



The Fruit of the Tree

Edith Wharton

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EDITH WHARTON (1862-1937) was one of the most remarkable women of her time, and her immense commercial and critical success--most notably with her novel "The Age of Innocence" (1920), which won a Pulitzer Prize. Her other novels, including "The Fruit of the Tree," remain fascinating portraits of an earlier time.

The Fruit of the Tree Details

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From Reader Review The Fruit of the Tree for online ebook

Cynthia says

Set in an eastern mill town Fruit of the Tree is another book about the struggles of workers and how the owners I.e. The upper classes choose to exploit the workers or reform management of the mill. There's an emotionally stunted young man who Wharton takes to task through the ministration of the much, much wiser women around him. Since this theme appears in much of Wharton it feels belabored appearing in yet another of her books and, as is often the case, things become overwrought AND as is often the case I loved the book. Lol

Another of Wharton's perpetual themes is an enlightened individual who goes against the mores of society and who must pay the price. I don't know if it's because I've read so many of her books or if this particular one is written with less skill but these themes felt like hammer blows.

Micebyliz says

someone spelled Innocence wrong in the blurb.

i read a couple of chapters before realizing i read this book years ago. enjoyed it nonetheless.

Lucy says

I started this months ago, and put aside because it felt like a cheap 'nurse romance'. But I hate to be beaten by a book, so took it up again, and the Wharton magic worked. She has the knack of creating real people, a beautiful hand for descriptions of the natural world - and an unrelentingly bleak outlook on human behaviour. Don't expect any unalloyed happiness here. Once you're in it, though, it's unputdownable. Oh, and coming fresh from Ethan Frome, it's nice to see you can coast downhill safely....

Cherry Potts says

I couldn't finish this, it started well, but even by skipping bits I got ground down but the level of detail. I usually love Wharton but this is just unremitting, I stopped caring.

LauraT says

"Human life is sacred," he said sententiously.

"Ah, that must have been decreed by someone who had never suffered!" Justine exclaimed.

Mr. Tredegar smiled compassionately: he evidently knew how to make allowances for the fact that she was overwrought by the sight of her friend's suffering: "Society decreed it—not one person," he corrected.

"Society—science—religion!" she murmured, as if to herself.

"Precisely. It's the universal consensus—the result of the world's accumulated experience. Cruel in individual instances—necessary for the general welfare. Of course your training has taught you all this; but I can understand that at such a time...."

"Yes," she said, rising wearily as Wyant came in.

As the days dragged on, and Bessy's sufferings increased, Justine longed for a protesting word from Dr. Garford or one of his colleagues. In her hospital experience she had encountered cases where the useless agonies of death were mercifully shortened by the physician; why was not this a case for such treatment??
[...]

For her whole life was centred in Amherst, and she saw that he would never be able to free himself from the traditional view of her act. In looking back, and correcting her survey of his character in the revealing light of the last hours, she perceived that, like many men of emancipated thought, he had remained subject to the old conventions of feeling. And he had probably never given much thought to women till he met her—had always been content to deal with them in the accepted currency of sentiment. After all, it was the currency they liked best, and for which they offered their prettiest wares! "

This is one of Edith Wharton's few novels to deal directly with issues such as euthanasia, the problems of labor and industrial conditions, and professions for women.

Great Great Book

Dawn says

This was my first real Wharton (besides Ethan Frome and Bunner Sisters, two relatively short works). Gotta say I was impressed. It's so nice to follow early Woolf (Night & Day) with a minor Wharton. They work in different, almost oppositional, ways.

Woolf knits these complex inner thoughts that hit the surface of a character in oblique indeterminate actions. Characters like Mary and Catherine seem 'compelled' by a matrix of psychologies they don't quite grasp, making the things they do/say seem more like quicksand than volition. While Woolf definitely masters this and much more by the time she writes To the Lighthouse; the early stuff seems to sink into itself, lost in a rubble of half-thoughts, thoughts yet to thought, and beginnings that have not yet begun.

On the other hand, Wharton works on the outward societal matrix and its multifarious influences on characters' subjectivity. While this matrix is much better tuned, expansive to the point of being airy, and "beautiful" in many ways -- it's not as convoluted or interesting. Wharton's characters have been described as "two-dimensional," and while I understand the impulse to make this critique, I'm not as quick to judge. The work of bringing the outside inside is no small task, Wharton winnows the vast sociological landscape to its essential grains.

This feeling of calm came over me while reading The Fruit of the Tree, undiminished calm. This feeling wasn't due to a subdued plot (the plot could have been... I don't know... less soap-opera-ish, more elegant). This feeling hinged on Wharton's ability to digest and activate all the social data clicking around the characters. It makes the world feel more manageable, because most of the characters could actually *see* the world and bang out their relation to it. Now whether she used this power to really get at something, is another story. I'm not sure she did. But I did thoroughly enjoy this book. And I'm definitely reading more Wharton.

Christopher Sutch says

Though the characterizations are sometimes heavy-handed and the plot sometimes relies on the constraints of formula, this book has much of Wharton's flair for intricate psychological insights and memorable scenes. It's made more interesting for me by the strong theme of labor rights and the almost Marxist-socialist view she takes of labor relations (though situated firmly from an upperclass POV). Also interesting are the themes of euthanasia and drug abuse. Certainly a book that more Wharton fans and scholars should be reading.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

This may be nearly one of the last Edith Wharton novels that I had not yet read. This was, all in all, a fascinating novel too. It is much more of a 'social conditions' novel than many that Wharton has written; as it describes the working conditions in the clothing mills in New England in the late-19th century. Wharton also spends much of the novel dealing with the issue of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. I need to go back to Hermione Lee's great biography and see if I can ferret out the backstory, or impetus, for this novel.

I love anything that Ms. Wharton has written and this was no exception. Was it as good as *The Reef*, or *The House of Mirth*, or *The Age of Innocence*? No, but it was well worth reading, and quite thought-provoking particularly in light of the social discussions that we are having about issues associated with the quality of end-of-life. My mother died several years ago from ALS (i.e., 'Lou Gehrig's Disease) and it was a miserable, miserable experience for all of us--this novel meant a lot to me personally.

The Fruit of the Tree is a solid 4 of 5 stars for me.

Cindy says

Liked the plot, not the ending so much. Interesting plot and characters were "human" and reacted as such. A classic by a writer deserving her respect. Recommended for those who like vintage (clean) mystery / romance & tales that wrestle with your heartstrings.

Amy says

I was disappointed by this. It had beautiful moments, but it ended with so much artificiality and unhappiness between central characters which felt inconsistent and unbelievable as a character portrait of one the people involved (Mr Amherst). There were scenes in which I thought it was going to be like "A Room with a View" in which one finds a soaring crescendo of honesty and love clearing away all misunderstandings and social conventions, but instead in this book the social niceties/negative assumptions won to the everlasting detriment of central characters. I was impressed that Mrs. Ansell turns out to be a much more interesting and insightful person than she was originally portrayed.

Victoria says

I am a big Edith Wharton fan. I can only think of one of her novels that I disliked more than this one. About 1/3 in I almost stopped reading it. It's not because of the way it's written. It's because of the characters and the plot. I absolutely loathe John Amherst, the main male character. At the very end, I was hoping his wife (who could have done so much better) would destroy his self-serving lie and leave him. He was a zealot. He was pompous, holier than thou, massively self-absorbed despite his imagined works of 'charity'. He cared only for his own ideas. He had no interest in someone who disagreed with him. People had no value unless they supported his self-aggrandizing ideas. His works served to enslave the workers and make them his puppets. How about paying them a decent wage and letting them decide how they want to live and spend their meager spare time. Wharton has had other main characters who were not particularly admirable, i.e, 'Custom of the Country'. This one particularly annoyed me. I finished the book because I wanted to know what happened. I can only hope that Justine came into full understanding of what he was and left him.

Margaret says

This is a little-known, unusual, and fascinating Wharton. She's more generally known for her books about New York and European high society, yet here she chooses a mill town for her setting and creates a love triangle among the poor, radical assistant manager of the mill, a high-minded nurse, and a charming but shallow upper-class widow. As always, Wharton observes her characters sharply, especially Justine, the nurse, who is determined to have a life and a career for herself, to break out of the life another character calls "the plan of bringing up our girls in the double bondage of expediency and unreality, corrupting their bodies with luxury and their brains with sentiment." The plot gets a little unwieldy, but there were more than enough ideas -- about labor reform, class, euthanasia, and the lot of women -- to keep me reading with interest.

Andie says

This is definitely NOT a typical Edith Wharton novel. Instead of the foibles of the aristocracy of New York Cit, we have a book that is part a muckraking polemic on the evils of manufacturing and part lurid love story laced with adultery, drug addiction and euthanasia. Quite the topics for 1907!

John Amherst, the reform-minded assistant manager at the Hanaford textile mills, meets trained nurse Justine Brent at the hospital bedside of Dillon, an injured mill worker. They agree that Dillon would be better off dead if he cannot return to the job. Their discussion of euthanasia, sets up the novel's major incident.

Meanwhile, Amherst is asked show the mills to the new owner, Bessy Langhope Westmore, who a wealthy young widow with a young daughter. During the course of later meetings over the fate of the workers, Bessy falls in love with Amherst. Thinking that she shares his idealistic social vision and concern for the workers, Amherst marries her and begins his campaign of reforming the mills.

However, he runs into opposition from Bessy's father and her lawyer who think that all this reforming will eat into Bessy's income. After the death of their infant son, Bessy and Amherst become increasingly estranged, and he spends longer and longer periods absent from home immersed in his work. When he is home he & , Justine meet and discussed conditions in the mills. He comes to regard her as a friend. who

understands him as opposed to Bessy who lives more and more for her own pleasure.

Bessy recognizes that Amherst is drifting away from her. Hurt by his indifference, she starts going to parties with the disreputable Mrs. Fenton Carbury and indulges herself in planning a "pleasure-house." Bessy has also renewed her friendship with Justine, who tacitly understands the situation. Seeing the two drift apart and urged on by Mrs. Ansell, an older friend of Bessy's, Justine writes to Amherst that he should return home. Hurt by Amherst's refusal to do so, Bessy rides over icy roads on her horse, and suffers a near-fatal spinal injury.

Justine watches Bessy suffer helplessly at the hands of Dr. Wyant, an ambitious young doctor determined to keep his patient alive at all costs. Justine recalls her discussion with Amherst about euthanasia, and moved by Bessy's plight, she administers an overdose of morphine to Bessy.

After Bessy's death, Justine and Amherst marry, but their happiness is short-lived. because Dr. Wyant, now addicted to morphine, threatens to expose Justine's action and blackmails her. Soon he will no longer be bought off by the small sums that Justine has sent him and she must tell Amherst the truth. He is appalled at her action and she sacrifices her own happiness and leaves.

When Bessy's daughter Cicely falls ill and pines for Justine, Amherst seeks Justine out and they reconcile, but not happily for long. .

Amherst finds a set of plans for Bessy's pleasure-house and mistakes them for a new recreation hall for the millworkers and believes Bessy had at last learned to share his compassionate attitude toward the workers in the mill. When he asks Justine about Bessy's motives for building the gymnasium, Justine, who knows the truth, nonetheless lies to preserve his illusions. With the specter of the now-idealized Bessy between them, however, Justine and Amherst can never again live in the total happiness of their first few months together. Wharton has clearly written a book ahead of its time.

Dave says

“The Fruit of the Tree” by Edith Wharton is well written, but falls short of her previous effort “The House of Mirth”. Published originally on October 19th of 1907, it is split into four books. The novel touches on social progress in the form of improvements for the working class, and then moves into an interesting ethical situation when it comes to the idea of euthanasia. The last part is the most interesting part of the book for me, and it is amazing to see how little the discussion has changed in the last hundred years.

In book one, a young man, John Amherst, takes advantage of an opportunity to push for significant change in the Westwood Mills. The opportunity is in the form of Bessy Langhope, the recently widowed wife and now owner of the mills. On the heels of an accident where a worker loses an arm, he is in the position of giving her a guided tour of the mills. She shows initial interest in making life better for the workers at the mills, but she is easily dissuaded and distracted from making any real change by those who her husband had put in charge of the mills. The result is that John Amherst is let go by those men, and though Bessy offers to intercede on his behalf, he is against her taking any such action. Her last appeal to him is of a more personal nature, and that is where the book ends. Another key character is Justine, a nurse who helps make John aware of the severity of the accident.

Book two picks up after John and Bessy have married. In this section, John learns the true nature of Bessy.

Though she can be stirred to action when confronted directly with issues, when the changes at the mills start to impact her finances, she starts to move away from letting John implement the changes he knows are so desperately needed. Justine is a friend both to John and Bessy and can see them being pulled apart, largely through lack of communications, but also by their social connections. Friends of Bessy are concerned about her finances, as well as the future for her daughter Cicely from her first marriage. Another stress point between John and Bessy is the loss of their own child through a miscarriage. This chapter ends with John and Bessy becoming separated.

Book three largely centers on Bessy and Justine during the separation. Justine works to try to bring John back, but he is stubborn, and Bessy is as well. Their inability to communicate with each other is what really keeps them apart, but deep down Justine knows that they both still care for each other. When a tragic accident occurs and Bessy is suffering and likely dying, Justine does all she can to find and bring John back, but he has taken a trip to South America and is difficult to contact. Justine is concerned about Bessy's sufferings. Dry Wyant strongly believes she can recover, but ignores the suffering aspect. Dr. Garford seems to believe she won't make it, but also admits that anything could happen. Justine while treating Bessy by herself, and hearing the pleas of her patient, breaks down and gives an overdose of morphine. Shortly after, Dr. Wyant comes in and realizes what occurred. This is where book three ends.

Book four has John Amherst back and fully in charge of the mills. He treats them like a trust for Bessy's daughter Cicely, and gives credit for his reforms to Bessy and Cicely but not himself. Justine has taken on the job of taking care of Cicely, the secret of what she has done remains, with only herself and Dr. Wyant aware of what took place. John and Justine grow together, and get married, but Dr. Wyant's career and life are going in a negative direction, and he starts asking for help from Justine. She gives small amounts to try to help him, but she feels he is no longer fit to be a doctor so she refuses to help him get a position. The threat of Wyant telling John or Bessy's father still remains, and this is where the discussion of the morality of euthanasia really comes to the foreground. How will John Amherst react, he is a very moral man and loved Bessy, and how will Bessy's father react, as he still has a great deal of influence with Cicely.

The writing is good, but the story feels a bit too much like a soap opera, and the characters sometimes come across as being a bit two-dimensional. Thus, though her use of language and story transitions is improved, overall this novel does not come up to the level of "The House of Mirth" or her other great works. Overall, I am giving this book three stars, but a three star book from Wharton is still not a bad thing to read, and it is interesting to see how little has changed with regards to attitudes towards euthanasia.

Perry Whitford says

A compassionate young nurse and a factory manager committed to improving conditions for the workers find themselves in sympathy with each other from their first meeting, though their unconventional convictions will be put to the test by tragedy and fate.

The nurse is Justine Brent, a competent and beautiful woman who won't compromise her career to marry into money. The factory manager is John Amherst, who does marry into money, hoping to persuade his young heiress wife into allowing him to carry out his staff-friendly reforms at the mill she owns.

This wife is Betty Westmore, a spirited yet frivolous girl who initially becomes enamoured of her husband's plans, against the wishes of her father Mr. Langhope.

He is the type of meddlesome old hand in social dissimulation so familiar in Wharton's fiction, as is his friend, Mrs. Ansell, who says tellingly of Bessy: "a peculiarity of the infant mind is to tire soonest of the toy that no one tries to take away from it."

The unconventional conviction that Justine and John share is about the sanctity of life, which conventional science and religion uphold beyond any amount of suffering. Wharton's gut-wrenching plot puts this philosophical question to the practical test, resulting in a characteristic resolution of bitter ironies.

Wharton really is a magnificent author, even when she meanders a little as she does here. Her main character, Justine Brent, at one stage commits an act that I simply couldn't forgive, not so much for how it impacted on the central question of the novel but because, in my view it simply wasn't hers to make. And yet Wharton never lost my full investment in her story.

It helps that she writes so very, very well. She's never showy, just extremely refined and perspicuous. I could have selected any number of passages to illustrate her style, the one below is merely typical:

'Certainly Bessy Amherst had grown into the full loveliness which her childhood promised. She had the kind of finished prettiness that declares itself early, holds its own through the awkward transitions of girlhood, and resists the strain of all later vicissitudes, as though miraculously preserved in some clear medium impenetrable to the wear and tear of living.'

A troubling premise as resonant today as it was in 1907, tacked with courage and dexterity.
