PREFACE

Mrs. Edith Wharton, the most popular and somewhat a shocking writer of her time, receives only moderate critical attention now. Being born and brought up in a social milieu which considered literary aspirations in women as a sin, Wharton could not make a headway through the male chauvinistic society. During her life time, and after, she had to suffer the shade of the genius of Henry James.

Though there has been a kind of revival of interest in the works of Wharton during the seventies, most of her critics focus on the conventional and rigidly moralistic bent of her fiction. The only exception to this general rule is Merilyn Jones Lyde, who analyses the complexities of Wharton's philosophical outlook. But no later critic of any merit followed the path opened by Lyde. The publication of R.W.B. Lewis' biography and Elizabeth Ammons' and Cynthia Griffin Wolff's critical studies has reinvigorated an added interest in Wharton.

This thesis, as its title suggests, is a thematic study of Wharton's fiction. Wharton has been a prolific writer. Her first novel was published at the age of thirty-four but, since its publication, she never rested till her death at seventy-five. During her creative period, Wharton wrote thirteen novels, ten collections of short stories, ten (book length) novelettes, ten volumes of verse, and books on travels, interior decoration, gardening etc. It would be an impracticable and bewildering attempt to make a detailed study of all her
books. This study is thus selective, touching only the higher places; especially those books written between 1905 and 1920. Supplementary evidences have been given to other books as well, whenever it was felt necessary or illuminating.

This study comprises of six chapters, four of them directly dealing with her major themes. The first chapter is biographical in nature and gives a brief account of the major incidents in her life. It also traces the major influences that contributed to the shaping of her genius.

Second chapter, "Feminism: Search for Identity" analyses Wharton's social criticism. The traditional aristocracy of New York was 'invaded' by a set of fabulously rich western barbarians and they 'married their way' into the aristocratic society. Money and power became the accepted standard of society. The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence depicts this society and shows how painful and demeaning it was to be a woman.

Third chapter, "Human Relationship: Marriage", probes the various problems that women face in the society, especially the problems of marriage, extramarital affairs and divorce. Marriage is a business enterprise and those who invest themselves in this market in the most lucrative way will emerge successful. The Custom of the Country depicts the profitable marital investment of Undine Spragg. In Summer and Ethan Frome marriage is viewed as an obligation.
Fourth chapter shows Wharton's ambivalent attitude towards traditional morality. Social morality does not give sufficient opportunity for self-fulfilment. At the same time, without such a binding principle, life will be chaotic and undisciplined.

Fifth chapter is a critical study of Wharton's critical theory and practice. Technically she was a formal writer adhering herself to the classical school of perfection. It has been pointed out that, at times, in her practice she outgrows her own theory.

Last chapter is a summing up and evaluation of Wharton's fictional merit. In evaluating Wharton's merit, both her strength and weakness have been taken into consideration.

In making notes and references, as well as the bibliography the MLA Style Sheet is followed.

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