



EDITH WHARTON
ROMAN FEVER

Instructor: Ann Newman
Course: ENGL 120

Edith Wharton



Genre

Criticism

Essay

Fiction

- Novel
- Poetry
- Short Story

Travelogues

School (type)

Realism

Themes

- Rivalry
- Love and passion

Edith Wharton



(1862–1937)

Edith Jones was born into a distinguished New York family. Educated by private tutors and governesses, she published a book of her poems privately but did not begin to write for a public audience until after her marriage to Edward Wharton in 1885. The author of more than 50 volumes of poetry, essays, fiction, travelogues, and criticism, she was the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale University (1923). Although she emigrated to France in 1907, she continued to write about the New England of her youth in novels such as the popular *Ethan Frome* (1911). Among her many works are *The Valley of Decision* (1902), *The House of Mirth* (1905), *A Son at the Front* (1923), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), the autobiographical *A Backward Glance* (1934), and *The Buccaneers* (1938). She received a Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

Roman Fever

Directions: As you read the story, look for key elements.

- Setting
- Characters
- Plot
- Point of view
- Conflict
- Foreshadowing
- Theme
- Symbols

Roman Fever

Setting

- Time – Afternoon
- Place – Hotel restaurant on a terrace in Rome
- Weather conditions – Spring weather
- Social conditions – “Roman Fever” was written in the 1930s and is set in the 1920s, but the story's characters and values reflect the attitudes of upper-class society in New York in the last half of the 19th century. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are the product of that environment of affluence and relative ease. The author belonged to this circle and was able to make this society come alive in her story. In Wharton's world, families such as the Astors and the Vanderbilts could be found at the height of the social ladder. In addition to this aristocratic class of people who came from old names and old money were the arrivistes. These arrivistes had earned their fortunes more recently and were often richer than the aristocrats. These members of high society entertained themselves by attending the theater and opera, by paying and receiving social calls, by attending lunch and dinner parties and house parties, by traveling abroad, and by summering in such fashionable spots as Newport, Rhode Island.

In this society, women were seen as moral judges. But, despite this important role, most families did not believe that girls needed to be educated. Instead, they felt that education should be acquired only for womanly purposes, for instance, to fulfill her future husband's needs. A woman's role in life was to be a homemaker, and her single-minded purpose was to make a good marriage.

Roman Fever

Setting (cont.)

The roles and accepted forms of behavior of American women in the 1920s and 1930s changed. After decades of struggling, women had won the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920. Young women, known as "flappers," exerted their greater independence by wearing shorter dresses, wearing makeup, and cutting off their long hair into bobs. They drove cars, played sports, and smoked cigarettes in public. Young women also increasingly worked outside the home, which brought them greater economic and social freedom. When a woman married, however, she was expected to quit her job and function solely as wife and mother. Thus, despite the achievements of women and changes in society, the homemaker still remained the ideal of American womanhood.

- **Mood** – The mood at the beginning of the story of light; however, as more and more of the past events in Mrs. Ansley's and Mrs. Slade's lives are revealed, the mood darkens.

Roman Fever

Characters

1. First character: Grace Ansley – Wealthy American widow vacationing with her daughter and Grace Slade and Alida Slade
2. Second character: Alida Slade – Wealthy American widow of Delphin Slade
3. Third character: Barbara Ansley – brilliant, vivacious daughter of Grace Ansley and Delphin Slade
4. Fourth character: Jenny Slade – Quiet daughter of Alida Slade and Delphin Slade
5. Fifth character: Delphin Slade – The deceased husband of Alida Slade, the former lover of Grace Ansley, and the father of Barbara Ansley

Roman Fever

Grace Ansley

1. Characteristics – Seemingly quiet, not very interesting middle-aged woman who, later, reveals herself to be a passionate person with the ability to love deeply
2. Grace Ansley is a developing character.

Roman Fever

Barbara Ansley

1. Characteristics – Bright, vivacious
2. She is a static character.

Roman Fever

Alida Slade

1. Characteristics – At first, she appears to be what she claims to be: a charming entertainer, a good hostess, and a vibrant person. However, as the story unfolds, she is seen to be envious and resentful as well as capable of plotting the death of her rival.
2. She is a developing character in the sense that she changes as the reader comes to know more about her.

Roman Fever

Jenny Slade

1. Characteristics – Quiet, unassuming, self-reliant
2. She is a static character.

Roman Fever

Delphin Slade

1. Characteristics – In the early part of the story, he is portrayed as educated (was a lawyer), successful and handsome. As the story progresses, the reader learns that he is unfaithful and devious.
2. He is a developing character.

Roman Fever

Plot

The story opens with two middle-aged American ladies enjoying the view of Rome from the terrace of a restaurant. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have been lifelong friends, thrown into intimacy by circumstance rather than by true liking for each other. They first met as young ladies vacationing in Rome with their families 25 years ago. Both are spending the spring in Rome, accompanied by their daughters. In the early afternoon, they talk about their current lives as widows.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Mrs. Slade remembers how Mrs. Ansley became sick during the winter that they spent in Rome when they were young. Although at that time of year people no longer caught malaria, or Roman fever, the dampness and cold night temperatures could still make people quite sick. Mrs. Slade recalls how Mrs. Ansley became seriously ill after going to the Coliseum after sunset one evening. Mrs. Ansley seems to have a hard time remembering this event, but Mrs. Slade reminds her of the details.

Roman Fever

Plot (cont.)

Suddenly, Mrs. Slade, wanting to hurt her friend, bursts out that she must tell Mrs. Ansley that she knows why Mrs. Ansley went to the Coliseum that night. Mrs. Slade then recites the contents of a letter asking Grace to meet Delphin Slade (then the fiance of Alida) at the Coliseum. When Mrs. Ansley wonders how Mrs. Slade could know the contents of the letter, Mrs. Slade confesses that she had written it. She had been afraid that Mrs. Ansley, who was in love with her fiance, would win Delphin away from her. She hoped that Mrs. Ansley would catch cold and, thus, be unable to be involved with Delphin for a few weeks until she (Mrs. Slade) could be more sure of Delphin's affections. However, she never thought that Mrs. Ansley would get so sick.

Mrs. Ansley is upset by the revelation because it represents the loss of a cherished memory; as she says, "It was the only letter I had, and you say he didn't write it?" Mrs. Slade realizes that Mrs. Ansley still cares for Delphin, although Mrs. Ansley claims to cherish only the memory. Mrs. Slade says that she wishes she hadn't told her friend about the letter, but she defends her actions by saying that she didn't believe Mrs. Ansley had taken Delphin so seriously since, after all, Mrs. Ansley had married Mr. Ansley just two months later, as soon as she left her sick bed.

Roman Fever

Plot (cont.)

After a pause, Mrs. Slade says that she sent the letter as a joke; she remembers how she spent the evening laughing at her friend, waiting in the dark by the Coliseum. Mrs. Ansley surprises her companion by saying that she didn't wait, that Delphin had arranged everything and that they were let into the Coliseum immediately. Mrs. Slade accuses Mrs. Ansley of lying, wondering how Delphin would know that Mrs. Ansley was waiting for him. Mrs. Ansley says that she answered the letter, and that she is sorry for Mrs. Slade because Delphin came to her that night. Mrs. Slade responds by saying that she doesn't begrudge Mrs. Ansley one night; after all, she had Delphin for 25 years and Mrs. Ansley had only a letter that Delphin didn't write. Mrs. Ansley has the final word: "I had Barbara."

Roman Fever

Point of View

Omniscient objective – The author lets the reader see and hear what the characters see and hear. The author, also, lets the reader know what they are thinking.

Roman Fever

Conflict

Man vs. man (non-physical)

Roman Fever

Foreshadowing

Early in the story, Mrs. Slade says, “Moonlight – moonlight. What a part it still plays. Do you suppose they are as sentimental as we were?” “I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t in the least know what they are,” said Mrs. Ansley. “And perhaps we didn’t know much more about each other.”

This discussion foreshadows what will be revealed about what happened nearly 25 years ago. By the end of the story, the two women will know much more about each other.

Roman Fever

Theme

1. First theme: Friendship – Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have been friends since they first met as single women 25 years ago. However, their friendship is never close because of the rivalry between the two.
2. Second theme: Rivalry – Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have always been rivals. As young women, both had loved Delphin Slade (the cause of the rivalry). Their rivalry is also seen in how Mrs. Slade views the marriages their daughters will make and in her comparison of her and Mrs. Ansley's difficulties in being widows. The rivalry prompts Mrs. Ansley, near the end of the story, to disclose that Delphin Slade is the father of her daughter, Barbara.
3. Third theme: Love and passion – While Mrs. Slade believes herself to be a loving mother and a passionate woman, nothing she says about herself or her family members backs this up. The one person she seems to love is her dead son. In contrast, Mrs. Ansley – although a seemingly quiet and mousey sort of woman – apparently has loved Delphin Slade. The fact that she has hidden her love for her for 25 years demonstrates that she is capable of deep love and passion.

Roman Fever

Symbolism & Imagery

1. The Palatine, Forum, Coliseum – These ruins symbolize the ruins of the images that Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have of themselves.
2. Knitting – Mrs. Ansley’s knitting is described as “a twist of crimson silk.” Thus, the reader might interpret the knitting as representing the more passionate side of Mrs. Ansley’s personality because of the color crimson, which is associated with passion. When Mrs. Slade starts to talk about their shared past, Mrs. Ansley lifts her knitting “a little closer to her eyes.” In other words, knitting – a not very passionate activity – is used to hide her emotions and passions.
3. “[Grace] began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the stairway.” – This imagery is used to represent the power shift at the end of the story. Up until the point, Mrs. Slade has been the powerful character. Now, she must give way to Mrs. Ansley, who by revealing her secret has become the more dominant character.