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Author(s): Blake Nevius
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"ETHAN FROME" AND THE THEMES OF
EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION
BLAKE NEVIUS

ALTHOUGH much—perhaps too much—has been made of
that minor classic of our literature, Ethan Frome, as a pic-
ture of New England life and as a triumph of style and con-
struction, its relation to Edith Wharton's more characteristic
and important stories has never been clearly established.
Ethan Frome is not a "sport." It belongs to the main tradition
of Mrs. Wharton's fiction, and it has a value, independent of
its subject and technique, in helping us to define that tradi-
tion. Alfred Kazin has linked it to The House of Mirth as a
demonstration of the spiritual value of failure, but although
this is a recurrent theme in Edith Wharton, particularly in
the novels she wrote in the twenties, and is inescapable in the
conclusion of The House of Mirth, it is no mean feat, I think,
to reconcile it with the episode which forms the narrative
framework of Ethan Frome. It is possible, as I intend to sug-
gest, that the spectacle of Ethan's prolonged and hopeless de-
feat, reinforced by the glimpses of his spiritual isolation, his
scarred and twisted body, and his querulous, demanding wom-
enfolk, is intended to convey quite the opposite of what Mr.
Kazin finds in the story.

Having said this, I must add that this essay is only inciden-
tally concerned with Ethan Frome. The best known of Edith
Wharton's stories, it offers a familiar peg on which to hang
certain generalizations that I want to make about her fiction-
al themes. The generalizations are my main concern, but
Ethan Frome has the virtue of illustrating them more clearly
and simply perhaps than does any of the major novels.

Beginning with The Fruit of The Tree (1907), the argu-
ment of Mrs. Wharton's novels focuses with varying depth
but remarkable consistency on a single problem, which she
once defined (although not with reference to her own work)
as "that immersion of the larger in the smaller nature which is one of the mysteries of the moral life." Many well known novels—The Scarlet Letter, The Portrait of A Lady, and Of Human Bondage among others—have explored the problem in their own way. It is strikingly present in George Eliot, whom Edith Wharton, no less than Henry James, regarded as one of the masters of her art. It provides the central theme in Proust as Mrs. Wharton defines it: "the hopeless incurable passion of a sensitive man for a stupid uncomprehending woman." But few novelists have exploited it as persistently as she did. Although it is prefigured in her early novelettes The Touchstone and Sanctuary, it is not until we are confronted in succession by The Fruit of The Tree, Ethan Frome, and The Reef that we are able to appreciate its centrality.

A glance at the principal relationships in some of the stories may help confirm my point. In each case the emphasis falls on the baffling, wasteful submission of a superior nature to an inferior one, a phenomenon which Edith Wharton, no more than George Eliot or Henry James, was able to explain, but which presented intriguing possibilities to the novelist who believed that it was moral issues principally that guaranteed the life of fiction. In The Fruit of The Tree, John Amherst's humanitarian program is hampered by the petty social aims of his first wife Bessy; and then, by an ironic inversion, the happiness of his second wife, Justine, is threatened by the limitations of his own moral vision. Ethan Frome is morally victimized by Zeena, Ralph Marvell (The Custom of The Country) by Undine Spragg, Ann Eliza Bunner (The Bunner Sisters) by her sister Evelina. Lawyer Royall, in Summer, a man of Ethan Frome's dignified stature, is thwarted and humiliated by his passion for his self-centered ward Charity. Two of Edith Wharton's rarest spirits, Halo Tarrant (Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive) and Anna Leath (The Reef), having blundered in their first marriages, find illusory compensation in Vance Weston and George Darrow. Martin Boyne, in The Children, forgoes his chance of happiness with
Rose Sellars to rescue the Wheater children—a quixotic effort born of his hopeless middle-aged passion for the girl Judith, who can neither appreciate his sacrifice nor return his love. The examples can be multiplied to include every novel Edith Wharton wrote after *The House of Mirth* with the exception of *A Son at The Front*, in which the usual relationship is reversed.

How do these unequal partnerships come about? Invariably they originate in a sentimental error on the part of the destined victim. Amherst, in love with Bessy Westmore, is deluded into thinking that she shares his interest in reform. Ethan Frome, grateful for Zeena's devoted nursing of his parents, marries her. Ralph Marvell, naively fancying himself a Perseus, rescues his corn-belt Andromeda from the clutches of rich, lecherous, pop-eyed Peter Van Degen. Anna Leath, impatient of the restraints which the sheltered life has imposed on her, is somewhat too anxious to extenuate Darrow's conduct in the affair with Sophy Viner. Halo Spear marries Lewis Tarrant because she is grateful to him for rescuing her brother from a scandal and for underwriting her parents' financial future. Newland Archer is trapped by his own futile logic into giving up Ellen Olenska for the duller and more respectable charms of May Welland. The motive in each case is high-minded, and the act calls for a generous, if vain, display of altruism.

In the anti-romantic tradition, none of the love affairs in Edith Wharton's novels acquires interest or significance until one or both the partners is married. Once she has her characters ensnared as a result of their sentimental miscalculations, she is able to introduce a second, contingent theme. In all of the stories I have mentioned, she proceeds directly to the question: What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of 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 fiction.
It is the great question posed by *Ethan Frome*. There is no doubt in her mind regarding the prior assumption that a sense of individual responsibility is the only basis of social order and development. But she is seeking the most liberal interpretation of that axiom consistent with her inherited notions of fair play and respectability. In all of these novels she is trying to determine the limits of responsibility.

Looking back, we can see that the whole of her subsequent thematic development is implied in *The Fruit of The Tree*. An earnest, rather dull, and unsuccessful novel, it was evidently designed as Mrs. Wharton's contribution to the reform movement which, shortly after the turn of the century, had captured the novelists as well as the journalists, social workers, and general public. But her investigation of one of the basic social problems of the day—the responsibility of the factory owner for the physical and moral welfare of his employees—is conducted half-heartedly at best; and it is apparent, before the novel gets well under way, that the author's real sympathies and interests are going to run away with her original intention. This is precisely what happens. The story is easily diverted from its muckraking pretensions by the complicated moral problem which arises out of the relations of the four principal characters; and as this interest usurps the center of attention, Justine Brent takes over from John Amherst as protagonist.

The story, rather brutally simplified, is this: John Amherst, a foreman in a large New England textile factory, convinces its absentee owner, a widow named Bessy Westmore, that basic reforms in the policy and conditions at the plant are needed. Essentially a frivolous person, she is for a time absorbed in his vision, marries him (Mrs. Wharton having assured us that, despite his occupation, his antecedents are impeccable), and then loses interest in his plans. The marriage goes rapidly downhill. In defiance of Amherst's wishes, Bessy takes an intractable mare for a gallop over the icy winter roads, is thrown and injures her spine. A long ordeal of pain, which can end
only in death, is cut short when Justine Brent, a former schoolmate who is serving as emergency nurse, deliberately administers a fatal dose of morphine. Amherst and Justine are married. Inevitably, the latter's complicity in Bessy's death is revealed by the doctor in charge of the case, who happens to be a disappointed suitor of Justine's. Amherst, shocked and, as it develops, unexpectedly obtuse, fails to rise to the occasion, and the hitherto singularly happy marriage is jeopardized. Justine performs the usual expiation without which few novels of the period were complete, and the story concludes with a reconciliation on a somewhat lower level of mutual confidence.

What seems at first glance to be a fault in the management of the plot may well be intentional. Mrs. Wharton has attempted the difficult feat of introducing two centers of revelation, but unfortunately they are not expanded simultaneously, and this accounts for the broken-backed structure of the novel. Nevertheless, there is a repetition of the thematic pattern which provides a certain formal unity. Amherst's failure to raise his first wife, Bessy, to his level of moral insight and conviction is followed by Justine's near-failure to raise Amherst to hers; the disaster which concludes the first experiment is narrowly averted in the second. Clearly, however, it is Justine's "case" which is the pivotal one. Her dilemma involves the question of her responsibility to the other three main characters, whose moral sensibilities are less acute than her own. At one time or another, the individual fates of Amherst, Bessy, and the young doctor Stephen Wyant pass into her unwilling control. The result in each instance is that the larger nature of Justine, which has argued consistently for the freedom to act on its most generous impulses, is betrayed by the smaller natures surrounding it, but particularly by Amherst, who cannot penetrate to the clear moral atmosphere in which her decisions are formed.

There is never any doubt in Justine's mind as to the moral justification of euthanasia under the particular circumstances
which compelled her to act. The purity of her motive is un-
deniable. But the step is taken with little thought of its pos-
sible consequences, and it is only after its exposure threatens
the happiness of several people that the moral issue loses its
original simplicity and becomes compromised with questions
outside the abstract realm. Too late, Justine learns what Delia
Ralston in *The Old Maid* is to learn, that it is "a terrible
thing, a sacrilegious thing to interfere with another's destiny,
to lay the tenderest touch upon any human being's right to
love and suffer after his own fashion," and that her responsi-
bility is limited, practically if not ideally, by the complexity
of the human situation and the fact that the gods are jealous
of their prerogatives.

As might be expected, the moral implications of divorce
are debated endlessly in Edith Wharton's fiction. The tradi-
tional prejudice of her class outlawed it. It was one of the
convenient arrangements introduced by the *nouveau riche*
invaders of her old New York, and partly because of her in-
stinctive hostility to this group she rejected it (in her fiction,
at least) as a solution. In spite of the latitude with which she
discusses certain moral problems, she generally rests her case
on the status quo. There is a pronounced straining at the
seams of conventional morality, and an occasional triumph of
open-mindedness, as in the treatment of euthanasia in *The
Fruit of The Tree*; but in her fiction, as in her life, flat re-
bellion is usually disparaged or at least shown to be futile.

There is of course a reason for this, which is rooted in the
puritan sub-soil of Edith Wharton's nature. The morality of
an act is evaluated in terms of its cost to others. When Mr.
Langhope, Amherst's father-in-law, proposes divorce as the
solution to his daughter's difficulties, Mrs. Ansell protests:
"Bessy will never be happy in the new way."

"What do you call the new way?"

"Launching one's boat over a human body—or several, as
the case may be."

Given the notion of individual responsibility, no human
destiny can be detached from those it touches, directly or indirectly, and the ramifications of a selfish or thoughtless act are indefinitely extended. The individual justification, as in the case of Justine Brent, is forced to yield to the larger question of the act’s effect on the social structure as a whole.

Taken in this light, one of Edith Wharton’s comments in her review of Leslie Stephen’s George Eliot not only betrays the characteristic bent of her interests, but may go a long way in explaining to her biographer—when he is permitted to appear—her own position:

All of George Eliot’s characters shrink with a peculiar dread from any personal happiness acquired at the cost of the social organism; yet her own happiness was acquired at such cost. That she felt herself justified by special circumstances her letters assert, and those who know her best have repeatedly affirmed. She wrote, in a moment of profound insight [italics mine], that “the great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it”; but she never ceased to revere the law she transgressed. . . .

The “shifting relation between passion and duty” is merely another way of formulating the second problem I have been discussing. Edith Wharton’s attempt to define the limits of responsibility is an act of mediation, as uncertain as George Eliot’s, between the claims of passion and duty. She is not a problem novelist. Except in some of the early short stories, her themes never become merely problems, demonstrations, propositions. The dilemmas of her characters, however much light they may shed on the nature of the conflict, are never resolved, unless, as I have remarked, by a return to the status quo—witness Ethan Frome, The Reef, The Age of Innocence. Her own experience, we must believe, was a perpetual testing-ground for her situations, but it provided no final answers. Her separation and divorce from Edward Wharton were not followed, as might have been anticipated, by a rationalization of the act in fiction: there is no discernible compromise in her attitude toward divorce.
On the contrary, there is a tendency in her later novels and short stories toward an almost iron-clad rectitude in the treatment of ethical questions—a tendency in which a certain hardness and even a certain cruelty are involved, and which is liable to outrage the sensibilities of a later, more tolerant generation. It is, we sometimes feel, a rectitude which compromises itself temporarily in open discussion of the issues only to emerge triumphant in the tone of her conclusions. It is noticeable as early as The Reef (1912), with its regrettable final chapter, and it frequently weakens her later novels by encouraging the impression of dowager-like severity.

But to return to Ethan Frome: The final, lingering note of the story, it seems to me, is one of despair arising from the contemplation of spiritual waste. Ethan himself sounds it just before his last, abortive attempt to escape his destiny:

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? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste. . . .

And taking Mrs. Wharton's novels as a group, that note swells into a refrain whose burden, as George Darrow in The Reef formulates it, is "the monstrousness of useless sacrifices." Here is the ultimate result of that "immersion of the larger in the smaller nature which is one of the mysteries of the moral life." As a theme, the inutility of self-sacrifice is merged repeatedly with the primary theme of the limits of individual responsibility. A realization of "the monstrousness of useless sacrifices" encourages the characters' selfish, passionale bent, while the puritanical assertion of responsibility opposes it. For Ethan, as for most of Edith Wharton's protagonists who are confronted by the same alternatives—Ann Eliza Bunner, Newland Archer, Charlotte Lovell, Kate Clephane, Nona Manford, Martin Boyne—the inherited sense of duty is strong
enough to conquer, but the victory leaves in its wake the sense of futility which self-sacrifice entails.

How and to what degree does the situation in *Ethan Frome* embody this conflict? No element in the characterization of Ethan is more carefully brought out than the suggestion of his useful, even heroic possibilities. He had longed to become an engineer, had acquired some technological training, and is still reading desultorily in the field when the narrator encounters him. This is one aspect of his personality. There is still another which helps explain why Edith Wharton is predisposed to treat his case with the utmost sympathy:

He had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion.

Add to these qualities his superior gifts of kindness, generosity, and sociability, and his impressive physical appearance ("Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man"), and it is evident that Edith Wharton set about, as Melville did with Ahab, to invest her rather unpromising human material with a tragic dignity.

It is in view of his potentialities that Ethan’s marriage to Zeena is a catastrophe. By the time Mattie Silver appears on the scene, he is only twenty-eight but already trapped by circumstances and unable to extend the horizon of his future beyond the family graveyard. Mattie, once she has become the victim of Zeena’s jealousy, offers a way out which Ethan is quick to follow. But immediately his plans are set afoot, things begin to close in on him again: farm and mill are mortgaged, he has no credit, and time is against him. Moreover, even in the heat of his resentment he cannot disregard Zeena’s plight: "It was only by incessant labour and personal supervision that Ethan drew a meagre living from the land, and his wife, even if she were in better health than she imagined, could never
carry such a burden alone." His rebellion dies out, only to be rekindled the next morning as Mattie is about to leave. Suddenly it occurs to him that if he pleads Zeena’s illness and the need of a servant, Andrew Hale may give him an advance on some lumber. He starts on foot for Starkfield, meets Mrs. Hale enroute, is touched by her expression of sympathy ("You’ve had an awful mean time, Ethan Frome"), continues toward his rendezvous—and is suddenly pulled up short by the realization that he is planning to appeal to the Hales’ sympathy to obtain money from them on false pretences. It is the turning-point of the action:

With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him.

Although he is neatly hemmed in by circumstance, it is Ethan’s own sense of responsibility that blocks the last avenue of escape and condemns him to a life of sterile expiation.

In *Ethan Frome* the themes I have mentioned are developed without the complexity that the more sophisticated characters and setting of *The Fruit of The Tree* and *The Reef* require; they are reduced to the barest statement of their possibilities. To a person of Ethan’s limited experience and capacity for straightforward judgments, the issues present themselves with the least ambiguity or encouragement to evasion; and in this, I believe, we have the measure of the subject’s value for Mrs. Wharton. As her characters approach her own sphere, their motives disentangle themselves with increasing difficulty from her own and their actions are regulated by a closer censure; they become more complex and are apt to lose their way amid fine distinctions and tentative judgments. They are aware, like Woburn in the short story "A Cup of Cold Water," of the impossibility of basing a decision upon absolutes:
Was not all morality based on a convention? What was the stanch-
est code of ethics but a trunk with a series of false bottoms? Now and then one had the illusion of getting down to absolute right or wrong, but it was only a false bottom—a removable hypothesis—with another false bottom underneath. There was no getting beyond the relative.

Ethan Frome is closer than any of her characters to the source of the ideas which underlie Edith Wharton's ethical judgments. Puritanism has lost very little of its hold on that portion of the New England mind which he represents and its ideas have not been weakened, as they have in the more populous industrial and commercial centers, by two centuries of enlightenment based on what Bernard Shaw calls the Mercanto-Christian doctrine of morality. It is not surprising that many persons unacquainted with Edith Wharton's biography associate her—and not wholly on the strength of Ethan Frome—with Boston or with New England as a whole. Whatever the influences exerted by her New York origin and background and her long career abroad, it is the moral order of Ethan Frome's world that governs the view of reality in all her novels.