

The Reef Short Guide

The Reef by Edith Wharton

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Reef Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	11
Copyright Information.....	12



Characters

Sophy Viner and Owen Leath serve as dramatic foils to Anna Leath and George Darrow. Anna Leath is uncertain not only of what she sees but of her own feelings throughout the novel.

In the last chapters, Anna goes back and forth from one attitude to another.

She gives herself to George Darrow; she feels that now she will be his forever. Then she starts to wonder when he will tire of her. Then she starts to resent the intimacy he has shared with Sophy. The younger woman in contrast has apparently worked through her feelings and can act upon them. Until Darrow appeared at Givre, she had little reason to think that she would ever see him again. When he turned up, she became aware of the falsity of her own position, not simply in relation to Owen but to herself. As she explains to Darrow, meeting him at Givre made her recognize that their brief affair in Paris meant more to her than she wanted to acknowledge to herself. But now her decision is to keep the memory of what she experienced in Paris rather than to compromise it by marrying Owen. Sophy here is showing an honesty and an awareness of her feelings that always escape Anna Leath. In addition, Sophy shows a freedom from the conventions that constrain Anna. In the opening chapters when she is alone with Darrow, she tells him that she intends never to marry. She believes in "self-development and the chance to live one's life."

The security and responsibility represented by an estate like the one at Givre, which would come to her as Owen's wife, holds no attraction for a young woman like Sophy.

In the first part of the novel when Darrow meets her on his way to Anna, he repeatedly compares her to the older woman. Sophy is spontaneous, in touch with her feelings, whereas Anna is tactful, self-contained. Sophy is also somewhat shallow and certainly not reflective. Darrow is aware that he quickly runs out of conversational gambits with Sophy.

Owen Leath resembles Sophy in his openness and candor. Darrow observes that "Owen, like Sophy Viner, had the kind of face which seems less the stage on which emotions move than the very stuff they work in. In moments of excitement his odd irregular features seemed to grow fluid, to unmake and remake themselves like the shadows of clouds on a stream." He cannot hide what he is feeling or thinking. Thus, he serves as a foil to the older man whose very polish and finish make him a kind of enigma to Anna. Whereas Anna can never be sure when Darrow is acting or what he is thinking, she is always aware of exactly what Owen is feeling.

She thinks of Owen as a brother rather than as a stepson, and she is very protective of him. Ironically, Anna's desire to protect Owen from being hurt by Sophy's rejection of him contradicts her belief that he should be permitted to experience life without the familial interference that had marred her youth.

Social Concerns

The Reef has been called Edith Wharton's most autobiographical novel, not in the sense that the events in the novel parallel events in Wharton's own life, but that the upbringing of the leading character is much the same as Wharton's own upbringing.

Anna Leath comes from an old, well-established New York family. She has never known any economic or physical need, but nonetheless her life has been characterized by an emotional and sexual deprivation that leave her in her late thirties like a young woman still waiting for her great awakening to the passionate side of life. Raised to be "a model of ladylike repression," Anna grew up in a world where no one in her parents' circle of acquaintances ever did or said anything that was "immoral or ill-bred." Anna wondered how great literature had ever been conceived, much less created. All the people she and her parents knew ignored "the passions and sensations which formed the stuff of great poetry and memorable action." Such an upbringing made her the perfect wife for Fraser Leath, an American expatriate living in France. Although in many ways scornful of the rigid, emotionally impoverished Protestantism practiced by Anna's parents, Leath, a devotee of the world of art and beauty, was in his way as rigid and repressive as they were. He "exacted a rigid conformity to his rules of non-conformity and his scepticism had the absolute accent of dogma." His special interest was a collection of snuff boxes.

If the restrictive, emotionally sterile world of old New York forms half of the social background of The Reef, the other half is an expatriate world of Americans who lack any firm sense of a stable social or moral order. Sophy Viner, the other leading female character is a product of this world. With her parents dead, Sophy has found herself in "a busy and indifferent world."

While she has known none of the material advantages of an Anna Leath, she has also known few of the restraints. In her mid-twenties, she has spent the last four years in the employ of the seminotorious Mrs. Murrett, a wealthy lady in Chelsea. Vulgarly and license are the characteristics of Mrs. Murrett's world just as good taste and restraint are the characteristics of Anna Leath's.



Techniques

The Reef may be classified as a psychological novel. The writer's focus is not so much on what happens as on the states of mind of her two leading characters, Anna Leath and George Darrow.

In the first part of the novel, the center of consciousness is Darrow's; in the fourth part, it is Anna's. In the second and third parts, the center of consciousness shifts between Darrow and Anna. Thus we frequently get Darrow's and Anna's thoughts on what is going on around them. Wharton's method invites a certain amount of tedium as she engages in expositions of mental processes that are never as neat or orderly as her careful analyses suggest.

In the case of Anna, there is also the added difficulty that her thoughts constantly shift, so she does not seem to know her own mind. Thus at one point Anna thinks of Darrow as "a stranger with whom she had not a single thought in common." Fourteen pages later she will have reconciled with Darrow, convinced that "she and Darrow belonged to each other." But this conviction will be followed by pages of self examination in which she doubts what she wants to believe. The conflict here then is not so much between characters but within a character's mind, particularly when her feelings, impulses, and perceptions do not reinforce each other.

Wharton is particularly successful at capturing moments of double consciousness dramatically when something in the present reminds a character of something from the past. Thus, when Anna Leath is waiting for Darrow on the morning after his arrival at Givre, she is standing in the sunlight at the end of a suite of rooms. As Darrow approaches from the other end, he looks like her first husband who used to make the same progress through the rooms. Wharton in one image makes the reader aware not only of Anna's sense of the difference between the two men but also of a similarity in her relationship to them. Later in the novel, when Sophy Viner has been accepted as Owen Leath's betrothed by Mme. de Chantelle, Sophy joins the family at dinner for the first time. The dress she is wearing and the poses she strikes as she listens to Owen play the piano remind Darrow of his time with Sophy in Paris. This scene dramatically realizes the falseness of Darrow's position in the house and validates Anna's insecurities as she tries to account for her distrust of Darrow.

The most telling use of the double image occurs in the private interview Anna has with Sophy, which becomes the reef on which her hopes and plans are shattered. Sophy reminds her of the girls in Anna's youth "who seemed possessed of a secret she had missed," and Anna feels "an odd sense of ignorance and inexperience" that curiously reverses the situation of the two women. The image becomes more specific, as Sophy reminds Anna of Kitty Mayne, a girl she had known when growing up in New York. Anna had watched the young George Darrow spend an evening flirting with Kitty at a dinner. At that moment, she had felt all the frustration of wanting exclusive rights to the charming George Darrow and not knowing how to secure them.



She may have mentally dismissed Kitty as a "silly girl," but she nevertheless felt that girls like Kitty were somehow "menacing to nice girls and the young men they intended eventually to accept." Her resentment of girls like Kitty Mayne was not simply at what they did but at her awareness that she didn't know how to do it even though she coveted the attention they received from men like Darrow. Many years have passed, but Anna Leath's relationship to George Darrow and girls like Kitty has not changed.



Themes

Anna Leath and Sophy Viner discover that they love the same man, George Darrow, an American diplomat who comes from the same genteel class as Anna Leath, but who has had experiences in both Anna's and Sophy's worlds because his position as a man permits him to move freely from one to the other. The donnee of *The Reef* concerns a set of accidental coincidences that place these three characters unexpectedly in a triangular relationship.

George Darrow is on his way to a meeting with Anna Leath, the woman he loves and hopes to marry. She puts him off with a telegram after he has embarked on his journey. While travelling, he meets Sophy Viner — a younger woman whom he knows only slightly and who is in desperate circumstances having left her employer, Mrs. Murrett, with no clear prospects in sight. He takes pity on her and offers her a holiday in Paris. They have a brief affair which both understand is only for the moment. When he must return to England, they go their separate ways. Time passes, and he reconciles with Anna Leath, journeying to her estate at Givre in order to arrange their marriage and plan their future.

When he arrives at Givre, he discovers that Sophy Viner has been hired to be governess of Anna's daughter, Effie, and subsequently, that she is in the process of becoming engaged to Anna's step-son, Owen. This engagement obviously represents a splendid opportunity for the impoverished Sophy, but it is opposed by Mme. de Chantelle, the mother of Anna Leath's first husband.

It is, however, supported by Anna who feels that her step-son should not be limited by the rigid societal restraints that have stymied her in the past. As she tells him, "not missing things matters most."

A number of themes are developed in the ensuing complications, including honesty and fidelity in personal relationships, the difference between verbal and nonverbal communication, and the constraints placed on women by class and sex. All of these themes are subsumed in a passage near the end of the novel when Anna realizes that "the truth had come to light by the force of its irresistible pressure," and she has become aware "of hidden powers, of a chaos of attractions and repulsions far beneath the ordered surfaces of intercourse."

When Darrow had first arrived at Givre, she had wanted everything to be aboveboard between them. She had asked him questions about the woman he was seen with in Paris, not so much to learn about what happened but for him to know her as she is, "to have the whole of my feeling" as she puts it.

Darrow is genuinely happy to be at Givre with the woman he loves, but he does not give her truthful answers to what happened in Paris or why he did not answer the letter in which she had explained what the unexpected problem was that had kept her from seeing him previously. Darrow continues to lie or tell half truths when Sophy Viner



appears on the scene. He is skilled in dissembling, perhaps by his training as a diplomat, perhaps because of his past sexual encounters with women. Anna gradually becomes aware that she cannot trust anything he says and never will be able to know when he is being truthful or not.

Her inability to know what Darrow is thinking or feeling is in sharp contrast to her stepson Owen who immediately senses the change in Sophy Viner when Darrow appears at Givre.

Although Owen does not hear any words that they exchange, he observes Sophy and Darrow in several encounters and judges by the way they look at each other, by their stances, and by their gestures, that they are more to each other than distant acquaintances from a remote past as Darrow had explained.

Owen's intuitive recognition is in sharp contrast to Anna Leath's inability to make a judgment based on what she sees. Anna attempts to see and know the whole truth, but it always eludes her. The reader sees her watching and observing Darrow, eager to catch a glimpse of the real man beneath the smooth, polished surface. Darrow is particularly aware that he is being observed once he sees Sophy Viner at Givre, and much of his behavior takes on the character of a performance. In this charged atmosphere, a kiss can represent a dodge from observation: "She [i.e., Anna Leath] drew back a step and lifted her face to his [i.e., George Darrow's] trying to look into his eyes more deeply than she had ever looked; but before she could discern what they expressed he had taken hold of her hands and bent his head to kiss them."

In *The Reef*, Wharton is confronting a double standard in sexual relations for men and women. Eventually, Anna learns the facts about Darrow's Paris holiday with Sophy Viner, and she consummates her relationship with Darrow, but she can find no peace in either knowledge or union. What she must come to terms with is that Darrow has had relations with a woman who has a share in him that she knows nothing about. What torments Anna is that she is shut out from that experience, that there are parts of Darrow's life that he will always keep secret from her, a respectable woman.

In the final chapter of the novel, Anna Leath seeks out Sophy Viner in Paris at the apartment of Laura McTarvie-Birch, Sophy's older sister. Anna does not find Sophy, who has gone off on a trip to India, once again in the employ of Mrs. Murrett. The scene that occurs strikes many critics as an odd and unsatisfying conclusion to the novel. Anna finds herself unexpectedly in the apartment of a prostitute with an engaging young man in attendance.

Another man in the anteroom outside Laura's boudoir where she is receiving the ministrations of her masseur ogle Anna in an appraising way. Finally she is led into Mrs. McTarvie-Birch's bedroom where she encounters a vulgar, immodest, overweight woman who strikes her as an older version of Sophy. Anna sees without understanding. If the scene is cruel, it is because it suggests that for all her experience in life, Anna remains essentially naive and unchanged from the "model of ladylike repression" that she was raised to be.



Key Questions

A reading of *The Reef* may be enhanced by an investigation of Wharton's life. A group discussion might be based upon a report of Wharton's affair with Morton Fullerton, which occurred shortly before the publication of this novel. Other discussions might focus on the conflict between public manners and private desires. Anna Leath comes from a neat, orderly world where nothing (not even a feeling) is ever permitted to be slightly askew. One avenue of discussion might be whether Anna has been irreparably damaged by her upbringing. Discussions might also be based upon Wharton's use of George Darrow's and Anna Leath's points of view. One might consider whether Wharton is equally successful at presenting a male point of view as a female. One might also consider how a reader's attitude toward Darrow changes during the course of the novel.

In particular, one needs to explain why Darrow disappears from the end of the novel. At the beginning, his was the controlling center of consciousness. At the end, his point of view is totally missing.

Some critics have dismissed *The Reef* by saying both Darrow and Leath are bores. Discussions might be based on whether there is any validity to this view. If there is a problem, one might trace it to the nature of the characters themselves or to the way their thoughts have been presented by Wharton. Finally one might want to compare this novel with Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. If *The Reef* is Wharton's most Jamesian novel, one might want to consider which writer is better when tackling this kind of subject.

1. Why is this novel called *The Reef*?

How may the image be applied to what occurs in the novel?

2. What are the functions of Mme.

de Chantelle and Adelaide Painter?

3. Discuss the difference between Paris and Givre as settings. What kind of values prevail in Paris (the locale of Parts I and IV)? What kind in Givre (the locale of Parts II and III)?

4. Is Wharton's use of point of view entirely successful in *The Reef*? How does the style of the George Darrow sections differ from the style of the Anna Leath sections?

5. It has been said that Anna Leath's basic problem is coming to terms with her own sexuality. Do you agree?

6. Does George Darrow appear a worthy object of Anna's and Sophy's affection, or does he in some way seem inadequate for the romantic role he has been asked to fill?



7. Does Sophy Viner seem better or worse than Anna Leath and George Darrow? Why?
8. Discuss the values represented by Fraser Leath, Anna's first husband.

What was wrong with this first marriage? How does Anna hope to rectify it in her relationship with George Darrow? Are Anna's expectations realistic?

9. Examine Darrow's changing attitude toward Sophy Viner in Paris and then later when he meets her at Givre.

Is there anything caddish in his thinking or behavior?

10. What role does money play in the lives of these characters? Is it significant that Anna is rich and Sophy is poor?

Literary Precedents

The Reef has been called Wharton's most Jamesian novel. The basic situation is the kind that Henry James had developed in many of his novels from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) through *The Golden Bowl* (1904). A woman becomes engaged to a man, only to find herself in a more complicated situation than she had ever anticipated because of his ties to an earlier relationship. The careful attention to point of view and the use of scene painting to suggest several levels of meaning are two particularly Jamesian techniques that Wharton uses throughout the novel.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994