

English 240: Writing Narrative Nonfiction  
Professor Edward Ball

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.— Emma Fallone

Choosing to Walk the Tightrope  
by Emma Fallone

On October 28, 1882, the local Newport, Rhode Island newspaper *Newport Daily News* published a small, unusual note stating that the engagement of two wealthy New York society members, Henry Stevens and Edith Jones, had been broken off indefinitely. This announcement was followed by just two short sentences of explanation: “The only reason assigned for the breaking of the engagement hitherto existing between Henry Stevens and Miss Edith Jones is an alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride. Miss Jones is an ambitious authoress, and it is said that, in the eyes of Mrs. Stevens, ambition is a grievous fault.”<sup>1</sup> Read without context, there would be little reason to linger upon this vaguely interesting tidbit of history. Yet Edith Jones was not just another rich debutante – rather, she would grow up to become Edith Wharton, the barrier-breaking author whose novel *The Age of Innocence* would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize – the first time in history that a woman was selected for this award. And this pivotal moment in Edith’s life would prove crucial not only in setting her on the course to break free of societal convention and embody the role of an independent female writer, but also would significantly influence the development of her novel itself.

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Edith Jones was an unfortunately bookish child. Born in 1862 to a family firmly ensconced within wealthy New York elite society, the girl who would grow up to become a renowned author was marked as an outcast even in her earliest memories. As she recalls, “I was

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 47.

a healthy little girl who loved riding, swimming and romping; yet no children of my own age, and none even among the nearest of my grown-ups, were as close to me as the great voices that spoke to me from books. Whenever I try to recall my childhood it is in my father's library that it comes to life. I am squatting again on the thick Turkish rug, pulling open one after another the glass doors of the low bookcases, and dragging out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion....There was in me a secret retreat where I wished no one to intrude, or at least no one whom I had yet encountered. Words and cadences haunted it like song-birds in a magic wood, and I wanted to be able to steal away and listen when they called.”<sup>2</sup> The precocious, solitary young girl began writing stories at the age of eleven, scrawling fantastic tales onto rough brown wrapping paper scrounged from the garbage after the arrival of the mail each morning, as her mother forbade her from wasting stationery on such a useless hobby.<sup>3</sup>

*...her dusky red cheeks and tight curls gave her an air of gaiety that seemed unsuitable in a child...old ladies shook their heads at [her] gaudy clothes, while her other relations fell under the charm of her high color and high spirits. She was a fearless and familiar little thing, who asked disconcerting questions, made precocious comments, and possessed outlandish arts...the little girl received an expansive but incoherent education...of course no good could come of this...<sup>4</sup>*



*Portrait of Edith Wharton as a young girl, by Edward Harrison May (1870)*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1920), 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

Edith Jones's first foray into the field of writing came shortly before her eighteenth birthday, in the winter of 1879 – coming as a shock to both New York City society and to Edith herself. The circumstance had happened almost by chance – after yet another morning of writing at her desk and watching the snow fall outside, Edith decided on a whim to send three of her best poems to a handful of well-respected literary magazine editors, whose addresses she had discovered using her family's far-reaching social connections. She fondly recalls her own naiveté: "I did not know how authors communicated with editors, but I copied out the verses in my fairest hand, and enclosed each in an envelope with my visiting card! A week or two elapsed, and then I received the three answers, telling me that all three poems had been accepted....as long as I live I shall never forget my sensations when I opened the first of the three letters, and learned that I was to appear in print. I can still see the narrow hall, the letter-box out of which I fished the letters, and the flight of stairs up and down which I ran, senselessly and incessantly, in the attempt to give my excitement some muscular outlet!"<sup>6</sup> One of the magazines in which her work was published was *The Atlantic Monthly*. After reading Edith's poems, editor William Dean Howells wrote that "If I can think of any good name I will print them in a little group. They strike me as having a fresh, delicate and authentic quality. It is something very uncommon to find so young a writer reminding you so very little of other writers."<sup>7</sup>

*...[her family] objected to her living in a "Bohemian" quarter given over to "people who wrote." It was not the peril but the poverty that her family disliked; but that shade escaped her, and she supposed they considered literature compromising. She herself had no fears of it, and the books scattered about her drawing room...[were] chiefly works of fiction...*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 109.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Mead, "The Age of Innocence: Early Letters from Edith Wharton," *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/29/the-age-of-innocence-2>

<sup>8</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 65-66.



*Photograph of Edith Wharton as a young girl.*<sup>9</sup>

While Edith was ecstatic at this sudden turn of events, her family was decidedly less so. In an attempt to curb her growing deviant, intellectual tendencies, as it was now unquestionably clear that the young girl had “spent too much time in reading,” Edith’s parents arranged for her to ‘come out’ into society a year earlier than was typical, in late winter of the same year.<sup>10</sup> Edith’s life was soon overwhelmed with social events, her days filled with returning calls and attending balls and luncheons, as she found herself caught up in the swirl and gossip of the New York elite lifestyle. As she recalls, “Our society was, in short, a little “set” with its private catch-words, observances and amusements, and its indifference to anything outside of its charmed circle...all were young in spirit, mostly good-looking, and full of gaiety and humour. The talk was never intellectual and seldom brilliant, but it was always easy and sometimes witty...I doubt if New York society was ever simpler, gayer, or more pleasantly sophisticated, than it was then.”<sup>11</sup>

*...one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms (the sea-green, the crimson and the bouton d’or), seeing from afar the many-candled lustres reflected in the*

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<sup>9</sup> Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>10</sup> Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

*polished parquetry, and beyond that the depths of a conservatory where camellias and tree ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo .... Couples were already gliding over the floor beyond: the light of the wax candles fell on revolving tulle skirts, on girlish heads wreathed with modest blossoms, and the dashing aigrettes and ornaments of the young married women's coiffures, and on the glitter of highly glazed shirtfronts and fresh glacé gloves.*<sup>12</sup>



*Photograph of Edith Jones (Edith Wharton).*<sup>13</sup>

The following spring, at yet another society party, Edith Jones was introduced to Henry Leyden Stevens. Three years her senior, well-known for his affable personality and passionate love of sports, he immediately stood out from the other young gentlemen as someone whose voracious appetite for life could finally match her own. The two spent increasing amounts of time together over the course of the year, as the winter dinner parties and informal Sunday luncheons flowed smoothly into summer months spent in grand “summer cottages” on the shores of Newport, Rhode Island. The young couple whiled away the humid hours with leisure and sport, Edith cheering as Henry bested nearly all of his fellow gentlemen in endless lawn tennis matches, before retiring for teas on the terrace and luxuriating in the cool ocean breezes that teased their lightweight cotton attire.

*The small bright lawn stretched away smoothly to the big bright sea. The turf was hemmed with an edge of scarlet geranium and coleus, and cast-iron vases painted in chocolate*

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<sup>12</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> Edith Wharton collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

*color, standing at intervals along the winding path that led to the sea, looped their garlands of petunia and geranium above the neatly-raked gravel....A number of ladies in summer dresses and gentlemen in grey frock-coats and tall hats stood on the lawn or sat upon the benches...Behind [them], the French windows of the drawing rooms through which [they] had passed gave glimpses, between swinging lace curtains, of glassy parquet floors islanded with chintz poufs, dwarf armchairs, and velvet tables covered with trifles in silver....Newport represented the escape from duty into an atmosphere of unmitigated holiday-making.<sup>14</sup>*

Henry even accompanied the Joneses on their many international vacations, traveling across the Atlantic to spend time with the family during their yearly European tour in late 1881. He was with the family when Edith's father died unexpectedly, in Cannes, France in March of 1882.<sup>15</sup> By late July, Edith and Henry had returned to the United States, and the close-knit, gossip-happy society was already beginning to wonder if an engagement announcement was on the horizon. Fellow young socialite Daisy Terry recorded with glee her observation of the couple sitting alone by the beach on one such warm summer evening, Henry "holding animated conversation" with Edith in what seemed to be a "possibly important *tête-à-tête*."<sup>16</sup>

*...his eyes met [hers], and he saw that she had instantly understood his motive, though the family dignity which both considered so high a virtue would not permit her to tell him so. The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than any explanation would have done.<sup>17</sup>*

At the end of August, as the summer season wound down and the young ladies and gentlemen retreated within their homes to escape the increasingly oppressive heat, Edith and Henry's engagement seemed all but inevitable. Pleased – and perhaps a bit relieved – that her bookish daughter had managed to make a successful match, Edith's mother Lucretia Jones wrote pre-emptively to tell her brother the good news. "My dear Fred – I had hoped to go to you today with Pussie [Edith] to announce her engagement to Mr. Stevens, but the heat had made me feel

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<sup>14</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 124-125.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 263.

<sup>16</sup> R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 12.

so wretchedly for the last day or two that I was afraid even to venture to Church today. So she must tell her own story – as I wished you and Fanny to know before it is announced to her friends tomorrow. I shall hope soon to be able to tell you how pleased we all are...”<sup>18</sup>

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Edith’s novel *The Age of Innocence* tells the story of lovers Ellen Olenska and Langdon Archer (who is originally engaged to another woman, May Welland), young members of the New York elite. Edith’s early plot outline for the novel, written on a delicate scrap of paper with the words “1<sup>st</sup> plan” scratched in red editor’s pencil at the top of the page, reads as follows:

*Gradually Archer falls in love with [Ellen Olenska], & sees that life with [his fiancée] May Welland, or any other young woman who has not had Ellen’s initiation, would be unutterably dull. It is very painful for him to break his engagement, but he finally has the courage to do so, though he does not tell May why he no longer cares for her. [May] gives him up magnanimously, but when she finds that Ellen is the cause she is very bitter, & reproaches Ellen... [May] does not suspect Ellen of being her rival, till the latter’s engagement is announced. Even then May is heroically generous, & is among the first to bring her good wishes to her cousin. Archer, his struggle over, is supremely happy. He urges Ellen to marry him at once.*<sup>19</sup>

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On August 19, the New York society newspaper *Town Topics* reported that “Mr. Henry Stevens, only son of Ms. Paran Stevens, is reported to be engaged to Miss Edith Jones, daughter of the late George Jones, Esq.”<sup>20</sup> The wedding was tentatively set to occur at All Saints Church in New York City, in mid-October. As the plans progressed, there was great rejoicing and excitement within the Jones family. Yet Henry’s mother was ominously silent about her son’s upcoming nuptials. Not a single social event celebrating, or even acknowledging, the couple’s engagement was held within the Stevens mansion – highly unusual in this age of near-constant balls and soirees.

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Wharton, Edith, Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University, New Haven, CT, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 262.

Wedding preparations slowly ground to a halt. The young couple seemed to be just as in love as ever, and were frequently observed spending almost all of their time together at social gatherings – and yet after the beginning of September, no record of further marriage planning appears in the papers of either Edith or her mother.

On October 28, the small note in *Town Topics* made everything clear. “The marriage of Mr. Henry Stevens to Miss Edith Jones, which was announced for the latter part of this month, has been postponed, it is said, indefinitely.”<sup>21</sup> It is easy enough to imagine the swirl of gossip that ensued, in a society that fed on such hints of intrigue. One witness to the drama was Edith’s first cousin, fifteen-year-old Helen Rhineland, who reported on the situation in a letter to her brother, Tom. “Is it not sad about Pussy’s engagement being broken?...It is evidently Mrs. S’s fault, or rather she is the cause....Don’t repeat this for the world. Aunt Lu told this to Mamma! I doubt Pussy and H have changed in their feeling for one another, but that Mrs. S is at the bottom of it all.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the efforts of Edith’s family to shape her into the form of a young woman expected by society, Edith’s persistent desire to be an author had made her an unsuitable choice for a wife. Beneath Edith’s layers of taffeta and ribbons lay a spirit that could not be contained; underlying the airy banter ran a powerful intellectual curiosity. Her uncanny desire to learn and to create had proved magnetic to Henry – and yet it had also alienated Edith from the culture in which she was inescapably enmeshed, a culture that delighted upon the careful monitoring of its members for even the slightest hint of impropriety. As a member of her social set astutely

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<sup>21</sup> Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 263.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 46.



remarked, “She was everything that was right and regular, but the young hawk looked out of her eyes.”<sup>23</sup>

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Lucretia Jones took her daughter on an extended European vacation the following month, ostensibly to escape the chilly November winds – but the true cause for their timely overseas flight was likely not lost on New York society. Yet her tactic seemed to have worked – by the time that the Jones ladies returned to America, in January of 1883, the new year had brought with it a fresh host of scandals and gossip, and Edith’s broken engagement was all but forgotten. Revived by her adventures abroad and eager to regale her friends with tales of the wondrous sights she had seen, Edith slipped smoothly back into the rhythm of elite society, renewing her social life with vigor. The years passed by in the same whirl of balls and luncheons as before.

*She looked down at the tip of the little satin boot that peeped from her long draperies. “I used to care immensely too: my life was full of such things. But now I want to try not to.”*  
*“You want to try not to?”*

*“Yes: I want to cast off all my old life, to become just like everyone else here.”*

*“You’ll never be like everybody else,” he said.*

*She raised her straight eyebrows a little. “Ah, don’t say that. If you knew how I hate to be different!” Her face had grown as somber as a tragic mask. She leaned forward, clasping her knee in her thin hands, and looking away from him into remote dark distances. “I want to get away from it all,” she insisted... “I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past.”<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 68-69.



THE AUTHOR, ABOUT 1884

*Photograph of Edith Jones in 1884, from “A Backward Glance.”*

At the end of March in 1885, a note in *Town Topics* once again mentioned Edith Jones’s name – this time, announcing her engagement to Mr. Edward “Teddy” Wharton, a well-respected gentleman from Boston, twelve years her senior. The unusually small ceremony took place without much fanfare, on April 29 at New York City’s Trinity Chapel. Comparing the event with other elite marriages of the day, *The New York Times*’ main description of the wedding was “a quiet one.” *Town Topics* was equally unimpressed – in its report, it called attention to the glaring lack of bridesmaids, “which many people expected there would have been.”<sup>25</sup>

*[She] opened [her] eyes (but could they really have been shut?), and felt [her] heart beginning to resume its usual task. The music, the scent of the lilies on the altar, the vision of the cloud of tulle and orange-blossoms floating nearer and nearer, the sight of [her mother’s] face suddenly convulsed with happy sobs, the low benedictory murmur of the Rector’s voice, the ordered evolutions of the eight pink bridesmaids and the eight black ushers: all these sights, sounds and sensations, so familiar in themselves, so unutterably strange and meaningless...*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 113.

In her own autobiography, Edith gives the entire event of her second engagement and subsequent marriage only a single sentence. The event almost seems to be a footnote, the most important consequence of which was her impending honeymoon and the opportunity to travel to Europe that it presented. She does not even mention the name of her now-husband, simply stating that “At the end of my second winter in New York I was married; and thenceforth my thirst for travel was to be gratified.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet despite their disappointment in the lack of enthusiasm displayed by all involved in the match, one can nonetheless imagine the relief felt by the New York ladies and gentlemen upon learning that the unusual, intellectual Miss Jones had now become Mrs. Wharton. At last, Edith had ceded to the overpowering conventions of the era and was beginning to conform to the role of a young woman that she was expected to play by society. The scandal was several years in the past, the deviant young writer was well on her way to becoming another obedient new wife. All was right within the small, circumscribed world of the New York City elite.

Six weeks later, on July 18<sup>th</sup>, Henry Stevens died in Newport Hospital of an unknown illness. He was just twenty-six years old.<sup>28</sup>

Returning to New York from her honeymoon, poised to embrace her new role as a society housewife, Edith wrote a short note in her diary: “The secret of happiness is to have forgotten what it is to be happy.”<sup>29</sup>

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The final outline for Wharton’s novel is written directly at the beginning of her first complete manuscript of the work. Her handwriting is firm and decisive, nearly free of erasures or crossings-out. The text reads:

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<sup>27</sup> Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 90.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Wharton, Edith, Papers, Box 5, Folder 1.

*Langdon Archer, a young man of very good “Old New York,” is engaged to May Welland, a charming young girl of the same set...[Ellen] Olenska & Langdon Archer meet & fall madly in love with each other. He is almost carried off his feet; but in “Old New York” a girl is almost disgraced if her fiancé jilts her, & Archer dares not break with May....with an aching heart he marries May, & they go on their tame colourless & eminently respectable wedding trip. When they return they settle down in New York & begin to lead their life which is to go on till the grave....Gradually Archer realizes that he cannot break with society...& the story ends with Mme. Olenska’s returning to Europe.<sup>30</sup>*

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In 1913, Edith Wharton divorced Edward and moved permanently to France. She formed a close circle of friends, expatriates and intellectuals, and devoted herself wholly to her writing.

*...she had managed to brush away the conventions...She had grown tired of what people called “society”; New York was almost oppressively hospitable...she had found herself, as she phrased it, too “different” to care for the things it cared about – and so she had decided to try [Europe], where one was supposed to meet more varieties of people and of opinion.<sup>31</sup>*

Edith Wharton published *The Age of Innocence* in 1920. It won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1921. As Edith later wrote in her diary, “Life is always either a tight-rope or a feather-bed. Give me the tight-rope.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Wharton, Edith, Papers, Box 22, Folder 701.

<sup>31</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 146.

<sup>32</sup> Wharton, Edith, Papers, Box 5, Folder 1.

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