Abstract

This paper focuses on Edith Wyatt, an author writing during Chicago’s Literary Renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century. Wyatt was a popular Chicago writer during her lifetime, even attracting attention from the noted literary critic and American writer, William Dean Howells. Yet today she remains largely unknown and overlooked in the canon of the Chicago Literary Renaissance. In this paper, I analyze a novel Wyatt wrote in 1903 entitled *True Love: A Comedy of the Affections* as a key narrative from the Chicago Literary Renaissance that appropriates a British literary genre and engages with a wider democratic discourse in more subtle and profound ways than either its title or plot may initially suggest. I assert that Wyatt’s urban comedy of manners critiques many elements of the genre in appropriating its form, but also echoes Jane Austen with its relatable characters, satisfying conclusion, and comedic moments. Beneath the veneer of Wyatt’s humor, witty narration, and satire of “old money” Chicagoans, lies a profound commentary on Chicago and American society in the early twentieth century. In the midst of the “revolt from the village,” and narratives rooted in the urban landscape, Wyatt, like fellow regionalist writers Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather, looks to the prairie, the small village, and the rural countryside with admiration and nostalgia for the “American values” nurtured there. While the subjects of her satire and criticism are not urban corruption or the meatpacking industry, Wyatt, like her literary male counterparts, finds fault with the Chicago that has emerged at the turn of the century and the shallowness that lies beneath its gilded façade.