



VHNSN COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS), Virudhunagar – 626001
(Accredited with 'A' grade by NAAC)
(Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625021)
Research Center of English



NOTIFICATION OF ONLINE PHD PUBLIC VIVA-VOCE EXAMINATION

As per the regulations of Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Mr. J. Saravana Kumar (Reg. no. P9879), Part-time research scholar of English, VHNSN College (Autonomous), Virudhunagar, will defend his thesis at a Public Viva-Voce Examination through Video Conference mode using Google Meet Platform.

Title of the Thesis

THE OEUVRE OF EDITH WHARTON: A CRITICAL STUDY

Date & Time

23.11.2020 (Monday) at 11.30 am

Venue

Research Centre in English, MBA LAB, VHNSN College (Autonomous),

Virudhunagar – 626001

Video Conference Platform

Google Meet

Meeting ID

<https://meet.google.com/mny-tisn-jpy>

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The Synopsis of the thesis is available in the College Website and a copy of the thesis is available in the Department Library, for reference. Faculty members, Scholars and Students are most welcome to attend the Viva-voce Examination and take part in the discussion.

All are cordially invited

Place: Virudhunagar

Date: 05.11.2020


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THE OEUVRE OF EDITH WHARTON: A CRITICAL STUDY

**Synopsis submitted to
Madurai Kamaraj University for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH**

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MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY

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MADURAI – 625 021,

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Synopsis

The Oeuvre of Edith Wharton: A Critical Study

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is one of the most popular and reputed American Women Novelists. Her literary achievement is quite spectacular and splendid. She is a multi-dimensional writer and her oeuvre includes novels, short fiction, short stories, essays, travel writings which are much admired and draw gradually much critical attention and appreciation. Wharton handles her themes with aplomb, and her themes are unique. Her style is distinctive, elegant, admirably appropriate and germane to the choice of her subjects.

Wharton's fictional art encompasses treatment of women, narrative expertise, masterly artistry, genius for description, love of Nature – nature which sometimes fittingly serves as a background to the story. Wharton also displays her consummate skill and creative forte in constructing episodes and what is called 'epiphany'. They deserve to be explored in detail in order to bring out and record her rich contribution to the development of American Literature in particular and World Literature in general.

The researcher has selected two of her most famous novels – *The House of Mirth* (1905) an immensely popular bestseller, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), a masterpiece and two short novels – *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917) for detailed study. The thesis is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter 'Introduction' is concerned with Wharton's biography: birth, parentage with particular stress on her mother's strict and rather harsh, stringent control over Wharton and her social behaviour and reading habits, and, naturally Wharton feels suffocated. It is important to note that she is raised for one career in life i.e. marriage – marriage to a wealthy person of status. For example, the female protagonist Lily Bart in *The*

House of Mirth is inspired by this goal and meets her tragic end, when she fails to realize her heart's desire.

The reader may find interesting portraits of Wharton's mother indirectly in the form of fictional mothers and motherhood in the novels chosen for critical evaluation. But they are all drawn with sympathy. *Summer* is an exception where the female protagonist Charity's mother is the very symbol of all the bad qualities one can find and hate in a woman. She is the very inversion of a mother generally associated with deep love and affection. Charity's mother deserted her baby and "she'd have given her to any body And her father was a drunken convict" (61)

Wharton longs for freedom to give expression to her creative urge. As Candice Waid and Clare Colquitt observe, Wharton "seized her life through writing". Her famous advice to her friend Sally Norton "Take your own life, every one of you" is the 'motto' of her writing-career and her guiding-principle she follows strictly throughout her literary profession and life.

The first chapter deals with Edith Wharton's unhappy marriage [in 1885] to Edward Wharton. It was an emotional disappointment which ultimately led to her divorce. The reference to her illicit affairs also finds a place in the first chapter, and the reader can come across such illegitimate love-affairs as well as the issue of divorce in her novels. Apart from marriage which plays a key role in many of her novels, what inspires Edith Wharton to write novels is her own society. Her high birth provides an opportunity to view critically and sarcastically her New York society – "a society of irresponsible pleasure seekers" – and its flamboyant and ostentatious manners. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* exemplify her satirical, sarcastic, ironic, trenchant treatment of her society. The first chapter also discusses in detail her French-connection, her travels, her passion for books and architecture, her modernism and feminism.

Wharton, who has suffered very badly in her unhappy marriage to Edward Wharton, has appropriately dealt with tearing angst, dejection and despair of the female protagonist Lily Bart in the second chapter entitled “Marital Fixation: Exploring the Female Mind and Motives in *House*.” Lily Bart had a great dream of marriage to a man of resources with high social status. Lily Bart’s attempts to lure with her beauty persons like Percy Gryce and Mr. Rosedale, the Jew, were not successful. On the other hand, she loved Lawrence Selden, an advocate but he did not have enough money to impress her. And he had not, in her view, all the qualities to tempt and lure her into a marriage. She chose to commit suicide when all her attempts to find a suitable match failed, reminding the readers of the distressful state of many such girls of the poor, indigent families in rural India.

The third chapter, aptly captioned, “Social Prescription and Individual passion in *Age*” deals with the novel *The Age of Innocence* which is a social satire, a bitter-sweet romance. Wharton superbly portrays how social taboos blight the deeply absorbing, passionate love between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. Both of them are married persons but Ellen cannot remarry without a legally valid divorce which was in those days abhorrently regarded as a sin by the society. Wharton remains unparalleled and exceptional in treating frustrated or failed love.

Wharton shows interest in writing short fiction, an integral part of her oeuvre. The fourth chapter and fifth chapter explore two short novels – *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*.

The fourth chapter investigates *Ethan Frome*, entitled “A Deep-Rooted Domestic Conflict in *Ethan*”. This short novel is an exception in that it deals with the life of an ordinary poor man who owns a farm and a mill. This tragic story is woven around Ethan, his ‘sick’ wife Zeena and Mattie Silver (Zeena’s cousin) a young, zestful, spirited girl employed by Zeena as her domestic maid. Both Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver fell in love with each other. It is an engrossing tale of love – adulterous love – between Ethan and Mattie. This illegal,

illegitimate love-affair may be an echo of Edith Wharton's extramarital relationship with Fullerton and Berenson, her friend.

The fifth chapter takes up her short novel *Summer* for critical study under the title "Love and Desertion in *Summer*". *Summer* relates the story of an ordinary, mountain-girl Charity who defied her guardian Mr. Royall, a powerful, influential, rich person and loved Lucius Harney of aristocratic family. She sacrificed her love and let Harney marry Annabel Balch when she learnt that both of them were in love with each other. Her selflessness and sacrifice were amazing and incredible as she refused to abort her pregnancy. Charity's refusal and rejection of her doctor's advice is a defiant expression of individualism and a solid and strong articulation of the novelist's feminist sensibility. Charity's flexibility and equanimity were quite astonishing as she decided to keep cool, and had no bitter complaints and anger against Harney who was responsible for her present miserable, agonizing and disgraceful situation. Circumstances forced Charity to accept Lawyer Royall's proposal of love, and she married him dramatically and ironically enough though she had hated him very much initially. Like much of her work Wharton examines the tension between societal pressures and pursuit of genuine happiness in her short novels.

"Summation" is the sixth chapter which sums up the research-findings that emerge from the close reading of the novels chosen for discussion. This thesis on Wharton's oeuvre may inspire a careful, comprehensive probing into the works of other women writers in English and regional languages in India for comparable studies, (for instance), under the heading "Women and Society".

The researcher has followed *MLA Handbook: Eighth Edition* for documentation.