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NEW ESSAYS ON
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* captured the attention of a large portion of the American reading public when it was published in a serial version in *Scribner's* in 1905 and then as a hardback in October of that year. Wharton's story of Lily Bart, a "social parasite," according to Edmund Wilson, "on the fringes of the very rich," topped one best-seller list for four months. The novel sealed the author's reputation as one of the major English-language fiction writers of her generation. Each of the four essays collected in this volume of *The American Novel* series makes distinctive new claims for the historical, critical, and theoretical significance of Wharton's seminal work.

Deborah Esch, Associate Professor of English at the University of Toronto, is the author of *In the Event: Reading Journalism, Reading Theory* (1999) and *The Brevity of Life* (forthcoming). She is coeditor of *Critical Encounters* (1994) and the Norton Critical Edition of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1999) and has published a range of articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American and comparative literature, literary theory, media culture, and visual art.

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Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretations has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many works of American literature had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical

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guides to American novels and other important texts now widely read and studied. Usually devoted to a single work, each volume begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the work's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of American literature, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside