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978-0-521-12678-6 - Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray

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The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provide representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically, each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals, generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by the volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted.

This book represents the first comprehensive collection of contemporary reviews of the writing of Edith Wharton from the 1890s until her death in 1937. Many of the reviews are reprinted from hard-to-locate contemporary newspapers and periodicals. In addition, lists of other reviews, not presented here, are provided. These materials document the response of the reviewers to specific works and indicate the development of Wharton's reputation as a novelist, short-story writer, travel writer, and autobiographer.

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AMERICAN CRITICAL ARCHIVES 2
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Edith Wharton

The Contemporary Reviews

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Series Editor's Preface

The American Critical Archives series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editor of each volume has provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired—be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases England, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE

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Introduction

If, as Irving Howe suggested in 1962, literary critics were still trying to refute the claim that Edith Wharton (1862–1937) was a rich, clever, narrow, dated, bleak, and minor Henry James, and if, as Gore Vidal has remarked, Edith Wharton has been denied her rightful place in American letters because of her sex, class, and residence abroad, the explanation may be found in some of Mrs. Wharton's earliest reviewers, who trivialized her work as that of a mere woman, sneered at the elite class that was her material, and dismissed her as out of touch with America. This is indeed paradoxical, since—from the very beginning of her career—Mrs. Wharton was simultaneously recognized as a writer of exceptional literary distinction. To examine reviews of the kind reprinted in this volume is to recognize how remarkable, even if she irritated them, nearly all of her reviewers understood her to be. The key words and phrases that stand out in these reviews are illuminating. She was praised for her “clarity,” “delicacy,” “distinction,” “chaste and unerring discrimination,” “polish,” “grace,” “skillful, finished writing,” “command of good English,” and “mastery of language.” Reviewers found remarkable her “profundity of comprehension,” “fine intuition,” “profound and often startling insight into the deeper things of life,” and the exceptional power with which she brought “subjective reality . . . into the field of vision.” Hers was “conscientious workmanship” performed with the “ease of a skilled craftsman,” with a “just sense of proportion.” Her work was, in short, “serious art.”

Readers and reviewers alike also praised Mrs. Wharton's fiction for its penetrating moral analysis, incisive social criticism, historical understanding, and aesthetic power. She had an avid popular readership, was extensively and usually favorably reviewed, made a substantial fortune from fiction royalties, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920, had many of her works translated, and experienced several theatrical or film productions of her work in her lifetime. After her death, however, her critical reputation declined sharply. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the history of critical reputations; but in Mrs. Wharton's case the decline was so steep that Patricia Plant, in concluding her 1962 dissertation, “The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton's Fiction in America and England with an Annotated Enumerative Bibliography of Wharton Criticism from 1900 to 1961,” felt obliged to do battle with a pervasive but simplistic view that Mrs. Wharton, born in the Genteel Era, was distinctly

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“old-fashioned” and would never regain the esteem with which most of her contemporaries had regarded her.

Fortunately, from the vantage point of the 1990s, Mrs. Wharton’s star is again in the ascendant. But it is worthwhile to examine the early reviews of Mrs. Wharton’s work because nearly all of the major issues that have preoccupied recent criticism are present, in some form or other, in the work of her reviewers between 1898 and 1938. Looking at the history of Wharton reviewing, it is possible to discover three phases in the reception of her work.

In the first phase, between 1899 and 1905—from *The Greater Inclination* up to *The House of Mirth*—Mrs. Wharton was sometimes praised but usually criticized as a writer in the school of Henry James. The response to her work in this early period—in the reviews of *The Touchstone* (1900), *Crucial Instances* (1901), *Sanctuary* (1903), and *The Descent of Man* (1904)—often depended on the reviewer’s opinion of James himself. For better or worse, Mrs. Wharton broke in upon the literary scene at the very moment when James’s achievements, especially those of the “major phase,” were being hotly debated by critics in both England and America; they either liked or did not like the moral complexities and stylistic involutions of the “Master” in this mandarin phase. She was thus caught up in, and at times victimized by, a controversy not of her own making. In April 1899, in *Literary World*, for example, John Barry attacked Mrs. Wharton’s style as reproducing some of Henry James’s worst faults. On May 13, he commented that it had come to his attention that she disliked these comparisons with James, and therefore he had reason to hope that her subsequent work would “not be marred by a slavish adherence to the methods of a very questionable literary model.” In August, the *Critic* reviewer went even farther, initiating a prejudice that would harm her for more than half a century. The reviewer accused her of “plagiarism, or unconscious adaptation. . . . Nor is the suggestion,” he argued, “merely one of method.” He found her dependence on James “in very substance, even in titular phrase.” The idea that she was a minor James still recurs in Wharton criticism, a point of view usually expressed by those who have not read much of either author.

Even so, there was another side to this question of Jamesian influence. The reviewer of *The Touchstone* for the *Atlantic Monthly* observed in 1900 that she who “has sat at the feet of Henry James” and “unquestionably learned much from him . . . would now do well to rise from her deferential attitude. Better things than he can inspire are, we believe, within the scope of her still widening possibilities.” Likewise, although the *Bookman* noted the Jamesian influence in saying that “she has caught his latest manner,” its reviewer found that “she has improved upon his workmanship and therefore she deserves a wholly independent criticism.” The London *Academy* was even more complimentary to Wharton, at James’s expense. Although the reviewer found her subjects Jamesian, he added that “though she is subtle, she is much less subtle

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than Mr. James and—may we utter it?—possibly more articulate.” The *Athenæum* found Madame de Treymes to be “a more subtle study than any of the characters in Mr. James’s novel [*The American*]”. This debate so tended to eclipse other aspects of her work that by 1904 the *Academy* reviewer of *The Descent of Man* pulled out of it entirely with this bit of self-congratulation: “[Let] the present reviewer account it to himself for righteousness that he has omitted all allusion to the particular King Charles’s head of Mrs. Wharton’s reviewers in general.”

The entire question of Jamesian influence—or, to put it another way, of Mrs. Wharton’s originality as a writer—thereafter became such a recurrent theme of Wharton criticism that it was difficult to see it in terms of a transient historical problem in the literary consciousness of the fin de siècle. But as these reviews will suggest, James himself was so controversial that the *literary* relationship between these two friends could hardly have been judged objectively. This situation is all the more remarkable because Mrs. Wharton, in fact, did not like James’s novels of the “Major Phase” and told their Scribner editor, William Crary Brownell, that she could not read them.

The second phase of Wharton criticism in the early reviews runs from 1905, with her best-seller, *The House of Mirth*, until 1920, with her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence*. The mere publication of Mrs. Wharton’s *Valley of Decision* (1902), with its historical setting of eighteenth-century Italy, ought to have made plain that she was no mere disciple of Henry James. But with *The House of Mirth* there could no longer be a question as to originality or discipleship to James. Here was a work of independent power and literary distinction, an episodic social chronicle written to quite different specifications of form and, in its irony and social satire, resembling in no manifest way the involutions of consciousness and style of *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl*. Lily Bart was said by the *Literary Digest* reviewer to surpass George Eliot’s Gwendolyn Harleth (in *Daniel Deronda*); and for the *Outlook* reviewer, the novel marked “the transition in Mrs. Wharton’s career from the region of cultivated tastes and skill to that of free, direct, individual creation.” James MacArthur, in *Harper’s Weekly*, noting the “sanity and truth” of her “relentless arraignment of the conditions which she portrays,” found the novel “the most timely and terrible commentary on the heartless and cynical outcome of a state of things we see all about us at present that could be conceived. [It] appeals like an inspiration, and comes with the authority of one who is a seer.”

This triumph was followed by other novels nearly as great as *The House of Mirth*, or perhaps even greater, according to a number of reviewers. This is the period when Edith Wharton became, in the critical literature, the first lady of American letters, owing to such achievements as *Madame de Treymes* (1907), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* (1908), *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef*

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(1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Xingu* (1916), *Summer* (1917), *The Marne* (1918), and her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

During this second phase of her reception (1905–20), other themes, which would tend to dominate later Wharton criticism, emerged or became more strongly accented. One of these themes involves Mrs. Wharton's status as a female writer and her portrayals of female characters. A great deal of sexist bias is manifest in the reviewers' comments—some of them positive, some negative. On the positive side, Aline Gorren, in the *Critic*, called for female writers to write of women with authority and looked to Mrs. Wharton "primarily for the genius with which she will bring to the surface the underground movements of women's minds." Mrs. Wharton was also praised in the *Academy* for her "sympathetic delineation of her heroine's character [that of Lily Bart], her acute analysis of a woman's mind," and the London *Saturday Review* praised Mrs. Wharton's "masterly study of the modern American woman, . . . spoilt and selfish, and yet withal intensely lovable." The loveliness of the heroine—or, to put it somewhat differently, the ability of the reader to identify with her—seemed to be a criterion of the acceptance of some of her works. When Mrs. Wharton created Undine Spragg, Henry Boynton complained in the *Nation* that she was a caricature with "nothing to attach the deeper sympathies of the reader." And the *Spectator* complained that Charity Royall in *Summer* was hard to comprehend because there was no "emotional arousal." In fact, throughout her career, Mrs. Wharton was to incur the charge, here made in reference to *Xingu*, that there was "something inhuman in the detachment of her method" and that "she has a peculiar talent for the dissection of disillusioned, unhappy, uncomfortable or disagreeable natures."

These comments on Mrs. Wharton's heroines and on the degree of the writer's closeness to, or detachment from, them have an exceptional resonance in view of the feminist movement both in the early twentieth century and today. It is worth remembering that Edith Wharton came into her own at a time when feminist arguments were gathering force, when debates raged hotly over whether women belonged in the home or outside in the larger world, and when the suffragists were clamoring for women's right to vote, which finally came in 1920. Attitudes, both for and against women's potentialities and achievements, color some of Mrs. Wharton's reviews. As early as 1903, the *Independent* reviewer criticized Kate Orme as unrealistic because she lacked the kind of "tender, stupid womanly sanity" of "normal women [whose] very obtuseness is a sort of healing power. They do not condone what is wrong about them, because they do not know and cannot imagine it." From there the reviewer passed on to Mrs. Wharton herself, who was attacked as one of those female writers who "do not demonstrate the growth of principles and manly stamina so much as . . . a beautiful tender sentimentality peculiar to

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women, whether they are writers, mothers or missionaries.” Another instance of a sexist slant, yet this time made in Mrs. Wharton’s personal favor, contrasting her to other women, was the *Academy* reviewer’s praise of her control of her imagination, as a “quality rare in women writers.” H. G. Dwight, in *Putnam’s Monthly*, rejoiced in 1908 that Edith Wharton was not one of the “golden geese” (typical American female novelists) and argued that when G. R. Carpenter complained that she had “defeminised” and “denationalised” herself (in his notorious *Bookman* attack on *Italian Backgrounds*), he was stating “her case more flatteringly” than he intended, for she did not belong among the lamentable American lady “apostles of culture.” Harry Thurston Peck, in the *Commercial Advertiser*, praised her in 1899 as having “the fine intuition of a woman with the firmness and precision of a man,” and even her friend Henry James, in a review collected in *Notes on Novelists* (1914), pointedly celebrated the way in which, in her fiction, “the masculine conclusion” so tended to “crown the feminine observation.” Mrs. Wharton herself played into this ambiguous public discussion of the coexistence in her of masculine and feminine literary powers. “I conceive my subjects like a man,” she told one of her correspondents, “that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women—then execute them like a woman,” so as to provide “the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterization, I mean.” Such was the prejudice against female writers, on the part of some reviewers, that she felt obliged to represent herself as possessing the powers of each sex.

During this second phase of her critical reception, reviewers also noticed, for better or worse, her birth and breeding and her attention, in the fiction, to class, convention, and social barriers. Very early in her career, in noting in *Literary World* that she was socially well connected in that city (her husband, Teddy, was of the well-to-do Boston Whartons), John Barry suggested that she might be able to write “studies of the leisure class such as Howells is asking for in *Literature*.” And after the success of *The House of Mirth*, reviewers quickly tried to describe her subject as limited to society and manners. Although *Ethan Frome* was heralded as a great work of art, it was a puzzle to many reviewers who agreed with Katherine Mansfield that the manners and mores of Old New York “suit Mrs. Wharton’s talent to a nicety.” Carl Van Doren, in the *Nation*, called *The Age of Innocence* a “masterly achievement,” for “she knows fashionable New York well in contrast to others who write about it.” All of this is quite true, but Mrs. Wharton never appreciated reviewers or others who tried to circumscribe her imagination within one setting. When Henry James told Mrs. Wharton to avoid the Franco-American subject and advised her sister-in-law, Mary Cadwalader Jones, that Mrs. Wharton “*must* be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduce her to a back-yard in New York,” the novelist replied with the New England settings of *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Ethan Frome*, and *Summer* and the

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Franco-American settings of *Madame de Treymes* and *The Custom of the Country*.

But other reviewers were perturbed, on the ground of class bias, at this rich, well-born, highly cultivated novelist. Olivia Howard Dunbar of the *Critic* termed *The House of Mirth* a “fastidiously conducted literary raid,” and the *Literary Digest* found “a certain unconscious condescension” in *The Fruit of the Tree*, arising from “the results of [Mrs. Wharton’s] tradition and training.” *Summer*, with its New England setting and culturally impoverished families, led Francis Hackett to accuse her in the *New Republic* of “going slumming among souls.” Henry Boynton protested this charge, but admitted that Mrs. Wharton had “come perilously near being the idol of snobs.” When it became clear in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919) that Mrs. Wharton had expatriated because she found America culturally and socially deficient, the indictment that she was an aristocrat with condescending attitudes toward the common people spilled over into a charge of virtual un-Americanism. In discussing that book, the *New Republic* reviewer remarked: “Some American snobs adopt England; others adopt France. . . . Can it be possible that America will survive this apologist and France this defender?”

Yet another charge against Mrs. Wharton arose in this second phase of her career, namely, that her works are bleak, disagreeable, and lacking in moral uplift. Trained in the tradition of Howellsian realism, yet averse to his claim that the writer ought to deal with the “smiling aspects of life, which are the more American,” Mrs. Wharton offended a good many reviewers who sought in literature images of idealism, nobility, and heroism. Dunbar found *The House of Mirth* seriously lacking in contrasts, with “figures . . . all of one exceedingly unpleasant tone”; hence the book “cannot be accepted as a sober and comprehensive interpretation of life.” The *Outlook* reviewer also objected to the “touch of futility [which] often lies on the people who move in Mrs. Wharton’s novels; they are caught in a tangle which a little vigor of will would cut with a stroke.” The *Spectator* criticized *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* (1908) for its lack of contrast, its unrelieved failure, disappointment, and disillusionment. It was not until the appearance of *Ethan Frome* in 1911, however, that this complaint came to overshadow other considerations. Most objections to the darkness of her work focused on the ending of the story. The London *Saturday Review* argued that she should have let Mattie and Ethan die, for the ending has “no motive we can discover.” The reviewer also argued that “there are things too terrible in their failure to be told humanly by creature to creature.” The *Bookman* likewise found it “hard to forgive the utter remorselessness” of the ending, citing “art for art’s sake” as her only “justification.” And although the *Nation* reviewer was positive in his assessment, he concluded of *Ethan Frome* that “it is to be hoped when Mrs. Wharton writes again she will bring her talent to bear on normal people and situations.”

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Some reviewers even equated her tragic endings with a lack of realism. Thus, the *Nation*, in reviewing *The Reef*, complained of the “blind alley” themes, from which there is no proper exit, dealing with problems of which “all possible solutions are equally unsatisfactory and undesirable”; and he claimed that Mrs. Wharton was “addicted” to them. Also speaking of *The Reef*, the *Sun* reviewer defined it as “a bitter, disheartening, sordid story and we could wish that Mrs. Wharton would look on brighter and nobler aspects of life.” The *New York Times* reviewer compared her plots to “vivisection” of the characters as she “diabolically” arranged events to conspire against them. *Summer* was sometimes seen as “sordid” and “depressing,” and Francis Hackett found Mrs. Wharton to be without redeeming humor, calling the landscape of *Xingu and Other Stories* “somewhat acid, cold and bleak.” It is worth remembering that Mrs. Wharton was writing in an era when Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and other figures in the history of American literary naturalism had made their mark—and had their defenders. But in the review media, a morally uplifting spirit seemed to be required. Even the English writer Katherine Mansfield asked, “Does Mrs. Wharton expect us to grow warm in a gallery where the temperature is so sparkingly cold?”

The third phase of Edith Wharton’s critical reception was the period from 1920 to 1938. After the high-water mark of the 1921 Pulitzer Prize, Edith Wharton published eight completed novels, four novellas collected as *Old New York*, four collections of short fiction, a volume of ghost stories, a volume of poetry, an autobiography, and a book on the craft of fiction. (*The Buccaneers* appeared incomplete, posthumously, in 1938.) During this period there were, of course, many positive reviews. In 1922, Katherine Fullerton Gerould announced matter-of-factly in the *New York Times Book Review* that “there is no doubt that, soberly speaking, [Mrs. Wharton] is the best of living American novelists” and that *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) was her “masterpiece.” Apropos of *A Son at the Front* (1923), William Lyon Phelps observed in the *Literary Digest International Book Review* that in that novel “there is nothing trivial; the subject has all the dignity of tragedy, and the style rises to the level of the theme. It must certainly rank high among our novelists’ achievements.” With respect to *Old New York* (1924), Lloyd Morris in *The New York Times* remarked that “The Old Maid” “affirms Mrs. Wharton’s absolute command over the elements of her art, and again reveals that capacity to achieve flawless beauty which she has too often been content to deny.” In 1925, Louise Maunsell Field, writing in the *Literary Digest International Book Review*, remarked: “That *The Mother’s Recompense* is one of Mrs. Wharton’s best novels, few will deny,” and she went on to rate it above *The Age of Innocence* (because its tragedy “transcended” place and class). Likewise, Mary Shirley wrote in *Outlook*, “No recent novel of Mrs. Wharton’s has impressed us so much [as *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929)]. It is beautifully written.” And the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer remarked

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that in *The Gods Arrive* “the social scenes are presented with her customary brilliance and finish.” Mrs. Wharton, then, continued to command the respect of many of her reviewers.

Yet these were also the years of the disputed later novels, the years when critical attitudes and prejudices, some of which we have traced as far back as 1899, became solidified into a negative Wharton formula that survived into the 1970s. The great praise for her social satire was now translated into condemnation that she was old-fashioned, trapped in a lost era, out of touch with America, and too bitter to deal objectively with the postwar world. Many reviewers were still enthusiastic, but a disrespectful note came to be more and more in evidence. Never again were she and her reviewers to enjoy a community of interests that would give her the largely unalloyed positive critical attention she had earlier enjoyed. Each of the critical reservations that emerged in the earlier phases of her career became rigidified in this period. The reviews became formulaic, repeating old objections to the point of striking the dominant tone for half a century, and increasingly her artistry, psychological insight, grasp of character, and social criticism came under attack.

Oddly enough, during this last phase, Henry James’s career began to be rehabilitated by the critics, and the comparisons of Mrs. Wharton’s work with his resurfaced. Because of his recovered reputation, she was again cast into his shadow. Even Rebecca West used James, in her 1922 *New Statesman* review of *The Glimpses of the Moon*, to disparage Mrs. Wharton, saying that Mrs. Wharton wanted to “write books that are exactly like the books of Henry James,” but since the subtle Jamesian method was not suited to explore Mrs. Wharton’s environment or her subject—which West narrowed to the establishment of the American plutocracy—Mrs. Wharton had imitated James with a “deadly sterility.” The novel was, according to West, a “dead thing.” On the other hand, even if a Wharton work was praiseworthy, a reviewer might suggest that she owed her success to James. Frances Newman, in a 1926 commendation of *Here and Beyond*, in the *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, remarked on Mrs. Wharton’s good fortune in having sat at James’s feet, and asserted that *Madame de Treymes* and *The Age of Innocence* could not have been written if James had died in childhood.

By 1937, James had been reestablished as the “Master” and the arbiter of fictional standards. In reviewing the “near-masterpieces” in Edith Wharton’s *Ghosts*, the Manchester *Guardian* asserted that James would have approved of them. But in discussing *The World Over* (1936), Katherine Simonds found in Mrs. Wharton’s stories the “thinness of an echo” of James; they were “not true,” while James’s more universal tales remained true. And after *The Buccaneers* was published, Louise Bogan remarked in 1938 in the *Nation* that the novel was “dead at heart” since Henry James’s concept of form had become in Mrs. Wharton’s work mere plot. She argued that “Wharton’s mildly ironic description of life in the great country houses” failed in comparison with

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James's "true dissection." "We love," she contended, "the living people [of James] and merely watch the puppets [of Mrs. Wharton]."

With respect to her status as a female writer and her characterization of women, we find in the third phase a number of positive accounts of her heroines. Grace Frank in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, for example, called Judith Wheeler of *The Children* (1928) an "altogether lovable child," one of Mrs. Wharton's "most unusual and delightful creations"; and Sherwin Lawrence Cook praised Judith as "a fine fighter and a happy spirit." But during this postwar period, in which the fiction was charged with a biting satire against Jazz Age and Depression-era follies, her characters were often called unconvincing or mere puppets. Clifton Fadiman argued in the *New York Evening Post* in 1928 that it was "impossible to believe in Mrs. Wharton's divorcees and precocious hotel children and ex-movie-star marchionesses," and the *Independent* reviewer criticized her satire as "shafts of implied indignation" that "pierce oaten dummies."

Moreover, a number of reviewers alleged again the inadequacy of her understanding of men characters. The female writer simply didn't understand men. Her men were sometimes felt to be mere "specimens"; Vance Weston, in *Hudson River Bracketed*, was called "only the husk of a character" by one reviewer; and V. S. Pritchett in the *Spectator* termed him "perhaps more of a problem than a man"; likewise, the *Independent* reviewer claimed that Mrs. Wharton could create nothing but a male type "uninteresting" to men. The reviewer of *Old New York* for the *Springfield Republican* asserted that a "few deft touches from a masculine hand would set him [Hayley Delane] right." Furthermore, the old theme of Mrs. Wharton's "masculine qualities" also extended into the postwar criticism. While a number of reviewers objected to yet another war novel in *A Son at the Front* (1923)—published five years after the armistice, when the topic seemed a dead issue—others were uneasy at the female writer's dealing with two central male figures, the young combatant and his father. It did not seem to matter that Mrs. Wharton had toured the front, seen combat firsthand, and written about it in *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915) and *The Marne* (1918). Warfare appeared to be a "man's subject."

One of the most striking aspects of her reception as a female writer, in this third phase, again related to her detachment from her characters, even her "coldness." References to the temperature of her work are evident from 1899 onward, but the growing dismay over Mrs. Wharton's biting postwar satires and an alleged "misanthropy" suggest that many reviewers continued to demand "sympathy" in the tone of a female author and a sympathetic treatment of character, especially female character. (In later years, Mrs. Wharton was to be charged with misogyny.) Yet, when Mrs. Wharton did reveal empathy with, or an understanding of, her heroines (e.g., Mrs. Clephane in *The Mother's Recompense* or Judith Wheeler in *The Children*), she was con-

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demned for “feminine” qualities, typically in the objection that she was writing merely women’s magazine fiction, with happy endings for sympathetic heroines—in short, hackwork. On the other hand, in discussing Halo Tarrant in *The Gods Arrive* (1932), Louise Maunsell Field, in the *North American Review*, objected that Mrs. Wharton evaded every issue and that the only solution she could find to the love affair was to make Halo an honest woman in true eighteenth-century fashion. Isabel Paterson, in *New York Herald Tribune Books*, found Halo “a complete embodiment of the sentimental nineteenth century ideal of woman as the inspiration of genius, mistress and school mistress in one. If such a being ever existed, her function vanished with the passing of the century.”

Those who applauded the later novels, in this third phase, often did so because they gave reviewers what they expected of Edith Wharton. For instance, the *Springfield Republican* praised *The Glimpses of the Moon* for its “vivid transcription of one phase of contemporary life,” and the *Literary Digest* found that “no tract on the vanity of riches could be more forcible than the picture she has given of rich idlers who are a blot on their country.” Carl Van Doren, in the *Nation*, found “her accustomed touches of social caricature” in the novel, and the London *Bookman* proclaimed that she could describe parasitic people better than any other author could. But in this third phase, what best characterized the negative reviews of Mrs. Wharton was her status as the grande dame of American letters who had moved to France, away from her natural material (New York society), and had become a Francophile who wrote biting satires about millionaires and the smart set, material deemed irrelevant to the experience of nearly all of her readers (especially in the Depression years). Mrs. Wharton’s age came increasingly into question in the era of flaming youth, and she was spoken of frequently as an old-fashioned historian of manners whose retrospectives in works like *Old New York* lay outside contemporary culture and concerns. Certainly, Robert Morss Lovett’s *Edith Wharton* (1925), in calling her old-fashioned and class-bound, did great damage to her reputation—at the price of an oversimplification of her diverse creative interests. This version of her history—as a cold, aloof, detached, cultured, hardly American cosmopolite—dominated criticism until the 1970s, when Mrs. Wharton’s private papers became available and when R. W. B. Lewis wrote her definitive biography, with its stunning account of her passionate love affair with Morton Fullerton.

Yet, ironically, she was also both praised and condemned in these later years for a new mellowness after *The Age of Innocence*, critics pointing out a warmer, more sympathetic tone. But since it contradicted the fixed image of her coldness, many attributed it to materialistic concerns: She was writing for slick women’s magazines merely to make money. If she abandoned the authorial detachment for which she had earlier been condemned, and wrote such pointedly moral novels about our social failings as *The Children*, *Twilight*

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Sleep, and *The Glimpses of the Moon*, it was termed the sermonizing and carping of an old woman at war with the modern world. If she abandoned the dark, ironic, or tragic dénouements of her earlier fiction, which some critics had been condemning for years, and if she provided happier resolutions to the fiction, critics often termed her romantic, unrealistic, sentimental, or (again their favorite word) old-fashioned.

In typing Mrs. Wharton principally as a historian of manners of New York high society, many reviewers were consciously or unconsciously restricting her to the material they thought most interesting or acceptable—or to a social class they wished to attack. Henry Seidel Canby, in praising *Old New York* in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, remarked that “she should be urged to send her imagination home more often.” But Dorothy Foster Gilman, reviewing *Twilight Sleep* (1927) in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, pinpoints the problem. Mrs. Wharton, she noted, was a “writer who steadfastly remained in the walk of life to which she has been called, by Deity and others. Having selected good society as the material from which her stories were to be fashioned,” she has “told us with magnificent taste and fine reticence all we ought to know about well bred people at home and abroad.” Gilman asserted that an “afternoon spent with Mrs. Wharton’s literary creations,” to many readers, was of “more value than a year devoted to the Vogue Book of Etiquette.”

All of this is, no doubt, true (although it ignores works like *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*). But Gilman goes on to say that, in *Twilight Sleep*, Mrs. Wharton deserted her class with “disastrous effects,” resulting in a “curious mist” obscuring not living characters but “puppets.” The Jazz Age inanities, so scathingly satirized in some of her novels of the 1920s, led Edmund Wilson to remark in the *New Republic* that her residence abroad had made her novels “a little thin” and that her America was “shadowy” and “synthetic” because she had “lived so long abroad.” Likewise, Louis Bromfield claimed in the *New York Evening Post Literary Review* that Wharton “neither understands nor wants to understand any save those who have titles or are in some way even vaguely part of old New York”—a comment that could have been made only by one who had not read *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Summer*, or “Bunner Sisters,” among others. Perhaps the most typical of left-wing Depression-era complaints about her work was Newton Arvin’s remark in 1934 in the *New Republic* that she would have “towered higher in American letters” if she could have overcome the obstacles of her class and her consequent vision of the world.

Comments like those of Bromfield and Arvin indicate how much some of the older reviewers had forgotten about Mrs. Wharton’s career. And of course, some in the younger generation of reviewers never took the trouble to read her earlier works. Thus, the poet Louise Bogan could surprisingly assert in the *Nation* that, except in *Ethan Frome*, Mrs. Wharton “based her values not upon a free and rich feeling for life but on a feeling for decorum and pre-Wall

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Street merchant respectability”—a remark that nullifies Lily Bart’s yearning for the “Republic of the Spirit,” Charity Royall’s passion, Newland Archer’s longing for freedom and love as represented by Ellen Olenska, Judith Wheeler’s love for her siblings, and Vance Weston’s passion for the creative life. Edmund Wilson was truer to Mrs. Wharton’s grand design when, in reviewing *The Buccaneers* for the *New Republic* in 1938, he singled out the heroine, Laura Testvalley, remarking the “peculiar appropriateness and felicity in the fact that Edith Wharton should have left as the last human symbol of her fiction this figure who embodies the revolutionary principle implicit in all her work.”

Edith Wharton was indeed a revolutionary artist, though not precisely in the sense Edmund Wilson meant. She was revolutionary in that she did not hesitate to subject to moral and social criticism a number of the attitudes and unthinking habits of her fellow Americans both at home and abroad—the soul-deadening constraints of outmoded convention in the elite, the crass disrespect for tradition grotesquely visible in heartland America, the materialism that fueled the social machine and warped genuine human values, hedonism at all levels in the frenetic search for pleasure, cultural rootlessness in the provinces of America and in Jazz Age Europe, the obsession of American men with business and their leaving of “culture” to women, the failure of the education of the American woman for a life other than that of wife and mother, the impoverishment of the lives of married women once they had tied the knot (hence the failure of the family and its impact on children), the comparative absence of the aesthetic sense in America, and the low esteem in which Americans held their artists and intellectuals. In working out these themes, Mrs. Wharton exhibited a faithfulness to the actualities of life in her time that made her a forceful voice in the school of ironic and satiric realism, while her understanding of the social and psychological pressures that circumscribe our existence showed the darker implications of her scientific understanding. She was regarded by the modernist critics of the 1920s and 1930s as distinctly old-fashioned because she practiced and defended the realist novel while taking a dim view of the slice-of-life naturalism and stream-of-consciousness fluidity of some of her contemporaries.

In 1936, *Time* magazine summarized popular opinion in observing that “to the eyes of the younger generation, her polite and cultivated formality might well seem quaintly behind the times.” But from our current perspective, both the literary naturalism and modernist experimentalism of that younger generation have now also receded into a past literary history where they stand on a plane no higher than that on which the realist novels of Howells, James, and Wharton stand. And if her novels seemed nostalgic to some of her younger contemporaries, her contemporaries’ experimental novels now seem to us equally susceptible to nostalgia (if that is the feeling we wish to entertain for the literary production of the avant-garde writers of the 1920s and 1930s). Can we any longer rightly entertain a prejudice against the realist novel of the

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type she wrote on the ground that it is more old-fashioned than the experimental writing? It seems not. Since the realist novel has continued into our own time (in the triumphs of writers as diverse as Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, John Cheever, Louis Auchincloss, John Updike, and Tom Wolfe), generational prejudice dissolves in the presence of the central aesthetic question: How well did Mrs. Wharton practice the art she elected to pursue?

As these reviews make plain, Mrs. Wharton was understood by her contemporary reviewers to be an exceptional artist, perhaps the best female novelist of her time, perhaps even the best American novelist. If this early estimate seems excessive, it is worth remembering that, in 1978, Gore Vidal remarked in "Of Writers and Class: In Praise of Edith Wharton" (*Atlantic Monthly*) that, to his mind, "Henry James and Edith Wharton are the two great American masters of the novel." This point of view, which has many adherents, suggests that the early reviewers' positive estimates have not been quite obliterated by the leftist resentment of her work in the 1930s, by the coming of subsequent writers, or by changing tastes in literary creation and criticism. Certainly, the emergence of an articulate feminism in the past twenty years has given Mrs. Wharton's exploration of what it means to be a woman—to be oneself as a woman, to be a woman in relation to men, and to be a woman in relation to society—a relevance more perennial than transient. There, of course, recur nowadays the old charges, for example, that of her coldness and detachment in dealing with her characters. (Janet Malcolm has bizarrely savaged Mrs. Wharton in "The Woman Who Hated Women" in the November 16, 1986 *New York Times Book Review*. Apparently to satirize women, and not men only, is, for Malcolm, to be misogynistic.) But the many new reprints of Mrs. Wharton's novels and stories, the development of new critical perspectives on her work in books and articles, and the many papers and panels at literary conferences suggest that readers today find that Edith Wharton still speaks to and about women in a compelling way. And of course, her achievement as a female writer stands as a model of what the feminine imagination can accomplish.

But setting aside these themes for the moment, we should note that Edith Wharton was also praised by her contemporaries—and is valued now—for those qualities that make her an artist of the first order: the aesthetic form of her greatest novels and stories in the irresistibility of their structure and plotting; her creation of memorable characters like Lily Bart, Ethan Frome, Charity Royall, and Newland Archer—characters who are alive with passions, feelings, and ideas that we can recognize as expressive of human nature in its rich variety; her convincing re-creation of the social worlds in which these characters move and interact; the profundity of her insight into human motivations and action; her astonishing grasp of ideas and of the appropriate dramatic forms in which they can be fictionally rendered; her insight into the

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operations of society itself and the limitations of social experience everywhere; her incisive wit; her sense of humor; her wickedly observant eye; her satirical gift in disposing of the vain and foolish. Among storytellers, she has few equals in America. And finally there is her style. A style inseparable from her themes and forms, it is far more than correct grammar or good English. It is compounded of her intelligence, her learning, her insight and understanding, but it is also compounded of a feeling for language and its possibilities that makes for felicity in the reading experience. Mrs. Wharton's earliest reviewers register these felicities in the pages that follow, as will most readers who turn to her fiction.

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A Note on the Selections

This volume offers a representative selection of reviews and excerpts from newspapers and other periodicals that is designed to provide an overview of the contemporaneous critical reception of the American novelist, poet, essayist, travel writer, literary critic, and short-story writer Edith Wharton (1862–1937).

The sources of these reviews and excerpts—since Mrs. Wharton was an expatriate living in France with a wide English readership—are American, French, and British newspapers and magazines of literary criticism and cultural commentary. The selections herein represent critical estimates of her individual books as each appeared, year by year. The only volume by Edith Wharton never to be reviewed, to our knowledge, was her first, *Verses*, privately published in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1878, when she was sixteen. In any case, by reading the reviews of her published work in chronological order, it is possible to form a trustworthy conception of the development of her reputation among her contemporaries.

Since Mrs. Wharton was a prolific and much reviewed author, not every review could, of course, be reprinted here. All of the known reviews that could not, for reasons of space, be included are listed after the reviews of each of her volumes. In some cases, reviews have been cut to eliminate repetitive plot summaries or digressions. In other cases, we have reprinted all of the known reviews of an individual book, and therefore no list of unreprinted reviews is appended. No claim as to the completeness of these lists is made, since long-forgotten items are still being turned up in many little-known (and even a few well-known but still unindexed) periodicals.

Each of the reprinted reviews has been selected for its cogency, persuasiveness, and importance in shaping Edith Wharton's reputation. It goes without saying, then, that major publications—like the *New York Times Book Review* or the *Times Literary Supplement*—are frequently represented. But in the case of controversial books with a “local” setting, such as *Ethan Frome* or *Summer*, an effort has been made to represent the regional reaction in less extensively circulated newspapers like the *Springfield Republican* or the *Hartford*

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Courant. Wherever a critical argument has developed over a particular book, we have tried to give a fuller than ordinary sampling of opinion. We have also tried to give ampler space to the fictional works felt to be Mrs. Wharton's major achievements. Even so, Mrs. Wharton wrote in a variety of genres, each crucial instance of which merits coverage herein; and the exceptionally large oeuvre to be dealt with has required us to sacrifice some reviews of, for example, *The Age of Innocence* so that such lesser-known works as *The Decoration of Houses* and *Fighting France* could receive some attention. We have also tried to reprint notices by reviewers who were already or who later came to be important voices on the literary scene, for example, Louise Bogan, Henry Seidel Canby, E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, Henry James, Edwin Muir, J. Middleton Murry, Seán O'Faoláin, William Troy, Carl Van Doren, Rebecca West, and Edmund Wilson. Indeed, Mrs. Wharton was quite fortunate in the intellectual quality of most of her reviewers, whether anonymous or well known.

During the course of Edith Wharton's long and productive career, a few interviews with the author were published, and of course biographical accounts and essays in literary criticism were devoted to her with greater and greater regularity in her later lifetime. Although these had an effect on her reputation with her contemporaries, they have not been included in the present volume. Nor have we included posthumous reviews of Mrs. Wharton's *reprinted* works, of which, since her lifetime, there have been many. Finally, this collection does not reprint or list the many books and articles of biography and literary criticism that have appeared in great numbers since her death. A full list of them may be found in *Edith Wharton: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1990), compiled by Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray. Instead, in this volume, we have endeavored to supply a selection of contemporaneous reviews on which a just estimate of Mrs. Wharton's reputation, during her lifetime, may be formed.

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