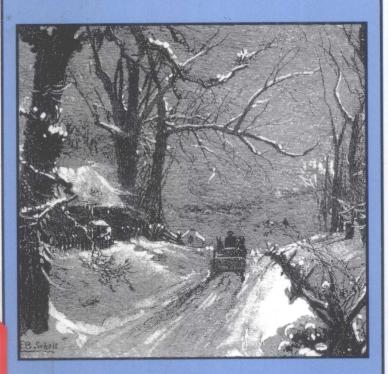
ETHAN FROME

EDITH WHARTON



EDITED BY KRISTIN O. LAUER AND CYNTHIA GRIFFIN WOLFF

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION



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Edith Wharton ETHAN FROME

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS CRITICISM

Edited by

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and

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MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

This title is printed on permanent paper containing 30 percent post-consumer waste recycled fiber.

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The text of this book is composed in Electra with the display set in Bernhard Modern.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wharton, Edith, 1862-1937.

Ethan Frome : authoritative text, backgrounds and contexts, criticism / Edith Warton ; edited by Kristin O. Lauer, Cynthia Griffin Wolff.

p. cm. — (A Norton critical edition)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. New England—Social life and customs—Fiction. 2. Wharton,

Edith, 1862–1937. Ethan Frome. 3. Married people—New England—Fiction. 4. Rual poor—New England—Fiction. 5. Farm life—New

England—Fiction I. Lauer, Kristin O. II. Wolff,

Cynthia Griffin. III. Title. PS3545 H16E7 1994

813' .52-dc20

ISBN 0-393-96635-6

94-17385

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110 www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House. 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3OT

Preface

The history of Ethan Frome, Edith Wharton's most famous tale, is as paradoxical as its chill beauty. The tragic story of an impoverished New England small farmer was hardly what her public expected in 1911 of the wealthy, well-born Mrs. Wharton, known for her novels and stories exposing the follies of the inner circles of fashionable society in fin de siècle New York.

Ethan Frome was decidedly outside the subject matter of the literature of manners. From the earliest reviews, critics, bewildered but universally moved by its power, went back to the Greeks to place it. They termed the story classical, shocking, beautiful, unforgettable, brilliant. Nonetheless, many questioned Edith Wharton's right to tell it.

Before Ethan Frome, Edith Wharton had been celebrated for her acerbic wit, her culture and vast knowledge of Italian and French history, art, architecture, and literature. At forty-nine, she had become an international hostess enjoying French salon society, a traveler of indefatigable energy, in love with the new joys of chauffeured motoring. A leisure-class descendent of heroes of the Revolution, she divided her year between her country estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, and her apartment in the exclusive Faubourg Saint-Germain of Paris. No one expected the celebrated satirist to give voice to the sufferings of a cripple trapped in the isolated Berkshire hamlet she emphatically labeled Starkfield.

Critical reservations, born of the public image of an elitist, intellectual Mrs. Wharton, gradually focused on two aspects of the work: structure—particularly the framing narrative—and setting. The first was termed clumsy and artificial; the second, condescending.

Still, the powerful little novel prospered. Of all the long shelf of her work—her twenty-two novels and novellas, her eighty-seven short stories, her nine volumes of nonfiction, and her two volumes of poetry—only *Ethan Frome* (except for the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1920 *Age of Innocence*) has remained consistently in print and widely read. A mainstay of American secondary education, it has been studied by more Americans than anything else she wrote. *Ethan Frome* staked out an unassailable position within the traditional American canon long before the 1975 R. W. B. Lewis biography of Wharton and the feminist revival unearthed many of her buried masterpieces—that is, long before the

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veritable Wharton revolution in both critical and popular consciousness began.

To Edith Wharton herself, this was an important book, for with it she felt for the first time "the artisan's full control of his implements." Perhaps for that reason (and perhaps also because she was acutely aware of the charges that she was merely a "literary" observer who had gone slumming in the Berkshire neighborhoods of her estate), in 1922 she wrote the first introduction she had ever penned for one of her works. In it she defended both her narrative structure and her intimacy with her fictional world. She argued that her vision of the economically and emotionally starved life of the small New England farmer was more realistic than that of the New England local color regional writers whom she was to accuse in her autobiography of wearing "rose-coloured spectacles."

In the tradition of *Ethan Frome* criticism, this edition offers a survey of varied responses to the narrative structure and sheds new light on the question of the book's psychological, historical, and cultural authenticity. Edith Wharton's public could never know the most poignant paradox of the novel: how close her private world was to the emotional reality of Ethan Frome himself. Trapped in a loveless marriage to a mentally unbalanced man, suffering since childhood from painful shyness and feelings of isolation, scarred at the end of a passionate, bruising love affair with an unfaithful American journalist, Edith Wharton, approaching fifty, rejected the illusions of romanticism, felt keenly the crushing demands of the household invalid, and fought a valiant inner battle to remain active, involved, and strong like her framing engineer, who abandons the seductive numbness of resignation and despair.

Such valuable biographical data, the wealth of material recently gathered on the position of poor farm women like Zeena Frome, the documentation of the nineteenth-century stunting of the potentialities of young women like Mattie Silver—all these riches of modern scholarship illuminate the text and make *Ethan Frome* a completely new subject of study.

Renowned for the beauty and lucidity of its style, *Ethan Frome* was actually begun in French as an assignment for her Parisian tutor, probably in early 1907. Yet in the long list of paradoxes, perhaps the greatest is that this, Edith Wharton's most famous, if controversial, fiction, has been eclipsed in the modern Wharton revival by feminist attention to *The House of Mirth* with its doomed Lily Bart whose career is a pointed lesson in fatal acculturation. Those familiar with the ironic history of *Ethan Frome*, however, will find in feminist theory new approaches only reaffirming *Ethan Frome*'s vitality and now indisputable authenticity.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ley Raphael located the elusive Van Deusen material, illuminated difficult French expressions and served as a knowledgeable consultant and enthusiastic best friend in all aspects of the editorial process. American historian Larry Menna supplied valuable data on the economic conditions in New England. Mark Sigerson was an ingenious research detective. Scott Marshall of the Edith Wharton Restoration was singularly important to the success of this volume with his encyclopedic knowledge of Wharton and Lenox and his sound suggestions. The editors are, as always, indebted to the gracious staff at the Beinecke Library at Yale. Carol Bemis was the gifted attentive editor of which authors dream. Wharton scholar Margaret P. Murray lent her considerable expertise and devoted partnership to this project. Heartfelt thanks to Professor lames Tuttleton and Lowell Acola for special research services, to superb copy editor Josepha Gutelius, and to Norton's ever-helpful Ann R. Tappert. Particularly warm gratitude to Darrell Lauer for a multitude of those unsung, generous daily gifts of time and encouragement which lighten the scholar's load immeasurably.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This edition of *Ethan Frome* is reprinted from the original 1911 edition published by Charles Scribner's Sons. No editorial changes have been made.

Introduction to the 1922 Edition

I had known something of New England village life long before I made my home in the same county as my imaginary Starkfield; though, during the years spent there, certain of its aspects became much more familiar to me.¹

Even before that final initiation, however, I had had an uneasy sense that the New England of fiction bore little—except a vague botanical and dialectical—resemblance to the harsh and beautiful land as I had seen it. Even the abundant enumeration of sweet-fern, asters and mountain-laurel, and the conscientious reproduction of the vernacular, left me with the feeling that the outcropping granite had in both cases been overlooked. I give the impression merely as a personal one; it accounts for "Ethan Frome," and may, to some readers, in a measure justify it.

So much for the origin of the story; there is nothing else of interest to say of it, except as concerns its construction.

The problem before me, as I saw in the first flash, was this: I had to deal with a subject of which the dramatic climax, or rather the anticlimax, occurs a generation later than the first acts of the tragedy. This enforced lapse of time would seem to anyone persuaded—as I have always been—that every subject (in the novelist's sense of the term) implicitly contains its own form and dimensions, to mark Ethan Frome as the subject for a novel. But I never thought this for a moment, for I had felt, at the same time, that the theme of my tale was not one on which many variations could be played. It must be treated as starkly and summarily as life had always presented itself to my protagonists; any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would necessarily have falsified the whole. They were, in truth, these figures, my granite outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate.

Refers to her summer residence at The Mount, her country estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains, 1902–1911.

Refers to the fiction of the local color regional writers, specifically Sarah Orne Jewett (1849– 1909), famous for her studies of rural life in Maine, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852– 1930), chronicler of rural life in Massachusetts.

This incompatibility between subject and plan would perhaps have seemed to suggest that my "situation" was after all one to be rejected. Every novelist has been visited by the insinuating wraiths of false "good situations," siren-subjects luring his cockle-shell to the rocks; their voice is oftenest heard, and their mirage-sea beheld, as he traverses the waterless desert which awaits him half-way through whatever work is actually in hand. I knew well enough what song those sirens sang, and had often tied myself to my dull job until they were out of hearing—perhaps carrying a lost masterpiece in their rainbow veils. But I had no such fear of them in the case of Ethan Frome. It was the first subject I had ever approached with full confidence in its value, for my own purpose, and a relative faith in my power to render at least a part of what I saw in it.

Every novelist, again, who "intends upon" his art, has lit upon such subjects, and been fascinated by the difficulty of presenting them in the fullest relief, yet without an added ornament, or a trick of drapery or lighting. This was my task, if I were to tell the story of Ethan Frome; and my scheme of construction 5—which met with the immediate and unqualified disapproval of the few friends to whom I tentatively outlined it—I still think justified in the given case. It appears to me, indeed, that, while an air of artificiality is lent to a tale of complex and sophisticated people which the novelist causes to be guessed at and interpreted by any mere looker-on, there need be no such drawback if the looker-on is sophisticated, and the people he interprets are simple. If he is capable of seeing all around them, no violence is done to probability in allowing him to exercise this faculty: it is natural enough that he should act as the sympathizing intermediary between his rudimentary characters and the more complicated minds to whom he is trying to present them. But this is all self-evident, and needs explaining only to those who have never thought of fiction as an art of composition.

The real merit of my construction seems to me to lie in a minor detail. I had to find means to bring my tragedy, in a way at once natural and picture-making, to the knowledge of its narrator. I might have sat him down before a village gossip who would have poured out the whole affair to him in a breath, but in doing this I should have been false to two essential elements of my picture: first, the deep-rooted reticence and inarticulateness of the people I was trying to draw, and secondly the effect of "roundness" (in the plastic sense) produced by letting their case be seen through eyes as different as those of Harmon Gow and Mrs.

^{3.} Sirens were mythical monsters, in some legends half-woman, half-bird, whose bewitching singing lured seamen to their deaths as ships dashed on the rocks. "Siren-subjects" are characters or plots that tempt a writer away from a current project.

^{4.} Thinks with purpose about.

The scheme of construction, controversial throughout the history of the novel, refers to Wharton's use of the frame and the engineer-narrator.

Ned Hale. Each of my chroniclers contributes to the narrative *just so much as he or she is capable of understanding* of what, to them, is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger categories.

I make no claim for originality in following a method of which "La Grande Bretêche" and "The Ring and the Book" had set me the magnificent example; my one merit is, perhaps, to have guessed that the proceeding there employed was also applicable to my small tale.

I have written this brief analysis—the first I have ever published of any of my books—because, as an author's introduction to his work, I can imagine nothing of any value to his readers except a statement as to why he decided to attempt the work in question, and why he selected one form rather than another for its embodiment. These primary aims, the only ones that can be explicitly stated, must, by the artist, be almost instinctively felt and acted upon before there can pass into his creation that imponderable something more which causes life to circulate in it, and preserves it for a little from decay.

EDITH WHARTON

^{6. &}quot;La Grande Bretêche" by the French author Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), a short story of an illicit love affair which employs a double narrator; "The Ring and the Book" (1868–1869) by English poet Robert Browning (1812–1889), a poem in twelve books based on an Italian murder case of 1698, presented in dramatic monologues spoken by twelve characters.

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The Text of ETHAN FROME



Ethan Frome

I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story.

If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, 1 you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan 2 Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade; and you must have asked who he was

It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two. I had this from Harmon Gow, who had driven the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days and knew the chronicle of all the families on his line.³

"He's looked that way ever since he had his smash-up; and that's twenty-four years ago come next February," Harmon threw out between reminiscent pauses.

The "smash-up" it was—I gathered from the same informant—which, besides drawing the red gash across Ethan Frome's forehead, had so shortened and warped his right side that it cost him a visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post-office window. He used to drive in from his farm every day at about noon, and as that was my own hour for fetching my mail I often passed him in the porch or stood beside him while we waited on the motions of the distributing hand behind the grating. I noticed that, though he came so punctually, he

Identified by Wharton as a typical village in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, supposedly in the vicinity of Lenox where she summered on her country estate from 1902–1911.

Name Ethan suggests Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804–1864) short story, "Ethan Brand" (1851), in which Ethan Brand finds the Unpardonable Sin in his own heart—intellect divorced from love. Echoes of the New England Hawthorne recur throughout in setting, imagery, and names.

^{3.} Trolley lines were laid in Lenox 1901-1902.

seldom received anything but a copy of the *Bettsbridge Eagle*, which he put without a glance into his sagging pocket. At intervals, however, the post-master would hand him an envelope addressed to Mrs. Zenobia—or Mrs. Zeena—Frome, and usually bearing conspicuously in the upper left-hand corner the address of some manufacturer of patent medicine and the name of his specific. ⁴ These documents my neighbour would also pocket without a glance, as if too much used to them to wonder at their number and variety, and would then turn away with a silent nod to the post-master.

Every one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own grave mien; but his taciturnity was respected and it was only on rare occasions that one of the older men of the place detained him for a word. When this happened he would listen quietly, his blue eyes on the speaker's face, and answer in so low a tone that his words never reached me; then he would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand and drive slowly away in the direction of his farm.

"It was a pretty bad smash-up?" I questioned Harmon, looking after Frome's retreating figure, and thinking how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape.

"Wust kind," my informant assented. "More'n enough to kill most men. But the Fromes are tough. Ethan'll likely touch a hundred."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. At the moment Ethan Frome, after climbing to his seat, had leaned over to assure himself of the security of a wooden box—also with a druggist's label on it—which he had placed in the back of the buggy, and I saw his face as it probably looked when he thought himself alone. "That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!"

Harmon drew a slab of tobacco from his pocket, cut off a wedge and pressed it into the leather pouch of his cheek. "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

"Why didn't he?"

"Somebody had to stay and care for the folks. There warn't ever anybody but Ethan. Fust his father—then his mother—then his wife."

"And then the smash-up?"

Harmon chuckled sardonically. "That's so. He had to stay then."

"I see. And since then they've had to care for him?"

Harmon thoughtfully passed his tobacco to the other cheek. "Oh, as to that: I guess it's always Ethan done the caring."

Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and

^{4.} Zenobia suggests Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804–1864) dark, queenly Zenobia in The Blithe-dale Romance (1852), named after Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, who openly defied the Roman emperor in A.D. 270. Thus any powerful, ambitious woman. A specific is a medicine indicated for a particular sickness. In the nineteenth century these mail-order medicines often contained alcohol.

I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps. But one phrase stuck in my memory and served as the nucleus about which I grouped my subsequent inferences: "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters."

Before my own time there was up I had learned to know what that meant. Yet I had come in the degenerate day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery, when communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys, such as Bettsbridge and Shadd's Falls, had libraries, theatres and Y. M. C. A.⁵ halls to which the youth of the hills could descend for recreation. But when winter shut down on Starkfield, and the village lay under a sheet of snow perpetually renewed from the pale skies, I began to see what life there—or rather its negation—must have been in Ethan Frome's young manhood.

I had been sent up by my employers on a job connected with the big power-house 6 at Corbury Junction, and a long-drawn carpenters' strike had so delayed the work that I found myself anchored at Starkfield—the nearest habitable spot—for the best part of the winter. I chafed at first. and then, under the hypnotising effect of routine, gradually began to find a grim satisfaction in the life. During the early part of my stay I had been struck by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community. Day by day, after the December snows were over, a blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, which gave them back in an intenser glitter. One would have supposed that such an atmosphere must quicken the emotions as well as the blood; but it seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of Starkfield. When I had been there a little longer, and had seen this phase of crystal clearness followed by long stretches of sunless cold: when the storms of February had pitched their white tents about the devoted village and the wild cavalry of March winds had charged down to their support: I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter. Twenty years earlier the means of resistance must have been far fewer, and the enemy in command of almost all the lines of access between the beleaguered villages: and, considering these things, I felt the sinister force of Harmon's phrase: "Most of the smart ones get away." But if that were the case, how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?

During my stay at Starkfield I lodged with a middle-aged widow collo-

Young Men's Christian Association. Britain-founded, international organization promoting Christian ideals and health, first in U.S. in Boston, 1851. Provided inexpensive lodging and recreation for young men.

A station generating electricity. Edith Wharton's home, The Mount, was electrically lit, rare in 1902. In 1886, one of the first main streets in America electrically lit was in Great Barrington, close to Lenox.

quially known as Mrs. Ned Hale. Mrs. Hale's father had been the village lawyer of the previous generation, and "lawyer Varnum's house," where my landlady still lived with her mother, was the most considerable mansion in the village. It stood at one end of the main street, its classic portico and small-paned windows looking down a flagged path between Norway spruces to the slim white steeple of the Congregational church. It was clear that the Varnum fortunes were at the ebb, but the two women did what they could to preserve a decent dignity; and Mrs. Hale, in particular, had a certain wan refinement not out of keeping with her pale old-fashioned house.

In the "best parlour," with its black horse-hair and mahogany weakly illuminated by a gurgling Carcel lamp, 7 I listened every evening to another and more delicately shaded version of the Starkfield chronicle. It was not that Mrs. Ned Hale felt. or affected, any social superiority to the people about her: it was only that the accident of a finer sensibility and a little more education had put just enough distance between herself and her neighbours to enable her to judge them with detachment. She was not unwilling to exercise this faculty, and I had great hopes of getting from her the missing facts of Ethan Frome's story, or rather such a key to his character as should co-ordinate the facts I knew. Her mind was a store-house of innocuous anecdote and any question about her acquaintances brought forth a volume of detail; but on the subject of Ethan Frome I found her unexpectedly reticent. There was no hint of disapproval in her reserve; I merely felt in her an insurmountable reluctance to speak of him or his affairs, a low "Yes, I knew them both . . . it was awful . . ." seeming to be the utmost concession that her distress could make to my curiosity

So marked was the change in her manner, such depths of sad initiation did it imply, that, with some doubts as to my delicacy, I put the case anew to my village oracle, Harmon Gow; but got for my pains only an uncomprehending grunt.

"Ruth Varnum was always as nervous as a rat; and, come to think of it, she was the first one to see 'em after they was picked up. It happened right below lawyer Varnum's, down at the bend of the Corbury road, just round about the time that Ruth got engaged to Ned Hale. The young folks was all friends, and I guess she just can't bear to talk about it. She's had troubles enough of her own."

All the dwellers in Starkfield, as in more notable communities, had had troubles enough of their own to make them comparatively indifferent to those of their neighbours; and though all conceded that Ethan

the center of Lenox; one girl died and four companions were injured. See p. 86.

Carcel lamp pumps oil steadily up its wick, therefore gurgles, invented by Frenchman B. G. Carcel (1750–1812). Horse-hair fabric, of horse hair, mostly manes and tails, covered furniture; mahogany, fine-grained reddish hardwood, indicates quality furniture.
 Wharton based the sledding accident on the March 11, 1904, tragedy on Courthouse Hill in