

Elif S. Armbruster. *Domestic Biographies: Stowe, Howells, James, and Wharton at Home*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011. 196pp.

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Looking at one hundred years of realism from 1836 when Harriet Beecher Stowe married to 1937 when Edith Wharton died, *Domestic Biographies* investigates the lives, homes, and writing of four literary magnates: Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. Elif S. Armbruster's first book, a mixture of biography, domestic description (of interiors and exteriors), and literary criticism, tracks the correlation between the four American authors' writing and the homes and rooms where they wrote. The thoroughly researched, well-crafted introduction, four chapters (one on each author), and epilogue introduce readers to the authors' domestic personalities and routines affecting their work. Chosen because all were "important culture-makers of the period" (4) and alike because all "meld the spheres" of "domesticity and literary production," (6) the four authors come to life in Armbruster's study through the inclusion of a variety of sources in addition to the authors' published fiction and non-fiction, including diaries, correspondence, private notebooks, and pictures.

Primarily, *Domestic Biographies* connects the lives of these four major literary figures to the background against which they write, of their homes and the nation's "consumer and materialistic culture that followed the Civil War" (3). Both important contradictions and links are found when home and fiction are compared. Stowe, whom the literary world has long proclaimed

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a sentimental fiction writer is redistributed by Armbruster as a somewhat hypocritical realist, a “conspicuous consumer” who advised ““American women and girls . . . to economize”” (34) yet “spared no expense on the inside of [her] house” (29). Armbruster also reveals the contradiction that despite setting trends for the American home through the advice found in her “domestic treatises” (15) Stowe was a poor domestic manager, overwhelmed by her household duties, and beleaguered by her children’s disappointing materialistic tendencies and their failure to help her with the housework.

Similarly, the chapter on Howells portrays a number of contradictions. Howells’ struggles to realize the American dream are echoed in his fiction and apparent in the enormous number of residence changes he and his family underwent (between 1866 and 1902 he lived in over twenty houses [8]). Having grown up in modest circumstances in Ohio, early on in his career Howells labored long and hard, splitting his time between his role as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* journal, the writing he wanted to fully devote himself to, and being a father and husband. Although success was difficult to attain, Armbruster points out that Howells was deeply conflicted and dissatisfied once he did attain it. On the one hand, Howells and his wife “were . . . deeply suspicious of consumerism and ostentation,” thus Howells could not fully enjoy his achievements. On the other hand, Howells seemed envious of friends of his like Henry James and Mark Twain who had more money and time for travel and leisure (59).

The chapters on Henry James and Edith Wharton constitute the latter portion of Armbruster’s investigation in Part Two, entitled: “Living to Write,” which focuses on James’s and Wharton’s devotion to their craft. They, unlike Stowe and Howells, hailed from wealthy families and were without families or children of their own (James was never married and Wharton was divorced without children). James and Wharton were thus largely economically

and otherwise independent to pursue their literary careers, beholden neither to spouse and children nor job. James's emphasis on luxurious domestic spaces in his fiction contrasts with his fairly Spartan lifestyle; in the first decade of his literary career he rented a small apartment in London for just sixteen dollars a week (85). He was, however, a frequent guest at his affluent friends' Italian villas and English country homes which found their way into his fiction, including the 1881 masterpiece *The Portrait of a Lady*. Late in life, in 1899 he finally purchased his own country home where he lived until his death in 1916 (161).

Wharton's wealth far surpassed James's; at "twenty-six, she inherited \$120,000 (more than two million dollars today)" (10). Not surprisingly, she, of the four authors, exhibited the most control over her domiciles, a control also evidenced in the way she structures the various homes in her fiction. She uses her fictional homes to show that "sound architecture was a moral dictum" (133), in other words, a well-built, appropriately-decorated house indicated a morally upright character, as well as the reverse. Armbruster spends much time discussing Wharton's last three homes: the home she constructed and named "The Mount" in Lenox, Massachusetts and the homes she remodeled in France: Pavillon Colombe and Sainte-Claire. These homes and Wharton's re-modeling of them were part of Wharton's motivation for writing.

Armbruster's intertwining of the four authors' domestic realities and fictional and non-fictional portraits articulate the cravings, movements, and creative life of a nation, a nation still obsessed with building, restoring, and keeping up beautiful and conspicuous homes.