



With an Introduction by Mary Gordon





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Ethan Frome and Other Short Fiction by Edith Wharton

With an Introduction by
Mary Gordon



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Edith Wharton

The upper stratum of New York society into which Edith Wharton was born in 1862 would provide her with an abundance of material as a novelist, but it did not encourage her growth as an artist. Educated by tutors and governesses, she was raised for only one career: marriage. But her marriage, in 1885, to Edward Wharton was an emotional disappointment, if not a disaster. She would suffer the first of a series of nervous breakdowns in 1894. In spite of the strain of her marriage, or perhaps because of it, she began to write fiction, and published her first story in 1889.

Her first published book was a guide to interior decorating, but this was followed by several novels and story collections. They were written while the Whartons lived at Newport and New York, traveled in Europe, and built their grand home, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts. In Europe she met Henry James, who became her good friend, traveling companion, and the sternest but most careful critic of her fiction. *The House of Mirth* (1905) was both a resounding critical success and a best-seller, as was *Ethan Frome* (1911). In 1913 the Whartons were divorced, and Edith took up permanent residence in France. Her subject, however, remained America, especially the moneyed New York of her youth. Her great satiric novel, *The Custom of the Country*, was published in 1913, and *The Age of Innocence* won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1921.

In her later years, she enjoyed the admiration of a new generation of writers, including Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In all, she wrote some thirty books, including an autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934). She died at her villa near Paris in 1937.

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INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton was a lady. Every aspect of her life, from her birth on Fifth Avenue to her death on the Riviera, was touched by the enlivening hand of privilege, a hand, which though sure and firm, could quite readily constrict. An astonishing number of critics, seemingly almost against their will, think of her in terms of her class and wealth; even the most admiring commentators seem to let the punitive tone in. An upper-class woman was an absurd figure as a writer, particularly a writer of fiction. The novel, we have been told, grew up with the middle class, and by and large its creators have come from that temperate zone. Few of the genuinely poor have written novels, nor have the unimaginably wealthy kept up their end. It takes a long time to write a novel; more than any other literary genre, it partakes of toil. The novelist as laborer is an idea that fulfills something important in the readerly imagination; to imagine a fashionable woman writing on a lapboard in her bed, as Edith Wharton did, offends our sense of what should be. Is it because we feel somewhat ashamed of devoting so much time to reading what has not happened and is not true? In any case, the novel has always had to defend itself against the charge that it is read by indolent ladies alternating pages with chocolates, killing time while waiting for their rakish lovers, or their fittings at the dressmaker's, or the shampooing of their little dogs.

Edith Wharton wrote in bed, her secretary sitting across the room patiently waiting to pick up the pages as they fell, like petals, to the floor. Wharton never wrote in a mean room, or an ugly one. The look of things, the rightness of them, was important to her. She could afford to make distinctions. She was the daughter of one of the oldest families of Old New York—the kind of family that resented the Astors and the Vanderbilts as parvenus. The love of beauty, but not only of “good things,” seems to have been one of her earliest driving forces. She spent eight years of her childhood in Europe, and the return to New York shocked her: she would always, even in her most charitable

moments, find New York to be a horror aesthetically. It seems odd to think of her as having been born during the Civil War, but 1862 was the year of her birth; and she lived to decry Mussolini. She came of age during that acutely felt and self-reflective historical time that was the transition to modernity.

But what was it a transition from? Our image of the nineteenth century as a time of solid and predictable probity is mere fantasy: Europe was regularly convulsed by political events, and by 1860 economic life was radically different from what it had been fifty years before. But the conventions of private life, it would seem, held. How they held and at what cost is the subject of most of the fiction we associate with Edith Wharton.

Her most successful and most fully realized novels, *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, concern themselves with the collision between the free spirit and the restraints of conventional society. But Edith Wharton was no simpleminded romantic; if she was aware of the price that society exacted, she was appalled by what would happen if society's props were pulled away. Her heart was with the sensitive, the impetuous, the sexually responsive, but her reason concluded it was better that they be sacrificed individually than bring down those who stood in their way. We find her caution sometimes hateful: why keep the structure up, we moderns ask ourselves, when it is only a shelter for rotting corpses, who steal oxygen from those who still draw breath?

But none of the great novelists was optimistic about the outcome if the human heart followed its course. Anna and Vronsky end up quarreling and disillusioned; Emma Bovary poisons herself, and not a day too soon. Oddly, for the texture of their fiction is so different, Wharton invites comparison with Hardy. For Hardy, the universe and its ambassador, Cruel Nature, are strong, implacable, ill-wishing forces. The weak human spirit has no chance. For Wharton, the universe is not natural but social; no less than the heaths or the unloving storms, the world of men waits to devour the responsive flesh. But unlike Hardy's natural forces, which destroy heedlessly and to no benefit, the society that Wharton presents feeds on its young for its survival. And the alternative is—what? An anarchy she shrank from and condemned. We do not go to Edith Wharton to find a problem solver. Her view of life is tragic, but her gods sit not on Olympus but on upholstered furniture in perfectly appointed rooms. And unlike the Greek gods, they have Reason and rea-

sons on their side, which they can summon by the silent raising of a gloved hand.

The biographical roots for Wharton's preoccupation with the sensitive, generous soul thwarted by society are obvious. She was the daughter of a stiff, judging mother and a kind but ineffectual and distant father. She had no reason to believe her parents understood her. They inhabited a world of social duty and social pleasure; her father's dilatory interest in his library—and in his daughter's increasingly frequent presence in it—was the closest anyone in the family came to an artistic or an intellectual life. Edith "scribbled"—poetry mostly—but no one took much notice of it. This, perhaps, was fortunate, for if they'd noticed they'd have discouraged it in no uncertain terms; ladies did not write. Edith came out, was proposed to, but the marriage was thwarted by the groom's mother, who resented the Whartons and their kind for having treated her with the cold indifference they reserved for the nouveaux riches. A man named Walter Berry then courted her but inexplicably failed to propose, although he became her lifelong friend.

These two rejections left her humiliated, and at twenty-four she married Teddy Wharton, a genial, simplehearted man who loved the outdoors and shared her affection for dogs. The dogs were almost all they had in common. Sexually, the marriage was a disaster, and after a short time there was no physical union between husband and wife. Nor did he understand her work. He seems not to have read her books, and once, while walking behind her, he remarked to a guest, "Look at that small waist. You'd never think she wrote a line of poetry."

When she was in her forties, her strong erotic nature was awakened by an affair with a journalist named Morton Fullerton. But as their relationship was reaching its maturity, Teddy Wharton had a kind of breakdown and revealed to his wife that he had squandered part (though by no means all) of her fortune and had kept a mistress in a Boston house—renting some of the house's other rooms to chorus girls. To Edith this must have seemed a grotesque, distorting mirror held up to her own life with Fullerton; their sexual relationship dissolved soon thereafter, though they remained always on good terms.

Long before the Fullerton affair, Edith Wharton had transformed herself from lady scribbler to *femme de lettres*. More than that: she had begun to earn money by her writing. It is impossible to trace this transformation; the pressure of some thrusting assurance—without which no one goes on writing—

must have inexorably made itself felt. She never gave up her interest in society, her position as a hostess, her luxurious and indefatigable traveling. But every morning she wrote, and her production is staggering: a score of novels and collections of stories, poems, and travel writing. Her great friends were Henry James and Bernard Berenson, but she was on easy terms with the nobility of several countries and entertained the artistic luminaries who passed through or lived in Paris (although, notably, not the circle whose center was Gertrude Stein). How odd, then, that she should write a book like *Ethan Frome*.

The source of the novel was a sledding accident that took place near Wharton's American home in Lenox, Massachusetts. The incident resulted in the death of one eighteen-year-old girl and the maiming and permanent disfigurement of two others. Wharton kept this incident in her mind for four years before she began writing *Ethan Frome*; one can imagine it cropping up, crowding out other more intellectual or fashionable images. The preface that Wharton attached to *Ethan Frome* betrays her insecurity about her subject. She is almost defensive, as if asserting her right to cross the class boundaries she so fervently believed in. Yet, she assures us, in a sentence odd if only for its rather humble straightforwardness: "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 part of what I saw in it."

What can she possibly have meant by this? That other subjects, closer to her immediate experience, failed to grip her with the immediate rightness of this one? Perhaps what took hold of her as a writer of fiction was the possibility of portraying a life shaped almost exclusively by necessity. For, as Cynthia Ozick has pointed out, Wharton's life never felt the impress of necessity. The double chance of her being free from any economic constraint and any familial emotional tie meant she could live anywhere, see anyone, do anything. For Wharton and the people she chiefly wrote about, anguish came as a result of the soul's wrong choices. But the limits of *Ethan Frome*'s life had their roots in the physical. The poverty of the land and the ill health of his parents prematurely turned Ethan from a promising young man studying engineering in Worcester—shyly taking pleasure in being referred to by his fellow students as "old Ethe" and "old Stiff"—and worrying about his awkwardness with local girls—into the embodiment of the Suffering Servant. Scarcity is a character in the novel, the dark side of the Puritan austerity that

was part, Wharton felt, of the New England landscape itself. As the novel progresses, the grip of winter is more and more surely felt. Interestingly, the French translation of *Ethan Frome* is titled *Hiver*.

Ethan Frome is a masterpiece of evocation, and it is remarkable that in this tale about rural life written by a woman, some of the strongest images are not natural but mechanical and metallic, two categories that we associate with the urban male worker. Consider this description of a winter night:

The night was perfectly still, and the air so dry and pure that it gave little sensation of cold. The effect produced on Frome was rather of a complete absence of atmosphere, as though nothing less tenuous than ether intervened between the white earth under his feet and the metallic dome overhead. "It's like being in an exhausted receiver," he thought. Four or five years earlier he had taken a year's course at a technological college at Worcester, and dabbled in the laboratory with a friendly professor of physics. (14)

And here is Edith Wharton describing the excluded Ethan looking in at the dance from which he must fetch Mattie:

Seen thus, from the pure and frosty darkness in which he stood, it seemed to be seething in a mist of heat. The metal reflectors of the gas-jets sent crude waves of light against the white-washed walls, and the iron flanks of the stove at the end of the hall looked as though they were heaving with volcanic fires. The floor was thronged with girls and young men. Down the side wall facing the window stood a row of kitchen chairs from which the older women had just risen. By this time the music had stopped, and the musicians—a fiddler, and the young lady who played the harmonium on Sundays—were hastily refreshing themselves at one corner of the supper table which aligned its devastated pie dishes and ice cream saucers at the end of the hall. The guests were preparing to leave, and the tide had already set toward the passage where coats and wraps were hung, when a young man with a sprightly foot and a shock of black hair shot into the middle of the floor and clapped his hands. (15)

These images are astonishing on several levels. Like metaphysical conceits, they bring together surprising combinations: the winter night and an exhausted receiver; the country dance and volcanic fires. In the case of both passages, some larger spiritual realm is suggested with a telegraphic sparseness. In Ethan's mind there is room both for the whole world of scientific knowledge and for the sensual overrichness of hell. The young man with a shock of black hair is a diabolic figure; the pie dishes are "devastated." In contrast to this, the emptiness of the winter night in which all traces of the body have been eliminated seems infinitely desirable. Yet these are the thoughts of a young man in love with a young woman—and how appropriate. Ethan imagines that fate has destined that he will be forever the frozen child staring in at the warm room where his beloved stands before the fire of ordinary happiness. What happens, of course, is incalculably worse.

The second extraordinary aspect of these images is that they were written by Edith Wharton. One of the problems for *Ethan Frome* is that, perhaps because of its length, perhaps because of its emotional accessibility, it has become a standard high school text, and much of Wharton's extraordinary imaginative achievement is lost to its first readers. But if all readers could be taught before they are of voting age that it is possible for a writer to write far outside the experiential range of his or her own life, well, that could only be a good thing for the body politic. The reader should marvel—and I mean marvel literally, as in a response to a genuine mystery—at the fact that a woman who spent all her life among the rich and powerful knew to the marrow of her writerly bones how a young man who had had one year at a technical college felt when he was cold, and what it was like at a country dance for New England farmers. She could not possibly have attended one; she could not possibly even have looked, like Ethan, through the window: her self-regard would not have permitted it. Yet in a paragraph we know everything about those dances just as, in a few words, every unreal winter night in our personal histories comes back to us, its inorganic beauty heightened in our memories by the breathtaking power of Wharton's language.

The power of the language—spare, passionate, and durable—is one of the factors that contributes to this highly dramatic story's utter lack of melodrama. Another factor is the story's relentless insistence on the impossibility of happiness in the lives it describes. Melodrama, really, is a palliative; it allows for release.

even if the release is death. The death, in melodrama, is a beautiful one, eminently illustratable. The circle is inevitably closed; if the young mother dies, she has not failed her child; the lovers, if temporarily parted, will meet in eternity. Had Wharton allowed Ethan and Mattie to succeed in their original plan, she would have written melodrama. And she would have failed us, for what she has portrayed is far worse than the violent, untimely, self-willed death of two lovers. It is the horrible reversal of love that she shows us, the change of the beautiful love object into the disfigured, petty tormentor. *Ethan Frome* has elements of romance in it, but Wharton radically refuses the Romantic's romance with time. Time here is not the swift devastator—like the consumers of the pie and ice cream at the dance. It is rather the gradual, relentless poisoner: each day a bit more of life is soured, hardened, and the crust, unpalatable, must nevertheless be consumed.

The end of *Ethan Frome* is, in fact, the triumph of the realistic mode over the Romantic one. Our penultimate vision of Mattie is of an ardent young woman about to face her death for love. Our last encounter with her—we are spared the visual details of her impairment—is our hearing her complain about the insufficiency of Zeena's tending the fire. "It's on'y just been made up this very minute. Zeena fell asleep and slep' ever so long, and I thought I'd be frozen stiff before I could wake her up and get her to 'tend to it.'" (86)

The character of Zeena is a brilliant portrayal of the kind of woman whose *métier* is illness and whose strength comes from the kind of certainty invented by the invalid's unlimited free time and the innocence born of the truth that most wrongdoing requires a physical capacity the invalid lacks or chooses to stifle. Ethan married her because he was both grateful to her for nursing his mother and fearful of losing his mind, as his mother did, if he stayed by himself on the desolate farmstead. But marriage turns Zeena from nurse to invalid. She becomes expert at her own symptoms, a connoisseur of the latest medical knowledge as it applies to her own case. She makes trips to consult doctors—her last one is the occasion of Ethan and Mattie's only night alone together—and comes back "laden with expensive remedies . . . her last visit to Springfield had been commemorated by her paying twenty dollars for an electric battery of which she had never learned the use." (32) But in fact, Zeena does not travel only to consult a doctor; her trip's real purpose is both to get medical justification and to lay plans for Mattie's

being replaced by a hired girl. The efficiency and speed with which she achieves her goal are thrilling to watch: she is the consummate destroyer, all the more horrifying because her destruction brings her no pleasure. Her only prosperity will accrue from nursing her symptoms, from her satisfaction at having destroyed the lives of two people whose capacity for happiness is greater than her own, and from the triumphs of having pressed the claims of her legitimacy and having kept her man.

But Fate is not even kind to the twisted desires of the legitimate wife. Zeena must nurse the woman who stole her husband from her; Mattie and Ethan's physical incapacity restores her strength. There is, though, the suggestion that however unbearable the conditions of Mattie and Zeena's life, Ethan's is worse. The women afford each other a kind of dreadful company, carping at each other with the freedom of equals. It is Ethan who has been utterly destroyed. The worst aspect of his survival is the Frome longevity. "Ethan'll likely touch a hundred," (4) says a Starkfield observer. We recall that the wife of one of the Ethan Fromes in the graveyard was named Endurance. Endurance is both the stone that crushes Ethan's life and the dark god in whose service he is raised up. Silent, maimed, he is heroic in his very bending to the Necessity that Edith Wharton lived her life so far from.

It is with a jolt that we turn from Starkfield to the world of Edith Wharton's short stories. The characters in these stories are typical of the people Wharton lived among, and if the stories lack the austere perfections of *Ethan Frome*—which Wharton referred to as her "granite outcroppings"—they provide a worldly massiveness that satisfies another kind of readerly desire. If *Ethan Frome* is a Shaker pie safe, these stories are a Louis XV armoire; if Scarcity is a character in *Ethan Frome*, then Artifice lives in the stories. Concealment is an important activity for people whose lives are radically divorced from the natural. Spontaneity is no virtue in a world whose center is the drawing room; under the gaze of ancestral portraits in heavy frames, one does not act directly from the heart. Or one does at one's peril and most probably to one's loss. Yet under all the well-tailored clothes are hearts and bodies whose demands press. These people must live their lives and move among their kind; their employment is the work of human relations, and the enforced constrictions of that field create demands and sorrows almost as impossible as the situation of Ethan and Mattie.

"The Other Two" is one of Wharton's most curiously modern stories. Alice Haskett Varick Waythorn is the survivor of two divorces; the story begins at the inception of her third marriage. It is told from the point of view of her latest husband, who looks upon the prospect of marriage with Alice with a comfortable and quiet optimism. Alice so embodies the domestic harmony he has always prized and so easily fits into his notions of private felicity that he congratulates himself on his liberality in not balking at her past failures. He understands that she has triumphed over her victimization with a quiet heroism of a particularly feminine kind. In the end, however, he discovers that what he thought was heroism was really a species of ambitiousness. She does possess strength, but it is the strength of being able to invent herself in the image of whatever man is the next step on her steadily upward climb. In a brilliantly realized scene, Waythorn takes tea in his library with the other two husbands and realizes that he will never genuinely possess his wife, because if there is an essentially true Alice, she will never give it to a man. Mysteriously, ineffably, this consummate wife will nourish the self that will present itself to no husband.

The theme of divorce recurs frequently in Wharton's fiction, and this is not surprising, either in biographical or in aesthetic terms. If marriage is the perfect metaphor for the conjunction of public and private life, divorce is the ideal one for that life's dissolution. Wharton must have often contemplated divorcing Teddy, but she shrank from the kind of implications of divorce that she suggests in "Autres Temps" (not included in this collection). This subtle, wistful story's theme is that "the success or failure of the deepest human experiences may hang on a matter of chronology." "Autres Temps" is the story of a Mrs. Lidcote, who left her husband and was divorced in an age when this meant being cast out by society. Her daughter, Leila, does the same thing at a time when it means only a new note in a hostess's engagement book.

Mrs. Lidcote has an admirer, Franklin Ide, who tries to reassure her that her belief that she is still being punished by society is only her paranoia. But it turns out that she is right. Leila must uneasily hide her mother upstairs—with protestations that she is merely securing her mother's rest—while she entertains an ambassador's wife below. It is understood that Mrs. Lidcote's presence at the table would scotch Leila's new husband's chances for a diplomatic post. Changes in mores have come too late for Mrs. Lidcote; she has lost everything, including her lover. "She

had had to pay the last bitterest price of learning that love has a price: that it is worth so much and no more. She had known the anguish of watching the man she loved discover this first, and of reading the discovery in his eyes." She cannot accept the kind offer of Mr. Ide because she knows that for women like her there are no second chances.

It is interesting to compare the treatment of attractive, traditionally feminine women in the works of Edith Wharton and George Eliot. For Eliot, these women are destructive parasites, manipulative, acquisitive, a symptom of all that is harmful in human life. But Wharton grants these women their strengths; she sees that prettiness need not be a veneer covering up corruption, that underneath a charming facade there may be a valuable repository of virtue. This idea is treated comically in "Xingu," in which Mrs. Roby, the supposed flibbertigibbet, shows up the pseudointellectual women of the reading circle, thereby saving them from social disaster but being ostracized by them (it can only have been a relief) for her pains.

The question of female beauty and its powers forms the center of the novella "The Touchstone." "Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair," (100) Wharton tells us. But does she speak from the secure perspective of a woman who believes she does know how to do her hair, or the anxious one of the woman who fears that she does not? The matter of "The Touchstone" concerns the love of a distinguished woman writer, Mrs. Aubyn, for a young man, Glennard, who cannot reciprocate her passion because he does not find her beautiful. After Mrs. Aubyn's death, he falls in love with a young woman as poor as himself and as lovely as his dreams. In order to have enough money to marry her, he offers Mrs. Aubyn's love letters for publication. The book is a wild success—but Glennard is torn apart by self-revulsion. He deliberately arranges that his wife will find him out, and her response is the triumph of one of those Wharton women, cool, harmonious, seemingly impassive, who are the source and the embodiment—the "touchstone"—of the only genuine virtue in a world steeped in corruption, self-service, and self-deceit.

The great strength of these stories comes from the beautifully sculpted sentences that are the foundation of Wharton's formal genius. I mean *formal* in its two senses: pertaining to form, and the opposite of informal. Wharton, like her friend Henry James, writes always from a distance. The observer, never dispassionate, is at the aristocrat's remove. This position allows Wharton

the opportunity for the grand, patrician generalization, impossible in a less wrought prose. It may no longer be open to writers in the new democracy of fictional language to write sentences like these: "The desire to propitiate a divinity is generally in inverse ratio to its responsiveness." ("Xingu," 200) "If man is at times indirectly flattered by the moral superiority of women, her mental ascendancy is extenuated by no such oblique tribute to his powers." ("The Touchstone," 100) And it would be difficult to imagine a contemporary feeling free to describe Rome as Wharton does in another story, "Roman Fever" (not included here):

The clear heaven overhead was emptied of all its gold. Dusk spread over it, abruptly darkening the Seven Hills. Here and there lights began to twinkle through the foliage at their feet. Steps were coming and going on the deserted terrace—waiters looking out of the doorway at the head of the stairs, then reappearing with trays and napkins and flasks of wine. Tables were moved, chairs straightened. A feeble string of electric lights flickered out. Some vases of faded flowers were carried away, and brought back replenished. A stout lady in a dust-coat suddenly appeared, asking in broken Italian if any one had seen the elastic band which held together her tattered Baedeker. She poked with her stick under the table at which she had lunched, the waiters assisting.

The genius, then, is formal, it is distant, but it is never cold. For all her sophistication, Wharton believed in innocence (Ethan is an innocent), and her sympathy is with the innocents who are shredded in the teeth of the machinery of the world. Perhaps the truest reflection of her sense of life occurs in her story "The Last Asset," which has at its center two innocents, Samuel and Hermione Newell, a father and daughter whose lives have been shaped and disfigured by the shrewd and desperate calculations of the woman who is wife to one, mother to the other. Newell offers his philosophy to a fellow American whom he meets in a Paris restaurant: "If you make up your mind not to be happy there's no reason why you shouldn't have a pretty good time." (162)

Newell has been estranged from his wife and daughter because his wife has, in some way that Wharton does not specify, emotionally assassinated him. But Mrs. Newell has made a brilliant match for her unpromising daughter, with a member of

one of the oldest French families, and the marriage cannot take place unless Mr. Newell appears at the wedding. At first he refuses; he has asked only to be left in peace, to his life of small activities. But in the end the goodness and courage of Hermione triumph. "It was one more testimony to life's indefatigable renewals, to nature's secret of drawing fragrance from corruption; and as his eyes turned from the girl's illuminated presence to the resigned and stoical figure sunk in the adjoining chair, it occurred to him that he had perhaps worked better than he knew in placing them, if only for a moment, side by side." (189)

It is possible that only a woman born of privilege could have written those sentences; but what is necessary is that the woman who created them was first and most passionately from her birth a writer, and a writer with a heart.

MARY GORDON

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
Ethan Frome	1
The Touchstone	91
The Last Asset	159
Xingu	191
The Other Two	217