

Lecture Four

Oh, Ellen

The outsider against the social code / Ch 2-9



OVERVIEW

THESIS

The Countess Olenska is introduced to the reader as an outsider in her own country, entrapped and then expelled at the end of the novel. A victim of the social code, the character precisely serves to underline the rigidity and conservatism of Old New York's customs and conventions. Amidst these testing circumstances, Ellen becomes a symbol of the New Woman, the 'European free-spirit' and the 'self-sufficient exile' whom the reader celebrates as the novel's great but tragic heroine.

METHODS

1. *Perspective*: The reader sees and learns about Ellen mostly through Archer's point of view
2. *Perspective*: A multitude of voices commenting on Ellen's situation (Mrs Archer, Mrs Mingott, Jackson)
3. *Motif*: Images of fire, yellow roses and blood are symbolic of the life, passion and mystery
4. *Motif*: Ellen is often dramatised in visceral, emotional terms ('blood', 'heart beat subordinately')
5. *Motif*: The theatre motif casts Ellen as a tragic heroine or Archer's imagined damsel in distress
6. *Characterisation*: Ellen is presented as a foil / contrast to May ('ice', 'lilies of the valley', 'darling')
7. *Characterisation*: Her name, physical appearance and the epithet 'poor Ellen' signify otherness

CONCERNS

1. Social form and conventions: Ellen's mannerisms, actions and attitudes fall out of line with society
2. Otherness and conformity: Ellen's 'Bohemian' independence is vilified by the Old New York tribe
3. The role of women: strict limits on women's freedom and the 'New Woman' as a progressive ideal

QUESTIONS

1. What do the reader and Newland Archer come to associate with Ellen Olenska?
2. What do Old New York's views of Ellen reveal about its social customs and conventions?
3. What is Ellen's role in the *bildungsroman*? How does she catalyse Archer's growth?
4. How is Ellen Olenska portrayed as an independent, 'free-spirited' woman?
5. How and why are May Welland and Ellen Olenska set up as opposites in the novel?
6. How and why is Old New York's concealed criticism of Ellen presented to the reader?
7. Why does Wharton characterise Ellen as a 'New Woman' displaced in 'Old New York'?

Compounding the angst between socialite and writer was the opposition between educated, independent woman and submissive, dependent woman. Wharton was "**critical of the old mores that restricted women's freedoms**". She valued the order that supported, even cared for women, but disparaged a code that undervalued her sex's intelligence and strength. This was a true paradox for a woman who thwarted convention by divorcing her husband and by choosing to live as an expatriate for much of her life.

Alisa Mariva DeBorde, 'Fire and Ice in *The Age of Innocence*'

PORTRAIT OF A COUNTESS

Like Edith Wharton herself, Ellen Olenska (born Ellen Mingott) is a woman divided between America and Europe, and torn between high society and a literary, artistic life. Echoing Wharton's affair with Morton Fullerton, the Countess is suspected to have had dalliances with her husband's secretary, Monsieur Rivière, Julius Beaufort and Lawrence Lefferts. These and other similarities with the writer help the reader construct Ellen Olenska as the true 'heart' of the novel, a character who is an object of allure and sympathy, a victor and a victim at the same time.

Perhaps it is not surprising that at the beginning of her writing career, it was the deficiencies of Old New York—and particularly the scarcity of options for **talented and vigorous women** in these circumstances—that dominated Edith Wharton's imagination (Introduction, xviii).

SCENT OF THE OUTSIDE

Right from the beginning of the novel, the Countess Olenska is effectively cast out by Old New York as soon as she appears at the opera. Her 'parading' creates a 'stir in the box' (13) that imprints her exclusion from society, in spite of her best efforts to assimilate into this 'dear old place' (15). In both word and appearance, Ellen Olenska embodies French ways that single her out as a 'strange foreign woman' (21) from the opera-glasses of Newland Archer and the rest of the theatre.

She is introduced to the reader wearing the foreign 'Josephine look' (7) and an improper 'blue velvet gown' showing 'a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing' (12). The 'red velvet gown' she later wears to the van der Luydens' dinner reminds Newland Archer of the French painting *The Lady with the Glove*¹ by Carolus Duran. Her unconventional and sometimes inappropriate choice of costume, whether her 'glossy black fur' or her eagle-feathered fan (14), is deemed 'perverse and provocative', compared to the 'usual', 'simple dinner dresses' that New York women adorn (85).

Her name and setting are also used to set her apart from the New York tribe. She is identified foremost by her husband's surname and not her maiden name, Mingott. The narrator consistently uses the formal title 'the Countess Olenska' or 'Madame Olenska' throughout the novel, as if to remind the reader of her Europeanness and the past she is unable to shake off. New York's perception of Ellen is clear: she is not the Ellen Mingott of old, but the disgraced Countess who has left her husband. Her already tainted reputation is worsened by her choice to move to a poor 'Bohemian² area of writers and artists; her association with 'poverty' incurs the disdain of her family and brands her 'strange' and 'foreign' (58). Even her drawing room is littered with works by the French authors, Paul Bourget, Huysmans and the Goncourt brothers (84). From the first to the final chapter, the reader is not allowed to forget the 'trailing slightly foreign accent' (15) in anything Ellen says or does. The Countess Olenska is an outcast trapped *within* the New York citadel³.

¹ Known in French as *La Dame Au Gant*, Carolus Duran's 1869 portrait is exhibited at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and depicts a Parisian woman in black.

² To be Bohemian is to be unconventional, non-conformist, *avant-garde*, artistic. The word has a highly negative, critical connotation here.

³ A recurring motif in the novel, where Wharton presents New York as a fortress that keeps out foreign ways but also locks in its citizens.

RUMOUR HAS IT

Wharton employs a multitude of perspectives to reinforce this sense of ‘otherness’, with each voice joining to a chorus of disapproval. Even if the reader does not really witness Ellen’s ‘suffocation’, the atmosphere of vilification in the ‘gossip chapters’ certainly suggests a kind of violence against her. Wharton’s narrator starts this chain of condemnation by remarking that ‘it was generally agreed in New York that the Countess Olenska had ‘lost her looks’” (48). The deliberate use of quotation marks and the words ‘generally agreed’ imply that this is the collective opinion of the hypercritical elite, who even compare her to a ‘gipsy foundling’ on the same page (48).

Ellen is thus subject to the often brutal but always private conversations on her behaviour. Wharton uses direct discourse from the likes of Mrs. Archer, Mrs. Welland and New York’s chief critics, Lawrence Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson to convey New York’s disfavour. This brings the reader immediate access to Lefferts’ hyperbolic judgements (“Well—upon my soul!”) and Jackson’s cutting observation, ‘I didn’t think the Mingotts would have tried it on’ (9). We also perceive Mrs. Archer’s strong sense of reproach where she deems it ‘in better taste’ for Ellen ‘not to go to the ball’ in her ‘night-gown’-like dress and Mrs. Welland rebuff Ellen further as ‘completely Europeanised’ (32) in Ch 5. Later in Ch 26, Ms. Sophy Jackson’s acidic, scathing tongue labels her a ‘great favourite with the gentlemen’ for rumours of promiscuous behaviour (214). These two gossip chapters, Ch 5 and Ch 26, highlight to the reader the repeated censuring of Ellen’s behaviour that occurs at the dinner table. It is through hearing these criticisms that the reader learns the true face of Old New York, its callous intolerance of outsiders and its conservative, ‘unalterable’ social code (48).

BURN THE FRENCH WITCH

This hypocritical treatment — pleasant on the surface, vicious beneath — is caused by Ellen’s own ignorance towards her new circumstances. This disregard for ‘American ways’ is emphasised through words that express both recklessness and deviance. She is judged at length to be ‘unseemly’ (15), ‘flippant’ (15, 60), ‘heedless of tradition’ (85), a ‘culprit’ and ‘outcast’ (33) whose ‘shadowed’ reputation becomes an ‘embarrassment’ (24) to the Mingott clan. Her behaviour, especially around men, is illustrated in similar terms. Her appearance with Julius Beaufort is euphemistically described as ‘unexpected’ (25). She actively ‘seeks’ and therefore flouts the ‘etiquette’ expected of women:

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... 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. (Ch 8, 52)

Yet, the reader might recognise this as a fierce independence, a ‘rebellious spirit’ that we can admire in the way the protagonist Newland Archer does. Ellen’s direct speech is uninhibited and undiplomatically frank. She openly mocks the van der Luydens’ home for being ‘gloomy’ (59) despite them being the ‘most powerful influence in New York’ (61). Their guest, the Duke of St. Austrey, is branded ‘the dullest man [she] ever met’. Her vehement short sentences are a clear contrast to the insincere, sometimes deceitful words of the social circle.

Arguably, Ellen Olenska is the means by which Old New York affirms its traditions and moral code. In other words, it is exactly from Ellen's otherness that the reader comes to understand the prison-like rules and regulations of the 'citadel'. Her desire to initiate divorce proceedings⁴, her associations with various men and other transgressions are roundly condemned by society, even if they do acknowledge her marriage to be a 'disaster' (49).

Countess Olenska is a New Yorker, and should have respected the feelings of New York. (Ch 10, 72)

Such verbal generousities were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the **inexorable conventions** that tied things together and bound people down to *the old pattern*. But here he was pledged to defend, on the part of his betrothed's cousin, conduct that... would justify him in calling down on her **all the thunders** of Church and State. (Ch 6, 35)

From the words 'should have respected' in the example above, Mrs. Archer stresses Ellen's obligation to society. The Mingotts' lawyer, Mr. Letterblair likewise frames her potential divorce-suit as 'scandalous' and an 'always unpleasant' affair for the family (81). Even Archer, who sympathises with Ellen's situation, believes that the family's reputation would justify 'calling down on [Ellen] the thunders of Church and State'. The wrathful tone of 'thunders', together with the prison motif in 'tied' and 'bound', suggest that the social customs and duties of Old New York are infinitely more important than individual freedom... and will be forced upon every individual. The 'old pattern' is thus described with absolute words like 'inexorable' and 'always' to reinforce this ruthless inflexibility. Ellen will be carefully *persuaded* to give up her divorce suit to the 'infinite relief' of the Mingott-Welland clan (95).

There were certain things that *had to be done*, and... done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the **old New York code**, was the **tribal rally** around a kinswoman about to be **eliminated** from the **tribe**. (Ch 33, 276)

Not content with suffocating Ellen's last ounce of freedom, the tribe of Old New York will eventually remove this outsider, even if she is willing to endure its conventions. As Ellen herself admits in Ch 24, she is simply 'too different' for New York to *endure her* (197). Wharton employs the tribal motif to portray the 'things that *had to be done*', at once illustrating the tight-knit uniformity of Old New York and its primitive savagery. The word 'eliminated' unmistakably captures this cruel dimension of the tribe and the injustice suffered by the social outsider, Ellen Olenska.

Wharton portrays Ellen Olenska as an apparently thoroughly confident woman, moving through life with a refreshing lack of consciousness... there is even some humor in her discourse, suggesting that she does not take herself too seriously. She is also **willing to risk her place** in that society, if it should conflict with what she sees as important duties. Struggling to secure a divorce and braving society's opinion to visit Regina Dallas after Beaufort's failure, the Countess Olenska takes New York in stride. Her **firm sense of self** is not disoriented with geographic change. If May is Diana the huntress ready to preserve her hearth by any means, then Ellen is a **softer, older, and wiser** woman, a mortal woman rather than a goddess.

Linda Wagner-Martin, '*The Age of Innocence* as Ellen Olenska's novel'

END OF PART ONE

⁴ The reader learns in Ch 12 that New York's 'ideas on marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned' (90). One imagines that its social customs would be particularly unjust to the woman, limiting their right to personal freedom and seeing divorce as perhaps even sacrilegious or immoral.

THE 'DARLING' AND THE 'POOR' DEVIL

The contrast between social rejection and acceptance in Old New York is epitomised in the portrayal of May Welland and Ellen Olenska as character foils to each other. While Ellen is often described with the epithet⁵ 'poor Ellen', May is celebrated as the pristine 'darling' of society, New York's 'handsomest girl' (52) and Mrs. Archer's 'ideal' daughter-in-law (124). Where Ellen aspires to independence and individual expression, May is seen by Archer as an 'artificial product' (37), a 'doll cut out of the same folded paper' (68), a conventional, docile wife 'cunningly manufactured' by society (37).

MAY WELLAND

...hung on the threshold, her **lilies-of-the-valley** in her hand (she carried no other bouquet) (Ch 3, 19). [...] He turned into his florist's to send her the daily box of lilies-of-the-valley (Ch 9, 65).

ELLEN OLENSKA

...his eye lit on a cluster of **yellow roses**. He had never seen any as sun-golden before, and his first impulse was to send them to May instead of the lilies. But they did not look like her—there was something too **rich**, too **strong**, in their fiery beauty (Ch 9, 65).

The floral motif of lilies-of-the-valley and yellow roses encapsulates the differences between May and Ellen, as seen through Newland Archer's point of view. Archer's future wife is symbolically identified by lilies-of-the-valley⁶, so *pure* and *innocent* in their whiteness that Archer finds her dull and 'abysmal' (6). On the other hand, he associates Ellen with yellow roses, dramatically depicted as 'too rich, too strong in their *fiery beauty*'. The *intense vibrancy* of both the image and the accompanying description reflects directly upon Ellen's 'precocious' nature and the indelible 'thrill' (53) Archer feels in her presence.

MAY WELLAND

A 'terrifying product of the social system' (36), May is frequently described in terms of **water**. When Newland looks into her eyes, they figuratively float 'away on the **soft waves** of the Blue Danube' (20). Later Newland mentions her '**swimming blue**' eyes" (DeBorde). They sat down on a bench under the orange-trees and he put his arm about her and kissed her. It was like drinking at a **cold** spring with the sun on it (123).

ELLEN OLENSKA

Wharton repeatedly presents Ellen with **fire**: Ellen 'smokes', 'glows' and emits 'electric shocks'" (DeBorde); she has 'dusky red cheeks' and is dressed 'in crimson merrino' (48). Her face looked.. extinguished, as if dimmed by the rich red of her dress (88); a log broke in two and sent up a shower of sparks (90); Madame Olenska rose, wound it up and returned to the **fire** (91). He still saw her... drooping over the **fire** with her indolent smile (110). Everything about her shimmered and glimmered (133). He looked away into the **fire**, and then back at her shining presence (135).

Even more illuminating is perhaps the use of ice and fire motifs to present May and Ellen respectively. Wharton connects the character of May with pale, snow-like colours; Archer's relationship with May grows *colder* as he becomes more disillusioned with the 'blameless domesticity' of his new life (31).

What are the effects and significance of the fire motif? How does it foreshadow Archer's 'fate' at the end?

⁵ An **epithet** is a word / phrase that describes a trait or attribute. It precedes or follows a name to describe the character (e.g. *Serious Sam*, *Marc Superior*).

⁶ Students armed with Google might observe that lilies-of-the-valley are in actual fact **poisonous**. May Welland hides a similar **maliciousness**.

ARCHER CATCHING FIRE

Caught within his rigidly ritualised 'New York engine', it is no surprise that Newland Archer would be drawn to the 'fire' of Ellen Olenska. That Archer frequently 'blushes' and 'reddens' (52) on meeting the Countess in Ch 8 is the first of many physical responses that show this burning attraction: he 'laughed' (61), he is 'glad' (59), his 'heart was beating insubordinately' (110). Wharton presents Ellen's 'undeniably exciting' (52) effect on Archer further through visceral imagery, where her words give him an 'electric shock' (59) and his passion for her is described to be 'as close to him as the *blood* in his veins' (179) and 'closer than his *bones*' (199). While May is associated with the cold machinery of New York's customs, Ellen becomes a symbol of warmth, emotion and romance.

There had been days and nights when the memory of their kiss had **burned** and **burned** on his lips... the *thought of her* had run through him **like fire**; but now that she was beside him, and they were drifting forth into this unknown world, they seemed to have reached the kind of *deeper nearness* that a touch may sunder (Ch 24, 195).

The words gave him an **electric shock**, for few were the *rebellious spirits* who would have dared to call the stately home of the van der Luydens gloomy. Those privileged to enter it shivered there, and spoke of it as "handsome." But suddenly he was glad that she had *given voice to the general shiver*. (Ch 9, 59)

THE NEW WOMAN

Ellen is thus an embodiment of freedom and imagination in the novel — an outsider to the tribe but also a path out of conformity. In the eyes of Newland Archer, she possesses a 'mysterious authority' 'full of a conscious power' (50) that he, as well as the reader, may never come to unravel. Nevertheless, the reader is asked to appreciate her 'outlandishness' as a passion and independence to 'make one's own fashions' (60). Ellen stands as a counter-point to May, Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer and the other women of *old* New York to show the reader the possibilities for progress, of breaking the constraints imposed upon them and to forge a new New York in which women like her can feel 'cared for and safe in'.

But there was about her the **mysterious authority of beauty**, a *sureness* in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which... struck his as highly trained and *full of a conscious power*. (Ch 8, 50)

"Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? *Why not make one's own fashions?* But I suppose **I've lived too independently**; at any rate, I want to do what you all do—I want to feel cared for and safe." (Ch 9, 60)

In James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, the young artist Stephen Dedalus speaks about his aspirations in 19th century Ireland: 'When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.' One could say the same of Ellen Olenska, Edith Wharton and indeed, the New Woman in New York. To be free, they will have to fly by the nets of tradition and stricture.

"You, you, *you!*" she cried, her lip trembling like a child's on the verge of tears. "Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing—give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, **how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage**... and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal? And because my family was going to be your family—for May's sake and for yours—I did what you told me, what you proved to me that I ought to do. Ah," she broke out with a sudden laugh, "I've made no secret of having done it for you!" (Ch 18, 138).

One must not forget that Ellen Olenska's role is redeemably progressive. She sparks Archer's romantic desire but more importantly, initiates his education in the novel: she is capable of leading Archer to examine his own social circumstances, the higher meaning of love (which involves sacrifice, not just fulfilment) and the importance of social duty. While Ellen claims ignorance, she is perhaps the wisest, most enlightened character in the novel. Even if she does not change New York, she changes the protagonist into a 'good citizen' who recognises his duty to society.

CONCLUSION

The Age of Innocence thus expresses a concern not just for the New Women in society, but also a desire to move forwards. The sympathetic portrayal of Ellen Olenska illustrates Wharton's discontent with the regressive values and mores of America, a 'New Land' built on the principles of innovation and independence from the old 'European' ways. Imprisoned in Old New York, the New Woman represents freedom, 'diversity', 'democracy' and ultimately, progress. It is Old New York, Wharton suggests, that must 'conform' to the New Woman.

Wharton sharply contrasts French and American attitudes and practices, but her later characterisation of Ellen Olenska, a kind of cultural mixed breed, attempts to reconcile these differences... A sign of diversity and democracy. Ellen is a **new American woman**.

Corrine Viglietta, 'The Crisis of a Countess'

The image that opens *The Age of Innocence* perfectly anticipates Wharton's theme. The novel begins with a performance of *Faust*, and it is the soprano Christine Nilsson, not any of the male artists, that Wharton asks us to imagine on stage. We are required to enter the novel with a real woman artist in mind. [The inclusion of] Christine Nilsson, Ada Dyas and Adelaide Neilson, real women who made their living as artists in 1870s New York is... revealing. These women are **independent**. They are not American.

Elizabeth Ammons, 'Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse'

The expulsion of Ellen so that Archer can remain one of the tribe provides an exaggerated illustration of the fact that **women must sacrifice themselves to maintain the social order**. Nancy Cott's description of the expected role for women in the early nineteenth century clearly persists in Wharton's old New York: 'constant orientation toward the needs of others, especially men.' Behind the differences between Ellen and May that Wharton so painstakingly articulates is their fundamental similarity: both resort to **self-sacrifice** at moments of crisis. As Ellen tells Newland, 'You showed me... how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage... I've made no secret of having done it for you!'. May, similarly, after her unorthodox moment of promising to free her fiancé (not herself), reverts to type, 'and he understood that her courage and initiative were all for others, and that she had none for herself'. The capacity for self-erasure that Ellen and May both exhibit shows old New York's triumph in silencing the free woman.

Clare Virginia Eby, 'Silencing Women in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*'

END OF PART TWO

FURTHER READING

1. Alisa Mariva DeBorde. 'Fire and Ice in *The Age of Innocence*.' Available on livreordie.wordpress.com/read
2. Clare Virginia Eby, 'Silencing Women in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*'. On livreordie.wordpress.com/read
3. Corrine Vigliette. 'The Crisis of a Countess.' Available on livreordie.wordpress.com/read
4. Linda Wagner-Martin. *The Age of Innocence: A Novel of Ironic Nostalgia*. On livreordie.wordpress.com/read

APPENDIX

ELLEN AND THE SOCIAL CODE

Archer's attraction to Ellen further jeopardises group unity, since New York regulates romance and passion as strictly as it does dinner parties. In a series of well-orchestrated but unacknowledged manoeuvres, Ellen is *expelled from the community*. She becomes the means by which Old New York **reaffirms its traditions** and **seals cracks in its social fortress**. Her removal from society becomes not only desirable but *necessary for group survival*. Ellen represents more than a social or romantic threat: she also **challenges New York's ethical code**. By the tribe's standards, *Archer lives an exemplary life and Ellen a suspect one*. Through the contrast of the two worlds, however, Wharton asks exactly what constitutes a good life. Old New York is a reactive, instinctual society whose ritualistic acts bring about concrete results. But Wharton is concerned with quality as well as function. Throughout the novel, Ellen is committed to reasoned truth, not instinct. She bravely follows her conscience without regard for personal or material outcome. Specifically, Ellen represents three qualities simultaneously: Platonic **idealism**, a metaphysical quest for love and truth, which embraces **passion**; and **beauty** and **truth** itself.

Carol J. Singley, 'Puritan Hellenism in *The Age of Innocence*'

ARCHER'S DILEMMA

The novel tells the story of would-be lovers caught in a *wealthy, self-scrutinising, and self-satisfied* society. During the 1870s, what the members of New York's elite think of each other is more important than individual effort, honour, or happiness. And although Wharton shows clearly that some members of society's upper echelon are hypocrites (secretly participating in the very acts they criticize others for considering), most lead the lives they deem suitable for people in their positions. It is clear that the narrative was to be more a **story of trouble—and unfulfilled—romance** than an anatomy of that "age" the title suggests.

Linda Wagner-Martin, 'Edith Wharton's View of *The Age of Innocence*'

Archer's dilemma is dramatised through Wharton's contrasting depictions of the two women in his life. May is the fair American girl whose lean body suggests the physical but not the sensual. Ellen, on the other hand, is the **dark, passionate beauty** touched with the **mystery** and **experience of Europe**. May represents the *safe, secure world of New York* gentility; Ellen the exotic, the original, and the unknown. Wharton's classical allusions sharpen this contrast. Wharton associates Ellen with the Greek goddess **Aphrodite**, who reigns all over aspects of sexual love and beauty... Archer sends Ellen **yellow roses** after visiting her. Crimson and amber are the colours Ellen wears at the van der Luyden's party and at her farewell dinner — symbols of **passion** and **decadence** by Victorian standards, but also the colours most often associated with Aphrodite.

Carol J. Singley, 'Puritan Hellenism in *The Age of Innocence*'

As Wagner-Martin argues, Archer's dilemma provides the active tension in Wharton's narrative. He must make the *choices*: whether to endure an airless marriage with May Welland or to continue pursuing Ellen Olenska; whether to act against his society or to submit to its social mandates; whether to live in his idealised, romantic visions or to reconcile himself with harsh realities. The significance of the 'unfulfilled romance' between Archer and Ellen to Wharton's *bildungsroman* should not be understated. The young Archer's evaluation of his world as stifling and its rules as destructively infantile is concomitant with his attraction towards the literary and the artistic — the *world of intrigue*, imagination and passion that lies outside of Old New York. Ellen, the fire, the yellow rose, the Europeanised Other, is arguably the *enigma* of the novel that Archer finds himself hopelessly drawn to. The Countess Olenska is the Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness*, the Jay Gatz of *The Great Gatsby*, the Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, the Edward Rochester to *Jane Eyre* and perhaps, the Blanche Dubois to the enamoured Mitch in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.