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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

The Age of Innocence is rife with literary and artistic references, including novels, poetry, plays, opera, music, and paintings. Writers often refer to other works of art as a way to add a deeper layer that highlights or explains some of the events, emotions, or characters within the work. Edith Wharton's writing style is especially rich in these moments, because she deliberately draws parallels between these allusions and her characters' actions. Ask your students to pay attention to these artistic references as they read the novel. (A worthwhile activity may be for students to pair up and research one such allusion's relevance to the novel's plot or character development.)

Allusions to opera are among the most important in the novel. The novel opens and resolves at the opera. The Faust story and Gounod's *Faust* provide a key to understanding it. If you wish to provide a more in-depth introduction to opera for your students, you may find the National Endowment for the Arts' educational resources for "Great American Voices" helpful. Materials may be downloaded here:

<http://www.nea.gov/national/GAV/index.html>

Discussion Activities

Have students read Handout Two. Charles Francois Gounod's *Faust* premiered on March 19, 1859. Find a CD or DVD of Gounod's *Faust* and play the "M'ama" aria for your students. If this is difficult to find, you may want to play the opening scenes of Martin Scorsese's 1993 film, *The Age of Innocence*, so they can hear a few parts of the song.

Writing Exercise

If you were to write a memoir, what book, play, film, or painting would begin your story? Create a dramatic opening scene for your memoir by relating your life to this work. Try to mimic Wharton's opening opera scene in the way she uses specific details to help a reader visualize the scene.

Homework

Read Chapters 6-9 (pp. 32-60). The novel is told from the point of view of Newland Archer. Find three passages that describe Newland's thoughts about his upcoming wedding to May Welland, at least one from the beginning of Chapter 6. What does he think his marriage will be like?