



Novels: The House of Mirth / The Reef / The Custom of the Country / The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton , R.W.B. Lewis (Editor)

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Edith Wharton's full and glamorous life bridged the literary worlds of two continents and two centuries. Born in 1862 into an exclusive New York society against whose rigid codes of behavior she often rebelled, she lived to regret the passing of that stable if old-fashioned community and to appreciate the sense of personal identity its definitions provided. She became a prolific professional writer, author of more than forty published volumes, including novels, short stories (many of them tales of the supernatural), poetry, war reportage, travel writing, and books on gardens and house decoration. An expatriate in France for three decades before her death in 1937, she included among her many distinguished friends men as various as Henry James, Theodore Roosevelt, Kenneth Clark, and André Gide.

The four novels in this *Library of America* volume show Wharton at the height of her powers as a social observer and critic, examining American and European lives with a vision rich in detail, satire, and tragedy. In all of them her strong and autobiographical impulse is disciplined by her writer's craft and her unfailing regard for her audience.

The House of Mirth (1905), Wharton's tenth book and her first novel of contemporary life, was an immediate runaway bestseller, with 140,000 copies in print within three months of publication. The story of young Lily Bart and her tragic sojourn among the upper class of turn-of-the-century New York, it touches on the insidious effects of social convention and upon the sexual and financial aggression to which women of independent spirit were exposed.

The Reef (1912) is the story of two couples whose marriage plans are upset by the revelation of a past affair between George Darrow (a mature bachelor) and Sophy Vener, who happens to be the fiancée of his future wife's stepson. Henry James called the novel "a triumph of method," and it shares the rich nuance of his own *The Golden Bowl*.

The Custom of the Country (1913) is the amatory saga of Undine Spragg of Apex City—beautiful, spoiled, and ambitious—whose charms conquer New York and European society. Vulgar and voracious, she presides over a series of men, representing the old and new aristocracies of both continents, in a comedy drawn unmistakably from life.

The Age of Innocence (1920) is set in the New York of Wharton's youth, when the rules and taboos of her social "tribe" held as-yet unchallenged sway. A quasi-anthropological study of a remembered culture and its curious conventions, it tells the story of the Countess Olenska (formerly Ellen Mingott), refugee from a disastrous European marriage, and Newland Archer, heir to a tradition of respectability and family honor, as they struggle uneasily against their sexual attraction.

Novels: The House of Mirth / The Reef / The Custom of the Country / The Age of Innocence Details

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Brian says

I read this as part of a literature discussion group, paired with Phillip Roth's American Pastoral. While it was hard to connect with turn-of-the-century New York City, especially given the upper-upper class insularity of Wharton's 40 Families world, the writing--so descriptive and lyrical--was a joy.

Marshall says

Loved Custom of the Country. If Wharton's good characters, Newland Archer and Lilly Bart find life unsatisfactory, her evil character, Undine Spragg doesn't. Nothing gets in her way and really she allows nothing to inhibit her rise in the rarefied worlds of Paris and New York. The funniest parts of the book are those where Undine learns how the aristocracy really live in late 19th century France. It is not that different from the old monied families of New York.

Rdonn says

This was a book club choice and I rather unwillingly started it. I'd read many Wharton and Henry James books in my 20s. It really is a brilliantly written book that gives you a knowledge of NY Society at the turn of the century. What a group of dull, self-centered, shallow people! However, with a couple of more inquisitive, intellectual people, it remains a fascinating book. It's one thing to write about the past, and another thing to write about a world you know, which Wharton does.

Derek Emerson says

Wharton's novel is a departure from what you expect in a novel of manners and it can even be described as depressing. The question of what are we to take from this is strong as it seems to chronicle a wasted life to serve as a lesson for others. It does show the attractions and terrors of society, especially against the inability of an individual to face reality and make adjustments.

Dan Tracy says

Age of Innocence

A delightful look at a long past way of life by an author of the era. Her brief, admiring reference to Theodore Roosevelt showed that, like him, she understood that, as Bob Dylan sang, "the times they are a changing".

Jane says

This is a review for House of Mirth, which Natalie told me to read. I did read Age of Innocence and liked it. I just couldn't get into this one. I didn't seem to like any of the characters and didn't like the one who I think is the main character.

Tim says

I just finished reading *The Reef* in this collection of four of Edith Wharton's books. I've previously read *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*. While I enjoyed the others very much, this time I was overwhelmed by her skill at constructing long, descriptive sentences. Using a combination of commas, semicolons, and colons, she strings phrases together like pearls.

Her writing strikes me as a mix of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. If Jane Austen's books are comedies of manners, then Edith Wharton's are dramas of manners. And where Dickens long strings of phrases bring to life the sights, sounds, and smells of a dreary London slum, Ms. Wharton connects the dots of emotions and thoughts of upper-class people trained to present a reserved facade to everyone.

This book confused me in two ways; the title and the ending. I'm not sure what "The Reef" refers to and I'm not a good researcher. Please let me know if you have any light to shed on how she chose the title.

(view spoiler)

This edition is published by the Library of America, "a nonprofit publisher dedicated to preserving America's best and most significant writing in handsome, enduring volumes, featuring authoritative texts," and at a very reasonable cost. They absolutely live up to their goals. The beautiful page layout on soft-white, acid-free paper in a cloth binding that allows the book to stay open easily without breaking made reading a visual, tactile, intellectual pleasure. After moving several times in the past year I've become a big fan of ereaders. But this edition has earned space on the shelf and, more importantly, in the moving box. More info at: www.loa.org.

Susan says

I had read The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence before this, but I reread them and then tackled the The Custom of the Country and The Reef. These novels are all wonderful, especially the brutal and claustrophobic world of Society they present. The women characters especially have such potential and absolutely no where to go with all their energies and intelligence, so that to watch their eventual defeats seems particularly poignant.

Karen says

The novel I just read in the collection was The Age of Innocence. (I read The House of Mirth over 10 years ago and it is also excellent. I have not gotten to the other two yet.) Wow. What a writer. Set in 1875 in New

York high society, the novel is both incredibly beautiful (the sentiments of the main character towards the woman he loves, who happens to be his fiancee's cousin, as well as the writing itself) and somewhat infuriating when you realize how small-minded and even cruel the seemingly genteel characters can be under their veneer of civility. Newland Archer must decide if he should follow thru on his commitment to marry young and beautiful May Archer or follow his increasingly strong feelings for her cousin Ellen Olenska, who has returned to New York to escape an unhappy marriage with a Polish nobleman, but the plot is just as much about the accepted modes of behavior (and deception) within a small social circle and how far one can push against them. Impossible to say how good Wharton is in a brief summary -- just read it!

Michelle says

The House of Mirth I think is my new favorite book. Upon finishing I was too tired to fully digest the ending, but it's absolutely the way it had to happen. Incredible!

The Reef was not good. It felt very obvious the story had been originally published in installments. The main female character was very tedious. I didn't even care that the end was abrupt and didn't tie much up. The book was a bore.

The Custom of the Country was much more fluent and readable than the reef. The main character was pretty well-developed. An okay read.

The Age of Innocence interesting because it was from a guy's perspective. Too many society rules contradicted rules in the other stories. Probably would've been fine if I hadn't read them all back to back. Really wish in the end they had paid their dues and did chose the happy road.

Beth says

The fourth novel, "The Age of Innocence" was a good read, which I wasn't expecting. Much more of a page turner than "The Reef" or "The Custom of the Country". I was a little surprised at the ending of "The Age of Innocence", but then when I reflected on the style exhibited in the previous three novels I nodded my head in acceptance.

Eva Wierzuchowska says

The Age of Confusion.

Certainly an age among the wealthy classes of New York which managed to adhere to conventions and extreme morals of the time, yet at the risk of scandal, willing to forego life time dreams and promises. The love affair which was doomed from the outset, was mainly hampered by Archer's ill-timed marriage to innocent youngling, and seemed a good idea at the time. But swiftly realising his mistake, when May revealed herself to be the steady unambitious cosseted creature she was. And yet astute enough to subtly end the star-crossed romance. She had enormous influential family support. And Archer, withdrew from the love of his life.

He was given a last chance to meet with Ellen, but declined, probably because of wasted years too many to

contemplate.

Nicole Ferguson says

Well...I've enjoyed my first classic book of 2009, Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth. Lily Bart's character was exhaustingly entertaining. Her world gave me a glimpse into the social goals, stresses, and perspectives of the early 1900's upper class. It was a love/hate relationship with the main character for me. I cringed at many of her decisions, yet I rooted for her to rise above her superficial tendencies. I know it may do me good to experience the type of ending that Wharton leaves us in The House of Mirth, but that does not mean that I feel good about it right now(I just finished the book a few seconds ago). Let's just say that I enjoyed the book enough to finish it in two days.

The Custom of the Country...

If Lily Bart's character made me cringe then Undine (she had many last names because of all her husbands) repulsed me. She was everything that I do not like in a person...superficial, selfish, greedy, one dimensional, and oblivious. This book forced me to grow as a reader. Instead of always having to identify with the characters, I can read a good novel objectively, through critical thinking. It was a struggle to finish this book, because of all the horrible things that Undine does. I am still very glad that I read it.

The Age of Innocence

I've enjoyed this book so far. I have a few more pages to go, but at this point the book has been entertaining and insightful into the interactions of the privileged class of 1900 New York. Reading Edith Wharton has provoked many tangents of thought that relate to the present. Her books have helped me understand the motivations and behaviors of people I come across today. In the past, I may have thought myself superior to the people I speak of. The reason I felt this superiority was I felt that those who were preoccupied with image and wealth seemed to be missing the point of life. Reading these books reminds me yet again that just because something is different does not make it wrong. We are all made of our experience. I do not believe that experience is all we are made of, but I feel strongly that it molds a good portion of who we are and who we become. There are many other factors in this creation of self like genetics, ambition, decisions, the unexplainable, etc. All of Wharton's characters come from a similar experience, those who have money in New York(and other states and countries) and those who want or are acquiring money in the same time period. I find it fascinating to have a peek into the world of these classes and what occupies their thoughts and lives.

Verity says

There is something about the way Wharton describes the very rich of late 1800s America, in The House of Mirth, that can only really be captured with the very delicate paper of this edition. Of the story, it is the imperfect natures of the characters that draws me in and the fact that, whilst they resolve some issues, they are still flawed in the end. It may not be as gritty as some novelists with the setting, but it feels as though the

emotions are...it helps to remind me that the glittering world of money isn't an Austen-esque world.

Miranda says

The House of Mirth by Edith Wharton was a book containing, drama, romance, scandal, and heartbreak. The book begins in the 1890s in New York, with a woman who is twenty-nine years old. Now during this time period, most women at that age would be married by now. Which is why in this novel the young Lily Bart is chasing down rich men to marry her in order to stay in her social circle. But when an opportunity strikes, she passes them up. This could be because she thinks that she can do better, the fact that she might just not want to be married to anyone, or because she is in love with a man named Lawrence Selden, but he is not rich enough to become her husband. This quote explains very well Lily's attitude in life, when a man she decided she wanted to marry had become engaged to another woman, "Lily's passing light-heartedness sand beneath a renewed sense of failure. Life was too stupid, too blundering! Why should Percy Gryce's millions be joined to another great fortune, why should this clumsy girl be put in possession of powers she would never know to use?" (95). She is already made rich by growing up with her Aunt Peniston, and she knows that she is an attractive woman, which leads to the coming and going of men in this novel. It seems as soon as she has picked one, they either decline or have become engaged to someone else. But Selden remains her constant throughout the novel, and they have intelligent conversations that she can never have with the boring wealthier men. Wharton does an excellent job at keeping the reader involved with the story and making predictions on what will happen next. Lily then gains almost ten thousand dollars in debt from playing cards and gambling. She thought this was money Gus Trenor, a grumpy business man in her social circle, had invested in stock for her, but instead had given her his own money. In return for his help he wanted Lily to spend more quality time with him. She refused, so he wanted her to pay the money back. Lily decides to get away when offered to go on a cruise in the Mediterranean with a wealthy couple, Bertha and George Dorset, and another man named Ned Silverton. Bertha only wanted Lily to come to occupy George's time enough so that she could sleep with Ned. When George finds out and is trying to divorce Bertha, she tells everyone on a stop in the cruise that Lily will not be returning to the boat. She also spreads the rumor that Lily slept with her husband George.

When Lily's aunt finds out that Lily has been gambling and is now in debt, she decides to give most of her money as well as her house to other relatives. She has given Lily ten thousand dollars. Now as a social outcast and a woman in debt, Lily tries to get a job, but struggles holing one. In the end of the novel Lily takes an overdose on medicine and passes away. The heart wrenching tragedy in this is the morning after she dies, Selden rushes to her house to tell her he loves her and wants to be with her, but he is too late. This is what was stated after he sees her says goodbye, "But at least he had loved her—had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her—and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives." (347).

Wharton's novels have endings where the reader does not find what might be expected to happen, and usually ambiguous, where there are questions at the end that are left unanswered, they are left for the reader to decide what they believed took place. The greatest question was at the end, as to whether or not Lily killed herself or had an accidental overdose.

The greatest theme in this book is the importance of social classes. Most people during this time wanted to be wealthy and have nice things like high society did, and it was somewhat easier to become wealthy because of the booming stock markets. This is Lily thought of being poor once it happened to her, "It was indeed miserable to be poor—to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle-age, leading by dreary degrees of economy and self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding house. But there was something more miserable still—it was the clutch of solitude of her own heart, the sense of being

swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years.” (336). Not only was she poor, but she was alone, besides Selden and his cousin Gerty Farish, who is not rich but is kind to Lily. This is Gerty and Selden speaking of Lily while she was in a sort of fashion show, “ It was though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment... ‘Wasn’t she too beautiful, Lawrence? Don’t you like her best in that simple dress? It makes her look like the real Lily-the Lily I know...’ ‘The Lily we know,’ he corrected.” (142-143). Lily had given up her intelligent mind to be one of the beautiful, almost airhead women who could not be smarter than the men. But behind the glamour Lily was still gorgeous and very smart, but she wanted to live in the only way she knew how, and unfortunately she failed. Another point to make in this book is deciding who to put your trust in. Lily seems to put her trust in all of the wrong people or at the wrong time, thinking that she is going to get what she needs, but then it backfires and she has to start over or work her way out of it.

I enjoyed reading this book, it was interesting for me because when I watch movies or television shows based from around this time period, I never put much thought of women who did not want to marry or only married based on economic status but had no choice other than to become a social outcast. I usually believed they would just marry whom they loved, even if that meant leaving the higher classes of society. But there is much more to it, especially if the only thing a woman has ever known is being wealthy. That kind of life change can be a miserable one, and can change you into another person. We see what being cast out of society can do with Lily Bart’s case, and it was too much to her.
