

# author of age of innocence

**The Age of Innocence** is a novel written by Edith Wharton, an American author renowned for her incisive critiques of the social mores and conventions of high society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Published in 1920, the work won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921, making Wharton the first woman to receive this prestigious award. This article explores the life of Edith Wharton, her literary contributions, and the themes and significance of her celebrated novel, *The Age of Innocence*.

## Edith Wharton: A Brief Biography

Edith Wharton was born on January 24, 1862, into a wealthy New York family, which provided her with a privileged upbringing. She was educated at home by private tutors and developed a love for literature and writing at an early age. Wharton's exposure to the elite circles of New York society would later inform her literary works, allowing her to offer an insider's perspective on the cultural norms of her time.

## Early Life and Education

- **Family Background:** Wharton was the daughter of George Frederic Wharton and Lucretia Stevens Wharton. Her family was part of the American upper class, which afforded her extensive travel and education.
- **Literary Influences:** Influenced by classic literature, Wharton found inspiration in authors such as Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose works shaped her own writing style and narrative techniques.
- **Writing Career Beginnings:** Wharton began writing poetry and short stories in her teens, and by the age of 29, she published her first novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902).

## Personal Life

Wharton's personal life was marked by both privilege and tumult. In 1885, she married Edward Wharton, a man from a well-established Boston family. However, the marriage was fraught with difficulties, leading to their divorce in 1913. The experience of her marital struggles and her subsequent independence significantly shaped her worldview and literary themes.

## Literary Contributions

Edith Wharton's literary career spanned several decades and encompassed a wide range of genres, including novels, short stories, and essays. She produced over 40 works, establishing herself as a prominent figure in American literature. Some of her most notable

works include:

- The House of Mirth (1905)
- Ethan Frome (1911)
- The Custom of the Country (1913)
- The Age of Innocence (1920)
- The Old Maid (1924)

## Major Themes in Wharton's Works

Wharton's writings often explore themes such as:

- Social Class and Morality: Wharton critiques the rigid social structures of her time and examines the moral dilemmas faced by individuals within those constraints.
- Feminism and Gender Roles: Many of her female protagonists grapple with the limitations placed on them by society and seek to forge their own identities.
- The Conflict Between Desire and Duty: Wharton frequently portrays characters caught between their personal desires and societal expectations, creating tension and complexity in her narratives.

## The Age of Innocence: Overview

Published in 1920, *The Age of Innocence* is set in the elite society of New York City during the 1870s. The novel tells the story of Newland Archer, a young lawyer, who is engaged to the beautiful but conventional May Welland. However, Archer's life becomes complicated when he meets May's cousin, the unconventional and scandalous Countess Ellen Olenska, who has returned to New York after separating from her abusive husband.

## Plot Summary

The novel unfolds as Newland Archer grapples with his feelings for Ellen and the societal expectations surrounding him. As he becomes increasingly drawn to Ellen's free-spirited nature, he finds himself questioning the values of his society and the life he is expected to lead. The tension between his desire for genuine love and the constraints imposed by his social circle creates a rich narrative filled with emotional depth.

## Key Characters

- Newland Archer: The protagonist, a young lawyer torn between duty and desire.
- May Welland: Archer's fiancée, a symbol of traditional values and societal expectations.
- Countess Ellen Olenska: A progressive and independent woman whose return to New York disrupts the status quo.

## Thematic Elements in *The Age of Innocence*

Wharton masterfully weaves several themes throughout *The Age of Innocence*, which resonate deeply with readers even today.

### Social Conformity vs. Individual Desire

One of the central themes of the novel is the tension between social conformity and individual desire. Wharton critiques the rigid codes of conduct that govern the lives of her characters, highlighting the emotional toll these expectations take on individuals. Newland Archer's internal struggle exemplifies this conflict as he navigates his love for Ellen while trying to adhere to societal norms.

### Gender Roles and Feminism

Wharton's exploration of gender roles is particularly significant in *The Age of Innocence*. The novel portrays the limited options available to women in the 19th century, as exemplified by May's subservience to societal expectations and Ellen's defiance. Through these characters, Wharton critiques the patriarchal structures that confine women and the consequences of their rebellion.

### The Illusion of Happiness

Wharton delves into the concept of happiness and its often illusory nature. The characters' pursuit of happiness is clouded by social obligations and personal sacrifices, leading to a poignant commentary on the superficiality of high society. Archer's ultimate choice reflects the sacrifices individuals make in the name of societal acceptance.

### Impact and Legacy

*The Age of Innocence* received critical acclaim upon its release, and it has since become a classic of American literature. The novel's rich exploration of social dynamics and human emotions ensures its continued relevance. Wharton's ability to portray complex characters

and their struggles resonates with readers across generations.

## **Cultural Adaptations**

The novel has inspired various adaptations, including:

- A 1993 film directed by Martin Scorsese, starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Winona Ryder, which brought renewed attention to Wharton's work.
- Stage adaptations and literary reinterpretations, showcasing the story's timeless appeal.

## **Wharton's Influence on Future Writers**

Edith Wharton's influence extends beyond her own writings; she paved the way for future generations of female authors. Her exploration of gender and societal constraints has inspired writers to challenge conventions and address similar themes in their works.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* stands as a testament to her literary genius and her keen understanding of human nature and social dynamics. Through her rich characterizations and thoughtful exploration of themes such as desire, duty, and societal expectations, Wharton invites readers to reflect on the complexities of life in a rapidly changing world. Her legacy as a trailblazer in American literature endures, making her a pivotal figure in the canon of Western literature.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Who is the author of 'The Age of Innocence'?**

The author of 'The Age of Innocence' is Edith Wharton.

### **When was 'The Age of Innocence' published?**

'The Age of Innocence' was published in 1920.

### **What themes are explored in 'The Age of Innocence'?**

The novel explores themes such as social class, love, and the conflict between individual desires and societal expectations.

## **What is the setting of 'The Age of Innocence'?**

The setting of 'The Age of Innocence' is New York City during the 1870s.

## **What notable awards did Edith Wharton receive for her writing?**

Edith Wharton was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921 for 'The Age of Innocence.'

## **What is the main conflict in 'The Age of Innocence'?**

The main conflict in the novel revolves around Newland Archer's struggle between his duty to society and his love for Ellen Olenska.

## **How does 'The Age of Innocence' critique society?**

The novel critiques society by highlighting the rigid social norms and the hypocrisy of the upper class in 19th-century New York.

## **What literary style is 'The Age of Innocence' known for?**

'The Age of Innocence' is known for its detailed character development and rich descriptions, characteristic of Wharton's literary style.

## **Is 'The Age of Innocence' part of a larger literary movement?**

Yes, 'The Age of Innocence' is often associated with the Realism literary movement, which focuses on depicting everyday life and society accurately.

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