Edith Wharton Changed My Life

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Abstract

In this personal essay, the author recounts five decades of reading, teaching, and being inspired by Edith Wharton's life and work, highlighting meetings with many noted Wharton scholars in the United States and abroad, and recounting the genesis of three of his twenty-seven books that deal with Wharton. Those works are a study of shame in her life and fiction, Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame*; an acclaimed comic mystery,* The Edith Wharton Murders*; and a revisioning of her classic novel* The House of Mirth *from the point of view of Simon Rosedale and his family,* Rosedale in Love.

Keywords

Edith Wharton, shame, personal essay, memoir, inspiration

The year 2024 marks my golden anniversary with Edith Wharton: I've shared my life with her and her work for fifty years in surprising ways.

As the son of immigrants who were very poor, I couldn't have had a more different background than Wharton's. But I was primed to enter her literary world in part because I grew up amid echoes of Gilded Age New York.

My towering apartment building at the northern edge of Harlem was built in the early 1900s with gorgeous brown and gray tapestry brickwork and stone detailing. The same architect designed the far more elaborate and grandiose Hotel Lucerne on the Upper West Side. Some of the *Edith Wharton Review* readers might know that rose-colored, Beaux-Arts pile with enormous pillars framing the entrance.

My more sedate building had an impressive name like some fortress in Anglo-Saxon England: Northhold. To me as a kid it felt like a castle, thanks to its bulk taking up almost half a city block, the lobby floor and walls dressed in intricately patterned ceramic tiles, and an enormous fireplace you could imagine as the background of a Douglas Fairbanks Jr. sword fight.

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Our airy, eighth-floor apartment was quietly gracious in a way I think Wharton might have admired: high ceilings, large foyer lit by an antique carriage lamp, intricate parquet floors, French doors between the formal dining room and light-filled living room. The bedrooms were far away from the kitchen where there was a back door for deliveries.

Out on Broadway, the tarmac was worn down in some places, revealing the original cobblestones and reminding me daily of the time when carriages would drive up and down that street. Then there was the view from my bedroom window of the Upper Manhattan graveyard for Trinity Church. Celebrity graves there included Mrs. Astor, doyenne of The Four Hundred.

A few blocks away, the public library we visited weekly had been designed by Stanford White's architectural firm to look like a Venetian palazzo. So even though I lived miles uptown from the West 23rd Street brownstone where Wharton was born, vestiges of her world were all around me.

I wasn't the best student, even in English classes, because I often preferred reading library books to what was assigned in class, especially having discovered that the Shakespeare texts we were given in junior high school were expurgated. But despite very catholic tastes, I seemed to have missed Wharton in those years, even though I found her friend Henry James.

Yet once I started reading Wharton in college, she seemed to connect me to a past that I could claim. More than that, at a time when I was immersed in reading Virginia Woolf, Lawrence Durrell, George Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wharton revealed me to myself the way no other writer had before. That's because of the scene in *The House of Mirth* where Lily Bart is humiliated in the South of France by Bertha Dorset.

I was riddled with shame myself though I didn't have the words yet to express it and understand it. All the same, the quietly poisonous way Lily Bart was left exposed and vulnerable in that scene—and afterward—made the novel into a tool of revelation. As Kafka once wrote: "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us" (16).

I was mesmerized by Wharton's style, wit, sharp eye for hypocrisy, and vivid characterization of people and places. I scoured bookstores and bought every Wharton trade paperback Scribner's had in print, back when their average price was $2.50. And in one of life's lovely coincidences, my college mentor and professor of American literature, Kristin Lauer, would years later compile the new secondary bibliography of Wharton.

While reveling in Wharton's fiction, the universe sent me what felt like an amazing birthday present: R. W. B. Lewis's Pulitzer Prize–winning biography, which I devoured. Its dynamism and detail made me admire Wharton even

more, not just for her art but also for her determination, industry, and the ways in which she saw writing as a business and controlled her career—or tried to. She was a great model. And at the time, I wouldn't have minded living a life that was even half as glamorous as hers—especially in France, given eight years of studying French and growing up with a francophone mother.

Pursuing my twin goals of writing and teaching, in the late 1970s I was in the MFA program at University of Massachusetts Amherst, where I had the good fortune to take Cynthia Griffin Wolff's first-ever Wharton seminar. At each meeting, she presided over the enormous manuscript of *Feast of Words*, due later that academic year, though she rarely had to consult anything. Wharton was part of her, body and soul, and one of the many pleasures of the seminar was falling in love with *Summer* as a pendant to *Ethan Frome* because I had never really seen them in relation to one another before.

As a senior graduate assistant in the American studies doctoral program at Michigan State University a few years later, I got to teach *The House of Mirth* in a Women and American Culture class. Though some students were puzzled by the tableaux vivants, the mostly-female class felt strong kinship with Lily's ambivalent efforts to be attractive *and* find a husband. To them, the book felt very contemporary. To me, it demonstrated one more time what Maya Angelou called "the life-giving power of literature" (Angelou).

It was in Michigan that I discovered the affect theory of psychologist Silvan Tomkins. Both psychologists and novelists concern themselves with questions of human motivation. What propels us, drives us, governs our relationships, our very lives? Each psychological theory posits a specific vantage point or organizing principle from which all human experience is revealed. For affect theory, it's not the drives that are primary, as Freud first conceived—instead affect or emotion is primary.

From this perspective, affect is the *primary innate biological motivating mechanism*, more urgent than the physiological drives such as sex, more urgent even than pain. We are born already biologically equipped to both experience and express affect and seek to increase positive affect and diminish the negative. Affect makes us care deeply about whatever becomes associated with it. Without affect, nothing matters, but *with* affect, anything can matter. The primary site for affect is the face, a concept that has been demonstrated cross-culturally by many psychologists.

One of the affects that matters most is shame. To feel shame is to feel *seen* in a painfully diminished sense. Our eyes turn inward: suddenly we are watching ourselves, which generates the excruciating torment of self-consciousness. Shame is the affect of defeat, failure, and rejection. Shame is

inferiority. Shame covers a range of experiences, from social embarrassment to utter worthlessness and alienation. While shame can motivate a drive for social justice, shame too often can feel like a sickness of the soul.

With that perspective, it was evident that shame was everywhere in Wharton's work with obvious facial signs of blushing, eyes down, head down, and averting the eyes to cut off contact. I saw the *rhetoric* of shame ever-present: humiliated, humiliatingly, ashamed, shame, mortified, mortifyingly, mortification, abased, abasement, self-abasement, humility—and the consistent concern with pride that is invariably being humbled.

Throughout her life, Wharton carried within her the conviction that she was, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff put it, "at base a small, hungry, helpless creature despite the success, wealth, gorgeous homes and gardens, loving friends, devoted servants"—and that Pulitzer Prize (16).

Reading about her in various biographies as well as in her own words it was clear that Wharton herself had been shamed in her family. She described many instances in *A Backward Glance* that mirrored this sense of shame:

> I was laughed at by my brothers for my red hair & for the supposed abnormal size of hands and feet; and as I was much the least good-looking of the family, the consciousness of my physical shortcomings was heightened by the beauty of the persons about me. My mother laughed at me for using long words and for caring about dress [. . .] under this perpetual crossfire of criticism I became a painfully shy self-conscious child." ("Life and I" 37)

When I started exploring the role of shame in Wharton's life and work, my essays were not immediately well received. *American Literature* sent me a scathing two-page rejection for a paper about shame in *The Touchstone*, deploring it as both nothing new and junk psychology. But I knew from my contact with Professor Lauer, who was working on her bibliography, that shame and its various forms like embarrassment and shyness had not yet been written about—and that *The Touchstone* was unfairly neglected. I had the pleasure of writing back to the editor and quoting Prof. Lauer. I also noted that Duke University's prestigious Grand Rounds lecture series at its medical school had recently featured a guest lecture on the phenomenology and psychodynamics of shame, so it was ipso facto *not* junk. I received an apology in which the editor claimed that sometimes the journal's editorial readers were "too enthusiastic."

A handful of articles led to publishing *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame* with St. Martin's Press, which had already published my first collection of

short stories. The book focused heavily on Wharton's more neglected work, and because I thought most photos of Wharton were too staged or stiff, I was to my knowledge the first person to use that striking photo of her with a half-smile and wearing fur. It made her seem so much more human and approachable than the ones commonly used at the time by publishers like Scribner's.

While researching the book, I had the unique experience of getting a brisk guided tour of Pavillon Colombe outside Paris from the Princess of Lichtenstein, an experience that made the perfect coda for the book.

Encouraged by my editor to write something humorous, I chose a time-tested subject of satire: academia. My next book, *The Edith Wharton Murders*, imagined a conference attended by members of two rival Wharton groups. It garnered me my first *New York Times* review and was in some parts of the country not just shelved in mystery sections of bookstores, but in literature side by side with Wharton's books. Or so readers told me. The book got a rave, and you carry a pull quote from the *Times* forever forward; it can be recycled on your book jackets over and over.

Having been to a Wharton conference at Lenox, I had been meeting and corresponding with a whole world of Wharton scholars: Margaret McDowell, James Tuttleton, Adeline Tintner, Judith Fryer, Alfred Bendixen, Candace Waid, Clare Colquitt, Alan Price, Katherine Joslin, Annette Zilversmit. None of them, however, are in *The Edith Wharton Murders*. I did, however, make my amateur sleuth a fan of Wharton and a bibliographer—in tribute to my college mentor.

In my college and graduate school courses, I had often relied on Norton critical editions, so it was a thrill to have an excerpt of *Prisoners of Shame* appear in the Norton *Ethan Frome*. Paris was the next landmark in the 1990s when I presented a paper on *A Son at the Front* and, I confess, played hooky with my spouse, Prof. Lauer, Cynthia, and her husband.

Writing and reviewing for the *Washington Post*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and other publications, I kept reading Wharton and reading about Wharton while exploring European and South American writers. "Read everything!" was the advice of my college mentor when I said I wanted to be an author, and that has been my path.

In a recent six-year stint teaching at MSU, I had great freedom to teach what I wanted and I offered a Wharton and Sinclair Lewis seminar that students loved as we explored their intersecting themes as well as their intriguing personal relationship. Both authors wrote about cultural traps for women and cultural hypocrisy in general with stunning insight. And Wharton was apologetic

when she discovered that she was awarded a Pulitzer for *The Age of Innocence* because the Pulitzer board did not think Lewis's *Main Street* was the year's best presentation of "the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood" (Caplan). They corresponded, met, and he dedicated *Babbitt* to her.

Teaching Wharton again, the idea for *Rosedale in Love* came to me. I was a fan of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and I realized I needed to write a version of *The House of Mirth* that turned the book inside out. Though I admired *The House of Mirth*, it had always struck me that Rosedale was too clichéd, too one-dimensional, so I revisioned that novel from Rosedale's perspective. In that book, he has a family, a past, a network of wishes and dreams, a fully rounded life—though not a perfect one. He's no paragon, but he's also not a caricature. *Rosedale* turned out to be my first audio book and a career highlight for me was reading from it at the Wharton in Florence conference in a medieval church with amazing acoustics. I've spoken at the Library of Congress, Oxford University, and the Jewish Museum of Berlin, but this venue dwarfed all of those.

To write *Rosedale*, I spent two years both rereading *The House of Mirth* and reading everything about the Gilded Age as well as books from the Gilded Age, including guides to manners. I didn't try to copy Wharton's voice; what I did do was write the book in a period voice, as if it had been a manuscript published soon after Wharton's own book.

More recently still, I reread her ghost stories because I wanted to write a ghost story set in today's London and felt that the tone, the narrative strength, and the sustained creepiness was just what I needed. So what's next? I don't know, have never really known the answer to that as an author. Twenty-seven books ago, I started out as a short story writer and gradually moved into nearly a dozen other genres. What I *do* know is that Wharton has been a lodestar in my life, helping to make me a better writer and a better observer of the enigmas and joys of human existence.

LEV RAPHAEL is the prize-winning author of twenty-seven books in genres from memoir to mystery; has seen his work appear in fifteen languages and has done invited talks and readings in nine different countries. Special Archives at Michigan State University's library has purchased his literary papers, updates the collection yearly, and they are indexed online for scholars and researchers at https://findingaids.lib.msu.edu/repositories/4/resources/5871.

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