



EDITH
WHARTON'S

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

New Centenary Essays

ARIELLE ZIBRAK

BLOOMSBURY

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Edited by
Arielle Zibrak

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Contributor Biographies

Shari Goldberg is Assistant Professor of English at Franklin & Marshall College and the author of *Quiet Testimony: A Theory of Witnessing from Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Fordham University Press, 2013). She researches modes of human receptivity in US literature and culture and her work has been published in journals including *American Literature*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *Paragraph*, and the *Henry James Review*. Her current project connects the psychology of suggestion to literary visions of personhood developed in turn of the century novels. In 2018–2019, she held a Boston Medical Library Fellowship in the History of Medicine.

Hildegard Hoeller is Professor of English at the College of Staten Island with an appointment in English and Women's Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). She is the author of *From Gift to Commodity: Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2012) and *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (University Press of Florida, 2000), as well as co-author with Rebecca Brittenham of *Keywords for Academic Writers* (Longman, 2004); she is also the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (2007). Her essays have appeared in *PMLA*, *American Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *ESQ*, *American Literary Realism*, *African-American Review*, *Edith Wharton Review*, and other scholarly journals and edited collections. A former president of the Edith Wharton Society, Hoeller is currently editing the *Old New York* volume of the *Collected Works of Edith Wharton* (Oxford University Press) and is slated to be co-editor of the *Translations* volume of the same series.

Margaret Jay Jessee is Assistant Professor of English and Director of English Honors at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her work on Edith Wharton has appeared in *JML: A Journal of Modern Literature* and in *Edith Wharton: Critical Insights* (Salem Press, 2017). She is co-director of the

2020 conference sponsored by the Edith Wharton Society. Her other work has appeared in the journals *Arizona Quarterly*, *South Atlantic Review*, and *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, as well as in the edited collections *Nathaniel Hawthorne in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Liminality, Hybridity, and American Women's Literature: Thresholds in Women's Writing* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018). Her book, *Murderess to Doctress: The Affective Legacy of the Abortionist in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, is forthcoming with Routledge Press.

Gabi Kirilloff is Assistant Professor of English at Texas Christian University, where she specializes in digital humanities, twentieth-century American literature, and new media studies. She has worked on several digital projects, including the *Willa Cather Archive*, the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and the Novel TM project. Her research has appeared in journals such as *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities (DSH)* and the *Journal of Cultural Analytics*. Much of Kirilloff's research uses digital tools and computational methods to explore the portrayal of gender in fiction.

Beth (Bich Minh) Nguyen is the author of the memoir *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and the novels *Short Girls* and *Pioneer Girl*. Her work has received an American Book Award and a PEN/Jerard Award, among other honors, and has been featured in numerous anthologies and university and community reads programs. Nguyen was born in Saigon and grew up in Michigan, where her refugee family was resettled. She is a professor in the MFA Program at the University of Wisconsin, where she teaches fiction and creative nonfiction.

Virginia Ricard teaches American literature at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne in France. For the past ten years, the main focus of her research has been Edith Wharton. In 2012, she edited a special issue of *The Journal of the Short Story in English* on Wharton's short stories. Since then, she has published a number of critical essays on Wharton's work in both English and French: "Walking in Wartime: Edith Wharton's 'The Look of Paris'" (Palgrave, 2016), "La Conviction jubilatoire d'Edith Wharton," (Modernités, 2016), "Reading *The Age of Innocence* in France," and "An Unknown Letter from Edith Wharton to Minnie Bourget," both in the *Edith Wharton Review* (2017). More recently she has contributed chapters to *The New Wharton* (Cambridge University

Press, forthcoming 2019) and *L'Amérique au tournant: La place des États-Unis dans la littérature française entre 1890 et 1920* (Classiques Garnier, forthcoming 2019). In 2018, she published the first English translation of a little-known lecture Wharton had given in Paris ("America at War: Edith Wharton on the National Character in 1918," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 14, 2018).

Carol Singley is Professor of English at Rutgers University-Camden, where she teaches American literature and childhood studies. She is the author of *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); co-author of *House of Mourning, House of Mirth* (Fahrenheit, 2013), and author of *Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2011). She has edited four books on Wharton: *The House of Mirth Casebook* (2003) and *A Historical Guide* (both Oxford University Press); *The Age of Innocence* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000); and *Ethan Frome* (Broadview, 2013). She is editor or co-editor of *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women* (SUNY, 1993), *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era* (New England, 1997), and *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader* (Rutgers University Press, 2003). She is General Editor of the thirty-volume *The Complete Works of Edith Wharton* (Oxford University Press) and past president of The Edith Wharton Society.

Margaret Toth is Professor of English and the director of the film studies minor at Manhattan College. Her research interests include late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century US literature, film, and adaptation studies. Her scholarship on Edith Wharton has been published in such journals as *Modern Fiction Studies* and the *Journal of Narrative Theory* and in the collections *Edith Wharton in Context* (ed. Laura Rattray) and *Edith Wharton and Cosmopolitanism* (eds. Meredith Goldsmith and Emily Orlando). She is editing *Hudson River Bracketed* (Volume 25) for the *Complete Works of Edith Wharton* (Oxford University Press). Her current book project, *After Innocence: Edith Wharton and Post-War Writings on Art and Faith*, is an intertextual study that focuses on the figure of the artist and forms of spirituality in Wharton's late works.

Arielle Zibrak is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wyoming. Her research interests include American women writers, gender and sexuality

studies, the *fin de siècle*, aesthetic theory, and the relationship between art and politics. She is currently at work on a monograph about the various ways in which the transatlantic reform realist novel was contested on aesthetic grounds in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a book entitled *Guilty Pleasures* about the cultural history of women's genre fiction. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Arizona Quarterly*, *ESQ*, *Criticism*, *Edith Wharton Review*, *ALH*, *The Baffler*, *The LA Review of Books*, and *The Toast*. She has also served on the Executive Board of the Edith Wharton Society.

Introduction: “Each Time You Happen to Me All Over Again”

Arielle Zibrak
University of Wyoming

This volume marks the centenary of the publication of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, a novel that has been almost uniformly praised since its initial serialization in the *Pictorial Review* in 1920 and its receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year. At the time of its publication, William Lyon Phelps—a professor of literature at Yale, which would award Wharton an honorary doctorate of letters in 1923—wrote in his *New York Times* review of the novel: “Edith Wharton is a writer who brings glory on the name America, and this is her best book. After reading so many slipshod diaries called ‘novels,’ what a pleasure it is to turn the pages of this consummate work of art.”¹ In the years since, it has appeared on almost every “Best American Novels” list, has been adapted to film, television, and theater multiple times, has inspired contemporary rewritings, and is regularly cited as a favorite text by present-day authors including Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, and Beth Nguyen, whose essay on reading *The Age of Innocence* as the teenage daughter of refugees concludes this volume.²

Though the past 100 years have brought few doubts regarding the merit of the novel as a work of art, they have brought curiously little celebration of what *The Age of Innocence* brings to the table in the form of social critique, literary innovation, or cultural significance. Published in a moment of high modernism—at the same time as works like Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*, and in the middle of the publication of Proust’s epic *In Search of Lost Time*—*The Age of Innocence*, despite its obvious merits, has long been deemed a throw-back text both thematically and stylistically. For this reason, it is perhaps the most underrated highly rated novel in the history of American letters.

Such a paradox began with the controversy surrounding the choice of *The Age of Innocence* for the relatively new and prestigious Pulitzer Prize. The jury's first choice for the fourth recipient of the award in 1921 was Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, a work that indulged America's fixation with its own moment and the region of the country that was then known as the Middle West. If New York in the early 1920s seemed to Americans to be a relic of the past, with its connections to the conventions of the hierarchical European culture America was destined to escape, the Middle West was its egalitarian future. Set in Minnesota in the teens, *Main Street* was the epitome of literary cool for Americans at the end of that tumultuous decade. But it was Wharton, not Lewis, who emerged with the 1921 prize after the jury's decision was overturned by the board on the grounds that Wharton's novel did more to "uplift American morals." In a telegram to Lewis, Wharton herself lamented these terms:

When I discovered that I was being rewarded—by one of our leading Universities—for uplifting American morals, I confess I did despair. Subsequently, when I found the prize shd [sic] really have been yours, but was withdrawn because your book (I quote from memory) had "offended a number of prominent persons in the Middle West," disgust was added to despair.³

Wharton later satirized this awards drama in the 1929 novel *Hudson River Bracketed*, wherein a "Pulsifer Prize" is awarded to a realist novel entitled "The Corner Grocery." As Meredith Goldsmith demonstrates, Wharton's position in relation to both prize juries and the literary marketplace is one that chafes at faddism—and the novel of "main street" was one such fad that seemed to promise endurance to many of her peers.⁴ In her own 1927 essayistic consideration of "The Great American Novel," Wharton rejected the idea that the newly conceived dream of such a comprehensively representative work would have to be about middle America and mounted a convincing case for cosmopolitan fictions that depicted the United States as a new world power following the great war.⁵ The international context, the historical setting, and the largely missed irony of the title of *The Age of Innocence* have led many readers—but not all—to assume it is a far tamer and less critically important work than it actually is. The actress Michelle Pfeiffer, who starred as Ellen Olenska in the 1993 film adaptation by Martin Scorsese, acknowledged that

Scorsese, who had previously directed *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Cape Fear* (1991)—films famous for their controversial violence—“described it as his most violent film.”⁶ The counter-intuitiveness of this claim aligns with many of the critical revelations realized in this volume: *The Age of Innocence* is set in a world where people rarely say what they mean, and what the novel itself appears to say about its greatest themes (history, modernity, internationalism, sexuality, and gender) undergoes, in these pages, a series of startling reversals.

As Hildegard Hoeller reveals in her essay in this volume, from the time of the composition of her first novel *Fast and Loose*, at the tender age of 14, Wharton’s career is one that has always been plagued by a thwarted desire to shock. As Hoeller describes, earlier outline drafts of *The Age of Innocence* had the affair between Ellen and Newland explicitly consummated, which would of course have made a far greater splash in this regard than the final version that consigns the realization of the couple’s erotic relationship to the subjunctive with the subtle gesture of Ellen returning an unused room key in a sealed envelope. The marketing of the novel in anticipation of its publication traded on this potential allure; Hoeller quotes a racy advertisement that appeared in *Publishers’ Weekly* in 1920:

Why was this American girl forced to leave her brutal Polish husband? Why did Ellen, Countess Alenska [*sic*], return to New York, seeking to forget? Whispers came all too soon that she had been compromised in the artistic continental society from which she had fled. But in the narrow New York society of the 1870s she was welcomed back, and the whispery of far off Europe ignored, until she and Newland Archer are swept together by mutual attraction, and the old, old question is renewed, shall she create a scandal just because she is unhappy?⁷

Despite such tantalizing promises, even readers at the time received the novel as an extraordinarily well-written teacup drama. Margaret Toth writes here of how Hollywood executives, eager to stave off charges of undue licentiousness, sought to adapt Wharton’s novel because her name “would lend the film a level of respectability”—“Edith Wharton” was antonymous with scandal and excitement.

On the surface, *The Age of Innocence* is old-fashioned and even tame. Set almost entirely in the 1870s, among the coterie of long-established New

York families that Wharton was and still is most often associated with, it has traditionally seemed to readers more of a capital-V Victorian novel than a capital-M Modern one. Wharton was well aware of this public perception, writing to F. Scott Fitzgerald at the height of his fame: "To your generation, which has taken such a flying leap into the future, I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted furniture and gas chandeliers."⁸ It was a formulation she must have particularly enjoyed; she reiterated it almost exactly to a journalist four years later: "[Mrs. Wharton] says that to the greener growths of her day, she must seem like a taffeta sofa under a gas-lit chandelier."⁹ The double-voice of this self-critique is apparent, especially given its analogical content. Wharton made her name in publishing in 1897, with the design treatise *The Decoration of Houses*, co-authored with Ogden Codman. It is a work that polemically eschews the tufted-furniture design style of the Victorian age and advocates for its substitution with a return to the clean lines of eighteenth-century furnishings that lack "dust-collecting upholstery and knick-knacks" and a jettisoning of the "habit of lining chintz curtains and of tufting chairs [that] has done away with the chief advantages of a simpler style of treatment."¹⁰ Wharton's redress for her undeserved "old-fashioned" reputation is a subtle reminder of her popular contributions to modern interior design—contributions that themselves engaged two time periods: a call to imagine a different future via a return to the previous century for inspiration. It's a move Wharton makes in *The Age of Innocence* as well. Despite its historical setting, the novel points far more to the future than the past, concluding with a section set twenty-six years after the main events of the plot, in which the protagonist Newland Archer muses on the changes modernity has wrought within his world from the invention of the telephone, to five-day cross-Atlantic voyages, to the laxity of social mores. In the final moments of the novel, Archer decides not to join his son Dallas on a visit to Ellen Olenska, the lost love of his youth that the 1870s plot of the novel chronicles, telling Dallas to relay a simple message to explain his absence: "say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough."¹¹ The novel's third-person narrator hews closely to Newland's perspective; his is the only consciousness the novel enters. Therefore, there has been a tendency to read Archer's old-fashionedness as the novel's, and to read the novel's as Wharton's. Margaret Jay Jessee, in her essay in this volume, suggests that Newland's consciousness is not to be read through but around. In Jessee's view, the bluntness of his insight is precisely what the

novel critiques, though it is frequently mistaken for what the novel performs. In other words, the old-fashioned character at the center of the novel, whose dominant perspective practically makes him its narrator, paradoxically offers a depth of understanding of the novel's second time period (the twenty-six years later section) as well as its third: the future the novel anticipates.

The centenary occasion of this collection of essays itself, then, makes a Whartonian gesture: it asks us to consider both the period of the publication of the novel (1920) and what it has to tell us about our own moment (2020)—a date that seems fantastically removed from the early-twentieth-century modernity of quick steamer travel and landline telephones. Though the novel is largely celebrated for an almost scientific preservation of its past, it brings as much to bear on a consideration of 2020—a year that is only just yet to happen at the time of my writing—as it does on 1920, an age that Wharton was practically alone among major American novelists in examining with some degree of distance at the same moment of its unraveling through her return to the previous century.

In 1920, the nineteenth amendment to the constitution was ratified, ensuring the right of women to vote; the eighteenth amendment (also ratified that year) prohibited the consumption and sale of alcohol. On September 16, the Wall Street bombing of 1920, likely perpetrated by Italian anarchists, became the deadliest terrorist attack on US soil. In November 1920, the first commercially licensed radio station began broadcasting live results of the presidential election, a development Eric Burns identifies as “the birth of mass media.”¹² In many ways, these events signal beginnings within a teleological view of history: progress toward gender equality, the growing need for regulation of intoxicating substances, the rise of terrorism, and a media-run political system. It's tempting to connect these developments to their twenty-first-century analogs: the Women's March following the election of President Trump and the birth of social media movements like #timesup and #metoo, the pharmaceutical drug crisis, rampant gun massacres, and the proliferation of Fox News—an outlet Nicole Hemmer calls “the closest we've come to having state TV.”¹³ As even this cursory list suggests, such historical nodes are related more thematically than sequentially.

Consider two images of women protestors from these two periods separated by a hundred years. In the first, taken on January 10, 1917, a group

of women from the National Woman's Party, wearing long black coats and fashionable cloches, stand outside the White House wielding a hand-sewn banner that reads "Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?" In the second, taken in 2016 at the Czarny protest against proposed abortion legislation, a Polish woman carries a sign made of cardboard on which she has affixed two pieces of 8.5 x 11 inches printer paper that reads: "I can't believe I still have to protest this fucking shit."¹⁴ The Czarny protest image circulated widely on social media, resulting in many such similar signs carried by older protestors in the United States—indeed, in front of the White House—during the Women's March on Washington that took place on January 21, 2017. Such juxtaposed images suggest not a linear path forward but a circling back to the same problems in different guises and materials. Indeed, their very language resists a narrative of progress as the foundation of its protest. Wharton was likewise skeptical of modern utopian notions of progress; *The Age of Innocence* is the novel in which she most clearly performs this skepticism both thematically and formally.¹⁵

Because of this, *The Age of Innocence* is perhaps best read with its various time periods collapsed into one another as interrelated phenomena rather than distinctly arranged as a causal sequence.¹⁶ Reading the novel in this way, its observations about individual and group psychology and the functioning of complex social systems become equally applicable to aspects of countless periods and settings. For example, 2020 is the year in which the Chinese government plans to enroll all of its citizens into a database that processes its "social credit system," wherein individuals will be given scores that rank them on the basis of their "goodness":

[T]he score is built upon personal data including social status (education and professional background), credit history, social connections (including the credit score of one's social connections), and behavior patterns ... befriending people with high scores while unfriending those with low scores would improve one's rating ... [low scorers] would struggle to rent a car, find a job and might be publicly shamed.¹⁷

Most Western accounts have heralded this new system as the dawning of a dystopic age of communism wherein, in the words of American Vice President Mike Pence: "China's rulers aim to implement an Orwellian system premised

on controlling virtually every facet of human life.”¹⁸ Bing Song, director of the Berggruen Institute’s China Center, takes a more nuanced approach to understanding this system, suggesting that “a more appropriate term to describe the initiative is a ‘social trust system,’” with “many measures ... intended to curb official corruption, tackle official dereliction and improve efficiency in enforcing court decisions, as well as punish unethical behaviors of professionals.”¹⁹ Such a description might equally apply to the code of conduct to which Newland Archer clings in *The Age of Innocence*. While the code of old New York may keep him from leaving his wife to pursue passion, its restrictive social system is one Archer ultimately embraces for what it prevents more than for what it upholds. The financial scandal occasioned by the dishonesty of Julius Beaufort in the latter part of the novel is in no way unrelated to Archer’s decision to eschew sexual desire in favor of the party line; the scandal demonstrates the dire consequences of abandoning those conservative values. Archer is disgusted by the repeated indiscretions of serial adulterer Lawrence Lefferts and sees both sexual and financial probity as key to upholding social order. The stakes of his emotional affair with Ellen Olenska extend far beyond its potential to derail his personal life.²⁰ In the end of the novel, his decision to adhere to the old ways allows him to celebrate his own “good citizenship,” a status he comes to prize above all else:

He had been, in short, what people were beginning to call “a good citizen.” In New York, for many years past, every new movement, philanthropic, municipal or artistic, had taken account of his opinion and wanted his name. People said: “Ask Archer” when there was a question of starting the first school for crippled children, reorganising the Museum of Art, founding the Grolier Club, inaugurating the new Library, or getting up a new society of chamber music. His days were full, and they were filled decently. (349)

In 2020 China, Newland Archer would have a high social credit score. Wharton would likely see the 2020 Chinese system as neither wholly “bad” nor “good,” nor so different in anything beyond scale from the codes of closed societies within the American past and present. *The Age of Innocence* still has a lot to teach us about tacit systems of ethical conduct in general; Wharton’s ironic mode allows her to equally depict their merits and drawbacks. As a contemporary reviewer of the novel observed: “she has described these rites

and surfaces and burdens as familiarly as if she loved them and as lucidly as if she hated them.”²¹ Even Archer himself remarks, at the novel’s end and regarding a general dissolution of old New York customs: “Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways,” while he simultaneously recognizes: “There was good in the new order too” (350).

Archer is a clean-lined, eighteenth-century chaise of a character. His values and decisions simultaneously illuminate the shortcomings and merits of the American past as they gesture toward the problems and solutions of the American future. As Gabi Kirilloff argues here, the novel “draws our attention to the way in which even progressive change becomes traditional when viewed through the hindsight of history.” That, in the twenty-first century, we’ve come to see Archer’s version of the “old ways” as so fundamentally un-American we can only associate them with “Orwellian” communism or the faux aristocracy of Wharton’s old New York youth speaks to the acceleration of the very trajectory Wharton identifies in *The Age of Innocence*—not one of social progress or decline, but one of epistemology, in which the lessons of the past are in peril of remaining lost to us forever.

What *The Age of Innocence* depicts is a privileged communism, a closed society that pools its resources via carefully negotiated marriages and investments, and polices its borders through strict rules of conduct.²² Here, again, the connection to modern-day China holds fast, a connection noted by a reviewer of *Crazy Rich Asians* author Kevin Kwan’s *China Rich Girlfriend*: “In the same way that Edith Wharton catalogued the Gilded Age via novels like *The Age of Innocence*, Kwan in his novels is doing his bit for a China that now has the second-highest number of millionaires in the world.”²³ The popular American television show *Gossip Girl*, which ran on the CW network from 2007 to 2012 and was based on a series of novels by Cecily von Ziegesar, also focuses on a small coterie of privileged elite among whom a prodigal daughter wreaks havoc. Like *The Age of Innocence*, *Gossip Girl* features an arch narrator who functions as both satirist and enforcer—reflective of the dialectical stance each fiction adopts toward critique and homage. In a 2009 *Gossip Girl* episode called “The Age of Dissonance,” the show’s high-school-age characters even mount a dramatic performance of *The Age of Innocence*. The episode ends with a note from Rachel, the character who plays Ellen, to Dan, who plays Newland:

“I’m going back to Iowa, as you must have known. I’m sorry for everything. As Edith Wharton wrote: ‘There is no one as kind as you, no one who gave me reasons I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard.’”²⁴ The novel’s lessons seem to resonate even with the show’s disillusioned Upper-East-Side teenagers and their implied audience.

In some ways, these references merely signal Wharton’s enduring significance as a novelist of manners, but there is something about how *The Age of Innocence* in particular deploys this literary tradition that stands out. Other notable novelists of manners define its boundaries: Jane Austen lightly satirizes the tendencies of the closed societies she depicts but ultimately treats them with tenderness; Henry James savagely rips them apart. It is the subtlety of Wharton’s ambivalence, at the height of its powers in *The Age of Innocence*, that distinguishes her approach and establishes her firmly at the center of the tradition.²⁵ As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in an *Atlantic* article that I think is worth quoting at length:

Wharton presents to us a deeply flawed world. But whereas a lesser writer would have stopped there, Wharton shows us how an honorable person, totally apprised of those flaws, might die for that world nonetheless ... When Newland says to Countess Olenska that he is searching for a world where “categories” like husband, wife and mistress don’t exist, the much more worldly, and wiser, Olenska looks at him and says, “Oh my dear—Where is that country?”

Where is that country.

I fucking love that line. It says so much about how we both underestimate, and overestimate, our imagination. I think some of the Old Virginians must have thought much the same when faced with the beast of slavery—Where is that country.²⁶

Coates is the rare critic who is able to draw broader historical lessons from the structures of thought Wharton depicts. This is especially notable as Wharton is typically appreciated for the historical particulars of her depictions. Early critics such as Harry Hartwick focused almost exclusively on the material culture of *The Age of Innocence*, a tendency that persists in popular and student readings of the novel—there is even a *Medium* article devoted to cataloging everything Ellen Olenska wears in its pages, as though she were a present-day Instagram “influencer.”²⁷ In her own time and thereafter, Wharton’s novels

have often been read as *romans à clef* of old New York, a tendency she didn't much admire but saw as inevitable.²⁸ These kinds of readings distract from the fact that the psychological realities she depicts are so thorough as to be exportable. In Goldberg's reading here, for example, the narrator notes that Ellen's drawing room smells of "Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses," not primarily to envelop us in the scents of the period, but to communicate the complex levels of narrative access to Newland's consciousness. Through narrative technique and a mode of portraying history that is thematic rather than plainly documentarian, Wharton is able to teach us not only about 1870s New York, but also, as Coates suggests, about 1850s Virginia, and, as I do, about 2020 China.

More than a chronicle of a rarefied 1870s society consigned to the same fate as their once ubiquitous city-block-sized mansions, *The Age of Innocence* is a novelistic study of competing desires and allegiances: between risk and safety, love and duty, the present and the past. Its exploration of these poles is played out within the context of its love plot: Newland Archer, its stultified protagonist, mired in the traditions of his old New York "tribe" and yet longing for the change he imagines possible when reading romantic literature in his bookcase-lined study, must decide between his young fiancée, May Welland, the most perfect specimen of old New York femininity and innocence, and her cousin the Countess Ellen Olenska, a free spirit fleeing an unhappy European marriage. May is precision: a literal archer, a schemer, a keeper of secrets, a hider of sentiments, and a purchaser of highly appropriate articles. Ellen is chaos; in a representative scene, she runs out of her house "bareheaded" to rescue a neighborhood child with a skinned knee (121). She arranges her flowers against the custom, speaks candidly in public, and is possessed of a magical little charm bracelet from which a gold cigarette case can be detached—she is a woman who smokes. (So, sometimes, was Wharton.)²⁹

It could be said that the novel has two kinds of readers: those who admire the unconventional and bohemian Ellen (as Beth Nguyen reveals she did here) and those who side with the calm and steady May (whose defense has been most notably articulated by Gwendolyn Morgan).³⁰ Or, to put it differently, those who lament the foreclosure of Newland's romance with Ellen and those who applaud his choice to stay with May. Much has been made of Wharton's own troubled and potentially loveless marriage to Boston's Edward "Teddy"