



EDITH WHARTON

ROMAN FEVER

Instructor: Ann Newman
Course: ENGL 223

Edith Wharton



Genre

Criticism

Essay

Fiction

- ☐ Novel
- ☐ Poetry
- ☐ Short Story
- ☐ Travelogues

Movement

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

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.

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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 characters' emotional response to the events) – The mood at the beginning of the story is light; however, as more and more of the past events in Mrs. Ansley's and Mrs. Slade's lives are revealed, the mood darkens and becomes charged with bitter rivalry.

Roman Fever

Setting (cont.)

- Tone (emotional atmosphere of the work) – Wharton's story contains several tone shifts.
 - a) At the beginning of "Roman Fever," Wharton is **reminiscent**. She might even imagine herself as Mrs. Slade or Mrs. Ansley. The two women enjoy their vacation remembering back to when they were their daughter's age, attracting suitors and commanding attention.
 - b) Throughout the whole story, Wharton is **critical** of Old New York society. As she describes the two middle-aged women, she provides their thoughts about one another and, in doing so, illustrates their condescending, self-righteous attitudes toward one another even though they proclaim themselves "friends." Wharton's description of the widows' plights following their husbands' deaths adds to her social critique. The author stresses that the women feel lost in society without their husbands and struggle to find a purpose in life.
 - c) Finally, at the story's end, Wharton's tone is **revealing**. In having Mrs. Slade expose her plot against Mrs. Ansley all those years ago, the author depicts the lengths that women will go to in order "to keep their man." However, the story's end is full of revelations, the most shocking of which is that Mrs. Ansley did meet Mrs. Slade's future husband all those years ago and had a child with him--Barbara.

All of Wharton's various tones contribute to her purpose in exposing the underbelly of "aristocratic" Old New York. The author adeptly demonstrates in this story that the seething emotions under the starched and corseted members of her society eventually surface and reveal their true character.

Roman Fever: Characters

Aunt Harriet

1. Characteristics – She is devious and murderous.
2. Aunt Harriet is a static character.

Roman Fever: Characters

Grace Ansley

1. Characteristics – She is smaller and paler than Alida Slade. She is the mother of Barbara Ansley.
2. Grace Ansley is a developing character who, initially, appears to be a quiet, not very interesting middle-aged woman but, later, reveals herself to be a passionate person with the ability to love deeply.

Roman Fever: Characters

Barbara Ansley

1. Characteristics – She is the bright, vivacious daughter of Grace Ansley and Delphin Slade.
2. She is a static character.

Roman Fever: Characters

Alida Slade

1. Characteristics — She is larger and darker than Grace Ansley. She is the mother of Jenny Slade.
2. She is a developing character in the sense that she changes as the reader comes to know more about her. 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.

Roman Fever: Characters

Jenny Slade

1. Characteristics – She is the quiet, unassuming, self-reliant daughter of Alida and Delphin Slade.
2. She is a static character.

Roman Fever: Characters

Delphin Slade

1. Characteristics – He is the deceased husband of Alida Slade. He was a lawyer, successful and handsome.
2. He is a developing character. As the story progresses, the reader learns that, while unfaithful to his fiancé Alida Slade and deviously plotting to meet Grace Ansley, he was honorable in that he fulfilled his promise to marry his fiancé .

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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.

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Conflict

External conflict

- Man vs. man (non-physical) – Alida Slade and Grace Ansley struggle against each other for the love of Delphin Slade.

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Conflict (cont.)

Internal conflict (Man vs. himself)

- Alida Slade is having to cope with the change in her identity. The death of her husband and the new resulting social identity that she is forced to live with leaves her feeling "unemployed" and even hoping that her daughter will start a relationship with an unsuitable man so that she could feel "needed."
- Alida Slade struggles with her envy of Grace Ansley and the way that she knows that her husband actually loved Grace. It is this envy that she is finally able to give voice to during the course of this story.

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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?”
- Aunt Harriet sent her sister out to the Forum, hoping that she would catch a chill and die because they were in love with the same man.
- Grace Ansley, who is in a struggle with Alida Slade for the love of Delphin Slade, met him at the Coliseum, former site of gladiatorial combat.

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Theme

1. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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Symbolism

1. The Palatine, Forum, Coliseum – These ruins symbolize the ruins of the images that Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have of themselves.
2. Coliseum – Once the site of fights between gladiators, it is the site (and symbol) of the final struggle between Alida Slade and Grace Ansley for Delphin Slade's love.
3. Moon - It symbolizes romance and passion.
4. Roman fever
 - The passion felt by Grace Ansley and Delphin Slade
 - The jealousy of Grace Ansley felt by Alida Slade

Roman Fever

Symbolism (cont.)

5.

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.

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Imagery

- “The luncheon hour was long past” – On the sunny terrace in the sunlight of afternoon, Alida Slade and Grace Ansley appear to be friends reminiscing about the past.
- “Let's leave the young things to their knitting.” – Knitting is something that normal housewives usually do, and this gives us a sense that the two middle-aged ladies are stereotypical widows who have dull and passive lives. However, it is, as the two women continue to “knit” together what happened more than 25 years previously, that the reader discovers that one of them is passionate and the other is capable of plotting murder.

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Imagery (cont.)

- “Mrs. Slade leaned back, brooding, her eyes ranging from the ruins which faced her to the long green hollow of the Forum, the fading glow of the church fonts beyond it, and the outlying immensity of the Colosseum.” – As the sun begins to set, the two women begin revealing their dark secrets.
- “[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.

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Irony

- Grace Ansley appears mousy and incapable of deep emotions; however, she is passionate and continues to love Delphin Slade 25 years after their one-night tryst.
- Barbara Ansley's personality appears the opposite of her mother's personality. However, in reality, she is much like her mother was 25 years previously.
- Alida Slade attempts to murder her rival, Grace Ansley. However, it is Grace, who wins triumphs at the Coliseum.