

**THE AGE OF
INNOCENCE**

by
EDITH WHARTON

adapted for the stage by
DOUGLAS MCGRATH
directed by
DOUG HUGHES

STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

This study guide serves as a classroom tool for teachers and students, and addresses the following standards:

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading Literature: *Key Ideas and Details*

- **Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **Grades 11-12: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grades 11-12: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS FOR THEATRE

Theatre/Responding

- **TH:Re7.1.HSI-a.** Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-a.** Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-b.** Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-c.** Justify personal aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation in and observation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-b.** Use new understandings of cultures and contexts to shape personal responses to drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-b.** Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-c.** Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of a drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience.

Theatre/Connecting

- **TH:Cn10.1.HSI-a.** Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Cn11.2.HSI-b.** Use basic theatre research methods to better understand the social and cultural background of a drama/theatre work.

GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDING THE THEATRE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to Hartford Stage.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
 - › Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience affects the performance. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special!
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Audience members are more than welcome to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be?
 - › Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off. Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be taken into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.

Gilded Is Not Golden

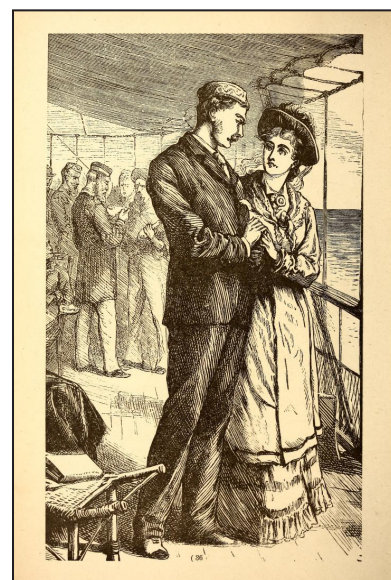
By Julia Paolino

The period lasting from approximately 1870 through 1900 is known as America's Gilded Age, a time in which industrialization boomed and the country's elite grew wealthier. The development of railroads transformed the United States' local regional economy into a national one. Merchants expanded the reach of their products, as materials such as steel, oil, coal, and timber could be transported from various locations into the cities. This progress led to rapid urbanization as former farm workers moved to cities for work. Entrepreneurs like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt took advantage of the evolving industrial landscape and amassed incredible wealth, which did not go unnoticed by the public (The Gilded Age 2018).

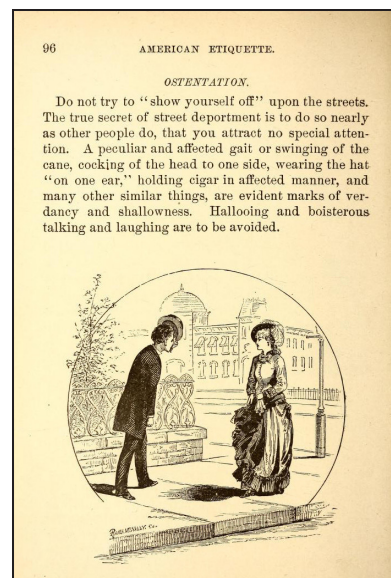
Wealthy families demonstrated their status by hosting large parties and balls in their mansions, riding horse-drawn carriages through Central Park, and attending the Opera dressed in the most fashionable attire. Perhaps the most outlandish example of such revelry is the 1897 Bradley-Martin Ball, which took place at the famed Waldorf Hotel. The ball was one of the most anticipated in American history and came with a hefty price tag. Newspapers at the time asserted that the total cost of the party, \$369,000, could feed one thousand working families for an entire year (The Gilded Age 2018). Today, that amount equates to about \$9 million (Galante 2012).

Yet in the midst of these lavish displays of incredible wealth, the rest of the nation was facing incredible poverty. PBS's recent documentary *The American Experience* explains, "By the time New York's elite gathered at the Waldorf ballroom, the richest four thousand families in the country—less than one percent of all Americans—had scooped up nearly as much treasure as the other 11.6 million families combined" (The Gilded Age 2018). This widespread poverty, hidden beneath the elite's flashy displays of luxury, is the reason the late 19th century is known as the Gilded Age. Gild refers to a very thin painted layer that makes an object appear golden when it is not, as opposed to something that is solid gold throughout. Author Mark Twain first used this term in an 1873 novel entitled *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, which satirized the corruption and greed of the time (Galante 2012). Historian Nell Irvin Painter explains, "Gilded is not golden. Gilded has the sense of a patina covering something else. It's the shiny exterior and the rot underneath" (The Gilded Age 2018). *The Age of Innocence* begins to poke holes in that shiny exterior, revealing the upper-class hypocrisy that lies beneath.

During the Gilded Age, The New York wealthy governed themselves by strict social rules and protocols in order to maintain an air of status and superiority. Although many of these began as unwritten rules, etiquette manuals were soon published to document the complex and extensive guidelines. The 1883 book *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* by Walter R. Houghton dedicates an entire chapter to articulating the value of proper etiquette in society, with special sections focused on



Two pages with illustration from *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness*, 1883.



the value to men, women, the rich, the middle class, the poor, businesses, and government. Houghton writes, “What is called society would be impossible were it not for the laws and usages of etiquette...” (pp. 14-15). Those who disregarded these rules put their social status at risk and could easily be labeled as a “scandal” or “of low breeding” (Hartley 1860).

Throughout *The Age of Innocence*, the characters are at odds with these societal rules and expectations. The most obvious culprit of rule-breaking is the Countess Olenska, who is immediately named the latest scandal when she returns from Europe without her husband.



Countess Ellen Olenska. Costume renderings by Linda Cho.



While attending one of her first formal dinners since arriving, the Countess shocks the other guests by leaving a Duke to sit by Newland. The Older Gentleman explains, “As we waited for them, there was a revolutionary social breach. The custom in New York then was for a lady to fix her position in a room, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side. No lady ever walked away from one gentleman to seek the company of another” (Act I, Scene 5). Later, Newland himself breaks a social rule when attempting to embrace his fiancée, May, in public (Act I, Scene 9). *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* (1860) by Florence Hartley clearly states, “Do not make any display of affection for even your dearest; kissing in public, or embracing, are in bad taste. Walking with arms encircling waists, or such demonstrative tokens of love, are marks of low breeding” (p. 56). Thus, May quickly extracts herself.

While many characters in the play are quick to criticize others for disregarding standards of etiquette, they are simultaneously ignoring the basic standard presented across all the guides: genuine kindness. The introduction to Hartley’s guide includes the following assertion: “Many believe that politeness is but a mask worn in the world to conceal bad passions and impulses and to make a show of possessing virtues not really existing in the heart; thus that politeness is merely hypocrisy and dissimulation...True Christian politeness will always be the result of un-selfish regard for the feelings of others...there can be no *true* politeness without kindness, purity, singleness of heart, and sensibility” (p. 3). Despite this, many of the play’s characters appear to lack a genuine regard for others and prioritize the outward appearance of their politeness. When all of the guests decline the invitation to the Countess’ party, Mrs. Manson Mingott articulates this very idea, even referencing the sort of ‘mask’ Hartley mentions. She

says, “They won’t meet her. That’s their message. In old society they would have come, no questions asked. They would have grumbled about it on the way here, and grumbled about it on the way home, but while they were here they would have come together as society should and put on the mask” (Act I, Scene 4). Mrs. Mingott calls for etiquette, yet acknowledges that none of it would be genuine. These elite characters also enjoy sharing gossip behind closed doors without any sincere care for those who may be wrapped up in scandal. Even though Mrs. Mingott’s family is the subject of gossip, she immediately tells

Julius Beaufort, “Pull up an armchair! I want a good gossip!” (Act I, Scene 3). Houghton calls such gossip a form of “malice” that should be avoided by all people (p. 210). These families continually police and criticize the actions of others, yet they are also at fault. This hypocrisy within the wealthy is representative of the Gilded Age as a whole. Outward trappings of glamor and luxury were only a thin gilded coating, disguising the problems below the surface.

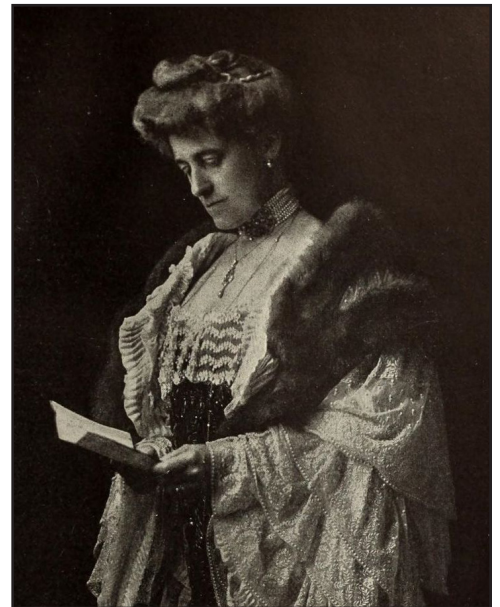
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you think of any similarities between the Gilded Age and today?
2. What unspoken rules of etiquette exist in our current society? How do they compare to those demonstrated in *The Age of Innocence*?
3. Do you believe in acting polite, even if it means hiding your true emotions? Or do you believe in speaking the truth, even if others will think you are rude? Explain.

Biography of Edith Wharton

By Aurelia Clunie

Edith Wharton was an accomplished writer of over 40 titles throughout her career, including novels, novellas, short stories, poetry and non-fiction. She was born on January 24, 1862, to George Frederic and Lucretia Rhinelanders Jones and into New York City’s high society. The phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” is rumored to have been about her well-to-do family. Edith lived in Europe as a child for six years, and began writing after overcoming a childhood illness. In 1872, her family moved back to America and split their time between living in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. At age 15, Edith completed her first novella, entitled *Fast and Loose*, which was published after her death. At age 16, her mother published a collection of her poems called *Verses*.



Portrait of writer Edith Wharton.

As was common for New York’s high society, Edith was presented to society as a teenager. A year later, in 1880, she was engaged to Henry Leyden Stevens, but after her father’s death, the engagement ended and she remained unmarried until 23. She eventually married the wealthy Edward Wharton in 1885, and the couple lived in Europe, New York, and Newport.

Between 1880 and 1889, poems of Wharton’s were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner’s Magazine*. In 1891, Wharton received her first publication of a short story, “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” in *Scribner’s*. Wharton’s first book to be published was a non-fiction work about interior design. In 1897, she co-authored *The Decoration of Houses* with architect Ogden Codman, Jr. In 1901 Wharton, an avid scholar of architecture and interior design, purchased land in Lenox, Massachusetts, where she would design and build The Mount. The Mount became her summer home with her husband from 1901 to 1911. While she wrote some of her most prolific works during this period, she did describe herself as “a better landscape gardener than novelist, and this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses *The House of Mirth*...”

In 1905 Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth* was published. It became well-known and

Wharton became a contemporary of other writers, including Henry James. Wharton continued publishing novels including *Ethan Frome*, *The Reef*, and *The Custom of the Country*. In 1913, her marriage to Edward Wharton ended in divorce and she moved to France.

During World War I, Wharton became involved in the war effort. As a famous writer, Wharton turned her talents and voice to journalism to shed light on the war. She traveled to northern Africa and devoted herself to many humanitarian efforts, including opening schools and finding homes for orphaned Belgian children, as well as opening hostels for refugees. Her work was recognized by the French Legion of Honor award in 1916.

Wharton published *The Age of Innocence* in 1920. The book recalled New York high society during the Gilded Age of her childhood for an audience reading at the outset of the roaring twenties. Wharton received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Age of Innocence* in 1921 and was the first woman to do so. She received an honorary doctorate from Yale University in 1923. In 1934 “Roman Fever,” one of Wharton’s most famous short stories, was published in *Liberty* magazine. Between 1924 and 1936, Wharton published novels and novellas such as *Twilight Sleep*, *The Children*, and *Hudson River Bracketed*, collections of short stories including *Certain People*, *Human Nature*, and *The World Over*, and her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*. She died of a stroke on August 11, 1937.

LITERARY CONTEMPORARIES OF EDITH WHARTON INCLUDE:

Henry James,

who wrote *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The American*, and became a friend of Wharton before his death in 1916.

Willa Cather,

who wrote *My Antonia*.

Sinclair Lewis,

who dedicated his book *Arrowsmith* to Edith Wharton.

T.S. Eliot,

whose work *The Waste Land* was published toward the end of Wharton’s life.

Archies and Archers: Exploring the Betty and Veronica Trope

By Krista DeVellis

In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer is in love with two women. One is seen as pure and innocent, while the other is seen as indelicate and a rebel. This kind of love triangle is modernly called the “Betty and Veronica” trope, named after characters from the comic series *Archie*. Generally, the “Archie” is the crux of the conflict and is torn between two people who offer different things: the “Betty” is a person who is kind and attractive but ultimately a boring choice, while the “Veronica” is a person who is mysterious and desirable but ultimately a dangerous choice. Not every story with this trope is the same, but there are stereotypes that occur often. Common aspects of this trope include a male “Archie” and two female love interests; “Betty” is blonde and “Veronica” is brunette; “Betty” lives next door to “Archie” while “Veronica” is a new person in town; and “Betty” dresses modestly and “Veronica” dresses suggestively.

The world has seen this trope many times, long before the *Archie* comics. Early instances of this trope tend to favor the modest “Betty” as the right choice. The “Archie” will either choose the “Betty” and live happily ever after, or choose the “Veronica” and chaos ensues. An early example exists in versions of Helen of Troy’s story, in which she struggles to choose between her stable husband Menelaus and the dashing rogue Paris. When Paris



Monty Navarro from *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* hides between doors from his two loves, Sibella and Phoebe. Photo of Lisa O'Hare, Ken Barnett and Chilina Kennedy by Joan Marcus.

kidnaps Helen to elope with her, they start the Trojan War, causing numerous deaths. In another myth from the Greeks, Jason chooses to leave his wife Medea for a woman named Glauce. This leads the enraged Medea to murder her own children. In the King Arthur myths from the Middle Ages, Arthur's queen Guinevere has an affair with Sir Lancelot, resulting in the demise of King Arthur's court. These stories showed all of the terrible things that could happen if people went against the societal norms of the time.

However, as moral codes and expectations for relationships changed over time, so did the possible outcomes of this trope. In modern versions of this love triangle, the "Veronica" can be just as good a choice. In *The Notebook*, Allie Hamilton is in emotional turmoil over marrying Lon or Noah. Lon is handsome, wealthy, and has the approval of Allie's parents. Noah is working class and rugged, and Allie's parents disapprove of him. Despite the risk of losing her social and economic status, it is implied throughout the story that Noah is the one she should choose in order to be truly happy. Further modern examples include Bella's wavering affection between Edward and Jacob in *Twilight*, Monty Navarro's oscillating devotion between Sibella and Phoebe in *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, and Peeta and Gale's rivalry over Katniss in *The Hunger Games*. There's even *Riverdale*: a current series inspired by the *Archie* comics, in which Archie's interest in both Betty and Veronica is a central plotline.

In the case of Newland Archer, his "Betty" is May Welland, to whom he is engaged and later married. In the play, Newland describes May as "loyal, gallant and unresentful," and "one of the most beautiful and popular young women in New York, as well as [...] one of the sweetest and most reasonable wives" (Act II, Scene 6). May's love comes with an unspoken promise for a family, financial stability, and social prosperity. His "Veronica" is the Countess Ellen Olenska, who is May's scandalous cousin. Newland describes her as "charming" and "a little like looking at a shell under water." He says, "Every time you think you have a clear view and gain some clarity, there is a breeze and a rippling and the whole picture changes" (Act I, Scene 9). Ellen's love comes with a dream of adventure, vivacity, and passion. The story of *The Age of Innocence* unfolds at a turning point at which many societal expectations are changing. Newland is expected by society to stay with May, but no Greek tragedy would occur if he were to leave her. If he follows his passion for Ellen, his life would drastically change, and his family's reputation would be marred. Ultimately, the conflict of the story lies in which woman Newland will choose: the pleasant but boring May, or the exotic but scandalous Ellen?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you think of other examples of this trope in any of your favorite shows, books or movies?
2. Do you have any favorite or least favorite tropes? Explain why you enjoy stories with them, or why you dislike them.
3. Who do you think Newland Archer should be with?
4. Have you ever been indecisive about a big choice? What made the choice so difficult?

Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Art as Communication

By Sara Berliner

In *The Age of Innocence*, we are presented with the wealthy, elite society of Gilded Age New York. Its members are bound by strict social codes of behavior which govern every aspect of their interactions. Trapped by the norms of the time, many characters turn to art as a means of communication. However, their attempts are often unsuccessful. Art provides an outlet for expression and avenue towards dialogue, but it is no replacement for open communication.

Newland Archer and his fiancée, May Welland, inevitably fail in their attempts to connect through art. When she asks him if he finds a love song in an opera enchanting, he changes the



Above: May Welland. Below: Newland Archer. Costume renderings by Linda Cho.



subject. When Newland gives May a book of love poems, she doesn't have time to read them. Their coded expressions of love are completely missed by the other person. The only real interaction they have expressing views on art is when May writes in a letter that she prefers birdsong to any human craft, and Newland muses that it reminds him how kind and true she is. However, this exchange occurs in written word and thoughts, with nothing actually spoken between them. Newland and May's situation appears to be common. A lawyer at Newland's office confides that he and his wife sometimes sing at the piano because it "gives the appearance of communicating," when in reality they have nothing left to say to each other. When Newland attempts to reproduce this ritual with a reluctant May, the result is futile and embarrassing for them both. Using art as a means of engagement cannot hide how little May and Newland have to communicate to each other.

Newland and Countess Ellen Olenska also attempt to use art to communicate their desires and perspectives. When Newland must have a difficult conversation with Ellen to convince her to conform to society's expectations, the two first discuss painting. Ellen expresses her admiration of Impressionism, a style that stands in direct contrast to the mainstream realism to which Newland is accustomed. Impressionist painters used loose brushstrokes to emphasize light and color in dark images, rejecting the dark tones and linear perspective adhered to at the time (Samu). Ellen celebrates this approach because it is a tool with which painters "reimagine and reveal" the world around them, rather than replicating "something you've seen a thousand times." Before Ellen can speak directly about her outlook on society, she first tries to communicate indirectly through art. She then breaks from the approved pattern and honestly shows her emotions, which catches Newland off-guard. Rather than allowing the conversation to end in unpleasantness, they return to the safety of art. Ellen invites Newland

to sing with her, asking if it makes him feel “outside of the window” to be continually judging rather than making music. At the end of their visit, she gives him sheet music to show her gratitude and affection, commenting on how few ways she has of making her feelings known (Act I, Scene 9).

These attempts to communicate through art appear to be successful, because Ellen uses them as starting points for honest communication about her emotions and circumstances. Through Ellen’s influence, Newland becomes an active participant rather than a passive observer, and seeks to discuss more perspectives on art and, by extension, the world. Connecting through art, however, creates new barriers as well as lifting old ones. When Ellen and Newland pass each other in the street after a period of absence, both of them think of a popular musical in which “the hero saw the girl he loved standing underneath a fruit tree. But she did not see him. The boy felt that if she really loved him, she would know he was there and would turn” (Act II, Scene 8). They both decide to imitate this scene, with the end result that neither acknowledges the other. Their attempt to communicate by modeling art causes them to lose an opportunity for connection. They still struggle to say what they really mean and understand each other, because a discussion about art will never replace a discussion about themselves.

In “Silencing Women in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*,” Clare Eby argues that the silence of many characters in the play is a method of social control. While the microcosm of New York upper echelon society has a “powerful, unspoken capacity for complex communication,” communication stays unspoken because silence is “a means of surveillance and control” (p. 94). The characters attempt to use art as a means to break the silence and express affection, explore philosophies, and connect with others in a socially acceptable way. Their refusal to communicate openly, however, still prevents them from sincerely explaining their emotions and understanding each other. Art is not a replacement for the listening, honesty, and vulnerability necessary to form and sustain relationships.



Scenic design by John Lee Beatty.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There are many examples in popular media of people using art as a means of communication. For example, music is often used to express love through the act of serenading. Can you think of any famous instances where fictional couples use art in lieu of saying what they feel?
2. There are some moments in which the characters succeed in using art to connect and enhance their communication. Is there a clear-cut point where it stops being a useful tool? How can you determine when it supports and when it silences real communication?
3. Are there examples in your own life of using art to communicate emotions? For example, does using images like memes and emojis count as expressing one’s self and communicating your feelings?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

“What I Really Mean Is...”

Throughout *The Age of Innocence*, many of the characters’ true thoughts and feelings are concealed beneath pleasantries and politeness. Ask two students to read the scene below aloud (Act II, Scene 10). After each thought, the student should say, “What I really mean is...” and then improvise their own interpretation of what the character is *actually* trying to communicate.

NEWLAND

Well, hello!

ELLEN

Oh! Oh.

NEWLAND

What in the world are you doing here?

ELLEN

I needed some air.

NEWLAND

No, I meant—well—You do your hair differently.

ELLEN

No. This is just the best I can manage it without Nastasia.

NEWLAND

She isn’t with you?

ELLEN

For two days it wasn’t worth it to bring her. As it was a business matter, I felt I only needed to look clean, not fancy.

NEWLAND

To me, you look wonderful as always.

Create Your Own Etiquette Manual!

What are our modern day standards of etiquette when it comes to friendship, dating, and socializing? Using a medium of your choice (brochure, PowerPoint, video, poster, etc.), create a new and updated version of the Gilded Age etiquette guides.

Memory Monologues

The Age of Innocence is narrated by a character listed in the script as “the old gentleman.” The old gentleman is Newland Archer looking back on his own past. Throughout the play, he judges his younger self and expresses what he wishes he had known back then. Is there a time in your life that you look back on now and wonder what else you could have done? Write and perform a monologue about a time in your past when you had to make a big decision. Is there anything you would have done differently? What do you know now that you wish you could tell your younger self? Is there a lesson that your audience can learn from your story?

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