

# Edith Wharton:

## Remarkable Talent Who Defied Convention

By Elena Petricone



Edith Wharton was a prolific American author who, over the course of her inimitable life, published over 40 volumes. She was also the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, in 1920 for her novel *The Age of Innocence*.

As a woman born during the Civil War to a wealthy, upper class family, Edith Newbold Jones was not expected to become an author according to the social norms of the time. At an early age, however, Wharton advocated for her writing so that she managed to get her work *Fast and Loose* published in 1877, as well as *Verses*, a collection of poems, which was privately published the following year. Another literary thoughtleader of her time, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, expressed great admiration for Wharton's early work and as a result did his best to encourage her to keep at it.

Though Edith Wharton had a remarkable talent, she also utilized her family's connections by networking wherever she went, befriendng businessmen, writers, journalists and art critics alike. Henry James became one of her most trusted confidantes. Such fans passed her work along to publication editors, serving as reliable contacts throughout her life.

In 1902, Wharton published *The Valley of Decision* followed by *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *Summer* (1911), *The Marne* (1918), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *A Son at the Front*

(1923), *A Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), *The Children* (1928), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932). Her body of work also included almost a dozen short-story collections (many of which were comprised of works that had been serialized in magazine publications) as well as novellas, travel essays, plays, and poems. Wharton also became expert at interior design and architecture, co-authoring works on these subjects as well.

Wharton consistently produced, and much of her work was serialized in publications such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's*, *Century*, *Harper's*, *Lippincott's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Though her life took many busy twists and turns, she made it a point to keep writing and publishing. In 1930 she gained membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Wharton's work often revolved around conflict between societal pressures and personal happiness. Her sometimes witty, sometimes devastating portrayals of the rich appealed to many audiences. Her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), sharply lays bare the hypocrisy guiding wealthy classes and the cost of appeasing what high society demands. Wharton herself may have been a living example of this, defying convention as a published author, divorcee, and relentless advocate for her own career.

At 23, she married a banker, Edward "Teddy" Wharton but later called this action her "greatest mistake." Teddy

embezzled money from her to support his mistresses, and Wharton divorced him in France (so as to block likely press coverage) in 1913. She then moved to Paris, rarely visiting the United States again. In her new home, she had a brief, hot and cold affair with Morton Fullerton, a journalist for *The London Times* and became active in World War I relief efforts in both France and Belgium, receiving a French Legion of Honor for her philanthropy.

Though acutely sensitive to gender and class issues facing those in her own sphere, Edith did not extend her empathy to other cultures, declaring herself at one point a "rabid imperialist." During a visit to Morocco she even praised the French administration there despite its oppressive regime.

Wharton acted as her own agent for many years, and was known for being precise and particular regarding how her work would appear in print. A business woman as well as a creative mind, Wharton was not afraid to abandon old publishers when she recognized opportunities elsewhere. She wrote and wrote until the end, leaving her final novel *Buccaneers* unfinished at the time of her death. Naturally, because of her popularity and brilliance, it was published posthumously.

*Elena Petricone is a Publishing Assistant with emerson consulting group inc. in Concord.*