

From "*The Age of Innocence* as a Bildungsroman"

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Newland perceives May's moments of understanding as mere flickers of light in an otherwise unilluminated darkness. The evocation of her as a "young Diana is, in Archer's mind, a reductive, vision of empty, unknowing, unsoiled virginity. He can deal with her primitive complexity no more than he can deal with the consequences of Ellen's experiences with Old World culture. He supposes that her "faculty of unawareness was what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess. The blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element; yet her look of indestructible youthfulness made her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure." He doesn't hear or understand even her spoken disclaimer: "'You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices—one has one's feelings and ideas.'"

Given Archer's own abysmal innocence, he is unprepared to counter the marshaled forces of the moral world that May commands. For Diana is the divinity of childbirth and fertility; she presides over the generation of life itself. May might well be ignorant of the more refined customs of decadent European culture; but in her "primitive" purity, she is committed to the most fundamental human processes, and in this commitment she is as ruthless as nature itself. May's devotion to an order by which the family can perpetuate itself is absolute; she is willing to release Archer from his engagement to her (for she is a generous woman), but once he rejects that offer, she dedicates herself to the task of holding him to the morality implicit in old New York's regulation of the process of generation.

Archer knows the rules of this morality: he recites them to Ellen much as a child recites a catechism by rote. Old New York has "'rather old-fashioned ideas. . . . The individual . . . is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together—protects the children.'" And yet they are meaningless to him throughout much of the novel. He sees himself not as an active force in this world—indeed, it is a world whose deep moral structures he little comprehends—but as the victim of its well-mannered brutalities, "a wild animal cunningly trapped." The escape that Ellen seems to offer is, given his romanticized vision of her, not the liberty to choose an alternate moral system; it is a seductively blurred vision of "freedom" in an artistically and intellectually stimulating world whose constraints and moral ambiguities he little images.

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What May and Ellen do together in a remarkable unvoiced conspiracy is confront Archer with the realities of his situation and thereby confirm the integrity of his life. Ellen does this by awakening his slumbering sentient self and wrenching his passional life away from pure imagination to an actual person (however

romantically construed) and a series of particular situations within which he can measure his true capacities. May does so by offering her own "innate dignity" as a worthy object of his emotional and moral allegiance: "Whatever happened, he knew she would always be loyal, gallant and unresentful; and that pledged him to the practice of the same virtues. ... She became the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences." Thus his growing involvement with Ellen both awakens his deepest passions and ruthlessly outlines his personal limitations. May offers if not passion at least a "glow of feeling" that becomes an "inner glow of happiness" after the marriage; even more, she offers a way of life that is worthy of the passion he has discovered in himself. "She would not disappoint him"; she represented "peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an unescapable duty." Eventually, she offers a true and honorable life when his dreams of Ellen are confounded.