A GUIDE TO WHARTON CRITICISM, 1974-1983

This issue of the Edith Wharton Newsletter is devoted to updating Marlene Springer's annotated guide to Wharton criticism. The ten years covered in this survey were among the most important ones in the history of Wharton criticism. Several first-rate books, including R.W.B. Lewis' distinguished biography, led to an enhanced appreciation of Wharton's achievement and of her place in the canon of our major writers. While critics continued to explore such issues as Wharton's contribution to the novel of manners and her relationship to Henry James, the central focus of critical interest shifted to a subject that had previously received little attention: Wharton's fascination with the aspirations and frustrations of women. Wharton's artistic techniques and her treatment of psychological issues also received more sophisticated critical attention than at any previous time.

Wharton criticism flourished during the decade surveyed in this guide, but much work still needs to be done. The purpose of this guide is to make that work easier by providing scholars with a convenient source of reliable information. The dozen scholars who collaborated on this project share a devotion to Wharton studies. We have attempted to offer a clear, concise, and accurate account of the major work on Wharton during 1974-1983. Future issues of the Newsletter will continue to provide updated information on Wharton scholarship.

We would appreciate hearing from anyone who knows of material inadvertently omitted.

Alfred Bendixen
Bibliographic Editor

1974: Review by E. Suzanne Owens

Ammons, Elizabeth. "The Business of Marriage in EW's The Custom of the Country." Criticism, 16: 326-338. Analyzes novel as example of W's satirical treatment of marital customs and W's belief that "within marriage, there is for women no admirable way to accept or escape male proprietorship."


Evans, Elizabeth. "Musical Allusions in The Age of Innocence." Notes on Contemporary Literature, 4: 4-7. Suggests that the musical allusions mirror "the static and politic behavior of characters" and draws special attention to performances of Gounod's Faust.


McDowell, Margaret B. "Viewing the Custom of her Country: E W's Feminism." Contemporary Literature, 15: 521-538. Infers W's feminist philosophy from the short fiction and novels. W documented changing public attitudes towards women, and explored the aspirations and deprivations of women in a male-dominated society.


Sasaki, Miyoko "The Sense of Horror in E W." D.A.I., 34:7244A.

Tintner, Adeline R. "The Hermit and the Wild Woman: E W's 'Fictioning' of Henry James." Journal of Modern Literature, 4: 32-42. Argues that the Hermit in "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" and "Ogrin the Hermit" is a disguised Henry James and that these works "cross-reference" with James' treatment of W in "The Velvet Glove."

Wolfe, Robert F. "The Restless Women of E W." D.A.I. 34:1130A

502. Edith Wharton and Naturalism
3:30-4:45 p.m., New Orleans, WT, Hyatt

533. Cash Bar following "Wharton and Naturalism"
5:15-6:45 p.m., New Orleans, WT, Hyatt.

502. Edith Wharton and Naturalism
Sunday, December 29, 1985

Wolff, Cynthia, "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death." American Literature, 46: 36-40. Examines The House of Mirth in the context of late 19th and early 20th century American art, particularly art nouveau, in which woman becomes the idealized symbol of mixed purity and latent sexuality. Lily Bart's tragedy is her confused existence as the "ultimate exquisite" divorced from social reality.

1975: Review by Wendy Gimbel


Lewis, R.W.B. "Powers of Darkness." *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June: 644-46. Review praises ghost stories, calling W one of the ablest practitioners of this underrated genre. With great skill, W summoned back the ghosts of her childhood and ordered them into narrative.


Robinson, James A. "Psychological Determinism in *The Age of Innocence.*" *Markham Review*, 5: 1-5. Focuses on W’s anthropological interest in ritual and custom and explores Newland Archer’s conflict between the “responsible, socially-determined side” (May) and the “imaginative, aesthetic side” (Ellen). Explains why “Escape with Ellen was never a realistic possibility for a man of Archer’s background and personality.”


Sklepowich, Edward A. "E W." *American Literary Realism*, 8: 331-40. Review of dissertations noting that one area that had been neglected or poorly treated was W’s “position as a female writer.”


1976: Review by Carol J. Singley.

Ammons, Elizabeth. “Fairy-Tale Love and The Reef.” *American Literature*, 47: 615-628. The Reef critiques romantic female fantasies about love and marriage. Anna Leath must wake from the Sleeping Beauty dream of “waiting for a man’s passion to animate her”; Sophie Viner must forgo the Cinderella “myth of economic salvation.” For both women, expecting male “rescue” means accepting “the double standard” and “male proprietorship.”


Ellman, Mary. "Manners, Morals, and Mrs. Wharton." *Sewanee Review*, 84: 528-32. Review states that R.W.B. Lewis’ *E W: A Biography* presents a "believable and thorough history" but overemphasizes W’s social activities and concern for profits; the biography also lacks detailed footnotes and critical sharpness. Gary Lindberg’s *E W and the Novel of Manners* is “dense” but “intelligent” and "thorough.”

Finn, Helena Kane. "Design of Despair: The Tragic Heroine and the Imagery of Artifice in Novels by Hawthorne, James, and W." *D.A.I.* 37: 5827A.

Gargano, James W. "E W’s The Reef: The Gentle Woman’s Quest for Knowledge." *Novel*, 10: 40-48. Anna Leath’s ultimate repudiation of Darrow and Sophie proceeds from a "vision of the individual lie as a vital service in behalf of the moral structure of society." Links W’s conservatism, with its “dignity and a certain austere beauty,” to T.S. Eliot’s need to preserve fragile human and cultural values.


L’Enfant, Julie. "E W: Room with a View." *The Southern Review*, 12: 398-406. Review says that R.W.B. Lewis’ *E W: A Biography* “expands our notion of Mrs. W’s emotional perimeters,” showing that her art was neither as “objective” nor “effortless” as she would have us think, and captures “on a public level the story of her houses and friends.”

McDowell, Margaret. E W. Boston: Twayne, 1976. Surveys the major fiction and sees W. as a "moralist as well as a mannerist" who "transcends the realistic aspect of her world by striking into the psychic motivations of her characters." Also argues that W. "continued to develop and to explore with versatility new genres, techniques, and subject materials" until just before her death.


Ozick, Cynthia. "Justice (Again) to E W." Commentary, 62 Oct.: 48-57. Laments treatment of W. by both orthodox critics and "new feminists" who pay more attention to her life than her writings; argues that W.'s life was marked by "spiralling solipsism and tragic drift."


Rooke, Constance. "Beauty in Distress: Daniel Deronda and The House of Mirth." Women and Literature, 4: 28-39. Both Gwendolyn Hareth and Lily Bart "are caught forever between a world in which they may appear to rule but are in fact up at auction, and a world not yet realized in which they can own and be themselves."


Westbrook, Wayne W. "The House of Mirth and the Insurance Scandal of 1905." American Notes and Queries, 14: 134-37. The title of the novel "may derive its source and meaning from the prevailing practices of high finance and the Wall Street-related insurance scandal of 1905," which popularized the phrase, "house of mirth."

Winner, Viola Hopkins. American Literature, 48: 398-400. Review notes that R.W.B. Lewis' E W: A Biography "brings his subject to life, but he has been perhaps too chary of conceptualizing and concluding - socially as well as psychologically." Also notes the lack of both documentation and an "interpretative principle."

Woollf, Cynthia Griffin. "The Age of Innocence: Wharton's 'Portrait of a Gentleman'." The Southern Review, 12: 640-658. The Age of Innocence is "neither a celebration of the past nor a condemnation of it; it is the determined effort to discover a basis for human growth and continuity." Using Eriksonian psychology linking maturity and social progress to tradition, Woollf shows how Archer, with May's and Ellen's help, comes to understand the realities of his situation and choose "a good life" of "family affection" and "community concerns."


Bloom, Lillian D. "On Daring to Look Back with W and Cather." Novel, 10: 167-78. Review of Gary Lindberg's E W and the Novel of Manners and David Stouck's Willa Cather's Imagination compares W. and Cather as conservative, realistic novelists who value manners and view the past "as a pejorative commentary upon the present."


Eggenschwiler, David. "The Ordered Disorder of Ethan Frome." Studies in the Novel, 9: 237-46. "Will have it both ways, showing that man does determine his life in a universe that is not chaotic, but also showing that his lot is hard, his choices difficult, his sacrifices many, his strengths inseparable from his weaknesses..."


Lawson, Richard H. "Thematic Similarities in E W and Thomas Mann." Twentieth Century Literature, 23 (October 1977) 289-98. Suggests that W may have read Mann and explores similarities.


Peterman, Michael A. "A Neglected Source for The Great Gatsby: The Influence of E W's The Spark." Canadian Review of American Studies, 8: 26-35. Fitzgerald may owe a debt to The Spark's portrayal of Long Island high society. Despite their obvious differences, Hayley Delane and Jay Gatsby both were forever changed by a crucial early experience that makes them mysterious and misunderstood.


Saunders, Judith P. "Ironic Reversal in E W's Bunner Sisters." Studies in Short Fiction, 14: 241-45. Bunner Sisters challenges the notions that marriage is woman's salvation and self-sacrifice her duty. A Bildungsroman in reverse, the story forces Ann Eliza to unlearn these beliefs when her relinquishment of courtship in favor of her sister destroys Evalina.


Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "'E W and the 'Visionary' Imagination.' Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, 2, #3: 24-30. Relates W's "ambivalence about the creative process" to feminist issues. "E W met the challenge of her imaginative power by transforming the merely 'visionary' into increasingly forceful works of art."


1978: Review by Margaret B. McDowell


Golden, Arline. "E W's Debt to Meredith in 'The Mortal Lease.'" Yale University Library Gazette, 53: 100-108. W's 8-sonnet sequence reflects the influence of George Meredith's Modern Love, in which Sonnet 29 supplies the title. The diction, imagery, and tone, as well as the chief theme -- impersonam of love -- are similar.


Stuck, David. "Women Writers in the Mainstream." Texas Studies in Language and Literature, 20: 660-70. Recent books belatedly draw Willa Carter, Gertrude Stein, Ellen Glasgow, and E W into the mainstream of American literature. Wolff's A Feast of Words is "truly remarkable," and Elizabeth Ammons and Margarete B. McDowell "are two other critics who write with insight on W."

Vidal, Gore. "Of Writers and Class: In Praise of E W." Atlantic, 241 (Feb. 1978) 64-7. Reprinted as "Introduction" to The E W Omnibus. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978, pp. vii-xii. Until recently, gender and class have prevented W's full recognition, with Henry James, as one of the "two great American masters of the novel...they are giants, equals, the tutelary and benign gods of our American literature." The Age of Innocence is "unusually beautiful" in style, and "there is no woman in American literature as fascinating as the doomed Madame Olenska." "One needs a well-defined society to make good novels."

1979: Review by Alan Price


Kozikowski, Stanley J. "Unreliable Narration in Henry James's *The Two Faces* and EW's *The Dilettante.* *Arizona Quarterly*, 35: 357-72. Comparison reveals W's artistry and independence from Jamesean influence; W's skilful story "reflects her own ideas about how the reflector should be placed within a narrative.


Wershoven, Carol Jean. "The Female Intruder in the Novels of E W." D.A.I. 41: 675A.


1980: Review by Kathy A. Fedorko

Ammons, Elizabeth. *E W’s Argument with America.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980. W’s argument is that women, no matter how privileged or assertive, are not free to control their own lives. Explores W’s works through an approach which merges literary analysis with biography and social history.


Bremer, Sidney H. "American Dreams and American Cities in Three Post-World War I Novels." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 79: 274-85. The city's ability, after WWI, to sustain individual dreams or the myth of community is questioned by W's *The Age of Innocence,* Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* and West's *X'ss Lonelyhearts.* Metaphors in *The Age of Innocence* emphasize the deadening quality of old New York's community.


Collinson, C.S. "The Whirlpool and *The House of Mirth.*" *Gissing Newsletter*, 16: 12-16. W was probably familiar with Gissing's *The Whirlpool.* Although both novels deal with the adventures of an admirably drawn heroine, W is the more professional of the two writers.

Hays, Peter L. "Bearding the Lily: W's Names." *American Notes and Queries*, 18: 75-76. W chose her characters' names with elaborate care and an awareness of their multiple meanings.


Price, Alan. "The Composition of E W's *The Age of Innocence.*" *Yale University Library Gazette*, 55: 22-30. W made significant revisions while writing the novel. Artistic problems in three alternative plot outlines were worked out as W clarified her story.

Saunders, Judith. "A New Look at the Oldest Profession in W’s *New Year's Day.*" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 17: 121-26. W's story focuses on the "cultural degradation of women." Although Lizzie Hazelden seems to be taking her life in her own hands, she is still trapped in her social environment. Prostitution is an extreme version of the "business" of amusing men engaged in by women in her society.

W.'s short story, "The Descent of Man," is an ironic commentary on the evolutionary progress of humankind and on optimistic predictions about the future of science.

Schröber, Mary Suzanne. "E. W. and the French Critics, 1906-1937." *American Literary Realism*, 13: 61-72. During W.'s career, several of her books were translated into French, and for a time she received substantial attention from French critics who looked to her for insights into "the New World soul." Includes bibliography.


Smith, Allan Gardner. "E. W. and the Ghost Story." *Women and Literature* 1: 149-59. W.'s ghost stories explore experiences that her society "preferred to be unable to see," especially experiences dealing with sexuality. Four stories are used to show that the horror of the suppressed natural is greater than the horror of the conventionally supernatural.

Spangler, George M. "Suicide and Social Criticism: Durkheim, Dreiser, Wharton, and London." *American Quarterly*, 31: 496-516. In *Suicide, Sister Carrie, The House of Mirth*, and *Martin Eden*, the four authors all reach the same conclusion: that modern society is a killer and the suicide is its victim.


Zilversmit, Annette Claire Schreiber. "Mothers and Daughters: The Heroines in the Novels of E. W." *D.A.I.* 41: 5104A.

**1981: Review by Ellen P. Stengel**


French, Marilyn. "Introductions" to paperback reprints of *The House of Mirth, Summer, The Custom of the Country*, *Rohan Fever* and *Other Stories*, and *Old New York*. New York: Berkley, 1981. These introductions are listed together because they share essentially the same long opening section which presents W as an under-rated writer whose literary achievement was based on her "awareness that females are illegitimate in the world." The discussions of individual novels also reflect a feminist perspective. The most original comments are in French's account of *Summer*, which she calls "W.'s greatest novel."


Hanley, Lynne T. "The Eagle and the Hen: E. W. and Henry James." *Research Studies*, 49: 143-53. Hanley qualifies the extent of Henry James' literary influence on E. W., who "remained suspicious of the master's preoccupation with theory, aesthetic control, and detachment from life." In their personal relationship, W. was the more "masculine" and aggressive, but as an artist, she advocated a more passive, "feminine" creative process.


Leder, Priscilla Gay. "'Snug Contrivances': The Classic American Novel as Reformulated by Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, and E. W." *D.A.I.* 42: 4000A.

Link, Franz. "A Note on 'The Apparition of these Faces...' in *The House of Mirth* and 'In a Station of the Metro.'" *Paeonactus*, 10: 327. Argues that Wharton may have influenced Pound's famous poem.


**1982: Review by Sandra Seabury and Sivaporn Leearabhandh**


Collins, Alexandra. "The Art of Self-Perception in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and E W's The Reef." *Atlantic* 7: 47-58. Both W and Woolf endow their heroines with the "creative impulse" which enables them to withstand "the predatory forces in both nature and society."

Crowley, John W. "The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in W's Summer." *American Literary Realism*, 15: 86-96. W transforms a conventional romance and trite plot into a "radically feminist" novel which rejects the idea of salvation by marriage and depicts Charity's "final entrapment" in a "dependent childish identity."


Saunders, Judith P. "Becoming the Mask: E W's Ingenues." *Massachusetts Studies in English*, 7 iv: 33-39. Analyzes May Welland to show that innocence can be a "mask" and that W's women characters are entrapped "from within as well as from without."

Strout, Cushing. "Complementary Portraits: James' Lady and W's Age." *Hudson Review*, 35: 405-415. Argues that Wharton's novel was a response to James' and that comparison reveals "their different ways of telling a story" and "their mutual capacity for appreciating renunciation as both a moral decision and a culturally formed trait."


Wershoven, Carol. *The Female Intruder in the Novels of E W.* Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1982. W's fiction often relies on "the female intruder," an outsider who functions as a critic of society and the carrier of positive values. The four variations in the pattern consist of the intruder in the novels of social climbing, the intruder as part of a romantic triangle, the double intruders, and the intruder as teacher, all of whom are illustrated by the female protagonists of W's novels.

Wershoven, Carol. "E W's Final Vision: The Buccaneers." *American Literary Realism*, 15: 209-220. In her last novel, "W's fears" are "transformed into a new hope" for the union of "the best of the traditional and the modern." Instead of focusing on isolation, the novel affirms the possibility of "alliances, connections, links."

Whaley, Ruth M. "Landscape in the writing of E W." *D.A.I.* 43: 2995A.

Worby, Diana Zacharia. "The Ambiguity of E W's 'Lurking Feminism'." *Mid-Hudson Language Studies*, 5: 81-90. Contends that Wharton equivocates about women's rights in her fiction, frequently creating roles that defy society and rewarding those "who are chaste and proper." Suspects W was uncomfortable with "the female sensibility," and preferred men as friends, disliking their wives, and even contemporary woman writers such as Virginia Woolf.

**1983: Review by Judith E. Funston**

Brazin, Nancy Topping. "The Destruction of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, and Male Chauvinism." *Denver Quarterly*, 17: 97-108. W is most powerful when depicting Lily's destruction, which is rooted in her socialization and "subsequent inability to act with conviction." However, W sentimentalizes the domestic ideal, the working class, and death, thereby weakening the novel.

**WHARTON COUP: The Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin, New Series Number 31, 1985, has published 26 of Wharton's love letters to Morton Fullerton from its archives. The issue also contains two articles of commentary on the whole Fullerton-Wharton correspondence by Alan Gribben and Clare Colquitt. The editors announce that this correspondence is in anticipation of the forthcoming *The Letters of Edith Wharton* to be edited by R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis and published finally by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1987.**


Fryer, Judith. "E W's 'Tact of Omission': Harmony and Proportion in A Backward Glance." *Biography*, 6: 148-169. W had two selves: one, ornamental and social; the other, "consumed by a passion to 'make up' stories." Her autobiography is a reconciliation of the two, and "the presentation of a final, perfected version of her life."


O’Neal, Michael J. "Point of View and Narrative Technique in the Fiction of E W." *Style*, 17: 270-289. Examines features of W’s language that assist the reader in recognizing the various "layers" of her narrative voice and judging her characters.

Papke, Mary Elizabeth. "‘Abys of Solitude’: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and E W." *D.A.I.* 44:1451A.

Poirier, Suzanne. "‘The Weir Mitchell Rest Cure: Doctor and Patients.’” *Women’s Studies*, 10: 15-40. Concludes that Mitchell helped many women despite his sexist theories. W’s case, however, is ironic: Mitchell encouraged her to write to compensate for her empty marriage and thereby contributed to her subsequent divorce.

Rahi, G.S. E W: A Study of her Ethos and Art. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983. W neither blindly accepted nor totally rejected the ethical and social values of her class. Her best work balances sympathy and intellectual judgment; her art declines when "she is swayed by prejudice and exasperation."

Rusch, Frederik L. "Reality and the Puritan mind: Jonathan Edwards and Ethan Frome." *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 4: 238-47. Links Edwards’ belief in man’s ability to choose and his subsequent moral responsibility to Ethan Frome’s decisions. Thus, while the consequences of Ethan’s choices seem to suggest despair, "the fact that Ethan could make those choices is cause for some celebration."

Schriber, Mary Suzanne. "Convention in the Fiction of E W." *Studies in American Fiction*, 11: 189-201. Though convention is both useful and necessary, it can restrict "human possibility." In W’s fiction, "when convention is used to close rather than open life’s possibilities," the woman characters usually are the ones who suffer.

Tintner, Adeline R. "Mothers vs. Daughters in the Fiction of E W and Henry James." *AB Bookman’s Weekly*, 71 (June 6, 1983), 4324, 4326-4329. Argues that W depicts poor mother-daughter relationships because she was influenced by James’ treatment of the subject and not because of her negative feelings about her own mother.


Walker, Nancy A. "‘Seduced and Abandoned’: Convention and Reality in E W’s Summer." *Studies in American Fiction*, 11 (Spring 1983) 107-14. W’s *Summer* transforms the conventional "seduced and abandoned" heroine into a realistic and unsentimental portrayal.