




ETHAN FROME  
SUMMER  
BUNNER SISTERS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY HERMIONE LEE

EDITH WHARTON

A K N O P F  B O O K

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EVERYMAN,

I WILL GO WITH THEE,

AND BE THY GUIDE,

IN THY MOST NEED

TO GO BY THY SIDE

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## INTRODUCTION

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'Bunner Sisters' is the name of a shop, and it is the only thing written by Edith Wharton to have such a title. It is not what you expect if you associate her mainly with class, wealth, and snobbery. But the underside of society interests her, too, more than she has been given credit for. Because she made her name as an analyst of rich, leisured Americans in Old New York, Wharton's strong strand of compassionate realism has tended to be undervalued. She is not Dreiser or Zola, but her writing life overlaps with theirs, and she is well aware of the economic and social inequities which underly the world she specializes in. She gives more thought than many of her fictional characters do to the lives of people who have to get up and go to work and struggle to make a living. In an early story called 'A Cup of Cold Water', a grim tale of urban struggle and despair, the central character looks out in the morning at the city going about its business: 'That obscure renewal of humble duties was more moving than the spectacle of an army with banners.' And he quotes one of Wharton's favourite lines from *Hamlet*, 'For every man hath business and desire.' It is like Dorothea's knowledge, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, that she must rouse herself, after a night of personal anguish, to an involvement in 'the involuntary, palpitating' life of humanity. Wharton admired, and emulated, George Eliot's seriousness and responsibility. She said in a letter of 1905 that she did not want *The House of Mirth* to be a superficial study of trivial people. On the contrary, she wanted to bring out the 'tragic implication' of a society with no 'inherited obligations', but concentrating on 'what its frivolity destroys'.

The unemployed, the hard-up, the pauperized and the shabby-genteel, servants and workers, press in at the corners of her fictions. She makes you wonder what it would be like to see events from their point of view – as in 'The Lady's Maid's Bell' or 'After Holbein' where the servants have their say. How would Undine Spragg's story read, in *The Custom of the Country*, from the point of view of Mrs Heeny, the masseuse and manicurist who collects society clippings, part subservient social parasite, part malevolent gossip? What would Lily Bart's story be like as told by Mrs Haffen, the charwoman she is so curt with, and who comes back to blackmail her, whose desperation and resentment burn off the page on which she appears? Lily Bart, slipping down the cold social surface she has tried to grip on to, reduced in the end to an incompetent milliner's assistant and a supplicant to the working-girl Nettie Struther, shows us the underside of the social fabric, the place the despised Mrs Haffen comes from. Only very rarely does Wharton shift the vantage point altogether to that underside (other examples are 'Mrs Manstey's View', 'Friends', 'A Cup of Cold Water' and 'Bewitched'). But when she does, she gives the lie to critics who accuse her of not understanding the 'real America'.

*Bunner Sisters* is the earliest, and by far the least well-known of her three superb novellas of poverty and deprivation, and it deserves to be as famous as *Ethan Frome* or *Summer*. Wharton's editors at Scribner's, Edward Burlingame and Charles Scribner, were nervous of its unflinching grimness. Wharton tried to get Burlingame to run it in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1891 and again in 1893. It was early in her publishing career, when her confidence in her own work was not yet high – but she knew it was good. 'Though I am not a good judge of what I write,' she told him, 'it seems to me, after several careful readings, up to the average of most

writings.’ But *Bunner Sisters* would not be published until 1916 (the year that she was writing *Summer*), and Scribner did not want to publish it on its own because (he told her in June 1916) it was ‘just a little small for the best results in separate form’. So this real masterpiece of thwarted lives was included in her war-time volume of stories, *Xingu*, and never had the impact it would have had if published separately.

*Bunner Sisters* is a poignant and cruel story of two sisters who, at the start of the novella, are making ends meet with a bit of sewing and a shabby-genteel basement shop that sells hat trimmings, artificial flowers and other knick-knacks, in a run-down side-street in New York. They are a fretful pair, the older one, Ann Eliza, self-martyring and anxious, the younger Evelina, spoiled and dissatisfied. Into these dismal lives comes a seedy German clock-mender, Mr Ramy, who makes up to them both. When Ann Eliza, who has always indulged her younger sister, begins to fall for Mr Ramy, the narrator tells us: ‘She had at last recognized her right to set up some lost opportunities of her own.’ But *Bunner Sisters* only allows a brief vision of hopes and possibilities before it settles, implacably, for renunciation, loneliness, and disappointment. Evelina, obtusely and permanently unaware of her sister’s feelings, marries Mr Ramy and is taken away to a fate which turns out, on her eventual return, to be as bad as any of Ann Eliza’s worst imaginings. A sympathetic upper-class lady, who has troubles of her own, makes occasional visits to the Bunner sisters’ shop, but we never find out her story, or even her name, and like everyone else in the story, she cannot be of any help to the sisters. Ann Eliza comes to feel that there is no God, ‘only a black abyss above the roof of Bunner Sisters’. Wharton tells the story with a painstaking, Balzacian exactness and a scrupulous interest in these compressed lives. She shines a light which is at once harsh and compassionate on every detail – the district, the neighbours (who provide some subdued humour), the sisters’ home-life, a Sunday outing to Central Park, or a ferry-crossing to Hoboken to visit Mr Ramy’s friend the German washerwoman Mrs Hochmüller (a soft, tender piece of urban pastoral, unlike anything else in Wharton). But there is nothing soft or tender in the dialogue between the sisters. Any hint that the older sister’s love for the younger might sentimentalize the story is bleakly made away with:

‘Don’t you talk like that, Evelina! I guess you’re on’y tired out – and disheartened.’

‘Yes, I’m disheartened,’ Evelina murmured.

A few months earlier Ann Eliza would have met the confession with a word of pious admonition; now she accepted it in silence.

‘Maybe you’ll brighten up when your cough gets better,’ she suggested.

‘Yes – or my cough’ll get better when I brighten up,’ Evelina retorted with a touch of her old tartness.

‘Does your cough keep on hurting you jest as much?’

‘I don’t see’s there’s much difference.’

At the end, Ann Eliza, horribly alone, sets out on a spring morning into the great city, which ‘seemed to throb with the sense of innumerable beginnings’. But not for her.

\*

In all three of these stories, a window of hope and love is opened onto a narrow, thwarted life, only to be closed shut again. The most startling example of this is *Ethan Frome* (1911), which became the best-known of all Wharton’s works, frequently reprinted and adapted for



stage and screen. This famously American, provincial novella began life around 1907 amazingly enough, as a formal exercise in improving her French, written in the grand Parisian setting of the Faubourg St-Germain. She told her friend Bernard Berenson that it amused her to do 'Starkfield, Massachusetts' and 'Shadd's Fall' in the rue de Varenne. A few years later, at the darkest point of her own marital crisis, she returned to this French exercise and turned it into a great work of art.

For readers more familiar with *The House of Mirth* or *The Custom of the Country*, *Ethan Frome* comes as a shock, and this is not just because of the dramatic switch from her usual territory to the remote hills and poor farmers' lives of nineteenth-century New England. What is just as startling is its quietness, what Henry James admiringly called its '*kept-downness*'. *Ethan Frome* is a story of silence and speechlessness. Voices and feelings are all 'snowed under'. (The first French translation, which she oversaw, was titled *Sous la neige*.) The characters live inside 'dumb melancholy' and 'secretive silence', broken by sudden outbursts of long-repressed emotion. The gravestones by the farm gate seem more articulate than the living ('We never got away – how should you?' they say). Their deep quiet, in the end, may be preferable to any words.

Ethan was a frustrated figure long before the crash which dooms him to a slow lifetime of silent misery. The first sighting of him, a ruined giant, is of someone who seems to be dragged back persistently by 'the jerk of a chain'. As one neighbour puts it: 'You've had a awful mean time, Ethan Frome.' This grim figure of endurance once had potential and aspirations. A sensitive young man with intellectual curiosity, he had interests in physics, astronomy, and geology. Though 'grave and inarticulate', he had an appetite for 'friendly human intercourse'. He looks after other people; he is kind and honourable and has a sense of duty. (His box-room 'study', with its home-made bookshelves, its engraving of Abraham Lincoln, and its calendar with 'Thoughts from the Poets', suggests his qualities.) But his father's accident and breakdown, his mother's illness and his confinement on the farm have doomed him: he cannot escape 'the long misery of his baffled past'. 'The silence had deepened about him year by year.'

Ethan's disabled father is an almost invisible figure in the story, but his mother's life, just touched in, is desolating. A woman who once kept her home 'spruce' and shining has had to watch her husband go 'soft in the brain', their farm and saw-mill run down, and the road by the farm-house go quiet after the railway took the traffic away: 'And mother never could get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died.' In illness and solitude she became more and more silent:

Sometimes, in the long winter evenings, when in desperation her son asked her why she didn't 'say something', she would lift a finger and answer: 'Because I'm listening'; and on stormy nights, when the loud wind was about the house, she would complain, if he spoke to her: 'They're talking so loud out there that I can't hear you.'

That loud silence is echoed in the wretched marriage Ethan makes to the older cousin Zenobia, who comes to look after his mother and who, after her death, seems a preferable alternative to utter loneliness. ('He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter.') Over seven years, Zeena Frome turns from an efficient manager into a joyless hypochondriac, and she too falls silent; because, a

she spoke 'only to complain', Ethan has developed a habit of never listening or replying. Under her 'taciturnity', 'suspicions and resentments' fester.

Into this hostile household, summed up by the word 'exanimate', Mattie Silver, Zeena's orphaned twenty-year old cousin (everything in these villages is a family matter) arrives to help keep house. Mattie is ardent, sensual, innocent, and fragile (it is one of the novella's triumphs that she is touching and plausible, too) and Ethan falls deeply and silently in love with her. In the one year she spends with the Fromes, the tender, inarticulate relationship that grows up between them is marked by the rhythms of rural life, as in a novel by Hardy or Gaskell: the village dance, church picnics, walks home in the starry night. Ethan fantasizes about life with Mattie, and he finds himself longing for his lawful spouse to die. But such visions of release are instantly replaced by that of 'his wife lying in their bedroom asleep, her mouth slightly open, her false teeth in a tumbler by the bed.' The climax comes on the night that Zeena leaves them in the house, and they spend the quiet evening as if they were husband and wife, yet without touching each other. This sweet 'illusion of long-established intimacy' is disrupted when Zeena's special red-glass pickle-dish, which Mattie has got down from its secret place to 'make the supper-table pretty' is broken by the cat, Zeena's baleful familiar. So deep and sure is the tone of the book that this little, homely accident seems as great a tragedy to us as to the characters. Zeena returns, discovers the breakage, and bitterly laments her loss:

'You waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got ... You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver ... I was warned of it when I took you, and I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em – and now you've taken from me the one I cared for most of all –'

It is one of the places in the novel where the pressure of feeling bursts through the silence. And though all our sympathies go to Ethan and Mattie, Zeena's own suffering – sick, lonely, unloved, betrayed – rushes onto the page.

Zeena's 'inexorable' will and the force of circumstances mean that there is no way out for the unconsummated lovers: Mattie must go and Ethan must stay. Their passion finally breaks through their shyness in intense, pared-down, simple utterances, words 'like fragments torn from' the heart:

'Ethan, where'll I go if I leave you? I don't know how to get along alone. You said so yourself just now. Nobody but you was ever good to me. And there'll be that strange girl in the house ... and she'll sleep in my bed, where I used to lay nights and listen to hear you come up the stairs ...'

Urged by Mattie (Ethan's role throughout is to be at the service of his women), they take what they hope will be a fatal sled-ride, a scene written with the utmost intensity. And because what is meant to be their farewell scene together is told with such concentrated lyricism, the coda to the novella, where we find out what has become of these three, nearly thirty years later, is one of the most quietly horrifying moments in all fiction, cruel and powerful and done with brilliant, ruthless economy. One of the village witnesses to Ethan's life-long incarceration concludes, grimly: '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; 'ceiling that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.'

In itself this story, with its grim final twist, is powerful enough. But (unlike in *Bunn Sisters* or *Summer*) we come at it through a frame narrator, who sets up the flashback into Ethan's story, signalled by several lines of dots. He acts as the conduit between the reticence of Starkfield and the eloquent piece of literature we are reading. Wharton's models for *Ethan Frome* were Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and – for their use of competing narrative versions – Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Balzac's story 'La Grande Bretèche'. Ethan and Mattie owe something, too, to Hardy's *Jude* and *Tess*; Nietzsche, one of Wharton's most admired philosophers, lies behind Ethan's lost 'will to power'. Another acknowledged debt, in all these novellas, was to Hawthorne. Ethan's name comes from Hawthorne's guilt-ridden isolated hero Ethan Brand, and Zenobia's from the doomed feminist heroine of his satire on New England utopia, *The Blithedale Romance*. That novel is told from the viewpoint of a cynical, semi-detached observer, Coverdale. Wharton's nameless narrator, like Coverdale and like Brontë's Mr Lockwood, seems to belong to another world. He is a man of progress bringing electricity and communication with the outside world to Starkfield. But after winter there, he begins to understand the isolation and deprivations of the natives a little better.

The narrator allows Wharton to be both outside of, and inward with, her subject. Like a biographer, he collects the evidence, listens to the different versions, and makes up his own story of the past. Like his author, he is as interested in the conditions of New England life as in the personal story. Wharton would say more than once, for instance in her introduction to a 1922 edition of *Ethan Frome*, that she wanted to present a truer picture of the 'snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts', with their grim facts of 'insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation', than she had ever found in the 'rose-coloured' versions of earlier New England writers (she meant, rather unfairly, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett). She was always extremely irritated by critics who accused her of remoteness from and condescension towards this material. During her years at the Mount in Lenox, she was vividly aware of the bleakness of the surrounding landscape. The grimness of lives in remote New England farms and desolate little hill villages, particularly in winter, and the hard times of the industrial workers in the region, stirred Wharton's imagination as much as the life of the wealthy 'cottagers' in their opulent houses in Lenox or Stockbridge. There were violent contrasts in this environment between that wealth and the deprivation of the rural poor between the romance of the landscape and the development of local industries. Lenox Dalton, not far from the Mount, was an industrial centre. The Lenox Iron Works were founded in 1848. Clocks, carriages, china, and muskets were made in Pittsfield. Dalton, the industrial town on the banks of the Housatonic, had the thriving Crane Paper Mills, and there was a paper-making factory at Lee, near Lenox. Further north, in Adams and North Adams, there were shoe factories and cotton and wool mills. Technological advances like railway lines and tunnels and the influx of trolley cars and motors were changing the landscape. Wharton has written about these aspects of life in the Berkshires in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), which shows 'the great glare of leisure' of the wealthy houses against the needs of the mill-workers. In *Ethan Frome* – and a few years later in *Summer* – she took the wealthy houses right out of the picture.

Her story had its specific factual origins in a terrible sledding-accident in Lenox in 1901 and in the lingering, fatal paralysis of a Lenox friend, Ethel Cram, after an injury in 1902. More broadly, it provides, by inference, a factual, sociological account of this bleak slice of American life. We learn, through the narrator, about the transactions between local farmers and builders, the effects of the railway, attitudes to debt and the status of doctors, the inadequate education of girls, and levels of rural unemployment. Occasionally her narrator uses a phrase which opens up the distance between 'us' and 'them': 'the hard compulsions of the poor', 'a community rich in pathological instances'. So, as she often does, Wharton uses a unique, pitiful story for a generalized, determinist account of environmental pressures, and holds romance and realism brilliantly in balance.

All the harsh matter-of-factness of life in Starkfield – dogged conversations about money and work, details of journeys, luggage, buildings, medicines, farming, the omnipresent but useless church, the ingrown, watchful community, the practical difficulties created by the weather – are mixed with suppressed romantic emotions, passionately invested in nature. What to the narrator seems a blank and desolate wilderness becomes, when we see it through Ethan and Mattie's eyes, a landscape full of detail and beauty. The emotions that are so 'keyed down' come through in an intense sensual language straight out of Keats (one of Wharton's favourite poets). Ethan's awareness of 'huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things' calls up 'Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance' in Keats's anguished farewell to life and love, 'When I have fears that I may cease to be'. The wintry romance of Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' is touched in everywhere. The snow beats 'like hail against the loose-hinged windows' as, in Keats's poem, the 'frost-wind' blows the 'quick pattering' of the 'flaw-blown sleep' 'against the window-panes'. The warm little feast in the kitchen is a homely version of Porphyro's sensual banquet; the 'lustrous fleck' on Mattie's lip in the lamplight is like the 'lustrous' light of Madeline and Porphyro's encounter, lit by moonlight. Mattie's erotic trance ('She looked up at him languidly, as though her lids were weighted with sleep and it cost her an effort to raise them') is like Madeline's tranced sleep. Ethan's 'ache' of cold weariness echoes Keats's knights in armour aching in their 'icy hoods and mails'. These lovers make a doomed attempt, like Keats's lovers, to flee away for ever into the storm; but the story, like the poem, ends with the crippled paralysis of an old 'beldame', who dies 'palsy-twitched, with meagre face deform'. In both there is the sense of it all having happened 'ages long ago'.

The 'high romance' in *Ethan Frome* speaks through nature:

Slowly the rim of the rainy vapours caught fire and burnt away, and a pure moon swung into the blue. Ethan, rising on his elbow, watched the landscape whiten and shape itself under the sculpture of the moon.... He looked out at the slopes bathed in lustre, the silver-edged darkness of the woods, the spectral purple of the hills against the sky, and it seemed as though the beauty of the night had been poured out to mock his wretchedness ...

Wharton told Berenson that it gave her 'the greatest joy and fullest ease' to write this story. She knew that distance can create closeness, and that transforming painful materials can produce creative joy. *Ethan Frome* was an anguished elegy to love, and a description of being incarcerated in a terrible marriage. It was also a farewell to New England, written a long way away from it, and published as she would be leaving it for ever.

When Wharton returned to the landscape of *Ethan Frome*, five years later, she again used the word 'joy' to describe the process of writing about pain and loss. *Summer*, written in the summer of 1916 and published in 1917, was, she told Berenson in May 1917, written at a 'high pitch of creative joy'. It was her escape from the pressures and demands of her war work in France, as much of an antidote as possible to refugees and hospitals. It is a highly coloured, full-blooded, sensual narrative with an intense appetite for life. But it is shadowed by violence and death and by dark emotions about nationhood, civilization, and savagery.

The idea for it suddenly came into focus, but she had had it in mind since *Ethan Frome*. She often mentioned them together, famously calling *Summer* the 'hot Ethan'. Like *Ethan Frome*, *Summer* is a novella set in the poorest and remotest part of New England, in which an inarticulate, untravelled character with an obscure sense that there might be some preferable life elsewhere has a brief moment of idyllic love and joy but is pulled back to the harsh realities of the place she lives in. *Summer's* romance is fulfilled, not thwarted like Ethan's. It is one of the few Wharton fictions in which a love affair is acted out rather than denied. But as elsewhere in her fiction, pain, loss, and grief rush up behind it.

The novel is brim-full of, and best known for, a sensual evocation of the New England countryside in heat, felt through the perceptions of a young woman close to nature: uneducated, speechless, throbbing with awakening eroticism. She feels and thinks through her blood, she lies on the ground like an animal, 'her face pressed to the earth and the warbling currents of the grass running through her'. She feels earth and water, heat and light, sun and the colour of skies (*Summer* is full of fine sunsets) and the 'long wheeling fires' of stars on her pulses. She is all sap, growth and passive, sun-warmed earth-life, and Wharton piles this on with a Whitmanesque feel for minute, creaturely animalism. Heroine and author seem fused apart, but Wharton gives her her own passionate feeling for nature and her nostalgia for her lost New England countryside, so remote from the war-bound rue de Varenne.

Pagan sensuality is at the heart of the novel's escapism, but the heroine is not a joyous figure, and the summery outdoors is not the novel's only landscape. Charity Royall is a discontented creature, more like a small-town Undine Spragg than like Mattie in *Ethan Frome* (Conrad, who enjoyed *Summer*, praised her 'bewildered wilfulness' in a letter to Wharton in October 1917). She is trapped in a gossipy, puritanical, and philistine little town, which is almost all she has ever known. She lets out hot bursts of inarticulate resentment: 'How I hate everything!' 'Things don't change at North Dormer: people just get used to them.' The name of the town puns on the French for sleep, implying 'dormant' and 'dormitory'. North Dormer defines its level of civilization not against Boston or New York or the wider world but against 'the Mountain', a 'bad place' that looms over the town from fifteen miles away, where a squalid, degenerate community, 'a little colony of squatters', lives beyond the pale of the law or the church or any genteel 'household order'. (They are said to be descendants of the men who built the local railways fifty years before, who took to drink and 'disappeared into the woods'. Wharton derived them, she tells us in her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, from a real colony of 'drunken mountain outlaws' on Bear Mountain, near Lenox.) This is where Charity Royall was born, rescued as a little girl by Lawyer Royall from a convict and a bad mother and brought up first by the lawyer and his wife, and then, after Mrs Royall's death, by himself alone. Her name has been imposed on her, marking her out as a recipient of philanthropic

and a possession. She is made to feel 'poor and ignorant' and ashamed of her origin protected only by the distinction of her guardian.

Mr Royall, though banked down for a great deal of *Summer* (because we mainly see him through Charity's eyes) is its most powerful and problematic character: Wharton always insisted that 'he's the book'. A disappointed man who could have had a better career somewhere else, vigorous, intelligent, impressive, he is also gloomy, bitter, given to drink and in need of female company. He once tries to break his way into Charity's room when she is seventeen; she holds him at bay by force of will, and never forgives him. When, after this he asks to marry her, he seems to become 'a hideous parody of the fatherly old man she has always known'. She continues to live in his house, but on her own terms, which include taking a pointless job at the moribund local library, where she sits furiously all day surrounded by books she has no idea how to read.

This is where she is at the start of the novella, which immediately introduces a blithely handsome, cultured young visitor, Lucius Harney, an architect interested in old New England houses, with whom Charity falls in love. (Harney is thinly characterized, but he is meant to be lightweight.) Her secret love affair, 'a wondrous unfolding of her new self', which makes her even more conscious of her ignorance and provincialism, comes under the constant pressure of small-town surveillance. For all its romantic ardour, rhapsodically conveyed, it is increasingly felt to be a risky illusion, shadowed by menace and fear.

Large-scale realistic local set-pieces interrupt the idyll, which combine, as increasingly in Wharton's postwar American writing, nostalgia and distaste. There is a July Fourth celebration in Nettleton (based on Pittsfield), complete with omnibuses, shop displays of confectionery and fancy goods, a firemen's band and a picture show, trolley rides to the Lake and fireworks displaying 'Washington crossing the Delaware'. A romantic adventure for Charity, it ends humiliatingly in an encounter with a drunken, abusive Royall. That is followed by North Dormer's marking of Old Home Week with a banquet, a dance, a procession to the church, and speeches, for which the local girls are dressed – highly ironically in Charity's case – in vestal, sacrificial white. Wharton enjoys herself with these local American rituals, viewed through Charity's impressionable eyes. T. S. Eliot, reviewing *Summer* in the *Egoist* in January 1919, thought the whole thing was a satire on the New England novel, done by 'suppressing all evidence of European culture'. This is not quite true, as a touch of French culture is slipped into Nettleton when Lucius takes Charity to a little French restaurant. But these provincial festivals do display the American insularity and isolationism that Wharton had been complaining about in the early years of the war, before the United States involved itself in the struggle. She calls it, drily, 'sentimental decentralization', and makes fun of the genteel spinster, Miss Hatchard, who insists on the importance of 'reverting to the old ideals, the family and the homestead, and so on'.

The idea of 'home' in *Summer* goes beyond a satire on provincialism and insularity, though. It plays through the novella in subtle ways. Lucius is investigating the fine old eighteenth-century houses of rural New England, many of which have been left to decay: his architectural interests show up the local indifference, at the time, towards historic American homes. The lovers' secret trysting-place is a deserted, ghostly little house in an abandoned orchard, a fragile, pathetic, makeshift home. Lawyer Royall makes a speech at the ceremony, which shows him at his best, about 'home' as a site of potential, not of

confinement. Those who have gone away from their old home may return 'for good': to make it a 'larger place' and 'to make the best of it'. Wharton was partly thinking, as she often did, about what it would have been like for her to go back to America and stay there, instead of living her life in France. But she was also implying that small-town America needed to look outward and could be improved by sending its sons off to war.

The grimmest 'home' in the novella is the savage place Charity comes from, a derelict sheath on the mountain, described with as much brutality as Wharton can muster. This is where Charity goes when her lover leaves her for a girl of his own class and she becomes pregnant, and this is where she tells herself she belongs. There is no romance or decorum here to cover over the life of the body, displayed with shocking ruthlessness in the figure of Charity's dead mother:

A woman lay on it [a mattress on the floor] but she did not look like a dead woman; she seemed to have fallen across the squalid bed in a drunken sleep, and to have been left lying where she fell, in her ragged disordered clothes. One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled down about the ankle.... She looked at her mother's face, thin yet swollen, with lips parted in a frozen gasp above the broken teeth. There was no sign in it of anything human: she lay there like a dead dog in a ditch.

Charity's only consolation for this sight is the burial service, administered by the priest who is going to help her return to her guardian and her town, where she also belongs – and does not belong. The powerful burial scene on the mountain takes us back to the world of war in Europe from which *Summer* was meant to be an escape. All the ingredients of war that were at the forefront of Wharton's mind at this time – the slaughter, the corpses, the wretched women and children, the refugees with their homes destroyed, the balm of religious ritual and the efforts, however inadequate, of charity – cluster behind this scene. And Charity is the victim, like so many of the war survivors Wharton was dealing with at the time of writing *Summer*.

The choices she has, as a woman, are few and grim. This is one of Wharton's most outspoken and lacerating books about the limitations of women's lives – for all that she is not easily described as a feminist. Charity is at the mercy of a male double standard. Royal himself prone to 'debauchery', is violently abusive about Charity's 'half human' mother and Charity's bad blood, and the person he talks to about this is the two-timing Lucius, as though both men are conspiring to judge and define the speechless, exploited girl. Charity's choices are to return to the 'animal' life of her mother or to have an abortion or to become a prostitute. These options are very clearly spelt out, much more openly than in any previous novel of Wharton's. There is even a visit to the abortionist: the sign reads 'Private Consultations ... Lady Attendants', and the woman doctor seems to be Jewish. There are several uses of the word 'whore'. (As a result, *Summer* was banned in Pittsfield and much disapproved of by Wharton's Boston readers.) Charity is recognizably in the tradition of 'the woman who pays': pregnant Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, Tess abandoned by her lover in Hardy's novel. Wharton even has Charity encountering a preacher on the road, in a 'gospel tent', like Tess's encounter with a travelling evangelist. Most of all she invokes Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, cast out by the Puritan community for adultery, more in tune with the natural wilderness than the town, and listening, as Charity listens, to the rhetoric of

the preacher giving his great Election Day sermon on the values of America. Wharton plans the clue herself, comparing *Summer's* realism with Hawthorne's in *A Backward Glance*. And there is a strong echo of Hawthorne's obsessional, spying old husband Chillingworth in Lawyer Royall.

The ending of *Summer* is extremely disturbing, and to some readers as harrowing as the ending of *Ethan Frome* and as bleak as *Bunner Sisters*. The window onto joy and romance closes down for ever, and Charity, in a state of passive horror and exhaustion, allows herself to be led off the mountain, and married, by her much-hated father figure. The ending can be read as a depressing immolation of youth and hope in a hypocritical and quasi-incestuous social compromise. Or it can be seen as a realist adjustment on both sides, since at this point Royall becomes grave, kindly, and forbearing, and Charity feels reassured and secure, as in a refuge. Royall's acceptance of Charity and her baby could be read not as exploitative but as bravely introducing into self-protective, small-town America a necessary new influx of 'strange blood'. Wharton's readers cannot agree about the ending, because the book pulls against itself. The loss of midsummer love is felt as unbearable but inevitable. Growing up (for countries as for people) is a process of 'tragic initiation', and it means moving from romance to 'ineluctable reality', adopting the stoicism that is the only virtue left in the face of a great catastrophe, and 'making the best of it'.

Hermione Lee

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND EDITIONS

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# CHRONOLOGY

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| DATE | AUTHOR'S LIFE   | LITERARY CONTEXT  |
|------|---|---|
| 1861 |   | George Eliot: <i>Silas Marner</i> .<br>Dickens: <i>Great Expectations</i> .<br>Rebecca Harding Davis: <i>Life in the Iron Mills</i> .   |
| 1862 | Edith Newbold Jones born 24 January, in New York City.  | Elizabeth Barrett Browning: <i>Last Poems</i> .<br>Turgenev: <i>Fathers and Children</i> .  |
| 1863 |   | Elizabeth Gaskell: <i>Sylvia's Lovers</i> .<br>Longfellow: <i>Tales of a Wayside Inn</i> .  |
| 1864 |   | Tennyson: <i>Enoch Arden</i> .<br>Trollope: <i>Can You Forgive Her?</i><br>Death of Hawthorne (b. 1804).<br>Whitman: <i>Drum-Taps</i> .<br>Emerson: <i>English Traits</i> .               |
| 1865 |   | Dickens: <i>Our Mutual Friend</i> .<br>Gaskell: <i>Wives and Daughters</i> .<br>Lewis Carroll: <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> .  |
| 1866 | Family moves to Europe to conserve income in postwar depression. Next six years spent in Italy, Spain, Paris and Germany. | Dostoevsky: <i>Crime and Punishment</i> .<br>Gaskell: <i>Wives and Daughters</i> .<br>Eliot: <i>Felix Holt</i> .<br>Whittier: <i>Snow-Bound</i> .<br>Arnold: <i>New Poems</i> .           |
| 1867 |   | Turgenev: <i>Smoke</i> .<br>Marx: <i>Das Kapital</i> (I).<br>Mill: <i>The Subjection of Women</i> .<br>Browning: <i>The Ring and the Book</i> .<br>Harriet Beecher Stowe: <i>Old Town</i> |

1869

*Folks.*

Flaubert: *L'Education Sentimentale.*

Tolstoy completes *War and Peace.*

1870

Death of Charles Dickens.

1871

Darwin: *The Descent of Man.* Birth of

Proust.

## HISTORICAL EVENTS

Lincoln US president (to 1865). Ten states secede from Union on the slavery issue. American Civil War (to 1865). Battle of Bull Run: Union forces are completely routed. Britain declares itself neutral in the conflict. Victor Emmanuel II becomes king of a united Italy. Russia abolishes serfdom. Battle of Shiloh – Union forces successful. Battle of Antietam in which 23,000 are left dead on the field. Lincoln proposes that slaves in all states in rebellion against the government should be free on or after 1 January 1863. Greatest battle of the war fought at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Colonel Robert E. Lee, commanding the Confederate Army, forced to retreat. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Bismarck gains power in Prussia.

Lincoln re-elected president. First Socialist International (to 1876).

Assassination of Lincoln. Andrew Johnson president (to 1869). Civil War ends. A general pardon is granted to the South. Negroes given full rights as citizens in the 14th Amendment. No state can come back into the Union unless it ratifies this amendment.

US Reconstruction under way. Petition requesting the franchise signed by 1500 women in Britain, and presented by John Stuart Mill to the House of Commons.

US purchases Alaska from Russia. Building of the first elevated railroad.

Gladstone becomes leader of the Liberal Party in Britain and prime minister the following year (to 1874). Austro-Hungarian empire formed.

Ulysses S. Grant, ablest of Union generals, elected president.

Union Pacific railroad completed.

Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company begins to corner the market.

The West is opened up. There follows mass cultivation of land, an ever expanding frontier and population growth through immigration. These factors spell the end of the 'Wild West'.

Two national associations for American women's suffrage founded.

Suez Canal opens.

Franco-Prussian War (to 1871). Napoleon III defeated at Sedan, dethroned and exiled.

Doctrine of papal infallibility.

French Third Republic suppresses Paris Commune. Wilhelm I first German emperor. Bismarck becomes German chancellor. Ku Klux Klan outlawed.

| DATE | AUTHOR'S LIFE   | LITERARY CONTEXT   |
|------|---|--|
| 1872 | Family returns to United States.<br>Edith works with governess and reads widely in father's library.  | Eliot: <i>Middlemarch</i> .<br>Turgenev: 'Spring Torrents'.<br>Nietzsche: <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> .                    |
| 1874 |   | James: <i>Roderick Hudson</i> .  |
| 1876 |   | Twain: <i>Tom Sawyer</i> .<br>Eliot: <i>Daniel Deronda</i> .<br>Death of George Sand.<br>Sarah Orne Jewett:                |
| 1877 | Secretly completes manuscript of <i>Fast and Loose</i> , a short novel (30,000 words; unpublished).   | <i>Deephaven</i> .<br>James: <i>The American</i> .<br>Tolstoy completes <i>Anna Karenina</i> .<br>Birth of Gertrude Stein. |
| 1878 | Mother has twenty-nine of Edith's poems ( <i>Verses</i> ) privately printed.  | Hardy: <i>The Return of the Native</i> .<br>Stowe: <i>Pogonuc People</i> .   |
| 1879 | Longfellow shows Edith's poems to William Dean Howells. One poem published in <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> . Edith's social debut in millionaire's private ballroom on Fifth Avenue. | James: <i>Daisy Miller</i> .<br>Ibsen: <i>A Doll's House</i> .   |
| 1880 | Two poems published in New York <i>World</i> . Travels with family to France.   | Dostoevsky: <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> .<br>Death of George Eliot.<br><br>James: <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> ;        |

|      |   |   |
|------|---|---|
| 1881 |   | <i>Washington Square.</i>   |
|      |   | Death of Dostoevsky.  |
| 1882 | Father dies in Cannes. Edith inherits over \$20,000. Brief engagement to Harry Stevens (his mother opposes the marriage).   | Twain: <i>The Prince and the Pauper.</i><br>Howells: <i>A Modern Instance.</i><br>Birth of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.  |
| 1883 | Returns to United States with her mother. Briefly becomes close to law student, Walter Berry. He considers marriage, but fails to propose. Edith meets Edward Wharton (Teddy), popular Bostonian and socialite. | Twain: <i>Life on the Mississippi.</i><br>James: <i>Portraits of Places</i> (travel sketches).<br>Nietzsche: <i>Thus Spake Zarathustra</i> (to 1892).<br>Death of Turgenev. |

## HISTORICAL EVENTS

Grant wins office for a second time.

The Liberals are defeated in British elections. Disraeli becomes prime minister (to 1880)  
First Impressionist exhibition in Paris.

Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone.

Death of Wild Bill Hickok (b. 1837) – Western folk-hero.

Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes (to 1881).

US Reconstruction collapses; southern states impose racist legislation.

Russia declares war on Turkey (to 1878).

Edison invents the phonograph.

Afghan War. Congress of Berlin.

Zulu War.

Standard Oil refines 95% of America's oil. Invention of the incandescent lamp. 1880s: growth of Women's Clubs in American cities; labour unrest – almost 10,000 strikes and lockouts; rise of magazines – *Cosmopolitan*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McClure's*; electricity for private homes.

houses; rise of department stores. Taylor's 'time-study' experiments.

Gladstone becomes British prime minister for a second time (to 1885).

Presidency of James Garfield. Garfield assassinated. Presidency of Chester Arthur (to 1885)

Founding of the American Federation of Labor.

Tsar Alexander II assassinated.

Jesse James shot and killed.

First central power plant in New York (Edison, backed by J. P. Morgan).

Married Women's Property Act in Britain.

Death of Garibaldi (b. 1807) and Darwin (b. 1809).

Death of Marx (b. 1818) and Wagner (b. 1813).

Russian Marxist Party founded.

Brooklyn Bridge opened.

| DATE | AUTHOR'S LIFE  | LITERARY CONTEXT  |
|------|--|---|
| 1884 |  | Twain: <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> .<br>Jewett: <i>A Country Doctor</i> .<br>Maupassant: <i>Miss Harriet</i> ;<br><i>Clair de Lune</i> .<br>Zola: <i>Germinal</i> .                 |
| 1885 | Marries Teddy Wharton.   | Marx: <i>Das Kapital II</i> .<br>Howells: <i>The Rise of Silas Lapham</i> .<br>Maupassant: <i>Bel-Ami</i> .<br>James: <i>The Bostonians</i> ; <i>The Princess Casamassima</i> . |
| 1886 |  | Death of Emily Dickinson.<br>Stevenson: <i>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i> .<br>Tolstoy: <i>The Death of Ivan Illych</i> .<br>Nietzsche: <i>Beyond Good and Evil</i> .                |
| 1887 |  | Mary Wilkins Freeman:<br><i>A Humble Romance</i> .<br>Zola: <i>La Terre</i> .   |
| 1888 | Edith and Teddy go on a four-month Aegean cruise. Edith inherits | James: <i>The Aspern Papers</i> .<br>Birth of Katherine Mansfield and T.  |



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