



HELEN KILLORAN

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION
OF EDITH WHARTON

CAMDEN HOUSE



*Edith Wharton on her patio at Pavillion Colombe,
France, ca. 1920s.*

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OF EDITH WHARTON

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藏书章

CAMDEN HOUSE

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*To the Magnificent Multitudes
Killorans and Jenkinses*

*Studies in American Literature and Culture:
Literary Criticism in Perspective*

Literary Criticism in Perspective

James Hardin (*South Carolina*), General Editor

Books in the series *Literary Criticism in Perspective* trace literary scholarship and criticism on major and neglected writers alike, or on a single major work, a group of writers, a literary school or movement. In so doing the authors—authorities on the topic in question who are also well-versed in the principles and history of literary criticism—address a readership consisting of scholars, students of literature at the graduate and undergraduate level, and the general reader. One of the primary purposes of the series is to illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself, to gauge the influence of social and historic currents on aesthetic judgments once thought objective and normative.

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Preface

EDITH WHARTON MAY BE the greatest American author of the early twentieth century—the greatest author, not the greatest female author. Critics who favor other authors may argue, but Edith Wharton will make them work. Before and since R. W. B. Lewis's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Edith Wharton, critics have probed the edges, but have yet to pierce the essence of her philosophy, purpose, and narrative technique. Critics during and after her lifetime have criticized her for the purported influence of Henry James, thereby impugning her originality. They have criticized her neglect of the existence of contemporary cultural and historical currents abroad or at home, then decided she could not know about social matters in the United States because she had lived too long in France and could not know current English. They sighed that she had had “it” once, but now “it” was gone.

Nevertheless, some critics have developed a core consensus about how to interpret her major work. One problem with their critical conversation, however, is the tendency to assume another's errors for instance by repeating that Edith Wharton was the pupil of Henry James. It will become quite apparent that the bias here runs largely (but not entirely—see chapter 8) against that idea. Critics have yet to recognize the full dimensions of Edith Wharton's greatness because they have not yet recognized the knowledge, aesthetics, and magnificent technical innovations at the root of her creative philosophy.

This volume on Edith Wharton, in common with the other volumes in the Camden House Literary Criticism in Perspective series, examines critical trends chronologically, making no attempt at all-inclusiveness, but seeking representation. Chapter 1, “Preview,” summarizes the trends in the criticism from 1898 to the present and includes the metamorphosis of “the feminine” into feminism. Readers wishing more sophisticated discussions of that subject, can consult the sections of feminist and other theory in libraries or major bookstores. Chapter 2 discusses the vast criticism on *The House of Mirth* (1905), so vast, in fact, that it was necessary to arrange the material chronologically within major topics. Chapter 3 studies *Ethan Frome* (1911). As those familiar with *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* will understand, these works have been variously called long short stories, novellas, and novels. Merely for convenience, the terminology used here is “novel.” Chapters 4, 5, and 6

focus on *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1918), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), respectively. Then chapter 7 notes the rising critical interest in *Ghosts* (1937). Chapter 8, "Review," sums up the main trends, opinions, fads, and political and social changes, from groundbreaking to downright silly, which have shaped the first one hundred years of Edith Wharton's critical reception. It also lists the basic sources for the study of Edith Wharton and her work. A chronological bibliography and index follow. As always, the author must take complete responsibility for errors, opinions, and choice of emphasis.

Acknowledgments

I MUST EXPRESS MY DEEP SADNESS about the death in 1998 of one of the first great Edith Wharton scholars, James Tuttleton, whose work will nevertheless live on. In fact, his reference, with Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray, *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992) has been indispensable to use of the early reviews. I acknowledge with deepest appreciation the infinite patience of Camden House editors Jim Hardin and Jim Walker, and the generous financial support of Ohio University-Lancaster.

I deeply value the bolstering of my Dad and other family members, the exceptionally efficient OU-L library staff, especially Julia Robinson. My celestially sent Research Assistant, Patricia DeLong, lifted such tremendous burdens from me that she inspired this refrain as I worked: "Thank heaven for Pat!"

Finally, excerpts from *A Backward Glance* and the photograph of Edith Wharton at Pavillon Colombe are reprinted by permission of the Estate of Edith Wharton and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.

Abbreviations for Citations

- BG Edith Wharton. *A Backward Glance*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1934. Rpt. New York: Scribners, 1985.
- CC Edith Wharton. *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Scribners, 1913.
- CR James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, eds. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- EF Edith Wharton. *Ethan Frome*. New York: Scribners, 1911.
- G Edith Wharton. *Ghosts*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1937.
- GS Edith Wharton. *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*. New York: Scribners, 1973.
- S Edith Wharton. *Summer*. New York: Appleton, 1918.

After all, one knows one's weak points so well, that it's rather bewildering to have the critics overlook them and invent others.

—Edith Wharton, 19 November 1907

1: Preview—

The Feminine, the Lull, the Feminist

HERS WAS, AND IS, A PUZZLING GENIUS. During Edith Wharton's lifetime, critics grudgingly admired her craftsmanship, but backhandedly referred to it as too clever and too artificial. Then, as if in an attempt to explain the mystery of such artificially clever fiction, they created a myth that imagined her seated at the feet of the man who became known as "The Master," Henry James. James attracted the praise of conservative critics who liked his focus on morals, ethics, and human behavior. Critics with socialist leanings and interest in the welfare of the "lower classes" were offended by wealth. But although both James and Wharton had some wealth, their incomes, by the standards of the wealthy, were modest. But these critics thought that at the feet of the master Wharton absorbed whatever skill and wisdom it takes to become an author. How else could a woman write so well? Women can only imitate greatness.

She never could shake the shadow of Henry James in the eyes of critics and the public. This great author was her dear friend, but in no way her teacher. As late as 1934 she attempted to break the spell in the "Henry James" chapter of *A Backward Glance*. Essentially, Edith Wharton became a victim of repetition and association and, of course, history. Those academic critics under the thrall of early socialism felt that the accident of Wharton's wealth and connections made her undemocratic and outside the spirit of "realism," the genre of writing associated with William Dean Howells, and the preferred writing style of the time. She was accused of being too rich and aristocratic and, obviously, employing servants, the rich and aristocratic could not also develop a social conscience. In addition, her tendency to cite classical allusions irritated her less educated detractors. In a 1922 essay entitled "The Great American Novel," she felt forced to defend the leisure-class subjects she knew best as being just as human as "the man with the dinner pail" (652). Yet she had not ignored the lower classes as testified by *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1913), *Summer* (1918), and any number of short stories.

After she moved to Europe, Wharton found herself criticized as "not American enough," and people insisted that she had lost touch with the sound of American English. Again a victim of history, her

charitable efforts for the French and Belgians during the First World War disrupted the regularity of her fictional output. Furthermore, she was accused again and again of writing works that lacked morality, of creating weak characters, and of stiffness, both personal and literary. As time passed, her late work was dismissed as inferior, written by a woman unable to sustain quality when her emotions subsided, a woman as outdated as the dust of old lavender, a woman slipping into the trap of writing magazine fiction merely for the income. Yet the assumption beneath this criticism is that she had been an artist at least once, when she won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence* in 1921.

After Edith Wharton died in 1937, criticism all but ceased, but people quietly continued to read *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*. The Second World War forced academic critics to put their energy toward the war effort, and critical conversation all but stopped. Interest was aroused once again when Percy Lubbock's biography appeared in 1947—a flash that quickly died out. But as the country settled down after the war, New Critics of the fifties and sixties such as Blake Nevius, Geoffrey Walton, Irving Howe, and others, began to write about her, although none delved as deeply as he might have. The pause continued until the release of Edith Wharton's private papers in 1968 made possible the advent of R. W. B. Lewis's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography in 1975.

The publication of Lewis's biography coincided almost exactly with the rise of the first wave of feminism. A second, feminist, biography by Cynthia Griffin Wolff appeared in 1977. The Edith Wharton Society, formed in 1984, began to publish the *Edith Wharton Review*, and to hold biannual conferences that now attract scholars from all over the world. Another group, The Edith Wharton Restoration, purchased The Mount, the home she designed and loved but which had fallen into serious disrepair. Thanks to the work of people like Scott Marshall, progress toward restoration to its original beauty has already resulted in its designation as a historical landmark. Finally, in the nineties, some critics removed her from the cultural contexts that had prevented true appreciation of her work, and Edith Wharton was resurrected and appreciated as a genius and great literary artist. Her works are being reissued in numerous editions, and her out-of-print novels have again found their way into bookstores. Much of this delayed success can be credited to the rise of feminism, but in addition culture simply changed enough for readers to notice that Edith Wharton's novels and stories are not outdated. As a critical perspective, feminism has its politics, however, as do other critical theories. Each develops its own perspective, both illumi-

nating and limiting. As a result, the critical conversation has become vast and challenging. But whatever the cause, Edith Wharton is finally recognized as a great American author.

Victorian Lavender: The Reception of Wharton During Her Lifetime

Edith Wharton's early stories began to appear in 1898, the end of the Victorian era. (The early reviewers who wrote about her praised her craftsmanship, but those who came later smilingly dismissed her work as something to be put in a drawer with a lavender sachet, to be removed some long time later and read with sighs and sentiment.) In general, they held two culturally ingrained prejudices against her. First, she belonged to the "inferior" sex, a society female writer entering a tradition scornfully biased against what Nathaniel Hawthorne called "scribbling women." Second, she had the misfortune of fortune, since she had descended from the Dutch patroons and British landowners, whose wealth constituted the "old money" of Manhattan. The supposition was that such a woman could not understand the average working person. The matter worsened in the 1920s when a form of socialism represented by *The New Republic* became popular in academic circles. Critics, mostly academic middle-class men, scorned the accidents of Edith Wharton's wealth and womanhood, and naturally that affected their evaluations of her work. They confused their invented cliché of the fur-clad, pretentious female snob with the content of her stories and novels. Charges abounded that her upper-class characters, based on the privileged "four hundred," constituted too narrow a subject matter: the highly aristocratic social set of New York at the *fin de siècle*, also called the Gilded Age. Critics automatically categorized Edith Wharton with the women of her set—those not college educated, who learned a little French, music, needlework, and tea-pouring from questionably educated governesses. She also bore the burden of her own family, who hurt her deeply by refusing to speak of her as an author. Because Wharton was related to most of the members of New York society, the wound from her family's ostracism of the most valued part of her life can be more easily understood.

Edith Wharton's superb craftsmanship represented the only matter reviewers and critics consistently agreed upon during her lifetime, although some insisted that with their "brilliancy" and "cleverness," the works must be "too clever," "artificial," "unoriginal," "unimportant," or even "classical" to be realist. At a later period, critics did place Wharton among realists, but when the biographies became available,

the truth proved strikingly different from the assumptions and generalities.

The general tenor of the criticism can be found in Carl Van Doren, who in 1923 accuses Wharton of exposing upper-class splendors “merely as noisy brass to the finer metal of the authentic inner circles” (95). He calls her milieu less an “American aristocracy” than an “aboriginal aristocracy,” whose characters, straying from custom, “walk through their little drama with the non-adventurous stride of puppets” (97), obviously fearful that any straying from custom would invite disaster. While admitting Wharton’s “magnificent irony” (98), Van Doren undermines it by reflecting on its coldness and surmising that “her advance in satire may arise from nothing more significant than her retreat into the past for a subject” (98). Yet in the eleven novels Edith Wharton published between 1900 and 1920, only *The Valley of Decision* (1902) about eighteenth-century Italy, and *The Age of Innocence* about New York in the 1870s mined the past. She would write just one more historical novel, *Old New York*, in 1924. (Another, *The Buccaneers* [1937], set in the 1870s, found incomplete at her death, has since been published.) *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913)—and in fact all of her other writings—were contemporary with the times during which they written.

The admired craftsmanship became a complaint: it was *too* good. Vernon L. Parrington’s jealous-sounding remarks (1921), responding principally to *The Age of Innocence*, at first concede Wharton’s “keen intellect” (151), her cerebral analysis, and the structural ingenuity of her books, but then Parrington makes this often-quoted statement, a fuller version of which can be found in chapter 2: “But when one has said that the craftsmanship is a very great success, why not go further and add that it doesn’t make the slightest difference whether one reads the book or not. . . . Her distinction is her limitation. . . .” Then, in 1925, in the first book-length work on Edith Wharton, Robert Morss Lovett, apparently another liberal of those times, struck a similar blow, one that began the slow decline of Edith Wharton’s reputation. Meanwhile voices in her defense, buried in small journals, went largely unheard. Lovett claims that “Mrs. Wharton” is not only cold, defensive, and snobbish, but “a novelist of class. . . . [and] her conception of class is limited. The background of the human mass is barely perceptible through her high windows . . .” (75). Lovett’s insistence that she was a relic who did not understand evolution or the problems of the masses destroyed any sense of her relevance to modern life: “The unleashing of the cruder forces in the racial and industrial conflict has thrown the world back into a more primitive phase of the evolution struggle. All

this has come to pass since Edith Wharton made her appearance in literature nearly thirty years ago. She cannot claim to have been born out of her due time, but it is among the happy consequences of her persistence in her original well-doing that she remains for us among the voices whispering the last enchantments of the Victorian age” (87).

Contributing to the painfully progressive descent of the author’s reputation, Regis Michaud (1928) admits Wharton’s “excellent craftsmanship” and deft plot construction, but like Lovett, he compares her to Henry James. He calls her characterizations “objectivity verging on indifference and even on cruelty,” her field limited, her psychology flimsy (55), and he pronounces the remainder “antediluvian” (56). He insists, in an odd statement, that her “old-fashioned” (55) Victorian characters “live without a real moral background” (58). Then he repeats the leftist position: “Modern critics. . . are shocked by her indifference to social or political problems” (55–56). Jacob Zeitlin and Homer Woodbridge (1929) quote George Moore’s apology for Lovett’s “restricted sociological test”—“Is there, or is there not. . . always an abundance of new novels available of just the sort which the proletariat likes?” Moore concludes that a “revision rather than a reversal of judgment was in process, a new flexibility of thought about Edith Wharton’s work” (712). If so, Lovett did not contribute to it.

Possibly the first critic to note the literary depth of Wharton’s work, Katharine Fullerton Gerould, in her review of *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1923), gives the conservative, aesthetic viewpoint of Edith Wharton’s talent and places her among both male and female writers: “Her superb gift of narrative, her well-nigh faultless building of a plot, none can question. Architectonicé, as Matthew Arnold calls it, is not usually the gift of the female artist; and perhaps the appearance of Mrs. Wharton’s name on nearly all the submitted lists of the ‘twelve greatest women’ is attributed to her masculine power of handling events. . . . In any given novel of hers . . . you always have to recognize her as a master-builder. She knows, infallibly, how to tell a story.” Gerould compares Wharton to Balzac in her ability to show society revolving around questions of money (although her main theme is marriage). She praises Wharton’s irony, wit, and gift of laughter. The presence of the Fulmer children at the end of the novel demonstrates the kind of humor that contains the truth that “life is like that.” Rather than church divorce laws, this is the “real center of the labyrinth . . . this goes back to something . . . fundamental[, a] feeling of a certain type of human being concerning the marriage relation . . . and the Cave is rebuilt in the depths of the Ritz” (CR 307–10).

Other critics, assuming her minor importance as an American author, began short probes of her novels during the "period of neglect" from 1938 to 1975—that is, after her death, until provisions of her will allowed access to her private papers in 1968, and R. W. B. Lewis had time to research and write his revealing biography.

The Lull: 1938–1975

Between 1938 and 1975, Edith Wharton was not quite neglected. After 1938 critical attention diminished, and most attention focused on *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, or *Ethan Frome*. Writers on Wharton in these years mostly speculated, repeating much of what had previously been written about: her apparent lack of knowledge about her native country and her failure to "discover" it. She had lived abroad too long to know America, people said, explaining her "inferior" late work. A story goes that the question was anticipated by one particularly naive reporter, who arrived at Hyères to interview Edith Wharton. When the young lady asked how Wharton's English stayed so modern, the author replied that she picked it up by listening to peoples' conversations in elevators. The reporter, it is said, took her quite seriously.

New Critics and formalists made brief incursions into Wharton's novels. What genre did her work represent? Was it psychological, realist, naturalist, internationalist, novel of manners, historical, or simply Jamesian imitation? Only one critic uses the term that Wharton herself used in *The Writing of Fiction*, the "chronicle novel."

At the same time, interest in colonial and Puritan influences on Wharton, partly in the context of the regionalist and local color concepts of genre that focused on morality and value, evolved into discussions of the socio-cultural influences of regionalism, determinism, or social Darwinism. Critics eagerly raised questions of genre, of realism and naturalism, anticipating the appearance of a "Great American Novel" that would encompass the entire nation, similar perhaps to the way Tolstoy's *War and Peace* encompasses Russia.

But in general, after the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the quantity of literary criticism declined radically. The nation turned nearly all its resources, from paper and ink to many of the literary critics themselves, toward winning the Second World War. The specific result was a virtual silence about Edith Wharton (and others) for the dozen years between 1939 and 1951. Even so, serious voices here and there began to repeat the title of an essay by Edmund Wilson (1938), "Justice to Edith Wharton." Wilson provides some biography and a survey of the writings, with a backhanded assertion (to greatly

paraphrase) that she was good while she was here, but now she's gone. He refers to her books as dealing with the "artificial moral problems of Bourget" developed in James's least satisfactory manner, having "the character of expensive upholstery" (19). He also calls her a "passionate social prophet" and "at her strongest and most characteristic, she is a brilliant example of the writer who relieves an emotional strain by denouncing his generation" (20). He concludes that she was a "child of a political movement played out, yet passes on something of its impetus to the emergence of the society of the future" (31). But in 1939 Ludwig Lewisohn could still write about Wharton as a Victorian, stressing her status as the social aristocrat related to the Rhinelanders, Roosevelts, Astors, and the rest of the "four-hundred," members of old families on the famous list that Mrs. William Backhouse Astor based on how many people could fit into her ballroom.

In 1947 Yvor Winters included Wharton in his book, but only in the context of a discussion of Henry James. There he argues that the New England moral sense was merely an intensification of that of New York (305). He strangely considers *The Bunner Sisters* her best short novel (307), but redeeming that, gives Wharton serious credit, for at her best she "gives greater precision to her moral issues than James is able to achieve" (310). In addition, the advent of Percy Lubbock's biography (1947), *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, produced an interesting effect, not only letting people feel a false sense of "knowing" the truth about the author, but also encouraging continued interest in her work.

The Feminine

Waves of women's movements have swelled and waned since before the Victorian era and such sea changes are reflected in much early Whartonian criticism. The common assumption, accepted by most men and women, was that literature written by women could not be seriously "literary" because female qualities such as sentiment destroyed the effort. Few would write as Hamilton Wright Mabie (1902) did in discussing *The Valley of Decision* that "Mrs. Wharton is the accomplished artist, to whom the art of writing is an end in itself." Familiar cultural prejudices constantly interfered with a fair evaluation of her work, and when it was more or less fairly evaluated, the automatic second assumption was that a man must be helping out somewhere. Men, and many women, believed that the only way to explain a female writer's serious success was either to find "masculine qualities" in her person or her writing, or to attribute her writing to a man behind the scenes—in

this case Henry James. Otherwise, a woman's writing was merely a feminine diversion—a hobby like making riddle books.

As it happened, Wharton's first collection of short stories, *The Greater Inclination* (1898), appeared during an ongoing debate about the value of Henry James's novels. Both wrote in the manner of realism, that is, in a manner meant to evoke life as actually lived, and both emphasized the human damage caused by warped moral values. As a result, Wharton instantly found herself cast in James's shadow. In addition to its innate sexual prejudice, this pairing resulted from a political attempt to place Wharton in the neohumanist literary camp of morality-conscious James supporters and against the socially conscious liberal detractors of James's writing. Furthermore, James served to supply "the man behind the woman" needed to justify any praise awarded to a female writer. The most generous technique of accomplishing this de-traction often involved discussing supposedly masculine dimensions of her work, like "cold intellect," as Hildegard Hawthorne does in 1908:

Some one has said, "Never make a general statement about women, because at most you know a hundred or two, and the other millions probably don't in the least resemble any of your particular collection." But one may perhaps venture on a generalisation of Mrs. Wharton's women, the women she is making familiar to us in one book after another; the women she has drawn with a fine point, decisively, yet with an extraordinary lack of sympathy. These women are creatures of the intellect, and the passions which disturb the current of their cold-flowing lives are of the mind, not of the heart. . . . These women express not excess, but emptiness. (216–17)

"Masculine" qualities such as intellect were nearly attributed to her by men such as Henry Dwight Sedgwick (1908), even as he attempted to defend her femininity:

When a woman writes a novel such as "Jane Eyre" or "Adam Bede" there is a general masculine agreement that the talents and capacities which created the novel are of a particularly masculine order. In Mrs. Wharton's case men are debarred from any such self-complacent theory, for her talents and capacities are not only intrinsically feminine, but also, despite her cleverness which, general speaking, is a neutral trait, they are superficially feminine. This fundamental fact of Mrs. Wharton's femininity is conspicuous in many ways. . . . There is also in the stories what one may call a certain feminine capriciousness or arbitrariness, even beyond the autocracy of the story-teller,—a method of deciding upon instinct rather than upon reflection. (59–61)

Women writers like Edith Wharton found themselves in a Catch-22: a logical, reasoning woman was accused of frigidity and of writing like a

man, but defense of any feminine qualities simply made matters worse, indicating a woman drawing on some unnamed instinct rather than reason. Nevertheless, there is some validity to the observation of Wharton's inability to render strong emotion in her early work, particularly in the earliest stories, in *The Valley of Decision*, and even in *The House of Mirth*, all of which seem to have been written in intellectual overdrive. Yet by the time she had written *Ethan Frome* (1911), she had conquered that weakness. Reviews of *The Greater Inclination*, a collection of stories, illustrate critical attitudes that, although the shading changed, remained fairly constant during Wharton's lifetime. The most popular technique of explaining a successful female writer (beyond quoting Samuel Johnson's comment that the surprise is not in her doing it well, but in her doing it at all) involved aligning her with a successful man like Henry James.

While little disagreement about the quality of her craftsmanship occurred among reviewers and critics of either gender, it required only the coupling of the two names, James and Wharton, to point out a perceived emotional frigidity (which Wharton would probably have called "restraint") a perception that in retrospect seems exaggerated when her work is compared, first to the usually sentimental writing then expected from women, and second to the most famous modernist writers. "Mrs. Wharton writes with the finished ease of the skilled craftsman, and with the feeling and distinction of the artist," writes an anonymous reviewer of *The Greater Inclination* (1899).

But as technical superiority automatically meant that the machinery must be compared to a refrigerator rather than, say, Henry Adams's dynamo, which most readers familiar with Edith Wharton's biography might find more appropriate, the perception of her coldness expanded to criticism of her characters: "Artistry first of all. In technique and finish all she has touched is distinctive. . . . To compare [the novels] to the work of Henry James is conventional, but it is also unavoidable. . . . *The House of Mirth* impress[es] without being impressed with its atmosphere of artificiality. In technique it is near perfection but one cannot breathe. . . . All her women are parasites, cruel as leeches and as soulless" (251). And according to the reviewer for *Munsey's Magazine* (1901), "Her men are subtle and complex ladies wearing mustaches." The question of Wharton's "ineffective" male characters continues today. (See for instance, David Holbrook, *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man*). The assumption is that Wharton could not portray a "strong" male character, not that she that deliberately drew these characters in shades of weakness. Some might argue for Ethan Frome's endurance as strength or that Vance Weston and Frenside of *Hudson*

River Bracketed (1929) are, or develop into, strong characters. Even so, the observation seems largely correct. Although weak or strong, if the characters play their parts, the question seems unimportant except for those who want to find "weak men" to emphasize powerful women.

The "emotional frigidity" of which Edith Wharton was constantly accused does allow restraint, a positive quality in most writing. Even so, that skill was presented negatively, as in the *Independent* (1904): "Moral defeat is the sum total of every situation portrayed. . . . and no one except perhaps Mr. Henry James can present a revolting scene with more social delicacy." R. W. B. Lewis reports, however, that Wharton wrote W. C. Brownell, her editor at Scribners, after receiving copies of some reviews he had sent her, that she felt discouraged by "the continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can't read, much as I delight in the man)" (131).

Unknown to today's critics is the fact that Edith Wharton attempted a response to a review by John D. Barry. In *Literary World* (April, 1899) Barry writes, "I recall reading the first story, 'The Muse's Tragedy,' in *Scribner's Magazine* and being impressed by its fine quality and by its resemblance to the work of Mr. Henry James. The author, Miss Edith Wharton, has evidently studied Henry James very closely. . . ." Miss Wharton apparently does not believe in the principle that a writer should always begin his story or his article with a short phrase. . . . a shrewd bit of advice given many years ago by Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Miss Louisa Alcott [was] always to begin her stories with conversation. . . . Miss Wharton has not as yet mastered her technique . . ." (CR 105-6). And in his May 1899 column, Barry's having heard from Edith Wharton either directly or indirectly, did not improve matters, for at the end of his next column Barry becomes decidedly catty: "She is said . . . not to relish the frequent references made by her readers to her indebtedness to Henry James, so her next book will probably not be marked by a slavish adherence to the methods of a very questionable literary model" (CR 152-53). Barry's comparison annoyed Wharton so unforgettably that she alludes to it thirty-five years later in *A Backward Glance* (1934), using the opportunity cunningly to disassociate herself from Henry James by following her comments with credit to another close friend, Walter Berry:

"When Mrs. Wharton," the condescending critic wrote, "has learned the rudiments of her art, she will know that a short story should always begin with dialogue."

"Always"? I rubbed my eyes. Here was a professional critic who seemed to think that works of art should be produced by rule of thumb, that there could be a fixed formula for the design of every

short story ever written or to be written. . . . I had pondered [the principles of my craft] deeply, and this egregious commentary did me the immense service of giving my ponderings an axiomatic form. Every short story, I now saw, like every other work of art, contains within itself the germ of its own particular form and dimensions, and *ab ovo* is the artist's only rule. In an instant I was free forever from the bogey of the omniscient reviewer, and though I was always interested in what was said of my books, and sometimes (though rarely) helped by the comments of the professional critics, never did they influence me against my judgment, or deflect me by a hair's-breadth from what I know to be "the real right" way. . . .

In this I was much helped by Walter Berry. (BG 114)

As Lewis puts it: "By 1899 it was already too late . . . for so resolute a writer as Edith Wharton to be anybody's *élève*" (131). But no denial would stop an anonymous reviewer for *Critic* (1899) from egregiously accusing her of plagiarizing from Henry James: "The pointing out of plagiarism, or unconscious adaptation or imitation, is a task neither pleasant nor difficult nor lofty. . . . [but it] becomes more imperative in proportion as the work considered is more clever. It is Miss Wharton's cleverness that betrays her and assigns her to her place" (CR 24). Edith Wharton's response to having been falsely put in her "place" among plagiarists is, unlike the unpleasantness with John D. Barry, unrecorded, but her response to having "masculine" qualities was pride. She enjoyed having her writing thought "masculine" because at the time that adjective indicated quality.

The excerpts that follow should provide a sense of the thinking about "the feminine" in literature in the early part of the century. Again, in 1908, Hildegard Hawthorne, as a female critic, was backhandedly generous, alluding to the criticism of Wharton's frigidity: "Mrs. Wharton writes with a . . . deliberate art, with a satisfying finish. She is wholly devoid of humour, but humour as an asset in the world amid which her creations move would be absolutely undesirable. These people must take each other and be taken with the utmost seriousness. One whole-hearted laugh would melt their icicle existences entirely away" (215). Also in 1908, Henry Dwight Sedgwick's comments contain some contemporary entertainment: "There is . . . in the stories what one might call a certain feminine capriciousness or arbitrariness, even beyond the ordinary autocracy of the story-teller,—a method of deciding upon instinct rather than upon reflection. Take the union of episodes. Mrs. Wharton sees her story in episodes; or rather she sees episodes and puts them together. . . . A man would acknowledge their independence, and leave them apart; but Mrs. Wharton, insisting on her autocratic prerogative, forcibly unites them" (61).

On the other hand, in his 1930 book Fred L. Pattee praises *The Valley of Decision* in a chapter entitled "The Feminine Novel": "She started on her wingings full-fledged: she needs blush at no surviving awkwardness. Again it is noteworthy that her first major novel was an attempt to catch the trade winds of a popular fictional movement. . . . The historical fiction movement produced nothing better done" (250). Then in 1935 Harlan Hatcher, responding to *The Age of Innocence*, praises her in the true patronizing spirit of "The Feminine." The book announced that:

[T]he most distinguished woman of letters of her generation had felt the strong current of the new day, and that she could remain abreast of it in spirit without losing her established bearings or the delicate odor of Victorian lavender. . . . She had remained the cultivated and decorous lady, fastidious in taste, restrained in irony and in wit. She had preserved her cool detachment from the specimens under her edged scalpel, and under the assault of modernism she had not relaxed her firm grasp on her own materials and her individual methods in creating her art. (90)

Another female critic, Margaret Lawrence, wrote in *The School of Femininity* (1936) of "helpmeets," whom she defines this way: "The helpmeet women are not all gentlewomen in actuality. But they are intrinsically, for they have all the qualities of the gentlewoman. They are self-effacing, faithful and, in the old sense of the word, womanly, which is to be interpreted now, unambitious for themselves" (249). Of Edith Wharton's fiction she remarks, "She places her sympathy, though very delicately, with the men. This does not set her outside the helpmeet class of writer. On the contrary, it encloses her completely within it. For the helpmeet is essentially a man's woman." She goes on to discuss May of *The Age of Innocence* as "the conventionalized presentation of femininity" and an example of "the design for femininity against which the feminist movement was a revolt. . . . Edith Wharton is a romantic and a gentlewoman [who, as a helpmeet writer] believes that somehow this thing between men and women should get settled with dignity and happiness" (258-59).

"The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton"

When feminism replaced "the feminine" as a concept after the gap of about a generation, it came in two waves. The first focused on social prejudice against women, which in the main came from the concept of women's repression by a "patriarchal culture." Considering the critical abuse that she had received from men and women such as those quoted

above, Edith Wharton appeared on the surface to fit nicely into this category. Feminism's premises included the ideas that women were consistently used for the sexual pleasure of men, forced into marriage, vilified in divorce, pressured out of the professions, denied equal education, equal pay for equal work, and equal participation in politics. On these premises feminists built the concept of the social construction of sexual identity. They agreed that female sexuality is suppressed by men, and also that women have internalized or "reified" men's "patriarchal" idea of women as "Other." In short, women were forced to believe men's lies. Feminists theorized that for the most part sexual identity was not a result of biological factors, but of a social hegemony (a psychological infusion of male-founded state and cultural concepts) designed to deprive women of power. Why men would wish to control in this way has been explained mainly in terms of their desire for sexual dominance, though the biological source of desire for dominance seems at least partly to contradict the concept of social construction. But as will become evident, biological theories emerged as well.

The critical evolution of Edith Wharton into a feminist began cautiously enough. Against stronger voices, Peter Conn (1983) regarded Wharton as having come only halfway to feminism. While "her loyalty was always to stability and tradition," she was also "the victim of traditional codes and customs" and consequently "a profoundly divided woman" (173).

(The "first phase" of feminism began with Virginia Woolf's ideas as expressed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) and ended, most probably, with *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949).) First-phase feminists emerging in the seventies attempted to show that as a divorced, childless woman living alone in Europe, Edith Wharton had carved a niche in the male profession of authorship. This, they reasoned, showed her sympathy to feminists who rallied for male/female parity. Margaret McDowell (1974), writing five years before the publication of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a seminal critical work of feminism, attempts to align Edith Wharton with feminism by building ironies around stereotypes: "Repeatedly she questioned the validity of a woman's submitting to the restrictions imposed upon her in a male-oriented society." She further points out that the subject of a third of Wharton's novels and stories is "the marriage question." Wharton exposes the "penalties experienced by women as they confronted such common realities as abortion, illegitimacy, economic dependence, and the double standard of sexual morality" (520). McDowell cites *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) as a feminist novel because its protagonist is a professional nurse. She says carefully, however, that

“the exact nature of Edith Wharton’s feminism resists easy definition,” but that “it is possible to deduce from her work her feminist concerns, which thus tend to be cumulative and implicit rather than explicit” (523). Cynthia Griffin Wolff felt bolder. She used Erikson’s psychological theory of adult development combined with a feminist approach, writing Edith Wharton’s biography to interpret many of her works in *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977). Wolff and McDowell proved to be the vanguard of this “first phase” of feminism regarding Edith Wharton. In 1980 Elizabeth Ammons attempted to show that Wharton’s “fiction records her public argument with America on the issue of freedom for women . . . [and] is both a record of one brilliant and intellectually independent woman’s thinking about women and a map of feminism’s ferment and failure in America in the decades surrounding the Great War” (ix).

Subsequently, second-phase feminism developed into two branches. This phase was rooted in ~~Betty Friedan’s~~ *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a popular book based on the idea that bored, frustrated middle-class American women felt trapped in intellectually stifling domesticity. Second-phase feminist criticism looks most closely at female biology as a source of positive creativity in life and art, regarding it as a difference to celebrate. It sees women’s experiences as differing from men’s, but notes oppression by a male-dominated language intended to exclude women. If women are limited by words like “chairman” and “postman” and otherwise excluded from the language, how can they become writers, let alone postal workers? Feminists also began to examine the unconscious, beginning to use the Lacanian theories derived from Freudian and Kristevian theories. They pointed to social and economic conditions, the inadequacy and absence of institutions helpful to women, and women’s financial victimization by a patriarchal economic system. This criticism began to absorb the literary Marxism and socialism that had excluded Edith Wharton (and Henry James) in the thirties because of their relative wealth and their subject matter related to the social upper classes.

Alexandra Collins (1982) provides an example of second-phase feminist criticism when she compares Edith Wharton’s *The Reef* to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her conclusion is primarily a reiteration of the 1930s’ Marxist ideals:

[T]hey reveal similar views toward the future of civilization. In their writing, they show a certain disdain for democracy. Both fear the chaotic force of humanity as a whole, unable to understand what Wharton called “the man with the dinner pail” and “promiscuous contacts” with “agglutinated humanity” (*The Reef*, p. 10) and what Woolf de-

scribed in her letters as “The London poor, half-drunk and very sentimental or completely stolid with their hideous voices and clothes and bad teeth,” and that for both art is the “key element in the . . . creation of a more ideal world.” (56–7)

A second branch of second-phase feminist theories led to a less exclusively American and European view, to include third-world enslavement under postcolonial regimes. Many critics felt that the first branch of the second phase breaks down too simply into a binary opposition that omits many diverse elements of race and class. Second-phase, second-branch feminism is a more activist movement than the others, as shown by Kate Millett’s angry *Sexual Politics* (1969). That powerful book distinguished between sex and gender, regarding the patriarchy as viewing the female as an inferior male. At nearly the same time, Shulamith Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), which attempted to substitute sex for class as the prime historical determinant. Germain Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) shows the neutralization of women’s power by a patriarchal society, while Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden from History* (1973) discusses how Marxist theory ignores women and how Marxist feminists’ main task should be to study relations between gender and the economy. In *Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (1973) Rowbotham points out the double oppression of the sexual division of labor of women at work and in the home. Subsequent Marxist-feminists showed a particular interest in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* because of these novels’ subjects—women trying to improve their social and personal status by marrying wealthy men, apparently having no other choice. Yet further examples seemed hard to obtain.

Soon Elaine Showalter created “gynocriticism,” an alternate canon of “suppressed” women’s literature and culture, for feminists tended to attribute the literary quality and equality of the traditional “white male” canon to suppositions based on the ideas of deconstruction. Criticizing the “narrow literariness” of the early work of Gilbert and Gubar, feminist theorists of this second phase-second branch adapted the deconstructionist theories of Derrida and others for their purposes because they purport to show that texts have no fixed meaning. “Texts” is used as a democratic word meant to equalize, for instance, the works of Shakespeare with matchbook covers, or of Tolstoy with candy wrappers, for if texts have no fixed meaning, no fixed value can be placed upon them. But as James Tuttleton so aptly phrases it, based on aesthetics, “these writers [Augusta Jane Evans Wilson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth] were being held

out to us, with a straight face, as neglected geniuses worthy of comparison with Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James" (8).

Pushing feminist ideas even further, and into problematic areas for critics who wish to support Edith Wharton—who had been so often accused of literary frigidity—the gender theories of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray stress the "writing effect of the text" and "writing the body," encouraging women to allow their sexual energy to flow into their writing as men presumably do. They should find and overcome or remove the "phallocentrism" of literary and social constructs. Lesbian feminists such as Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) chart male sexual violence in all cultures and history, and suggest a new "gynomorphic" vocabulary with which to counter male mythology. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote her influential essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) to theorize that by way of an invisible "lesbian continuum" all women are innately lesbian or "abnormal," allowing them to share their own history and culture outside of the "rapacious power" of a heterosexual patriarchal culture.

Most feminist criticism of Edith Wharton and her work remains within the first phase or the first branch of the second phase, presumably because her subject matter and characters do not lend themselves well to second-phase, second-branch investigation. There are, for instance, no African-American characters or easily recognizable homosexual characters. Some attempts have been made to establish or refute Wharton's prejudice against Jews by using Simon Rosedale from *The House of Mirth* as a prime example, supplemented by a few offhand remarks in some letters, but those essays are at best "slippery," as deconstructionists view language.

An examination of the criticism reveals that, for the most part, two types of feminists write about Edith Wharton: radical and moderate. The radicals generally study feminism rather than Edith Wharton. These women often attempt to prove a feminist theory by using examples from an author's work. By the laws of logic, however, examples chosen because they prove the theory are fallacies of hasty generalization, and such critics rarely appear more than once in Wharton's bibliographical literature. The other group consists of women and some empathetic men who primarily study Edith Wharton, but who also espouse feminism. These critics range from those who use variations of feminist theories to illuminate Edith Wharton and her work, to those who in varying degrees are likely to include some close reading and use feminist theories moderately in their subjects and conclusions. Voices of dissent and a few simple abstainers also exist, but generally find their ideas drowned out by the very volume of feminist points of view.

Julie Olin-Ammentorp issued a caution in 1988: "Most feminist critics seem to imply that Wharton, though never one to ally herself with the feminist movements of her day, was a kind of inherent feminist" (237). Rather, she argues, Wharton was a "special woman who accepts her own success as something due to her, something she has earned" (242). "Edith Wharton's challenge to feminist criticism is the challenge created by historical distance and by shifting definitions of feminism itself." She continues by saying that in shaping a "Wharton who conforms to . . . expectations . . . [feminist critics] have oversimplified the complexities of Wharton's personality and times," and that although they have respected her genius, "they have detached it from the woman as a whole" (243).

Olin-Ammentorp's voice was joined by that of James Tuttleton in a controversial essay entitled "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton" (1989). He describes a conference where "speaker after speaker assumed as a given that Mrs. Wharton had languished in obscurity, stifled by the critical prejudice of the patriarchy, until the present generation of feminist critics had rescued her from oblivion." He continues: "All of this suggested to me a complete unfamiliarity with the massive bibliography of Wharton studies before the 1970s" (8). Having written several annotated bibliographies of Edith Wharton, he formed a background from which to make that statement. He mentions that the "thirty-year ban on the inspection of her private papers delayed . . . biography and other kinds of cognate criticism" (9) and goes on to discuss the fiction and how it "does not serve very well to buttress the ideology of a feminism engaged in an attack on men, their domination and cruelty, on marriage as such, or on the so-called patriarchy" (11).

This side of the argument is beautifully summed up by Elsa Nettles (1997):

[Edith Wharton] did not conceive of the writers she revered as belonging to a masculine tradition inherently hostile to women. It is true, she was sensitive to the prejudice against women writers; she attacked [a literary] double standard. . . . But she did not seek to create or validate a woman's tradition implicit in the idea of a masculine tradition to which women are alien. Unlike Virginia Woolf, she did not regard the language of English literature as the creation of men, its syntax ill-suited to the needs of the female writer. She did not view the English language itself as an instrument of male domination or feel the need to create a new sentence or a new language. Paradoxically, the fashionable society which marginalized writers, denied her literary companionship and never acknowledged her importance as a writer, in at least one way made men and women equal. In upholding as a part of its code of manners a standard of speech to which both men and