

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Wharton's Writing Style

Edith Wharton's writing style may be difficult for some students to decipher, but a little background information may help them see a deeper layer to her fiction. Wharton's first published book as an adult was *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) written with Ogden Codman, Jr. Since this work prompted a serious reconsideration of interior design, it comes as no surprise that houses, rooms, furniture, and fabrics are described in great detail in her fiction.

In her 1925 collection of essays, *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton articulates several principles for future writers and students of literature:

The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of a soul, and the use of the 'descriptive passage,' and its style should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence (from "Constructing a Novel", Part IV in *The Writing of Fiction*).

Discussion Activities

Divide your class into groups, looking for memorable examples of the citation above. Discuss a descriptive passage that may reflect "an event in the history of a soul." Here are two examples:

- Chapter 1—The novel's opening scene communicates more about its characters than we may notice. Although the narrator does not directly tell us about each character's attributes, what do we learn through the descriptions?
- Chapter 9—The "shadowy charm" of Ellen's home brings Newland a "sense of adventure" (pp. 52-53). Ask your students to pay attention to the furniture, colors, artwork, and décor. Ellen does not decorate her home based on the fashions of New York, but according to her own tastes. How is Ellen's home a reflection of herself?

Writing Exercise

In Chapter 13 Newland compares his relationship with Ellen to a scene from the play *The Shaughraun*. The narrator asks: "Wherein, then, lay the resemblance that made the young man's heart beat with a kind of retrospective excitement?" (p. 86) How might the theater reflect Newland's emotional state?

Homework

Chapters 18-21 (pp. 122-162). Based on today's lesson, how do the details of Newland and May's wedding reflect the "history" of Newland's "soul"?