Breaches of Realist Conventions in Edith Wharton’s Short Fiction

David Malcolm
Breaches of Realist Conventions in Edith Wharton’s Short Fiction

David Malcolm

1 Edith Wharton’s critical reception emphasizes her status as a social and psychological realist. The consensus is almost overwhelming. For Malcolm Bradbury, she is “one of America’s finest social satirists and observers of the evolving American order” (44). In his introduction to The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton (1968), R.W.B. Lewis notes Wharton’s thematic adventurousness and complexity, but sees her as a writer content to reproduce the conventions of nineteenth-century social-psychological realism (33-34). In a review of another of Lewis’s editions of Wharton’s short fiction, Samuel I. Bellman describes Wharton, unambiguously, as “a delineator of daily living in the world of wealthy and privileged Americans, from the 1890s to the 1930s” (133). Critics seem almost unanimous in their celebration of Wharton’s thematic daring, while disregarding the possibility of her having technical ambitions (Messent 184-203; Lowe 383-400; Allen 33-40; Gray 355-358; Campbell). Maria Lauriet is typical in describing Wharton as a writer of “feminist realism” (83).

2 Yet, as John Updike points out, “she lived into modern times.” “But,” he continues, “she was not a modernist; though well aware of changing fashions, her young friends could not convince her of the virtues of Ulysses” (157). Claudia Roth Pierpoint writes of Wharton’s vexed relationship with innovative and younger contemporaries. She felt out of date when she read The Great Gatsby, hated it when Virginia Woolf saw her as epigonic and passé, but encouraged her identification with a commonsensical traditionality in her comments on novels and short stories, in, for example, The Writing of Fiction (1925) (74). Barbara White writes of Wharton that she “lived at the wrong time”—neither a “pioneer” in the development of short fiction, nor a participant in the innovations of the period after the Great War (xi) (See also: Totten 116). Nonetheless, Candace Waid and Clare Colquitt point out Wharton’s connections with and interest in younger writers and even her influence on Faulkner’s work (547-549).

3 Indeed, a small number of commentators have discussed Wharton’s fiction, especially her short fiction, as more technically innovative than the critical consensus acknowledges it...
to be. Lewis’s description of her work as “resolutely traditional art” (35) that operates within “received forms” (34) has been questioned. Gianfranca Balestra and Sarah Whitehead separately write of Wharton’s fully conscious subverting of the norms of magazine publishing (Balestra 13-24; Whitehead 43-56). Janet Beer comments on Wharton’s self-reflexive engagement with the conventions of supernatural and Gothic fiction (269-287). Sharon Kim discusses Wharton’s interest in Joycean epiphany in her short stories (Kim 150-175). One of the boldest of such revisionist views of Wharton’s short fiction is that of Kathleen Wheeler in “Modernist” Women Writers and Narrative Art (1994). Wharton’s novels, travel writings, and short stories are, she argues, “not just social commentaries or moral analysis but works of art” (77). Wharton’s writing must be seen, Wheeler insists, in the context of the “scutiny” and rejection of the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. It is placed in the company of the work of James, Woolf, Willa Cather, and Djuna Barnes (78), and it is marked by “anti-realist gestures” (79). In discussions of travel writing and short stories, Wheeler points to Wharton’s foregrounding of the text as artifact, and insists that such evident disruption of realist norms has a thematic and, indeed, feminist purpose (82-83, 88-98).

4 Many of Wharton’s short stories—and not just at the beginning of her writing life—certainly follow realist conventions.1 Their focus is on social mores and attitudes and the effects of those mores on the psychology and lives of their protagonists. Stories such as “The Lamp of Psyche” (1895), “Souls Belated” and “A Journey” (both 1899), “The Other Two” and “The Reckoning” (both 1904), “The Daunt Diana” (1909), “The Day of the Funeral” and “Her Son” (both 1933), and even (pace Wheeler) “Roman Fever” (1936), predominantly follow the conventions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism set out above. “The Lamp of Psyche,” for example, is set in an economically, but highly verisimilar, established social and geographical world—Paris, Boston, the Corbetts’ charming hôtel particulier, their “delightful dinners” (24), the social world “from the Back Bay to the South End” (30), Mrs. Hayne’s home and Mrs. Hayne’s dress (31-32)—the story material is recounted in a logical-chronological fashion, point of view is largely restricted to that of Delia, the protagonist, and her crisis is set within and, in a sense, dependent on, documented historical events and their implications. She must rethink her attitude to her husband because he did not serve in the Civil War (36). “The Lamp of Psyche” is a compelling story, and it is so powerful and complex because it is realized within a set of realist conventions. When Wharton takes the short story into challenging and controversial thematic areas—women’s psychological complexities and needs, the trials of socially irregular liaisons, intricate existential dilemmas, madness and delusion—she does this predominantly in pieces that do not undermine or question the rules of the realist text.

5 However, Wharton also continually breaches realist conventions. Two of the ways in which she does so are obvious, and have been commented on by many critics (although not quite in the context of a pushing against the boundaries of realism). Wharton’s interest in fable is a case in point. In, for example, “The Valley of Childish Things” (1895) the story material is simplified to produce clear contrasts, the geography is undocumented, many of the characters do not age, and there is no verisimilar social structure. “The Valley of Childish Things” is an acute and powerful feminist fable (the last paragraph, in which the male protagonist wishes that the “she” of the story had “taken better care of [her] complexion” (44) is particularly damning), but it comments on reality without following realist conventions. Wharton’s career-long interest in the supernatural
story also illustrates a desire to deploy different conventions, to touch upon areas of experience that the realist story cannot. (See in this matter: Judith Hale Young 1.) Wharton’s supernatural stories are justly celebrated: “Afterward” (1909), “The Eyes” (1910), “Pomegranate Seed” (1936), and “All Souls” (1937), for example. “Afterward” is a genuinely innovative ghost story, in which the premise of the story material is that, in the house the Boynes acquire, those who are haunted only realize some time after the supernatural encounter that it was an encounter with a ghost. The ambiguities of “The Eyes”—why is the young man Frenham so affected by Culwin’s story?; is his life a replay of Gilbert’s?—make this tale particularly sinister beyond its supernatural apparatus. All of Wharton’s supernatural stories plumb psychological depths—for example those of being a second wife to a husband still deeply linked to his first wife in “Pomegranate Seed,” and of complete isolation in “All Souls”—and supernatural story conventions allow the author to express the sinister and obsessional in vivid shapes.

What has been much less noticed by Wharton scholars (with the exceptions noted above) is the degree to which her short fiction manifests a self-advertising literariness which sits ill with the consensus that Wharton’s work can be understood only in terms of social and psychological realism. Such literariness, the foregrounded artistic focus of parts of Wharton’s output, can be observed on two levels of her work, thematic and technical. On each level two elements point to the self-referentiality of several pieces of short fiction. First, her stories are often concerned with the literary and artistic life. Second, texts and fictions play a substantial and foregrounded role in many stories. These are both thematic aspects of literariness. Technical aspects, which are more radical, can be seen in an occasional self-referentiality of language and in a foregrounding of convention, both of which are inimical to the protocols of realism.

The literary and artistic life is at the center of a significant number of Wharton’s short stories: for example, “Expiation” (1904), “Full Circle” and “The Bolted Door” (both 1909), and “The Temperate Zone” (1924). “Expiation” and “The Temperate Zone” are particularly good examples of Wharton’s complex interest in authorship, literary reception, and scholarship, and in the writing of books in general. “Expiation” involves four writers, Paula Fetherel, Bella Clinch, their uncle the Bishop of Ossining, and Archer Hynes. The central parts of the story involve paradox. Mrs. Fetherel’s novel—Fast and Loose, despite its lurid title a rather bland production—becomes a best seller because it is denounced as immoral. Its being a succès de scandale allows its author to donate money to install a chantry window in her uncle’s cathedral, a service for which she receives no public thanks, the Bishop taking the credit for raising the money through his own maudlin and tendentious production Thru a Glass Darkly. The successes and perturbations of these amateur or, at least, tyro writers are observed by Mrs. Clinch, a professional author of non-fiction, with titles such as Nests Ajar and How to Smell the Flowers to her credit, and “the distinguished novelist Archer Hynes” (491). The latter is observed collecting detail for his next novel (494), and he also works out the intrigue that lies behind the funding of the chantry window (498). “The Temperate Zone” is reminiscent of Henry James’s “The Aspern Papers” (1888). In it, Willis French, himself a failed visual artist and poet, pursues information about a once neglected but now fashionable painter Horace Fingall. He discovers that the legacies of both the artist and a writer whom he knew and admired greatly (Emily Morland) are in the hands of the superficial Paul couple with whom he has to compromise in order to write books about his great artist subjects. Donald Paul is a benign but philistine inheritor of the famous
In keeping with the author's interest in the literary life, texts and fictions play a prominent role in many of Wharton's short stories. In “The Pelican” (1899), Mrs. Amyot makes a living by reading (however superficially) and lecturing, and comes from a text-generating family (a life her son Lancelot has fled). Lecturing, too, is the profession of Mr. Westall in “The Reckoning,” while letters are at the center of the story material in “The Letters” (1910), as they are in “The Line of Least Resistance” (1900), “Full Circle,” “Pomegranate Seed,” and “Confession” (1936). Letters—one false, one true—have determined the hidden event in the past of “Roman Fever.” Other kinds of texts are crucial in other stories: a doctor’s written verdict in “Diagnosis” (1933), a foreign newspaper article in “Afterward,” an altered painting in “The Moving Finger” (1901), and an inscription written on the back of a miniature of a dead Union officer in “The Lamp of Psyche.” In “Souls Belated,” (1898) Gannett is a writer (although he does not write anything in the hotel in Monte Rosa) and the adventuress Mrs. Cope is desperately waiting for the document that records her divorce. In “The Eyes,” Culwin tells a ghost story and Gilbert Noye’s aim in that story is to be a writer.

In Wharton’s stories, texts are often fictional, and certainly fictions and lies of a variety of sorts recur. Mrs. Amyot lies about her need to support her son (“The Pelican”), Mrs. Westall has subscribed to a doctrine of free love in which she no longer believes, and one suspects that Mr. Westall preaches the same doctrine as a principled cover for promiscuity (“The Reckoning”). In “After Holbein” (1930), Mrs. Jasper is surrounded by fictions of a dinner party and guests, and Anson Warley is drawn into the macabre charade to the degree that he becomes convinced of its reality. In “Her Son,” Mrs. Glenn has lied about her illegitimate child, and is herself practised upon by the unscrupulous and horrid Browns. Deception also takes place in “Diagnosis,” as Eleanor Welwood suppresses the doctors’ revised verdict on Dorrance’s health. The unnamed protagonist of “A Journey” spins lies about her husband in order to hide the fact of his death. In “The Moving Finger,” Claydon repaints and repaints again Mrs. Grancy’s portrait, so that its relation to any original is attenuated. The text and the false text are, thus, at the center of many (but by no means all) of Wharton’s short stories. And several of her texts actually advertise their own fictionality, through foregrounding of language, and (more frequently) through foregrounding of convention. Parts of Wharton’s œuvre, thus, become both a reflection on the powers of texts and fictions, and embody and manifest the fictionality involved in producing stories.

Because of the length of her writing career, the language of Wharton’s stories might be expected to show substantial shifts. After all, the stylistic norms of the 1890s were not those of the 1920s and 1930s. However, one is struck by the relatively informal and
modern lexis and syntax of most of Wharton’s short fiction from all periods of her output. For example, the following passage is from “A Journey.”

“We’d better get him up now, hadn’t we?” asked the porter, touching her arm.
He had her husband’s hat in his hand and was meditatively revolving it under his brush.
She looked at the hat and tried to speak; but suddenly the car grew dark. She flung up her arms, struggling to catch at something, and fell face downward, striking her head against the dead man’s berth. (75)

Apart from “meditatively revolving it under his brush,” this passage (drawn virtually at random) would produce no raised eyebrows in a contemporary short story. Compared to this passage, “The Temperate Zone” shows no stylistic differences.

French had wandered up to a bookshelf in what had apparently been Fingall’s dressing room. He had seen no other books about, and was curious to learn what these had to tell him. They were chiefly old Tauchnitz novels—mild mid-Victorian fiction rubbing elbows with a few odd volumes of Dumas, Maupassant and Zola. But under a loose pile the critic, with beating heart, had detected a shabby sketchbook.
His hand shook as he opened it; but its pages were blank, and he reflected ironically that had they not been the dealers would never have left it there. (533)

The passage’s lexis tends at times toward the formal—“detected” or “reflected”—but this scarcely pushes it much beyond relative informality and modernity. At least two stories, however, do manifest a linguistic brio that is highly self-advertising. These are “The Moving Finger” and “The Line of Least Resistance.” The former does so only in one section of the text; the latter does so throughout.

The opening paragraph of “The Moving Finger” clearly illustrates part of this linguistic configuration:

The news of Mrs. Grancy’s death came to me with the shock of an immense blunder—one of fate’s most irretrievable acts of vandalism. It was as though all sorts of renovating forces had been checked by the clogging of that one wheel. Not that Mrs. Grancy contributed any perceptible momentum to the social machine; her unique distinction was that of filling to perfection her special place in the world. So many people are like badly-composed statues, overlapping their niches at one point and leaving them vacant at another. Mrs. Grancy’s niche was her husband’s life; and if it be argued that the space was not large enough for its vacancy to leave a very big gap, I can only say that, at the last resort, such dimensions must be determined by finer instruments than any ready-made standard of utility. Ralph Grancy’s was in short a kind of disembodied usefulness: one of those constructive influences that, instead of crystallizing into definite forms, remain as it were a medium for the development of clear thinking and fine feeling. He faithfully irrigated his own dusty patch of life, and the fruitful moisture stole far beyond its boundaries. If, to carry on the metaphor, Grancy’s life was a sedulously-conducted enclosure, his wife was the flower he had planted in its midst—the embowering tree, rather, which gave him rest and shade at its foot and the wind of dreams in its upper branches. (307)

In this passage, the lexis is conspicuously formal and sophisticated—“irretrievable,” “perceptible momentum,” “vacancy,” “such dimensions,” “determined by finer instruments,” “disembodied usefulness,” “fruitful moisture stole far beyond his boundaries,” “a sedulously-cultivated enclosure,” and “embowering tree.” The syntax, too, can be complex. The reader encounters the following examples of multiple subordination and parenthetical insertion: “and if it be argued that the space was not large enough for its vacancy to leave a very big gap, I can only say that, at the last resort, such dimensions must be determined by finer instruments than any ready-made standard of utility” and “one of those constructive influences that, instead of crystallizing into
definite forms, remain as it were a medium for the development of clear thinking and fine
feeling.” One should also note the marked presence in the paragraph of simile and
metaphor. Examples include extended metaphors (that of irrigation) and extended
similes (the comparison of people to “badly composed statues”). The narrator even
acknowledges the elaborateness of his figurative language (“to carry on the metaphor”).
The density of figurative language is remarkable for a paragraph of eight sentences, each
sentence carrying a simile or metaphor, or developing one that has already been
introduced. The first two parts of “The Moving Finger” are replete with the same self-advertising lexis and figurative language, although this changes in the last half of the
text. Once Grancy begins his intradiegetic narration, the language changes, and the
homodiegetic frame narrator’s language in parts IV and V, although at times rich (“They
had the baffled manner of empirics who have been superseded by the Great Healer”
[319]), is much more informal and self-effacing than that of parts I and II.

Rather than discuss at this stage the function of such foregrounding of language in “The
Moving Finger,” I would prefer to point to the similar highly wrought language of a
contemporary story “The Line of Least Resistance.” Once again, it is revealing to look at a
brief passage from the text.

On this occasion it was the unpunctuality of the little girls. They came in with their
governess some minutes after he was seated: two small Millicents, with all her arts
in miniature. They arranged their frocks carefully before seating themselves and
turned up their little Greek noses at the food. Already they showed signs of finding
fault with as much ease and discrimination as Millicent: and Mr. Mindon knew that
this was an accomplishment not to be undervalued. He himself, for example,
though Millicent charged him with being a discontented man, had never acquired
her proficiency in depreciation; indeed, he sometimes betrayed a mortifying
indifference to trifles that afforded opportunity for the display of his wife’s
fastidiousness. Mr. Mindon, though no biologist, was vaguely impressed by the way
in which that accomplished woman had managed to transmit an acquired
characteristic to her children: it struck him with wonder that traits of which he had
marked the incipience in Millicent should have become intuitions in her offspring.
To rebuke such costly replicas of their mother seemed dangerously like scolding
Millicent—and Mr. Mindon’s hovering resentment prudently settled on the
governess. (342)

Here, the foregrounding of language is achieved mainly through elevation of lexis
(although some syntax is notably complicated): “unpunctuality,” “finding fault with as
much ease and discrimination as Millicent,” “an accomplishment not to be undervalued,”
“charged him with being a discontented man,” “acquired her proficiency in
depreciation,” “mortifying indifference,” “afforded opportunity for,” “fastidiousness,”
“accomplished woman,” “transmit an acquired characteristic,” “traits,” “incipient,” and
“hovering resentment.” In contrast to “The Moving Finger,” “The Line of Least
Resistence” remains linguistically homogeneous throughout. It is stylistically a most
formal text.

What are the functions of such a linguistic configuration in these two stories? Both are
stories about deceit and pretense. This is obvious in “The Line of Least Resistance.” Mr.
Mondon is a comic and absurd character whose manly decisiveness in abandoning his
frivolous, expensive, and (it turns out) adulterous wife is condemned from the start to be
short-lived. It is a pretence, and his return to the family will be the beginning of another
and added level of pretence. In a story of personal and social hypocrisy (emphasized by
the coming of his three [like Job’s] comforters who aim to bring him back to his sham
marriage), the story’s elevated language is appropriate in its mock-heroic dissonance with the paltry central figure and his feeble will. The function of the linguistically elaborate sections of “The Moving Finger” is more complex. They are in dissonance too, juxtaposed to the differing, less formal shaping of language in the second half of the text. Evident artistry is replaced by something more self-effacing. One must remember that this is a story about art. The painter Claydon declares proudly toward the end: “Pygmalion [...] turned his statue into a real woman; I turned my real woman into a picture” (321). There is more than a suggestion (which Claydon denies [321]) that he uses his art to kill Grancy. (By repainting Mrs. Grancy as a woman expecting her husband to die, Claydon encourages the mentally frail Grancy to decline.) Where is the real Mrs. Grancy? In the first picture? In the two intermediate and repainted ones? In Claydon’s final repainting? What is the reader meant to make of these men who live with simulacra of a woman? Did Claydon hasten Grancy’s demise? In a story with so many questions, with such an emphasis on artifice and artificiality, with so many lies and (self-) deceptions, the self-advertising language of the story’s first half, drawing attention to text as text, is most appropriate. The rude shift in level of formality in the second half of the story only serves to highlight the first half’s ornateness.

18 But such modest *gongorismo* is multi-functional and has a metafictional effect beyond the semantics of any particular story. Both “The Line of Least Resistance” and “The Moving Finger” are—through their linguistic shaping—self-advertising fictions, performances, stressing the madness, the artifice, of any story. Such a metafictional focus is further achieved through another strategy employed by Wharton—the foregrounding of convention in a significant number of stories. She emphasizes the fictionality of her texts by deploying the connected devices of coincidence and paradox.

19 Coincidence is a recurrent device in much prose fiction, and can be employed to complex effect. Lady Dedlock’s and Esther’s relationship and their connection with Jarndyce in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), or Parson Tringham’s chance encounter with Tess Durbyfield’s father and his whim to jest with him in Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), are only two striking examples of the way in which fiction thrives on coincidence. Wharton’s short stories are full of coincidences. In “The Pelican,” the narrator’s meeting Mrs. Amyot’s son just before receiving a ticket to one of her lectures is a coincidence. So, too, is the surprising identity of Garnett’s restaurant-acquaintance in “The Last Asset” (1908). Lizzie West’s discovery of her unopened and therefore unread letters to Deering in the beaded bag also smacks of coincidence (“The Letters”). The presence of coincidence is not by any means necessarily something negative in a text. After all, coincidences do occur in extratextual human life, and the device itself can powerfully emphasize part of the vision of a story (for example, the role of chance in the world, the cruelty of circumstances, the necessary undoing of self-satisfaction and arrogance). In some of Wharton’s stories, coincidence assumes a very prominent role in the text. Examples here include Dorrance’s meeting with his former doctor after his wife’s funeral, when by chance, as it were, the doctor reveals that Dorrance had received the wrong diagnosis years before and that his wife had known it (“The Diagnosis”). “The Temperate Zone” is a tissue of coincidences—that the surviving spouses of Emily Morland and Hector Fingall should have married each other, that a sketch of Emily Morland should be found in a an abandoned sketchbook by French, and that French should have encountered Jolyesse on the Channel boat that he and the Pauls (unbeknownst to each other) were on. In “The Lamp of Psyche,” Corbett buys his wife (“something I picked up in a little shop in the Rue
Bonaparte” [39]) the very thing, a Civil War miniature, that precipitates Delia’s disillusion. The central action of “After Holbein” hinges on Warley’s turning up, many years too late, at Mrs. Jasper’s house. “Queer coincidence—it was the Jasper house,” he muses (491). The climax of “Les Metteurs en Scène” (1908) depends entirely on coincidence—Blanche becomes wealthy and marriageable just as Le Fanois commits himself to marry Mrs. Smithers.

This last example demonstrates the closeness in Wharton’s work of coincidence to paradox. Le Fanois and Blanche seem destined for each other, but their scheming only serves to separate them not once but twice, both with Catherine Smithers and her mother. Paradox runs throughout Wharton’s short stories. In “Autres Temps” (1911) Mrs. Lidcote experiences paradox on two levels. First, her daughter’s divorce, which she is certain will bring her social ruin as it has her mother, has had no such effect. Second she learns twice that, paradoxically, the new mœurs do not apply to her. She is a social embarrassment both to her daughter and her admirer Franklin Ide. In “The Bolted Door,” Hubert Granice, a murderer, just cannot convince anyone of his guilt. As a further example of paradox, it is his attempts to prove his guilt that drive him mad and lead to his confinement. In “Charm Incorporated” (1936)—a paradoxical, or at least oxymoronic title—Targatt discovers that his wife’s numerous, exotic, and expensive relatives are finally very bankable. The story material of the celebrated “Roman Fever” itself hinges on coincidence and paradox combined. Mrs. Slade’s letter to Mrs. Ansley, which is maliciously intended to kill any relationship between Delphin and her rival, in fact, brings them together, if only briefly. The dull Grace Ansley has the brighter and more vibrant daughter, and here they are years later on a Roman terrace mulling over the past. Mrs. Slade’s sense of superiority and triumph is dashed in the story’s concluding sentence.

With a writer of Wharton’s skill, any element of a text is certainly multi-functional. Paradox is part of the vision of the world in many of her stories, and that is simply how things are. But coincidence and paradox have another function too. They constantly reveal the narrative mechanism of stories. (See, in this respect: Pierpoint 74.) In a famous essay on Laurence Sterne, written in 1921, the Formalist scholar Viktor Shklovsky argues that Tristram Shandy is “the most typical novel in world literature” because it exposes (“lays bare”) the devices and conventions of the novel (57, 30). Shklovsky’s fellow (and greater) Formalist Boris Eichenbaum writes of O. Henry’s short fiction in 1925 that the American author “often enough annotates the progress of the plot, taking each instance as an opportunity for introducing literary irony, for destroying the illusion of authenticity, for parodying a cliché, for parodying the conventionality of art, or showing how the story is put together” (255). One is tempted to argue that Wharton is doing something similar in her heavily foregrounded deployment of coincidence and paradox in some stories. The machinery of fiction is exposed. The technique is revealed. A story is a story, not an unmediated presentation of the real or actual, no matter how referential to and engaged in the social and existential dilemmas of reality that story may be.

Wharton does not do all this everywhere, nor is that all she does. But the presence of such elements as I have indicated above suggests that one needs to see her output of social and psychological realism in a nuanced light. It suggests Wharton was not nearly as hostile to or immune to the ludic bravura and metafictional interests of her modernist contemporaries as some commentators have indicated. Just as Wharton is interested in
the life of writers and artists, and in the power of fictions, she demonstrates a marked, if intermittent, disposition toward emphasizing how artistic her short stories are.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. I understand realism here as a set of literary conventions, established in the course of the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, and still widely employed in novels and short fiction today. These include a focus on and limitation to the social and material, an embedding of characters in a social environment, an obfuscation of the fictive nature of the text, and a transparency of language. One of the best discussions of this issue is in Lilian Furst’s All Is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction (23-24). See also: Morris 97-118.

ABSTRACTS

On considère en général Edith Wharton comme une représentante du réalisme social et psychologique. Son œuvre a été qualifiée de « résolument traditionnelle » par R. W. B. Lewis, et on la dit hostile à l’expérimentation moderniste. S’il est incontestable que Wharton a respecté en général les conventions réalistes, il n’en est pas moins vrai qu’elle les a souvent violées—dans ses histoires de fantômes, par exemple. Ses nouvelles, en particulier, ont souvent un caractère très littéraire. En témoignent la place qu’y occupent les milieux artistiques et littéraires, ainsi que le rôle joué par des textes dans l’univers imaginaire de l’auteur. Sur le plan de la technique d’écriture, les nouvelles de Wharton sont marquées par le caractère parfois autoréférentiel de la langue et par une fréquente mise en relief de conventions littéraires telles la coïncidence ou le paradoxe. Ces deux derniers caractères font de ses nouvelles des œuvres d’art manifestes plutôt que de simples témoignages sur les mœurs ou la psychologie des personnages.
AUTHORS

DAVID MALCOLM