

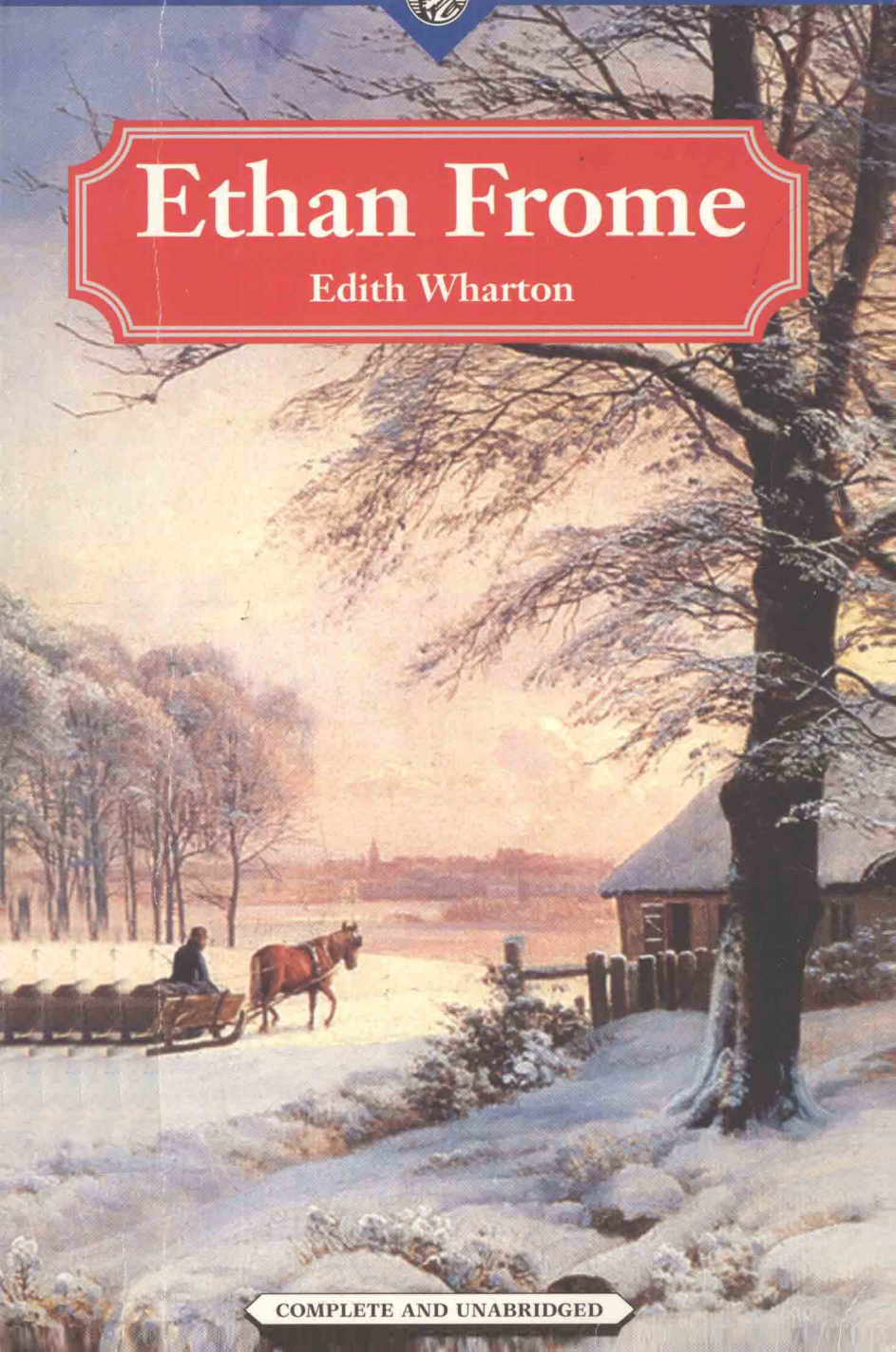
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# Ethan Frome

Edith Wharton



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

## **ETHAN FROME**



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Edith Wharton



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*Ethan Frome* engages several issues that have continuing interest for our times. What, for instance, is the quality of rural life? Wharton presents a harsh view of it in this novella. She was reacting against what she regarded as the overly pretty and sentimental picture characteristic of the school of New England regionalists and represented by 'abundant enumeration of sweet-fern, asters and mountain laurel, and the conscientious reproduction of the vernacular'. She chose the metaphor '*granite outcroppings*' to represent both the living conditions and the people in the region. The cold, the snow, the storms that envelop the action underline the isolation and deprivation the characters confront.

This picture of the natural world provides the grounding for Wharton's exploration of aspects of determinism. According to her biographer, she was introduced in the 1880s to Darwin, Huxley and Herbert Spencer, and through them to 'the naturalist theory of the implacable power of the environment' (Lewis, p. 56). In particular, the narrative notes the accident to his father that forces Ethan to return to the Starkfield farm from school, to abandon the delights of the mind for the 'burden of mill and farm'. In a chain reaction follow his bondage to his ailing (and suddenly silent) mother and the combination of loneliness and obligation that brings him to marry Zeena (Chapter Four). His bondage is economic as well – to the unrelenting work required to eke a living from the farm and, later, to the lack of funds simultaneously to provide for Zeena and to escape with Mattie. Family and economic responsibilities, as Ethan perceives them, interlink to chain him to the farm and to his wife.

Opposed to these forces are those represented by Mattie Silver: sexual desire and romantic passion. Is Ethan as bound by these impulses as he is by those others? The Victorian reticences that constrain Wharton's presentation of the relationship between Mattie and Ethan may in fact have the effect of intensifying the record of their feelings. Surging emotions, desperately but less and less effectually repressed, finally explode in the culminating scenes into mutual admissions of love and a frustrated search for a solution to their dilemma. The narrative is completely convincing and gripping.

One reason for this is that Edith Wharton had herself just been through an intensely passionate adulterous affair. This affair, known to only a few of her intimates, was uncovered and documented by R.W.B. Lewis and his research assistant as he prepared the first full scholarly biography of the author. In 1908, after twenty-three years of marriage to Edward Wharton that had been sexually unfulfilling from the beginning and revealed increasing incompatibility, Edith Wharton,

## INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton was forty-nine years of age when *Ethan Frome* appeared in 1911. From 1899, when she finally committed herself to a career in letters, until 1911, Wharton had written steadily and in a variety of forms. She had poured out three novels, four collections of stories, two novellas, two collections of articles and sketches about Italy, a volume of poems and an adaptation for the theatre of her novel *The House of Mirth*. In accepting the request to have *The House of Mirth* serialised in *Scribner's Magazine* almost a year ahead of schedule, Wharton believed she had developed the 'discipline of the daily task' that gave her for the first time confidence in the powers of her imagination (*A Backward Glance*, pp. 208-9).

The 'busy, happy Parisian years', roughly between the publication of *The House of Mirth* (1905) and the outbreak of World War I, produced in Wharton 'a growing sense of mastery' that made her work 'more and more absorbing'. *Ethan Frome*, she decided in retrospect, was the work of that period which gave her 'the greatest joy and the fullest ease' in composing (*A Backward Glance*, p. 293). It was in handling the materials of this tale that she finally felt 'the artisan's full control of his implements' (*A Backward Glance*, p. 209). Sensitive to criticism from friends and critics for interposing an engineer-narrator between her readers and the story, Wharton explained her decision in the brief Jamesian introduction she wrote for the 1922 edition of the book (included in this edition).

Her experience of rural New England might, indeed, be suspect. Raised in New York City's old-monied social élite, she had built in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts in 1902 a large country house, modelled on Christopher Wren's Belton House in Lincolnshire, where she lived during most summers for the next decade. Her associations with the local citizens came through business dealings and through her automobile excursions in the region. It was a matter of faithfulness to her own experience of these people that she chose as narrator of *Ethan Frome* an outsider who, picking up bits and pieces of a story from the laconic villagers, can envision the whole story, in its psychological complexity and passion, and be the 'sympathising intermediary' between the characters and readers.

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#### FURTHER READING

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at the age of forty-five, found sexual ecstasy and an overflowing of romantic feelings with Morton Fullerton, a newspaper journalist. But Fullerton was married and was otherwise promiscuous. There was no hope that Wharton and he would ever live together, and the relationship ended in 1910. That was the year in which her quarrels with her husband began to come to a head (she reluctantly divorced him in 1913) and in which she began to write *Ethan Frome*. The book, says Lewis, 'Portrays her personal situation, as she had come to appraise it, carried to a far extreme . . . and rendered utterly hopeless by circumstances' (Lewis, p. 309). The parallels in the situations, with genders reversed, and Wharton's adaptation of passages from her 1908 journal in the text of the novella, lead Lewis to call it 'one of the most autobiographical stories ever written' (Lewis, p. xiv).

Never had Edith Wharton confronted the power of romantic passion as she did in *Ethan Frome*. It was a subject she was to explore with intensity and a tender irony in subsequent works such as *The Reef* (1912), *Summer* (1917) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

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.

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 anti-climax, 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 of 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.

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 till 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 – 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 on-looker, 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 sympathising 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 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 Bretèche* 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  
31 March 1922



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, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan 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.

'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 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. 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.

Everyone 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 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 YMCA 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 at Corbury Junction, and a long-drawn-out 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 colloquially 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 horsehair and mahogany weakly illuminated by a gurgling Carcel lamp, 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 Frome's had been beyond the common measure, no one gave me an explanation of the look in his face which, as I persisted in thinking, neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there. Nevertheless, I might have contented myself with the story pieced together from these hints had it not been for the provocation of Mrs Hale's silence, and – a little later – for the accident of personal contact with the man.