The Age of Innocence:  
Wharton's "Portrait of a Gentleman"

Just the other week I was talking to the dean of a small men's college. "Edith Wharton—" He was momentarily puzzled. "Edith Wharton, why she wrote period fiction." "That's roughly like saying that Jane Austen wrote novels about clergymen." "And so she did." He fluttered his hand deprecatingly and smiled our conversation to a close.

So many people, even very intelligent people, seem to see only the most visible, simple, literal level of Wharton's work: Edmund Wilson called her "the poet of interior decoration," as if she had had an unpretentious domestic hobby—china painting, for instance. Wharton herselfanguished over this problem. She wondered whether a woman writer who wore fashionable clothes and rode in a chauffeur driven car was, by general consent, not to be considered a serious novelist. Her friend Henry James knew how serious, how very deadly she could be. She was said to have the eyes of a young hawk, and if he cherished her (and he did—she was one of his dearest friends), he feared her too, for she could look at the human condition unflinchingly. Her own life was far from easy (how deceptive the sheen of wealth is, ultimately); and she learned to love life with the passion of a triumphant warrior. The process of living converted her into a profoundly anti-romantic realist. She was on terms of long intimacy with life—was conversant with imperfect happiness and relinquished dreams, and knew the price one paid to

This essay is an excerpt from a forthcoming study of Edith Wharton by Cynthia Griffin Wolff entitled A Feast of Words: The Fictions of Edith Wharton, to be published in the spring of 1977 by Oxford University Press.
survive. She could be a devastating social critic, and the satirical vein is strong in the best of her work. Yet the deepest thing in all of her best work is, finally, her profound and compassionate understanding of human nature. She could no more write period novels than Goethe or Tolstoy.

We can best understand the timeless significance of The Age of Innocence by beginning with the particular problems that provoked Wharton to write it. It is a novel that grows out of experiencing the First World War, feeling that holocaust not merely as a disruptive of easy, familiar ways, but as a potent assault upon the integrity of an identity that had been formed in other days. All of Wharton’s generation felt the fissures opening around them; and Wharton’s novel seeks a reliable core of truth to stand against the threats of those unsettled times—against any time of rapid, destructive social change. It is a novel about the development of a viable adult “self” and about the durability and the soundness of that self.

Wharton chose to go back in time to another era of social change. Some readers, gulled by her reminiscent eye, have seen The Age of Innocence as a charming vignette of “the good old days.” Others, noticing the often acid tongue of the narrator, have seen it as a satire of a narrow and repressive world. (Certainly there is satire; pomposity is deflated, triviality exposed.) Yet Wharton’s splendid evocation of an “Age of Innocence” is neither a celebration of the past nor a condemnation of it; it is the determined effort to discover a basis for human growth and continuity. There are unmistakable similarities between Wharton’s hero, Newland Archer, and the author herself, and Wharton seems deliberately to have insisted upon them. No other of her novels, as several critics have observed, draws so explicitly on the stuff of her own childhood. Indeed, Archer’s age at the conclusion of the novel is fifty-seven, Wharton’s age when she wrote the book. Yet these comparisons touch only the surface; the final likeness stems from a sameness of purpose, a similarity of struggle. Wharton’s postwar need to affirm her own identity is mirrored in the problem that forms the moral and psychological core of the novel—Newland Archer’s journey toward emotional integrity, maturity, and self-respect.

Part of the enormity of Wharton’s loss during the war was her loss of Henry James, who died in 1916. Her letters during this period reflect her anguish—her preoccupation with his memory, her regret that she had made no farewell. James had occupied a peculiar place in Wharton’s life. Their shared intellectual passions drew them together, although they disagreed deeply about many things; and their genuine
emotional closeness is marked by nothing so much as a secret code of
humor. Wharton’s own description tells the tale:

Of the qualities most impossible to preserve in his letters, because
so impossible to explain with whatever fulness of foot-notes, was
the quality of fun—often of sheer abstract “fool:ing”—that was the
delicious surprise of his talk . . . . From many of the letters to his
most intimate group it was necessary to excise long passages of
chaff, and recurring references to old heaped-up pyramidal jokes,
huge cairns of hoarded nonsense. Henry James’s memory for a joke
was prodigious; when he got hold of a good one, he not only
preserved it piously, but raised upon it an intricate superstructure
of kindred nonsense, into which every addition offered by a friend
was skillfully incorporated.

The title of The Age of Innocence is Wharton’s parting jest with James—
superbly appropriate for capturing both the mood of their relationship
and the delicate poise of their disagreements.

“The Age of Innocence” is the title of a well-known portrait by Sir
Joshua Reynolds which hangs in the National Gallery. It is the portrait
of a lady (a sly allusion to Wharton’s favorite among James’s novels)—
though a very young lady, a little girl, in fact. The reference converts
Wharton’s title into a private pun, a pun that she almost certainly
intended; for at the same time that she changed the original title of the
novel from Old New York to The Age of Innocence she changed the
name of the hero into Newland Archer, an American who (unlike Isabel
Archer) stays in the “new world” only to have “old world” temptation
come to him. Wharton underscores the parallel in Ned Wimsatt’s re-
mark to Newland: “You’re like the picture on the walls of a deserted
house: ‘The Portrait of a Gentleman.’”

Wharton used these allusions to James much as eighteenth-century
satirists used classical epics, to convey a sense of moral seriousness and a
similarity of concern. If The Age of Innocence describes that stable
pre-First World War society of old New York, it also describes a pre-
lapsarian state. Thus while James explores the notion of a “fortunate
fall” in The Portrait of a Lady, in The Age of Innocence Wharton examines the
moral value of choosing uncorrupted integrity. Moreover, Wharton and
James focus their intense moral scrutiny on similar concerns, in particu-
lar the problem of the right to (or the capacity for) individual “freedom”
as measured against the power of those social mores that have been
internalized to form “character.” In the end, Wharton’s novel is a
balancing companion piece to James’s; for while James is interested in
exploring the world an American pilgrim might discover by moving away from recent antecedents and new world prejudices, Wharton’s thrust is in the other direction—back into the shaping culture in which her American hero is born. Wharton knew instinctively what Erik Erikson has articulated for this generation: the development of “an identity” is “a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities.” Wharton, a self-conscious product of the old New York she re-creates, knew that the children of that time and place forever bore its mark—cherished its values, suffered in some degree its inadequacies—for every human grows by internalizing the community that sustains him. Growth must, then, proceed from an understanding of one’s background—a coming to terms with one’s past, not a flight from it.

The penetration of Wharton’s view is nowhere more evident than in her handling of tradition. As Erikson has observed:

Each human life begins at a given evolutionary stage and level of tradition, bringing to its environment a capital of patterns and energies; these are used to grow on, and to grow into the social process with, and also as contributions to this process. Each new being is received into a style of life prepared by tradition and held together by tradition, and at the same time disintegrating because of the very nature of tradition. We say that tradition “molds” the individual, “channels” his drives. But the social process does not mold a new being merely to housebreak him; it molds generations in order to be remolded, to be reinvigorated by them.

Thus, since social change is inevitably tied to the individual struggle to achieve maturity, social change is, ironically, always rooted in the past; for no man can achieve maturity until he has come to terms with the particular conventions and traditions that have shaped him. If he wishes to alter these conventions and traditions, he can do so only by drawing on the strengths of his heritage: he cannot choose his heritage, and he cannot repudiate it without repudiating himself; for “an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history.”

The particular traditions of old New York threaten to obscure the reader’s vision, even as they threaten to suffocate the hero in The Age of Innocence; and Wharton’s eye for detail is seductive. Yet to focus on the superficies of “place” is, in the end, to miss the point of the novel. Wharton’s narrative vantage is carefully chosen: the narrator may step
outside of Newland Archer’s mind to make judgments or draw conclusions, but when we see old New York, we almost always see it through his eyes. The world that seems at first a novelistic tour de force becomes, on closer examination, a mirror of Newland’s mind, the very condition of his being. This is his “one segment of history”; these are the traditions that have “molded” him and “channeled his drives.” The Age of Innocence is Wharton’s major bildungsroman, and in it she traces Archer’s struggle to mature, to become in some continuous and authentic way—himself.

Her profound acceptance of the kind of limitation described by Erikson is mirrored in the creative use to which she puts the bildungsroman tradition; her master was undoubtedly Goethe, whose works she read so often as almost to know them by heart. The theme of her novel might be captured in the most famous lines of Wilhelm Meister: “Your America is here!” Newland Archer does have choices, but they have been limited by the nature of his one portion of history. Thus while Wilhelm’s search (and that of most bildungshelden) is pursued in a journey, Newland’s search is entirely internal. He cannot flee the provincial world of old New York; he must learn to transmute it into something valuable. And to learn that lesson, he must choose not to go questing. Newland perceives himself as alienated and without vocation; his ordeal by love teaches him the lessons that Wilhelm learned—acceptance of “reality” and dedication to generativity. In this novel, the central “place” is the little rock cottage at Skuytercliff: that home stands for the values that will endure, the values of family and honor. Newland is here when he decides not to become involved with Ellen, and later he spends his wedding night with May here. It is not a lofty dwelling—narrow, unaesthetic, almost primitive—it scarcely answers the visions of a romantic adolescent. Yet it is this place that Newland must “find.”

In this novel the first few chapters are particularly significant, for in them Wharton seeks to describe the parameters of Newland’s character, to lay before us the present and the possible in such a way that the middle-aged man who concludes the novel will seem a significant outgrowth of the untired youth at the opening.

Our first glimpse of Archer tells us that he is, perhaps by inclination, perhaps by training, an onlooker, a member of the audience that stands to the side of life’s great struggles but does not participate in them. To meet him as he prepares to watch a production of Faust is consummately, ironically appropriate, for his own imagination has been developed at
the expense of his ability to interact with the actual world and to take pleasure from it. "He was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization." There is a dangerous vitality in Newland's inner life. It derives from the fact that his considerable passion, finding no satisfactory outlet, has been sublimated into extraordinarily palpable fantasies (old New York gave men like Newland very little else to do with their passions). Unknown to Newland, however, fantasies that have been nourished by the rich passional needs channeled into them slip quietly back into his perceptions of the actual world, distorting these perceptions and deluding his expectations.

"We'll read Faust together ... by the Italian lakes," he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honey-moon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride. ... If he had probed to the bottom of his vanity (as he sometimes nearly did) he would have found there the wish that his wife should be as worldly-wise and as eager to please as the married lady whose charms had held his fancy through two mildly agitated years; without, of course, any hint of the frailty which had so nearly marred that unhappy being's life, and had disarranged his own plans for a whole winter. How this miracle of fire and ice was to be created, and to sustain itself in a harsh world, he had never taken the time to think out.

Archer's naïveté about the configuration of his emotional life is paired with an empty adherence to convention. Never having examined the rules by which his society lives, he has a notion of "duty"—as in "the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair"—that is easily to be confounded with Larry Lefferts' notions of "form." Thus his moral life is infused with only the vaguest sense of purpose. There is no self-consciousness in his virtue, and his admirable acts inform no continuous inner life of conscience.

When we first meet Newland, we may be most impressed by his deficiencies—the absence of available passion and the habit but not the substance of "correct" behavior. Yet these apparently empty places in Newland's life contain the possibility of change. His innate vigor has been shaped but not hardened by the traditions of his background; the final inclinations of his character have yet to be formed, and the eighteen months of the novel's principal duration comprise the period of that transformation. Newland is nearing the conclusion of his apprenticeship in old New York. Marriage will constitute a commitment, an irrevocable
assumption of his adult roles and an affirmation of the society in which he lives. Newland is not prepared for this commitment, and the moment of the crisis is complicated by "the case of the Countess Olenska." Ellen is the catalyst who forces Newland's self-confrontation, for had she not appeared, he might have spent his whole life attaching his deepest emotions almost entirely to fantasy. Ellen offers him the opportunity to test his capacity to fulfill these fantasies; she draws forth his passion into a real flesh and blood attachment. If he is ever to be the man he fancies he might become, he can be that man with Ellen Olenska. And yet, his reactions to her are deeply ambivalent.

It is typical of Newland's thinking that he should construe Ellen as a "case"; and this is a piece with all those other habits of mind that push aside the ordinary complexities of actual human life for the grander sweep of the romantic imagination. He evaluates her exotic plight and her "foreign" appearance with nervous interest: her "pale and serious face appealed to his fancy as suited to the occasion and to her unhappy situation; but the way her dress (which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders shocked and troubled him." Ironically, Ellen in person makes him uncomfortable (just as the fashionable nudity of her gown has unsettled his notions of propriety): her frankness, her wry sense of the absurd, and her easy assumption of intimacy unbalance him. "Nothing could be in worst taste than misplaced flippancy." Thus while the actual freedom of her manner is distasteful, the abstract "right" to "freedom" that her situation justifies is infinitely appealing to him. His image of Ellen balances conveniently against an image of May as "the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything." Central to these images of the women in Archer's life is some picture of what he is to become himself.

This quest for identity is rendered throughout the novel in a series of episodes in which Archer retreats to his study to ponder upon the direction of his life. In the aftermath of Ellen’s appearance he is haunted by the first of an increasingly terrifying series of invocations of self; the future stretches before him, "and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen." In fearing acceptance into the "hieroglyphic world" of old New York, Archer really fears anonymity and personal insignificance. Erikson identifies this specific phase of personal development as the crisis of "Intimacy vs. Isolation." It is a time when the individual leaving adolescence attempts to integrate his still precarious adult "self" into a meaningful and confirming community of peers.

Newland's difficulty with this phase of development follows from the
fact that his impatience with specific details and intractable actualities follows him in his quest for personal identity; for just as it is easier to deal with the "case" of Ellen than with Ellen herself, so it is easier to pursue an image of personal fulfillment that is uncomplicated by the details of everyday living. Throughout much of the novel Archer longs for a life that moves well beyond the chartered realms of the familiar, a life of high emotional intensity and sustained moral and intellectual complexity. The kind of life he only hazily conjectures is a life that is, given the "harsh world" of human experience, available to only a very few. Archer, with his domesticated longings for "'sincere' Eastlake furniture and the plain new bookcases without glass doors," seems an unlikely candidate for the life that his imagination yearns toward. Ironically, the danger that his life will be insignificant lies not so much in the probability that he will fail to fulfill these fantasies as in the more immediate possibility that having failed to fulfill them, he will lack the capacity to give any aspect of his life authenticity. Not all things are possible for a man of Newland's time and place; some ways of life that are unavailable to him are, perhaps, better than any that are. But every real life involves compromises and relinquished hopes—even though some lives require more in the way of sacrifice than others. The problem that Newland faces without fully understanding it is that his desire to create an ideal self substantially hinders him from infusing some genuinely possible self with meaning. To be specific, if the passion that Ellen has finally released in him is eventually thwarted by his failing to achieve a relationship with her, then he might not manage to attach these emotions to any part of the life he actually leads. He might direct them back into idle, empty dreaming, he might never attain the capacity for sustaining deep and meaningful bonds with others; he might become a hollow man altogether. The danger that he faces in this struggle is the one Erikson identifies as the defining difficulty of attaining adulthood: a man "may settle for highly stereotyped interpersonal relations and come to retain a deep sense of isolation. If the times favor an impersonal kind of interpersonal pattern [and Newland's times certainly do], a man can go far, very far, in life and yet harbor a severe character problem doubly painful because he will never feel really himself, although everyone says he is 'somebody.'"

Newland's yearning for transcendent experience is, from the very beginning, inseparable from his passion for Ellen; the longing for them suffuses the novel with an exquisite pain. And yet Wharton lets us know, though it becomes fully apparent to Newland only at the end of the novel, that precisely those capacities in Ellen that most attract him are
capacities leading to behavior that his innermost being cannot tolerate. Throughout the earlier portions of the work, Newland drastically simplifies his notions of Ellen (indeed, as he does of May as well) so that he need not deal with the complexities of her complete person. Ellen is conjured with convenient imprecision outside of any coherent social pattern: she has the “mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience.”

Yet Archer and Ellen have not one meeting in which the fundamental antipathies between their ways of life are not apparent: Archer may romanticize Ellen’s past in blurred and indefinite terms, but Ellen herself has a complete and quite precise complement of habits, manners, and tastes which are the product of this world. During Archer’s first visit to Ellen’s home, for example, he is enchanted with the artistry of Ellen’s drawing room, “intimate, ‘foreign,’ subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments”; and in some way (the connection is surely not one of decorative affinity) he is moved to ponder on his own highly “American” insistence on “‘sincere’ Eastlake furniture.” He is charmed by her experienced, casual manner and offended by her being “flippant.” He is deeply outraged by her association with Beaufort, and he naively supposes that he can convince her to terminate the association. He claims that she makes him “look at his native city objectively”; yet he leaves in a fury when she greets the Duke and Mrs. Struthers (who is not “received” by the polite world) with as much composure as she had greeted him. And even at those times after his marriage when Archer seems most unambivalently to press Ellen to an elopement, he views her more as a “case”—“the compromised woman”—than as another complex human being. Thus when he greets her on her return from Washington, she shocks him by asking: “‘Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress—since I can’t be your wife?’ . . . The crudeness of the question startled him: the word was one that women of his class fought shy of, even when their talk flitted closest about the topic. He noticed that Madame Olenska pronounced it as if it had a recognized place in her vocabulary, and he wondered if it had been used familiarly in her presence in the horrible life she had fled from.” Unable to accept her social accommodations, Newland unrealistically rejects society altogether. “‘I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won’t exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.’ ” However, if Ellen has learned nothing else, she has learned the terrible
and inexorable toll that tradition takes: "She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?"

Ellen has a motley background; she is born of old New York, but has spent her childhood as a European vagabond. These bizarre antecedents give her more flexibility than anyone else in the novel, and though Newland is most vividly impressed with her European connections, Ellen herself is oddly imbued with an admiration for what could only be termed May's world. Ellen's view of this world is naïve at first: she sees it simplistically as a place that is "'straight up and down—like Fifth Avenue. And with all the cross streets numbered!' " But she learns of its cruel social isolations, and she learns of the loneliness of living among the "'kind of people who only ask one to pretend,' " who don't want to "'hear anything unpleasant' "—and still she respects the complex morality that she (but not Archer) can so accurately calculate.

The young Newland Archer evaluates his world harshly and superficially. He sees its innocence as a stifling and destructive element—"the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience." Yet there is much in the novel that suggests intricate harmony where Archer perceives only emptiness and silence.

There are silences, to be sure; but they are rich with communication—a kind of totality of understanding that is possible precisely because the world of old New York is small and limited. It is a world where one can understand, without being told, that Mrs. Beaufort's presence at the opera on the night of her ball indicates "her possession of a staff of servants competent to organize every detail of the entertainment in her absence"; a world where Archer strolling abroad in the evening can ascertain that Beaufort must be about on an errand of "clandestine nature" because "it was not an opera night, and no one was giving a party." This depth of understanding concerns grave things as well as trivial; and at the deep quiet center of this world is May.

The novel is filled with instances of May's intuitive flashes of understanding. Occasionally these are verbalized, but usually they are not. Her relationship with Newland is filled with a profound silence, but the very limitations of the code that governs their marriage fills that silence with meaning. The most remarkable instance of this unvoiced dialogue occurs one evening when Archer tells May he must go to Washington and May enjoins him to "be sure to go and see Ellen."
It was the only word that passed between them on the subject; but in the code in which they had both been trained it meant: 'Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about Ellen, and heartily sympathize with my family in their effort to get her to return to her husband. I also know that, for some reason you have not chosen to tell me, you have advised her against this course, which all the older men of the family, as well as our grandmother, agree in approving; and that it is owing to your encouragement that Ellen defies us all, and exposes herself to the kind of criticism of which Mr. Sillerton Jackson probably gave you, this evening, the hint that has made you so irritable. . . . Hints have indeed not been wanting; but since you appear unwilling to take them from others, I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that, since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval—and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to.'

It is true, as Ellen has observed, that old New Yorkers don't like to talk about "unpleasant" things. But what a wealth of shared knowledge their reticences permit!

Newland perceives May's moments of intuitive understanding as mere flickers of light in an otherwise unilluminated darkness. The evocation of her as a young Diana is, in Archer's mind, a reductive vision of empty, unknowing, unsoiled virginity. He can deal with her primitive complexity no more than he can deal with the consequences of Ellen's experiences with the old-world culture. He doesn't hear or understand even her spoken disclaimer: "'You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine.' " Given Archer's own abysmal and ironic innocence, he is unprepared to counter the marshalled forces of the moral world that May commands. For Diana is the divinity of childbirth and fertility; she presides over the generation of life itself. May might well be ignorant of the more refined customs of decadent European culture; but in her primitive "purity" she is committed to the most fundamental human processes, and in this commitment she is as ruthless as nature itself. May's devotion to an order by which the family can perpetuate itself is absolute; she is willing to release Archer from his engagement to her (for she is a generous woman), but once he has rejected that offer, she dedicates herself to the task of holding him to the
morality implicit in old New York’s regulation of the process of generation.

Archer knows the rules of this morality; he has recited them to Ellen like a catechism, by rote. We have “rather old-fashioned ideas. . . . The individual . . . is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people clinging to any convention that keeps the family together—protects the children.’ ’ And yet they are meaningless to him throughout much of the novel. He sees himself not as an active force in this world—indeed, it is a world whose deep moral structures he little comprehends—but as the victim of its well-mannered brutalities.

Ellen’s view is altogether different. Her contact with old world corruption enables her to appreciate the pious primitivism of her American cousins. Even New York’s rigidities have meaning for her; “under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison. I don’t know how to explain myself . . . but it seems as if I’d never before understood with how much that is hard and shabby and base the most exquisite pleasures may be paid.’’ Much of Ellen’s affection for Newland stems from her supposition that he really does embody the goodness of a society she has come to respect. She imputes a more self-consciously principled mind to him than he possesses; the creed he recites in attempting to dissuade her from the divorce acquires in her understanding of it a meaning that Archer cannot yet feel.

“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.”

Ellen demands a moral substance from Newland that he does not have; for the only Newland Archer that Ellen can love is a man whose actions will confirm his commitment to what is genuinely honorable in the code of old New York. Newland is not yet the man Ellen expects him to be; however, there are clear indications that he has committed himself to becoming that man.
The center of Newland’s early pieties, the grave enduring traditions of his life all have to do with family; when he acts without thinking, his automatic behavior affirms the bonds of kinship and familial affection. For May, and in a different way for Ellen, this loyalty is part of a coherent ethical framework. However, throughout much of the novel Archer has no emotional contact with that part of his nature (by far the greater part) that is so irrevocably wed to the customs of New York. Because so little feeling attaches to this “self,” he cannot experience it as truly and authentically himself; because he so little understands it, he cannot respect or admire it, and he cannot give it meaning. What May and Ellen do together in a remarkable unvoiced conspiracy is to confront Archer with the realities of his situation and thereby to confirm the integrity of his life. Ellen does this by awakening his slumbering sentient self and wrenching his passioned life away from pure imagination to an actual person (however romantically construed) and a series of particular situations within which he can measure his true capacities. May does so by offering her own “innate dignity” as a worthy object of his emotional and moral allegiance. Though Archer’s longing for Ellen usually blinds him to the differences between them, he is sometimes able to put their relationship into focus. The most significant readjustment of his values occurs during and after their meeting at Skytercliff. He is always jealous of Beaufort, consistently plagued by a desire to “correct” Ellen’s views of him. When Beaufort interrupts their meeting at Skytercliff, the old jealousy emerges. Yet this time, the outrage is tempered by an even-minded appraisal of their situation.

Madam Olenska, in a burst of irritation, had said to Archer that he and she did not talk the same language; and the young man knew that in some respects this was true. But Beaufort understood every turn of her dialect, and spoke it fluently: his view of life, his tone, his attitude, were merely a coarser reflection of those revealed in Count Olenski’s letter. This might seem to be to his disadvantage with Count Olenski’s wife; but Archer was too intelligent to think that a young woman like Ellen Olenska would necessarily recoil from everything that reminded her of her past. She might believe herself wholly in revolt against it; but what had charmed her in it would still charm her, even though it were against her will.

Thus, with a painful impartiality, did the young man make out the case for Beaufort, and Beaufort’s victim.

Having confronted these painful facts, Archer makes what must, in part, be understood as a conscious decision: he immediately journeys
south to see May. May’s intuitive understanding of his ambivalence toward her contrasts markedly with the distance that has just been demonstrated between himself and the Countess Olenska, and her offer to release him makes him conscious, perhaps for the first time, of the depths of her basic goodness. It is a genuine offer, and Archer refuses it; his refusal constitutes a pledge to May’s world as well as to May, and once the pledge has been made, May and Ellen cooperate to hold him faithful.

Ellen convinces the family to hasten the marriage, and then she moves to Washington, out of Archer’s sight. She actively wills that their love be realized not in union but in a continuing separation that gives substance to Archer’s own moral life. She conjures him to “‘look, not at visions, but at realities.’”

The news of May’s pregnancy is the final force that drives the would-be lovers apart. Yet there is a real decision implicit in this penultimate act of drama; for a man without firm moral commitments might almost as easily leave a wife and child as a wife alone. Newland is restrained from leaving not by any objective and external force—but by the deep-rooted conviction that his own moral duty must ultimately be defined by family obligations.

Wharton never supposed that Newland could find happiness with Ellen; and though there are earlier outlines of the novel in which he does break his engagement to May and marry Ellen, he and Ellen are not happy together. There is no shared sense of reality: she misses the life in Europe that she has always known; he misses the familiar amenities of old New York; and finally they separate and return to their different worlds.

Throughout the novel, as finally written, Newland is driven to attempt to define the nature of “reality” for his own life. Often he presumes Ellen to have known the “real” world in her life outside of New York, and his own “real” experiences are featured as lying outside of May’s world and his marriage to her. Yet just as often he finds “reality” in May’s world: “Here was truth, here was reality, here was the life that belonged to him.” When he renounces May’s offer of release and decides after all to marry her, he tacitly acknowledges the limitations of his real life (though his doubts continue); and his behavior toward Ellen, especially after his marriage, betrays the fact that he has genuinely chosen to cast his life in terms of old New York morality. For the most part Archer is more comfortable with this decision. “In Archer’s little world no one laughed at a wife deceived, and a certain measure of contempt was attached to men who continued their philandering after
marriage. In the rotation of crops there was a recognized season for wild oats; but they were not to be sown more than once.” The imagery suggests the degree to which Newland has actively internalized the values of May’s primitive, natural order. The alternative is to become a man like Larry Lefferts, and “in his heart he thought Lefferts despicable.” In the end, Archer is forced to realize that there can be no real life for Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska together. And the magnitude of his sacrifice measures for him the value of what he has preserved. He relinquishes his Faustian dreams for the more realistic understandings of a Wilhelm Meister and turns his energies from imagination to the process of generation.

The final chapter, which takes place thirty years later, begins with a confirmation of the values that Archer has chosen as his “realities.” He is seated alone in the library, reflecting with satisfaction upon the course of his life.

It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened. There his wife, nearly twenty-six years ago, had broken to him, with a blushing circumlocution that would have caused the young women of the new generation to smile, the news that she was to have a child; and there their eldest boy, Dallas ... had been christened. ... There Dallas had first staggered across the floor shouting “Dad,” while May and the nurse laughed behind the door; there their second child, Mary (who was so like her mother), had announced her engagement to the dullest and most reliable of Reggie Chivers’s many sons; and there Archer had kissed her through her wedding veil. ... But above all—sometimes Archer put it above all—it was in that library that the Governor of New York ... had turned to his host, and said, hanging his clenched fist on the table and gnashing his eye-glasses: “Hang the professional politician! You’re the kind of man the country wants, Archer.”

Not a great life, perhaps, but a good life and a productive life, a life whose goodness has grown naturally and fruitfully out of the best that Newland Archer’s time and place had to offer. The emotions that Ellen freed have flowed bountifully into family affection, and beyond family into community concerns. Newland understands himself, now, with the graceful tolerance of a man who reveres the achievements of his special place in history.
It was little enough to look back on; but when he remembered to what the young men of his generation and his set had looked forward—the narrow groove of money-making, sport and society to which their vision had been limited—even his small contribution to the new state of things seemed to count, as each brick counts in a well-built wall. He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante; but he had had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in; and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride.

"Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery... When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed." He is not the man he had once dreamed of becoming, but he is a man at peace with himself and a man who has the satisfaction of having become most truly himself in the ways that were available to him. He has not betrayed his own capacities. "Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways."

And New York has changed; it had contained the seeds of change all along, in old Catherine Spicer's journey up through society or in Mrs. Struther's increasing respectability. However, the change has not come wrenchedly, as Archer had once thought it must. Instead, it has developed continuously out of the traditions that had molded his youth. In his acceptance of the imperatives of his own life, Archer has helped to shape this change, by loving and guiding the son so like himself and by being what New Yorkers came to call "a good citizen." Above all, there are meaningful connections for Newland Archer between the past and the present: his children know freedoms that he had never known as a youth; but he is an unaffected comrade to his own son, who shares his fundamental decency. May was not entirely wrong in assuming that "whatever happened, Newland would continue to inculcate in Dallas the same principles and prejudices which had shaped his parents' lives." After all, "there was good in the new order too."

The moment of acquiescence seems to speak directly to the problem of dislocation that Wharton voiced during the period when she was writing the novel. For her, too, one might say, "there was good in the old ways" and "there was good in the new order too." The young people she had come to know through her work during the war were, as Newland's
children, more candid and less limited by the rigidities of custom. Yet Newland’s experience suggests that the validity of old New York’s morality could withstand changes—even the more violent changes wrought by the First World War. There is continuing value in loyalty, in commitment to family, and in undertaking responsibility for the generation that is to follow. Newland’s self-confrontation substantially parallels Wharton’s; and the placid man whom we meet at the beginning of the last chapter seems entirely to have come to terms with his own life; however, for Newland one final test of the integrity of his identity is left. It comes when he has the opportunity once again to meet Ellen Olenska.

Newland is a widower, and Ellen has never remarried; there is no external obstacle to the consummation of the impossible dream they shared almost thirty years earlier. Newland is intoxicated with the possibilities implicit in their meeting. Yet at the same time he is overcome with doubts. The more Newland ponders his encounter with Ellen, the more he feels that it can only prove him a failure, no matter what course of behavior he takes. If he cannot rise to the challenge of a life with Ellen Olenska, then he is genuinely insignificant, and his life has been wasted; but if he can now find a viable world to share with Ellen, then he might have accepted his freedom thirty years ago when May offered it. The quandary seems impossible thus postulated, but Newland is saved from despair by a final and redemptive visitation from the past.

The great strengths of old New York lay in its powerful, unspoken capacity for complex communication (and with that—understanding, even compassion) and in its insistence upon the importance of the family above all else. Newland has reaped the fruits of the second of these in his loving fellowship with his son Dallas. Now Dallas, outspoken embodiment of the “good” new ways enables his father finally to understand the magnitude of the first. Dallas wonders aloud whether Ellen wasn’t “the woman you’d have chucked everything for; only you didn’t... Mother said... the day before she died... 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.” Newland, astounded that May knew his secret sorrow all along, astounded that she has told Dallas, can only reply “in a low voice: ‘She never asked me.’ ”

Then Dallas continues: “No. I forgot. You never did ask each other anything did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact. Well, I back your generation for knowing more about each other’s private thoughts than we ever have
time to find out about our own.' "May has again managed to live up to the height of her intuitive strength. Archer once presumed to suppose that she would never fail him, and now he discovers that she never did. "It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone has guessed and pitied... And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably."

One vindication of old New York’s code is Dallas himself, the son whose affection for his father encompasses even that father’s deepest sorrow. This second vindication, the depth of the unspoken communication that has informed Archer’s life with his wife, causes him to look at the meeting with Ellen in a somewhat different light. He has become, inexorably over the years, the man that he is now—a man who has had an affectionate but not passionate marriage, a man who has been a good father, a man who has used the strengths in his own tradition to mold the traditions that followed him. He has become a gentleman, in the truest usage of old New York. Madame Olenska, too, has been formed by the traditions of the world that she fled to. “For nearly thirty years, her life—of which he knew so strangely little—had been spent in this rich atmosphere that he already felt to be too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs... More than half a lifetime divided them, and she had spent the long interval among people he did not know, in a society he but faintly guessed at, in conditions he would never wholly understand. During that time he had been living with his youthful memory of her.” If his youthful and more flexible self could not live with the “real” Ellen Olenska, then even less can this man that he has become. Yet this recognition need not bring sorrow or self-doubt.

At fifty-seven, Newland has finally become the man Ellen saw in him so long ago; any attempt to recapture the past would be a repudiation of the love that Ellen gave and of the integrity of his own life. And so he decides, in the end, not to see Ellen. His message, “‘Say I’m old-fashioned: that’s enough,’” is an affirmation of the life he has committed himself to, a private reference to that night long ago when he championed family loyalty to Ellen. So he waits below her apartment, envisioning her—not as she was at their first meeting nor at their last, but at the meeting when he “explained” old New York’s code to her. Of all their moments in the past, this one has become the most real to him: she will always be the woman she was that night and it is thus that he pictures her, “a dark lady, pale and dark, who would look up quickly, half rise, and hold out a long thin hand with three rings on it.” Only now he has actually fulfilled the role whose words he spoke so long ago.

He has found the reality he sought, and it rests in the man he has
become. For the rest—"it’s more real to me here than if I went up." In
the end he has gained more than he has lost: he has not rejected his
unique moment in history; he has taken the best of it and built upon it.
His final act confirms the coherence of his own identity, and in this
confirmation of self, Newland achieves genuine maturity. Erikson might
say that he shares the wisdom of all men, past and present, who have
reached ego integrity: he understands his "one and only life cycle as
something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no sub-
stitutions; . . . he knows that an individual life is the accidental coinci-
dence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for
him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style or integrity of
which he partakes." Newland has escaped the narrow limitations of old
New York in the only way that was ever really available to him, by
achieving an inner peace that transcends time and place altogether. "A
wise Indian, a true gentleman, and a mature peasant share and recog-
nize in one another the final stage of integrity."

He watches Ellen’s apartment, content to be no more than a spec-ta-
or to the play of high passions. "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." The drama is over, and
Newland can go home.