

About the Author

EDITH WHARTON (1862-1937)

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862 during the height of the American Civil War. Her parents were descendants of



wealthy European businessmen and bankers, and she grew up in a privileged household in New York. Many of her written works are set in the world of the fashionable upper class.

Wharton spent part of her childhood living in Europe and found it to be a welcome change from the increasingly materialistic sentiment in late 19th century America. After many return trips, she settled permanently in Paris during the early 1900s.

Though discouraged by her parents, Wharton's remarkable talents as a linguist and writer were evident from a young age. She first attempted to write a novel when just 11 years old, and by the age of 13, her German poetry translations were published in a magazine.

In 1885, after the death of her father, 23-year-old Edith Jones married Edward Wharton, a wealthy businessman from Boston who was twelve years her senior. The couple's marriage became a difficult and unhappy one, and they divorced in 1913.

Despite her personal setbacks, Wharton achieved great success in her professional life. She published a total of 16 novels and novellas, 8 volumes of short stories, two collections of poetry and numerous articles. In 1921, her highly acclaimed novel *The Age of Innocence* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, marking the first time a woman had received the honor.

Wharton was also the first woman to be recognized as a chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur by the French government for her tremendous efforts in providing aid to European refugees who fled to France during WWI. She died in 1937.

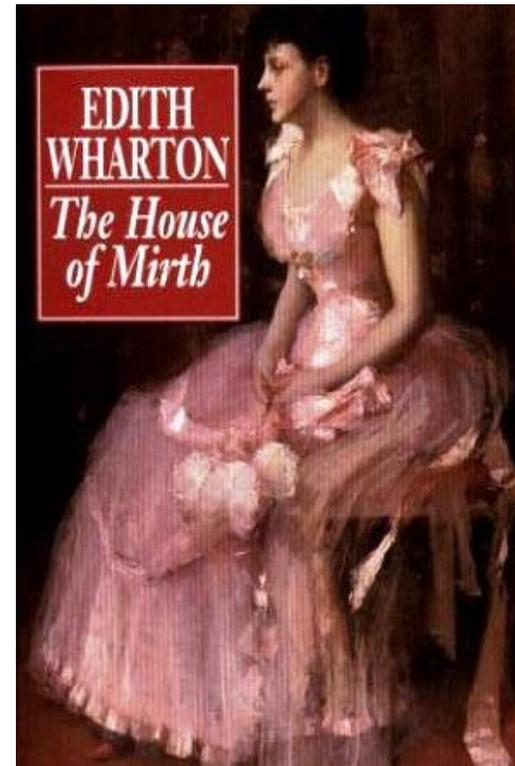


ROSENBERG LIBRARY
MUSEUM BOOK CLUB

PROGRAM AGENDA Winter 2017

*Presented by Rosenberg Library &
Galveston Historical Foundation*

12:00 noon	Welcome & Introductions
12:00-12:15	Historical Presentation
12:15-1:00	Book Discussion



*Rosenberg
Library's
Museum Book
Club provides
a forum for
discovery and
discussion,
linking literary
selections with
artworks and
historical
objects from
the permanent
collection.*

1. Wharton took the title from a biblical verse (Ecclesiastes 7:4) — “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Does Lily Bart’s allegiance to the follies and superficialities of society mean that she has the heart of a fool or is she trapped by the dictates of her upbringing and the expectations of the times?

2. Lily rejects both Sim Rosedale, a fabulously rich man of “unacceptable” lineage, and Selden, a man she clearly admires who cannot support her in style. Do these rejections represent an unrealistic, perhaps inflated, view of her own worth and potential? Are they purely selfish or do they reflect an underlying sense of morality on Lily’s part?

3. Even early in the novel, Wharton offers hints that foreshadow Lily’s public humiliation by the Trenors and the Dorsets, her abandonment by Carry Fisher, and her aunt’s decision to disinherit her. What events alert you to the true nature of the other characters’ feelings and attitudes toward her? Is Lily too naïve to grasp the significance of these events? Does she genuinely misunderstand her financial arrangement with Gus Trenor or simply choose to ignore its “obvious” implications? When she agrees to accompany the Dorsets on the cruise, is she unaware of her role as a mask for Bertha’s affair with Ned Silverton?

4. Both Lily’s cousin, Grace Stepney, and Selden’s cousin, Gerty Farish, live in genteel poverty on margins of society. How are their attitudes about their positions reflected in the way they treat Lily?

5. Lily and Selden have five intimate conversations: at his apartment in the opening chapter; at the Trenors’ country home, Bellomont; at the Brys after Lily’s stunning performance in the tableaux vivants; in Mrs. Hatch’s hotel room; and once again at Selden’s apartment, on the day before Lily dies. How do the tone and contents of their conversations change as Lily’s circumstances change, and what does this reveal about their feelings for one another? Are either of them really capable of loving and being loved?

6. Are all the women in the novel passive “victims,” dependent on the power and money of men? Who really creates the rules in Lily’s circle and how do they wield their powers? Why does Rosedale ultimately turn Lily away, despite his previous persistence in courting her and his aggressiveness in making his way into society? Is he right in believing that his money alone is not enough to rescue her reputation?

7. Is Lily’s descent inevitable? What opportunities does she have to turn things around and why does she reject them? Does her decision not to use Bertha Dorset’s letters to regain her social standing make sense in a society that unquestioningly accepts the manipulations of Gus Trenor, Carry Fisher, and Bertha herself?

**Discussion questions courtesy of
Penguin Random House Publishing**