

Edith Wharton Biography

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Biography

Edith Wharton (1861-1937), American author, chronicled the life of affluent Americans between the Civil War and World War I.

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in New York City, probably on Jan. 24, 1861. Like many other biographical facts, she kept her birth date secret. Gossip held that the family's English tutor--not George Frederic Jones--was really Edith's father. The truth may never be known, but Edith evidently believed the story. After the Civil War, George Jones took his family to Europe, where they could live more cheaply.

Back in New York, by the age of 18 Edith had published poems in magazines and in a privately printed volume and had experimented with fiction. However, events deferred her writing career. The family's second long European trip ended in her father's death. In New York again, she evidently fell in love with Walter Berry; yet she became engaged to Edward Wharton, eleven years her senior, a wealthy Bostonian. They were married in 1885.

Marriage brought Edith Wharton two things she valued most, travel and leisure for writing. In the early 1890s her stories began appearing in magazines, but her first commercial success was a book written with an architect, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). She sought help on it from Walter Berry, who remained in some uncertain way part of her life until his death (1927). Soon after this book, Mrs. Wharton suffered a nervous breakdown. For therapy her physician suggested she write fiction. In 1899 a collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination*, appeared--the first of her 32 volumes of fiction.

In 1905, after she began her friendship with Henry James, Wharton's first masterpiece, *The House of Mirth*, laid bare the cruelties of New York society. Her range was apparent in *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), a collection of chillers, and in the celebrated novella *Ethan Frome* (1911). In 1910 the Whartons moved to France, where Edward Wharton suffered a nervous breakdown and was placed in a sanatorium. After their divorce in 1913, Edith Wharton stayed in France, writing lovingly about it in *French Ways and Their Meanings* (1919) and other books.

The Age of Innocence, a splendid novel of New York, won the Pulitzer Prize (1921), and a dramatization of Mrs. Wharton's novella *The Old Maid* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama (1935). She died of a cardiac attack on Aug. 11, 1937, and was buried in Versailles next to Walter Berry.