**Use of Character Foils to Critique New York “Society” in *The Age of Innocence***

1. Ellen as a foil to May and Newland

* Outside status due to her European upbringing and mysterious and disgraced past. Offers an outsider perspective on the NY Society’s pros and cons
* Lack of understanding of the social conventions of NY furthers her outsider status
* Shocks Newland as early as the end of Chapter 2, comparing NY Society to children, then to Heaven, calls the Duke and the van der Luydens “dull”. She says what she thinks rather than following a script.
* Compare to the exchange between May and Newland; Newland comments it feels stilted:

“He saw that he was saying all the things that young men in the same situation were expected to say” (p. 53).

* May’s lovable qualities are social constructed:

“…all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product” (p. 29).

* Ellen is worldly, self-assured, controlled, a woman. Newland is most drawn to May when she expresses these qualities

“…she seemed to grow in womanly stature and dignity…” (p. 95)

* Emphasizes

1. May’s innocence, ‘tabular rasa’ existence.’ She is a product of the social order
2. Newland’s stilted nature, devotion to tradition. He is a product of the social order

* Demonstrates good and bad things about the social order

1. Good: Continually mentions how ‘safe’ NY makes her feel, compares it to Heaven (in both a good and bad sense). It is a comfortable existence
2. Bad: To preserve their “Heaven” they deny anything unpleasant. Constant borders between other people. “The real loneliness is living among all these kind of people who only ask one to pretend!” (p. 50). Lack of artistic influence compared to her European lifestyle; she complains how rarely she gets to meet artists, and Medora tries to use this as leverage to get her to return to her husband.

* Sets up a choice for Newland: between May and Ellen, between two different ways of living

1. Winsett as a foil to Newland

* Demonstrates how ‘artistic people’ are excluded from “Society”, which is blamed on them. He also serves as an artistic character. When Ellen ends up living among them, it’s not respectable

“…the obstinate unwillingness of the “clever people” to frequent the fashionable” (p. 79)

* Objects to the idle rich

“You’ll never amount to anything, any of you, till you roll up your sleeves and get right down into the muck” (p. 81).

* Is a man out of time, which functions as a critique of the era:

“A pure man of letters, untimely born in a world that had no need of letters” (p. 80)

* In a sense, he represents Newland’s fear that he lives a life unfulfilled and reminds Newland of the “elaborate futility of his life” (p. 81).

1. Lack of Art in the Society portrayed as biggest critique through these two characters

* Edith Wharton was, of course, a writer, but was for a long time discouraged from the literary profession
* The 1870s was the era of her youth
* It makes sense that she would be critical of the NY attitude towards artistic pursuits
* Examples: failure to establish a salon (65), the opera is barely responded to but people’s responses seem to follow a script (they listen to one scene, talk through another), divide between families who prefer wealth and dinners etc, and those who prefer “travel horticulture, and the best fiction” (20).
* The difficulty of human connection, emphasized in Newland’s attraction to May as a reason he wants to marry her, are a related deficiency

“…he and she understood each other without a word…” (10).

* They live by ‘symbols’ in a ‘hieroglyphic world.’ A need for art to translate? (p. 28).

1. Questions for the group

* There are a lot of sharp dichotomies within the book. Do the dichotomies represented by the distinctions between these characters represent mutually exclusive ways of life?
* There is also a lot of critique of the strict rules of society? Is this a bigger issue than the lack of intellectual / artistic interest?
* What parts of this “Society” does Wharton seem to admire?
* Newland critiques the life of artists as just as “small” and shallow as the world of the rich families (67). Are some of the issues Wharton critiques problems inherent in a social group? Do we have any of these ‘problems’ (implicit codes of conduct, importance of being ‘fashionable’ and avoiding ‘vulgarity) today?