

Mary's gave special attention to the Spanish language, partly due to the number of Hispanic and Spanish students. Not only does she trace the importance of Spanish in St. Mary's, but also everything connected to the organization, administration and staff of the institution.

Finally, chapters 9 and 10 complete the panoramic view of the teaching of Spanish and other modern languages within North America prior to 1848. In chapter 9 she refers to colleges in the north, such as Princeton, Rutgers, Dartmouth etc. and the development of their traditional curriculums that made room for modern languages. Then she goes on to the institutions of the Upper Midwest, which gave preferential treatment to French and German due to their cultural tradition in the area. Similarly, many institutions of the Lower Midwest, such as North Carolina State University, also taught French and German. However, others included Spanish, for example, the University of South Carolina, the University of Georgia and many other private universities which followed the model established by St. Mary's. The last territories she refers to in chapter 10 are Florida, Louisiana and Texas, those with a direct connection with Spain. Here she deals with the linguistic and cultural manifestations of the Spanish and French settlements. She studies the 'anglisation' suffered by Louisiana, Florida and Texas before, during and after the annexation of the territories by the United States in 1804, 1819 and 1845, respectively.

The summary provided above does not do justice to the comprehensive study this book entails. Each chapter carefully examines the institutions, curriculums, scholars, books, and communities that played a role in the advance of Spanish as a second language in the U.S. It fills the gap in recorded history of the period within which Spanish began to be taught. The precision with which the book encompasses such a vast area of study and the extensive research undertaken has produced an outstanding historical and applied linguistic reference book.

**Wharton, Edith. *La carta*, 1999. Selection, translation and epilogue by Teresa Gómez Reus. Barcelona: Clásicos del Bronce. 176 págs.**

Reviewed by M<sup>a</sup> Dolores Martínez Reventós  
University of Murcia

The compilation of short narrative pieces titled *La carta* puts together for the first time in Spain some of Edith Wharton's best well-known short stories, which, surprisingly enough, had not yet been translated into Spanish. If we consider this fact surprising – even unbelievable – it is because, although Edith Wharton's fame is based on her novels, such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911) or *The Age of Innocence* (1920), her short narratives are an essential part of her literary output. She published a total of eighty five short stories, and no less than twenty of them have been highly acclaimed by Anglo-American critics. Hence the need for this anthology, which contains some of her most memorable pieces.

In her epilogue, the editor and translator, Teresa Gómez Reus, regrets "esa pérdida que supone traducirla" and comments that it is not always possible to translate "de manera satisfactoria todo el contenido de las vivencias sabrosas, sutiles ironías y evocaciones

misteriosas de que están llenas las páginas de Edith Wharton" (pp. 161-162). It is true that translation is interpretation, and that any translation whatsoever is only able to show the original through a sort of mist, hoping that the content is kept sufficiently "intact". I do not, nevertheless, agree that this unavoidable vicissitude of the art of translation implies necessarily a loss, for even through the mist of translation the reader of these short stories can perceive clearly what Jung called the *anima*, the exclusive individuality of a person; in this case, of a certain worldview inextricably linked to a style. This selection of tales has successfully "translated" Edith Wharton's *anima*, her stylistic and thematic nuances.

*La carta* contains five stories, written in different periods of the author's life, belonging to different genres and narrative styles. Thus, the comic style of "Los otros dos" ("The Other Two", 1904) and "El último recurso" ("The Last Asset", 1908) contrasts with "El grano de la granada" ("Pomegranate Seed", 1936), a ghost story. But it is precisely the almost impossible mixture of difference and similitude that characterizes this book what makes it so fascinating. What seduces the reader is its variety and, at the same time, its coherence –in my opinion, the experience of reading *La carta* can be compared to the reading of a certain type of postmodern novel, in which chapters do not follow a straight line but whose overall effect is one of a deep unity of intention.

Indeed all the tales in this anthology are linked by various elements that produce the effect of an essential coherence. One aspect that is specially noticeable is Wharton's rejection of external realism; what her contemporary Virginia Woolf called "material realism", which reduces the complexity of life to its external aspects, easily noticed and, therefore, easily represented. In this sense, "Su capacidad de fijar la mirada sobre las personas y el modo en el que se relacionan entre sí para buscar lo que hay más allá de las apariencias" is, in José María Guelbenzu's words<sup>1</sup>, one of the dominant features of these short pieces. In a more ostensible way, the stories in this collection all share the presence of one or several letters that have the power to start or decide their dramatic development.

Early in the XXth century epistolary communication was very usual: a quick and practical way of sending messages; the equivalent of a phone call or an email nowadays. This apparently trivial element is what Teresa Gómez has chosen as the support that lends structural unity to the book. All the letters that appear in the stories are short messages: an appointment with a lover (in "Las fiebres romanas"), legal notifications regarding divorce matters ("Los otros dos", "Almas tardías"), a note announcing someone's arrival ("El último recurso")... The only exception are the nine letters in the last story, "El grano de la granada", whose content is never revealed due to their supernatural origin. But even these ghostly letters are intuitively felt by the reader as being short messages. No letter in *La carta* contains self-analysis or narration of current everyday life. Yet, in the ironical way that characterizes Edith Wharton's writing, these brief and prominently practical messages open a window into the inner life of the characters, allowing the deep, intimate psychological representation typical of today's letters. Every letter in *La carta* is unexpected and produces disconcerting effects, in the reader as much as in the characters, despite their succinct nature. They allow the reader to make out, in Edith Wharton's words, "ese breve destello de interiores iluminados que un mensajero pudiera percibir a través de una puerta entornada".<sup>2</sup>

In "Almas tardías" the plot is apparently conventional, telling the story of the

elopement of an unhappily married woman with a writer, searching for a life away from the rigid codes of the society to which they belong. For her – an honest person, able to rationalize her emotions – love is inextricably linked to freedom as much as to emotional closeness, but the concrete situation where the lovers find themselves (in a Swiss hotel, registered under false pretences as a married couple) forces her to reassess her predicament: *one the one hand she desires free love; on the other hand, she is convinced that marriage helps to protect the couple from excessive introspection.* Facing this dilemma, she feels alone, experiencing an inner sense of catastrophe.

The letter that the protagonist gets (referred to as "la cosa") is what gives impetus to the plot. Although it announces her divorce, the reader is disconcerted by its effect on her: she receives it with a feeling of anguish for it makes her aware that society demands as the price for her rehabilitation that she goes from one man to another (as "a thing", as a letter that goes from one hand to another), and this realization leads her both to the perception of the injustice of her predicament and to the conviction that only the repression of her emotions is able to protect her. Besides the subtle expression of psychological nuances in the mind of the protagonist, the author's great artistic skill is shown in the way she constructs the way out of her heroine's conflictive situation: at the end of the story, it is from the point of view of her lover that the reader sees the result of the woman's decision – naturally, to marry him, for she needs the social acceptance that is rejected by her on ideological grounds. As in the novel *The House of Mirth*, the heroine's desire to get out of the rigid mould imposed by a conventional society is curtailed by reality: a part of her self is still tied up to convention, to appearance. The self that chooses to marry her lover is "external", social; nevertheless, in a subtle way, Wharton makes the reader see that the barrier between the external and the internal self is blurred, that, to a large extent, we are what we do. Therefore, the pressure of the social environment overdetermines the psychological portrayal of Wharton's female characters.

In "Los otros dos" there appear themes repeated in "Almas tardías": again, the heroine aspires to social recognition through marriage; again, a letter of legal nature will act as a catalyst of the characters' feelings and as the impetus to the plot. The letter – concerning the visiting rights of the protagonist's first husband, her daughter's father – causes a turmoil of feelings and doubts in her third husband, whom the twice-divorced protagonist has just married. As in "Almas tardías", Wharton reveals in a subtle and ironical way the husband's lack of knowledge of the woman he thinks he loves. In this context, the letter, which eventually lets him meet his two predecessors, is seen by him as the key that opens the secret chamber of a woman he believed he knew and possessed. But here the letter does not only act as the key that allows him access to his wife's past – showing him previously unseen aspects of her personality –: it will also be the torch that throws light in the inner space of his own feelings of disappointment in the face of a marriage that, ironically, he had represented in terms of exclusive possession.

In "Las fiebres romanas", there reappears the theme of how little we know about the people we share our lives with. The new element in this short piece is that the protagonists are two elderly women who, despite having been "close" friends since childhood, fifty years later come to the realization that they hardly know each other. There reappears the theme of social respectability, of the empty conventions that limit the human being, above

all women, and that are again the target of Wharton's ironical attack. In this short story, two American ladies, who have a casual encounter in Rome after having lost contact for several years, remember the past together sitting opposite the Coliseum, and in the process of remembrance, there come to the surface virulent feelings that time has not managed to erase. In this story, the letter does not act as the impetus to the plot, but as its dramatic climax, revealing a passion that had been kept secret for decades.

"El grano de la granada" is the only story with more than one letter – there are nine, in fact – but, as the heroine remarks, "eran tan iguales en apariencia que se habían confundido todas en su mente, convirtiéndose en una sola: 'la carta'" (p. 131). Although this short piece is quite different from the four previous ones, belonging to the genre of the ghost story, besides containing numerous letters, it is linked to the others in one important way: these letters, like the others in this collection, fulfil the function of opening a window into the characters' psychology. Furthermore, as in "Las fiebres romanas", this story represents relations between women (while men are absent) that are not stereotyped. Here the relation between the protagonist and her mother-in-law is excellent: there is love, they get on and understand each other exceedingly well and are even portrayed as being in complicity. In other words, the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship in this tale is at the opposite extreme of the usual cultural representations of this type of relationship.

But the most surprising aspect of "El grano de la granada" is that, through the motif of the letter, what the reader makes out is not only the psychology of characters involved in complex interpersonal relationships, but the unconscious itself, what Virginia Woolf called "the dark places of psychology", which, precisely for being so badly lit, for having such difficult access, lend themselves well to be treated in the genre of the ghost story. It seems rather appropriate that this should be the closing story of the collection, for, as I see it, it constitutes the climax of the exploration of the darkest and most invisible elements of the psyche; in fact, the content of the letter remains invisible, inaccessible, even when at the end of the story the protagonist decides to open the last of the disturbing letters addressed to her husband and finds that the writing is illegible, ghostly. Like the protagonist, the reader is left only with a number of hypothesis about the content of the letter, as in the interpretation of the unconscious.

To conclude, *La carta*, as the rest of Edith Wharton's work, shows what the author called "the underground currents of existence", above all regarding women's subjectivity, which, until the turn of the XIXth century had not been sufficiently represented.

#### Notes

1. See José María Guelbenzu's review of *La carta*, "La maestría de Edith Wharton", *El País*. Literary supplement *Babelia*, 6th November 1999

2. This quote belongs to one of the short stories in this anthology, "El ultimo recurso", page 61.