

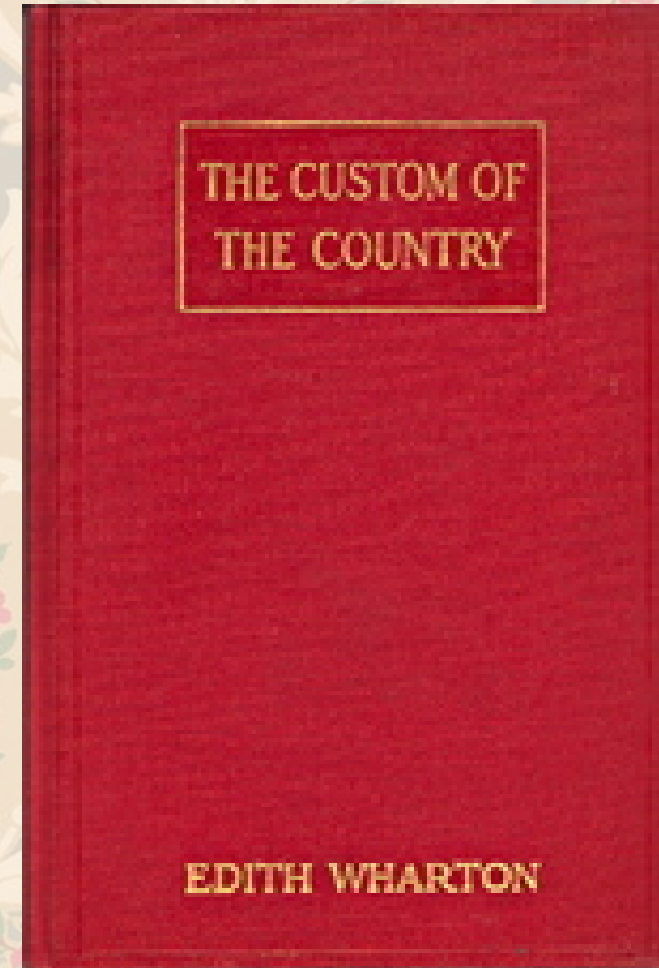
The Custom of the Country

Edith Wharton, 1913

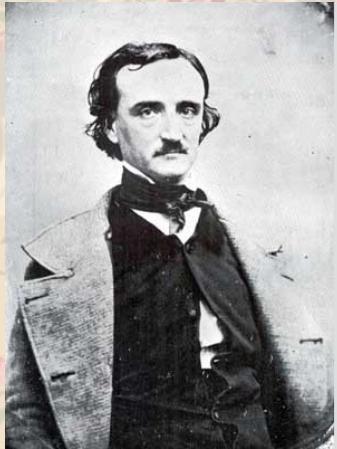


Week 8

March, 2020



Edgar Allan Poe suggested that:



"The death of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world."

Edgar Allan Poe

Edith Wharton, who loved Poe's writing, might have agreed with him about beautiful women in fiction. But most of her beautiful women characters were not dead. They were smart, beautiful, and unhappy, but not dead.

These women characters are in good company. Through the centuries, women characters have defined some of the greatest novels in the Western canon. Let's review a few. I hope you can think of others as well!

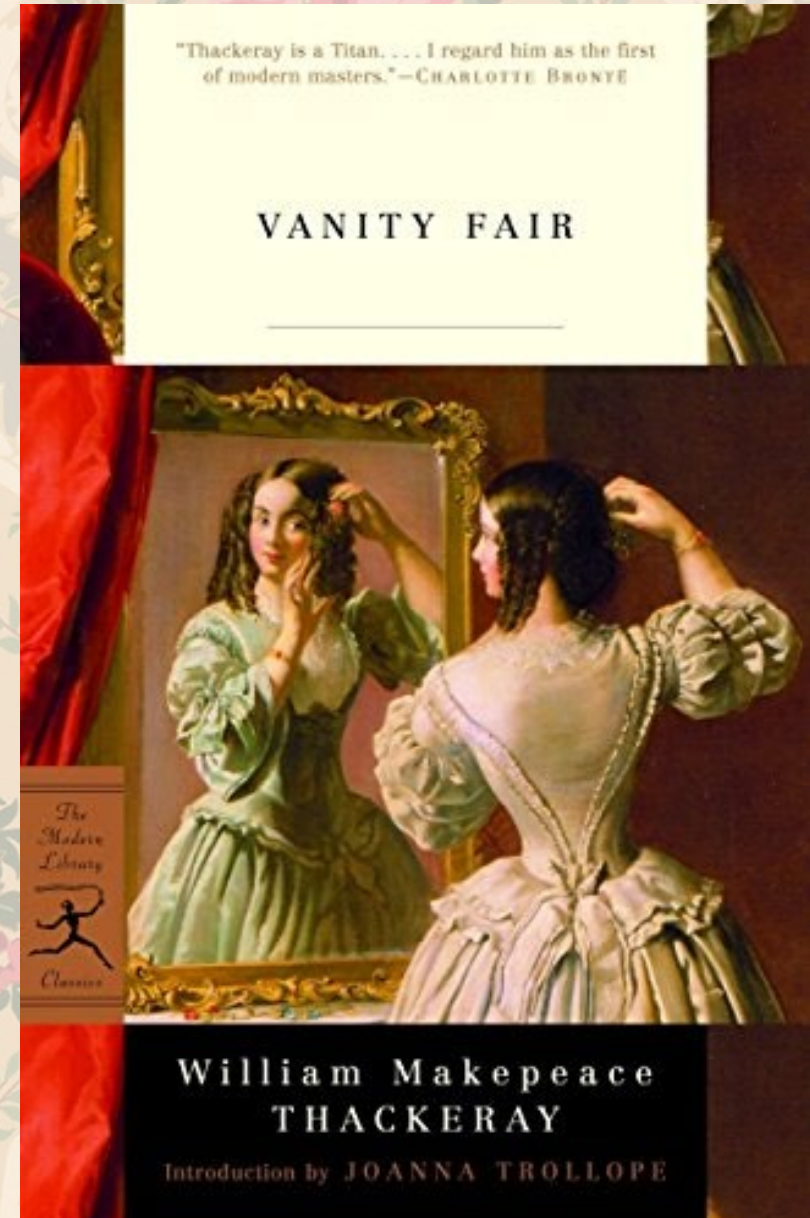


Vanity Fair

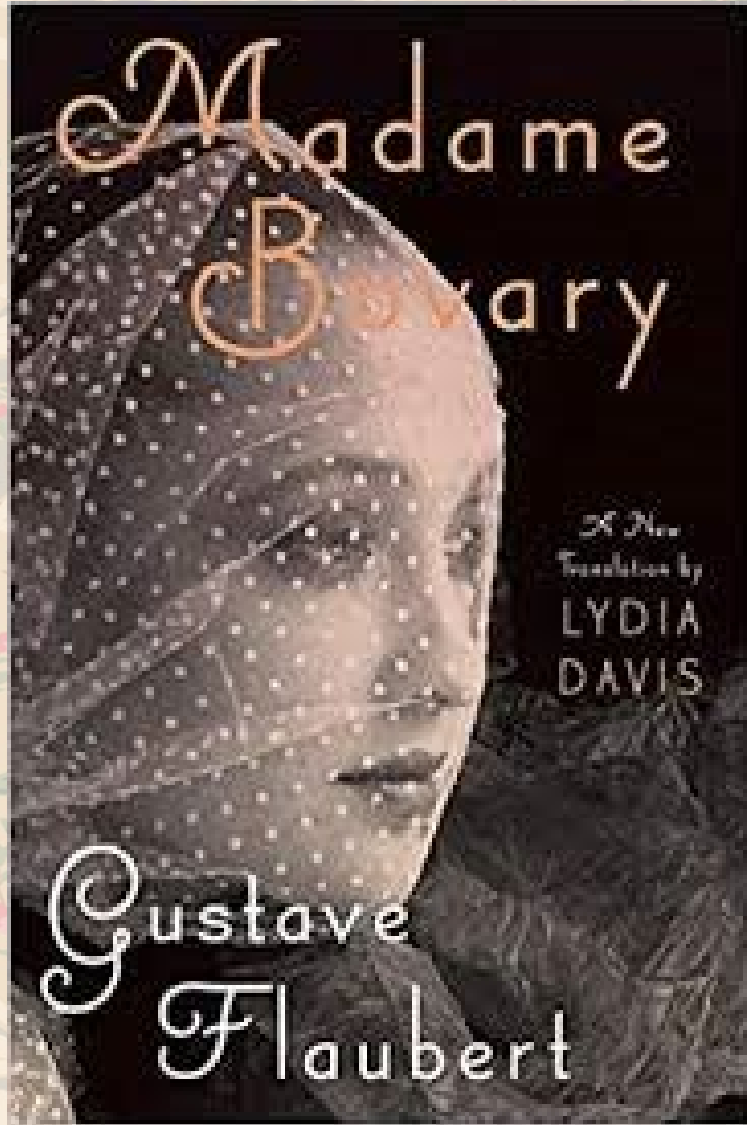
William Makepeace Thackeray, 1848

***Vanity Fair* follows the lives of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley amid their friends and families during and after the Napoleonic Wars. It was first published as a 19-volume monthly serial from 1847 to 1848, and was published as a single volume in 1848 with the subtitle *A Novel without a Hero*, reflecting Thackeray's interest in deconstructing his era's conventions regarding literary heroism. It is sometimes considered the prototype of the Victorian domestic novel. Becky Sharp anticipates many later women characters.**

The story is framed as a puppet play, and the narrator, despite being an authorial voice, is somewhat unreliable. The serial was a popular and critical success; the novel is now considered a classic and has inspired many later writers, including Edith Wharton, whose *Undine Spragg* owes much to Thackeray's remarkable Becky Sharp.



Madame Bovary **Gustave Flaubert, 1857**



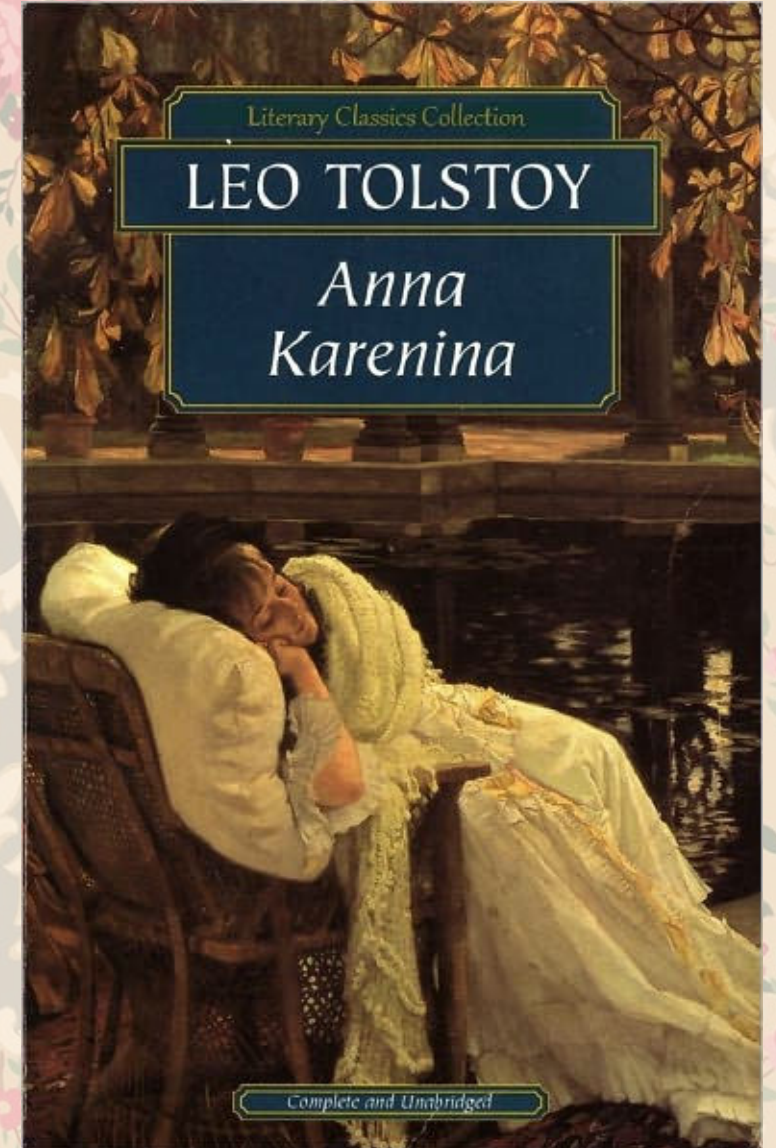
Emma Bovary is beautiful and bored, trapped in her marriage to a mediocre doctor and stifled by the banality of provincial life. An ardent devourer of sentimental novels, she longs for passion and seeks escape in fantasies of high romance, in voracious spending and, eventually, in adultery. But even her affairs bring her disappointment, and when real life continues to fail to live up to her romantic expectations, the consequences are devastating. Flaubert's erotically charged and psychologically acute portrayal of Emma Bovary caused a moral outcry on its publication in 1857. It was deemed so lifelike that many women claimed they were the model for his heroine; but Flaubert insisted: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." Edith Wharton adored this book.

Anna Karenina

Leo Tolstoy, 1878

Acclaimed by many as the world's greatest novel, *Anna Karenina* provides a vast panorama of contemporary life in Russia and of humanity in general. In it Tolstoy uses his intense imaginative insight to create some of the most memorable characters in all of literature. Anna is a sophisticated woman who abandons her empty existence as the wife of Karenin and turns to Count Vronsky to fulfill her passionate nature - with tragic consequences. Levin is a reflection of Tolstoy himself, often expressing the author's own views and convictions.

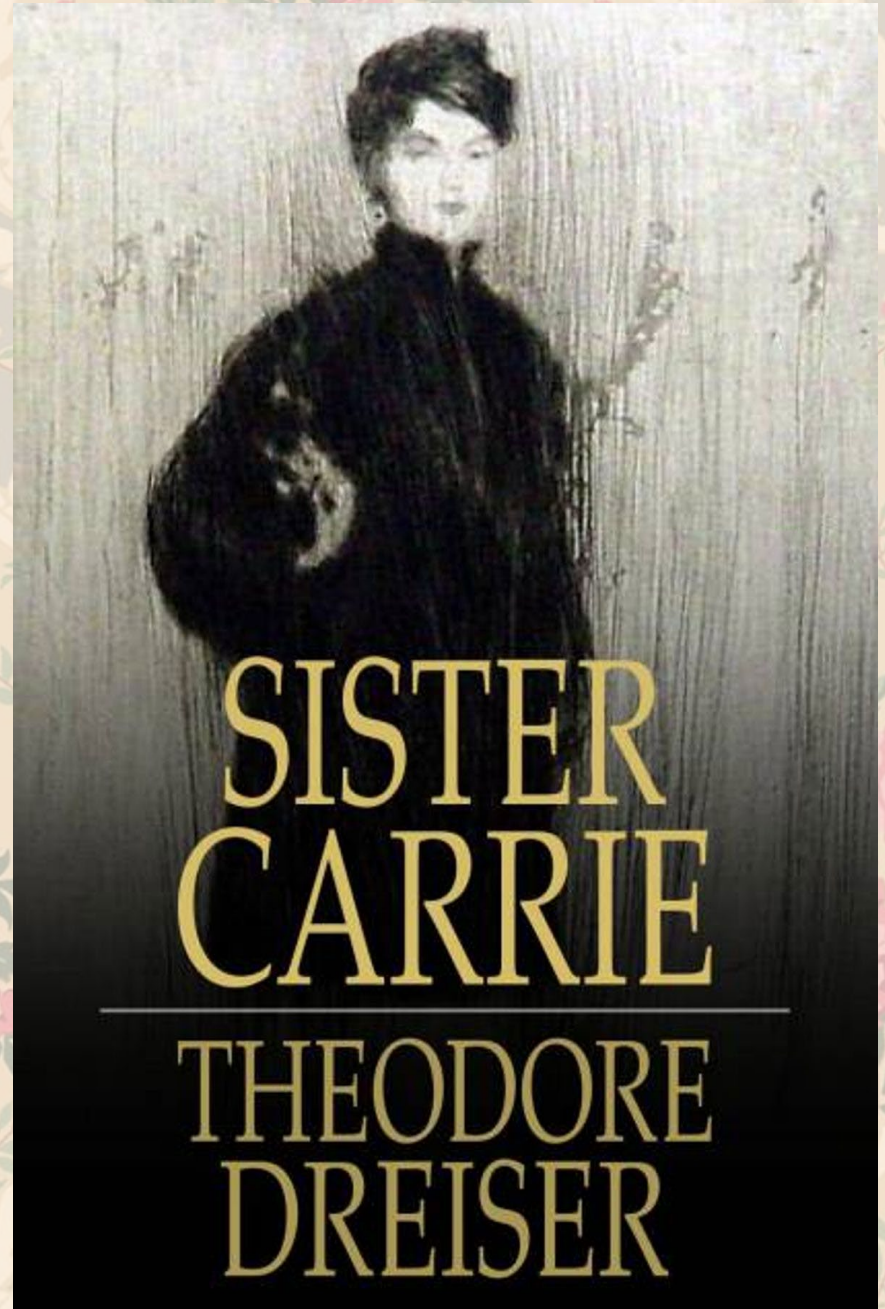
Throughout, Tolstoy points no moral, merely inviting us not to judge but to watch. As scholar Rosemary Edmonds comments, Tolstoy "leaves the shifting patterns of the kaleidoscope to bring home the meaning of the brooding words following the title, 'Vengeance is mine, and I will repay.'" Edith Wharton loved this novel.



Sister Carrie

Theodore Dreiser, 1900

In *Sister Carrie* (1900) a poor young woman moves from a farm in Wisconsin to Chicago because her parents can no longer afford to keep her. Before she gets off the train and starts looking for work in the city, Carrie Meeber has already started learning to raise herself above her working class status. She first becomes a mistress to men that she perceives as superior, and later she becomes a celebrated stage actress. A master of stark, ruthless prose, Dreiser presents Carrie as a naïve girl who becomes a savvy survivor. *Sister Carrie* is considered one of the greatest of all American urban novels. Edith Wharton loved the book.

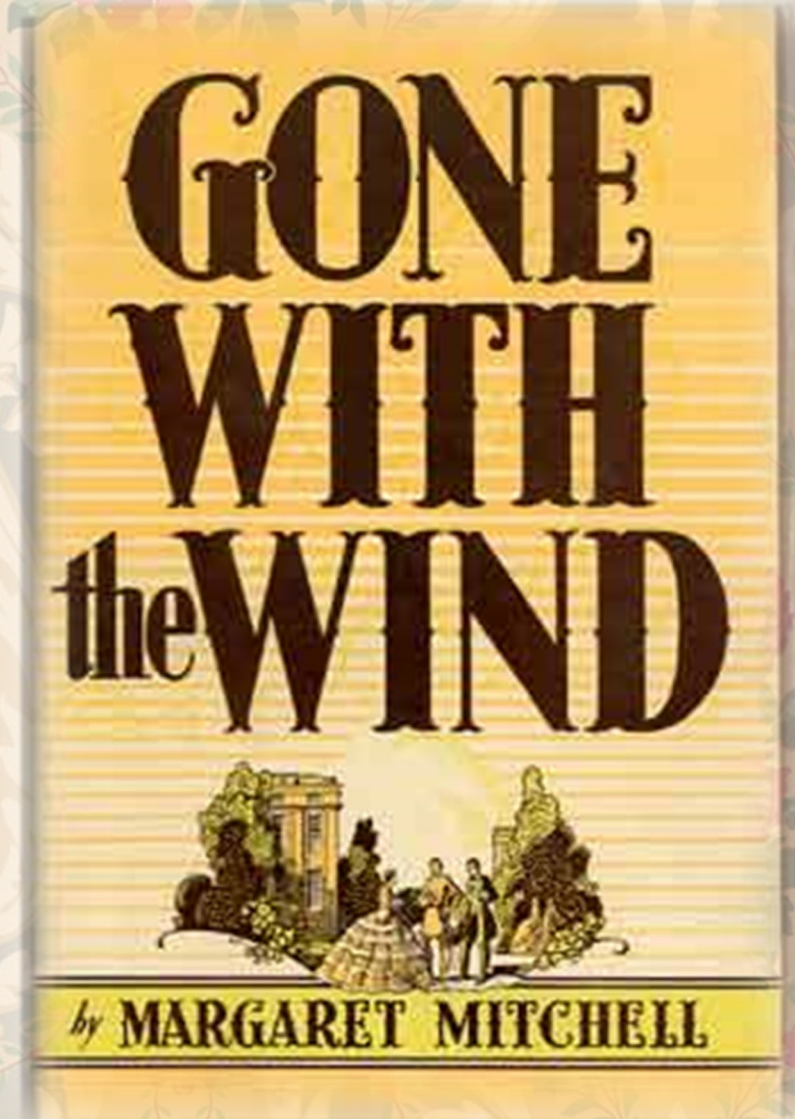


1936

***Gone with the Wind* is set in Georgia during the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era, about the struggles of young Scarlett O'Hara, the spoiled and ambitious daughter of a well-to-do plantation owner, who comes of age just before the Civil War. During the course of the novel she marries three times and has three children, all part of a story about how she learns to manipulate in order to survive and thrive as a white woman in the South.**

***Gone with the Wind* was popular with American readers from the outset and was the top American fiction bestseller in 1936 and 1937. Although Mitchell won the Pulitzer Prize in 1937, *Gone with the Wind* has undergone a reassessment in the 21st century, and remains a controversial reference point for subsequent readers and writers, both African American and white American. Scholars consider the novel to be an icon of 20th century popular culture.**

Mitchell, an avid reader of Edith Wharton's fiction, never wrote another novel. *Gone with the Wind* was adapted to film, and the 1939 Oscar-winning film is considered one of the most spectacular achievements of Hollywood.



Darling

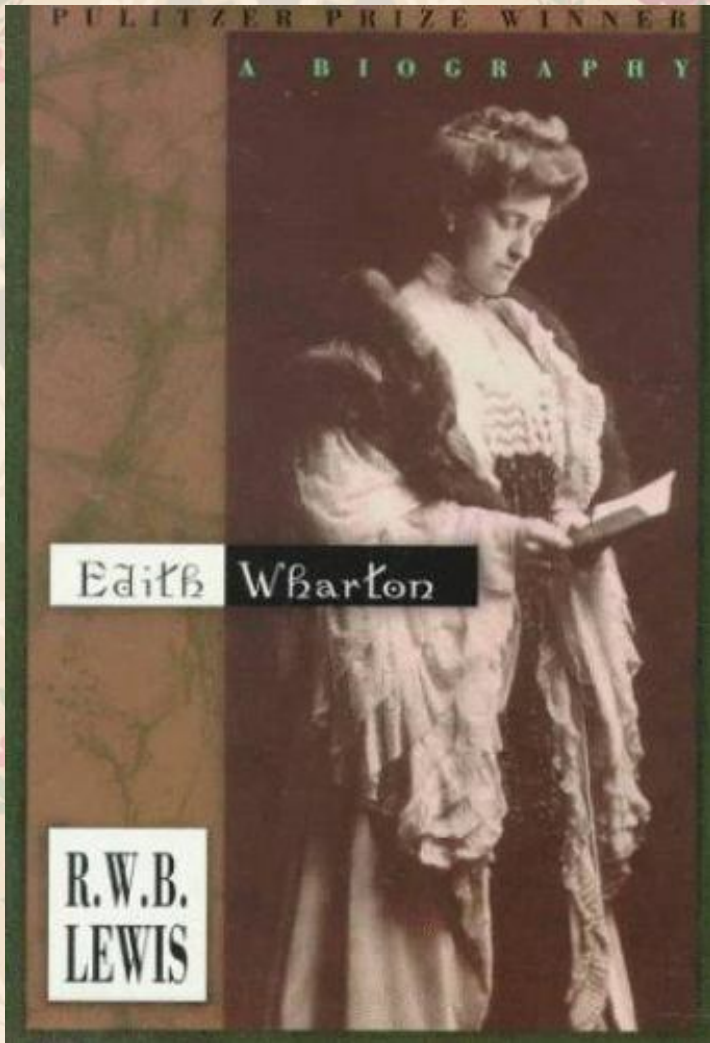


Beautiful but easily bored **Diana Scott (Julie Christie)** becomes a popular model and actress in London in the 1960s while toying with the affections of two older men, married television newsman **Robert Gold (Dirk Bogarde)** and public relations mastermind **Miles Brand (Laurence Harvey)**. Although Diana is the toast of swinging London, the dark side of fame and fortune begins to take its toll, but it proves harder to escape the mod scene than she expects. Her trajectory parallels that of **Undine Spragg** in uncanny ways.

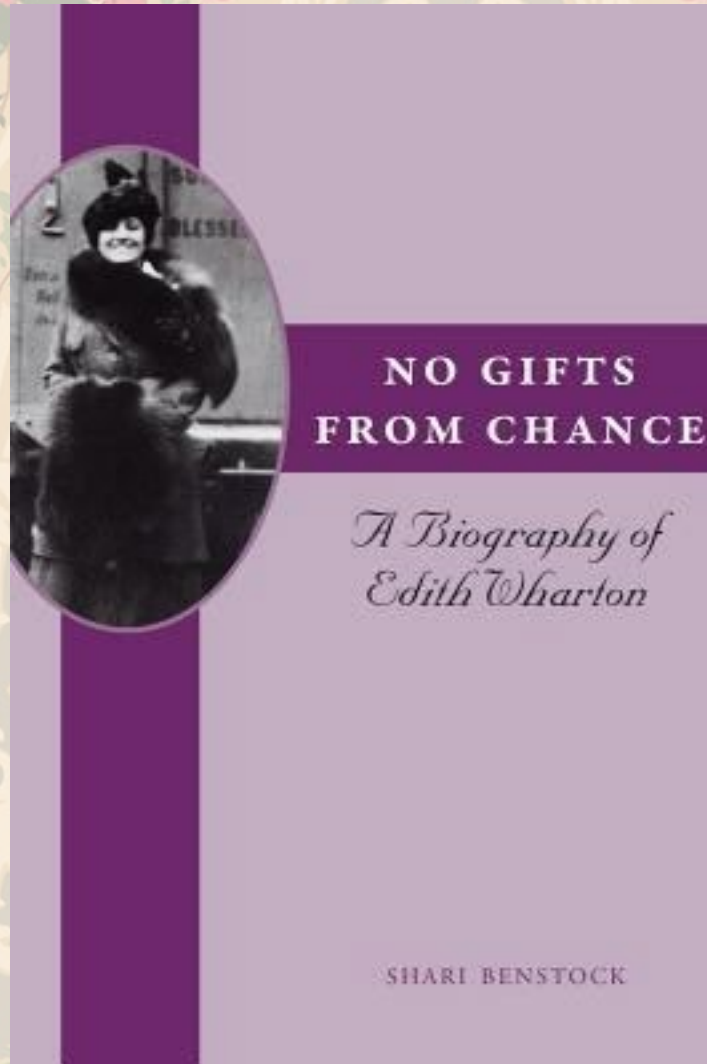
Christie and the original screenplay won many awards, including Academy Awards, in 1966.

Directed by John Schlesinger, 1965
\$3.99 rental on Amazon Prime

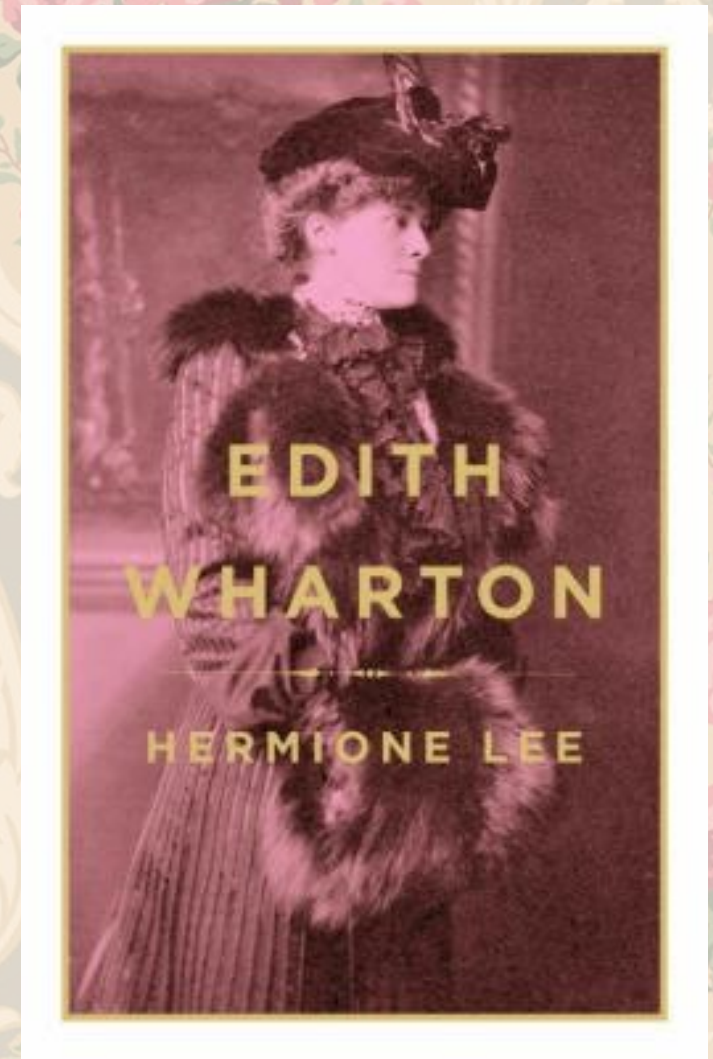
(Once again): Edith Wharton biographies



R.W.B. Lewis, 1975



Shari Benstock, 1994



Hermione Lee, 2007

Scholarly works on Wharton's Fiction

For further reading, here is a list of more lists of scholarly works, including essays on critical theory, on Wharton, and on *The Custom of the Country*. (Note: You will need to cut and paste these websites.)

<https://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/custom.html>

public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/custom.html

https://www-jstor-org.proxy1.library.eiu.edu/stable/3195117?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

<https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/49-Modern-Fiction-Studies-687.pdf>

<https://edithwhartonsociety.wordpress.com/new-books-and-articles/bibliographies/1999-2011-bibliography/>



**This is a really good
essay about *The
Custom of the Country*
from *The New Yorker*,
September, 2019:**



<https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/what-edith-wharton-knew-a-century-ago-about-women-and-fame-in-america>

(cut and paste)

The Custom of the Country **Edith Wharton, 1913**



**Thank you all for
helping to make
this such a
wonderful class!
Let's all stay
healthy, and I
hope we see
each other later
this year.**

--Ann Boswell

