



Ethan Frome and Selected Stories

Edith Wharton, Kent Ljungquist (Introduction)

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Ethan Frome and Selected Stories, by **Edith Wharton**, is part of the *Barnes & Noble Classics* series, which offers quality editions at affordable prices to the student and the general reader, including new scholarship, thoughtful design, and pages of carefully crafted extras. Here are some of the remarkable features of *Barnes & Noble Classics*:

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One of Edith Wharton's few works of fiction that takes place outside of an urban, upper-class setting, *Ethan Frome* draws upon the bleak, barren landscape of rural New England. A poor farmer, Ethan finds himself stuck in a miserable marriage to Zeenie, a sickly, tyrannical woman, until he falls in love with her visiting cousin, the vivacious Mattie Silver. As Mattie is forced to leave his household, Frome steals one last afternoon with her—one that culminates in a ruinous sled ride with unspeakably tragic results.

Unhappily married herself, **Edith Wharton** projected her dark views of love onto people far removed from her social class in *Ethan Frome*. Her sensitivity to natural beauty and human psychology, however, make this slim novel a convincing and compelling portrait of rural life. A powerful tale of passion and loss—and the wretched consequences thereof—*Ethan Frome* is one of American literatures great tragic love stories.

Also included in this volume are four of Edith Wharton's finest short stories: "The Pretext," "Afterward," "The Legend," and "Xingu."

Kent P. Ljungquist, Professor of English at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, is the author of *The Grand and the Fair: Poe's Landscape Aesthetics and Pictorial Techniques*, co-editor of the SUNY Press edition of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, and editor of several reference works of American fiction.

Ethan Frome and Selected Stories Details

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From Reader Review Ethan Frome and Selected Stories for online ebook

Rachel Pieters says

The first story had promise. There was a lot of great tension and I thought it was going to be really fantastic at the end, but I got there and I was like, "Um, okay. That was anti-climactic and odd."

It was a bit of a jump to read a novel written in this time period b/c Edith Wharton does embellish a bit on detail in old language, which is fine, and it was interesting to read about this time and place from that perspective, but at times I just wasn't entirely sure what she was saying.

When I got to the second story, The Eyes, it was that old-school style of telling a story about a person telling a story about a person, which was unneeded. I wanted to yell, "Just get on with it, already!" And then the story itself that's being told was quite odd and boring. By the time I got a few pages into the third story, I had had enough. I closed the book right after thinking, "I'm hardly enjoying this anymore. Time to trade it in for something better."

Good at some parts, quite disappointing at others. Sorry, old girl. Ya just didn't keep me hanging on.

Joe1207 says

Ethan Frome has been on my “need to reread” list for a while. I was forced to read it in high school and I hated it; everyone did. Same with most of the books on my list—*The Scarlet Letter*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Odyssey*. But I remembered the gist of it and figured the story would be more interesting now, or at least more relatable.

Mixed feelings. The story is told by an unnamed, Ethan-curious narrator. But the narrator is more than curious about Ethan—they think and speak like him. The text says, “[Ethan] had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty,” (23) then delves into a detailed description of snowy Starkfield, fulfilling Ethan’s appeal.

Sometimes the speaker leads the witness. Our first introduction to the Eady family is on page 12 with Denis, who is characterized as “the rich Irish grocer” shortly after hints of Ethan’s money troubles. The community at large suffers a similar struggle to Ethan; the previous page says, “It was clear that the Varnum fortunes were at the ebb, but [Mrs. Hale and the landlady] did what they could to preserve a decent dignity.” (11).

The text reintroduces us to Denis ten pages later, as if for the first time, but from Ethan’s perspective: “Denis Eady was the son of Michael Eady, the ambitious Irish grocer, whose suppleness and effrontery had given Starkfield its first notion of ‘smart’ business methods.” (21). This sentence would be important to Ethan’s development if it didn’t follow the “impartial” observation ten pages earlier. Instead, we wonder what the author thinks about Irish people.

I don’t think Wharton is xenophobic; I think this example is one among many where Wharton’s best intentions to connect with readers fails. Some are execution errors, like the first few pages of Mattie’s dance—we’re informed of Ethan’s ennui before we see it—while other defects include the rushed

presentation of Ethan's feelings when he first meets Mattie. I get the sense Wharton wanted to jump into the meat of her story quickly and tried to simplify and underscore the important stuff. This could have been a great novel if certain scenes were allowed space to breathe.

But for what it is, it's a very good short story—really, a novella—and novellas can sometimes generalize if they aren't careful, or if they don't make their message universal to the human condition, like *Cannery Row* or *The Pearl*. Taken as a whole, *Ethan Frome* fits neatly into the Romantic tradition, with its declarations of love, symbolism, and foreshadowing. Though I suppose its place in the pantheon of American literature depends on how you interpret the story's commentary about the strictures of society and morality on happiness and individuality.

Many people see this theme from Ethan's perspective, like the narrator. The Frome family gravestones “mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom.” (32). Zeena makes Ethan's discontent worse with her “fault-finding” and “obstinate silence.” (37). Christian ethics hover over the story via watchful figures like Jotham (37, 80). And due to Ethan's fascination with Mattie, we get recapitulations of Mattie's inherited debts and Zeena's faux-Christian duty to take her in (36).

But when the epitaphs are not ham-fisted, and the weather is not omniscient, readers are treated to soft and subtle details about Zeena, which prove important to this theme. Like Denis Eady, she is smart: “She seemed to possess by instinct all the household wisdom that [Ethan's] long apprenticeship had not instilled in him.” She is a go-getter: Ethan follows her orders, leaves her “to see to things,” and this dynamic at first “restored his shaken balance” after his mother's death but now “her efficiency shamed” him. (41).

What starts as a blessing turns controlling, according to Ethan. He enjoys the “thrilling sense of mastery” (50) he has over Mattie, and he tells himself he didn't kiss Mattie because he “restrained” (56) himself. By contrast, Ethan feels “weak and powerless” against Zeena. His “manhood was humbled” (77) because “now she had mastered him.” (66). He stands up to Zeena only once—when he insists on driving Mattie to the train station—and riding this high, he uses the “note of authority in his voice” (88) to command Mattie into the sled. Moments before the accident, Mattie had “yielded.” (92).

The toxicity of gender roles is just one root to the old oak. “Within a year of their marriage [Zeena] developed the ‘sickliness’;” when she “fell silent,” Ethan “recalled his mother's growing taciturnity, and wondered if Zeena were also turning ‘queer.’ Women did, he knew.” (42). We're told in the beginning, by Harmon Gow, that “sickness and trouble” (13) follows Ethan. But we only see these troubles in the women around him—and maybe it has less to do with the women and more to do with Ethan.

Zeena seems to know this: “I'd ‘a’ been ashamed to tell [Dr. Buck] that you grudged me the money to get back my health, when I lost it nursing your own mother!” (63). Mattie is susceptible as well: “So strange was the precision with which the incidents of the previous evening were repeating themselves that [Ethan] half-expected, when he heard the key turn, to see his wife before him on the threshold; but the door opened, and Mattie faced him. She stood just as Zeena had stood.” (46-7).

We have every reason to believe that Zeena “had faded into an insubstantial shade” (26) in no small part because of Ethan, and his need to uphold societal notions of manhood. *Ethan Frome* seems to pick up the baton from feminist literature like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” especially with the last line of the story: “if [Mattie] ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; ‘cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.” (99).

But because of the framing of the story—the way in which it begins and ends with a narrator sympathizing with Ethan and telling his story—along with the details lending weight to Ethan’s gripes, the feminist rendering of this story feels half-baked. More likely, Wharton was chronicling the breakdown of a relationship, or wanted to map how relationships can become boring and untenable. This interpretation is hard to argue against when you know her personal history. Unfortunately, this takes away from the universal appeal offered by an overriding, tightly-knit vision, message, or theme.

So, upon further inspection and reflection, and with the wholehearted backing of my former high school self, I can safely say that I am still not entirely sure why this text is used in schools—if it still is, as of 2018. At best, students learn that every side has a story. At worst, students side with Ethan or Zeena and overlook half the novella. Worse still, those who pull for Ethan—which probably make up a good portion of the classroom, if not the teacher too, from my experience—will have the difficult task of dismissing his aggression, authority, and domineering presence over the women of Starkfield.

Charly says

Ethan Frome and the other selected stories were a bit on the transparent side for me. Perhaps for their time they were more engrossing, but it wasn’t a thrilling adventure for me.

Frome is a man caught between two lives and in trying to deal with it ends up caught in yet another.

Predictable and not something I move right to the top of my "to read" list.

Mark Sandbothe says

Ethan Frome: A short story set in a cold and brutal New England town. The geography and weather play a substantial part in this short story. Its all pervasive. I liked that it was told in a flashback mode as it internalized the inevitability of everything that was going to happen. Everything lead inexorably toward it. I did think the sled riding incident at the end was somewhat contrived. Really, out of the blue Mattie says to him; let’s kill ourselves, I can’t do anything without you; and Ethan agrees? I’m not buying it.

Xingu: Loved it! I love the play on words and the puns that flowed from between Oscir and Rohby’s subtle jabs at the Lunch Club members.

Afterwards: This one was haunting. Again, the location played more of a part in the short story than the characters seemed to. Great twist at the end.

Pretext: I didn’t really get this one. So she fell in love with him, and he with her, yet it seemed as though he only used her as an excuse not to marry one that he was betrothed to. Did he really love her? It was never really made clear.

Janis says

Edith Wharton’s story of Ethan Frome is so well written that when I read it in the middle of a muggy and

unbearable heat wave I could actually feel the coldness and bleakness of a western Massachusetts winter in the early part of the 20th century. The short stories that are included are full of well developed characters, Wharton's satire, and her clever endings. My favorite was Xingu.

Jacqui says

Memorable Quotes

Ethan Frome

"Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart one's get away."

"He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence."

"...he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access..."

"It looks just as if it was painted!" It seemed to Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul..."

"Now, in the bright morning air, her face was still before him. It was part of the sun's red and of the pure glitter on the snow."

"He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter..."

"It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder."

"I've been in a dream, and this is the only evening we'll ever have together."

"Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. It was the sense of his helplessness that sharpened his antipathy."

"All the while he felt as if he were still kissing her, and yet dying of thirst for her lips."

"For the life of her smile, the warmth of her voice, only cold paper and dead words!"

"...it seemed as though all the beauty of the night had been poured out to mock his wretchedness..."

"The words were like fragments torn from his heart."

"Her sombre violence constrained him: she seemed the embodied instrument of fate."

"...the way they are now, I don't see there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm

and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues."

The Pretext

"...ghosts vanish when one names them!"

"It had simply given her a secret life of incommunicable joys, as if all the wasted springs of her youth had been stored in some hidden pool, and she could return there now to bathe in them."

The Legend

"Have you any notion how it shifts the point of view to wake under new constellations? I advise any who's been in love with a woman under Cassiopeia to go and think about her under the Southern Cross."

Jensen Troup says

This short tale/novella, Ethan Frome, has reminded me afresh of why American literature should be valued in the first place. I had not heard much of this work as of yet, but I have heard great things about Wharton. Her other works seem to be more popular and noteworthy across the American lit canon, but this work by NO means should be underestimated.

Set in the fictitious town of Starkfield, Massachusetts and based most likely on an actual event that took place in Lenox, MA in 1904, this work is a masterpiece of American literature. The symbols (red scarf/ribbon, the cat and pickle dish, and the final sled ride) are all interspersed thoughtfully throughout the plot. The pace of the novel is just right -- not too slow or fast but just perfect enough to capture enough detail without boring readers, all within 100 pages. Motifs of illness, disability, and the stark/bleak winter weather that is ever present in the (not coincidentally named) town of Starkfield run through the tale powerfully.

It's a story of what it means to merely survive instead of live. It deals with societal pressures versus one's inner longings. It is raw, real, stunning, brilliant, grim, and powerful all at once. LOVE it! Storytelling at its best.

Ken Oder says

This novella and collection of short stories was my first foray into the world of Edith Wharton. It proved to be an interesting journey. Ethan Frome is a good read. Wharton develops the three main characters so well you feel they are in the room with you. She makes great use of the Massachusetts landscape to create the atmospherics of this story. The winter clime is as frigid as Ethan's wife; the land as barren and bleak as his life; the rocks and fields as unforgiving as his fate. And the story is the very definition of irony. Of the short stories, Pretext is my favorite. Wharton captures perfectly a woman's late-in-life infatuation with a younger man. She tells the story entirely through the eyes of the woman, which makes the ending devastatingly effective. Another tour de force in irony. A great writer, at her best in this collection.

Neha says

This book of Wharton's has Ethan frome and few other short stories namely

The pretext

The afterword

The legend

And the Xingu

And with exception of the legend I liked everything.

Ethan frome is tragic story of Ethan and Hus wife zeena and lover Matt.I just love the way Edith Wharton portrays her characters. They suffer yet they live their life enduring its torture for the sake of people they don't even love. Satiric!!

The pretext made me even more thoughtful.The end was horrible I was kinda half expecting it like age of innocence. But way too different.

The afterword had its creepy part which Wharton described elaborately. N she made the hair stand on my skin...

The legend I couldn't actually concentrate properly .I kept getting confused anyways wasn't my type.

The Xingu was hilarious . a bunch of newbees who started reading literature starts thinking they are experts and the newly joined groupie teaches them a nice lesson.

So a full package of emotional drama, suspense thriller creepy and at the end the comedy show.again impressed!!

Jeni Enjaian says

I did not enjoy this book. However, my lack of enjoyment was much different than the lack I just wrote about in my review of "The Good Soldier" by Ford Maddox Ford.

The primary reason that I did not enjoy this book was the incredibly depressing nature of the primary story, "Ethan Frome," and the morbid slant of the other stories included in the collection.

Wharton created a fluid narrative free of confusion that admirably tugged at the reader's heartstrings. That much is true about "Ethan Frome." I cannot say the same about the other short stories in the collection. I continue to not be a fan of short stories, especially when the author dives into the story with not attempt at backstory. The lack of reference to anything else leaves the stories like hanging chads.

This is definitely a story ("Ethan Frome") that should be read by all those who wish to be proficient in the classics. Other than that, I have no inclination to recommend this book and a distinct disinclination to recommend the other short stories.

Fabrice Conchon says

Fantastic Edith Wharton ! This book is a set of five short stories, one that I am not very fond of (*Afterward*, I am not very keen on ghost stories) and the rest being just ... superb.

In the first and most important one, Ethan Frome, this is the story of classic repressed impossible love, in a poor rural setting (unlike in Wharton's masterpiece *The age of innocence* where the world of the wealthy New York aristocracy is replaced by just a simple village community).

Her very simple style make the book very fluid and at the same time very gripping, creating genuine empathy between the reader and the characters of the book. The book is cleverly set up with a narrator that tells the story that he discovers long after it has happened, making us know straight from the beginning that something terrible has happened without exactly describing what. This is not a romantic drama, characters are not heroes who die in a spectacular way but everyday people who do not even die, applying therefore Wharton's motto present also in *The age of innocence* and a few short stories that live sentence in much worse than death penalty.

The other stories are also great, Xindu is really funny, The pretext is clever and The legend is also interesting, all are mocking this pretentious uptight American high society that Wharton is part of on a delightful way. A masterpiece.

Frank Spencer says

I just read *Ethan Frome* and will save the other stories for later. Her writing here is just as good as in *The Age of Innocence*. It is a lot darker here, with a lot of writing describing darkness, hopelessness and danger. This is surely an early book to have a suicide pact, but there it is. People stuck in situations and relationships that hold no advantage for them is certainly a theme. It is interesting that the horses are described by their breed or color like, "a big-boned grey." The horses seem to be the most reliable of the characters in the story. Don't read this if you're looking for something to put you in a good mood.

Esteban del Mal says

Ethan Frome is one of those stories that people have a strong reaction to, typically in the negative. And if you read it and rated it one or two stars, you probably don't like it because you think everyone falls somewhere on the Seth Rogan/Tony Robbins spectrum of affable enthusiasm for life. You probably also grew up in some nondescript suburb which you never moved from, most of your friends are white, and if not, they at least share your taste in chain restaurants and are consistently, non-threateningly, predictably homogeneous in both disposition and appearance. Like chain restaurants. You also were probably never in a fistfight, and if you were, it was probably at the bicycle rack after school and you, or your adversary, opted to eat grass before fisticuffs erupted and even then the confrontation was broken up by what would become your aforementioned homogeneous lifetime friends and their, as well as your, equally homogeneous adversaries. Adversaries that are now counted among your friends and which sometimes accompany you to your weekly outings at chain restaurants. You have quite probably never bounced a check and may consider at least one parent a best friend. Both of your parents helped you pay for college, if not paid for it altogether. You stand to inherit their home when they die, but you can no more conceive of your parents as dead as you can conceive of yourself as having debt in the form of a college loan. Those that do have debt in the form of a college loan you find vaguely distasteful because debt in the form of a college loan is a consequence of a life of poor decisions. You have remained at least an acquaintance of your date to your high school prom. Your last anxious moment came about when you were confronted with the possibility of getting a new hairstyle. The rain, you opportunely tell others, makes you sad. This assertion confirms you as a person of great depth and feeling amongst your peers. You hope to one day be a member of Jimmy Fallon's live studio audience and to visit The Wizarding World of Harry Potter. The most that anyone will remember about you upon your death is that you had a series of new cars throughout your life and that you did not like to talk about politics.

Jennifer Woods says

I liked this book. I liked it so much better than The Chronicles of a Death Foretold. I could actually get into this book. The whole book I was thinking that Mattie and Ethan should be together instead of Zena and Ethan. However, I was also thinking how if he did marry Mattie it would be just like his marriage with Zena since both of them helped him care for someone in his family and he fell in love with each of them while this was occurring. The parallel between this book and Chronicle is the weather. The weather in both these stores sets the mood for death, illness, love, or whatever it may be.

Laurie says

More depressing than 'Summer,' but well-told. I wonder if Wharton has written anything happier?

Alex Milledge says

If I read this book before reading Wharton's age of innocence, I would have been spared from saying much negative about her as an author.

I have never read a book that made me want to cry than Ethan Frome.

Well, maybe with the exception of when Piggy died in The Lord of the Flies, but I can strongly relate to the struggles of Ethan Frome, in how he lives in a world that severely restricts his freedom and wishes to love a girl that he can't have. All of these emotions swelled in me and made me feel like I was Ethan Frome, which no novel has even done for me.

Great read and spares any negative opinion of Wharton. She can now do no harm.

Jeanette says

The bleak New England setting of Ethan Frome helps set the tone for this rather bleak little novel. Ethan Frome is a poor, down trodden, and in my opinion weak willed farmer. He is married to Zeena, a hypochondriac, uncommunicative, rigid, complaining, manipulative (I could go on...) woman.

When Zeena's destitute cousin Mattie Silver moves in with the Fromes Ethan quickly becomes enamored with the young, happy woman who seems to be the exact opposite of his wife in every way. Ethan finds himself being pulled between doing the right thing and what he thinks will make him happy.

It is a tragic story filled with a strong sense of pessimism, depression and hopelessness but written in a good way, i.e. not overly melo-dramatic.

A brilliant novel. Maybe just don't read it when you are looking for something happy and uplifting.

Sam Flanagan says

Though not set in her typical circles of socialite aristocracy, *Ethan Frome* carries the distinct flavor of Edith Wharton. Her firm grasp of the human struggle for independence and understanding is pervasive and profound. Ethan is the embodiment of the awakened romantic who is bound to a constricting and outdated system of social norms and moralities, and the dreary landscape of a small Connecticut town in the dead of winter serves as the realized metaphor of the paralyzing hopelessness that Frome bears internally. His story is relatable and familiar yet Wharton's terse style and frigid landscape provoke an intense sense of pity and impending dread rarely captured in a story of this brevity. The novel's conclusion is memorable - if a bit contrived - and reveals the sordid moral of Wharton's unconventional love story. She has thrown a bone to the readers of her time, bringing to vivid reality that conclusive moment of misguided self-possession and action so often considered by - yet wistfully denied to - the protagonists of her contemporary authors. This work is short, cutting, and unforgettable - a fitting ode to the tortured souls of her age.

Bryan says

Oh my god, the things Edith does to her characters! All of these stories were great. *Ethan Frome* is obviously a deserved classic, but my favorite was "The Pretext" which broke my heart in one million places. After the emotional turmoil of those two stories, I was happy to end on the hilarious note that was "Xingu."

Barbara says

I am sure I read *Ethan Frome* in high school. The story is vaguely familiar. But reading it now with more detailed knowledge of the time period in which it was written and in which it is set, and perhaps the wisdom of many more years and experiences, was a joy. I mightn't have noticed the exquisite detail in Edith Wharton's writing back then, but made an impression this time. I won't say more. My book club is discussing this book this Friday.
