

# 10

## Lesson Ten

### FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Edith Wharton articulates one of her definitions of what makes a great book:

A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy a surface it presents, a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context. [from "In General," Part IV]

### Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. In small groups, ask students to discuss specific books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Age of Innocence*?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Wharton create through *The Age of Innocence*? What does this novel tell us about the concerns and motivations of old-fashioned New York? Are these attributes consistent with 21st century America? Why or why not?

Using Handout Three, discuss one way a literary argument can be articulated, supported, and developed. Can students find other examples of Newland's imagined reality? What other moments in Chapters 1-33 foreshadow the novel's conclusion in Chapter 34?

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a persuasive letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *The Age of Innocence* is a good book. Do students feel *The Age of Innocence* succeeds according to the quote cited above (from *The Writing of Fiction*)? Why or why not? Develop an argument that explains why the novel has meaning for many people, not just a particular group.

Have students work on essays in class. Be available to assist with each essay's main argument. Have students partner to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with the characteristics of a well-written essay.

### Homework

Continue working on essays. Students will turn in rough drafts of their essays at the next class.