

**American Literature & Culture**  
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**Mod 10 Lecture Number 42**  
**Edith Wharton The Age of Innocence (Lecture 36)**

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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: So Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* and the cosmopolitan woman, we are talking about cosmopolitanism in Edith Wharton, we were talking about how Edith Wharton through his woman protagonist sort of, is manifested in what then contemporary, then modern woman was and what a cosmopolitan woman was. See we have been talking about *Daisy Miller* and *A Portrait of a Lady* with reference to Henry James' characters and how his characters travel, they are on the move, particularly Europe, Americans who travelled to Europe and we did refer to the concept of cosmopolitanism in Henry James if you may recall.

Now here we are talking about Cosmopolitan women who are, as we know are like Ellen Olenska's character, self-educated. Edith Wharton herself, you have watched the movie and you have seen Ellen Olenska's character and if you know little bit of Edith Wharton's own life, you know that so many things overlapped. So both women, self-educated through foreign travels and so was *Newland Archer*, yeah instructed in foreign languages and interested in the best of artistic world.

So at one point Ellen Olenska says that she is interested in meeting artists in New York and then Newland Archer tries to be helpful and he says there are painters and Beaufort is very sarcastic. He says, are there painters? That means the common perception was that New York was not artistically rich. Although on the fringes there existed people who wrote, remember? Yeah may be, in the movie it doesn't come across

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Professor: but throughout the novel, the people who wrote, writers and journalists.

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Professor: love for literature, now Edith's love for literature was well-known and in the novel, Madame Olenska, through the imagination of Newland Archer, he says you know she has lived in Paris. I am sure she is, her house that is full of books, she is familiar with the works of the Goncourt, or Goncourt brothers. They were the French naturalists. You know

something about Emile Zola. You know something about Theodore Dreiser. They were the naturalists.

The Goncourt brothers were also naturalists, Ok pioneers of naturalism in, in Europe in literature yeah. So now my question to you is that why is Edith Wharton referring to naturalists in *The Age of Innocence*? Is it a, do you find or there a touch of self-allusion or self reference here? Is it a naturalist novel? After all we know that naturalism, one of the key features of naturalism is also that it deals with the lives of the lower section of society. Here there is no such thing; but why?

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Student: There is a sense of a larger force standing between him and Countess Olenska away from each other

Professor: Yeah

Student: It is like they are sent to never be together and they can't seem to act on their own

Professor: There is no sense of free will

Student: Yeah

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Professor: No sense of free will, at the same time, there are occasions when Edith Wharton (( )) in the territory of those who are on the margins, on the fringes of the aristocratic society. So there is a character of Ned Winsett, the journalist, yeah and also Madame Olenska's personal situation is no different from those who are on the fringes of society. That comes very well, that comes across very well when we see her living in those quarters where people who write, live. It is respectable enough but not fashionable enough and they know that addresses matter a lot in aristocratic New York society. Therefore so, perhaps that is the, that is Edith Wharton's burgeoning interest in naturalism.

Although remember she is an aristocrat herself comment, or critiquing her own type. She is not like Dreiser. Dreiser was an activist, journalist who , who had difficulty in meeting his financial requirements. So therefore when he portrays and he attacks the richer section of society, he is an insider. She is not. She is an insider who is critiquing her own tribe. She uses the word tribe quite often for her own set of people, Ok and when Edith Wharton made Paris her home along with, not along with but at the same time, around the same time, may be much later, no it can't be the same time but later when Gertrude Stein, the way Gertrude Stein made her home, Paris her home, Edith Wharton had also made Paris her home in the last part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century and she became a prominent literary hostess. Now what is a literary hostess?

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Student: Salon

Professor: Yes, good, the salons

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Professor: her literary salons where people, like-minded people come together. In New York, Newland Archer observes that there is no such culture. There are reading clubs occasionally. Something was made by Medora Manson, you remember? Who is Medora Manson, the woman who has raised Countess Olenska? Countess Olenska is an orphan brought up by unconventional kind of aunt, her father's sister Medora Manson, Ok so therefore always remember that she has been unconventionally brought up and she is an orphan. Now I am also interested in this part of Olenska's personality. An orphan girl in early part or middle part of in nineteenth century; an orphan girl in any part of any century in any part of the world is

always at a disadvantage but May Welland as opposed to Ellen Olenska, how is she brought up? Consider the domestic situations. Namita, I want to see your face.

Student: Like in Henry

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Student: like in Daisy Miller there is this absence of a father figure, so there's, the lack of family also adds to pattern of upbringing suspicious.

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Professor: Suspicious also, yeah. There is no father, there are no brothers. In May's case there is every one. People rally around her. , Ellen doesn't have anyone from the day one to guide her, to guide her, to protect her. Therefore her situation is very vulnerable. Therefore when Newland Archer says she was different, she is different because she had to fight around to make her own way in the world where as May has been told throughout, how to act, what to

do and at the end she fights for her marriage and we know how she wins her, gets her husband back.

Ok, so what is Parisian circle and this you can think that it is Ellen Olenska's circle also. She was in the company of Paul Bourget who is referred to somewhere in the novel also that perhaps Ellen Olenska has read a lot of Paul Bourget who was again a very avante gardeish kind of a novelist. So I am talking about Edith Wharton and her literary contemporaries. Ok Paul Valéry, again very avante gardish, André Gide, Rainer Maria Rilke, perhaps you have read some of his poems German literature and then Auguste Rodin, the sculpture, the sculptor Ok who has famously made, good, The Thinker, and also Jean Cocteau, Jean Cocteau you have already done something of, in the film studies class The Beauty and the Beast, so he was a, what kind of a, we were talking of modernism and people like Cocteau, remember?

The Beauty and the Beast and Orphée, how he reinterprets the legend of Orpheus and he was a poet, he was a painter. He lived in the typical Parisian districts of, inhabited by painters. He was contemporary of the great Picasso and the great Modigliani, so we are talking of those kinds of people that Countess has been exposed to, and Edith Wharton too. Ok, so those were her circles, yeah. But very significantly she had nothing to do with the Hemingways, the Fitzgeralds and also, there is no proven record, no documentation of her any meeting with Gertrude Stein. Perhaps there has been but it is your research, you can find out, so why not? See those people were also there in America at the same time.

And such a grandeur of American literature living in Parisian circles and those people are there. Fitzgerald liked money so, he liked good society. Hemingway at least liked good drinks, good liquor so why didn't they meet? May be they didn't belong to her class. It is very important. Yeah Europeans must have fond over her. Ok Americans wouldn't. Ok so she always kept, so it is always there, an elite writer, she has her exclusive circle and she wouldn't meet them and also remember that she and Henry James, very close to each other. Even they would meet in Paris for long periods of time and presided over the period of Trans Atlantic Travel and Cultural Exchange.

So they were like cultural ambassadors of America to Europe. And then you have to also remember that both along with Henry James, Edith Wharton was interested in the anxieties of

a generation of privileged cosmopolitan American expatriates. Ok, so anxieties of this particular elitist generation, however Fitzgerald and Hemingway are not the so-called elitist generation. So they would capture realities of some other class of people, anxieties of some other kinds of people but for James and Wharton there was an exclusive circle, social circle whose anxieties they were interested in.

Now you have seen the movie, you have read the novel. You know how important settings, drawing room spaces and streets are in the novel. So she uses, she makes lot of references to old New York localities, streets to indicate the binaries between different social classes. Now let me read this passage to you, the binaries between various social classes. There is a passage

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Professor: couple of lines below

As the young man strolled up Fifth Avenue from Waverley Place, the long thoroughfare was deserted but for a group of carriages standing before the Reggie Chiverses' (where there was a dinner for the Duke),

Who is this Duke?

Student: Relative of van der Luydens

Professor: Yeah, good because there he is in town, there was this party thrown for him in which the Countess was invited which was very symbolic of her acceptance in the right kinds of circle, otherwise New York had declined invitations from her grandmother. We don't want to come to, we don't want to attend your dinner because a woman of this reputation is there,



that is the implication but with the van-der-Luydens backing her up and with the Duke showing friendly interest in her, she is accepted.

and the occasional figure of an elderly gentleman in heavy overcoat and muffler ascending a brownstone doorstep and disappearing into a gas-lit hall. Thus, as Archer crossed Washington Square, he remarked that old Mr. duLac was calling on his cousins the Dagonets, and turning down the corner of West Tenth Street he saw Mr. Skipworth, of his own firm, obviously bound on a visit to the Miss Lannings.

Who are the Miss Lannings? Not Mrs. Lannings, Miss Lannings? The Dagonets, the Lannings and the van-der-Luydens, they are at the top of the social hierarchy, the pyramid. So they are at the top.

A little farther up Fifth Avenue,

I am very sure you are aware of Fifth Avenue, what is Fifth Avenue? Today it is known as the fashion capital in New York, Fifth Avenue Saks you have, I mean those interested in Carrie Bradshaw and her escapades, they know how frequently she frequents Fifth Avenue. So it is considered a fashionable street, then also and today also.

Beaufort appeared on his bow step, sorry on his doorstep, darkly projected against a blaze of light, descended to his private brougham, and rolled away to a mysterious and probably unmentionable destination. It was not an Opera night, and no one was giving a party, so that Beaufort's outing was undoubtedly of a clandestine nature. Archer connected it in his mind with a little house beyond Lexington Avenue in which beribboned window curtains and flower-boxes had recently appeared, and before whose newly painted door the canary-coloured brougham of Miss Fanny Ring was frequently seen to wait.

Beyond the small and slippery pyramid which composed Mrs. Archer's world lay the almost unmapped quarter inhabited by artists, musicians and "people who wrote."

The way it is written in quotations, in inverted commas, the people who wrote means weird fellows who write, Ok

These scattered fragments of humanity had never shown any desire to be amalgamated with the social structure. In spite of odd ways they were said to be, for the most part, quite respectable; but they preferred to keep to themselves. Medora Manson, in her prosperous days, had inaugurated a "literary salon"; but it had soon died out owing to the reluctance of the literary to frequent it.

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Professor: Now this is very ironical. It is a literary salon. She wants artists, sorry specially people who write to come and have some reading clubs and book discussions and it should be a very fertile ground for people who like books but the literary types avoided it. Now what would you say to that? What is so ironic? Is she being sarcastic? But here we are talking of people who want to read, Ok but they wouldn't come to a serious literary club or session because they think who would go to these parts of New York. This is not a place worth, this is not an address worth visiting.

So this is Waverley Place I am talking about Archer's walk in New York and this is old Washington Square during the late nineteenth century. Henry James in fact had written a short novella called Washington Square so this is Archer's walk and this is Washington Square. Now and then, this is also Washington Square Arch which was built in 1892 definitely during Edith Wharton and Newland Archer's time. So this is Archer's New York. Ok so now The Age of Innocence, which is set, when did she write it, when was it published, do you remember?

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Student: Nineteenth

Professor: Nineteenth what?

Student: Early 1930s.

Professor: 1930, good

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Professor: but it is set in the 1870s. The very opening line tells us that in sometime in the 70s  
Ok, so it is set in the 70s and this is how it opens, The Faust Opera. You remember the actress singing Mama Ok and the man, Faust desperately wooing her, Margarita or Margaret in English translation, Margarita when you are watching the Opera in Scorsese's Age of Innocence. Now why open a book with Faust? It could have been something else also. What does Faust represent to you? He is the guy who sold, traded his immortal soul for something,

something. So you have then this Marlowe's Doctor Faustus so what is this, what does he want? What does he want?

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Professor: What does Faust want?

Student: He wants to conquer all knowledge in the world

Professor: Ok conquer knowledge, conquer wealth, conquer beauty,

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Professor: yeah to attain everything. So the idea is to live life to the maximum, to the utmost, drink the cup of life to lees. Now why here? Do you see some kind of significance here in the character of The Age of Innocence? Is there anyone who wants to live life to the maximum? No? Yes?

Student: Ellen Olenska

Professor: Yes, it's Ellen.

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Professor: She at least, in spite

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Professor: of her reduced circumstances, she manages to, she manages to lead her life or live her life to the maximum. She experiences everything; see Faust is definitely, there may be misinterpretation somewhere that he wants to have everything, only that is good, beauty and wealth and knowledge. He also wants to, he also wants to suffer and be miserable to the fullest possible extent. That is what Goethe's Faust tells us. It is not just happiness but it is also sorrows and sufferings that he craves for so that he is able to able to life to the utmost, to the fullest, that is the idea.

Now do you think Ellen does that? To a large extent she has suffered, Ok she also has experienced life more than anyone else and as we know Faust represents someone intent on draining life to the lees despite the dangers and therefore again and again, in Newland as well as in Ellen Olenska's character, we find very prominently a theme of exploration foregrounded, prominently foregrounded. So that's the significance of the opening scene. He could have opened with even Romeo and Juliet. She could have opened even with Romeo and Juliet but because it is Faust we know the implication.

the other day I was reading something on the observing characters in Edith Wharton, Ok so people are always observed and this is very prominent when the movie opens at the opera. Now you have come to watch an opera and it is Faust and we are told it is a hit play. It has been travelling round the world and wherever it goes people flock to the Opera to watch it. So when you are here to watch the Opera, please watch the Opera. What do they do, Larry Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson, where are their opera glasses trained; on the lady's buxom. So you have all these beautiful enameled opera glasses, Opera glasses just to give you a some, it is a digression but just wanted to tell you, opera glasses are associated with extreme elitist kind of people.

They don't come cheap. Ok, so they are, opera glasses are something that men in Newland Archer's position would gift to their betrothed. The more ornate the opera glass, the more, the higher he is in social position. And other thing was the ring. So there is lot of fuss made about the engagement ring, remember? Saffire set in, there is some kind of a modern setting and it showed around and then grandmother also talks about getting May Welland's hands modeled Ok by a great sculptor. So what is the significance of getting your hands modeled?

Student: Hands are that (())

Professor: Hands are that beautiful, delicate, feminine and also other thing if you are beautiful and delicate and feminine and wealthy of course then there would be painters and artists clamoring you to, yeah model for you and your portraits would be made. So we are told at one point, I think by the grandmother that Ellen has been her painted 9 times. Now that's quite a record! Someone painted 9 times. Such a great beauty!

Yeah so observational possession of New York's elitist lifestyle, how people are always watching or rather they are very voyeuristic kinds of elites and then practices of observation that intertwine at the opera scene. The upper class people, they completely ignore what is happening on the stage, they rather, it is a very nudge nudge, wink wink kind of a situation. See what's happening up there in the box, Ok they judge each other Ok, based on then prevalent social norms and customs. So this is important. Who is wearing, what is wearing, who is accompanied by whom, all these are important things?

So here we see, from Scorsese's film, still people are looking at each other through the opera glasses. Observing people is extremely important. If Larry Lefferts is an expert on form, then Sillerton Jackson is an expert on? Sillerton Jackson is an expert on history, family history, yeah. He knows every scandal that has taken place in everybody's family. And the crowds gaze upon the box, as you know people are extremely fond of looking at each other in the movie. This is the Mingott's box, where the Mingott clan has gathered around Ellen Olenska and do you find something in the positioning of the women? So this is the conformist New York. The women dress alike. Their silences mean much more than their words. This is the society she is referring to.

I am on Chapter sixth, sixth. Go down a couple of pages.

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Professor: but the difference was after all one of intelligence and not of standards. In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought,

do you get it? Chapter 6

but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs;

Now you have done some semiotics, and you know how language operates within the schemata of arbitrary signs. They really don't mean anything by themselves but because we have assigned certain meanings to them, that's what is meant by arbitrariness of language.

as when Mrs. Welland, who knew exactly why Archer had pressed her to announce her daughter's engagement at the Beaufort ball (and had indeed expected him to do no less), yet felt obliged to simulate reluctance, and the air of having had her hand forced, quite as, in the books on Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read, the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parents' tent.

The result, of course, was that the young girl who was the centre of this elaborate system of mystification remained the more inscrutable for her very frankness and assurance. She was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called "the facts of life."

So married life and

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Professor: the facts of life and she had no idea and that's how a young girl should be. Now it is not mentioned in the movie of course, and we will talk about why but in the novel there is a reference to Archer's affair with a married woman called Mrs. Thorley Rushworth. Ok it was quite an intense scene, remember, if you have read the novel. In the movie it is not mentioned at all, not hinted to. I think at one place it is, in fact when May asks him whether he is having second thoughts about their engagement and there was this lady. She completely misunderstands who is his ambiguity or ambiguous feelings towards, yeah so. She thinks he is still pining for the old love where as in reality something else. So why do you think it is so important. I mean what's his age, our hero's age in the film?

Student: Middle aged

Professor: He is in his late 20s. Ellen is 30, it is mentioned very clearly. She is 30 and May is 22, yeah she begins as a 21 year old and is nearing 22. Now a man in his late 20s, and we are talking of facts of life. The girl is in her early 20s, the wife, going to be his bride, why do you think it is so necessary to give that angle to his personality, that he has had a sexual affair? Was it needed? Yes

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Student: (()) always protected (())

Student: A worldly man

Professor: A man of the world, yes a worldly man and he is a gentleman, and therefore

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Professor: therefore he has to have an affair with a lady, so in order to get familiar with the facts of life and it was very common, Edith Wharton tells us in the upper class, upper sections of New York society, that young men often had affairs with these kinds of women and how are these women regarded as? Now see we have lot of moral problems against Ellen Olenska, we have already seen. Then what is Mrs. Thorley Rushworth so excluded from balls and is she rejected, ostracized by the New York society?

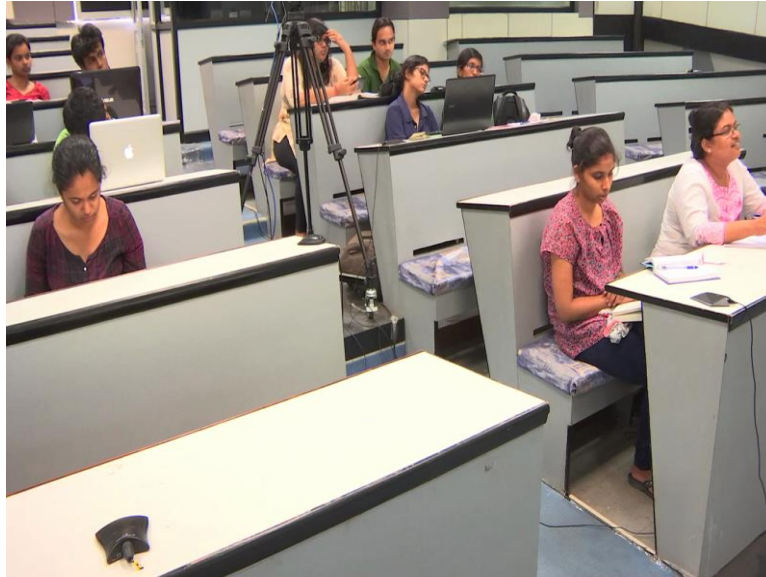
No. We see her everywhere. There are references that she was there, yeah. She is there. Why not, I mean? It was quite, I mean people talked about it in whispered tones, we know that. There is not a smudge or stain on his reputation. That is also there. Why is she not ostracized where as Ellen is?

Student: She is married and continues to live

Professor: She is married and continues to live under the protection of husband and family where as Ellen is not. Ellen has no male protector. So she is always vulnerable to loose talk.

Student: A lot of this is also seen in House of Mirth

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Professor: Oh, have you read that?

Student: Yeah

Professor: Yes

Student: But as all sexual escapades with the men are, it is brushed under the carpet because she is married, and Lily Bart, she is being seen as a (( ))

Professor: So it's your money and it's your family, your social position

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Professor: that protect, combinely protect you against social , any kind of talk. So money matters. Social position

Student: It is clearly mentioned

Professor: Because of that

Student: Because of this, she is safe from all sort of rumors and other things.

Professor: And Archer also says at one point that men in his position, when they have affairs with married women, how are they looked at? How are they considered? At the most, society will say what a foolish man, Ok but he has had his experience. Let him now get away with it. And women; and how are women perceived as? These are pitiable creatures, these women with whom such kinds of men have affairs with, pitiable creatures but more than that, nothing. So it is the cuckolded husband that is laughed at, he is ridiculed. But then divorces are always expensive.

They are not really, socially allowed. They don't have the social sanction. Newland says at one point, our legislation allows, our social customs do not, Ok, she says why not? I am an American, I am a Protestant. My religion allows divorce and he says our legislation allows but our social customs do not. So these are the hypocrisies that Edith Wharton is drawing attention to. These things always prevail. So you can always look at the entire feminist approach that Edith Wharton, one of the earliest great feminists, Ok she has lot of things to say within her narrow circumstances.

Ok and May with her lilies, gardenia in his button hole look at the (( )) here, idyllic setting. Ok this is the way they are expected to live happily ever after but we know better that such kinds of marriages. There is interesting passage in the film also and in the book also where he makes a reference to Ellen Olenska's marriage at the Van der luyden's ball and he says that don't you know that marriages in our country are never arranged. Ok the idea is we marry for love but how do they marry for love?

They are constantly cajoled and guided by the family members to love the right kind of person. It is not like you are loving the wrong person. The moment you fall in love with wrong person like Ellen Olenska you are gone. You love, so you marry for love, of course but that love has to be arranged. That love has to take place with all the social sanctions, social conventions.

Student: Marry each other, I mean

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Student: these are these couple of names cropping up again and again.

Professor: Again and again

Student: And towards the end, somewhere in the book he says, I mean our daughters are going to end up marrying Beaufort's bastards

Professor: Which happens

Student: Which happens. His own son marries a

Professor: Yeah, but then what is she drawing attention to? Our children

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Professor: Larry Lefferts says, at this rate, society is going to, the most hypocritical person, Ok he is most bothered about niceties and moral conventions and don't you think that's true? The worst kind of people are most bothered about upholding moral principles, Ok. People

whose own personal lives are, leave lot to be desired, so he says at the rate society is going and people like Ellen Olenska are allowed to come in, Fanny Rings of the world, they are allowed to move in our social circles, then at the end of the day our children will end up marrying Beaufort's bastards and are there any, Sillerton Jackson is very intrigue. Are there any, and nobody says anything to that, because they are not too sure. Then it turns out, so happens that, yes there was, there is a bastard who, Dallas, Dallas Archer ends up marrying. Now what is she trying to tell us here? And nobody raises an eyebrow. An Archer marrying a Beaufort bastard but nobody is bothered any more.

Student: Times have changed

Professor: Times have changed, signaling modernity. So that is another concept; feminism and signaling of modernity. See if you say Edith Wharton, is she a modernist, not at all. She is not considered a modernist like Hemingway. Ok she is not considered a modernist like Fitzgerald and not even the later European modernists but you can see signs of change in her literature, yeah. She is signaling some change. There are various signposts which mark shift towards modernity.

Now when we look at the binaries, it is always brought out in their demeanor, in their clothes and in their things you know, external experiences also, so Lady in Red, The Scarlet Woman, Ok and The Innocent Girl in White. She is perennially dressed in white. And very, you hardly ever see her in very dark clothes or dark shades. That means that in that society, there is a taboo against wearing clothes that call lot of attention to themselves.

Although she is immediately after wedding, she becomes very preoccupied with clothes and she orders dozens of clothes in Paris and fittings in London, but they have to be modest in keeping up with the image. So image maintenance was important; again lilies of the valleys for the girl who is constantly referred to as pure chaste and innocent; and then yellow roses for her; lots of references, plenty of references to Countess and her yellow roses; why does he send her yellow roses? Lily of the valley is for her and yellow roses for the other woman. He says something in the novel.

There is a reference in the novel. Because yellow roses was so gorgeous, so rich, so passionate, first he thought why not send them to May but then he thought this bunch of flowers do not actually suit May's personality. They should rather be sent to Ellen Olenska;

again the contrast between two women. We are told that she loves literature and travel where as May travels only for getting new clothes.

Ok, when she is travelling to Europe after honeymoon, you remember, in the beginning we are told that he has all dreams of honeymoon. One day I will go and instruct her in the ways of literature, great literature, we will read together. Does that ever happen? She likes books and literature and in Paris, she says that fellow, she meets someone and he wants to invite that person over. Remember? Let's have him for dinner. He has met with, he has met Maupassant. He refers to that and she says, that fellow, that common fellow, you want him home?

Ok, then he says then we shall not invite him. So she is enigmatic and mysterious which is quite true. She is innocent but of course it is very suspect, because is she innocent? Is she innocent? Yeah. But she remains innocent throughout the novel, throughout the movie but you never know what she is up to. The older people, the tribe, at the end of the novel, it is the tribe that rallies around her when the Countess is packed off, that now you leave, we will help you get settled in Paris but please leave the continent, not just the city, because if you are in the same country, he will be chasing, following you all over.

We know that but we want absolutely out. So she is wiped away, wiped out of their existence where as she is always surrounded by the older ladies, on one hand mother and on other hand, mother-in-law. Ok what better combination and I mean she is supposedly innocent. She has managed to win over to very formidable women and the van der Luydens, they adore her, the other family groups also adore her. She is best friends with all the younger set girls also.

So again he is caught between the love of two women, but is it a classic love triangle? Do you want to read the novel? Conventional wisdom would say, classic love triangle. But is it? Coming back to the classic love triangle situation is it or does she intend the novel as a love triangle or does she structure? Yes they are. They are the three main protagonists of the novel; the entire plot revolves around their love for each other. He is a man caught between the love of two women. It is not like he loves Ellen only. He loves May as well, is there and when he is engaged to May he never realizes how deeply he has fallen in love with Ellen. He lets her go several times. Ok, so what is it, what is it about then? Is it a classic love triangle?

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Professor: or is it something else?

Student: It does seem like a love triangle but the characters aren't as two dimensional. So there are times when Ellen is the only innocent one. She doesn't realize that so many

Professor: Traps

Student: Yeah, (( )) around her but the seemingly innocent May turns out to be, and even Archer (( )). There are gray areas in every character. Even May is very complex character.

Professor: Good.

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Professor: Now see what happens in a classic love triangle is that entire plot revolves around those 3 characters. But here there are several significant characters throughout the novel and there are lots of observation about the lifestyle, the social conditions, the living conditions of



a variety of people. Therefore the novel has been called; it is less of a romantic novel and more of an anthropological novel.

She does a very deep rooted or a deeply thought, analysis of people, understanding of people, society and cultures. So that's what we have to read. That is the lens through which we need to look at the novel. It was the age of innocence, the title is, but then it was also the age of conformity. Now look at the mise-en-scène of this scene, you remember this scene? This is the scene, very odd, very strange scene and at first glance you want to know what is Scorsese trying to do, it also occurs in the novel. What is the significance of this scene? Mary, would you like to comment?

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Student: It is conformity, like

Professor: All of them

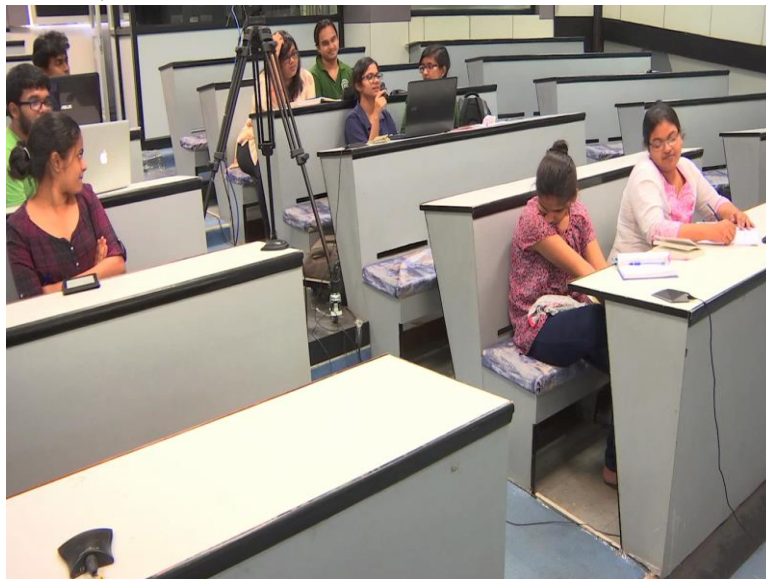
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Professor: even all of them dressed alike, they have same kinds of body language, Ok, they have same kinds of hats, they look alike, it is almost like Agent Smith from the Matrix, yeah, they are all, yes Namita

Student: I have seen them, read it, I gave one presentation

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Student: . My topic was on the faceless crowd and masculinity and the age of conformity, so this is in the early 1900s when the man was almost manufactured as much as the products, so everybody looked alike

Professor: So were women, Ok.

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Professor: So we also find Archer in the middle of this. There is also Newland Archer who is in the middle of this crowd. What Scorsese is telling us that he is no different. He may feel differently. There are, you know there are lot of inner conflicts. He will never act upon them. He is going to be like them. So it was an age of conformity which comes across so clearly in the ball scene also, the ballroom scene as well, the opening Beaufort ball, yeah, the way they make their moves, the way they choose their partners, the way they walk down the magnificent corridors. They are all alike. There is so much of conformity in their movements.

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Professor: We are talking about conformity.

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Professor: And I am on Page 60. Its chapter 8, just wanted to read out and jog your memories back to the scene. This is the scene takes place at the van-der-Luydens ball.

It was not the custom in New York drawing-rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another. Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side. But the Countess was apparently unaware of having broken any rule; she sat at perfect ease in a corner of the sofa beside Archer, and looked at him with the kindest eyes.

"I want you to talk to me about May," she said.

Instead of answering her he asked: "You knew the Duke before?"

"Oh, yes--we used to see him every winter at Nice. He's very fond of gambling--he used to come to the house a great deal." She said it in the simplest manner, as if she had said: "He's fond of wild-flowers"; and after a moment she added candidly: "I think he's the dullest man I ever met."

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Professor: Now he is the man in whose honor the ball is being held. He is the man, thanks to whom she is being involved and welcomed in the society. She is very candid; he is such a dull man, Ok. She is being invited around by; the implication is that we are not really told that she is aware of her exclusion. She is not too aware of the intensity, the magnitude of her exclusion from the society but now that she is in it, she is welcomed back by the van-der-Luydens, the great van-der-Luydens, so she is not too thrilled, Ok. It is just like any other family, any other company for her. Again this is the point, this is the moment he starts looking at her as someone who is quite different. She is not like any other woman. Any other woman would be thrilled to pieces. She is being welcomed by the van-der-Luydens in spite of her stigma. But she is not like any other woman he has ever known before.

We also talk about materialism. Now there is a famous anecdote about Edith Wharton. When she was a little girl, she started writing, scribbling rather very early on when she was very young, almost a little girl and she was 11 and she wrote a story and the plot is like the drawing room is very untidy and the little girl is expected to rearrange it. And she was very happy about her creative writing and she took the story to her mother and she showed the story to her mother. And her mother just gave one feedback, drawing rooms are always tidy.

Ok, that is something that remained in her mind, in subconscious that drawing rooms are always tidy but then as we know that most of our work expose the emotional repression that tidy drawing rooms, conceal, there is lot of neatness, there is lot of cleanliness on the surface but there is lot of chaos, there is lot of turmoil that is not brought to the foreground. So that is,

that was always her concern. You mentioned *The House of Mirth*. Drawing rooms are always tidy there but how untidy the people are! How messy the people are!

So we know how clean the drawing rooms are in *The Age of Innocence* and also the fact that it's a society defined by its possessions that this is Regina Beaufort's portrait in the Beaufort Hall, you remember the ball scene and you also know this audacious nude, *The Return of the Spring*, so conspicuously shown in the film. So we know how people are informed by their possessions in the film. In the novel we are told that when they have dinner together, the first dinner the Archer family has with Sillerton Jackson and they discuss Countess Olenska and Newland Archer's impending marriage, it's May so the dining room and Archer feels that he is being looked at by all his dead ancestors, by all well-fed and well-clothed ancestors harking back to several generations.

You live with the ghosts of your ancestors, you are informed by the ghosts of your ancestors. Why is it so difficult for Newland Archer to break free from his very constraining, very stifling world? Because he is a product of a society where you are always told, your grandfather was this, your great grandfather was this. You just can't break away from those kind of conventions to follow your heart. And this is another when they visit Catherine Mingott's house and again it is stuffed with beautiful objects, beautiful pieces of furniture.

The dining table always overstuffed, laid with the choicest of things so such scenes happen very frequently. Dinner is a ritual, right. The story takes place in series of rituals. This is a ritual that should, even you know when you come across the point when Newland is getting married to May, it is a ritual that the bride should arrive a little late. She has to keep the bridegroom waiting. That's a custom. It is not something she had something very important to do at home but she has to arrive late. Bride shouldn't look too eager to get married. The man who should look eager and he should make sure that the best man is around and the best man should ensure that the ring is around, so all those are rituals and conventions.

So these things have to be followed to the T. The chinaware, the van-der-Luydens layout their best china, it's mentioned there because you know; every occasion demanded a different set of, dinner set. So if it is extremely important, only the best, the most special of the special are coming for the party, then the best china, best silverware has to be laid out. Otherwise for

the ordinary people, even ordinary plates are enough but this was a scene where the best has to come out; and the silverware, so lot of importance given to drawing rooms, dining rooms, carriages. The sending of dinner for the Countess and again Edith Wharton describes it very vividly, it was a formal dinner and the best had to be hired and rented and, after all Newland Archer is not as wealthy as the van-der-Luydens so they have to hire a lot of things, hire footmen for example. So it was a very formal kind of dinner where everything has to be perfect and it was a great occasion and a great success. And this is how she describes it.

the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe

This is the sending-off dinner for the Countess. Why reference to the tribe? After all they are the most civilized of all people, most sophisticated of all people so why are they called tribals here?

Student: They can be savage in their exclusion

Professor: They can be savage in their exclusion and why are they tribes? It is an anthropological term.

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Professor: Yeah and we are told Newland suddenly got interested in reading books on anthropology.

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Professor: He wants to know a lot about people. That's how he has started reading his own social sets, through the lens of, through the prism of anthropology. Now these tribes have certain characteristics. They behave according to certain codes and conventions and he feels everything is there and because this woman has dared to break certain conventions, she has to be eliminated. It's plain eradication. Once she is sent away, there is no mention of her. Nobody wants to talk about her. Nobody wants to discuss her any more. The novel is also read as a kind of nostalgic piece; now nostalgia for what?

What is nostalgia; nostalgia for what? Edith Wharton getting all nostalgic about the kind of New York she was brought in because remember, she wrote it when she was away in Paris. Or is it Newland Archer who is all wistful and nostalgic about his, about his years when he just fluttered away his chances, it's a novel definitely of nostalgia. So you remember the place, the point where he sees Ellen standing at the bay, at the (( )) and he tells himself that if she doesn't turn around, when the steamer passes, crosses the boat, the lighthouse, he is going to wait till then.

Otherwise he will just walk away. And he takes the image, that particular image of she looking over the bay. So it is a very romanticized, all bathed in golden lights and golden glory, very warm scene but he takes this scene with her and at the end, she never looks around, she never turns around. She knows he is back there, she knows that he is waiting but she doesn't because she wants him to call. It's always that kind of a tussle between them.



She wants her to come to her, to come to him and she wants him to call or reach out to her. OK, it is always there and this is at the end, you remember when the novel ends, he remembers the same scene again and he says that's the memory that he wants to carry with him. That's the memory that remains in his heart forever, Ok and this is the way he remembers her. She should have, she could have turned around and things would have been so different for them.

Edith Wharton wrote her autobiography, very aptly titled *A Backward Glance* which was published in 1934 and we will refer to *A Backward Glance* later but then I also want to discuss the concepts of modernity. Now modernity is a most prominently brought about in the, there is a very odd situation, odd scene when Newland and Ned Vincent, not Vincent sorry Ned Winsett have, they have a discussion. What are they talking about? Ned Winsett is his journalist friend who lives in the same quarters as Madame Olenska, not a very fashionable quarter. What is the discussion about?

What does Ned Winsett ask Archer to do? Go to Chapter 14 and Ned Winsett advises Archer, it is people like you who should get into politics. Now this is a modern writer talking about a very significant social change. Why should Newland Archer who has never done anything in his life, never done anything very productive in his life, why should he join politics? What is Ned Winsett's justification for pushing Archer towards, you know getting more actively involved in civic society? Do you remember that point in the novel? You don't have that in the film at all. But see these are the passages that tell you that she had started leaning towards modernism, modernity, at least her mindset had started changing. Now a gentleman never enters politics. It is a dirty business. Even back then we are told and

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Professor: in chapter 14, Archer

It was useless to prolong the discussion: everybody knew the melancholy fate of the few gentlemen who had risked their clean linen in municipal or state politics in New York.

Now this is something very strange in a novel of this character, of this sort. Suddenly talking about people who get into politics, it has got no bearing on the basic plot but this must be something that must have bothered Edith Wharton a lot and she was away, she is giving an emigrant's perspective to her New York.

The day was past when that sort of thing was possible: the country was in possession of the bosses and the emigrant

Now who are these bosses and the emigrant, bosses? The other day somebody was talking about Gangster cinema. Remember? So we are; these are the bosses

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Professor: Mafia bosses. We are talking about the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Remember, Ok the Italian gangsters. All the gangster pictures that we talk about, they started coming on the scene, the early part of the twentieth century. So Italian mafia had taken over, so this is Edith Wharton telling us; and the emigrants? Who are the emigrants? Particularly Jews, yeah, she was not particularly fond of Jews and that; you have read The House of Mirth. Is there a Jew character

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Professor: who is so despicable, he is the richest of all; he wants to marry Lily Bart

Student: Yeah, yeah, Rosedale

Professor: Rosedale.

Student: Rosedale.

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Student: Rosedale.

Professor: Rosedale is a Jewish character in *The House of Mirth*. She refuses him because throughout the novel we are told how distasteful she finds, even the very concept of marrying Rosedale and Rosedale is also one of those emigrants who has come here, made a lot of money, just like Beaufort, yeah but he wants to marry right, that also he tells her, I want to marry right kind of person, I have such of money. I want the right woman to spend my money so that I come up in society. There is a re-imagination of the *House of Mirth*. Rosedale in *Love*, yeah, the story is told from Rosedale's point of view. Ok so we are talking about the changing America which has now been taken away, taken over by very different kind of people, Edith Wharton does not like them, we are told very clearly and we are on Page 92 and we are told about

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Professor: Newland's affair for Mrs. poor silly Mrs. Thorley Rushworth. His secret love affair with poor silly Mrs. Thorley Rushworth had not been too secret. It was supposed to be secret. See this is important, you can, you can, you are allowed to have affairs but what is the buzzword? Discretion, Ok, be discrete, don't go around flaunting your illicit love. You have to be discrete and everything will be forgiven. That kind of society where we are told, people talk in whispers. You have to, people shouldn't start screaming. They have to, there should be soft tones and whispers and silences.

to invest him with a becoming air of adventure But Mrs. Rushworth was "that kind of woman";

Now what is it in inverted commas, that kind of woman? Not a very nice woman, in the sense, not an ideal kind of furtive lover.

foolish, vain, clandestine by nature, and far more attracted by the secrecy and peril of the affair than by such charms and qualities as he possessed. The affair, in short, had been of the kind that most of the young men of his age had been through,

It was very common to go through this kind of affair.

and emerged from with calm consciences

Yeah, you don't really mind. You know, you have affair with such those kind of women and emerge out, definitely she doesn't want to marry you and you don't have to marry her. There is no such kind of pledge. You know that you are getting in this kind of a relationship for something very different, for a reason which is very different. and undisturbed belief in the abysmal distinction between the women one loved and respected and those one enjoyed and pitied. So I think those binaries exist even today, right?

You have the Madonna-whore binary. You enjoy certain kind of woman, that's all and you pity her later. Ok but then you don't respect and don't love those women. That's the rule of the game. Jean Renoir, he made this movie, *The Rules of the Game* that is all about this. Have an affair but be very discrete. The moment the male lover starts making lots of noise about his love for this woman that he is in love with, married to an aristocrat, he is shot dead. He has violated the rule of the game, you see. You are pointing to Shubjeet.

In this view, and now this is important because we are talking about how women come together or the role women play in such kinds of situations. The complicity of older women in such kinds of situations,

In this view they were sedulously abetted by their mothers, who? The young men, they are encouraged by their mothers, aunts and other elderly female relatives, who all shared Mrs. Archer's belief that when "such things happened" it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow always criminal of the woman. Ok and in this view, they are encouraged, not by their mothers, by older female relatives, by their aunts. Now what kind of society are we talking, has anything changed much?

Not really, Ok. Our boy, he is an innocent, he got trapped by that kind of woman. This is something that will never change, that will always be there. All the elderly ladies whom Archer knew regarded any woman who loved imprudently as necessarily unscrupulous and designing, and mere simple-minded man, simple-minded man as powerless in her clutches. The only thing to do was to persuade him, as early as possible, to marry a nice girl, and then trust to her to look after him. Settle down in domesticity.

In the complicated old European communities, Archer began to guess, love-problems might be less simple and less easily classified. Rich and idle and ornamental societies must produce many more such situations; and there might even be one in which a woman naturally sensitive and aloof would yet, from the force of circumstances, from sheer defenselessness and loneliness, be drawn into a tie inexcusable by conventional standards. What is she saying?

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Student: I think that he is also hinting that that may be the case here also, that the position of women often forces them into

Professor: Such kinds of affairs, yeah but

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Professor: in New York society, they will be labeled dangerous and that kind of women. In old European society, these things are slightly more acceptable, more tolerated because it's considered that these things are done. So the novel and the female agency implicit in the novel especially when we are talking of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, so you have to consider Ellen Olenska as an agent of change. Ok she is the one who brings about such a monumental change in Archer who has been brought up in such conventional traditions; although he questions things in private, yeah but in public he wants everything to be maintained.

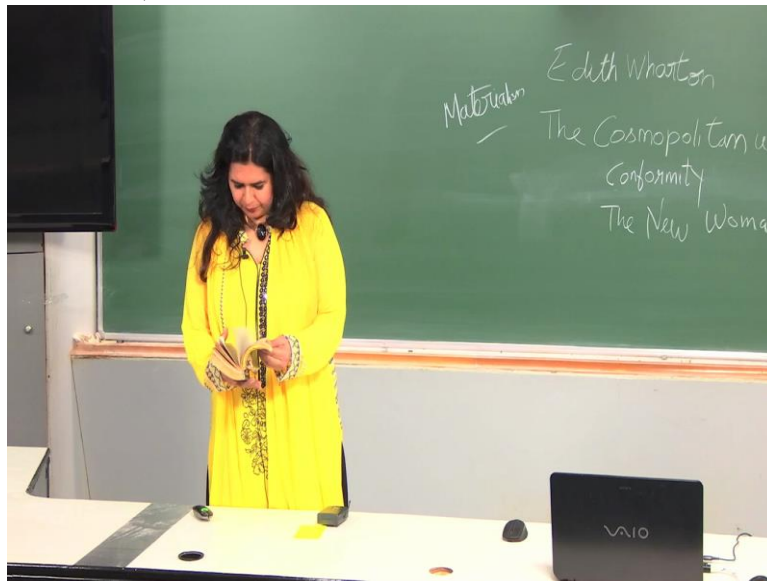
In public conformity has to be maintained as it is. So we also know that Ellen can be seen as completion of May or even as an older version of Edith Wharton herself. The primal urge in the novel is to explore all facets of life and that is seen only through agency of Ellen Olenska through lot of travel, voyaging and through experience, that was what I was referring to, hinting at when we were talking of Faust and Ellen Olenska, Ok. The marriage is always a goal for all women, as you have seen in most Victorian novels and here too, marriage is a goal but again in Edith Wharton, it is informed.

The novel is informed; the situation is informed by the forces of modernity as she must have seen in Europe that marriage is a goal. Of course marriage is a goal. But is Ellen Olenska really clamoring for marriage? She wants to be free, and everyone asks her, you want to divorce, do you want to get married again? I don't think that she wants to get married to anyone at all. She is free. She wants her freedom more than anything else. At subconscious level we have to realize that her marriage to New York and happily live ever after, I am sorry, her marriage to Newland Archer and her perhaps imagine happily after situation in New York society would have been impossible.

There was no future for them and had they left New York and settled in Europe, there was no future for Newland. So, it was a doomed love affair from the beginning. Ellen Olenska is not the kind of woman who could be tied down. So the unorthodox Ellen and we are talking about the female agency and there is a point when Newland tells Ellen you gave me my first glimpse of my real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with the sham one. I am the man who married one woman because another woman asked him to, yeah. So she also makes him see how differently she sees things. On page 71,



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Professor: this must be chapter, give me a moment, chapter 9, chapter 9

"The van der Luydens," said Archer, feeling himself pompous as he spoke

Why does he feel pompous when he speaks van der Luydens? Yeah, they are his relatives, remember and they are the ones who supposedly brought her back into the society's fold

"are the most powerful influence in New York society. Unfortunately--owing to her health Louisa's health, we are told very frequently, that because of Louisa's health, van der Luydens do not go out too much. They don't even eat out, Ok.

--they receive very seldom."

She unclasped her hands from behind her head, and looked at him meditatively. "Isn't that perhaps the reason?" "The reason--?" "For their great influence; that they make themselves so rare."

Ok, so they are rare because they rarely go out Ok and therefore, and because through this kind of maintaining performing exclusivity, they have become exclusive. They have become the ultimate court of appeal; because they make themselves exclusive.

He coloured a little, stared at her--and suddenly felt the penetration of the remark.

At a stroke she had pricked the van der Luydens and they collapsed. He laughed, and sacrificed them.

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Professor: So this big bubble, a big balloon of van der Luydens, she pricks them. And very inadvertently, she is not a plotter, she is not a manipulator. That is the way she is, she looks at things differently. She makes him look at things differently. The female agency that I am talking about, she is the one who brings about a major change in our hero. Otherwise he would have, that's what he ends up becoming a loyal husband and a loving father, Ok.

Now May is frequently referred to as Diana, the goddess of archery? He is Archer and she is the goddess of archery, very significant. And there is a scene where she wins, she is a sportswoman, we are told that she is extremely fond of modern sports. Her grandmother tells her at one point that because of all your modern sports, your hands are not as delicate as they should be, but still they are beautiful but they could have been better had you not been playing, so women are not supposed to be so outdoorsy. But she is, she likes to play sports and you remember what does Beaufort says about her archery? At the archery contest?

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Professor: You see the entire New York society, they love, they adore May. So why, why say something like this about her, that is the only kind of

Student: Beaufort, like he is also a

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Student: little bit of an outsider.

Professor: Yes

Student: She wants to belong to him but at the same time

Professor: He thinks differently

Student: Yeah

Professor: You see a man like Beaufort would never get attracted to a woman like May.

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Professor: She is not the kind of the woman who would appeal to a man of the world. She is a very conventional woman who can only end up with a very conventional man. It's like taking a job at Newland Archer that both of you are made for each other, because Beaufort has realized that Newland was making lot of trips to Ellen Olenska's house. There is some kind of

a reference to that. But of course, he doesn't mind. But he knows ultimately he is going to end up with someone like his own and that's May. That's the only kind, the only target she would ever hit. That's what Beaufort says. Newland is offended but at the same time, pleased that the coarse-minded Beaufort doesn't find his wife too appealing.

So we also read the novel in terms of the implicit nostalgia memory and theme of memory and sense of loss. So Edith Wharton has a very patrician or very aristocratic or aristocrat's nostalgia towards old New York. She looks at the lost world of noblesse oblige that is concept of nobility and how it is important for the nobility to have some kind of responsibility. Now what I am trying to say noblesse oblige, this is a very kind of motif in all Novels of Manners. Do you remember we were talking of the novel, Age of Innocence as a novel of manners? So what does it mean; noblesse oblige? Nobility has some kind of responsibility. What responsibility do these people have?

Student: To keep up appearances.

Professor: To keep up appearances yes; to uphold traditions and values of old New York. So that is your responsibility so therefore Newland Archer becomes the last of this dying breed. He knows it is up to him to uphold the virtues of this, so, uphold the principles of old New York noblesse oblige. He has to maintain those kinds of principles, values, attitude and behavior. He is the one who represents but now as the novel ends, we approach the early twentieth century the winds of changes and we know how nobility has become the relics of the past, the noble people, the so-called aristocrats have become relics of the past. Do you remember a point in the novel where he says all of feel like portraits on a wall? We don't feel like real alive, people of flesh and blood, Ok with passion flowing through our veins. We all feel as if we are painted and our portraits are hung on the wall. Now what does that mean? We have become like, yes frozen miniatures.

Are you aware of this film called The Leopard? Bhargavi, The Leopard by? I think when we were discussing Italian cinema, I referred to the film. It's a film by Visconti, Ok, The Leopard. Now The Leopard is about the disintegration of nobility in Italy. Luchino Visconti, that is his film and there is a beautiful scene where the entire clan, like the Archer or the Mingott's clan, they or the van-der-Luydens, they are all sitting at a church and they look like dusted pieces, old dusty statues, statues, they are just frozen in time and they are covered in dust. Now what is Visconti telling us?

That this kind of, this kind of social class has already become unnecessary and obsolete, yeah with their old fashioned outdated value system, Ok they are outdated and they are no longer, relics of the past, statues covered in dust, nobody wants them. That's what they have become. So that's a metaphor, telling, talking about winds of change and disintegration of certain class of people. So at age 57 he comes to Paris, and then this is the image that he has carried in his, very often it is very mysterious, very enigmatic, why doesn't he go up there, she is there, she is willing to receive him, right?

Her, his own son has given him blessings that you can go ahead and meet the woman you have loved so passionately in your youth and mother knew it and all of us know, so what are you hiding, Ok? There is nothing that stops you. So go ahead and meet, the son who is very modern in his thinking, he asks him to go and, go and get reunited with your lost love. Why doesn't he do that?

Student: Because he is very old- fashioned

Professor: He is old-fashioned, Ok, he wouldn't do that, because he is the kind of person who has been very passive, things have just happened to him. He doesn't make things happen. Why does she get her maid-servant, do you remember the scene, the windows are shut in his face? Why does she shut him out? He sits down and gazes up at her window for very long time, for hours together. Perhaps she is waiting. I mean you have to imagine the novel, because it has such a restricted point of view. We are never told what those two other women think about. We always get his point of view. Why does she close the windows on him?

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Student: It is the same logic, right as like he won't call out to her and she won't turn out.

Professor: She wouldn't, yeah it is her female pride. She isn't going to let things, yes. She turns him down because he has never reached out to her. And even now she knows finally

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that at 57, if he is not, and although he is free and she is free, we are told that very clearly in no uncertain terms, Edith Wharton tells us that they are both free. May is dead and Count is dead as well. Ok, so there is no question of stigma and it's a changed world. Your own son is marrying Beaufort's bastards. So what? So nobody is raising an eyebrow? So why don't you just go ahead and do it? Ok but he wouldn't, so therefore now, that's her final good bye to him; because if you wouldn't come up, then I am not going to come and show my face to you.

It is very poignant and this is the Fifth Avenue that is referred to so many times in the novel. Fifth Avenue, the fashionable street during the times of Edith Wharton in the nineteenth century. This is the Fifth Avenue and we know that Archer takes so many walks down the street and so does people like, so do people like Beaufort and Larry Lefferts and all and this is Fifth Avenue today, as you know in several of films, several of the films that you know so well. Thank you very much.

(Professor – student conversation ends)