

Early critical history of Wharton's career charted her response to Old New York—a presiding social structure based on kinship, tradition, and privilege—and her sometimes hesitant vision of a new, modern culture. The dominant mode of viewing Wharton was as a satirist, often an ironist, and as having a Jamesian gift of doing what Henry James could not—indulge in local color and regionalism. Early Wharton criticism tended toward key scholarly moves of the times, such as biography and close readings, to address Wharton's major themes and to mitigate the once conventional way of seeing her through her friend and sometimes rival, Henry James. Comparing Wharton to James was a significant dimension of Wharton Studies, as significant comparisons of the two authors by Adeline Tintner illustrate.

After *The House of Mirth* (1905), Wharton's reputation was based on *Ethan Frome* (1911), a novel often brought into the schools to teach a steadfast morality. During the teens, Wharton devoted herself to writing about World War I and to her charities, including a collection, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), which was created to make money for refugees and children. Her sense of compassion extended to nonhuman beings too: she campaigned for animal rights *avant la lettre*, especially with her plea to Minnie Cadwalader Jones, her sister-in-law, to help put dog bowls on New York City sidewalks. After her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Wharton's reputation was cemented as a writer of both the old ways (sometimes with a tinge of nostalgia) and the newest impulses in US culture. Throughout her career, Wharton was known for her engagement with various genres, including her brilliant short stories—from “The Other Two” to “Xingu,” “Roman Fever,” and her famous ghost stories like “The Lady's Maid's Bell.” In 1938, a year after Wharton's death, Edmund Wilson wrote a now-famous essay, “Justice to Edith Wharton,” followed in 1976 by Cynthia

Ozick's "Justice (Again) to Edith Wharton." Both of these essays call for a new attention to Wharton's work, underrated as both critics assumed her to be.

In many ways, Wharton Studies—the scholarly field that examines Wharton's oeuvre—has followed the prevalent modes within the academy, moving from the attention to close reading in New Criticism to the interconnection between literature and social, economic, and political issues in New Historicism and feminist criticism, invigorated in 1980 when Elizabeth Ammons took Wharton's politics and aesthetics more seriously by addressing Wharton's "argument" with her America. Furthermore, Orlando and Goldsmith's essay collection on Wharton's cosmopolitanism shows her transnational side, giving rise to a "global Wharton"—the new Wharton Studies that include how she is received internationally and how she is interpreted across the world.

### **An Overview of Wharton Studies**

In the first fifty years after Wharton's death, major analyses focused on whether Wharton was a modernist (or not), a naturalist (or not), and a novelist of manners (or not). Perhaps the most influential and galvanizing of the new wave of Wharton studies was Ammons's study on Wharton's cultural critique. Wharton's "argument with America," as the title of Ammons's book suggests, crystallized how Wharton's cultural politics challenged the status quo. For Ammons, "Wharton's argument . . . begins in the 1890s uncertainly, develops during the years of the progressive movement into an early sophisticated critique that fuses sociological, economic, psychological, and anthropological perspectives, reverses much of itself and grows conservative in the 1920s, and comes to rest in the 1930s, mystically" (ix). Wharton's perspective, Ammons avers, was concerned with the "Woman Question"—the debate over women's roles and power. In *Conflicting Stories* (1992), Ammons returns to Wharton's overall sense that "mainstream modern America as a culture . . . pretends to, but does not really, offer women equality with men" (145). This powerful system (and Ammons's interpretation of it) opened up the field for taking sides whether Wharton was truly a

feminist. In this respect, Ammons remains one of the most forceful critical voices about Wharton's politics, and her first book paved the way to even more intricate readings of Wharton's canny perspective.

So many of these readings depend on *which* Wharton critics analyzed, whether it was her early career, her bestsellers, her later career, her short stories, her poetry, her travel writing, her letters, and even her home, The Mount, and its library. Some of the most exciting work on Wharton details her interest in and engagement with her peers and employees: Irene Goldman-Price, for instance, focuses on Wharton and her governess Anna Bahlmann, while Susan Goodman examines Wharton's exchange with friends, including Henry James, Percy Lubbock—who wrote a “portrait” of her after her death—Howard Sturgis, Walter Berry, John Hugh Smith, and Robert Norton. Goodman details their impact on Wharton, especially James's advice to explore the cultural changes in what he believed Wharton knew best: New York society. On the mass culture of Wharton's time, Parley Ann Boswell's *Edith Wharton on Film* delivers on two fronts: first, Wharton's attitude toward film, which Boswell contends Wharton disliked; second, on how her novels have been depicted, especially for Martin Scorsese's vision of *The Age of Innocence* (1993). Some of the most important insights into Wharton's multifaceted work have come from Wharton's memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934), which provides a grasp of the double life—at once Victorian and modern—that Wharton led. Finally, the journal that is devoted to Wharton's oeuvre, the *Edith Wharton Review*, continues to register the changes in Wharton Studies, from conferences to future projects and her various neglected writings.

One of the most exciting approaches to Wharton Studies appears in the essay collection *Edith Wharton and Cosmopolitanism*. As Goldsmith and Orlando argue, Wharton was a citizen of the world whose travels through Europe allowed her to compare the United States with other places she visited. The term “cosmopolitanism” offers the editors “new entry points into the experiences of otherness that Wharton depicts in her fiction,” including “identity, difference, and belonging” (11). This broad axis of focus has allowed twenty-first-century scholars to seize on one or another of Wharton's

array of interests and devote books to each of them in their turn: for example, we can cite Wharton's vexed perspectives on race and ethnicity—specifically her antisemitism—or her World War I writings as well as Wharton's commitment to France and charities that Julie Olin-Ammentorp examines. Some critics see Wharton as offering conservative, even reactionary, perspectives on her culture in casual racism and fears of “race suicide”; other critics celebrate Wharton's rejection of these same ideas in her fictions. In *Wharton and Cosmopolitanism*, specifically, the editors offer an excellent survey of responses to Wharton's canon, including “sentimentalism (Hildegard Hoeller), regionalism (Campbell), realism (Amy Kaplan, Hoeller), naturalism (Pizer, Saltz), and modernism (Hoeller, Robin Peel, Jennifer Haytock, Karin Roffman, Dale Bauer, Meredith Goldsmith)”; as the editors claim, “Edith Wharton resists categorization” (11) and invites reflection not only on American culture but also on the intersections between American and cultures across the world, from Italy to Morocco.

The wide reach of Wharton's oeuvre has encouraged many critics to investigate Wharton on each of the individual axes of Ammons's first critical study: Nancy Bentley on anthropology and ethnography, Jennie Kassanoff on sociology and politics, Wai Chee Dimock on economic and marketplace values, Carol Singley on morality and philosophy, and Gloria Ehrlich (as well as Avril Horner and Janet Beer) on her sexual education, among many others. Later critics are moving beyond the material to the emotional, affective side of Wharton's work, including affect theory and how Wharton represents a cohort of writers who valued sentimental modernism (like Kathleen Norris and Gertrude Atherton). Finally, in rethinking modernism, Alice Kelly refigures Wharton's writing after finding the new Wharton story (written in 1918), “A Field of Honour,” in the Beinecke Library at Yale, among Wharton's collected writings there. Kelly is pursuing Wharton's work on women and World War I, while other scholars, such as Alan Price, follow Wharton's reporting on the Great War in which she argues for the war refugees and rescue charities.

## Early Fiction

Wharton's early fiction—especially *The House of Mirth*—began her work on social issues such as women's power, sexuality, and the contradictions of social classes. Wharton's 1936 Preface to the novel speaks to her intentions of her heroine's dangerous portrait: "And what picture did the writer offer to their [members of the clan] horrified eyes? That of a young girl [Lily Bart] of their world who rouged, smoked, ran into debt, borrowed money, gambled, and—crowning horror!—went home with a bachelor friend to take tea in his flat!" For Wharton, this was not a portrait of a lady but "a study in social corruption" (Wegener 268). This intention anchors Wharton to the harrowing events in Lily Bart's doomed life. Yet Lily does not accept blackmail or deception. Instead, she embraces the changing moral codes of the present, from smoking to gambling, and financial speculation to travel as a distraction. She also seeks the cultural luxuries of the day: tea, chloral, and fashion. More promising is that Lily's New Woman image counters the old woman's Victorian morality in the heroine's personal domain. While Wharton's irony is often slippery, the novel depends on Wharton's master discourse, a rhetoric loaded in terms like Selden's famous phrase "republic of the spirit" (81) to describe his sense of freedom from material concerns.

In one of the most cited essays on *House*, Wai Chee Dimock details the economic polemics of the novel, focusing on the "centrality of exchange" for the "traded benefits" and "reciprocal obligations" among the characters (375). The marketplace logic of Wharton's world reveals how the leisure class reproduces itself, while Lily Bart is beyond the pale of its "business" and intimate transactions. Instead, she refuses to exchange herself—sexually or otherwise—and therefore loses her social status and her intimacy with Lawrence Selden. Only Simon Rosedale understands her worth, but he won't give up his imminent rise in status unless she blackmails to sustain her prestige. Selden, on the other hand, cannot read Lily: her grand ideas of commitment are "beyond" him (Lily's word on her stationery). From this reading of the economic basis of Lily Bart's world, we might also consider the economics of race and the moral question surrounding the Jew, Rosedale, who is the

“glossy” embodiment of new money capitalism (35). As Kassanoff argues, the novel alludes to racial hybridization if Lily and Rosedale marry, an imagined future that would challenge Wharton’s conservative politics. Following Ammons in this context, Kassanoff writes compellingly on Wharton’s “dramatization” of America’s racial culture.

Like Dimock, Jennifer Fleissner contends that Lily was a “woman adrift” (196), like many naturalist heroines meeting the dilemmas of modern culture. Her “indecisiveness”—as Fleissner sees Lily’s ambivalence—directly responds to the compulsiveness that her times demanded. Bentley also sees this novel as part of Wharton’s obsessions with her love of speed, crashes, and accidents, which match the novelist’s modernism in the face of mass culture from 1870 to 1920. To that end, Sarah Way Sherman’s exploration of material culture focuses on Lily and the “fetishization of commodities” in the novel (12).

One of the most provocative works on Wharton’s idea of style is Katherine Joslin’s *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*. Joslin explores Wharton’s obsession with dresses by Doucet and Worth, creators of couture lines of elite clothing—both what she herself wore and how her characters would wear fashion to present themselves in high culture. This intricate study moves from *The House of Mirth* to Wharton’s last, unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers*, to debate the link between clothing and personal style. Hats, gloves, gowns—of crucial detail to Wharton as a writer—include cultural baggage as well. From Charlotte Perkins Gilman—who hated hats—to Charles Gibson’s drawings of “Gibson Girls,” such fashion was a key component in Wharton’s study of social codes and resulting women’s pleasure and neuroses. In this sense, *The House of Mirth* in its dedication to fashion and competition might be read as an ironic “House of Worth.”

After *House*, Wharton’s attention was devoted to more overtly social fiction focusing on an observable “problem” in US society. By 1916, Wharton edited the *The Book of the Homeless*, a charity book devoted to a group of art pieces—poetry, essays, music, and images—that she collected to support the American Hostels for

Refugees and The Children of Flanders Rescue Committee. Much of Wharton's earlier fiction deals with sociopolitical issues. *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), for instance, concerns the euthanasia that leads to Bessie's death after her horse-riding accident. Her nurse eventually marries Bessie's husband and they become—quite consciously—devoted to Bessie's memory. In *Ethan Frome*, one of Wharton's most depressing novels, critics highlight Ethan's lust for Zeena's cousin Mattie Silver, while Zenobia, his wife, is treated as a drug-enabled domestic prisoner. Jennifer Travis's emphasis on the "emotional pain" of Ethan's failed romance is matched by Zeena's belief that "pain is a weapon" (151). Singley's reading of this novel is especially striking, contending that it reveals Wharton's "Calvinist demons" that haunted her and her prose. Singley carefully focuses on the author's willingness to challenge her past beliefs and to "transcend that pain" of repression (108). Wharton's plot details the "contemporary spiritual malaise" that she imagines in Ethan's failures, thus allowing Wharton "to reinterpret Calvinism for her own spiritual purposes" (109). In short, critics treat this novel as a way to crystallize Wharton's most direct statement about emotional despair.

### Mid-Career Fiction

Perhaps Wharton's most passionate novels might be part of her mid-career fictions, starting with *The Reef* (1912) and the ironically social vision of *The Custom of the Country* (1913). The latter novel has elicited studies of how myth influences the formation of the novel's heroine, Undine, just as it has generated studies of groups of women who have suffered induced hysteria. Candace Waid's *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* analyzes "Wharton's identification with the daughter who chooses to leave the world of the mother and dwell in an underground of experience" (3). Nowhere is this intention clearer than in the story of Undine Spragg, written while Wharton was divorcing her husband Teddy. This complicated emotional register fuels Undine herself as the water nymph who destroys "the American artist" in Ralph Marvell (172), the elite

New Yorker who is devoted to poetry and painting and who marries Undine because of her potential to believe in art.

More recently, Jean-Michel Rabaté's *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* offers a stunning analysis of Undine's "controlled hysteria" (191) in the context of other 1913 novels, and especially Proust's *Swann's Way*. Rabaté's goal is to demonstrate how Wharton produced her own kind of modernist prose, drawing on her own "undiagnosed hysteria"; both led her to manipulate the narrative "deliberately" (193). For Rabaté, "the main modernist feature is the novel's ethical ambivalence: whereas some critics speak of satire, others conclude that we are not to judge Undine" (194). The view that ambivalence is key to modernist prose is central to Rabaté, as it is to many other Wharton critics.

This same ambivalence is part of the critical discussion of Charity Royall's exploration of female sexuality in *Summer* (1917). Some critics, like Ammons, contend that this novel is "sick"; others, like Cynthia Griffin Wolff, claim that the marriage is triumphant because it is so "erotic" (*Feast* 267) and a "hymn to generativity and marriage" (*Feast* 293). Others argue that the reference to an abortionist unveils the secret strategies of women's often ambivalent sexual lives. Karen Weingarten has published a book about abortion fiction, where Wharton figures as a writer who showed the culture's "harsher vision of abortion" shift in interest from the abortionist to the body of the pregnant woman (31, 25). Rather than an anti-abortion novel, *Summer* "deconstructs" the abortion rhetoric of the 1910s (35).

Among the most insightful essays is Walter Benn Michaels's "The Contracted Heart," which analyzes the novel in the context of other contemporaneous fictions about sexuality, including Chopin's short fiction and *The Awakening* (1899), along with Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). His major question concerns whether Charity has a sexual contract with Lawyer Royall: "Does she give herself away or does she sell herself?" (505). Michaels focuses especially on "Old Home Week" and Royall's gift of ten dollars to Charity, which suggests a complete change in the idea of modern marriage. Michaels ironically concludes: "If you love your father, you marry

him; Charity begins, and ends, at home, for good” (525). Michaels’s irony here dovetails with the layers of Wharton’s irony about what it means to be “at home,” “for good” or ill.

Like *Summer*, Wharton’s Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence* has a major focus on domestic pleasure and troubled masculinity in the anguished Newland Archer. His conflicted ideas contrast May Welland’s moneyed tastes, highlighting the sophistication of Wharton’s rhetoric about both his and May’s values. Tintner notes that critics consider this novel the “most Jamesian,” given its beautiful rendering of Old New York and past morality versus the present new mores (Tintner, *James’s Legacy* 58). A central issue concerns Wharton’s style: her “nostalgia”—and her irony about it—remains fully at play in this examination of US cultural tastes.

Perhaps the most significant ways to treat this novel occur when critics focus on one of the three major characters, Newland Archer, May Welland, or Ellen Olenska. Well-known for its anthropological references (especially to Malinowski, one of the most important anthropologists of his day), the novel delivers the clash of “tribal” culture and these three characters’ viable perspectives in the “museum culture” of Wharton’s New York. Critics see Archer as one of Wharton’s “unsatisfactory” men (Holbrook 117), Welland as “America’s Dream Girl” (Ammons, “Cool Diana” 214), and Olenska as part of a “figurative harem” (Edwards 496, 502). Welland herself defies Archer’s views about women and marriage while she also manages to exile Countess Olenska to France. Finally, Olenska is one of Wharton’s most empathetic women, devoted to cultural change and openness that the Old New York finds threatening.

Meredith Goldsmith’s website of a GIS-digital map for *The Age of Innocence* provides a view of the novel’s New York City and Paris spaces, and it represents a carefully constructed sense of ownership for Olenska after her visit to New York. As seen below, Goldsmith’s interactive maps enhance Wharton Studies in advancing ideas about women’s regionalism and the interrelations of identity, space, and body movements. Furthermore, Goldsmith’s essay on “Mapping Literary Visions” argues for visioning Wharton’s

geographies, mobility, and “spatiality” through interactive digital maps and historic documents. Indeed, these digital studies illuminate Wharton’s grasp of cultural spaces and politics.

