

EDITH WHARTON

ETHAN FROME

— AND —

SUMMER



EDITH WHARTON

Ethan Frome

AND

Summer



INTRODUCED BY

VICTORIA GLENDINNING

Oxford New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1982

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London Glasgow New York Toronto

Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo

Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town

Melbourne Auckland

and associates in

Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

Ethan Frome © Charles Scribner's Sons 1911

Renewal © Frederic R. King and Leroy King

Summer © Charles Scribner's Sons 1917

Introduction © Victoria Glendinning 1982

Ethan Frome first published 1911 by Charles Scribner's Sons

Summer first published 1917 by Charles Scribner's Sons

First issued, with a new Introduction, as an

Oxford University Press paperback 1982

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wharton, Edith

Ethan Frome; and, Summer.—(Oxford paperbacks)

I. Title II. Wharton, Edith

813'.52 [F] PS3545.H16

ISBN 0-19-281366-8

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wharton, Edith, 1862-1937.

Ethan Frome; and, Summer. (Oxford paperbacks)

I. Wharton, Edith, 1862-1937. Summer. 1982.

II. Title.

PS3545.H16A6 1982 813'.52 82-7861 AACR2

ISBN 0-19-281366-8 (pbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by

R. Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd

Bungay, Suffolk

ETHAN FROME

AND

SUMMER

EDITH NEWBOLD JONES was born in New York City on 24 January 1862, the third child and only daughter of George Frederic Jones and Lucretia Stevens Rhinelanders. She was privately educated. In 1885 she was married to Edward Robbins Wharton, a Harvard graduate thirteen years her senior, from whom she was divorced in 1913. From 1910 onwards she made her home in France; for her achievement as a writer and for her war relief work she was made a member of the Legion of Honour.

She died on 11 August 1937, at Pavillon Colombe, her house at Saint-Brice-sous-Fôret, and was buried at the Cimetière des Gonards at Versailles, close by the grave of her lifelong friend Walter Berry.

She started writing in 1897, but it was not until 1905 that she made an outstanding success with *The House of Mirth*. During her life she published more than forty volumes: novels, stories, verse, essays, travel books, and memoirs. While *Ethan Frome* (1911) is possibly her best known work it is the least typical of her art. This found full expression in her "society" novels, and particularly in *The Age of Innocence* (1920) with which she won the Pulitzer Prize, where she brilliantly analysed the changing scene of fashionable American life, and contrasted the manners of the New World with those of Old Europe.

VICTORIA GLENDINNING is the author of *A Suppressed Cry*, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer*, and *Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn Among Lions*. She regularly contributes reviews and articles to the *Sunday Times* and other periodicals and newspapers, and is currently working on a biography of Vita Sackville-West.

INTRODUCTION

BY VICTORIA GLENDINNING

EDITH WHARTON was born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862; she died in 1937. She belonged to the “old New York” élite—her mother was a Miss Rhinelander—and was reared in pomp and circumstance. She was first taken to Europe as a young child, and knew Italy, Spain, France, and Germany by the time she “came out” in New York society. Her attractive father died when she was nineteen, leaving his children rich. Edith never seriously rebelled against her social background, which she later used to vivid effect in her fiction; but she did have some feeling of isolation in her high-society milieu on account of her inconvenient intelligence and literary aspirations.

An early admirer, the literary lawyer Walter Berry, failed to propose to her—or to anyone else, subsequently—but became a lifelong friend, critic, and counsellor. The most important of her literary friendships was with Henry James, whom she admired unreservedly. But the man she married in 1885 did not share many of her interests. He was Edward Robbins Wharton—“Teddy”—a popular Boston socialite thirteen years older than herself, with no vocation and no money.

Edith Wharton wrote seventeen novels and several volumes of short stories, as well as poetry, plays, and travel books. The two short novels *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* are changelings: they are unique in her large output in that they do not deal with characters struggling for survival in the milieu to which she herself belonged, but with people subsisting at the most barren level of rural New England society. (She did in “The Bunner Sisters” write a short story about simple people, but in an urban setting.) She was already, when she wrote them, established as an author several times over; and *The House of Mirth*, her first major work, had appeared in 1905.

Ethan Frome and *Summer* come between this and another of her best-known novels, *The Age of Innocence* (1921).

Her two changelings were conceived way back at the turn of the century, when Mrs. Wharton had a large country house built for herself and Teddy near Lenox, in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts. She called it The Mount, and there she entertained, among others, Henry James; and in what James called "their big strong commodious new motor" the Whartons, James, and Walter Berry explored the surrounding countryside and its lonely picturesque villages.

Mrs. Wharton in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1933), wrote that her two New England stories, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, were the direct result of these expeditions. To the sophisticated party in the motor car the isolation and primitive conditions of the rural communities seemed frighteningly suggestive:

In those days 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 of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighboring hills; and Emily Brontë would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors.

It was this gothic reality that caught her imagination and that she wanted to capture: Hawthorne's New England, rather than the lavender-and-roses version put out by the popular novelists of her time. (Both *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* shocked the genteel.)

She used real-life events and places in both the stories. In 1904 there actually was a sledging accident in Lenox at the foot of Courthouse Hill—called Schoolhouse Hill in *Ethan Frome*—which left several people maimed for life. The Mountain in *Summer* is Bear Mountain, twelve miles from Lenox; and the details about the drunken mountain outlaws in *Summer* were given to her by the rector of Lenox who had, like the clergyman in the story, been called up the mountain to read the burial service over a woman of ill repute, and who told Mrs. Wharton about it afterwards.

The Wharton's marriage was not a success. Sexually, it was a disaster. It was not until 1908, in Paris, that Edith Wharton had her first, last, and overwhelming sexual awakening. She was then already in her mid-forties. Her lover was William Morton Fullerton, a clever American journalist, a little younger than herself. He had intrigued Henry James, who had known him for years; he was an experienced seducer; and for a short period he made Mrs. Wharton deliriously happy. This liaison also fertilized her writing.

Ethan Frome had its beginnings that very year. Mrs. Wharton, in Paris, was trying to perfect her French, and the first version of the story was written in that language, simply as an exercise. It was not until two years later, again in Paris, that she settled down to it in English. Teddy, who was unfaithful, and suffering from bad bouts of melancholia and mental instability, was away. Although it is a sad story *Ethan Frome* was, she said, "the book to the making of which I brought the greatest joy and the fullest ease". Every evening she read her morning's work aloud to Walter Berry. "We talked the tale over page by page, so that its accuracy of 'atmosphere' is doubly assured." It was published in September 1911 and was to become one of the most famous of her works, even though her publisher, Charles Scribner, did not think highly of its popular appeal.

If Morton Fullerton provided the sexual yeast for *Ethan Frome*, and Walter Berry support and advice during the writing, Henry James was a major literary influence. In *Edith Wharton and Henry James* (1966) Millicent Bell went so far as to say that the period of her friendship with James "saw her greatest artistic growth which culminated in the three memorable works that she wrote close together—*Ethan Frome*, *The Reef* [1912], and *The Custom of the Country* [1913]—novels that now seem the summit of her work."

In her foreword to *Ethan Frome*, written for the Modern Student's Library edition in 1922, Mrs. Wharton concentrated almost entirely on how she had constructed the piece. Her problem was, as she saw it, how 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 story". She was concerned, in a Jamesian way, with perspectives

and points of view; and she introduced an observer-narrator of Jamesian detachment and sensibility through whom the story, and the past, are filtered. Her Ethan and Zeena and Mattie are primitive people—"granite outcroppings", she calls them in her foreword, "but half-emerged from the soil and scarcely more articulate".

Her narrator, eliciting from minor characters "just so much as he or she is capable of understanding", reconstructs his version of the whole awful story—"this vision", as he calls it at the end of the introductory chapter. But to the modern reader this mediating framework may seem all rather a waste of time, since the narrator thenceforth assumes precisely the authorial omniscience that a novelist assumes when writing "direct" narrative. (Emily Brontë used the same narrator-device in *Wuthering Heights*; and there, as in *Ethan Frome*, one tends to discount or forget the narrator and remember only the story he or she tells.) The gulf between social classes being what it was, Edith Wharton may also have felt some unease in presenting the emotions of her "granite outcroppings" to a sophisticated readership; the narrator, as she said, acts as "the sympathising intermediary between his rudimentary characters and the complicated minds to whom he is trying to present them". The device justifies itself in the concluding chapter, when the time-lag of twenty years is bridged at once and shockingly.

It is only when problems of form are overcome, wrote Mrs. Wharton, that an author "can pass into his creation that imponderable something more which causes life to circulate in it, and preserves it for a little from decay". The "imponderable something more" in this case may be autobiographical. She switches the sexes: like Ethan with Zeena, Edith Wharton felt trapped and stifled in her sexless marriage with Teddy; like Ethan, she briefly glimpsed life and happiness with someone else. R. W. B. Lewis in *Edith Wharton* (1975) reported that passages from the diary she kept in 1908 describing her excitement over Morton Fullerton were transposed into the scenes between Ethan and Mattie; and the quarrels between Ethan and sickly Zeena echoed those between Edith and Teddy.

It is worth remarking however that illness, used as a protest or as an emotional weapon as Zeena used it, was something that not only

Teddy in real life knew. The Wharton's marriage in early days was a seesaw: Edith too had long periods of physical and emotional breakdown. It was only when she began to achieve personal confidence and professional success that Teddy fell to pieces. Like all true novelists Mrs. Wharton breathes in all her characters, including the hypochondriacal Zeena—who emerges dominant, and mysteriously cured, after tragedy befalls her rival.

Mrs. Wharton's depiction of a joyless rural slum is all the more striking when one remembers that her own external world was one of powerful motor cars, villas in the sun, telephones, books, and the creation and decoration of elaborate homes. Her preoccupation with décor in its widest sense was, perhaps, precisely what enabled her to enter so fully into its negation—complete physical and cultural deprivation. In her evocations, the decrepit farmhouses in its cruel winter landscape is as stark and as real as in a painting by Andrew Wyeth. *Ethan Frome* is, in fact, a supremely painterly book. The prevailing tone is of cold darkness, pierced by lamplight or moonlight. Wherever Mattie is, there is brightness and warmth. When his grim wife opens the door to let him in at night, Ethan sees her as a vision of hell:

Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping pins. To Ethan, still in the rosy haze of his hour with Mattie, the sight came with the intense precision of the last dream before waking. He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like.

When Mattie opens the door to him in Zeena's absence, thirty pages on, the scene is the same, but so different:

She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim

young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. Then, striking upwards, it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows.

Similarly, the kitchen by day is bleak and dank when Zeena is in it, warm and bright when Mattie is in charge. This pattern of contrasts, which is sustained throughout, is as blatant, and as effective, as the stage lighting plan for a melodrama.

Ethan's final romantic gesture fails and, which is more tragic, his romantic vision of Mattie is destroyed as well. The romantic vision fails in *Summer* too. *Summer* is the companion piece to *Ethan Frome* (which appeared in its French translation simply as *Hiver—Winter*); it was written during the First World War. By this time the house in the Berkshire Hills had been sold, and the Whartons were divorced.

Mrs. Wharton was at Fontainebleau near Paris in 1916 when she wrote to Charles Scribner that she was writing a long short story "of the dimensions of *Ethan Frome*. It deals with the same kind of life in a midsummer landscape . . ." (But Scribner's magazine did not publish it. *McClure's* offered more money.) To Gaillard Lapsley, Mrs. Wharton wrote gaily that the work in progress "is known to the author and her familiars as the Hot Ethan".

Much later, in her autobiography, she said that *Summer* was "as remote as possible in setting and subject from the scenes about me, and the work made my other tasks seem lighter". She was involved in many kinds of war work in France, notably the organizing of the American Hostels for refugees. Shortly before she began *Summer*, she had been saddened by the death of Henry James. Writing her "Hot Ethan" was a release. "The tale was written at a high pitch of creative joy, but amid a thousand interruptions, and while the rest of my being was steeped in the tragic realities of the war; yet I do not remember ever visualizing with more intensity the inner scene, or the creatures peopling it." She liked *Summer*, rating it among her five personal favourites of her own books.

The story is told directly: the observing Jamesian fine intelligence

is bypassed. The June atmosphere is immediately established as the tale opens on the village street in "silver sunshine". Yet the girl Charity Royall—pretty, ignorant, uneducated, desirous of she knows not what, a virgin Madame Bovary—feels as trapped as Ethan Frome. "How I hate everything!" Her desires are answered by an outsider, the city-bred sophisticate Lucius Harney—one of Mrs. Wharton's typically charming, plausible, unreliable young men. Amid rising sap, bird-song, and sweet summer scents the idyll in the sunlit valley develops until, with the coming of autumn, Charity is left pregnant, abandoned, disgraced.

It is a stereotype of a story: but there is that "imponderable something more". If *Ethan Frome* is darkness briefly shot by light, *Summer* is brightness threatened by looming darkness—the Mountain, the "perpetual background of gloom" behind the village. Up the Mountain live the alcoholic, lawless throw-outs of the community in abject poverty. It is a bad place, a place of shame and fear. It is where Charity came from, rescued in childhood from an immoral mother by Lawyer Royall, now her guardian. The Mountain is where she fears she belongs. The Mountain is a handy catch-all for interpretive criticism, representing original sin, or the uncontrollable impulses of the subconscious, of the heart of darkness in human nature (Conrad was a great admirer of *Summer*). More directly, it may have its roots in Mrs. Wharton's own lifelong, irrational, choking fits of terror, or in her awareness of the "tragic realities of the war" around her as she wrote.

There is more graphic horror, paradoxically, in *Summer* than there is in *Ethan Frome*: in the description of Dr. Merkle the female abortionist, for example, with "the false hair, the false teeth, the false murderous smile"; and in the night-scene on the Mountain, with Charity's mother's corpse lying sprawled on a mattress in a filthy hovel, surrounded by her drunken, squabbling, subnormal relations.

There is a subtle suggestion of incest in the account of the Mountain colony. Incest was a topic in which Mrs. Wharton took an odd interest. Late in life she wrote a piece of startlingly vivid pornography—an extraordinary thing to come from the pen of someone

of her upbringing, age, and demeanour—in which passionate coitus between father and daughter is avidly desired, and enjoyed, by both. (She never published it, naturally; but R. W. B. Lewis includes it as an appendix in his biography.) There is nothing remotely comparable in *Summer*. But there is something incestuous in Lawyer Royall's thwarted sexual longing for Charity, his ward, early in the book, as in their marriage of convenience at the end.

When Bernard Berenson picked out the character of Lawyer Royall for special praise, Mrs. Wharton was delighted: "Of course he *is* the book!" This assertion puzzled me when I first read it, in the biography. What was the significance of this dour man, to whom she gave the name of one of her friends, the art historian Royall Tyler? One must look at Lawyer Royall again.

In his big speech at the village festivities Lawyer Royall has a positive message for the defeated. Millicent Bell has written that Mrs. Wharton's fiction was "repeatedly concerned with the effect upon the individual of denial enforced by family, society, the meanness of others". This is so, but Lawyer Royall perhaps transcends personal denial when he speaks to those who remained in or returned to the village because they could not succeed in the wider world: ". . . and even if you come back against your will—and thinking it's all a bitter mistake of Fate or Providence—you must try and make the best of it".

Grave, austere, apparently puritan, Lawyer Royall represents and upholds all that is respectable in that narrow society. But he is also a disappointed man, a failure in his profession. He is a man of frustrated passions: he has rattled the knob of Charity's bedroom door begging to be let in and, away from the village, he indulges in drunkenness and whoring. He combines in his person all the constricting moral values of the village and all the chaotic impulses of the Mountain. Order and disorder are reconciled in his final unselfish love for Charity and her unborn child. When, at the very end he says "You're a good girl, Charity", she replies: "I guess you're good too." It has to be for these reasons that Lawyer Royall "*is* the book" in *Summer*.

The defeated Ethan Frome had to "make the best of it" too, in

his long silent caring for fretful, un-giving women. And so perhaps did Edith Wharton, so far as her inner self and her most violent emotions were concerned, in spite of her success and her energetic, even overbearing, personality. Nevertheless, what one remembers of both these short novels, afterwards, is not so much character, plot, or "message" but the intensity of atmosphere and setting—the result of Edith Wharton's imagination and art working on what she had glimpsed long before on her excursions "among villages still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence" (as she wrote in *A Backward Glance*) "and sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians". All that—given life and significance by her "imponderable something more".

Ethan Frome

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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."