



Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics, and Fiction Before World War I

Robin Peel

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Edith Wharton enjoyed a complex relationship with early modernism. On the one hand, as a writer committed to the seriousness of novel writing as an art, her love of French literature and her close relationship with Henry James made her open to experiment. Other elements in her circumstances made her resistant to change. She enjoyed enormous success with *The House of Mirth*, and the public clearly demanded more from her in this style. That novel's naturalism and didactic purpose, Peel argues, conformed to her own belief in the moral purpose of literature, and ultimately Wharton's reading of politics, culture, and society led her to abandon modernistic experiment for ethical, rather than aesthetic reasons. *Apart from Modernism* explores the political and cultural influences that helped shape Edith Wharton. Peel examines such subjects as her politics, her relationship to bohemianism and modernist experiment, and her idea of the good society through a discussion of her fiction 1900 - 1915, starting with a survey of the early novellas and novels such as *The Valley of Decision*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Fruit of the Tree*, before concentrating in detail on the years which saw the publication of *The Reef*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Custom of the Country*. Important issues such as Wharton's reading of gender, empire, and class form a central part of this discussion.

The study emphasizes the crucial role that Wharton's contact with Europe had on her writing, and the significance intellectually and politically of her relationship with Morton Fullerton and her reading of his books on politics. It locates Wharton in her period, surrounded as she was by discourses which called for political and social change, change which an outlook that Peel calls 'American Toryism' made her reluctant to embrace. Her love of motorcars and her excitement about other technological developments such as aeroplanes was inspired by a feeling of exclusivity and not the democratization of culture, whic

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