



(c. 1889)

AML 4311: Major Authors: Edith Wharton

Professor Stephanie A. Smith

Fall 2024/ MWF 7 (1:55-2:45) **100% online and synchronous.**

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Like her older friend, the American/British author Henry James, Edith Wharton (née Edith Newbold Jones 1862-1937) was a writer's writer and a novelist's novelist, a chronicler of *The Gilded Age*, both ahead of her time and quintessentially of it. Born into a well-to-do, white New York City family—the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” was coined about her family's holdings—she grew up a child of privilege among the American aristocracy of the city, which she would later ruthlessly skewer in her novels. At the late age of twenty-three she dutifully married Edward (Teddy) Wharton, a family friend, and an older man from an old Boston family, with whom she had little in common except for their mutual adoration of small dogs and a love of nature and traveling. The marriage didn't last; Teddy's mental health had never been stable, and it slowly fell apart. Wharton was granted a divorce in 1913, which was unusual for a woman, and moved to Paris out of New York society, where, as a divorcée she was no longer entirely welcome. Wharton won the first Pulitzer prize awarded to a woman and was given an honorary doctorate by Yale; during WWI, instead of retreating into her wealth, she became a war correspondent and a humanitarian and was awarded the Legion of Honor by France in 1916, an award rarely given to either a woman or a foreigner.

Popular in her lifetime, Wharton's works were quickly translated into the new medium of film; unfortunately, all of the silent versions of her novels have been lost. But she continued to and continues to inspire filmmakers. *The House of Mirth* was made twice (silent film 1918, lost and a 2000 version, starring Gillian Anderson and Eric Stolz); *The Age of Innocence* was made three times (1924 silent version, lost; a 1934 version starring Irene Dunne and the 1993 version with Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder). In 2014, Scarlett Johansson reportedly took on *The Custom of the Country* as an 8-part TV mini-series for Sony, but so far as I can see, it was never made.

In this class we'll read a selection of Edith Wharton's most important works in a re-examination of this major American author from both an historical perspective and from the perspective of the 21st century.

Selected Online Resources

A quick overview of Wharton: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SIZxfe1HqQ>

An award-winning biographical short film about Wharton:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pkvnrTkjjs>

A Somewhat Old-Fashioned video about Wharton, but very informative:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fucxnpp-Agg>

A Tour of the Mount:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efN4qjojzpl>

The Mount as Biography:
<https://oncemoretoshore.com/i-am-going-to-leave-her-here-edith-whartons-the-mount/>

For more about the author see: <https://www.edithwharton.org/discover/edith-wharton/>

Required Reading: while many of these are available in various electronic forms, and in various hard-copy formats, keep in mind that you are required to read the books, okay? Not simply listen to an audible version or watch a movie version. You are welcome to do so, but not instead of reading the book.

Given that most students now use electronic texts, I've given up trying to get us all "on the same page" even if I still think this is the most effective way of understanding literature in a classroom. So I have provided the ISBN numbers of the texts I will be using, for those of you who want to be on the same page as the one from which I will be teaching and reading.

Trigger Warning: Wharton handles mature themes, including adultery, infidelity, domestic abuse and violence, and suicide. If you are sensitive to serious social issues like these, please be aware of that fact in advance and choose wisely.

Wharton, Edith. *Three Novels of New York: House of Mirth (1905), The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence (1920)*. NY: The Penguin Classics Edition. ISBN-10: 0143106554

_____. *Ethan Frome (1911)* NY: Penguin. ISBN: 9781101554883

_____. *The New York Stories of Edith Wharton*. NYRB Classics; Main edition. ISBN-10: 1590172485

_____. *A Backward Glance (1934)*. NY: Simon & Schuster. ISBN-10: 0684847558

Requirements: We shall be doing three short responses, tied to the three units of the class, and a longer, argumentative paper. Final grades will be assigned according to the following numerical breakdown: Attendance/class participation 40%; shorter responses, averaged together: 30% and major paper: 30%.

Grading Scale A = 94-100; A- = 90-93; B+ = 87-89; B = 84-86; B- = 80-83; C+ = 77-79; C = 74-76; C- = 70-73; D+ = 67-69; D = 64-66; D- = 60-63; E = 0-59.

You are welcome to track your final grade on Canvas but do keep in mind that not **every** in-class workshop participation exercise is entered onto Canvas. This means that the 40% you will receive for attendance/class participation will likely be a little higher than what Canvas will show you.

Class participation: I would like to encourage active, responsible engagement during the Zoom class period. I ask for a good faith effort. Class participation includes:

a. Attendance. You should attend our virtual sessions virtually, preferably with your camera on but the camera is **not mandatory**.

Participation, however, is mandatory as is attendance. The participation portion of your grade for this class will be calculated based on your attendance and your participation in class activities. Since the pedagogical approach of this course depends on student engagement and interaction, you are required, **at a minimum (i.e. the minimum is equivalent to a C grade)**, to participate in class activities through the audio function of Zoom and/or the chat function. I print out the chat after every class and I keep track of who is engaged there but **I do prioritize oral participation.**

b. Preparation. You will agree to have prepared the assignment and will be ready to discuss it or write about it or ask questions about it.

Just turning on your computer and logging in to Zoom does not constitute adequate class participation.

Policies:

1. Using AI: I ask you to keep in mind that ChatGPT (and like AI content generation platforms) produces identifiable blather (which often sounds exactly like what it is, a robot) and that I have access to it as much as you do, and that it's as reliable as Wikipedia, which is to say so-so. If you make use of AI to generate your work, it shows, so please don't. Also technically using AI is against the UF Honor Code, because it is (technically) a form of plagiarism. UF now has an Ethics policy about AI at <https://ai.ufl.edu/about/ai-ethics/>

2. Late-work policy: you have a 24-hour grace period for all written work **except the asynchronous assignments**; so if you turn in a piece 24 hours late, it will not be counted as late. After that, I take 3 points a day off the grade you would've gotten if the paper had not been late.

3. Calculation of Final Grades: I am always available to talk to you about your grade, but I can't do so over email because email is not private in Florida, and your grade is private. I can offer to pre-calculate your final grade for you if Canvas is not enough, but it must be done in a Zoom meeting.

4. Absence policy: you have three class periods off scot-free, no penalty and if you are ill, you are also excused. Ditto for religious holidays. After that, I take three points of your final grade for every day that you miss.

Major Paper: As we will have been discussing, Wharton's territory is not only New York Society, but also the chaos which the human heart can wreak. Choose one of the short stories we've read and discussed so far.

Once you've chosen your short story, I am asking you to write an argument about why that short story lays some of the topical groundwork for some aspect of *Ethan Frome* and *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*.

BEWARE: This is not a compare and contrast paper! You are to make an argument as to how the short story you've chosen to examine closely lays out some of the literary groundwork—whether that be thematic or metaphoric or with respect to the imagery etc.—for the three novels that come after, or were written close to, that short story. Keep in mind that you will need to engage with both the story and all three of the novels, and that these novels take place in very different settings and contexts (12 pages, due Friday, Nov. 15 by midnight)

Shorter Papers: these are unit-oriented discussion papers, each 5 pages long.

Unit I: The Early Years: Edith Wharton did not shy away from serious topics; her first published short story includes an act of arson. The House of Mirth's protagonist, Lily Bart, has a long, slow descent from a position of glittering social prominence as an influencer to her eventual suicide—if she does commit suicide, which is one of the major questions of the text. Does she overdose on purpose or is her death accidental? Much of her decline is tied to money, pride, and the choices she makes, particularly with respect to Lawrence Selden.

Today, suicide is now the second-leading cause of death for teens and young adults, ages 10-34 (CDC, 2023). It has been reported that 13.6% of adults 18-25 had serious thoughts of suicide and 22% of high school students reported having considered suicide, making suicide a terrible problem in our time.

Write a short discussion paper in which you examine and explain how Lily Bart's death is both relevant in the present as a portrait of a twenty-something in trauma, but also how Bart's trauma is tied to her own historical moment. You must use at least two specific quotes from the book to support your discussion (due on Canvas on Monday, Sept. 16, by midnight).

Unit II: The Maturing Artist:

The Custom of the Country's Undine Spragg is often regarded as a stunningly modern portrait of a young American woman, a character who precedes and foretells the coming dominance of celebrity and cash over character and class in America. Spragg anticipates the early 20th century 'gold-digger' figure and might be regarded as the earliest version of Madonna's late twentieth-century 'material girl'. A brash, crass Midwesterner, she uses her beauty and her father's fortune to gain entrée into New York high society, where she quickly becomes adept at manipulating both the media and men to climb the social ladder. Write a short discussion paper in which you show how Undine Spragg's character and story anticipates at least two female media celebrities of today; you must use at least two specific quotes from the novel to demonstrate your claim that her story or her character anticipates the celebrities of your choice (due on Canvas on Monday, Oct. 21 by midnight).

Unit III: The Artist in Exile and Reflection

By 1934, a 20-something white woman had the legal right to vote; divorce was still considered socially shameful, but she could get one; she could own property and the law was beginning to favor the mother's rights; some limited contraception was available, and many more young women went to work before getting married. Wharton lived through these many changes, and so for your final response, I ask you to regard The Age of Innocence through the lens of Wharton's autobiography A Backward Glance to see how that novel was informed by Wharton's life experience. The novel is fictional of course; neither it nor any of the characters in it directly parallel or portray Wharton herself. And yet, an author's work is always a refraction of their historical moment and of their individual experience. Your job is to demonstrate how Wharton's most famous novel comments on, revises, or rethinks Wharton's individual experience as she portrays herself in A Backward Glance, as well to comment on how that life experience might still have relevance in the 21st century (due Monday, Dec. 2 on Canvas by midnight).

And now for the obligatory UF stuff

Academic Honesty Policy: UF students are bound by the Honor Pledge that states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: 'On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.'" The Honor Code (<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor of this class.

Plagiarism: I regret having to remind you that plagiarism is a serious offense. All students are required to abide by the Academic Honesty Guidelines, which have been accepted by the University. The academic community of students and faculty at the University of Florida strives to develop, sustain, and protect an environment of honesty, trust, and respect. Students are expected to pursue knowledge with integrity. Exhibiting honesty in academic pursuits and reporting violations of the Academic Honesty Guidelines will encourage others to act with integrity. Violations of the Academic Honesty Guidelines shall result in judicial action and a student being subject to the sanctions in paragraph XIV of the Student Conduct Code. The conduct set forth hereinafter constitutes a violation of the Academic Honesty Guidelines (University of Florida Rule 6C1_4.017). For more information about academic honesty, including definitions of plagiarism and collusion, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/academic.php>

Civility: If you need to leave the Zoom room during class, please be sure to leave with discretion. You will be marked absent if you are gone more than 10 minutes; if you need to sleep, please stay offline and sleep; please do not be rude, either to me, or to your fellow students. It is the policy of The University of Florida to provide an educational and working environment for its students, faculty and staff that is free from sex discrimination and sexual harassment. In accordance with federal and state law, the University prohibits discrimination based on sex, including sexual harassment. Sex discrimination and sexual harassment will not be tolerated, and individuals who engage in such conduct will be subject to disciplinary action. The University encourages students,

faculty, staff, and visitors to promptly report sex discrimination and sexual harassment. For more about the University of Florida policies regarding harassment, see the University of Florida Student Conduct Code at <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/conductcode.php>

The Disability Resource Center: The Dean of Student's Office provides students and faculty with information and support regarding accommodations for students with disabilities in the classroom. Staff at the Disability Resource Center will assist any student who registers as having a disability. Official documentation of a disability is required to determine eligibility for appropriate classroom accommodations. The professional employees at the Disability Resource Program serve as full-time advocates for students with disabilities ensuring students have physical and programmatic access to all college programs. For more information about Student Disability Services, see: <http://www.ufl.edu/disability/>

Course Delivery: UF Admin. has designated this course as a 100% online. The class will largely be synchronous, but we may have some asynchronous sessions.

Online Course Evaluation: Students are expected to provide **professional and respectful** feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. **For example, calling the instructor hateful names is neither professional or respectful.** Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>

Final Grade Appeals: If you want to appeal the final grade you receive for this course, you should contact Professor Pamela Gilbert, Associate Chair and Undergraduate Coordinator of the English Department. You will submit your course materials for evaluation by a committee assembled by Professor Gilbert. The committee may decide to raise, lower, or leave unchanged your final grade for the course. Its decision is final.

UF Grading Policies for Assigning Grade Points

<http://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

Week 1

Unit I: The Early Years

F: August 23—First day of classes: introduction to course, syllabus, and a poem.

HMW: read three short stories “Mrs. Manstey’s View” (1891) “The Portrait” and “A Cup of Cold Water” (both 1899).

Week 2

M: August 26—The Art of the Short Story

HMW: read “The Rembrandt” (1901) “The Quicksand” (1902).

W: August 28—Family and Traditions

HMW: begin reading The House of Mirth (1905) up to and including Chapter 14.

F: August 30—finish discussion of the short stories, begin talking about HM.

HMW: over the long weekend, finish reading The House of Mirth.

Week 3

M: September 2—LABOR DAY

W: September 4—continue with The House of Mirth.

F: September 6—con’t.

Week 4

M: September 9—con’t.

W: September 11—con’t.

F: September 13—Friday the 13th. **Asynchronous class participation exercise** (on Canvas)

HMW: read the short story “His Father’s Son” (1909).

Week 5

Unit II: The Maturing Artist

M: September 16—Subjects Taboo. **Unit I discussion paper due**

W: September 18—con’t.

F: September 20—con’t.

HMW: read Ethan Frome (1911—yes, all of it).

Week 6

M: September 23—A Change of Venue: Ethan Frome

W: September 25—con’t

F: September 27—con’t

HMW: over the weekend, begin The Custom of the Country (1913) read Book I (Chapters 1-10)

Week 7

M: September 30—The New-Money American Type.

W: October 2—con’t.

F: October 4—**Asynchronous class participation exercise (on Canvas)**.

HMW: over the weekend read Book II of CC (Chapters 11-20)

Week 8

(mid-term)

M: October 7—Undine Spragg’s Triumph—or is it a Tragedy?

W: October 9—con’t.

F: October 11—con’t.

HMW: Over the weekend, finish reading CC (Book III)

Week 9

M: October 14—America vs. Europe

W: October 16—con’t.

F: October 18—con’t.

HMW: over the weekend, begin The Age of Innocence (Book One, chapters 1-18)

Week 10

Unit III: The Artist in Exile

M: October 21—Taking apart the Past: Wharton’s Diagnostic Eye. **Unit II discussion paper due**

W: October 23—con’t.

F: October 25—con’t.

HMW: over the weekend, finish reading The Age of Innocence (Book Two).

Week 11

M: October 28—The Long View

W: October 30—BOO!— con’t.

F: November 1—con’t.

HMW: read “Pomegranate Seed” (1931) and “Roman Fever” (1934)

Week 12

M: November 4—The Haunting of the Past

W: November 6—con’t.

F: November 8—**Asynchronous class participation exercise #3 (on Canvas)**

HMW: Over the weekend, begin A Backward Glance (up to/including Chapter VI)

Week 13

M: November 11—VETERAN’S DAY

W: November 13—The Art of Autobiography

F: November 15—con’t. **Long Paper due**

HMW: over the weekend, finish reading A Backward Glance.

Week 14

M: November 18—con't

W: November 20—con't

F: November 22—con't

Week 15

THANKSGIVING WEEK HOLIDAY

Week 16 ♪♪♪

M: December 2—wrapping up Wharton's career. **Unit III response due.**

W: December 4—last day of class

Patience
Atlantic Monthly 45 (April 1880)

PATIENCE and I have traveled hand in hand
So many days that I have grown to trace
The lines of sad, sweet beauty in her face,
And all its veiled depths to understand.

Not beautiful is she to eyes profane;
Silent and unrevealed her holy charms;
But, like a mother's, her serene, strong arms
Uphold my footsteps on the path of pain.

I long to cry, -- her soft voice whispers, "Nay!"
I seek to fly, but she restrains my feet;
In wisdom stern, yet in compassion sweet,
She guides my helpless wanderings, day by day.

O my Beloved, life's golden visions fade,
And one by one life's phantom joys depart;
They leave a sudden darkness in the heart,
And patience fills their empty place instead