype of a foreigner than like a typical New Yorker; she has more liberal ideas about the proper way of conducting one's life, she hungers for good conversation about art and music, and she even constructs certain English phrases the way a French speaker would. If New York society hesitates to think well of foreigners, then Archer's attraction to Ellen—essentially a foreigner—increases as he more deeply questions the mandates of New York society. Ellen's foreignness means that she doesn't inherently understand or respect New York the way that Archer does, and as Ellen unwittingly oversteps social boundaries, Archer becomes more aware that these boundaries are arbitrary and even damaging to the lives of New Yorkers. In a way, Ellen can be seen as an embodiment of the political impact of Europe around World War I (when the novel was written); she causes conflict in New York and challenges the status quo, but her perspective is necessary to progress.

No matter what the characters think, Wharton portrays Europe as a more artistic, intellectual place than New York, which, coming from a writer, is obviously a recommendation of the continent. Archer thinks that Ellen must find New York dull after the lively intellectual scene she's used to in Europe, and when M. Rivière suggests that he might move to New York to find such a scene, Archer warns him that he won't find what he's looking for in New York. Indeed, unlike today's New York, New York of the 1870s seems to be a cultural desert. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is spare in its treasures, and most of Archer's circle doesn't know or care enough to have discussions about literature and art. The artists and writers of New York live in an area considered almost slum-like by the upper class, and they're looked down upon. In Europe, the upper classes invite artistic people to their gatherings as honored guests, but in New York, fashionable people shun Mrs. Struthers for holding parties that include artists and dancing.

Though New Yorkers travel in Europe relatively often, they seem to remain mentally and socially in New York as much as possible. Mrs. Archer and Janey focus on the landscape when they travel, avoiding exposure to such things as art and architecture that actually provide windows into foreign culture. They also avoid socializing with Europeans, feeling that looking up people to whom they have connections would be an improper imposition that would reflect badly on Americans in general. In fact, Mrs. Archer and Janey remain steadfastly isolated on their travels unless they run across someone whom they already know intimately from home.

Wharton seems to frown on the kind of cultural isolation she portrays, as it contributes to the New Yorkers' closed-minded prejudices. She certainly doesn't glorify foreigners—Beaufort and Ellen's Polish husband are both scoundrels—but she does suggest that Americans might benefit from a closer connection with Europe. Wharton also criticizes New York's lack of interest in art and literature. Significantly, this book was written just after World War I, which the United States hesitated to enter due to its isolationist policies. Wharton seems to argue in favor of the United States abandoning its sense of superiority and engaging more fully with the rest of the world. In fact, certain aspects of the book can be read as an allegory of foreign policy, in which the destructive social and cultural isolationism of New York demonstrates the foolishness of America attempting to remove itself from world affairs.

CHANGE AND PROGRESS

As Wharton is writing about a period approximately fifty years before her own time, her retrospective view of the 1870s lays bare all of the changes that have come about since then—even the very title, *The Age of Innocence*, suggests that the story takes place during a definable period that's now over. This sense of change over time is magnified by the central conflict of the novel: Archer and Ellen chafing against the social rules of their era, trying to change them, and failing to do so quickly enough that they can benefit from the results. Ultimately, Wharton gives a complex judgment on the value of change; while she seems to advocate caution in seeking change too quickly (it's important, she suggests, to first discern which aspects of society are good and should be kept and which are harmful), Wharton's novel emphatically argues that change is inevitable and progress is to be lauded.

In *The Age of Innocence*, New York society is naturally resistant to change, as its cornerstone is tradition; in the eyes of the strictest adherents to society's rules, change can only ever mean destruction. Mrs. Archer, in particular, is known for lamenting the ways in which she sees society changing around her, believing that all changes are for the worse. The changes she abhors most often involve people being accepted into society whom she thinks are not refined enough or don't have the family heritage to justify their inclusion, such as Mrs.

Struthers. Mrs. Archer perceives these people to be dangerous to the fundamental values of high society, but in reality, their different perspectives often lead to progress. Wharton suggests, then, that the future will perceive social change as positive, even though high society perceives it as negative in the moment.

Throughout the bulk of the novel, Wharton portrays changes both in individual characters and in society as a whole, suggesting that the former will eventually cause the latter. The most notable change is Archer's gradual broadening of mind under Ellen's influence, but events such as Beaufort's bank failure also modify the dynamic of society, forcing new perspectives on conservative people. For much of the book, however, society's rules are so stifling that even the major changes exert great influence on only one or two people—for example, the Beauforts are the only ones whose lives are entirely transformed by their bank failure, while everyone else grapples with the fallout only as much as their closed-mindedness allows. The last chapter of the book, however, presents a very different situation. Because this final chapter takes place twenty-six years after the bulk of the novel, Wharton is able to show how all of the small stirrings of change, which seemed to have little momentum, have actually gathered strength over time to transform society in a larger way. For example, in his youth Archer lamented the lack of artistic life in New York and the lack of diversity in career options, but in the last chapter, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is filling with treasures and the young men can do as they please with their careers.

In this final chapter, many of the rules that made Archer and Ellen so miserable have slackened; people have real pursuits to focus on and don't care so much about policing their neighbors' lives. This softens Wharton's criticism of society by implying that society always had in it whatever was necessary for this change to gradually occur. She seems to suggest that not only change, but progress—change for the better—is inevitable given enough time. Though this knowledge can't lessen the pain of Archer and Ellen's thwarted love, it can provide hope that their tragedy doesn't have to be repeated.

Wharton also conveys a sense of changes not limited to New York high society, particularly in terms of technological advances. Technologies such as the telephone and electric lighting seem unimaginable to Archer in the 1870s, but they're perfectly normal both in the later setting of the last chapter, as well as to Wharton's readers. These technological changes that affect the entire world help Wharton show that societal changes, too, aren't confined to New York high society—humanity as a whole inevitably progresses over time, no matter how hard short-sighted people fight to stop it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FLOWERS

In this book, flowers are used to represent the opposition between innocence and experience. May is always carrying white flowers, usually lilies-of-the-valley. In fact, Archer sends her a bouquet of these flowers every day of their engagement. White is traditionally symbolic of purity and virginity, and the lilies-of-the-valley act as a reminder of May's state of innocence about sexual and worldly matters. The association between lilies-of-the-valley and May is strengthened by the flower's scientific name, *maialis*, which translates to "of or belonging to May." However, lilies-of-the-valley are also highly poisonous, which implies that May's innocence, though beautiful in the eyes of society, can ultimately be more harmful than beneficial. Ellen Olenska, on the other hand, is associated with the yellow roses that Archer sends her. Though he considers sending them to May, he thinks their color is too strong for her, suggesting that they fit better with Ellen's boldness and experience of the world. May and Ellen act as contrasting characters throughout the book, and their differences are symbolized by the flowers Archer gives each of them.

WEDDING DRESS

May's wedding dress represents, rather obviously, the state of her marriage with Archer. It's customary for brides to wear their wedding dresses a few times in the years immediately after their weddings, and May wears hers to the opera on the night that Archer decides to tell her he's leaving her. On the way home, just before Archer tries to be honest with May about his feelings for Ellen, she catches her wedding dress in the carriage door, and it tears and gets dirty. Thus, throughout the following scene, in which Archer does not confess his betrayal to May, but instead finds out that Ellen is moving to Europe, May's torn and soiled wedding dress represents the destruction of their marriage, even though the marriage is still intact according to law and custom.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Age of Innocence* published in 1997.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ ...[A]n unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was molded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole.

Related Characters: Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with the main characters at a performance of the opera *Faust*, and this scene presents the characters' values and desires so that the reader can track their changes over the course of the story. One of the most important standards established here is Archer's unquestioning acceptance of the social rules that guide his every move (such as wearing a flower in his buttonhole). The story's central tension is Archer's chafing against these very rules and navigating how to live the life he desires within the confines of society, so establishing that he was once utterly conventional is central to the story.

In this passage, Wharton not only makes it clear that Archer blindly follows the dictates of society, but also that she doesn't think society's rules come from any place of supportable logic or necessarily deserve to be followed. She portrays this absurdity through her explanation of why the opera is performed in Italian. Though she calls it "an unalterable and unquestioned law," she makes it clear that it's ridiculous for the opera to be translated into Italian when it was originally in German and no one interacting with it is actually Italian. She directly connects this absurdity to the absurdity of all the other rules that Archer accepts unquestioningly.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ "Living together? Well, why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn't? I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots."

He stopped and turned away angrily to light his cigar. "Women ought to be free—as free as we are," he declared, making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences.

Related Characters: Newland Archer (speaker), Ellen Olenska, Mr. Sillerton Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

A few days after Ellen's appearance at the opera starts all of New York society talking about her, Sillerton Jackson comes to dinner at the Archers' house. When Mr. Jackson accuses Ellen of impropriety in living with the secretary who helped her run away from her husband, Archer finds himself unexpectedly defending this scandalous choice.

In this passage, Archer makes the declaration, truly radical not only in the 1870s, but even in the 1920s (when the book was published), that women should have the same freedoms men have. He does so apparently without thinking, and his ability to think this way when society is condemning Ellen for acting as though she's free shows that he has the capacity to rebel against society, as he will try to do later on. He also attacks the double standard that denounces a wife for being unfaithful to her husband when her husband has already been unfaithful to her. By approving of Ellen's choices, Archer shows himself to be primed for falling in love with her independence.

Chapter 6 Quotes

What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a "decent" fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal?... He reviewed his friends' marriages... and saw none that answered, even remotely, to the passionate and tender comradeship which he pictured as his permanent relation with May Welland. He perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess; and with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other.

Related Characters: May Welland, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

After Archer declares that women should be free, he begins to think about his impending marriage to May and all of the ways in which it could go wrong. Most of these ways actually proceed from the fact that May, as a woman, isn't free, but instead has been taught to be innocent and moldable to his instruction. Archer isn't innocent; he's already had an affair with a married woman, but he's never supposed to tell May about any of that. In fact, he's supposed to pretend he's as innocent as she is. As a result, his marriage will begin with a foundation of deception and inequality.

If everyone in Archer's world—particularly the women—is a product of their society, and Archers' friends' marriages aren't what he wants his own to be, there's no reason to think that his will be any better than theirs. Essentially, Wharton argues here that society's dictates make marriage a fundamentally flawed institution that's doomed to failure.

But when he had gone the brief round of her he returned discouraged by the thought that all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product. Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent, it was full of the twists and turns and defenses of an instinctive guile. And he felt himself oppressed by this creation of a factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow.

Related Characters: May Welland, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Archer becomes engaged to May, he begins to analyze her character and worry about his impending marriage. May is defined, first and foremost, by her innocence, but Archer realizes that this innocence has been trained into her by her relatives, whom society has convinced that carefully-guarded innocence is necessary to her marriageability. If this innocence isn't natural, but it affects every aspect of May's character, then May herself becomes little more than an artificial construction of society's ideal.

Furthermore, Archer understands that the whole point of girls being innocent is to make them marriageable—in other words, to please men by giving them the (often hypocritical) relief of knowing that their wives' pasts are unblemished, and also to give men the pleasure of being the ones to break their wives' innocence, both in terms of their virginity and their exposure to the world. But Archer recognizes that this innocence, besides being unnatural, is not what he wants. He wants a wife with wisdom and experience—someone like Ellen. It's a bizarre trap in which he finds himself, then, that May has been made innocent essentially to please him, and yet it's her innocence that prevents him from loving her.

Chapter 8 Quotes

The Countess Olenska was the only young woman at the dinner; yet, as Archer scanned the smooth plump elderly faces between their diamond necklaces and towering ostrich feathers, they struck him as curiously immature compared with hers. It frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes.

Related Characters: Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Archer is at the dinner that the van der Luydens are holding for the Duke of St. Austrey, which also serves to show their approval of Ellen after much of society has snubbed her. Ellen is constantly characterized as different from other women in New York society, and in this particular moment,

Archer sees her difference as a matter of maturity.

Having lived in more liberal European society and endured her husband's mistreatment of her, Ellen has far more worldly experience than these New York women, who, despite their age, still live as though they're innocent girls, ignoring everything unpleasant about the world. This experience is part of what attracts Archer to Ellen; she is someone from whom he can learn as an equal, rather than someone like May, whom he's expected to teach the ways of the world. At the same time, Ellen's experiences have scarred her, and Archer can detect her trials in the very expression of her eyes.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!

Related Characters: Ellen Olenska (speaker), Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

On Archer's first visit to Ellen's house, she asks him to help her understand New York society. He says that her female relatives will help her, but she's frustrated that they can't bear to hear about anything unpleasant.

Ellen has lived a more difficult life than most people in New York society, since she's had to deal with her cruel and unfaithful husband as well as the judgment that rained down on her when she left him. Now her relatives, who have done their best never to think about such trials as these, refuse to let her even talk about her past with them. As a result, she's forced to pretend that she's someone she isn't—that she is as innocent as they are and hasn't faced the challenges she has.

The answer to Ellen's question is that New Yorkers don't, in fact, want to know the truth. Instead, they want to live in the rosy world of their imagining and simply pretend that unhappiness doesn't exist. This is part of the reason Wharton calls their time "the age of innocence," though once their contentment is scraped away, the reader discovers that it is all, in fact, pretense.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ "Sincerely, then—what should you gain that would compensate for the possibility—the certainty—of a lot of beastly talk?"

"But my freedom—is that nothing?"

... "But aren't you free as air as it is?" he returned. "Who can touch you? Mr. Letterblair tells me the financial question has been settled—"

"Oh, yes," she said indifferently.

"Well, then: is it worth while to risk what may be infinitely disagreeable and painful? Think of the newspapers—their vileness! It's all stupid and narrow and unjust—but one can't make over society."

Related Characters: Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer (speaker), Mr. Letterblair

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Letterblair, Archer's employer, sends him to convince Ellen not to get a divorce. His main argument, as seen in this passage, is that society will judge Ellen harshly for getting a divorce, particularly if her husband spreads rumors that she had an affair with his secretary, as he has threatened to do.

Not yet married, Archer doesn't understand the prison that marriage can be. He thinks that Ellen is free simply because she is living a continent away from her husband and has plenty of money. Ellen's attitude, however, shows that marriage is a state of mind as much as a physical condition. As long as she knows that she's married to a man who's been cruel to her and she can't become romantically involved with anyone else, she's not free.

Archer presents the point of view that society has taught him. Society wants, above all, to avoid unpleasantness, and so he believes that this pitiful goal is more important than Ellen's freedom. Although he's open-minded enough to see that society's response to Ellen's divorce would be wrong, he doesn't think that it can change, much less that he or Ellen could contribute to its change. Finally, it's ironic that Archer is the one to convince Ellen not to get divorced, when he'll soon be wishing that he could marry her himself.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ No, it was worse a thousand times if, judging Beaufort, and probably despising him, she was yet drawn to him by all that gave him an advantage over the other men about her: his habit of two continents and two societies, his familiar association with artists and actors..., and his careless contempt for local prejudices.... [T]he circumstances of his life, and a certain native shrewdness, made him better worth talking to than many men, morally and socially his betters, whose horizon was bounded by the Battery and the Central Park. How should anyone coming from a wider world not feel the difference and be attracted by it?

Related Characters: Julius Beaufort, Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Returning to New York from Skuytercliff, Archer thinks about the relationship between Ellen and Beaufort. Even though Ellen fled to Skuytercliff to get away from Beaufort's attentions, Archer worries that she's still drawn to him because he's so different from other men in New York.

This passage highlights the contrasts between New York and Europe. Beaufort is British, and the characters constantly associate Europe with a superior artistic culture and social standards that are more lax than those of New York. These are essentially the qualities that Archer worries will attract Ellen to Beaufort, because she has also lived in Europe and seems to miss these aspects of it.

At the same time, Archer is unwittingly listing all the qualities that attract him to Ellen—she's been exposed to broader social circles, craves art and culture, and often disregards New York's social rules. Thus, his musings on Beaufort actually reveal his own yearning for exposure to a wider, freer world where people care about worthwhile topics. It also shows his burgeoning disdain for New York society and its rules.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Traces still lingered on [her features] of fresh beauty like her daughter's; and he asked himself if May's face was doomed to thicken into the same middle-aged image of invincible innocence.

Ah, no, he did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience!

Related Characters: May Welland, Mrs. Welland, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

When Archer runs off to St. Augustine to join the Wellands, he has a conversation with Mrs. Welland in which she thanks him for convincing Ellen to give up the idea of divorce. Examining her face, Archer sees the similarities between May and her mother, and worries that May will follow in Mrs. Welland's footsteps.

May is characterized throughout by her innocence, which society sees as a virtue, but Archer begins to see as a vice. Though May is still young, her mother is not, and yet Mrs. Welland has retained the same innocence that May has now. Wharton describes her innocence as "invincible," suggesting that it can never give way to experience; in fact, she guards it fiercely, refusing to hear about anything that might destroy her view of the world.

As Archer perceives, innocence should only be allowed to last so long. By persisting, it has made Mrs. Welland close-minded and boring. May will indeed retain her innocence in the same way her mother has, and it will contribute to Archer's dissatisfaction with their monotonous marriage.

❝ I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong—an unfairness—to somebody else.... What sort of life could we build on such foundations?... I've wanted to tell you that, when two people really love each other, I understand that there may be situations which might make it right that they should—should go against public opinion. And if you feel yourself in any way pledged... pledged to the person we've spoken of... and if there is any way... any way in which you can fulfill your pledge... even by her getting a divorce... Newland, don't give her up because of me!

Related Characters: May Welland (speaker), Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

While Archer is visiting the Wellands in St. Augustine, he and May have a surprising conversation in which May admits that she thinks Archer is hastening their marriage because he isn't sure of his love for her. She believes he's still in love with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth, and she offers him his freedom if this is the case.

This is essentially the only time when May ever surprises Archer by doing something unconventional. It's shocking enough that she would talk to him directly about such a sensitive topic, but her endorsement of love and loyalty, whether it requires breaking off an engagement or getting a divorce, is truly radical in a society that puts adherence to its rules above everything else. This scene suggests that May might be more complicated than Archer thinks her, but she proves unable to practice for herself the unconventional line that she preaches here.

May and Ellen are opposite characters in almost every way, but May actually expresses here exactly the argument that Ellen will use to justify keeping her distance from Archer. Neither woman can bear the thought of gleaning happiness from another person's pain, and they know that any love based on betrayal of another person will always be tainted.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ I felt there was no one as kind as you; no one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard and—unnecessary. The very good people didn't convince me; I felt they'd never been tempted. But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world outside tugging at one with all its golden hands—and yet you hated the things it asks of one; you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before—and it's better than anything I've known.... I can't go back now to that other way of thinking. I can't love you unless I give you up.

Related Characters: Ellen Olenska (speaker), Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

When Archer visits Ellen's house for the last time, he finally confesses his feelings for her. She admits that she's in love with him, too, but she insists that they can't do anything about their feelings.

At her request, Archer has helped Ellen navigate the rules of New York society, but he now discovers that he has convinced her of their importance too well for his own good. In a world where the women are kept pristinely innocent and pure, Ellen, who isn't innocent, needed to hear Archer's perspective in order to understand why she should conform to society's expectations.

Ellen believes that Archer has faced the same temptations to vice that she has, and yet he has rejected them, preferring the rewards of a moral life. He has shown her that a purer happiness comes from morality than from pleasure. The supreme irony of the situation is that this realization will now keep her from giving in to her desire for him. In fact, part of Ellen's attraction to Archer comes from his fundamental morality, so having the affair, in compromising his morality, would destroy just what she loves about him. In effect, their love is doomed before it begins.

❝ She tore it open and carried it to the lamp; then, when the door had closed again, she handed the telegram to Archer.

It was dated from St. Augustine, and addressed to the Countess Olenska. In it he read: "Granny's telegram successful. Papa and Mamma agree marriage after Easter. Am telegraphing Newland. Am too happy for words and love you dearly. Your grateful May."

Related Characters: May Welland (speaker), Mr. Welland, Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Catherine Mingott, Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113-14

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first time that May thwarts the relationship between Archer and Ellen. They have just admitted their feelings for each other, and Archer has said that he can still break off his engagement since May refused to move the wedding up. Ellen doesn't think this is an honorable option, but it becomes impossible anyway as soon as this telegram arrives.

This telegram, and the situation in general, are full of painful irony. It's all due to Archer and Ellen that the wedding is going to be so soon, as they pushed for the Wellands to move it. Additionally, the contrast between May's elation and the misery this telegram will cause Archer and Ellen is harsh. Finally, May expresses her gratitude to Ellen for convincing Mrs. Mingott to telegram the Wellands, not knowing that she has every reason to curse Ellen, who has just begun to ruin May's relationship with Archer.

Archer and Ellen's relationship will be often be thwarted just when it seems it might succeed, and the painful irony present in this scene will similarly become a theme.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ A stormy discussion as to whether the wedding presents should be "shown" had darkened the last hours before the wedding; and it seemed inconceivable to Archer that grown-up people should work themselves into a state of agitation over such trifles.... Yet there was a time when Archer had had definite and rather aggressive opinions on all such problems, and when everything concerning the manners and customs of his little tribe had seemed to him fraught with worldwide significance.

"And all the while, I suppose," he thought, "real people were living somewhere, and real things happening to them..."

Related Characters: Newland Archer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during Archer's wedding, when he sees known adulterer Lawrence Lefferts judging everyone's "form" at the wedding and realizes how much his own opinions on such matters have changed since the time before he met Ellen.

Though Archer used to care about all of society's rules for how things should be done, falling in love with Ellen has made him realize how trivial society's concerns are. To people with nothing else to worry about, it seems like a matter of great importance whether Archer and May should show off their wedding presents, but Archer can't care less now that he's immersed in the tragedy of marrying the wrong woman.

In a way, this passage can be seen as a reference to the difference that experience makes; the innocent New Yorkers think that matters of etiquette have a great importance, but Archer and Ellen, who have opened themselves up to experience, know that other, painful things make far more of a difference in the world. Archer's eyes have been opened, and he now sees the falsity of New York society.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ In all the rainy desert of autumnal London there were only two people whom the Newland Archers knew; and these two they had sedulously avoided, in conformity with the old New York tradition that it was not "dignified" to force oneself on the notice of one's acquaintances in foreign countries.

Mrs. Archer and Janey... had so unflinchingly lived up to this principle... that they had almost achieved the record of never having exchanged a word with a "foreigner" other than those employed in hotels and railway-stations.

Related Characters: Janey Archer, Mrs. Adeline Archer, May Welland, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

On Archer and May's extended European honeymoon, they stay in London before returning home, but try their best not to interact with anyone else, particularly foreigners. New Yorkers generally try to avoid foreigners in any context, but it seems particularly ridiculous to do so when actually in a foreign country. Part of the point of traveling to a foreign country is supposed to be immersing oneself in the culture and learning about the people who live there, as this expands one's view of the world and increases understanding among countries, particularly in a time before modern technologies such as the Internet.

However, New Yorkers purposely isolate themselves from anyone unlike them, keeping their minds closed against different perspectives on the world. It's likely that this contributes to their strict adherence to their own traditions. Furthermore, Wharton might be gesturing to the United States' isolationist policy at the beginning of World War I, when the country believed it could simply ignore the conflict in Europe just the way that the Archers ignore the very existence of foreigners, even when in their midst.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen.... It had seemed so exactly the place in which he ought to have found Madame Olenska; and she was far away, and even the pink sunshade was not hers...

Related Characters: Miss Blenker, Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

While in Rhode Island, Archer goes to the house where Ellen is staying. Seeing a parasol, he thinks it belongs to Ellen, but when its owner returns, she is simply Miss Blenker, who tells him that Ellen has gone to Boston.

Archer is affected by this incident beyond his disappointment at not seeing Ellen; he takes it as a failure of intuition that seems to reflect on his larger destiny. His life with May represents routine and boredom, and he sees himself following in the footsteps of every other man of society. Ellen, on the other hand, represents difference and excitement, but now that he has finally taken a decisive step to seek Ellen out, it has failed. He feels that marrying May has trapped him in a monotonous future from which he cannot escape.

Archer essentially can't deal with the divide between reality and his romantic imaginings, and this scene might give a clue into the novel's ending, as well. Archer's imagined meeting with Ellen has filled him with excitement, and the return to reality in this passage is painful. At the end of the book, he chooses to preserve the scene his imagination creates rather than ruin it with reality, as happens here.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ "*Is* it a bad business—for May?"

He stood in the window... feeling in every fiber the wistful tenderness with which she had spoken her cousin's name.

"For that's the thing we've always got to think of—haven't we—by your own showing?" she insisted.... "[I]f it's not worth while to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery—then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one there took account of them—all these things are a sham or a dream—"

Related Characters: Ellen Olenska (speaker), May Welland, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

When Archer finds Ellen in Boston, they take a boat out to an inn. They realize they're both still in love with each other, but Ellen insists they can't have a relationship.

Ellen's first priority, here and always, is May's happiness, perhaps because she feels bound to protect the innocence and virtue that May has and that she herself lacks. She refuses to let Archer do anything that will hurt May. Ironically, she feels that Archer has shown her that the best part of New York society, in contrast to European society, is that it doesn't stand for its members being hurt by others' carelessness or impropriety. She herself has been disillusioned and made miserable by her husband's infidelities, and she has decided that the only point of living is to prevent others from going through what she's gone through. Thus, she constantly puts May first, perhaps contributing to Archer's increasing dislike of his wife.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ [P]unctually at about this time Mrs. Archer always said that New York was very much changed.

Observing it from the lofty stand-point of a non-participant, she was able... to trace each new crack in its surface, and all the strange weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables. It had been one of the amusements of Archer's youth to... hear her enumerate the minute signs of disintegration that his careless gaze had overlooked. For New York, to Mrs. Archer's mind, never changed without changing for the worse....

Related Characters: Newland Archer, Mrs. Adeline Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

The social season in New York begins in November, and at this time Mrs. Archer takes stock of the status of society. Mrs. Archer is very much a traditional adherent to society's rules, and so she sees any change as a threat to the traditions she worships.

Archer usually doesn't notice the changes that his mother does, because they're very small. In fact, they're so small that they seem insignificant to him, but all of these changes that are trivial on their own eventually stack up to a very significant alteration in society's fabric. Since Wharton is critical of society and tradition overall, these small changes are essential to note because they are the agents of greater societal change that will overthrow the conventions that bind Archer and Ellen to unhappiness. Though Mrs. Archer deplores the changes she sees, they will eventually provide hope in a largely tragic story.

Chapter 30 Quotes

"As she sat thus, the lamplight full on her clear brow, he said to himself with a secret dismay that he would always know the thoughts behind it, that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion.... Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and mysteriously, by the very process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland.

Related Characters: Newland Archer, May Welland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190-91

Explanation and Analysis

The evening that Archer meets Ellen at the station and brings her into New York, he sits with May in their library and ponders his suffocating marriage. Archer often dreads stagnation in his life, and this passage demonstrates that to him, May represents that very stagnation that he wants to avoid.

May is, first and foremost, a predictable person. This is largely due to the fact that she's entirely a product of her society, and since Archer knows all the intricacies of this society, he knows exactly how she'll react to everything. She has little imagination or desire to overcome what society has taught her.

May lived with her parents and was constantly under their influence until her marriage to Archer, so she naturally mimics their way of going about being married. The Wellands prize their own innocence above most things, and thus are easily ridiculed. Archer certainly has never wanted his marriage to look like theirs, but May doesn't have enough worldly experience to make it anything else. It doesn't seem that they can be happy this way.

"Catch my death!" he echoed; and he felt like adding: "But I've caught it already. I *am* dead—I've been dead for months and months."

And suddenly the play of the word flashed up a wild suggestion. What if it were *she* who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! ...He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling. Yes, May might die—people did: young people, healthy people like herself: she might die, and set him suddenly free.

Related Characters: Newland Archer (speaker), May Welland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

The evening that Ellen returns to New York, he and May find themselves in the library together, and May worries when Archer opens a window and lets the cold air in. Archer realizes that being married to May feels like being dead, which is not a good sign for their marriage, to put it lightly.

But even worse than feeling dead himself, Archer reaches a climax of desperation by finding hope in the idea of May's death. This passage shows, perhaps better than any other, the failure of marriage. Marriage is supposed to be based, first and foremost, on mutual love, but it has made Archer feel so trapped that any love he had for May has evaporated. Though he doesn't hate May herself, he hates being tied to her enough to wish her dead.

More than anything, Archer wants his freedom. The obvious solution is divorce, but he hardly even considers this option because it's so socially unacceptable. Wharton implicitly argues for making divorce more common; surely it's better

for people to be separated but happy than to be married and waiting for each other to die.

"Poor May!" he said.

"Poor? Why poor?" she echoed with a strained laugh.

"Because I shall never be able to open a window without worrying you," he rejoined, laughing also.

For a moment she was silent; then she said very low, her head bowed over her work: "I shall never worry if you're happy."

"Ah, my dear; and I shall never be happy unless I can open the windows!"

Related Characters: Newland Archer (speaker), May Welland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191-92

Explanation and Analysis

After Archer brings Ellen across the ferry to Mrs. Mingott's from Jersey City, he feels particularly trapped while talking to May in the library. He opens the window for some air, but she worries he'll get sick from the draft. Their consequent interaction, in which the open window represents the freedom and variety that Archer craves in his life, demonstrates their fundamental incompatibility.

Archer needs this freedom and variety, and yet freedom also means the danger of questioning society, which puts his marriage in danger. May, in her unimaginative innocence, refuses to go against society's rules, and, more particularly to this situation, her security and social position as a woman depend on Archer not leaving her. Though she wants Archer to be happy, his happiness essentially depends on something that she cannot provide him. If Archer needs the metaphorical window open, but May can't live with it open, then they are simply not meant to fulfill each other in the way that a married couple should.

Chapter 33 Quotes

And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers.... He guessed himself to have been, for months, the center of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything....

It was the old New York way, of taking life "without effusion of blood"; the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scenes," except the behavior of those who gave rise to them.

Related Characters: May Welland, Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

May insists that she and Archer hold a farewell dinner for Ellen before Ellen returns to Europe. At this dinner, all animosity against Ellen is set aside, and everyone pretends that they've adored her all along. Although there have been clues for many chapters that certain people might suspect Archer and Ellen of an improper relationship, Archer has largely ignored them in his preoccupation with Ellen. Now, however, he suddenly realizes that all of society believes them to have been carrying on a full-blown affair.

Society responds to this belief in its typical way, ignoring the affair in the belief that its consequences only have to exist if people acknowledge that the affair is going on. Undoubtedly, people have discussed the situation in select company and decided how best to orchestrate its finish, but in public, everyone agrees to feign ignorance. This is how the innocence of society works; all that's needed is the outer appearance of virtue.

In this passage, Wharton gives one of her most scathing appraisals of high society, arguing that its members adhere to their unspoken standards at the cost of their integrity. Their refusal to face the unpleasantness of reality amounts to cowardice, as they drain life of its most vibrant aspects in the name of harmony. Sometimes it's necessary to face conflict in order to reach a sense of fulfillment.

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Only Mamma and your mother." She paused, and then added hurriedly, the blood flushing up to her forehead: "That is—and Ellen. You know I told you we'd had a long talk one afternoon—and how dear she was to me."

"Ah—" said Archer, his heart stopping.... "But that was a fortnight ago, wasn't it? I thought you said you weren't sure till today."

Her color burned deeper, but she held his gaze. "No; I wasn't sure then—but I told her I was. And you see I was right!" she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory.

Related Characters: May Welland, Newland Archer (speaker), Mrs. Adeline Archer, Mrs. Welland, Ellen Olenska

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

After the Archers' going-away party for Ellen, Archer decides once again that he has to confess everything to May and follow Ellen. However, before he can do so, May reveals that she's pregnant. This is the news that made Ellen decide to return to Europe and cut off her affair with Archer.

Every time Archer and Ellen try to find a way to be together, their efforts are thwarted and Archer's hopes dashed to pieces. This scene is the final, harshest example of this pattern, and thus the climax of the book. Now that May is pregnant, Archer can no longer consider leaving her; it's one thing to leave his wife, but entirely another to leave her with an unborn child. He is finally and inescapably trapped.

The bitterest part of this situation is that May essentially lied to make Ellen leave, a bold move that's unexpected coming from the virtuous May. There's no doubt that she did so on purpose—her blush and the victory in her eyes make it clear that she knows about the feelings between Ellen and Archer, and she has schemed to keep her husband by her side. It's impossible to condemn May for her lie, considering that Archer has been lying to her on an even grander scale.

However, the fact that she saved her marriage in this way confirms Wharton's condemnation of marriage as it exists in this society: May and Archer are now bound together with lies on both sides, and they will never acknowledge their deception. Just like New York society as a whole, their lives will be governed by a duplicity that gives the impression of normality by covering up the ugliness underneath.

Chapter 34 Quotes

And as he had seen her that day, so she had remained;... generous, faithful, unwearied; but so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change.... And she had died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own, and resigned to leave it because she was convinced that, whatever happened, Newland would continue to inculcate in Dallas the same principles and prejudices which had shaped his parents' lives, and that Dallas in turn (when Newland followed her) would transmit the sacred trust to little Bill.

Related Characters: Dallas Archer, May Welland, Newland Archer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Twenty-six years after May tells Archer she's pregnant, he sits in his library, looking at his first photograph of her, in which she looks just as she did in the garden in St. Augustine. She's now dead, but in life she proved herself to be just as Archer suspected early on that she would be.

May's innocence, which Archer began to dread during their engagement, has indeed endured throughout her entire life, just as her mother's did. Her example clearly shows that blind innocence does not create change; one must have realistic experience of the world in order to see how it might be improved. The structures of society were so fundamentally inculcated into May that she couldn't imagine a world without them, so when they fell away, she had no framework by which to conceive of a new order.

Furthermore, May believed that the world she grew up in would endure forever in its apparent perfection, with traditions passed down through families. The fact that Archer and their children no longer subscribe to the rules of society that May believed in so heartily shows that she has been left behind, and the world is changing.

"She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted."

Archer received this strange communication in silence.... At length he said in a low voice: "She never asked me."

Related Characters: Newland Archer, Dallas Archer (speaker), May Welland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

When Archer and Dallas go to Paris, Dallas makes it clear that he knows Archer was in love with Ellen, and he reveals what May told him on her deathbed. This disclosure shows that Archer's affair, though an act of terrible deception in his marriage, ultimately increased May's trust in him, because he proved himself willing to make great sacrifices for his family—specifically, giving up on being with Ellen.

Although Archer is moved by May's faith in him and her recognition of his suffering, his response is rather bitter. May did not, in fact, ask him to do anything. Instead, she forced the situation by lying to Ellen about her pregnancy, and Archer stayed with May because he couldn't leave her once she was pregnant. The way in which she went about gaining his sacrifice, as well as the fact that she never directly let him know that she understood the importance of what he had done, show that despite their long marriage, May and Archer's relationship remained forever restricted by an upbringing that taught them to avoid confrontation.

> "It's more real to me here than if I went up," he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other.

He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters.

At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel.

Related Characters: Newland Archer (speaker), Ellen Olenska

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

This is the closing passage of the novel. Archer's son, Dallas, has gone up to Ellen's apartment in Paris, but Archer stays on a bench below, imagining the scene inside. This is his chance to reunite with Ellen after years apart, and there's no longer anything to keep them from being together, yet he decides to walk away. There's a chance that Archer could finally get his happy ending if he made a different decision, but he prefers to preserve his image of Ellen as it has survived through the years. This way, he doesn't have to face the prospect of another disappointment or go through the rollercoaster of falling in love with her all over again.

In an earlier scene, Archer opened the window of his library in an attempt to feel less trapped by his marriage with May and feel that he might escape to Ellen. Now, as Ellen's servant closes her shutters, he also closes once and for all that possibility that Archer opened by going to Paris. Archer decides that after all these years, his love will live on best inside himself.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

On a January evening in the 1870s, the opera singer Christine Nilsson is singing in *Faust* at New York's Academy of Music. Though a new and grander opera house is going to be built, fashionable New Yorkers still come to the Academy because it's traditional and has good acoustics. The audience has come in private carriages or in Brown *coupés*, which allow the passengers to take the first one in line after the show, rather than waiting for their carriage to arrive.

The opera Faust deals with cursed love and loss of innocence, making it a fitting background for the beginning of this story. Notably, New York society is immediately characterized by its adherence to tradition in the form of the Academy of Music, and yet change is on the horizon with the construction of a new opera house.

Newland Archer arrives late. He could have made it on time, but punctuality isn't fashionable, and he cares terribly about being fashionable. Besides, he enjoys thinking about a pleasure to come more than actually partaking of it. He arrives at a perfect moment, when Madame Nilsson is singing, "He loves me—he loves me not." In fact, she's singing in Italian, though it's a French opera with German text in translation. This is simply a convention of opera that seems as normal to Newland Archer as all the other conventions of his life.

Since Archer will change immensely over the course of the book, it's important to note his state at the beginning—he's characterized, first and foremost, by his adherence to the conventions of his society, even if they're somewhat ridiculous. Archer's preference for thinking about pleasure rather than partaking in it helps explain his decision at the end of the novel not to enter Ellen's apartment.

Madame Nilsson sings her line triumphantly, gazing up at the male lead playing Faust. Archer looks at the audience opposite him, where he sees the box of Mrs. Mingott, who is too obese to attend. Her daughter and daughter-in-law are there, and a girl in white is watching from just behind them. As she watches Madame Nilsson sing, she blushes and touches a bouquet of **lilies-of-the-valley** on her knee.

This first view of May, the girl in white, establishes much of her character. Her innocence is symbolized by her flowers, and this innocence has been nurtured and protected by the women from her family with whom she is sitting. Notably, May is wearing white, the color of maidenly purity.

Archer turns back to the stage, which has been decorated beautifully even by the standards of European opera houses. The foreground is covered with green cloth. Beyond that are rose trees with giant pansies beneath them. Madame Nilsson stands in this garden listening to M. Capoul (who plays Faust) and pretending not to understand what he really wants as he tries to coax her into a villa. Archer looks back to the girl in white, thinking that she doesn't understand the opera and treasuring her purity. He imagines them reading *Faust* together by Italian lakes on their honeymoon. That afternoon May Welland, the girl in white, agreed to marry him, and his imagination is running wild.

Wharton begins already to compare American culture with European culture, implying that Europe usually has finer cultural landmarks, though New York's Academy is an exception. In this scene of the opera, Madame Nilsson feigns a lack of sexual knowledge. May, too, is expected to act innocent, though much of her innocence is still genuine. Archer will not always be so glad of this fact as he is now. For now, he dreams about peeling away this innocence and exposing the world to her by helping her understand this opera about vice.

Archer wants his future wife to be sociable and witty enough to match other young married women. It's fashionable for them to simultaneously attract and discourage men's attentions. Though he doesn't admit it, Archer also wants his wife to be similar to the married woman with whom he was infatuated for two years, though he doesn't want her to be as frail as that woman was. He never considers how unrealistic this female image might be, but he doesn't feel the need to analyze it, since he knows that all of the other New York gentlemen think in the same way. He thinks he's intellectually superior to most of these men, but as a group, they represent a moral authority that he obeys without question.

Even as Archer thinks approvingly of May's innocence, Wharton points out that Archer himself isn't innocent at all—he's already had an affair with a married woman. At this point, Archer doesn't think about the assumptions he makes; he accepts them blindly because society has taught him to do so. Wharton, on the other hand, is already suggesting that society has impractical expectations for women and wives that might cause difficulty in marriage.

Next to Archer, Lawrence Lefferts exclaims. Lefferts is an expert on "form," partly through having studied it carefully, but also because it comes naturally to him with his handsomeness. He carries the highest authority about all matters of fashion. He gives his opera glass to Sillerton Jackson. Archer realizes that Lefferts exclaimed because another woman has entered Mrs. Mingott's box, wearing a band of diamonds in her hair and a dress with an unusual cut. Mrs. Welland gives the woman her place in the front of the box.

"Form" is society's term for how to act in a respectable and fashionable way, and Lefferts represents the quintessential member of society who cares about little but keeping up appearances no matter what illicit activities he engages in. Ellen, entering the opera box, is unconventional from the first, contrasting with Lefferts. She wears a dress that no New Yorker would wear.

Archer's group turns to Mr. Jackson, who knows everything about New York families, such as who is connected to whom and the dominant characteristics of each family. He's also an expert on all the scandals of New York society for the last fifty years, but he never reveals this knowledge due to his sense of honor and the fact that being trustworthy helps him learn about more scandals. Archer's group waits with suspense for him to speak, and he says that he didn't think the Mingotts would have done such a thing.

The men's deference to Mr. Jackson displays the petty interests of society, as he can hold an important social place simply by keeping up with all the gossip. The group's amazement at the appearance of someone they don't recognize proves how insular high society is. From the first, Ellen is associated with an aura of impropriety that she'll never truly shake.

CHAPTER 2

Archer is feeling embarrassed to have everyone focused on the box where his betrothed sits, particularly since he momentarily can't figure out who the woman attracting attention is. Then he realizes that she's May Welland's cousin, Ellen Olenska, who recently arrived from Europe. Archer admires the Mingotts' willingness to stand by the odder members of the family, and he's glad that May is kind to Ellen Olenska in private. However, he's indignant that the Mingotts would bring Countess Olenska to the opera with them.

Here, Archer displays his conformity to the rules of society. While the Mingotts are expected to support members of their own family through whispers of scandal, Archer and his friends think their support should be approached carefully and doesn't need to extend to bringing Ellen out in public. This is just one of the hypocrisies of the society in which Archer lives.

Archer knows that the matriarch of the Mingotts, Mrs. Catherine Mingott, is quite daring. Despite initial social disadvantages, she managed to marry into the wealthy Mingott family, marry two of her daughters off to foreigners, and build a large, unconventional house. Mrs. Mingott's foreign daughters never come to see her, and she remains at home, enthroned in the house that proves her moral courage. Mrs. Mingott has never been beautiful, and some people say that she's been successful only because of her stubbornness.

Mrs. Mingott is established as a force that has thwarted the expectations of society. She is a woman who has risen above the limitations placed on her, though she has never truly rebelled against society, but only forced it to stretch its mind a bit. Her unusual background makes her a fitting champion of her granddaughter, Ellen, against the conventionalities of society.

Mrs. Mingott's husband died when she was young, but she went on boldly mingling with all kinds of people, both noble and socially questionable. Her reputation has never been doubted. Mrs. Mingott's husband's money was initially tied up after his death, and though she was able to get access to it, she still lives thriftily. In particular, her food and wine are of mediocre quality, much to her relatives' dismay. People continue to visit her in spite of this.

If marriage is a weakening and destructive influence in this novel, it is notable that Mrs. Mingott, one of the strongest characters, has lived for many years without a husband. Her social strength, however, also comes from her avoidance of any situation that might give her the taint of scandal—in other words, from following society's most important rules.

Archer turns back to the Mingotts' box. May Welland is the only one who looks the slightest bit aware of the significance of having Ellen Olenska there. Countess Olenska watches the stage, her dress revealing a bit more than is typical in New York. Archer hates few things more than people going against "taste," and Countess Olenska's dress shocks him. He doesn't like to think of May being under her influence.

Again, Archer displays his wholehearted belief in the value of propriety as defined by society. He and May seem united by their concern over Ellen's presence, making this one of the few times that Ellen will bring them together rather than tearing them apart. Archer also wants to protect May's innocence.

The men in Archer's box are talking about Ellen Olenska, who left her brute of a husband. Lefferts confirms that he was an awful womanizer and spent freely, but she ran off with the husband's secretary. The affair didn't last long, and one of her relatives retrieved her from Venice. The men think it's not right for her to be at the Opera, particularly with May Welland, but Lefferts attributes this bold move to Mrs. Mingott's influence.

Although the men sympathize with Ellen because her husband treated her badly, their sympathy is limited because they believe she became lovers with another man. They seem to think this impropriety is almost contagious, and the innocent May will somehow be spoiled by association with her.

As the act ends, Archer feels a sudden need to go to Mrs. Mingott's box and help May through her social difficulty. He hurries to the box, where he can tell that May understands why he's come. The fact that she can immediately understand this delicate matter makes him feel very intimate with her. Mrs. Welland introduces Countess Olenska, and Archer sits down next to May. He tells her quietly that he wants to announce their engagement at the ball that evening. She says he can do so if he can persuade her mother to let him, and he should tell Countess Olenska now, since he used to play with her when they were children.

Again, Archer and May connect over their inherent understanding of the social rules that Ellen doesn't know. Archer wants to announce their engagement immediately because it will allow him to publicly defend May and the Mingott clan, since everyone will know that he's about to become connected to the family. As the first of many ironies in Archer and Ellen's love affair, her appearance instigates the formal engagement of Archer and May.

Archer goes to sit next to Ellen Olenska, who reminds him that he was an awful child and once kissed her. Being here is making her think of everyone as she knew them when they were children. Archer is shocked that she's thinking of these honorable people in such a way, particularly when they're all judging her. She says she's been gone so long that she feels she's died and New York is heaven. To Archer, this seems a very disrespectful description.

That Ellen remembers the people around her as children gestures to the fact that Archer will eventually think Ellen's worldly experience and trials make her seem much wiser than everyone else. It bothers Archer that Ellen doesn't understand that people in New York are judging her; to Archer, this misunderstanding comes across as disrespect for New York society.

CHAPTER 3

Mrs. Beaufort always goes to the Opera on the night of her annual ball in order to prove that her servants are good enough to do everything without her. The Beauforts' house is one of the few with a ballroom, and the superiority of having such a room that is only used one day of the year makes up for any scandals in the Beauforts' past. The Beauforts are seen as somewhat common. Mrs. Beaufort was a South Carolina beauty related to some high society families, but her marriage to Julius Beaufort overruled these privileges. No one is quite sure who Beaufort is, though he came from England with recommendations from Mrs. Mingott's son-in-law.

The Beauforts are a prime example of how money can spare people the taint of possible moral impurities. Though money is not often discussed directly in this book, the adoration of the Beauforts' ballroom is a reminder that money is actually the basis of everything in high society. Finally, Beaufort is always recognized as a foreigner, which is often used to explain his actions.

Even so, Mrs. Beaufort somehow manages to run the most distinguished house in New York. She's essentially boring and lazy, but she dresses her beauty lavishly and everyone comes to her house. People say that Beaufort runs all of the domestic activities, but he acts perfectly carefree in the house. Despite a rumor that the international banking-house where he was employed in England "helped" him leave the country, people go to his house with a sense of social security and know they'll get better food than at Mrs. Mingott's.

The hypocrisy of New York society is evident in the fact that people don't really respect Mrs. Beaufort, and yet everyone comes to their house for the sake of socializing and good food. The rumors about Beaufort's shady professional dealings in the past foreshadow the failure of his bank later in the book.

When Mrs. Beaufort leaves the Opera after the third act, the audience knows that the ball will begin in half an hour. New Yorkers are proud to show the Beaufort house to foreigners. They have their own red carpet and awning, and they let ladies take their cloaks off in the hall instead of in the hostess's bedroom. The ballroom is at the end of a series of beautiful drawing rooms.

The New Yorkers' pride in showing off the Beauforts' house and customs to foreigners suggests that they feel a sense of inferiority to Europeans, and need to prove that they, too, are wealthy and socially refined. This insecurity might contribute to the New Yorkers' hostility towards foreigners.

Archer arrives fashionably late. After dawdling in the library with a few men, he joins the line of guests to be received. He's nervous that the Mingotts might go too far and bring Ellen Olenska to the ball. He knows this would be a terrible mistake, and he's feeling less inclined to defend her since speaking to her.

Archer's first interaction with Ellen has turned him off from her due to her nonchalance about New York society. He's worried most of all about keeping up proper appearances.

Mrs. Welland and May are standing by the ballroom door. Couples are dancing beyond them. May is holding **lilies-of-the-valley** and standing with a group of young people, to whom she is revealing her engagement. Archer wishes that she hadn't announced it in such a public place, because the matter is so close to his heart, but when May looks at him he can tell that she feels the same regret. Archer wishes that Ellen Olenska hadn't made this announcement necessary. The group congratulates him, and he takes May onto the floor to dance. He thinks how different life will be with her always beside him.

Archer and May seem to understand each other better at this point than at any other in the book, able to communicate volumes just by glances. This is likely because they both still subscribe unquestioningly to the same set of values. May is holding the white flowers that symbolize purity, drawing attention to the fact that she is a marriageable virgin. The book starts with the beginning of May and Archer's relationship, and it will trace its entire course.

When the dance ends, Archer and May go sit in the conservatory. They say how they wish the announcement hadn't had to be at the ball, but at least they're alone together. Archer is overjoyed to think that she'll always understand him. He says he wants to kiss her but can't, then he makes sure they're alone and does kiss her. He brings her to a less secluded sofa and takes a **lily-of-the-valley** from her bouquet.

This scene emphasizes the prudishness of New York and the social rules that guard a girl's innocence. By taking a flower from May after kissing her, Archer symbolically takes some of her innocence, a reminder that he will also take her virginity in marriage before long.

May asks whether Archer told Ellen of their engagement, and he realizes that he didn't. They debate which of them should tell her and decide that Archer must. He asks whether she's at the ball. May says that she decided not to come at the last minute because she thought her dress wasn't nice enough. Archer is very pleased with May's constant determination to ignore anything unpleasant. He thinks May knows exactly why Ellen really didn't come, but he'll never let May see that he knows Ellen has a bad reputation.

Archer thinks that Ellen isn't at the ball because she's aware of society's attitude towards her, but he will later find out that she's actually oblivious to the situation. Though he likes it now, Archer will eventually grow exasperated with May's dedication to ignoring unpleasantness (which is a tendency she shares with society overall). For the moment, however, he takes the same approach to Ellen's reputation.

CHAPTER 4

The next day, Archer, May, and their mothers conduct the proper betrothal visits. They go to Mrs. Mingott's house to receive her blessing. Archer is always amused to visit her. The house is decorated more frivolously than most houses in New York. Mrs. Mingott sits at the window, patiently watching for the society that she knows will come to her door. Though she lives in an unfashionable area, she's sure that stately houses will arrive there at any moment.

Mrs. Mingott claims some power in society by forcing everyone to come to her, particularly in such an out-of-the-way area of New York. She has the sense that she can set fashions, and though stately houses don't seem about to arrive in her neighborhood, she does have the ability to affect the way society thinks, particularly about Ellen.

Mrs. Mingott has grown immensely fat. She accepts her size and now, in old age, is hardly wrinkled. Her face and hands seem tiny in comparison to the rest of her. She wears a pin with a miniature portrait of her dead husband. She can no longer use the stairs, so she has made her sitting room on the ground floor, though this is not usually considered proper. Sitting there, guests can see into a bedroom, which calls to mind scandalous novels and seems to invite immorality. Archer thinks it's funny that she lives such an innocent life in this setting, but he's sure that if she'd wanted a lover she could have found one.

Mrs. Mingott seems to encompass a number of paradoxes. Ironically, she is physically almost immobile, but her mind is far more open to change than most of the characters are. The environment in which she lives seems vaguely scandalous, but she lives perfectly innocently. Though her husband is always present on the pin she wears, she never speaks of him, perhaps gesturing to the general falsity of marriage in this novel.

Everyone is relieved that Ellen Olenska isn't at Mrs. Mingott's while Archer and the Wellands are there. She's gone out, which seems improper at this hour, but at least they don't have to deal with the awkwardness of her presence. Mrs. Mingott is very happy with the engagement, which the family approved of even before it was official. She admires the modern quality of the engagement ring and compares it to her own. Archer says they're going to be married as soon as possible. Because it's proper, Mrs. Welland says they must get to know each other better first, but Mrs. Mingott says they should do it very soon.

The fact that Ellen can't even go out during the day without bringing judgment down upon herself shows how restricted women of this era are in their actions. The Mingott clan, including the Wellands, approve wholeheartedly of Archer as a conventional husband for May, as their marriage will unite two powerful families. Though it seems negligible now, the dispute over how soon they should marry will only become more important as time goes on.

Just as the guests are about to leave, Ellen Olenska enters, accompanied by Julius Beaufort. Mrs. Mingott welcomes him informally and asks for all the gossip from the ball. She and Mr. Beaufort have always gotten along well, and she wants to know why he invited Mrs. Struthers, who's been trying to enter New York society.

This scene establishes conflicts that will soon grow; Ellen's association with Beaufort becomes a point of contention, as does his approval of Mrs. Struthers, with whom most of society will not associate because they think her far too common.

While Mrs. Welland and May are putting their furs on in the hall, Archer says to Ellen Olenska that she must already know of his engagement, and that he couldn't tell her in the crowd at the Opera. She understands perfectly and says he should come see her sometime. In the carriage home, the group talks about Mrs. Mingott, but not about Ellen Olenska. Archer knows that Mrs. Welland doesn't think she should have been out and about with Mr. Beaufort, and Archer himself thinks it improper for Ellen to have invited him to visit her.

Archer's earlier failure to tell Ellen about his engagement suggests that he may already feel a subconscious attraction to her. Ellen doesn't hesitate to spend time alone with men, which invites censure from society, particularly because people believe she's had an affair in the past. Archer seems entirely unable to interact with her without thinking about all of the ways in which she's breaking the rules.

CHAPTER 5

The next evening, Sillerton Jackson comes to dinner at the Archers' house. Mr. Jackson and his sister Sophy, who lives with him, collect between them all the gossip worth knowing. Mrs. Archer is shy and doesn't entertain often, but she invites Mr. Jackson to dinner whenever she wants the latest gossip. Mr. Jackson prefers to come when Archer isn't there, since he sometimes seems to question the intelligence that Mr. Jackson brings. He also wishes that the Archers' food were slightly better, but the families to which the Archers are connected have always been devoted to travel, horticulture, and literature rather than food and money.

Though Archer does subscribe to society's conventions at this point in the book, his willingness to question Mr. Jackson's gossip and obsession with scandal indicates that, unlike his mother, he is able to remove himself from society's preoccupation with judging people. Wharton associates the Archers with a slightly more intellectual subset of society, which will make Archer more sensitive to Ellen's experience of New York as a cultural desert.

Mrs. Archer has been a widow a long time and lives with her son and daughter. Archer has the upper floor, while Mrs. Archer and her daughter Janey live together below, reading novels set in Italy. They read about peasant life for the descriptions of scenery, but they understand better the novels about people in high society. When they travel abroad, they always admire the scenery rather than the art or architecture. Mrs. Archer was born a Newland, and she and her daughter both have the tall, pale Newland look. They appear and act almost like sisters. Though they have similar mannerisms, Janey is more romantic and imaginative than her mother. They love each other and Archer deeply, and Archer is satisfied by the authority they give him in the house.

Mrs. Archer and Janey are portrayed as quite close-minded, in a way typical of New York society. They don't even try to understand anyone whose life isn't like theirs, and they likewise make no effort to appreciate art or architecture when they travel, which would help them learn about foreign cultures. Admiring scenery does not require thought or an expansion of the mind, but only an appreciation for natural beauty. As the only man in their immediate family, Archer is essentially the highest power.

Archer is sure that Mr. Jackson doesn't want him around at dinner, but he stays anyway. Everyone wants to talk about Ellen Olenska, and, since Archer's presence makes this awkward, he's curious to see how they'll deal with it. They begin by talking about the regrettable presence of Mrs. Struthers at the ball. They blame her invitation on Beaufort, whom Mrs. Archer has never trusted. Mr. Jackson claims that Mrs. Struthers came from a mine or a saloon. He hesitates to go on because of Janey's presence, but he says that Lemuel Struthers used her image to advertise his shoe polish and then eventually married her.

Now that Archer is engaged to May, he's considered to be connected to the Mingotts, so people have to be polite about Ellen while he's around. Mr. Jackson's comments about Mrs. Struthers make it clear that he thinks her background disqualifies her from any position in society; she has base origins, and no connection to old money or powerful families. Because Janey is supposed to be an innocent maiden, her presence limits talk of sexual scandal.


Mrs. Archer doesn't really care about Mrs. Struthers, so she turns the conversation to Ellen Olenska. She's very glad to have Archer safely engaged to May Welland, an advantageous match, particularly after his earlier obsession with the married Mrs. Rushworth. However, she's unhappy that Ellen Olenska's presence forced the couple to announce their engagement prematurely. Though Mrs. Archer was perfectly polite when they went to visit Mrs. Welland, Archer could tell she was worried that Countess Olenska would appear at any moment. Still, he and his mother have never discussed what they were actually thinking about, so they didn't discuss this, either. Archer doesn't mind hearing Ellen Olenska talked about in private at dinner, but he's already beginning to get bored of the subject.

It's notable that Mrs. Archer knows at least something about her son's affair with a married woman and obviously has not censured him harshly for it, though she certainly disapproved. On the other hand, she doesn't even want to see Ellen because of the taint of scandal on her. This is a prime example of the double standard by which women are judged far more harshly than men for their affairs. Archer and his mother are typical of everyone in New York society in that they never talk about their actual thoughts, but instead talk around or ignore delicate subjects.


Mr. Jackson is visibly dissatisfied with the food, and he remarks that Archer's grandfather loved a good meal. Then he says that Ellen Olenska wasn't at the ball, but Beaufort certainly knows her, as everyone saw them walking together just that afternoon. Janey wonders what kind of hat she wears in the afternoon, since at the opera she was wearing something that looked like a nightgown. Mrs. Archer remarks that it's good that Ellen Olenska didn't go to the ball, but Archer says she only stayed away because she didn't think her dress was fancy enough. Mrs. Archer and Mr. Jackson pity Ellen, implying that her fate was sealed when her guardian, Medora Manson, gave her too much freedom growing up.

Everyone is particularly quick to find fault with Ellen because her unstrict (and foreign) background makes them expect her to act in unacceptable ways. It's clearly bad for her reputation to be seen walking alone with Beaufort, who's a known womanizer. As Janey points out, even Ellen's clothing sets her apart from the crowd and seems scandalous to New Yorkers. The pity that Mrs. Archer and Mr. Jackson express is really just condescension: Ellen is a woman to whom they feel far superior.

Janey says that Ellen should have changed her name to Elaine to sound more Polish, but Mrs. Archer says the name is too conspicuous. Archer, however, argues that Ellen shouldn't have to hide just because she made a bad marriage. Mr. Jackson says there are rumors of worse, but Archer argues that the secretary with whom she's supposed to have had an affair helped her get away from her brutish husband, which is perfectly honorable. Mr. Jackson says Ellen intends to get herself a house, and Janey says she intends to get a divorce. Archer exclaims that she should, but Mrs. Archer stops this line of discussion because of the butler's presence.

Archer hasn't been feeling overly charitable towards Ellen, but faced with the petty disdain of his family, he suddenly begins to defend her. Even before he gets to know her, then, Ellen is causing Archer to react against the rest of society and consider matters in a different light. Wharton seems to poke fun at Mrs. Archer's stiff sense of propriety, as she mustn't let the butler hear them discussing such a scandalous thing as a divorce.

After dinner, Mrs. Archer and Janey go to the drawing room, where they work on embroidery. Meanwhile, Archer and Mr. Jackson smoke cigars in the library. Mr. Jackson remarks that the secretary didn't only help Ellen escape her husband, since they were seen living together a year later. Archer argues that there's nothing wrong with that, since her husband was a good-for-nothing. He says women should be as free as men, not thinking about the consequences of what he's said. Mr. Jackson says Ellen's husband must agree, since he's never tried to get her back.

It's customary in this time period and social milieu for men and women to socialize separately for a while after dinner. Outside of the more sensitive presence of the women, Mr. Jackson can reveal the more sordid details of Ellen's story. Archer makes quite a radical feminist statement for the 1870s; though this thought appears spontaneously, he will toy with it frequently in different forms throughout the rest of the book.

CHAPTER 6

After Mr. Jackson leaves, Archer goes to his study, which feels very welcoming. He sits by the fire and looks at a photograph of May, thinking that she is the type of girl society expects and thereby creates: innocent and depending on him to protect her. He's realizing more and more that marriage is a difficult thing. The debate around Ellen Olenska has been disturbing certain of his long-held beliefs. Though he said that women should be free, the fact is that men are far more willing to offer freedom to the "nice" women who will never actually take it, meaning that the old conventions remain in place. Now he has to defend Ellen's behavior, when if May, as his wife, were to behave similarly, he could condemn her in the eyes of church and state.

Already, Ellen's presence in New York is changing not only Archer's attitude towards society, but also his view of May as he begins to see how May is entirely a product of the society in which they live. Ellen's publicly disastrous marriage acts as a reminder that marriage isn't necessarily the ideal domestic harmony that society advertises, and Archer is beginning to recognize the power that men hold over women—effectively, the power of freedom or confinement. Even if women fight for their freedom, men eventually have to be the ones to concede it to them.

Archer worries that his marriage with May could go badly. They really hardly know each other, since it's his duty to conceal his past and hers to have no past to conceal. Besides, they might tire or irritate each other. None of his friends have marriages that he considers ideal. His ideal, in fact, requires May to have certain qualities of experience and freedom that she's been trained not to have. He fears that his marriage will become as unfeeling and hypocritical as those he sees around him. Lawrence Lefferts, for example, has frequent affairs while his wife remains ignorant and even blushes when someone implies that Beaufort might have a mistress.

Archer begins to recognize the way in which society's conventions poison marriage at its root. May has been raised to be marriageable, which means having a spotless past and little knowledge of the real world. Though Archer actually has sexual experience, he's supposed to pretend to her that he doesn't, meaning that they can never come to marriage as equals. Ironically, in order to have a successful marriage May needs the experience that society keeps from her in order to make her marriageable.

Archer's world is one in which the reality of a situation is never acknowledged, but only represented by signs. For example, Mrs. Welland knew why Archer wanted to announce the engagement at the ball, but she had to pretend that she didn't want him to. As a result of this system, girls such as May remain perfectly innocent and unprepared, and yet must suddenly become disillusioned as soon they're married.

New York society is inherently dishonest in the name of propriety. The ease with which its members pretend means that it's difficult to truly understand everything that goes on. May clearly has a disadvantage coming in to marriage if this system of ignoring reality has kept her blind to anything unpleasant for her entire life.

Archer is in love, but not passionately. He takes pleasure in many aspects of May, including the intellectual engagement that he's helping her to develop. She's loyal and brave and laughs at his jokes, but he's discouraged that her innocence is only the product of society. Humans are not naturally innocent, he believes, but devious. However, women create this unnatural purity in their daughters because men are supposed to want it just so they can have the pleasure of destroying it.

Archer seems to regard May as a sort of pet project, wanting to help her think in all the same ways he does. This isn't, after all, so different from what society has done to her. Interestingly, the girlish innocence which so harms women is produced in younger women by older women, constituting a destructive female inheritance that is, however, necessary for girls' marriage prospects.

Archer's thoughts are shared by most young men before their weddings, but unlike other men, Archer doesn't regret the fact that he can't offer May innocence of his own. He can only think that if he had been as sheltered as she, they would be doomed in life, and he doesn't see why she shouldn't have been allowed as much freedom as he. He's aware that his thoughts feel particularly pressing because of Ellen Olenska. It doesn't really seem like she should influence his life at all, but he feels that the risks of defending her have just begun.

May's innocence makes her a weak partner in marriage, placing more pressure on Archer, since he's been trained to understand the world much better. Despite his somewhat radical thoughts on women's rights, he himself is far from being liberated from society's confining influence—he dreads the effects of his decision to publicly defend Ellen. He can't even fathom a world in which he doesn't care what other people think of him.

A few days later, the Lovell Mingotts send out invitations to a formal dinner to welcome Ellen Olenska. The guests invited are only the most fashionable people of New York. Within two days, everyone except the Beauforts, Mr. Jackson, and his sister has refused the invitation. The notes carrying refusals don't even include the pretense of a previous engagement, and the insult is clear. New York society is so small that everyone knows which evenings people are free, so it's obvious that people are simply refusing to meet Countess Olenska.

The guests obviously know that the Mingotts will understand that they're insulting Ellen, meaning that they're making a bold statement: Ellen is not welcome in New York society. She has committed acts that simply are not acceptable, and people don't want to associate with her.

When Archer hears what has happened, he appeals to his mother, who eventually gives in and goes to see Louisa van der Luyden. People in New York society have long been cemented into unofficial ranks from which they barely move. At the bottom are the "plain people," who come from respectable families and have married into ruling families. Mrs. Archer says that the old traditions of rank are beginning to crumble. Above this group are families including the Mingotts and the Archers. Mrs. Archer tells her children that the newspapers are wrong about the existence of a New York aristocracy, or if it exists, neither the Mingotts nor the Archers belong to it. Their ancestors were just merchants. Only the Dagonets, Lannings, and van der Luydens can claim ancestors from the European aristocracy.

Now that Archer is engaged to May, he and his relatives have an obligation to defend May's family, including Ellen. While Mrs. Archer only discusses the ranks within high society, it must be remembered that only the wealthiest New Yorkers are members of high society, and the majority of even those who are wealthy don't qualify to be included in Mrs. Archer's rankings. She thinks she detects change in society that she sees as detrimental to its structure. The United States has never had true aristocracy; the idea is very European, and society's respect for people with aristocratic blood shows deference to European tradition over American. This is strange in the context of the novel, as society people in New York generally regard Europeans with suspicion.

The van der Luydens sit at the top of this highest rank, and the only ones who are prominent are Mr. Henry van der Luyden and his wife. Mrs. van der Luyden was originally a Dagonet, and her family fought in the British army. She and her husband still visit aristocratic relatives in England. They divide their time between a house in Maryland and an estate on the Hudson which belonged to the first Dutch colonial governor of New York. They rarely come to their house in the city. Mrs. Archer wishes Archer would come with her to visit Mrs. van der Luyden. She's only doing this because of his connection with May, and because everyone must stand together to preserve New York society.

Ironically, New York society sees Mrs. van der Luyden's family connection to the British army as a marker of respectability, even though they fought against American independence. Their house further links the van der Luydens to American colonialism, so that it seems like their authority over society and its traditions actually pulls New York back in time. Mrs. Archer believes that New York society is in danger of falling apart, but to her credit, she thinks that Ellen is less of a threat than people's refusal to receive her is.

CHAPTER 7

Mrs. van der Luyden listens silently to Mrs. Archer. Even if one knows that Mrs. van der Luyden is always silent and always kind to those she likes, her silence is still unnerving in the elegant drawing room. Her portrait on the wall faces that of an ancestress. She still looks just the same as she does in the portrait, though it was done twenty years before. Archer thinks of her as preserved in the airlessness of her faultless life. He likes her, but he finds her difficult to approach.

This introduction to Mrs. van der Luyden emphasizes her status as a relic of the past—she's linked to her ancestors and looks like she could still be living her life of twenty years earlier. She's almost like some immortal goddess of society and tradition to whom the Archers go to seek divine intervention in the problem of Ellen Olenska.

Mrs. van der Luyden never makes any decision without her husband's input. She and he are so similar that it's almost difficult to imagine them being separate enough to be able to discuss anything. Archer and his mother expect Mrs. van der Luyden to say she needs to talk the situation over with her husband, but instead she rings for a servant to summon him from his newspaper. The way she speaks of Mr. van der Luyden suggests that she thinks his every action is of utmost importance. Though bringing him in indicates that she thinks the situation is urgent, she pretends she's doing so because he'll want to see the Archers.

Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden are probably the best—and perhaps the only—example in this book of a happy, harmonious marriage in which husband and wife work together towards their common goals. However, they're so shy and retiring that Wharton hardly seems to hold them up as prime proponents of the institution of marriage. In the typical way of New York society, Mrs. van der Luyden talks around her real reasons for calling her husband in.

Mr. Henry van der Luyden enters the room and greets the Archers. They discuss the most convenient time to read the newspapers, Mr. van der Luyden saying that life is so rushed these days. At Mrs. van der Luyden's prompting, Mrs. Archer relates the tale of the Mingotts' snubbing, saying that everyone felt the van der Luydens ought to know, particularly since Archer is engaged to May. Then they sit silently, Archer in awe of the regal couple who are forced to wield social authority when they would rather live quietly and alone.

Similar to his wife, Mr. van der Luyden seems to appreciate the past more than the present, which he sees as hurried. The van der Luydens are obliged to get involved in Ellen's situation because they're related to the Archers, and Archer is about to become part of Ellen's family. The couple is perhaps better fitted than anyone to wield power in society, simply because they don't want this responsibility, and thus won't abuse it.

Mr. van der Luyden asks whether the situation is really Lawrence Lefferts's fault, and Archer says he's sure it is, because Lefferts has been having an affair with a postmaster's wife. Whenever his wife begins to suspect, he works up a show of indignation about other people's improprieties. Mrs. Archer and Mrs. van der Luyden exclaim that society is being ruined if the Leffertses have so much influence. Mrs. Archer makes the mistake of saying she wishes the van der Luydens went out more. They're very sensitive to the fact that they refuse all invitations when they come to town. Archer covers her blunder by pointing out that the van der Luydens are authorities in society.

Lawrence Lefferts is often held up as the prime example of society's hypocrisy, because he loudly condemns other people's actions to distract from his own. Mrs. Archer is often worried about the destruction of society, and she usually attributes it to the inclusion of people whom she thinks really shouldn't be included in society—in other words, society's exclusivity allows it to keep up its defining traditions. She thinks that the van der Luydens' influence would rectify the changes in society.

Mr. van der Luyden is unhappy about the situation because society should accept the decision of a family to support one of its members in a difficult situation. He realizes that Ellen Olenska is already distantly related to them, even before Archer's marriage. The van der Luydens communicate with a look. Mr. van der Luyden says that they would attend Mrs. Mingott's dinner if his wife's health allowed, but as they can't, they will invite Ellen to a dinner that they will be holding for the Duke of St. Austrey, who is arriving the next week. Mrs. van der Luyden will deliver the invitation herself. Mrs. Archer thanks them, and the Archers are shown out. Before long, everyone knows that Mrs. van der Luyden has invited Countess Olenska to dinner.

The principle of family coherence is one of the fundamental structures of high society, so family essentially has an authority that should trump that of outsiders who might want to judge Ellen. The van der Luydens can't break their policy of never going to parties when they're in the city. However, inviting Ellen to their dinner will show that they approve of her, and because they're so powerful in society, this should convince everyone else to accept Ellen as well. Thus, without saying a word to acknowledge the snub to the Mingotts, the van der Luydens will rebuke the rest of society.

CHAPTER 8

It's generally agreed that Ellen Olenska has lost her beauty. She first came to New York when she was about ten and very pretty. When her parents died, she was taken in by her aunt, Medora Manson. Medora was a wanderer and widow who often tried to settle down with a new husband or ward and always ended up selling her house of the moment in order to travel. Society indulged her because of her family connections, but people thought it a shame that Ellen only had Medora to take care of her. Medora didn't follow the rules of American mourning, and she dressed herself and Ellen improperly after Ellen's parents' deaths.

Women are supposed to attract men with their beauty and innocence, so the fact that Ellen is neither beautiful nor innocent, yet still attracts many men, suggests that convention doesn't understand the true nature of attraction. Ellen has never led a traditional life, and her unusual upbringing has predisposed her to flout society's rules. In many ways, she follows in the steps of her aunt, who has never really belonged in one place or been accepted by society.

Ellen's relations were quickly charmed by her precociousness and foreign talents. Medora Manson gave her an expensive but unconventional education. When Medora's husband died, she and Ellen left New York. Eventually society heard that she had married a vastly wealthy Polish nobleman. When Medora later returned to New York in dire financial straits, people thought it a shame that Ellen hadn't helped her. Then they heard that Ellen's marriage was a disaster and she was coming home to her family.

Although Ellen hasn't been to New York in a long time, people have been keeping tabs on her life from afar. Even ignoring her affair, Ellen has earned society's disapproval in multiple ways: she's married a foreigner, she failed to help a family member in need, and she has fallen short in a woman's most important occupation—marriage.

Archer thinks about Ellen's story as he watches her enter the van der Luydens' drawing room the night of their dinner. Though she's late and still putting a bracelet on, she doesn't seem embarrassed. As she pauses, Archer decides that she is, after all, still beautiful, partly due to her surety and sense of authority. He later hears that people are disappointed that she isn't more stylish; instead, she's quiet and simple, which isn't what society expected.

Not only is Ellen unconventional, but she doesn't even fit with society's idea of an unconventional woman. Moreover, she doesn't seem to realize how unconventional she is; she breaks the rules without understanding that she's doing so. Already, Archer sees a beauty in her that others miss.

Dining with the van der Luydens and a duke is a solemn and formal affair. New York society generally accepts noblemen with a distrustful snobbery, but because this duke belongs to the van der Luydens, he is received cordially. Archer finds these distinctions in society odd but endearing. The van der Luydens are using all of their fanciest china, and everyone is dressed most handsomely, if in an old-fashioned way. Though Ellen Olenska is the only young woman, she somehow looks more mature than any of the elderly women.

Because America doesn't have an aristocracy, New York society can't bow wholeheartedly to aristocrats, or it would always be acknowledging a foreign authority above its own—thus, its distrust of noblemen. Ellen seems particularly mature because she has so much more worldly experience than the older women around her, who are still as innocent as society demands that they be.

Though the Duke of St. Austrey is supposed to be the center of attention, he's almost invisible. His clothes are shabby, and he has a quiet and unassuming manner. After dinner, he and Ellen Olenska immediately become engaged in discussion, apparently unaware that each of them should have first talked with certain important guests. When they're finished talking, Ellen walks straight to Archer, despite the fact that etiquette requires her to sit in one place while men come to speak to her. She seems unaware of breaking the rules.

Since one might expect an aristocrat to have better etiquette than anyone else, the Duke's general ignorance of or disregard for propriety emphasizes the difference between New York society and European society, which seems not to be quite so obsessed with appearances. Ellen has also been living in Europe, so her mistakes can be attributed to the same source. Her actions also demonstrate an independence that women aren't supposed to have.

Ellen wants to hear about May. Instead, Archer asks her if she already knew the Duke. She says he used to come to their house frequently to gamble, but she thinks he's dull. Archer is both shocked and pleased at her daring to say such things, and he wants to know more about her life. She asks whether he's in love with May, and he says he has found no limit to his love. She seems surprised that their marriage wasn't arranged in any way, and he reminds her that Americans don't have arranged marriages. She's embarrassed at forgetting how much better everything is in America than where she's been. She wants to forget the past and become completely American again, because she feels that everyone is so friendly to her here.

While Archer is shocked at Ellen's comments about the Duke because society would regard them as improper, he already likes her disregard for what society expects of her, proving that he doesn't subscribe to the rules of his world as strictly as someone like his mother does. Ellen is still adjusting to being in the United States again, and she idealizes it greatly, thinking that it's a place of freedom, rather than recognizing that everyone is judging her. Even she regards herself as somewhat European, despite her American roots.

Ellen points out that May has arrived. Archer thinks that May, in her white and silver dress, looks like the goddess Diana. He points out that the Duke is already talking to May, so Ellen says he should stay with her, touching his knee with her fan. He thrills to her touch. Though he intends to stay, other men approach and he gives up his seat. Ellen says that she expects him tomorrow after five. Archer agrees, though they have not discussed seeing each other again.

Diana is a goddess known for her perpetual virginity, so Archer's comparison of May to Diana stresses her innocence that will never truly end, even with marriage. This image forms a contrast to Ellen, who lost her innocence long ago and seems to be flirting with Archer. For his part, he seems attracted to both of them.

Archer watches Lawrence Lefferts and his wife meeting Ellen Olenska, along with other couples who had refused to meet her at Mrs. Mingott's. The van der Luydens' power is apparent. Mrs. van der Luyden tells Archer that it was good of him to speak so long with Ellen, but she sent his cousin to relieve him. He smiles vaguely, and she says that May has never looked more beautiful.

Now that the van der Luydens have demonstrated their approval of Ellen, everyone else is following suit. Mrs. van der Luyden thought she was helping Archer by getting him out of talking to Ellen, when in reality he wanted to continue talking to her. This type of painful irony will forever mark their relationship.

CHAPTER 9

At 5:30 the next evening, Archer rings the bell of the house Ellen is renting. It's an odd neighborhood for her to be living in, as it's mostly inhabited by writers and artists. Archer knows a journalist named Ned Winsett who lives down the street. Ellen's modest house makes Archer think that her husband must have robbed her of her money.

Ellen's choice of neighborhood shows partly her disregard of convention, but also her attraction to the intellectual life. Furthermore, in Europe writers and artists are often part of society, so she's showing her European quality by deciding to live here.

Archer has had a dissatisfying day. He had lunch with the Wellands and wanted to go for a walk with May afterward to urge her to hasten their marriage, but when he hinted at this, Mrs. Welland pointed out how much there was to do before the wedding. They went on a round of family visits, Archer feeling like a trapped animal. He can hardly bear the idea of his dull life in the year before the wedding will occur. He realizes that they're visiting the families in alphabetical order, and they're only on D.

Archer begins trying to convince May to get married sooner right after he realizes that he is attracted to Ellen, proving that his motivations are not entirely pure—he doesn't trust himself. Archer is also starting to feel hemmed in by the traditions of his world and to recognize that his life isn't particularly interesting.

Archer meant to tell May that he was going to visit Ellen, but he never managed to. Besides, he knows May wants him to be kind to Ellen, so there's no need to tell her. He's curious about Ellen and her invitation. A maid opens the door and leads him to the drawing room, then she goes to find Ellen. The maid doesn't speak English, but when she returns Archer manages to speak to her in Italian and learns that Ellen is out.

Archer is already making excuses for seeing Ellen without his fiancée's knowledge, suggesting that he feels guilty about it, which means that, on some level, he recognizes his attraction to her. Ellen's Italian maid highlights Ellen's own foreignness.

While he waits, Archer examines the room, which is decorated unlike any room he's seen. Certain pieces he assumes Ellen has brought back with her. Archer is proud of his knowledge of Italian art, but the Italian paintings he sees here are unlike anything he knows. He now regrets not telling May of his visit, and he worries that she might come to visit Ellen while he's there. He thinks it odd that Ellen has forgotten him. The room's atmosphere makes his self-consciousness disappear, replacing it with a sense of adventure. He's impressed by the way Ellen has made the room seem foreign and romantic, and he tries to figure out what it is about the **roses** and the perfume that makes it seem so.

The way in which Ellen has decorated her drawing room emphasizes her difference from the rest of New York, particularly in her romanticism and love of art. Notably, she doesn't even display the kind of Italian art that Americans admire, but instead Italian art that Archer doesn't recognize, making it seem more purely foreign. The room also shows Ellen's creativity. Archer's worry about May appearing suggests that he's already thinking of the room as a place he would meet Ellen as a lover.

Archer begins to think about what May's drawing room will look like. Mr. Welland is already considering buying them a newly built house of greenish-yellow stone. Archer would have liked to travel and get a house later, but the Wellands are insistent. He already feels that he'll go through that door every evening of his life, but he can't imagine how May will decorate the interior. She'll probably imitate the Welland house. Archer only hopes he'll be able to decorate his own library.

Although Archer doesn't realize what he's doing, he's starting to compare May with Ellen and find May lacking. Furthermore, he's beginning to dread the sameness that he senses approaching him in married life, not only the sameness of his own routine, but also May's imitation of her parents' life. Archer is already trying to carve out a place—the library—where he can do as he likes.


The maid checks on Archer and leaves again. He's beginning to feel foolish and wonders whether he should leave. He hears a carriage on the street and, looking out the window, he sees Ellen Olenska descending from Julius Beaufort's carriage. When she enters the drawing room, she's unsurprised to see Archer. She asks what he thinks of her house, which she loves. Her family doesn't like it, but at least it's not as gloomy as the van der Luydens'. Archer is amazed to hear her say such a thing about the venerated van der Luydens, but he compliments her decorations. Most of all, she says, she likes being in New York and being alone in her house.

This is the second time that Ellen has been seen with Beaufort, making their relationship somewhat suspect by the standards of New York. Just as she did with the Duke of St. Austrey, Ellen doesn't hesitate to tell wicked truths about people who are supposed to be above insult. She also demonstrates her independence through her house, not only by liking living alone, but also by living here against her family's wishes.

Ellen reclines in a chair by the fire. Archer says he was worried she'd forgotten him. She says that Beaufort was showing her houses, as she's supposed to move since her current neighborhood isn't fashionable. Ellen thinks this is foolishness, but she wants to fit in with New York society and feel safe. Archer says sarcastically that New York is terribly safe. She says it's like being a little girl taken on holiday for being good. Archer is displeased, feeling that she's unaware of how narrowly she has escaped social ostracism.

Beaufort is already coming between Archer and Ellen, a trend that will soon become more marked. As Ellen has appeared to willfully flout convention, it's surprising to discover that she actually wants to fit in, even if it requires leaving this house that she so enjoys. Archer seems to simultaneously find New York a bit too safe for his liking and to want Ellen to respect the ways in which it can be dangerous.

Archer turns the conversation to the van der Luydens' party, but Ellen doesn't seem to understand how important it was. He says they're very powerful but rarely have guests. Ellen points out that they're powerful because they make themselves difficult to reach. Archer feels that she has struck them down incredibly easily, and he laughs. As tea arrives, Ellen tells him she wants help understanding society. He says that she's the one making him see things in a new light. He wants to tell her not to be seen driving with Beaufort, but the atmosphere of the room makes this seem ridiculous. He feels as though they're in Samarkand and he's looking at New York through the wrong end of a telescope.

As an outsider, Ellen manages to see the van der Luydens in a way that Archer, who has been raised to venerate them, never has before. She strips them of their power by recognizing its source. Ellen and Archer each have something that the other can use—Ellen has a fresh perspective, and Archer has an understanding of tradition. Already, Ellen is making Archer see his world in a different way, as though he's a foreigner like Ellen, and this vision makes society seem distant and trivial.

Archer points out that Ellen has plenty of people to advise her, and she says that her family is irritated that she wanted to live alone. He insists that her family can guide her. She's surprised to hear that New York is so complicated; she likes it for being straightforward. She says that only Archer and Beaufort seem to understand her. Archer feels it his duty to show her who Beaufort really is. He suggests that she shouldn't abandon the older women who want to help her, but she says that they refuse to hear anything unpleasant, and she can't stand pretending so much. She begins to cry. Archer tries to reassure her, fixated on the fact that he's just called her by her first name. May seems very far away.

Although Ellen is already changing Archer's perspective, he can't yet think for himself, but instead repeats what he's always been taught about the role of the family in a woman's life. For her part, Ellen is beginning to see that New York might not be the heaven she imagined. The stubborn innocence of the women around her makes Ellen feel alone in her troubles. She's far more genuine than most of these people, but they don't want her to be genuine. Archer's use of her first name is a familiarity that seems slightly too intimate.

The maid, Nastasia, announces the Duke of St. Austrey, who enters with an old friend of his named Mrs. Struthers who wants to meet Ellen. Both Ellen and the Duke seem unaware of how strange it is for him to have brought Mrs. Struthers. Mrs. Struthers says she wants to know everyone young and interesting, and she invites Ellen to hear a pianist play at her house the next evening. Ellen accepts with pleasure. Mrs. Struthers can't remember Archer's name and seems sure he's a diplomat. He leaves quickly.

Ellen and the Duke both occupy positions of importance in society, coming from old families. In contrast, Mrs. Struthers comes from new money and an uncertain background, making her unfit company for such important people. Furthermore, her failure to recognize Archer seems like an additional insult. However, Mrs. Struthers represents a love of art, and Ellen doesn't know or care that she shouldn't attend Mrs. Struthers's gathering.

Archer wishes that he had left earlier and not wasted so much emotion. Outside, his perspective on the world returns to normal. He goes to a florist to send May her daily bouquet of **lilies-of-the-valley**, realizing he forgot to do so that morning. He sees instead some yellow roses, but they seem too strong to send to May. On an impulse, he sends them to Ellen without any message attached.

Archer feels that he got overly invested in Ellen's life when she doesn't even care enough about fitting in to avoid Mrs. Struthers. His failure to send May flowers suggests an early unfaithfulness, and sending the bright roses to Ellen instead of May represents the difference between the two women—the difference between innocence and experience.

CHAPTER 10

The next day, Archer persuades May to go for a walk with him instead of going to church with her parents. Mrs. Welland lets her go because she's just convinced May of the necessity of a long engagement. The snow and blue sky make May particularly beautiful, and Archer is proud of her. She says she loves the fact that Archer remembers to send **flowers** each day rather than putting in a standing order. He admits that he sent Ellen roses, and May is glad, but she says that Ellen didn't mention it when she had lunch with them that day. Archer wants to tell her he went to see Ellen, but he doesn't in case Ellen didn't mention it to May. Instead, he turns to their own plans for the future.

Though nothing has actually happened between Archer and Ellen, Archer already finds himself omitting things about Ellen in his conversations with May, despite that May is completely supportive of his kindnesses towards Ellen. The fact that he feels at all odd about May knowing or not knowing that he went to see Ellen suggests that he feels his visit was somehow illicit, which means he must feel that he has been unfaithful to May in his emotions about Ellen.

May insists that their engagement isn't as long as some couples', and Archer wishes she would speak for herself instead of repeating what others say. He realizes that it's men's fault that women don't speak for themselves. Before long, he'll have to guide May to see the world for what it is, but he worries that she's been blinded for too long to ever face reality. He suggests they might travel together if they got married sooner. She says she would love to, but her mother wouldn't understand their acting unconventionally.

Archer is beginning to think of May more critically, though he recognizes that the faults he sees in her are due to the way society has molded her. May is an untainted example of what society makes women, and Archer is beginning to worry that she isn't fully equipped for real life. Even when Archer pushes her to act for herself, she insists that she must stick to convention.

May thinks Archer is original, but he realizes that they're both acting just the way everyone else does in their situation. He wants them to break away from the pattern that's been set, and she jokes that they could elope, taking his eagerness as proof that he loves her. She says they can't behave like characters in novels do, but she can't give a reason why. Finally she says it would be vulgar, and she is astonished when Archer questions how bad it would be to be vulgar. She changes the subject to Ellen's admiration of her ring.

To his credit, Archer realizes that he's really no more unconventional than May is. He has a sudden urge to be different, perhaps because of the perspective shift that he experienced at Ellen's house. May's comment that they can't behave like characters in novels is ironic and metafictional, since they are characters in a novel. This further calls attention to the constraints of society.

The next afternoon, Janey comes to Archer in his study. He's in a bad mood, fearful that he'll have the same routine every day for the rest of his life. He avoided going to his club on the way home from his job at a law office because he knew exactly how the discussion at the club would go. The men would talk about the Duke and about a high-class prostitute, Miss Fanny Ring, being seen in Beaufort's carriage. Archer can imagine Lawrence Lefferts exclaiming over society's ruin.

Now that Ellen has given Archer a taste of difference, he's no longer happy with the predictable future or the social group that he thought satisfied him before. Lawrence Lefferts is again characterized by his hypocrisy, as Archer knows Lefferts would readily condemn Beaufort's affair even though he has them himself.

Archer irritably pretends not to see Janey when she enters. His table is piled with books. Janey says that their mother is angry. Sophy Jackson has brought word that her brother is coming after dinner to give details. Exasperated, Archer demands she clarify what she's talking about, and Janey says that Ellen Olenska was at Mrs. Struthers's party the night before with the Duke and Mr. Beaufort. Archer is angry, but hides it. He says he knew she meant to go. Janey can't believe he didn't try to stop her, but he insists it's not his responsibility, dismissing the importance of family connections. He wants to say that nobody around them can deal with reality, but Janey is almost crying.

Archer is now becoming invested enough in Ellen's life to be angered by her actions, particularly by her association with Beaufort. Though Archer doesn't recognize it yet, he's jealous of Beaufort. Everyone is upset because Mrs. Struthers's gatherings are not seen as a proper place for Ellen to spend her time, since Mrs. Struthers isn't really a member of society. Archer, however, is under the influence of Ellen's perspective, and he sees the ridiculousness of his relatives' horror at Ellen's choices.

Janey says that the family has already been supporting Ellen—the van der Luydens even invited her to their dinner. Archer doesn't see any harm in that, but Janey says that the van der Luydens are so upset that they're going back to their estate on the Hudson. Archer finds his mother in the drawing room and announces that he thinks it's ridiculous for the van der Luydens to be so offended by Ellen's actions. Mrs. Archer thinks Mrs. Struthers's gatherings are scandalous because there's smoking, champagne, and French music. Archer implies that New York society isn't as interesting as London or Paris, but Mrs. Archer says that Ellen needs to respect New York's way of life.

Archer's family and the van der Luydens see Ellen's attendance at Mrs. Struthers's party as a betrayal of the van der Luydens' attempts to help Ellen make her way in society. Mrs. Archer's attitude makes it clear that Mrs. Struthers isn't only an outcast because of her background, but also because her parties are too radical and seem almost like European parties, which again associates anything foreign with scandal. Archer, however, suggests that New York might be lacking in some of the culture that Europe nurtures.

Mrs. Archer wants Archer to come with her to explain to Mrs. van der Luyden that Ellen is simply used to a different culture. However, Archer thinks it's all the Duke's fault, since he brought Ellen to Mrs. Struthers's. Mrs. Archer argues that the Duke is a stranger, whereas Ellen is really a New Yorker, and should know better. Archer doesn't think they need to defend her to the van der Luydens.

For the Archers, the situation comes down to the differences between foreigners and New Yorkers. Foreigners might not perceive the problems with Mrs. Struthers's gatherings, but New Yorkers should understand the finer societal distinctions that govern their world.

Suddenly the butler announces Mr. van der Luyden. Mrs. Archer quickly arranges herself before he enters, and Archer greets him, saying that they were just talking about him and Ellen Olenska. Mr. van der Luyden says that he's just been to see her, and she had arranged the **flowers** he'd sent her in an incredibly charming way. He would like to bring his wife to see her, if only the neighborhood were better. The Archers are shocked by his speech.

Since the Archers are expecting Mr. van der Luyden to be upset and angry about Ellen's faux pas, the contrast between their expectations and the truth creates powerful irony that highlights the ridiculousness of the Archers' panic. Mr. van der Luyden's actual reaction to the situation demonstrates the strength of Ellen's charm and creativity.

Mr. van der Luyden goes on to say that he visited to warn Ellen about letting the Duke take her to parties. Mrs. Archer pretends she hasn't heard what happened. Mr. van der Luyden explains that they can't expect Europeans to understand American rules, but the Duke took Ellen to Mrs. Struthers's. Since Mrs. van der Luyden was troubled, her husband decided to give Ellen the social guidance she had asked him for earlier.

In classic New York form, Mrs. Archer simply lies to put herself in the most proper position for this social situation. Like the Archers, Mr. van der Luyden blames Ellen's attendance at Mrs. Struthers's on the differences between Americans and foreigners. Taking a straightforward approach to the situation has paid off for him.

Mrs. Archer says that Archer will be particularly thankful to Mr. van der Luyden because of his attachment to May's family. Archer agrees, saying that he knew Mr. van der Luyden would like Ellen. Mr. van der Luyden confirms this and takes his leave. Janey exclaims that the situation is romantic—her family often has no idea what she's talking about. Mrs. Archer still isn't convinced everything will be all right.

Because of his family attachments, Archer is expected to be grateful to Mr. van der Luyden for his intervention with Ellen—her mistake could have social repercussions even for him. Mrs. Archer insists on taking the darkest view of the situation, even though she should feel reassured.

CHAPTER 11

Two weeks later, Archer is summoned by the head of his law firm. Mr. Letterblair sits at his desk, looking perplexed. He says he needs to speak of a matter that he doesn't want to mention to the other senior partners of the firm. Mrs. Mingott sent for him because Ellen Olenska wants to get a divorce. Since Archer is about to marry into the family, Mr. Letterblair wanted to consult with him first.

The gravity of getting a divorce can be detected in the fact that Mr. Letterblair feels he shouldn't even tell his senior partners about it; only Archer, as a future relation of the Mingotts, is trusted with this scandalous knowledge.

Archer has only seen Ellen once, at the opera, since his visit to her. She has receded in his mind, and May has replaced her again. He doesn't like the idea of divorce, and he's irritated that Mr. Letterblair is putting him in this position. When Mr. Letterblair takes out some papers for Archer to look over, Archer says he would rather not get involved, precisely because he's about to marry into the family. Mr. Letterblair is slightly offended, saying that Mrs. Mingott and the men of the family all want Archer's input. Archer begins to feel angry that the Mingotts are putting this pressure on him. Mr. Letterblair says that the Mingotts are opposed to the divorce, but Ellen wants a legal opinion. Supposedly she's not looking to marry again. Mr. Letterblair insists that Archer look over the papers before they talk about the case.

Mr. Letterblair is forcing Archer into the awkward position of providing legal advice that might offend or anger various members of the family that he's about to join. Notably, Ellen has to gain the approval and permission of not only her male family members, but also her male lawyers—as a woman, she has little power to decide her own fate in marriage. Although divorce is scandalous under any circumstances, it's particularly bad if the woman wants a divorce in order to be able to marry someone else, especially someone with whom she's presumably been having an affair.

Archer's temporary intimacy with Ellen has not been renewed since he went to her house. He feels that someone who can charm Mr. van der Luyden so effectively doesn't need his help. Recently May has seemed ever so wonderful and proper in contrast to Ellen. He has finally given in to her wish for a long engagement, because she said she needed to give her parents satisfaction in this last thing they'll ever ask of her as a little girl. This was a purely New York thing to say.

Archer seems a little jealous of Ellen's ability to make people, particularly men, like her. He's beginning to see Ellen and May as opposites that make each other's characteristics more vivid in comparison. May's reason for agreeing to a long engagement reinforces the idea that she's currently an innocent little girl, and the moment she marries she'll become a worldly woman.

The papers are mostly letters between Ellen's lawyers and her husband's, and they also include a letter that he sent to her. After reading it, Archer consents to discussing the matter with Ellen. Mr. Letterblair tells him to come to dinner that night to go over the case. Archer goes straight home after work, not wanting to speak to anyone. He had to take the case to protect Ellen's secrets from anyone else. He feels compassionate, wanting to save her from herself.

Wharton does not yet reveal any of Ellen's secrets, but Archer's eagerness to keep anyone else from learning them makes them seem particularly scandalous. Archer approaches the situation with condescension, feeling like the mature man who must protect the fragile woman from her own folly.

Archer wonders if New York seems so pure simply because its inhabitants ignore anything unpleasant. He realizes that his morals have always been basic. His affair with Mrs. Rushworth gave him an air of adventure, and when he realized that this was what attracted her to him, he was heartbroken. Most men of his age have similar affairs and realize the difference between women they love and women they enjoy. Their female relatives always support the idea that women are more to blame in these affairs than men. However, Archer thinks that in rich and idle European societies, there must be far more affairs, and a naturally good woman might be drawn into one.

Archer characterizes New York society as a whole as innocent, but he's beginning to recognize that its innocence might only be a veneer that covers the less agreeable parts of society. Once again, Wharton suggests that women are complicit in their own oppression, as women are quick to blame other women (rather than men) for affairs, perhaps because these women must seek the approval of men. Archer finds himself trying to excuse Ellen's affair as a matter of foreignness.

When he gets home, Archer writes Ellen to ask when he might come see her, and discovers that he should go that very evening, because she's going to Skuytercliff, the van der Luydens' estate, the next day. He goes to Mr. Letterblair's house for dinner. The man takes his food very seriously. After dinner, Mr. Letterblair says that he thinks the Mingotts are right to oppose the divorce, and Archer immediately feels the need to argue.

The van der Luydens have obviously forgiven Ellen for going to the Struthers's. Archer thought he was opposed to the idea of Ellen getting a divorce, but he seems more opposed to her family and Mr. Letterblair dictating her life—he wants to argue against whatever they're telling her to do.

Mr. Letterblair points out that Ellen and her husband are already separated, and she's not going to get any more of her money back. Though Archer originally thought the same, now that this old man is saying it, he seems like a representative of a society desiring to ignore everything unpleasant. Archer says the benefits of the case are for Ellen to decide. He passes off the threat that Ellen's husband has put in his letter, but Mr. Letterblair says it could cause unpleasant gossip. This exasperates Archer.

Archer finds himself arguing not only for Ellen to get a divorce, but against society and its strictures as a whole. In a way, the question is whether Ellen should be happy and free, or whether she should do what will keep society calm and preserve her reputation. Archer thinks that only Ellen can know what's best for her, repudiating the idea that men know what's best for women.

Archer says he can't promise to argue against the divorce until he's talked to Ellen. Mr. Letterblair is shocked that Archer would consider marrying into a family overshadowed by a divorce scandal, but Archer thinks this irrelevant. Now that Archer has been forced into this position, he doesn't want to have it taken from him, so he must reassure Mr. Letterblair. He says that he won't decide either way until talking to him again, and he leaves.

Mr. Letterblair expects Archer to be working on this case with an eye to its personal effect on him, rather than impartially, as he probably should. Archer takes a more ethical standpoint, recognizing that this is about Ellen's life, not his.

CHAPTER 12

On Archer's way to Ellen's house, he can tell who is visiting whom from the carriages on the streets. He sees Beaufort leaving his house, probably for some scandalous destination. Archer assumes he's going to visit Miss Fanny Ring. Outside of high society, there's the group of artists, writers, and musicians who prefer to keep to themselves. Sometimes one can meet some of them at the Blenkers' house. The Archers' group highly respects literature and art, and Mrs. Archer often says that society was far better when it included celebrated writers, but now society doesn't quite know how to deal with the artistic types. Mrs. Archer thinks it used to be much easier to class everyone, and to know everyone worth knowing.

High society is so small and tight-knit that Archer can trace everyone's movements just from seeing their carriages. Wharton emphasizes the constant existence of affairs such as Beaufort's, even as Ellen is condemned for hers. The Archers' respect for art and literature is like much else in society; it exists on a surface level, but they rarely get to know the actual artists who live immersed in it. As she often does, Mrs. Archer despairs at the negative changes she sees in society.

Only Mrs. Mingott or Beaufort might have been able to bridge the gap between high society and artists, but they couldn't care less about art and literature. Archer has always accepted this social structure. He knows that elsewhere, artists are honored members of the upper classes, but he can't imagine it happening in New York. He knows a lot of the artistic set from music and theater clubs, and he likes them, but he feels that their world is just as small as his.

If two of the main figures of society don't care about art, then it's obviously not an integral part of New York. Archer sees this as a difference between New York and Europe; New Yorkers remain isolated within their social circles even as they remain isolated from foreigners. This isolation inhibits progress.

Archer is thinking about these topics because he's trying to imagine Ellen Olenska's previous life. When he last saw her, she didn't understand that her family didn't like her living in the artistic neighborhood because it seems impoverished. She had books lying around her drawing room, where New Yorkers didn't keep books. She always makes him see the world from a different perspective.

Archer's observations of Ellen suggest that he's attributing her differences to living in Europe, where artists are more revered and society people are more likely to be intellectual. Her European perspective is opening up his world, which has been largely confined to New York before this.

When Nastasia lets Archer into Ellen's house, he sees Beaufort's coat and hat in the hall, which makes him angry. He goes into the drawing room determined to make Beaufort feel out of place. Beaufort is leaning on the mantelpiece, and a table is filled with **flowers** that he's brought. It's customary for ladies to wear simple dinner dresses in the evenings, but Ellen is wearing a red velvet robe bordered in fur. Archer has seen a similar garment in a French painting.

Archer is both jealous of Ellen spending so much time with Beaufort and concerned that Beaufort will be a bad influence on her. Beaufort's flowers seem rather suggestive of an illicit attachment. Ellen's clothing emphasizes her difference from New Yorkers and her familiarity with foreign fashions.

Beaufort is scoffing at the idea of Ellen spending three days at Skuytercliff, saying that Mrs. van der Luyden is a cold hostess. He's disappointed that Ellen will miss the dinner with some artists that he was planning for her. She says she's hardly met any artists in New York, and Archer suggests that he could introduce her to a couple of painters. Ellen was really thinking of actors and musicians, who were always at her husband's house. Archer is surprised how lightly she mentions her husband. Beaufort says that New York is terribly dull and tries to convince Ellen to stay for his dinner. She says it's too late to decide tonight, but she'll let him know in the morning. She has to talk business with Archer. Beaufort is irritated but takes his leave.

Beaufort is insistent on wanting Ellen's company at his dinner, adding to the sense that he has improper intentions in his relationship with her. As a foreigner himself, it's unsurprising that Beaufort is the one who's trying to introduce Ellen to artists in the way she's been used to in Europe. Even though she wants a divorce, she seems to miss certain social aspects of living with her husband. This scene highlights the sense of competition between Archer and Beaufort for Ellen's attention.

Ellen inquires about Archer's connection to painters, and he says that he always goes to exhibitions in Paris and London. She says she wants not to care about such things anymore, because she wants to be like everyone in New York. She hates to be different. Archer brings up the fact that he's come at Mr. Letterblair's request, and Ellen is glad that she can talk to him instead of Mr. Letterblair. Archer is gratified that she didn't know his purpose in coming, and only spoke of business to get rid of Beaufort. She suddenly looks pale and pitiful.

Even though Ellen clearly misses associating with artistic people, she's determined to abandon this pleasure if it's the only way to become a New Yorker. It's ironic that she claims not to like being different, as she's essentially defined by her many differences from the people around her. Archer feels that Ellen lying to get Beaufort to leave shows that she wanted to be alone with him.

Archer has little practice talking about awkward situations. Ellen bursts out that she wants to be free. Archer understands, but he wants to know more about the situation. Learning that he knows about her life with her husband, Ellen is surprised that he needs anything more. She can't imagine that such things are tolerated in America.

Archer doesn't know how to approach this conversation because everyone in his world simply avoids talking about sensitive topics like divorce. Ellen thinks of America as inherently freer than Europe, but on the contrary, New York tolerates subjection in the name of suppressing unpleasantness.

Archer needs to know how much truth there is in the angry letter Count Olenski sent to Ellen. He says that if the Count fights the case as he threatens to, he might spread harmful rumors about her. Ellen is quiet, but finally she expresses doubt that such rumors would hurt her here. Archer thinks they would hurt her more here than anywhere, and he says that New York is old-fashioned. If a woman has acted at all unconventionally, society frowns on divorce even if the laws don't. Ellen droops and eventually says that her family has told her the same.

It's implied that Count Olenski has threatened to spread details about the affair that Ellen supposedly had while married to him. Though to this point Ellen has persisted in her delusion of New York as unfailingly welcoming and accepting, she is beginning to understand that her view of New York is false, and it will treat her more harshly than she thought.

Ellen asks whether Archer agrees with her family that she shouldn't get a divorce. He wanders around the room, thinking that he does agree as long as what her husband says is true. Instead, he says she couldn't gain anything that would make up for the gossip it would cause. She points out that she would gain her freedom. Archer guesses that the Count's accusation is true, and Ellen wants to marry the man with whom she has had an affair. He says she's already free, and there's no reason to risk unpleasantness. He rambles about why society acts as it does. In the New York way, he doesn't want to disturb her ugly secret.

In line with the society which has molded him, Archer worries more than anything about appearances, and the way that people will react. Furthermore, he doesn't think to ask whether his assumption about Ellen's motives is correct. He influences her future through this assumption, and he'll only find out later that it was wrong. As an unmarried man, he doesn't understand how trapped a woman can feel in marriage.

Archer says he has to help her see matters the way her friends see them, and Ellen understands. She tends to a lamp and remains standing, so he stands, too. She says she will do as he wishes. Taken off guard, he grabs her hands, saying he does want to help her. She bids him good night, and he kisses her hands before leaving.

Archer is acting as the voice of society. Though this is a valuable viewpoint, he's certainly not saying what Ellen wants to hear, and he's not thinking independently. His farewell gesture betrays his growing feelings for her.

CHAPTER 13

It's a crowded night at the theater. The play is *The Shaughraun*, and everyone enjoys the melodrama. In particular, the audience is enthralled by the scene in which the male lead departs from his lover, who leans against the mantelpiece with her head in her hands. At the door he creeps back to kiss a ribbon falling down her back, and she never realizes what he's done. Archer comes to see the play just for this scene, thinking it as good as anything in Paris or London.

This scene of leave-taking occurs just after a scene in which Archer has departed from Ellen's presence, suggesting that Archer and Ellen may be suppressing certain feelings that are being played out at the theater. Archer's attitude again marks New York as culturally inferior to Europe.

On this night, the scene reminds Archer of him leaving Ellen Olenska after their discussion about her divorce. There's no real resemblance between the two situations; the people don't look similar and Archer and Ellen aren't lovers. But Ellen somehow makes everything tragic and moving; she seems like someone to whom things will always happen no matter how much she tries to avoid them. Her lack of surprise at anything makes it seem like the general pitch of her life is particularly high.

The fact that this scene reminds Archer of Ellen reinforces the growing sense that he has feelings for her, though he doesn't recognize them yet. Archer will later feel that he is someone to whom nothing will ever happen; perhaps his sense of Ellen as the opposite is part of what attracts him to her. However, it also makes it harder for her to find acceptance in society.

Archer left Ellen believing that she probably did become lovers with the secretary who helped her escape from her husband. Archer can understand how this happened, but in the eyes of the law and society, it makes her no better than her husband. He made her see this despite the pain it caused him. He's glad that he learned her secret rather than someone less sympathetic, and he assured Mr. Letterblair and the Mingotts that Ellen decided against a divorce. Mrs. Welland and Mrs. Mingott were very grateful to him.

Society refuses to consider people's situations on a case-by-case basis; if Ellen has had an affair, she must be rejected, no matter the circumstances. Archer seems to be congratulating himself on his liberal attitude towards her background, reinforcing the sense that he sometimes condescends to her. Besides, he has gained credibility and esteem in his future family by convincing Ellen to remain unhappy.

As the curtain falls on the scene, Archer's eyes fill with tears and he rises to leave. Just then, he sees Ellen sitting in a box with the Beauforts. Mrs. Beaufort gestures to him, and he goes to the box and sits down behind Ellen. Sillerton Jackson is telling Mrs. Beaufort about Mrs. Struthers's last party. Ellen quietly asks whether Archer thinks that the play character will send his lover yellow **roses**. Archer blushes. He has anonymously sent Ellen roses each time he has visited her, but he didn't realize she knew he had done so. He says he was going to leave to preserve the scene in his mind.

The fact that the reader hasn't seen Archer sending these additional yellow roses makes his action seem particularly illicit—he's hiding it even from readers. Ellen is obviously thinking along similar lines, since she connects their lives to this extremely romantic play scene, essentially putting them in the roles of the lovers through her allusion to the roses. This is Ellen's most flirtatiously bold move towards Archer so far.

Ellen asks what Archer does while May is gone, and he says he works. As they always do at this time of year, the Wellands have left for St. Augustine for Mr. Welland's health. No one can interfere with Mr. Welland's habits, and he must have his wife and daughter with him for peace of mind. The Wellands all idolize him. They trust the family physician because Mr. Welland has never caught pneumonia, and since the doctor insists they go to St. Augustine, the hastened announcement of May's engagement wasn't about to change their plans. Though Archer would have liked to join them there, they would have thought him frivolous for abandoning his work.

The fact that May is out of town makes the situation between Archer and Ellen seem even more charged; Archer doesn't have May there to bring him back to society's conventional views. Mr. Welland is representative of the sameness and fragility of New York society; he's essentially a hypochondriac, and he insists, above all, on routine. He also demonstrates the prison-like quality of marriage, as his whims dictate the lives of his family members.

Ellen says that she has done as Archer advised. She knows that he was right. As Beaufort begins to speak, Archer leaves the theater. The day before, he got a letter from May asking him to be good to Ellen, who is lonely. May can tell that New York seems dull to her after everything she had in her old life, and Archer is one of the only people who can amuse her. He loves May for this letter, but he doesn't plan to act on it. There are plenty of men waiting to help Ellen. Even so, he thinks May is right in believing her to be lonely and unhappy.

Although Ellen seems more independent than many of the women in this book, she's quick to bow to society's dictates in order to fit in as a New Yorker. Ironically, May is unwittingly encouraging her fiancé to spend more time with a woman he's attracted to. Archer likes May's compassion for Ellen and her trust in him. He still doesn't seem to recognize his own feelings for Ellen.

CHAPTER 14

In the theater lobby, Archer comes upon his friend Ned Winsett, one of the intellectual set. Winsett proposes they go to a restaurant, but Archer says he needs to get some work done. They begin to walk together, and Winsett admits he wants to know the name of the lady sitting with the Beauforts. Archer is annoyed at his curiosity. Winsett explains that she's his neighbor and she brought his son home when he fell and cut his knee, but his wife didn't get her name. Archer is pleased at this tale and gives Ellen's name. Winsett wonders why a countess lives in his neighborhood, and Archer is proud to say that she doesn't care about social rules. Winsett supposes she's been in bigger places. They part ways.

Archer again betrays his romantic interest in Ellen by acting slightly possessive of her; he doesn't like the idea that Winsett might be asking her name because he finds her attractive. Winsett's tale about Ellen shows an almost heroic side of her; she's not too self-important to help an unknown boy on the street. It's a bit hypocritical of Archer to feel proud of Ellen's carelessness with social rules, since he's just convinced her not to get a divorce by impressing the importance of social judgment upon her.

Archer has only ever seen Winsett at places frequented by the intellectual set. Supposedly his wife is an invalid. Winsett hates social conventions, and Archer thinks his "Bohemian" attitude just makes fashionable people seem simpler than other people. Even so, he likes having long talks with Winsett. Winsett is naturally a literary man, but when his attempt at literary writing failed, he took a job at a women's magazine. Though he can poke fun at this job, he's deeply bitter about his failure. Talking to him always makes Archer realize how empty both of their lives are.

Archer seems to think that Winsett's hatred of convention only complicates his life and makes him seem particularly fussy. Archer's attitude emphasizes the fact that society's rules do make life somewhat simpler, but only by allowing its members to never have to think about their actions or opinions. As a man of society, Archer doesn't have to have ambitions, but Winsett's ambitions make Archer feel, for the first time, his own lack of professional fulfillment.

Winsett feels that his own case is hopeless, but he insists that Archer should go into politics. Archer only laughs at this, because gentlemen don't go into politics in America. Winsett doesn't understand that decent people have to occupy themselves with sport and culture. Winsett argues that culture no longer exists in America. He thinks that gentlemen have to either get involved in the less refined aspects of life or emigrate to make anything of themselves. Archer always turns the conversation back to books. He doesn't think either of these options are in the least possible. Winsett doesn't understand that gentlemen stay out of the general fray.

Society's rules are restricting Archer's life, but he can't even see their effect on him because they seem so natural. Winsett, as an outsider to society, can perceive its strangling influence on Archer, but he fails to convince his friend to break the rules in order to find a purpose in life. For Archer, being a gentleman has always been his unquestioned priority, and everything else has to fall by the wayside if society demands it.

The next morning, Archer goes looking for more yellow **roses**. He arrives late at the office and realizes that no one cares, which makes him feel useless. Old-fashioned law firms like his usually engage a few wealthy young men who do unimportant work because it's proper for them to have an occupation. They usually have no ambition or motivation. Archer has interests and likes to be intellectually sharp, but he imagines that once he marries, he might easily sink into a dull routine.

Even though Archer told himself he wasn't going to spend more time with Ellen, the yellow roses show that he's still preoccupied with her. Archer's lack of purpose at the law firm reinforces Winsett's sense that Archer needs to find a worthier vocation, as he won't be happy doing this meaningless work for his entire life. Archer is beginning to associate marriage with the boredom of sameness.


Archer sends Ellen a note asking if he can call on her, but he receives no reply until three days later. It comes from Skuytercliff, and Ellen writes that she ran away to think somewhere quiet. Archer wonders what she's running from, but he thinks she might be prone to exaggerating in writing. She often speaks English as though translating from French, and in French, the phrase "run away" might imply only that she wanted to escape social engagements. It's funny that the van der Luydens have taken her in, as they rarely have guests at Skuytercliff. It seems that now they've rescued her once, they're determined to continue doing so.

Ellen exhibits a spontaneity that's unusual in Archer's circle. His observations about her way of speaking emphasize her foreignness, while his close analysis of her note betrays his excessive interest in her. Although Ellen seems unable to fit into society, the fact that such an important couple as the van der Luydens like her so much suggests that something in her charm transcends the requirements of society.


Archer is disappointed that Ellen is away, but he remembers that he just refused an invitation to the Chiverses' house near Skuytercliff. Parties there are always filled with flirting and mild practical jokes, and he wanted to read some new books instead. But now he sends a telegram saying he's changed his mind and will come after all.

Archer is beginning to go to great lengths to get closer to Ellen, changing his weekend plans to surprise her at Skuytercliff when she didn't even invite him to come. However, Wharton still gives no indication that Archer is conscious of the gravity of his actions.

CHAPTER 15

Archer takes part in all of the required activities at the Chiverses', going out in the ice-boat and going through the stables, talking to a girl who used to have a crush on him, and taking part in practical jokes. The next day, he drives to Skuytercliff. Mr. van der Luyden built the house in anticipation of his marriage, and it looks like an Italian villa. It sits high above a small lake, surrounded by lawns. In a hollow lies an old stone cottage. It's a rather gloomy house, especially in the snow. When Archer rings the bell, the butler seems surprised to see any visitor.

The Chiverses' party seems quite immature, particularly in comparison to Ellen's life. Skuytercliff is removed from the center of New York society, and this, along with its imitation of Italy, makes it a prime location for events to occur that seem outside the possibilities of society's conventions.

Archer learns that Ellen is at church with Mrs. van der Luyden. He declines the butler's offer to seek out Mr. van der Luyden, choosing instead to walk towards the village in search of Ellen. He meets her on the road and takes her hand, saying that he came to see what she was running away from. She replies that he'll see soon and rebuffs his attempts to find out more. She suggests they race, and takes off running through the snow. Archer follows joyfully. When they stop, she says she knew he would come, which he takes to mean she wanted him to.

This scene is charged with romantic possibility as Ellen is both running from him and urging him to chase her in metaphorical and physical senses. They seem magnetically drawn to each other, and Ellen's refusal to reveal her secret might make the reader wonder whether she's left New York specifically to suppress feelings for Archer.

Ellen knows that May asked Archer to take care of her, but he says he didn't need to be asked. She says women in New York never seem to feel the need, and when Archer asks what kind of need she means, she says she can't speak his language. He feels devastated by this retort. She finally agrees to tell him what's happened, but only if they can find somewhere private. She feels that American houses never let anyone be alone. Walking past the small stone house, they realize that Mr. van der Luyden had it opened up because Ellen wanted to see it. No one will expect them back at the big house for an hour.

The "need" that Ellen speaks of is most likely sexual desire, but even she can't put it into words. Women of this time weren't really supposed to feel sexual desire. Ellen's sense that she and Archer speak different languages gestures to her foreignness and her unfamiliarity with New York society's way of talking around everything improper. Archer, however, wants nothing more than to make her feel understood.

Archer and Ellen go into the house. It's cozy and seems to have been created just for them. They settle by the fire, Ellen saying that she can't be unhappy with Archer there. He thrills at her words and goes to look out the window to control himself. But he still sees her even when he's not looking at her. He wonders if she's been running from him. He asks her to tell him what's wrong. With the whole room between them, he imagines her coming up behind him to throw her arms around his neck. Instead, he sees Julius Beaufort coming up the path.

This is the first time that Archer fully acknowledges his attraction to Ellen. She's filling his mind entirely, and he's daring to hope that she might feel the same way about him—perhaps she needed to leave New York to control her emotions. However, as always happens in this book, their moment of possibility is cruelly thwarted, this time by the appearance of Archer's rival.

Archer laughs. Ellen comes to his side and takes his hand, but when she sees Beaufort she shrinks away. Archer asks whether this is what she was running from. She says she didn't know Beaufort was there, but Archer pulls away from her and throws the door open, telling Beaufort that Ellen expected him.

Archer will often laugh in these moments when circumstance foils his desires, as though he sees the irony. In his bitterness, he turns against Ellen, blaming her in part for Beaufort's presence and wanting her to feel the same disappointment he does.

As Archer returns to New York the next morning, he relives the previous day. Beaufort was irritated to find Archer there and ignored him thoroughly. It was clear that Ellen didn't know Beaufort was coming and had not told him she was going to Skuytercliff. Supposedly, he had come because he had found the perfect house for her. He grumbled that if only telephoning were better perfected, he wouldn't have had to come all this way. They discussed the almost fantastical nature of the telephone for the rest of the walk back to the house.

Beaufort and Archer both know that the other is attracted to Ellen, and they resent each other for it. However, it bodes well for Archer that Ellen was glad to see him, but not to see Beaufort. Since the telephone was a normal part of life for Wharton's readers, the characters' marked lack of it and incredulity at the very idea of it would act as a reminder that the novel is set decades before their own time.

Archer left, while Beaufort went inside with Ellen. Archer knew the van der Luydens would probably ask him to dinner, but certainly wouldn't invite him to stay the night. Beaufort knew this too, and the fact that he made such a long journey anyway showed his desire for Ellen. He's always looking for affairs. The question is what Ellen's aim was in fleeing from him, but Archer thinks that he detected real annoyance at Beaufort's appearance.

Beaufort seems rather foolish or desperate, coming all the way to Skuytercliff when Ellen didn't even want him there and he would have to return the same night. It's possible that Ellen was being flirtatious in leaving New York and making Beaufort come after her, but she's actually too genuine a person to do such a thing.

However, Ellen's annoyance is almost worse than if she had left New York just to meet Beaufort secretly. It's worse if she despises him but is still drawn to him by his association with artistic people and the world beyond New York. Archer knows that in some ways, it's true that he and Ellen don't speak the same language. Beaufort, however, does speak her language; he reflects the life she had with her husband. What she liked about that life, she will still find attractive. Sometimes Archer only wants to make Ellen see her situation clearly.

Archer worries that he and New York as a whole fall terribly short when compared to Ellen's former life in Europe. He knows that Beaufort, as an Englishman, can understand and reproduce her former life in a way that Archer can't, and he fears that Ellen will ultimately gravitate towards Beaufort for this reason. He's also worried that Ellen doesn't see how harshly people will judge her association with Beaufort.

That evening, Archer unpacks the books he's been sent from London, including *Middlemarch*, which has gotten interesting reviews. However, he has trouble focusing on them until he comes to a book of poetry called *The House of Life*. In this book he finds the beauty of passion and imagines it speaks of Ellen Olenska. But the next morning, his time with her at Skuytercliff seems entirely unreal. At breakfast, Janey and Mrs. Archer remark that he seems ill, but they blame it on his work, which they think far more strenuous than it is.

Middlemarch, *by George Eliot, deals with the failure of marriage and the difference between appearances and reality in society, making it quite relevant to this novel.* The House of Life, *by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is a collection of passionate and sometimes explicit love poems, so Archer's association of this work with Ellen shows how deeply he's falling for her now.*

The next few days drag by, Archer feeling like his future will be dark and monotonous. On the fourth evening, he receives a note from Ellen telling him to visit the next day so that she can explain. Late that night he re-reads the short note again and again, considering all night how to respond. In the morning, he packs a bag and boards a boat to St. Augustine.

Having tasted this passion for Ellen, Archer's sure future with May now seems awfully dull in comparison. However, he's still bound by his morals to fight his attraction to Ellen, and he decides that fleeing to May in Florida is the best way to do so.

CHAPTER 16

When Archer arrives at the Wellands' house and sees May, he wonders why he didn't come sooner. This is the reality of his life. May first worries that something has happened, but he says that he had to see her, and her happiness shows him that it won't matter that he left his work behind. Archer wants to be alone with May, and they go for a walk in an orange garden outside town. She looks very athletic, and the sight of her soothes Archer. They sit on a bench and he kisses her, which seems to startle her. This is only the second time he's kissed her on the lips.

As she has done in the past, May acts as a solid anchor to the strictly dictated life that Archer lived up until he met Ellen. Ellen begins to seem almost fantastical in comparison. May again presents a stark contrast to Ellen, particularly in her shock at Archer's kiss—May is deeply innocencent, whereas Ellen was just discussing her own sexual need.

Archer asks May to tell him what she does all day. This way he can think his own thoughts while she talks. She speaks of her athletic hobbies and the people who are staying nearby. She hasn't had time to read a book Archer sent her, but she's memorizing one of the first poems he read to her. Soon they hurry back to breakfast at the Wellands' house, which is rather shabby. Every year, Mrs. Welland struggles to find servants to run it so that Mr. Welland can feel that he is at home.

Despite Archer's relief at seeing May, he obviously isn't very interested in what she has to say about her life. She speaks of everyday topics, seeming particularly plain in comparison to the drama of Ellen's life. May only cares about literature as a way of connecting to Archer, not as something to think deeply about. Wharton holds up the Wellands' marriage as almost ridiculous.

At breakfast, Mr. Welland tells Archer that they rough it here, though they're eating delicacies. May's parents were very surprised to see him, but he said that he came to ward off a cold, which Mr. Welland thinks is very wise. May says she would like St. Augustine better than New York if Archer could stay, and Mrs. Welland says he must stay until he's entirely healthy. Mr. Letterblair eventually lets him stay a week, in part because he handled the matter of Ellen's divorce so well.

Mr. Welland always seems rather absurd and pitiful in his lack of perspective on the world and his obsessive worry about even the smallest health issues. Because May is so similar to her mother, there's an implication that marriage could eventually turn Archer into Mr. Welland. It's ironic that Archer's conversations with Ellen are what allow him to spend more time with May.

One day, when May is out with Mr. Welland, Mrs. Welland brings up Ellen, saying that she has very different ideas than most New Yorkers. She recalls the scandal of Medora Manson dressing her in black at her coming-out ball. Having been in Europe for at least twelve years, Ellen now thinks like a European. Archer points out that Ellen thought she was being American in asking for a divorce. Mrs. Welland says that foreigners always say ridiculous things about Americans and expresses the family's appreciation at Archer's role in persuading her. Archer feels like the family is pushing her towards being Beaufort's mistress by forbidding her divorce, and he wonders what Mrs. Welland would do if he said so. He doesn't want May to maintain the same innocence that her mother has.

Mrs. Welland, as a diehard adherent to society's rules, can see in Ellen only her constant transgressions of those rules. Ellen has in fact been brought up to break the rules, as the story involving Medora Manson shows, and living in Europe has only made this tendency worse. Archer worries that Ellen is more likely to become Beaufort's mistress to find satisfaction if she can't divorce and remarry, and being someone's mistress would be at least as bad socially as getting the divorce. Though Archer earlier venerated May's innocence, he's now beginning to see how harmful it is.

Mrs. Welland says that her husband probably would have died if Ellen's scandal had been in the newspapers. She told Ellen she didn't want to know about it. Even the possibility of divorce, and of May learning about such things, gave Mr. Welland a temperature. Archer had meant to speak to Mrs. Welland about letting him marry May sooner, but he can't think of anything that would convince her.

Though innocence is most often associated with women, Mr. Welland is just as fragile in his innocence as any woman, making innocence a general Welland trait that May inherits. Archer sees that Mrs. Welland is so entrenched in convention that he'll never manage to pull her out of it.

The day before he leaves, Archer goes for a walk with May and says they could travel to Spain in the spring if they got married soon. However, May is content with only dreaming of such things, while he wants to make them real. He says he wants her for his wife now. She looks at him deeply and asks whether it's because he's not sure he'll continue to love her. Archer angrily says it might be. She asks whether there's someone else. He's seemed different since their engagement. She thinks they should talk about it, acknowledging that Archer may have made a mistake in proposing to her. He argues that he wouldn't be asking to hasten their marriage if this were the case, but she points out that he might want to settle the matter.

Archer will remember this discussion with May for the rest of his life, as it's one of the only times they speak genuinely to each other and May isn't so trapped in convention. May shows deep perception into Archer's character here, seeing his darker motives for what seems like a request that comes out of love for her. This interaction proves that May isn't as innocent as she seems; she knows that Archer could be unfaithful to her. Her awareness here foreshadows her later awareness of Archer's affair with Ellen.

Archer is surprised by May's perception, but he can tell that she's nervous. She says that girls are more aware and less innocent than they seem. She's long known that he used to have feelings for someone else; she once saw the woman looking sad and felt sorry for her. Archer feels relieved that this is all she's worried about. May doesn't want her marriage to be based on a wrong to another woman. She believes that two people who love each other should be together even if it goes against public opinion, and she wants Archer to be with this other woman if he's promised himself to her.

May knows that Archer sees her as innocent, and she's purposely disrupting this image of herself. However, she hasn't struck to the real root of the problem—she thinks that Archer is still in love with Mrs. Rushworth. She shows great integrity here, going against what society has taught her in order to follow a personal moral code. She feels sympathy, rather than jealousy, for the woman she believes loves Archer.

Archer is amazed both that May is worried about his affair with Mrs. Rushworth and that her views are so unconventional. He assures her that he hasn't pledged himself to Mrs. Rushworth in any way. He agrees that each case of love must be judged without regard for social rules, and he urges her to see that it's only convention that's keeping them from marrying soon. She's overjoyed, but he realizes that even though she can understand others breaking convention, she cannot do it herself. To Archer's disappointment, the unexpected side of her that she has just revealed vanishes, and they walk home.

May is exhibiting a side of herself that Archer hasn't realized existed—a side that's more like Ellen. However, at this crucial moment, May fails to follow through with her new way of thinking; she can sympathize with the unconventional, but unlike Ellen, she can't act unconventionally herself. This side of May flares up only in this one glimpse, and Archer loses it forever to the innocent, traditional, unimaginative May.

CHAPTER 17

When Archer returns home, Janey tells him at dinner that Ellen came to visit Mrs. Archer when he was gone. He shows his surprise. Janey describes Ellen's stylish outfit and says she wanted to meet them because he had been good to her. Mrs. Archer says Ellen's very adept at pleasing people, but she likes May better for her simplicity.

Although Archer was trying to escape from his attraction to Ellen, she has obviously been seeking him out and trying to learn more about him. Notably, even Mrs. Archer compares Ellen and May to each other, though she prefers May's innocence to Ellen's charm.

A couple days later, Archer calls on Mrs. Mingott to bring her messages from St. Augustine. She's grateful to him for his influence with Ellen, and charmed by his story of dropping everything to go see May. He explains that she wouldn't agree to get married sooner. Mrs. Mingott says that none of the Mingotts know how to flout convention; everyone was aghast when she built her house in such a remote part of New York. Ellen is the only relation who takes after her, and she jokes that Archer should have married Ellen. Now, she says, Ellen's life is finished.

Mrs. Mingott thinks that Archer is similar to herself; unconventional to a point, but not so unconventional as to completely betray society. He's capable of passionately begging May to get married sooner, but never of advising divorce. Like Archer, Mrs. Mingott is attracted to Ellen's unconventionality. Strikingly, she knows that a woman's life revolves around marriage, and Ellen is done with marriage—thus, she unimaginatively believes Ellen's life to be finished.

Archer asks whether Mrs. Mingott might convince the Wellands to move the wedding up. She likes his spirit. Ellen enters, looking happy. Mrs. Mingott tells her Archer has been to see May, and Ellen says she went to see Mrs. Archer to find out where he'd gone. He says he meant to write her from Florida. She seems indifferent to him, and he's hurt. Mrs. Mingott says he's a real lover, impatient to be married. Ellen suggests that they can persuade the Wellands to go along with his wishes.

Mrs. Mingott thinks that Archer is very passionate and just can't wait to have May all to himself, particularly in bed. Even as Archer tries to chain himself to May to control his feelings for Ellen, he's hurt by his sense that she doesn't care about him. As she often does, Ellen ironically acts the essential factor in moving Archer's relationship with May forward, to her own detriment.

When Ellen walks Archer out, he asks when he can see her, and she replies that he should come soon, as she's moving the next week. He treasures his memories of her house. He suggests the next day, and she agrees but says to come early, for she's going out. He realizes she must be going to Mrs. Struthers's. He's annoyed that she'll probably see Beaufort there, and is probably going expressly to see him. He plots to go late in order to prevent her from going out or to miss her altogether.

Besides trying to move his marriage up, Archer is making no effort to distance himself from Ellen. He sees Ellen's house as the cradle of his love for her, and reveres it for this reason. She's returning to Mrs. Struthers's in spite of the uproar that her visit there caused before. Still jealous of Beaufort, Archer wants to either have Ellen all to himself or not have her at all.

The next night, Archer doesn't arrive as late as he meant to because he was too restless to wait. When he enters Ellen's house, he's surprised to see very strangely fashioned hats and overcoats in the hall. He's sure neither one belongs to Beaufort. Nastasia shows him into the drawing room. Ellen isn't there, but another lady is, wearing an eccentrically designed dress. He also sees Ned Winsett and a large older man. They're all looking at a huge bouquet of **flowers** lying on the sofa.

The oddness of the clothing in the hall foreshadows the unconventionality of the people whom Archer finds in the drawing room. Though Beaufort himself isn't there, the presence of the bouquet acts as a reminder of Ellen's multiple admirers, seeming almost to compete with the yellow roses that Archer has sent Ellen in the past.

The guests turn to Archer, and the woman introduces herself as the Marchioness Medora Manson. She's visiting Ellen from Cuba. She introduces Dr. Agathon Carver, founder of the Valley of Love Community, and expresses despair over New York's spirit. She says that Ellen has gone up to dress and will soon return. Winsett says he must leave, but he will miss Ellen when she moves. When he's gone, Medora Manson says he's very witty. Dr. Carver says he never notices wit.

Everything that other characters have said about Medora Manson, along with her strange clothes, prepares Archer for her to be a very unconventional woman. The Valley of Love community is a reference to the many experimental communities that sprang up in the Northeast around this time, often promoting free love.

Medora Manson explains that Dr. Carver lives the life of the spirit and is preparing for a lecture he's about to give at Mrs. Blenker's. She points out that it's time for him to leave, and he reluctantly prepares to go. She says she'll join him soon, and he suggests that she might bring Archer. Medora Manson says Ellen needs Archer tonight, so Dr. Carver gives him his card.

Wharton portrays Dr. Carver as somewhat ridiculous, suggesting that his idealistic community offers no real solutions to the problems of marriage that her characters experience. Archer misses this opportunity to learn about an alternative to marriage, whose chains he will soon curse.

Medora Manson expresses her pleasure at everything Archer has done for Ellen. Archer is embarrassed that everyone knows about his interference. Medora reveals that his role was providential, since Ellen's husband himself appealed to her to convince Ellen to take him back. Archer is horrified. Medora says he has humbled himself, and she has a letter from him that she has not yet given Ellen. Archer says Ellen must not return to her husband, but Medora points out that she is giving up incredible luxury, art, and conversation. In Europe she's thought gorgeous, unlike in New York.

Medora now proves herself to be just what Archer hasn't expected of her—this supposedly unconventional woman is speaking in the name of convention. Medora discounts the horror of living with a man whom Ellen can't stand, instead arguing that life with Ellen's husband in Europe would offer Ellen uncounted privileges that New York can never give her.

Archer can't believe that his first meeting with Medora Manson has her playing messenger to the devil. She says that Ellen doesn't know anything about her mission yet, because Medora has been waiting to speak to Archer, hoping that he would help her. Archer exclaims that he would rather see Ellen dead than back with her husband. Medora doesn't seem to mind this. She sits quietly until she hears Ellen approaching, then points to the bouquet, asking whether Archer prefers that for Ellen.

Archer hates the idea of Ellen returning to her husband not only because he believes she'd be miserable with the man, but also because Archer doesn't want Ellen to leave New York, and him. However, Medora knows the bouquet signifies that Ellen is heading towards an affair, and she would prefer Ellen be miserable with her husband. Ironically, Archer himself embodies the danger that Medora fears for Ellen.

CHAPTER 18

Ellen enters her drawing room wearing a shimmering dress and looking like she's ready for a ball. Medora Manson points out the **flowers**. Ellen grows suddenly angry, saying the bouquet is ridiculous. She calls Nastasia and tells her to bring them to Mr. Winsett's house for his wife, but not to say they came from her. She gives Nastasia her own cloak for the task.

Wharton implies that the bouquet has come from Beaufort, and Ellen's violent reaction to it shows that she does not welcome his attentions. Her romantic and unconventional spirit emerges when she gives her maid her own cloak to wear.

Ellen laughs, saying that Medora Manson and Archer have become friends while she fussed with her hair. She sees that it's time for Medora to join Dr. Carver, and she and Archer show Medora out. The unconventionality of Ellen's familiarity with Nastasia has excited Archer. Back in the drawing room, he lights a cigarette for her, and she asks what he thinks of her temper. He replies that it helps him understand what Medora has been saying about Ellen being used to all kinds of amusement not available in New York. Ellen says Medora is always romantic, and Archer asks whether she tells the truth. Ellen wants to know what else she's been telling him.

Archer increasingly associates his attraction to Ellen with her willingness to act in ways that other New Yorkers never would. Ellen is acting flirtatiously, and this is the first time they've been alone since their interrupted encounter at Skuyterkill, making this scene ripe for drama. Once again Archer is preoccupied by his worry, which Medora has increased, that Ellen can never be happy near him because only Europe can provide the kind of entertainment she craves.

Archer says that Medora Manson has told him that Ellen's husband wants her back. Ellen seems unsurprised. After a long silence, she admits that Medora has hinted at such a thing, but she isn't sure whether Medora has come for that reason. Supposedly Medora had a "spiritual summons" from Dr. Carver, whom she might marry. Ellen doesn't know why she's really there, but she does believe Medora has a letter from Ellen's husband. Archer is restless, knowing that Ellen will have to leave at any moment. He says Medora believes she will return to her husband, and Ellen blushes, saying this is a cruel thing to believe.

Even if Medora is acting conventionally in wanting Ellen to return to her husband, considering marriage to Dr. Carver for spiritual reasons is certainly not a normal New York thing to do. Ellen seems to think the worst of anyone who would believe she has so little self-respect that she would go back to the husband who has mistreated her. She obviously cares more about her freedom than about the allure of Europe.

Ellen says she thinks the Wellands are being ridiculous about Archer's long engagement. He follows her lead in changing the subject. Ellen is surprised that May is so attached to convention, but Archer admits that she thinks he cares for someone else. Ellen thinks this would make May want to rush the marriage, but Archer explains that May is giving him time to give her up if necessary. He hears Ellen's carriage approaching. Ellen finds May's attitude noble, but Archer says it's ridiculous because he's not going to marry anyone else.

Even though she's been somewhat flirtatious, Ellen is keeping up the appearance that she isn't attracted to Archer by continuing to vocally support his marriage. She also remains steadily devoted to May, as she always will. Archer manages to broach the subject of his potential feelings for a woman other than May, but he seems to doom their affair before it begins by saying that May needn't fear he'll marry someone else.

Ellen asks whether this other woman loves Archer, and he clarifies that the person May was thinking of is unimportant. She wants to know why he's really so hasty to get married. Just then her carriage arrives. She invites him to come with her to Mrs. Struthers's. Archer feels he needs to keep her from leaving. He says that there is another woman, but not the one May thinks. He sits beside Ellen and takes her hand. She pulls away, telling him not to flirt with her.

Like May, Ellen doesn't believe that Archer has pure motives in wanting to hasten his marriage. Archer finally pushes the moment to a climax, preparing to confess his feelings for Ellen. Perhaps it bodes ill that he gets to this point by talking about his impending marriage; their love has no straightforward future.

Archer is embarrassed, but he says he would have married Ellen if it were possible. She retorts that he has made it impossible. He's astonished. She cries that he made her give up the idea of divorce, showing her that she needed to sacrifice herself to preserve the institution of marriage and avoid scandal. She's given up on divorce for him, because he's marrying into her family. Stricken, Archer implies that he assumed something about her, and she demands to know what. He admits that he thought her husband's accusation against her was true, but she says she had nothing to fear from his letter.

Ellen points out one of the many ironies that mark her relationship with Archer; if he had only argued for her to get a divorce, he might be able to marry her now. Furthermore, her love for him is pure enough that she chose to help him in his marriage by not getting a divorce, rather than trying to win him for herself. The final blow is that Archer based his advice that she not get a divorce on a false assumption that she had had an affair.

Archer feels like their silence is crushing him like a gravestone. He says at least he loved her, and he hears Ellen crying. He goes to her, saying that she can still get a divorce. He kisses her and immediately feels like everything is much simpler. After a moment, she pulls away and says that nothing can change. Archer replies that they can't lie about their love, and he can't marry May. She's adamant that it's too late for them to go back on their decisions, explaining that he changed everything for her even before she knew what he'd done to help her.

Archer has finally taken a decisive step in his relationship with Ellen, only to find that her returning his feelings can bring him no joy in the hell he discovers he has built himself. Everything between them seems like it's already finished before it has even started. They seem to have switched places; Archer is arguing for the unconventional path, whereas Ellen insists that they do what's expected of them.

Ellen says that she didn't realize at first that people didn't like her, and she only found out later what Archer had done to support her socially. She thought that New York was a peaceful home and everyone was kind. Only Archer helped her understand how she needed to act, because he was the only one who had been tempted by the outside world but refused its dishonorable method of providing happiness. Her words feel like lead in his chest. Impulsively, he kisses her satin shoe. Ellen says she can't go back to the way of thinking that he cured her of.

Just as Ellen's flouting of tradition has attracted Archer to her, it is Archer's knowledge of how to act conventionally that has drawn her to him. Ellen seems to view New York as a pure society that contrasts with the outside world's debauchery. The central irony of their relationship is that Archer has changed her viewpoint in such a way that she can no longer have an affair with him, though she might have before.

Archer becomes angry, asking whether Beaufort will take his place. He wants Ellen to be angry too, but she wilts. He reminds her that Beaufort is waiting at Mrs. Struthers's. Ellen rings for her maid and tells her she's no longer going out that evening. Archer says that he can't keep her from her friends if she's lonely, but Ellen says she's no longer lonely because she's no longer empty inside herself. Archer exclaims that he doesn't understand her, and she points out that he understands May. He says that he has the right to end their engagement, since May has refused to hasten it, but Ellen doesn't agree.

Archer can't seem to deal with the fact that he has ruined any future he might have had with Ellen; instead, he lets his jealousy of Beaufort take over, making it seem like he thinks Ellen susceptible to any man who wants her. Ellen feels like coming to understand the value of New York society has filled her with a purpose that she didn't have before. Though society thought her immoral, she now acts more honorably than Archer, refusing to let him hurt May.

Archer feels terribly tired. He wants to hold Ellen again, but her attitude keeps him at bay. When he begins to plead with her again, she screams at him as though frightened. They hear the doorbell, and soon Nastasia comes in with a telegram. She says that Winsett's wife cried with happiness at the **flowers**, thinking Winsett had sent them. Ellen opens the telegram. It's from May, and she says her parents have just agreed to let the marriage happen after Easter.

Both Archer and Ellen are in terrible emotional pain, so close and yet so far from finding happiness together. The scene at the Winsetts' presents a picture of a joyful marriage that contrasts with Archer's future. May's telegram is another ironic bite, closing off the possibility that Archer could break his engagement, since he has fought so hard to get the marriage moved up.

When Archer returns home, he finds a similar telegram from May. He crushes it and takes out his pocket diary, turning the pages frantically. Then he goes upstairs and knocks on Janey's door. She was waiting up in case the telegram had bad news. He asks what day Easter is, and she says it's the first week in April. He calculates the time until then and begins to laugh, saying he's going to be married in a month. Janey is overjoyed but can't understand why Archer keeps laughing.

Archer only ever seems to laugh when he experiences painful irony, such as the arrival of this telegram on this night, and his laughter suggests that he fully recognizes the role he himself has played in making these circumstances the nightmare that they are. If he only hadn't tried to convince May to get married sooner, he might have more options with Ellen now.

CHAPTER 19

The day of the wedding is beautiful, and all of the old ladies have gotten out their old, smelly furs. Archer stands with his best man on the step of Grace Church. The carriage with May and Mr. Welland is in sight, but they have to prepare in the lobby once they arrive. While this happens, the groom is expected to stand and wait as a sign of his eagerness, and Archer follows this tradition just as he has followed all the other wedding traditions, with resignation. He has done everything right, sending bouquets of lilacs and **lilies-of-the-valley** to the bridesmaids and cufflinks to the ushers. He's packed to leave after the wedding, when they'll take a train to a destination whose location has been carefully guarded, per tradition.

By skipping ahead from Archer's declaration of love for Ellen to his wedding to May, Wharton emphasizes the sense that Archer is carried along to his fate on currents of propriety that he can't fully control. In fact, he has given in to all the traditions of marriage, and since he's obviously not eager to get married, the fact that these traditions are meant to display eagerness shows how society's customs often cover up a deeper insincerity that lies beneath appearances.

Archer's best man asks whether he has the ring, and Archer feels in his pocket to check in just the same way he's seen countless grooms do. Then he stands looking at the door of the church. Handel's March is playing, reminding him of all the weddings he's attended here. He thinks it feels like a night at the opera, and he sees all the same people he would see there. The women look excited, the men sulking at having to dress up so early. Archer imagines Reggie Chivers and Sillerton Jackson speculating on the food to be served at the breakfast and the fashion of serving it.

Archer does nothing at this wedding out of sincerity; his actions are dictated by tradition alone. In other words, society simply requires him to live up to the necessary appearances, and it's simple to do so without feeling what he's expected to feel. Similarly, the guests see the event as little more than a show that's presented for their entertainment and subject to their judgment.

Archer sees his mother sitting in a pew and weeping, and he pities Janey for her poor view of the guests. He also sees Beaufort looking at the women while sitting next to his wife, as well as Lawrence Lefferts seeming to represent the god of "form." Archer wonders what Lefferts will find lacking, and then realizes that he used to think such things important, though they now seem very trivial. He couldn't believe how worked up everyone got over whether the wedding presents should be displayed. He thinks that the whole time he was worried about manners and form, people were living real lives somewhere.

Archer has become almost entirely removed from society's viewpoint, and now he watches those who are still in its thrall with a hint of contempt. In comparison to the tragedy of his love for Ellen, the customs and etiquette that the people around him worry about seem absolutely ridiculous. From this perspective, New York society prevents people from living genuinely by focusing on everything that doesn't matter.

The best man gets excited, thinking May is entering, but it's only the sexton checking the scene in the church. In a minute the door opens again, and the Wellands enter to the murmur of the crowd. As soon as Mrs. Welland sits, everyone cranes their necks to see who else is coming. The day before, there were rumors that Mrs. Mingott was going to attend the wedding. She sent a carpenter to see whether enough space might be made for her gigantic form, but it seemed impossible. Her family was worried she would insist on sitting in her wheelchair, and they were relieved when someone realized that the chair was too wide to get through the awning between the door and the curb. Mrs. Welland refused to let the awning be removed, since it would allow reporters to take photographs of May. However, Mrs. Mingott insisted that the wedding breakfast must be at her house, even though it's in the middle of nowhere.

Mrs. Mingott shows her investment in May and Archer's partnership by her valiant attempt to attend their wedding. The crowd, however, seems to have rather superficial concerns, as they're more interested in whether they'll see Mrs. Mingott out and about than in the actual marriage. This episode reinforces Archer's sense that the people of New York society aren't living real lives. Additionally, Mrs. Welland's concern about May's picture being taken acts as a reminder that these characters are important enough in New York that the newspapers publish articles about their weddings.

People are disappointed to see that Mrs. Mingott's daughter-in-law has come in her place. However, everyone approves of her dress. On the other hand, Medora Manson, entering next, is dressed wildly in stripes and fringes. Archer's heart practically stops. He thought Medora was still in Washington with Ellen. They supposedly left in order to get Medora away from Dr. Carver, who wanted her to join his Valley of Love. They weren't expected to attend the wedding. Archer strains to see if Ellen will enter, too, but no one else comes in.

Medora is portrayed as rather ridiculous, particularly in her relationship with Dr. Carver, who, though he represents an alternative to this social tradition of marriage, seems no more rational. For Archer, the possibility that he might see Ellen is far more exciting than the actual sight of his bride, proving that this marriage is doomed to unhappiness. Even on his wedding day, Archer is emotionally unfaithful to May.


The best man points out that May is here, but Archer is hardly aware of the procession going up the aisle. All the sights and sounds of the wedding are mixed up in his mind. He checks again to make sure he has the ring, and May is beside him at the altar and he smiles at her. Then the ceremony is over and the organ is beginning the Mendelssohn March, a traditional necessity. The best man hisses at Archer to give May his arm, and Archer realizes his mind has been drifting because he saw a woman with dark hair, though when she turned she looked nothing like Ellen.

The way in which Wharton describes this wedding as a blur and completely omits the actual ceremony emphasizes the fact that a wedding is not a very important part of a marriage; everything that follows the wedding will be the true struggle or triumph. Archer, who's supposed to be enthralled by his beautiful bride, can think only of the woman he would rather be marrying.

Archer and May leave the church and enter the waiting carriage. May turns to him eagerly, and Archer rambles about his nervousness at the wedding while he feels he's falling into a black abyss. She flings her arms around his neck, exclaiming that everything will be wonderful now.

The contrast between May and Archer's attitudes is painful; May sees a secure future full of possibility, while Archer feels that all possibility of happiness has closed to him forever. Worst of all, he's supposed to be overjoyed.

After the wedding breakfast, Archer and May change their clothes and get into their carriage in a shower of rice and satin slippers. They drive to the station and settle in the train compartment that's been reserved for them. They'll be staying at the house of some of Archer's aunts in Rhinebeck. May loves this idea, and the Englishness of staying in a country house adds to society's feeling that the wedding is particularly brilliant. Only the parents of the bride and groom are allowed to know where they're going.

The traditions surrounding the wedding help make it seem like Archer and May are a happy couple, but in reality, anyone could go through these motions. This is the way society works in general, keeping up appearances no matter what's really happening.

Once the train makes it to the countryside, conversation is easier than Archer expected. May wants to talk over the wedding, and neither of them seems any different than the day before. For May, the whole thing feels like a game and a great adventure. Archer is amazed that she can be so emotional and yet lack any imagination. He perceives that she will always deal with life as it comes, but never anticipate anything unusual. She looks more like she represents a moral ideal than a real person, and she seems indestructibly young. Archer feels like she's a stranger, and he begins talking about the wedding breakfast to cover his confusion.

Although May is now married, she retains her innocence—obviously, since a ceremony isn't going to suddenly give her worldly experience. She hardly even knows how to feel the importance of the commitment that she and Archer have made. Archer feels as though he's married an embodiment of society and its rules, who will never change no matter what they endure together. Unfortunately, Archer no longer believes in society's rules.

May says she was surprised that Medora Manson showed up, and she wishes Ellen had come instead. Archer has been dreading her bringing up Ellen; it feels like his world will collapse every time he hears her name. He changes the subject to the tea they'll have when they arrive.

Ironically, May wishes that Ellen had been at her wedding, not knowing that Ellen was very much present in Archer's mind throughout the ceremony, and Ellen has already ruined her marriage.

When they arrive in Rhinebeck, Archer and May meet one of the van der Luydens' men who has been sent with a carriage. He informs them that there's a water leak at the house where they were supposed to stay, and Mr. van der Luyden has prepared the stone house at Skuytercliff for them instead. Archer can only stare, but May exclaims that it will be perfect. As they drive away, she gushes that the van der Luydens rarely show the house to anyone, though Ellen has told her she thought it the only place she could be perfectly happy. Archer says that's just what they'll be, and May says this is the beginning of their good luck.

This scene drips with irony that causes Archer much pain. The house where he and May will be spending their wedding night is the same house where he and Ellen went in the snow, and he imagined Ellen declaring her love for him. Archer would strongly prefer to be there with Ellen than with May, and the specter of what could have been will hang over him. It's fitting that this is the beginning of their marriage, and it shows May's extreme innocence that she interprets it as good luck.

CHAPTER 20

Over breakfast at a lodging-house in London, Archer tells May that they certainly must dine with Mrs. Carfry. They only know two people in all of London, and in keeping with New York tradition, they have stayed carefully away from these acquaintances. It's not considered dignified to force foreign acquaintances to entertain travelers. Mrs. Archer and Janey have stuck to this principle with such dedication that in all of their travels, they've hardly ever talked to foreigners, and they'll only talk to Americans whom they already know.

Though the characters have already expressed many opinions about Europeans, the reader now sees how New Yorkers act in Europe. It becomes apparent that New Yorkers are determined to isolate themselves to an almost absurd degree. Part of the point of travel is to immerse oneself in a different culture to expand one's mind, but New Yorkers seem wary of anything that might force them to question their values.

However, one night at a hotel an English lady asked Mrs. Archer and Janey for a bottle of liniment for her sister, Mrs. Carfry, who had bronchitis. The English women were terribly grateful for the Archers' help. Though the Archers would never have dreamed of remaining in contact with the women, Mrs. Carfry and her sister took every chance of meeting the Archers whenever they were in Europe. The four women ended up all having the same interests, and a tie was formed between their families. When Archer and May left for England, Mrs. Archer told them they must go visit Mrs. Carfry.

The Archers' interaction with Mrs. Carfry and her sister proves that Europeans don't necessarily want Americans to keep to themselves—they're perfectly willing to be friends with and entertain Americans. Furthermore, the relationship that Mrs. Archer and Janey gained with their British friends shows that foreigners aren't necessarily so different and morally corrupt as New Yorkers stereotype them to be.

Archer and May had no intention of actually doing so, but Mrs. Carfry has sent them an invitation to dine. May protests that she'll feel shy and won't know what to wear. Archer thinks she looks particularly like Diana in the English climate. He says that she has plenty of dresses, not understanding that English fashion is different than American. May doesn't know what it's proper to wear. He suggests that she wear her **wedding dress**, but she doesn't have it with her.

Although Archer and May have been constantly socializing throughout their lives in New York, the simple fact of being in England suddenly makes them feel like they have no idea how to socialize. This shows how different they think England is. They don't feel like they can let their cultures mix; instead, they have to try to act like British people do.

Archer suggests they go to the National Gallery. They're on their way home from their wedding tour. They spent a month in Paris for the dressmakers, then went to the Swiss mountains in July and the beach in August. May isn't very interested in traveling, and thinks of it only as providing opportunities for her athletic pursuits. Back in London, she's eager to go home. She finds London less interesting than Paris, where Archer would translate as much as he thought was appropriate of the songs they heard in the cafes.

May acts in typical New York style; Mrs. Archer and Janey only look at the scenery when they travel, and May only wants to hike and swim. None of them—except perhaps Archer—want to immerse themselves in the art and culture of foreign countries. Even now that May is married, Archer is still protecting her innocence rather than letting her fully experience Paris.

Archer has reverted to obeying the traditions around marriage, because it's much easier than trying to give May freedom that she doesn't realize she's missing. He's realized that May prefers to give up freedom to show her adoration of him. Knowing that she'll always be perfectly loyal to him makes him feel obligated to do the same. He has begun to worship her simplicity again. He sees that his intellectual life will continue outside the home, and returning to May will never be wearisome. Besides, having children will fill their lives.

Many of the changes that Ellen made in Archer's approach to his life have disappeared since he's been under May's influence, which is much more traditional. Though Archer was attracted to the idea of having a free and equal partner in marriage, May prefers to gain society's approval by remaining bound to conventional ideas of marriage. Archer has essentially grown complacent in his mild unhappiness.

Archer thinks of all this as he and May drive to Mrs. Carfry's house. Archer, too, usually avoids meeting people on his travels. Only once did he spend a few weeks at Florence dancing and gambling, but the time seemed unreal. The people there seemed exotic and very different from anyone he knew. He has run into the Duke of St. Austrey in London, who said to come visit him, but no American would consider doing so. Archer and May even put off their visit to London so that May's English aunt wouldn't feel she had to see them.

May and Archer, and Americans in general, go to almost absurd lengths to avoid interacting with foreigners. In fact, they seem to feel themselves a terrible burden on Europeans, which might suggest that Americans feel culturally or socially inferior. Though Archer enjoyed himself when he did mingle with foreigners, his world seems entirely separate from theirs, and it's impossible to join the two worlds together.

May looks beautiful sitting next to Archer in the carriage, and he says that there probably won't even be anyone at Mrs. Carfry's. She says she doesn't want them to think Americans dress like savages, and he realizes that clothing acts like armor for women. In fact, when they arrive they find that the only other guests are a vicar and his wife along with Mrs. Carfry's nephew and his French tutor. May is stunning among them, but Archer perceives her shyness. Nonetheless, the men quickly engage her in conversation.

May's concern about her clothing reinforces the idea that Americans are worried about seeming inferior to Europeans. Archer perceives that, unlike men, women are judged almost entirely on their appearances, and so mastering their physical presence gives women power in a way that men don't have to worry about. Even at this dinner, May's appearance saves her when her social skills are lacking.

The dinner is no great success, and May's awkwardness makes her a poor conversation partner for the men. Everyone is relieved when the ladies go to the drawing room. The vicar and the nephew soon leave, but Archer finds the tutor, M. Rivière, as interesting as Ned Winsett. He learns that the man will tutor Mrs. Carfry's nephew until the boy goes to Oxford the next year. Archer thinks he'll surely find a job soon, since he has so many talents. He was drawn to literature from a young age, and tried being a journalist, then an author. He was part of the literary set in Paris for a while, but his ambitions have failed. He has to support his mother and sister, but he lives in a world that loves ideas, which Ned Winsett would envy.

May is perfectly good at socializing in New York, so her failure here in London must come from her sense of discomfort among foreigners. In New York, Archer probably wouldn't have the opportunity to talk with someone like M. Rivière at a dinner, as someone of Rivière's class status wouldn't be invited. His presence here demonstrates that Europeans are more comfortable with intellectuals and society people mingling together, as they have a higher respect for art and literature. Though M. Rivière's story parallels Winsett's, Winsett doesn't have the fortune to live in a country that loves ideas.

M. Rivière says that he left journalism and began tutoring to preserve his intellectual freedom and be able to engage in good conversation. However, he feels he needs to make a change to avoid growing old in this position, and he asks whether he might find something to do in New York. Archer is startled, thinking that there's no life of ideas there like M. Rivière is used to. The tutor becomes flustered, saying he was under the impression that New York had an active intellectual life.

It has long been common for Europeans who are dissatisfied with or unwelcome in their home countries to seek success in America. M. Rivière essentially wants to follow this trend and pursue the American dream, but Archer, with his American perspective, knows the reality—Europe has much more to offer a man like M. Rivière. For him, America fails to be a land of possibility.

On the drive home, Archer thinks about his conversation with M. Rivière. He feels refreshed by it and wants to invite him to dinner, but when he tells May how interesting he was, she says he was very common. Archer guesses she's disappointed at the company the Carfrys had to offer. New Yorkers feel they deserve to meet more prominent people when they take the risk of being social in a foreign country. Archer challenges her judgment of M. Rivière, and she admits she wouldn't have known if he was clever. Archer doesn't like this judgment, either. He's beginning to fear how much he thinks about what he doesn't like about her, particularly since her attitude is exactly that of everyone he knows in New York.

This conversation displays one of the fundamental incompatibilities between Archer and May. Archer craves a connection to the life of the mind, whereas May can't—and doesn't want to—see past social conventions for long enough to engage with art and literature on any deep level. Archer can judge people on their own merits, but May can judge them only on what the hive-mind of New York society would think of them. It seems possible that Archer and May are fundamentally incompatible in marriage.

Archer says he won't ask M. Rivière to dine, and May is appalled that he would consider such a thing. He says M. Rivière is looking for a job in New York in order to enjoy good conversation, which May finds hilarious. Overall, Archer is rather glad not to meet M. Rivière again, since he can't see how he would be happy in New York. He realizes that May will often interfere in his life this way, but he figures that things will be easier after the first six months of marriage. However, May is already changing him in all the ways he doesn't want to be changed.

May thinks that M. Rivière is not nearly socially prominent enough for Archer to have him to dinner, displaying her essential snobbishness. Though May reveres New York society more than Archer does, even she knows that it's not a place where intellectuals will find any satisfaction. May is making Archer's life more confined, forcing him to live strictly according to the conventions that have always ruled her life.

CHAPTER 21

The lawn stretches to the sea, decorated with **flowers** and vases along a path. There are two archery targets between the cliff and the house, and a number of ladies and gentlemen are gathered under a tent. Every so often a girl steps out to shoot an arrow at a target. Archer watches from the verandah of the house. Behind him, French windows hung with lace curtains give glimpses of the elegant interior. This is the Beauforts' house, and the event is a meeting of the Newport Archery Club. Though lawn tennis is becoming more fashionable, archery is still preferred for social occasions.

Wharton's technique of skipping over months of her protagonist's life and meeting him again in a new setting creates the impression that his life goes on according to the path prescribed for him by society; as he's simply swept along, it's not even necessary to describe what happens to him. Many of the New York families come to Newport, Rhode Island for the summer, essentially continuing their normal socializing in a different location.

Archer is surprised that life continues as it always has despite the change in his perception of it. The previous winter, he and May moved into their new house, and he returned to his old routine of work. He was occupied with finding a horse for May's carriage and decorating his library as he wanted. He had socialized with the same people at the same places as before, and his life seemed normal. But going to Newport means escaping from duty. Archer wanted to go to Maine for a more rustic holiday, but the Wellands have always gone to Newport and insisted they continue to do so. May couldn't understand why he didn't want to go since he always liked it before, but standing on the verandah, he can tell that he's not going to enjoy being there.

Archer's interactions with Ellen have permanently changed his view of the world, even if he still acts more or less the same as he did before. As long as Archer is glued to his normal routines of work and home life, he can maintain an appearance of normality, but now that he's been removed from these routines, all bets are off. Like her parents, May is attached to tradition even in her personal choices; she sees no need for the change and variety that Archer craves. Maine would have temporarily removed the couple from New York society, but Newport does not.

May does not disappoint him. Archer married, as most people do, because he met her at the right moment and she represented a stable life. He's happy to be married to such a beautiful, popular, and sweet woman, and he has come to think of his passion for Ellen Olenska as a ridiculous experiment that he could never have gone through with. However, his mind feels rather empty, and so the joyful people on the lawn shock him.

It's important to note that though it is not a roaring success, Archer and May's marriage is not an utter failure. In fact, it's almost worse for Archer to be stuck in this relationship that does not hurt him in any real way, but nonetheless does not bring him any satisfaction.

Medora Manson joins Archer, wearing her usual eccentric clothing. She says she didn't realize he had arrived. She knows that work often keeps husbands from joining their wives here, but she always told Ellen that marriage is a sacrifice. Archer's heart stops at the sound of her name. Medora says she's staying with the Blenkers in Portsmouth. Dr. Agathon Carver is holding meetings there, which are a very different scene than the one before them. She says she has always told Ellen to beware of monotony, but Ellen has declined to come to Newport. Medora even had trouble getting her to come to the Blenkers'.

Medora unwittingly strikes on a truth about Archer's marriage—he has indeed sacrificed much, including his passion for Ellen and the possibility of real happiness, in order to remain loyal to May and uphold society's ideal of marriage. Her warning about monotony also applies to Archer, as he has committed himself to a life of monotony that he dreads. Meanwhile, Ellen avoids Newport because she doesn't want to run into Archer.

Archer and Medora head towards the tent, and Beaufort comes towards them over the lawn, looking fat and overdressed. In the spring he went on a cruise, and there are rumors that Miss Fanny Ring went with him. He's been spending lavishly, and in response to the rumors that he's in financial straits, he only spends more. He greets Medora and Archer and says that May is sure to win the archery competition.

Though Beaufort has never been particularly respected for his morals, this is really the beginning of the end for him. He continues his affair with a prostitute, and the rumors about his finances foreshadow his coming financial ruin. For him, the appearance of wealth is more important than actually having money.

As they reach the tent, May emerges, looking as much like Diana as she did on the night of her engagement. Archer marvels at the way experience never leaves its mark on her. She takes aim at the target so gracefully that everyone murmurs, and Archer feels proud. Her rivals stand in a pretty group behind her, but none of them can make athletic pursuits look so easy. Lawrence Lefferts remarks on her beauty, but Beaufort says this is the only kind of target she'll ever hit. Archer feels oddly angry. He should be glad that someone like Beaufort doesn't find May attractive, but he worries that her extreme "niceness" only conceals emptiness. May hits the bull's-eye and receives everyone's congratulations with grace. She looks most radiant when she sees Archer's pleasure.

Wharton's comparisons of May to Diana is a gesture to her innocence, so the fact that she still looks just the same as she did before her marriage signals that she has grown no more worldly than she was before; she's preserved as an innocent maiden. Beaufort and Archer have shared their attraction to Ellen, May's opposite, so Beaufort's dislike of May suggests that she's lacking just what made Archer and Beaufort fall in love with Ellen. Meanwhile, May's success in archery symbolizes her success at playing the role of "Archer," Newland's wife.

Before long, May and Archer drive off, with May taking the reins. The streets are crowded with well-dressed people in carriages. They decide to go visit Mrs. Mingott before dinner. The old woman built a house on an unfashionable, cheap piece of land overlooking the bay. A winding drive leads up to a walnut front door, and the ceilings inside have been painted with Greek gods. Mrs. Mingott spends her days sitting in an armchair waving a fan.

Mrs. Mingott acts in Newport much as she does in New York, flouting convention to live where she wants instead of where people expect her to live. The paintings of Greek gods give her house a sense of eccentricity and mild impropriety, as Greek myths do not shy away from sex and betrayal.

Ever since Mrs. Mingott helped hasten Archer's marriage, she has treated him as though they are partners in some secret, as she believes him particularly passionate. She admires May's prize from the contest, a diamond-tipped arrow brooch which she says May should leave to her eldest daughter. The mention of children makes May blush, which makes Mrs. Mingott tease her further.

Mrs. Mingott seems to think that Archer just couldn't wait to get May in bed, which is ironic, considering that the truth is almost the opposite. Even the mention of children embarrasses the innocent May, for whom it must come too close to touching on the subject of sex.


Mrs. Mingott asks them to tell her about the party so she doesn't have to hear about it from Medora, who is coming by to pick up Ellen. Ellen has been spending the day with Mrs. Mingott. She calls for her, and when she receives no answer she summons a servant, who tells her that Ellen went down to the shore. Mrs. Mingott asks Archer to fetch her, and Archer goes, feeling like he's dreaming.

Archer didn't know that Ellen was at Mrs. Mingott's house, and he hasn't seen her since before his marriage, so this coincidence seems almost too good to be true. In fact, May and her family often push Archer and Ellen together as happens here, not realizing the effects of their actions.

Archer has heard about Ellen's life since he last saw her; she spent the previous summer in Newport, but moved to Washington in the fall, where she moved through diplomatic society. He has listened to people talk about her as though he was hearing about someone dead, but when Medora spoke her name at the archery match, his last night in Ellen's house suddenly became real again.

Until now, Archer has been pretty successful at moving past his love for Ellen and not attempting to pursue her. May and Ellen, as opposites, always seem to make each other almost unreal, and Archer has been living with May, so Ellen has come to seem like a dream in the meantime.

Through weeping willows along the path to the shore, Archer sees the Lime Rock lighthouse and the other islands in the bay. At the end of the path is a pier with a pagoda, and he sees Ellen leaning against the rail, facing the water. Archer stops, thinking this vision is a dream, and reality lies with May sitting in the house above, and Mr. Welland waiting for dinner in their villa. Archer thinks of himself as a son-in-law.

Ellen, along with Archer's feelings for her, can't fit into Archer's monotonous and conventional married life. As their affair increases in strength, he will often feel that Ellen and May can't both be real at the same time. Now, in his "real" life, Archer feels destined to become an imitation of his father-in-law.

Archer gazes at the boats on the bay against the sunset, and he remembers the scene in *The Shaughraun* in which the man kissed his lover's ribbon. He wonders whether he would know if Ellen came up behind him, then decides that he'll go back if she doesn't turn by the time a certain boat reaches Lime Rock. Archer waits until the boat is far past Lime Rock, but Ellen still doesn't move, and so he walks back up the hill.

Archer's situation is similar to the one in the play, since in both, a man watches his love without her knowledge, making their interaction almost more intimate than it would be if she were aware of him. Archer wants Ellen to sense his presence, as this would prove some sort of connection between them. He will later learn that Ellen does in fact know he's behind her.

On the drive home, May says she would have liked to see Ellen, but Ellen seems very different now. She stays with strange people and ignores her friends. May wonders whether she might be happier with her husband. Archer laughs, saying he's never heard May be cruel before. There's no way Ellen would be happier in hell. May replies, in the same tone that her mother uses with Mr. Welland, that Ellen shouldn't have married a foreigner.

May sees Ellen's situation through the inelastic eyes of convention, rather than compassionately considering the circumstances surrounding Ellen's separation from her husband. May and Archer are already beginning to imitate May's parents, just as Archer seems to have foreseen down by the pier.

As they approach the Wellands' house, Archer sees Mr. Welland through the window, pacing the drawing room in exactly the way he imagined him earlier. The Wellands' house usually pacifies Archer with all the small details that make up a system of time and life. It usually feels like the only reality, but now it feels incredibly unreal. All night he lies awake thinking of Ellen driving home across the beaches.

Mr. Welland is always predictable, preferring the comfort of sameness to the excitement of change, and Archer seems destined to the same kind of life. However, just the sight of Ellen has once again overturned Archer's world, making him see possibilities that didn't exist before.

CHAPTER 22

At the lunch table, Mrs. Welland mockingly reads aloud an invitation from Amy and Emerson Sillerton to a party for the Blenkers. She and Mr. Welland find such an idea absurd, and Mrs. Welland pities Mrs. Sillerton. Her husband is an irritation to Newport society. He comes from a respectable family, but he's an archaeologist and breaks with tradition at every turn. The worst of it is that he married Amy Dagonet, and none of the Mingotts understand why she submits so willingly to the strange company he keeps and the strange pursuits he drags her into. However, whenever they give a party, their relations all have to send someone.

Just as May couldn't imagine asking M. Rivière to dinner, her parents snobbishly think it's ridiculous to have a party for a family as common as the Blenkers. The Sillertons have to be accepted as part of society because of their family heritage, but they don't act the way that society expects its members to act. For one thing, gentlemen aren't supposed to have professions like archaeology. No one considers that Amy Sillerton could possibly enjoy her husband's odd pursuits.

Mr. Welland says he can't go to the party, because he has to take his medicine and go for a drive at a certain time. Mrs. Welland assures him that she'll go for a short while. She suggests that May can take him for his drive if Archer's afternoon is provided for. She always feels that people's time should be provided for, as she can't stand the idea of having nothing to do. She herself has so much to do to take care of her husband that she's always busy. May says she's sure Archer has something to do. Mrs. Welland is always distressed that he doesn't plan his days out and sometimes simply lies on the beach. May has explained that Archer reads when he has nothing else to do.

Mr. Welland displays the compulsive need for sameness which irritates Archer, and which he fears falling into himself. Mrs. Welland, meanwhile, seems to fear boredom, perhaps because having nothing to do allows one to think about one's life and realize how empty it actually is. She prefers to fill her life, and the lives of those around her, with meaningless activity that provides the impression of happy occupation. She can't understand Archer's desire to think and read.

Even so, as the day approaches, May begins to worry that Archer will be bored when she takes her father out for his drive. He reassures her that he's going to go look at a second horse for their carriage. He's been thinking of this ever since the Sillertons' invitation arrived, but he didn't say anything, as though to keep it secret. After lunch, he drives off into a gorgeous day in a hired carriage, feeling excited at the prospect of having time to himself after he visits the farm.

May again shows signs of acting like her mother in marriage. Although Archer isn't really going to do anything illicit, he seems to need something in his life that the Wellands can't monopolize and consume by their routine. Marriage has taken his independence from him, and he feels like he has to be secretive in reclaiming it.

As soon as he heard about the Sillertons' party, Archer realized that Medora Manson would probably be coming in to Newport for it, and Ellen might go to Mrs. Mingott's again. Ever since he saw Ellen, he's wanted to see the place where she's been living and imagine her there. He doesn't want to see Ellen, but it seems that seeing her place of habitation will make the world feel less empty.

Ellen and Medora have been staying at the Blenkers' house, so Archer is hoping their house will be empty because of the party. At this point, Archer has no intention of rekindling his love affair with Ellen, but she's the only thing that has given his life meaning, and he hopes to find that feeling without doing any damage.

Archer isn't satisfied with the horse he's come to see, and before long he heads towards Portsmouth in golden sunlight. He drives past farms and villages and eventually comes to the Blenkers' tumbledown house at the end of a road. He ties his horses in a shed and walks towards the house. He leans on the gate for a while, taking in the silence. Eventually he wants to see the inside of the house, and he decides to ring the bell. If someone is there he can write a message in the sitting room.

It's clear that the main goal of this trip has always been to see where Ellen is staying—looking at the horse was only an excuse. Though there's nothing explicitly unfaithful to May in this outing, it certainly has a feeling of illicitness. Furthermore, this scene echoes the scene by pier and the scene in The Shaughraun, *as Archer is again watching something related to Ellen without her knowledge.*

But as Archer walks across the lawn, he sees a parasol in the summer-house and feels sure that it belongs to Ellen. He goes to the summer-house and picks up the parasol. Then he hears the rustle of skirts. He doesn't look up from the parasol, sure that it will be Ellen. Instead, a young woman says his name and he looks up to find the youngest of the Blenker girls, who seems just to have awoken. They're both confused to see each other, and Archer explains that he was waiting for Mrs. Blenker or her visitors to return. Miss Blenker says that they're all at the Sillertons' party, which she couldn't attend due to a sore throat.

Though Archer has told himself that he doesn't want to see Ellen, it quickly becomes clear that he's harbored a secret hope of finding her here. The parasol seems to promise him so much; he feels that their meeting here is destined, but he's wrong, and he's deprived of the romantic scene he has imagined. As often happens to him, his hopes are dashed just at the moment he believes everything he wants will finally occur.

Archer asks whether Ellen went to the party as well, and Miss Blenker says that she's been called away to Boston. She rambles about her parasol and Ellen's hair. She doesn't know why Ellen went to Boston; it seemed Ellen didn't want Medora to know. Archer suddenly sees his future empty before him and feels that nothing will ever happen to him. He really thought he would find Ellen here, but even the parasol wasn't hers. He says he's going to Boston the next day, and Miss Blenker tells him that Ellen is staying at the Parker House. Archer is hardly aware of the rest of the conversation, and he eventually drives away.

If this were a romance novel, Ellen and Archer would have had a perfect reunion here in the summerhouse. But because this book runs on irony, Archer finds that just when he's come to find her, Ellen isn't even in Rhode Island anymore. Archer seems to understand how different his life is from a romance novel—he has no confidence in getting a happy ending. However, this thwarted attempt has rekindled his desire for Ellen, and now he'll take more drastic steps.

CHAPTER 23

The next morning Archer takes the train to Boston, where it's oppressively hot. People move through the streets as carelessly as though they're going to the bathroom. Even the fashionable neighborhoods seem less tidy than European cities ever do. Archer can't imagine Ellen in this setting. He eats breakfast at the Somerset Club. He's been feeling energetic ever since he told May he was going to Boston on business and would return to New York the next evening. A letter from the office had fortuitously arrived to make his trip seem plausible. The ease with which he lied made him feel guiltily like Lawrence Lefferts.

Wharton describes Boston as far inferior to European cities, particularly in the dignity of its residents, which is ironic, considering that New Yorkers generally think Americans more dignified than Europeans. Archer feels a sense of renewed life as a result of reclaiming his independence from May, but this also means that he's deceiving her. He begins to see that he's following in the footsteps of many other unfaithful husbands.

After breakfast, a few men Archer knows come in, confirming that he still is, after all, in the same world as before. He has a messenger take a note to Ellen, but the man returns with news that Ellen was out. Archer can't understand why Ellen would be out at this time. He decides to go to the Parker House himself. As he walks across the Common, he comes upon Ellen sitting listlessly on a bench. At first she looks startled to see him, but she quickly becomes happy. He sits.

Reorienting his life in relation to Ellen instead of in relation to May makes Archer feel as though his world has entirely changed. Notably, when Archer makes elaborate plans to reach Ellen, as he did going to the Blenkers', they fail; but he manages to simply happen upon her on Boston Common. It seems that everything in their relationship must always be unexpected.

Archer says he's come on business, and begins to pretend he's surprised to see her. He doesn't even know what he's saying. She says she's here on business, too, and he's amazed that he doesn't remember her voice. He comments that her hair is different, and she says it's only because Nastasia isn't with her. He points out that it's unconventional for her to be alone at the Parker House, but to her it seems like nothing next to the fact that she's just refused to take back money that belonged to her in the first place.

Archer has come to Boston for one reason: to see Ellen. The fact that he pretends otherwise proves that he doesn't yet want her to know that he's still in love with her. Unsurprisingly, Archer comes upon Ellen in the sort of unconventional situation that seems, in fact, to compose her entire life. By the nineteenth-century laws of marriage, Ellen's money became her husband's once she married.

Archer springs up. In response to his questions, she confirms that someone has come to meet her here with this offer, but she refused. Her husband wanted her to return to him, and was willing to pay a large amount. Archer asks whether she came to meet him, but she laughs. Her husband wouldn't come here. He sent someone with a message, as he never writes letters. He doesn't need to, because he has secretaries. Archer blushes at the offhand way she mentions secretaries. He's tempted to ask whether the Count sent his secretary, but he doesn't. Ellen says that the messenger insisted on waiting until the evening in case she changes her mind.

Ellen's husband never actually appears in the novel, and the fact that he doesn't even write letters only adds to his position as an invisible, hovering menace who can never be directly vanquished. Archer believes that Ellen had an affair with her husband's secretary, so he's shocked that this circumstance isn't always in her mind the way it is in his. Ellen's husband seems to regard her as his property, which will be returned to him if he simply pays enough for it.

Ellen tells Archer he isn't changed. He wants to say that he was until he saw her. He suggests that they go out on the bay, saying there's no reason they shouldn't, as they've done all they could. She stands up and says he shouldn't say things like that. He says it can't do any harm—he just wants to listen to her. She says the man is coming to see her at eleven, and Archer says she must come with him immediately. She doesn't need to be afraid, as he just wants to hear about her life.

Since he last spoke to Ellen, Archer has reverted somewhat to his old perspective on the world, but her presence makes the effects of his time with May melt away. He feels that he and Ellen have been virtuous in staying away from each other, so no one can blame them for going on one outing and talking. Obviously, his feelings are too strong for this situation to actually be so innocent.

Ellen asks why Archer didn't come fetch her at the shore that day at Mrs. Mingott's. He explains that he swore he wouldn't unless she looked around. She says she purposely didn't look around. She knew he was there and went to the beach to get away from him. He laughs and admits that he came to Boston just find her. She says she must go back to the hotel to leave a note before they go to the boat, and he gives her materials to write there on the bench. He joyfully watches the passers-by staring at the strange sight of a well-dressed lady writing a note on her knee.

This revelation of what really happened at the pier shows how Archer and Ellen are always at cross purposes in their love for each other; Ellen avoids Archer because she can't handle her feelings, but Archer continues to pursue her. May would never write a note in full view of so many people, and Archer seems to enjoy the fact that Ellen does so, because it reinforces his sense of freedom.

When Ellen finishes the note, they begin walking and have the unlikely luck to come upon a cab. They drive to the Parker House, and Ellen takes her note in. Archer worries that the messenger might already be waiting inside. He paces by the cab, impatiently watching everyone who comes out the doors of the hotel. Suddenly he sees the face of a young man who seems different from everyone around him, and for a moment Archer thinks he recognizes him, but then the man disappears and he assumes he was just a foreign businessman. Archer begins to think Ellen must have met the messenger, and is about to go look for her when she reappears. Back in the cab, he realizes she was only gone for three minutes.

Now that Archer has found Ellen, he can't bear the thought of losing her again and he becomes entirely fixated on keeping her at his side for this day. Archer will later discover that the man he recognizes is M. Rivière. The fact that he seems so different from everyone else emphasizes the divide between Americans and Europeans; something about his very way of conducting himself in this crowd marks M. Rivière out from the Americans around him.

Sitting next to each other on the boat, they realize that they don't need to talk. Being alone is enough. As the boat begins to move, Archer feels that they're starting on a long journey away from the normal world, but he's afraid to say as much to Ellen for fear of betraying her trust. Though he has remembered their kiss with passion, he now feels like they're closer than touch could ever make them. The air is cool on the water, unlike in the city. Ellen seems very calm.

This is, in fact, the beginning of a time in which Archer and Ellen will actively love each other in spite of them both being married, and Archer's sense of beginning a journey gestures to this stage of their affair. Simply being together and joined in their knowledge of what has passed between them brings them closer than physical passion can, proving that Archer is, in fact, being unfaithful to May.

Archer and Ellen go to the dining room of an inn at Point Arley, where Archer is disappointed to find a loud group of schoolteachers. He gets them a private room that opens on the ocean. It's quite bare and doesn't seem like the setting for an illicit meeting. Ellen's quietness and simplicity makes him feel like they're not breaking any rules; they're just two old friends who want to catch up in private.

Archer is constantly trying to convince himself that he and Ellen aren't doing anything wrong, while Ellen's attitude adds to the sense of her great worldly experience. She knows that meeting in private will only mean as much as their actions in this room make it mean.

CHAPTER 24

While Archer and Ellen eat lunch, she tells him about her life since he last saw her. She eventually decided she couldn't really fit in with New York society, so she decided to try Washington. She'll probably make a home there for Medora, who's always in danger of making a bad marriage. Archer is surprised that Ellen isn't worried about Dr. Carver, but she says he only wants Medora as a convert to his social schemes. She herself is more interested in his ideas than in everyone else's dedication to European tradition. It seems silly to act like America is a copy of another country rather than making a new society.

Ellen's comments on the relationship between America and Europe suggest that American society imitates that of Europe, perhaps at an older stage, as the American characters disapprove of Europe's liberalism. She accuses America of simply being a bad copy of something that was already flawed. The only way to improve society, then, is to break from that tradition to create something modern and uniquely American.

Archer asks whether Ellen has seen Beaufort lately. She hasn't for a long time, but he understands her point of view. Archer thinks she likes Beaufort because he isn't like other New Yorkers, who are so dull. He asks why she doesn't go back to Europe. After a long time, she says without emotion that she stays because of him. Archer doesn't dare to speak. She says he made her understand that the dullness covers things far more delicate than anything in her old life. She's realized the price of pleasure. She has long wanted to tell him how he's helped her.

Archer is clearly still jealous of Ellen's affinity for Beaufort, who lives as unconventionally as she does. However, just as Ellen has changed his view of the world, he has also changed hers. She can no longer be happy in the European life that New Yorkers think immoral, because Archer has shown her the goodness of the New Yorkers' way of life. Though Wharton often criticizes society, here she also admits that it has a certain value.

Archer says that Ellen has changed him much more than he has changed her. He married because she told him to. She asks whether the marriage is bad for May. She has to believe that the most important thing is to save people from misery, or else everything she learned from Archer that made her old life seem bare is just a sham. In that case, she might as well go back. Archer says there's no reason for her to stay if she's been counting on the success of his marriage. She made him see what a real life would be like, and then she made him continue with a fake one. She says she's enduring it, so he can too, and she begins to cry.

In changing each other to such an extent, Archer and Ellen have placed responsibility for their misery on each other's shoulders—enlightenment does not, in their case, bring happiness. Ellen's goal in life has now become entirely selfless, as she wants only to protect other people. Practically, this means protecting May from the consequences of Ellen and Archer's desires. Ironically, they can't be happy as they are, but neither can they be happy if they ruin others' lives to be together.

Ellen's face suddenly exposes her soul, and Archer sees that all this time, she has been feeling the same anguish as he. Half the room is between them, but they don't move. Though Archer fixates on her hand on the table, he knows that touching her would not satisfy his desire now. Desperation soon overtakes him; they're so close, and yet so much stands between them. He asks what's the use of anything when she'll go back anyway, but she promises that she won't go back as long as he stays strong. He knows she means that if he makes any move that will hurt May, Ellen will leave. She says she'll be all right as long as they are both a part of each other's lives, but they can't have any more than that.

Archer and Ellen both want to be together, and Archer is ready to do something drastic to make it happen. Ellen, however, knows she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she hurt May to be with Archer. At the same time, she's too in love to give Archer up completely. This leaves them in a state that will prove almost more painful than anything else; they have to know that they're in love with each other but accept not being together. Archer will have to manage his actions knowing that if he takes a wrong step, Ellen will return to her husband.

Archer springs towards Ellen, and she rises quietly. She takes his hands, but her arms keep him away. They stand that way in silence. Archer understands that he must not do anything that will drive her away. She says not to be unhappy, and he makes her promise again that she won't go back. She leads the way out to the dining room, where Boston lies across the water.

Their pose here represents the emotional state they must maintain: connected, but not closely enough to do harm. This scene has taken place in a location removed from reality, but now they must return to Boston, where all their hardships await.

CHAPTER 25

Back on the boat, Archer feels surprisingly calm. By any normal measure, the day has been a failure, but he feels oddly comforted by the balance Ellen holds between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves. He's glad he didn't tempt her to break it. Even after he says goodbye to her at the station, he feels satisfied with their meeting. He returns to the club and thinks about their day. He realizes that Ellen will only go back to Europe if she thinks she's tempting Archer to be disloyal. He has to keep her near him, but not go too near.

Though a part of Archer is ruled entirely by his love for Ellen, he fundamentally doesn't want to hurt their families any more than Ellen does. For this reason, he can be content with the agreement they've come to. Now, his job is to navigate their relationship so that he can gain satisfaction for his love, but not drive Ellen away by being bold with his love in a way that could hurt May.

Archer falls into a haze of these thoughts on the train, and is only stirred out of it once he arrives in New York and finds outside the station the same man he had vaguely recognized outside the hotel the day before. The man approaches him and asks whether they met in London. Archer suddenly recognizes him as M. Rivière. M. Rivière says he's returning to Europe in two days, and he begins to ask Archer for a favor. Archer interrupts to ask him to lunch, but M. Rivière says he only needs help finding transportation because American stations are hard to navigate. Archer helps him and they make plans to meet that afternoon.

Perhaps influenced by his recent encounter with Ellen, which has influenced him back towards unconventionality, Archer takes this opportunity to ask M. Rivière to dine, an idea that May shot down on their last meeting. The strange coincidence of seeing the man both here and in Boston suggests that his appearance will have some unknown significance. M. Rivière's difficulty with the station reinforces the sense that America is hostile towards foreigners and travelers.

Later, M. Rivière comes to Archer's office. He says he thinks he saw Archer in Boston. He finds it strange that they met in the current circumstances; he has come on a special mission. Archer suddenly makes a connection about M. Rivière's presence. He asks him to sit. M. Rivière says he wants to speak to Archer about Ellen Olenska. Though Archer knew this was coming, it still bowls him over. He asks whether M. Rivière is Count Olenski's messenger, but M. Rivière says that his mission as such has failed, and he thinks Archer can help make it a failure with Ellen's family, as well. Archer grows angry and says he certainly will do so. Believing that the Mingotts don't want Ellen to return to her husband, he's offended that M. Rivière would try to set him against the family. The Frenchman becomes distressed and timid.

Archer has liked, and perhaps even pitied, M. Rivière up until this point. Suddenly, however, the man reveals himself to be the very person who could threaten Archer's future with Ellen, the very person whom Archer despises for the message he brings her. Archer and M. Rivière begin this interaction with a misunderstanding: Archer gets angry because he thinks M. Rivière wants him to convince the Mingotts that Ellen should return to her husband. What Archer doesn't realize is that he doesn't have the full picture of the situation.

M. Rivière clarifies that he wants to present his own opinion to Archer, not the arguments that he was sent with. Archer is no more receptive than before. M. Rivière asks whether Archer thinks the matter is entirely closed. Archer calms down and asks whether the matter isn't closed. M. Rivière asks whether he agrees with the family that the new proposals he's brought mean Ellen must return to her husband.

M. Rivière is essentially betraying his mission to do what he thinks is morally right. He assumes that the Mingotts have informed Archer about the situation and their opinion on it, but in fact, they have done no such thing. The family has chosen wealth over Ellen's freedom, and they have an unreasonable amount of influence over her future.

Archer is shocked. He realizes that the Mingotts have kept him from even knowing that negotiations with Count Olenski were happening. They must have sensed that he wouldn't be on their side. He remembers May saying Ellen might be happier with her husband. She hasn't mentioned Ellen since; this must have been a test. Archer admires May's family loyalty, but she must also believe Ellen would be better off with her husband. M. Rivière asks whether Archer knows that the Mingotts are advising Ellen to accept proposals he has brought on the Count's behalf.

As much as the Mingotts seem to like Archer, this development proves that they don't necessarily trust him. They know that his personal moral compass is too strong to let him simply agree with whatever the Mingotts decide is the family line. Furthermore, the deception in his marriage is going both ways, as May has obviously colluded with her family in keeping this information from Archer.

Archer wants to know why M. Rivière is even talking to him about this, and M. Rivière exclaims that Archer must not let Ellen go back to her husband. He seems passionately sincere. Archer asks whether he expressed this opinion to Ellen, but M. Rivière says he originally believed that she should go back to regain her money and social position, or else he wouldn't have accepted his mission. However, after he spoke to Ellen and explained the Count's offers, he changed his mind because he could see Ellen had changed. He has known Ellen for many years through his acquaintance with Count Olenski.

M. Rivière's attitude is unexpected, considering that Count Olenski sent him to argue the exact opposite of what he's now telling Archer. However, the risk he's taking in doing so makes his opinion even more convincing. Ellen and Archer have just been discussing the ways in which they have changed each other, and now M. Rivière confirms that Ellen has indeed transformed since returning to America.

Archer gazes at a wall calendar with a portrait of the President on it. It seems unimaginable that such a conversation as this is going on under his rule. He asks how Ellen has changed. M. Rivière says he discovered that she's an American, and things that are acceptable in other societies are not acceptable to Americans. If the Mingotts understood what those things were, they would surely not want her to go back, but they think her husband is just longing for domestic life. Both men are very moved. Archer thanks M. Rivière, who adds that he is currently employed by Count Olenski out of financial need, but he will quit immediately when he returns.

Something about this interaction seems distinctly not American to Archer, presumably the frank talk of deception. M. Rivière thinks that Americans are more scrupulous than foreigners are, and he makes the Mingotts seem simply naïve in their belief that life will be better for Ellen with her husband. In fact, they seem to understand Ellen's husband's true nature, and yet still do not change their opinion. Finally, M. Rivière wants Archer to understand that he's an honest man who doesn't like to be betraying his employer.

CHAPTER 26

New York begins to prepare for the social season in October, and by the middle of November it's in full swing. Around this time, Mrs. Archer always comments on how changed New York is, and in her opinion it only ever changes for the worse. Two years after his marriage, even Archer has to admit that New York is changing. Mrs. Archer brings the topic up, as usual, at Thanksgiving dinner, wondering what's left to be thankful for.

Because Mrs. Archer worships tradition, any forward progress in society seems negative to her. She undoubtedly idealizes the past, making the present seem worse in comparison. However, since Wharton has never portrayed Mrs. Archer as a particularly wise character, this change might actually be for the better.

Everyone knew what the Reverend Dr. Ashmore meant when he gave his Thanksgiving sermon on a Bible verse about loving and pursuing foreigners. When he speaks against society he discusses its "trend," an idea that frightens Mrs. Archer. Miss Sophy Jackson thinks it's odd that he preached about it on Thanksgiving, but Mrs. Archer thinks they're supposed to be thankful for what's left. Miss Jackson exclaims that people are dressing very extravagantly now. She and Mrs. Archer think it's awful to wear a dress from Paris immediately upon receipt, instead of waiting at least a year. Miss Jackson tells a story of one woman who died possessing forty-eight dresses that had never been worn, and her daughters were able to wear them fashionably once they got out of mourning.

The Reverend surely meant that New York society should be wary of imitating foreign cultures and abandoning their own morals. Mrs. Archer not only dislikes change, but she actually fears it; there's safety in what she knows. Wharton seems to poke fun at Mrs. Archer and Miss Jackson for their inflexibility. They're shocked by the idea of people breaking social rules that never protected anyone in the first place, but were simply pointless customs of fashion. Ironically, New Yorkers buy their clothes from Paris but don't want to seem too French by wearing them while they're actually in fashion in France.

Miss Jackson thinks Beaufort started the new fashion by making his wife wear her dresses as soon as she received them, which makes her look very improper. Mrs. Archer expresses pity for Mrs. Beaufort, because there are rumors that Beaufort is heading for financial ruin. People don't really like him, but they don't want to see him stain his wife's family. New York socially ostracizes anyone who commits financial crimes, as it seems Beaufort is doing.

Notably, Miss Jackson blames this frightening trend on Beaufort, the foreigner in their midst. Society has been able to ignore Beaufort's many affairs, but financial ruin cannot be ignored, perhaps because it's more public. Mrs. Beaufort comes from a prominent family, and her husband's shame will reflect on them.

Everything they talk about seems to confirm Mrs. Archer's sense of change. She remarks that May now goes to Mrs. Struthers's gatherings, but May says that everyone does. Archer thinks New York deals with change by ignoring it until it has entirely arrived, and then pretending it happened long before. Mrs. Archer says she's never quite forgiven Ellen for beginning the trend of going to Mrs. Struthers's. May blushes and speaks deprecatingly of Ellen. The Mingotts all speak of her this way ever since she refused to return to her husband, but Archer is surprised to hear May do so.

Even the reader can see the change that has occurred in society throughout the course of the book thus far, since it wasn't so long ago that everyone was thrown into a tizzy by the news that Ellen went to Mrs. Struthers's house. Though the Mingotts supported Ellen's initial decision to leave her husband, they can't accept her refusal to return to him when he offered her money. She has now asserted her independence too strongly.

Mrs. Archer feels that people like Ellen, who have lived in aristocratic societies, should help New York keep its social distinctions. May says that Ellen doesn't care for society. Everyone knows that Ellen no longer has the Mingotts' good opinion. They have too much family solidarity to publicly speak against her, but they have abandoned her to the company she chooses, and she has become Bohemian. The Mingotts take this as proof that she should have returned to her rightful place in her husband's home. Miss Jackson says Ellen is favored by the gentlemen, and Mrs. Archer says this is a natural danger of her place in society.

Though everyone blames Ellen's unconventionality on her foreignness, Mrs. Archer paradoxically thinks that this same foreignness should actually make her support New York's conventions. Ellen has become even less conventional now that the Mingotts have given up on her and she doesn't have to please them. Mrs. Archer essentially implies that women who let themselves fall out of favor with society have to become promiscuous to gain the attention they crave.

Archer and Sillerton Jackson retreat to the library. Mr. Jackson remarks that if Beaufort collapses, people will find out scandalous details about his affairs. Archer always thinks of Beaufort as he saw him in the snow at Skuytercliff. Mr. Jackson hopes that certain influential people can help Beaufort, as he doesn't want Mrs. Beaufort's life ruined.

Archer can't separate Beaufort from his jealousy of Beaufort's pursuit of Ellen. Since society generally agrees to pretend affairs don't happen, Beaufort's collapse could crack this pretense and force society to face its own ugly underside.

Archer keeps wondering about May's sustained blush when she mentioned Ellen. He hasn't seen Ellen in four months. He wrote to her once in Washington, but she said they couldn't meet yet. He has built a place within himself filled with thoughts of her, and this has gradually come to seem like his real life. The life he actually lives seems unreal, and he's absent from everything around him.

In the past, Archer's reality has changed depending on which woman he's with in the moment. Now, however, he has committed to the reality of Ellen even in her absence, making his everyday life with May seem fake. This is an unusual, but still harmful, way of being unfaithful to his wife.

Mr. Jackson says it's a pity that Ellen refused to return to her husband, because she won't have any money to live on now. Archer doesn't understand until Mr. Jackson mentions Beaufort's name, at which point he becomes enraged and demands that Mr. Jackson explain himself. He says that Mrs. Mingott reduced Ellen's allowance, and she no longer has the money that Count Olenski offered to return to her if she came back to him. Archer insists that Mr. Jackson is making an improper insinuation, but Mr. Jackson says Lefferts is really the one doing it. Archer retorts that Ellen snubbed Lefferts for flirting with her. Mr. Jackson remarks that if Ellen goes back now and Beaufort fails, everyone's suspicions will be confirmed.

Mr. Jackson implies that people believe that Beaufort and Ellen are having an affair and that Beaufort is supporting Ellen financially. If Beaufort goes bankrupt and Ellen then returns to her husband, everyone will believe that she was forced to do so because Beaufort could no longer support her. In this society, upper-class women are completely dependent on their husbands or their families for an income. If Ellen's family refuses to support her and she wants to remain independent from her husband, she could feasibly have to find another man to give her money.

Archer says that Ellen certainly won't go back now, but Mr. Jackson seems to have been waiting for this. He says that Medora Manson's money is in Beaufort's hands, and if he fails, Medora and Ellen will be penniless unless Ellen convinces Mrs. Mingott to give her more money. Archer is angry to the point of doing something foolish. He sees that Mr. Jackson can tell that he's been excluded from family decisions, and has drawn conclusions. However, he's aware that Mr. Jackson is his guest, and he must be polite. He suggests they join the ladies.

Mr. Jackson is the king of New York's gossip, and he undoubtedly earned this position by being particularly attuned to any hints of scandal that might come his way. Now, it seems that Archer and Ellen have come into his purview. He's baiting Archer by pointing out how likely it is that Ellen will have to return to her husband, and he seems to suspect that Archer might care for Ellen a little too much.

May is strangely quiet on the way home, and Archer is still worried about her blush at Ellen's name. When they get home, he calls her into the library to complain about a smoking lamp. She says it won't happen again, and he feels like she's humoring him the way Mrs. Welland does her husband. Her youth strikes Archer, and he wonders with horror how long he'll have to live this life with her.

May's blush might signify that she, like Mr. Jackson, is suspicious of Ellen and Archer's relationship. Archer is taking petty revenge on his wife, and they're beginning to fall further into the shallow life that May's parents live. Now that Archer has seen Ellen again, he's even less happy in his marriage, almost to the point of wishing May dead.

Archer says he might have to go to Washington soon on business for a patent case. May says only that he must see Ellen while he's there, but he knows that she means much more. She means that she's on her family's side in Ellen's case, and she knows that Ellen is defying them on Archer's advice, making herself vulnerable to gossip. May is warning him that she knows he might be going to Washington just to see Ellen, and he should tell Ellen the potential consequences of her actions. May turns out the lamp and pauses for a kiss in the doorway.

Archer is beginning to lie to May, as his main goal in going to Washington is to see Ellen. The excessive subtext in May's reply shows how New Yorkers communicate—unable to deal with unpleasantness outright, their politeness conceals what they really want to say. Having grown up with this, and knowing May, Archer can decode her true meaning. It's ironic that May tells him to see Ellen as a warning that she suspects their relationship.

CHAPTER 27

The next day, the rumors say that Beaufort has successfully called on influential people, and everyone is relieved to see Mrs. Beaufort at the opera with a new necklace. They're all aware that Beaufort will have to be ejected from their social circle if he's been immoral in his business dealings, but, at the least, they don't want to lose the Beauforts' ballroom.

As is typical, society takes Mrs. Beaufort's appearance of wealth as proof of actual wealth, though it will later become clear that the necklace hasn't been paid for. People don't actually care that much about Beaufort as a person, but he's a social fixture.

Archer has definitely decided to go to Washington, even though the case he was using as an excuse has been postponed. He figures May won't find out. One morning, however, Mr. Letterblair meets him at the office with news that Beaufort put out rumors to give people confidence in his bank, but they have turned out to be false, and there's been a run on the bank. It's about to fail. Mr. Letterblair says he's never seen anything as bad in his life, and everyone they know will lose money. Mrs. Beaufort's only chance is to leave her husband, but her duty is to stay.

Archer is beginning to take bigger risks to see Ellen, purposely deceiving his wife. Though society has tolerated all of Beaufort's affairs, it can't forgive him for his financial immorality, perhaps suggesting that people care more about money than about interpersonal relationships. Mrs. Beaufort's reputation will decline with her husband's if she stays with him, but people will also lose respect for her if she abandons him.

A letter arrives from May. Mrs. Mingott somehow found out the night before what Beaufort had done, and it caused her to have a stroke. Archer immediately goes to Mrs. Mingott's house. He sees all the signs of illness in the hall—coats, a doctor's bag, letters. It seems Mrs. Mingott will be all right. Mrs. Welland tells him that the previous night, Mrs. Beaufort came to see Mrs. Mingott. They were closeted together for an hour, and when Mrs. Beaufort left, Mrs. Mingott was helped to bed. At three in the morning, the servants heard her bell and found her sitting up with a crooked smile, one hand hanging limp.

The gravity of Beaufort's actions can best be understood from the fact that they caused such a violent physical reaction in Mrs. Mingott. At the same time, her shock acts as a reminder of society's innocence—even one of society's less conventional members never imagined this sort of thing could happen, and when it did, she didn't know how to deal with it.

The stroke wasn't too bad, but everyone is terribly indignant to find that Mrs. Beaufort came to ask Mrs. Mingott to back up her husband. Mrs. Mingott told her that she wouldn't support dishonesty, and even Mrs. Beaufort's Dallas heritage wouldn't convince her otherwise. Mrs. Welland tells Archer all of this, horrified at having to face such unpleasantness. She worries about how to keep the news from Mr. Welland, who wants to preserve his illusions about the world. The doctor has promised to keep him in bed until it's all over.

Up until now, everyone has been pitying Mrs. Beaufort because they thought her husband was dragging her down with him. Now, however, it becomes clear that she supports him wholeheartedly, even though he's committed unacceptable acts in the eyes of society. The Wellands want to willfully remain innocent; they know they don't see the world realistically, and they don't want to, an attitude that Wharton condemns.

Archer can't really be helpful, and there's nothing much to do but discuss the Beaufort scandal. Mrs. Welland says that in her time, the wives of men disgraced in business would simply disappear with them. Mrs. Mingott herself was brought up in the country for that reason, and her mother would never have asked the family to hide their dishonor. Opinion has turned decidedly against Mrs. Beaufort. Archer believes unquestioningly in financial honesty. He feels more sorry for Mrs. Beaufort than for her relatives, but he thinks she must stand by her husband. He agrees that the one thing families can't do is support their members in business dishonor.

Mrs. Welland thinks that Mrs. Beaufort shouldn't try to defend what society sees as indefensible. Instead, she should accept the consequences of having chained herself to an immoral man. This, perhaps, is Wharton arguing for the necessity of divorce. Though families are expected to support their members through most scandals, business scandal falls outside this responsibility, perhaps because money is the unspoken foundation of high society.

Mrs. Mingott demands that the family telegraph for Ellen to come immediately, alone. No one wants to, but May says they must carry out her wishes. As the servants are busy, she asks Archer to take the telegram. She remarks on what a pity it is that he'll will be going to Washington just as Ellen is leaving it, but he certainly can't give up an important business trip. As Archer leaves, he hears May say that perhaps Mrs. Mingott wants to urge Ellen again to return to her husband.

Again, Archer and Ellen's relationship is marked by irony. Just as Archer was going to seek her out in Washington, she'll be coming to New York, but it would seem suspicious for him to now cancel his trip. The fact that May remarks on this reinforces the sense that she might be catching on to their affair. Meanwhile, the specter of Ellen's husband haunts Archer.

CHAPTER 28

Archer runs into Lawrence Lefferts at the telegraph office. He just heard about Mrs. Mingott's stroke and followed Archer to find out how bad it is. He thinks it must be bad, if the family is summoning Ellen Olenska. Archer feels his temper rise, but Lefferts's expression reminds him what bad form it would be to get angry in public. He hardly cares, but he doesn't want to talk about Ellen with Lefferts. They leave the office together, discussing Mrs. Mingott and Beaufort.

Lefferts's awareness that Archer is easily angered by insults to Ellen suggests that he knows Archer doesn't share the rest of the family's attitude towards her, and perhaps even that he, too, suspects a relationship. Lefferts's appearance at this point acts as a warning of what Archer is in danger of becoming if he takes his affair too far—a hypocritical lout like Lefferts.

That afternoon, the Beaufort failure is in all the papers, but no one connects it with Mrs. Mingott's stroke. There's never been such a bad bank failure, and many of its clients were of the upper class. People begin to turn against Mrs. Beaufort even more than against her husband, as she tries to convince everyone that misfortunes are a test of friendship. Besides, she doesn't have Beaufort's excuse of being a foreigner. People take the situation as evidence that marriages can't be dissolved. The Beauforts will no longer be part of society. Mrs. Archer says they'd better move to North Carolina and breed horses.

There could be negative consequences for the Mingotts if they were publicly associated in any way with Beaufort at this point. Mrs. Beaufort could preserve some of society's respect if she accepted her disgrace along with her husband's, but instead she fights what society has decreed, digging herself further into a hole. People expect her to know better because she's American. In the end, society uses the situation as proof that divorce is never a realistic solution.

The next day, Mrs. Mingott is much improved, and orders that no one speak to her about the Beauforts again. She begins to pass her stroke off as indigestion. But her attitude towards life has changed, and she starts to take an interest in family members she has ignored up until now. She has never respected Mr. Welland, but now she wants him to come visit her to compare diets as soon as he's healthy enough.

Mrs. Mingott wants to return to her state of innocence, rather than dealing with the reality of what has occurred. She becomes more ridiculous in this willful ignorance, becoming associated with Mr. Welland, who is obsessed with problems that he imagines so that he can ignore real problems.

Ellen sends a telegram announcing that she'll arrive in New York the following evening. At lunch, the Wellands struggle to figure out who can pick her up in Jersey City, as everyone is otherwise engaged. Mrs. Welland thinks that Mrs. Mingott's desire to see Ellen must be proof that she isn't as well as the doctor says. Mr. Welland is dismayed and begins to worry that perhaps the doctor, who also treats him, might not be reliable. Mrs. Welland forces herself into cheerfulness again and assures him that she only meant it's odd that Mrs. Mingott wants to see Ellen after their conflict over her marriage. Even so, Mr. Welland decides that he should find a new doctor before he gets much older.

This scene presents the absurdity of the Wellands' marriage in a nutshell. Mrs. Welland makes an offhand comment that's meant principally as a criticism of Ellen, but Mr. Welland, who cares only about himself, latches onto it as an indication that his health is in danger. In this marriage, Mrs. Welland spends all of her time making the world seem purer and happier than it is to protect her husband from the health problems that he makes up. Thus, they both waste their time in an imagined world.

As Mrs. Welland leads the way into the drawing room, she turns the conversation back to the problem of getting Ellen to New York the next day. Archer suggests that he can meet her after work if May sends the carriage to the ferry. May and Mrs. Welland are relieved at this solution.

For once, Archer has a stroke of luck in his attempts to see Ellen. However, it's ironic that May and her mother are so happy for him to meet Ellen when, in reality, their interactions only serve to ruin May's marriage.

When they leave the Wellands', May asks Archer how he'll be able to meet Ellen if he's going to Washington the next day. He replies that he's not going, because the case got postponed. She's surprised, because she saw a note from Mr. Letterblair saying that he was going to Washington for the patent case the next day. Archer says that Letterblair decided to go instead of him. She points out that the case is not postponed, and her uncharacteristic insistence makes Archer nervous. He wishes he hadn't given as many details when he first said he was going; he hates to see May pretending she hasn't detected his lie. He says he's not going until later. Their eyes meet, and they seem to understand each other more than they want to. When Archer gets out of the carriage to go to work, he wonders if May has tears in her eyes. All he can think is that he'll have two hours with Ellen.

This scene reinforces the sense that May is beginning to suspect Archer of an inappropriate interest in Ellen. Archer is taking a risk by canceling his trip just as Ellen is arriving, and doing so requires him to lie to May even more than he already has. Because of her conditioning in New York society, May would never come out directly and accuse Archer of lying to her, but nonetheless, he can tell that her insistent questions amount to approximately the same thing. Ellen wanted only for their relationship not to hurt May, but it seems to already be doing so, since Archer can't keep himself from deceiving May in the service of his love for Ellen.

CHAPTER 29

May's carriage meets Archer at the ferry and brings him to the train station in Jersey City. It's a snowy afternoon, and he paces the platform, thinking of the people who think there will someday be a tunnel under the Hudson, along with flying machines, electric lights, and telephones without wires. He's only thankful there's no tunnel yet. He imagines seeing Ellen far away on the platform and walking with her to the ferry, sitting with her in the carriage. He has so much to say to her. As the train comes slowly into the station, he pushes forward, looking in every window until he sees her face and realizes he'd forgotten what she looked like.

The snow in this scene brings to mind the snow at Skuytercliff when Archer first pursued Ellen. Archer's ponderings about modern technology, most of which existed by the time Wharton wrote this book, would remind her readers of all the changes that had occurred since Archer's time. In many ways, the 1870s would seem like a simpler time to her readers, no matter how complicated they seem to these innocent characters.

Everything happens the way Archer imagined. He guides Ellen to the carriage and tells her about the situation with Mrs. Mingott and the Beauforts. As the carriage makes its way to the wharf, they pass a hearse, and Ellen clutches at Archer's hand, worrying that it's a sign about Mrs. Mingott. He reassures her, then unbuttons her glove and kisses her palm. He tells her that he was planning to come to Washington to see her, and he admits that he hardly remembered her. She doesn't understand, and he says that she happens to him again every time. She says she feels the same way.

Reality doesn't usually measure up to Archer's fantasies about his meetings with Ellen, but this time it does, at least for a while. Though Archer cares only about Ellen and her presence in New York, Ellen actually cares deeply about her grandmother, and her loyalty to her family upstages her love for Archer. However, their meetings inevitably threaten their resolve not to act on their desires, as they fall in love all over again.

Archer watches Ellen, wondering what she's been doing since he saw her. He's forgotten everything he wanted to say to her, and can only think about how simultaneously close and far they are from each other. Ellen asks whether the carriage is May's, and whether May sent him. He says it is, and she did. Then he tells her that M. Rivière came to see him, hoping to retaliate against her mention of May. Ellen doesn't seem surprised, which he takes to mean that M. Rivière writes to her, but she says she didn't know. Archer asks tensely whether he was the one who helped her get away from her husband. She replies very calmly that he was.

Ellen's continuing sense of guilt is evident in her awareness of May's influence on their lives; it seems particularly cruel for Archer to be unfaithful to May in her own carriage. Archer believes that Ellen had an affair with M. Rivière, and his insecurity in his relationship with her makes M. Rivière just another person to be jealous of. However, Ellen never gets ruffled when talking about her tumultuous former life, reinforcing the sense of her worldly experience.

Archer feels stupidly conventional and says that Ellen is the most honest woman he's ever met; she looks at things realistically. She says she's had to look at the Gorgon, and it hasn't blinded her, but has dried her tears. She seems far more experienced than Archer. The movement of the boat flings them against each other. Archer says that she must see that they can't last this way, being together yet not together. She says he shouldn't have come to meet her, but then she kisses him. The carriage moves off the ferry.

Archer is struck by Ellen's seasoned perspective on life, which is so different from that of the Wellands. Ellen references the Gorgon, a monster in Greek mythology who turns everyone who looks at her to stone. Ellen means that experiencing awful things has made her strong enough to face them. Ellen is torn, both wanting Archer and wanting to do what's best for others.

Archer says Ellen shouldn't be afraid of him, because he doesn't want to touch her. He understands why she doesn't want them to have an ordinary affair. When he's with her, he wants so much more than stolen hours that he can sit quietly with her and trust that his vision will come true. She doesn't understand, and he says that she must know it will come true. She says this is a bad place to say it, as they're in May's carriage. He suggests they walk, but she says she has to get to Mrs. Mingott's. She insists he stay and look at reality with her. He says this is the only reality.

Neither Ellen nor Archer wants to have the kind of affair that others have, in which they regularly meet in secret to have sex. Archer feels he has to have Ellen to himself all the time; they have to find a way to be together for real. However, Ellen knows that this would require him to leave May, and she won't stand for the injury that would do her cousin. Archer has abandoned the reality that May represented, and now lives in the one that Ellen represents for him.

Ellen asks whether Archer wants her to live with him as his mistress. He's startled by her use of this crude word. He says he wants to go somewhere where such categories don't exist, and they can simply love each other. She says she knows many people who have tried to find that place, and have only ever found more promiscuous places. He remarks that the Gorgon really has dried her tears. She says the Gorgon has also fastened her eyes open so she can never not see, which is like torture.

Archer is becoming less realistic about society's possibilities, and more idealistic about what the world should look like instead. Even though Archer was in love with a married woman before, Ellen's experience of transgressions is far beyond his, and she knows that they're not about to find a harmless solution to their love when no one has yet been able to do so.

The carriage is moving quickly. Archer asks what Ellen's plan is for them. She says they can only be near each other if they stay away from each other, or else they're just two people related to May trying to be happy by betraying people. Archer says he's beyond that, but Ellen insists that he's not, and she has been beyond, and knows what it looks like. Archer sits there in pain until he presses the bell that signals to the coachman. The carriage stops and he gets out, though Ellen tries to stop him. He says through the window that he shouldn't have come to meet her. He tells the coachman to drive on. He realizes that he's been crying, and the wind has frozen his tears. He heads home.

Ellen is concerned, first and foremost, with preserving their integrity. She knows that if they betray May in order to be together, it will taint their love and they won't be any more satisfied than they are now. Archer thinks that he has overcome society's conventions enough to be happy even if he betrays May, but Ellen's experience of the world means she can understand that some social conventions exist for a reason. Her perspective tempers Wharton's criticism of society. In effect, there's no good solution for their affair.

CHAPTER 30

That evening, Archer finds the drawing room empty before dinner. He knows May is home, so he wonders why she isn't there. He has begun dwelling on such insignificant things to remain tied to reality. When May appears, she looks tired, but she has her usual tenderness. She asks what happened to him; she was waiting at Mrs. Mingott's when Ellen arrived alone. He says he had to send a letter, and he doesn't see why he should have gone to Mrs. Mingott's, as he didn't know May was there. She turns to look in a mirror, and something weary about her makes him remember that he had agreed that morning to meet her at Mrs. Mingott's so they could drive home together. He's irritated that she would hold this against him. He almost wishes she would voice her criticisms of him.

Archer's new tendency to worry about insignificant things mirrors his father in law's obsessive worry and suggests that society similarly worries about all of its ridiculous rules just to avoid thinking about unpleasant things. Archer's relationship with Ellen is hurting May even though they aren't acting on their desires; Archer isn't present enough to be a responsible husband. His forgetfulness in this situation is undoubtedly a symptom of his greater failures. May's inability to face conflict means their frustration stays bottled up.

Archer asks how Mrs. Mingott is, and May says she's disturbed by the latest news about the Beauforts, which is that they're planning to stay in New York. During dinner, May makes no mention of Ellen, which worries Archer slightly. Afterwards, they go up to the library, where he begins to read a history book. He's begun to avoid reading poetry, because May always asks him to read it aloud, and he always knows what she'll say about it. She tries to have her own opinions now, and he usually doesn't like them. May begins to embroider, which she considers her duty even though she's not very good at it.

The Beauforts are refusing to accept their disgrace, which weakens the power of society and the dominance of its rules. Archer used to want to teach May about art and literature, but now he's grown protective of this part of his life, a part that could have helped them understand each other on a deeper level. They grate on each other's nerves and make no headway in their solitary pursuits; May, bad at embroidery, for once fails at fulfilling society's expectations.

As Archer watches May working, he realizes that she'll never surprise him with a mood, an idea, or an emotion that he can't predict. All her romance has disappeared now that their courtship is over. She's turning into Mrs. Welland and turning him into Mr. Welland. He stands up and says he needs some air. He opens the window and leans out into the cold night. Seeing other houses and imagining other lives makes it easier to breathe. After a few minutes, she says he'll catch his death. He closes the window, wanting to say that he's been dead for months.

As has happened to him before, Archer suddenly begins to dread the sameness of his future with May. He's not happy, and he has no hope that he will be. He pities the Wellands, but he's destined to follow in their footsteps. He feels trapped with May, as represented by the relief he gets at opening the window. May asking him to close the window mirrors Archer's perception that their marriage consists of May asking him every day to suffocate in monotony.

Suddenly Archer imagines May dying and leaving him free. He hardly realizes the enormity of the fact that he's wishing this; instead it seems like a wonderful new possibility. She asks whether he's ill. He moves to sit, saying that he pities her because he'll never open a window without worrying her. She says quietly that she won't worry if he's happy, but he says he has to open windows to be happy.

Archer is becoming truly desperate; though he doesn't actually wish May any harm, he so wants to be free of her that death seems like a good option. Their interaction about the window symbolizes their fundamental incompatibility. Archer needs something that May just can't give him.

A week goes by without Archer seeing Ellen or hearing anything about her. He has formed a resolve that came to him when he leaned out the window. One day May says that Mrs. Mingott wants to see him. Archer asks whether they should go together, but May says he should go alone, which is exactly what he wanted. His heart is pounding when he arrives at the house. He imagines that Ellen is waiting for him inside. All he wants to know is the date she's returning to Washington.

After his desperate moment at the window, Archer has decided to leave May once and for all and follow Ellen back to Washington. Once again, May unwittingly facilitates Archer's plans to meet Ellen. Like usual, he imagines an entire scene with Ellen, but reality rarely goes the way he wants it to.

However, Archer is shown into Mrs. Mingott's room without seeing Ellen. She's sitting in her armchair, and all evidence of her stroke has disappeared besides her being pale and shadowy. She asks whether she's hideous, and Archer says she's more beautiful than ever, which makes her laugh. She asks whether Ellen was so very beautiful when he drove her back from the ferry, and whether that was why he left the carriage. She says it's a pity Ellen didn't marry him, but now Ellen's going to stay with her.

Mrs. Mingott displays an odd attitude towards Archer. Though she seems almost to suspect that Archer is attracted to Ellen, she also teasingly encourages him in his attraction, meaning that their interactions are rather torturous and definitely ironic. If Ellen's going to stay with Mrs. Mingott, then she and Archer will be able to see each other often.

Mrs. Mingott says that her family convinced her to cut off Ellen's allowance until she agreed to return to her husband, but as soon as she saw Ellen, she knew she shouldn't go back to him. She'll stay and nurse Mrs. Mingott, and she'll have her allowance back. Archer is stunned; he had decided so surely on his course of action that he hardly knows what to feel. But gradually he realizes that this is a wonderful opportunity, and it must be Ellen's response to his ultimatum in the carriage.

Mrs. Mingott has always been one of the less conventional members of society, and it now becomes evident that she never disapproved of Ellen's choices as much as people made it sound like she did. Archer believes that Ellen has agreed to this arrangement in order to allow them to be together without doing anything drastic that would hurt May, which he was in fact about to do.

Archer says that Ellen certainly couldn't have gone back to her husband. Mrs. Mingott reveals that she wants him to convince her family to let Ellen stay. He protests that he's not important enough, but she says he can get at them through Letterblair. Finally he agrees to support Ellen, to Mrs. Mingott's delight. She says she was sure he would help because the family never quotes him when talking about why Ellen should return to her husband. He asks when he can see Ellen, and Mrs. Mingott says she's gone to see Mrs. Beaufort. Ellen began visiting her the day after she got back. Mrs. Mingott didn't want her to, but Ellen insisted that she's a relation in need. Eventually she even convinced Mrs. Mingott to let her take her carriage. Archer kisses Mrs. Mingott's hand. She teases him and says not to mention their talk to May.

People tend to use Archer to convince others of what's best for Ellen, since nobody realizes how personally invested he is in Ellen's situation. However, his vocal support of Ellen staying in New York is only going to add to the suspicions of those who already think they might be having an affair. Despite her teasing, it seems impossible that Mrs. Mingott believes anything is actually going on between them, proving that she's so innocent she can't see what's right in front of her. Ellen again displays her compassion and disregard for society's judgment by visiting Mrs. Beaufort.

CHAPTER 31

Archer has trouble understanding why Ellen has decided to live with Mrs. Mingott. He's sure that it isn't due to financial motives, even though Ellen has barely enough to live on without her grandmother's support. She doesn't mind going without luxuries, even though she was used to them with her husband. Archer thinks that she must have made the decision because she could tell from him not trying to see her that he was considering doing something drastic. She probably thought it better to accept a compromise rather than have to refuse his decisive step entirely.

Up until now, Ellen has insisted that she and Archer can only be together emotionally if they remain physically distant. Now, however, she's breaking her own rule by moving back to New York. Though Ellen constantly tries to reject her feelings for Archer for the good of everyone else, she never manages to do so, and she can't trust herself to refuse him if he tries to run away with her.

Before Archer saw Mrs. Mingott, he had planned to learn what day Ellen was returning to Washington and join her on the train to run away wherever she would let them. He would leave a note for May that would make it impossible to return. However, he initially felt relieved when he heard he wouldn't have to do this. Walking home, he begins to sour to the future of secrecy and duplicity now laid before him.

Archer has grown desperate enough to leave May once and for all, despite the consequences and Ellen's disapproval. Even so, he wants fundamentally to belong, and taking this drastic step scares him. But he and Ellen have never been satisfied by the idea of having the kind of affairs that everyone else has.

Archer has long known the proper way to conduct an affair of this sort, but it's different now that he's married. He watched Mrs. Rushworth constantly lie to her husband while she was having an affair with Archer himself. Wives are generally judged less harshly for affairs because more excuses can be made for them, but society disapproves of husbands who have them. Archer has always agreed with this view, but he feels that his situation with Ellen is somehow different. He imagines May and all the conventions of society waiting at home, and he walks right past his street.

Although deceit has already played a large role in his marriage, Archer doesn't want to embark on an affair that will make deceit central for an indeterminate amount of time. It seems that the typical gender double standard switches in marriage; while unmarried women must be chaste and innocent and unmarried men may do as they please, wives who have affairs are given more sympathy than husbands. While Archer once believed this, Ellen (and his own self-interest) cause him to change his mind.

Archer goes to the Beauforts' house, thinking of his memories with May there. The house is dark except for one window, and Mrs. Mingott's carriage is at the door. He knows society won't take kindly to Ellen visiting here. He imagines that Ellen and Mrs. Beaufort are sitting in the only lit room. The street is deserted, and he's glad that no one will see Ellen emerge. Just then she does emerge, and he says her name as she reaches the street.

The Beauforts' house was the location of May and Archer's engagement announcement and their first kiss, in a distant time when Archer was actually in love with her. Since society has collectively alienated the Beauforts, it's daring of Ellen to go against public opinion to display her sympathy for Mrs. Beaufort.

Lawrence Lefferts and another man come down the road, but Archer stops worrying about Ellen being seen there when he feels her hand in his. He says they'll be together now, and she understands that Mrs. Mingott has given him the news. Lefferts and his friend have crossed to the other side of the road, and Archer knows they're helping him maintain secrecy. He feels that he and Ellen can't live like this. He says he needs to see her alone the next day. She says she'll be at Mrs. Mingott's, and there aren't any churches or monuments in New York where they can be alone. He suggests they go to the Art Museum. She gets into her carriage and drives off, Archer hating being trapped in these well-worn rituals of a common affair.

Lawrence Lefferts always represents the hypocrisy of society. Archer himself is now acting rather hypocritically; he has often judged Lefferts for his affairs, but now he's having one himself. Furthermore, in crossing the road, Lefferts and his friend indicate that they know Archer and Ellen are having an affair. This is the sort of illicit, guilty meeting that they'll have to make part of their normal life, and Archer can't stand it. Besides, the fact that all other affairs are conducted in this fashion makes their love seem tawdry and unremarkable.

Ellen and Archer avoid the popular part of the Metropolitan Museum, going instead to the recovered antiquities that no one visits. Archer figures that someday it will be a great museum. Ellen wanders around the room, Archer noticing all the details of her appearance. He joins her before a case of small broken archaeological objects. Ellen says it doesn't seem fair that eventually nothing matters more than these little things that used to be important to people. Archer says that meanwhile, everything concerning Ellen matters. They sit back down in silence until Archer begins to feel how little time they have.

In this novel, New York is known for being unwelcoming to the arts, in contrast to Europe. Thus, meeting in an art museum is reminiscent of Europe, where the social conventions they're fighting are already not as strict. The fact that the museum will one day be revered acts as a reminder that social norms around marriage and divorce will also change with time. As the artifacts prove, time eventually changes everything.

Ellen asks what Archer wanted to tell her. He says he thinks she came to New York because she was afraid he would come to Washington. She admits he's right, and she thinks that their current situation will hurt people less than their taking a decisive step. He says he doesn't want them to always be near each other but have to meet in secret; he thinks it detestable. She agrees, relieved. He asks what she thinks would be better. A museum official appears, and they're silent until he leaves.

In spite of Ellen moving back to New York, she and Archer have no better way to deal with their love than they ever did. Ellen's sense of honor won't let them run away together, and Archer's sense of honor won't let them carry on a secret affair under the noses of their friends and family. They're essentially searching for a way to live their lives honestly, but without doing harm.

Ellen says she agreed to stay with Mrs. Mingott because it seemed she would be safer here from doing irreparable harm like so many others have done. Archer says he has the same desires as other people. She looks terrified and asks whether she should come to him once and then go home. Archer feels overwhelmed, but asks what she means by going home. She means going back to her husband, which he can't agree to. She says she can't stay in New York and lie to the people who have helped her; if they ran away it would destroy these people's lives. Archer knows that the power Ellen would give him if she came to him once would make it easy to convince her not to return to her husband, but he can't bear to trap her like that.

Up until now, Archer and Ellen's affair has remained almost entirely centered on their emotional desire, rather than their sexual desire. At this point, however, unable to find a sustainable way to fulfill their emotional desire, they turn to sexual desire for satisfaction. Ellen seems to think that sleeping with Archer would give their affair some sort of conclusion, but such a breach of society's rules would then require her to return to proper domesticity with her husband. Archer briefly considers blackmailing her into staying in New York, but doing such a thing would ruin their trust.

Archer says Ellen is so experienced that he doesn't see why she doesn't look their situation in the eye, unless she doesn't want to make the necessary sacrifice. She frowns and says she has to go. He catches her wrist and says she should come to him once, in two days. Her face looks radiant with love, and Archer is in awe of it. She hurries away, as though his love has frightened her.

Archer thinks that Ellen's experience with transgressing society's rules should make it easier for her to do it again, but he doesn't see that she's lived with the consequences and knows better than he does what they're risking. Consummating their love will be a new level of betrayal of May.

When Archer gets home, everything in his house looks strange to him. To his relief, May isn't home yet. He sits in his library, feeling amazed that his situation has come to this. He had dreamed of something much different. May enters, hoping she didn't worry him by being late. She looks pale but animated.

Archer is giving himself over more and more fully to the reality of Ellen, which means abandoning the reality of his life with May. May's concern that he was worried about her seems pitiful, considering that he's consciously hurting her every day and he hardly cares.

May was at Mrs. Mingott's and ran into Ellen. They had a good, long talk. She feels that she hasn't judged Ellen fairly lately because she acts so differently than other people. May blushes, and Archer can tell she's trying to see something in a way she doesn't usually. He realizes she's trying to overcome a hatred of Ellen. He's about to throw himself on May's mercy, but then she says that he must understand why the family has been annoyed by Ellen's flouting of social convention. As they rise to dress for dinner, May flings her arms around his neck and says he hasn't kissed her that day.

Even as May tries to understand and like Ellen, her unshakeable loyalty to society's conventions, along with her suspicions about the affair, makes it difficult. Even when she tries, May truly can't change the perspective with which she was raised. Unbeknownst to Archer, May has actually just told Ellen that she's pregnant, putting an abrupt end to the affair. May's insistence on a kiss suggests that she feels the lack of Archer's love.

CHAPTER 32

The next evening, Archer and May dine with the van der Luydens, who have come into the city to help stabilize society after the Beaufort scandal. Mrs. Archer thinks this is just the time when common people like Mrs. Struthers will try to get a footing in society, and she has told the van der Luydens they need to help maintain the status quo. This evening, they have invited Sillerton Jackson, Mrs. Archer, Newland, and May to go see *Faust*.

The Beaufort scandal spells change for society, and Mrs. Archer is worried that the change will bring down the caliber of families involved in society. The van der Luydens represent the most distinguished part of society, so she hopes their presence will prevent change from occurring.

Due to his work, Archer hasn't seen May since the night before. Now she seems pale but overly animated. The group is talking about the Beaufort failure, and Mrs. van der Luyden asks May whether Mrs. Mingott's carriage was really seen at the Beauforts' house. Mrs. Archer says if it was, Mrs. Mingott surely didn't know it was there. Mr. van der Luyden says that Ellen's kindness might have unwisely led her to visit Mrs. Beaufort. Mrs. van der Luyden and Mrs. Archer are disappointed in her.

Archer doesn't know why May is acting strangely, but it's undoubtedly because of the potential lie she has told Ellen about her pregnancy in order to break up the affair. Mrs. van der Luyden and Mrs. Archer judge Ellen harshly for her refusal to accept society's judgment of the Beaufort; their worship of convention prevents them from recognizing the value of compassion.

Mr. Jackson interjects that at the French court, moral standards were very lax. Ellen's foreign upbringing might have affected her sense of right and wrong. Mr. van der Luyden is still appalled at her actions. May says that Ellen surely meant to be kind, but the older women don't think this improves the situation much. The ladies leave the dining room, and the gentlemen settle to their cigars.

Once again, New Yorkers blame what they perceive as immorality on foreigners' liberal views rather than actually taking the time to evaluate their own beliefs. Now that May knows she has vanquished Ellen, she can afford to defend her unconventionality.

After the first act of the opera, Archer goes to the back of the box to watch the same scene he saw when he first met Ellen two years before. He almost expects her to appear in Mrs. Mingott's box, but she doesn't. He looks at May, who is wearing white as she did on that night, but he realizes it's her **wedding dress**. It's customary for brides to wear their wedding dresses a few times in the first year or two after they're married. May looks almost exactly the same as she did two years ago, and he's moved by her continued innocence. He remembers how generous and understanding she is, and he wants more than anything to ask her for his freedom.

In an ironic repetition of the opening scene of the novel, Archer watches the same opera; then he had just proposed to May, and this time he intends to leave her. May's wedding dress acts as an additional painful irony, bringing attention to the sad state of their marriage. Additionally, the fact that they're watching Faust foreshadows May's announcement of her pregnancy, since Faust abandons his lover after he finds out she's pregnant.

Archer is used to conforming to society's rules, and he doesn't like being conspicuous. But suddenly he's unaware of the demands of society. He enters Mrs. van der Luyden's box and asks May to come home because he has a headache. May excuses herself, and the older women smile significantly. In the carriage, May worries that Archer is being overworked. He asks if he can open a window, and does so, watching the houses pass by.

Archer's disregard for society's rules surrounding opera etiquette paves the way for a much larger transgression—leaving his wife. Ironically, the older women seem to think they're going home to make love. Just as he did in an earlier scene in the library, Archer opens the window, symbolizing his need for freedom.

At the door of their house, May catches her **wedding dress** on the carriage and tears it. She and Archer go upstairs to the library. May is pale and says Archer had better go to bed, but he insists he's all right and needs to tell her something. The distance between them seems unbridgeable. He says he needs to tell her something about himself. She's very pale, but calm. Archer is determined not to make excuses for himself. When he says Ellen's name, the light strikes May's wedding ring, and she protests that she doesn't want to talk about Ellen. May knows that she's been unfair to Ellen, and Archer has been good to Ellen, but it's all over now.

The destruction of May's wedding dress symbolizes Archer's intention to destroy their marriage. Her paleness suggests that she knows what Archer is going to say to her. Wharton lays a heavy emphasis on the trappings of marriage, not only with the destruction of the wedding dress, but also with the timely mention of May's wedding ring. These items, however, are only surface representations of marriage; the real relationship is already in tatters.

Archer doesn't understand. May clarifies that Ellen is going back to Europe soon, since Mrs. Mingott has agreed to make her independent of her husband. Archer has to steady himself against the mantelpiece. May says she thought he was taking care of the business arrangements at the office that day. He stares at her awfully, and then buries his face in his hands. Five minutes pass in silence.

Though Archer has often heard news about Ellen from sources other than herself, this is the first time he hears it from May, which is fitting but cruel, since this is the most important news of all. His reaction leaves no doubt that May must know about the affair.

Eventually, Archer asks how May knows this information. She brings him a note that Ellen sent her that afternoon. Ellen writes that Mrs. Mingott understands that she must return to Europe with Medora, and she is going to Washington immediately to pack before sailing the next week. Furthermore, if anyone wants to convince her not to go, May should tell them it's useless. Archer tosses the note away, laughing. His laughter reminds him of the night he learned that his marriage was to be sooner than expected.

Ellen has finally decided to take decisive action to break off the affair, leaving even before she and Archer can spend the night together. As always happens in this relationship, Archer's desires have been thwarted just at the moment he thought they were going to finally be satisfied. He was in the same situation on the night he remembers now, and both times, his reaction is to laugh bitterly at his helplessness and hopelessness.

Archer asks why Ellen sent this letter, and May replies that it's due to their conversation the day before. May had acknowledged that she never really understood how hard life was for Ellen in New York, and she wanted Ellen to know that she was just as much a friend to her as Archer was. Ellen understood why May wanted to tell her this. May presses Archer's hand to her cheek, then says her head aches too and leaves with her torn **wedding dress** dragging behind her.

In typical New York fashion, May talks around what she actually means, but Ellen has understood what she intended her to understand—that she knows about the affair and forgives her. Notably, May omits the fact that she also told Ellen that she's pregnant. By bringing attention to the torn wedding dress, Wharton points out that their marriage is still ruined, even though the affair is technically over.

CHAPTER 33

A young couple's first big dinner is a great event. Archer often has informal company, though he wonders whether May would ask anyone to the house if left to her own devices. He's given up trying to separate her authentic self from the self that social training has created. A big, elaborate dinner is very different, and people rarely refuse invitations to a young couple's first one. Even so, it's an honor that the van der Luydens have agreed to attend May's farewell dinner for Ellen Olenska.

Ellen's departure notably coincides with—even causes—what society considers a landmark event in Archer and May's marriage, suggesting that they will continue to live under the guise of a successful union. Archer has accepted that May is entirely a product of society; he will never discover some deeper part of her that's not ruled by convention, because it doesn't exist.

Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland sit in May's drawing room on the afternoon of the dinner, making last-minute preparations. When Archer gets home from work, they tell him that May is inspecting the table decorations. Mrs. Archer runs through the guest list, and Mrs. Welland says that May and Archer are certainly giving Ellen a good send-off. She knows Ellen will appreciate it. As Archer leaves, Mrs. Welland tells him to go look at the table, but he pretends not to hear. He goes to his library, which looks strange due to having been tidied for the gentleman to smoke in.

Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland are two of the principal enforcers of the rules of society, and now they have come to help May eject from all their lives one of the major threats to those rules—Ellen. Of course, they'll do so with every politeness, never acknowledging that they're glad to see her go. The library was the one place that Archer had some control over, but now even this haven has come under May's purview.

In the ten days since Ellen left New York, Archer has only received from her a key sealed in an envelope. He's determined to follow her to Europe, and he doesn't think she'll send him away once he has taken this step. His confidence in this outcome has allowed him to remain calm and not write to her. Even so, it was very difficult when Mr. Letterblair had him go over the financial arrangements for Ellen. He felt that he was being consulted for reasons besides his connection to the family. Mr. Letterblair said that Ellen has been treated well all around. Archer took this to refer to Count Olenski's offer to give her back her own money, but Mr. Letterblair said that Ellen knew the law, looking disapprovingly at Archer. He took out a report suggesting that Ellen had an affair with her husband's secretary.

Presumably, Ellen is returning a key that Archer gave her for whatever illicit meeting place they had chosen for sleeping together; by returning it she is attempting to symbolically end their affair. However, because Archer doesn't yet know that May is pregnant, he doesn't understand Ellen's conviction that the affair is completely and conclusively over. Mr. Letterblair's opinion acts as a reminder of how harshly Ellen has been judged for leaving her husband, particularly because people think she did so to have an affair. This is what also lies in store for Archer if he follows through with his plan.

A day or two later, Archer went to visit Mrs. Mingott, who lamented Ellen's desertion of her. She thinks that Ellen couldn't stand the dullness of New York in comparison to her life with Count Olenski. Now Ellen is going to Paris with Medora, and Mrs. Mingott will miss her fiercely. She just wants the family to leave her alone. That evening, May told Archer, to his surprise, that they should give Ellen a farewell dinner. Though he didn't understand why she was doing it, she insisted that she was. He realized that it's a matter of family loyalty.

Once again, Ellen's unexpected actions are attributed to her foreignness—Mrs. Mingott thinks she needs the excitement of Europe. It's ironic that May and Archer should give her farewell dinner, since May is eager for her to leave, Archer can't stand the idea, and the two of them together are the very reason that she's going. May needs to give this final show of approval to feel she's done the right thing socially.

Archer finds May in the drawing room before dinner. May's drawing room is generally thought to be decorated very nicely. She says she doesn't think Ellen has ever seen the room lit up. Then the guests begin to arrive. Archer is showing one guest a painting when Ellen appears next to him. She looks very pale, and Archer is reminded of the parties that they attended together as children. Something about her face seems ugly, and he has never loved it more. She says that she's sailing tomorrow on the *Russia*, and then May asks Archer to bring Ellen in to dinner. Ellen puts her hand on Archer's arm, and it's so beautiful that he thinks he would have to follow her just to see it again.

Just as Ellen sees the drawing room lit for the first time, so she now sees starkly the whole truth of May and Archer's relationship, to an extent that neither May nor Archer can because of the secrets they're keeping from each other. The fact that Ellen tells Archer which ship she'll be on suggests that, even as she's trying to save his marriage, a part of her wants him to follow her. Knowing her future is safe, May can afford to keep up appearances of normality by having Archer escort Ellen to dinner.

The fact that Mrs. van der Luyden is seated to her host's left emphasizes the fact that Ellen is regarded as a foreign visitor. This sort of family rally around a member about to leave the family is an essential part of New York society. Now that she's leaving, the Mingotts do all they can to show how much they love her, and Archer marvels at the way all grievances have been erased. He doesn't feel entirely present, and it seems like the guests are all conspiring against him and Ellen. Suddenly he realizes that they all think he and Ellen are lovers, and they have been trying for a long time to separate the couple. However, they're all here to support May in the assumption that nothing ever happened between Archer and Ellen. These people dread scandal and scenes more than anything.

Mrs. van der Luyden would typically be on her host's right, the place of honor, but a foreign visitor takes precedence. Putting Ellen there is almost a snub, making it seem like she was never really a New Yorker, has never fit in, and was always expected to leave sooner or later. The Mingotts' attitude toward Ellen as they're about to be rid of her exemplifies how society works, presenting an impression of happiness and harmony that covers up the actual pettiness and strife underneath. Everyone is using this same strategy towards the issue of Archer and Ellen, which almost delegitimizes their love.

Archer feels like a prisoner. He takes a discussion about Beaufort and his wife as a warning about what could happen to him, and he laughs. Ellen is sitting next to him, and he becomes aware that her other neighbor is talking to someone else. May sends him a look, and he realizes he has to talk to Ellen. They chat about her journey to New York and the inconveniences of travel. He says he intends to do some traveling himself soon, and she looks alarmed. He suggests to Reggie Chivers that they take a trip around the world, but this idea is quickly shot down. Mr. Selfridge Merry begins to talk about his own trip around the world and what it's most important to see. Finally the ladies go up to the drawing room.

Archer is beginning to come undone in his grief. It's unclear to what extent he's being paranoid in believing his guests are subtly reproaching him, but the feeling that they're rallied against him while pretending politeness drives him crazy. It's torture for him and Ellen to have to speak, perhaps for the last time, in this way—in public, and only about acceptable topics. She rightly takes his allusion to travel as an indication that he's intending to follow her to Europe.

The gentlemen in the library talk about the Beauforts. Lawrence Lefferts gives a scathing speech about a man's duty and the sacredness of the home. He doesn't think Beaufort should ever have gotten into society in the first place; people should never have received a man of unknown origin, for it has put the very structure of society in danger. If things continue this way, he says, their children will be marrying Beaufort's bastards. This last is taken as a bit much by the men present. Sillerton Jackson remarks to Archer that Lefferts is only saying such things to cover his own misdeeds.

Considering his own affairs, Lefferts is being doubly hypocritical by not only condemning Beaufort for his, but also doing it, presumably, in order to show his support for everyone's silent condemnation of Archer's affair. His reference to Beaufort's foreignness also seems to reflect on Ellen, implying that it's good she's leaving. Ironically, Archer's son will eventually marry one of Beaufort's bastard children, showing how standards change.

Archer can't focus on the conversation. He's vaguely aware of an attitude of friendliness aimed at him, as though the men are trying to make his captivity more acceptable, which only makes him want to be free even more. When they join the ladies in the drawing room, he can tell that May is very satisfied with the gathering. Archer sees all the most important people flocking to Ellen's side, intent on making it seem as though no one ever questioned the behavior of either of them. Their very determination to do so proves to Archer that all of society believes him to be Ellen's lover, and he realizes that May shares this belief.

Some of these men have had affairs of their own, and can probably sympathize with Archer, but this only makes his affair seem more commonplace, which he despises. If society knows about the scandal, then everyone automatically becomes obligated to pretend that it never happened and that everyone is still innocent, even if people are gossiping about Ellen and Archer behind their backs.

Eventually, Archer sees Ellen preparing to leave. He can't remember anything he said to her at dinner. She and May kiss, and someone remarks that May is certainly more beautiful than Ellen. Archer helps Ellen with her cloak. He's been determined not to say anything to worry her, as he has already decided on his course of action. He's robbed of a moment alone at the door of her carriage, as she's going with the van der Luydens. They say goodbye, and he says he'll see her in Paris soon. She assumes he means with May. Then the van der Luydens take her into their carriage. As he returns to the house, Lawrence Lefferts asks him to tell people that he's dining with him at the club the next night.

This is the last time Archer will see Ellen for more than twenty years, but he believes that he's going to leave May and rejoin Ellen soon. However, his extreme anxiety leaves the question somewhat open: If the situation were the same but May wasn't pregnant, would Archer really have the guts to go through with his plan? Lefferts clearly thinks he and Archer are in cahoots now that they're both having affairs, and he wants Archer to cover for him. Ironically, he was very recently condemning Beaufort for his affairs.

As soon as the guests leave, Archer goes up to his library, hoping May will go to bed. Instead, she comes to talk over the night with him, feeling that it went wonderfully. They both sit quietly for a while, until Archer says he needs to tell her what he didn't manage to the other night. He says he's terribly tired, and he wants to take a long trip to India or Japan. He doesn't manage to strike the tone of indifference that he was trying for.

Archer is trying once more to tell May that he's leaving her, although it's unclear whether he plans to be completely honest, as he did the other night, or to just pretend he's going on a long trip. Since May is already aware of his feelings for Ellen, however, she'll certainly see through any excuses.

May says he can't go unless he brings her along, and that will only be possible if the doctors allow it. Just that morning, she became sure of something she's been hoping would happen. Archer feels sick, but he holds her. She says that only Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer, and Ellen know. She told Ellen when they had their long talk recently. She's worried he'll mind that she told Ellen first. He says he doesn't, but points out that their talk was two weeks ago. May admits that she wasn't sure of it then, but she told Ellen that she was. Her eyes are victorious.

Even in this most essential moment, May talks around the delicate topic of pregnancy, too proper to approach it with directness. Though May acts innocent, she clearly told Ellen she was pregnant—though it could have been a lie—in order to force Ellen to break off her relationship with Archer. Now Archer is truly trapped in marriage, as he can't possibly leave a pregnant wife.

CHAPTER 34

Archer is sitting in his library. He's just gotten back from a reception at the Metropolitan Museum, where he had a flash of memory of his meeting there with Ellen. Now he sits thinking about everything that has happened in this library over the thirty years he's lived here. It's been twenty-six years since May told him she was pregnant. This is where their eldest boy, Dallas, was christened, and where he said his first words. This is where their daughter Mary announced her engagement and prepared for her wedding. Archer and May have always discussed their children's futures here. The young men now are going into all sorts of professions, including politics, archaeology, and architecture, which Dallas is pursuing.

By jumping so far ahead in time for this final chapter, Wharton manages to present a broader view of Archer's life and society's influence on it. Though May's pregnancy announcement may have seemed like it ruined his life, he obviously cherishes his children, who have given meaning to the life he used to think would be a desert. Notably, the Metropolitan Museum is now a cultural hub, and young society men are no longer limited to professions in law or business. It's immediately clear that society has changed.

Archer's most important memory of the library is the Governor of New York telling him to go into politics. Archer glowed at his praise and couldn't resist doing as he said. In retrospect, Archer isn't sure that he was the right type for politics; he spent a year in the State Assembly, but was not reelected. He then worked in city politics and wrote articles. As little as it is, he's proud of his contribution to changing the expectations for young gentlemen. He has been a good citizen, and every charitable or artistic movement in New York has been consulting him for many years. His days are full.

Long ago, Ned Winsett urged Archer to go into politics, but he felt that path was closed to him because gentlemen simply didn't go into politics. Eventually, however, he went against this rule, and society as a whole has changed its stance on this issue. Archer thought that his life would be empty and meaningless if he stayed with May, but in fact, he's managed to make quite a bit of it. This outcome tempers Wharton's criticism of marriage and society.

Archer knows that he has missed "the **flower** of life," but it seems so unattainable that he hardly mourns it. Only Ellen Olenska could have provided this happiness. She now represents everything he has missed throughout his life. He was faithful to May, and when she died, he grieved with real feeling. He learned that it didn't matter if marriage was dull, as long as it maintained its dignity. He mourns for the past, as the traditional ways had value.

In speaking of "the flower of life," Wharton seems to reference a higher level of happiness, passion, and beauty. Ellen has become more a symbol than a reality. As society has changed, so has Archer; he can see the value in what he used to hate. Wharton argues that no time or society will ever be perfect, and as much as she has criticized high society, it wasn't all bad.

Archer's first photograph of May still sits on his desk. She remained always the way she was in St. Augustine, generous and faithful but so without imagination that she never even noticed the changes happening around her. Archer and the children always hid their opinions from her, and she died thinking that the same principles that she had grown up with would go on governing the world and her family. Opposite May's picture is their daughter Mary's. She's even more athletic than her mother was, and just as conventional, but she's more tolerant.

It was in St. Augustine that May offered to release Archer from his engagement, but she couldn't act unconventionally enough herself to move the marriage up. She has remained conventional and innocent throughout her life, which was just what Archer used to fear would happen. However, these characteristics haven't ruined his marriage the way he thought they would. Instead, he learned to accept them as part of her.

Archer receives a phone call from Dallas, who's in Chicago on business. He invites Archer to sail to Europe with him the next week, as he has some business there. Archer marvels at how close Dallas sounds when he laughs, even though long-distance telephoning has become as normal as electric lights. Dallas's laugh means that he has to be back in time for his wedding to Fanny Beaufort. He quickly convinces Archer to come with him. When Archer hangs up, he thinks that this will be the last time he and Dallas will be together before his marriage. He can tell that Fanny Beaufort, whom he likes, won't harm their closeness, but it will still be different after.

Earlier, Archer could hardly imagine what the world would be like with telephones and electricity, but technology has progressed as much as social norms have, emphasizing how much time has passed and how much of life Archer has lived since Ellen left. Furthermore, the fact that Dallas is marrying Beaufort's daughter with Archer's blessing is a sure sign that much has changed, considering the social disgrace of the Beauforts and Archer's hatred of Beaufort up until now.

Archer hasn't traveled much, as May didn't like to travel unless there was a specific reason to do so. When Dallas graduated from college, the family traveled through England, Switzerland, and Italy. Dallas wanted to see the French architecture, but Mary and Bill wanted to go climb mountains. May suggested that Archer could go to Paris, but he said they should stick together. Since May died two years before, he could have begun to travel, but he felt bound to habit.

It's clear that being married to May has indeed restricted Archer's life in certain ways, but Archer doesn't resent this the way he did before. He's come to value his family over his own interests and to accept that marriage requires sacrifices, but will also provide rewards. May's suggestion that Archer go to Paris, where Ellen is, shows her trust in him, and his refusal shows his full commitment to his family.

The worst part about doing one's duty is that it doesn't let one do anything else. The traditional divisions between right and wrong don't leave any room for unexpected situations. Archer suddenly regards his life with a broad view and wonders what's left of the world that shaped him as a young man. He remembers Lawrence Lefferts suggesting that one day their children would marry Beaufort's bastards. Dallas is marrying one of Beaufort's bastards, but everyone approves. Janey even gave Fanny Beaufort Mrs. Archer's jewelry.

In looking backwards, Archer sees that the main fault of society's rules has been their rigidness. Though something may seem right in theory, when applied to a specific situation, one must be able to independently judge whether it's actually right. Society has changed so much that a situation that seemed scandalous before is now occurring with the approval of one of the most conventional characters, Janey.

Fanny Beaufort came to New York at eighteen, after her parents' deaths. Everyone accepted her as charming and accomplished, and no one cared about her origins. After Mrs. Beaufort died, Mr. Beaufort had married Fanny Ring and traveled all around the world. When they died, Fanny Beaufort came under the guardianship of May's brother and his wife, which made her almost a cousin to the Archer children. Everyone is now too busy with reforms and fads to care about people's pasts, particularly since society is far more equal now.

Fanny is the daughter of a woman who, it's implied, was a prostitute. As such, the old society would never have even considered accepting her into its ranks, and instead would have despised her. Now, however, people have better things to worry about. They've found worthwhile ways to pass their time, notably with reform movements—society is changing because its members are working for change.

Archer looks at Paris out his hotel window and feels young and eager. He wonders whether Dallas gets as thrilled as this in Fanny Beaufort's presence, but Dallas never worried that his family wouldn't approve of his engagement. Archer realizes that the younger generation is confident they'll get what they want, whereas his generation was confident they wouldn't.

Thinking they wouldn't get what they wanted gave Archer's generation a harmful desperation that Dallas's doesn't have. However, Archer also realizes that he felt desire more sharply because he thought he would be denied satisfaction, and these emotions were valuable.

Archer insisted that he and Dallas stay in what Dallas considers an old-fashioned hotel. After Ellen left, Archer often imagined going to Paris, or imagined her life there. Now that he's actually here, he feels inadequate compared to the person he imagined himself being. Dallas appears, saying carelessly that Ellen Olenska expects them at half-past five. He explains that Fanny made him promise to see Ellen while in Paris, because Ellen was very kind to her when Beaufort sent her to school there. That morning, he called Ellen and told her that he and Archer wanted to see her. Archer is astonished.

Though Archer used to get frustrated with the old-fashioned people around him, the progress of society has made him the old-fashioned one. Though Archer has done better for himself than he once expected to, reality always falls short of his dreams, and his current state is no exception. It's unclear whether Archer even would have sought Ellen out if Dallas didn't take the initiative, since he feels so inferior to the person he dreamt of being when he faced her.

Dallas asks what Ellen was like, as he's heard that she and Archer were close. Archer says she was different. Dallas says it's always like that; that's what he feels about Fanny. Archer pretends not to understand, but Dallas insists that Ellen was once Archer's Fanny. Dallas has always been extremely straightforward. He perceives that Ellen was the woman Archer would have sacrificed everything for, but didn't. He reveals that the day before May died, she told him the family was safe with Archer because he had once given up what he most wanted when she asked him to. Archer is silent, then says that May didn't ask him. Dallas agrees that Archer's generation would only ever guess what each other were thinking. He hopes Archer isn't angry with him.

Dallas acts in a way that his mother, or anyone entrenched in old New York society, never would have—instead of talking around a delicate subject, he confidently faces it head-on. In fact, he essentially speaks for May, who could never have discussed Archer's affair to his face. It's moving for Archer to find, after her death, that May understood what he had sacrificed in being married to her. In fact, their early trials made her trust him more deeply later on. However, Archer seems to still harbor some bitterness, pointing out that May's coercion left him no choice about his future.

Archer spends the afternoon roaming Paris alone. He's relieved and moved to know that May guessed how he felt and pitied him. Dallas probably sees the situation as a waste of effort, and Archer wonders whether that's all it was. Ellen never went back to her husband, and he's now dead. Nothing stands between them anymore. He walks to the Louvre and wanders through its beauty, thinking of her spending time here. He realizes that he's only fifty-seven, but he tells himself it's too late for anything but friendship.

Ironically, Archer wonders whether the entire story that the reader has just followed has actually been worth anything, but the affair was an important experience, and it was Ellen's experience that drew him to her in the first place. Now is the chance to make something of his heartache, but perhaps a fear of renewed pain keeps him from seeking her love again.

Archer meets Dallas at the hotel and they walk towards Ellen's house. Dallas talks enthusiastically about Versailles, where he's been that day. Archer thinks that Dallas's generation is very confident and has swept away all the old rules and fears. They emerge at the dome of Mansart, and Dallas exclaims at its beauty. Archer has known that Ellen lived near the Invalides, but he had forgotten how beautiful and rich the area is. She has lived this whole time in an atmosphere filled with art and knowledge. He remembers M. Rivière exclaiming over the value of good conversation. Ellen has been living a life that Archer can hardly guess at, and surely has not thought often of him.

By rejecting the social rules that enchained Ellen and Archer, Dallas's generation has finally found the personal freedom that America failed to provide to Archer's generation. Throughout the book, Europe has been characterized by its richly artistic culture. Experiencing it now, Archer has to deal with the sense of having missed not only a life with Ellen, but a life of beauty and enlightening intellectual pursuit. Ellen has probably been quite happy living in this this atmosphere, independent of her husband.

The neighborhood is quiet, and the daylight is fading. Dallas stops before Ellen's building and puts his arm through Archer's. He speaks to the porter to find out which floor Ellen lives on, while Archer gazes up at the windows. Archer says that he'll sit on a bench for a moment, and Dallas should go up without him. Dallas is bewildered and says that Ellen won't understand if he doesn't come up. Archer says to tell her that he's old-fashioned. Dallas goes inside.

After so many years, Archer is finally facing the possibility of Ellen again, and yet he now finds it too overwhelming. He labels himself as old-fashioned, which is ironic because old-fashioned notions kept him and Ellen from happiness. However, it also suggests that he prefers to live in the past rather than complicate his idealized image of Ellen.

Archer sits on the bench and thinks of Dallas going up to Ellen's floor and entering her drawing room. He imagines the other guests who will be there along with Ellen herself. He realizes that the scene is more real to him in his mind than if he had actually gone up, and he remains sitting so as not to lose that reality. He sits watching Ellen's balcony as it gets dark out, and finally a servant comes out to close the shutters. Then Archer gets up and walks back to his hotel.

Archer ultimately chooses not to meet Ellen again, having learned throughout the book that nothing real can measure up to what he imagines in his mind. He doesn't want Ellen ruined by tawdry reality. Archer once opened a window to feel that he might find the freedom to be with Ellen, but now that window closes once and for all, tying up their story.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Greider, Julia. "*The Age of Innocence.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Jun 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Greider, Julia. "*The Age of Innocence.*" LitCharts LLC, June 21, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-age-of-innocence.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Age of Innocence* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Wharton, Edith. The Age of Innocence. Dover Publications. 1997.

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Wharton, Edith. The Age of Innocence. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 1997.