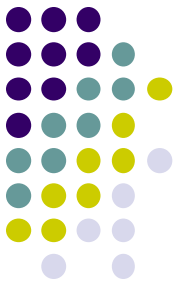


Edith Wharton born Edith Newbold Jones (1862-1937)



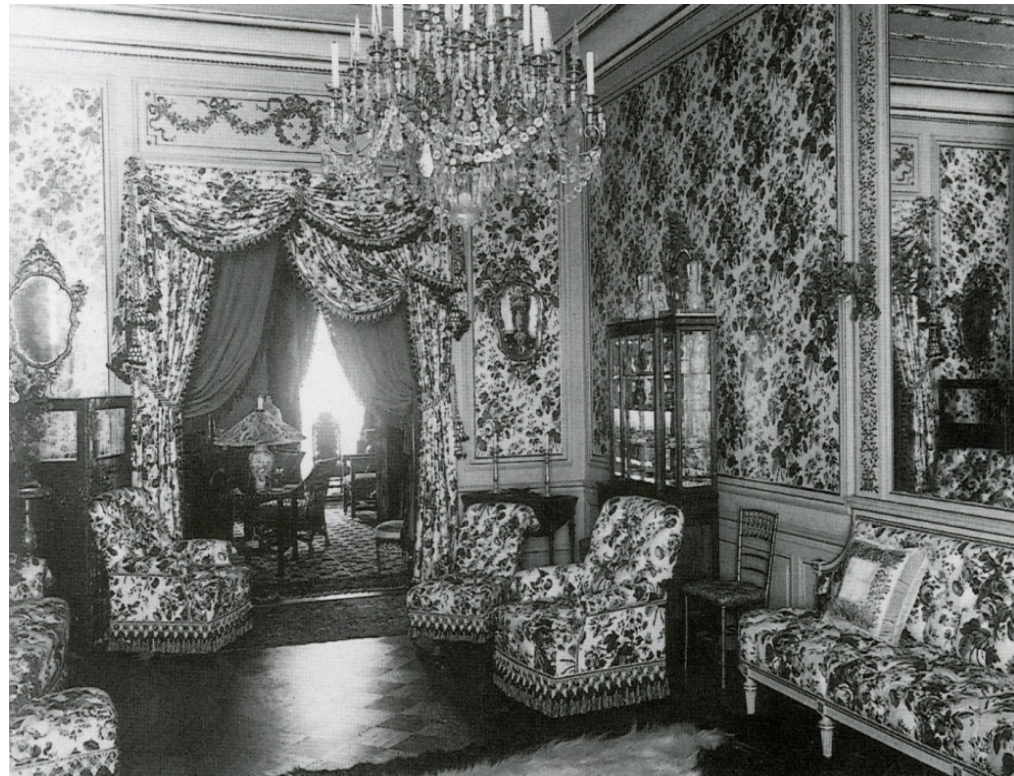
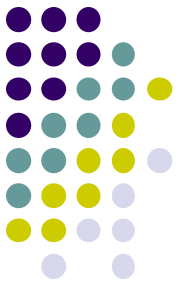
“Old New York”

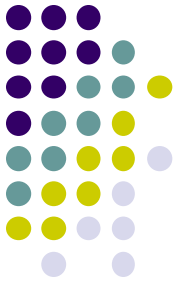


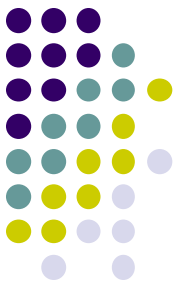
- Inherited wealth: NY's financial aristocracy
- Conservative
- Blind to change
- Suffocating world
- Limited role for women



Lucretia Jones's drawing room





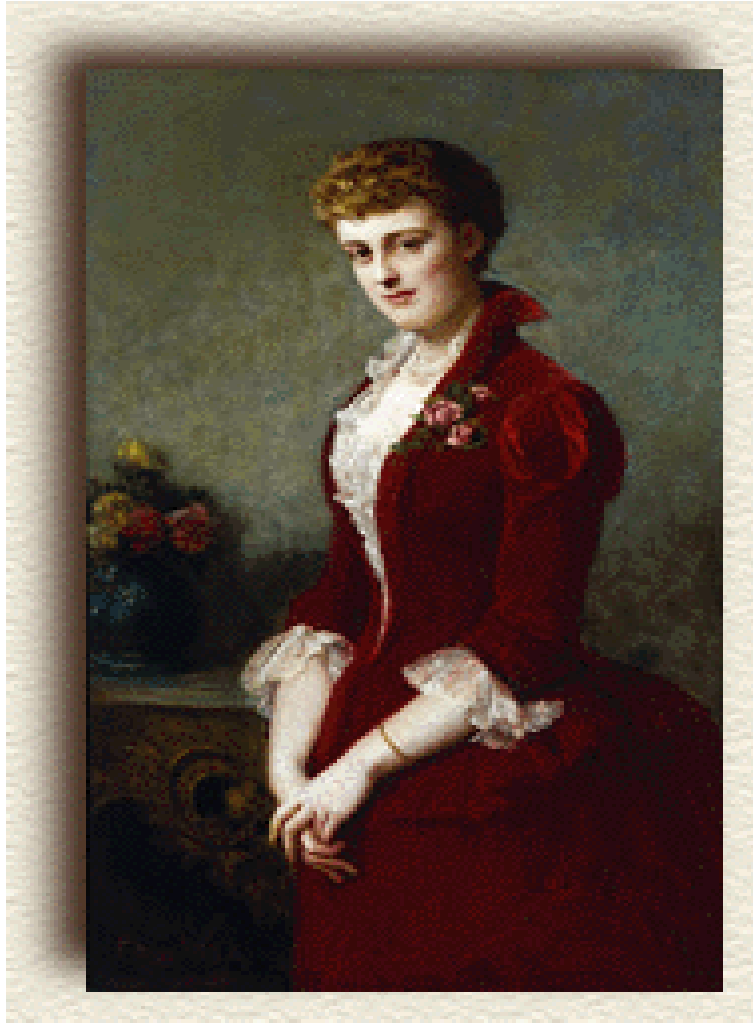
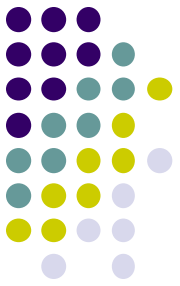


- I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood, to think how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform facades... Beauty, passion, and danger were automatically excluded from each man's life (for the men were almost as starved as the women). (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 1934).

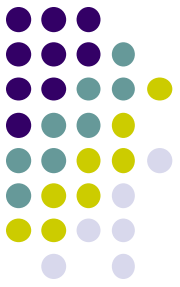


- Married to Edward Wharton in 1885





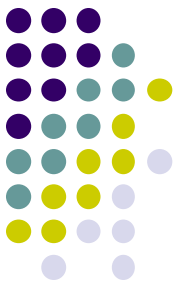
- Suffered a series of nervous breakdowns in 1894
- Published first story in 1889
- Writing grew out of emotional unhappiness



Edith Wharton as a young
society matron

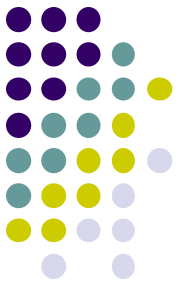


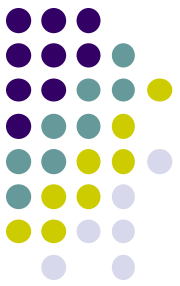
“I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.” “The Fulness of Life” (1893)



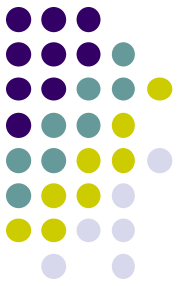
- None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame -they simply ignored them, and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins (...) the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace. (Quoted by R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton. A Biography*, 1985)

Life at “The Mount”





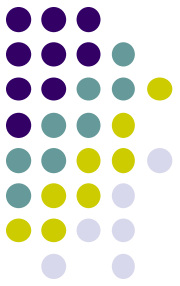
- In 1908 Edith Wharton left the US and settled in France
“Ah, good conversation - there's nothing like it, is there? The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing.”
- “The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!”
(*The Age of Innocence*, 1920)



- Affair with Morton Fullerton (1908-1911)
- 1913 divorced Teddy Wharton
- 1914-18: Participation in WWI. Relief work.
1916: She was awarded the *Croix de la Légion d'Honneur*
- Last years



Pavillon Colombe,
Wharton's house in France

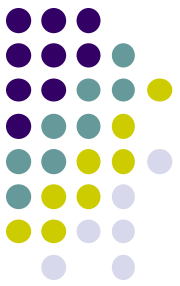


- In 1923 she received an honorary doctorate from Yale University
- Died in France in 1937

Reception



- Widely acclaimed in her own time
- First woman to enter the American Academy of Arts and Letters and to obtain an Honorary Doctorate Degree from Yale University
- Awarded *Pulitzer Price* for *The Age of Innocence* (1921)
- Forgotten afterwards due to the rise of experimental fiction (Modernism)



The hidden Edith Wharton

- Reputation after her death: Derogatory images of Edith Wharton in the 1930s and 1940s: snobbish, cold, rigid, extremely conservative...
- Critical revival of her work after 1970:
Reasons:
 - a) A clause in her will
 - b) the emergence of gender studies in the academic world

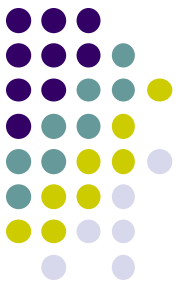
What the archives revealed: The hidden Edith Wharton



- She had had a lover, Morton Fullerton
- She had kept a diary
- She was a woman of strong passions and qualities
- Intriguing manuscripts among her papers at Yale: “The Beatrice Palmato” piece

Literary output

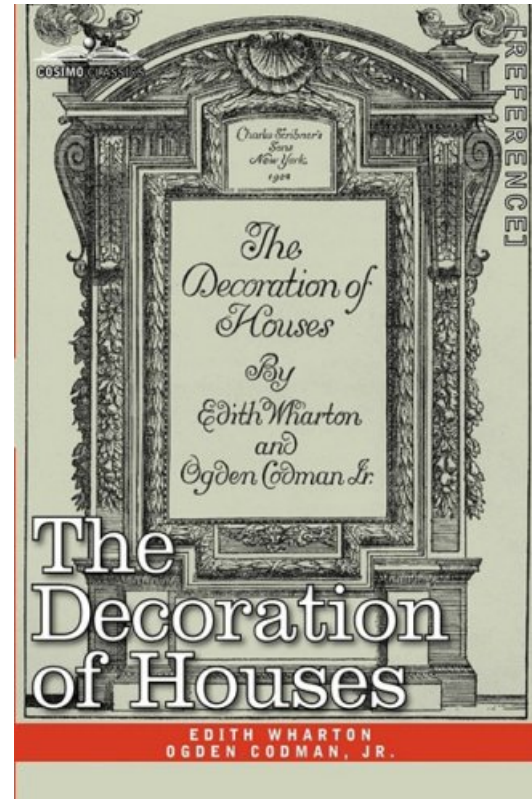
- Started with a book on interior design: *The Decoration of Houses*

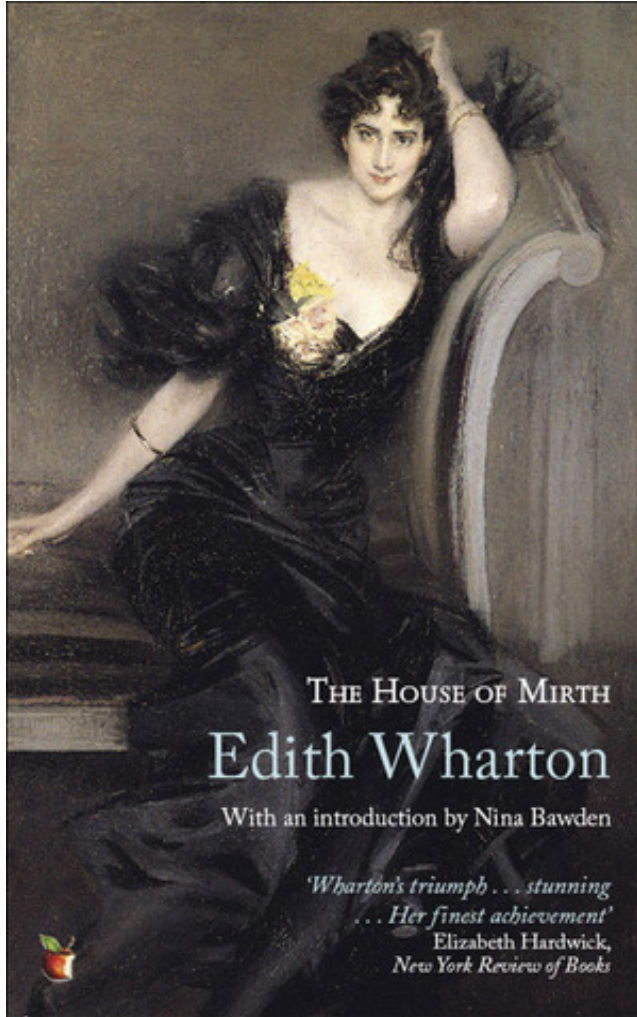
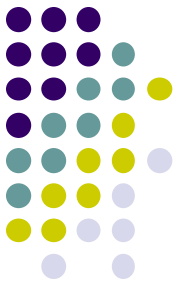


It anticipates Wharton's view of houses as metaphors of identity

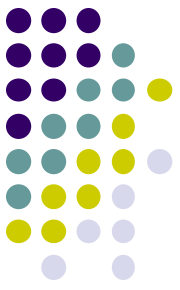
It expresses her strong rejection of the surroundings in which she grew up

...and her preference for European settings





- *The House of Mirth* (1905)
- Her first international success... and one of her finest achievements



The House of Mirth

- *The House of Mirth* tells the story of Lily Bart, a woman who is torn between her desire for luxurious living and a relationship based on mutual love. She sabotages all her possible opportunities for a wealthy marriage, loses the esteem of her social circle, and dies young, poor, and alone.
- The story is set in the “Gilded Age” and explores the ruthless world of the new tycoons and the very rich

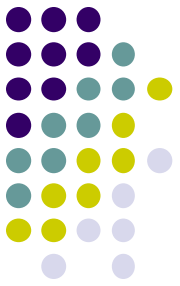
The Gilded Age (1870-1910)

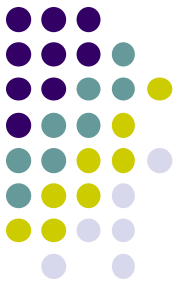
Vast industrial fortunes, monumental architecture, and the emergence of the United States as a world power marked the era.

However, the Gilded Age was also an era of enormous poverty.

A “small” country house in Newport

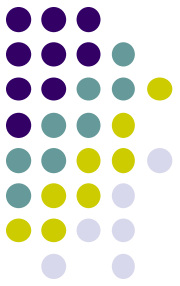




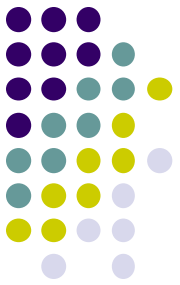


- Other important titles:
- *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), *The Age of Innocence* (1920)
- Writer of short stories: ghost stories, stories of social manners and psychological perception...

The Age of Innocence (1920)



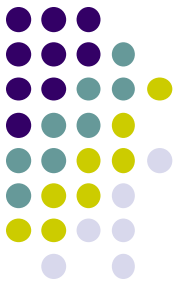
- Revisits the “Old New York” of Wharton’s childhood
- Balances the positive and negative sides of that world
- Tackles topics such as: duty vs. desire; individual vs. society; the quest for freedom



What kind of writer is she?

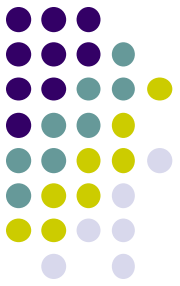
- Often compared to Henry James
- In the realist tradition of manners, with psychological insight
- Emphasis on order, design, structure
- More modern in themes than in form

Old New York



- Social satire of that privileged society
- Wharton explores:
The positive and negative qualities of her “Old New York” (morality, education, taste, but also prejudiced, oppressive, provincial)
- Old New York vs. the new millionaires
- The new rich are energetic, but they also as depicted as vulgar and ruthless

Themes



1. The plight of women in turn of the century America. The marriage question
2. The “Old New York”
3. The clash between the longings of the individual and the constraints of society
4. The complexity of human nature → Wharton addresses common universal longings and aspirations.