
Entering Middlebrow Territory: Edith Wharton's The Glimpses of the Moon and its Commercial Afterlives

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Abstract

Describing emerging publishing markets in the 1920s, Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith observe that many "women writers . . . successfully made transitions between literature and the burgeoning technologies of magazine publication, book clubs, advertising, radio, and film, institutions that deliberately targeted 'middle' audiences for maximum distribution and profits" (Middlebrow Moderns 4). Edith Wharton, most commonly identified with urbane works like the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence* (1920), actively participated in this movement. In this paper, I explore the author's foray into middlebrow territory by examining her 1922 novel *The Glimpses of the Moon* and its afterlives in other media. I argue that *Glimpses*, in both its original and adapted forms, uniquely engages the conference's theme of "Border Crossing." In addition to revealing Wharton's experimentation with popular genres, particularly romance, the novel poses meaningful questions about globalization. Wharton populates *Glimpses* with "denationalized" (40) cosmopolitan characters who wander through a variety of U.S. and European landscapes in search of stable identities. How, I ask, might Wharton's own conflicted views towards citizenship—she wrote the novel as a U.S. subject residing permanently in France, where she spent the last three decades of her life—have shaped the novel's transnational concerns? The history of the novel's adaptation also raises questions about crossing borders, both generic and linguistic. Wharton was pressured to adopt popular conventions when she wrote *Glimpses* for serialization in *The Pictorial Review*, and while she bristled at editors' suggestions, the resulting bestseller appealed to artists working in other media. *Glimpses* was adapted into a 7-reel silent film by Famous Players-Lasky in 1923, which in turn inspired a popular jazz ballad by composer Tom Johnstone. Significantly, these media forms, which relied less on language and more on image and sound, were capable of traversing linguistic boundaries and therefore reaching an expanded, international audience. The story of *Glimpses* and its afterlives, then, is also the story of an established author reinventing her career to survive within an evolving literary marketplace.

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