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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Henry James was born in 1843 to a wealthy family with high educational standards and a fondness for travel. James and his siblings often studied with private tutors while their family toured Europe. The Jameses lived in many different places, but their maternal grandmother's home in New York's Washington Square was a haven that remained constant. This house and James's memories of the surrounding area provide the backdrop for *Washington Square*.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Copy and distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel," "Henry James (1843–1916)," and "The History of Washington Square." Divide the class into three groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it has learned.

### Writing Exercise

Fiction writers are often advised to "write what you know." Henry James followed this advice by taking a true story and adapting it to fit into a familiar time and place. Read aloud the passage on page 39 that begins, "The ideal of quiet and of genteel retirement, in 1835, was found in Washington Square..." to the end of the paragraph on the next page. Here, Henry James addresses the reader through first-person narration and describes his own memories of the area.

Have students write a three-paragraph essay on a place from their childhood. Ask them to describe the setting, the mood it evokes, and what type of story would best be set there.

### Homework

Read Chapters 1–5 (pp. 27–54\*). Prepare your students to read twenty to thirty pages per night in order to finish reading the book in eight lessons. Ask your students to consider the descriptions of the female characters in the pages they've read and then write a one-paragraph description of what they imagine life would have been like for an upper-class woman in the 1850s.

\* Page numbers refer to the Penguin Classics 2003 edition of *Washington Square*.