Chapter 13

Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome
A Psychobiographical Exploration

An Isolated Childhood

The novelist Edith Wharton published an autobiography that never gets beneath the surface. But she also left behind some unpublished pages that are far more revealing. These begin:

My first conscious recollection is of being kissed in Fifth Avenue by my cousin Dan Fearing. It was a winter day, I was walking with my father, & I was a little less than four years old, when this momentous event took place. My cousin, a very round and rosy little boy, two or three years older, was also walking with his father; & I remember distinctly his running up to me, & kissing me, & the extremely pleasant sensation which his salute produced. With equal distinctness, I recall the satisfaction I felt in knowing that I had on my best bonnet. . . . Thus I may truly say that my first conscious sensations were produced by the two deepest-seated instincts of my nature—the desire to love & to look pretty. (Wharton, 1990, p. 1071)

I would add that the experience includes intimacy with a male, not only her little cousin but her father, whom she had to herself on that wintry day. Her nascent sexuality is suggested; the kiss aroused an “extremely pleasant sensation.”

This significant memory—her “first conscious recollection”—points to central themes in Wharton’s life, and no less in her fiction: her desire to love and be loved, her yearning for intimacy with a man, an intimacy augmented by sexual closeness, and her wish to be admired and appreciated. Wharton’s experiences as a child set her desires in motion, yet also created numerous obstacles to their fulfillment.

Her name at birth, in 1862, was Edith Newbold Jones. She was the last child of older parents. Her father and mother, George and Lucretia Jones, were forty-one and thirty-seven years old when Edith was born. Edith had two brothers, Frederic and Henry, who were sixteen and eleven years older than she was. Her childhood was much like that of an only child.

If there has ever been anything in the United States like the aristocracy of Europe, it would be the elite group into which Edith was born. Both of her parents were part of upper-class New York, old families who had wealth, lived in brownstones, kept summer homes (usually in Newport, Rhode Island), and socialized only with members of their own set. Edith’s father never worked but lived off of real estate holdings that he had received from his family.

In the unpublished autobiographical chapters, she described herself as “a morbid, self-scrutinizing & unhappy child.” She did not seem to be able to connect with her parents, brothers, or other children. Her kindest words are for her nurse, Hannah Doyle, who, she said, made her feel “safe and sheltered” in her earliest years (Wharton, 1990, p. 1091).

Edith developed solitary activities from a young age, especially inventing stories and reading voraciously in her father’s library. She felt alienated from others and did not have anyone with whom she could share her favorite pursuits. Her mother arranged for other little girls to come over to play, but Edith felt they were unable to...
talk with her about what “really mattered.” After a short time she would excuse herself, find her mother, and beg her, “Mamma, please go & amuse those children.” She wanted to be by herself so she could make up stories. She lived, she later wrote, in “complete mental isolation” and believed “none of the children I knew had a clue to my labyrinth,” that is, her elaborate inner world (pp. 1076-1077).

There was one partial exception to her isolation that points to her embryonic interest in intimacy with a man. When she was five or six years old, a friend of her father’s would take her on his knee after Sunday dinner and say, “Tell me mythology”; Edith had learned about the Greek gods. She looked forward to this event all week. “[O]ur Sunday evening guest,” she recalled, “was the only person who ever showed signs of knowing anything about the secret story-world in which I lived” (p. 1077).

In looking back, she thought her parents feared her and viewed her as being like “some pale predestined child who disappears at night to dance with ‘the little people.’” She was physically active and enjoyed riding ponies and hiking, and she liked to play outside, especially with boys, but she described all this as being merely her “external life.” “I often wonder,” she wrote, “if any other child possessed of that ‘other side’ was ever so alone as I.” She imagines that others like her usually had some opportunity for sharing their internal world, but, she noted, “I never exchanged a word with a really intelligent being until I was over twenty” (pp. 1076-1077, 1083).

She retained some fond memories of her father but had little to do with him. The worlds of middle-aged gentlemen and their children had little overlap. She recalled that he liked to read, especially about Arctic explorations. She mused, “I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure” (p. 813). She may have had a fantasy that, if they had ever been close, she could have helped him and they could have understood each other. That never happened; he died when she was twenty years old.

With her mother she had a troubled relationship. She felt her mother controlled her life through a set of bewildering, arbitrary rules. For example, her mother did not allow her to read novels, although other books were not proscribed. Her mother expected her to do the right thing but forbade her from asking questions that might help her discover what the “right thing” was.

Edith also felt in conflict between her mother’s demand that she be careful never to hurt other people’s feelings and what Edith took as the religious dictate to avoid lying. One time at a dance class she believed she had to tell the truth and announced to the teacher that the teacher’s mother looked like a goat. She was surprised when the teacher scolded her furiously, instead of commending her, for her honesty (p. 1073). Late in her life she looked back at her mother and said she always intuited in her “a mysteri-
ous impenetrability, a locked room full of bats and darkness" (Benstock, 1994, p. 378).

In her childhood Edith received little appreciation from her family and did not feel valued by them. Her mother believed children should not be praised for their attractiveness or intelligence but considered it “wholesome to ridicule them for their supposed defects & affectations.” Edith was made fun of for having red hair and large hands and feet, for using long words, and for caring about how she dressed. She became “a painfully shy self-conscious child” (Wharton, 1990, pp. 1087-1090).

Edith gained an early knowledge of Europe and of foreign languages. Because of financial conditions after the Civil War, her family spent six years in Europe, where they could live much more cheaply. Edith’s family, while she was ages six to ten, resided for extended periods in Rome, Paris, Germany, and Florence. Edith noted that by living in Europe she had been “fed on beauty” for years. After returning to New York, she later recalled, “my first thought was: ‘How ugly it is!’ I have never since thought otherwise, or felt otherwise than as an exile in America. . . . I used to dream at frequent intervals that we were going back to Europe, & to wake from this dream in a state of exhilaration which the reality turned to deep depression” (Dwight, 1994, p. 20).

Intense anxieties permeated her childhood. Edith wrote that, after a near-fatal bout with typhoid fever at the age of nine, she experienced the world as being “haunted by formless horrors.” She explained,

I lived in a state of chronic fear. Fear of what? I cannot say—and even at this time, I was never able to formulate my terror. It was like some dark undefinable menace, forever dogging my steps, lurking, & threatening; I was conscious of it wherever I went by day, & at night it made sleep impossible, unless a light & a nurse-maid were in the room. But, whatever it was, it was most formidable & pressing when I was returning from my daily walk. . . . During the last few yards, & while I waited on the doorstep for the door to be opened, I could feel it behind me, upon me; & if there was any delay in the opening of the door I was seized by a choking agony of terror. It did not matter what was with me, for no one could protect me; but, oh, the rapture of relief if my companion had a latch-key, & we could get in at once, before it caught me!

She notes that she continued having such attacks of horror until she was sixteen or seventeen years old. And until the age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight, she recalled, “I could not sleep in the room with a book containing a ghost-story. . . . I have frequently had to burn books of this kind, because it frightened me to know that they were downstairs in the library” (Wharton, 1990, pp. 1079–1080).

Such anxieties were an inextricable part of her emotional isolation. Not having relationships in which she felt comforted, soothed, and understood, she found the world to be unsafe, and she was limited in her ability to soothe herself. As a girl, she was cut off from formal education; the men in her social circle, but not the women, attended college. She was taught by tutors and later concluded that she learned little from them that was of value, except for languages. She continued to read widely. Her reading excluded novels, because of her mother’s odd ban against fiction, but she immersed herself in poetry, history, and philosophy, written in English, German, French, and Italian (p. 820).

Becoming an Author and Marrying

Edith’s old habit of making up stories soon led her to write novels. She began one at the age of eleven. It included a line in which one of the characters spoke of tidying up her drawing room. Edith’s mother criticized the novel, saying, “Drawing rooms are always tidy.” At the age of fourteen she completed another novel, Fast and Loose, the manuscript of which has survived. Edith also wrote mock reviews of her work. One included the assessment, “Every character is a failure, the plot a vacuum, the style spiritless, the dialogue vague, the sentiment weak, and the whole thing a fiasco” (Benstock, 1994, p. 135).
She wrote poems as well. A friend of the family sent five of them to the famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He was impressed and passed them on with a letter of praise to William Dean Howells, who published them in the prestigious magazine he edited, The Atlantic. Edith was eighteen years old.

The age of her debut in a national magazine was the usual age for coming out in society. But a year before, apparently concerned with her shyness and bookishness, her mother arranged for her to become a debutante.

A pretty girl from a well-connected family and with two older brothers who had many friends, Edith found that men lavished attention on her. She wrote, "I tasted all the sweets of popularity. Oh, how I loved it all—my pretty frocks, the flowers, the music, the sense that everybody 'liked' me, & wanted to talk to me & dance with me!" (Dwight, 1994, p. 27).

Over the next few years, the social whirl enraptured her. She had several beaux and one engagement that lasted for only two months. During the summer of her twenty-second year, she met a young lawyer named Walter Berry, one of the few men in her social class who shared her appreciation for reading. This summer flirtation might have ended with a proposal, but it did not. In later years, though, she renewed her acquaintance with Berry, and he became her most cherished friend. She wrote in her autobiography, in reference to Berry, that "there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul" (Wharton, 1985, p. 115).

The next man in her life was Edward Wharton—called Teddy—a Harvard graduate from a respectable family and a friend of one of Edith's brothers. Teddy did not work and had no intention of doing so. He was nice looking, pleasant, and good humored. Edith and Teddy were married in 1885; Edith was twenty-three years old, and Teddy was thirty-five.

Edith tells us she was thoroughly ignorant about sex. When she was seven or eight, a cousin mentioned to her that "babies were not found in flowers but in people." Edith asked her mother about this, and, as she recalled, "I received a severe scolding ... and this was literally all I knew of the processes of generation till I had been married for several weeks" (Wharton, 1990, p. 1087).

"A few days before my marriage," Edith noted, "I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery, that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, & begged her, with a heart beating to suffocation, to tell me 'what being married was like.' Her handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most dreaded. 'I never heard such a ridiculous question!' she said impatiently; & I felt at once how vulgar she thought me." Edith claimed that she began her marriage believing that an act of God, not sex, generates a baby in the mother's womb (p. 1087).

In the early years of their marriage, living in Newport and New York and traveling frequently, Edith and Teddy were fond of each

Figure 13.2. Edith Wharton. (Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)
other and kind to each other but failed to connect sexually, emotionally, and intellectually.

As a pretty, shy, young woman in her twenties, Edith Wharton was twice in the presence of the novelist Henry James, but on both occasions he failed to notice her. Once some friends, knowing Wharton would love to meet James, invited both of them to dinner. Wharton wore a fetching hat in hopes of drawing his attention. She imagined he would compliment her on her hat, and then "I might at last pluck up the courage to blurt out my admiration for Daisy Miller and The Portrait of a Lady. But he noticed neither the hat nor the wearer" (Lewis, 1975, pp. 24-25). She thought her loveliness would draw the attention of this man, nineteen years older than she was. She did not realize that James had little attraction to female beauty. My conclusion in studying his life is that he was gay; we do not know whether he ever engaged in sexual activity with another person, and he never made his sexual interests public, but there is ample evidence that he appreciated handsome young men, not good-looking young women.

Wharton was friendly with a middle-aged man, Egerton Winthrop, who shared her intellectual interests and introduced her to science, particularly the work of Darwin, and she supplemented her reading in literature, history, and architecture with systematic reading in the theory of evolution.

Wharton wrote poems and short stories that were published in the most important magazines, such as Harper's Monthly and Scribner's. One of her little-known stories offers insight into the nature of her marriage. A woman dies, and in the afterlife she describes her husband to a spirit: "His boots creaked, and he always slammed the door when he went out, and he never read anything but railway novels and the sporting advertisements in the papers—and—in short, we never understood each other in the least." At times this woman had "exquisite sensations," but she never shared them with her husband (Wharton, 1899/1968, p. 18). She meets a true soul mate but chooses not to go with him; she prefers to wait for her husband. She does not love her husband, she explains, but "I shouldn't feel at home without him. . . . Besides, no one else would know how to look after him, he is so helpless. His inkstand would never be filled. . . . He would never remember to have his umbrella re-covered. Why he wouldn't even know what novels to read. I always had to choose the kind he liked, with a murder or a forgery and a successful detective" (pp. 19-20).

 Virtually all of her fiction during these years reflects her unhappiness and despondency; she later spoke of herself as having been neurasthenic during "the best years of my youth" (Benstock, 1994, p. 96). (Neurasthenia, thought of in the pre-Freudian world as stemming from weak nerves, was a condition characterized by fatigue, anxiety, and irritability.) Materially her life was comfortable, but, like the woman in the short story, she had no one with whom she could share her vibrant inner world. The isolation she felt would have resonated with the isolation of her childhood.

Wharton’s first work of nonfiction, The Decoration of Houses, written with an architect, was published in 1897, when she was thirty-five. Her first collection of short stories was published in 1899. And her first novel, The Touchstone, was published in 1900. All three books sold moderately well and received good reviews.

The Touchstone (Wharton, 1900) tells the story of a man who, in the past, had had a romance with a woman named Mrs. Aubyn, a literary genius. When the woman died she was an acclaimed author. The man, though a nice person, was incapable of comprehending her brilliance. He encountered a problem: He could not afford to marry the conventional woman with whom he was in love. Hiding his identity, he arranged to publish the love letters that Mrs. Aubyn had written him when the two of them were young. The profits from the book, which caused a sensation because of the beauty of the letters and Mrs. Aubyn’s fame, enabled him to get married. The novel expresses Wharton’s sense that her husband and others in her life did not value her talents. But it also suggests her recognition of her own rare ability as a novelist, because Mrs. Aubyn’s literary career foreshadows hers.

The Touchstone is infused with the underlying tragedy that this literary artist, a woman of subtle perceptions and delicate feelings, never had an intimate partner with whom she could
share her inner world; her lover, though companionable, was incapable of appreciating her.

When her first book of fiction was published, several critics observed the similarity between her style and Henry James’s (Benstock, 1994, pp. 99–100). James was widely considered the foremost living novelist who wrote in English. In 1900 Edith sent him one of her short stories. He wrote back with a mixture of praise and advice and suggested that she visit with him sometime (Lewis, 1975, p. 125).

James by this time had moved on to his “third manner,” the style of his later fiction that some consider convoluted and others view as his greatest creation. Wharton, who admired his earlier work, was one of those disturbed by the “third manner,” and, after reading one of his books, she wrote a friend, “[I] could weep over the ruins of such a talent” (Lewis, 1975, p. 125). She even composed a parody of James’s style. Here is part of a sentence, in which the hero worries about his hat being damaged by the weather: “[A]ny head-gear exposed after five o’clock that afternoon to the unimpeded action of the climatic influences must, within less than the hour hand’s gyration of the dial, be reduced to a condition warranting, if not necessitating . . . [the] provisionally restorative manipulations of the hatter” (Lewis, 1975, p. 126).

After reading her second novel, The Valley of Decision, which was set in eighteenth-century Italy, James called it “brilliant & interesting from a literary point of view” but urged her to write instead about “the American subject.” “Don’t pass it by—the immediate, the real . . . Take hold of it & keep hold & let it pull you where it will . . . DO NEW YORK! The 1st-hand account is precious” (Powers, 1990, p. 34).

No one knows for sure whether Wharton was responding to James’s advice, but she soon wrote her breakthrough novel, The House of Mirth, which describes a woman’s gradual descent in the New York society that Wharton knew so well. Published in 1905, The House of Mirth created a sensation and was a run-away bestseller. Today it is generally considered the earliest of her outstanding works. Critics have emphasized how the novel reveals the heartlessness and rigidity of the upper class in New York. Society at first takes up the main character, Lily Bart, but as time goes on, especially after questions emerge about her virtue, she is cast aside. The psychological center of the novel is different. While the novel is effective as social criticism, its psychological dimension is central. The novel expresses the experience of loneliness. Lily, who always considered herself special and found it exciting when people lavished attention on her for her external qualities, her beauty and grace, is unable to connect at a deeper level with anyone, particularly the men who pursue her. By the end of the novel, defeated by her solitude, she is overcome with despair.

In 1903 Wharton and James finally met. They had lunch together in London and were much taken with each other. James described her as “really conversable” (Benstock, 1994, p. 139). They developed a close friendship that each of them cherished, and, although never living in the same country, they visited regularly until his death in 1916. But there was a limitation to their intimacy, due in part, according to my interpretation, to the lack of sexual chemistry between them. They always maintained a touch of formality. Wharton still had not found someone with whom she could share fully what mattered most to her.

With her husband, she was even farther from experiencing intimacy. Two anecdotes help capture the nature of their relationship. Edith Wharton was an attractive woman with red hair, fine features, and a lovely, slim figure of which she was proud. Once her husband, Teddy, was walking with a friend a few feet behind Edith outside The Mount, the house the couple had built in Lenox, Massachusetts. The conversation took place after Edith had successfully published works of poetry and prose. Teddy commented, “Look at that: waist! No one would ever guess that she had written a line of poetry in her life.” Teddy further pointed out to the guest that they had needed a new piggery, so she had written a poem to cover the expense (Lewis, 1975, p. 272). While Teddy could be admiring and witty, his comments also reveal that her literary expressiveness lay far outside his ken.

On another occasion, Edith was fascinated by a passage in a scientific treatise on heredity, and she showed it to her husband. He replied, “Does that sort of thing really amuse you?” By this time,
more than twenty years into her marriage, she had become embittered. She wrote in her diary, "I found the key turn in my prison-lock . . . Oh, Gods of derision! And you've given me over twenty years of it!" (Lewis, 1975, pp. 228-229).

For several years Teddy, if unable to communicate with Edith, at least had been a pleasant, well-mannered companion, but in the early years of the twentieth century he began to deteriorate. He seems to have suffered from bipolar disorder, formerly called manic-depressive illness. While not the cause, Edith's increasing disappointment with him and her accompanying contempt surely exacerbated his condition, although she tried to conceal her reactions.

A Passionate Affair

Thirteen years after Edith Wharton's death, a man named William Morton Fullerton heard that someone proposed writing a biography of the famous author. Wharton, perhaps because of her status, while elderly, as a literary eminence, had died with the reputation of being stern, passionless, and aloof; it was assumed she had had a stilted marriage and no love affairs. Fullerton urged the prospective biographer to "seize the event, however delicate the problem, to destroy the myth of your heroine's frigidity." He claimed that in her love life Wharton had been "fearless, reckless even." If the writer doubted him, he clinched his point by enclosing a copy of an ardent poem Wharton had sent him reflecting on the consummation of their affair (Benstock, 1994, p. 226).

Fullerton, Paris correspondent for The Times of London, was an adventurous, charming, inconstant American. He led a flamboyant love life that included a brief marriage to an actress, an affair with a Parisian woman who blackmailed him for years over some compromising letters that she had in her possession, and various sexual encounters with years, possibly even with Henry James. It was James who brought Fullerton and Wharton together; when Fullerton traveled to the United States in 1907, James urged him to contact Wharton so that she might invite him to stay with herself and her husband at The Mount (Lewis, 1975, p. 182).

During this first visit, Wharton immediately became infatuated with Fullerton. While less involved emotionally, he seemed to enjoy flirting with this renowned woman of letters who, at the age of forty-five (three years his elder), retained her sexual appeal. By the time of their meeting, Wharton could hardly bear the frustration and loneliness that had built up during her marriage. Fullerton was an intelligent man with whom she could communicate on a deep level, much like the man in her early story about a woman who meets her soul mate in the afterlife. After he left The Mount, she began a diary addressed to him (later she gave it to him to read). In it she wrote, “[F]inding myself—after so long!—with some one to talk to, I take up this empty volume, in which long ago, I made one or two spasmodic attempts to keep a diary. For I had no one but myself to talk to, and it is absurd to write down what one says to one’s self” (Benstock, 1994, p. 175).
In 1980, forty-three years after Wharton’s death and twenty-eight years after Fullerton’s, about 300 letters that she had written him turned up for sale. They provide a detailed account of her emotions during and after their love affair. Despite her frequent admonitions to him to burn her letters, he saved them. Her early novella, The Touchstone, comes to mind. Unlike the man in her novel, he did not sell them to bankroll a marriage to another woman, but there is still the coincidence of a body of letters surviving that documents a great author’s love for a man who seems unworthy of her devotion.

Fullerton enjoyed Wharton’s company and could be intimate for short periods of time. At times he spoke with her and wrote to her with the ardor of a committed lover, but evidently he never intended to have an exclusive relationship with her. Simultaneously with his involvement with Wharton, in fact, Fullerton had an engagement, hidden from Wharton, with his first cousin, Katharine Fullerton. Katherine, fourteen years younger than Fullerton, not only was his first cousin but was more like a sister because his parents had raised her from infancy after her mother’s death. As she grew up, Katherine and Fullerton even regarded each other as sister and brother, although both knew that technically they were cousins.

The period of Wharton’s intense emotional involvement with Fullerton began in December 1907, after the two of them were both back in Paris. By the end of 1909, the romance was finished; they were friends or, as Wharton put it, “comrades.” The two years were tumultuous ones for both of them, but for different reasons. Wharton’s feelings careened between ecstasy and despair. At times they had frequent visits and outings; the peak was reached in June 1909, when they consummated their relationship and again later that summer when they had a period of love making while traveling in England. At other times they were separated, or Fullerton avoided her, or she saw her but did not feel her feelings, and Wharton was, at best, stoic and, at worst, bereft.

Fullerton, meanwhile, was preoccupied with his engagement to his cousin, which did not end in marriage; with other past and probably present lovers; and with job worries.

Wharton made it clear, in her letters to him and in the diary addressed to him, that the affair with him was a life-changing experience, all the more so because it fulfilled what she had always wanted and stood in contrast to her years of isolation. She wrote about her “numb dumb former self, the self that never believed in its chance of having any warm personal life, like other, luckier people” (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, p. 138). “You woke me from a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions, a needless self-effacement,” she commented in another letter (p. 161). She noted that before their relationship began “I had no personal life: since then you have given me all imaginable joy” (p. 189).

At times it seemed to her that her future life would be worse now that she had experienced love. During one of their separations she wrote in the diary, “I have stood it all these years, and hardly felt it, because I had created a world of my own, in which I lived without heeding what went on outside. But since I have known what it was to have someone enter into that world and live there with me, the mortal solitude I come back to has become terrible” (Lewis, 1975, p. 229). She wrote him in a similar vein that, since he had given her “the only moments of real life I have ever known,” how could she learn to live without joy? “I knew that lesson once, but I have unlearned it—you have kissed away the memory of it” (p. 229).

As Wharton’s affair with Fullerton was unraveling, she wrote how painful she found it to “have all one’s passionate tenderness demanded one day, & ignored the next” and added bitterly, “My life was better before I knew you” (Lewis & Lewis, p. 208). A month later she amended her statement. “I said once that my life was better before I knew you,” she wrote. “That is not so, for it is good to have lived once in the round, for ever so short a time” (p. 216).

In the summer of 1910, aware that they could be, at most, casual friends, she described her state of mind to him: “Everything ahead of me is so dark, Dear, save what you are to me & what I might be to you. That is little enough, heaven knows” (p. 219). It is just at this time that Wharton began writing Ethan Frome in earnest. The end of her affair with Fullerton was not the only factor that influenced her mood; her marriage also cast a pall over her life.
Her husband, Teddy, had gone from being a dull but polite companion to someone who could no longer function in the world. With his bipolar disorder, he was not just a quiet invalid. When manic, he got into trouble and could hardly be contained. When depressed, he was in danger of killing himself. Often Teddy and Edith were separated. During the summer of 1909, while Edith was in France, Teddy, back in the United States, spiraled dangerously out of control. He installed a mistress in an apartment in Boston. More malignantly, from Edith's point of view, he stole a huge sum of money from Edith's trust fund and lost it through a combination of profligate spending and foolish investments. After Edith learned, at the beginning of 1910, of his misbehavior, Teddy spent most of his time taking trips with companions and undergoing futile cures at spas and sanitaria (Benstock, 1994, pp. 226-229).

At one point Teddy seemed to do best when with Edith, and his family urged her to fulfill her wifely duty and take care of him. "He has only one thought," she wrote Fullerton in May 1910, "to be with me all day, every day. If I try to escape, he will follow." She went on, "And if you knew, if you knew, what the days are, what the hours are, what our talks are, interminable repetitions of the same weary round of inanities & puérilités; & all with the knowledge definitely before me, put there by all the Drs, that what is killing me is doing him no good!" (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, p. 215).

**Ethan Frome**

In the summer of 1910 Wharton's memories were alive with the rapture she had had with Fullerton, as well as the heartbreak, and the burden of taking care of her ill husband also weighed heavily on her. She recalled the theme of a story (only eight pages long when published many years later) she had begun three years earlier as an exercise while receiving lessons to improve her French; building on this theme, she began writing *Ethan Frome* (Wolf, 1994, p. 157). After some distractions, she returned to the manuscript a few months later, while Teddy was away on one of his trips. Just after the new year of 1911, she wrote to a friend, "I am driving harder and harder at that ridiculous nouvelle." She was nearly halfway done and was speeding along (Lewis & Lewis, 1988, p. 232). During most of the period in which she composed *Ethan Frome*, her dear friend Walter Berry was residing in her guest suite, and each evening she read him her day's work (Benstock, 1994, p. 247).

The narrator of the novel is an educated man whose employer has sent him to work on a power plant in western Massachusetts. Stranded by a strike for most of the winter in a small town, he becomes curious about a person named Ethan Frome. Ethan is "so stiffened and grizzled" that he appears to be an old man, although he is only fifty-two years old. The narrator learns from a local that Ethan has been that way ever since the "smash-up." After spending some time with Ethan, the narrator visualizes him as seeming to be "a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him bound below the surface." He concludes that Ethan lives "in a depth of moral isolation" (Wharton, 1911, pp. 16-17). The narrator pieces together what happened to Ethan and tells the following story.

Ethan, at the age of twenty-eight, was living with his wife, Zeena, who was seven years older than he was, and her younger cousin, Mattie. The young woman's father had died, leaving her destitute, and she could find no alternative but to come live with the Fromes, where she acted as Zeena's servant in exchange for room and board. Ethan had an empty relationship with his wife. They never conversed, she had lost her youth, she criticized him frequently, and she was sickly, constantly visiting doctors and trying remedies for her many obscure ailments.

Ethan had found when Mattie came to live with them a year before that it was "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth." "[H]e could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will." When they walked back to their farm from town at night, he especially felt "the sweetness of this communion." He was enthralled with nature; the emotion he had derived from it before meeting Mattie "remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it." He
had not known whether anyone else in the world
reacted as he did, but he “learned that one other
spirit had trembled with the same touch of won­
der” (Wharton, 1911, pp. 36-37).
Zeena decided that as an ailing woman she
needed a proper, paid servant who would help
her more efficiently than Mattie was able to do.
While out of town for an appointment with a
doctor, she hired the new servant and announced
to Ethan and Mattie that her cousin must leave
at once. Ethan tried to find an alternative to
Zeena’s edict but finally concluded that he had
go along. “There was no way out—none. He
was a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of
light was to be extinguished” (Wharton, 1911,
p. 146). He considered borrowing some money,
so that he and Mattie might flee together, but he
could not see deserting his ill wife.
So he resigned himself to driving Mattie to the
railroad station and picking up the new servant,
who was due to arrive. Ethan and Mattie talked
in the horse-drawn sleigh; Mattie was as in love
with him as he was with her, and she was also
as bereft. As they came to the steep hill that led
into town, Ethan reminded her that they had
planned to ride a sled down there some time. He
saw a sled under the trees and suggested they
have their ride now; they flew down the hill and
found it thrilling. After they walked back up the
hill, Mattie proposed a double suicide. They
could ride down again on the sled, and all Ethan
would have to do was to crash the sled into the
elm tree near the bottom of the hill. Ethan had
the “hated vision of the house he was going back
to, . . . of the woman who would wait for him
there.” He realized his life with his wife was “in­
tolerable” (Wharton, 1911, p. 180). He agreed
with Mattie. “She was right,” he thought, after
they got into the sled, “this was better than part­
ing” (Wharton, 1911, p. 183).
But their suicide attempt failed. The crash left
Ethan lame. Mattie was hurt more severely; due
to a spinal injury, she became partially paralyzed.
The narrator talks to a woman in town who ex­
plains what it has been like in the Frome farmhouse
in the twenty-four years since the crash (Wharton,
1911, pp. 194–195). The three of them, Ethan,
Mattie, and Zeena, have continued to live together,
with Zeena mostly taking care of the other two.
Mattie has soured, and Zeena continues to be
cranky. “[S]ometimes the two of them get going
at each other, and then Ethan’s face’d break your
heart.” The woman concludes with the last words
of the novel, “[T]he 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.”

The resonance between Edith Wharton’s life
and Ethan Frome is unmistakable. The novel is
not autobiographical in a literal sense (see An­
derson, 2001). Wharton never lived in a Massachu­
setts farmhouse, never fell in love with a servant,
ever attempted a double suicide. But in this
work of fiction she expresses, struggles with, and
lives through the same emotions that gripped
her as she wrote the novel. “[T]he soul of [a]
ovel,” she commented once, “is (or should be)
the writer’s own soul” (Wharton, 1985, p. 115).
An author expresses in her fiction the emotions
that matter to her most; how would anyone cre­
ate an imaginative story concerning anything
about which one did not care deeply? And from
where could these emotions—and the conflicts
and concerns that give rise to them—come, ex­
cept one’s previous experience? As the novelis­
t John North commented recently, “What I hope
you will accept as true is that my new novel, just
like its brothers and sisters, is autobiographical
in only one sense: it’s made out of stuff that life
has deposited inside me” (Brisendine, 2003, p. 4).

Ethan Frome not only captures, but also evokes
in the reader, the feelings that Wharton had in her
own life. From an early age, she yearned for inti­
mate closeness with another person. Her mar­
riage was arid and disappointing, much like
Ethan’s. She felt as if she were imprisoned there,
as he did. After falling in love with Fullerton and
finding someone with whom she could share her
inner world, she felt that for once she was alive,
and the sexual attraction was an inextricable
part of the communion she had with Fullerton;
Ethan’s experience with Mattie was much the
same. Wharton was depressed in the period in
which she wrote the novel; she was still trapped
in her marriage, and she knew she had no future
with Fullerton. Through different circumstances,
Ethan becomes depressed; he is stuck in his mar­
rage, and the young vibrant Mattie whom he
loved is gone.
Yet the writing of *Ethan Frome* helped Wharton get on with her life. Being able to express one’s emotions and share them with others offers some relief. With most novels, the author shares the work with readers in general. With *Ethan Frome* the process of sharing took place in a more literal way, in that, as she was working on the manuscript, Wharton read aloud each evening to Walter Berry what she had written that day. Constructing an imaginative world that carries an author’s emotions gives one a sense of some control over what before may have threatened to be overwhelming. And it is not unusual that authors discover a solution, or at least methods of coping, from their creative playing with what matters most to them. In the novel Wharton envisioned what the future could be like for her. She had been as reluctant to leave her spouse as Ethan was, yet within a few months after completing *Ethan Frome* she obtained a separation from Teddy, and in 1913 they were divorced. She refused to live a life of misery as had her character Ethan.

*The Age of Innocence*—the novel that rivals *Ethan Frome* for status as her most acclaimed work—captures her strategy. The outline of the underlying emotions is virtually the same in the two novels. In *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920, nine years after *Ethan Frome*, the main character, also a man, falls in love with someone with whom he has true communion, but, due to various circumstances, he cannot marry her but instead enters a marriage devoid of passion and intimate sharing. The difference is that in *The Age of Innocence*, although he never forgets what he has lost, nor what he lacks, the protagonist lives a vigorous, fulfilling life, while retaining a touch of inner melancholy. I believe that Wharton always had some underlying regret and sadness, but she avoided Ethan’s fate of becoming enveloped in depression, and she went on to live a busy, involving, satisfying life.

**Psychobiography and the Study of Literature**

Using Wharton and *Ethan Frome* as an example, I would like to end with a few words about the relationship between psychobiography and the study of literature. It seems to me that the two disciplines are invaluable for each other. Psychobiography offers us the potential of understanding much of the terrain of an author’s inner world. That understanding, then, can help us in looking at the author’s work. We can be sensitized to the emotional heart of the work, to the themes that resonate most fully with the author’s emotional struggles. Knowing about Wharton’s psychological experience, I would argue, helps us see that *Ethan Frome* revolves around the desire for intimacy and the desolation that comes when it is lost.

Studying an author’s work is also indispensable for exploring an author psychobiographically. At times, as with Wharton, we may find, in letters and diaries, direct evidence of an author’s inner struggles, but seeing how she expresses these concerns in her fiction adds depth and nuance to our understanding of what these concerns meant to her.

Henry James appreciated *Ethan Frome* more than any other of Wharton’s works. “I exceedingly admire... *Ethan Frome,*” he wrote her. “A beautiful art & tone & truth—a beautiful artful kept-downness, and yet effective cumulations. It’s a ‘gem’” (Powers, 1990, p. 195). *Ethan Frome* works in many ways, but I believe that what James responded to more than anything else was the novel’s emotional truth.

**References**


