

# Edith Wharton

*“A New York divorce  
is in itself  
a diploma of virtue.”*

- THE DESCENT OF MAN, 1904

BY LEANNE MILWAY

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**DITH WHARTON LIVED AND WROTE IN A SOCIETY ON THE VERGE OF MAJOR CHANGE.** Her more than 40 novels and collections of short stories, letters, poetry, and nonfiction both criticized her age and heralded times to come. In a variety of styles that ranged from satirical pieces on “Old” New York to ghost stories and historical fantasies, she turned a scathing eye to upper-class lives (drawing inspiration from people she knew, including the Astors), the nouveau riche, manners versus morals, and social versus personal fulfillment. She modeled her detailed, self-conscious, and elegant social realism on the style of Henry James, who exerted a profound influence on her life and work.

*The House of Mirth* (1905), her first major novel, rejected the values of the Gilded Age by cruelly satirizing the psychology of the East Coast elite, a “society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers.” Fifteen years later, on the eve of

### WHERE TO START

**THE AGE OF INNOCENCE** is as opulent as it is epic. Read it before watching Martin Scorsese’s award-winning production. Read **THE HOUSE OF MIRTH** for a feminist tragedy. **ETHAN FROME** falls on many high school reading lists, and it offers a quick and startling introduction to Wharton’s favorite theme: repression.



women's suffrage, Wharton's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Age of Innocence* (1920), depicted strong women defying social expectations. It also demonstrated, in Newland Archer's inability to act on his desires, how upper-class mores still prevailed over individual freedom and happiness. Breaking arbitrary rules of upper-class conduct offered a moral and imaginative release from social conventions, but at a terrible cost. In Wharton's hands, one either entered into a dreadful marriage in an acceptable class—or died. "Life is not a matter of abstract principles," Wharton concluded in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), "but a succession of pitiful compromises

with fate, of concessions to old traditions, old beliefs, old tragedies, old failures."

Women were deeply affected by the tension between social expectations and new freedoms after the turn of the century. R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton's biographer, calls her body of work a "continuing testimony ... to the modes of entrapment, betrayal, and exclusion devised for women in the first decades of the American and European twentieth century" (*Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 1975). Like American contemporaries Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, and Susan Glaspell, Wharton asked the big questions of the day:

## Wharton Selected Works

### VERSES (1878)

A poetry collection written anonymously.

### THE DECORATION OF HOUSES (1897)

A criticism of Victorian decorating practices. Co-written with architect Ogden Codman, Jr., it experienced immediate success.

### THE GREATER INCLINATION (1899)

This volume of short stories (and a one-act play) earned Wharton her first comparison to Henry James.

### THE VALLEY OF DECISION (1902)

This two-volume historical novel charts Italy's moral decline in the 18th century.

### SANCTUARY (1903)

An upper-crust socialite worries that her son will inherit his father's weak character.

### ITALIAN VILLAS AND THEIR GARDENS (1904)

A survey of more than 75 villas and their ornamental grounds.

### ITALIAN BACKGROUNDS (1905)

A travel diary in which the author seeks out remote treasures across the countryside.

### \* THE HOUSE OF MIRTH (1905)

### MADAME DE TREYMES (1907)

A novella about young Americans trying to leave France to return to New York.

### THE FRUIT OF THE TREE (1907)

Wharton's novel of social reform addresses mercy killings, drug addiction, and factory conditions.

### THE HERMIT AND THE WILD WOMAN, AND OTHER STORIES (1908)

The title story in this mature collection of seven stories explores religious mores.

### A MOTOR-FLIGHT THROUGH FRANCE (1908)

Wharton's description of three automobile jaunts across France can be reenacted today.

### \* ETHAN FROME (1911)

### THE REEF (1912)

A sexual dalliance has sweeping effects on Americans in France. Considered Wharton's most "Jamesian" novel.

### \* THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY (1913)

### FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANING (1919)

This collection of essays compares French and American culture (usually favoring the former).

### IN MOROCCO (1920)

Wharton describes her visits to harems, exotic markets, and palaces.

### \* THE AGE OF INNOCENCE (1920)

### THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON (1922)

In this romantic comedy, a young couple seeks mates for social advancement.

### OLD NEW YORK (1924)

These four novellas explore different decades of New York society.

### THE WRITING OF FICTION (1925)

Instructions on telling a short story and developing character, form, and style.

### THE MOTHER'S RECOMPENSE (1925)

A woman copes with her passion for the man who plans to marry her daughter.

### HERE AND BEYOND (1926)

Stories previously published for an audience of middle-class American housewives.

### TWILIGHT SLEEP (1927)

The Manfords embody the decadent Jazz Age. Critics thought the novel uncharacteristically crude.

### THE CHILDREN (1928)

Seven siblings enchant the ever-cautious Martin Boyne as he travels to meet his lover.

### HUDSON RIVER BRACKETED (1929)

Halo Spear and writer Vance Weston, both unhappily married, fall in love. A challenging look at gender roles and the artistic process.

### CERTAIN PEOPLE (1930)

This short story collection focuses on love outside of marriage.

### THE GODS ARRIVE (1932)

The sequel to *Hudson River Bracketed* continues the tragic story of Halo and Vance.

### A BACKWARD GLANCE (1934)

Wharton's autobiography reveals insight into her society life, frequent travels, and literary success.

### THE WORLD OVER (1936)

Wharton's final collection of short tales includes "Pomegranate Seed," one of her finest ghost stories.

### GHOSTS (1937)

This volume includes "All Souls," a story Wharton wrote a few months before her death and considered one of her best.

### THE BUCCANEERS (1938)

Five American girls deal with their new money. Marion Mainwaring completed this unfinished novel in 1993.



Could women achieve sexual fulfillment and true freedom in a patriarchal culture? Was the attainment of happiness at odds with retaining one's social status? Could sexuality provide a source of creativity? In answering these questions, the well-heeled Victorian writer both met and challenged society's expectations, combining turn-of-the-nineteenth-century sensibilities with an understanding of modern life.

**B**ORN IN 1862, the third child and only daughter into a distinguished New York family, Edith Newbold Jones enjoyed a traditional upper-class upbringing. She had a European governess and several servants, could speak four languages, vacationed in Newport, and spent a few years in Europe with her family. Her role as a daughter meant that she would eventually marry and run a house herself, a prospect that greatly displeased her. Much to the dismay of her family, who held the arts in rather low regard, she showed more of an interest in writing than in "society." At age 75, Wharton looked back on the world of Manhattan's elite in "A Little Girl's New York" (1938) and mourned "how pitiful a provision was made for life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades." Society, she thought, honored women for their beauty, not for their intellectual pursuits.

In 1885, she married Edward (Teddy) Wharton, a banker 14 years her senior and member of her mother's social circle. The match was never a happy one; Teddy supported a mistress in Boston and was mentally unstable. They also lacked marital intimacy, a challenge Wharton recounted in her short story, "Fullness of My Life." As a result, she suffered from nervous exhaustion for more than a decade.

Writing presented an outlet for her artistic and sexual repression, a recurring theme in her works. In the 1890s, Wharton started to write short stories for *Scribner's Magazine*. Yet even as late as the 1930s, *Ladies' Home Journal* considered some of her stories too risqué for refined female audiences. Her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (co-written with Ogden Codman in 1897), denounced overstuffed Victorian homes—and their stuffy inhabitants. Publication of *House of Mirth* in 1905 cemented her reputation as one



Pavilion Colombe, Wharton's villa in France.

of the new century's most important novelists. Another classic, *Ethan Frome* (1911), followed.

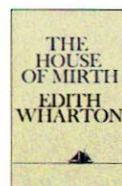
In 1908, 46 years old and unhappily married, Wharton moved to Paris and took a lover: the journalist Morton Fullerton, who finally fulfilled her sexual and intellectual yearnings. Their affair lasted until 1910. Wharton divorced Teddy in 1913 ("A New York divorce is in itself a diploma of virtue," she wrote in *The Descent of Man*), and never remarried. She remained in her homes in Paris and the south of France, where she hosted literary friends such as Henry James and Bernard Berenson. During World War I, she wrote reports for American newspapers and helped Belgian refugees. *The Marne* (1918) and *A Son at the Front* (1923) fictionalized these wartime experiences. In 1921 Wharton returned to the United States to accept the Pulitzer Prize for *Age of Innocence*. After a series of strokes, she died in France in 1937.

The acclaim Wharton received in her lifetime did not ensure her lasting reputation. After her death, critics regarded her novels as anti-modernist and inferior to those of Henry James. During the 1970s, Wharton's works experienced a popular resurgence. By the 1990s, film adaptations of *Age of Innocence* and *House of Mirth* presented stories that, though fixed in specific contexts, resounded with modern audiences. As critic W.L. Phelps wrote in his 1920 *New York Times* critique of *Age of Innocence*: "New York society and customs in the [1870s] are described with an accuracy that is almost uncanny; to read these pages is to live again." And, nearly 75 years later, in a time that brings Wharton's themes full circle by answering many of her questions, again.

## MAJOR WORKS

### THE HOUSE OF MIRTH (1905)

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Edith Wharton never felt entirely comfortable in her role as a wife. After her marriage began in 1885, she settled into an extended period of nervous exhaustion. She turned to writing to work out her emotional difficulties. With *The House of Mirth*, one of the first novels of manners to appear in American literature, she turned her observant eye on the injustices of the upper classes—marriage in particular.

**THE STORY:** "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning," cautions Ecclesiastes 7:4, "but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Beautiful upper class Lily Bart's destiny has been laid before her: to marry a wealthy man. Her rebellious nature has made this compromise difficult, but what happens to her self-worth and value in society when she finds herself nearing 30 still without a husband?

**"The story is the product of the most carefully calculated, the most skillfully handled, artistic values and effects. ... A story of such integrity of insight and of workmanship is an**



## THE HENRY JAMES EFFECT

It was Henry James who convinced Edith Wharton to turn her satirical eye on America. After reading her 1902 novel *Valley of Decision*, James wrote a letter praising Wharton's work but urged her to focus on "the American subject. Don't pass it by—the immediate, the real, the only, the yours, the novelist's that it waits for. ... Do New York!" She immediately began work on an insider's look at New York high society, *The House of Mirth*.

Throughout their long friendship, constant comparison to James haunted Wharton's reputation. While she both followed his frequent advice and incorporated many of his techniques, she cannot be judged by Jamesian standards alone. Two of her novels, *Madame de Treymes* (1907) and *The Reef* (1912), owe much to his influence, but the writing does not show Wharton at the height of her powers. Such is the power of critics that Wharton's reputation dimmed after her death, following repeated comparisons to the supposedly superior (and male) work of James. Wharton had recognized this fear as early as 1904, when she wrote, "The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James ... makes me feel rather hopeless." Now that her work has been allowed to stand on its own, the two are seen much more as related but equal.



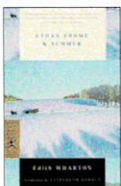
**achievement of high importance in American Life.**" OUTLOOK AND INDEPENDENT, 10/21/05.

**"... the greatest novel of recent years."** PUBLIC OPINION, 12/16/05.

**"... the main theme, which like the whole story, is worked out in a manner to stamp the writer a genius, and give her name a place in the history of American literature."** AMERICAN REVIEW OF REVIEWS, 12/05.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A classic American tragedy about a woman raised as a mere ornament.

## ETHAN FROME (1911)



Just three years before *Ethan Frome* was published, Wharton had her passionate tryst with Morton Fullerton in Paris. Their affair was, of course, doomed; he was married and so was she, and it ended in 1910. *Ethan Frome* and its harsh winter landscape—one of the only times

Wharton depicts a rural setting—seethe with repressed emotion.

**THE STORY:** "I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and ... each time it was a different story." So claims an unnamed narrator as he imagines the life of Ethan Frome, a farmer in Starkfield, Massachusetts. When Frome's unhappy wife falls ill, her sprightly cousin Mattie Silver moves in to offer aid. The farmer falls hopelessly in love with Mattie, but can they actually be together?

**"The wonder is that the spectacle of so much pain can be made to yield so much beauty."** NATION, 10/26/11.

**"Art for art's sake is the one justification of a piece of work as perfect in technique as it is relentless in substance."** T. COOPER, BOOKMAN, 11/11.

**"If *Ethan Frome* is not a great novel, it is at least an impressive tragedy."** NEW YORK TIMES, 10/8/11.

**"It is conceived and executed with a unity of insight, structural skill, and feeling for style which lies only within the reach of an artist who knows every resource of the art."** OUTLOOK AND INDEPENDENT, 10/21/11.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A short, bruising novel about the disastrous outcome of idealized love in the face of stark reality.

## THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY (1913)



In this epic satire, Wharton attacked both sexes and both sides of the Atlantic and introduced one of the most ruthless heroines in literature. Though Undine Spragg is Lily Bart's (from *The House of Mirth*) moral opposite, both women want the same thing: money. This novel follows Undine and other young Americans as they overtake New York society—and then move on to Europe to do the same. Wharton considered this novel her masterpiece.

**THE STORY:** Kansas-born Undine Spragg is a social-climber extraordinaire. Determining to live in high society at any cost, she twice marries far above her station. Her unrelenting greed wreaks havoc on her relationships and the men involved.

**"The theme of the spoilt, utterly selfish woman is of course no new one, but it has rarely been developed in a manner so skillful, so delicate, and so completely ruthless."** NEW YORK TIMES, 10/19/13.

**"Brilliantly written, it should be read as a parable."** SATURDAY REVIEW, 11/22/13.

**"The heroine is a mere monster of vulgarity. A caricature does not remain interesting to the length of six hundred pages."** NATION, 10/30/13.



**"Mrs. Wharton has painted Undine Spragg with an unsparing mercilessness that almost makes the reader wince. It is a splendid and memorable piece of work ..."** BOOKMAN, 12/13.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A stunning indictment of materialism that is as powerful today for its astute observations about greed as it was when it was written nearly a century ago.

## SUMMER (1917)



Though Summer's protagonist, Charity, is a teenager, her story is clearly inspired by Wharton's first affair at the age of 46. Passion led Wharton to divorce her husband, move to France, and compose aggressive critiques of society. Will society allow Charity the same freedom?

**THE STORY:** Charity, a feisty 18-year-old, lives an isolated life with her much older guardian in a dreary New England town. When city-educated Lucius Harney walks into the library where she works, passion ignites. Their romance has unexpected results, and Charity must face the daunting prospect of adulthood.

**"Anyone who cares about the way in which a pen is handled should take this book and read, and read again ..."** THE TIMES [LONDON], 9/27/17.

**"The characters seem drawn in the flat; they are two-dimensional so far as their emotions go. All the joy and pleasantness and tenderness has been extracted from their lives with a hand so skilled in literary portraiture that the sentences bite like the acids of the etcher."** AMERICAN REVIEW OF REVIEWS, 9/17.

**"A dreary and rather cold-blooded study, handled with Mrs. Wharton's usual finesse."** CLEVELAND 9/17.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** New England summers are dishearteningly short, just like many young love affairs. A conventional coming-of-age tale that created a sensation in 1917 for addressing female sexuality.

## THE AGE OF INNOCENCE (1920)

★ PULITZER PRIZE

★ MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS #58



In this novel Wharton returned to the New York of her youth to uncover—for the first time in her history—the benefits of the social scene she had cast aside. Her prior study of French culture (in *French Ways and Meanings*), which proclaimed French culture superior to American culture, may have inspired this new assessment of family values. It is another novel of manners and considered by most to be her finest.

**THE STORY:** Newland Archer, a young and privileged dreamer, is happily engaged to May Welland, a pairing that unites two established families. Then he meets May's exotic cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska. In Ellen, Newland finds an object for his wandering fantasies of passionate

love; he's willing to sacrifice stability for mystery. Newland's adolescence—his age of innocence—must end when he makes a final choice.

**"The absolute imprisonment in which her characters stagnate, their artificial and false standards, the desperate monotony of trivial routine, the slow petrification of generous ardours ... are depicted with a high excellence that never falters. ... one of the best novels of the twentieth century and looks like a permanent addition to literature."** W. L. PHELPS, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/17/20.

**"[A] masterly achievement. In lonely contrast to almost all the novelists who write about fashionable New York, she knows her world."** C.V.D., NATION, 11/3/20.

**"It is a book of unsparing perception and essential passionateness, full of necessary reserve, but at the same time full of verity."** F.H., NEW REPUBLIC, 11/17/20.


**"The picture is so finished, so convincing, and withal so entertaining, that the study of these pages is recommended to all students of manners."** SPECTATOR, 1/8/21.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Forced to choose between an illusion and marriage's confines, Newland Archer represents the enduring virtue of tradition and old world values. Wharton's masterpiece. ■

### Was She Justified In Seeking A Divorce?

Why was this American girl forced to leave her brutal Polish husband? Why did Ellen, Countess Menska, return to New York, seeking to forget? Whispers came all too soon that she had been compromised in the artistic continental society from which she had fled. But in the narrow New York society of the 1870's she was welcomed back, and the whispers of far off Europe ignored, until she and Newland Archer are swept together by mutual attraction, and the old, old question is renewed, shall she create a scandal just because she is unhappy?

All the glamour of the society life of the original Four Hundred is the background for this story, the nights at the opera, the balls, the intimate amusements of the society leaders of the day. Newland Archer's life is spent among them, and Ellen, with her charm of other lands, comes to him as a breath of a new day. But he is engaged to lovely May Welland, a girl of his own circle, and his whole being is firm-rooted in cramped New York. Graphically and with a sure understanding of the moral values of the situation is presented the call of the new things that lure them, these children of New York's Age of Innocence.



## THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

By Edith Wharton

**America's  
Greatest Woman  
Novelist**

"One of the greatest American novels." —*Bookman*

"This tragedy calls for the greatest dramatic spirit." —*New York Star*

"A book from our leading novelist's pen to be read." —*Philadelphia Public Ledger*

"Mrs. Wharton's touch is the deftest, the sweetest of all our American novelists, here in the moral law." —*The New Republic*


"Each of Mrs. Wharton's later books has represented a new dramatic masterwork." —*Charter Review*

This is a full length novel by the foremost American woman novelist, which in strength and breadth of appeal rivals "The House of Mirth." It is entertaining from the opening scene at the Opera in New York to the last pages laid in Paris. The leading characters appear as living human beings against the keen pictures of society, and the book, as a whole, will take its place beside "The House of Mirth" as the outstanding depiction of New York Society.

"The Age of Innocence" represents Mrs. Wharton's art at its pinnacle. All her splendid abilities find their choicest material in this her greatest novel, and in it she has given the world of readers a book that is unsurpassed for entertaining qualities.

\$2.00 net.

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An advertisement for *The Age of Innocence*.