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# NEW YORK SOCIETY IN THE 1870s

- **apprehensive:** cautious; unsure
- **bohemian:** socially unconventional and usually artistic
- **codes:** (here) rules
- **chandeliers:** elegant lights that hang from the ceiling
- **elite:** (here) rich, powerful and well-educated
- **heritage:** (here) culture and traditions
- **influential:** having a lot of power to affect things or people
- **posed:** presented; formed
- **quarters:** areas in a city
- **silverware:** dishes and cutlery made of silver



New York society in the 1870s was a very organized system. It was structured like a pyramid with the most influential• and powerful families on the top, the fashionable elite• just under and the newcomers on the bottom. The old families were apprehensive of the new people as they had new values and rules and posed• a threat to the former's authority. The new families often lived according to different rules or had become rich too quickly, like the Beauforts in the novel.

## THE 400

At that time an estimated 400 people belonged to the most fashionable circle of New York families. The name comes from the Astor family's ballroom, which was big enough for 400 guests. These families, for example the Astors, the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts were also called New York High Society. They became powerful either because of their British, Dutch

or French heritage or thanks to their investment in growing businesses. Their wealth was always on display. There were chandeliers, silverware and artworks shown at every social occasion such as weddings, dinners and balls. The women wore luxurious dresses with satin, velvet, feathers, and expensive jewelry.



## THE CODES

In the novel, the customs and traditions of these families are described as ‘rituals’ and the families as ‘tribes’. If someone broke the rules of society, they were punished. These rules or codes controlled every aspect of people’s lives from matters of social status through annual routines to everyday behavior. For example, divorce was unacceptable; balls, opera nights and other social occasions were standard fixtures everyone was expected to attend and going out on Sunday was not fashionable.

## THE PLACES

New York’s elite could be seen in a number of socially acceptable places such as the opera house or private ballrooms and dinner parties. Balls and dinners were obviously more private events while the opera houses were more public. Having one of the eighteen opera boxes at the Academy of Music was an important status symbol. The most fashionable areas in the city were found between 3rd and 6th Avenues, and most upper-class families did not move north of Central Park. Old families

lived on Washington Square and in its neighborhood. When they left the city, their destinations were typically Newport and Rhineback.

## THE REST OF THE SOCIETY

There were artists and writers, who could not afford to live in the rich areas of the city. They lived in the bohemian quarters of the city. The poor working classes lived in badly constructed and overcrowded apartment buildings. Six or seven people often had to share a bedroom without windows or a bathroom.



# The Age of Innocence





May Welland

Julius & Regina  
Beaufort

the van der Luydens

Mrs Mingott &  
Mrs Welland

# BEFORE READING

1 Read the extract from the story and then answer the question.



When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the box he shared with his friends, the opera had already begun. He was not worried about his late arrival. It was not "the thing" to arrive early at the opera, and what was or was not the thing was important to Newland Archer.

Does Newland Archer agree or disagree with the conventions of his friends?

2  Listen to Newland Archer's thoughts on his relationships then tick (✓) T (true) or F (false).

- |                                        | T                        | F                        |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a Newland's future wife loved reading. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b Newland's future wife was innocent.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c The married woman was charming.      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d The married woman was happy.         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

3 The words below are used in the story to describe Newland Archer's fiancée, and then wife, May. Look up the ones you don't know in a dictionary. Are these characteristics important to you in other people? Put them in order of importance (1-8).

- |                                   |                                       |                                    |                                      |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> innocent | <input type="checkbox"/> conventional | <input type="checkbox"/> beautiful | <input type="checkbox"/> intelligent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> popular  | <input type="checkbox"/> reasonable   | <input type="checkbox"/> nice      | <input type="checkbox"/> simple      |



- 4 **MP3** Ellen Olenska is an important character in the story. Complete this description of her using the words below. Then listen and check.

mysterious late drawing room voice simple

On the night of the dinner, Countess Olenska arrived

(a) ..... at the van der Luydens', but she entered the  
(b) ..... without any hurry or embarrassment. When  
she paused in the middle of the room, Archer noticed her  
(c) ..... beauty and (d) ..... behavior. She was  
quiet in her movements and (e) ....., and not as stylish as  
everyone had expected her to be.

- 5 **💬** Look at Exercises 3 and 4 again. How do you imagine May and Ellen? Share ideas with a friend.



Ellen



May

- 6 Match the places on the left with the definitions on the right.

- |                                         |                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| a <input type="checkbox"/> club         | 1 a theatre where operas are performed                |
| b <input type="checkbox"/> ballroom     | 2 the place where the members of an organization meet |
| c <input type="checkbox"/> drawing room | 3 a large room used for dancing                       |
| d <input type="checkbox"/> opera house  | 4 the main room in a house where guests are received  |



## 1 The opera

1 On a January evening in the early 1870s, the most elegant families of New York gathered at the Academy of Music. They happily filled the blue and gold boxes of this small and uncomfortable building, very much loved by conservative New Yorkers. When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the box he shared with his friends, the opera had already begun. He was not worried about his late arrival. It was not “the thing” to arrive early at the opera, and what was or was not the thing was important to Newland Archer. Directly opposite him was the box of old Mrs Manson Mingott. Although the old lady had grown too large to come to the theatre, her daughter, Mrs Welland, and daughter-in-law, Mrs Lovell Mingott, were there. With these two ladies sat a young girl in a white dress with the bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee. She was May Welland, his sweetheart, the future Mrs Newland Archer. Newland looked at his future wife, thinking of the books they would read together and admiring her innocence. He wanted her to be clever and witty and charming. And if he were honest he wished her to be as interesting as that married woman he had been in love with for two years, without any of that woman’s unhappiness of course.

### THE OPERA



Discuss what you know about operas with a partner.  
Can you name any operas?

• gathered: met

• lilies-of-the-valley:



• witty: funny and clever



Newland Archer thought of himself as superior• to the other men in the New York upper class. He had read more, thought more and seen more of the world than any of them. However, he didn't want to appear different, so he agreed with their moral values on all things.

As Archer was standing there thinking about these things, the other men in the box were talking about the lady who was sitting with May and her family. Archer realized they were talking about May Welland's cousin, the "poor Ellen Olenska", who had just returned from Europe. She was the black sheep• of the family, and it surprised Archer that the Mingotts presented her in public at the opera. It was obvious that old Mrs Mingott, the head of the family, dared• to do anything she wanted. Still, Archer hated to think that his fiancée could be seen with a woman who had just left her husband, even if that husband was a brute•. They also said that Countess Olenska had run away with her husband's secretary and then lived alone in Venice. Listening to all this gossip, Newland Archer suddenly wanted to sit with the ladies and show the world that he was engaged to May and that he supported her family.


## ELLEN OLENSKA

What is the gossip about Ellen Olenska?  
How do you think she feels?

- **black sheep:** someone who is different from a family or a group and seen as bad
- **brute:** rough and violent person
- **dared:** was brave enough
- **superior:** better; more important

# AFTER READING VOCABULARY

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- 1  In the story people don't always say how they are feeling, but their body language helps us to understand. Look at the words in the box and find examples of how they are used in the story. Then act out their meanings with a partner.

gaze   glance   nod   redden   sigh   stare   tremble

- 2 Complete the sentences from the story with words from Exercise 1. Write them in the correct forms.

- a Neither Archer, nor Ellen moved, and for a long moment he stood on the bank, ..... at the sea.
- b Newland Archer ..... and laughed.
- c Ellen did not say a word, she just .....
- d Archer started ..... and checking his diary.
- e She ..... at him understandingly.
- f Archer continued to ..... at his son.
- g 'Well, then; this is better, isn't it?' she .....

- 3 Match the words and the definitions.

- |   |                          |         |   |                          |          |
|---|--------------------------|---------|---|--------------------------|----------|
| a | <input type="checkbox"/> | admire  | d | <input type="checkbox"/> | despise  |
| b | <input type="checkbox"/> | adore   | e | <input type="checkbox"/> | persuade |
| c | <input type="checkbox"/> | consent | f | <input type="checkbox"/> | pretend  |

- 1 love someone very much
- 2 respect someone very much
- 3 hate someone and have no respect for them
- 4 give approval; agree to do something
- 5 make someone agree with you
- 6 behave in a way to make someone believe that something is true when it is not

## **P** B1 Preliminary English Test Reading Part 5

**1** Read the text below and choose the best word (A, B, C, or D) for each space.

He planned to go over to the Blenkers on the day of the party, when there was nobody at home. He would say he was (1) ..... in buying a horse from a farm close by. When the day came it was perfect. He arrived and stood by the gate, happy to take (2) ..... the scene. Then he walked towards the garden. There was something (3) ..... colored in the summer house. It looked (4) ..... a pink parasol, and it drew him like a magnet. He was sure that it was Ellen's. He picked it up and lifted it close to his face to (5) ..... it. He heard someone behind him and waited for Ellen's voice and touch. But it was one of the Blenker girls! She was friendly but also (6) ..... to find Archer in the garden.

- |   |           |              |              |            |
|---|-----------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| 1 | A curious | B interested | C determined | D excited  |
| 2 | A up      | B off        | C in         | D out      |
| 3 | A deeply  | B lightly    | C warmly     | D brightly |
| 4 | A like    | B as         | C similar    | D than     |
| 5 | A smell   | B taste      | C touch      | D hold     |
| 6 | A afraid  | B surprised  | C scared     | D worried  |