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IN BETWEEN CULTURES
FRANCO-AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS IN THE WORK OF EDITH WHARTON

This thesis is a study of how the American author Edith Wharton (1862-1937) in a number of novels and short stories written between 1876 and 1937 depicts cultural encounters between Americans and Europeans, mostly Frenchmen. Chiefly concerned with *Fast and Loose*, "The Last Asset", *Madame de Treymes*, "Les Metteurs en Scène", *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*, each of which articulates ideas relevant to the theme investigated, the thesis also contains a supplementary discussion of *The Reef*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *The Mother's Recompense* and *The Buccaneers*. Borrowing terms and theoretical perspectives from Pierre Bourdieu and post-colonial literary criticism, particularly Homi Bhabha’s theories about in-betweenness, mimicry and otherness, the study contends through detailed analyses of single works that Wharton’s descriptions of Franco-American encounters are dynamic processes through which the parties involved are made aware of their own and “the other’s” distinguishing qualities and, in some significant cases, reach a heightened state of consciousness resembling Bhabha’s in-betweeness. Wharton’s cultural encounters often involve people with different levels of education and different economic and social positions, which justifies the use of Bourdieu’s method of analyzing the relationship between educational and social status in terms of different kinds of capital.

While in her early works Wharton merely intimates the contours of the cultural encounter, in mature works such as *Madame de Treymes* and *The Age of Innocence* she views it as a highly complex process the many stages of which are intimated through the use of subtle narratological techniques. Throughout her work Wharton makes intricate use of imagery and keywords, some of them testifying to her interest in anthropology, to suggest the manifold dimensions of the cultural encounter, which is seen as both tempting and repelling. Her accounts of the Franco-American encounter are complexly related to the different phases of the American political and social situation described in her novels. The American experience of the meeting of the ‘old society’ and the ‘new’ is rendered even more complex by being seen as the background against which Europeans and Americans negotiate transactions of symbolic and economic capital. In most of her works these lead to tragic or tragic-comic misunderstandings; only in her last, unfinished novel does she describe a full-fledged Euro-American identity, a successful fusion of American and European experiences.