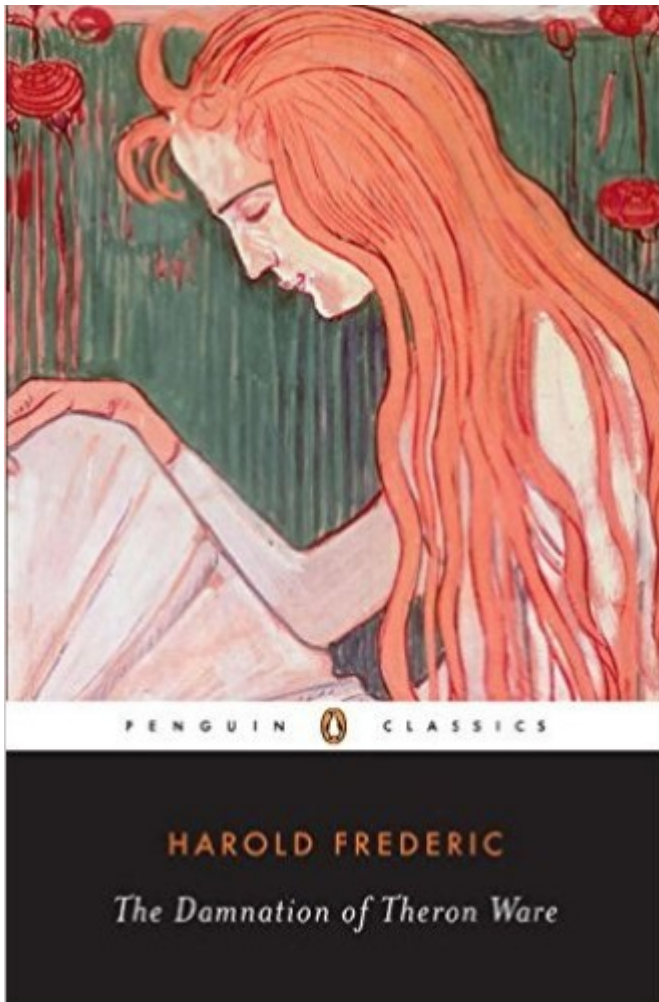


The Damnation of Theron Ware, by Harold Frederic

selected by [Laurie F Maffly-Kipp](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



The Damnation of Theron Ware

by Harold Frederic
Penguin Classics

The Damnation of Theron Ware, by Harold Frederic (1896), is the fictional tale of a sheltered Methodist minister who is suddenly bombarded with new theories of biblical criticism, exposure to Irish Catholic practices, and the allure of emerging

ideals of the “modern woman”—all of which shake his religious foundation. The reader feels for poor Theron, gets a taste of small-town Protestant life in the 1890s, and is alternately horrified and relieved as the minister becomes “illuminated” by the new life he encounters. The book allows students to think about what is gained and lost in any basic shift of historical meaning. Theron is neither a hero nor a villain. He is simply a man who enters the story with one set of ideas and values and emerges at the other end in a very different, very American place.

Frederic titled the English edition of the novel “Illumination,” and I ask students to think about the differences: Is Theron’s transformation a “damnation,” or is it a form of enlightenment? Why might people perceive the changes he experiences in very different ways? And how does Theron’s intellectual and moral journey reflect the larger cultural and religious transformations of his day? My students find *Damnation* to be a down-to-earth introduction to the basic theological, social, and textual controversies of the time. They enjoy the funny scenes and can see how larger intellectual issues affect the lives of ordinary people. The late arrival of the Soulsbys, a traveling husband-and-wife preaching team, is a harbinger of contemporary celebrity evangelism that they all recognize and want to discuss.