

The Dual Cultural Background of Edith Wharton: *Ethan Frome*

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According to her autobiographical work, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Edith Wharton (1862–1937) found that New Englanders longed for stories such as those Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) told in the nineteenth century.⁽¹⁾ In this sense, she succeeded in achieving popular acclamation for her masterpiece, *Ethan Frome* (1911), and also attained her artistic achievement.

Edith Wharton was a rare American writer who displayed European traits of culture. Born and brought up in a well-to-do family, she had been exposed to the culture of the top social strata. With this background she chose to write about a poverty-stricken villager and to develop her story showing the conflicts caused by the villagers' isolation in New England in the early twentieth century. Wharton provided us with an insight into the social heritage as developed in the Puritan communities. As Sacvan Bercovitch observes in the preface of his book,

...as always in this country (through the nineteenth century to our own time) the majority of people were "lower class." What the Puritans instituted in New England was effectually a new hierarchical order, ranging not from peasantry to aristocracy and crown, but from lower to higher levels of a relatively fluid free-enterprise struc-

ture. Not all at once but within the first half-century they established the central tenets of what was to become our “dominant culture.”⁽²⁾

In the introduction, after explaining the problem of the time lag between the subject and the dramatic climax, Wharton continues to mention her attitude toward her work.

This enforced lapse of time would seem to anyone persuaded —as I have always been —that every subject (in the novelist’s sense of the term) implicitly contains its own form and dimensions, to mark “Ethan Frome” as the subject for a novel....any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would necessarily have falsified the whole. They were, in truth, these figures, my granite outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate... I knew well enough what song those sirens sang,...I had no such fear of them in the case of Ethan Frome. It was the first subject I had ever approached with full confidence in its value, for my own purpose, and a relative faith in my power to render at least a part of what I saw in it.”⁽³⁾

In this paper, I will examine Wharton’s artistic approach through her specific cultural background which was mainly divided into two areas. One area manifested itself through the Colonial Age including the Puritan influence, and the other area her aristocratic upbringing.

1. Necessity of the Mount

Wharton tells about the setting of the story, explaining *The Mount* in *A Backward Glance* like this:

We had now organized our summer at the Mount, and had acquired a small house...and now that I had definite work to do I felt the need of a winter home where I could continue my writing....Personally I should have preferred to live all the year round at the Mount, but my husband's fondness for society, and his dislike of the New England Winter cold, made this impossible...."⁽⁴⁾

This shows her preference for the Mount and her husband's dislike of cold winter weather. She preferred country living at the Mount and liked to see the nature. The Mount was quiet and peaceful and gave her a sense of solitude.

It is certain that Wharton was looking for and collecting subject matter because many American writers like Henry James (1843-1916) and Nathaniel Hawthorne deplored the fact that America had nothing shadowy to drive the writers to creativity.

Something beyond and something remote must have aroused her imaginative interests, as Hawthorne finally found 'the rag of scarlet cloth' in the Custom-House.⁽⁵⁾

It is known that Wharton went on an excursion to the remote parts of Massachusetts and New Hampshire with her friends. One of her old friends, Percy Lubbock, an English literary critic, writes about the time when she seemed to discover the right place to write about.

One windy autumn afternoon we were driving in the country near Lenox, and on the top of a hill on the left of the road stood a battered two-story house, unpainted, with a neglected door-yard tenanted by hens and chickens, and a few bedraggled children sitting on the stone steps before the open door. 'It is about a place like that,' said Mrs.

Wharton, 'that I mean to write a story. Only last week I went to the village meeting-house in Lenox and sat there for an hour alone, trying to think what such lives would be, and some day I shall write a story about it. And I suppose the result was shown in the writing of *Ethan Frome*.'⁽⁶⁾

This sight of "the battered two-story house, unpainted, with a neglected door-yard tenanted by hens and chickens" was the impetus to express what she long cherished—a love of rural life. She described her joy of discovery thus:

...the range of country-lovers like myself had hitherto been so limited, and our imagination so tantalized by the mystery beyond the next blue hills, that there was inexhaustible delight in penetrating to the remoter parts of Massachusetts..., discovering derelict villages with Georgian churches and balustrated house-fronts, exploring slumbrous mountain valleys, and coming back, weary but laden with a new harvest of beauty, after sticking fast in ruts, having to push the car up hill...My two New England tales, "Ethan Frome" and "Summer" (1917), were the result of explorations among villagers still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence, and sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians."⁽⁷⁾

Wharton's discovery of a hoary and aged village provides a picturesque setting along with the imaginary characters she was going to create. She was especially concerned about, and tried to sense, the villagers' psychological consciousness under a cruel, natural climate, and the physical

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2. Climate of New England —Snow—

An anonymous engineer narrates a story in the prologue because Wharton needed to describe the environmental conditions in Starkfield in the midwinter days. The severity of the New England climate is one of the most important elements in the whole story, which will be deeply related to the main theme.

We do not know where this engineer comes from, but we can guess this man does not come from New England because he seems to be neither accustomed to the severity of the weather nor the villagers' mannerisms. Under these weather and social conditions, this narrator looks at Ethan Frome as an observer, and his consciousness is focussed on Ethan.

The natural environment in New England provides Wharton with the characterization of the protagonist, Ethan Frome. In the opening scene, Ethan enters the post office and the story develops with Ethan's physical characteristics and his aloofness towards the community.

Every one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own grave mien; but his taciturnity was respected and it was only on rare occasions that one of the older men of the place detained him for a word. When this happened he would listen quietly, his blue

eyes on the speaker's face, and answer in so low a tone that his words never reached me; then he would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand and drive slowly away in the direction of his farm. (EF p. 4)

At first we are told that villagers never interfere with Ethan. They never give him a hand to help with anything if he did not wish it, although we know that he is deformed and disabled, which is taken as a matter of course without any pity and sentiment. Here, Wharton shows us in Ethan the typical New England characteristic of self-sufficiency. Ethan is described as being industrious for his husbandry including his saw-mill. He was typical of the lower class—a laborer. He was a hard-working farmer with a powerful physique, but the following sentence shows us his subconscious awareness of his ignorance:

His father's death, and the misfortunes following it, had put a premature end to Ethan's studies; but though they had not gone far enough to be of much practical use they had fed his fancy and made him aware of huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things. (EF p. 13)

Wharton describes the beginning of Ethan's misfortune as a result of his father's death. When he strides along through the snow the sense of the meaning of life—the past to the present—glows in his brain and stirs his feelings. The snow here signifies "death", suggesting his mother's later death. As the snow continues to silently take command of the picturesque scenery, Ethan quietly moves through the "drudgery" of his day-to-day life. However, in his heart he feels the stirrings of a passion that

reaches beyond his cold farm. His hidden enthusiasm in his heart is contrasted with the silence of the snow, just as the snow keeps one indoors physically.

Ethan keeps his reflections to himself. His emotions and impulses are concealed. He is imprisoned by ambiguous fear. The next paragraph shows his secret passion clearly as he takes Mattie home after dancing.

He slipped an arm through hers, as Eady had done, and fancied it was faintly pressed against her side; but neither of them moved. It was so dark under the spruces that he could barely see the shape of her head beside his shoulder. He longed to stoop his cheek and rub it against her scarf. He would have liked to stand there with her all night in the blackness. (EF p. 20)

He always imagines but never starts action nor expresses himself. He wants to act as a lover, but can't do it. Ethan is absorbed by the snow as he waits motionless for Mattie. On the other hand, Mattie is embodied as a bird or a star. Snow reflects its whiteness by light from a star or the moon. He is exanimate at first but seems to revive after Mattie comes to his home. He wants someone to share pleasure and sorrow and "taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will." (EF p. 15) This is Mattie, but Ethan lacks the ability to communicate. Nothing changes. Ethan lives in delusion, albeit unwilling, and the snow seemed to hide the delusion.

As snow created images of sterility and barrenness, the same sterility and barrenness is Ethan's marriage to Zeena. Zeena is hypochondriac. Her concerns are always about pathological matters. There are no economic limits for Zeena. Her symptoms of illness had never been

cured. People in the village thought that she devoted herself to Ethan's mother. Zeena proclaimed to Ethan, "You grudged me the money to get back my health, when I lost it nursing your own mother!" (EF p. 46) This utterance convinces us that Ethan should take his responsibility for all of her life and that he has imprisoned himself by domestic and social conditions.

3. Breaking the code —

With an internal conflict, Ethan is forced to endure this hard situation. Ethan has a moment of relief from the tensions of latent fear caused by Zeena's threatening, when she decides to go out of town to consult with a new doctor. Although he knows the consultation would end in vain, he also knows he would have to pay extra money which will torment him. Ethan recalls his seven years with Zeena. "As he passed by the graves on the knoll and turned his head to take a glance at one of the head-stones, which had interested him deeply as a boy because it bore his name." (EF p. 33) Does this scene signify that has an idea of death? He is preoccupied with the approaching time of Zeena's absence from home. Thus, there are at least four streams of thought running through Ethan's mind: latent fear, a need to make money, wish for death, and anticipation of Zeena's absence.

When Ethan and Mattie are left alone, we see a typical Puritanical situation. The author intentionally shows them in a socially exceptionable situation and, to them, a cruel situation.

Ethan and Mattie are attracted to each other. How are they going to behave? What will happen without his wife? He is mentally and morally weakened. Mattie is supposed to be sent away soon. He cannot financially afford to keep Mattie and another maid. Will they obey the tradi-

tional values? For them at this moment, they cannot help spending their evening as happily as they can.

When he returned to the kitchen Mattie had pushed up his chair to the stove and seated herself near the lamp with a bit of sewing. The scene was just as he had dreamed of it that morning. He sat down, drew his pipe from his pocket and stretched feet to the glow....where all was warmth and harmony and time could bring no change.” (EF p. 37)

In warmth and harmony, they are supposed to be happy that evening, but Ethan is obsessed with his fear of Zeena: “the mention of Zeena had paralysed him.” (EF p. 35)

4. Effect of Surrounding Details

The story reaches a climax when the special pickle-dish falls to the floor with a crash. The happy evening falls into a bottomless pit because this pickle-dish is the only wedding present given to Zeena by her aunt.

This pickle-dish is an example of the trivial things by which Wharton criticises her society. She wants to discredit the frivolity of society, and this tiny symbol does just that. With the breaking of the dish, the characters invite the catastrophe implied in their relationship.

The cat breaks the dish. The cat bothers them. The cat is a tool of obstruction because the cat is embodied as Zeena's substitute. This is one of Wharton's elaborate artistic techniques. The cat and the red pickle-dish are the author's useful devices, although Blake Nevius says that “her precise notation of costume and decor was every now and then merely ludicrous.”⁽⁸⁾ Wharton understands female characters and female readers

like, and how they cherish their surroundings because even this small pickle-dish gives Ethan and Mattie far more pleasure than its apparent value would imply.

It is remarkable that Wharton pays “keen attention to (these) details in her characters’ physical surroundings and psychological makeup.”⁽⁹⁾ As Edmund Wilson admits that “Wharton had come to have a great hand with all kinds of American furnishings...the decors become the agents of tragedy ...”,⁽¹⁰⁾ and the china-closet storing this memorable pickle-dish is a seed of the catastrophe, just like the handkerchief dropped in Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

5. Morality and Partnership

Wharton had a special talent to write, but her life’s circumstances may have affected her work. How does Wharton cherish her ideas and apply each to her heroes and heroines in her stories? As we look at the characters in *Ethan Frome*, we see that Zeena is a strong-willed woman, while Ethan is weak and irresolute. His consciousness seemed to be crippled by manacles chaining him to his miserable fate. His innate defects of character invited Zeena’s and Mattie’s miserable and distorted lives. Susan Goodman refers to some information concerning this partnership as “Wharton’s failure,”:

The reasons for Wharton’s failure are multiple: her gender, her Victorian childhood, her guilt about her own unhappy marriage, and above all, her inability to side with either of the novels’ paired heroines. These split heroines symbolize the author’s own uncertainty about the desirability of both intimacy and marriage.”⁽¹¹⁾

Goodman believes that Wharton's own unhappy marriage and inability to side with either of the novels' paired heroines is a failure. I regard this as a far-fetched view. I believe it is the writer's detached point of view: Writers should stand in the center of the partners' unhappy marriages as an objective observer. Wharton tries to supply us with the situation based on her own experience that could be interpreted in many ways.

Wharton wrote about the writer's critical faculty: "...the 'Hawthorne' and the 'Poe' are models of serene impartiality, and yet those two were the authors most difficult for an American to judge objectively twenty-five years ago —Hawthorne because for some mysterious reason, every old literary cliché still sprang full-armed to his defense..."⁽¹²⁾ Many times we are not likely to be convinced by what a writer displays. Blake Nevius commented on this.

What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of existing manners, conventions, taboos, apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty? This question occupies the center of Edith Wharton's moral consciousness as it reveals itself in her fiction.⁽¹³⁾

Wharton regards her moral consciousness as a basis of the social order which combined Victorian and Puritan traditions. Robert M. Lovett explains that "the Puritan inheritance of morality and the new spirit of culture combined to insist upon the claims of significance of subject matter...and of beauty of form...into this America of the 1890's came Edith Wharton and in it she has steadily remained."⁽¹⁴⁾

Wharton was living in a changing society at the turn of the century. She wrote about characters who never caught up with this change and she

demands that society admit the possibility of choice, as she develops the scenes of the story. The protagonist, Ethan, seems to be writhing in the contradictions of these changes.

A moment ago he had wondered what he and Mattie were to live on when they reached the West; now he saw that he had not even the money to take her there....no one at Starkfield would lend him ten dollars. The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders hand-cuffing a convict. There was no way out —none. He was prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished. (EF p. 55)

Finally, Ethan is driven away to kill himself with Mattie, as the word, “extinguished”, suggests. This reminds us of the scene when they ride between the village and the woods. The village represents the civilized world and the woods represent wilderness. Between them there is a spaciousness —white snow— moral vacancy. That is “mental and moral starvation” as Wharton once said in *A Backward Glance*.⁽¹⁵⁾

Again snow and nature affect the characters’ movements and these are bound to the theme of the story. Blake Nevius points this out when he says,

Judging by such powerfully realized scenes, Edith Wharton’s remark about the intensity with which she visualized the “inner scene” of her story would seem to be valid. Again, as in *Ethan Frome*, her imagination is able to bring about a fusion of all the elements of her tale on a symbolic level. The cycle of the human drama is adjusted to the cycle of the seasons: the promise of spring and the fulfillment of summer

are followed by the bitter harvest of autumn and the approaching chill of winter. In no other story is Edith Wharton's attachment to the rich, unconscious life of nature utilized to such advantage.⁽¹⁶⁾

When Mattie arrived in Starkfield, she was not well because it was winter, but she gradually recovered. In the spring she is described as a bird. In addition, Ethan's and Zeena's marriage had lasted seven years and the seven years is significant to Ethan. He recalls those seven years with Zeena. Wharton's reference to the number seven indicates her awareness of the universality of the Seven Year Cycle.

These natural phenomena are juxtaposed and well-organized. Nevius again asks the readers, "How do these unequal partnerships originate? Invariably in a sentimental error on the part of the destined victim...Ethan Frome is led astray by his gratitude for Zeena's devoted nursing of his parents."⁽¹⁷⁾ When Ethan decides to marry Zeena, he is already morally victimized by her. In the marriage with Zeena, society allows him no choice.

Zeena's perspective completely controls the domestic side of the couple's life.

Even Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity. (EF p. 30)

In other words, if this couple's dwelling place had been in a different social condition, if they live in a bigger city, their partnership would have taken a different shape. Could we say that Zeena's continued wandering on pathological journeys is her journey to find her identity. She doesn't want to be cured but she wants to be noticed by someone, even Ethan, like

“the old ladies who send for the doctor everyday for the pleasure of talking over their symptoms.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Edmund Wilson indicates that “in Edith Wharton’s novels these men are usually captured and dominated by women of conventional morals and middle-class ideals; when an exceptional woman comes along who is thirsting for something different and better, the man is unable to give it to her... There are no first-rate men in these novels.”⁽¹⁹⁾ Ethan is really this kind of man. Both partnerships, Ethan and Zeena and Ethan and Mattie, result in unhappy lives at the end of the story. We are surprised at the ending as we feel the plot has returned us to the beginning.

Conclusion

The theme of *Ethan Frome* is developed with the hopeless situation that those characters could never overcome. Characters in the novel are willing to kill themselves but instead, become crippled. “There is a Puritan in Edith Wharton and this Puritan is always insisting that we must face the unpleasant and the ugly. Not to do so is one of the worst sins in her morality.”⁽²⁰⁾ Its incessant pessimism is represented by Wharton’s conflict which comes from her own cultural background. Wharton’s creativity was demonstrated by this bitter love story rather than a lavender-scented New England story. This is the story of real people.⁽²¹⁾ E. E. Fracasso points out.

All of these stories involve “real people,” as Wharton calls them, their “looks and ways and words”, and especially their anxieties, their pain, and their suffering. For Edith Wharton believed that real people lead sad lives.⁽²²⁾

In this sense "real people" in *Ethan Frome* are those at the Mount whom Wharton observed for ten years. A sledding accident in Lenox killed a young girl and maimed the other two riders. Wharton remembered this true account for four years before writing *Ethan Frome*.⁽²³⁾

She felt the same inability to cast off her cultural restraints as those in the lower labor class. Her home, at heart, was America. Although she became expatriate she still followed her ancestors' way of thinking and was strongly influenced by its shadowy puritanical aspects.

America, having decreed Manifest Destiny almost from the beginning, moved west to settle the land, bringing their Puritan culture with them. Wharton was attracted to this beautiful natural environment and to the self-sufficient people living there, who seem to be tossed off by its severity though.

These physical aspects mingle effectively with the sheer undaunted artistic beauty in the novel. She said, "life is the saddest thing there is, next to death." in the last part of *A Backward Glance*.⁽²⁴⁾

She was living her own private difficult time when nineteenth-century American literature was at the turn of the new century. Even if she was trying to create something different from the traditional American literature, we can still recognize the aura of New England in the book, *Ethan Frome*.

Notes

- (1) Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, 1933, 1934, 1961, 1962, 1964), p. 294
- (2) Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Wisconsin, 1978), p. xiii
- (3) Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (W. W. Norton & Company New York, 1995), pp. xi-xii. Hereafter, I will refer to the text as EF and show the number of the page in the parenthesis.

- (4) Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 143
- (5) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* He mentioned this in his introduction to Custom House.
- (6) Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (New York & London, 1969), pp. 22-23
- (7) Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, pp. 153-154
- (8) Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1953), p. 47
- (9) Theresa Craig, *Edith Wharton A House Full of Rooms: Architecture, Interiors, and Gardens*, (The Monacelli Press New York, 1996), p. 14
- (10) Edmund Wilson, *The Wound And the Bow Seven Studies in Literature*, "Justice to Edith Wharton" (The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1941), p. 200
- (11) Susan Goodman, *Edith Wharton's Women Friends & Rivals* (Hanover and London, 1990), p. 85
- (12) Edith Wharton, *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Scribners Magazine, Nov. 1928 ed. with introduction by Frederick Wegener, (Princeton New Jersey Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 208
- (13) Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, p. 110
- (14) Robert Morss Lovett, *Edith Wharton*, (New York, 1925), p. 3
- (15) Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 294
- (16) Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, p. 171
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109
- (18) Wharton, *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Yale Review, 1927, p. 152
- (19) Wilson, *The Wound And The Bow*, pp. 207-208
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 203
- (21) Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, pp. 211-212
- (22) Evelyn E. Fracasso *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Consciousness* (Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 2
- (23) Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome And Other Short Fiction* (Bantam Books, New York, 1987), p. x Mary Gordon mentioned a sledding accident which took place near Wharton's American home in Lenox.
- (24) Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 379