

THE NEW YORK STORIES OF EDITH WHARTON

EDITH WHARTON

Selected and with an Introduction by

ROXANA ROBINSON

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New York

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INTRODUCTION

THE WORLD into which Edith Wharton was born was a dignified one, carefully structured, with a formal façade and an elevated entrance. Based on a solid foundation of Puritan values, it was framed by inherited wealth and insulated by the belief that everything of worth was contained within. The unsettling winds of ambition, need, and change rarely penetrated the thick walls of tradition, pride, and entitlement. The interiors were polished, gleaming, and perfectly composed. The windows were shrouded with drapery, the floors were laid with a heavy carpet of decorum. This was a place of silence, order, and restraint.

A writer's world both shelters and confines, and she must write her way both into and out of it. She must form her own world, but it will always be part of the one that formed her. It will always be both beginning and end of her journey.

Edith Newbold Jones was born in 1862, in the family brownstone on West 23rd Street. Her forebears were Dutch, English, and Huguenot—a long line of successful merchants, bankers, and lawyers. At the time of Edith's birth, her family had lived in New York for nearly two hundred years.

The Joneses belonged to the small, privileged world of fashionable society. In these circles, family was more important than wealth, and George Frederic Jones was well-off, but not rich. He had an income from inherited real estate, and was mild, bookish,

and gentlemanly, an affectionate father and indulgent husband. His wife, Lucretia Stevens Rhinelander Jones, was not rich either, though she was from an old, grand family: she was one of the “poor Rhinelanders.” Intellectually indolent, Lucretia was intensely absorbed by etiquette and appearances. As a mother she was cold and critical, as a wife she was possibly adulterous, and as a person she was mercilessly snobbish. From her father Edith learned a love of books and of France; from her mother she learned rigid self-discipline and sartorial perfectionism. From both parents she learned the rules of decorum.

Old New York was an insular, tribal society, with a rigid caste system and a strict code of behavior. In her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, published in 1933, Wharton wrote, “One was polite, considerate of others, careful of the accepted formula, because such were the principles of the well-bred . . . ‘bad manners’ were the worst offence.” The code of manners governed all aspects of behavior, including trivial ones, such as the size of a calling card or the length of a widow’s veil. At its core, however, was a stern Puritan ethos of moral rectitude, self-reliance, and stoic disregard of pain. Self-control was essential, and emotional display was utterly prohibited. To grow up in that society was to recognize the enormous social forces implicit in the command, delivered to a distraught person of any age, “*Don’t make a scene.*”

Edith learned the rules of this formal, restrained world, but she felt the presence of another unacknowledged one that seethed around her like an invisible mist. This was the one of emotions and ideas. Wharton learned the power of this secret, forbidden realm and understood that the laws of decorum were set up to counteract it. The conflict between these worlds—the mannered, mandarin one, and the passionate, uncontrollable one—would provide the central dynamic of her work.

New York, however, was not Wharton’s only point of reference: at an early age she had discovered Europe. The Civil War brought financial reverses to the Joneses, who rented out their American properties and moved to the Continent. There they lived cheaply

for several years during Edith's childhood, returning because of her father's health when she was in her late teens. Edith developed an enduring affinity for European languages and culture. The great European capitals, with their wide boulevards, open plazas, and graceful architecture, offered captivating alternatives to New York's low, monotonous brown grid, just as European salons offered more lively and intellectual conversations than New York's bland dinner-party chatter. Europe became the vivid locus of Wharton's imagination, the place to which she was always longing to return.

Partly for financial reasons, Edith made her debut early, at the age of seventeen. She was neither rich nor beautiful, however, and she languished in the marriage market. Finally, at twenty-three, she married Edward Robbins Wharton. It was not a brilliant match: Teddy was twelve years her senior and of modest financial and intellectual means. A genial, aimless fellow, his chief interests were travel and sport, and at thirty-five he still lived with his mother. His father was in a mental institution, though doctors assured Lucretia that his condition was not hereditary. In 1885 Edith and Teddy were married.

At first the Whartons lived quietly in Newport and New York, traveling to Europe when they could afford it. When Edith came into an unexpected inheritance, their financial situation eased; later her royalties provided a substantial source of income. The couple built a grand house in Lenox, Massachusetts, and went more frequently to Europe.

Initially the marriage was affectionate, though probably companionate. Strains began to appear, however, due to intellectual disparity and Teddy's growing health problems, physical and mental. Edith's own health suffered as well, and in 1898 she spent several months in a rest cure. By 1902 Teddy was showing signs of his father's illness and, as his condition worsened, the marriage deteriorated. In 1907, Edith had a secret affair with an American journalist, Morton Fullerton. This was passionate, brief, and unhappy: Fullerton was a bisexual philanderer, cold, withholding, and

duplicitous. Four years later, Teddy confessed to his own affair, as well as to the illicit appropriation of Edith's funds, over which he was trustee. Edith had spent twenty-eight years with an increasingly unstable husband, in an increasingly unhappy union. When Teddy humiliated her publicly and damaged her financially, she finally made the decision to end the marriage.

In 1913 Edith moved to France, where she sued for divorce. This choice was driven partly by discretion: unlike America, France did not require evidence of adultery to be made public in the courts. The move was part of a larger change, however: Wharton sold her house in Lenox and abandoned the world in which she had grown up. At the age of fifty-one she began a new life in a society that accepted her as the person she chose to be—an independent woman—instead of the person she was raised to be—a gentleman's wife. She spent the rest of her life in France, to which she became deeply devoted.

Wharton never gave up her American citizenship, however, and her deepest literary and emotional connections always remained to Old New York. Her first novel, a historical romance called *The Valley of Decision*, was set in Italy. When it was published in 1902, Henry James had famously advised her: "Use the American subject! Do New York! There it is round you." But New York was already Wharton's subject; she had been "doing" it in her stories for more than a decade, and would continue to throughout her career. New York was the center of her life, the place where she had struggled most ardently with conflicting claims of manners and passion, the place where her heart had beat most powerfully, where her soul had seemed most desperately constrained and her happiness most perilously at risk. New York received her most searching scrutiny, sternest criticism, and deepest understanding. It was her greatest subject.

The twenty stories collected here span the period of 1891 to 1934, nearly the entirety of Wharton's writing life, and represent more

than two-thirds of her New York stories. Taken together—and more than any one of the novels—they reflect the evolution of her engagement with the city, and reveal the development of her imagination and her art. Her early stories show the awkwardness of apprenticeship, but from that apprenticeship come the magisterial reckonings of such late masterpieces as “After Holbein” and the peerless “Roman Fever.” In the stories gathered here we find all of Wharton’s great themes: stifled passion and the suffocating soul; the conflict between idealism and pragmatism; the charged erotic constellation of marriage, adultery, divorce, and betrayal.

The collection also reveals Wharton’s swift growth as a writer. “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” of 1891, is the first story here as well as Wharton’s first published one. In this lovely and beguiling work she lays claim to both her physical territory—the city of New York—and her metaphysical one—*les choses d’esprit*. Boldly, she chooses a protagonist and setting that are remote from her own experience.

Mrs. Manstey is poor, elderly, socially insignificant. She lives in a boardinghouse on “a street where the ash-barrels lingered late on the sidewalk.” Her view is one of “broken barrels, the empty bottles and paths unswept.” She is widowed and solitary, her neighbors are slatternly and philistine, and her environment grim. This New York seems soulless—but a secret landscape thrives within the slovenly urban one. Plants slip through the cracks in the pavement, invading the stone carapace, blooming and flourishing on their own. Untended and unauthorized, this natural world is powerful and alive.

“My powers of enjoyment have always been many-sided,” Wharton wrote of herself, and Mrs. Manstey, too, finds pleasure in her world, despite her bleak surroundings:

She had grown used to their disorder; the broken barrels, the empty bottles and paths unswept no longer annoyed her; hers was the happy faculty of dwelling on the pleasanter side of the prospect before her.

Nature performs its own triumphant annual pageant:

...did not a magnolia open its hard white flowers against the watery blue of April? And was there not... a fence foamed over every May by lilac waves of wistaria?

Mrs. Manstey's untended backyard view is filled with the glories of resurgent nature, and a church spire at sunset hints at that earthly paradise, Europe: Wharton declares that even a limited perspective can be sublime.

The story reveals Wharton's observant eye, her graceful style, and her sense of humor:

"Of course I might move," said Mrs. Manstey aloud, and turning from the window she looked about her room. She might move, of course; so might she be flayed alive; but she was not likely to survive either operation.

Learning that her cherished view is threatened, Mrs. Manstey takes drastic measures. She can't win—a poor, elderly widow can't stop the juggernaut of commerce—but even in defeat Mrs. Manstey achieves a moral triumph, one that reflects the young Wharton's exuberant belief in the power of passion. The story is not only an impressive debut, it's a manifesto of Wharton's commitment to beauty and passion. Here she addresses the drama she'll continue to explore: the struggles of a woman's life. Wharton's women, whether born to privilege like herself or to poverty like Mrs. Manstey, will be threatened by the world. They may have scant power to combat the forces that threaten them, but they will be resourceful, determined, and high-spirited. They will astonish us.

"Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible," was one of Lucretia Jones's imperious dictates. In that world it was the rule not to talk about money, but of course the Joneses

thought about it like everyone else. Money was always an issue, and Wharton was always conscious of its power.

Neither her relatives nor her husband had jobs, but everyone had to have money. New York society demanded affluence; it disapproved, however, of striving. The bourgeois requirement for wealth, coupled with the Puritan demand for, in Wharton's words, "scrupulous probity, in business and private affairs," produced a complex and paradoxical dynamic. She explored this in a series of meditations on personal ethics—issues of morality and idealism, hypocrisy and nobility, greed and pragmatism.

Another early story, "A Cup of Cold Water," offers a startlingly realistic rendering of Wharton's own New York. She reveals its beautiful surfaces and grim undercurrents, its seductive appeal and ruthless mechanics.

Woburn is an impecunious young man in love with the rich Miss Talcott. Because they are both from good families they move in the same circles, but because Woburn is poor, Miss Talcott will never marry him. Wharton depicts the situation with fine irony.

To the girls in Miss Talcott's set, the attentions of a clever man who had to work for his living had the zest of a forbidden pleasure; but to marry such a man would be as unpardonable as to have one's carriage seen at the door of a cheap dress-maker. Poverty might make a man fascinating; but a settled income was the best evidence of stability of character. If there were anything in heredity, how could a nice girl trust a man whose parents had been careless enough to leave him unprovided for?

Wealth has its own mesmerizing appeal, which Wharton both articulates and derides:

Woburn was conscious that it was to the cheerful materialism of their parents that the girls he admired owed that fine distinction of outline in which their skillfully-rippled hair

and skillfully-hung draperies cooperated with the slimness and erectness that came of participating in the most expensive sports, eating the most expensive food and breathing the most expensive air.

Courting Miss Talbot has been expensive, and Woburn has borrowed heavily from his firm, drifting unintentionally into embezzlement. Facing ruin, he plans to flee to Canada. On his last night, before boarding the ship, he goes to a ball. There he stands apart like a revenant, observing the glittering scene:

Was it possible that these were his friends? These mincing women, all paint and dye and whalebone, these apathetic men who looked as much alike as the figures that children cut out of a folded sheet of paper? Was it to live among such puppets that he had sold his soul? . . .

It was a domino-party at which the guests were forbidden to unmask, though they all saw through each other's disguises.

Woburn, like many of Wharton's characters, is trapped within a moral cat's cradle: he yearns for acceptance by a society he does not respect. His ambivalence is that of Wharton, who remained a member of what she called "the young married set," even as she wrote about its flaws.

"Was not all morality based on a convention? What was the stanchest code of ethics but a trunk with a series of false bottoms? . . . There was no getting beyond the relative." Woburn scorns the hypocrisy of this world, and in trying to rise within it he has only lowered himself. He has now sunk below the level of those he scorns, and has abdicated his moral position. Still he cannot undertake the last act of cowardice and board the ship.

"Again there rose before him the repulsive vision of the dark cabin, with creaking noises overhead, and the cold wash of water against the pier." The darkness, the solitude, the cold all suggest

that this is the voyage to hell. Woburn resists it, descending, as the night wears on, into increasing penury and a state of heightened awareness. He goes to a cheap hotel and takes a room for the remainder of the night. He follows the room clerk upstairs.

At each landing Woburn glanced down the long passageway lit by a lowered gas-jet, with a double line of boots before the doors, waiting, like yesterday's deeds, to carry their owners so many miles farther on the morrow's destined road. On the third landing the man paused, and after examining the number on the key, turned to the left, and slouching past three or four doors, finally unlocked one and preceded Woburn into a room lit only by the upward gleam of the electric globes in the street below.

The man felt in his pockets; then he turned to Woburn. "Got a match?" he asked.

Wharton's prose is strong and vivid. The contrast could not be more telling between this desolate, unlit bedroom and the ballroom earlier, with its graceful, beautiful girls, where "white skirts wavered across the floor like thistle-down on summer air; men rose from their seats and fresh couples filled the shining *parquet*." Woburn, in his dismal solitude, gazes out the window, "his elbows on the table . . . till at length the contemplation of the abandoned sidewalks, above which the electric globes kept . . . vigil, became intolerable to him, and he drew down the window-shade, and lit the gas-fixture beside the dressing-table."

Woburn has entered a new world, one without beauty or luxury. He had inhabited the old world under false pretenses: this, now, is his place, a kind of purgatory. By the end of the narrative Woburn has redeemed himself (through a somewhat unlikely act), but he must still suffer the consequences of his actions. A stern morality reigns here, as it does over much of Wharton's work.

In “A Journey,” written around 1898, Wharton is in full command of her powers. The story is a masterpiece, powerful, concise, and startlingly modern. Morality plays no part in this hallucinatory narrative in which she weaves together the disturbing themes of isolation, incarceration, abandonment, and death.

The story opens abruptly at a high level of tension. It is set on a train, and takes place in the course of twenty-four unrelenting hours:

As she lay in her berth, staring at the shadows overhead, the rush of the wheels was in her brain, driving her deeper and deeper into circles of wakeful lucidity. The sleeping-car had sunk into its night-silence. Through the wet window-pane she watched the sudden lights, the long stretches of hurrying blackness. Now and then she turned her head and looked through the opening in the hangings at her husband’s curtains across the aisle . . .

At once we feel the desperation of a woman violated in her most intimate recesses—those of her mind. Wharton sets the scene with precision: here are darkness and distance, speed and dread. The anonymity of the wife makes her both remote and frighteningly familiar; the silence and concealment of the husband are ominous.

The husband, who had been sent west for his health, is now returning home. The wife understands that this means he will not recover, but for the moment he is merely ill, and they are on their way to the refuge of New York. It is the last lap of the terrible journey of her marriage: she has watched her husband’s gradual metamorphosis from cheerful partner to deadly, inimical burden.

She still loved him, of course; but he was gradually, undefinably ceasing to be himself. The man she had married had been strong, active, gently masterful . . . but now it was she who was the protector, he who must be shielded from importunities . . .

Sometimes he frightened her: his sunken expressionless face seemed that of a stranger...his thin-lipped smile a mere muscular contraction. Her hand avoided his damp soft skin...It frightened her to feel that this was the man she loved...

Part of the story's emotional power derives from the dreadful apparition of the failed marriage. There is an "imperceptible estrangement...Doubtless the fault was hers," the wife thinks bravely. This is the most fearsome aspect of her life, the fact that her marriage has so horribly changed, and that her husband has become a ghastly parody of his healthy self. The nameless woman is confined within his life, her own health and vitality suborned to the rigid demands of his illness.

When Wharton wrote this story, her own husband, Teddy, was sinking into chronic illness, becoming just such a monster of neediness and frailty. The horror of such a ghastly partnership and the fear of being buried alive within the role of caregiver echo throughout the narrative.

The wife's sense of loneliness and suffocation are powerfully conveyed by the hurrying rhythm of the wheels carrying her endlessly and forever into her suffocating life, by the claustrophobic confinement of the compartments, and by the odious other passengers—"the freckled child [who] hung about him like a fly," and the wheedling Christian Scientist who wants to convert her.

Wharton tightens the narrative hold as the wife discovers that her husband has died. She knows that the law requires the expulsion of a dead body from a train, and fears that she will be put out beside the tracks with the corpse. She now becomes a more passionate and terrified dissembler. Earlier she had pretended only that her husband was healthy and her marriage happy; now the stakes have been raised. Abandonment and banishment are risks, and the horror at her husband's death is enlarged by her fear of her own fate. The reader is drawn further and further into her consciousness, as into an unwanted dream.

One of the richest and most fertile themes in Wharton's work was that of the complicated connection between love and pain. Her own romantic history was not happy: her first engagement was broken off, not by her; a second romantic relationship, disappointingly, failed to produce an offer; her marriage was neither passionate nor fulfilling, and ended in misery; her brief erotic engagement with Morton Fullerton was wounding. These experiences are reflected in her fiction: rarely are her central male characters both sympathetic and effective. Those who are sympathetic are often passive or uncommitted; those who are powerful are often evasive and opaque, solipsistic or brutal. The presence of a subtle emotional sadism runs like a dark undercurrent through Wharton's fiction. This is very evident in the unsavory dynamics of her novel *The Reef*, of 1912. She acknowledged privately that the book related to Fullerton, but the same troubling theme is strikingly present in her story "The Dilettante," written in 1903, long before her affair.

Perhaps her most shocking story, it is a subtle disquisition on cruelty. Thursdale, an idle and worldly bachelor, maintains an *amitie amoureuse* with Mrs. Vervain, an elegant divorcée. Cold, cynical, and controlling, Thursdale considers their relationship and the "emotional training" he has given Mrs. Vervain.

[I]n seeking to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment he had developed a science of evasion in which the woman of the moment became a mere implement of the game. He owed a great deal of delicate enjoyment to the cultivation of this art . . .

He had taught a good many women not to betray their feelings, but he had never before had such fine material to work with. She had been surprisingly crude when he first knew her; capable of making the most awkward inferences . . . of recklessly undressing her emotions; but she had

acquired, under the discipline of his reticences and evasions, a skill almost equal to his own, and perhaps more remarkable in that it involved keeping time with any tune he played and reading at sight some uncommonly difficult passages.

As the narrative unfolds we learn of his decision to marry—though not, of course, the well-schooled Mrs. Vervain. Thursdale has found a fresh, untainted young woman. With sublime effrontery he asks Mrs. Vervain to lie about their relationship in order to support his marriage suit, and persuade his young fiancée of his worth.

In the character of Thursdale, who is subtle, ingenious, and pitiless, Wharton offers a remarkable glimpse into the mechanics of sadism. He takes a connoisseur's pleasure in causing pain, testing and savoring the limits of his partner's awful obedience, binding her with an excruciating knot of loyalty, dignity, and self-sacrifice. The lethal potency of the story arises partly from Mrs. Vervain's intelligence and vitality: she seems to have deliberately chosen this ghastly thralldom, this humiliating emotional martyrdom. In return for it she receives only a cruel intimacy. Love is what she wants, but it is not offered her, and she is too well-trained to make a scene.

The intolerable emotional bondage is chillingly portrayed. Mrs. Vervain's courage and integrity are revealed, ironically, through the nobility of her subservience. Placing loyalty above pride, she transcends the baseness of her tormentor's demands through the dignity of her response.

Divorce was the reason for Mrs. Vervain's vulnerability: it was a kind of social expunction. In Wharton's world, a lady's name was supposed to appear in the newspapers only three times: at birth, at marriage, and at death. Divorce, with its public disclosure of private betrayal, was scandalous by nature and a serious matter to

“people who dreaded scandal more than disease,” as Wharton wrote in *The Age of Innocence*. Divorce was a central and crucial subject in her work, and she explored its consequences throughout her writing life, with increasing intensity as her own marriage began to founder.

In “The Other Two,” a small jewel published in 1904, Wharton considers a society in which divorce becomes common and accepted. The semi-comic narrative concerns the third husband of an oft-divorced woman. The husband’s determination to ignore his wife’s past is eroded by a cascade of small incidents, and he finds himself unwillingly immersed in her past lives. He begins, to his dismay, to perceive her in new and unsettling ways. The story is an exquisite meditation on possession, deception, and authenticity, as well as on marriage and divorce.

In Wharton’s fiction divorce represents disgrace and failure: it is a great rending of the social fabric. The woman who has left her husband—as Wharton did—is often subject to shame, censure, and exile. In one of her great stories, “Autres Temps . . .,” written in 1911, while her own marriage was in its final throes, Wharton delineates the subtle tortures of the social outcast’s life. The title, part of the French phrase *autres temps, autres mœurs* (other times, other customs), refers to a worldly, tolerant attitude which accepts the inevitability of social change. The phrase is a verbal shrug of the shoulders, and the title is one of Wharton’s sublime touches of irony.

Mrs. Lidcote is a New York matron who, years earlier, left her husband for another man, only to be deserted in her turn. Disgraced and alone, she fled New York. Since then she has lived a shadowy, humble existence in Florence, away from both the censorious glare of society and the comforting web of community.

When she was alone, it was always the past that occupied her. She couldn’t get away from it, and she didn’t any longer care to . . . she had made her terms with it, had learned to accept the fact that it would always be there . . .

It was a great concrete fact in her path that she had to walk around every time she moved in any direction.

She is condemned to exile.

When Leila, her married daughter in New York, announces her own divorce and remarriage, Mrs. Lidcote boards a steamship for home, ready to offer comfort during Leila's ordeal. She dreads her arrival, expecting ostracism for them both, but on the ship she's told things have changed. It seems that divorce is no longer an ordeal, and Leila is not considered disreputable. Nor is Mrs. Lidcote anymore, according to her shy suitor, Franklin Ide. She has rejected Ide once, keeping herself free in case unhappily married Leila needs her. Ide modestly offers himself again, but Mrs. Lidcote thinks Leila still might need her. And she can't quite trust this new reading: Old New York is still the center of her world, regardless of eighteen years in Florence: "New York was the sphinx whose riddle she must read or perish."

Mrs. Lidcote arrives and moves from the uncertainty and displacement of the journey to the luxurious comfort of stability in her daughter's new country house. Her daughter, in sharp contrast to herself, has sacrificed nothing by her divorce. To the contrary, she is now cherished by her new husband, surrounded by devoted friends, and immensely rich. Shown to a luxurious room, Mrs. Lidcote meditates:

[I]t was not the standard of affluence . . . that chiefly struck her . . . It was the look it shared with the rest of the house, and with the perspective of the gardens . . . of being part of an "establishment"—of something solid, avowed, founded on sacraments and precedents and principles. There was nothing about the place, or about Leila and Wilbour, that suggested either passion or peril: their relation seemed as comfortable as their furniture, and as respectable as their balance at the bank.

Mrs. Lidcote is assured that nowadays there are no rules, or at least that Old New York has loosened its petrified grasp of its denizens. She is welcome to return to the bright light of family and friends, to reenter the social world of interchange and affection. So she is told. But

...she continued to stand motionless in the middle of her soft spacious room. The fire... danced on the brightness of silver and mirrors... and the sofa toward which she had been urged... heaped up its cushions in inviting proximity to a table laden with new books... She could not recall having ever been more luxuriously housed, or having ever had so strange a sense of being out alone, under the night, in a wind-beaten plain.

This is one of the hallmarks of Wharton's fiction—the stunning juxtaposition of physical splendor and deep emotional need. Against a backdrop of luxury and ease Wharton presents a study of excruciating pain, as Mrs. Lidcote slowly learns her mistake. The world of Old New York has changed, but too late for her. The judgment on her is irreversible, her life has been sacrificed to the deadly demands of custom. Unwilling to inflict the basilisk glare of condemnation on her suitor, for the last time she rejects Ide, and returns forever to her solitary European exile.

In 1913, the year of her own divorce, Wharton published her novel *The Custom of the Country*. Written during the dissolution of her marriage, the book is filled with bitterness. Here Wharton explores the notion of divorce as a means of social advancement instead of as betrayal of a sacred trust. Here marriage is not gravely cherished but casually abandoned. This is a soulless world, driven by money. Though brilliantly conceived, the book lacks the depth and compassion of her great works. Filled with contempt for her shallow, venal, grasping characters, the novel resonates with Whar-

ton's own deep-seated rage at herself. It is her own divorce, her own private failure, that drives her to heights of snobbish and judgmental disgust at Undine Spragg and her ilk—people who fail as human beings, who lack moral fiber, who utterly and callously fail their mates. Here Wharton sounds like her mother, Lucretia: snobbish, critical, and superficial. Lacking the deep resonance of tenderness, the book is like a great symphony played only on the brasses—cold, high, shrill.

Once installed in France, and a new world, Wharton became increasingly removed from her old one, which was rapidly changing. She would continue to write about America, taking on such subjects as the Jazz Age and the literary scene with characteristic energy but with varying success. Wharton's real engagement was with the New York of another time. The defining imaginative event of her later career was the realization, at the end of the First World War, that Old New York was entirely gone. With this reckoning came a change of heart, and she began to reconsider the mores she had once scorned. She wrote a friend, "I am steeping myself in the nineteenth century. . . such a blessed relief from the turmoil and mediocrity of today—like taking sanctuary in a mighty temple."

Reveries on her vanished world—emotions remembered in tranquillity—produced some of her greatest works, among them perhaps her finest novel, *The Age of Innocence*, and also the deeply moving story "After Holbein," written in 1928, just after the deaths of Teddy Wharton and of her closest friend, Walter Berry. The title of the story refers to a painting of a *danse macabre*, in which skeletons escort living figures toward the grave; here, the two protagonists totter toward death. It is an epitaph for a whole world, an elegant rendering of decline and fall, in which all the outward aspects of Wharton's society are flawlessly portrayed: the rites, the courtesy, the exquisite attention to form, the strict repression of inner life.

Anson Warley is a dapper old bachelor, polished, sleek, and debonair. He was once a man of parts, with intellectual aspirations,

but slowly he has given way to the temptations of society. Now he is “a small poor creature, chattering with cold inside, in spite of his agreeable and even distinguished exterior.” He has spent his life dining out, dressing perfectly for dinner.

On his last morning he has a small stroke, and his last day is spent in gathering confusion. That evening, unable to remember where he is to dine, he muses on his confusion:

The doctors, poor fools, called it the stomach, or high blood-pressure; but it was only the dizzy plunge of the sands in the hour-glass, the everlasting plunge that emptied one of heart and bowels, like the drop of an elevator from the top floor of a sky-scraper.

On that ominous note, Warley sets out for the evening and dines, in befuddlement, at the house of Mrs. Jaspar, an ancient, rich, and famous hostess, now a senile octogenarian. The two attempt to perform the familiar ceremonies of the formal dinner: Warley admires the mineral water presented as wine, the bunched-up newspapers stuck like flowers into a porcelain bowl. He struggles for lucidity, but a mortal fog creeps into his brain. Wharton suggests that this ghastly parody echoes real long-ago dinners, when mindless responses and conventional murmurs were exchanged by people in full possession of their senses.

Like much of Wharton's work, the story is edged with satirical glitter, but to see this story as purely satirical—or Wharton as primarily a satirist—would be to miss its profound humanism. The great aim of Wharton's work, here and elsewhere, is not ridicule but compassion: her fiction is driven by tenderness. The emotional melody of this piece is carried by those who care for the ancient couple: their servants. Warley impatiently suffers the discreet solicitude of his valet; Mrs. Jaspar is tended by her elderly and arthritic maid, Lavinia. “Everything about [Lavinia] had dried, contracted, been volatized into nothingness, except her watchful gray eyes, in which intelligence and comprehension burned like

two fixed stars.” It is the servants to whom the fading life of the protagonists has been entrusted; their dedication and fidelity give the story its gravitas.

As was often the case, the story has parallels in Wharton’s life: for years Teddy was cared for by his devoted valet, Alfred White, and Edith by a beloved maid/companion, Catherine Gross. At the time of the story, Gross had been with Wharton for more than forty years. Wharton was elderly, single, and wealthy, and in her private life she depended greatly on her maid for affection, companionship, and intimacy. Gross surely had some bearing on this depiction of an aged retainer, informed by such sympathy and love.

The story is poignant, not punishing; Wharton does not hold this society in contempt. She mocks its rituals but not their celebrants. The story records the end both of an era and of a particular kind of man—the social dandy. A measured and beautiful rendering of the final descent, it reminds us of our own connections to ceremony and society, our own vanities and shortcomings, our own inevitable plunge into darkness.

Wharton wrote brilliantly right up to the end of her life, and “Roman Fever,” of 1934, just three years before her death, is one of her great stories. It is not a quiet rumination on mortality but the summoning up of rage, stifled passion, and sexuality: a remarkable work for a woman of seventy-two.

Though the story is set entirely on a rooftop terrace in contemporary Rome, Old New York is a looming presence and provides the background of “two American ladies of ripe but well-cared-for middle age.” Friends since childhood, brownstone neighbors on East 73rd Street, now both widowed and the mothers of two marriageable daughters, the two sit decorously watching the sunset, “contemplating it in silence, with a sort of diffused serenity which might have been borrowed from the spring effulgence of the Roman skies.” Mrs. Slade thinks slightly that her friend’s late

husband “was—well, just the duplicate of his wife. Museum specimens of old New York. Good-looking, irreproachable, exemplary.”

Slowly, through conversation and reminiscence, the two matrons recall their younger selves, inducting us into its secret sisterhood as they remember a common visit to Rome some twenty-five years earlier. If New York represents a moribund rigidity, Rome embodies a dark, charged vitality, worldly and unfathomable. The fever of the title refers to malaria, a fatal nineteenth-century disease and a real threat before the Roman marshes were drained. Fever was the ostensible reason for keeping young women inside during the evenings. The risk of illness was real, but so was the other, unspoken reason for sequestration—sexual adventure, with its terrifying consequences.

Seated overlooking a ravishing twilit view of Rome, with its “great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor,” the women are carried by the march of memory to the rising rhythm of animosity, through a landscape of jealousy and deception, illicit assignations, sexual thrall, and unwed pregnancy. It is a virtuoso’s performance, and Wharton’s greatest story of Old New York may be this one, set in Rome. Here she reverts to her most enduring theme, the power of passion—uncontrollable, inextinguishable, inexcusable. It is passion that has driven the lives of these two decorous matrons, and it is passion that reveals itself anew as they sit in the splendor of the Roman sunset.

Edith Wharton’s lifetime spanned the Victorian era, the First World War, the Jazz Age, and the Depression. It was a period of enormous transitions, subject to the competing forces of conservatism and modernism. In her work, the great changes she witnessed are set against the abiding presence of Old New York, which was, for all its limitations, Wharton’s touchstone, her social and moral measure, and the true north of her compass.

Her writing is hard to place, as her social and intellectual influ-

ences are so diverse. As a young woman, she schooled herself by reading nonfiction: history, philosophy, and scientific theory. This gave her a firm intellectual grounding and a rational, analytical approach to the world: she admired the novel of ideas, and the works of George Eliot and George Sand. One of her most powerful influences, however, was Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose dark Puritanism and punitive moral ethic was an important model for her. In his world, as in hers, passion is most often illicit, and renunciation and punishment are its consequences. Wharton's stern judgmental moralism is often blurred by her appreciation of and delight in the sensual world, but it is Hawthorne's bleak vision that offers the most direct antecedent to her own. Frequently, however, Wharton's work is linked with that of Henry James, her friend and mentor, because of the social circles about which they both write, as well as the elegance, intelligence, and nuanced quality of their styles. James is a very different sort of writer, however, and his vision is interior and more mysterious than hers. Wharton's work has more clarity and directness, more boldness and drama. It is also more modern. Wharton shares certain feminist concerns with her contemporary, Kate Chopin. Though no evidence shows that Wharton knew Chopin's work, the two authors explore many of the same themes, offering similarly disconcerting revelations about the inner lives of women.

Wharton wrote about the twentieth century, but her formal, ceremonial style and her belief in a moral order linked her inextricably to the nineteenth. The next generation—Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, among others—shared a sense of post-war disillusionment, and experimented with literary styles whose fractured rhythms echoed those of the twentieth century. Despite her decorous style, however, Wharton is anything but prim. Her work is informed by candor, clarity, and a deep understanding of the great subversive force of the emotions. Perhaps only one to whom the life of the emotions has been so explicitly forbidden can truly understand its potency.

Socially, Wharton was an Edwardian—worldly, informed,

confident. A member of a privileged and elitist society, she challenged its flaws and inequities, but also recognized its dignity and strengths. She was eloquent, proud, and perceptive, and as she witnessed the disruptions of modern life, she came to yearn for the order and ceremony she had once known. She was deeply committed to the concept of a moral order, though she recognized the complexities implied by its rule. She used the world into which she was born—the inner circles of Old New York—to create her own unique and individual landscape, as all great writers do. Wharton's characters are flawed and struggling, weak and noble, loving and heartless. Her New York is diverse, precise, and entirely her own. It is a place of beauty, complication, and authenticity.

Wharton's work was overlooked for many years because of its awkward placement, stranded between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Returned now to its rightful prominence in the history of American letters, it offers a profound and moving reflection on desire and its consequences, on freedom and its limits in American life.

The twenty stories collected here show Edith Wharton's world as she knew it. They show the crystalline brilliance of her literary style; they show the intellectual reach and complexity of her mind. They show the courage, depth, and compassion of her heart. They show her to be one of our greatest short-story writers.

—ROXANA ROBINSON