

# 8

## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events, from beginning, to middle, to end, can make a novel predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax, and close with a resolution (sometimes called *dénouement*). Sometimes the crisis, climax, and resolution are expressed chronologically; sometimes the plot is not chronological. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the narrator to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

The structure of *The Age of Innocence* divides sharply between Book One and Book Two. Book One often focuses on the future, especially Newland's misgivings about his upcoming wedding to May. In Book Two we see how Newland's choice to follow through with the wedding affects Ellen's decision not to divorce Count Olenski and how her family ultimately rejects her.

### Discussion Activities

Map the novel's major turning points, plots, and subplots. Students should trace the arc of the story, including rising action, climax, resolution, and the following significant events:

- Chapter 26—Beaufort's economic fall affects Ellen's fate because she is living with her aunt (Medora Manson), whose money is tied to Beaufort. Why has Ellen fallen out of "the good graces of her family" (p. 194)?
- Chapter 27—"New York was inexorable in its condemnation of business irregularities" (p. 200)—a viewpoint that changes Julius and Regina Beaufort's place in society. Regina attends the opera in order to dispel some of the rumors surrounding her husband. Why else might she attend the opera?
- Chapter 30—Ultimately, Beaufort's unscrupulous financial decisions disgrace his wife, Regina. Discuss the importance of Ellen's decision to call on Regina in her grandmother's carriage (p. 225).

### Writing Exercise

Using the discussion activity, write a brief essay on two instances when Wharton uses flashbacks or foreshadowing to propel the plot. How does this contribute to the pacing of the story and the reader's experience?

### Homework

Read Chapters 31-33 (pp. 225-256). The drama of the whole novel has been building toward the dinner party in Chapter 33, when the entire Mingott clan essentially kicks Ellen Olenska out of New York. Why does Wharton place this event at Newland and May's home, during their first hosted party? Do the events of this chapter change your understanding of May Archer's "innocence"?