Classic American Novels on Film and Television, OLLI, Fall, 2023

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, 1993, directed by Martin Scorsese, based on novel, “The Age of Innocence,” 1920, by Edith Wharton, produced by Barbara de Fina, camera by Michael Ballhaus, Edited by Thelma Schoonmaker, music by Elmer Bernstein, production company: Cappa Production, distributed by Columbia Pictures, release date: October 1, 1993, running time: 2 hours, 19 minutes, budget: $34 million, Box Office: $68 million.

THE CAST: Newland Archer: Daniel Day-Lewis

Ellen Olensky: Michelle Pfeiffer

May Welland: Winona Ryder

Mrs. Mingott: Miriam Margolyes

Mrs. Welland: Geraldine Chaplin

Henry van der Luyden: Michael Gough

Larry Lefferts: Richard E. Grant

Regina Beaufort: Mary Beth Hurt

Ted Archer: Robert Sean Leonard

Mr. Letterblair: Norman Lloyd

Sillerton Jackson: Alex McCowen

Mrs. Archer: Siân Phillips

Janey Archer: Carolyn Farina

Rivière: Jonathan Pryce

Louisa van der Luyden: Alexis Smith

Julius Beaufort: Stuart Wilson

Mrs. Mingott’s Maid: June Squibb

The Narrator: Joanne Woodward

The film was shot primarily in Troy, New York. The opera scenes were shot at the Philadelphia Academy of Music. The scenes set in Mrs. Mingott house were filmed in a Fraternity House at Renssalaer Polytechnic institute. This building was formerly known as the Paine Mansion, built in 1896.

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), né Edith Newbold Jones, was born into a wealthy, socially prominent family in New York. Her education was suited for a debutant, and she received much of it from tutors. She rejected society’s role for her, and she wanted more education. She started writing stories early, but her mother insisted she stop, so she wrote poetry. Her mother commanded that she not read novels until she married, and Edith obeyed. She married at the age of 23! Meanwhile, in her father’s library, she read the classics voluminously, and educated herself.

The family summered at Newport, Rhode Island, and travelled widely in Europe, beginning a way of life for Edith in which residences in Europe (especially France) was an accepted privilege. She crossed the Atlantic Ocean 60 times.

When she grew up, she was courted and engaged to a man named Stevens, but her family objected, and the engagement was broken off. In 1885, Edith married Edward Wharton, 12 years her senior. He suffered from depression, and after a long mental decline, she divorced him in 1913. In the meantime, she started, in 1908, a love affair with Morton Fullerton, a writer.

Wharton was variously gifted. She acquired a dizzying series of properties which she remodeled and landscaped with famous success.

Her first story was published in 1891, when she was 29, to be followed by many others. Her first novel, “The Valley of Decision,” was published in 1902. She became famous in 1905 with the publication of “The House of Mirth.” In all, she wrote 14 novels, and many books in other genres, especially travel.

After her marriage collapsed in 1913, she moved to France, where she remained in Paris during World War I. She became vey busy with relief work, visited the front lines, and worked to get America to enter the war and save France. She loved everything French, including its colonial empire. For her work during the war, she was appointed Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

Her friends included a who’s who of famous writers and politicians, led by Henry James.

As can be concluded, Wharton was born to write about the gilded age of New York society in the 1870s and later. “The Age of Innocence” won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, after the choice of the judging committee to give it to Sinclair Lewis for “Main Street” was cancelled by Columbia’s President Nicholas Murray Butler. Wharton was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927, 1928, and 1930. When she died at her house at Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt in 1937, she was buried in the American Protestant Cemetery in Versailles.

Martin Scorsese (born 1942) is a director famous for violent, macho-heroes in films such as the 1973 “Mean Streets,” the 1976 “Taxi Driver,” and the 1990 “Good Fellas,” with actors such as Robert de Nero. More recently, Scorsese has worked with Leonardo de Caprio in such films as the “Gangs of New York.” When Scorsese announced that he was directing “The Age of Innocence,” many eyebrows went up in Hollywood, but Scorsese said that it was a personal choice to do this kind of romantic film. Scorsese and members of his family played cameo roles in “The Age of Innocence.”

“The Age of Innocence” is a beautiful film, and it deserved an Oscar for Gabriella Pescucci’s costume design. Winona Ryder was nominated by Best Supporting Actress at the U.S. Academy Awards, as well as at the British Academy Film Awards, and in England, Miriam Margolyes won the award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role.

The film “The Age of Innocence,” was a “box office bomb,” and it was better appreciated in England and France in its evocation of the faded glories of a more elegant age. The title of the novel is ironic. In this age, all seems to be well, but all is not well.