

10th Grade Honors: Summer Reading

Text: *The Age of Innocence* (1921) by Edith Wharton

Note about the text: Please get the Dover Thrift Edition....(240 pgs)

ISBN-13: 978-0486298030. New book costs approx. 3 dollars, used approx. a dollar.

Link on [Amazon](#)

Overview of novel: Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* (1921) is set in the opulent world of the most **elite social class of 1870s New York**. At the heart of the novel is **Newland Archer and his fiancée May Welland**, who appear to be like today's perfect celebrity couple. When **May's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska**, arrives in New York, and brings with her scandal, rumors, and intrigue aplenty, Archer finds himself questioning the social conventions and entrapment of his and May's milieu. The novel is incredibly poignant in its suggestive critiques of social norms and unspoken rules of social interactions; in its exposure of vicious gossip and hypocrisy; and in its vulnerable honesty about the conflict between desire and social convention as well as the conflict between social pressures and one's authentic, creative self. I hope that you see many parallels between 1870s New York and your own experiences of fitting in/not fitting in; of knowing first-hand the power of judgment from peers, whether on social media platforms or in everyday experience; of wondering which voices should guide you in difficult decisions and why.

Your Summer Reading Assignments:

- 1) Create a **quote book** as you read. Please do not use a quote source online to simply copy and paste quotes off of a random list. This robs you of all scholarly joy. Be fully awake to the musical cadences of the text yourself; be conscious of your own writing voice which emerges in a special way when you are reading actively! Reading helps you develop your own artistic taste. To this end, please create a **1-2 page Google Doc you'll call "My Quote Book" or "My Quote Quilt,"** and include **a minimum of 1 quote per chapter, with page references** after each quote. You don't have to write comments or questions of your own next to these quotes, but you might find that it's second nature:)
- 2) **Write approx. 3-4 pages [double-spaced] in response to ONE of the critical reading questions below... (Note that this will be your brainstorming for a**

more formal essay due at the beginning of the quarter. Annotate quotes in the novel as you read (6+) that you can use to support your final analysis.)...

PICK ONE to answer in your essay:

- A. What is the role of social convention in the novel? Why has this society tacitly agreed to avoid all discussion of things that are “unpleasant”? What role do rumor and innuendo play in this society? Do social convention and morality always align?
- B. What does Newland see in May at the beginning of the novel? What does he see in Ellen? What does each woman represent for him? More broadly, what are the pros of cons of the outsider vs. the insider in high society? What does each woman see in Newland?
- C. Some critics have described May as one of the great villains of American literature. Does that characterization surprise you? Is it a fair assessment? In what ways might she be considered villainous?
- D. Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*, but only after some controversy where the prize was taken from its original recipient—Sinclair Lewis for *Main Street* (a biting social satire of small-town America). The Board of Trustees said Wharton’s novel “presented the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood.” Was their assessment correct?

3. Write approx. 1 page of creative writing in response to this novel:

Create an original piece of writing that could reasonably fit into the novel. For instance, you might write a vexing diary entry from the perspective of a major character; a letter from one character to another; a sonnet from one character to another; the musings of Newland and May’s son who meets Countess Olenska at the end of the novel; an imagined article in a tabloid that spreads gossip about one of the novel’s major scandals or rumors; or any dramatic piece of writing in any genre (poetry, diary, article, letter, dialogue of conversation at a park, etc). Note that a short poem might only be ½ page/14 lines, but represents as much creative energy as a full-page diary entry. Specify which page range the creative work would appear (within the novel) and provide a one-sentence rationale.

*** This will be due Tuesday, September 4, but I've provided the directions in case you have time to get started.**

Submission of work: You will create a file called "Summer Reading, 10th Grade Honors" which will be comprised of **three** items: Quote Book; Short 3-4 page essay; and 1-page creative work. Using "Insert-> Break-> Page break," create a page-break between each item. Submit the file electronically through Google Classroom prior to the first day of class. The class code is **e0rk7n**. Questions? Concerns? Need for further clarification? Email me (Dr. Saltmarsh) at saltmarshh@mjbha.org.