



ENRICHED
CLASSIC

ETHAN FROME

EDITH WHARTON

Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more

ETHAN FROME



Edith Wharton

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INTRODUCTION

Ethan Frome: A FAIRY TALE ABOUT ORDINARY PEOPLE



In *Ethan Frome* (1911), Edith Wharton spins a Gothic tale of love and loss, creating a hero constrained by poverty and duty, yet consumed by yearnings for happiness. This story of the hopeless and hapless farmer, Ethan Frome, is set in the snow-muffled, isolated Berkshires of western Massachusetts at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the tragic plot and bleak setting, Wharton claimed that writing the book made her happy because, for the first time, she felt fully in command of her art. Readers over the decades have confirmed Wharton's own belief in the quality of her story and style in this novel, for *Ethan Frome* remains an enduring American classic and the most widely read of her many celebrated works.

Ethan Frome was Wharton's most deeply personal novel to date. It was written during a particularly

intense period in her life. After over twenty years of an unhappy marriage to a mentally ill man, Wharton began, at age forty-five, a passionate love affair that lasted about three years. In 1910, as she wrote *Ethan Frome*, the affair was winding down, leaving her isolated in her increasingly stifling marriage. Her personal situation mirrors the central triangle in *Ethan Frome*: Ethan is torn between his passion for young Mattie Silver and his duty to his wife Zeena, whom he does not love.

Though Wharton made her reputation as a chronicler of the American upper classes among whom she was raised, *Ethan Frome* focuses on the rural poor. Some critics at the time of the novel's publication expressed astonishment that Wharton could write so knowingly about a social group so far removed from her own life of wealth and privilege. But Edith Wharton's childhood and young adulthood had been filled with loneliness and despondency. Unsited to be an idle, society wife, which was the fate of women of her class in the late nineteenth century, she dreamed of breaking away from the strictures of her fate, of forging a new life as an artist. Her longing and isolation as a young woman formed the seeds of her skillful creation of the doomed Ethan Frome.

Few of us feel entirely unfettered by our circumstances. The universal desire to escape that which constrains us, and the human needs for love and acceptance, resonate powerfully when we read *Ethan Frome*. We sense Wharton's great sympathy

for Ethan, and we feel sympathy for him, too. The profound connection between author, character, and reader is the secret of the novel's enduring power.

The Life and Work of Edith Wharton

Edith Wharton chronicles the movement of America from the opulent era of the Gilded Age, through the radical cultural changes following World War I, up to the fascist threat on the eve of World War II. Born during the Civil War into a wealthy, old New York family, Edith Newbold Jones (1862–1937) defied the mores of her aristocratic class to become a writer. Her journey from the strict, circumscribed world of her childhood to a rich and wide-ranging life as an intellectual, artist, and world traveler took great courage and invention.

Wharton showed early signs of great energy and a restless intelligence. The youngest of three children, her two brothers were so much older that she was raised virtually as an only child. For six years, her parents lived largely in France and Italy, establishing an early and very important connection to Europe (and enabling her later fluency in Italian, French, and German as well as English). Wharton published her first short story at the age of twenty-nine, although she would not produce a volume of fiction until 1899, when she was thirty-seven and *The Greater Inclination*, a collection of stories, appeared. During this period, torn between social expectations

and her artistic aspirations, she suffered several serious bouts of depression and fatigue. These states of neurasthenia dissipated, and later disappeared, as her success as a writer increased.

In 1885, Edith Newbold Jones married Edward ("Teddy") Wharton from Boston. An attractive, genial man from her own class with a passion for sports, Teddy appeared to be a suitable match for Edith; however, a quarter of a century later, friends like Henry James found the marriage inconceivable. Indeed, as Edith's literary and intellectual pursuits took an even greater role in her life, the differences between herself and her husband widened precipitously. Suffering from a growing clinical depression, Wharton himself deteriorated even as the marriage declined. Even in the face of their incompatibility and Teddy's mental condition, Wharton took her marital commitment very seriously, struggling to maintain the marriage and take care of a fragile, utterly dependent husband. Finally, after years of Teddy's infidelities and serious mismanagement of her financial affairs, she divorced him in 1913.

Settling into a new life at 53 rue de Varenne in Paris, Wharton's life finally became her own. Besides her daily habit of writing, Wharton was a tireless traveler and motorcar enthusiast, organizing often elaborate journeys throughout the world. Her wide circle of friends included, among others, the writer Henry James; the art critic Bernard Berenson and his wife Mary (also a writer); Walter Berry, an

American lawyer and public official in Paris, who advised her on literary affairs; the English writer Percy Lubbock; and the American journalist Morton Fullerton, with whom she had a three-year affair in her forties. The French novelist Paul Bourget introduced her into the upper reaches of Parisian intellectual and social circles.

During World War I, Edith turned her energy to establishing hostels and homes for war refugees. Launching a fund-raising campaign, by 1917 she had established twenty-one separate houses under three separate charities. For this work, Mrs. Wharton was awarded the French Legion of Honor—the highest award the French government can bestow on a civilian. After the war, Edith moved into her most productive literary phase, publishing best sellers like *A Son at the Front*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, and *The Age of Innocence*. Edith Wharton was as shrewd a businesswoman as she was prolific an author. Her book and film contracts in 1927 alone, at today's rates, amounted to nearly two million dollars. In 1921, she became the first woman to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize, for her novel *The Age of Innocence*.

Even though her protagonists often suffered tragic fates, Wharton herself was a triumphant character in her own life's drama. Like her heroine Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton escaped to Europe, leaving behind stifling social convention and fashioning a fulfilling life for herself. She died in 1937 of a stroke in France.

Historical and Literary Context of *Ethan Frome*
The Progressive Movement and Public Unrest

The period of the late 1880s until 1910 was particularly tumultuous in the United States. Public outrage over poor and unregulated labor conditions for adults and children; lack of civil rights for African-Americans, Native Americans, and women; and profiteering corporate monopolies led to the rise of the Progressive Movement at the turn of the century. Reformers sought to strike back at greedy industrialists, give women the vote, and restore democracy for the common person. From 1900 until 1910 we see the rise for the first time of the marginalized members of American society: women, minorities, and lower- to middle-class whites. While the abuses that galvanized progressive reform had their roots in the nineteenth century, the strides made by the Progressive Movement in the twentieth century created the continuing momentum for affirmative action and civil rights that is still evolving today.

American writers were part of this class struggle, and reformist works abounded during this period. Upton Sinclair published his exposé of the meat-packing industry, *The Jungle*, in 1902. In the same year, Lincoln Steffens published *The Shame of the Cities*. W. E. B. DuBois published his masterpiece on race in American culture, *The Souls of Black Folk*,

in 1903. Frank Norris exposed the dark side of industrialization in works like *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903). Massive strikes, like the Pullman strike in 1894 and the steelworkers strike in 1902, were indicative of the level of social unrest. The migration of people from rural America to the cities, and the accompanying move from agricultural jobs to factory work, proved devastating to the average worker. Working conditions in the factories in major cities were abominable and poverty was rampant. Ten thousand strikes occurred during the 1880s alone, as workers protested poor working conditions and the technology that made them possible.

Massachusetts was the most industrial state in the union at the turn of the twentieth century, and abuses against workers there were common. The state of the nation regarding labor is important in the novel, because Mattie Silver, like so many young women of the time, had no marketable skills. If forced out of the patriarchal shelter of the home, women like Mattie had to either work in a factory—where sixty- to eighty-hour weeks were common at the time and young women labored, standing all day, with virtually no breaks for food and rest—or worse, become prostitutes.

Wharton's Advocacy of Social Freedoms for Women

While Edith Wharton did not consider herself a feminist in her era (she did not approve of radical demonstrations for suffrage, for example), a central theme in her fiction is the restricted and unfulfilling nature of women's lives.

In her first bestseller, *The House of Mirth* (1905), Wharton creates the haunting Lily Bart. Like the gossamer butterfly whom everyone collected—brilliant, beautiful, socially adept—was one of the crowning inventions of Wharton's novelistic life. Lily craved all that wealth could bring, but she yearned for a life of the mind and spirit as well. Unable to resign herself to a gilded cage, unwilling to sell herself to the highest bidder in the marriage market, she refuses to marry for money and ends up impoverished. Like her creator, she was proud. But unlike Edith Newbold Jones, Lily Bart did not survive. Over and over again—in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *Summer* (1917, her other novel of the Berkshires, which she called the “hot” *Ethan Frome*), and *The Buccaneers* (unfinished at the time of her death in 1937)—she chronicled the “enslavement” of women to the marriage market. The inability of women to have productive professions enslaved the men they married as well, as we see with her character Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*. The resentment and mistrust generated by such a mercenary symbiosis kept men and women in her fiction from enjoying openness and intimacy with each other.

Realism, Romanticism, and the Gothic

Ethan Frome has been proclaimed a work of literary realism. Indeed, its unsentimental, simple prose, its well-defined, working-class characters, and its detailed descriptions rooted in concrete settings are all characteristic of literary realism, the likes of which we find in novels by writers such as Theodore Dreiser, author of the 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, or Stephen Crane, author of the 1895 novel *The Red Badge of Courage*.

But in *Ethan Frome*, Wharton also embraces visionary elements of writers of the American Romantic period, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne. Other writers associated with the American Romantic movement (roughly 1828–1865) were Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Edgar Allan Poe. Highly original and individualistic, the Romantic writers believed in the inherent goodness of men and women when allowed to exist in the natural world, but thought that civilization produced corruption in human behavior. They often used the natural landscape as a vehicle for revelation and transformation. Wharton aligns herself with this impulse when she calls her characters in *Ethan Frome* “granite outcroppings,” “half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate.” She allows them to absorb characteristics from the landscape, but she denied them transformation: they remain mired in their place and their fate. She cre-

ates Starkfield, a fictional village, as a place of barrenness, isolation, and bleakness. Against this landscape, like plants beset by cold weather, emotions wither and die. Ethan is trapped not only by the landscape, but by his inability to speak and to act. Like the granite, he is silent and passive.

The book also features some Gothic elements, such as a brooding tone, a remote setting, psychologically tortured characters, and dark events. Poe and Hawthorne also liked to blend the Romantic and the Gothic and, like Wharton, spin tales of tortured characters literally or figuratively trapped. Wharton clearly acknowledges her literary debt to New Englander Hawthorne: her main character, Ethan Frome, recalls Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, and Zenobia is the name of the heroine in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. But *Ethan Frome* is no mere Hawthorne derivation. It is a vision of New England and humanity entirely unique, entirely Wharton's own.

CHRONOLOGY OF EDITH WHARTON'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1862: Edith Newbold Jones born on January 24 in New York City.
- 1866–1872: Travels with her family to Europe.
- 1882: Edith's father, George Frederic Jones, dies.
- 1883: Meets lifelong friend Walter Berry; meets Edward Wharton (known as "Teddy").
- 1885: Edith Jones and Edward Wharton married on April 29, 1885, in New York.
- 1889: Edith Wharton publishes three poems—one in *Scribner's Magazine*.
- 1890: "Mrs. Manstey's View" published by Scribner's.
- 1897: *The Decoration of Houses* (written with Ogden Codman) published by Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1899: First book of stories, *The Greater Inclination*, published.
- 1901: Purchases one hundred thirteen acres in Lenox for The Mount; mother, Lucretia Jones, dies in Paris; first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, published.

- 1905: *The House of Mirth* published.
- 1907: Meets Morton Fullerton; *The Fruit of the Tree* published.
- 1910: Moves into 53 rue de Varenne in Paris.
- 1911: *Ethan Frome* published.
- 1912: *The Reef* published by Appleton & Co.
- 1913: Divorces Teddy.
- 1914–1918: Raises huge sums for war and refugee relief.
- 1916: Henry James dies in England; Edith Wharton awarded the French Legion of Honor.
- 1918–1919: Buys two French estates: one just north of Paris, one on the French Riviera, in Hyères.
- 1920: *The Age of Innocence* published by Appleton.
- 1921: Wins Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Age of Innocence*.
- 1924: *Old New York* published; awarded Gold Medal by National Institute of Arts and Letters, the first woman so honored.
- 1927: Walter Berry dies in France.
- 1928: Awarded Gold Medal by American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1933: Publishes *A Backward Glance*, a memoir.
- 1937: Dies in France at her villa, *Pavillon Colombe*, on August 11; buried in Versailles, next to Walter Berry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Ethan Frome*



- 1889–90: Jane Addams sets up Hull House, a center for reform efforts designed to help working women; Sarah Orne Jewett's *Tales of New England* published.
- 1892: Homestead (Pennsylvania) steelworkers strike; silver strikes in Idaho; telephone service established between Chicago and New York.
- 1893: Financial panic causes national economic depression; World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago; Stephen Crane publishes *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; Ida B. Wells protests that colored women are not in the Columbian Exhibition.
- 1894: Pullman workers strike.
- 1896: Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* published.
- 1898: Henry James' ghost story, *Turn of the Screw*, published.
- 1899: Two works of fiction about restricted lives of

women published: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*
Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Yellow Wall-
paper."

1899: Thorstein Veblen publishes *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

1900–1909: The Progressive Movement, a wide-ranging campaign for social and political reform, is at the height of its power.

1901: Theodore Roosevelt becomes president after William McKinley's assassination; Booker T. Washington publishes *Up from Slavery*.

1902: Upton Sinclair publishes *The Jungle*, an exposé of the meatpacking industry; United Mine Workers go on strike.

1903: Women's Labor League formed; Departments of Commerce and Labor created; Orville Wright makes his first flight of 120 feet.

1905: Industrial Workers of the World union formed in Chicago; W. E. B. DuBois holds a congress of African-American leaders on political action and equal rights in Niagara Falls.

1908: Henry Ford introduces the first Model T automobile.

1909: NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) formed.

1911–1912: Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire kills 146 women; California, Michigan, Kansas, Oregon, and Arizona approve amendments to their state constitutions that give women the right to vote.

1920: Women granted the right to vote in all states.