

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
the Novel Club of Cleveland
April 4, 2017

Jack and Jill Conomy opened their new home to the Novel Club membership on the date noted above. At the meeting in question Jack Conomy delivered the biographical sketch and James Saunders presented a compelling Hosts critical paper on Wharton's novel, *House of Mirth*. Molly Berger, and Lynda and Roland Philip were repeat guests. Yours truly, the Club's Recording Secretary, wishes to express his appreciation to those that took minutes and prepared summarizations at the February and March meetings when my wife and I were in Florida. A big "Thank you!" is in order.

Mr. Conomy commenced, in an excellent Irish brogue, his biographical presentation with a "Story of an Irish Knight or Prince" (I never knew which?) It was a delightful story and in my mind linked his story with the "Mirth" depicted by Wharton in tonight's novel. Since we're talking about knights and princes, so the focus is on wealth – something Edith Wharton's family knew a lot about. "Keeping up with the Joneses" was said to have referred to the means manifested by Wharton's father's family. Edith Jones was born in 1862 in New York into the highest strata of society. She was traveling to Europe by age 10 (by life's end she will have crossed the Atlantic 60 times) and there became fluent in French, German, and Italian. Her education was effected primarily thru tutors or governesses supplemented by the many books found in her father's library. There was a stipulation – she was not to read novels until she was married, an admonition she adhered to. Mr. Conomy noted that Lucretia Jones (her mother) and Edith, from childhood to death, never got along although Edith never openly criticized her mother. At age 15 Edith had sold her translation of a German poet for \$50. Later, but still age 15, she wrote a 30,000 word novella entitled *Fast & Loose* and a book of poems entitled *Verses* both of which were privately published by her father. In 1889, at age 27, she had a poem published in the broadly circulated *Scribner's Magazine*. At age 23 in 1885 she married Edward Robbins Wharton (who was 12 years her senior) and was the son of a proper Boston family. Life consisted primarily of travel. Unfortunately, shortly after they were married her husband manifested severe depression which in time brought their travels to an end. By 1908 Wharton's depression became acute. Edith Wharton divorced her husband in 1913 after 28 years of marriage.

Edith made her first journey to Europe at age 4 – and as she grew older, rather than just visit Europe she went to places like Morocco, the Greek Isles, and elsewhere. She wrote books about her travels including a title called "The Cruise of the Vandals" which is now considered to be the earliest known travel

writing. Other examples of her travel books included *Italian Backgrounds* and *A Motor-Flight through France*.

Wharton mixed travel, society life, and writing with residential design and landscaping. In 1897 she bought an estate in Newport called “Land’s End” and then went about redesigning the bones of the house, its interiors, and then its landscaping. In 1902 she designed a house called “The Mount” in Lenox, Massachusetts which even today is used as an example of her design talents. It was at “The Mount” that she wrote in 1905 tonight’s novel *The House of Mirth*.

Mr. Conomy stated that WW I was the turning point in Wharton’s life. She moved to Paris where she assisted in the war efforts by assisting refugees, the injured, the displaced, and the afflicted. She raised large sums of money to pay for the massive expenses her “causes” required. She called on well-placed friends to provide both effort and financial support. This non-stop effort was rewarded when she was honored with the country’s highest recognition – The Legion of Honor.

Mr. Conomy stated that Edith Wharton was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1921. The principal book cited by the Pulitzer Committee was her 1920 publication of *Age of Innocence*. A number of novellas including *Ethan Frome*, *The Sanctuary*, and *Old New York* are all memorable. As stated earlier she also wrote considerable poetry, non-fiction, and even a couple of plays. The literary output during her life was considerable.

The segue to the evenings critical paper was made easy by the thoughtful and well-reasoned critical paper presented by member James Saunders. While I embraced the pathos of Lily Bart’s life I received a reality lesson from Mr. Saunders. The book was more than the telling of the tragical tale of Lily Bart, a product of privilege as only New York society defines it. James cited a review of the novel from the January, 1906 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*: “As for the society in which poor Lily moves, Mrs. Wharton has no colors too black, no acid too biting, for its unredeemed odiousness and vulgarity.”

Yes, Saunders states, this is the story of Lily’s own downfall – brought to completion by her own lies, deceptions, and pettiness – simply, her undoing appears to be her own fault. It can be argued, as James has, that Lily’s progressive social views were feminist and in conflict with the gender restrictions that high society women were condemned to accede to, which makes both Lily and the novel “feminist” creations.

While I fell under the spell of the story of the sad ending to the poor little rich girl, James again cites the January, 1906 *Atlantic Monthly* in explaining this paradox: “For all its brilliancy, *The House of Mirth* has a certain shallowness; it is thin. At best Lily can only inspire interest and curiosity. You see, you

understand, and you ratify, but unfortunately, you do not greatly care.” The flawless prose that James defined as being the product of Mrs. Wharton’s pen engaged me and made me very sympathetic to Lily’s plight. Mr. Saunders did a masterful job of parsing the subtleties of the novel – and we all left the Conomy residence thinking and or talking about Lily Bart.

James felt it more appropriate to experience a general discussion on the book rather than comment on reviewer prepared questions. I had a copy of the questions from the January, 1995 Novel Club meeting, hosted by Bob Targett which also focused on *House of Mirth*. James saw fit to re-ask a couple of the questions from that evening’s critical paper presenter, David Novak. A truly delightful Novel Club evening was shared by all.

Respectfully submitted,
Thomas Slavin – Recording Secretary