



## Old New York: Four Novellas

*Edith Wharton*

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## Old New York: Four Novellas Edith Wharton

Set in the New York of the 1840s, '50s, '60s, and '70s, the four short novels in this collection each reveal the tribal codes and customs that ruled society, portrayed with the keen style that is uniquely Edith Wharton's. Originally published in 1924 and long out of print, these tales are vintage Wharton, dealing boldly with such themes as infidelity, illegitimacy, jealousy, the class system, and the condition of women in society. Included in this remarkable quartet are False Dawn, The Old Maid, The Spark, and New Year's Day.

## Old New York: Four Novellas Details

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# From Reader Review Old New York: Four Novellas for online ebook

## Sara says

I love Edith Wharton. I love her writing style, her insights, her understanding of the world of upper-crust New York (a world I can only ever get a glimpse of through the eyes of others), and her even deeper understanding of the human heart. I cannot say I am always fond of the short-story as a genre, but these novellas are really just short stories, and I enjoyed them every one.

In *False Dawn*, she shows us the ridiculous criteria on which the values of society are sometimes based and the injustice that can be heaped upon the head of a man who steps outside the norms others have set for him.

*The Old Maid* was my favorite in the book and the reason I elected a 5-star instead of a 4-star rating. This story, that deals with an illegitimate child and how the situation is handled by the mother and her cousin, is a perfect short story/novella for me. The subject matter is one we so seldom see addressed during this time, being as taboo a thing to speak of as to do. The ironies are myriad and the feelings of the two women are as sharp as broken glass.

Both *The Spark* and *New Year's Day* are interesting and well written. The latter particularly impressed me for its illustration of how things are not always what they seem to be and how often we think we know about someone from what we observe and have them pegged completely wrong.

As with all of her works, these have elements of tragedy that run through them like rising rivers. They swell and overflow and the characters themselves are at their mercy and stand no chance of stemming the waters. Perhaps growing up in Old New York, a privileged daughter of a very wealthy man, Edith Wharton was accustomed to others looking at her life and believing it perfect and blessed. Perhaps, from the inside, she saw how imperfect life could be regardless of the money or status one held. She certainly became a master at conveying that in her stories. Her ability to find the humanity in the midst of the oppressive societal conventions made her the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, a distinction she well deserved.

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## Mercurialgem says

I read this more than a month ago and my memory isn't that good with names and details but I can say that what I did like about this book was how she could put a really good story into a short story. Meaning each story in the book could have been a book but she was able to condense it with just the right essential details that it was like you got a whole book's worth into this nice short story. And in this book I believe there were four stories. I really enjoyed each and the fact that there was always an end and one of the stories that comes to mind is the one about the guy that bought all that artwork.....I like how we got to know what happened to it generations later.

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## Kalliope says

Lately I have been reading Edith Wharton and Henry James in an interspersed fashion. James I am following chronologically, Wharton I am not but I wish I were. Most of these works are rereads and I am delighted to be revisiting some of these books for a second time. This was particularly the case with *Old New York*. It became a New Old New York for me.

I picked it up as I was getting on a plane to fly to NY. For this visit I had decided to concentrate on the architecture of the city, both the old buildings and the history of how NY was planned out, as well as some of the more recent buildings. For this I had read *The City Observed: N.Y.* .

Wharton's novellas, published in 1924, are also laid out historically, covering the 1840s, 1850s, 1860s and 1870s. So they fall under the category of historical fiction. Although Wharton includes as a subtitle to each of her novellas the decade on which it is concentrated, her narration often is set in a later date at which a 'narrator' tells us what had happened 'before'.

There is a fair amount of I was not so aware of this in my first read. This time I was also conscientiously tracking any topographical references to the city and trying to imagine it visually. My (mentally) visual landmarks were amongst others Trinity Church, which by the 1840s was already its third building. This church was the tallest building in the city until the Brooklyn Bridge was finished in 1883. So the reader really has to erase from one's mind a great deal of what he/she knows about the appearance of New York.

The first story, **False Dawn, or the 1840s**, seemed just a bit forced or far fetched since one of the themes, the change in art historical appreciation that took place, mostly in England, during the 19thC and led by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood officially began in 1848. Nonetheless, I enjoyed reading the philistine atmosphere Wharton creates in which the appreciation of the early Italian Renaissance painters (Piero, Angelico, 'Carpenter', Giotto) is ironically derided. I also had to smile when I came upon:

*Ruskin--Ruskin--just plain John Ruskin, eh? And who is this great John Ruskin, who sets God's  
A'mighty right in his judgments? Who'd you say John Ruskin's father was, now?"*

and

*You said there was a Mr Brown and a Mr Hunt and a Mr Rossiter, was it?*

The second novella, **The Old Maid, or the 1850s**, is widely seen as the most accomplished one. The analyses of character are captivating. But again, following my new interest I was centered on any topographical mentioning of Gramercy Park, Irving Place, the Bowery and Waverly Place. The names also captivated me, seeing them as shadows of the gilded ones, such as the Vandergraves (Vanderbilts), the Ralstons (Randolphs), the Lovells (Lowells). As I found it striking that the Dutch continued to make such a strong colonial presence given that the new York had been the old new Amsterdam for only thirty-nine years.

The third one, **The Spark, or the 1860s**, inevitably had to have allusions to the Civil War, but for these to work with some perspective, the tale had to be told about three decades later. After having read the ambivalent reaction of the James family regarding the war, in this read I was paying attention to the reaction of the characters in general about those who did or did not participate in the fight. This is possibly the weakest of the four novellas, and it again acquired a contrived flavor easily generated in historical fiction. The mysterious personage had to be Walt Whitman, of course. Who else?

### **Frank Weston Benson, Portrait of a Lady. 1901.**

The last one, **New Year's Day, or the 1870s**, is very much à la Wharton in the development of the main female character. But here I was paying attention too to the chameleonic nature of 5th Avenue where both mansions and hotels in which women could gamble their reputation coexisted.

And so when coming to the end one imagines the author seeing herself and her younger double facing this lost panorama:

*And they breathed a joint sigh over the vanished 'Old New York' of their youth, the exclusive and impenetrable New York to which Rubini and Jenny Lind had sung and Mr Thackeray lectured, the New Hork which had declined to receive Charles Dickens, and which, our of revenge, he had do scandalously ridiculed.*

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### **Duane says**

In Henry James first letter to Edith Wharton, beginning what would be a long friendship, he advised her to write about what she was most familiar with, New York. That would set her on the course of writing what would come to define her literary legacy, her three classic novels of New York society, *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*. The four novellas in this collection also follow this theme, and they were written when Wharton was at the height of her profession.

4.5 stars

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### **Jennifer says**

I always love Wharton's view of New York society and *False Dawn* is a wonderful novella about the wealthy families of the mid-19th century New York and their relationship with money (old and new) and art - acquiring it, appreciating it, and using it to demonstrate their standing in society. Does Edith Wharton really need my review? She's brilliant. Read her.

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## **Tatiana says**

Wharton rarely disappoints. This is another anthology of novellas dedicated to the themes familiar to all Wharton readers - stifling constraints of Gilded Age New York society, utter dependence of women, etc.

The collection contains 4 stories, each set in a different decade of the 19th century. "False Dawn" deals with the consequences of being different, even in a trite matter of preference in art. "The Old Maid" is an interesting account of an aftermath of an illicit affair where two women are drawn into a very complex relationship raising an illegitimate child. "The Spark" explores (I think) an influence of a chance meeting on a man's character. "New Year's Day" is a story of a woman engaged in adultery whose reasons for being unfaithful are not quite what you expect them to be.

Unlike another anthology I recently read ("Roman Fever and Other Stories") this book is very uneven. "The Old Maid" and "New Year's Day" are the best, "False Dawn" a little underwhelming, but still good, and "Spark" is a definite disappointment (too unresolved and muddled). But nevertheless, Wharton, as always, delivers.

Reading challenge: #19.

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## **Tina Tamman says**

I don't often read short stories and this collection I read more or less by accident. I find them less satisfactory than novels because of their brevity, although this collection does have a unifying theme. It's all about old New York, its people and social norms that are slow to change.

Without wanting to give away the plot of any of the four stories in the collection, we are in familiar Wharton territory: these are primarily society ladies - and for Wharton women were very much in the foreground - who find themselves in conflict with their circle. I enjoyed the first - False Dawn - most of all because of its language. There are such marvellous descriptions of the father, Mr Raycie, "a monumental man" and his son Lewis, "a youth as scant as an ordinary man's midday shadow" who inserts "a languid fork" into his food. And the subject matter is unusual: paintings.

If you haven't read Wharton, I urge you to do so. But maybe you should start with something slightly more substantial, like "Ethan Frome" - it's not much longer than a novella but jam-packed with thought and feeling.

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## **Ginger Bensman says**

Old New York is my first experience reading Edith Wharton but it won't be my last. These four short novellas are set in New York society, each giving the reader a glimpse of the conventions and conduct of "polite society" during the last half of the 19th century (not always polite and frequently unkind). Even in these relatively short works, Wharton's characters are people we come to know and understand and the writing is nuanced. Each story comes to a very satisfying conclusion. I'm putting Wharton's House of Mirth and Ethan Frome on my "must read" list.

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## Sandy says

Edith Wharton was born into the world of wealthy "Old New York" society and her key to success as an author may have been writing about what she knew. Not having read any of the biographical works about her, I assume that she participated in Society to the extent that was necessary for acceptance and survival as a woman of that era. Yet she possessed, and used in her writing, the ability to step back and view the expectations of that Society with "double-vision" -- both as the "insider" who understood it and as an "outsider" who could evaluate it objectively.

I admire Wharton for her ability to see both the fine details and the Big Picture. Her gift for details gives us the believable and lovable one-of-a-kind characters which populate all of her works -- people whose lives, perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, are out of step with the accepted norms of "Society". Whereas their peers treat these characters with disdain, "cutting" them for their deviance from socially acceptable behaviour, Wharton treats them with gentleness, understanding, and compassion. These four stories, representing New York Society during four different decades of the 19th century, each feature a character of this type.

The first story, *False Dawn (The Forties)*, presents a young man who, during his pre-marital "Grand Tour" of Europe and the Near East, is tasked by his father with purchasing a private collection of Old Masters. Instead, he proudly brings home pieces of art which he personally prefers and is *disinherited by the old gentleman for bringing home such rubbish*.

*The Old Maid (The Fifties)* is a heart-wrenching story about two cousins who were inseparable as children. They make very different life-choices and, when their paths cross later in life, live together but grow apart. Wharton very boldly addresses (among other issues) the nature of motherhood and of women's relationships with each other. This is a story with a message which still reverberates in the 21st century.

*The Spark (The Sixties)* is a fascinating story of a veteran of the Civil War who is misunderstood by his Society friends. He is a mysterious character who makes a compassionate decision which causes his isolation from his wife and child as well as from Society. Although he was influenced by war-time experiences of another era (when PTSD was called by another name), this man's story speaks across the ages to modern readers.

*New Year's Day (The Seventies)* is (in my opinion) the crowning glory of the collection -- one of only a handful of stories which has ever (in my memory) left me in tears! It is the story of an "outsider" who is reluctantly accepted by Society by virtue of her husband's status; of the decisions which she makes in order to provide financially during his illness; and of her ability to rise above the judgments of Society and, as a widow, open her heart and home with grace and hospitality.

An absolutely spectacular collection of novellas! Highly recommended, especially to lovers of the work of Edith Wharton.

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## Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

I happened to be up in Ashland, Oregon, this weekend attending the Shakespeare Festival (saw a magnificent rendition of "The Tempest"), and stopped by a used bookstore, Shakespeare Books & Antiques, for a bit-o-

browsing. To my utter delight I discovered a collection of four slim hard-cover editions of Edith Wharton's "Old New York" novellas. These are first editions, published in 1924, are illustrated, and in very good condition. Of course I snapped them up for \$12 each! While waiting for plays to start, during intermission, or even while sitting in the park on a lovely afternoon, I read each one of them again simply marveling at the power of Edith Wharton's storytelling and use of language. Each novella is a stand-alone gem in its own right, but truly shine when read in the order she intended--"False Dawn", "The Old Maid", "The Spark", and "New Year's Day". Each novella is set in a different decade of the 19th century, i.e., the 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s.

I am ever so glad to have these books on my Edith Wharton shelf now!

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### **Laura Nowlin says**

I read this as a teenager. Like all Wharton works, I highly recommend it to any feminist fascinated by the Victorian age.

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### **Susan Budd says**

I really couldn't care less about rich people's problems. Coming as I do from a long and illustrious line of poor people, I have that instinctive disdain that the poor harbor for the rich. But Edith Wharton always manages to overcome my working class superiority and, for a time, force me to care as much for the blue-blooded as the blue-collared. That's how well she writes.

I must also confess that I enjoy her stories of "Old New York"—*The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, and now this collection of four novellas. But the "Old New York" of Edith Wharton is not the "Old New York" of my ancestors.

In *The Old Maid*, little Teena is cared for by a poor Irish woman and it is this woman who would bear the closest resemblance to one of my foremothers, not the high society ladies who are described in such brilliant prose. I almost feel like I should read *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob Riis as a countermeasure, lest I feel sympathy for Charlotte Lovell or Delia Ralston. For, while Wharton was writing books like *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), Riis was writing *The Battle with the Slum* (1901) and *Children of the Tenements* (1903). But Wharton writes so well that I can't help but read her. She writes so authentically that I can't help but believe her. And she writes with such heart that I can't help but care about her characters.

Reading Wharton allows me to imagine myself as a member of the elite class, to picture myself dressing for dinner, attending balls, and touring Europe, but the mere mention of Bridget, the poor woman in charge of Charlotte Lovell's destitute children, brings me back down to Earth, to the "Old New York" of my family's history, to my own childhood neighborhood of Irish, German, and Italian immigrants, to mothers who worked in factories to supplement their husband's meagre incomes, to the anxiety leading up to the landlord's monthly visit to collect the rent, and to dull summer evenings when hard-working people sat on their stoops with their little pails of beer while the children played in the street.

*"In a shabby white-washed room a dozen children, gathered about a stove, were playing with broken toys.*

*The Irishwoman who had charge of them was cutting out small garments on a broken-legged deal table”* (106).

Wharton wasn't oblivious to the poor. She writes about poverty in *Ethan Frome*. She is able to depict the stable where the destitute children receive charity from their betters, their crumbs from the upper crust. But Wharton writes what she knows and what she knows is wealth and luxury and privilege and all the apparently stifling traditions that go along with being a member of the American aristocracy. She portrays a world that few had the good fortune to experience and she does so with a genius that is uniquely hers. So I must put aside my contempt for the one percent from time to time and read her.

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## **Razvan Zamfirescu says**

Spicuiuri din recenzia finala care se gaseste pe blogul meu

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*Pentru a fi un scriitor care merit? s? r?mân? în istoria literaturii ?i numele c?ruia s? se potriveasc? ca o m?nu?? unui premiu prestigios precum Pulitzer, atunci trebuie s? fii capabil s? strângi în paginile c?r?ilor tale mici buc??i de timp ?i de oameni astfel încât cititorii t?i s? simt? c? tr?iesc efectiv al?turi de pove?tile pe care le oferi. Wharton nu doar c? face acest lucru, îns? talentul ei o ajut? s? exprime într-un mod sarcastic ?i cu o asprime (dup? cum bine observa Irving Howe) neîndur?toare, tarele unei societ??i în schimbare care refuz? s? se desprind? de vechile obiceiuri, insistând s? copieze ?i s? continue legi morale nescrise care nu se mai pot aplica în prezentul pe care par c?-l detest? prin simplul fapt c? distrugerea barierelor sociale ?i dintre sexe le arat? unor familii înst?rite c? prezentul e al celor activi, educa?i ?i doritori de succes.*

*„New Yorkul de alt?dat? al anilor cincizeci era dominat de câteva familii, care d?deau tonul cu un aer de naturale?e ?i opulen??. Una dintre acestea era familia Ralston.*

*Englezii voinici ?i olandezii ro?covani ?i zdraveni se contopiser?, ?i se formase astfel o societate prosper?, prudent? ?i totu?i risipitoare. A face lucrurile la scar? mare devenise un principiu fundamental al acestei lumi precaute, ridicat? pe averile bancherilor, ale comercian?ilor de m?rfuri indiene, ale constructorilor de vase ?i ale negustorilor ce aprovizionau vasele. Acei oameni bine hr?ni?i, cu mi?c?ri domoale – care p?reau enervan?i ?i apatici în ochii europenilor doar fiindc? o clim? capricioas? îi u?urase de câteva kilograme de prisos ?i le încercase nervii ceva mai mult – tr?iau într-o dulce monotonie, al c?rei echilibru de suprafa?? nu era niciodat? tulburat de vreo dram?, ea consumându-se în t?cere, din când în când, undeva în str?funduri. Sufletele sensibile erau în acele vremuri asemenea unei claviaturi în surdin?, pe care Soarta cânta f?r? s? se aud? vreun sunet.*

*Aceast? societate compact?, construit? din blocuri de piatr? bine unite între ele, era dominat? în mare m?sur? de familia Ralston ?i de ramifica?iile ei.”*

*Astfel se deschide povestirea Fata b?trân?, o povestire în care o doamn? Ralston intervine abrupt în via?a unei tinere mame, oferindu-i ?ansa s? tr?iasc? lâng? feti?a ei ?i luându-i deopotriv? dreptul a fi mama copili?ei. În doar câteva fraze Wharton reu?e?te s? prind? într-un mod de-a dreptul spectaculos modul în care familiile avute decid s? intervin? ?i s? conduc? nu doar ora?ul ?i afacerile acestuia, cât ?i via?a*

personal? de familie a unor locuitori.

Afacerile, banii ?i faima se confund? cu via?a de familie. Totul este dictat de interes, de respect, de opiniile celorlal?i, de ceea ce se vede la suprafa??, de ceea ce trebuie s? se vad? la suprafa??. Deciziile se iau în func?ie de rezultatul pozitiv pe care societatea sau partenerii de afaceri îl vor percepe, restul e irelevant.

Wharton nu ezit? s? critice într-un mod nu foarte elegant metehnele vremurilor ?i ale familiilor sus puse. Nu ezit? s? spun? pove?ti care e foarte posibil s? se fi întâmplat dat fiind modul de existen?? ?i filosofia high-class-ului din New York. Tocmai aceste pove?ti atât de fin legate de o filosofie de via?? vulgar? ?i lipsit? de umanitate o fac pe Wharton s? fie vocea sufletelor îngenunchiate ?i reduse la t?cere de c?tre b?rba?i influen?i ?i incapabili de a vedea în familia lor altceva decât pârgii menite a le ?ine afacerile ?i renumele în zona de confort, cu femei care se transform? în tirani datorit? puterii pe care b?rba?ii lor o au, exercitându-?i for?ele prin bârfe ?i interven?ii mali?ioase la balurile pe care le organizeaz? ?i la care particip? mai ales pentru a-?i ?ese intrigile vulgare.

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## El says

It's no secret that I have a girly hard-on for Edith Wharton, and I wear that badge proudly. She wrote fantastic novels, exquisite short stories, and now I've experienced her novellas. (Not to mention her work during the war and her wonderful sense of interior design.) She did it all amazingly.

Here are four novellas of, what else, New York society. Each story is of a different decade: *False Dawn* takes places in the 1840s, telling the story of a troubled father/son relationship; *The Old Maid* took on the 50s and is about a woman who has an illegitimate child that is adopted by her BFF; *The Spark* for the 60s is about a young man whose life is forever changed by a meeting with Walt Whitman; and *New Year's Day* takes place in the 70s, and is as yummy as any of O. Henry's stories.

Wharton's ability to tell such complete stories in as few pages as she did always blows my mind. Even in her short stories she manages to write whole characters, complete with flaws and imperfections; in these novellas she's able to do the same and then even a little bit more. I don't feel like I missed anything, or that they could have been improved if they were complete novels. Wharton had the skill to know when a story was finished which is why, in my opinion, there's not a bad one in the lot.

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## Bookworm1858 says

I was browsing in the library and came across Old New York by Edith Wharton, a collection of four novellas. I've read Ethan Frome, which is very different from other Wharton works as it's set in a rural area in New England while most of the others are in New York society like this one.

Summary from back cover: "These tales are vintage Wharton, dealing boldly with such themes as infidelity, illegitimacy, jealousy, the class system, and the condition of women in society."

False Dawn: A young man is sent on a tour of Europe to collect art to bolster his family's reputation; when he returns his father disowns him for choosing poorly. However many years later it turns out to be a very

valuable collection. I liked that the man's wife stood by him even through their years of poverty-I only wish his judgment could have been redeemed in his lifetime.

The Old Maid: This is also a Bette Davis movie; although I have not seen it, I enjoyed trying to picture her in this role. Possibly my favorite due to that. It's an especially heartbreaking story as a mother watches her daughter scorn her in favor of the adoptive mother, her cousin. I can't imagine having to watch your child everyday call someone else Mother and treat you as a poor spinster relative.

The Spark: This was my other favorite as the main character Hayley Delane is an interesting man. He ran away from school to enlist in the Civil War despite being underage and wealthy enough to buy his way out. Later he takes in his scandalous father-in-law as there is no one else to care for him. And it turns out that he is inspired by his meeting Walt Whitman during the war although he doesn't care for his poetry at all. I shared in the narrator's fascination with Delane and looked forward to finding out more about him as the story progressed.

New Year's Day: I really liked the twist in this one. A woman engages in an adulterous affair in order to scrounge up enough money to provide for her dying husband-everyone thought she was just a cheater but she didn't care because she kept her husband comfortable. She spends the rest of her life alone and comfortable in the knowledge that she did her best for her husband. It was a sweet love story although since the husband died in the beginning also tragic.

Overall: 4 out of 5. Actually all of these stories were to varying degrees depressing showing limitations placed on women and families by society. Despite that, they were enjoyable and readable. I was already planning on reading *The Age of Innocence* but now I am even more interested. The backcover also described the last story as O. Henryesque which makes me want to read some of his work now too.

I realize this wasn't so much a review as a description of the parts I liked but it is really good. I would recommend it as a nice bedtime reading or to someone who really likes Edith Wharton and has read her major works already.

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