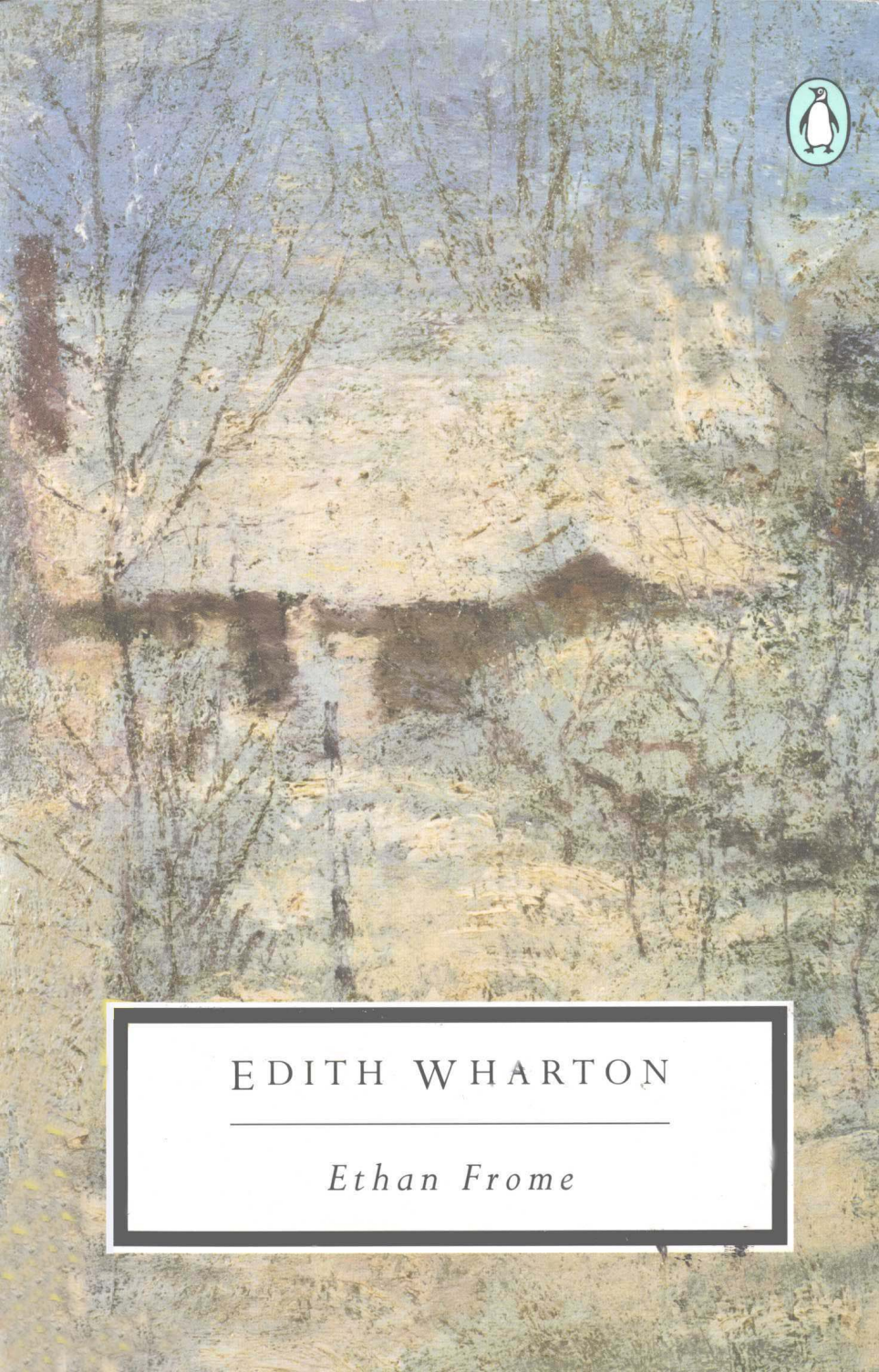

EDITH WHARTON

Ethan Frome

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INTRODUCTION

by Doris Grumbach

The subject and style of *Ethan Frome* are unique among Edith Wharton's thirty-one novels, novellas, and collections of short stories. Its tone is austere, bleak, and shocking. And it is told in the first person, a voice Wharton was not fond of, like her friend Henry James, who called the form "barbaric." It is a framed tale, a story within a story, not a common Wharton device (in this way it bears some resemblance to another awkwardly structured, intense masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights*). Most critics see in its despair and hopeless tone an alliance to Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction. Biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff feels it has tonal precedents in Wharton's masterpiece, *The House of Mirth.*

I have said *Ethan Frome* was a unique product for Edith Wharton. Another biographer, R. W. B. Lewis, has called it, in a moment of dubious hyper-

bole, "one of the most autobiographical novels ever written." This judgment comes as a surprise to me, for I have always felt that Wharton's first-hand, intimate knowledge of upper-class New York, New England, and European society had served her fiction well, but that she had always maintained a certain distance from the Gothic circumstances of her own life. Lewis makes a case for *Ethan Frome* as a reflection (although the roles of the protagonists are reversed) of the unhappy life Wharton led with her sickly, unbalanced husband, Teddy, a man much older than she, during which she was often to doubt his sanity, and sometimes even daydreamed about his death. The Mattie character, Lewis believes, is based on an earlier love of Wharton's, Morton Fullerton. The failure of her marriage, like Ethan's, convinced her that she was a prisoner for life. In the terrible ending she gives to the novel, Lewis contends, "we have Edith Wharton's appalling vision of what her situation might finally have come to."

Lewis is more convincing when he uncovers the geographic and atmospheric roots of the story. For many years, while she was living in The

Mount, her stately house near Lenox, Massachusetts, she took drives through the countryside. She absorbed the rolling hills, the dark woods, the skies of leaden clouds, "the derelict mountain villages of New England. . . ." "In those days," writes Wharton in her autobiography, "the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts . . . or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighboring hills." And much later, in an introduction to the dramatization of the novel, she wrote, "My poor little group of hungry, lonely New England villagers will live again for a while on their stony hill-side. . . ." She was shocked when she read a critic's remarks that *Ethan Frome* was "an interesting example of a successful New England story written by some one who knew nothing of New England!"

The background and the landscape she knew well. The story itself grew from an exercise she had written for her tutor, after she had moved away from The Mount to the rue de Varenne in

Paris. She had hired him to bring her idiomatic French up-to-date. Written in French, she sketched out the story of a poor New England farmer named Hart, married to a complaining wife, Anna, and in love with Anna's niece, Mattie. When Anna threatens to send Mattie away, Hart wants to go with her, but Mattie will not allow it. The bitter conclusion of the story she was to write seven years later was not appended. She tells us, many years later, that *Ethan Frome* was the book of all her books she most enjoyed "making," and to which she "brought the greatest joy and the fullest ease."

Wharton names her village Starkfield, a descriptive designation. To Starkfield comes the narrator, an engineer perhaps, who stays in the village but does the work he has been sent to do at Corbury Junction's power-house, a long, snowy journey from the village. We learn very little about the narrator, not even his name, so when he tells us that he "began to put together this vision of his [Frome's] story," we wonder whether to believe it. And we have moments of doubt when we understand that Wharton has used the narrator as a device for telling a story which, in all its

detail and long passages of dialogue, he could not possibly have known or heard. Indeed, we find it hard to imagine, given his scientific nature, that he could have created this "vision" out of his one night's view of the destroyed little triangle of tragic persons and the gossipy tidbits he had heard. Only when the story breaks away from the contrivance of the frame does it come to moving life for the reader.

Edith Wharton's superb craft makes the final scene a part of the frame. In an almost cinematic way, we are left with the narrator's desolate vision of the three, and with the few last opinions on the stark history by his landlady, Mrs. Ned Hale. A contemporary novelist might not have written the narrator's weak final line: "It's horrible for them all," might indeed have been tempted to let the vision of the three serve as an ending of great force without the diminishing effect of Mrs. Hale's commonplace summary words.

Taking the picture, the story, the narrator's "vision" from their frame, we are left with one of American fiction's finest and most intense narratives. It is carefully constructed of character and

frozen landscape: "The village lay under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners. In a sky of iron. . . ." At the very start of the story the village's notable feature, the sled coasting-ground, is passed by Ethan as he walks to the church to fetch home his wife's cousin, Mattie Silver. And it is part of the talk between Ethan and Mattie as they pass the same place: "Its icy slope, scored by innumerable runners, looked like a mirror scratched by travellers at an inn." Mattie's agreeable goodness, Ethan's "silent ache," the silence that exists between them, "a shock of silent joy," are all part of the atmosphere. When we have accepted the strong, but always silent bond between the two, Wharton introduces the difficult, suspicious, hypochondriac wife, Zeena (Zenobia), and the tragedy-to-come is prepared for.

Scrupulously, Wharton moves Ethan toward his doom. He develops from a good-looking young farmer whose almost-mad mother had retreated into silence to the married Ethan whose wife, after a year, "too fell silent" and, when she did speak, complained, accused, denied him. Once Mattie enters the farmhouse and invades his dreams, there

remains in Ethan "a slumbering spark of sociability which the long Starkfield winters had not yet extinguished." The vulnerable, sweet "hired girl," Mattie, appeals to him, he admires "recklessness and gaiety in others," and Mattie has both of these characteristics. Together, the best aspect of these protagonists develops; to the side, the worst of Zeenie looks on, plans, and makes the way clear for the inevitable ruin of the three.

Few readers will be prepared for the magnitude, the tragic waste, of the final scene. Few will be willing to attribute the sound of "the querulous drone," the sight of the "bloodless and shrivelled" face, to the character Edith Wharton's genius has fastened them upon. But no one engrossed in this tale (and I can think of no one who would not be) will not feel the full effect of the destiny assigned to Ethan and Zeenie Frome and the hired girl, Mattie Silver—the sense of an ineluctable sky lowering down upon the ill-starred trio, the frozen landscape with its ice-encrusted sledding hill, and the fateful big tree still shining in the cursed dark. It is made all the more tragic because of those earlier brief moments when, for Ethan, "the iron

heavens seemed to melt and rain down sweetness."

In 1911 the early reviews of *Ethan Frome* were full of praise. The public had been prepared for it by the serial appearance in three issues of *Scribner's* magazine the year before, but failed to respond with the kind of book purchases Edith Wharton hoped for. Perhaps it was the change in subject matter and tone from the fifteen books that had preceded it. More likely it was the unaccustomed force, the intensity of deep emotion, the implied but nonetheless *felt* presence of sexual attraction and repulsion that made the new Wharton fiction less acceptable to her faithful readers of the early twentieth century. Her harsh literary realism, with no blows softened and no romantic scrim dropped down over the grim story, may have been out of kilter with the literary tastes of the time.

Twenty-five years later, a year before Wharton's death and deep into the Depression years, the novel had an interesting and laudable revival. The play version, by Owen and Donald Davis, may well have assisted this resurgence of interest. Now the public's imagination was caught, and it was never to flag again. I am of the impression that *Ethan*

Frome has never been out of print for long. It has entered the canon of works commented on by critics, read by high school and college students, and studied for its form, its daring subject matter, its impressive emotional charge. The general reader has discovered its enduring pleasures.

Living comfortably in Paris, as Fenimore Cooper did when he wrote about Natty Bumppo and his Indians, and as Willa Cather did from her comfortable New York apartment, writing about destitute immigrants on the Nebraska plains, Edith Wharton was not affected by the disparity between her expatriate life at the moment and her New England setting. She said she was fatuously satisfied with her winter's work. And so are we, seventy-five years later. Mark Twain thought a classic was "a book which people praise but don't read." In the case of the novel in your hand, this is clearly not so. It is a classic, it is still widely read, and deservedly so.

INTRODUCTION
by Edith Wharton

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 noth-

ing 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 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.

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—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. 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.