**Ethan Frome: A Nightmare of Need**

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Twayne's Masterwork Studies. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. xiv + 130 pages. $22.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.

One of the most curious aspects of reader response to the writings of Edith Wharton appears to me to be the enduring interest in her 1911 novella **Ethan** **Frome**. When I was introduced to it in Freshman English in 1943, I found it flat, unappealing, and unimaginative. This has not by any means been a minority view of the story. Over the intervening years I have gone back, once in a while, and used it as a text in a literature course, but I have never found any reason to change my original opinion of the book. The characters have remained colorless, lifeless, difficult to imagine as players in a human drama. However, a single-text study such as Springer's, complete with an appendix on a 1936 dramatization of**Ethan** **Frome**, a chronological listing of author's life and works, notes and references, bibliography and index, would appear to offer a basis for a belated or renewed appreciation of the story.

The major drawbacks in my view involve Springer's handling of the author's characterization of the figures in Wharton's love-hate triangle:**Ethan**, his wife Zeena, and her cousin Mattie; and Springer's seeming over-reliance on symbolism (personal names and their origin, stars and their supposed influence on humans, birds, etc.). The few plot elements in **Ethan** **Frome** are reiterated and commented on so often and with so much overlapping that reading this study becomes at times a chore. As for Springer's making perhaps too much of symbolism in the story, one example among many is her use of personal names (**Ethan**, Mattie, Zeena) and their origins as indicators of what kind of people the major players in this drama are and how they interrelate. Another is Wharton's use of the cold, bleak "New England winter as a metaphor for Ethan's life, both past and present." The latter point, I feel, is too obvious for words.

On the positive side, much useful information is provided here for the student, general reader, and instructor using **Ethan** **Frome** as a text. Though the story uses a sledding accident that had actually taken place, it originated as a French-language exercise. Wharton, in Paris, had been asked by her French teacher to prepare a composition in French, and we have the later adaptation of that in an English version. As for personal circumstances that might have influenced her mood and outlook when she wrote **Ethan** **Frome**, Springer points out that around the time Wharton was working on it, her "relationships with the three most important people in her life--her closest friend, Henry James; her lover, Morton Fullerton; and her husband, Teddy Wharton--were in chaos." The first was now terribly ill, the second proved to be inconstant and unserious, and the last (Teddy was unsuited in every way to be a proper husband to her) could no longer be put up with, even within a kind of "open marriage." As for assessing the book, Springer is lavish in her praise. "**Ethan** **Frome** is important to Wharton's canon because it represents her confident coming of age as an artist." It "has gained its place as a masterpiece of American literature for its style: it is brilliant in its economy, clarity, and structure."

The most interesting feature for me in Springer's book is the array of fascinating "windows" it opens up (if I may adapt a current PC term here) on Wharton's depiction of **Ethan** **Frome**. There is for example the issue of morality, taken up in the chapter on Critical Reception. How far does Ethan's moral obligation to Zeena extend, etc.? Lionel Trilling, who saw **Ethan** **Frome** "as a dead book," is cited among those who found no or almost no moral value here, while Blake Nevius is mentioned among those who found unmistakable moral value in the story. But Springer gives us only an all-too-brief view through this window. Two other adjacent windows allow us to take in more of the rugged landscape.**Ethan**, "who could resign himself to death-in-life," is compared with Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure, and thus brings to mind numerous other literary male figures who fail to fight back, kick against the pricks, or who fail to seize momentous opportunities. Many more interesting comparisons with somewhat related male protagonists might have been mentioned here, by way of inquiring more deeply into Ethan's not-so-uncomplicated nature. Lastly, Springer cites a very suggestive notion from Elizabeth Ammons (in her 1980 study, Edith Marton's Argument with America), who "sees Zeena as a witch and interprets the story as a parallel to the fairy tale of Snow White." All told, Springer's book is a useful addition to Wharton criticism.

Fracasso's Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Consciousness deals with her "skill as a craftsman in consciously and carefully fitting her narrative techniques to the theme of imprisonment." Closely analyzing the texts, she considers representative stories from three phases of Wharton's literary career: the early period (1891-1904); the major phase (1905-19); the later years (1926-37). (The analogy with the way critics have divided up Henry James's creative periods is quite clear, except for the hiatus between major phase and later years.) Fracasso's focus is on imprisonment as Wharton's characters experience it, and she is quick to point out that she is not concerned with Wharton's personal experiences here, as other commentators have been in dealing with the motif of imprisonment. Instead, she will emphasize "the development of Wharton's technical artistry in presenting her imprisonment theme." Basing her story-classification scheme in part on an insight from a 1932 article by Frances T. Russell on Wharton's imagery, Fracasso creates the following categories: "individuals trapped by love and marriage"; "men and women imprisoned by the dictates of society"; "human beings victimized by the demands of art and morality"; and "persons paralyzed by fear of the supernatural."

So as to examine Wharton's artistic "development of her theme and technique" in creating her 86 short stories, Fracasso employs the method of chronological comparison: early stories are paralleled with those from the major phase and later years, based on resemblance of subject matter (and frequently storylines as well). Though one can observe a slightly dismaying overall sameness in many of these short stories--star-crossed marriages, adulterous husbands (and, sometimes, wives), on-stage and off-stage lovers, divorce as an almost institutionalized feature of the domestic scene--Fracasso is to be commended for bringing this array of Wharton's shorter fictions to our attention for closer examination. That such an artistic gem as the social satire "Xingu" has been omitted from this study is regrettable, but "Xingu" would doubtless have been hard to fit into Fracasso's formula, and then too Wharton was seldom on intimate terms with the Comic Spirit.

Space limitations permit mention of only a few specific details from Fracasso's investigation into the basis of Wharton's craft. In the chapter on "Prisoners of Love and Marriage," Fracasso cites Wharton's dictum that the representative short story foreshortens "a dramatic climax" that connects the lives of two or more people. Fracasso's examples show the climax doing this, and often altering and sometimes even transforming the protagonists' lives. Examples: "The Lamp of Psyche" from the earlier years, and "The Letters" from the later years. In the chapter on "Prisoners of Society," Fracasso quotes Wharton's definition of the short story as "a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience," and she points out that in the six stories selected for this section, two protagonists "resentfully endure society's rejection, two deliberately provoke [its] condemnation, and two reluctantly submit to [its] conventions." Examples: "Mrs. Manstey's View" from the earlier years and "The Pretext" from the later years. In all four of the ghost or supernatural stories Fracasso gives us, she appears to find the Wharton-mandated "preliminary horror." Examples: "The Lady's Maid's Bell" and "Afterward" (both of which, I regret to say, have left me singularly unaffected, much less horrified). The concluding chapter, in which Fracasso sums up her analysis of Wharton's use of such techniques as the framing device (e.g., "The Verdict" and "The Daunt Diana"), and time shifts (e.g., "The Lamp of Psyche"), is an effective conclusion to a really important book about Edith Wharton as poietes, "maker."

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