

FEMINISTS ASSAULT EDITH WHARTON

(1862-1937)

Wharton was recognized in 1925 by *Vanity Fair* in a full-page composite photograph of the 5 American novelists considered most important at that time: She is given the dominant position at the center of the picture, with the others arranged around her. Subsequently, however, Wharton was undervalued by critics because: (1) she did not produce as many masterpieces as Henry James; (2) her New York society subject matter was seen in a literal way as outdated; (3) she wrote about love; (4) some of her lesser works are close to women's magazine fiction; and (5) her complex treatment of Naturalistic themes was misread.

Later in the 20th century she was ignored by most Feminist academics because (6) she is a Realist rather than a Feminist; (7) she is conservative; (8) she criticizes the priorities of modern Feminists; (9) and she is very critical of women as well as men; while other Feminists read *their* politics into her fiction--overlooking all the powerful manipulative female characters in Wharton: These Feminists claim falsely that Wharton opposed marriage and blamed "patriarchal culture" for "hostility and rivalry among women." Some of Wharton's themes are in fact "feminist," but not in a gender-partisan sense, such as the high value she places on independent perception and female individuation--as exemplified by Lily Bart--her admiration for heroic working women, her warning against investing in physical beauty and her criticism of marrying for money.

Michael Hollister (2020)

"How depressing it was to find Edith Wharton termed a 'female regionalist' in Susan Gubar's review of Peter Conn's 'Literature in America' (8 October). To reduce one of America's greatest writers--not, dreadful phrase, 'woman writers'--to so limited a role is an ironic pursuit for a feminist scholar...Are we now to refer to Faulkner as a 'male regionalist?'"

Jessica Hornik, Letter
Time (1982)

Michael Hollister (2022)