



The Touchstone

Edith Wharton

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Glennard had never thought himself a hero; but he had been certain that he was incapable of baseness.

The story of a young man who scorns the love of a tortured novelist, only to have her words come back to haunt him from the dead, *The Touchstone* shows off the skills Wharton became famous for in novels such as *Ethan Frome* and *House of Mirth*, particularly her piercing and delicious talent for satiric observation. But despite its masterly control, this startlingly modern tale is also a simmering, rebel cri de coeur unleashed by a writer who was herself unappreciated in her own time. The combination of these attributes make this edgy novella a moving and suspenseful homage to the power of literature itself.

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The Touchstone Details

Date : Published September 1st 2004 by Melville House (first published 1900)

ISBN : 9780974607863

Author : Edith Wharton

Format : Paperback 124 pages

Genre : Classics, Fiction, Novella, Literature, 20th Century, American



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From Reader Review The Touchstone for online ebook

Kailey says

Raised more questions than it answered, which is the best thing a book can do. Most notably for me, Wharton raises my favorite question asked by female writers of her period: is it better to realize our greatest desires or is true joy only possible outside of the move toward fulfillment? It brings to mind the dilemma at the background of most of Kate Chopin's work - the irreconcilable natures of the "life that is within and the life that is without."

Terence says

I have long been a fan of Edith Wharton, and feel she obviously was an inspiration for F. Scott Fitzgerald and what I think is a lineage to Brett Easton Ellis. This story, her first novella, is so tightly wound and beautifully executed that it is a perfect example of pacing and intrigue. Wharton knew how to cut too, "Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair" and expose the constructs of love at her time. It's a quick read and just solidifies her for me as one of America's great writers.

Maureen Lo says

How can he betrayed his ex gf's (though dead) personal privacy and trust by publishing her love letters to him just to get rich and marry someone else? Hmm...

Dawn says

I loved "Ethan Frome," the first Wharton work I read. I did not love this novella. Much ado about not much. And unless I'm missing something, Alexa mentions "the baby" early on, and then never again. Um, what?

Jenny Clark says

It was not bad, but kinda melodramatic and the characters were rather annoying. As a satire it was good. A nice short read, with some interesting lines.

Mark Walsh says

This is the first Wharton ive read - it was collected with 3 other novellas. I love this story! Her writing word for word is beautiful. So is the way she describes her characters' thoughts and feelings.

Tittirossa says

Col suo splendido inglese e con l'ancora più splendida capacità di ritrarre l'animo umano, è una lettura balsamica. Anche se questa storia è stupida (ma perché non si divertivano?! Peggy Guggenheim è la dimostrazione che si poteva!), è un mirabile specchio di Edith (cioè di come avrebbe voluto apparire), nella duplice veste di scrittrice che porta il raggio della conoscenza e risveglia l'etica sopita del suo giovane protégé (che non l'ha né amata né capita, ma tradita due volte) e dell'amorevole moglie che attraverso il perdono riscatta quel fregnone del marito.

NOTA: questa lettura segue “L’età del desiderio”, storia romanzata degli amori tra la quarantenne Wharton e il giovanotto Fullerton (metà del libro titilla la pruderie: Edith scopre l’impero dei sensi col giornalista e l’autrice ce ne dà pure conto, e sembra pure che il tutto sia documentato dalla corrispondenza!).

La scelta del titolo è stata casuale (sul K ho tutti i racconti in inglese), ma incredibilmente centrata: The Touchstone è una sorta di vendetta letteraria retroattiva. Dove l’uomo fa una misera figura, e la donna si erge in tutta la sua grandezza (peccato che per farlo debba prima morire).

Wanda says

25 MAR 2017 - for the love of one woman, a man sells the memory of another.

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Sara says

Only her second published work, The Touchstone shows all the promise that Edith Wharton would later realize in her longer novels and short-stories. The central character, Stephen Glennard, sells for publication the private letters of a former, deceased lover, who had become a famous writer, so that he can finance his marriage to the girl he loves. What follows is an emotional and moral reckoning for this act of baseness and betrayal.

What struck me most was how society’s values have changed. I do not think most people would blink an eye today at such an action. Most would be pounding the man on the back and congratulating him on first his conquest of the famous woman and then his ability to capitalize on the relationship. It was quite interesting to see how others reacted and the degree to which it affected his life.

I read it without a break...a very short 120 pages. It certainly held my interest and had that elegant, sophisticated style that is Wharton’s hallmark. Webster says a touchstone is a “standard or criterion by which something is judged or recognized.” What an apt name for this novella.

Shari says

What is it with Edith Wharton and "unromantic" love? In *The Age of Innocence* we see love thwarted and denied; in *Ethan Fromme*, misguided and perverted; in *Summer*, disgraced and hardened. In *The Touchstone*, the theme of love continues to be unidealistic. It is betrayed and exposed, even sold.

Glennard, a man struggling to make ends meet, is once engaged to a woman who was a famous literary figure. Finding that there is a demand for any letters that would reveal much more of the life of the famous author, Glennard secretly sells the letters to a publisher. With the money he gets from the sale, he starts anew and marries a beautiful woman, Alexa Trent. Thinking that life would be smooth-sailing from then on, Glennard belatedly realizes the effect of his action. When the letters are published and sold like the proverbial hot cakes, he is slowly and belligerently besieged by criticism. Seen as uncouth by many readers, the letters' publication exposes many confessions so intimate that their very exposure is seen by many as downright betrayal.

Glennard is not a bad man. He didn't sell the letters for malicious reasons. He was in dire strait and the letters, being rightfully his, provides a way out of his predicament and he takes it, thinking that it wouldn't matter to his former lover as she has long died. But actions like his have ways of backfiring, and his did big time. Seeing the public's negative reactions, he begins to feel guilty. The torment escalates when his very wife reads the letters and finds out he owns them.

This is where Wharton's genius emerges: the description of Glennard's pathos and transition. Wharton worded it succinctly and graphically that Glennard's emotions take off from the pages and begin to breath. Like in her other novels, Wharton describes the process through the perspective of a tormented soul. She does it so well you'd think she was in the know.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

I just finished reading *The Touchstone* again, in conjunction with reading Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*. I believe that *The Touchstone* may have been Wharton's first published work of fiction too.

The novella tells the story of Stephen Glennard a youngish gentleman of New York's upper-crust society who is trying to find the financial wherewithal to marry his fiance, Miss Alexa Trent. Sitting in his club one evening he encounters an advertisement from a Professor Joslin who is looking for any papers and correspondence from the late author, Miss Margaret Aubyn. Miss Aubyn just happens to be the woman that Glennard had had a long-term intimate relationship with almost up until she died a few years earlier.

In short order, the reader discovers that Glennard has bundles and bundles of very personal letters that he received from Miss Aubyn during the course of their relationship. He then decides to have them published, and the two-volumes become a huge literary hit with the reading public.

As people begin reading the volumes, particular those in Glennard's circle of friends, he finds out that most people are frankly appalled that anyone would expose these intimate letters to public scrutiny. It is not long before Glennard himself begins to doubt his own motives for publishing the letters, and it begins to negatively impact his own relationship with his now wife, Alexa. In fact, they've even bought themselves a nice little house on the outskirts of New York City with the riches he's gained by selling the letters. Even

Alexa--who doesn't know that these intimate letters were addressed to Glennard, or that he's sold them--is basically horrified that anyone could be so callous and black-hearted as to open this incredibly personal window into Miss Aubyn's heart and soul.

For much of the novella the story revolves around the struggle and tension between Glennard's desire to do right and provide a meaningful income and life for his new wife, and the increasing guilt he is feeling for his betrayal of his former relationship with Miss Aubyn. It builds to an important and emotionally powerful climactic scene involving Glennard and Alexa.

I suggest that a reading of Edith Wharton's *The Touchstone* can be significantly enhanced by first reading Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888). The topics of personal privacy, betrayal, trust, and the role of literary biographers and academic research are really front-and-center in both novellas. Which is perhaps not all that surprising considering that Edith Wharton and Henry James not only knew each other well, but became very good friends. Finally, *The Touchstone* truly is a most excellent introduction to the fiction of Edith Wharton, the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921, for her novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

Debra says

My favorite line in chapter "VII": We live in our own souls as in an unmapped region, a few acres of which we have cleared for our habitation; while of the nature of those nearest us we know but the boundaries that march with ours.

Helle says

I vacillated between three or four stars for this novella and opted for three simply because the story didn't stay with me after I had finished the book, thought the writing did. It was Edith Wharton's first published novella, her second published book (her first being a short story collection).

Her writing here was every bit as accomplished, acerbic and exquisite as in her more known works, though occasionally so much so that the complexity of the sentences made me go back and look at them again, partly to savour them and partly to comprehend them.

The story is simple. A man has saved the love letters written to him by a woman who was a famous writer but who has died. The letters will fetch him a small fortune, with which he can marry the woman of his dreams, but he pays the price of a guilty conscience. Meanwhile, everyone around him (the usual Wharton-esque hypocrites) revels in the letters but finds the revelation of them a deplorable business.

Having read several of her other works, I found the ending a little bland, but I still enjoyed the novella. Read it for the gorgeous prose, the interesting insights and for Edith Wharton.

Laura says

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I didn't know but this is Wharton's first novella and her second book which was published in 1900. It was also published under the title "A Gift From The Grave".

Stephen Glennard betrays a former love - Mrs. Aubyn, selling her letters to him so that he may raise the money to marry his beautiful fiancee.

Excellent plot, a quite enjoyable reading. Another little gem of the literature.

Nancy says

The Touchstone is an early Edith Wharton story about a man of no principles. He was loved, but could not return that love. He held letters from a woman who loved him and, after her death, sold them, creating a rift in his own marriage.

While critics write Wharton was depicting the universal roles of men and women in her time, I found the book loaded with phrases and instances that expressed subtle rage. No one I read has said this, but I think the book was an outlet for Wharton to express her anger at "doing, being and saying the expected thing." When our "hero" decides to sell the love letters he had accumulated over the years, it is a sinking, heart-stopping moment. It places the woman who loved him in the category of the unloved and marks him as less of a man. And it was all for money.

Jennifer D. Munro says

Fantastic plot, long chewy sentences, surprisingly happy ending, published in 1900 and stands the test of time. "Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair."

Janez says

Conscience can play an important role in the behaviour of an individual. It steers him/her in the (presumably) right direction, it tells what is good and what is wrong, what is acceptable and what is reprehensible. But, does one always act upon it? This is the dilemma with which the reader is confronted in The Touchstone, one of the earliest works of Edith Wharton. A young lawyer, in a precarious economic situation, has the means of obtaining the affluence and, consequently, of obtaining the girl he loves. But this means is morally reprehensible, in his opinion. Wharton builds up the ensuing fight between good and bad, between the acceptable and unacceptable to such a pitch, that the reader cannot but feel himself involved into this psychological battle. But, is there a possibility of a redemption? Can one undo what has been done? Or, at least repair the deed committed by an act of atonement?

Ana Rînceanu says

The premise of *The Touchstone* tugs at your imagination and Edith Wharton's lovely use of language entices further. The building of tension is palpable, but I was a little frustrated with the ending. I think it could have been more dramatic had Alexa reacted differently or Margaret Aubyn been alive. It's interesting how Wharton plays with morality, both in theory and in practice. All in all, I liked this novella and can recommend it.

Karlan says

Wharton's novella captures the psychological problems of a young man who should be happy but who destroys his own chances. Owning a Nook has led me to read more books which I missed when young. This return to authors from the past may be an unforeseen consequence of the E reader.

Marita says

Maybe Wharton's charm and acerbity wear with the more of her books that you read or maybe this one just is not her best.

Lovely writing, some interesting insights but ultimately difficult to be invested in. The idea is compelling: selling out a not-love to secure your true love--who eventually falls a little flat. But if you've read Wharton, from the get-go you know it's not going to pan out all too well. And then it doesn't. And I couldn't quite get myself to care about any of the characters. And that was that.
