

Love is Close at Hand: The Age of Innocence

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Love is Close at Hand: The Age of Innocence

November 1998, written for FILM 220: Aspects of Criticism. This is a 24-week course for second-year students, examining methods of critical analysis, interpretation and evaluation. The final assignment was simply to write a 1000-word critical essay on a film seen in class during the final six-weeks of the course. Students were expected to draw on concepts they had studied over the length of the course.

[INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT](#): Brilliantly observed and beautifully written.

The Age of [Innocence](#) is a film about confinement, restraint, and stoicism. Characters drift from tea, to the opera, and home again. They attend lavish parties, and observe the rigidity of English decorum; marry, have children, and die. Emotion is mollified by these various diversions, and all of upper-class New York appears to be content being anaesthetized by the idle task of upholding wealth and reputation. Only [Countess](#) Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, with their feverish love for one another, test the bounds of this suffocating social structure.

Newland and Countess Olenska's love is in strong contrast with the emotional vacuity of their peers, and it is this very contrast upon which the pathos of their story hinges. The lovers relish the moments they manage to steal with one another, absconding to a remote log cabin or savoring a clandestine carriage ride. The film is permeated by this sort of foreplay, teasing the viewer from beginning to end with auspicious meetings between the two lovers. Each time, however, the promising moments are snuffed by the pressures of New York high-society. Conjugal constraints force Newland and Countess Olenska to repress their longings, and in the drudgery of everyday ...

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...untess Olenska's hand slides off Newland's as she leaves the table, and disappears from his life. Newland is left with a sculpture of May's hands, petrified and cold, sitting in his study to forever remind him of the Countess's delicate touch, and the ostensibly shallow and frigid wife who denied him his happiness.

Referred to as his family's "strong right hand", Newland's composure slips and shatters over the course of the film as he becomes increasingly obsessed with Countess Olenska and the allure of her forbidden touch. The camera plays close attention to hands, reinforcing the rigidity and frigid decorum that pervade the film, offering the notion of touch as an escape from the pedantic lifestyle of upper-class New York. Ultimately, the simplicity of hands becomes the essence of life, love, and happiness, in a film saturated with customs, pageantry and pomp.

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