

## Selected Vocabulary from Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

Please note that the definitions provided typically refer only to the meaning of the word in the context of the novel. Additional meanings are possible but not recorded here. (For instance, the word "collective" can function not only as an adjective but as a noun, the meaning of which is considerably different from that of its adjective cousin.)

**Adipose** — fatty; composed of animal fat

... she gave an **adipose** chuckle and patted his knee with her puff-ball hand.

**Aloof** — emotionally or physically remote or distant

... she still held him at a distance by something inscrutably **aloof** in her look and attitude ...

**Apoise** — balanced

The bridesmaids were **apoise** to resume their place in the procession ...

**Baleful** — ominous; harmful or malignant

... [it] was due to Madame Olsenska's desire to remove her aunt from the **baleful** eloquence of Dr. Agathon Carver, who had nearly succeeded in enlisting her as a recruit for the Valley of Love.

**Bedizened** — ornamented or dressed in a showy, gaudy manner

As usual, she was extraordinarily festooned and **bedizened** ...

**Bedraggled** — wet and limp; soiled, as if having been dragged through mud

... looking up he saw before him the youngest and largest of the Blenker girls, blonde and blowsy in **bedraggled** muslin.

**Blowsy** — having a coarsely ruddy or bloated appearance; unkempt and disheveled

... looking up he saw before him the youngest and largest of the Blenker girls, blonde and **blowsy** in bedraggled muslin.

**Capitally** — in an excellent manner; admirably

... the two got along **capitally** at their club ...

**Chinchilla** — the pale gray fur or pelt of the animal of the same name

Beside him sat his wife, all silvery chinchilla and violets ...

**Clandestine** — secretive, as if to conceal something illicit or improper

... but he had kept it to himself as if there were something **clandestine** in the plan.

**Collective** — as an assembled whole

... the clan recoiled with a **collective** shudder.

**Conciliatory** — characterized by an attempt to regain friendship or goodwill; aiming at reconciliation

"Madame Olenska is a great favorite with the gentlemen," said Miss Sophy, with her air of wishing to put forth something **conciliatory** when she knew that she was planting a dart.

**Conjectures** — inferences based upon limited or inconclusive evidence; guesses

He had fallen into the way of dwelling on such **conjectures** as a means of tying his thoughts fast to reality.

**Conjugal** — marital; relating to marriage

Archer was fond of having three or four friends to dine, and May welcomed them with the beaming readiness of which her mother had set her the example in **conjugal** affairs.

**Conspicuously** — in a manner that is highly noticeable and obvious

... a letter from the office, which fate had **conspicuously** placed on a corner of the hall table, sufficed to justify his sudden change of plan.

**Contrivances** — deceitful schemes cleverly designed to conceal or evade

... it reminded him, for an uncomfortable moment, of Lawrence Lefferts's masterly **contrivances** for securing his freedom.

**Coquetry** — flirtation; dalliance

Symptoms of a lumbering **coquetry** became visible in her ...

**Countenance** — to condone; to give approval to

"I've never quite forgiven your cousin Madame Olenska for being the first person to **countenance** Mrs. Struthers."

**Cynical** — believing or showing the belief that people are motivated chiefly by base or selfish concerns; **selfishly or callously calculating**; expressing jaded or scornful skepticism or negativity

Beaufort's duplicity seemed doubly **cynical**.

**Detachment** — lack of emotional engagement

There was nothing unknown or unfamiliar in the path he was presumably to tread; but when he had trodden it before it was as a free man, who was accountable to no one for his actions, and could lend himself with an amused **detachment** to the game of precautions and prevarications, concealments and compliances, that the part required. This procedure was called "protecting a woman's honour"; and the best fiction, combined with the after-dinner talk of his elders, had long since initiated him into every detail of its code.

**Dilettante** — a dabbler in an art or field of knowledge

He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a **dilettante**; but he had had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in; and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride.

**Dissimulation** — concealment of the truth about a situation

The silent organisation which held his little world together was determined to put itself on record as never for a moment having questioned the propriety of Madame Olenska's conduct, or the completeness of Archer's domestic felicity. All these amiable and inexorable persons were resolutely engaged in pretending to each other that they had never heard of, suspected, or even conceived possible, the least hint to the contrary; and from this tissue of elaborate mutual **dissimulation** Archer once more disengaged the fact that New York believed him to be Madame Olenska's lover. He caught the glitter of victory in his wife's eyes, and for the first time understood that she shared the belief.

**Duplicity** — deliberate deceptiveness in behavior or speech; double-dealing; the state of being two-faced or double

Beaufort's **duplicity** seemed doubly cynical.

**Efficacious** — capable of producing the desired effect

... Archer, as the carriage stopped, caught a glimpse of his father-in-law, exactly as he had pictured him, pacing the drawing room, watch in hand and wearing the pained expression that he had long since found to be more **efficacious** than anger.

**Ermines** — the pelt or fur of a weasel

All the old ladies in both families had got out their faded **sables** and yellowing ermines ...

**Exactions** — excessive or unjust demands or requirements

He was weary of living in a perpetual tepid honeymoon, without the temperature of passion but with all of its **exactions**.

**Expiate** — to make amends for; to atone for

Archer said nothing. It seemed to him so natural—however tragic—that money ill-gotten should be cruelly **expiated** ...

**Extricate** — to release from an entanglement or difficulty

... if you'll come along I'll **extricate** you ...

**Felicity** — happiness

The silent organisation which held his little world together was determined to put itself on record as never for a moment having questioned the propriety of Madame Olenska's conduct, or the completeness of Archer's domestic **felicity**. All these amiable and inexorable persons were resolutely engaged in pretending to each other that they had never heard of, suspected, or even conceived possible, the least hint to the contrary; and from this tissue of elaborate mutual dissimulation Archer once more disengaged the fact that New York believed him to be Madame Olenska's lover. He caught the glitter of victory in his wife's eyes, and for the first time understood that she shared the belief.

**Fraught** — filled with or charged with something, usually of a distressing nature

Yet there was a time when Archer had had definite and rather aggressive opinions on all such problems, and when everything concerning the manners and customs of his little tribe had seemed to him **fraught** with world-wide significance.

**Glibly** — performed with a natural, offhand ease; showing little thought, preparation, or concern; marked by ease and fluency of speech or writing that often suggests or stems from insincerity, superficiality, or deceitfulness

Beaufort ... **glibly** talked of soon being on his feet again.

**Impecunious** — penniless, lacking money; poor

Archer looked with a sort of vicarious envy at this eager **impecunious** young man who had fared so richly in his poverty.

**Incorrigibly** — hopelessly; irredeemably; insuppressibly; incapable of being reformed

Medora is **incorrigibly** romantic ...

**Inculcate** — to teach (others) by frequent instruction or repetition; indoctrinate

And she had died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own, and resigned to leave it because she was convinced that, whatever happened, Newland would continue to **inculcate** in Dallas the same principles and prejudices which had shaped his parents' lives, and that Dallas in turn (when Newland followed her) would transmit the sacred trust to little Bill.

**Indignant** — characterized by anger at a perceived injustice

A stormy discussion as to whether the wedding presents should be “shown” had darkened the last hours before the wedding; and it seemed inconceivable to Archer that grown-up people should work themselves into a state of agitation over such trifles, and that the matter should be decided (in the negative) with Mrs. Welland’s saying, with **indignant** tears: “I should as soon turn the reporters loose in my house.”

**Ineffably** — in a manner that is beyond expression and language

He took it up, and found himself plunged into an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich, and yet so **ineffably** tender, that it gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions.

**Inexorably** — unrelentingly; in a manner that is not subject to change or persuasion

Of course, Madame Olenska may still soften old Catherine, who’s been the most **inexorably** opposed to her staying ...

**Inopportune** — ill-timed

... he was conscious that their uncomfortable persistence and precision were due to the **inopportune** arrival of the Countess Olenska.

**Inscrutably** — in a manner that is incapable of being understood, fathomed, or interpreted

... she still held him at a distance by something **inscrutably** aloof in her look and attitude ...

**Insinuate** — to suggest something by subtle, artful, even devious means

**Intrepid** — courageous, brave; dauntless, audacious

... he said to himself, with considerable admiration, that if a lover had been what she wanted, the **intrepid** woman would have had him too.

**Languid** — lacking energy, vitality, vigor, and force

Archer was struck by something **languid** and inelastic in her attitude, and wondered if the deadly monotony of their lives had laid its weight on her also.

**Listless** — lethargic; lacking energy, disinclined to effort

As he approached he was struck by her **listless** attitude.

**Lucidity** — clarity; transparent intelligibility

Her quiet **lucidity** startled him ...

**Lumbering** — heavily awkward or cumbersome; characterized by a lumbering walk or gait

Symptoms of a **lumbering** coquetry became visible in her ...

**Muslin** — any of various sturdy cotton fabrics, often with a coarse weave

... looking up he saw before him the youngest and largest of the Blenker girls, blonde and blowsy in bedraggled **muslin**.

**Obdurate** — hardened against feeling

She had surprised and inconvenienced them by remaining **obdurate** to her husband's advances.

**Onerous** — burdensome

"What were the conditions?"

"Oh, they were not **onerous**: just to sit at the head of his table now and then."

**Opulently** — richly, abundantly

... he could never hear the name without the sharp vision of Beaufort's heavy figure, **opulently** furred and shod, advancing through the snow at Skuytercliff.

**Parvenu** — pertaining to a recent rise in wealth or position, often accompanied by a lack of acceptance into the new class

Only old Catherine Mingott, with her absence of moral prejudices and almost **parvenu** indifference to the subtler distinctions, might have bridged the abyss.

**Perspicacity** — acuteness of perception, discernment, or understanding

He winced a little at her terrifying **perspicacity**.

**Philippic** — verbal denunciation characterized by harsh, often insulting language

[They] paused to listen to the younger man's **philippic**.

**Platitude** — a trite or banal comment or statement expressed as if it were original and significant

... he took refuge in the comforting **platitude** that the first six months were always the most difficult in marriage.

**Precipice** — the brink of a dangerous situation; a cliff or overhang of steep rock

But he was still dizzy with the glimpse of the **precipice** they had skirted, and full of a new awe at the mystery of young girlhood.

**Prevarications** — evasions of the truth; lies

There was nothing unknown or unfamiliar in the path he was presumably to tread; but when he had trodden it before it was as a free man, who was accountable to no one for his actions, and could lend himself with an amused detachment to the game of precautions and **prevarications**, concealments and compliances, that the part required. This procedure was called "protecting a woman's honour"; and the best fiction, combined with the after-dinner talk of his elders, had long since initiated him into every detail of its code.

**Probity** — complete and confirmed integrity; uprightness

... those who broke the law of **probity** must pay ...

**Propinquity** — nearness, proximity; kinship

Her visitors were startled and fascinated by the foreignness of this arrangement, which recalled scenes in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of. That was how women with

lovers lived in the wicked old societies, in apartments with all the rooms on one floor, and all the indecent **propinquities** that their novels described.

**Prostrated** — reduced to extreme weakness or incapacitation (literally face down)

... heat-**prostrated** and deserted Boston.

**Querulously** — complainingly peevish; grumblingly argumentative

She gave another chuckle, and interrupted it to say almost **querulously**: "It's a pity she didn't marry you; I always told her so. It would have spared me all this worry."

**Remonstrate** — to reason or plead in protest

"I shall never be happy unless I can open the windows!"  
"In *this* weather?" she **remonstrated**.

**Repartee** — witty conversation

... her conversation was a chill to **repartee**.

**Sables** — the pelt or fur of a sable, a carnivorous mammal of northern Europe and Asia.

All the old ladies in both families had got out their faded **sables** and yellowing ermines ...

**Sedulously** — in a manner that perseveres through all obstacles or difficulties

... and these two they had **sedulously** avoided, in conformity with the old New York tradition that it was not "dignified" to force one's self on the notice of one's acquaintances in foreign countries.

**Shod** — wearing shoes

... he could never hear the name without the sharp vision of Beaufort's heavy figure, opulently furred and **shod**, advancing through the snow at Skuytercliff.

**Solicitude** — care or concern, as for the well-being of another

Her voice was clear as a bell, and full of wifely **solicitude**.

**Sultriness** — humidity and heat, literally and/or sexually

The fog of **sultriness** still hung over the city ...

**Tacitly** — in an unspoken manner

... after that the question of Newland's unemployment was **tacitly** dropped.

**Tenacity** — persistent determination

... but something in the humble and yet courageous **tenacity** of M. Rivière's gaze made him reject this conclusion ...

**Tenuous** — flimsy; thin and lacking in substance

When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed. That vision, faint and **tenuous** as it was, had kept him from thinking of other women. He had been what was called a faithful husband; and when May had suddenly died--carried off by the infectious pneumonia through which she had nursed their youngest child—he had honestly mourned her. Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways.

**Tepid** — lukewarm; lacking in emotional warmth or enthusiasm

He was weary of living in a perpetual **tepid** honeymoon, without the temperature of passion but with all of its exactions.

**Trenchant** — forceful, effective, and vigorous; caustic; cutting

Now, as he reviewed his past, he saw into what a deep rut he had sunk. The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else. At least that was the view that the men of his generation had taken. The **trenchant** divisions between right and wrong, honest and dishonest, respectable and the reverse, had left so little scope for the unforeseen. There are moments when a

man's imagination, so easily subdued to what it lives in, suddenly rises above its daily level, and surveys the long windings of destiny.

**Triteness** — the condition of lacking power to evoke interest due to overuse or repetition; the state of being hackneyed

There was a certain **triteness** in these reflections: they were those habitual to young men on the approach of their wedding day.

**Ubiquitous** — omnipresent

The **ubiquitous** handmaiden promptly appeared ...

**Ultramarine** — a vivid or strong blue to purplish blue; characteristic of lapis lazuli

A breeze from the north drove little puffs of white cloud across an **ultramarine** sky.

**Undulations** — a series of waves

As the boat left the harbor and turned seaward, a breeze stirred about them and the bay broke up into long oily **undulations**, then into ripples tipped with spray.

**Vagaries** — an extravagant or erratic notion or action

"It's a pity she ever married abroad then," said May, in the placid tone with which her mother met Mr. Welland's **vagaries** ...

**Venerable** — commanding respect by virtue of age, experience, character, and/or position

Professor Emerson Sillerton was a thorn in the side of Newport society; and a thorn that could not be plucked out, for it grew on the **venerable** and venerated family tree.

**Venerated** — regarded with respect or reverence

Professor Emerson Sillerton was a thorn in the side of Newport society; and a thorn that could not be plucked out, for it grew on the venerable and **venerated** family tree.

**Vicarious** — experienced indirectly, through imagining others' experience

Archer looked with a sort of **vicarious** envy at this eager impecunious young man who had fared so richly in his poverty.

**Vicissitudes** — sudden, unexpected changes or shifts in one's life or experience

... an insatiable taste for letters had thrown the young man into journalism, then into authorship (apparently unsuccessful), and at length—after other experiments and **vicissitudes** which he spared his listener—into tutoring English youths in Switzerland.