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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

Since the symbols discussed in Lesson 6 deal so deeply with May's character, use this lesson to focus on Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, and Julius Beaufort.

Discussion Activities

Newland Archer

Revisit the quotes about Newland from Lesson Three. Now that students have finished more than half of the novel, do they think Newland or his motivations have changed? Has marriage to May had a positive or negative effect on him? Ask students to identify some examples of Newland's impetuous actions, as well as his failure to act. One important example of the latter occurs in Chapter 21, when Newland fails to "fetch" Ellen as she gazes at the boats near her Grandmother's dock. (This important scene foreshadows the novel's final chapter.)

Ellen Olenska

By Chapter 25, rumors continue to circulate about Ellen's marriage, desire to divorce, and her flight from Europe. Is it possible for the reader to determine the truth from the rumors? The family objects to the divorce. However, Newland hears Ellen's point of view right before his wedding in Chapter 18. What motivates her to stay married, yet not return to Europe? According to Ellen (in Chapter 23), why did she go down to the dock that day at her Grandmother's? (Her response also foreshadows the novel's final chapters.)

Julius Beaufort

Thus far, Beaufort may seem to function merely as a foil to Newland Archer. Both men are drawn to Ellen yet despise each other. In tonight's reading, Beaufort will become even more important to the novel's plot, as he experiences a financial fall that will affect the entire Mingott clan. To prepare for these events, consider the way the narrator has portrayed Beaufort through Chapter 25. What are his motivations? Has he developed into a three-dimensional character, or does he remain a two-dimensional foil?

Homework

Read Chapters 26-30 (pages 190-225).

It is now clear that the French tutor rumored to have compromised Ellen Olenska's virtue is M. Rivière, whom Newland and May met on their honeymoon. Students should pay attention to how M. Rivière's conversation with Newland in Chapter 25 informs the novel's plot.