

EDITH WHARTON

A biographical essay by
John P Conomy MD JD

April 4, 2017

I. Edith Wharton, whose patronymic is wrongly confused with that of Joseph Wharton, a Quaker gone rich and the founder of the business school at the University of Pennsylvania, was born in 1862 under the twin dark clouds of fathomless wealth and notable heritage, entering the planet earth as an independent human being as Edith Newbold Jones. Her mother was a Rensselaer descendant, and her father, George Henry Jones, had somehow acquired enough of everything that the saying “Keeping up with the Joneses” now memorializes his family and their habits.



Little Edith, aka “Pussy Jones,” was not a Pretty Baby

If this were not burden enough, she was forced to spend much of her life having her portrait painted, her picture taken, and burning through a Pharaoh’s fortune travelling favorite bits of the European continent, buying houses, filling them with extraordinary art, innumerable tchotchkes, and blessing her homes with her own brilliant designs and architectural innovation. She entered the world at 14 West 23rd Street, Manhattan and later lived at 53 rue de Varenne, Paris. These were swishy addresses. I feel an identity with Edith Wharton. We were both war babies. She was born three years before the American Civil war, and I three years before America declared war on Japan and Germany. Further, we share familiar neighborhoods. She lived in New York and Paris when her addresses in both cities were brilliant residential stars of the Belle Époque. I discovered both of them when they were, well, down at the heels. Between the ages of 15 years and her death in France at the age 75 years, she had published 15 novels, 7 novellas, 85 short stories and a flood of books on design, travel (including the now neglected “A

Motor Flight Through France”), literary criticism, European culture and her own memoir.



Edith on her way to publishing her first book of poetry (at age 15)

If this were not enough, she found time to run through a failed marriage engagement, a 28-year marriage to the moneyed, hypolibidinal and psychotically depressed Edward Wharton (to describe him as a wimp is to praise him), their connubial calamity ending in divorce after 28 years, and long relationships with the Casanovas (but permanently uncommitted) Morton Fullerton and Walter Berry. She vacationed for months at a time, her various jaunts lugging Wharton, his friends and lots of luggage with her, cost up to \$1,000,000 per venture in current dollars. She crossed the Atlantic on steamers 60 times and in the course of the years prior to World War I accumulated a list of friends which reads like a role of the rich, the famous, the litterateurs, the philosophical and the artistically accomplished persons (mainly men) of her times.



Edith Wharton in her prime...

Edith Wharton lived in homes made famous by her artistry, industry and her endless wealth. In 1897 she purchased Land’s End in Newport, Rhode Island for \$80,000 and proceeded to spend much more changing everything about it. In 1902, she designed The Mount at Lenox, Massachusetts which survives as a public monument to her today, and where “The House of Mirth” was written. Her good friend Henry James called it “a delicate French Chateau mirrored in a

Massachusetts pond.” She lived there until 1911 during her increasingly infrequent visits to the USA.



The Mount, Lenox, MA



Land's End, Newport, RI



Le Pavillon Colombe

World War I and its aftermath were turning points in Edith Wharton's life. Always a woman in a man's world but never yielding to the historic dominance of men, she took up the cause of French women, the poor and displaced and reconstruction of the French nation, finally moving there. She visited war zones in France in 1915 and remained there until her death from a stroke at her home at Le Pavillon Colombe at Saint Brice le Foret on June 1, 1937. In the meantime, she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, that in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence*.



Edith Wharton in France with Walter Berry (Pres. US Chamber of Commerce) and French Soldiers, World War I

II. Edith Wharton the author presents a very much different picture than that furnished by a look at her fascinating chronology. For much of what follows, I am indebted to Jonathan Franzen’s critical analysis of Wharton’s major works appearing in *The New Yorker* in February, 2012 entitled “*A Rooting Interest.*” The focus of my remarks to you concern three of her books, (*The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920)), all of which involve themes of wealth, the motivating forces of money and self-preservation, poor romantic choices, dissolution and the prominence of rich, beautiful New York City women. The anti-heroine in each book is a pretty unsympathetic character, women of tenuous morality and unstable character, driven by the need to be preserved in money. Each of them – Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, and Ellen Olenska – are nature’s perfect fruit: young, beautiful, urbane and rich, or nearly so or soon to be, and all of them make regrettable romantic choices. The fruit matures and ages, beauty and youth fade, but wealth, or the promise of such is more enduring. None of these Wharton characters are sympathetic, yet Wharton pulls us to their side in an unstable and reluctant way. We admire their grit, and may even condone their faults and their behavior the way we might hope for Wylie Coyote to catch the Road Runner, Roskolnikov to get away with murder, the Jackal to kill the French President, that Frank Gatsby will quit drinking so much and look in the mirror, or in the real world that Kim Kardashian will get her stolen diamond back, that Fox News will tell the truth or that Donald Trump will succeed at anything in his presidency.

My own notion about the moral tug exerted by Wharton’s major characters – and they are all women in the age of men – reflect her own notions of the position of women in society, and her own experience with the male world. She was a “women’s libber” long before the term was invented, and long before the position of women in the United States and about the world became a recognized matter of

human rights. It was her correct perception that the place of women in her own society was unjust and anomalous. That conviction finally drove her from the United States. She was raised in a world where women were pretty adornments on the arms of men, only to be heard about publicly at their birth, marriage and death, and in between, provide new human beings for the upper classes to which they belonged. Her anti-heroines were not cut from that cloth, and neither was she. She was rather a polymathic Virginia Woolf, a raging force and a figure not so much for her age as for the ages to come.



Edith Wharton at the Turn of the 20th Century, in her Prime as an Author

This illustrated biographical report is presented to the April Meeting of the Novel Club of Cleveland. It is written in two sections, the first dealing with the chronology of Edith Wharton's life, and the second with her biography from the point of view of her writings and critical thinking. For those wishing to know a great deal more about her, I point you to the biographies of her written by Hermione Lee, by Eleanor Dwight and particularly that by Harry N. Abrams. I have referenced in the text a particularly inspirational piece regarding Edith Wharton written by Jonathan Franzen appearing in *The New Yorker* in February, 2012. It is particularly inspirational because she was.