

# EDITH WHARTON

b. January 24, 1862

d. August 11, 1937

## PULITZER- WINNING NOVELIST

**She was the first woman  
awarded the Pulitzer  
Prize for fiction.**

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

For her celebrated novel, “The Age of Innocence,” Edith Wharton was the first woman awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. At a time when society constrained women from achievement, she became one of America’s greatest authors, publishing more than 40 books.

Wharton was born during the Civil War to an aristocratic New York family. She spent much of her childhood in Europe, where she cultivated a passion for languages and the arts. Wharton gained access to her father’s library from a governess and read voraciously.

Though writing was not considered a proper occupation for a society woman in the late 19th century, Wharton’s talent was evident early on. Encouraged by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, her parents privately published a volume of Wharton’s poems when she 15.

A debutante at 17, Wharton became a keen and witty observer of her privileged social status. Her insider’s knowledge of New York’s upper class later featured prominently in her writing. At 23 she married Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton, a wealthy Boston banker with whom she had an unhappy, tumultuous marriage. They divorced after 28 years. Toward the end of her marriage, Wharton had an affair for several years with William Morton Fullerton, a bisexual journalist. She also had affairs with women, including the writer Janet Flanner.

Wharton crossed the Atlantic 60 times, with Italy and France among her frequent destinations. She wrote many successful books about her travels and related topics, such as architecture and gardens. Back in France at the start of World War I, she devoted herself to creating a complex network of humanitarian organizations. She received the French Legion of Honor for her philanthropic work.

Beloved for the vividness, humor, irony and satire in her fiction, Wharton garnered her greatest literary success later in life. The contradictions in upper-class society, conflicts between social and individual fulfillment, repressed sexuality, and manners of the affluent old families and the new elite formed central themes in her novels and short stories. Her famous works include “The House of Mirth” (1905), “Ethan Frome” (1911) and “The Age of Innocence” (1920). Set in New York during the Gilded Age, “The Age of Innocence” earned Wharton a Pulitzer Prize in 1921, making her the first female to receive the award. She subsequently became the first woman presented with an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Yale University and the first to receive full membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Wharton died in Pavillon Colombe, France, at age 73.



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