

Newland Archer's Imagined World

The ending of *The Age of Innocence* may surprise a first-time reader. But once we understand Newland Archer's character and the way Wharton foreshadows her conclusion at every turn, her acute psychological insight becomes unmistakable. In her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton reveals a clue to her fiction: "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write."

By the time a reader finishes *The Age of Innocence*, he or she may have forgotten an essential character trait of Newland Archer described in Chapter One: "He was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization." Here's the key to Newland's character—he is a man of imagination rather than action.

Especially after his marriage to May Welland, Newland's imaginative world becomes more vital than his real one. Before his wedding, he suspects that May's "frankness and innocence were only an artificial product." Ellen Olenska's unconventional tastes encourage Newland to see his world more accurately—and what he sees is its hypocrisy. But marriage to May quenches Newland's desire to question the rules of fashionable New York. Over time, his marriage leads him to be "absent from everything most densely real," and he compares himself to a dead man.

May can't completely extinguish Newland's love for fiction and drama, and he often compares his life to a book he's read or a play he's seen. One

example of this comes in Chapter 21, when May's grandmother tells Newland to fetch Ellen from the pier. Newland finds her standing with her back to him, far away at the pier's end. At this moment he remembers a popular play that he had once seen on the same evening as Ellen (Chapter 13)—particularly the scene where a man says goodbye to his beloved without her knowing it. Newland gives Ellen a peculiar test: "If she doesn't turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light, I'll go back." Ellen doesn't turn around, and Newland returns to the house, and his life, without her.

Several scenes in the novel parallel the novel's conclusion, but perhaps this scene by the pier is the clearest example. In this "hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs," the plot is usually filtered through Newland Archer's internal, psychological reflections. Since the reader only sees Old New York from Newland's point of view, those "arbitrary signs" are even more subjective, since he is often fallible, blind, or biased. His justifiable sense of superiority "in matters intellectual and artistic" doesn't extend to his view of women, least of all May and Ellen. In a way, reading the novel becomes an exercise in re-reading, since, like Newland, we constantly re-examine his situation based on our growing suspicion that he has failed to grasp the truth.