

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*The Cambridge Introduction to
Edith Wharton*

Born in New York into a world of wealth and privilege, and writing with unique insight into the lives of the rich and fashionable, Edith Wharton was a best-seller in her time, and is now, again, one of the most widely read American authors. This book provides an accessible and stimulating introduction to Wharton's life and writings, to help map her work for new readers, and to encourage more detailed exploration of her texts and contexts. Suggesting a range of perspectives on her most famous novels – *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) – it stimulates fresh lines of inquiry, examining these alongside other writings that are now attracting lively critical interest. With its clear structure, illustrations and guide to further study, this book will form the ideal starting point for students and for general readers.

Pamela Knights is Senior Lecturer in English at Durham University, UK.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

PAMELA KNIGHTS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton
Pamela Knights
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521687195

© Pamela Knights 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-86765-8 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68719-5 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
Chapter 1 Life	1
Edith Wharton (1862–1937): biographical overview	2
Growing up in old New York: family and social contexts	7
Chapter 2 Contexts	18
Modernity	18
Palimpsests	21
Transatlantic crossings and the expatriate literary tradition	23
Chapter 3 Works	31
General perspectives	31
Turn-of-the-century writings	41
Mapping the modern	56
Culture and consciousness	76
Two American stories	89
The impact of World War I	101

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton
Pamela Knights
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
	Chapter 4 Critical reception	122
	Wharton’s readers	122
	Critical reputation	128
	Legacies	136
	<i>Notes</i>	138
	<i>Guide to further reading</i>	145
	<i>Index</i>	150

Illustrations

1 The Mount in winter. (Reproduced by permission of the estate of Edith Wharton and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.)	page 4
2 Harrison Fisher, ‘American Beauties’ (1907). (By permission of Library of Congress.)	38
3 Alonzo Kimball, ‘He stood by her in silence, his eyes on the injured man’; frontispiece, <i>The Fruit of the Tree</i> (New York: Scribner’s, 1907).	74
4 The Electropoise, advertisement, <i>The Delineator</i> (March 1896).	88
5 Edith Wharton’s French automobile permit, World War I (May 1915). (Reproduced by permission of the estate of Edith Wharton and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.)	103
6 Edith Wharton, genealogical sketch, <i>The Age of Innocence</i> . (Reproduced by permission of the estate of Edith Wharton and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.)	108

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

In her publicity photographs, draped in furs and lace, festooned with small dogs, or posed at her writing desk, Edith Wharton became famous as the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan of American authors: brilliant, rich, snobbish, acerbic. Her biography and writings complicate this picture. Within the old and well-off New York clan into which she was born, only a couple of members, so she recalled, had ever ‘stepped out of the strait path of the usual’ (ABG 23). Although she sensed early that she was ‘different’, she never believed herself to be a particularly bright or confident child; and she felt an oddity in her family. But she grew up to forge for herself a remarkable life – as traveller, hostess, social observer, expatriate, divorcée, lover, conversationalist, arbiter on interior decoration, inspirational gardener, intellectual, wartime relief organiser and, above all, professional writer. Her fictions made her a best-seller in her own day and, in literary histories, a novelist of the highest rank. As the endless stream of new reprints attests, she still appeals to a wide general audience; and she was, and remains, a powerful influence on generations of younger writers. R. W. B. Lewis’s revealing *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975) fired modern critical interest, stimulating a wealth of new approaches; Hermione Lee’s 800-page life in 2007 has stirred a fresh wave of attention. *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton* aims to suggest to new readers some possible entry-points into her writings, and to encourage individuals to begin to map their own routes (and take diversions) into areas of particular interest.

Most readers first encounter the ‘canonical Wharton’: *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920); these remain central to this *Introduction*, where I consider them within various cultural and literary landscapes. Anyone wishing to venture further has a wealth of choices, which I also touch on here: Wharton’s travelogues, ghost stories and other short fictions; her war writing; her narratives of ‘new’ America in the 1920s; her meditations upon the art of fiction, and her various ‘backward glances’ of the 1930s. Many first editions are now reproduced online; as are page-images of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Preface*

some of her most important manuscripts. We can read writings once unpublished or lost, such as her satirical/sentimental novelette, 'Fast and Loose' (finished shortly before her fifteenth birthday in 1877); or her journal of her early Mediterranean cruise, which came to light in the Municipal library at Hyères, on the Riviera, in 1991; her critical essays or literary reviews; her garden-plans or poetry. Readers acquainted only with the image of Mrs Wharton, the reserved upper-class lady, have been riveted by passages ignored in her published memoirs, but uncovered in her archives: her story of attempting on the eve of marriage to elicit the facts of life from her chilly mother; her tempestuous letters, verses and love diary from her mid-life affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton; her experimental erotic fragment, 'Beatrice Palmato', with its striking description of consensual father-daughter incest. Discussions of her notebooks, unfinished novels and unpublished plays and stories continue to intensify debate.

All these enrich readers' possibilities, but crowd a landscape already densely packed. Here, the opening chapters will map Wharton's life and writings onto the broader contours of her society and wider cultural and literary contexts. For completely new readers, I try to introduce her work in these chapters without disclosing too much about its turns of plot and narrative. The following chapter, 'Works', consolidates these contexts, beginning with some general perspectives and delineating some frameworks relevant to all her writing. As Wharton's details repay attention, I give a taste of reading in close-up, looking from various angles at an early short story, and at selected aspects of *The House of Mirth*. The rest of the chapter moves outwards, to give an outline of her career, highlighting a range of individual texts and groups of texts, and aligning significant events in her private and professional life. Within this dominantly linear model, I suggest other possible ways of thinking about Wharton – for example, through theme, place, genre, form or craft. The final chapter gives an overview of Wharton's changing critical reception, and points to the continuing life of her texts in the creative legacies she still inspires.

Engaging with Wharton the writer keeps us in touch with Wharton the lifelong reader: that 'interchange of thought' which overflowed in notebooks, memoirs, letters, essays, travel-writing and fictions, and, as biographers record, in her conversations and numerous literary friendships. Throughout her life, in private writings, as in her fiction, she presents encounters with books: descriptions of collaborative reading and writing, evocations of an ideal listener (her friend, Walter Berry) and the inadequate one (her husband, Teddy); her own literary enthusiasms and pilgrimages – all these hint at the kind of responses she may have wished for her own creative work. In

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface xi

her stories, she satirised popularisers and intellectual pretentiousness: the unstoppable parlour lecturer in ‘The Pelican’; the explicators of a dead poet in ‘The Muse’s Tragedy’; and, most devastatingly, the ladies’ reading circle in ‘Xingu’. Duly cautioned, I attempt in this introduction simply to share my own enthusiasm, and to keep questions open: about the child, the woman, the writer and the author, ‘Edith Wharton’; and, above all, the writings which come together under her name.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the many people, at Durham and elsewhere, who generously gave me time and support: Jennifer Terry, Michael O'Neill, Pat Waugh, Kay Sambell; Janet Beer and Liz Nolan; Ray Ryan and anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press and Monica Kendall, my copy-editor; staff at the Lit & Phil, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, The British Library Newspaper Library, Colindale, and the Beinecke Library, Yale University; Ben Knights for appearing keen to read drafts; and Richard Godden who introduced me to Wharton in 1978. My readings since have evolved in dialogue with many inspiring critics; particular thanks go to colleagues at the Edith Wharton Society. I have credited specific influences, and detailed further references as fully as possible within the space permitted. My chief debt is to Durham University English students, who, for over twenty years, have been ever-enthusiastic about discussing Wharton; and, especially, since 1997, all my special 'Wharton' groups, who flung themselves into the seminars which helped me to develop my own readings and to structure this book.

I gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint the following:

Extracts from Edith Wharton's manuscript/typescript collections held at the Beinecke Library, Yale University; photographs of The Mount, Edith Wharton's automobile permit and the manuscript page of *The Age of Innocence* (family tree) are reprinted by permission of the estate of Edith Wharton and the Watkins/Loomis Agency. 'American Beauties' is reproduced with permission of The Library of Congress.

Abbreviations

Unless noted otherwise: place, New York; publisher, Scribner’s.

Works

ABG	<i>A Backward Glance</i> (Appleton-Century, 1934)
AI	<i>The Age of Innocence</i> (Appleton, 1920)
Beinecke	Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL Mss 42 [with box and folder number]; now increasingly appearing online
C	<i>The Children</i> (Appleton, 1928)
CC	<i>The Custom of the Country</i> (1913)
CI	<i>Crucial Instances</i> (1901)
CR	James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray (eds.), <i>Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews</i> (Cambridge University Press, 1992)
DH	<i>The Decoration of Houses</i> , with Ogden Codman Jr (1897)
DM	<i>The Descent of Man and Other Stories</i> (1904)
EF	<i>Ethan Frome</i> (1911)
FF	<i>Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort</i> (1915)
FT	<i>The Fruit of the Tree</i> (1907)
FWM	<i>French Ways and their Meaning</i> (Appleton, 1919)
GI	<i>The Greater Inclination</i> (1899)
GM	<i>The Glimpses of the Moon</i> (Appleton, 1922)
HM	<i>The House of Mirth</i> (1905)
HWW	<i>The Hermit and the Wild Woman</i> (1908)
IB	<i>Italian Backgrounds</i> (1905)
IM	<i>In Morocco</i> (1920)
IVG	<i>Italian Villas and their Gardens</i> (Century, 1904)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86765-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton

Pamela Knights

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xiv *List of abbreviations*

'L&I'	'Life and I' (in <i>Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings</i> , ed. Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York: Library of America, 1990)
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of Edith Wharton</i> , ed. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (London: Simon and Schuster, 1988)
'LGNY' <i>Lib</i>	'A Little Girl's New York' (<i>Harper's Magazine</i> , 1938); in <i>UCW Edith Wharton's Library: A Catalogue</i> , George Ramsden (compiler), foreword, Hermione Lee (Settrington, Yorkshire: Stone Trough Books, 1999)
<i>M</i>	<i>The Marne</i> (Appleton, 1918)
<i>MFF</i>	<i>A Motor-Flight through France</i> (1908)
<i>MR</i>	<i>The Mother's Recompense</i> (Appleton, 1925)
<i>ONY</i>	<i>Old New York</i> (1924; single-volume edition: Scribner's, 1952)
<i>R</i>	<i>The Reef</i> (Appleton, 1912)
<i>S</i>	<i>Summer</i> (Appleton, 1917)
<i>SF</i>	<i>A Son at the Front</i> (1923)
<i>T</i>	<i>The Touchstone</i> (1900)
<i>TMG</i>	<i>Tales of Men and Ghosts</i> (1910)
<i>TS</i>	<i>Twilight Sleep</i> (Appleton, 1927)
<i>TVD</i>	<i>The Valley of Decision</i> (1902)
<i>UCW</i>	<i>Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings</i> , ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton University Press, 1996)
<i>WF</i>	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i> (1925; Touchstone, 1997)
<i>XS</i>	<i>Xingu and Other Stories</i> (1916)

Other resources

<i>BE</i>	<i>Brooklyn Eagle</i> online: www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/
<i>Benstock</i>	Shari Benstock, <i>No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton</i> (London: Hamilton, 1994)
<i>Lee</i>	Hermione Lee, <i>Edith Wharton</i> (London: Chatto and Windus, 2007)
<i>Lewis</i>	R. W. B. Lewis, <i>Edith Wharton: A Biography</i> (London: Constable, 1975)
<i>NYT</i>	<i>New York Times</i>