

Edith Wharton's Historical Consciousness in *The House of Mirth*

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Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* embodies strong historical consciousness, presenting both the literary and historical views of early 20th century New York. Wharton details the historical changes in American society influenced by industrial development by depicting the upper society of old New York during the Gilded Age. The characterization of main characters, especially the protagonist Lily Bart, reflects Wharton's investigation of history and culture, showcasing the essence of human life experience through history, reality, and fiction. Analyzing *The House of Mirth* through the lens of New Historicism, especially the concepts of "historicity of text" and "textuality of history", not only aids in restoring the objective "History" of New York society but also explores Wharton's in-depth interpretation of class and historical transformation, highlighting the historical dimension of the interaction between text and history.

Keywords: *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton, historicity of text, textuality of history, historical consciousness

Introduction

The House of Mirth is a well-known masterpiece of American female writer Edith Wharton. The novel shows her observation on the complex and delicate relationship within the American upper class at the start of the 20th century, and her artistic reflection on social consciousness and social existence at the historical level. The novel tells the story of Lily Bart, a pretty and noble heroine, whose family has fallen into financial ruin. Despite her beauty and charm, Lily struggles to secure a suitable marriage that would ensure her place in high society. Her attempts to navigate the complex social expectations and financial pressures ultimately lead to her downfall.

New Historicism is referred to as "cultural poetics", which reinterprets historical texts and provides a political interpretation of them. This theory argues that literary works and history interact with each other. By establishing the overall connection between texts and history, it makes an all-round examination of history from the perspective of cultural studies. In the view of New Historicism, literature is always a cultural force that shapes human nature in the historical context. In publicizing "subject", "history", and "ideology", "historicity of text" and "textuality of history" become the two main aspects of literary criticism. According to new historicists, such as Louise Montrose, literary works record history through texts. Accordingly, Wharton's novels of social manners not only present the macroscopic "History" of society, but also highlight a microscopic and plural "histories" that she observed and understood from her personal point of view.

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Historicity of Text

Historicity of the text endows the text with specific social and historical qualities. The text is shaped, extended, and changed with the passage of time, and at the same time, constantly enriched, showing a dynamic and open situation. On the one hand, the historicity of text emphasizes that history plays an important role in the text. No texts can be produced without its social background, and any text will inevitably be influenced by the society at that time. Therefore, if readers want to interpret the historicity of a literary text, they must focus on three aspects: the author's life; the social regulations in the text; and the reflection of the text on the historical situation (Bressler, 1994, p. 34). On the other hand, the text also has initiative, and thus participates in the construction of history, which in turn exerts certain influence on the era.

From the perspective of new historicists, any type of text is historical. A literary text is formed in a specific time and place. Therefore, it should be analyzed in its own context, that is, the social and cultural patterns of that era. Without the help of historical background, readers cannot fully understand the text (Ma, 2022, p. 5). At the beginning of 20th century, American monopoly capitalism concentrated capital in the hands of a few capitalists, while many city residents lived in poverty, resulting in serious polarization of society. Wharton, who was born into a wealthy family in old New York, creates many masterpieces based on her childhood experience and her views on the world around her. *The House of Mirth* realistically provides many details concerning this historical period.

Lily Bart's life experiences are almost synchronized with Wharton's life. As a member of the upper-class in old New York, Wharton reveals the noble class's money worship and utilitarianism from her own perspective by portraying Lily Bart's way of life. Right there, at the start of the 20th century, the new industrial bourgeoisie has been rising since American Civil War, and a large number of new rich are impacting the old noble class with irresistible power. Compared with the narrow, traditional, and almost enclosed high society before the Civil War, it seems that the aristocratic class has changed. For example, *The House of Mirth* depicts that the old New York tried to assimilate the upstart. The old aristocratic class is not what Mark Twain described as one who "stand stunned and helpless under the new order of things..." (Crain, 2016, p. 229), but has taken active measures to assimilate the upstart class and make it accept those established social regulations (Huang, 2023, p. 91). However, the essence of the upper class has remained the same, and it is money that dominates everything among elites. Lily, who is living on the edge of penury, struggles to secure a position in the aristocratic circle, but finally ends up in the life of working class. With her epiphany, she chooses to commit suicide. Her plots show the American social environment at that time and the historical background of America in early 20th century step by step.

The root of Lily's tragic ending comes from the tradition of repressing personality in old New York, a patriarchal system, as well as the money worship and distorted morality. The name Lily Bart implies the meaning of materialization, which echoes with Lily's identity. As a kind of flower, Lily is very decorative; Bart contains an "art" in it, which also implies that Lily is just an object for men to appreciate. New York in Wharton's works is a pure commercial society, where wealth has become an important criterion to measure people's social status, and the relationship between people is essentially a naked money relationship. Lily is educated by her mother to exchange her appearance for everything she desires at an early age. In the marriage market, aristocratic men covet her beauty like high-grade art, but they are indifferent to the sorrow and pain in her soul. For example, Mr. Rosedale tells Lily that the premise of marrying her to solve her financial crisis is that Lily must shake hands

with the lady who tramples on her self-esteem. Otherwise, it will affect his own fame. As a new rich who wants to mingle with the aristocratic class of old New York, Mr. Rosedale's greed for Lily's beauty comes from his vanity of social status and power, and he needs to be recognized by the old aristocrats. The upper class of old New York is closed, and its moral norms are like an unbreakable and indestructible fortress entrenched in the downtown area of New York, which deeply affects every member of it and stubbornly resists the invasion of social changes.

The old upper class always despises the new rich. However, with the rapid development of American industry, the new money has become a force that cannot be ignored by the old money. Although the upstarts have no prominent origin or pure blood, they can also knock on the door of the upper class through marriage with abundant financial resources. Even though Lily is penniless, she is still a popular figure in upper society's social circle by virtue of her beauty that everyone cannot ignore. More importantly, the traditional customs, etiquette, and clothing style of the old New York aristocrats are important components of their history and culture. Lily spent her childhood and juvenile life in accordance with the lifestyle of the old New York aristocrats. Therefore, she fully understands the traditional social customs and norms. Mr. Rosedale's desire of Lily is only driven by his eagerness to integrate into real culture of the old New York aristocrats. By describing the emotional exchange between Lily and Mr. Rosedale, Wharton vividly reproduces the opposition and integration between the old and new aristocrats in American society at that time, and reflects the historical epitome that "the upper class life in New York is in a state of disintegration and reconstruction" (Homburger, 2004, p. 27), which marks the dissolution of the strict social conventions in old New York.

Textuality of History

The most essential theoretical feature of New Historicism is to emphasize the textuality of history. As an objective existence, absolute history has already disappeared. Now, as a certain material, history is the result of human subjective consciousness, and any history is the product of artificial description, analysis, and explanation. History first refers to a certain relationship with the "past" reached by means of a special kind of written discourse. The textual nature of history breaks the unity view of traditional historicism, and changes from objective single-line history to subjective diverse history. In Foucault's view, capitalized "History" will be replaced by small "histories". Moreover, the new historicists believe that history is accidental and fragmented, and they regard the transformation of history and the occurrence of events as the result of contingency, which is the driving factor for the development of historical process (Li, 2012, p. 101).

According to above-mentioned analysis, it is impossible to avoid subjectivity. It can be said that there are as many forms of historical expression as there are many people who write it, so history as a discourse becomes multifaceted and multiple. This view of New Historicism reveals the similarity between literature and history, that is, both of them are composed of subjective discourse narration, and they can only be explained in interaction. As Zhou Zhonghou (2022) said: "Writers who write history cannot come into contact with a so-called 'comprehensive and true history'. They only interpret discourse and construct ideas according to historical materials, so that the explained history has the textual characteristics of narrative discourse structure" (p. 279). Therefore, the fate of the characters in *The House of Mirth* is not completely dominated by capitalized history, and there is various subjective consciousness of the author in the text, so the personality and pursuit of the characters are also important reasons for the development and ending of the text.

Wharton decomposes history into the memories of many individuals through the promotion of individual subjects, helping them find themselves in the historical backtracking. This writing of individual memory realizes the rewriting of history and releases many fragmented histories buried by official history, thus playing a role in the reconstruction of history. New York society presents a brand-new appearance in the novel. By analyzing Wharton's historical consciousness through portraying Lily, the textuality of history in *The House of Mirth* can be reflected.

Wharton was dissatisfied with the situation that women were deprived of right to speak or make decisions at that time, so she described Lily's psychology of struggling between the aristocratic class and the working class delicately in this novel, filling the gap of women's "histories". Lily passively or voluntarily gives up the opportunity to marry rich aristocrats many times in her novels. Mr. Selden and his cousin Gerty's "Republic of the Spirit" wakens Lily's morality. She realizes her spiritual desolation, devotes herself to charity and manual labor of the working class for a short time, and finally obtains spiritual transformation. However, Lily falls into a dilemma between spiritual enlightenment and physical hardship. She is conscious of the moral emptiness of old New York, but she cannot completely give up her elegant living style and aesthetic taste. The simple mechanical life mode of the working class oppresses her, so she has to drink medicine to maintain her normal work and rest. When Mr. Rosedale finally reaches out to Lily with his proposal, Lily chooses to give up, keeping sublimity in spirit. From the perspective of "History" with a single value standard, Lily's birth, education, and the era she lives in will not give birth to her noble personality and spiritual strength, which is another interpretation of history given by Wharton. Wharton tells us through *The House of Mirth* that by constructing history, its authority is not absolute. Lily is doomed to be deprived of the right to speak under the dominant power of aristocratic class and patriarchal society, when women are considered as the second sex and pieces of decorative artifacts. However, with the changes of the times, women in the aristocratic class begin to realize their subjective initiative to resist.

Wharton uses Lily to deconstruct this patriarchal society centering around money. Lily is obviously the victim of the society that shaped her. "The links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (Wharton, 2005, p. 19). The meanness and vulgarity of the nobles are apparently exposed in the comparison with Lily. Lily finally understands the true meaning of life from Nettie Struther, a poor but kind female worker: Although living in poverty, Nettie and her husband trust and support each other.

It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. (p. 359)

Lily finally understands that "it had taken two to build the nest; the man's faith as well as the woman's courage" (p. 359). She chooses to run away from the abyss of spiritual degradation forever, and ultimately uses her death to fight against the trampling of personal dignity and spiritual pursuit by the upper class. This is a powerful representation that Wharton can offer in that particular era. As a member of high society in old New York, Wharton felt the urgency of describing the dying community in the violent social unrest of the Gilded Age. This sense of urgency led Wharton to integrate the history of old New York into fictional stories when writing novels, such as *The House of Mirth* (Huang, 2023, p. 91).

It is true that Wharton's novels have certain subjective limitations and cannot completely and objectively reflect the history of old New York. However, because of this, the historical text *The House of Mirth* is endowed with textuality. In the view of New Historicism, the textuality of history lies in turning the living and real history

into literary fiction, language metaphor, and rhetorical imagination, and putting it in the text to create the history. Therefore, this novel is one of the informative and powerful history versions describing New York at the turn of 20th century, providing readers with a brand-new perspective to explore that pretentious and hypocritical world and its social transformation.

Conclusion

As a novel of social manners, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* attempts to restore the historical dimension through representing, explaining, and rebuilding history, allowing readers to see more possibilities of historical interpenetration within New York's high society at the beginning of 20th century. The novel explores the relationship between literature and history as well as the relationship between literature and society, embodying the artistic charm of the historical novel and complexity of the social conventions. Wharton accurately depicts the society and customs of that time, when people lose their vitality due to traditional constraints and live a monotonous and emotionally numb lives. Although many of Wharton's works focus on the upper class in New York, she vividly and incisively portrays the historical features of this elite group, thus giving her works extensive and far-reaching social significance.

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