

# 4

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists, in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.



### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Aside from Newland Archer, there are three main characters in *The Age of Innocence*: May Welland, Ellen Olenska, and Julius Beaufort. Divide your class into groups, giving each group one character to write about and discuss. At the end of class have one member of each group “teach” the whole class about its group’s character.

#### **May Welland: the fiancée of Newland Archer**

May Welland seems to be a naïve, wealthy New Yorker who is passively excited about her upcoming marriage to Newland. As the novel progresses, May becomes increasingly more complex.

- Why is May reluctant to move up her engagement to Newland?
- At the end of Book One, Chapter 13, May writes Newland a letter, asking him to spend time with Ellen because she’s lonely and unhappy in New York. Why might she do this?

#### **Julius Beaufort: the mysterious, rich banker**

Despite the appearance of “insider” status, Julius Beaufort remains an outsider to fashionable New York. His marriage to the lovely Regina gives him access to a society otherwise closed to him.

- Why do you think Julius and Ellen so quickly become friends? Why does their relationship evoke so much controversy among the family?
- Why does Newland hate Julius Beaufort so much?

#### **Ellen Olenska: the cousin of May Welland**

The Countess Ellen Olenska was born Ellen Mingott. Ellen eventually marries the Polish Count Olenski, a bad match according to fashionable New York.

- How does Ellen’s childhood, described in Chapter 8, inform your perspective of her as an adult?
- Why does Newland want to protect Ellen from Beaufort? Does she desire this protection?



### Homework

Read Chapters 14-17 (pp. 91-122). Ask students to write down three characteristics of Wharton’s writing style.