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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novel.

*The Age of Innocence* (1920) analyzes the tightly structured society of New York in the years after the Civil War, during Edith Wharton's childhood. In her 1934 memoir, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton reflected that after the devastation of World War I, she "found a momentary escape in going back to [her] childish memories of a long-vanished America" while writing her Pulitzer-prize winning novel.

In many ways, Edith Wharton had a difficult childhood. She had two principal motivations: to learn and to look pretty. She viewed herself as the ugliest member of the family. Her two older brothers teased her for her red hair and large hands. She received the ordinary education for girls of her class—French, German, music, and drawing—but she longed for a tutor or a first-rate teacher. Most of her reading was done on her own, in her father's well-stocked library. At nine, she nearly died from typhoid fever, an experience that led to chronic fears. When she looked back as an adult, she said her father's copy of Washington Irving's *Alhambra* fueled her desire to tell stories.



### Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD.

Copy the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Edith Wharton," "Divorce in *The Age of Innocence*," "Wharton and Her Other Works," as well as Handout One from this Teacher's Guide. Divide the class into groups, and assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it learned.



### Writing Exercise

Read the novel's opening three paragraphs aloud to your students. Wharton's memoir reveals a clue to her fiction: "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write." Based on this knowledge and the first page, ask your students to imagine and then write the novel's ending.



### Homework

Read Chapters 1-5 (pp. 3-32). In *The Age of Innocence*, a social code is often not communicated verbally. "Arbitrary signs" are given, usually through a look, a gesture, or even silence. Look for three examples of this in Chapters 1-5. List social customs that exist in your world of dating and friendship. Are there any similarities?