The enormous attention given to Edith Wharton's New England tale of *Ethan Frome* since the time of its publication in 1911 to today is based partly on the variety and extraordinary number of possible interpretations for this brief novel. There has been a continuing search for its many meanings that stretch from Lionel Trilling's finding the novel without a moral issue, a portrayal of cruel suffering without reason, stemming from the author's "limitation of heart," to Bernard de Voto's evaluation in his introduction to the 1938 edition that "[Ethan Frome] is held in higher esteem than any other of Mrs. Wharton's books and is certain to endure longer because it is magnificent story-telling."

Recently a most ingenious and convincing fairy tale in reverse interpretation has been developed by Elizabeth Ammons. For her the story contains social criticism, fictive psycho-history, and a coherent moral. Ethan shares a general male fear that "Woman will turn into Witch." This fear becomes real as his mother, then his wife, Zeena, and finally his young love, Mattie, do exactly that. Ammons concludes:

Stated simply, Zeena Frome is the witch that conservative New England will make of unskilled young Mattie; and Wharton's inverted fairy tale about the multiplication of witches in Ethan's life, a story appropriately told by a horrified young man whose job is to build the future, finally serves as a lesson from the past. Witches do exist, Wharton's tale says, and the culture creates them.

Ammons finds the narrator, this "horrified young man," appropriate for the story. The fact that he is male and therefore shares and understands Ethan's fear of Woman helps make him a convincing narrator and conveyer of Wharton's theme of cultural oppression.

However, in contrast to Ammons, to see the author herself as the narrator brings out a biographical tie between Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome that is convincing and enlightening. Concern with Wharton as the author of the story arises initially when close examination brings out flaws and inconsistencies in the novel that plead for explanation, especially because Wharton's previous work had been so meticulously presented. Two reasons for these inconsistencies are the strain Wharton exhibits in her narrative method, and the overwrought emotionalism that she experienced during the writing of the story.

Wharton does not state that she considered her method of narration a strain. Rather, with the excitement coming from her appreciation of her control of her craft, she lights on Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Balzac's "La Grande Bretèche" as employing methods of narration applicable to her story. She is delighted with the challenge of imitation and states that she has mastered their method for her theme which, she believes, must
be treated as starkly and summarily as life had always presented itself to
my protagonists; any attempt to elaborate and complicate their senti-
ments 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.8

The way to avoid this falsification, she declares, is to follow the Balzac-
Browning method which includes several verbatim observers. She sum-
marizes the success of this method in her introduction to the 1922 edition
of the novel:

Each of my chroniclers contributes to the narrative just so much as he or
she is capable of understanding of what, to them, is a complicated and
mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see
it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place
among the larger categories (p. ix).

This complicated and mysterious case seems at first glance to be an
ordinary story of a man who, married to a dreary wife, is attracted to a
younger girl. Ethan, farmer and small sawmill owner near Starkfield in
western Massachusetts, has married his distant older cousin Zeena in fear
of his own loneliness and in gratitude for her having nursed his mother
during her last illness. At the mother's death, Zeena in turn becomes the
sickly and gloomy one.9 A destitute relative, youthful, bright-eyed Mattie
Silver is brought in to help Zeena with the household chores.

The easily foreseen burgeoning love between sensitive Ethan and
appreciative and vibrant Mattie is poignantly portrayed during the cli-
mactic evening of seclusion given to the young lovers by Zeena's need to
see a doctor far enough away to require an overnight absence. Mattie's use
of Zeena's prized pickle dish for their memorable supper, the breaking of
the dish by Zeena's cat, Ethan's attempt to repair it (frustrated by Zeena's
unexpected early return) bring out the misery of Ethan's and Mattie's
inability to communicate their mutual affection and portend the disaster
that is to come when the declaration of mutual love brings on the suicide
attempt.

Wharton follows the Balzac-Browning multiple approach method
by choosing a first-person narrator to bring together the several ways of
looking at these events. Before commenting on the appropriateness of the
narrator or the strain occurring by using such a narrator, some of the
inconsistencies in the story overlooked by the author need description.

Once such flaw appears in the details of the first meeting between
the narrator and Ethan. The narrator is inspired to search out the events in
Ethan's life when he sees this ruin of a man as he comes to get his mail at
the Starkfield post office. Ethan comes to the post office every day at
noon, the narrator tells us. But how is one to reconcile this with the
statement (p. 7) that the historical time of the encounter is in the "degener-
ate day of . . . rural delivery"? Other facts of the story, "the big power-
house at Corbury Junction" (p. 8), the $20 electric battery that Zeena buys
(p. 62),10 the new things in biochemistry (p. 15), suggest that the narrator
and Ethan met some eight or nine years after the turn of the century. At
that time rural delivery was already well established.11 Ethan's abhor-
rence of exposure would have made him eager to accept rural free delivery. Zeena’s starved soul might, for opposite reasons, have insisted on rural delivery so that she could observe the daily passage, at least, of the rural mail carrier even if he brought nothing. Ethan’s mother, crippled with rheumatism, was able to perk up enough to walk each day to the gate just to see Harmon Gow go by when his stage route had been shifted for some six months from the flooded Bettsbridge Pike to the road past the Frome farm. Zeena would remember that the later establishment of train service took the few remaining passersby from the Frome road and contributed to the elder Mrs. Frome’s despairing senility (pp. 21-22). Why, then, did Ethan, living some two miles away, come into the village every day for his mail? No reason for Ethan’s failure to take advantage of rural delivery is offered.

The narrator says that Ethan “used to drive in from his farm every day about noon, and as that was my own hour for fetching my mail I often passed him . . .” (p. 4). Perhaps here the aura of excitement of mail delivery has again let Mrs. Wharton present an impossible circumstance. This daily fetching of mail would be completely impractical for the narrator because of the distance he would have to travel. The powerhouse at which he works as an engineer is ten miles away (three miles by walking or by horse and buggy to Corbury Flats and from there seven miles by train to Corbury Junction, the location of the powerhouse). The engineer-narrator tells us that he went to work in the morning and returned in the afternoon (p. 14). He says nothing about coming back to Starkfield at noon each day to get his mail. It is hard to believe that he took this complicated ten-mile trip four times a day.

On page 18 the narrator describes Ethan as “not the kind of man to be turned from his business by any commotion of the elements.” But on page 24, Ethan does let the storm decide for him that he should turn in at his own farm and not go on to take the engineer to Starkfield. This creates a convenient opportunity for the narrator to see the inside of Ethan’s home but the reader is disappointed by Ethan’s unexpected resignation to the “commotion of the elements.” Not only is Ethan’s submission to the storm a contradiction in description, it is out of character with the author’s portrait of the taciturn and withdrawn New Englander who would do anything to keep a stranger from breaking into the privacy of his house. This is all the more true in Ethan’s case because his home hides his tragedy. Even his oldest friends respect his wish that he be left alone with his misery. To let Ethan open his house to a stranger not only makes his character appear inconsistent but reveals the difficulty of the author to find a way to get the narrator inside Ethan’s house.

Mrs. Wharton has trouble with Zeena’s laughter. On page 70 when Zeena has come to nurse Ethan’s mother who is weak in body and mind, Zeena “laughed at him for not knowing the simplest sick-bed duties and told him to ‘go right along out’ and leave her to see to things.” Later, when Ethan tells Zeena he can’t believe she will send her cousin Mattie away: “Zeena laughed,” but Ethan then “did not remember ever having heard her laugh before” (p. 115). Still later, when Zeena confronts Ethan and Mattie with the broken pickle dish “she emitted her small strange laugh” (p. 126). The possessive pronoun implies that this laugh was habitual. Yet
both Mrs. Wharton and Ethan seem to feel that Zeena never laughed. It may be that an underlying preoccupation with the way the narrator got that information led the author to this inconsistency.

Toward the end of the story an unbelievable innocence is given to the young Mrs. Hale as she comments to the engineer, "The folks here could never rightly tell what [Mattie] and Ethan were doing that night coasting, when they'd ought to have been on their way . . . to ketch the train [to take Mattie away]." Certainly the inhabitants of Starkfield could not have been so naive as not to have a suspicion, at least, of adulterous yearnings on the Frome farm.

Although Mrs. Wharton wrote the novel with the help of her friend and careful critic, Walter Berry, who was accustomed to examine and discuss every detail of many of her manuscripts and this manuscript in particular, they both failed to notice and to correct these inconsistencies.

Not only has Wharton allowed contradictions to remain in her story perhaps because of her absorption in the Balzac-Browning scheme of first-person narration, she also failed to maintain that first-person point of view. In "La Grande Bretèche" Balzac successfully maintains his first-person point of view by using his capable doctor-scientist Horace as the narrator. There is never any doubt about his identity. He reports his own views in his own words and the views of others on the tragedy that occurred in the mysterious mansion in their own words. Edith Wharton's other model was Browning's The Ring and the Book. Browning reached his height as a dramatic monologist in this work. He had full command of shifting viewpoints of the same events. The circumstances surrounding murder and the accusations of adultery are retold almost two hundred years after they had occurred. For each of the nine seventeenth-century speakers Browning pulls together elaborate detail so that they become credible, living actors, aware of their defenses or protests, their audiences, milieus and motivations.

Wharton allows only a few characters to give brief verbatim reports on a few aspects of the Frome affair to the narrator. This narrator, a visiting engineer, serves as a receptacle, a receiver of details from these few Starkfield inhabitants. He then molds these views into an interpretation of Ethan's story. Far from the appropriate narrator Ammons claims, Wharton creates here a condescending, pallid, unconvincing narrator. She fails to make him completely masculine. She is slow to identify him and never does give him a name contrary to her assertion that "my characters always appear with their names." This is unfortunate. It is not until page 6 that the sex of the narrator is indicated. His exclamation at his first sight of crippled Ethan, "Good God!" makes the reader begin to doubt that the "I" is Edith Wharton, or even a female. On page 8, the information that "I had been sent up by my employers on a job connected with the big power-house at Corbury Junction," suggests definitely that "I" is a male. Henry James was particularly amused by this line and the resultant image of a dominating (as he knew her) Edith Wharton being sent by anyone, much less by employers! James assumes or pretends to assume that the author and narrator are the same.

This assumption by James points to Wharton's abandonment of
first-person narration in the first part of the novel and her shift to a third-person omniscient author. John Crowe Ransom is also bothered by Mrs. Wharton’s invention of this special male reporter whose only advantage is that he is a man and presumably thus better able than a woman to interpret Ethan and have access to him. But this nameless engineer does more than present Ethan as one of Edith Wharton’s “granite outcroppings; but half emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate.” He enters Ethan’s mind, expresses Ethan’s thoughts with more sophistication than Ethan could possibly be capable of, and reveals acts and ideas of Ethan’s that no one in Starkfield could have known and have been the source of the narrator’s information.

Although Blake Nevius agrees with Ransom that the narrator knows more than his situation can supply, he approves this choice of narrator as a felicitous one:

...first, because the narrator must have a pretext for visiting Starkfield, and this is more easily supplied for an engineer than for a woman with the requisite “sensibility and education” [Ransom’s words], and second, because there must be some probability established for Ethan’s inviting the narrator into his home—over and above, that is, the accident of the storm.

Nevius defends the choice of a male narrator by declaring that “the narrators employed in the framework of Edith Wharton’s early stories are always men...” He implies that the repeated use of this form makes her male narrators particularly credible. Although Nevius misses at least one female narrator (the simplistic lady’s maid Hartley in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”), it is true that Mrs. Wharton did, for most of her first-person narrator stories up to the writing of Ethan Frome, choose males as narrators. Even the first bit of published poetry (1878) attributed to her, “The Old Grave,” has a male revenant address wistful, nostalgic murmurings to his own grave.

Nevius conjectures that the choice of narrator in Ethan Frome gives the author greater freedom. Cynthia Griffin Wolff sees not freedom but necessary limitation in the choice of narrator: “the fictional world of that entire novella [Ethan Frome], then, was interior... and for the presentation of such a world, Wharton’s limitation of narrative vantage was not only workable, it was necessary.” Neither critic notes, however, that Edith Wharton abandons her engineer-narrator after twenty-five pages and with an almost audible sigh of relief continues her story as its omniscient author. She provides for this departure by giving her narrator the introductory phrase: “It was that night [Ethan’s overnight hospitality during the storm] that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of the story...” Three lines of periods follow. The next paragraph (the first of Chapter 1) begins in omniscient fashion and with poignant pity Ethan’s tale. There is no further attempt (except briefly in the last eight pages of the book) to bring out individual verbatim observations of the several characters as Edith Wharton had promised to do when she stated her desire to imitate Balzac and Browning. The narrator has made a “vision” of Ethan’s tragedy from the information he has gathered.
from Starkfield's inhabitants, from brief encounters with Ethan when Ethan serves him as a substitute driver, and from his overnight stay in Ethan's house.

However, Wharton gives her narrator no special qualifications as creator of this vision. He is "pulled up sharp" by his first sight of Ethan (p. 3); he concludes that the troubles of Ethan "had been beyond the common measure" (p. 11); he does see the inside of Ethan's house; but there are no reasons given why this colorless engineer should be able to fathom the frustrations of Ethan's life. There is nothing in this character to make him capable of articulating Ethan's thoughts as lyrically as he does when Ethan, twenty-four years before the narrator's arrival in Starkfield, walked from his farm to call to Mattie at the close of the square dance social at the church:

But it was not only that the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth. The girl was more than the bright serviceable creature he had thought her. She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will (p. 33).

This setting and these thoughts are engendered not by a visiting engineer but by Mrs. Wharton, full of pity for her "granite" character and aghast at the horror to which his frustration is to lead him. The recorded conversations between Zeena and Ethan and Mattie and Ethan could in no way have come to the knowledge of the narrator. These are Mrs. Wharton's inventions. It is she who probes Ethan's sensitivity as he comes to shudder at his wife's unattractiveness and her soul-stifling way of life and to expand in Mattie Silver's bit of beauty. She becomes Ethan. His thoughts, his interior monologue, his interpretation of past events, his descriptions of his mounting frustrations are selected and expressed by the author. She can enter so well into Ethan's point of view because she is experiencing, at the time of writing the story, Ethan's dilemma. The inconsistencies in the novel become minimized and overshadowed when the striking parallel between Ethan's distress and that of his author's is described.

This parallel can be verified by giving attention to Mrs. Wharton's biographers. For instance, Millicent Bell depicts the turmoil Edith Wharton was in during the writing of Ethan Frome. She points out the similarity between Mrs. Wharton's and Ethan Frome's marital circumstances.

Both Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome were married to sickly partners; both had response and warmth from other more sympathetic partners. Ethan had his Mattie and Edith Wharton had Walter Berry, who was particularly helpful to her while she was writing Ethan Frome. The novel had begun as an exercise in French as part of the tutoring given to Mrs. Wharton by a young French professor in Paris, probably in 1907. The locale of the exercise is the Lenox, Massachusetts, neighborhood, the area Mrs. Wharton knew well from her many drives throughout the countryside, conversations with church rectors, participation on village committees (Lenox Library, Village Improvement, Flower Show), deal-
ings with local workmen and workwomen during her ten years' (1901-
1911) ownership of her grandiose mansion, The Mount, a mile from
Lenox.\textsuperscript{26} Daniel Berkeley Updike, whose Merrymount Press printed sev-
eral of Wharton's volumes, recalls her verbatim comment concerning her
involvement with Ethan's world:

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 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 [church]
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.'\textsuperscript{27}

Another biographer, Percy Lubbock, though admitting how little
he really knows her, recognizes her affinity with Ethan and his world
when he, in almost a parody of Jamesian phrases, states:

\begin{quote}
\textsc{T}he fact remains that in \textit{Ethan Frome}—and perhaps even more else-
where, whenever she faced the rawness of the 'frontier,' geographical or,
moral—it is somehow, against all likelihood, as though she came home to
her own; for here, as it seemed, she found herself in contact with people
and things that spoke up and answered to the most original, the most
spontaneous of the souls within her—that of the lurking adventurer, who
saw more clearly and felt more keenly and understood with a great relish
of appreciation the drama of the wilds, among the hewers of history in
the making, than ever the genteel play, in an ordered enclosure, of a
company living on such history as it possessed, unearned at that.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Mrs. Wharton supports the case for her knowledge of this "drama of the
wilds" by referring to the helpfulness of Walter Berry (even as Mattie
accepts Ethan's help with the household chores):

\begin{quote}
\textsc{T}he following winter [1910-1911] in Paris I wrote the tale as it now
stands, reading my morning's work aloud each evening to Walter Berry,
who was as familiar as I was with the lives lived in those half-deserted
villages before the coming of motor and telephone. We talked the tale
over page by page, so that its accuracy of "atmosphere" is doubly
assured—and I mention this because not long since, in an article by an
American literary critic,\textsuperscript{29} I saw "Ethan Frome" cited as an interesting
example of a successful New England story written by someone who
knew nothing of New England! "Ethan Frome" was written after I had
spent ten years in the hill-region where the scene is laid, during which
years I had come to know well the aspect, dialect, and mental and moral
attitude of the hill-people.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

It was not only Ethan's country that Edith Wharton knew so well. She
knew Ethan's marital circumstances were as disastrous as her own. A
muted or possibly non-existent physical relationship with her husband\textsuperscript{31}
made all the more welcome the intellectual companionship she had with
Walter Berry, whom she had known since the year before her marriage. In
1910 while she was writing the novel, he occupied the guest suite in her
Paris apartment at 53 Rue de Varenne from July 1 to the end of the year. Her tributes to Berry are many and intense.\(^3^2\) Her burial next to him in the cemetery at Versailles is implicit proof of the intimacy of the relationship.

For some years prior to the writing of *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton had been pressed by the growing seriousness of her husband Teddy's neurotic illness,\(^3^3\) culminating in the summer of 1908 in his defiant behavior of supporting a house on Montfort Street in Boston and a mistress for it on his wife's money; by her concern for the increasing costs of the upkeep of her demanding mansion, The Mount, in Lenox and the fear of her husband's likely mismanagement of this property;\(^3^4\) by serious contemplation of divorce;\(^3^5\) and by the deepening of her strong emotional liaison with Berry. From these stresses and strains Berry himself provided enormous protection. Their mutual friend, Henry James, was well aware of the moments of bliss between the two as well as apprehensive that Berry's attachment to her was less earnest than Ethith Wharton's to him and that he had no intention of making her honest if and when a divorce should occur.\(^3^6\) There is little indication that she thought of marriage to Berry but her deep involvement and dependence on this mecurial, busy, restless lawyer could have been the cause of her development during these crucial years into the woman Grace Kellogg so extravagantly describes:

> During the years from say, 1906 to 1910 we know the emotional stress she was under, the tides of contrary feeling that flooded her Puritanical and highly conventional being. Perhaps during these years, for the first time in her whole rigidly restrained and controlled life, she was all woman. She was warm and exposed: vulnerable to the creative impregnation.\(^3^7\)

If Berry really awakened all these deeply feminine responses and yet refused to commit himself completely to a continuous relationship, there is reason to think the frustrations of this Platonic friendship may have stimulated Edith Wharton's conception of Ethan's frustrations.

A far from Platonic friendship has been added to details of Edith Wharton's life by her recent biographer, R. W. B. Lewis. This affair coincided with the time of the writing of *Ethan Frome*. Its intensity and emotional demands might well have lessened the power she thought she had acquired over the tools of her craft. This affair took place during the three years just prior to the final writing of *Ethan Frome* begun in December 1910.\(^3^8\) Grace Kellogg is certainly right that these were trying years for Wharton but the main source of her emotional turbulence was not, as has so often been previously conjectured, Berry or her husband,\(^3^9\) but Morton Fullerton. Although the Fullerton-Wharton relationship has been given some attention by Leon Edel,\(^4^0\) it is not until Lewis's biography that full details of this crucial experience are revealed. The facts of the affair are attested to by Edith Wharton's diaries, letters between her and Fullerton, Henry James's recognition of the affair and hotel registrations in London. Lewis has made extensive use of the Wharton papers deposited at Yale.\(^4^1\) In addition, through detective work by himself and Marion Wainwaring in Paris, he has brought this startling love story to life. Morton Fullerton emerges as a man of extraordinary charm and physical attractiveness for women and on occasion for men. A New England minister's
son, a Harvard graduate and free-lance writer, he was introduced to Edith Wharton by Henry James, who urged Fullerton to call on his good friend Edith at The Mount.

This meeting took place in October 1907. The two discussed ideas, common friends, his nascent essay on Henry James and, on an outdoor excursion, exchanged sprigs of witchhazel, the flower that blooms so late and thus so richly symbolized Edith Wharton’s own late blossoming. She was now forty-five. The quickly established rapport impelled her into an intensely passionate affair which she records in a private journal as though she were conversing with Fullerton about her affection for him and his importance to her. She began the journal on October 30, 1907. To be near him she returned to Paris in December, a month earlier than she had planned. The intimacy grew rapidly and produced with it and in its wake besides the journal, a four-stanza poem of restrained beauty and thanksgiving; fifty-two long lines of Whitmanesque free verse commemorating in lovely detail a night together at London’s Charing Cross Station Hotel replete with pathos for other transient lovers and for all rootless and mobile mankind echoing in it; a bitterly ironic short story, “The Choice,” of a woman immersing herself in death wishes for her husband; “The Mortal Lease,” an eight sonnet sequence recognizing the inevitable loneliness to come. Surely, too, Edith Wharton’s bit of erotica written sometime in 1919 had its inspiration in fond memories of her intimacies with Fullerton.

However, the most closely connected to the Fullerton affair of all her writings is the tale of Ethan’s tragic reaching out for and failing to hold the beauty his sensitive soul yearned for. Lewis suggests that “The relationship between Ethan and Mattie Silver contains memories of Morton Fullerton (even the names echo faintly) . . .” There is a similarity in the despair of Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome which points to her as the teller of Ethan’s story and not to the engineer, a visitor of only a few months to Ethan’s locale with no hint of involvement in emotional upheaval. Through her own experience she is able to divine Ethan’s pain and spurred on by realization that the dates of her husband’s flagrant infidelities in Boston corresponded with her own night of comfort in London with Morton Fullerton, she brings pathos and greatness to this tale that is as much hers as Ethan’s.

Lewis has synthesized Fullerton by giving a synopsis of the usual three-year run of his many love affairs. The intense physical consummation comes about after a beginning of gentle idealism gives way to mutual engendering of passion. After total and complete satisfaction is achieved, a period of absenteeism occurs, then silence, then gradual termination. The gentle idealism which marked the Wharton-Fullerton relationship began with the exchange of witchhazel sprigs in October 1907. The affair ended with the summer of 1910. The intensity of the affair was well over when Berry moved into the Wharton Parisian guest suite in July 1910.

Edith Wharton chose not to continue her affair with Fullerton, in part, because of her feeling of guilt that her affair had contributed to the degeneration of her husband’s mental health. Later, she was able to break away from the stifling relationship by divorce (July 1913), two years after she had written Ethan Frome.
Ethan, too, had thought of breaking away from Zeena. He reasons that the only way to do it would be to ask Andrew Hale for immediate payment for the lumber he has delivered rather than wait the usual three months for payment on the plea that he needs money for medical help for Zeena. He would then use this money to transport himself and Mattie away from bleak New England to the promising West. Ethan needs a distant place to bring his wild dream to fruition; he could never, steeped in inhibition as he is, give in to his physical need for Mattie anywhere near Zeena. Their one evening alone full of tenderness, though conscious unwillingly of Zeena's unseen presence, brought not even a touch of hands (p. 97). However, this request for prepayment would mean playing on the sympathy of his friend and obtaining money from him under false pretenses. Ethan has his pride, his own measure of honor. His code of ethics does not allow the end to justify the means; his standards of righteous behavior do not permit him to be deceitful. His alternative of mutual suicide with Mattie becomes his fundamental and deliberate choice. (Actually, it is Mattie who suggests and urges the suicide attempt but Ethan agrees wholeheartedly.)

This choice is, in effect, a conscious despairing attack on poverty and fate. The attack is thwarted because Ethan chooses to remember Zeena during the swift progress of the intended fatal slide on the bobsled. It is the flashing image of Zeena's distorted face that causes him to swerve the sled so that the result of the ride is not death but armchair invalidism for Mattie, incurable lameness for him, and suffering for them both under Zeena's harsh care. This fateful retribution Ethan accepts.

Ethan chooses to carry out his obligation and duty to care for his shrewish wife and the soon-to-be querulous Mattie as long as he lives. By molding this character who painfully takes on the burdensome care of those for whom he is responsible, Edith Wharton has fashioned a scapegoat. She has in some measure pushed on to Ethan the gruelling life that she herself would have had to live had she tried to fathom and relieve her husband's despair.

But even as the emotional turmoil in which the novel was written helps account for the inconsistencies in it, it is also the cause of the greatness of the novel. Soon after it appeared (first as a serial in Scribner's, August through October, and in book form in September 1911) The Nation's book reviewer was moved to this intense eulogy:

The wonder is that the spectacle of so much pain can be made to yield so much beauty. And here the full range of Mrs. Wharton's imagination becomes apparent. There is possible, within the gamut of human experience, an exaltation of anguish which makes a solitude for itself, whose direct contemplation seals the impulse of speech and strikes cold upon the heart. Yet sometimes in reflection there is revealed, beneath the writhing torment, the lineaments of a wronged and distorted loveliness. It is the piteous and intolerable conception which the Greeks expressed in the Medusa head that Mrs. Wharton has dared to hold up to us anew, but the face she shows us is the face of our own people.

Ten years later, Carl van Doren in the January 12, 1921, issue of The Nation, placing Mrs. Wharton first in his "Contemporary American Nove-
lists" series, gives this high praise: “Not since Hawthorne has a novelist built on New England soil a tragedy of such elevation and mood as this.”

More recently, Gore Vidal remarked:

Traditionally, Henry James has been placed slightly higher up the slope of Parnassus than Edith Wharton. But now that the prejudice against the female writer is on the wane, they look to be exactly as they are: giants, equals, the tutelary and benign gods of our American literature.54

The reason Edith Wharton is placed by critics on the heights of creative writing along with Hawthorne and James must be based in part on the superb creation of her heavy-laden, solid and monumental Ethan Frome. She was able to bring him to life because she identified so closely with his pathos and grief.

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NOTES


8. Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (1911; 1922); renewal copyright, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939], Introduction, p. vi. Subsequent references to this edition will be indicated in parentheses in the text.
9. David Eggenschwiler suggests a psychological case study “could make much of the fact that Zeena has replaced Ethan’s mother as the invalid who keeps him on the farm . . .” Although Eggenschwiler does not refer to the flaws enumerated in this essay, he does point out contradictions in Ethan’s character caused by Wharton’s successfully “making a coherent and complex novel,” pp. 242, 245.
10. In the 1935 dramatic version of *Ethan Frome* this electric battery “of which [Zeena] had never been able to learn the use” (p. 63) becomes an Energex Vibrator advertised by Sears Roebuck at $22.95. [Owen Davis and Donald Davis, *Ethan Frome*, a dramatization of Edith Wharton’s novel, suggested by a dramatization by Lowell Barrington (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), Act I.] Both the battery and the vibrator are symbols pointing to Zeena’s inability or unwillingness to be a real wife to Ethan and to Ethan’s frigidity. Edith Wharton’s own marital circumstances echo the Frome situation. See pp. 14 ff. above.
11. Rural delivery was authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1892 and established in 1898. By 1910 there were 38,200 routes covering 184,300 miles [United States Post Office Information Service, *Rural Delivery Service from Its Beginning* (Washington, D.C., 1959), p. 8.] Ethan, it seems would have had an opportunity to use this free service. According to the United States Post Office *Annual Report*, 1887, p. 105, the service was established experimentally for widely different areas and clients, including “the farmers and summer boarders of Massachusetts.”
12. Bernard De Voto, although he places *Ethan Frome* at the head of Wharton’s novels, finds that she has stereotyped her characters to correspond to “the literary convention of dour New England which was, within a few years after *Ethan Frome* was published in 1911, to develop into a literary credo.” De Voto, p. x.
14. J. D. Thomas has noted other “uncertainties” in the novel brought about, he conjectures, through Mrs. Wharton’s attempt to make her narrator a man. Thomas refers to confusion of the terms “logs,” “lumber,” “tree trunks,” all referring to the load Ethan delivers to Andres Hale; the odd arrangements of payment between Ethan and Hale for that load; some haziness concerning the time of Ethan’s year of study at the Worcester technological college.
27. Quoted in Lubbock, Portrait, pp. 22-23.
31. Lewis, pp. 53-54.
33. Kellogg, p. 171.
35. Edith Wharton’s ambivalence toward divorce is apparent not only in the length of time she took to come to the decision of divorce in her own case but in the central attention she gives the subject and that of extramarital affairs throughout all her fiction. See Margaret B. McDowell, “Viewing the Custom of Her Country: Edith Wharton’s Feminism,” Contemporary Literature, 15, 4 (1974), 534-37.
36. For a discussion concerning Berry’s importance to Mrs. Wharton and his role as a model for her heroes, see Winifred Lynskey, “The ‘Heroes’ of Edith Wharton,” University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIII (1954), 354-61. See also Wolff, pp. 382-83, 439, concerning their intimacy.
37. Kellogg, p. 171.
38. Lewis, p. 296.
39. Nevius makes a strong case for Berry’s emotional importance to Edith Wharton in the introduction to his Edith Wharton’s “Ethan Frome,” pp. 3-4. See also Jo Agnew McManis, “Edith Wharton’s Hymns to Respectability,” Southern Review, 7 (1971), 988-89. Debra Joy Goodman, “The Scapegoat Motif in the Novels of Edith Wharton,” pp. 23-24, states “it is clear that Ethan Frome was in part the product of a time of emotional strain when she must have feared herself permanently tied to the husband James described as ‘wholly quarrelsome, abusive and impossible.’” (Quotation within the quotation from Bell, p. 173).
40. Edel mentions gossips’ conclusions that Fullerton and Edith Wharton were lovers in Henry James: The Treacherous Years: 1895-1901 (1969; rpt. New

41. Edith Wharton had become the first daughter of Yale when she was given an honorary degree there in 1923. In 1927 seven Yale professors warmly supported her nomination for the Nobel Prize. It was natural that she should ask Gaillard Lapsley, who was to become her literary executor, to offer papers (letters, diaries, fragments of manuscripts, business correspondence) to Yale and request that there be some lapse of time before their release. Lewis, pp. 203, 452-53, 549, et passim. Kellogg names Elisina (Mrs. Royall) Tyler as Edith Wharton’s literary executor until her death in 1958, pp. 164-65, 321. (Gaillard Lapsley died in 1949.) Lewis states that upon Mrs. Wharton’s death, Mrs. Tyler became her residuary legatee, p. 549.

42. Quoted in Lewis, p. 227.

43. Quoted in Lewis, pp. 259-60. The poem’s title is “Terminus.”


47. Lewis, p. 310.


49. Lewis conjectures that Teddy Wharton was well aware of his wife’s liaison with Fullerton, pp. 209, 306-08.

50. Here is still another inconsistency. Previously at the supper table, “The two leaned forward at the same moment and their hands on the handle of the jug. Mattie's hand was underneath, and Ethan kept his clasped on it a moment longer than was necessary” (pp. 84-5).

51. This analysis contests Lionel Trilling’s attributing Ethan’s decision not to choice or moral strength but only to a “morality of inertia.” See “The Morality of Inertia,” pp. 137-38.

52. Goodman has put the same thought succinctly. “Once the scapegoat, the bearer of guilt has been punished, there is a relief from guilt through the purging” (p. 18). More pertinently to *Ethan Frome*, Goodman says “in destroying her characters, in writing a book of consummate cruelty and destructiveness, she [Wharton] may have exorcized her own demons” (p. 45). The main demon was not, however, Wharton’s marital disaster (Goodman, pp. 23-4) but her Fullerton affair guilt feelings. Goodman (pp. 50-2) and Wolff (pp. 214, 218-19) connect the Fullerton affair more closely with Wharton’s next novel, *The Reef*.
