Nathanael West

Bibliography:

Biography:

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AWARDS: Legion of Honor, 1916; Order of Leopold (Belgium), 1919; Pulitzer Prize for The Age of Innocence, 1921; honorary Litt.D., Yale University, 1923; elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1930.


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Perhaps the most striking thing about Edith Wharton's reputation as a novelist is the fact that she has been "reclaimed" so many times. This fact seems all the more remarkable when one reflects that before her death in 1937, her novels and short stories were consistent best-sellers, while at the same time they won widespread critical acclaim. She won a Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for The Age of Innocence, and several of her novels, Ethan Frome, The Age of Innocence, and The Old Maid, were successfully adapted for the Broadway stage; Zoe Akin's dramatization of Ethan Frome itself won a Pulitzer Prize in 1935. Yet after her death, Wharton's reputation declined rapidly. Her work seemed dated, perhaps because she employed few of the experimental forms of narration that such writers as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had begun to explore with such dazzling success.

The popular image of Wharton herself did little to discourage this rejection of her work as old-fashioned and perhaps a little snobbish. Both her parents had come from distinguished families who belonged to that small and exclusive group which constituted "old New York"—the safe and circumscribed world that was swept into history by the newly wealthy vulgarians of post-Civil War America. In A Backward Glance (1934) Wharton tells
Edith Wharton

an anecdote that captures one part of the problem. Her mother, Lucretia Rhinelander Jones, was beautiful in her young womanhood, exquisitely dressed and universally admired. One day Edith's aunt Mary Newbold asked the little girl what she would like to be when she grew up. "The best-dressed woman in New York," the child replied; when Aunt Mary voiced surprise at such an ambition, Edith rejoined, "But Auntie, you know Mamma is." Edith Jones's marriage to Teddy Wharton of Boston (a man from a social class much like her own) merely reinforced the exclusive social status which her ancestry had conferred.

Wharton's best work was done before 1922; her writing after that time is less powerful—the satire is not so biting, and the poignancy of emotional drama is less acute. Moreover, Wharton's field of scrutiny remained relatively narrow, focusing primarily on the "American aristocracy" to which her parents had belonged. When Wharton died at the age of seventy-five, the critical obituary was gentle but scarcely laudatory: her time had passed a good while ago, it seemed, and her books might most kindly be left in the attic.

Some time passed before any major attempt was made to reassess her work. The first book which served in any major way to recall her to attention was Percy Lubbock's *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (1947). Yet if anything, the book may have served more effectively to convince the critical reader that Edith Wharton's work would not be worth resurrecting. Lubbock first met Wharton in 1906 when he was the houseguest of Henry James, then at the peak of his powers. He seems not to have liked Edith Wharton in the beginning, and subsequent social encounters after James's death merely served to widen the breach. It was no small irony, then, that he wrote the first literary biography of her. Lubbock candidly admits the coolness between them, and although he does establish her as novelist and intellect, he dwells even more on her role as a kind of expatriate American aristocrat. However, the most subtly diminishing tactic of his elegantly written study is his placement of Wharton's work: she is, in the end, a writer in the Jamesian tradition—both friend and follower—perhaps the most talented of the writers who followed the example of the master.

One of the effects of Lubbock's identification of Wharton as a Jamesian novelist was to imply that critics might profitably study the more Jamesian novels of Wharton's fiction: one thinks especially of *Madame de Treymes* (1907) and *The Reef* (1912), neither of which would rank among Wharton's half-dozen best works. Another more damaging result was to encourage critics to believe that James's virtues as a writer must necessarily be those of Wharton; thus Wharton's work was measured by the principles according to which James fashioned his own works, especially his later ones. If Wharton's work was seen to lack the design of James's, it was thought not merely to be different, but rather to be inferior. Wharton herself had disavowed indebtedness: "Though I greatly admired some of the principles he had formulated . . . I thought it was paying too dear even for such a principle to subordinate to it the irregular and irrelevant movements of life. And one result of the application of his theories puzzled and troubled me. His latest novels, for all their profound moral beauty, seemed to me more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move." Even a perceptive critic like Blake Nevius too often slips into such an attitude; "Mrs. Wharton follows her friends Henry James and Paul Bourget in attaching a special importance to the intensity residing in 'a personal, a direct impression of life' (the phrase is James's)." Not surprisingly, when she was held to a standard essentially extrinsic to her own greatest strengths, Wharton's work was judged, finally, to be of the second order.
Still, one must understand that these critics of the 1940s and 1950s were to some extent prohibited from taking a full measure of Edith Wharton. During her lifetime she maintained an intense reserve about her private life. After her death both the bulk of Wharton’s letters and the archives of unfinished fictional works were closed until the late 1960s, and access to them was limited until the mid-1970s. When these became available to supplement the published material, a startling new image of Wharton emerged in R. W. B. Lewis’s definitive biography, *Edith Wharton*. A critical reassessment soon followed in Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s *A Feast of Words*. No longer the rather two-dimensional grande dame of Lubbock’s *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, certainly not the slavish disciple of Henry James, Wharton was finally recognized as a complex, passionate artist whose work could command the highest respect entirely on its own terms.

Perhaps it is not surprising to find that the attitudes taken toward Wharton’s work in these two recent studies are to some extent anticipated in an essay by Edmund Wilson; indeed, Wilson was the first to reclaim Wharton, and there is a sense of balance finally in the fact that his judgment accords with the assessments of Wharton’s most recent critics. His essay “Justice to Edith Wharton” was written almost immediately after her death. Wilson acknowledges the world of American aristocracy and wealth from which Wharton had come, but he recognizes that she often saw it as a world “which annihilates every impulse toward excellence.” He makes it clear that she was aloof, private, reluctant to engage in easy intimacies, but he suggests that the reticence—even the writing itself—was a response to pain, the anguish of a nervous breakdown after her marriage, and the even more bitter despair of “the hopeless situation created by her husband’s insanity.” Having access to none of the private documents which would later prove his brief sketch to have been remarkably accurate, Wilson asserts that Wharton’s “work was . . . the desperate product of a pressure of maladjustments; and it very soon took a direction totally different from that of Henry James, as a lesser disciple of whom she is sometimes pointedly listed.” One may not entirely agree with the tone of Wilson’s essay: one may demur from his picture of the frantic, sometimes hysterical impulse that he feels impelled Wharton to write; one may conclude that Wharton’s work is not so pessimistic as Wilson paints it. Yet in the end, one must respect his prescient insight.

The small world of old New York to which Wharton’s parents belonged powerfully influenced Wharton in two quite opposite directions. On the one hand, it was a suffocating world that stifled spontaneous expressions of emotion: Wharton became increasingly aware of the deprivation inflicted by such a society, and although she eventually forgave, she always remembered it with pain. In her very last portrait of herself, “A Little Girl’s New York” (written when she was seventy-five), the author comments: “I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood, to think how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades. . . . Beauty, passions, and danger were automatically excluded from [each man’s] life (for the men were almost as starved as the women).” In every one of Wharton’s fictional representations of this world, the element of repression is present to some degree; and, as the quotation suggests, it was a form of repression that seems to have been even more painfully visited upon the women than on the men. The men, at least, had the opportunity to exercise their intellects—they went away to college, and if they were not encouraged to enter business or a profession, it was at least possible for them to do so. Women had not even this limited vista of freedom. They did not go away to school; they had access to no occupation save that of marriage, motherhood, and party-giving. Wharton’s visual recollection of the young Dianas of her childhood is both beautiful and ominous: “Wide leghorn hats, and heavy veils flung back only at the moment of aiming. These veils were associated with all the summer festivities of my childhood.” The girls were often perfectly beautiful; the veiling kept their skin safe from the sun—“young cheeks untouched by paint or powder, in which the blood came and went like the lights of an aurora.” Yet their upbringing stifled them. Women did not learn to “do” much of anything in the outside world; they were expected principally to “be” young American beauties.

The repression and lack of energy in this culture is sometimes judged by Wharton to have been a fatal flaw. If the lives of its members were devoid of purpose and organizing drive, it is perhaps this very fault that caused the old order to give way so utterly to the vulgar amorality of America’s robber barons and their families. Such seems clearly to be the conclusion in a work like Wharton’s superb satirical novel, *The Custom of the Country* (1913).

Yet there was another side to New York’s vanished age of gentility. There were moral strengths in this society—a sense of family coherence and of devotion between parents and children. If at its worst the world of old New York did not turn its
energies sufficiently to the world of business and professional activity, at its best it did concern itself with perpetuating a set of values which might give sustenance and meaning to the individual life. If its women were excessively repressed and limited in their options, sometimes they turned their energies to the commitments of marriage and motherhood in such a way as to impart dignity and transcendent meaning to the lives they had devoted to their families. Such is the implication of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

Neither attitude toward the world of her youth ever completely dominated Wharton's thinking; the two were always held in tension, although the balance between them shifted throughout her life. Similarly, Wharton's particular strengths as a novelist led in two very different directions. On one side, she engaged in devastating satire which is aimed both at the weakness of the old order and at the insufferable moral folly of the new. On the other side, however, Wharton was capable of the most delicate emotional compassion—a fine sensibility for the feelings of all of us who have been caught in society's embrace. Properly understood, Edith Wharton's complex reaction to the emotional and social dilemmas of her own life can be seen as providing most of the major themes of her work.

Wharton wrote competent, sometimes brilliant short stories throughout her entire career. However, many critics would claim that the very best short stories were those written earlier in her career. The first collection of short stories, published in 1899 under the title *The Greater Inclination*, contains several of Wharton's best efforts. "Souls Belated" is a haunting tale about a couple, Lydia and Gannett, who have run away together (she leaving her husband) hoping to find perfect happiness in love without the painfully binding tie of marriage; ironically, they discover that love without marriage may be even more binding than the matrimonial tie and that it lacks the rich support of family and tradition that makes married happiness possible in some sustained and continuing way. "The Muse's Tragedy" explores the emptiness of Mary Anerton, who has not chosen to create beauty, but who has instead allowed herself to be the passive inspiration of another. "The Other Two," published in a later collection, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904), is perhaps Wharton's best short story. It describes with ever deepening horror the grotesque distortions that have developed in Alice Waythorn's identity as she has managed to become the perfect wife to three successive husbands.

Wharton's first novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), is a long historical tale set in the eighteenth century. It was inordinately popular in its day and provided the occasion for Henry James's first letter to Wharton—a substantial congratulatory note. Still, it seems dull to the modern reader, and her next lengthy novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), is generally regarded as her first important piece of fiction. With the exception of *Ethan Frome* (which is often taught at the high-school level), it is now probably the most often read of Wharton's novels.

Wharton's personal life was unsettled in 1905. Three years after her marriage in 1885, she had begun to sink into what eventually proved an almost twelve-year period of nervous exhaustion. Edward ("Teddy") Wharton was a kind and gentle man at this time, considerate of his young wife's needs; yet the sexually repressive attitude which had pervaded Edith Wharton's childhood (for her home seems to have been a perniciously extreme version of the culture's general reticence in these matters) left the girl unfit to cope with marital intimacy. She reacted with a kind of hysterical depression. Edmund Wilson suggested that Wharton's writing served to help her work out these emotional difficulties, and Lewis and Wolff give full documentation of that process. During the decade 1890-1900, Wharton had written a number of good short stories; by 1900 she felt able to take on the challenge of writing a full-length novel; and with *The House of Mirth* she emerged as a professionally serious, masterful novelist.

*The House of Mirth* is a profoundly pessimistic work—echoing the many dissatisfactions Wharton felt at this time. Its heroine, Lily Bart, is the quintessence of "the American Girl"—exquisitely beautiful and trained to think of herself not as a woman capable of defining her own goals and making emotional commitments that would give shape and sustenance to her life, but rather as the lovely, passive lady whose future must necessarily be defined by the man who would marry her. Wharton's intimate and sympathetic portrait of Lily Bart is perhaps the finest example anywhere in American fiction of the tragedy of a woman who has come to regard herself primarily as a decorative object.

One source of the tragedy lies in Lily's heritage: "There had never been a time when she had any real relation to life. . . . There was no centre of early pieties, of grave enduring traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others." The good things in the world of old New York did not find their way into Lily's upbringing. Her father had died, leaving an almost impoverished wife who was accustomed to comfort. The widowed Mrs. Bart
resolved to recover her lost fortunes through her
daughter, whose entire mission in life subsequently
became defined in terms of bartering her loneliness
for a wealthy husband: “She was like some rare
flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which
every bud had been nipped except the crowning
blossom of her beauty.” Nor is Lily liberated from
this fate by her mother’s early death; Lily must go
on, seeking to maintain a luxurious life by living
parasitically on the leavings of the newly wealthy,
seeking to legitimize her position by achieving the
right alliance, not because she wants to, but because
she has never learned anything else. She feels that
she is “somebody” only when she perceives herself
reflected in the admiring mirror of someone else’s
eyes.

Still, there is something as yet untainted in
Lily; she could have made a successful match long
ago (we are clearly given to know that) if something
in her spirit had not recoiled from this final
compromise. She is a fortune hunter, perhaps, but one
whose moral reticence—which never strengthens
into moral fortitude—prohibits her from full
acquiescence.

Lily seeks help and advice from Lawrence Selden,
a bachelor whose parents also come from the
sheltered world of old New York. Yet Selden has
carried the society’s moral weakness into his life,
too. He is conversant enough with genuine moral
values to criticize Lily unsympathetically, but
neither perceptive enough nor strong enough to see
her earnest gropings toward some better code of
behavior or to help her achieve some better life.
And if both Selden and Lily are fatally weak, both
suffer from the instinctive repression which their
society so often encouraged. Thus the narrator re-
peatedly suggests that “the situation between them
was one which could have been cleared up only by a
sudden explosion of feeling,” but the habits of a
lifetime cannot be so easily dismissed.

The decline of Lily’s fortunes and her death at
the novel’s conclusion represented more to Whar-
ton than the failure of a single young woman: Lily
embodied that which was most exquisite in old New
York, and she is ill equipped to contend with the
crass, insensitive greed of the monied class that had
taken over New York society. The old world had
died because of its own inherent weakness—or so it
must have seemed to Wharton in 1905.

Her next novel, The Fruit of the Tree (1907),
turns away from the New York scene; it is Whar-
ton’s one attempt to write a novel of social reform.
However, the hardships of a New England factory
town were too far out of Wharton’s experience to be
realistically represented; and although the novel
sold well, it is generally held to be greatly inferior to
The House of Mirth.

By this time in her life, Wharton had achieved
considerable personal strength: no longer tor-
mented by the nervous illness that had clouded the
first years of her marriage, a successful and prolific
author, Wharton seemed destined finally to enjoy
her blessings. Unfortunately, such was not yet to be
the case. Ironically, the husband who had been so
sympathetic and supportive during her illnesses
began to exhibit alarming signs of ill health himself.

Postcard to Morton Fullerton, ca. 1907-1910

Teddy Wharton was eventually diagnosed as an
incurable manic depressive; and after many years
during which Edith Wharton tried to help him—
even as he had sympathized with her—the couple
was divorced in 1913. After the divorce, Wharton
was finally able to begin to put her life in order; but
the years between 1905 and 1913 were times of
violent stress, for in addition to dealing with her
husband’s illness and gradual alienation, Edith
Wharton had to contend with another unexpected
element in her own life. She fell passionately in love.
For three years—between 1907 and 1910—Edith
Wharton and Morton Fullerton (a friend and pro-
tege of Henry James) shared what was for her a
completely successful affair. For the first time, she
was able to throw off the inhibitions of her Victorian girlhood to discover the delight of physical intimacy. The affair ended, but its lesson lives on in much of Wharton’s fiction.

Ironically, the first fictional resonance of these emotionally complex times can be seen in the utterly barren world of Ethan Frome (1911). It is as if Wharton could bring herself to confront the full horrific implications of emotional frigidity only after she had been liberated from them in her own life. Perhaps because The Fruit of the Tree had focused explicitly on the plight of poorly paid New England factory workers, critics sometimes mistake the focus of Wharton’s subsequent novel, regarding Ethan Frome as a kind of satire aimed at the emotional impoverishment of the New England rural life. Yet such a view of the novel is distorting; both Ethan Frome and Summer (which Wharton consciously thought of as a companion piece to the earlier work) have the human condition as their principal subject. New England life can be impoverished—and the picturesque, romantic vistas offered by much of the American regional fiction of the period certainly presented a grotesquely distorted version of that life. Yet Wharton would contend that all human life must suffer deprivation in some degree: the real possibilities for happiness always fall short of our dreams of perfect fulfillment. Thus mankind is forever compelled to relinquish the impossible fantasies of his own beguiling imagination and to accept the sometimes harsh necessities of life as it must be lived; anyone who fails to make terms with reality will lose the possibility for happiness altogether.

Ethan Frome is the most carefully constructed of Wharton’s novels. Ironically, the structure which Wharton selects as most suited to her intention owes little or nothing to the craftsmanship of Henry James, but more than a little to the innovations of Nathaniel Hawthorne. If one were to seek an American precedent for Wharton’s method here, one might well look to The Blithedale Romance. The principal character in the novel is not Ethan Frome, whose name gives the work its title, but rather the narrator, a figure who remains unnamed throughout. He might be any one of us. The tale is rendered entirely by this interlocutor, an outsider to the little New England town of Starkfield—having come only because business required it. During his unwilling visit, which is eventually protracted throughout a long, isolated winter, the narrator becomes fascinated by the figure of Ethan Frome, a farmer whose limp gives poignant testimony to some earlier, undefined accident. Gradually, as his contact with the busy outside world of complex reality is severed by the intractable snow and cold, the narrator’s curiosity about this man rises to a fever pitch: “He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface. . . . I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it . . . the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters.”

The narrator’s language gives us a hint of Wharton’s central concern here: he is a man with a rich, overactive imagination. It is a dangerous possession. Now that the man is thrown so much upon himself—deprived of the wholesome necessities of social interaction and congenial compromises—his imagination begins to cloud his other, more reliable faculties. He is fascinated by what “seemed” to be so, by what he “felt” to be true. He is guided by what he guesses or by what he supposes himself to sense rather than by the bare facts of the case. Though he is a man of science (an electrical engineer by trade), his pragmatic self yields to the visionary. Finally, one lowering, stormy night, the narrator is forced to seek shelter in the Frome farmhouse. Surely now, one supposes, he will learn the truth and convey it to us. Yet the opening words of the story-within-a-story (the story which purports to outline the sources for Ethan Frome’s woe) are ominous: “It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story. . . .” It is not, then, the story itself; not truth, but merely a vision.

The narrator’s visionary tale, his own version of Ethan’s history, is an unselfconscious mirror of the narrator himself, for according to this tale, it was Ethan Frome’s own visionary capacity that brought about his crippling injury. The story seems simple enough. Frome had lived an isolated existence, and when his mother died, he had married his cousin Zeena—not for love, but merely for company. Soon the marriage falters, and Zeena slips into perpetual complaint. After a while, the couple hires young Mattie Silver to help out; Ethan and Mattie fall in love; Zeena discovers their affection and sends Mattie away. On the way to the train, Ethan and Mattie impulsively take a long toboggan ride and accidentally hit a tree; Mattie, no longer able to walk, becomes a permanent, complaining resident in the Frome household; and Ethan, imprisoned
with the droning voices now of two complaining women, walks with a pronounced limp, the visible wound of his mortal woe.

Wharton's economical management of the fiction, however, makes it clear that the full story is far from simple. To begin with, the reader has no way of knowing whether the narrator's vision has any but the loosest foundation in fact. As the narrator candidly admits at the very beginning of the novel, "I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and... each time it was a different story." We have his version, now; but there is no reason to suppose that this story has any more truth than any of the other different stories. Even more disturbing, however, is the fact that Ethan's plight, as the narrator has construed it, is an echo of the narrator's own fatal dilemma. Isolated on a Starkfield farm, Ethan himself has fallen prey to his unwholesome visionary capacity. He may love Miss Mattie Silver, but he never speaks his love aloud, never kisses her until the moment before their fatal descent. Like Lily Bart, Ethan Frome is incapable of becoming an effective agent who can liberate himself from misery; unlike Lily, he makes not even groping efforts toward a reasonable, if limited, happiness. Instead, he prefers the warm, passive suffusions of his imagination. He thinks of how things might be if he and Mattie were to wed; he has fanciful images of some vague escape. Most of all, his life, as the narrator interprets it, is a yielding to the fatal and immobilizing force of his visionary capacity: "He let the vision possess him as they climbed the hill to the house. He was never so happy with her as when he abandoned himself to these dreams. Halfway up the slope Mattie stumbled against some unseen obstruction and clutched his sleeve to steady herself. 'The wave of warmth that went through him was like the prolongation of his vision.'

Ethan Frome relinquishes, finally, any ability to settle for real-world solutions to his problems; the visions of his imagination beckon with such beguiling beauty. He gives up possible solutions altogether and discovers not a lovely dream, but a nightmare vision which will define the rest of his life. This is, perhaps, a lesson to the narrator; it is certainly intended as a lesson for the reader. It is better to strive for real, if limited, possibilities for happiness, for the phantom of ideal rapture may well lead to a reality of unrelenting despair.

This period just before World War I was a time of active productivity for Edith Wharton: in her novels she was dealing in an honest and complex way with the need to find realistic ways of asserting one's own will to achieve valuable if circumscribed goals; in her personal life, this concern was mirrored in the energy that she devoted to this outpouring of fiction.

_The Reef_ is perhaps the most Jamesian of Wharton's novels. Artistically it falls short of the superb economy and control manifested in _Ethan Frome_; however, if it is a less successful work than its predecessor, it is at the same time much more ambitious in scope. _Ethan Frome_ deals with the tragic and sterile renunciation of sexuality; _The Reef_ attempts to deal with the complex personal and social implications of acting on one's sexual impulses, and it examines this question as it pertains to both men and women. For its time, _The Reef_ was an audacious experiment.

The story focuses on three expatriate Americans living in France: Anna Leath, George Darrow, and Sophy Viner. Anna Leath and George Darrow are both products of old New York. Years earlier, they enjoyed a flirtation, but Anna married and moved to Europe. Now in her early thirties, Anna is widowed, and George Darrow intends to continue the romance that her first marriage interrupted. The novel opens with him en route to make in person the proposal of marriage which his correspondence with her has implied. In the midst of this journey, he meets Sophy Viner.

Sophy cannot be "placed" by the standards according to which George and Anna had been reared. She is an orphan, supervised by no one. She seems to make a precarious living by acting as a sort of social secretary to the newly wealthy; she is not in any narrow sense dishonest or immoral—she shrinks from deliberately hurting people and from wanton or malicious acts of prevarication. Still, she does not live by the old-fashioned (and perhaps outdated) code that governs the lives of Anna Leath and George Darrow: "She is clearly an American, but with the loose native quality strained through a closer wool of manners: the composite produce of an enquiring and adaptable race." Most of all she is active and assertive, even though she is a woman, and she believes that active sexual enjoyment is quite acceptable for both sexes—even outside of marriage. The novel develops less by unraveling a plot or following a story than it does by presenting a dilemma; both Anna Leath and George Darrow must come to terms with this young woman, and neither is equipped with a set of categories that makes this task possible.

Darrow has a brief affair with her. Afterward, he recoils from the memory of it, loathing himself
for the weakness of having become temporarily so involved. He wants to rid himself of the traces of Sophy Viner, and he offers money to her (which she refuses)—as if thereby to render the affair a mere commercial transaction. Finally, he simply leaves to continue his journey to Anna Leath and the safe world with whose contours he is entirely familiar.

Anna is as different from Sophy as a woman can be: she is charming, beautiful, but without any apparent passion. Always vaguely aware of the fact that this “feminine purity” has left her missing something—perhaps something vital—she has merely “deepened the reserve which made envious mothers cite her as a model of ladylike repression.” She hoped that marriage might open certain mysterious doors to her, but marriage to a cool and proper Frenchman “had the effect of dropping another layer of gauze between herself and reality.” Now, looking forward to this second marriage, she still has little specific notion of the full range of feeling that a man and woman can experience together. When she learns of George Darrow’s brief liaison with Sophy, she is utterly unable to understand either his motivation or the girl’s; and of the two, Sophy seems altogether more enigmatic.

Eventually, the engagement between Darrow and Anna Leath is broken: each has been changed by the encounter with Sophy Viner. George Darrow has managed, perhaps, some limited insight into the complexities of human behavior which his earliest training had worked to deny: “You’ve always said you wanted, above all, to look at life, at the human problem, as it is, without fear and without hypocrisy,” he tells Anna, “and it’s not always a pleasant thing to look at.” Once Darrow steps out of Anna’s life, Anna is left to grope alone, knowing only that there still is much she cannot comprehend: “Here they were, these dark places, in her own bosom, and henceforth she would always have to traverse them to reach the beings she loved best!” It is a dubious lesson, and the novel ends on just such an uncertain note.

Of the five or six of Wharton’s novels which have received more than passing critical attention, The Reef is the weakest. It is perhaps Jamesian in its focus on interacting sensibilities, rather than on plot in the more ordinary sense. But this kind of fiction does not draw on Wharton’s strengths, and here one may well feel that the narrative mode and lack of clear resolution allows Wharton as author to evade some of the questions that her characters have raised. The complex personal and social implications of human sexuality remain to be dealt with more definitively in the later novels Summer and The Age of Innocence.

Nineteen thirteen was a momentous year in Wharton’s life. She was divorced from her husband of thirty years, and the ensuing reverberations among the Wharton’s Boston and New York friends were vividly—perhaps too vividly—impressed upon Wharton’s consciousness. Never after 1913 did she reside in America, and she visited her homeland only one more time before she died. Although Wharton had become involved with Morton Fullerton between 1907 and 1910, no scandal over the affair was ever attached to her during her lifetime (although there were probably a very few close friends who knew of the relationship—Henry James, for example). By contrast, Teddy Wharton’s family and their Boston friends resented the divorce, even if the marriage had founded for reasons everyone could see; yet there is no evidence that the wider circle of Edith Wharton’s friends in America was shocked or scandalized. Probably she could have resided in New York quite comfortably without suffering any major social exclusion. Still, she was concerned lest she be ostracized. It seems clear that the fears derived more from her own unresolved feelings than from objective reality. In any case, by 1913 Wharton had made Europe her home.

In 1913 Wharton brought out The Custom of the Country, one of her two or three best novels. Temporarily, Wharton abandoned fiction that concentrated primarily on sensibilities and returned to the satirical mode that had succeeded so brilliantly in The House of Mirth. Yet Wharton’s subtle insight into the workings of human nature is not excluded from this novel. Like The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country satirizes by demonstrating the way in which a corrupt society distorts character. In The House of Mirth, old New York’s fundamental moral weakness is captured by the fragility of Lily Bart’s beauty; the ruthless destructiveness of the new monied class is confirmed in the destruction of that beauty. In The Custom of the Country, the range of the satire is vastly broader, indeed epic in scope; but here as before, the visible evidence of corruption may be found in distortions of individual identity.

Both sexes and both sides of the Atlantic come under fire in this attack. The faded remnants of a better New York are captured in Wharton’s portrait of the Marvell family. Ralph Marvell, its scon, is a limp and passive man who contrives to live on his family’s modest inherited income and who spends his time pursuing the same dreams that infect Ethan.
Frome. The languid motions of his body suggest the weary indolence of his moral capacity, and the motions of his mind as well have an air of unutterable fatigue: "He could do charming things, if only he had known how to finish them!—and, on the writing table at his elbow, scattered sheets of prose and verse; charming things also, but, like the sketches, unfinished. Nothing in the... Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dawdling with life. For four or five generations it had been the rule... that a young man should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction." Ralph Marvell's European counterpart can be found in the French marquis Raymond de Chelles. The de Chelles family name itself suggests no more than an empty, elegant reliquary; and that mausoleum finds tangible form in the dreary, damp provincial family home at Saint Desert where "as far back as memory went, the ladies of the line of Chelles had always sat at their needlework... while the men of the house lamented the corruption of the government." Wharton's satirical sweep includes even the anglicized American Mr. Bowen, who watches the passing parade in the dining room of the Nouveau Luxe, analyzing exquisitely, making subtle and correct inferences while having little or no capacity for vital moral action. In some sense, all of these characters—the Marvells, the de Chelles, Mr. Bowen—are echoes of a past dignity. They represent a virtuoso conclusion to the line of Wharton characters that includes Laurence Selden and George Darrow, etiolated remnants of a once vigorous culture which seems to have been supplanted entirely.

Matched against these are the conquering barbarians of the twentieth century, a crude collection of unscrupulous hucksters. These characters have all the energy that the vanquished culture seems to have lost. Pushing, jostling, shoving their way to the top, they are an unappealing lot. Still, they thrive. And insofar as they represent anything, they represent our inevitable future. It is true that this ragtag collection is intended by Wharton as the object of our scorn: their very names are risible—Undine Spragg, Indiana Frusk, Elmer Moffatt. Yet because they embody the future, we dare not dismiss them with a laugh, nor does Wharton intend such a simplistic moral summation. Just as there is something wistfully beautiful about the world that is collapsing into extinction—a realm of shadowy elegance with "its dark mahogany doors and the quiet Dutch interior effect of its black and white marble paving"—so there is a more visceral appeal exerted by the magnificent kinetic vigor of the invaders, epitomized in Undine Spragg's supple grace.

In A Backward Glance, Wharton comments on her satiric method in The House of Mirth: "A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart." A similar method is at work here in the characterization of Lily's mirror opposite, Undine Spragg. Undine, like Lily, is grotesque; her character has been distorted by the social world that has shaped her. If Lily has ideals but lacks the moral energy to implement them or even to define them clearly, Undine seeks after goals worth earning. She knows, always, that she wants nothing but "the best"; however, she lives in a world of transition where there is no best to win. Undine is what Lily might have been if Lily had successfully negotiated the contract of marriage. And like Lily, Undine ultimately demands our sympathy as well as our scorn; she is a lost soul, moving from marriage to "better" marriage, always seeking that elusive best life and winning no fixed happiness at all.

Some critics have read The Custom of the Country as representative of the Naturalist school; however, Wharton is no Norris or Dreiser, and she does not see the human race as the inevitable victim of its own animal drives. Wharton suggests a different way to understand human history. Any healthy organism must have a clear aesthetic and moral structure, and along with them the energy to prevent these structures from crumbling. Ideally, every good society must have within it the capacity to change. Once old New York has lost its vitality, the aesthetic-moral traditions of that world become insufficient to ensure its survival. The emerging new world has all the animation that the fading world now lacks, but it has not yet imposed order on this vitality. Wharton expected, however, that moral and aesthetic coherence might emerge. Indeed, the change that takes place in the character of Elmer Moffatt strongly suggests such a possibility. Little more than a buffoon at the beginning of the novel, he emerges at its conclusion as a man of substance—capable, perhaps, of even tragic insight. Yet if this process of evolution is as Wharton describes it, something that takes place on the battlefield of the marketplace, then it is a process that will affect men directly, but women only indirectly. As Mr. Bowen remarks, "The average American looks down on his wife... How much does he let her share in the real business of life? How much does he rely on her judgment and
help in the conduct of serious affairs? . . . And what's the result—how do the women avenge themselves? All my sympathy's with them, poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempts to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male—the money and the motors and the clothes—and pretend to themselves and each other that that's what really constitutes life."

Poised on the brink of the future, The Custom of the Country records a period of momentous change. In the end, Wharton does not presume to predict where the future will lead us; it is an act of sufficient ambition merely to characterize the forces at work without attempting some tidy summation. Viewed in retrospect, Wharton's judgment seems to have been wise indeed. What followed in 1914 was World War I.

Since her divorce, Wharton had been trying to decide whether to settle permanently in France or England. For more than a decade she had made France her base of operations during the protracted time she had spent away from America; still, she had close ties with England, and warm friends (among them Henry James) urged her to buy a residence there. If it had not been for World War I, Wharton might have settled in England, for she was negotiating the purchase of a house there when war erupted. However, after some early uncertainty, she returned to Paris, where she spent most of the period between 1914 and the end of the war. After the war, in 1919, she moved to an elegant little eighteenth-century estate, Pavillon Colombe, in Saint Brice-sous-Forêt, about twelve miles north of Paris.

Wharton all but suspended her fiction writing during the war. Her energies were entirely drained by the momentous work she did for wartime France. She organized French seamstresses whose husbands had been called to war and set them up in workrooms, providing food and care for them and their children. She set up hostels for the Belgian refugees who flooded into France after Belgium fell to the Germans. She organized an employment service for these displaced persons so that they might be able to support themselves. She solicited American money tirelessly in an attempt to enlist the support of her fellow countrymen long before American soldiers entered battle. She worked at numerous tasks to sustain the war effort in Paris, and on 8 April 1916, the president of France appointed Edith Wharton a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, conferring upon her the highest honor that the country could bestow.

Throughout much of her adult life, even after the nervous illness of her young married days had entirely disappeared, Wharton's periods of work followed a predictable pattern: she would labor with great vigor, gradually tiring herself more and more; finally, she would be forced to rest, perhaps to take a vacation in order to get entirely away from her toil. This same pattern pertained to the enormous load of practical day-to-day work that Wharton did in France during World War I. One respite from war work was, ironically, the work of writing. During this period Wharton brought out a fascinating piece of literary journalism, Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort (1915), a book that gives details of front-line fighting as she had seen it herself. Yet this piece of writing was also part of the war work, not a diversion from it. During 1916, Wharton finally took a real "vacation" from the war effort and wrote Summer ("hot Ethan" as it was affectionately called by her intimates), another novel of the Berkshires and a consciously planned companion piece to Ethan Frome.

Of all the novelists who might be said to have influenced Edith Wharton, none had greater impact than the German master, Goethe. Wilhelm Meister, Goethe's great Bildungsroman, influenced Wharton's work more directly than any other piece of literature. Wharton had been rereading Goethe during this period—perhaps to retain a balanced picture of Germany (now so completely construed as the enemy by most of Wharton's acquaintances), but more probably to remind herself of the value of continuity during this period of dislocation and disruption. It might seem at first glance odd that Wharton should write such an American novel, a work sometimes wrongly dismissed as merely local-color fiction, at a time when she had taken up more or less permanent residence in Paris. However, the incongruity fades before careful scrutiny. Confronted with disruption, Wharton sought the security of coherent values; having scorned and satirized American culture in The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country, having rid herself of the liabilities of her heritage, she was willing to look for its assets.

It is no accident that Wharton's first American Bildungsroman should be a mirror image of Ethan Frome: Frome's world is a claustrophobic nightmare of relinquished passion, a world where the less than perfect real world has been rejected for a world of fruitless dreaming—in the end, a lethal world of interminable cold, where "cold" may be seen to represent the sterility of empty illusion. When Wharton offers a realistic response to this deadly dream, the life she suggests is neither sentimental nor optimis-
tic: life as it is genuinely experienced, Wharton would argue, bears little relationship to the rose-colored fantasies of youth or adolescence.

Sadly, true adulthood brings with it the recognition that happiness is always imperfect and incomplete. *Summer* (1917) moves away from *Ethan Frome* in many ways: its heroine is full of activity, far from the passive helplessness of Ethan Frome; moreover, she is determined to experience passion directly—to engage in a real love affair and not remain satisfied with mere pleasant imaginings. Yet her commendable resolutions have unexpected consequences. The title of this New England novel contains a wry joke. Summers are very brief in the Berkshires; a resident must prepare realistically for winter. Thus the giddy elation and intolerance of adolescence takes but a small portion of one's life. Its moods are all-consuming in their intensity, and the hopes and dreams of young adulthood may seem so real—so much more real than the prosaic world inhabited by those who are even a few years older—that this older world of stern and apparently incomprehending adults may seem entirely unacceptable to the adolescent. Yet it is toward this real world of limitation that every adolescent must move. Failing to direct one's journey toward a world of actual, if circumscribed, happiness may leave one mired forever in fantasy; it could even lead to the hellish nightmare of an *Ethan Frome*.

Thus if coldness is the emblem for ultimate isolation in *Ethan Frome*, here the unavoidable chilly fingers of autumn which creep into the novel's conclusion have the opposite intention. The coldness of *Summer* is a recognition that all idealized romances must have their ending; but it signals an ending with promise. Wharton brings the reader in from the cold and shows how people can join together with each other in comfort and dignity.

The tale of *Summer* is told with consummate simplicity and beauty: Charity Royall, the naive country girl who is its heroine, begins the novel with an arrogant, dismissive contempt for everything and everyone she has ever known. "How I hate everything," she murmurs—her very first words in the novel. A different world seems promised in the figure of Lucius Harney, a young man who has drifted into the Berkshires from his college vacation—a man who has nothing in common with Charity except that intensity of youth which they share. For a while, long enough for a passionate affair, this seems enough. Yet when the idyllic isolation of their romance is shattered by the intrusion of another creature—the baby whom Charity finds herself carrying—then adolescence must yield to maturity. A man and a woman may experience passion in an atmosphere divorced from every other reality, Wharton suggests. Probably they cannot experience love in such an environment; certainly they cannot manage to deal competently with the complex psychological and social consequences of love there. Hence the mere fact of the pregnancy itself is not Charity's problem; her problem derives from the need to see her beloved as a complete, real person. "Behind the frail screen of her lover's caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people—his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man's life is entangled." When Charity begins to understand Lucius in this more complex way, the things they had seemed to share drop away as unimportant; they have so little in common.

Charity finds a solution both to the practical problem of her pregnancy and to the larger problem with which she begins the novel—the problem of self-assertion and self-discovery as it is involved in the process of growing up. Eventually she learns that if she has begun by hating everything in her background, a more informed vision will reveal that there are things in her heritage to which she can return "for good." This is the lesson of Charity's guardian, Lawyer Royall, when he gives a formal address at the festivities of Old Home Week in August. It is a lesson she decipheres in more personal form when she returns at the end of the novel to the town she had so contemptuously dismissed at the beginning, willing at last to discover the good in her heritage and to make peace with it.

Wharton had begun her novel-writing career with a rebellious and rejecting attitude toward her own background; by 1917, when *Summer* was published, she had gone a long way toward reconsidering her more youthful judgments. To some extent, this reevaluation was occasioned merely by the mellowing process of aging, but Wharton's view of World War I greatly influenced the direction that her fully matured assessment would take. One can catch glimpses of the change in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), a study of the nation which she had begun to consider her adoptive home: "Only children think that one can make a garden with flowers broken from the plant; only inexperience imagines that novelty is always synonymous with improvement.... The French express, perhaps unconsciously, their sense of the weight of their own long moral experience by their universal comment on the American fellows-in-arms whose fine qualities they so fully recognize. 'Ce sont des
enfants—they are mere children!" is what they always say of the young Americans: say it tenderly, almost anxiously, like people passionately attached to youth and to the young, but also with a little surprise at the narrow surface of perception which most of these young minds offer to the varied spectacle of the universe.

"A new race, working out its own destiny in new conditions, cannot hope for the moral and intellectual maturity of a race seated at the cross-roads of the old civilisations. . . .

"Had [America] had a more mature sense of the value of tradition and the strength of continuity she would have kept a more reverent hold upon this treasure, and the culture won from it would have been an hundredfold greater. . . .

"In all this, France has a lesson to teach and a warning to give. . . . We should cultivate the sense of continuity, that 'sense of the past' which enriches the present and binds us up with the world's great establishing tradition of art and poetry and knowledge." Edith Wharton was preparing to begin her own journey back into the shaping culture which she had so vehemently put behind—preparing to look one last time at old New York so that she might discover some way to return "for good." The result of Wharton's quest is perhaps her finest novel, The Age of Innocence.

Like Summer, The Age of Innocence is a Bildungsroman; it examines the poignant process by which its hero, Newland Archer, grows from adolescence to manhood. Because The Age of Innocence is set in the past (the principal portion of the novel takes place in New York during 1872), some critics have dismissed the work as no more than a nostalgic retrospection. Because the novel offers an unapologetic view of the narrowness of that world, other critics are inclined to read it as no more than a satire—and one which lacks the acid, biting fury of The Custom of the Country. There is, of course, some truth in both of these views. The Age of Innocence aims to offer a balanced assessment: it does not avoid the limitations of old New York (which would always remain, in Wharton's memory, as an often painfully constricting society); yet it wisely suggests that at least some of these limitations had use and meaning, that they gave form and structure to everyday life. Above all, Wharton concludes, the New York of her youth was a world infused with a coherent set of values that permitted men and women to live together in loving dignity—a world in which children, inevitably different from their parents, might nonetheless carry the integrity of some of their parents' values into their own lives, thereby allowing the good of the old ways to be preserved in newer ways. The hero's name, "Newland" Archer, indicates that the lesson Wharton derived from her study of French ways might be applied to her native America.

The story of The Age of Innocence is almost trite in its simplicity: Newland Archer has just become engaged to May Welland when the novel opens; it is a happy affiancement, a joining together of families who have known each other for generations. Like many of the men in earlier Wharton novels, Newland has a penchant for dreaming: "He was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subter satisfaction than its realization." It is possible, then, that Newland might fall into the indecisiveness of a George Darrow or the more devastating idle inwardsness of a Ralph Marvell; in short, perhaps the greatest danger in Newland's life comes from himself—from the inconstant tendency to exchange possible, real-world happiness for the more charming visions of his own fancy. The force of this possibility is felt almost immediately when, shortly after the novel opens, Newland is introduced to May's European cousin, Ellen Olenska.

Ellen, the Countess Olenska, has come to America to evade a tyrannical husband; her "case," as Newland construes it, is exotic and full of interest—her "pale and serious face appealed to his fancy as suited to the occasion and to her unhappy situation." Newland Archer knows almost nothing of the details of Ellen's unhappiness; indeed, one feels that details would lessen her charm. How much more pleasing and convenient to balance an indefinite and infinitely appealing dusky vision of Ellen against an oversimplified, parochial image of May as "the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything." Not surprisingly, Newland supposes his love for May to be fading before the intenser feelings which Ellen's presence has stirred in him, for Ellen comes to represent an entire world which exists in beckoning mystery outside the neat and undoubtedly circumscribed world of New York brownstones, a "society in which the Countess Olenska has lived and suffered, and also—perhaps—tasted mysterious joys." The reader, who may be more clear-sighted about Newland's "love" for Ellen than Newland himself, can often perceive that the desperate passion which develops is not, perhaps, love—but rather a reaction against the recognition that in settling down to commit himself to any given, any real (and therefore limited) possible life, all other possible lives are necessarily rejected. In Newland's imagination, Ellen is conjured
with the roses, and was vexed at having spoken of them. He wanted to say: "I called on your cousin yesterday," but hesitated. If Madame Olenska had not spoken of his visit it might seem awkward that he should. Yet not to do so gave the affair an air of mystery that he disliked. To shake off the question he began to talk of their own plans, their future, and Mrs. Welland's insistence on a long engagement.

"If you call it long! Isabel Chivers and Reggie were engaged for two years: Grace and Thorley for nearly a year and a half. Why aren't we very well off as we are?"

It was the traditional maidenly interjection, and he felt ashamed of himself for finding it singularly childish. No doubt she simply echoed what was said for her; but she was nearing her twenty-second birthday, and he wondered at what age "nice" women began to speak for themselves.

"Never, if we won't let them, I suppose," he mused, and recalled his mad outburst to Mr. Sillerton Jackson: "Women ought to be as free as we are —"

It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness?

"We might be much better off. We might be altogether together — we might travel."

Her face lit up. That would be "lovely," she owned: she
not in terms of one other, one different, life choice: rather, she comes to represent all other lives, all the unknown options which he will relinquish when he marries. Thus the projected marriage to May begins to seem not a life choice so much as a life sentence.

When Ellen Olenska presses Newland to articulate his hopes for the life they might spend together, Newland lapses into incoherent generalities: "I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like [wife]—categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other. Who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter."

Ironically, although Newland fancies May Welland to live a life of total innocence, it is his "age of innocence" that gives the novel its title; he supposes that a man and a woman might love outside of all social constraints and limitations—and that such love might even endure the test of time. Ellen Olenska knows this hope to be an illusion, and when Archer postulates a world where the two of them might be "the whole of life to each other," Ellen merely responds with a laugh. "Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?" Ellen understands the complex social implications of the loving relationship of man and woman; May understands them too. Newland must discover them, and that is the essential step he must take toward manhood.

Wharton did not suppose that the lesson was an easy one: old New York was a constricting environment—no one had better cause to know that than Edith Wharton—and in the preliminary plotting of this novel, her own residual longings remained to be dealt with. There are early outlines of the novel in which Newland does break with May and run away to be happy with Ellen. Yet in these drafts, Wharton could postulate no common happiness for Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska: they have so little mutual past, so few similar tastes—in the end, no shared reality at all. She misses the rich intellectual and artistic life that she had always known in Europe, and he misses the familiar amenities of New York; inevitably, they separate and return to their different worlds.

In the novel as Wharton finally wrote it, then, Newland is forced to come to terms with the possibilities for happiness which life really can hold for him (as opposed to the options he might like to have); in concrete terms, this growth is measured by the yardstick of his marriage. Insofar as Newland is unable to create a satisfying life with May (and for the first year or so of their marriage he seems destined for ultimate unhappiness), to that extent will he have failed to utilize the life he has chosen in productive ways.

One triumph of this novel is Wharton's management of the reader's sympathetic identification with Newland. Throughout much of the work, Newland is convinced that marriage to May, with all the restrictions that would imply, must be a barren existence. He longs for that indefinable "something more" even as one part of him seems to recognize that he has chosen this marriage and that the choice itself reveals a limitation in the range of options that is available to such a man as Newland. All the while Newland suffers this agony of longing and loss, one part of the reader suffers with him—hoping, as any dreamer does, for the magical "something more" that the mystery of Ellen's personality appears to promise. The penultimate chapter in the novel seems to seal Newland's doom: his wife, May, comes into his study to tell him privately that she is carrying their child. Newland feels the force of this obligation as he would feel no other; his dreams of Ellen must die now, and all the joy of his life seems lost forever—to Newland's eyes and perhaps to those of the sympathetic reader.

The last chapter begins in that same study, thirty years later. "It was the room," Newland reflects, "in which most of the real things of his life had happened." Here his wife had told him of their coming child; here the growing child had taken his first, staggering steps; here this daughter had told her father of her engagement; here "he and May had always discussed the future of the children.... But above all—sometimes Archer put it above all—it was in that library that the Governor of New York... had turned to his host, and said, banging his clenched fist on the table and gnashing his eyeglasses: 'Hang the professional politician! You're the kind of man the country wants, Archer'.... It was little enough to look back on; but when he remembered to what the young men of his generation and his set had looked forward... even his small contribution to the new state of things seemed to count, as each brick counts in a well-built wall. He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante; but he had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in; and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride."

In this brilliant turn of the last chapter, Wharton's method becomes clear. Newland Archer has taken the best that has been available to him and
has made of it a life worth remembering with pride. Not favored perhaps with opportunities nor blessed with extraordinary capacities, Newland is a man whose lot was inevitably fated to be more limited than his rich imagination had hoped. But he has not, in the end, been led astray by that imagination; he has chosen the real—the finest possibility that his world had to offer—and he has become an authentic, admirable man.

After the publication of *The Age of Innocence*; however, nothing that she wrote subsequently could rank next to this novel or to several of the novels which preceded it.

Between 1920 and 1937, she produced five collections of short stories, nine novels, three volumes of nonfiction, a book of poetry, and numerous articles. Some are worth investigation. *The Old Maid* (1924), a novella which deals with the struggle between a birth mother and an adoptive mother for influence over the daughter whom both have loved, is a poignant and powerful tale. (It was later made into a film starring Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins.) *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), while not comparable to James’s essays on the same subject, has instructive passages and an excellent essay on Marcel Proust; her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), is entertaining—though far from candid. Yet all of these fail to meet the mark of Wharton’s earlier achievement.

Most of the full-length novels of this period fall far short of the standard set in the earlier fictions. *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), a story of an engaging young man and woman who agree to become fortune hunters and marry for money but who succumb to love and marry each other, is shallow in its characterization and facile in plotting. *A Son at the Front* (1923), Wharton’s novel about World War I, is sometimes sensitive in portraying a father’s anguish at the death of his soldier son; however, it is spoiled by an excessively patriotic tone that was outdated by the time of publication. *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925) is the best of these later novels—capturing a middle-aged woman’s wistful longing for her lost youth and ruthlessly outlining a mother’s competition with her daughter—yet even this work is flawed by excessive melodrama. *Twilight Sleep* (1927), Wharton’s satire of the “modern woman,” is uncharacteristically crude; and *The Children* (1928), her one sustained effort to portray preadolescents, is stilted and ultimately unsuccessful. Her last two complete novels—*Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932)—are Wharton’s attempt to chronicle the growth of a novelist. The subject was close to her heart, and these should have been among her best works. But perhaps she was too tired; perhaps she was too reticent. For whatever reason, these last novels are weak and best forgotten.

When she died in 1937, Wharton was well past her prime as a writer; it was too easy to dismiss her work as dated or, even worse, imitative. Now almost two generations later, the modern reader is able to
appreciate those talents which were uniquely hers—an incomparable understanding of complex psychological motivation and perhaps the keenest satiric capacity in American fiction. The eagerness with which this generation of readers greets her books—especially as they are read on college campuses—suggests that we will never be forced to reclaim Edith Wharton again.

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**Papers:**
The major manuscript repository for Edith Wharton’s papers is the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

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**WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE**
(10 February 1868-29 January 1944)

SELECTED BOOKS: *Rhymes By Two Friends,* by White and Albert Bigelow Paine (Fort Scott, Kans.: Izor, 1893);
The *Real Issue* (Chicago: Way & Williams, 1896);
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*Stratagems and Spoils* (New York: Scribners, 1901);
*In Our Town* (New York: McClure, Philips, 1906);
*A Certain Rich Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1909);
*The Old Order Changeth* (New York: Macmillan, 1910);
*God’s Puppets* (New York: Macmillan, 1916);
The *Martial Adventures of Henry and Me* (New York: Macmillan, 1918);
*In the Heart of a Fool* (New York: Macmillan, 1918);
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*Politics: The Citizen’s Business* (New York: Macmillan, 1924);
*Woodrow Wilson* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924; London: Benn, 1926);
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*Some Cycles of Cathay* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press/London: Milford, 1925);
*Boys—Then And Now* (New York: Macmillan, 1926);
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*What It’s All About* (New York: Macmillan, 1936);
*Forty Years on Main Street,* comp. Russell H. Fitzgibbon (New York & Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937);
*A Puritan In Babylon* (New York: Macmillan, 1938);
The *Changing West* (New York: Macmillan, 1939);