



The Descent of Man, and Other Stories

Edith Wharton

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Edith Wharton (1862-1937), born Edith Newbold Jones, was an American novelist, short story writer, and designer. She combined her insider's view of America's privileged classes with a brilliant, natural wit to write humourous and incisive novels and short stories. Wharton was well-acquainted with many of her era's literary and public figures, including Henry James and Theodore Roosevelt. Besides her writing, she was a highly regarded landscape architect, interior designer, and taste-maker of her time. She wrote several influential books, including *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), her first published work, and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904). *The Age of Innocence* (1920), perhaps her best known work, won the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for literature, making her the first woman to win the award. Her other works include: *The Greater Inclination* (1899), *The Touchstone* (1900), *Sanctuary* (1903), *The Descent of Man, and Other Stories* (1904), *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Madame De Treymes* (1907), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Hermit and the Wild Woman, and Other Stories* (1908), *Ethan Frome* (1912), *In Morocco* (1921), and *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1921).

The Descent of Man, and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review The Descent of Man, and Other Stories for online ebook

Jenny Yates says

There are so many good stories in this collection. There are a few duds too, but most are engaging, thought-provoking and witty. It's fascinating to see the way turn-of-the century society adapted to new trends, like divorce. There are also a couple of funny stories about the writer's relationship with his or her audience.

Isabel (kittiwake) says

A sense of having been decoyed by some world-old conspiracy into this bondage of body and soul filled her with despair. If marriage was the slow life-long acquittal of a debt contracted in ignorance, then marriage was a crime against human nature. She, for one, would have no share in maintaining the pretence of which she had been a victim: the pretence that a man and a woman, forced into the narrowest of personal relations, must remain there till the end, though they may have outgrown the span of each other's natures as the mature tree outgrows the iron brace about the sapling.

A short story collection from 1904.

The majority of the stories were about marriage and other relationships between men and women, but there were a couple about the trials of being a published author and a couple of historical stories. In general I preferred the stories in the second half of the book. My favourite was The Quicksand in which a widow tells a younger woman her feelings about her own marriage and why she doesn't want the same fate to befall her, followed by The Reckoning, whose protagonist discovers that what's sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander, much to her regret.

The Lady's Maid's Bell was shaping up to be an atmospheric if not frightening ghost story about a lady's maid her mistress and her mistress's late lady's maid, but then just fizzled out and stopped. I'm hoping that the stories in her 1910 collection Tales of Men and Ghosts will be better. I was less keen on The Descent of Man, The Other Two and The Dilettante, and A Venetian Night's Entertainment would have been better if the twist at the end had come as a surprise (unfortunately I cottoned on to what was happening straightaway).

Kate Sherrod says

Some silly, romantic fripperies to leaven out some searingly intense social criticism. Full review at my blog.

Kim says

A good collection of well-written stories from this talented author - 7/10.

Umi says

Not sure how many times I can say I don't think short stories were the form for our pal Ms. Wharton but here I am yet again.

'The Mission of Jane' has some really great bits, especially the description of her collecting facts and using them to best others and her ensuing lack of luck with lads. Little else was as memorable, though some other scattered lines certainly delighted me at the time.

I'm not big on her historical stuff as it seems to go more like something she maybe enjoyed reading than using a historical instance to transpose her present for commentary or anything of the like. Not that she needs that kind of distance anyway, as her writing in her present is always my favourite of her stuff, though I can see how she might have been unsure of that and tried things like this at first. And of course now I wonder who this historical writer with whom she may have been so enamoured was.

Really, though, I'm getting tired of reading about Venice, but I can see some twenty something in the lobby bar of a hotel in Shoreditch in 100 years saying something sassy about how I keep writing about Berlin, so, whatever, Edith, I get you.

Ankit Goyal says

The Descent of Man and other stories reads almost like a spiced up sociological study into marital relationships in the early 20th century against a backdrop of a rising current of liberalism , an attitude which the author personally seems to share . Be it the struggling researcher caught in a mire of reluctant compromises to support his family to the inherently different couple whose relationship is held together and ultimately brought close by the single minded purpose of ensuring the welfare of their adopted daughter , Edith brings out the whole range of ins and outs of the marital "arrangements " of her era .

Just when we start to feel that Edith is decisively leant towards an attitude of breaking free from bogus relationships in a spirit of modern liberalism , in walks Julia Westall going back to the traditional values of loyalty and sticking through a relationship . " If we don't recognise an inner law (love) , there is nothing to prevent us from spreading ruin unhindered " , she accepts at length .

If this was an exposition , "The Letter " takes these values to the highest pedestal in an apt Sicilian setting , culminating in an emotional barrage of self sacrifice , suffering , solitude , honour and chivalry for the sake of one's love.

A bit later , we see Mrs. Quentin strike again a libertarian note .

" I can't see you walled up alive.....without stretching a hand to save you" , she lets out .

The collection ends on a lighter note with a sarcastic play on all the machinations and arrangements that the institution of marriage had brought in its wake . The Venetian setting is perfectly suited for such an act with all its colour , vigour and quirky personalities . It is a sort of a final comment from Edith , who leaves the question on the institution of marriage and love open ended , preferring to end it with a touch of indecisive sarcastic musing .

All in all, a good read for those who still have the "feeling" aspect in their relationships intact and are ready to plunge headlong into the tumultuous emotional currents that a relationship invariably entails. I still believe that women are much more emotionally evolved and sensitive to their full force, and hence I expect them to have better takeaways from the collection.

Olivia says

Oh, Edith Wharton, I love you so. These stories are so varied and so fascinating. Some could be written by Roald Dahl, some could be Hawthorne, some could be Agatha Christie. She really was a genius.

Dave says

"The Descent of Man and Other Stories" is the third collection of short fiction from Edith Wharton and was published on April 30th of 1904. Oddly enough there are two versions of the collection which were published the same year. The Macmillan edition included 10 stories while the Scribner's edition only had 9 stories as it did not include "The Letter". The stories were also in a different order in the two editions. For purposes of this review, I am listing the stories in the order they were in the Macmillan edition.

"The Descent of Man" – Published originally in "Scribner's Magazine" in March of 1904. Professor Linyard is a man of science who writes a book where he pretends to take the side of religion, expecting it to be understood as a satire of popular scientific books. When it is taken as serious, he goes along with it in order to provide better for his family, thus selling his principles time and time again.

"The Other Two" – Published originally in "Collier's Weekly" on February 13th of 1904. Mr. Waythorn has married Alice Haskett, who was married twice before and has a child, Lily, by her first marriage. When his business brings her second husband into their lives, and her first husband continues to be part of his daughter Lily's life, he initially becomes upset at the situation. However, he eventually realizes the position she is in and comes to accept the situation.

"Expiation" – Published originally in "Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan" in December of 1903. Mrs. Fetherel is a new author who manages to get her book published. She is also the niece of the Bishop of Ossining, whose own literary efforts have not sold well, thus preventing him from paying for needed fixing of the chantry window. When her book "Fast and Loose" is considered "harmless" by the critics, she gets her uncle to denounce it, thus improving the sales, and the chantry window is able to be constructed, thanks to a generous donation, by a woman who chooses to remain anonymous.

"The Lady's Maid's Bell" – Published originally in "Scribner's Magazine" in November of 1902. A ghost story, where Miss Hartley becomes the lady's maid to Mrs. Brympton, a woman who is a near-invalid. A previous maid, had died, and Miss Hartley sees and hear things which have driven those who have taken the job between out of the house within six months of accepting the position.

"The Mission of Jane" – Published originally in "Harper's Monthly" in December of 1902. Lethbury consents to adopting a child when his wife Alice insists. Their marriage was not going well, and Lethbury feels that Jane will keep his wife happy. Initially he is kept out of Jane's life, but as she grows up he is forced

to participate more and be a part of both Jane and Alice's life.

“The Reckoning” – Published originally in “Harper’s Magazine” in August of 1902. Clement Westall and his wife Julia have agreed on a different kind of marriage. Julia had been married before, and was allowed to walk away when she decided to. Thus, she wanted for both her and Clement to have the same ability. She is surprised when Clement exercises that option, forcing her to reflect back on what she had done to her first husband, John Arment.

“The Letter” – First published in “Harper’s Magazine” in April of 1904. When Colonel Alington dies, the narrator reflects back on the one story he told that said the most about who he was, and the bravery of one woman and the sacrifice she was willing to make for Italy. This is my favourite story in this collection, one in which Edith Wharton very artfully mixes history, character, and story.

“The Dilettante” – Published originally in “Harper’s Monthly” in December of 1903. After seeing Miss Ruth Gaynor off at the train station, Thursdale pays a call on Mrs. Vervain to discuss his previous visit which he and Miss Gaynor had paid to Mrs. Vervain. Mrs. Vervain tells him a story about how Miss Gaynor doesn’t like the friendship between Thursdale and Mrs. Vervain.

“The Quicksand” – Published originally in “Harper’s Magazine” in June of 1902. Mrs. Quentin is upset when her son Alan is rejected by Hope Fenno because of his owning a newspaper which is ruthless in its reporting. He asks her to go see Miss Fenno, but when she does so, she recognizes a bit of herself and remembers the sacrifice she had to make when she married as well as the kind of person her son is.

“A Venetian Night’s Entertainment” – First published in “Scribner’s Magazine” in December of 1903. An amusing story about Tony Bracknell and his first time in Venice as a sailor on a merchant ship.

This is a very nice collection of stories, with a good amount of diversity in the subject matter and styles. Edith Wharton once again shows that she can write short fiction very well, and that she can use all aspects to create an engaging story which keeps the reader’s interest. Not quite as good as the collection “Crucial Instances” in my opinion, but worthwhile nonetheless.

Lunar Snowflake says

Oh Edith, I love you SO much, but you really don't translate well in to short stories, do you?

At the end of nearly all these stories, I was upset - I desperately needed to know more. Like, ya know, what happened to the characters I was falling in love with.

Overall, like always, I was happy with Edith's writing..I just...don't think short stories are her medium.
