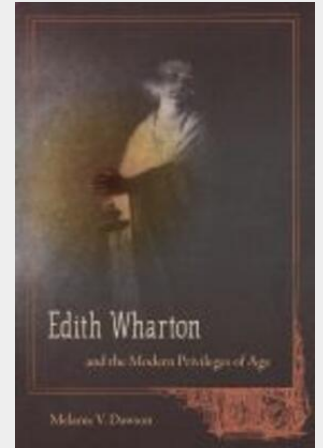


Dawson

Edith Wharton and the Modern Privileges of Age

Providing a counterpoint to readings of modern American culture that focus on the cult of youth, *Edith Wharton and the Modern Privileges of Age* focuses on representations of modern American identities past early youth in twentieth-century literature. Looking at the works of Edith Wharton and her contemporaries, Melanie Dawson argues that obsessions with age and the narrative conflicts they generated act as central narratives characterizing a popular United States modernity. Dawson examines how representations of aging connect the work of Edith Wharton to writings by a number of modern authors, including Willa Cather, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Zora Neale Hurston, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Floyd Dell, Eugene O'Neill, and Gertrude Atherton. For these writers, age-based ideologies filter through narratives of mourning for youth lost in the Great War, the trauma connected to personal change, the contested self-determination of the aged, the perceived problem of middle-aged sexuality, fantasies of rejuvenation, and persistent patterns of patriarchal authority. The work of these writers shows that as the generational ascendancy of some groups was imagined to operate in tandem with disempowerment of others, the charged dynamics of age gave rise to contests about property and authority. Constructions of age-based values also reinforced gender norms, producing questions about personal value that were directed toward women of all ages. By interpreting Edith Wharton's and her contemporaries' works in relation to age-based anxieties, Dawson sets Wharton's work at the center of a vital debate about the contested privileges associated with age in contemporary culture.



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