

LITERARY PORTALS TO PRAYER

EDITH WHARTON



50
PRAYER
STARTERS

ILLUMINATED BY

THE MESSAGE®

COMPILED AND INTRODUCED BY

PATRICK T. REARDON

I cannot remember
when the grasses first spoke to me.

EDITH WHARTON



*Oh, visit the earth,
ask her to join the dance!
Deck her out in spring showers,
fill the God-River with living water.
Paint the wheat fields golden.
Creation was made for this!*

THE MESSAGE

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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER



Prayer is sometimes difficult. Perhaps we need spiritual inspiration. Something to reignite our spiritual life. A way to initiate a new and fruitful spiritual direction.

Great literature can do these things: inspire, ignite, and initiate.

Which is why ACTA Publications is publishing a series of “Literary Portals to Prayer.” The idea is simple: take insightful passages from great authors whose work has stood the test of time and illuminate each selection with a well-chosen quotation from the Bible on the same theme.

To do this, we use a relatively new translation by Eugene Peterson called *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*. It is a fresh, compelling, challenging, and faith-filled translation of the Scriptures from ancient languages into contemporary American English that sounds as if it was written yesterday. *The Message* may be new to you, or you may already know it well, but see if it doesn’t illuminate these writings of Edith Wharton in delightful ways.

We publish the books in this series in a size that can easily fit in pocket or purse and find a spot on kitchen table, bed stand, work bench, study desk, or exercise machine. These books are meant to be used in a variety of ways. And we feature a variety of authors so you can find the one or ones that can kick-start your prayer life.

So enjoy these portals to prayer by Edith Wharton illuminated by *The Message*. And look for others in this series, including Louisa May Alcott, Hans Christian Andersen, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Herman Melville, William Shakespeare, and others. Consider them, if you will, literary *lectio divina*.

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
President and Publisher
ACTA Publications

INTRODUCTION



Four photos of Edith Wharton are easy to find on the Internet. In one, she is wearing an intricately odd hat and seems the image of the stifled school marm. In two others, she looks away from the camera. The focus is on her elaborately layered clothing.

In the fourth, from 1902 when she was forty years old, Wharton sits at a desk and pensively looks out toward—but not really at—the viewer. She appears to be thinking of something other than the moment in which she finds herself.

That's the image I can relate to—Wharton as someone in the world and yet also outside it. She looks fearful, perhaps, but also courageous. Uncertain and yet stalwart. You can see her mind at work here, but for the best view you need to read her books and stories.

“A WOMAN WHO SEARCHED”

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), a writer of intense observation and keen sensitivity to the tides of human emotion, was a spiritual seeker. Often pigeon-holed as a novelist of manners, she was at a deeper level a novelist of morals, “a woman who, in life and in art, searched for religious, moral, and philosophical meaning,” writes Wharton expert Carol J. Singley.

Although relatively little has been written about Wharton's religious sentiments, Singley published a book in

1995 examining those views in depth, *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*.

“Edith Wharton,” she writes, “was born an Episcopalian; she inherited a Calvinist sensibility; and she flirted with transcendental philosophies.” She toyed with agnosticism and the teachings of ancient Greeks. She found great meaning in art and culture. “She arrived finally at the door of Catholicism, but neither it nor Protestantism—whether homespun or genteel—could fully answer her spiritual needs.”

Sisley reports that Wharton’s library contained more books about religion than any other subject. Yet, as a writer, Wharton never acted as if she were someone with all the answers. Indeed, Singley writes, “Wharton is not didactic, insistent, or judgmental in her treatment of moral issues. On the contrary, she is circumspect to the point of appearing tentative; she strikes a note of inquiry rather than of declaration.”

Wharton owned a well-worn, leather-bound copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, a fifteenth-century work that, for half a millennium, has been one of the most important devotional works in Catholicism after the Bible. It is filled with numerous passages that she marked regarding the mystery of God’s work of salvation. “Paradoxically, then,” writes Singley, “Wharton—who had always prided herself on rationality—valued religion at the end of her life because it embraced mystery.”

Wharton was so enamored of Catholicism that she planned social activities so they wouldn’t conflict with attend-

ing church on holy days. Yet as much as she felt a kinship with the church, she never converted or actively practiced the faith.

Wharton, bright and passionate, was uncomfortable with the attitude of the Catholic Church toward women. She was, Singley writes, “critical of the Pauline doctrine, which granted women moral equality with men but prescribed their social subordination....”

Like most seekers, Wharton was never truly at peace. “In the end,” writes Singley, “Catholicism was no more the right faith for Wharton than any other, but it is fitting that she embraced it in her final years because it embodied so many of the tensions with which she had struggled throughout her life.” Nonetheless, Wharton never officially joined the Catholic Church.

CLOSELY WOVEN FABRICS

The greatness of Wharton’s art has long been overlooked. Over the past century, she has been dismissed as a woman novelist and as someone who specialized in the novel of manners, as if a work such as *The Age of Innocence* was simply about the etiquette and expectations of society.

Although she hasn’t gotten her due, Wharton is on a level with the other great U.S. novelists. As a storyteller, she is subtle and nuanced. The most important action in her narratives takes place in the minds and hearts of her characters. Her subject isn’t so much the world as our perceptions of the world and our search to find our place in that world. And at

the heart of all of her works is the question: What does it all mean?

Wharton's novels and her stories are closely woven fabrics. A seemingly simple comment made two-thirds of the way through a book will tie back to the intricate series of events that led up to that moment and tie forward to all that is to come. Like my life, like your life, Wharton's women and men don't act in a vacuum. They are the sum of their many choices.

Wharton tackles the same topics the Bible deals with—the fabric of human existence, the quest for meaning, the often dichotomous calls of the heart and head. And those are the topics addressed in the excerpts in this book, which come from her novels, short stories, poetry, non-fiction and autobiography.

Like all great artists, Wharton looks at the world with open eyes and an open mind. Her characters are a mix of good and bad, of hope and despair, of fear and bravery. They often fall short.

But, then, don't all of us?

Patrick T. Reardon
St. Gertrude's Church
Chicago, Illinois

EDITH WHARTON



SELECTIONS FROM NOVELS AND NOVELLAS

The Age of Innocence, 1920

Bunner Sisters, 1916

The Custom of the Country, 1913

Ethan Frome, 1911

The Fruit of the Tree, 1907

The Glimpses of the Moon, 1922

The House of Mirth, 1905

The Mother's Recompense, 1925

The Reef, 1912

Sanctuary, 1903

Summer, 1917

The Touchstone, 1900

The Valley of Decision, 1902

FROM STORIES

"Coming Home," 1915

"The Hermit and the Wild Woman," 1908

"The House of the Dead Hand," 1904

"The Long Run," 1909

"Mrs. Manstey's View," 1891

"The Triumph of Night," 1914

FROM POETRY

"All Souls Night," 1909

"Survival," 1909

FROM NON-FICTION

A Backward Glance, 1934

In Monaco, 1920

HARD TIMES

At the hospital they were protestingly admitted by Mrs. Ogan, though the Official "visitors' hour" was not till the afternoon; and beside the sufferer's bed, Amherst saw again that sudden flowering of compassion which seemed the key to his companion's beauty: as though her lips had been formed for consolation and her hands for tender offices. It was clear enough that Dillon, still sunk in a torpor broken by feverish tossings, was making no perceptible progress toward recovery; and Mrs. Ogan was reduced to murmuring some technical explanation about the state of the wound while Bessy hung above him with reassuring murmurs as to his wife's fate, and promises that the children should be cared for.

THE FRUIT OF THE TREE, CHAPTER SIX



HARD TIMES

All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us. We have plenty of hard times that come from following the Messiah, but no more so than the good times of his healing comfort—we get a full measure of that, too.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5



BREATHING ROOM

She was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded. She loved the roughness of the dry mountain grass under her palms, the smell of the thyme into which she crushed her face, the fingering of the wind in her hair and through her cotton blouse, and the creak of the larches as they swayed to it.

She often climbed up the hill and lay there alone for the mere pleasure of feeling the wind and of rubbing her cheeks in the grass. Generally at such times she did not think of anything, but lay immersed in an inarticulate well-being.

SUMMER, CHAPTER TWO



BREATHING ROOM

God, listen to me shout,
 lend an ear to my prayer.
When I'm far from anywhere,
 down to my last gasp,
I call out, "Guide me
 up High Rock Mountain!"
You've always given me breathing room,
 a place to get away from it all,
A lifetime pass to your safe-house,
 an open invitation as your guest.

PSALM 61:1-4



LIVE GENEROUSLY AND GRACIOUSLY

The fire, however, was soon put out, and the frightened occupants of the house, who had fled in scant attire, reassembled at dawn to find that little mischief had been done.... In fact, the chief sufferer by the fire was Mrs. Manstey, who was found in the morning gasping with pneumonia, a not unnatural result, as everyone remarked, of her having hung out of an open window at her age in a dressing-gown. It was easy to see that she was very ill, but no one had guessed how grave the doctor's verdict would be, and the faces gathered that evening about Mrs. Sampson's table were awestruck and disturbed. Not that any of the boarders knew Mrs. Manstey well; she "kept to herself," as they said, and seemed to fancy herself too good for them; but then it is always disagreeable to have anyone dying in the house and, as one lady observed to another: "It might just as well have been you or me, my dear."

But it was only Mrs. Manstey; and she was dying, as she had lived, lonely if not alone. The doctor had sent a trained nurse, and Mrs. Sampson, with muffled step, came in from time to time; but both, to Mrs. Manstey, seemed remote and unsubstantial as the figures in a dream. All day she said nothing; but when she was asked for her daughter's address she shook her head. At times the nurse noticed that she seemed to be listening attentively for some sound which did not come; then again she dozed.

"MRS. MANSTAY'S VIEW," COLLECTED STORIES



LIVE GENEROUSLY AND GRACIOUSLY

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

MATTHEW 5:43-48



Patrick T. Reardon is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region, its planning issues and literary scene for more than forty years. For much of that time, he was a reporter at the *Chicago Tribune*. He has also written extensively about his Catholic faith in articles and essays in a variety of newspapers and magazines. His books include *Daily Meditations (with Scripture) for Busy Dads*; *Catholic and Starting Out: 5 Challenges and 5 Opportunities*; and *Faith Stripped to Its Essence: A Discordant Pilgrimage through Shusaku Endo's Silence*. His website is patricktreardon.com, and his "Pump Don't Work" blog is at <http://patricktreardon.com/blog/>.



LITERARY: pertaining to or of the nature of books and writing, especially those classed as literature

PORTAL: a door, gate, or entrance, especially one of imposing power or utility

PRAYER: the lifting up of the mind and heart to divine reality

TO ILLUMINATE: to brighten, light up, make lucid or clear



Edith Wharton, a writer of intense observation and keen sensitivity to the tides of human emotion, was a spiritual seeker whose personal journey took her through a variety of philosophies and Christian denominations. The ultimate subject of her novels, novellas, stories, poetry, and non-fiction is our search to find our place in the world. In this volume of *Literary Portals to Prayer*, each verso (left) page contains an excerpt from one of her works, and the opposite recto (right) page illuminates the selection with a Bible verse from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson.

This book is the perfect gift for fans of Wharton, as well as those who have yet to discover some of her writings, and will serve as a welcome resource for those seeking a way to reignite their prayer life. Think of it as literary *lectio divina*.

Other volumes in this series include Louisa May Alcott, Hans Christian Andersen, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Herman Melville, and William Shakespeare.

Prayer/Literary



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