

60 QUOTATIONS



Edith Wharton

(1862-1937)

Edith Wharton was generally considered the greatest living American novelist in 1925. She is the American improvement on Jane Austen. As a witty Realist, a novelist of manners excelling at irony, she was a major influence on F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis. Her best is *The House of Mirth* (1905), a masterpiece that challenges the prevailing Naturalism of the day. The aesthetics of Wharton are more Neoclassical than those of her influential older friend Henry James, whose Impressionism evolved toward Expressionism—toward the Modernist megaworks of Joyce, Proust, and Mann. Because she is more clear and economical than James, her ironies are sharper and the motivations of her characters more dramatic. The perfect example of her Neoclassicism is her great short story “Roman Fever.” Her novella *Ethan Frome* (1911) is another vivid masterpiece, uncharacteristic in its New England setting and focus, blending Naturalist themes rendered with realistic ambiguity and Impressionist techniques in the tradition of Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, and Ambrose Bierce. Her ambitious *The Custom of the Country* (1913) is one of her most Jamesian novels. James himself judged it too satirical, but that is what most appealed to Sinclair Lewis. *The Age of Innocence* (1920) returns to the judicious tone of her most representative fiction. Wharton is less popular than she deserves today because (1) she is overshadowed by James; (2) her social milieu has disappeared; (3) many of her characters are aristocratic; (4) her later works are not as good as her best; (5) the prevailing values in the intolerant Postmodern period are opposed to hers; and (6) many Feminists dislike her for being a Realist, for depicting faults in women characters, for her skepticism about social reform, for believing in love and for liking men.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, individuation, life, men and women, woman, love, compatibility, society, America, Europe, writing, Realism, Impressionism, irony, originality, multiple viewpoints, Henry James, classics, politics, critics, wisdom, old age:

YOUTH

The only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair.

The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else.

I don't know if I should care for a man who made life easy; I should want someone who made it interesting.

Misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one.

A New York divorce is in itself a diploma of virtue.

My little dog—a heartbeat at my feet.

INDIVIDUATION

There's no turning your back—your old self rejects you, and shuts you out.

LIFE

Life is always a tightrope or a feather bed. Give me the tightrope.

If only we'd stop trying to be happy we'd have a pretty good time.

Life is the only real counselor; wisdom unfiltered through personal experience does not become a part of the moral tissue.

Habit is necessary; it is the habit of having habits, of turning a trail into a rut, that must be incessantly fought against if one is to remain alive.

His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him, and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen.

Beware of monotony; it's the mother of all the deadly sins.

MEN AND WOMEN

Each time you happen to me all over again.

Nothing is more perplexing to a man than the mental process of a woman who reasons her emotions.

What Lily craved was the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath.

WOMAN

She had no tolerance for scenes which were not of her own making.

But I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.

LOVE

Hitherto the emotion had remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it.

He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty.

She was very near hating him now; yet the sound of his voice, the way the light fell on his thin, dark hair, the way he sat and moved and wore his clothes—she was conscious that even these trivial things were interwoven with her deepest life.

Though she had not had the strength to shake off the spell that bound her to him she had lost all spontaneity of feeling, and seemed to herself to be passively awaiting a fate she could not avert.

COMPATIBILITY

The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humor or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances on any subject cross like interarching searchlights.

SOCIETY

The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!

In the summer New York was the only place in which one could escape New Yorkers.

In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs.

She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.

It was easy enough to despise the world, but decidedly difficult to find any other habitable region.

AMERICA

The American landscape has no foreground and the American mind no background.

What a shame it is for a nation to be developing without a sense of beauty, and eating bananas for breakfast.

EUROPE

The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing.

An unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences.

WRITING

Silence may be as variously shaded as speech.

There's nothing grimmer than the tragedy that wears a comic mask.

In any really good subject, one has only to probe deep enough to come to tears.

REALISM

To be able to look life in the face: that's worth living in a garret for, isn't it?

There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence. I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access. [*Ethan Frome*]

A dead cucumber-vine dangled from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death.... Then he had a distinct sight of his wife lying in their bedroom asleep, her mouth slightly open, her false teeth in a tumbler by the bed.

IMPRESSIONISM

Gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body.

So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope.

Suddenly the air was full of that deep clangor of bells which periodically covers Rome with a roof of silver.

It was as if her words had been some rare butterfly that the least motion might drive off on startled wings, but that might gather a flock if it were left undisturbed.

We came to an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe.

[She had] a way of throwing her head back when she was amused, as if to taste her laugh before she let it out, and a trick of sinking her lids slowly when anything charmed or moved her.

Her hands went up and down above the strip of stuff, just as he had seen a pair of birds make short perpendicular flights over a nest they were building.

IRONY

"I always wanted a brilliant daughter...and never quite understood why I got an angel instead.... You tried your best to get him away from me, didn't you? But you failed; and I kept him.... I had him for twenty-five years. And you had nothing but that one letter...." Mrs. Ansley...turned toward the door of the terrace. She took a step, and turned back, facing her companion. "I had Barbara [her brilliant daughter]," she said, and began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the stairway.

The querulous drone ceased as I entered Frome's kitchen, and of the two women sitting there I could not tell which had been the speaker.

ORIGINALITY

True originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision.

There are moments when a man's imagination, so easily subdued to what it lives in, suddenly rises above its daily level and surveys the long windings of destiny.

Another unsettling element in modern art is that common symptom of immaturity, the dread of doing what has been done before.

MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story.

HENRY JAMES

Disastrous was the effect of letting him know that any of his writings had been parodied. I had always regarded the fact of being parodied as one of the surest evidences of fame, and once, when he was staying with us in New York, I brought him with glee a deliciously droll article on his novels by Frank Moore Colby, the author of *Imaginary Obligations*, 1904. The effect was disastrous. I shall never forget the misery, the mortification, even, which tried to conceal itself behind an air of offended dignity. His ever-bubbling sense of fun failed him completely on such occasions.

CLASSICS

A classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its author had quite probably never heard). It is classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness.

POLITICS

I have never known a novel that was good enough to be good in spite of its being adapted to the author's political views.

CRITICS

After all, one knows one's weak points so well, that it's rather bewildering to have the critics overlook them and invent others.

WISDOM

To know when to be generous and when firm—that is wisdom.

OLD AGE

In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways.

Old age, calm, expanded, broad with the haughty breadth of the universe, old age flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death.

