Summary Article: Wharton, Edith Newbold Jones
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1862–1937, American novelist, b. New York City, noted for her subtle, ironic, and superbly crafted fictional studies of New York society at the turn of the 20th cent. The daughter of a socially elect family, she was educated privately in New York and in Europe. In 1885 she married Edward Wharton, a Boston banker; after the first few years of marriage Edward Wharton became mentally ill, and the burden of caring for him fell upon his wife. Finally, in 1913, after she had settled permanently in France, Edith Wharton terminated the marriage by divorce.

Her early stories and tales were collected in The Greater Inclination (1899), Crucial Instances (1901), and The Descent of Man (1904); somewhat narrow in scope, they nevertheless show the unity of mood and the lucid, polished prose style of her more mature works. Much of her writing bears a resemblance to the fiction of Henry James, who was her close friend. However, the similarities are superficial, and in her best and most characteristic novels—The House of Mirth (1905) and The Age of Innocence (1920; Pulitzer Prize)—she asserts herself as a distinctive artist. Recreating the atmosphere of the unadventurous, ceremonious upper-class society of New York, she depicts in these and other works the cruelty of social convention, the changing fashions in morality, and the conflicts that arise between money values and moral values.

In the novella Ethan Frome (1911)—one of her best-known, most successful, and least characteristic works—Wharton evokes the tragic fate of three people against the stark background of rural New England. Among her many other novels are The Valley of Decision (1902), a historical novel of 18th-century Italy; The Custom of the Country (1913); Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and its sequel, The Gods Arrive (1932); and an unfinished work, The Buccaneers (1938). Collections of her short stories include Xingu and Other Stories (1916), Certain People (1930), and Ghosts (1937). Wharton also wrote travel books (e.g., Italian Backgrounds, 1905), books on interior design and architecture (e.g., The Decoration of Houses, 1897; Italian Villas and Their Gardens, 1904), literary criticism, and poetry. In 1915 she was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor by the French government for her services during World War I.

Bibliography

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