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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Discussion Activities

Students should propose themes they believe to be most important to the novel. You might examine social customs, marriage, money, justice, love, or gender. Historical context or references may also support or contradict a thematic interpretation. Explore the theme of “innocence” to begin your discussion. Students can research how writers, artists, and intellectuals might have defined this theme in 1875. Students can also examine whether this theme is defined differently in America and Europe circa 1875.

Innocence

Ask your students to discuss the complex ways innocence is defined, discussed, and defied in the novel. Innocence is related to purity, ignorance, religion, morality, social mores, and often draws out its opposites: guilt, knowledge, cynicism, and unorthodox, bohemian ways. Consider Chapter 16, when Newland reflects: “He did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience!” (p. 109)

Has Ellen lost all innocence? Is she doomed to guilt as long as she remains separated from her husband? Is Newland chosen to represent Ellen legally because of his innocence and a desire to maintain the family’s moral integrity? What do we learn about May’s “innocence” and adherence to social mores by the end of the novel? How does each character’s development relate to whether and how they might be innocent or have lost innocence? Finally, why has Wharton titled the novel *The Age of Innocence*? By writing the novel, does she mean to imply that this age has come to a close?

Writing Exercises

Students should identify a theme other than innocence, writing a brief essay on the way this theme develops throughout the novel. Select specific quotes or sections of the text that address this theme. Explain how these sections may be linked to develop an interpretation of the novel.

Homework

Read Chapter 34 (pp. 256-270) and Handout Three. Begin working on essays, choosing one of the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.