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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

In 1905 Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness*, wrote an essay titled "Henry James—An Appreciation." Conrad praised his friend as a modern master of the literary form, saying:

He has mastered the country, his domain, not wild indeed, but full of romantic glimpses, of deep shadows and sunny places. There are no secrets left within his range. He has disclosed them as they should be disclosed—that is, beautifully. And, indeed, ugliness has but little place in this world of his creation. Yet it is always felt in the truthfulness of his art; it is there, it surrounds the scene, it presses close upon it. It is made visible, tangible, in the struggles, in the contacts of the fine consciences, in their perplexities, in the sophism of their mistakes.

Ask students if they agree with Conrad's praise of Henry James. Have them make a list of the characteristics of a great book using the quotation above and their own criteria. What elevates a novel to greatness? As a class discuss other novels that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Washington Square*? What makes this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Henry James create in *Washington Square*? What cultural and social concerns does this novel satirize? Why might James have used literature as a vehicle for examining difficult issues rather than writing an essay or a letter to the editor of a newspaper?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay exploring their personal reactions to *Washington Square*. Encourage them to go beyond like or dislike. Ask them to consider the emotions they felt while reading the novel, and to examine why. Which characters and scenes did they relate to, and which remained strange or difficult to comprehend? Was the resolution of the novel satisfying? Why or why not?



Homework

Students should finish their essays.