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.

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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
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
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.
Acknowledgements

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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

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher/Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABG</td>
<td>A Backward Glance</td>
<td>(Appleton-Century, 1934)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>The Age of Innocence</td>
<td>(Appleton, 1920)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beinecke</td>
<td>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</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>The Children</td>
<td>(Appleton, 1928)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>The Custom of the Country</td>
<td>(1913)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>Crucial Instances</td>
<td>(1901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DH</td>
<td>The Decoration of Houses, with Ogden Codman Jr (1897)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>The Descent of Man and Other Stories</td>
<td>(1904)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EF</td>
<td>Ethan Frome</td>
<td>(1911)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FF</td>
<td>Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort</td>
<td>(1915)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT</td>
<td>The Fruit of the Tree</td>
<td>(1907)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWM</td>
<td>French Ways and their Meaning</td>
<td>(Appleton, 1919)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GI</td>
<td>The Greater Inclination</td>
<td>(1899)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>The Glimpses of the Moon</td>
<td>(Appleton, 1922)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM</td>
<td>The House of Mirth</td>
<td>(1905)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HWW</td>
<td>The Hermit and the Wild Woman</td>
<td>(1908)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>Italian Backgrounds</td>
<td>(1905)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>In Morocco</td>
<td>(1920)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IVG</td>
<td>Italian Villas and their Gardens</td>
<td>(Century, 1904)</td>
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List of abbreviations


‘LGNY’ ‘A Little Girl’s New York’ (Harper’s Magazine, 1938); in UCW

Lib Edith Wharton’s Library: A Catalogue, George Ramsden (compiler), foreword, Hermione Lee (Settrington, Yorkshire: Stone Trough Books, 1999)

M The Marne (Appleton, 1918)

MFF A Motor-Flight through France (1908)

MR The Mother’s Recompense (Appleton, 1925)

ONY Old New York (1924; single-volume edition: Scribner’s, 1952)

R The Reef (Appleton, 1912)

S Summer (Appleton, 1917)

SF A Son at the Front (1923)

T The Touchstone (1900)

TMG Tales of Men and Ghosts (1910)

TS Twilight Sleep (Appleton, 1927)

TVD The Valley of Decision (1902)

UCW Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton University Press, 1996)

WF The Writing of Fiction (1925; Touchstone, 1997)

XS Xingu and Other Stories (1916)

Other resources

BE Brooklyn Eagle online: www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/


NYT New York Times