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剑桥美国小说新论·30
（英文影印版）

New Essays on

The House of Mirth

《豪门春秋》新论

Deborah Esch 编

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导　读

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近年来，美国文学在我国很受欢迎。大专院校英语系纷纷开设美国文学选读和专题课，学生从中学到的大部分内容是美国小说。不仅如此，在本科毕业论文、硕士论文或博士论文方面，学生所选题材也大多为关于某部美国小说或某个美国小说家。然而，我们的学生往往热衷理论而对作品或作家缺乏深入细致的了解和分析。他们往往先大谈理论规则，然后罗列一些例证，不能很好地把理论和文本融会贯通，恰如其分地结合在一起。在这种情况下，我们需要一些好的参考资料来帮助学生更好地认识和理解他们在阅读或研究的作品和作家。《剑桥美国小说新论》正是这样一套优秀的参考书。

这套丛书的负责人是曾经主编过《哥伦比亚美国文学史》的艾默里·埃利奥特教授，并且由英国剑桥大学出版社在上世纪80年代中期开始陆续出书，至今仍在发行并出版新书，目前已有五十多种，不仅出平装本还有精装本。一套书发行二十多年还有生命力，估计还会继续发行，主要因为它确实从学生的需要出发，深受他们和教师的喜爱。

《剑桥美国小说新论》的编排方式比较统一。根据主编制定的原则，每本书针对一部美国文学历史上有名望的大作家的一本经典小说，论述者都是研究这位作家的知名学者。开篇是一位权威专家的论述，主要论及作品的创作过程、出版历史、当年的评价以及小说发表以来不同时期的主要评论和阅读倾向。随后是四到五篇论述，从不同角度用不同的批评方法对作品进行分析和阐

释。这些文章并非信手拈来，而是专门为这套丛书撰写的，运用的理论都比较新，其中不乏颇有新意的真知灼见。书的最后是为学生进一步学习和研究而提供的参考书目。由此可见，编书的学者们为了帮助学生确实煞费苦心，努力做到尽善尽美。

这五十多种书有早期美国文学家库珀的《最后的莫希干人》，也有当代试验小说大师品钦的《拍卖第49号》和厄普代克那曾被《时代》杂志评为1923年以来100部最佳小说之一的《兔子，跑吧！》；有我们比较熟悉的麦尔维尔的《白鲸》，也有我们还不太了解的他的《漂亮水手》；有中国学生很喜欢的海明威的长篇小说《永别了，武器》，令人想不到的是还有一本论述他所有的短篇小说的集子。有些大作家如亨利·詹姆斯、威廉·福克纳等都有两三本作品入选，但它们都分别有专门的集子。丛书当然涉及已有定论的大作家，包括黑人和白人作家（可惜还没有华裔作家的作品），但也包括20世纪70年代妇女运动中发掘出来的如凯特·肖邦的《觉醒》和佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》，甚至还有我国读者很熟悉的斯托夫人的《汤姆叔叔的小屋》。当年这部小说曾经风靡美国，在全世界都有一定的影响，后来被贬为“政治宣传”作品，从此在美国文学史上销声匿迹。70年代后随着要求扩大文学经典中女性和少数族裔作家的呼声日益高涨，人们才开始重新评价这部作品，分析它对日后妇女作家的影响、对黑人形象的塑造，甚至它在美国文学的哥特式传统中的地位等等。

这样的例子还有很多，例如威廉·迪恩·豪威尔斯和他的《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》。以前人们只肯定他在发展现实主义文学和理论方面的贡献，对他的作品除了《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》评价都不太高。但在这本新论文集子里编者对已有定论进行挑战，强调豪威尔斯的小说、他的现实主义跟当时的社会经济文化现状有很大的关系。他的小说既有其文学形式，又是一种社会力量。另外一位19世纪新英格兰作家萨拉·奥尼·裘威特过去一向被看成是乡土作家，现在学者们用女性主义观点强调她的《尖枞树之乡》对美国文学的贡献，分析当年的种族、民族主义和文学市场

对她写作的影响。用封底宣传语言来说，这本集子对美国文学研究、女性主义批评理论和美国研究等方面都会引起很大的兴趣。

还有一本书似乎在我们国家很少有人提起过——亨利·罗思的《就说是睡着了》。此书在20世纪30年代曾经风靡一时，此后长期销声匿迹，60年代又再度受到推崇。现在这部小说则是上面提到的《时代》杂志100部优秀小说中的一部，被认为是上个世纪头50年里最为出色的美国犹太小说、最优秀的现代主义小说之一。评论家认为集子里的文章采用心理分析、社会历史主义等批评方法探讨了有关移民、族裔和文化归属等多方面的问题。

这套集子里还出现了令人信服的新论点。很长时间内海明威一直被认为是讨厌女人的大男子主义者。但在关于他的短篇小说的论述里，作者通过分析《在密执安北部》，令人信服地证明海明威其实对妇女充满同情。不仅如此，这一论断还瓦解了海明威在《太阳照样升起》中充分暴露他的厌女症的定论。

然而，作者们并不侈谈理论或玩弄理论名词，所有的论断都是既以一定的理论为基础，又对文本进行深入的分析；既把理论阐述得深入浅出，又把作品分析得丝丝入扣，让人不由得不信服。他们能够做到这一点完全是因为他们了解学生的水平和需要。

我认为《剑桥美国小说新论》是一套很好的参考书。北京大学出版社购买版权，出版这套书是个有益于外国文学研究教学的决定。

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

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

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Introduction

DEBORAH ESCH

I

Inscribed in a recollection by Philomène de la Forest-Divonne of an afternoon visit to the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice in 1935 or 1936 is another reminiscence: that of her host and longtime friend, Edith Wharton: "'I was writing little stories when I was four,' she said to me, not at all boasting about her gift, but also not seeking to deny it."[1] Months before her death, the accomplished author made her visitor "a participant in her earliest memories," and recalled fabricating fictions even before she learned, at the age of six, to read. The nascent career took a decisive turn during Edith Newbold Jones's twelfth year, when, according to her biographer R. W. B. Lewis, she "decided to write a story: she would, that is, set down one of her inventions on paper. She would 'make up'" (Lewis, 29–30). Taking her own immediate circumstances as point of departure, she again put pen to paper: "'Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?' said Mrs. Tomkins. 'If only I had known you were going to call, I should have tidied up the drawing room'" (quoted in Lewis, 30).

The reception of this early attempt was swift and severe: Lucretia Jones promptly returned the page her daughter had shyly proffered with the curt judgment that "drawing rooms are always tidy" (Lewis, 30). In the wake of her mother's response, the young Edith turned her talents to poetry, thereby earning the approval of her parents and eventually publishing a handful of poems. After a three-year hiatus, she reverted to narrative fiction with a secret but sustained effort, a novella of thirty thousand words entitled *Fast and Loose*. As Shari Benstock observes, "An irony of Edith's early literary development is that she *wrote* a

novella before she had ever *read* one."[2] This time around, she assumed as her own the function of unforgiving critic and "began at once to deprecate the work. She wrote a number of mock reviews, attributed to various New York and London periodicals, each denouncing [the novella] in uncompromising terms. . . . [A]dopting the authoritative voice of *The Nation*, she declared that 'It is false charity to reader and writer to mince matters. The English of it is that every character is a failure, the plot a vacuum, the style spiritless, the dialogue vague, the sentiment weak and the whole thing a fiasco!'" (quoted in Lewis, 31). With this harsh anatomy, Edith Newbold Jones cast herself in the dual role of storyteller and critical reader at the tender age of fifteen.

The biographer's reconstruction of these early episodes is remarkably consistent with Wharton's own account, in her memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934), of the composition of *The House of Mirth*. "Fate had planted me in New York," she relates, "and my instinct as a story-teller counselled me to use the material nearest to hand, and most familiarly my own."[3] After the fact, the critic elaborates the storyteller's dilemma:

> There could be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to *what it ought to have been about*. . . . As a matter of fact, there are but two essential rules: one, that the novelist should deal only with what is within his reach, literally or figuratively (in most cases the two are synonymous), and the other that the value of a subject depends almost wholly on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see *into* it. Almost – but not quite; for there are certain subjects too shallow to yield anything to the most searching gaze. I had always felt this, and now my problem was how to make use of a subject – fashionable New York – which, of all others, seemed most completely to fall within the condemned category. There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy, and should not have to get it up out of note-books and encyclopedias – and yet! (*A Backward Glance*, 206–7)

The autobiographical account goes on to formulate the predicament posed by the most familiar material and its attendant thematics: "how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one

story rather than another" (*A Backward Glance*, 207). More particularly,

> In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world," any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. (*A Backward Glance*, 207)

With the critical question of "typical human significance" – which is to say, of a story's meaning and its figuration – provisionally articulated and answered, the narrative acquired the requisite momentum. The novel had been promised in advance to *Scribner's Magazine*, and the deadline moved forward to January 1905 when the novel that was to have preceded it was not submitted in time. *A Backward Glance* belatedly registers the alarm of a fledgling novelist torn between "critical dissatisfaction with the work, and the distractions of a busy and hospitable life, full of friends and travel, reading and gardening" (*A Backward Glance*, 207), to say nothing of the repeated nervous collapses of her husband: "The first chapters of my tale would have to appear almost at once, and it must be completed within four or five months! I have always been a slow worker, and was then a very inexperienced one, and I was to be put to the severest test to which a novelist can be subjected: my novel was to be exposed to public comment before I had worked it out to its climax" (*A Backward Glance*, 208). Just what that climax would be was not in doubt: "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way always become clear only as I write, and now I was asked to gallop over them before I had even traced them out! I had expected to devote another year or eighteen months to the task, instead of which I was asked to be ready within six months; and nothing short of 'the hand of God' must be suffered to interrupt my labors, since my first chapters would already be in print!" (*A Backward Glance*, 208).

Under the enforced "discipline of the daily task" (*A Backward Glance*, 208), Wharton managed to deliver the manuscript to the

publisher on schedule. She recollects her gratitude in the aftermath of her trial by fire: "It was good to be turned from a drifting amateur into a professional; but that was nothing compared to the effect on my imagination of systematic daily effort. . . . When the book was done I remember saying to myself: 'I don't yet know how to write a novel; *but I know how to find out how to*'" (*A Backward Glance*, 209).

2

In its serial version, *The House of Mirth* appeared in eleven installments in *Scribner's*, running from January to November 1905, and finding a receptive public; "readers who arrived late at their local newsstand found no available copy."[4] Wharton collected $5,000 for the serial rights. The book was initially published in New York on October 14, 1905, in an edition of 40,000 copies. Readers paid $1.50 for the volume, and Wharton's contract stipulated royalties of fifteen percent. As Lewis notes, "by the end of 1905 she had been paid $7,000 against accrued royalties of more than $30,000" (Lewis, 151). The tax-free figure translates to well over $500,000 today.

The House of Mirth, in other words, was from the first a formidable commodity. Ten days after the novel appeared, the publisher notified Wharton that "so far we have not sold many over 30,000, but perhaps that will satisfy your expectations for the first fortnight" (quoted in Lewis, 151). The author recorded in her diary a subsequent printing of 20,000 by October 30, and an additional 20,000 on November 11. As the year drew to a close, 140,000 copies were in print, and Charles Scribner could report that *The House of Mirth* was enjoying "the most rapid sale of any book ever published by Scribner" (quoted in Lewis, 151; Benstock, "A Critical History," 310).

Contemporary reviews of the best-selling novel (it held the top spot on one list for four months) were on the whole more concerned with evaluation than analysis, and with the answer to Wharton's critical question ("in short . . . my heroine, Lily Bart") than with the possibilities inscribed in the question itself. For

the most part, the work won praise from American as well as English reviewers (it appeared under the Macmillan imprint in Britain), whether they read it as realist chronicle or mannerist satire. Unfavorable responses focused on the hopelessness of the tale of Lily Bart's inexorable descent from privilege to destitution, and debated whether her death was the necessary price of the author's moral claim. Others took Wharton to task for her unsparing portrayal of New York society: either for not presenting finer exemplars of humanity in her chosen context, or simply for having selected in the first place material "utterly unsuitable for conversion into literature," which "demands all that such society has not – ideas, intellectual interests, sentiment, passion, humor, wit, tact, and grace."[5] (This assessment in *The Nation* thus anticipates aspects of Wharton's own subsequent judgment about her subject matter in *A Backward Glance*.) But a survey of early critical responses to the novel makes clear that even the most hostile contributors to the controversy surrounding the publication of *The House of Mirth* sought somewhat vainly to find fault with what was widely regarded as a work of great merit.[6] "Amid the favorable, the issue was whether *The House of Mirth* could be adjudged a masterpiece or whether it fell just short of that final accolade" (Lewis, 154). *The Saturday Review* summarily pronounced the work "one of the few novels which can claim to rank as literature" (Ammons, 313).

If *The House of Mirth* sealed its author's reputation as one of the major English-language novelists of her generation, and as a worthy "historian of the American society of her time," Wharton's restlessness as a storyteller and social critic would thenceforth transport her far from the New York of her day.[7] In only one other novel, *The Custom of the Country* (1913), would she return to that familiar time and place. At her death in 1937, she had been living as an expatriate in France for several decades, and was arguably best known to a new generation of readers as the author of *Ethan Frome* (1911), which had become available in an inexpensive and widely circulated library edition.

The warm reception that had greeted most of Wharton's fiction in America as well as Europe cooled significantly in the 1930s, when, as Benstock observes, "her social chronicles, *The House of Mirth* first among them, were judged as mere 'curiosities' – nostalgic reminiscences . . . of a bygone age rather than condemnations of modern mores. With the rise of fascism and the fear of war in Europe . . . Wharton's comedies had little to say to a generation that anticipated the collapse of civilization" ("A Critical History," 315). But in "Justice to Edith Wharton," an essay written shortly after the author's death, Edmund Wilson sought to revive Wharton's flagging critical fortunes, and specifically "to throw into relief the achievements which did make her important during a period – say, 1905–1917 – when there were few American writers worth reading" (Wilson, 19). In the context of its measured defense of the novelist ("she was one of the few Americans of her day who cared enough about serious literature to take the risks of trying to make some contribution to it" [Wilson, 30]), the essay does at best equivocal justice to *The House of Mirth*: Wilson writes that "[t]he language and some of the machinery . . . seem old-fashioned and rather melodramatic today; but the book has some originality and power, with its chronicle of a social parasite on the fringes of the very rich . . . and finding a window open only twice, at the beginning and at the end of the book, on a world where all the values are not money values" (Wilson, 21).

It would fall to a subsequent critic to make a more compelling case for the persistent interest and lasting value of *The House of Mirth*, and arguably "to show Mrs. Wharton in her proper place in the main stream of American literature."[8] Diana Trilling's "*The House of Mirth* Revisited," which appeared in 1962, acknowledges that the quarter-century following Wharton's death "has delivered the mortal blow to the society in which she came of literary age, so that it is no small wonder that her extraordinary work has passed into the archeological shadows and that now, where she is known at all outside university English courses, it is merely, and pejoratively, as a society lady become society

author" (Trilling, 103). But Trilling's polemic overturns this conventional wisdom, arguing that Wharton "knew the reality of class as no theoretical Marxist or social egalitarian can know it: not speculatively but in her bones" (Trilling, 105). Read in this light, *The House of Mirth* is for Trilling "nothing if not a novel about social stratification and the consequences of breaking the taboos of class," and indeed ranks as "one of the most telling indictments of a social system based on the chance distribution of wealth, and therefore of social privilege, that has ever been put on paper" (Trilling, 105, 106).

In crucial respects, Trilling's revaluation of the novel paved the way for later readers who would bring a range of theoretical approaches to bear on Wharton's text. In the aftermath of the New Criticism and the formalist tendencies that predominated in North American literary studies in the 1940s and 1950s (and that had little investment in, and as little to say about, the ethical, social, and historical stakes of a work like *The House of Mirth*), critics of the novel returned to the "issues that had drawn the attention of its earliest readers: the tension between character and situation, and the influence of gender, social class, race and the marketplace in shaping the moral climate of society – and, by extension, the literature it produced" (Benstock, "A Critical History," 317). Something of a "renaissance" (Benstock's term) or "revolution" (Annette Zilvermatt's) in Wharton studies took place following the opening in 1967 of the Yale archive, and the appointment by the Wharton estate of R. W. B. Lewis as official biographer (his *Edith Wharton* apppeared in 1975, and garnered the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and Columbia University's Bancroft Prize for history). In the subsequent quarter-century, scholars and critics, many of them representing a diversity of feminisms informed by psychoanalysis, historical materialism, and deconstruction, have re-revisited *The House of Mirth*, generating a substantial and varied body of criticism on the novel.

Since the late 1970s, several landmark studies have sought to establish the interpretive authority of approaches that would do greater justice to Wharton's life and work. *A Feast of Words*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's psychobiography, appeared in 1977,