

ANALYSIS

“Roman Fever” (1934)



Edith Wharton

(1862-1937)

The setting is Rome, on a lofty terrace overlooking the ruins of the Forum below, with a view of the Palatine Hill and the Colosseum in the distance. This background gives the story depth in time, as Wharton demonstrates that basic human nature has not improved through the centuries and generates ironies by contrasting the grandeur of imperial Rome with the petty rivalry of two American widows, ostensible friends—“each of them the modest appendage of a salient daughter.” The classical setting is ideal for a story manifesting traditional Neoclassical aesthetic values, in particular social order, proportion, symmetry, concentration, restraint and grace.

Alida Slade and Grace Ansley “had lived opposite each other--actually as well as figuratively.” Long ago as girls vacationing here in Rome, they opposed each other for the love of Delphin Slade. Alida apparently won, but this story reveals the actual triumph of Grace. Wharton transcends the conventions of Realism by making her characters traditional icons in a moral allegory--the dark lady and the fair: Alida “the dark lady” with “vigorous black eyebrows” is “determined,” assertive, considers herself the equal of her husband, is sure of “her rights in the world” and hates Grace, who “was always old-fashioned.” Grace is the Victorian angel in the house: modest, quiet and sweet. She calmly knits while Alida, though she has apparently won, is still competing and taking revenge against her.

The archetypal power of the two sets of opposing principles makes it possible to see them as political sides in social history: “The two ladies, who had been intimate since childhood, reflected how little they knew each other.” At the same time, Wharton the Realist stands apart from allegory and sees the two women as human beings as well as abstractions, equally reductive in their perceptions: “So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope.”

Roman fever, or malaria, was common in Rome until the 20th century. Alida sees the danger of Roman fever as past, whereas metaphorical Roman fever, the disease of imperialism or the overbearing will to dominate, is obviously still alive in her. She surveys the ruins of imperial Rome as if she feels at home, while Grace tends to her knitting. She uses their luncheon overlooking the Forum as a forum to assert her lifetime victory over her rival. As Alida marches on, her passionate will to prevail over Grace reaches a fever pitch. In *Daisy Miller* (1878) James compares Daisy to the Christian martyrs killed in the Colosseum. In “Roman Fever” (1934) Wharton identifies Grace--a name evoking spiritual grace and Christianity--not

so much with a religion as with western civilization after the Dark Ages of ignorance, with the relative stability and manners that increasingly prevailed over imperialism in the long run. Ironically, the story was written just before the rise of fascism in Europe.

Grace's great aunt Harriet was in love with the same man as her sister and sent the sister out to the Forum after sunset hoping she would catch Roman fever and die--which she did. When they were here as girls, Grace told that story to Alida, who then wrote a letter to Grace--supposedly from Delphin Slade--luring Grace to the Colosseum after sunset, knowing she had a throat condition and might catch a chill, which she did, and almost died. Alida confesses these many years later that *she* wrote the letter, not Slade, wanting to justify herself. She claims she never thought Grace might die, but she feels guilty—"cut off from the warm current of human communion." She knows she could be seen as a monster: She calls her attempt to murder Grace a joke and says she laughed about it at the time.

At the end, facts are exchanged like the blows of gladiators. Alida thinks she inflicted a "wound" by sending Grace to the Colosseum to be disappointed and another wound now by revealing that *she* herself and not Delphin wrote the letter. But Grace strikes a shocking blow in return by revealing that she wrote a letter to Delphin in response and that *he came to her!* Delphin's name contains the word Delphi, identifying him with the oracle in ancient Greece, with spiritual wisdom in western tradition. Delphin is united to both the dark lady and the fair, Alida and Grace, and he is the father of both their daughters. Allegorically, he is the father of western civilization. Engaged to Alida, he also loves Grace, who proved her grace by burning the letter, like Lily in *The House of Mirth*.

With oldfashioned femininity, Grace defeated Alida in the Colosseum of the heart. Then she gave up Delphin to marry Horace, the name of a Roman poet—someone more advanced than Delphin--in Florence the city of art. This sequence evokes the history of western civilization from ancient Greece, to Rome, to Renaissance Italy. Given her sensitivity to the feelings of Alida during their conversation, it is also implied that Grace gave up Delphin for the sake of her friend. She feels sorry for Alida. Grace's renunciation is evidence of spiritual *grace*, a thematic motif in both Wharton and Henry James. Alida accuses her of still caring for Delphin, but Grace says she cares only for "that memory." Ultimately, then, Alida must concede defeat in the past: "Yes; I was beaten there."

In the present, Alida rallies with what she thinks is the killing stroke, that she had Delphin for the rest of his life and that Grace had nothing else of him but the letter he didn't write. But Grace shocks her with a death blow: She reveals that, apparently from their liaison in the Colosseum, she had Barbara by Delphin, the brilliant daughter Alida envies her for. Barbara is "brilliant" and "dynamic" and "an angel too." Alida represents a thesis, Grace an antithesis and Barbara an ideal synthesis combining the best qualities of opposites. In the last line of the story, Grace "began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade."

Alida must now see her life as analogous to the ruins of Rome, "the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor at her feet." She set herself up for defeat twice, by her original treachery and then again in the present by pushing Grace into the devastating revelations that cut Alida down. Alida overreaches like the ancient Romans and she falls.

Michael Hollister (2015)