OANA ALEXANDRA ALEXA
"Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM. SOCIAL AND MORAL CONFLICTS IN EDITH WHARTON'S ETHAN FROME

Abstract: Edith Wharton was the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for her 1920 novel, The Age of Innocence, which is quintessential for her long literary career. A member of the leisure class herself, Wharton was able to capture the unique social and moral conflicts within the New York elite by going beyond the carefully knit curtain of conventions. Her few attempts to move towards the other end of the social spectrum are, in this sense, surprising and that much powerful.
This paper focuses on the story of a poor lower-class man from an isolated community who falls helplessly in love with his wife's cousin. After a failed suicide attempt, the couple ends up crippled and in the care of the hypochondriac wife. Ethan Frome (1911) is about conventions and crippling moral conflicts which destroy three souls and leave them as icy as the long Massachusetts winters. I will show that Wharton's insight on Frome's tragic fate equals her praised depictions of the upper-class manners and deserves a closer look at the particularities of social and moral conflicts in remote communities like Starkfield.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, lower-class, social conflict, moral conflict, tragedy.

1. Introduction

Edith Wharton was a writer of the leisure class, and her favourite topic was Old New York, with its conventions and exclusivism. Her few novels which deal with the provincially poor are surprising exceptions which, on the one hand, strengthen the rule and, on the other hand, stand out as masterpieces, confirming the author's extraordinary insight on less familiar grounds. *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917) and even *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932) are edifying examples in this sense, proving a deep understanding of what is outside the inner circle. In fact, *Summer* was refered to as 'Hot Ethan' by the author herself, because it describes Ethan Frome's feminine counterpart and is set in the same geographical area of Lenox, Massachusetts.

The book tells the story of Ethan Frome, his wife Zenobia and her cousin, Mattie Silver, as it is narrated by an engineer who works in the small village of Starkfield for a few winter months. After he commissions Ethan to be his daily driver, a snow storm forces him to spend a night at the Frome farm, where he meets the two women. The state of affairs at the Fromes urges the engineer to find out more about their life story, and this allows the reader to get aquainted with their tragedy. Some twenty-five years before, Ethan and Zeena had only been married for a couple of years when her distant cousin Mattie came to live at the farm. Zeena was a hypochondriac and wanted a helper around the house, while Mattie had no other place to go after her father's death. Her arrival brings a ray of light into Ethan's existence, who was facing poverty alongside his ever-complaining wife. He had been forced to give up his studies in the city when his mother fell ill and, after her death, for fear of loneliness in the long, hard winters, he married Zenobia, who had previously come to the farm to help nurse his mother. Inevitably, Ethan and Mattie fall in love, but their feelings are closely guarded in Zeena's looming presence. One day, however, she decides to see a new doctor in the nearby town and spends the night away from home, leaving Ethan and Mattie alone for the first time.

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)

Mattie prepares dinner and even brings down Zeena's most praised possession, a red pickle-dish, to make the table prettier. But they can hardly enjoy each other's company, since the cat breaks the dish and reminds them of the living obstacle in their way. The next day, Zeena returns to discover the dish broken and announces that Mattie must leave immediately, since she is to be replaced by a qualified helper. Hearing the news, Ethan plans to elope with Mattie, but soon realises that he has no means to do it, while also feeling responsible for his wife. So the two take one last ride together, towards the railway station. On their way, Ethan offers to take Mattie coasting as he had previously promised. They finally get to express their feelings for each other and, with no alternative in sight, they suddenly decide to commit suicide by intentionally steering their sleigh into a tree. Unfortunately, their attempt fails, leaving Mattie paralyzed and Ethan disabled. Zeena takes them both back to the farm, where they are still living together when the engineer meets them.

Ethan Frome is not as much about social conflicts, simply because there are only lower-class people living in Starkfield. But it is about conventions and crippling moral conflicts which destroy three souls and leave them as icy as the long winters in this God-forgotten place. Starkfield stands, at the same time, for something strong and stiff, suggesting that only the powerful ones remain to live there, because it is a place that encloses its inhabitants like a frozen vise. It is a place to come from, not to come to. Those who remained there were more or less forced by circumstance. Ethan himself wanted to leave more than once: the first time was before his parents became ill and the second time right before the sleighing "accident." In both cases, he failed to do so for moral reasons. As Carol Singley observes, "in this novel Wharton is obsessively, pessimistically, moral. She leaves no doubt about Ethan's condition; as the narrator exclaims, 'he looks as if he was dead and in hell now!'" (Singley 1998: 122)

For many readers, *Ethan Frome* is the most intense and painful of all Edith Wharton's fiction, and the excruciating ending has horrified them with its naturalistic circumstance. Whenever Wharton discussed the book, in *A Backward Glance* or in her Introduction to the 1922 edition, she saw it as reflecting the essence of New England as she felt she had come to understand it during her long summer visits to the Mount. During that time, Lenox had become a favourite retreat for wealthy summer visitors, but she intended to counteract the idealised tourist images she encountered in local colour fiction. The mountain villages she had discovered during her travels were still unthinkably isolated. "My two New England tales, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, were the result of explorations among villages still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence, and sad slowspeaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians." (Wharton 1998:85) Here,

"insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm houses on the neighbouring hills; and Emily Brontë would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors." (Wharton 1998: 162-163)

Through the choice of geographical and social background, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* remain exceptions in Wharton's fiction. "In her society fiction, she was thoroughly at home with the manners and register of her fashionable cosmopolitans." (Knights 2004: 11) Even though she had previously experimented with industrial town New England in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), there she had given all her characters genteel connections and her lower-class people were never given a voice. In *Ethan Frome*, however, Wharton "was trying to enter the inner life of a landscape through which she had passed only as a privileged observer." (Knights 2004:11)

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)

The story of Ethan Frome is so complex that critics have not ventured to consign it to any rigid category. Their interpretations vary from a critique of the regional tradition (Campbell), a piece of Darwinian social realism, a myth of infertility (Waid), to a fairy-tale of a feminist Snow White, a warning against a culture which turns its women into witches (Ammons). (apud Knights 2004: 12) The "deeper meaning of the story" (Wharton 2004: 34) lies, as the narrator himself states, in the gaps and the reader is invited, as in most of Wharton's fiction, to observe the "huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things." (Wharton 2004: 43) Even more so in shorter fiction like this one, objects speak volumes, like the much discussed red glass pickle-dish which focuses the entire frustration and sexual tension of the novel and prefigures further disasters to come.

2. A Glimpse at the Social Background

Ethan Frome is about a triple tragedy in an isolated community where people know more about suffering than anything else. In such few words as Wharton has used to render this powerful story, there is little space for superfluous background details. But the few hints she does give about the social component of the story are precious in painting the picture of a world so far from her own that it sets the story in deep contrast to the novel of manners she masters so well.

Frome's story is framed by a nameless narrator, an engineer who comes to work at Corbury Junction because of a prolonged carpenters' strike at the local power-house. Forced to remain in Starkfield for the most part of the winter (of a non-specified year, which we guess to be in the 1880s), he (presumably it is a male character) points out some particularities of this community which remains secluded despite the available modern amenities like rural delivery, YMCA halls, threatre, libraries, stage-coach and trolley. The inhabitants of Starkfield can and do move around, going to nearby bigger cities like Bettsbridge, Shadd's Falls and Springfield to seek the doctors' advice or even buy things they cannot find at the local store, and the railroad is close enough for easy access. It seems that, even though Starkfield is a little out of the way, it is still connected to everything available in the early 1900s. Fashion and modernity (like the new 'smart business methods' at the local grocery store or Zeena's twenty dollar 'electric battery') had reached even this remote place, even though they are still scorned and set apart in quotation marks by the author to show the characters' attitude). But somehow the narrator feels that, once the winter settles in, it is as isolated and dead as it would have been twenty years before, when "the means of resistance must have been much fewer." (Wharton 2004: 35)

On the surface, the living conditions of the people in Starkfield are very similar to those of the mill workers in Hanaford, the small industrial town in the *Fruit of the Tree*. But the situation is in fact worse than that. With no industry, Starkfield's chances of growth are slim.

"The region is gripped in a cycle of economic decline. Though increasingly dependent on the money economy of the cities, this is a place where actual cash is scarce. In his twenties, Ethan cannot muster a fare to the West; in his fifties, 'he wouldn't be sorry to earn a dollar' (p. 37). The land is starved and unproductive, the farm unsellable, Ethan's sawmill redundant with the arrival of new technologies." (Knights 2004: 21)

Ethan, Mattie and Zeena all feel that they were not meant to live here. Like Madame Bovary, they constantly remember that short period of time when they experienced a superior lifestyle and dream to achieve it again. Ethan had studied in Worcester and his brief engineering job in Florida nurtured his dream to be an engineer "and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and 'fellows doing things'." (Wharton 2004: 63) He even

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)

has a separate "study" room in the house. Mattie's father had descended from the hills of Connecticut and married into a thriving drug business, but his poor management skills left his daughter with nothing more than a fashionable genteel education. She was useless both as a working city girl and as a helping hand around the farmhouse. Similarly, Zeena came from a village "slightly larger and nearer to the railway than Starkfield" and so she chose to "look down" on her new home, even though she would have suffered "a complete loss of identity" in the bigger cities Ethan had planned to move to after selling the mill. (Wharton 2004: 63-64)

Starkfield "society" was made up of Mrs. Ned Hale, the daughter of the village lawyer of the previous generation (she is also the narrator's landlady) and her husband, Andrew (who was a builder and Ethan's occasional employer), Harmon Gow, the former stage-coach driver, Denis Eady, "the rich Irish grocer" (Wharton 2004: 36) who had successfully implemented the notions of the 'smart' business method, widow Homan, Eady's competition and Jotham Powell, Ethan's occasional helper. Frome is a trustworthy man. Everyone in the village has kind words to say about him, mostly because he is pitied for his life before as well as after the coasting accident. His nature, hardships and his wife's attitude had condemned him to a harsh and mostly solitary life and poverty had placed him on the lowest step of the social ladder in Starkfield. But this does not place him in conflict with the others, because the village has a different social order than the city. The inhabitants help each other in need and their sense of community is sharpened by their small number and the harsh living conditions. Frome's interactions with the villagers are, however, limited to business. He shows up every day at the post office to collect the mail, occasional packages for his wife and his paper, he picks up groceries and he does business with Andrew Hale, but the conversations are so limited that Ethan can barely be said to socialise. Mrs. Hale, who shares Zeena's preoccupation with health, and the doctor become the only visitors at the farm, partly because of the Frome's poverty and partly because of their nature.

The Fromes' silence is something to be mentioned in relation to their social life, or rather lack of it. It had all started with his father's accident, which simultaneously meant Ethan left his tudies in Worcester and sank into hard work at the farm, while also looking after his mother. The opression of the long winters in Starkfield is coupled with growing responsibilities and the opressive work he does not love. Still, "there was in him a slumbering spark of sociability which the long Starkfield winters had not yet extinguished. By nature grave and inarticulate, he admired recklesness and gaiety in others and was warmed to the marrow by friendly human intercourse." (Wharton 2004: 62) Ethan takes his pleasure in watching others be happy and conversational but doesn't like to take initiative. He is ready to blame his unhappiness on his wife or the dreadful winter he did not want to endure alone rather than look into his own unsociable nature: "After the funeral, when he saw her preparing to go away, he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; […] He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter…" (Wharton 2004: 63) Zeena's taciturnity, so much like her mother-in-law's queerness, is most likely a reaction to the fact that Ethan 'never listened'. He doesn't want to hear her complain, but rather to be cheerful like Mattie Silver, while he has nothing to offer in return. So the source of Zeena's power of Ethan is not necessarily her strong personality but his own weakness. From the beginning, he feels guilty for the selfish act of marrying Zenobia and for his inability to provide a better life for them, which leads to his lack of will to fight her decisions.

"Ethan Frome is an isolato who prefers the world of his imagination over the reality of Starkfield.[…] Constantly envisioning a life that is better than his real one, Frome never actually does anything to improve the conditions of reality." (Cahir 1999: 71) Even before the accident, with the loss of hope to sell the farm and move into town, all that is left for Ethan is to ignore his wife's 'sickliness' as much as possible and retreat into his study with the mental

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)

picture of a different life. Even with Mattie by his side, during the short time they are alone, it is easier for him to dream a happy picture of their hypothetical marriage rather than openly express his feelings: "he set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so…" but "when the door of her room had closed on her he remembered that he had not even touched her hand." (Wharton 2004: 73-76) The next day, Ethan is conscious of his inability to act, but he is nevertheless "irationally happy" (Wharton 2004: 77) because the simple fancy of what could be is enough to exhilarate him.

When it finally comes to taking a decision, however, Ethan Frome is quite realistic. His old dream of going west is reactivated when Zeena suddenly wants to send Mattie away in order to hire a qualified helper. He eagerly starts writing his farewell letter to Zeena, but he soon realises that his dreams are impossible to achieve: "The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders handcuffing a convict. There was no way out – none. He was a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished." (Wharton 2004: 93) In the end, it is not his pessimism that defeats him, but his moral conscience.

3. The Moral Conflicts of the Poor Lorn Man

The moral conflict between duty and passion is not new to literature nor to Wharton. Her passionate affair with Morton Fullerton which took place while she was still married with Teddy had made her extremely familiar with issues like deception, guilt and moral responsibility. Carol Singley argues that *Ethan Frome* evokes the Calvinist religious doctrine as a result of the complex personal and literary forces that affected the author throughout her life. While she admired the natural beaty of New England country-side, Wharton was most interested in its underlying "granite outcroppings," (Wharton 2004: 29) the gloomy aspects of pessimistic determinism which seem to describe her vision of the modern spiritual crisis: pain and suffering without profit and uselesness of human will. (Singley 1998: 108)

Determinism is coupled with the acute pain of realisation that no comfort is to be achieved and even death is denied to poor souls like Frome. With the hard but simple life like his, moral choices seem pretty straightforward. Ethan does not have to think things twice when he leaves the city to help his mother and not even when he asks Zeena to stay after her death. And while he admits that his reasons for marrying her are purely selfish, he is not willing to take responsibility for her growing queerness, even though he does not love her and had promised they would not remain in Starkfield for too long after their marriage: "Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it?" (Wharton 2004: 91) The reality is, however, that poverty had never permitted them to leave Starkfield. With the new technologies, the mill was becoming useless, and the long winters in what was left of the old farm were bound to deteriorate anyone's health in no time.

Ethan's moral code is empirical, but even a quick look at his situation tells him that he is in fact responsible for two more people besides himself and that finding faults within others does not change that: "'Zeena', he writes, 'I've done all I could for you, and I don't see as it's been any use. I don't blame you, nor I don't blame myself. Maybe both of us will do better separate'." (Wharton 2004: 92) His falling in love with Mattie happens so imperceptibly and is manifested so inocently that Ethan cannot really be blamed for it either. He does feel guilty enough, however, to hide his affections from his wife, who seems to know more even when she's away from home.

Frome's sense of moral responsibility does not only apply to Zeena and Mattie. In a final attempt to realise his plans of going away, he decides to lie about his wife's health and

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)

extract fifty dollars from Mr. Hale on account of his pity for him. He stops on his way, however:

"He was planning to take advantage of the Hales' sympathy to obtain money from them on false pretences. […] He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him.

He turned and walked back slowly to the farm." (Wharton 2004: 97)

Instead, his and Mattie's death would have left Zenobia free and with the posibility to sell the farm or go back to her family without the shadow of a shameful divorce. His debt towards her would be paid in full. Similarly, Mattie cannot but choose death, since Zenobia is her relative and Ethan's wife. Her feelings for Ethan are incompatible with her status in the household and are limited to listening to him come upstairs at night, enjoying their walks home on the nights she goes to the dances and, the most extravagant thing of all, having a quiet dinner at home without Zeena sitting between them. Mattie cannot conceive upsetting her relative, and breaking the pickle-dish equates with a disaster, since it reveals her feelings and betrays the special moments she and Ethan clandestinely shared.

With Zeena on the other hand, moral responsibility is surpassed by the bitterness of a poor and loveless life. Once she proclaims that she had lost her health while nursing Ethan's mother, she feels no liability to accept any compromise, whether it is her spending money on various doctors or using Mattie as a free maid and sending her away as soon as she does something wrong, even though she knows the girl has no other place to go to. We gather that she guesses Mattie and Ethan's feelings for each other, and this makes her sour nature a little more understandable. She is jealous of Mattie's youthfulness, her sweet nature and her urban upbringing and she is quick to find faults in her lack of domestic skills, while enjoying the free service. Zeena's portrayal is the most complicated in the novel. Her age and the fact that she had cared for Ethan's mother assigns her a parental role, which turns both her husband and Mattie into helpless children. But, as Elizabeth Ammons argues, she is more of a "mother-antithesis." (apud Singley 1998: 120) Zeena's self-absorbtion is broken twice: once, when she returns home to find the pickle-dish broken and sends Mattie away and, the second time, when she remains to take care of Mattie and Ethan after their almost fatal accident. The author leads us to believe this is her final act of revenge: "if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and 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; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues'." (Wharton 2004: 114) There is nothing moral about Zeena's attitude, nor her final gesture. She is a benumbing force and we understand why death seemed nothing to Ethan and Mattie in comparison to the death-in-life that follows.

Blake Nevius makes an interesting point in relation to the male character's ultimate defeat. Beginning with *The Fruit of the Tree*, he notices, and continuing with *Ethan Frome* and *The Reef*, "the argument of Edith Wharton's novels focuses with varying depth but remarkable consistency on a single theme, which she once defined as 'the immersion of the larger in the smaller nature which is one of the mysteries of the moral life.' […] In each case, the emphasis falls on the baffling, wasteful submission of a superior nature to an inferior." (Nevius 1976: 107-108) In other words, those characters who are the most morally responsible and sacrifice their happiness for the sake of doing the right thing invariably end up with a broken heart, in relationships that will never be the same again, Frome's being the worst case of all. The partnerships between Amherst and Justine Brent, Anna Leath and George Darrow or Ethan Frome and Zeena are obviously unequal and are originated in a sentimental error on the part of the victim: Justine supports Amherst's social measures, Anna

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)

cannot wait to free herself from her sheltered past and Frome is grateful for Zeena's help. As a consequence, they are morally victimized by their partners and cannot find enough strength to break off completely.

So the question for Wharton is to what extent one has moral obligations towards those who, legally or within the framework of existing manners, conventions, taboos, claim one's loyalty. "In all of these novels she is trying to determine the limits of responsibility." (Nevius 1976: 110) Frome is not concerned with taboos like divorce and a similar case of lovers going West seems to make his plans justifiable enough, but he does feel responsible for his wife's welfare, since his pre-nuptial promise of more prosperous years to come had not been fulfilled. There is a "Puritan subsoil of Edith Wharton's nature. The morality of an act is evaluated in terms of its cost to others." (Nevius 1976: 111) Ethan and Zeena have not had a proper education, like the one Mattie enjoyed, but the harsh living conditions impose an empirical but strong sense of community and moral duty which the three share, regardless of their feelings for each other. Like with many of Wharton's characters, morality and moral choices are not necessarily educated but spring from the primitive distinction between good and bad, between right and wrong and from long-established social conventions.

4. Conclusions

Ethan Frome, like *Summer,* is proof that Edith Wharton had a better understanding of the world than some critics have credited her for and it hows her ability to remain true to her literary style while changing the viewpoint on her stories. Capturing the limitations caused by poverty and an underdeveloped community is the essence in Wharton's successful rendering of the social and moral conflicts in *Ethan Frome*. The main character was doomed from the start. On the social level, he broke the rules by falling in love with his wife's cousin and on the moral level he was too weak to go through with it, which is common to most of the author's male characters. Like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, he never stood a chance to happiness, only he lived longer to receive his punishment. His final withdrawal from the community is both motivated by its disapproval and its constant reminder of his misfortune. Society and morality are closely knit together, and they can have a devastating effect on the individual, no matter how high or low on the social pyramid he might be.

Bibliography

Bell, Millicent, *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo, *Solitude and Society in the Works of Hermann Melville and Edith Wharton*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1999.

Knights, Pamela, *Introduction to Ethan Frome*, London, Wordsworth, 2004.

Nevius, Blake, *Edith Wharton. A Study of Her Fiction*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976.

Preston, Claire, *Edith Wharton's Social Register*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Singley, Carol J., *Edith Wharton. Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Veblen, Thornstein, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Wharton, Edith, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography*, New York, Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Wharton, Edith, *Ethan Frome*, London, Wordsworth, 2004.

BDD-A21739 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:52:05 UTC)