

What is the novel about?

In Marilyn French's introduction to the novel in the Virago Modern Classics edition she writes,

'Each segment [novella] deals with one decade from the 1840s through the 1870s and the work as a whole suggests the changes in manners that occurred in that forty-year period. The novels are rich with details of setting, dress and customs, but they also convey the ambience of a past era. Most important, they portray the people of this wealthy class in all their complacency, superiority, and insularity, their moral blindness.' (p.vii)

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1. As you read the novellas, make a list of the settings, dress and customs that you find, their importance in each text and whether you feel that they help 'convey the ambience of a past era.'
2. Do you agree with French that the characters are portrayed 'in all their complacency, superiority, and insularity, their moral blindness'? Give reasons for your decisions.
3. French goes on to write, 'Yet, as is always true of rigid societies, it was less behaviour than appearance that really mattered; whatever people actually did, it was what other people knew and thought that determined their social standing ... Since appearances were more important than reality, manners were more important than morality, and most important of all was conformity, in behaviour and taste.' (p.vii) Discuss these ideas in relation to the novellas and consider to what extent you find this a text of manners over morality.
4. The first novella, 'False Dawn', French writes, 'strikes a theme that crops up throughout the volume – the ignorance and provincialism of American taste.' (p.viii) Explore this suggestion and discuss whether or not you agree with it both in this text and in the other three.
5. 'The Old Maid', according to French, is a 'subtle condemnation of the sexual mores of that class [old New York society]' (p.xi). Do you find this a fair judgement of the text? Discuss your ideas.
6. French writes, 'Wharton never became a conscious, outspoken feminist, but she never stopped pointing at the conditions of life for upper- and middle-class women ... Through a young male narrator, Wharton offers in 'New Year's Day' her most explicit protest about this situation.' (p.xiii-xiv) Do you agree that this last novella is about the conditions of life for women at the time?
7. Which themes do you consider the most important in these novellas? Do you find many overlaps between the stories or are they very separate and individual? What 'progress' or otherwise can you identify through the decades of the texts?
8. If you had to summarise the themes and ideas of the novellas in two words which two would you choose? You might consider some of these: men/women; morals/manners; wealth/poverty; society/isolation. What others can you think of? Which summarise most accurately the themes of the novellas for you?