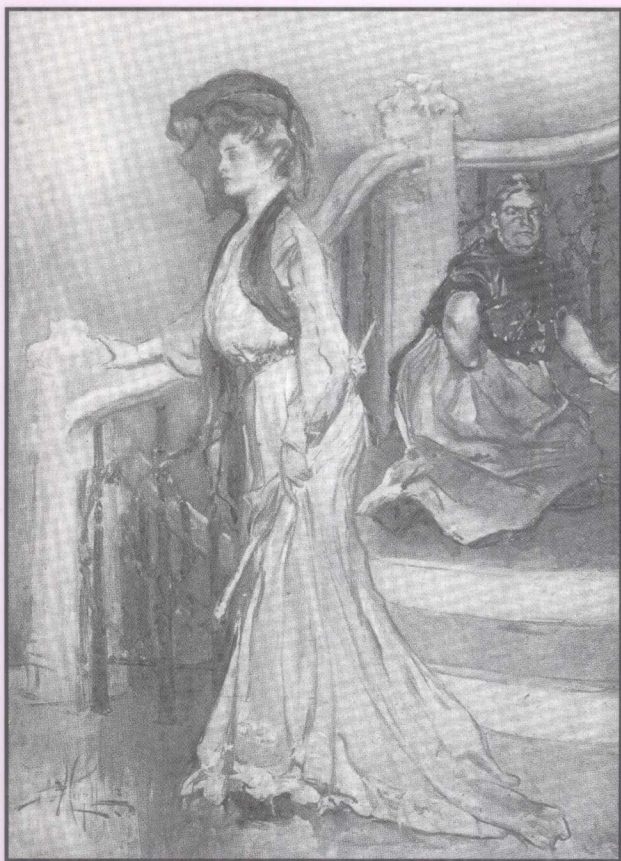


THE HOUSE
OF MIRTH
EDITH WHARTON



EDITED BY ELIZABETH AMMONS

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Edith Wharton
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by
ELIZABETH AMMONS
TUFTS UNIVERSITY

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Preface

The House of Mirth made Edith Wharton famous. Published in 1905, the novel became a national bestseller and launched her career as America's foremost novelist in the two decades that opened the twentieth century.

Wharton was born in 1862. Christened Edith Newbold Jones, she was the only daughter of leisure-class parents who descended from aristocratic Old New York families; her parents, like others of their class, lived off accumulated wealth rather than having to labor for an income. Because her two brothers were teenagers when she was born, Edith grew up, in effect, as an only child. Typical of her time and class, she and her family traveled a great deal, dividing their time annually among New York, Europe, and Newport, Rhode Island; she was privately tutored; and she made her debut at the age of seventeen. So when she married Edward ("Teddy") Wharton in 1885, her future seemed clear. She appeared conventionally headed for leisure-class life as a hostess, wife, and mother. That she would become instead one of America's most accomplished and prolific novelists was hardly foreseeable. Not only did her class and gender combine to mitigate against a literary career, but her individual family environment did as well. According to Wharton, her parents distrusted emotion and had little interest in art or the life of the mind. She spent many hours as a child reading and making up stories in her father's dark, seldom-used library; but the activity, at least as the adult author recalled it, was undertaken in spite of, not because of, family tastes and values.

Sharing very few interests, Edith Wharton and her husband grew apart the longer they were married. Edith suffered bouts of acute depression during the 1890s that were alleviated only by medical treatment and by her establishing an independent intellectual and creative life for herself as a writer. In 1913, against the Wharton family's wishes, she secured a divorce, an action that deepened the chronic depression into which Teddy Wharton had progressively sunk the healthier his wife became. During some of these years (from about 1907 to 1910), Edith Wharton had an affair with a slightly younger man, Morton Fullerton, which was successfully kept secret while she was alive and for many years after her death. Wharton had no children and, following her divorce, made her permanent home in France. By the time she died in 1937, she had published eighteen novels and novellas, eleven volumes of short stories, a handful of poems, numerous essays, a memoir, and several books of

argument and analysis. During her lifetime she was widely honored. She was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor for her war work on behalf of refugees during the First World War; and for her accomplishments as a writer she received, among other distinctions, a Pulitzer Prize in 1921 and an honorary doctorate from Yale University in 1923.

Wharton's critical reception during the twentieth century has followed the major shifts in mainstream American critical attitudes toward women writers. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, her reputation, like that of many other white women writers at the time, such as Ellen Glasgow or Mary Austin or Willa Cather, swelled. Enthusiasm about the ambitions and achievements of such women, while not without its detractors, ran very high at the turn of the century, with the work of Edith Wharton and *The House of Mirth* in particular routinely singled out for praise. Then the widespread, deep-seated reaction against work by women that set in during the 1920s and continued through the mid 1960s, especially among scholars and critics in colleges and universities, effectively reversed that early high assessment. Although there are important exceptions, most critics and teachers from the 1920s to the 1970s, when they thought of Wharton at all, which was seldom, dismissed her either as a novelist of manners, a lesser genre in American literature according to the prevailing mid-twentieth-century academic preference for male psychological dramas and escape fantasies, or as an imitator and inferior version of Henry James. With the revival of serious attention to women writers that occurred as a result of the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which in turn grew out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, interest in Edith Wharton dramatically revived. No longer considered simply or even primarily the heir of Henry James, and certainly not dismissed as a "mere" novelist of manners, a form that itself is enjoying reassessment, she is today once again widely read and written about as a major American fiction writer. Most frequently, as the critical essays in this volume illustrate, she is read as a writer especially, although not exclusively, interested in writing about women.

Beginning in a very narrow, rarefied world of upper-class leisure and privilege but ending in a far different place, *The House of Mirth* raises a number of questions about American capitalism and class structure, gender relations in the worlds Wharton focuses on, connections and animosities among women within and across particular economic and social boundaries, white family structure in the United States, and the dynamic of ethnic assimilation and bias. Wharton, like many writers, was both the unthinking product of her time, place, class, and culture and a sharp critic and questioner. Although she by no means escaped many of the prejudices and privileges of her world, she brought to her investigation of American life, particularly at the top, a cool, penetrating gaze, and she did not invent issues as much as she reflected them. As the historical selections and excerpts following the novel in this volume suggest, when

she wrote critically about conspicuous consumption in the leisure class, the economics of marriage for white middle- and upper-class women, or the physical rigors and deprivations of working-class life for many Americans, she was reflecting in fiction issues and arguments broadly current in the culture.

In her own day Wharton's appeal was wide and various. In her letters at the turn of the century to Fanny Quincy Howe, published in 1977 as *The Maimie Papers*, the former prostitute Maimie Pinzer named *The House of Mirth* as one of her favorite books. Upon its publication the novel attracted warm praise from fellow writers such as Hamlin Garland and Owen Wister. In her advice to young black Americans who aspired to be writers, the Harlem Renaissance author Jessie Redmon Fauset in 1923 identified Wharton as one of six authors (only two of them American, the other being W. E. B. Du Bois) who should be taught and emulated. Although *The House of Mirth* examines only a small section of American life, its artistry—Wharton's elegance and control as a stylist—and insight have made it a book, in its own time and now, of broad and major importance.

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A Note on the Text

This edition of *The House of Mirth* is reprinted from the original 1905 edition published by Charles Scribner's Sons. The illustrations by A. B. Wenzell appeared in that original edition as well as in the prior serialization of the novel in *Scribner's Magazine* from January 1905 through November 1905. No editorial changes have been made in the text.

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The Text of
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH



She lingered on the broad stairway, looking down into the hall below.

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

BY

EDITH WHARTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. B. WENZELL

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

MDCCCCV

The House of Mirth

I

Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station¹ his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.

It was a Monday in early September, and he was returning to his work from a hurried dip into the country; but what was Miss Bart doing in town at that season? If she had appeared to be catching a train, he might have inferred that he had come on her in the act of transition between one and another of the country-houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season;² but her desultory air perplexed him. She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose. It struck him at once that she was waiting for some one, but he hardly knew why the idea arrested him. There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions.

An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line to the door, and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test.

"Mr. Selden—what good luck!"

She came forward smiling, eager almost, in her resolve to intercept him. One or two persons, in brushing past them, lingered to look; for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train.

Selden had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven

1. One of two enormous railroad terminals in downtown Manhattan, begun in 1903 and completed in 1913. A remarkable engineering and architectural feat, it was important as a symbol of modernity and as a center of activity for the whole United States.

2. Very wealthy people at the turn of the century often summered in Newport, Rhode Island, a fashionable ocean resort, where many members of New York high society had summer houses and mansions, sometimes referred to as "cottages," in which they entertained lavishly.

years of late hours and indefatigable dancing. Was it really eleven years, Selden found himself wondering, and had she indeed reached the nine-and-twentieth birthday with which her rivals credited her?

"What luck!" she repeated. "How nice of you to come to my rescue!"

He responded joyfully that to do so was his mission in life, and asked what form the rescue was to take.

"Oh, almost any—even to sitting on a bench and talking to me. One sits out a cotillion—why not sit out a train? It isn't a bit hotter here than in Mrs. Van Osburgh's conservatory—and some of the women are not a bit uglier."

She broke off, laughing, to explain that she had come up to town from Tuxedo, on her way to the Gus Trenors' at Bellomont, and had missed the three-fifteen train to Rhinebeck.

"And there isn't another till half-past five." She consulted the little jewelled watch among her laces. "Just two hours to wait. And I don't know what to do with myself. My maid came up this morning to do some shopping for me, and was to go on to Bellomont at one o'clock, and my aunt's house is closed, and I don't know a soul in town." She glanced plaintively about the station. "It *is* hotter than Mrs. Van Osburgh's, after all. If you can spare the time, do take me somewhere for a breath of air."

He declared himself entirely at her disposal: the adventure struck him as diverting. As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal implied.

"Shall we go over to Sherry's³ for a cup of tea?"

She smiled assentingly, and then made a slight grimace.

"So many people come up to town on a Monday—one is sure to meet a lot of bores. I'm as old as the hills, of course, and it ought not to make any difference; but if *I'm* old enough, you're not," she objected gaily. "I'm dying for tea—but isn't there a quieter place?"

He answered her smile, which rested on him vividly. Her discretions interested him almost as much as her imprudences: he was so sure that both were part of the same carefully-elaborated plan. In judging Miss Bart, he had always made use of the "argument from design."

"The resources of New York are rather meagre," he said; "but I'll find a hansom first, and then we'll invent something."

He led her through the throng of returning holiday makers, past sal-low-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was.

A rapid shower had cooled the air, and clouds still hung refreshingly over the moist street.

3. A stylish New York restaurant located at Fifth Avenue and Forty-fourth Street.

"How delicious! Let us walk a little," she said as they emerged from the station.

They turned into Madison Avenue and began to stroll northward. As she moved beside him, with her long light step, Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modelling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair—was it ever so slightly brightened by art?—and the thick planting of her straight black lashes. Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?

As he reached this point in his speculations the sun came out, and her lifted parasol cut off his enjoyment. A moment or two later she paused with a sigh.

"Oh, dear, I'm so hot and thirsty—and what a hideous place New York is!" She looked despairingly up and down the dreary thoroughfare. "Other cities put on their best clothes in summer, but New York seems to sit in its shirt-sleeves." Her eyes wandered down one of the side-streets. "Some one has had the humanity to plant a few trees over there. Let us go into the shade."

"I am glad my street meets with your approval," said Selden as they turned the corner.

"Your street? Do you live here?"

She glanced with interest along the new brick and limestone house-fronts, fantastically varied in obedience to the American craving for novelty, but fresh and inviting with their awnings and flower-boxes.

"Ah, yes—to be sure: *The Benedick*. What a nice-looking building! I don't think I've ever seen it before." She looked across at the flat-house with its marble porch and pseudo-Georgian façade. "Which are your windows? Those with the awnings down?"

"On the top floor—yes."

"And that nice little balcony is yours? How cool it looks up there!"

He paused a moment. "Come up and see," he suggested. "I can give you a cup of tea in no time—and you won't meet any bores."

Her colour deepened—she still had the art of blushing at the right time—but she took the suggestion as lightly as it was made.

"Why not? It's too tempting—I'll take the risk," she declared.

"Oh, I'm not dangerous," he said in the same key. In truth, he had never liked her as well as at that moment. He knew she had accepted without afterthought: he could never be a factor in her calculations, and there was a surprise, a refreshment almost, in the spontaneity of her consent.

On the threshold he paused a moment, feeling for his latch-key.

"There's no one here; but I have a servant who is supposed to come in the mornings, and it's just possible he may have put out the tea-things and provided some cake."

He ushered her into a slip of a hall hung with old prints. She noticed the letters and notes heaped on the table among his gloves and sticks; then she found herself in a small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug, a littered desk, and, as he had foretold, a tea-tray on a low table near the window. A breeze had sprung up, swaying inward the muslin curtains, and bringing a fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony.

Lily sank with a sigh into one of the shabby leather chairs.

"How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in a luxury of discontent.

Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake.

"Even women," he said, "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat."

"Oh, governesses—or widows. But not girls—not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!"

"I even know a girl who lives in a flat."

She sat up in surprise. "You do?"

"I do," he assured her, emerging from the cupboard with the sought-for cake.

"Oh, I know—you mean Gerty Farish." She smiled a little unkindly. "But I said *marriageable*—and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know."

"You shouldn't dine with her on wash-days," said Selden, cutting the cake.

They both laughed, and he knelt by the table to light the lamp under the kettle, while she measured out the tea into a little tea-pot of green glaze. As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.

She seemed to read his thought. "It was horrid of me to say that of Gerty," she said with charming compunction. "I forgot she was your cousin. But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not. If I were, I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat. It must be pure bliss to arrange the furniture just as one likes, and give all the horrors to the ash-man. If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman."

"Is it so very bad?" he asked sympathetically.

She smiled at him across the tea-pot which she was holding up to be filled.

"That shows how seldom you come there. Why don't you come oftener?"

"When I do come, it's not to look at Mrs. Peniston's furniture."

"Nonsense," she said. "You don't come at all—and yet we get on so well when we meet."

"Perhaps that's the reason," he answered promptly. "I'm afraid I haven't any cream, you know—shall you mind a slice of lemon instead?"

"I shall like it better." She waited while he cut the lemon and dropped a thin disk into her cup. "But that is not the reason," she insisted.

"The reason for what?"

"For your never coming." She leaned forward with a shade of perplexity in her charming eyes. "I wish I knew—I wish I could make you out. Of course I know there are men who don't like me—one can tell that at a glance. And there are others who are afraid of me: they think I want to marry them." She smiled up at him frankly. "But I don't think you dislike me—and you can't possibly think I want to marry you."

"No—I absolve you of that," he agreed.

"Well, then——?"

He had carried his cup to the fireplace, and stood leaning against the chimney-piece and looking down on her with an air of indolent amusement. The provocation in her eyes increased his amusement—he had not supposed she would waste her powder on such small game; but perhaps she was only keeping her hand in; or perhaps a girl of her type had no conversation but of the personal kind. At any rate, she was amazingly pretty, and he had asked her to tea and must live up to his obligations.

"Well, then," he said with a plunge, "perhaps *that's* the reason."

"What?"

"The fact that you don't want to marry me. Perhaps I don't regard it as such a strong inducement to go and see you." He felt a slight shiver down his spine as he ventured this, but her laugh reassured him.

"Dear Mr. Selden, that wasn't worthy of you. It's stupid of you to make love to me, and it isn't like you to be stupid." She leaned back, sipping her tea with an air so enchantingly judicial that, if they had been in her aunt's drawing-room, he might almost have tried to disprove her deduction.

"Don't you see," she continued, "that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me, and that what I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend—I don't know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you." Her voice had dropped to a note of seriousness, and she sat gazing up at him with the troubled gravity of a child.

"You don't know how much I need such a friend," she said. "My aunt is full of copy-book axioms, but they were all meant to apply to