

New York Social Customs

The Age of Innocence transports the reader to New York during the 1870s—a period often called “the Gilded Age.” While this world may feel foreign, a little understanding of its social customs may reveal some similarities to 21st century American life, especially during a high school’s homecoming or prom. The opera of Chapter One and the ball of Chapter Three provide several examples of the “hieroglyphics” that Ellen Olenska must decipher when she returns from Europe to Old New York.

How to Get Invited

During the Gilded Age, social classes in New York City became increasingly stratified. In the 1890s, social adviser Samuel Ward McAllister (1827-1895) and society matron Caroline Astor (1830-1908) devised “the Four Hundred,” a list comprised of a carefully selected group of upper-class families. (This number was supposedly based on how many people could fit into Mrs. Astor’s ballroom.) Money mattered, but the way a family made its fortune—and how long they had possessed it—counted most of all. In Chapter Three, Regina Beaufort’s annual ball is a direct reference to Mrs. Astor’s annual ball—considered the opening event of the social season. Although the family invites Ellen Olenska to the opera, they will not go so far as to bring her to this elite party since her compromised reputation would reflect poorly upon them.

What to Drive

In Chapter One, three types of four-wheeled carriages are specifically mentioned. The brougham was a closed, private carriage that could seat up to four. The landau was a more spacious private carriage, and the back half of the top could

be thrown back. (Compare this to a contemporary soft-top jeep or sports car.) The coupé was a more convenient but “humbler” mode, designed for two people, with elevated seating outside for the driver. As with contemporary vehicles, the type of carriage indicated the owner’s position and wealth. Toward the end of the novel, Ellen’s compassion and courage is revealed when she drives her grandmother’s carriage to the home of a disgraced relative.

What to Wear

A strict dress code applied to both men and women for evening engagements. For gentlemen, getting “dressed” for dinner meant changing from a suit into a tuxedo. The dress code for women applied even to the colors and textures of their dresses, so Ellen Olenska’s clothes and accessories reflect her European taste. At the opera, she unconventionally wears a diamond headdress and a dark blue velvet gown with a clasp under her bosom. This “Josephine look” or Empire waist—modeled after the empress of France—marked a sharp contrast to the plunging necklines covered by lace that American women wore.

When to Arrive

Newland Archer has no reason to be late to the opera in Chapter One, but since “in metropolises it was ‘not the thing’ to arrive early at the Opera”, he lingers over his cigar. When Regina leaves the opera early in Chapter Three, everyone knows her ball will begin thirty minutes later. But the rules for a dinner party are different, and because Ellen is unfamiliar with these social rites, her consistent tardiness provides one more excuse for her family’s disapproval.