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## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object – above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in the novel’s title, at the beginning and end of the novel, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.

Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in *The Age of Innocence*: flowers, eyes, and archery.

### Discussion Activities

#### Flowers

During his engagement, Newland sends lilies-of-the-valley to May. The only day he forgets is the day of his first visit to Ellen’s home. Lilies-of-the-valley symbolize purity, modesty, and the return of happiness. Yellow roses, more complex, can represent jealousy, infidelity, friendship, or waning love. Do you agree with Newland that the yellow roses are “too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty” for May (p. 60)? Note references to flowers during the play in Chapter 13 and during the wedding in Chapter 19.

#### Archery

Why does Wharton compare May to Diana (p. 49), the beautiful virgin goddess of hunting and childbirth? In Chapter 21, how does May’s success in the archery tournament relate to her becoming an Archer through marriage? How is Julius Beaufort right when he says, “that’s the only kind of target she’ll ever hit” (p. 157)? How is he wrong?

### Writing Exercise

Write a brief essay to explain how symbols of sight, insight, and blindness function within the novel. Why does Newland compare May to a Kentucky cave-fish, a newly discovered creature at the time, who “ceased to develop eyes” (p. 62). In Chapter 16, Newland notes May’s “eyes of such despairing clearness” (p. 110) when she gives him the chance to break their engagement. Does the narrator consider Newland’s judgments to be the last word?

### Homework

Read Chapters 22-25 (pp. 163-190). Do Newland, Ellen, and Julius change and develop throughout the story? Have they learned something about themselves and adjusted their actions?