

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. Often an all-knowing character, the distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Age of Innocence is told by an omniscient, subjective narrator, who tells the story entirely from the point of view of Newland Archer. In order to understand *The Age of Innocence*, students must understand Newland’s personality and motivations. Although he is a sympathetic character, he is repeatedly fallible and has a flawed view of himself.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups, and give each one of the following passages to analyze as a close reading. Ask students to answer the following questions: What does the passage reveal about Newland’s view of himself? What does it tell us about his view of his society? What does it state or imply about his view of May and Ellen?

“He had dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization. This was especially the case when the pleasure was a delicate one [...]” (p. 4).

“In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number” (p. 7).

“Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against ‘Taste,’ that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vicegerent” (p. 12).

“[...] He returned discouraged by the thought that all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product. Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent, it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile” (p. 34).

Writing Exercise

Building on the close reading, provide one example of Newland’s flawed perception, and one example of something you suspect he may get wrong in the future.

Homework

Read Chapters 10-13 (pp. 60-90). At the end of Chapter 9, Newland buys flowers for May and Ellen. What does his choice reveal about his view of each woman?