

SYNOPSIS

Summer by Edith Wharton (published 1917) is a short novella about a young woman searching for her place. Charity Royall does come to her own sexual awakening over the course of a summer, but Wharton writes about Charity's choices without too much sexual reference. To me, the book seemed to focus even more on a young woman's realization that she can make her own choices for her life, that she is an individual. The end, then, was somewhat problematic for me, although probably quite accurate in terms of a young woman making choices.

Summer revolves around Charity Royall, a young woman bored by her small-town, Massachusetts life and lack of opportunities. She yearns for something more but her ignorance and lack of options holds her back. She resents and is disgusted by her guardian, Mr. Royall, the town attorney, who wants to marry her. Charity is a fascinating character that is often selfish, ignorant, and at times both snobbish and concerned with her own inadequacy. Charity meets Lucius Harney when he comes visiting, and she is immediately swept away by his intelligence, elegance, and symbol of things she's looking for in life.

Summer is one of the realistic love stories. The times and circumstances have changed, but as far as feelings go, Wharton could have been talking about the first guy I ever fell for. "Her heart was ravaged by life's cruelest discovery: the first creature that had come toward her out of the wilderness had brought her anguish instead of joy." Wharton's novel also felt remarkably modern in the way it frankly addressed sex and even abortion.

Charity, a foster daughter of Judge Royall, searches for her place. In the years since Mrs. Royall had died, Charity found herself questioning her place in the small community of North Dormer. Her name was assigned by the Royall to remind her that she was a charity case; her last name was accepted by default since she has been raised by the Royall. But her roots go to the people of the mountain, those that live without “civilization” in the sense generally accepted in turn-of-the-century New England. Ms. Wharton always seems to appraise the limited definitions of “proper” behavior in her fiction, and this book was no exception in addressing the issues.

As Charity searches for her place in “civilization,” she questions where she belongs. Her sexual awakening, which began when the handsome Lucius Harney arrived in town, begins this self-awakening. I found myself liking Charity very much in her innocence. I hoped that things would not go wrong for her as she searched for her place and learned to make her own decisions.

As Charity Royall’s summer drew to a close, however, her story lost the passion and heat metaphor; as the weather changed and leaves left the trees and snow covered the ground, Charity’s situation became hopeless. In the end, Charity was stuck in difficult situations from which she could not extricate herself; she was alone and scared. Because she was raised in a far more sheltered environment with possibly more strict social conventions, it was all the more tragic to me, the reader. I really disliked the disturbing end (I hated Mr. Royall from start to end), although Charity’s ignorance of the world limited her choices. To me, it ended in

tragedy, which should not have surprised me, given that this is an Edith Wharton novel.

APPENDIX