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# Oppositional Nationalities: Edith Wharton, the American ‘Frenchwoman’

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## Abstract

In 1925, Virginia Woolf published her essay "American Fiction" in the London Saturday Review, containing the notable exemption of Edith Wharton, a writer who she considered as "not American". Having grown up in both Europe and America, Wharton does indeed seem to have had a national identity in a state of flux, a question explored in her life writing, essays and fiction. In the 1918 publication *French Ways and their Meaning*, Wharton juxtaposed these two nationalities against each other, stating that national differences always need to be understood within context. The text illustrates ways in which Americans and the French misunderstand each other, a notion reflected in *The Age of Innocence*, *The Reef*, and, most notably, in her short story "Madame de Treymes" amongst others. As a backdrop to her life France played a strong role and it is indeed in this country that Wharton lived: playing as a young child, buying property, having a lover, divorcing her husband, settling down and eventually dying in her home in Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt. I wish to examine the "New Frenchwoman" that Wharton describes in *French Ways and their Meaning*, exploring how this figure appears throughout her life and writings, particularly in her short story *Madame de Treymes*, published in 1907. I will investigate the juxtaposition between the American Fanny Malrive and the Frenchwoman Madame de Treymes/ in order to discover how Wharton used this concept in her own understanding of her marriage and her life. One can ask, was Edith Wharton "not American" after all?

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