

# *Edith Wharton—The Sense of Harmony: A documentary about the American novelist*

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Directed by Elizabeth Lennard; screenplay by Lennard and Danielle Mémoire

“Conformity is the bane of middle-class communities,” wrote American novelist Edith Wharton in her 1934 autobiography, *A Backward Glance*.

In her long career, which stretched over 40 years and included the publication of more than 40 books, Wharton (1862-1937) mercilessly skewered a segment of post-Civil War society during America’s “First Gilded Age.” Born in New York City to wealth and privilege, she is best known for several novels, *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). The writer was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature, in 1921, for *The Age of Innocence*.

A critic of her own social milieu, Wharton was termed “The Angel of Devastation” by her close friend, American writer Henry James (1843-1916).

IndiePix Films has recently released a one-hour documentary, *Edith Wharton—The Sense of Harmony*, made in 1999 for French public television. Directed by Elizabeth Lennard, the film features fascinating, never-before-seen archival footage, along with commentary by Wharton biographers Louis Auchincloss, R.W.B. Lewis and Eleanor Dwight.

As the film notes, Wharton was an American cosmopolitan, at a time when cosmopolitanism was the privilege of the elite, who crossed the Atlantic a remarkable 66 times. She settled in France in 1907, returning to the US only once in 1923 to receive an honorary degree from Yale University.

The filmmakers opine that it was an urgent 1902 letter from Henry James that helped motivate Wharton to broaden her focus from interior design (*The Decoration of Houses*, 1897) and similar preoccupations “in favour of the *American Subject*,” in James’s words. “There it is round you. Don’t pass it by—the immediate, the real, the ours, the yours, the novelist’s that it waits for. Take hold of it and keep hold, and let it pull you where it will.”

Wharton’s fourth and arguably her greatest novel, *House of Mirth*, was published in 1905, selling over 140,000 copies in three months. The book recounts the story of Lily Bart, a single young woman in New York City, and her ultimately tragic efforts to survive and find some happiness in the emotionally and economically brutal world of high society. After a number of episodes that, largely through no fault of her own, ruin Lily in the eyes of the “right people,” she is reduced to working as a secretary and later, unsuccessfully, for a milliner. In the end, she dies, alone and abandoned in a boarding house, from an overdose of a sleeping draught to which she has become addicted.

Wharton describes Lily’s state of mind immediately before she drinks—by accident or otherwise—the fatal soporific: “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 at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now—the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life.”

British filmmaker Terence Davies directed a moving adaptation of the novel in 2000, with Gillian Anderson as Lily Bart.

Literary critic Edmund Wilson, in a valuable essay, “Justice to Edith Wharton,” written in 1937, observes that the catastrophe in Wharton’s novels “is almost invariably the upshot of a conflict between the individual and the social group.” Her heroines and heroes “are passionate or imaginative spirits, hungry for emotional and intellectual experience, locked into a small closed system and destroying themselves by beating their heads against their prison or

suffering a living death in resigning themselves to it.”

At the same time, Wilson comments, Wharton is well aware that “the other side of this world of wealth, which annihilates every impulse toward excellence, is a poverty which also annihilates.” In both “*The House of Mirth* and *The Fruit of the Tree* ... she is always aware of the pit of misery which is implied by the wastefulness of the plutocracy, and the horror or the fear of this pit is one of the forces that determine the action.”

In 1905, as Lennard’s film notes, Wharton wrote to Boston biographer and historian, William Roscoe Thayer, about *The House of Mirth*’s ability to “maintain my readers’ interest in a group of persons so intrinsically uninteresting except as a social manifestation. ...” [The documentary flashes before our eyes paintings of the Vanderbilts and Astors.]

“But I must protest—and emphatically—against the suggestion that I have stripped New York society. New York society is still amply clad and the little corner of its garment that I have lifted was meant to show only that little atrophied organ, that group of idle and dull people that exists in any big and wealthy social body. And if it is more harmless, that is because fewer responsibilities are attached to money with us than in other societies.”

As one commentator in the documentary notes, Wharton is describing the second and third generation of post-Civil War tycoons (she called them “The Lords of Pittsburgh”), “who built great European châteaux up and down Fifth Avenue [in New York City].”

The movie sheds light on Wharton’s work during World I in France, when she helped establish workrooms to employ women who had no means of support and raised funds for these projects. She reported from the front lines, and the film presents harrowing images of the carnage.

Wharton edited *The Book of the Homeless* in 1916, which included contributions from Igor Stravinsky, André Gide, Thomas Hardy, Auguste Rodin, Jean Cocteau and Jean Renoir. Wharton’s poem, *The Tryst* is part of the anthology. (“They shot my husband against a wall,/ And my child (she said), too little to crawl,/ Held up its hands to catch the ball/ When the gun-muzzle turned its way.”)

Director Lennard also emphasizes Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*—her 1913 novel about the rich. In an essay, Lennard asserts that Wharton’s description of Ralph Marvell, the banker husband of central character Undine, “could just as easily describe a Wall Street banker today.” In the following passage, Undine, whose parents have made money in the Midwest and moved to New York, encounters the nouveau riche Peter Van Degen:

“Undine’s heart was beating excitedly, for as he turned away she had identified him. Peter Van Degen—who could

he be but young Peter Van Degen, the son of the great banker, Thurber Van Degen, the husband of Ralph Marvell’s cousin, the hero of ‘Sunday Supplements,’ the captor of Blue Ribbons at Horse-Shows, of Gold Cups at Motor Races, the owner of winning race-horses and ‘crack’ sloops: the supreme exponent, in short, of those crowning arts that made all life seem stale and unprofitable outside the magic ring of the Society Column?”

The last portion of the documentary is less interesting, uncritically chronicling the final decade or so of Wharton’s life. In fact, her conservative political views, which became more pronounced after the war, were foreshadowed in 1901, when Wharton described herself as a “rabid imperialist.” Literary historian Frederick Wegener writes: “For her deliberately provocative description of herself as a ‘rabid imperialist’ is merely the most overt pledge that Wharton made on behalf not only of a nascent American empire but of imperial Britain and France as well.”

Edmund Wilson offers this significant assessment: “*The Age of Innocence* is already faded. But now a surprising lapse occurs. (It is true that she is nearly sixty.)

“When we look back on Mrs. Wharton’s career, it seems that everything that is valuable in her work lies within a quite sharply delimited area—between *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. ... With her emergence from her life in the United States, her settling down in the congenial society of Paris, she seems at last to become comfortably adjusted; and with her adjustment, the real intellectual force which she had exerted through a decade and a half evaporates almost completely. She no longer maims or massacres her characters. Her grimness melts rapidly into benignity.”

However incomplete, *Edith Wharton—The Sense of Harmony* is an important introduction to this “passionate social prophet” (Wilson), providing remarkable archival images and valuable commentary.



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