

Ethan Frome: Sources

Student Name _____ Date _____

Wharton on New England Regionalist fiction

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 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.

From Wharton’s Introduction to *Ethan Frome*

* * * *

But the book to the making of which I brought the greatest joy and the fullest ease was “Ethan Frome.” For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett. In those days the snowbound 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 isolates farm-houses on the neighbouring hills...

From Wharton’s 1934 autobiography, *A Backward Glance*

Edwin Bjorkman on the nature of Ethan’s tragedy

Glancing over the all too brief volume [*Ethan Frome*] in retrospect, I can find only one point where it suggests a certain degree of failure, of growth still unachieved...

As I read the book now, I come away with an impression that, in the author’s mind at least, the one thing needed to change Ethan’s life from a hell to a heaven would have been the full and free expression of his love for Matt.

Romantic love, as idealized for us by our forefathers, has long ago gone into bankruptcy. Had Zeena died and Matt married Ethan—well, it is my private belief that inside of a few years life on that farm would have been practically what it was before Matt arrived, with Matt playing the part of a Zeena II—different, of course, and yet the same. For the life in our Starkfields is cursed or saved not by this or that single incident, not by the presence or absence of this or that individual, the curse lies in staying there, in breathing the crushing, choking atmosphere of Starkfieldian sterility.

From “The Greater Edith Wharton,” in *Voices of Tomorrow: Critical Studies of the New Spirit in Literature* (1913)