

The age of innocence by edith wharton: the problem of double standards

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



The Age of Double Standards

In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, she examines the complicated relationship between men and women, both in the public eye and behind closed doors. The double standard of the sexes played a great role in New York's upper class during the 1870s, specifically how they are expected to act and show themselves. The contradictory opinions supported men living a double life, one in their home and one outside, while women observe their husbands infidelity but must be polite enough to not mention it. They must maintain the picture that society has painted of them, innocent and pure, much like May Welland. The relationship between men and women consists of a united public front, regardless of internal conflict and favors infidelity in men while expecting women to remain supportive and submissive to these practices.

In the public eye, men and women had an unspoken agreement to show a united front and to maintain the image of what a married couple should look like. The relationship between Julius and Regina Beaufort is a prominent example of how the seemingly unbreakable bond is only a public display and behind closed doors, the bond is much more strained. Mrs. Beaufort visits Mrs. Mingott to beg for support as she and her husband endure a financial crisis and she debates deserting her husband. Mrs. Mingott reminds Regina that her name "was Beaufort when he covered you in jewels and it's got to stay Beaufort now that he's covered you with shame" (203). While the extreme financial strain that plagued the Beauforts created a type of scandal, Mrs. Beaufort leaving her husband's side at such a crucial time

would become an even larger ignominy. Despite Mrs. Mingott's grating response to her niece's plea for help, she is only trying to save the reputation of the Beauforts. If Mrs. Beaufort were to file for divorce, she would be shunned in the same way Ellen was when she wanted a divorce from Count Olenski. Although the law may favor divorce, society does not. In the eyes of the public, a woman must remain pure and wholesome, supporting her husband no matter what difficulties he faces, even if these difficulties include an affair.

Infidelity in the 1870's came with a double standard for men and women that fed into shaping the complicated relationship between the sexes. Men like Julius Beaufort, Lawrence Lefferts and Newland Archer are examples of how society acknowledges but doesn't challenge the affairs that married men engage in. During the dinner party that's thrown in Madame Olenska's honor before she departs for Europe, Newland Archer finally realizes that everyone knows about his emotional affair with Mme Olenska. " And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to " foreign" vocabularies. He guessed himself to have been, for months, the center of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears..." (249). Nobody ever formally confronted Newland about his relationship with Madame Olenska, instead they quietly observed the two sneak around behind the backs of their spouses. Newland had thought for so long that he had everyone fooled, even his wife. However, he was terribly wrong considering everyone was well aware of what he and Madame Olenska, two

married members of society, were doing. Among these people were other men who shared the same secret as Newland, sneaking around behind the backs of loved ones, believing they were the only ones who knew about their illicit affairs. However, Newland has become one of these men, joining the twisted fellowship which he once looked down on. Within this group of men, they cover for each other when they're in need of an excuse in order to see their mistresses. Lawrence Lefferts asked Newland that it be understood that he is dining with him at the club the following night as a cover for a night with his mistress (254). While Newland doesn't respond to Lefferts, he can finally see that he has become everything he prided himself on not being. Newland goes through the most change out of all the characters in *The Age of Innocence*, but the change ultimately changed him to fit the description society deems acceptable.

On the other side of the spectrum, society looked much differently upon adulterous women than they did men. While it is unclear if Madame Olenska ever had an affair during her marriage to the count, the mere speculation of her relationship with the secretary cast a dark shadow over her reputation. Newland Archer was one of several characters that severely judged her for even potentially having an affair. Monsieur Rivière, a messenger sent by Count Olenski to retrieve Madame Olenska, mentioned to Newland during a conversation that he "used to see her in her husband's house" (189). M. Rivière appeared to be blushing after he mentioned that he knew Madame Olenska, which he later discovered that she had lived with M. Rivière for a year prior to returning to New York. Newland's reaction was not notably

dramatic but it was clear that he looked on the supposed affair with disdain, as did the rest of New York society. Unfortunately, Madame Olenska had not learned the customs and ideals of society yet and did not realize how large of a scandal she was capable of making by not strictly following the social rules the rest of society follows.

The standards to which men and women are both held in 1870's New York are conflicting on several fronts, creating the complicated relationship that Edith Wharton analyzed in *The Age of Innocence*. The two drastically different principles support men cheating on their wives and women supporting this twisted tradition in the upper class. The image created of how men and women should appear creates the dynamic between men and women, forcing them to prevail in public but lack a real relationship when the return home. These unfortunate circumstances have shaped the relationship between men and women in high society long before *The Age of Innocence* was written and they continue to shape this dynamic relationship today.