



Self-Realization

*A Critical Study of
Edith Wharton's Eight Novels*

走向自我实现

伊迪丝·华顿小说研究

李晋 著

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To Professor Tao Jie

自序

伊迪丝·华顿（1862－1937）是美国著名小说家之一。1905年到1920年间，她的小说尤其深得评论界和读者的喜爱。1921年获普利策文学奖。20世纪30和40年代，主要评论家认为华顿的小说过于悲观、未提供积极的解决社会问题的方法，而且某些评论家把她看成是亨利·詹姆斯的追随者。华顿的后期作品一度被认为趋于保守和怀旧。20世纪50和60年代，华顿和她的小说仍不太受重视。20世纪70年代起，评论家日渐对华顿和她的作品发生浓厚兴趣，这与对华顿的原始信件与文稿的发掘、女权主义的发展密切相关。这一时期的评论家主要从传记、生平、心理分析的视角出发，研究作家与作品的联系。华顿的后期作品仍被认定怀旧、缺少研究价值而未受重视。20世纪80年代的女权主义评论家侧重分析华顿小说中女性人物的命运，对她后期作品有的持否定态度（这往往与评论家对作品的误读分不开），有的则认为后期作品并非保守。20世纪90年代起至今，对华顿作品的研究角度可谓多元化：与其他作家的比较、与同时代评论家的联系、与文学传统的关系、作品与根据作品改编后的电影研究、作品中的性别、种族、宗教、科技、经济、语言等研究。同时，华顿的某些后期作品受到了重视和研究，也很有启发意义。

然而，华顿小说中一个重要主题——自我实现——并未得到足够重视。华顿的大多数作品中，都探讨了个人在压抑人性的社会中努力追求、实现自我这一主题。这在早期和晚期作品中都有所体现，说明华顿始终对个人与社会之间的冲突、对人物心理成长抱有浓厚兴趣。借用社会心理学自我理论（现实自我－社会自我－理想自我）及女权主义批评理论，本书对华顿的八部小说共有的主题进行剖析并指出：一、实现自我是华顿多数小说的一个重要主题。

二、华顿的晚期小说并不趋于保守、怀旧。从早期小说到晚期小说,对自我实现的探讨有所发展:早期小说如《欢乐之家》(*The House of Mirth*),《伊桑·弗罗姆》(*Ethan Frome*),《暗礁》(*The Reef*)中的主人公由于饱受社会主导观念的压制、由于在自我发展过程中对社会自我的部分接受、由于理想自我中的消极成分等等,他们痛不欲生。尽管有的人物最终觉醒,但因长期内化的压抑个性的社会传统观念,最终无力主宰命运。第一次世界大战后,华顿的小说(包括被忽略的小说)继续探讨个人在与社会的矛盾冲突中努力实现自我这一主题。在作品《夏天》(*Summer*)、《纯真年代》(*The Age of Innocence*)、《母亲的补偿》(*The Mother's Recompense*)、《哈得逊河斗拱建筑》(*Hudson River Bracketed*)以及《神到了》(*The Gods Arrive*)中,主要人物在不同阶段以不同程度挑战压制个性的社会规范,反思现实自我,重构理想自我。最后两篇小说中的男女主人公不仅试图理解自我,也努力理解并接受对方,他们的理想自我在社会一家庭的框架中赢得了发展空间。由于多数人物不同程度上对自我和社会的认识趋于成熟,他们的自我实现也取得了相对的成功。自我的实现实质上就是解读现实自我中的社会自我与理想自我、摒弃束缚个性及社会发展的伪道德、创造融积极社会自我与积极理想自我为一体的现实自我,追求这一目标意识与过程远比结局更为重要。三、华顿的小说向读者展现了在社会力量压制个性发展的情况下,个人对社会自我中消极成分的勇于反叛(它知)、对理想自我的不断更新(自知)、以及人与人之间相互理解(相知)等都是实现自我的关键成分。

本书以小说文本为主线,以华顿的书信、回忆录、有关著作及有关评论等为辅线,论证了华顿的小说创作贯穿着实现自我的主题,从早期小说到晚期小说,是一个逐步走向自我实现的征途。华顿本人挣脱种种社会束缚成长为文学家,这本身就是一个实现自我的过程。

李 晋

2004年岁末于北京望京花园

List of Abbreviations

<i>AI</i>	<i>The Age of Innocence</i>
<i>BG</i>	<i>A Backward Glance</i>
<i>EF</i>	<i>Ethan Frome</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>The Gods Arrive</i>
<i>HM</i>	<i>The House of Mirth</i>
<i>HRB</i>	<i>Hudson River Bracketed</i>
<i>MR</i>	<i>The Mother's Recompense</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>The Reef</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Summer</i>
<i>WF</i>	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i>

Preface

Based on my dissertation, this book explores Edith Wharton's (1862 – 1937) thematic quest for self-realization, which is an important but neglected theme. Integrating the social psychological self-theory, feminist critical approach, and textual analysis, the book examines the development of Wharton's thematic quest for self-realization by investigating eight of her novels.

The book consists of six chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter One studies Lily's tragic search for self-realization against the frivolous society of the late 19th and early 20th century New York in *The House of Mirth*. Chapter Two is made up of two sections and centers on a discussion of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, companion pieces about New England life. The first section mainly discusses Ethan's ineffectual quest for self-realization as he is torn between his ought self and the ideal one. The second section investigates, through an analysis of Charity's defiance of her ought self, Charity's partially fulfilled quest for self-realization. Chapter Three focuses on *The Reef*, especially Anna's failure to realize her ideal self against the Victorian culture that emphasized "the cult of the lady". Chapter Four examines Newland's quest for self-realization and that of Ellen's within the 1870s old New York in *The Age of Innocence*. While Newland's quest results in a sympathetic failure, Ellen's quest is comparatively more successful. Chapter Five deals with *The Mother's Recompense* and explores how Kate Clephane confronts her ought selves as a self-effacing mother, a decorative wife and an evasive member of the society in America after the first

World War. Chapter Six discusses *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* and investigates both Vance Weston's and Halo Tarrant's quests for self-realization particularly in the literary sphere. The book concludes that Wharton's novels share the theme of questing for self-realization, that Wharton's late novels are not nostalgic, that a resisting consciousness of the oppressive social conventions, an adjustment of one's ideal self, and mutual support between men and women are the essential elements for self-realization.

It contends that: first, the individual character's resisting his or her ought self and pursuing an ideal self is a theme that Edith Wharton consistently explores. Second, the relative failure of self-realization on the part of certain protagonists especially in the early novels is, in part, due to their passive internalization of ought selves and to their problematic ideal selves. Third, the relative success of some quests is owing to, mostly, the perception an individual has about the nature of his or her ought self and that of the ideal one. Finally, the ideal existence would be one where men and women influence each other in overcoming the hurdles of oppressive social conventions.

It is hoped that readers will find the critical reading of Wharton's novels useful in opening up their interpretations of Wharton's fiction.

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To my elder sister, who always wrote to me and shared my troubles, thank you.

And by no means least, thanks to my husband Lang Jianguo; for light, warmth, tolerance, good humor, insight and love; and to my daughter Lang Langchen; for sunshine, humor and sound sleep.

My gratitude also goes to my college and my university,

who have generously supported; to Lin Bin and Xiao Xiaohong, who have offered great help in various ways. Thank you all.

Alexander Pope wrote: Blest, who can unconcern'dly
find/Hours, days, and years, slide soft away/In health of
body, peace of mind. I'm blessed with all the above, so as I
feel the refreshing breeze from the land of literature, hours,
days and years softly slide away.

Introduction

Edith Wharton was most popular among both critics and general readers, especially from 1905 when she published *The House of Mirth* to 1921 when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence*. She was “recognized as one of the leading – in many cases – the leading American writer of her day” (Lauer and Murray xxvi). For three decades after Edith Wharton’s death in 1937, however, her fiction mainly received negative critical views. In the late 1930s and 1940s, major critics were very critical about Edith Wharton’s fiction in terms of her importance as a writer, the social scope of her subject matter, the pessimistic treatment of conflicts between society and the individual, the inferiority of her later novels to early ones, her imitation of Henry James, etc. Q. D. Leavis (1938) considered Wharton as an unimportant novelist in that she had not offered any positive solution in her novels (Bloom 1988, 4216). Alfred Kazin (1942) criticized Wharton for her excessive concern with her old society while ignoring the poor class or the parvenu (Bloom 1988, 4217). According to some critics, Alfred Kazin, for example, Edith Wharton’s later novels were inferior to her early ones due to her shrinking from the social order in these works (Bloom 1988, 4220). Percy Lubbock’s *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (1947) was “essentially a tribute to Henry James” (Joslin 130). Blake Nevius, in *Edith Wharton : A Study of Her Fiction*

(1953), diminished her stature by placing an exclusive emphasis on Wharton's being a novelist of manners.

In the 1970s, Wharton's novels were read from biographical, psychobiographical and feminist perspectives. R. W. B. Lewis, representative of the biographical approach, wrote an influential biography (1975) on Edith Wharton based on the Beinecke Library collection of Wharton's letters and manuscripts. He emphasizes that Wharton drew upon her life for her fiction and in her later years drew upon her fiction for her life. He tends to identify most of the protagonists in Wharton's novels with Wharton herself.

Margaret B. McDowell initiated feminist criticism of Wharton's fiction. Her essay, "Viewing the Custom of her Country: Edith Wharton's Feminism" (1974) was the first study that approached Wharton from a feminist perspective (Joslin 137). Some male critics, Richard H. Lawson for example, however, wrote that Wharton was a feminist only in a limited way because class division to her was more important than sex inequality (578). Furthermore, Lawson argued that Wharton "did not deal kindly with the members of her own sex as they appeared in her fiction" (579).

During this decade, critics still debated on the importance of Wharton's later novels. In challenging the established view that Edith Wharton's powers declined during the 1920s in his *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, Geoffrey Walton maintains that Wharton's central interest as a novelist remained social.

In the 1980s, Wharton's literary reputation expanded with the development of feminist criticism. Elizabeth Ammons wrote *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, viewing Wharton's novels against other contemporary feminist

texts. In discussing the protagonists of Wharton's novels, Ammons acknowledges Wharton's attack on the patriarchal repression of women. She also suggests that Wharton's progressive argument with America declined in her later novels in that she allowed her women characters to be content with domestic life. According to Ammons, while Wharton formerly took sympathy on women with aspirations trapped by marriage and the lack of alternatives, she later argued that marriage and domestic life were woman's best means of self-fulfillment. Carol Wershoven illustrates the pattern of the female intruder, defined as the woman who is, to some extent, an outsider of her society, in Wharton's novels and concludes that Wharton did not become conservative in her late years. The female intruder, according to Wershoven, functions as a social critic and bearer of positive values. Judith Fryer, on the other hand, focuses her attention on the relationship between space and female experience in Wharton's novels.

While feminist perspectives of Wharton's works prevailed, women critics were not always uniformly feminists in viewing Wharton. Marilyn French renounced the complaints about Wharton's ineffectual treatment of men characters by arguing that Wharton was sympathetic to many of her male characters (Bloom 1988, 4248). Shari Benstock proposed a study of "the difference within gender, within the experience of gender" in *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900 - 1940* (Joslin 139).

In the 1990s, Wharton scholarship continued to thrive as Wharton's novels are read in relation to other writers, to literary traditions, gender, race, class, religion, ethnology and language etc. Mary E. Papke made a parallel study of

Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin, in which she views both as radical writers who articulate desires and challenge authority, but their characters gain autonomy at the cost of alienation. Elizabeth Ammons read Wharton alongside the black woman writer Jessie Redmon Fauset. Elaine Showalter (1991) asserts that Wharton subverts the sentimental literary tradition by dealing with heterosexual relationship between men and women. Margaret McDowell, on the other hand, revised her feminist ideas and posits that Wharton is not a conscious feminist writer, for she has no intention to propagandize for “simple solutions to problems in the relationships between men and women, between generations, and between classes” (131). Susan Goodman analyzes the relationships between women in the major novels in *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends & Rivals*. Reading Wharton from the perspective of existential dialectics, Lois Tyson contends that “individual and institutionized desire, in twentieth-century America, merge in the commodity” (10). To Tyson, the American dream of commodity can help the individual to escape existential inwardness, “that anxious awareness of oneself as a creature ‘whose very being is at issue’ in an uncertain world” (8). Examining Wharton’s fiction against the backdrop of religion, Carol J. Singley argues that the polarities between science and Christian values exist in Wharton’s novels. In observing the link between fictive and ethnological images in Wharton’s novels, Nancy Bentley points out that society as forces of cohesion is emphasized in Wharton’s novels. Relating Wharton’s fiction to that of William Dean Howells, Henry James and Willa Cather, Elsa Nettels lays emphasis on the connections between language and gender in Wharton’s works.

The abundance of Wharton criticism demonstrates the

importance and the complexity of Edith Wharton as a distinguished writer. However, despite the vast insightful criticism that keeps emerging so far, the theme of questing for self-realization as represented in Wharton's novels has not been sufficiently explored. Judith Fryer, Mary E. Papke, and Susan Goodman respectively use terms such as "sense of self", "personal sense of self", "identity" while discussing Wharton's certain novels. But, they did not observe Wharton's exploration of self-realization throughout her writing career. Furthermore, none of them approached Wharton's novels from the perspective of questing for self-realization.

Few critics have explored the thematic relationship of Wharton's later novels to her early ones in terms of this quest for self-realization. Except for Elizabeth Ammons, Susan Goodman, and Carol J. Singley, few have shown enough interest in *The Mother's Recompense*, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. However, Ammons misread *The Mother's Recompense* when she wrote that Kate Clephane, the mother, concludes "mothers oughtn't ever to leave their daughters" (1980, 163) while in fact, it is Anne, the daughter, who utters this sentence (MR 186). Thus, Ammons' argument that Wharton became conservative in her late years is incorrect. Susan Goodman and Mary E. Papke notice Kate's efforts to maintain her individuality, but their discussions are incomplete since they neither point out what social forces Kate faces nor analyze how Kate consciously resists these forces. Carol J. Singley, in examining Halo Tarrant, the female protagonist of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, did not pay attention to her conscious efforts to be her self. Moreover, Singley did not even include *The*

Mother's Recompense for analysis in her book *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*.

Such neglect of Wharton's thematic quest for self-realization throughout her novels is unjust, for it is one of her important themes. Edith Wharton herself emphasized once that "I am never interested in the misfortunes of my personages, only in their psychological evolution" (cited from Lewis 1975, 326). This indicates Wharton's interest in exploring the growth of self as reflected in her novels. In fact, the quest for self-realization also applies to Edith Wharton herself, who challenged the conventions of her upper middle class and became a serious writer. Moreover, phrases about "self" have high frequency in most of her novels and her protagonists are often deeply involved in the consciousness of "self". To name a few, the reader can find in the texts Lily's "real self" (*HM* 90), Charity's "new self" (*S* 117), Anna's "the self" (*R* 285), Kate's "that self" (*MR* 251), Vance's "selves under selves" (*GA* 260) and Halo's "inmost self" (*GA* 350). Other characters such as Ethan and Newland also aspire for selves different from what society expects them to be.

I find the social psychologist E. Tory Higgins' self-schemata about different aspects of self useful in analyzing Wharton's thematic quest for self-realization in her major novels. According to this self-schemata, there are three aspects of self, namely, "the actual self", "the ideal self" and "the ought self" (Baron et al ed. 84). The actual self is "the representation of the attributes that a person believes he or she possesses" (ibid.). The ideal self is "the representation of the attributes that the person would like, ideally, to possess" (ibid.). Among these three selves, the actual self is the