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SEX, SILENCE AND ISOLATION: WHARTON'S ENTRAPPED WOMEN

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“I, Olgahan Bakşı Yalçın, confirm that the work presented in this dissertation is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the dissertation.”



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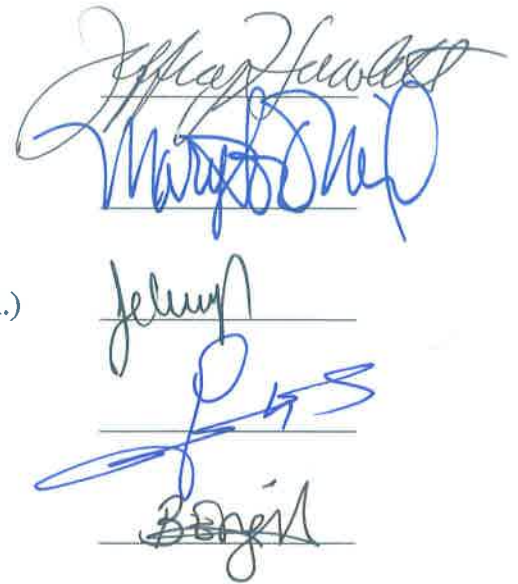
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ÖZET

Seks, Sessizlik ve Yalnızlık: Wharton'ın, Rollerine Hapsolmuş Kadınları
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Transatlantik bir yazar olarak Edith Wharton, 75 yıllık yaşamı boyunca gerek Amerika'da gerekse diğer ülkelerde emsali görülmemiş sosyal, ekonomik ve politik değişimlere tanık olur. Gününün sorunları ile yakından ilgili bir birey olarak Wharton eserlerinde, bu değişimin kentsel ve kırsal toplumun - hem kendisinin de ait olduğu New York yüksek sınıfı hem de kırsal New England kasabaları olmak üzere - farklı kesimleri üzerindeki etkisini ele alır. Bu tezin amacı, Wharton'ın *Ethan Frome*, *Summer* ve *The House of Mirth* isimli romanlarında geleneksel cinsiyet rollerinin ve ekonomik olarak erkeklere bağımlı olmanın yarattığı yalnızlık ve sosyal sıkışmışlık içinde kalan kadın karakterleri incelemektir.

Tezin ilk iki bölümünde, anlatıda söz sahibi olmayan, birbirlerine rakip olacak şekilde tanıtılan Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver ele alınmaktadır: Gilbert ve Gubar'ın kavramsallaştırmasına göre Zeena bir canavar, cadı ve deli bir kadındır; Mattie ise bir melek. Oysa ki her ikisi de eşit derecede geleneksel rollere hapis olmuş ve ekonomik olarak tek bir erkeğe, Ethan Frome karakterine bağımlı kalmış olan kadınlardır.

Üçüncü bölümde, Wharton'ın *Summer* isimli romanının başkahramanı Charity Royall ele alınır. Buna göre, Charity hem North Dormer gibi küçük bir kasabaya hapis olduğu için hem de üvey babasına ekonomik olarak bağımlı olduğu için mutsuz genç bir kızdır - romanın sonunda Charity üvey babası ile evlenecektir.

Son bölümde ise, *The House of Mirth*'in başkahramanı Lily Bart'ın yalnız başına hayatta kalma mücadelesi ve New York yüksek sınıfının yozlaşmış değerlerine nasıl hapis olduğu gösterilmektedir: Zenginlik ve güzelliğe verilen aşırı önem bireylerin yaşamını derinden etkilemekte ve şekillendirmektedir.

Wharton eserlerinde toplumsal kural ve değerlerin bireylerin hayatlarını nasıl kısıtlayıp onları biçilmiş rollere hapis ettiklerini yansıtır ve aynı zamanda da, söz konusu romanlarını mutsuz ve şoke edici bir sonla bitirerek, yaşamın beklenmedik trajedileri ile güvenilmez taraflarına dikkat çeker. Wharton'un romanları görüldüğünden daha karmaşık ve kafa karıştırıcıdır: Yapısöküm kuramının tekniklerinden faydalanarak, bu tez metinlerin içinde birden fazla anlamın gizli, gömülü olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Wharton'un eserlerini yazarken tam olarak hangi anlamı aktarmak istediğini tahmin etmek oldukça güçtür ancak farklı yorumlara açık sonlar yaratarak yorumu hem çağdaşı hem de gelecekteki okuyucuya bıraktığı söylenebilir. Pek çok feminist eleştirmenin de belirttiği gibi, okuyucunun emin olabileceği tek şey; Wharton'un 19.yy Amerikan toplumunda kadınların erkeklere hizmet etmek üzere yetiştirildiği ve yaşamlarını bir dizi kısıtlamalar ve beklentiler çerçevesinde geçirmek zorunda olmalarına yönelttiği eleştirisidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Seks, yalnızlık, sessizlik, güvenilmez anlatıcı, geleneksel rollere hapsolmuş kadınlar, yapısökümcülük, feminist yaklaşım, Amerikan Yıldızlı Çağı'nda toplum, ekonomik bağımlılık, ensest, evlilik.

ABSTRACT

Sex, Silence and Isolation: Wharton's Entrapped Women

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As a transatlantic writer, Edith Wharton witnessed unprecedented social, economic and political transformations both in America and in the world at large. Deeply concerned with the issues of her day, Wharton produced fiction about the effects of change at all levels of society - not only the upper - class New York society, of which she herself was a member, but also that of New England villages. This dissertation analyzes female characters in the novels of Edith Wharton - *Ethan Frome*, *Summer* and *The House of Mirth* - that suffer from *isolation* and *social entrapment* as a direct result of the traditional gender roles imposed on them as well as of their financial insecurity and economic dependence on men.

The first two chapters focus on the two female characters, Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver, who are not only marginalized but also presented as rivals – in Gilbert and Gubar's terminology, Zeena is a monster, a witch or a madwoman while Mattie is an angel although they are equally trapped and powerless in their dependency on the single male figure, Ethan Frome.

In the next chapter, I focus on Charity Royall in *Summer* who feels miserable because of her entrapment in a small village like North Dormer and of her forced dependence on her foster father Lawyer Royall, who becomes her husband in the end.

In the final chapter, I demonstrate how Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* is entrapped by isolation and the false values of the upper-class New York society: the extreme emphasis on wealth and beauty, the two dominant forces shaping and affecting individual lives deeply. Reflecting on how social norms and codes restrict individuals and set boundaries for their roles, Wharton comments in her fiction on the tragic unpredictability and insecurity of life, which comes especially in the form of the unhappy and shocking endings of her novels. One can argue that her fictional world is more complex and confusing than it looks on the surface. Drawing techniques from deconstruction, this dissertation discusses that there are various meanings inherent in the text: one cannot easily guess which one Wharton intended to convey but Wharton grants the reader a lot of latitude, and so her novels, especially their endings, are open to many interpretations. Yet, as many feminist scholars have also noted, one can only be sure of Wharton's severe critique of the limitations and expectations placed on women who are raised to become nothing more than domestic servants and companions for men in nineteenth-century American society.

Key words: Sex, isolation, silence, unreliable narrator, traditional women roles, social entrapment, deconstruction, feminist approach, the Gilded Age society in America, financial dependency, incest, marriage .

INTRODUCTION: Edith Wharton's Entrapped Women

In all ages there have been writers in exile who speak for masses of people even while being cast out of their land. One kind of exile to which writers have always been subjected is as individuals who had to leave to fulfill their sense of individual destiny and personal vision. In that sense, some of them can be called expatriates since their exile or emigration was self-chosen regardless of how profound the pressures were that made it necessary. Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is one example of a transatlantic writer, who settled permanently in France in 1914 and visited the United States only once after that, for twelve days. One can easily argue that her distanced view of American culture in France might have helped her to gain a more objective perspective: "Indeed, it is only by having seen other countries, studied their customs, read their books, gotten to know their inhabitants, that one can place one's own country in the history of civilization" (Wharton, quoted in Tintner, 27). Her life in France also enabled her to make a comparison between European and American customs: In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton comments on the lingering effects of Puritanism in American society and especially highlights the different attitude towards the equality between men and women in French society: "The long hypocrisy which Puritan England handed on to America concerning the danger of frank and free social relations between men and women has done more than anything else to retard real civilization in America" (112-113).

Edith Wharton's novels set not only in New England villages, as we will see, but also in 1890s New York high society reflect the changes America was undergoing during the transitional period from the post-Civil War to the post-World War I era. During that time period, America was entering the era of industrialization and urbanization: advances in science and technology, the development of pragmatism, Darwinian Theory, the rise of sociology and psychology along with an awareness of social and economic inequalities also witnessed in this period. At this point it would be helpful to mention *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) co-authored by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner who illustrate the outwardly showy, and inwardly corrupt nature of American society during the industrialization of the late 1800's. Lacking tradition, the culture of the newly rich of this period supposedly based on the culture of upper-class Europeans; hence, the mansions of the wealthy imitated European palaces decorating their mansions with European works of art, antiques and rare books. In *The Incorporation of America*, Alan Trachtenberg characterizes the Gilded Age with the following features: "the new immigrant work force, the doom of the countryside and rise of the great city, the mechanization of daily life, the invasion of the marketplace into human relations, the corruption and scandal of a political universe dominated by great wealth" (143-144.)

Under such circumstances Edith Newbold Jones was born the third child and only daughter in an elite, conservative, old New York family to lead a privileged life as a novelist. As many biographers and commentators would agree, her sheltered life produced the highly developed, educated woman who was able to write and publish fiction for a living. However, not many women could liberate themselves from societal norms and manage their own lives, pursuing happiness and self-realization as they mostly lived in the shadow of men. Emily Hancock in "The Girl Within:

Touchstone for Women's Identity" notes that the oppressive force in culture does not allow a woman the freedom to realize her full potential based on her identity: "They [women] described the cultural press that negated their feminine identities in youth, and they conveyed their shock when they discovered, long after making adult commitments that tied them to the destinies of others, that the identities they had assumed since girlhood were bolted to a man-made foundation that was not of their own making" (60-61). It seems that marriage is a "vocation" for all women, as Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* calls it (9), not only in New York society but also in New England villages. As Zeena Frome in *Ethan Frome* also emphasizes: "I wouldn't ever have it said that I stood in the way of a poor girl like Mattie marrying a smart fellow" (48).

Acting like a social observer and critic, particularly of the leisure class she belonged to, Wharton pays attention to the inner complexities of women's lives derived from their subservient position as *objects of desire* for men, from their emotional distress and physical pain in their *entrapment* in traditional gender roles as well as societal norms and codes. The vulgarity of the *nouveaux riches*, the repression of the established upper class, the contrast between European and American customs and values, and the inequality and repression of women in patriarchal culture, the hostility and rivalry between women, were some of the subjects she dealt with. Other major themes in her works include the effects of class on both behavior and consciousness (divorce, for example, often horrifies the established upper class for its violation of moral standards); the American belief in progress; the confining nature of marriage, especially for women; the preference of powerful, white, usually upper-class men for childish dependent women; the repression of women's sexual desire, the structure of patriarchal power, the desire of middle-class white women for

respectable, paid work; the financial insecurity and economic dependence of women for survival; a sense of homelessness- rootlessness in a country bereft of a cultural heritage.

As a prolific writer, Wharton completed twenty-four novels and novellas, twelve volumes of collected short stories, nine non-fiction books, three books of poetry, and thirty articles, translations, editions, and reviews. Her novels set not only in New England villages, as we will see, but also in 1890s New York high society, have received both popular and critical acclaim: her fiction offers social and psychological insight, especially to the ways women attempt to survive within suffocating social boundaries. In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) and in her essay “Permanent Values in Fiction” (1934), Wharton states that her purpose as a writer was to illuminate and define the quality of life by focusing on characters rather than on mere situations and the creation of “vivid and memorable characters” is of significance to any accomplished fiction. To bear this in mind, I will analyze each female character locked up in the hopeless social entrapment in the following chapters, drawing upon the central concepts and issues that Edith Wharton focused on in almost all her works.

The first chapter provides a study on the entrapment of Zeena Frome in *Ethan Frome*: the reader follows the male narrator who collects bits and pieces of Frome's story from the people around town in order to grasp its deeper meaning. I will question whether Ethan Frome, as the central protagonist of the story, is the one who has to endure a loveless marriage in a dilapidated farm house in frozen Starkfield, or rather his *mean, grumpy and sickly* wife Zeena is the one entrapped in an unfulfilling, barren marriage in which her husband remains inefficient, weak and taciturn. Is it possible that she is the secret sufferer? Or can it be the male narrator who frames

Zeena up as a villain who stops her husband accomplishing his hopes and dreams, separates him from the woman he loves, and abuses and deserts her poor cousin, Mattie Silver?

The next chapter focuses on the entrapment of Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome*: An attractive young woman who has been recently orphaned, Mattie Silver is introduced as a weak, vulnerable person who is incapable of supporting herself in the modern city and is financially dependent on the Fromes for existence since moving in to help Zeena with the house chores. I will question whether the character Mattie Silver is a representative of the preference of powerful, white, usually upper-class men for childish dependent women who cannot survive outside marriage or not. Is it possible that as a charming young woman Mattie Silver is really attracted to a married man, Ethan Frome? Can her financial insecurity be the reason for her romantic attraction to him? Does the reader know how she thinks or feels throughout the story? Does her economic dependence also have impact on the narrative? Why is she marginalized in the narrative just like Zeena Frome?

The third chapter deals with the entrapment of Charity Royall in *Summer*: the novel seems to follow a traditional plot line leading to the inevitable end/fate - either marriage or death—for a young woman, Charity Royall, who ignores moral and social norms and codes as she chooses. I will explore whether the story attempts to engage the reader's tearful sympathies as the protagonist, Charity Royall, who, after becoming pregnant by a visiting New York architect, Lucius Harney, is forced to marry the lawyer Royall, the most powerful man in North Dormer and her own step-father: Can Charity's decision to marry her step-father Lawyer Royall be considered as a happy ending? Is it possible to argue that Charity is treated as a disposable object by the man she falls in love with while fighting against the lecherous attempts of the

only father she knows? Or can she be the representative of the “new woman,” in other words, modern woman who desires sexual freedom and independence? Is it possible to see Charity’s story which ends with a semi-incestuous marriage as a parody of contemporary sentimentalism? Or is it only a story of a young woman caught up in the emotional turmoil of sexual passion while experiencing first love?

The fourth chapter analyzes the entrapment of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*: the reader follows the misadventures of beautiful ill-fated Lily Bart, finally exiled to the working class where she perishes after failing in her matrimonial designs. I will explore the reasons of her failure to achieve her objective to marry a rich man and financially secure herself for good: Is Lily’s failure to participate in such a system a result of her refusal to be merely a decorative object of exchange in the world of the late Gilded Age New York? Is she an example of the “new woman” (modern woman) who smokes, gambles and desires an independent existence? Is she the mere product and the embodiment of the hypocritical values of wealthy Gilded Age New York high society? Or is she entrapped thereby? Can she be a victim of changing economic and social circumstances over which she has no control? Or is she a classic tragic figure who falls due to her own inborn flaws: her exaggerated self-esteem and her overvaluing of material resources in her quest for marriage? Is she a person of conscience whose scruples ultimately won't allow her to join with the corrupt system for which she has been trained? Can death for Lily be the only way to escape from her entrapment in false values of wealthy Gilded Age New York high society?

Certainly, one purpose of this dissertation is to present other ways of reading the novels. To this end, in developing my analysis of Wharton’s entrapped women, I have employed a variety of critical approaches - to use Levi-Strauss's term, *a*

bricolage using whatever tools are appropriate to the task. To begin with, the study of narrative informs my discussion of Wharton's sophisticated plot structures. Narrative shape often reflects and amplifies thematic material and the delineation of character, as illustrated in the framed narrative in *Ethan Frome*. In this regard, my reading harmonizes with that of critics such as Frederick Turner (1992) who has called for the use of deconstructive techniques without recourse to deconstruction's principles of "pure change and slippage" (137). In my analysis, I use deconstruction not as a theoretical framework, but as a technique of discovering "another level of coherent meaning underneath, or above, one which seemed so exquisitely structured and worked out" (Turner, 137). In this regard, drawing from the techniques of deconstruction, my discussion of possible ways of constructing *Ethan Frome* reveals another level "of hidden articulations and fragmentations within [the] assumedly monadic totalities" (De Man, 249).

It is also noteworthy that what is not said in a text is often as important as what is said (Gusfield, 119). As the story of Ethan Frome is told with a single voice, the male narrator's, the female characters (Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver) are marginalized and underdrawn in the narrative: they depend on Ethan's (and the narrator's) point of view for representation as they do not speak in their own voices. I argue that there are other stories to be told and other perspectives not given voice in the narrator's version of the story constructed by collecting bits and pieces of information from the people around town. Therefore, the internal structure of the narrative undermines the seeming authority of the narrator, inviting the reader to question his reliability and his limited perspective. As we shall see, I will also argue that Wharton's fiction with its controversial endings and narrative are open to many interpretations as there are various meanings inherent in the text.

In recent years, feminist scholars have given Wharton's works increased attention for their detailed and accurate depictions of the restricted lives of women around the turn of the last century: therefore, I have made use of a range of feminist theories, notably studies of nineteenth-century women's writing including the works of Gilbert and Gubar and Elaine Showalter. For instance, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar explore 19th Century literature by women from a feminist perspective which includes female writers' search for identity and the binary view of female characters as either angels or monsters (as Mattie Silver versus Zeena Frome). In a more general way, I can say that I rely on radical feminism's critique of patriarchy and its structures which force women to conform to the oppressive gender roles imposed by traditions and cultural norms of the *fin de siècle* America. Feminist scholars such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Elizabeth Ammons, Candace Waid, and Linda Wagner Martin are also of interest to my analysis of female entrapment in Wharton's fiction.

In my consideration of gender, class and the ideological machinery by which it is perpetuated, a primary focus in Wharton's fiction (as in *Summer* and *The House of Mirth*), I have also consulted Marxist Feminism: Emma Goldman's *The Traffic in Women* (1970), Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* (1980) and Lillian Robinson's *Sex, Class and Culture* (1978). The primary theoretical concepts I tried to explore in my reading of these critics, amongst others, are as follows: "the subordination of women as a class through the conjunction of class and sexual relations" (Madsen, 67) – the economic dependence of women as a sexual class and not the circumstances, moral, personal and social, causes them to consider prostitution as an option to survive; "the analysis of gender relations with the materialist analysis of contemporary capitalist society" (Madsen, 69) - the concept of patriarchy not in

terms of the biological basis of power relations but in terms of class analysis allows a more properly materialist understanding of women's oppression; the representation of women in male literary works also reveals a great deal about the mechanisms of women's oppression – "A book cannot be sexist and still 'great' as a work of literature, in feminist terms" (Madsen, 73); "It is men who legislate between 'respectable' women and whores, yet it is the dependence of women as a subordinate class that determines feminine sexual behaviors (both chastity and promiscuity)" (Madsen, 75).

Considering the various literary platforms utilized by Wharton, I have also made some references to genre studies: for example in enumerating the logic of *naturalism*, and in characterizing the attributes of the *sentimental novel*. Donald Pizer, Claire Preston and Judith Saunders, are some of the critics who comment on Wharton's familiarity with evolutionary ideas focusing especially on the application of Darwinism to social theory. I also want to add that Gregg Crane's *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth Century American Novel*, in particular, is an illuminating work to which all researchers and scholars can deeply benefit from. As for my reading of the sentimental "rose-and-lavender pages" of New England fiction, critics such as Donna M. Campbell, Black Nevius and Josephine Donovan are among others I have encountered and found useful/helpful/valuable. While Wharton cannot be comfortably categorized by these definitions, one can argue that her understanding of literary history allows her to use genre types as the basis for *parody* or as points of departure from which she can pursue explorations in new directions.

No specialized knowledge of the various critical theories mentioned above is needed to follow the lines of discussion in this study. Concepts and terms necessary to understand the readings of Wharton's fiction in the chapters are explained in context

and the information in the notes directs readers to further reading and primary sources on specific topics. Discussion of the novels in the following chapters is not in the chronological order of their publication. Chapters are organized around individual works of fiction, and works selected for discussion with two principles in mind. First, they represent both New England village life as well as New York High society which is associated with Wharton: *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, on the one hand, and *The House of Mirth*, on the other. Second, the chosen texts illustrate a taste for excess and shock that Wharton shares with Frank Norris and Stephen Crane. As a group, they underline the depth and extent of the social entrapment as well as the male victimization Wharton's female characters experience under the rules/norms/codes of patriarchal order.

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CHAPTER 1

Framing Zeena Frome: Ethan Frome

1.1 The Untold Story of Zeena Frome

Edith Wharton is associated prominently with literary realism which began to reshape American fiction in the decades following the Civil War, but she also appears to have adapted certain essential features of naturalistic fiction in *Ethan Frome*.

Throughout her career she was attentive to the pressure of circumstance on character; hence, there is little or no God in Wharton's world; the environment - natural, cultural or situational - decides people's fate, creating a sense of "helplessness" and "powerlessness"¹. *Ethan Frome* (1911), set in the fictional New England town of Starkfield, Massachusetts tells the story of a taciturn farmer whose dreams and desires end in a tragic way. The unnamed male narrator, who relates both the *framed* story and the *Frome* Story, is introduced as a visiting engineer planning to spend a winter for business in Starkfield.² The novel's introductory and concluding passages are told from the narrator's point of view; the first chapter (which records events taking place twenty-four years previously), starts by switching narrators from first-person to a limited third-person: that is, through the eyes of Ethan Frome. Between the introductory and concluding passages, the reader follows how Ethan Frome must have thought and imagined things happening.

A close reading would reveal the warning of the narrator about his version of the story: “I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases; each time it was a different story” (*EF*, 33). Collecting bits and pieces of Frome’s story from the people around town, the narrator forms his own version in which Zeena Frome appears to be a mean, grumpy and sickly figure who browbeats her husband, stops him from accomplishing his hopes and dreams, separates him from the woman he is in love with, abuses *and* deserts her poor cousin, Mattie Silver. In other words, trapped for most of his adult life in silence and loneliness Ethan Frome is the central protagonist of the story who has to endure a loveless marriage in a dilapidated farm house in frozen Starkfield.³

However, I would argue that although his wife is not a center of interest in the novel, Zeena (Zenobia) Frome has likewise fallen victim not only to the harsh circumstances of a New England village⁴ but also to the unfulfilling, barren marriage in which her husband Ethan Frome, remains inefficient, weak and taciturn. In other words, she is meticulously framed as a villain by the male narrator, who sympathizes with Ethan Frome when he sees him at the post-office: “he was the most striking figure in Starkfield” (*EF*, 33). From the very beginning, the narrator makes his masculine partiality clear, but I argue that Zeena Frome deserves a closer reading to reveal the hidden/untold story of her version as opposed to his.⁵

To begin with, it would be helpful to look at the introductory passage where the reader follows mostly what Harman Gow and Mrs. Ned Hale (Ruth Varnom), the main sources of information for the narrator, convey about the main characters of the story: Ethan Frome, Zeena Frome and her cousin Mattie Silver who has come to Frome Farm to take care of Zeena and the house. Gow - a retired stagecoach driver who develops “the tale as far as his mental and moral reach” allows - is a primary

source of information whose facts, the narrator candidly admits, show “perceptible gaps...” (*EF*, 36). His second source, Mrs. Hale (Ruth Vernum), the landlady of the narrator, has a mind “like a store-house of innocuous anecdote” and “any question about her acquaintances” brings forth “a volume of detail”; “but on the subject of Ethan Frome”, as the narrator relates, “she is unexpectedly reticent” (*EF*, 36); he finds “no hint of disapproval in her reserve” but only “an insurmountable reluctance to speak of him of his affairs” (*EF*,36). Hence, the narrator feels compelled to fill in the gaps according to his own judgment, in order to grasp the deeper meaning of the story: the inarticulateness, reticence and silence of rural New Englanders. ⁶

In the introductory passage, Zeena Frome enters the novel first through her name, then her poor health and lastly her career as a professional nurse. Right after Ethan Frome is introduced to the reader through his physical deformity as “the ruin of a man” (*EF*, 33) with the “red gash branded across his forehead” ⁷ (*EF*, 33), his wife, Zeena Frome’s name appears, described as on “an envelope addressed to Mrs. Zenobia—or Mrs. Zeena—Frome, and usually bearing conspicuously in the upper left-hand corner the address of some manufacturer of patent medicine and the name of *his specific*” (A treatment aimed at a particular symptom, ailment or part of the body) (*EF*, 33). At this point, it is not clear who is under medication, the husband or the wife or somebody else, and as the narrator mistakenly guesses since *the smash-up* “they’ve had to care for him (Ethan) (*EF*, 34); however, Harman Gow corrects him stating that “it’s always Ethan done the caring” (*EF*, 34) leaving both the unnamed narrator and the reader confused and curious about the true story of the Fromes.

It would be also useful to mention that from the very beginning of the novel, one cannot help noticing the obvious allusions to Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864). In the first draft of her story as a 1907 French exercise, Wharton sketched a love

triangle consisting of a young farmer called Hart, his wife Anna and her cousin Mattie. In 1910, she renamed the married couple after two of Hawthorne's characters. *Ethan Brand: A Chapter from an Abortive Romance* (1851) begins life in a small Berkshire village like Frome's Starkfield; after spending nearly twenty years traveling in search of the Unpardonable Sin, the protagonist, Ethan Brand, realizes that he has found the Unpardonable Sin in his own heart and commits suicide by throwing himself into the fire. As many critics would agree, Wharton's young farmer, Hart, became Ethan Brand who achieved what Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver unsuccessfully attempt at the climax of *Ethan Frome*.

As for the name Anna, Wharton favors the name Zeena/Zenobia who also finds herself part of a love triangle with a noticeably younger and prettier woman in Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Here Zenobia, an advocate of women's equality, devotes great energy to the utopian project and looks confidently to a future with the community's leader, Hollingsworth. However, when Hollingsworth rejects her unexpectedly in favor of her shy younger sister, Zenobia leaves Blithedale Farm in grief and drowns herself in the river. Zeena Frome - who has none of her fictional predecessor's achievements - does not kill herself either upon discovering her husband's love for her alluring cousin Mattie, whose name signifies light; rather she is forced to look after two crippled figures as the end of the novel reveals.⁸ It is noteworthy to point out that the figures Wharton chose from Hawthorne's romances both take their own lives as if foreshadowing the tragic end of her own characters in *Ethan Frome*.

Right after her name and poor health are introduced to the reader, Zeena is described as a professional nurse who “has always been the greatest hand at doctoring in the county” (*EF*, 37) as Harman Gow informs the narrator. When Ethan’s mother “got queer and dragged along for years as weak as a baby” (*EF*, 37), it was Zenobia Pierce who “came over the next valley to help him nurse her” (*EF*, 63) till her death. When the narrator hires Ethan to drive him to the train that he takes to the power plant every day, he hopes to hear what he would say: however, there is not much progression in their intimacy in spite of their daily contact. The narrator informs: “He never turned his face to mine, or answered, except in monosyllables, the questions I put, or such slight pleasantries as I ventured” (*EF*, 37). Intrigued with the unspeaking Ethan Frome more and more, the narrator hopes to penetrate to his hidden past and character with a biochemistry book he left accidentally in the sleigh. When Frome returns the book to the narrator, he loans the book to Frome, but still they go back to the “usual silence” (*EF*, 38) disappointing the narrator once again in his attempts for conversation and communication.

The day that the narrator seeks comes when the narrator is forced to take shelter in Frome’s house during a storm: “It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story” (*EF*, 42). When the narrator follows Ethan “into a low unlit passage” marked by “a line of light,” the prologue ends leaving both narrator and reader again in suspense, wondering whether the “woman’s voice droning querulously” (*EF*, 42) heard by the narrator outside the kitchen door is Zeena’s or not. As one can easily conclude here there is not much information provided about either Ethan or Zeena Frome; however, it is obvious that the narrator is very much intrigued with the possible “combinations of obstacles” that “have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome” (*EF*, 35) while “most of the

smart ones get away” (*EF*, 34) as Gow commented earlier. Therefore, the narrator needs some explanation of an obstacle or somebody to hold accountable for Ethan’s failure to leave Starkfield and pursue his dreams and attain his goals. The narrator forms his vision with a few sparse threads of hearsay and his own imagination; when the story is revealed, it is clear that Zeena, the wife, is *framed* to be held responsible for Ethan’s disappointments and failure in life.

According to the Collins English dictionary, “*frame-up*” means “a conspiracy to incriminate someone on a false charge” while the Macmillian Dictionary defines it as “a situation in which someone tries to make an innocent person seem guilty of a crime, by lying or by producing false evidence.” This thematic idea is reproduced in the structure of the narrative: *Ethan Frome* was written as a frame story which means that the prologue and the epilogue constitute a “frame” around the main story. The frame here is the narrator’s vision of the tragedy that befalls *Ethan Frome*; the framed story takes place nearly twenty years after the events of the main story and is written in first person, revealing the thoughts and feelings of the narrator. The main story describes the three and a half days before and including Ethan and Mattie’s sledding accident and is written in the third person - an omniscient narration and allows Wharton relate the thoughts and feelings of all the characters.

The broken ellipses Wharton employs throughout the novella not only punctuate the novel but also they frame the vision of the narrator, presented to the reader as the story of *Ethan Frome*. At the end of the prologue, where the male narrator is standing on the threshold of the *Frome* kitchen, there are fifty-six ellipses which take up nearly three full lines and thirty three ellipses before the concluding chapter. One can here argue that the elliptically marked spaces between the prologue and the concluding chapter might indicate the events that remain unknown or

unrecorded, in other words, the untold story of the characters on the Frome Farm including Zeena Frome. By means of ellipses, Wharton seems to be inviting the reader to take an active role in discourse with the text, to question the narrator's perspective and the world from which he has constructed the characters' lives and roles as there are other stories to be told, other perspectives not given voice in this text.⁹

1.2 Zeena, you are already an old woman!

Consistent with the negative suspicions entertained in the prologue, in the framed story, the male narrator provides an appalling physical description of Zeena as if to justify the unfulfilled affair between her husband and her cousin who is portrayed as younger and much prettier throughout the novel:

Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins (*EF*, 55).

This is the strongest physical description of Zeena Frome from the end of Chapter Two where Ethan and Mattie come home from the church dance and find the door locked. Here, Zeena is portrayed as tall, unfeminine, dried-up, overly thin, all hard angles with protruding bones and flat breasts. One can easily notice that she is described as being devoid of any curves and images of fertility and sexuality, in other

words, of all romantic allure. However, as the reader learns at the end of Chapter Three, “she was but seven years her husband's senior, and he was only twenty-eight, she was already an old woman” (*EF*, 60) who “always went to bed as soon as she had had her supper” and lie “in their bedroom asleep, her mouth slightly open, her false teeth in a tumbler by the bed... (*EF*, 55, Wharton’s ellipses); moreover, as the narrative vision reveals, when she is asleep, “not a sound was audible but Zeena’s asthmatic breathing” (*EF*, 57).

It is obvious that her unattractiveness and premature agedness seem to contribute to the sharp opposition between Zeena and Mattie.¹⁰ In the narrative of the vision, Zeena is *pictured* as old, cold, and unappealing; she is a woman prone to long silences: “when she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to remedy” (*EF*, 64); hence, her voice is described as an obnoxious “flat whine” (*EF*, 47). On the other hand, Mattie Silver is a picture of youthful vigor and beauty, with a sparkling personality and name to match. At this point one cannot help noticing that her surname associated with feminine energy is suggestive of luster (reflecting light; glitter; sparkle; sheen or gloss) which attracts not only Ethan Frome from the very moment they encountered at the station but also Denis Eady, the son of the rich Irish grocer (*EF*, 45).

When Zeena leaves town overnight to see a doctor the next morning, Ethan fantasizes about an evening alone with Mattie. Approaching his house on the same evening, he sees “a light twinkling in the house above him” (*EF*, 67) and imagines her preparing herself for dinner. When he finds the door locked, he rattles the handle “violently” (*EF*, 67) and then stands “in the darkness expecting to hear her step” (*EF*, 68); he even calls out her name with joy: “Hello Matt!” (*EF*, 68). Obviously here the scene of the previous night is repeated, to strengthen the sharp contrast between

Zeena, the undesirable wife and Mattie, the glowing young cousin. Even Ethan cannot help noticing that “the incidents of the previous evening were repeating themselves that he half expected, when he heard the key turn, to see his wife before him on the threshold” (*EF*, 68); when the door opens, it is Mattie who faces him:

She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. Then, striking upward, it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows (*EF*, 68).

As seen above, the narrative stresses the image of Mattie as a young and attractive woman who arouses passion especially when she wears a red scarf or puts a red ribbon on her hair. In contrast to Zeena’s infertility, she is described even *as* “milky” befitting the overall intention of the biased male narrator who is looking through Ethan’s lustful eyes. In Chapter Two, she wears the red scarf at the dance and afterwards while walking home with Ethan and then in Chapter Four, when Mattie and Ethan have a romantic dinner in Zeena’s absence: “through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon” which “transformed and glorified her” and thus she “seemed to Ethan taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion” (*EF*, 68). As the narrative vision relates, while Ethan thinks Mattie's hair is one of her most beautiful features representing beauty, love and sexuality, Zeena’s hair is visualized as “always crimped and confined with pins,” just as she constrains Ethan through their marriage and the constant expenses of her illness. However, here her hair being “always crimped and confined with pins” represents her imprisonment in Frome Farm where

she had to lead an isolated life, away from the rest of the town or other towns, in other words, from the rest of the world. One can also further claim that considering her childless union with Ethan, her hair might be emblematic of her repressed femininity in her loveless marriage.

The physical description of Zeena not only stresses ugliness and agedness, it also evokes “sickness” and even “death”. When the narrative draws attention to the “fantastically” exaggerated “hollows and prominences” in her face, its “ring of crimping-pins,” he seems to be portraying the picture of a skull, with its gaping eye sockets and its streamlined silhouette of a head. Hence, according to the narrator’s version of the story, Zeena represents coldness and infertility in opposition to the robust sexuality and fertility abundant in Mattie, but also she *is framed* as the picture of death itself, in opposition to life in general, befitting Ethan’s wish for his wife’s death. As we shall see, the sources of Zeena’s illness are hidden in the Frome Farm as the history of Fromes, provided by the male narrative vision reveals in Chapter Four.

1.3 Wish you were dead, Zeena!

In Chapter Two, as Ethan is returning to the farmhouse with Mattie in his arms, he fantasizes about the death of his wife: “A dead cucumber-vine dangled from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death, and the thought flashed through Ethan's brain: ‘If it was there for Zeena—’ ”(*EF*, 54, Wharton’s dash). Here the dead cucumber-vine which makes Ethan imagine Zeena’s death also emphasizes the infertility and barrenness the narrator attributes to Zeena, the wife, who is responsible for Ethan’s “bleak and unapproachable” face (*EF*, 33).¹¹ In the same scene, while trying to find some kind of explanation for the disappearance of the key

from its usual place, “another wild thought tore through him. What if tramps had been there—what if...?” (*EF*, 55, Wharton’s ellipses). When he kneels “on a level with the lower panel of the door,” he catches “a faint ray of light beneath it” and wonders “Who could be stirring in that silent house?” (*EF*, 55). He hears “a step on the stairs, and again for an instant the thought of tramps tore through him” (*EF*, 55). Obviously, Ethan imagines that the tramps might have killed Zeena but to his disappointment, “then the door opened and he saw his wife” (*EF*, 55).

Considering the appalling physical appearance, as quoted earlier, the contrast between Zeena and Mattie, the woman he has been watching admiringly all the way home, is rather shocking: “To Ethan, still in the rosy haze of his hour with Mattie, the sight came with the intense precision of the last dream before waking. He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like” (*EF*, 55). Zeena without speaking lets them into the kitchen, “which had the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night” (*EF*, 56); here once again Zeena is associated with coldness and death befitting the overall intention of the narrator to perfectly justify Ethan’s desire to cheat on his wife. Then it is clear that, quite rightfully, trapped with an undesirable spouse, Ethan is longing to get rid of his wife, Zeena, so that he can marry young and fertile Mattie Silver and live happily ever after. As seen in the scene where Ethan passes the Frome Graves-stones with Mattie, after the church dance, he even dreams about Mattie lying happily ever after beside him in the Frome graveyard: “We’ll always go on living here together, and some day she’ll lie there beside me” (*EF*, 54), which in a way foreshadows Mattie’s fate as dying in Frome Farm entrapped in isolation and misery.

When Ethan contemplates the meaning of the gravestones and his imprisonment in Frome Farm, it is clear that he has always desired change and freedom: “We never got away—how should you?” seemed to be written on every headstone; and whenever he went in or out of his gate he thought with a shiver: “I shall just go on living here till I join them” (*EF*, 54); but now that he is in love with Mattie Silver, he sees his surrounding in a brand new way. All his desires, hopes and aspirations seem to vanish since “all his life was lived in the sight and sound of Mattie Silver ”and“ he could no longer conceive of its being otherwise” (*EF*, 49) as Mattie with her “kindled face” and “laughter” which “sparkles though her lashes” (*EF*, 68) is the source of life for Ethan. However, Zeena described only “an oppressive reality” is doomed to fade “into an insubstantial shade” (*EF*, 49) and should disappear completely leaving the two of them alone. Therefore, it requires an effort for Ethan to turn his eyes to his wife as he keeps “looking at Mattie while Zeena talked to him” (*EF*, 60) like in the scene where Zeena is sitting at the table in her best dress, with a small piece of luggage at her side, determined to set off for Bettsbridge to visit a new doctor and spend the night with her Aunt Martha Pierce.

1.4 “I’m a great deal sicker than you think”

The male narrator *frames* Zeena as a woman who “had always been what Starkfield called ‘sickly’”, and always “needed the help of a stronger arm” ¹² (*EF* 47), which makes the reader suspicious of her being a hypochondriac; however, in order to understand the “sickliness” or “queerness” which Zeena is beginning to exhibit, it would be useful to trace the history of the Fromes provided by the narrative vision in Chapter Four. When “Zenobia Pierce came over from the next valley to help him

(Ethan) nurse her (Ethan's mother)", "human speech was heard again in the house" (*EF*, 63). To Ethan, "Zeena's volubility was music in his ears" especially "after the mortal silence of his long imprisonment" (*EF*, 63). One can deduce here that there must have been some time when Ethan and Zeena enjoyed each other's company and had mutual feelings of love and compassion. There must have been even a time when Ethan fixed the house to please Zeena and to make the farmhouse nicer, as the scene where Ethan asks Andrew Hale for a small payment for his delivery of a load of wood reveals, right after Zeena leaves for Bettsbridge. When Hale politely refuses, explaining his own financial constraints - one of which is fixing a house for his son Ned and his fiancé Ruth - he reminds Ethan that "it's not so long ago since you fixed up your own place for Zeena" (*EF*, 66) as "the young people like things nice" (*EF*, 66).

According to the narrator's version of the Frome story, after the funeral, when Ethan sees Zeena preparing to go away, he does not want to be left alone to spend another silent winter on the farm and proposes to Zeena "before he knew what he was doing" (*EF*, 63). Ethan often thinks "it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter..." (*EF*, 63); At this moment it is worth mentioning that all the action in the story unfolds in the fierce cold of the winter season with frozen layers of snow and ice, which can be seen as an expression/reflection of the "buried lives" due to the limitations of the rural life in Starkfield; therefore, associated with death, silence, immobility and isolation, the winter season may also reflect the "inner lives" of the characters in the story. On the other hand, the spring season may refer to the themes of awakening, renewal, rebirth and hope. One can argue that Ethan might have found the power, energy for a fresh start if his mother had died in spring but not in winter, which separates and isolates him from the rest of the world. One

also wonders whether Zeena - 28 years old and lacking beauty and prospects - felt in the same way, marriage often being the only way in which a woman with little or no income could provide a home for herself; there may not have been a better option but to marry Ethan and secure a kind of shelter in the long winters of New England villages. Likewise, if it had been spring, Zeena might have also been filled with feelings of hope and have continued her life as a professional nurse traveling from one place rather than stuck with a husband who is constantly worried about money due to a failing farm and mill.

Soon after she gets married, Zeena may have come to realize that Frome Farm compared to her own home town is far from a shelter or a true home in which she can happily live ever after, but rather a prison in which she feels confined like her hair, “always crimped and confined with pins” (*EF*, 55): “Zeena’s native village was slightly larger and nearer to the railway than Starkfield, and she had let her husband see from the first that life on an isolated farm was not what she had expected when she married” (*EF*, 64). The fact that Zeena’s hometown is “a bit larger and nearer to the railway” (*EF*, 64) suggests that it might have been easier for Zeena to travel and nurse sick people when necessary as in the case of Ethan’s mother. It also implies her relatively greater sophistication and autonomy expressed by freedom of motion, which may indicate that Zeena actually married beneath herself in accepting Ethan. It is clear that Zeena, as a professional woman, had “expectations” from her marriage which were nonetheless unfulfilled: a place like Frome Farm and its oppressive rural conditions turn lively women like Ethan’s mother (her name is never revealed) or Zeena Pierce sullen and vindictive.

After his father passed away, as Harman Gow informs the narrator in the introductory passage, Ethan's mother also fell victim to "queerness," and "the sound of her voice was seldom heard, though she had not lost the power of speech" (*EF*, 63). When Ethan remembers "his mother's growing taciturnity," he cannot help noticing Zeena's turning "queer" as well since he "himself knew of certain lonely farm-houses in the neighborhood where stricken creatures pined, and of others where sudden tragedy had come of their presence" (*EF*, 64).¹³ As the narrator also speculates: "perhaps it was the inevitable effect of life on the farm" (*EF*, 64) where the land is under siege throughout long winters, separating its residents from the rest of the town, and the rest of the world.

As already mentioned above, from the limited male narrative perspective, Zeena is *framed* as a "sick" woman who "would have suffered a complete loss of identity" if she had ever lived "in the greater cities which attracted Ethan" (*EF*, 64); however, one can speculate that being accustomed to living in a town nearer to the railway, Zeena indeed must have been more familiar with city life compared to her husband and she must indeed "have suffered a complete loss of identity" when she had to lead a life of isolation and frustration in the Frome farmhouse, which also explains why "she chose to look down on Starkfield" (*EF*, 64), as the narrator relates. Perhaps for the same reason, because of the oppressive conditions of a farm in New England, Ethan has always longed to get out of Starkfield like "most of the smart ones," become an engineer and live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and "fellows doing things" (*EF*, 63). In the narrator's view, "Ethan felt sure that, with a "smart" wife like Zeena, it would not be long before he had made himself a place in it" (*EF* 64) and continue his studies interrupted by his father's sudden death and his mother's illness afterwards. On the other hand, Zeena, who is smarter and

more experienced than her husband, may have realized the impossibility of paying off the heavy mortgage on the farm “resulting from Mrs. Frome's long illness” since “purchasers were slow in coming” and there was no way for them to realistically consider moving. Therefore, one can argue that Zeena should not be the one to be held responsible for Ethan’s failure in getting out of Starkfield, and achieving his dreams and goals in life. It is even possible to say that being dragged into the Frome farm by Ethan, Zeena is victimized and “buried under” the lonely conditions of frozen Starkfield.

As the male narrator relates, when Zeena “came to take care of Ethan’s mother she was like the very genius of health” (*EF*, 63), but when Zeena becomes Ethan's wife, she becomes bitter, taciturn and spiteful. As a professional nurse, Zeena “... had at her fingers’ ends the pathological chart of the whole region” and could cite many cases of the kind “while she was nursing his mother” (*EF*, 64). Yet “within a year of their marriage”, she herself develops the “sickliness” which “had made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances” (*EF*, 64). The fact that Zeena falls into sickness in a year’s time also suggests that she might not have been able to get pregnant and nurse her own child, which may have caused her to be “wholly absorbed in her own health” (*EF*, 60), as Ethan thinks. It is possible to speculate here that Zeena’s deepening discontent within a barren/childless marriage on a failing farm may have ended in losing her health; consequently she may have been forced to seek patent remedies as well as make expensive visits to doctors in Bettsbridge. It is true that not only does she collect medical opinions from doctors, relatives and neighbors but also she doses herself with quantities of various patent medicines before bed and after meals. As a woman whose vitality is gone, Zeena cannot bear any children and cannot find fulfillment in life under the circumstances; now all she could do is obsess

about “doctoring”, hence the book she was reading over breakfast entitled *Kidney Troubles and Their Cure* (EF, 98).

One can also argue that her premature ageing, obvious infertility and loss of teeth might have been indications of some illness, in other words, some “complications” such that “any regular doctor would want [her] to have an operation” as Dr. Buck in Bettsbridge informs Zeena (EF, 82). In the narrative vision, Ethan also acknowledges that it is widespread to have “troubles” but “only the chosen had “complications” which “was in most cases, a death-warrant” as “people struggled on for years with “troubles,” but they almost always succumbed to “complications” (EF, 81). It may be true that she is accustomed - as her husband accuses her - to attracting his attention through reminders of her poor health, and her physical symptoms. However, when Zeena shares the bad news about her deteriorating health with her husband, “her words fell on his ear with a strange shock of wonder. He had often heard her pronounce them before—what if at last they were true?” (EF, 81) It is possible to conclude that there are some physical signs of illness that cannot be seen as a result of her hypochondria or exaggeration, especially when her unfeminine, dried-up, overly thin physical appearance is taken into consideration.

Damaged by the isolation and frustration of her days on a remote farm, Zeena falls into silence “perhaps, as she sometimes said, it was because Ethan ‘never listened’ ” (EF, 64). As the narrative vision informs, “the charge was not wholly unfounded” because “when she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to remedy” (EF, 64). Here one can suspect that Zeena must have gradually become discontented within her barren/childless marriage; at first Ethan “had first formed the habit of not answering her”, and then “finally of thinking of other things while she talked” (EF, 64), which must have forever destroyed the

possibility of any communication between them. Therefore, as the narrator also suspects, her silence deliberately seemed “to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess” (*EF*, 64), which makes Ethan feel more disturbed than her turning “queer” (*EF*, 64). Her feelings seem to be beyond male comprehension, and Ethan cannot imagine what her suspicions and resentments are, which also demonstrates the limitations of the male narrator.

1.5 “I guess you're always late, now you shave every morning”

Aware of the rural conditions on Frome Farm, Zeena suggests, when Mattie came to live with them, that “some chance of amusement” such as the dance night at the church “should be put in her (Mattie’s) way” “not to let her feel too sharp a contrast between the life she had left and the isolation of a Starkfield farm” (*EF*, 45). To this end, Zeena who sent her husband to fetch home Mattie “on the rare evenings when some chance of amusement drew her to the village” (*EF*, 45) “had never shown any jealousy of Mattie” (*EF*, 47) but lately she started to “grumble increasingly over the housework and found oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl’s inefficiency” (*EF*, 47). After some time, Zeena may have become suspicious of her husband’s secret feelings for Mattie who is not only quite “forgetful” and “dreamy” (*EF*, 47) but also does not have any talent or training for housekeeping. As a result, Mattie is constantly supported by Ethan who “did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire, carrying in the wood overnight, and neglecting the mill for the farm that he might help her about the house

during the day” (*EF*, 47). Interestingly one can easily observe that Ethan is the more “domestic” of the two women in the house.

The fact that Ethan neglects the mill for the farm might have been sufficient for Zeena to deduce that her husband has been completing many of Mattie’s chores. As the narrative vision reveals at the end of Chapter One, there is even one day when Zeena “had surprised him at the churn and had turned away silently, with one of her queer looks” (*EF*, 47) as he is in the habit of creeping down on Saturday nights “to scrub the kitchen floor after the women had gone to bed” (*EF*, 47). One can conclude here that Zeena, who has now been aware of her husband’s obvious infatuation with Mattie, might have started experiencing feelings of insecurity, anxiety, fear, sleeplessness and depression, as a result of which she cannot sleep all night as she tells Ethan when he is back home with Mattie arm in arm: “I just felt so mean I couldn’t sleep” (*EF*, 56).

Therefore, Zeena’s unexpected decision of departure for a doctor in Bettsbridge can be seen as an attempt to seek a way to get rid of Mattie before it is too late for her marriage. Mistakenly, Ethan is unable even to suspect his wife of having an ulterior motive and simply assumes that Zeena must truly need medical attention: “He had now no doubt that Zeena had spoken the truth in saying, the night before, that she had sat up because she felt “too mean” to sleep: her abrupt resolve to seek medical advice showed that, as usual, she was wholly absorbed in her health” (*EF*, 60). Instead of suspecting any motive other than her sickness, Ethan is occupied with calculations that “showed Ethan that Zeena could not be back at the farm before the following evening....” (*EF*, 60 Wharton’s own ellipses). In the meantime, trying to justify her decision to visit a doctor, Zeena expresses the pain she has been suffering: “All I know is...I can't go on the way I am much longer” (*EF*, 60), which can also refer to

her emotional suffering due to her suspicions of her husband as well as unfulfilled expectations of her marriage.

Ethan displays indifference towards his wife and lacks any genuine sympathy; he “hardly heard what she was saying” (*EF*, 60) because “there was only one thought in his mind: the fact that, for the first time since Mattie had come to live with them, Zeena was to be away for a night. He wondered if the girl were thinking of it too....” (*EF*, 60 Wharton’s ellipses). Here Ethan proves that Zeena was right when she was complaining about him “not listening” but “thinking of other things while she talked” (*EF*, 64). Moreover, instead of taking her to the station himself, he prefers to lie about his collecting a direct cash payment from Andrew Hale upon his delivery of a load of wood that afternoon so as to avoid a long ride with his wife. One can guess that it would be impossible for a smart woman like Zeena not to notice her husband’s obvious infatuation with Mattie and not act against it. The ellipses employed by Wharton frequently as mentioned earlier seem to remind the reader of the fact that the deeper story lies in the gaps, the story of the secret sufferer, Zeena Frome, the wife who is held responsible for Ethan’s disappointments and failure in life.

One can say that getting gradually suspicious of her husband’s attraction to Mattie, Zeena has been planning to send Mattie away for some time. As the narrative vision reveals earlier, Zeena seems to be in the habit of “letting things happen without seeming to remark on them” (*EF*, 48) and then, “weeks afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inferences” (*EF*, 49). For instance, Ethan remembers the morning when Zeena who observed him shaving in the mornings and suggests that they would need to hire a new girl for housekeeping if Mattie married Denis Eady, the son of the rich Irish grocer, reveals: “the doctor don’t want I should be left without anybody to do for me” (*EF*, 47). That Zeena

mentions a possible marriage between Denis Eady and Mattie while watching her husband shaving may serve a number of purposes. Firstly, she might have been testing Ethan to see whether he really cares about Mattie or not. Secondly, she might have been reminding Ethan that Mattie is staying with them temporarily, and as a young single woman she will find a husband and leave them eventually. In both cases, Zeena might be suggesting that there will be a hired girl to replace Mattie who is bound to leave the farm one day.

To Ethan, what is more disturbing, even frightening, than “any vague insinuations about Denis Eady” (*EF*, 48) is the fact that Zeena has noticed his shaving every day “since Mattie Silver's coming”: “I guess you're always late, now you shave every morning” (*EF*, 48) although “she always seemed to be asleep when he left her side in the winter darkness” (*EF*, 48). Here for the first time Ethan realizes that Zeena is aware of everything that goes on around her “but he had stupidly assumed that she would not notice any change in his appearance” (*EF*, 49). The fact that Ethan has started shaving since Mattie came also indicates his indifference to his wife, which might be one of her resentments, as the male narrative finds impossible to guess. Instead of confronting Ethan openly over his feelings for Mattie, Zeena might prefer to make use of a combination of her “sickness” and Mattie’s inefficiency in housekeeping in order to get rid of her and save her marriage.

To this end, after she comes back from Bettbridge, Zeena announces her intention of replacing Mattie with a hired girl, which starts “the first scene of open anger between the couple in their sad seven years together” (*EF*, 83). In this scene, Zeena is *framed* as a mean, callous woman who kicks her poor cousin Mattie out of the house although she knows very well that Mattie - whose parents died and left her with no money - has nowhere to go. It is clear that increasingly in the narrator’s

vision, Zeena appears to be the obstacle that has blocked all of Ethan's goals: "All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way" (*EF*, 86). Moreover, as the narrator relates, for Ethan, she is "no longer the listless creature who lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an *evil energy* secreted from the long years of silent brooding" (*EF*, 85 my emphasis). Here, one can also observe that not only does the narrator demonize Zeena who wants to kick her poor cousin out, but he also visualizes her as an "evil force" and even like a witch when her laughter is described as an "odd unfamiliar sound—he (Ethan) did not remember ever having heard her laugh before" (*EF*, 84).

Considering the fact that Zeena has a black cat also contributes to the narrator's framing Zeena as an "evil energy" as black cats are usually associated with witchcraft. The cat representing Zeena's *invisible presence* in the house serves as a force that reminds Ethan and Mattie of her existence.¹⁴ In this scene, the cat as if a supernatural extension of Zeena, first, causes Mattie to almost trip over it (*EF*, 68) and then, it "jumped between them into Zeena's empty chair" (*EF*, 69) when they sit for their meal; after causing the pickle dish to be broken, "the cat, ... jumped up into Zeena's chair, rolled itself into a ball, and lay watching them with narrowed eyes" (*EF*, 72) near the fire. When animals narrow their eyes, it is to determine distance to their prey, which serves an aggressive purpose and the cat staring at them silently with *narrowed eyes* can be interpreted as an expression of evaluating the unusual situation – the *tete-a-tete* romantic dinner between Ethan and Mattie - and even disapproval of their obvious mutual infatuation for one another.

Therefore, the cat jumps out of Zeena's rocker to "dart a mouse in the wainscot and as a result of the sudden movement the empty chair had set up *a spectral rocking*" (EF, 75), which makes Ethan realize that the evening has been like a dream; that Zeena "will be rocking in it herself this time tomorrow"; this is "as painful as the return to consciousness after taking an anesthetic" (EF, 75) as the narrative vision relates. One can here argue that not only the cat but also Zeena's rocking-chair contributes to the framing vision of the narrative in which Zeena is also associated with some kind of mysterious evil force and specter. Accordingly, after the meal when Mattie sits on Zeena's rocking-chair, "Ethan had a momentary shock" as when Mattie's head "detached itself against the patchwork cushion that habitually *framed* his wife's gaunt countenance", "it was almost the other face, the face of the superseded woman had obliterated that of the intruder" (EF, 72), which could be interpreted as a foreshadowing on Mattie's destiny who will spend the rest of her life on the very same chair as an invalid.¹⁵

The prejudiced point of view in the narrative vision is also obvious in the negative way that Zeena's cushion is described. After the first open fight between Ethan and Zeena, Ethan lays down on the sofa in his cold study: "under his cheek he felt a hard object with strange protuberances" (EF, 92), which "was a cushion which Zeena had made for him when they were engaged" (EF, 92). It is obvious here that even the cushion Zeena made for Ethan is visualized as uncomfortable and irritating, befitting Ethan's feelings for his wife whereas Mattie's pin-cushion is portrayed as "pretty" (EF, 98) like its owner. When Ethan realizes that the "hard" cushion under his cheek is Zeena's, he throws "it across the floor" (EF, 92), which symbolizes his growing dislike and rejection of Zeena. Here once again, the contrast between Zeena, the undesirable wife and Mattie, the pretty young cousin is underlined to justify

Ethan's wish to divorce Zeena and run away with Mattie. Accordingly, after throwing the cushion across the room, Ethan remembers the story of a married man who runs away to the West with his lover, leaving his farm to his wife (*EF*, 92).

At this point it would be relevant to mention that throughout the framed story, the only moment where the narrator seems to sympathize with Zeena is the end of the pickle dish scene in which Zeena discovers the smashed pickle dish, her most treasured wedding gift, at the top of the china closet where she keeps it safe.¹⁶ To begin with, the color red is usually associated with love and passion¹⁷; the red pickle dish can be seen as a symbol for the love and passion that Zeena and Ethan shared once as a couple. Therefore, when it is shattered by the cat during the romantic dinner between Ethan and Mattie, as mentioned earlier, it seems to be signaling the end of their marriage, which is obviously devastating for Zeena. Upon discovering that her most treasured wedding gift is used by Mattie to “make the supper-table pretty”, she cannot help expressing her feelings of anger, disappointment and betrayal: “you waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use it, not even when the minister come to dinner, or Aunt Martha Pierce come over from Bettsbridge -” (*EF*, 90-91). It is clear that the extra effort Mattie has made to impress Ethan with a pretty table can be interpreted as an attempt to express her feelings of love and passion for him. Therefore, Zeena quite rightfully holds Mattie responsible for the breaking of both the pickle dish and her marriage: “You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it. It's the way your father begun, and I was warned of it when I took you, and I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em—and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all – ” (*EF*, 90)

At this point it would be true to say that contrary to the narrator's attempts to *frame* Zeena as a mean person who kicks her poor cousin out, one cannot help feeling sorry for her. She at last realizes that she should have listened to people long ago in order to preserve her marriage: "If I'd 'a' listened to folks, you'd 'a' gone before now, and this wouldn't 'a' happened" (*EF*, 90). Zeena "gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body..." (*EF*, 90). Here while Zeena mourns for the destruction of the dish, she is actually mourning over her shattered marriage as she has lost any chance of happiness with her husband and therefore all her dreams, expectations, and aspirations are shattered along with her marriage. It is also interesting that Zeena does not prefer to use the dish to make the table more attractive but instead she hides it away and keeps it in perpetual storage, which could be seen as another sign of feeling repressed as a wife. At this point one cannot help noticing that Zeena is trying to reserve her love to avoid being hurt as she is keenly aware of her aging, her loss of femininity and fertility.

1.6 "Why, where are you going Zeena?"

Within the limitations of the male narrative vision, it is still possible to argue that Zeena seems to be the strongest character in the story in spite of her negative portrayal including her "sickliness." To begin with, as already mentioned in the history of the Fromes, Zeena is known as quite competent in her profession as a nurse and when she comes over to the Frome farm to take care of Ethan's mother, she "seemed to understand his case at a glance" and she even "*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" (*EF*, 63). Upon Zeena's arrival on Frome Farm, she starts

demonstrating her capability in domestic life, appearing “to possess by instinct all the household wisdom that his long apprenticeship had not instilled in him” (*EF*, 63); thus, as the narrator suggests, Ethan’s “shaken balance” is “restored” by “obeying her orders” (*EF*, 63). Not only does Zeena seem to be competent in her profession as a nurse but also quite talented and even trained in housekeeping, she displays a powerful presence in the household, which made Ethan feel “shamed and dazzled” (*EF*, 63).

At this point, I argue that considering the traditional gender roles, Ethan proves to be inefficient, weak and inarticulate as a man as opposed to the competency, efficiency and smartness Zeena displays in various ways. As is obvious in the pickle-dish scene, Zeena seems able to express herself when she chooses, quite understands her situation, and exhibits an acute sense of observation. Therefore, compared to Ethan, she is a stronger character, a more solid force in the Frome household and in the frame story. On the other hand, Ethan is incapable of expressing his feelings, of understanding his own situation, and is rather stunted in his capacity for observation. He constantly dreams about his wishes, aspirations and longings but does not act to fulfill them. As the narrator also acknowledges, as already mentioned above, Ethan’s major failure is that he cannot get out of Starkfield like “most of the smart ones” (*EF*, 35). Instead he chooses to pretend “nothing happened” and blames his wife for his own failure and incapacity to act when it is necessary.

When Zeena wants to visit the new doctor at Bettsbridge, she simply informs Ethan in a “matter-of-fact tone” and leaves, which indicates again her powerful presence in Ethan’s life as she does what she likes to do whether Ethan approves or not. While Ethan and Mattie are having a romantic dinner in her absence in Chapter Five, Zeena’s dominance is obvious from the impact of her very name which “...

threw a chill between them”, or “... paralysed him”; lastly, “the name benumbed him again and once more he felt as if Zeena were in the room between them” (*EF*, 69) as the narrative vision relates. When Zeena is somewhat unexpectedly early back home from Bettsbridge again, she announces her intention to expel Mattie from the house. In this scene in Chapter Seven, Ethan characteristically finds himself unable to respond to the decision Zeena has made but he simply keeps saying that he does not have the money to pay the hired girl (*EF*, 83). Then Zeena exposes Ethan’s lie about the money he would get for the lumber he delivered the day before which causes him to feel weak and inefficient once again. As opposed to Zeena’s decisive attitude, Ethan seems to be delusional in that he tries to avoid reality by simply doing nothing and pretending nothing is going to happen at all.

Feeling powerless to oppose Zeena, Ethan tries to shame Zeena into agreeing to keep Mattie on as in: “you may forget she’s your kin but everybody else’ll remember it. If you do a thing like that what do you suppose folks’ll say of you?” (*EF*, 85), but Zeena, who always crafts her statements carefully, replies that people are already gossiping about him and Mattie, and that she should have let Mattie go long before. The effect of her comment on Ethan is “like a knife-cut across the sinews and he felt suddenly weak and powerless” (*EF*, 85) and he realizes now that he has been “mastered” (*EF*, 86) by Zeena. It would be true to say that Ethan feels as if he is stripped of the husbandly authority he feels he deserves; therefore, he “abhorred her” (*EF*, 86) ; yet, he cannot stand up for himself and Mattie.

Throughout the narrative vision, one can easily argue that Ethan remains passive, inarticulate and indecisive, but it is especially clear in this scene that he cannot take any action against Zeena although he thinks, Zeena “had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the

others” (*EF*, 86) and “for a moment such a flame of hate rose in him that it ran down his arm and clenched his fist against her” (*EF*, 86) hinting at potential physical violence. He even “took a wild step forward” (*EF*, 86) but his fury reverts to a state of passive “bewilderment” and “meekness”, retreating downstairs: ““You’re – you’re not coming down? He said in a bewildered voice” (*EF*, 86). Here Ethan is filled with emotional turmoil, blaming his wife for his recurring failure in life and for separating him from the only thing he cares about most; he ultimately proves weaker than his wife. His failed suicide attempt can be the only proactive move, which is more an expression of cowardice than of true courage since it is Mattie who proposes suicide on the icy hill *and* it’s the ultimate passive aggressive action.

One can here speculate that, in addition to her mental strength and articulateness, Zeena has always had the physical strength to take care of the chores of the household but prefers not to as slightly more sophisticated than Ethan, she may have wanted a girl at home to do the cooking and cleaning so that she could enjoy “doctoring” - reading her book in “her rocking-chair by the stove”, feeding her cat with leftovers and looking after the “geraniums” like her Aunt Martha Pierce does (*EF*, 95). However, quite tragically, as the secret sufferer of the frame story, Zeena ends up looking after both her husband who does not love her anymore and her paralyzed cousin Mattie.

1.7 “It’s a pity, though, ... that they’re all shut up there in that one kitchen”

In the concluding chapter, which starts with the narrator’s entering Frome’s kitchen, the description of the two women sitting so much alike that it is hard to tell which of them in the room has been speaking upon the men’s arrival. One of them,

“raised her tall bony figure from her seat” (*EF*, 111) to prepare the evening meal while the other, “much smaller and slighter” (*EF*, 111) remains seated in the corner by the stove as she is paralyzed. When the woman “from her cushioned niche” blames the other woman for having only just started the fire: “It's on'y just been made up this very minute. Zeena fell asleep and slept ever so long, and I thought I'd be frozen stiff before I could wake her up and get her to 'tend to it'” (*EF*, 111), the narrator recognizes the whining voice he has heard previously as the voice of the seated woman: “I knew then that it was she who had been speaking when we entered” (*EF*, 111). The tall woman comes back around to the table to set a pie in place “without appearing to hear the accusation brought against her” (*EF*, 112) and Frome introduces her to the narrator as his wife, Zeena Frome and then proceeds to introduce the seated woman as Miss Mattie Silver. One can say that at the end of the story it is rather shocking for the reader to find out that the woman complaining with a whining voice in the introductory passage turns out to be Mattie who “suffered too much” and “soured,” (*EF*, 114) as Mrs. Hale comments, but not Zeena who is “always cracky” according to the framed narrative. It is as if the unnamed male narrator is playing with the minds of the reader by not fulfilling their expectations but fooling with their set beliefs and prejudices, which contributes to the unreliability of the narrator.

As argued earlier, in the introductory passage Harmon Gow corrects the narrator's false assumption that “it's always Ethan done the caring” (*EF*, 34), leaving both the unnamed narrator and the reader confused and intrigued with the true story of the Fromes. However, in the concluding chapter Mrs. Hale reveals that that after the accident, “she's (Zeena's) had the strength given her to care for those two for over twenty years” (*EF*, 113) despite the fact that “she thought she couldn't even care for herself” (*EF*, 113). Therefore, it is actually Zeena who has been doing the caring for

the last twenty years but not Ethan, which also challenges the reliability of the main sources of the narrator.

As Mrs. Hale further informs the narrator: “when she (Zeena) heard o' the accident she came right in and stayed with Ethan over to the minister's, where they'd carried him. And as soon as the doctors said that Mattie could be moved, Zeena sent for her and took her back to the farm” (*EF*, 113). As many commentators would agree, Ethan lives a dream turned nightmare trapped with a bitter spouse he cannot escape and a crippled lover who resembles his complaining wife more each day. However, contrary to this vision, created by the narrator on purpose, I would argue that it is Zeena who had to spend the rest of her life not only with a crippled spouse who does not love her any more but also with her husband's paralyzed lover.

It is true that from the beginning till the end of the story, the reader never knows what Zeena Frome thinks or feels about Ethan Frome, her marriage or the farm on which she has been living since she got married (for the last seven years). Even after the suicidal accident Ethan and Mattie had, as Mrs. Hale, one of the sources of information for the narrator, states in the concluding passage: “I never knew myself what Zeena thought—I don't to this day. Nobody knows Zeena's thoughts” (*EF*, 113). Yet, a close reading would reveal Zeena as the secret sufferer of the Frome Story although she has been framed in a demonized representation, portrayed like a witch or a kind of evil force blocking Ethan's attempts to accomplish his dreams, aspirations and longings in life.

Zeena Frome, like her husband Ethan and her cousin Mattie, falls victim to the unrelenting conditions of New England villages, where people are hardened and beaten down by life. It would be true to point out that the name of the town, Starkfield, symbolizes the devastating and isolating effects of the harsh winters on the

land and the men who work the land.¹⁸ The isolation of New England farms seems to be particularly hard on women, who are confined to their houses with domestic chores, whereas the men have more opportunities to socialize when they are out on business. In *Ethan Frome*, the unnamed male narrator who encounters Ethan Frome at the post office feels intrigued with the story of Ethan's life and as a subjective tale-teller takes his side rather than the women he sees in the Frome Farm kitchen. Here I further argue that by employing an unnamed male narrator, Wharton seems to be criticizing the male point of view and perspective towards women not only in rural New England villages but also in portrayals of the rural life in literature. To this end, the narrator's gender rather than his name is revealed to the reader and his obvious unreliability seems to be contributing to this criticism.

NOTES

¹ In her work *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Carol Singley argues that *Ethan Frome* is an “important milestone” in Wharton’s career since it secures her reputation as an emerging American novelist on realism and naturalism. Especially Chapters 1 and 3 provide an insightful analysis of Wharton’s roles in the American literary traditions of Calvinism, transcendentalism, and modernism, as well as realism. See also *Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome: A Reference Guide* by Suzan Fournier for a thorough introduction to *Ethan Frome* and Wharton, which is a helpful companion to the novel illuminating the most important themes and symbols as well as analyzing its place in the American literary tradition.

² In her work, *A Feast of Words*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff also suggests that the text is the narrator’s story and his vision of *Ethan Frome* is a fantasy, a result of his own “private nightmare” of winter, impotence and death. 183. In the same work, Wolff points out the importance of the narrator in *Ethan Frome* by reflecting the function of art: “Not situation alone, nor narrator alone, but each illuminating the other; the situation filtered through the larger categories of a narrator’s consciousness (the author outside the work, controlling the delicate relation) –this is to be the subject of the work” 163. See also “Edith Wharton’s “Scheme of Construction” in *Ethan Frome: A Statement About Writing*” Muğla University Graduate School of Social Science, Fall, 2001 No 6 by Çiğdem Pala Pull for a discussion of the reasons Wharton might have had to choose an educated male narrator from upper-class for the narration of her story. 1-7

³ For the motives of the narrator’s representation of Zeena and Ethan, see “The Slippery Slope of Interpellation: Framing Hero and Victim in Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*” by Johanna M. Wagner and Marysa Demoor who assert that “the narrator as the law of the frame story—his vision— attempts to interpolate the two into subjects of his own choosing” as a result of which Ethan, the hero, is victimized by his wife Zeena. 419.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the setting in *Ethan Frome*, see also *Edith Wharton’s Social Register* by Claire Preston. 73-75; in his introduction to *American Naturalism*, Harold Bloom cites the setting of *Ethan Frome* as “a world where the will is impotent, and tragedy is always circumstantial” 15. See the note Stephen Crane wrote on Hamlin Garland’s copy of *Maggie*, quoted in Fournier: “It is inevitable that you will be greatly shocked by this book but continue please with all possible courage to the end. For it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory one makes room in Heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people” (March 1893), 137.

⁵ In her work, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton*, Pamela Knights also states that not only is the reader encouraged for interpretative participation but also she is invited “to speculate about the angle of vision and to picture other possible versions.” 81. She also concludes that “there are potentially as many different stories as there are readers; and, to any single approach, many possible facets.” 81.

⁶ In his work “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” Bernard argues that the lack of articulateness of her characters imposes certain difficulties on Wharton in revealing the story but she solves her difficulty by means of her use of imagery and symbolism: “It is in her use of imagery and symbolism that the depths of the story are to be found” and he divides the imagery and symbolism in three parts as “the compatibility of setting and character”, “the uses of light and dark”, and “the sexual symbol”. 179. See also “Theme and Symbol in Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*.” by Wook-Dong Kim. 677-94.

⁷ Singley compares the red gash on Frome’s forehead (his badge of ignominy) to the embroidered “A” which Hester Prynne wears in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. 113.

⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their work *No Man’s Land*, argue that the ironic contrast between Hawthorne’s *Zenobia* and Wharton’s *Zeena* illuminates *Ethan Frome*’s criticism of the limitations placed on the nineteenth-century American women. They state: “Thus, though Wharton does not explicitly examine “the woman question” in *Ethan Frome*, her novel implicitly points to an

issue which concerned many of her contemporaries: the issue of what women could realistically expect to attain and at what cost. Significantly, as the hope for a new future merged with revulsion against a contaminated past, and as the vision of a New Woman fused with horror at the traditional woman, much female-authored literature oscillated between extremes of exuberance and despair, between dreams of miraculous victory and nightmares of violent defeat.” 81.

⁹ For other discussions of the ellipses in *Ethan Frome*, see *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* by Elizabeth Ammons, 62; also see *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* by Candace Waid, 68-69; for a detailed exploration of the use of ellipses in the works of Wharton, see also “Edith Wharton’s Art of Ellipses” by Jean Frantz Blackall, 145-162.

¹⁰ For another discussion on younger and older woman rivalry, see *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton* by Pamela Knights. 82-84. See also *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* by Ammons who plots the contrasts onto fairy tale, seeing Mattie and her cousin Zeena as Snow-White and the witch. 66

¹¹ For a discussion on female barrenness and infertility in *Ethan Frome*, see *Edith Wharton's Letters From the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing*, Chapter Two (The Woman Behind the Door) by Candace Waid, 53-83.

¹² For a detailed discussion of Zeena Frome as the prime player of the sick role, see Mary D. Lagerwey, Mary D. Lagerwey-Voorman and Gerald E. Markle, “Edith Wharton's Sick Role” 121-134. For example, they point out the fact that for the past six years Zeena has constructed a complex sick role for herself which sets the parameters for her life and for the other two lives within the household. 123. When Zeena becomes aware of the mutual attraction between Ethan and Mattie, she claims the rights of her sick role to exert her only power; her doctor, as she claims, has told her to replace Mattie with a more competent housekeeper. 123.

¹³ In *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*, Judith Fryer also invites the reader to envisage the wife’s tragedy: “imprisoned on an isolated farm, with only the taciturn and inarticulate Ethan for company” 182. In her novel, *Zeena* (1996), Elizabeth Cooke also takes the reader back a decade or so before Wharton begins her story and seeks answers for some of the questions regarding her background, marriage and life before and after the accident.

¹⁴ In his article, “Ethan Frome: Structure and Metaphor,” J. X. Brennan treats Zeena’s cat as the “watchful surrogate” of her mistress: “In its cunning, cruelty, and languid domesticity the cat indeed is the perfect representative of its mistress.” 353.

¹⁵ When Ethan sees Zeena’s face in Mattie, as Knights argues, it is foreshadowing of the locked-up characters who are drawn into repeated cycles of suffering”. 84.

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, in her introduction to *Ethan Frome*, interprets the unused wedding gift – the red glass pickle dish hidden on the top-shelf of the china closet - as the symbol of Zeena’s unconsummated marriage. Xxiii.

¹⁷ For more detailed information on the symbolism of the color red, see *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* by Michael Ferber. 169.

¹⁸ For a discussion on the symbolism of the setting in *Ethan Frome*, see also “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” by Kenneth Bernard. For example, Bernard points out the barren characterization of the village, Starkfield: “the village lies under a “sky of iron” and “points of the dipper over it hang “like icicles,” and Orion flashes “cold fires;” “the countryside is “gray and lonely” and each farmhouse is “mute and cold as a grave-stone”; “Frome unhappily married to Zeena, and pining for her cousin Mattie, is indeed parallel to the Starkfield setting”; “everything on the surface hard and frozen”. 179.

CHAPTER 2

An Angel or a Monster, Mattie Silver: *Ethan Frome*

2.1. “Where’d I go, if I did [leave]?”

As explained in the previous chapter, the novel’s narrative structure is established when a visiting engineer, who serves as Wharton’s unreliable, anonymous male narrator, encounters Ethan Frome at the post office, feels intrigued with the story behind his physical deformity and strives to learn more about him and the accident that left him lame twenty-four years ago.¹ When the narrator begins by stating he “put together this vision of his (Ethan’s) story” (*EF*, 42) complete with beginning, middle and end, it is clear that he knows the closure of the narrative: a “sickly” wife, Zeena, is caring for a paralyzed, homeless cousin, Mattie and a crippled husband, Ethan in the poverty-stricken Frome household after a “smash up” which had happened somewhere in the middle. Thus when the male narrator is forced to take shelter in Frome House during a blizzard at the end of the prologue, he naturally takes Ethan’s side rather than that of those same two women there in the kitchen, whom he subsequently marginalizes.

At this point one can easily speculate that neither Zeena Frome nor Mattie Silver is a center of interest in *Ethan Frome* as they are mostly excluded in the narration, which is an indirect criticism of female confinement/entrapment in

traditional roles, as well as of the limitations and expectations placed on women who are raised to become nothing more than domestic servants and companions for men in nineteenth-century American society.² An attractive young woman who has been recently orphaned, Mattie Silver is introduced as a weak, vulnerable person with few prospects for an independent existence outside marriage. Inefficient and unskilled, her growing desperation to remain on the farm may reflect more than her romantic attraction to Ethan Frome: she is aware that she is incapable of supporting herself in the modern city as she has already failed to earn her living in the Stamford store. It is also important to note that before the novel begins, Mattie is already a social outcast isolated both by the deaths of her parents and by the ill-will of relatives who mistreat her at the time when she needs support most. When forced to move in to help Zeena with the house chores, beyond the Fromes and church socials she has very little human contact and is financially dependent on the Fromes for existence.

I would argue that Mattie's economic dependence – in other words, her financial insecurity- has obvious narrative effects as she is not given an individual narrative section or point of view to articulate her own story; instead in the eyes of her admirer, she emerges vividly against the *infertility*, *sickness* and *ugliness* of the older Zeena who is also marginalized in the narrative. While the prejudiced male narrator frames Zeena Frome as a mean, grumpy and sickly figure who stops her husband from realizing his hopes, aspirations and dreams, he portrays Mattie Silver as a charming young woman full of joy and life with a sparkling personality and name to match. All the natural images and descriptions of Mattie seem to be filtered through the narrator's (in other words, Ethan's) consciousness: therefore, the reader follows how she must have appeared to Ethan and what she must have meant to him, but the reader does not see far into her character except when she speaks. Only towards the

end of the novel does Mattie appear to take control over her narrative, in the scene where she suggests suicide. Marginalized and underdrawn in the narrative – as indeed is Zeena - Mattie depends on Ethan's (and the narrator's) point of view for representation, which causes her to remain a mysterious character throughout the story.

The male narrator's perspective starts in Chapter One with Ethan Frome, young and vigorous, setting off to collect Mattie Silver, his wife's cousin, from a church dance in the village and return her safely home on a cold winter's night. It is crucial to note that the first two chapters portray Ethan as a figure preoccupied with *watching* "pretty and sparkling" Mattie Silver at a distance: in other words, one can argue that not only is Mattie dependent on Ethan's eyes for representation but also she is trapped in his gaze from the very beginning as we shall see. On his way to the church dance in Starkfield, Ethan seems to be eager for conversation with her on the two-mile walk back to the farm; however, he does not enter the brightly-lit church full of neighbors and friends when he reaches it; instead he positions himself near a window where he cannot be seen and remains in the shadows as "the hidden watcher" (*EF*, 51) *observing* as the dark haired girl with a red scarf leads a Virginia reel with Denis Eady, the Irish grocer's son whom he regards as rival.³

From his dark post, Ethan's jealousy intensifies quickly as he notes the gaiety of Mattie in motion: "her laughing panting lips, the cloud of dark hair about her forehead, and the dark eyes which seemed the only fixed points in a maze of flying lines" (*EF*, 45). At this point one can easily argue that the reader is also invited to share Ethan's admiration and voyeurism when Ethan even notices "two or three gestures which, in his fatuity, he had thought she kept for him: a way of throwing her head back when she was amused, as if to taste her laugh before she let it out, and a

trick of sinking her lids slowly when anything charmed or moved her” (*EF*, 47).⁴ This sight makes Ethan unhappy as he thinks the way she laughs and talks to Denis Eady is reserved only for him alone and “her gaiety seemed plain proof of indifference” (*EF*, 47) to his feelings but at the same time plain proof of her flirting with Denis Eady, which is quite appropriate for a young girl who is expected to marry soon and leave the Frome Farm.

However, later in the chapter, during Mattie’s first conversation with Ethan, he raises the question of her departure by referring to the village gossip about her future plans with Denis Eady: “It’s natural enough you should be leaving us” (*EF*, 53). Here - although only a minute previously, Mattie had walked on without him “with a rapid step” (*EF*, 52) appearing fearless and independent - she immediately demonstrates her anxieties of losing the only home she has. Instead of sharing her own plans with him, she leaps to the painful conclusion that Zeena has decided to send her away: “You mean that Zeena—ain’t suited with me anymore?” (*EF*, 53). Here, obviously, Ethan wants assurance that Mattie will not marry Denis Eady but he fails to understand the fundamental insecurity of her life. Her reaction to him actually shows how fearful and dependent she is: “There’s lots of things a hired girl could do that come awkward to me still—and I haven’t got much strength in my arms. But if she’d only tell me I’d try. You know she hardly ever says anything, and sometimes I can see she ain’t suited, and yet I don’t know why” (*EF*, 53); “Where’d I go, if I did [leave]?” (*EF*, 54) Also in the dinner scene once again when Ethan brings up the subject of Mattie’s marriage prospects, she questions him whether Zeena has got anything against her not (*EF*, 75). From the very beginning, presented as a vulnerable figure who has nowhere to go, Mattie lives with constant dread of dismissal from the Frome Farm: in order to

understand the reasons for her financial insecurity, we should first look at her family history provided by the narrative vision in Chapter Three.

2.2 “I wouldn’t ever have it said that I stood in the way of a poor girl like Mattie marrying a smart fellow like Denis Eady”

Arguably, Wharton clearly critiques social limitations and expectations for women as much via Mattie Silver’s family history as through repeatedly referring to her as unskilled, inefficient and weak. As the daughter of Zeena’s cousin, Mattie was raised for a life more genteel than that of “indentured servant on a barren farm like Fromes” (*EF*, 58). Her father, Orin Silver had been “the envy and admiration of his relatives” (*EF*, 58) as he had moved to Connecticut, “married a Stanford girl and succeeded her father’s thriving drug business” (*EF*, 58) and led everyone to believe his business ventures were successful. After his death, the family found out that he had mismanaged their fortune and all their money was gone. The shame of this revelation contributed to the death of Mattie’s mother soon after. Mattie, an orphan at the age of twenty, was now “...left alone to make her way on the fifty dollars obtained from the sale of her piano” (*EF*, 58). The piano symbolizes the education and privilege of someone raised to occupy a relatively high rank in society; this destiny is subverted by a father’s fruitless and clandestine dealings in pharmacy, resulting in a daughter addicted to painkillers and patent medicine, a lifelong invalid after an attempted suicide with Ethan.⁵

As the male narrative reveals that Mattie’s relatives punished her for her father’s mismanagement of their money by refusing to give her financial assistance. Alone for the first time in her life, she had to struggle vainly to take her place in the

modern work force: “When she tried to extend the field of her activities in the direction of stenography and book-keeping her health broke down, and six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store did not tend to restore it” (*EF*, 58). Without training or proper skills, she found escape from the only alternative of physically exhausting work in Zeena’s offer to live on the farm as an indentured servant in exchange for a roof over her head and food to eat. Thus Wharton articulates the struggles of a single woman trying to survive when few employment opportunities are available. In several important ways, it is emphasized how unprepared Mattie is for any sort of independent existence, which in a way foreshadows her tragic entrapment as an invalid in the Frome Farm.

When Mattie comes to live with them, it is Zeena who suggests, that “some chance of amusement” such as the dance night at the church “should be put in her (Mattie’s) way” “not to let her feel too sharp a contrast between the life she had left and the isolation of a Starkfield farm” (*EF*, 45). At this point it would be possible to argue that Zeena, understanding the importance of a possible courtship between Mattie and any eligible suitor, sends Mattie to these dance nights. Confined to a remote farm for much of her year in Starkfield, Mattie is expected to marry the grocer’s son as the first scene of the novel identifies him as her most promising suitor, with Ethan resenting what he perceives as Denis Eady’s “almost impudent ownership” of her (*EF*, 45). It is again Zeena who sends her husband to fetch Mattie home “on the rare evenings when some chance of amusement drew her to the village” (*EF*, 45) and the fact that she “had never shown any jealousy of Mattie” (*EF*, 47) also shows her expectation of a marriage between Mattie and Denis Eady. One day Zeena even reminds Ethan of the need to find “a hired girl” for the housework when the expected marriage between Denis Eady and Mattie is to occur: “I wouldn't ever have

it said that I stood in the way of a poor girl like Mattie marrying a smart fellow like Denis Eady” (*EF*, 48).

In this scene, Zeena also makes clear that she has observed her husband not only shaving every day but also neglecting the mill since Mattie’s arrival at the farm: “I guess you’re always late, now you shave every morning” (*EF*, 48), which is more disturbing, even frightening, than “any vague insinuations about Denis Eady” (*EF*, 48). Clearly, Zeena or anybody from the community of Starkfield would expect Mattie to explore “good chances” in her quest for marriage in order to survive. As seen in the opening scene of the narrator’s vision, she has already been flirting with Denis Eady going to the church dances regularly; therefore, she could easily have married, and joined the well-fed matrons of Starkfield village.

However, Mattie Silver is attracted to a married man: Ethan Frome, the husband of her distant cousin and the only one to offer shelter at a time when all other relatives turned away.⁶ One is inevitably reminded of the ill-fated beauty Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, who - just as she has for eleven years with every eligible bachelor - ruins her chances too with Percy Gryce by spending the day instead with Lawrence Selden. Likewise, after the church dance, as Ethan observes, Mattie refuses Denis Eady’s offer to drive her back to the farm in his cutter although “she let Denis Eady lead out the horse, climb into the cutter and fling back the bearskin to make room for her at his side” (*EF*, 51). In the meantime, Ethan waits anxiously as she scans the darkness for him; only after Mattie refuses Eady’s offer a second time and starts walking alone in the darkness does Ethan appear in the black shade of the Varnum spruces, slipping “...an arm through hers, as Eady had done” (*EF*, 52), which - as we shall soon see - indicates a dependence on him beyond walking on snow or doing daily housework.

2.3 “There's lots of things a hired girl could do that come awkward to me still”

Ethan does his best to assist Mattie by completing as many of her chores as possible; yet he knows that she remains unsuited for the housework required of her and lately his wife Zeena started to “grumble increasingly over the housework and found oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl’s inefficiency” (*EF*, 47). It appears Zeena is not wrong in her complaints as not only is she quite “forgetful” and “dreamy” (*EF*, 47) but also she does not “take the matter (housekeeping) seriously” as domesticity “did not interest her” (*EF*, 47). As a result, Mattie, who did not have any talent or training for housekeeping, is constantly supported by Ethan who “did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire, carrying in the wood overnight, and neglecting the mill for the farm that he might help her about the house during the day” (*EF*, 47). She rarely completes her daily tasks; however, rather than listen to Zeena complain, Ethan steps in and “supplement(s) her unskilled efforts” (*EF*, 47) as Ethan relates. Knowing that Mattie has neither natural aptitude nor training for the housework required of her, Ethan fetches wood, washes floors and even churns butter (*EF*, 47). Gradually, Zeena realizes that her husband has been completing many of Mattie’s chores as he neglects his duties in the mill.

As Zeena gradually realizes both her husband’s infatuation with Mattie and her intolerable inefficiency in the household, she becomes more vocal in her dissatisfaction, which makes Mattie’s situation even more precarious. As Ethan contemplates, Mattie cannot support herself in the modern world because for this

purpose [of making her way in the world] her equipment, though varied, was inadequate. She could trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite “Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight,” and play ‘The Lost Chord’ and a pot-pourri from ‘Carmen’” (*EF*, 58). Here it is clear that Mattie’s accomplishments are distinctly genteel in nature, intended to charm a husband rather than impress an employer or maintain a household. One is again unavoidably reminded of Lily Bart, ultimately failing in her matrimonial designs as well as in her attempts to earn a living at the millinery. When Mattie first entered Starkfield a year previously, as Ethan remembers (*EF*, 57), Mattie had been a “...colourless slip of a thing...” at the train station, frail from months of work in Stamford. Ethan cannot imagine how she would help Zeena with household chores (*EF*, 47); the subsequent year on the farm seems to restore her however, but she remains financially insecure and still entirely dependent on Zeena for her board.

Ethan associates her fragile, vulnerable situation with the images of birds: for example, during their walk home after church dance: “The motions of her mind were as incalculable as the flit of a bird...” (*EF*, 53).⁷ And when she sews in the romantic dinner scene in Zeena’s absence: “while he sat in fascinated contemplation of the way in which her hands went up and down above the strip of stuff, just as he had seen a pair of birds make short perpendicular flights over a nest they were building” (*EF*, 74). One can say that birds have connotations of gentleness, liveliness and joyfulness but at the same time timidity and fragility. To Ethan, Mattie is not a “fretter” (*EF*, 46), in other words, she does not complain like his wife, Zeena. Since her arrival, Mattie has become healthier and prettier and at the same time with her youth and positive energy, warmed and brightened Ethan’s life. The fact that birds can also fly can be associated with freedom and independence, which is something Ethan has been yearning for since he came back to the farm upon his father’s sudden death.

Therefore, Mattie seems to be the symbol of freedom and all the things he has always wanted to achieve. However, as Ethan regains consciousness after the accident, he hears “a small frightened cheep like a field mouse” (*EF*, 109, Wharton’s emphasis). The noise comes from Mattie - his last hope for escape - who is actually in terrible pain. As a result of the unsuccessful suicide attempt, bird-like Mattie now becomes a furtive creature, soft and defenseless but at the same time common and earthbound; trapped on the farm with her broken body, just like Zeena and Ethan. The imagery conveys Mattie's fragility and vulnerability: qualities that might have awakened a protective instinct in Ethan.

2.4 “I guess we’ll never let you go, Matt,”

Associated with imagery of summer and nature, Mattie Silver evokes youthful vigour and beauty: her surname, associated with feminine energy, suggests “luster” which soon attracts not only Ethan Frome, for whom “...the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth...” (*EF*, 46) but also Denis Eady. Ethan’s perception of Mattie’s face is “like a window that has caught the sunset” (*EF*, 47) when he watches her dancing in the church. Later, when Ethan reveals to Mattie that he had been hiding while she talked to Denis Eady, “her wonder and his laughter ran together like spring rills in a thaw” (*EF*, 52). During their romantic dinner in Zeena’s absence, when Ethan reminds of her their plans of coasting the following night: “She laughed with pleasure, her head tilted back, the lamplight sparkling on her lips and teeth” (*EF*, 73). In the same scene, Ethan thinks her face seems “like a wheat-field under a summer breeze” when “he (Ethan) kept his eyes fixed on her, marvelling at the way her face changed with each turn of their talk”

(*EF*, 73). Once again, Ethan is transfixed by Mattie, just as he had been when Zeena - sitting at the table in her best dress, with a small piece of luggage at her side - had tried to explain why she must immediately visit a new doctor in Bettsbridge (*EF*, 60).

The color red attributed to Mattie also stresses the image of her as a young, attractive and eye-catching woman who arouses passion especially when she wears a red scarf or puts a red ribbon on her hair. The color red has always carried connotations of passion and sexual sin, hence terms like “scarlet woman” (in the contemporary moral climate, a “whore” or “promiscuous woman”). The color red also implies the threat of Mattie’s attractiveness as her sparkling presence in the story stands out against the dark, cold setting of the village, Starkfield.⁸ She wears the red scarf at the dance and afterwards while walking home with Ethan, who finds in Mattie’s presence “life-giving warmth” (*EF*, 54). To Ethan, even the family graveyard, hitherto a reminder of his entrapment, seems a pleasing symbol of “continuance and stability” (*EF*, 54). He desires no changes in his life as long as he keeps Mattie with him: “I guess we’ll never let you go, Matt,” he whispered, as though even the dead, lovers once, must conspire with him to keep her; and brushing by the graves, he thought: ‘We’ll always be living here together, and some day she’ll lie there beside me’ ” (*EF*, 54). Here her situation becomes a dark and hopeless fantasy, her dependence underscored by the expression “let you go.” Note also how “we” have authority over Mattie: the triangle has already established a structure and a destiny, foreshadowing the entrapment of all three on Frome Farm.

Then in Chapter Four, when Zeena leaves town overnight to see a doctor the next morning, Ethan starts fantasizing about an evening alone with Mattie. For example, as soon as Zeena leaves town, Ethan thinks, the kitchen looks “warm and bright” in the winter sunshine while Mattie is “washing up the dishes, humming one

of the dance tunes of the night before” (*EF*, 62); it is interesting here that Ethan must have watched Mattie many times to learn the right order of her actions: “watching her tidy up and then settle down to her sewing,” (*EF*, 62), again evoking Lily Bart, whose highly specialized beauty becomes an object for the male appreciation and aesthetic. Likewise, Mattie is presented to the reader most of the time through Ethan’s love-stricken gaze and the narrative invites the reader to join in his admiration and even voyeurism. All day anxious to return before nightfall, Ethan contemplates how, minus Zeena, the kitchen with Mattie moving in it looks “homelike” again, (*EF*, 62).

Approaching his house on the same evening, he sees “a light twinkling in the house above him” (*EF*, 67) and *imagines* Mattie preparing herself for dinner: “She’s up in her room,” he said to himself, “fixing herself up for supper” (*EF*, 67). When he finds the door locked, he rattles the handle “violently” (*EF*, 67) and then stands “in the darkness expecting to hear her step” (*EF*, 68); he even calls out her name with joy: “Hello Matt!” (*EF*, 68) Here it is obvious that the scene of the previous night is repeated: “So strange was the precision with which the incidents of the previous evening were repeating themselves that he half expected, when he heard the key turn, to see his wife before him on the threshold” (*EF*, 68). But when the door opens and it is the glowing Mattie who faces him:

She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. Then, striking upward, it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows (*EF*, 68).

As clearly seen above, the narrative stresses the image of Mattie as a young and attractive woman, whose appearance at the kitchen door seems to kindle Ethan's lust and passion for his wife's cousin. The repetition of the scene perhaps reinforces too the contrast between his *de-feminized, dried-up* and *overly thin* wife, and Mattie - who epitomizes fertility and sexuality.⁹ Smiling on the spot where Zeena stood only the night before, Mattie appears radiant to him: "through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon" which "transformed and glorified her" and thus she "seemed to Ethan taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion" (*EF*, 68). As the narrative vision relates, Ethan often thinks Mattie's hair is one of her most beautiful features representing love and sexuality - for instance, Ethan wants to touch her hair and "tell her that it smelt of the woods" in the scene where they declare their love for each other at Shadow Pond just before the sledding accident (*EF*, 103). When Zeena had opened the door the previous evening, the kitchen had "... the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night" (*EF*, 56). Under Mattie's influence it now exudes a sunny uplifting vitality. Here one cannot help noticing Ethan's romantic view of Mattie as an ideal woman: accordingly, the festive table Mattie has set for their meal together also fills him with quiet satisfaction: "it was carefully laid for supper, with fresh dough-nuts, stewed blueberries and his favorite pickles in a dish of gay red glass" (*EF*, 68). The closing image, the sensuous coloration, is practically erotic.¹⁰

2.5 "Oh, Ethan, Ethan—it's all to pieces! What will Zeena say?"

As the narrative vision relates, Mattie admires Ethan's observations, thoughts and knowledge on the stars and rock formations and shares his appreciation of nature with wide-eyed wonder: "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” (*EF*, 46). There was one time when she described “the cold red of sunset behind winter hills, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow” (*EF*, 46) as in the line “it looks just as if it was painted” (*EF*, 46), which makes Mattie “his secret soul” (*EF*, 46). At the same time it is Mattie, not Zeena, who helps Ethan fulfill contemporary gender codes and expectations by feeling manly and strong.¹¹

The episode of the broken pickle dish is also worth mentioning: 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” (*EF*, 69). At this moment, as if trying to stop “this unusual demonstration” Zeena’s cat leaps from her chair onto the table and the pickle dish falls to the floor and shatters. Mattie immediately starts crying “on her knees by the fragment” (*EF*, 70) and trying to explain why the case is so serious: “she (Zeena) never meant it should be used, not even when there was company; and I had to get up on the step-ladder to reach it down from the top shelf of the china-closet, where she keeps it with all her best things, and of course she'll want to know why I did it—” (*EF*, 70). It is clear that although Mattie knew its value to Zeena, she removed it from the closet to please Ethan, a married man who displays a “sudden authority” and commands Mattie: “here, give them to me” (*EF*, 70). When he sees “how his tone subdued her”, he feels a “thrilling sense of mastery” because she obeys him and “she did not even ask what he had done” (*EF*, 71) with the broken bits. The narrator suggests this thrill over Mattie is similar to Ethan’s feeling of “steering a big log

down the mountain to his mill” (*EF*, 43). Here one can easily argue that Ethan’s attraction to Mattie depends in part on her submissiveness to him.

To avoid any crisis, he restores the dish to its cupboard, placing the “pieces together with such accuracy of touch that a close inspection convinced him of the impossibility of detecting from below that the dish was broken” (*EF*, 70). He plans to glue the glass together before Zeena’s return and then to replace it later with a lookalike, which looks like a brilliant, master plan, but he cannot heroically fix the broken dish before Zeena returns, and he is unable to come up with a plausible excuse when he is confronted about it. Likewise, when Zeena announces her decision of replacing Mattie with a hired girl, Ethan tries to shame Zeena into agreeing to keep Mattie on as in: “you may forget she’s your kin but everybody else’ll remember it. If you do a thing like that what do you suppose folks’ll say of you?” (*EF*, 85), but Zeena silences him by village gossip about Mattie’s continuing presence in their home: “I know well enough what they say of my having kept her here as long as I have” (*EF*, 85). These words of Zeena’s strike him with the force of “a knife-cut across the sinews,” and he is rendered as helpless and weak as Mattie (*EF*, 85). Throughout the novel, as the narrative reveals, Mattie struggles at her chores in constant fear of displeasing Zeena and several times she asks Ethan if Zeena’s intention is to send her away as discussed earlier. At this point one can speculate that Mattie might have heard the gossip surrounding herself and Denis Eady as well as the rumors about her stay with the Fromes; one might surmise that her fear of dismissal from the Farm stems in part from her understanding of the destructive potential of small-talk in a place like Starkfield.

Upon discovering that her most treasured wedding gift is used by Mattie to “make the supper-table pretty” (*EF*, 89), Zeena cannot help expressing her feelings of anger, disappointment and betrayal: “you waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use it, not even when the minister come to dinner, or Aunt Martha Pierce come over from Bettsbridge - ” (*EF*, 90-91).¹² It is clear that the extra effort Mattie has made to impress Ethan with a pretty table can be interpreted as an attempt to express her feelings of love and passion for him, but at the same time proves their infidelity indirectly and that Zeena should have listened to her folks: “If I'd 'a' listened to folks, you'd 'a' gone before now, and this wouldn't 'a' happened”, she said; and gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body . . .” (*EF*, 90). Believing that Mattie is responsible for the breaking of both the pickle dish and her marriage, Zeena rightfully blames her: “You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it. It's the way your father begun, and I was warned of it when I took you, and I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em - and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all - ” (*EF*, 90). Obviously, this scene fuels Zeena's determination to replace Mattie with a hired girl and the sins of the father once again rob Mattie of any status among the family.

After Zeena's departure with the broken pickle-dish, Mattie temporarily disappears and the narrative only follows Ethan, alone in his study, where he decides that he and Mattie should go to the West like the “young fellow of about his own age” from a different Berkshire village did a few years earlier when he divorced his wife for another woman (*EF*, 92). Ethan seems to be charmed by the memory of this couple's recent visit home to Shadd's Falls as they are also accompanied by their daughter “with fair curls who wore a gold locket and was dressed like a princess”

(*EF*, 92). Here it is important to note that Ethan struggles between his desire for Mattie, and his sense of duty toward his wife, Zeena who is deliberately framed as horribly shrewish and devoid of any redeeming attributes, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter. On the other hand, throughout the novel Mattie is portrayed as kind, gentle, radiant and fertile befitting the traditional gender roles in any society: therefore, Ethan's desire to leave Zeena for Mattie is completely understandable.

However, as soon as Ethan sees the train fares, he acknowledges his complete entrapment in Starkfield once again since the farm and mill are already heavily mortgaged, which means he has nothing to leave Zeena and he lacks the money even to pay for the train tickets that they will need for a new life together: "The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders hand-cuffing 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" (*EF*, 93). At this moment, one cannot help being reminded of the scene where Shakespeare's Othello draws a similar comparison himself – while he is standing over his sleeping wife, Desdemona, with a lit candle in his hand, he says he's going to "Put out the light, and then put out the light;" he blows out the candle and then strangles Desdemona. Similarly, when Ethan says "his one ray of light was to be extinguished," he obviously means the end of his hopes of a happily married future with Mattie, but at the same time he might be foreshadowing their suicide attempt, as a result of which, Mattie's life as a young, lively and radiant woman will be "extinguished."

2.6 “Ethan, where’ll I go if I leave you? I don’t know how to get along alone”

In the next two chapters, the reader follows again only Ethan who is presented as a lifelong prisoner struggling ineffectually against his bonds. It is painfully clear to him that Mattie has nowhere to go when she leaves his farm and that he cannot do anything to rescue her. When he *watches* his neighbor depart for the station with Mattie’s trunk, he himself feels he is in the grip of forces beyond his control: “It seemed to Ethan that his heart was bound with cords which an unseen hand was tightening with every tick of the clock” (*EF*, 99). He resents that he is forced to play the role of “helpless spectator at Mattie’s banishment” (*EF*, 95); yet, because of his strict code of ethics, he chooses not to lie to the Hales to get the money to run away with Mattie: instead, “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 had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him” (*EF*, 97). It is clear here that even though he writes his goodbye letter to Zeena and talks to Mrs. Hale afterwards, his conscience does not allow him to follow his wishes: hence, in a way, he chooses to be *a spectator* watching Mattie even when she is on the verge of being dismissed from the farm, as he has always done.

One can also easily notice that Ethan struggles against the customs and rules of society, fighting an inner battle between what he feels he needs in order to be happy and what he feels he must do to appease his family and society. Mattie also seems to recognize the struggle/dilemma he finds himself in as her note to him reveals after the scene where Zeena announces her dismissal of Mattie: “Don’t trouble, Ethan” (*EF*, 91). As both understand, there is no actual escape from social

imprisonment; thus Ethan repeatedly assures Mattie he would act decisively only if he could: “You know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you if I could,” he tells her; “Oh, Matt . . . if I could ha’ gone with you now I’d ha’ done it,” he protests (*EF*, 103). As darkness falls, he grows more conscious about the limitations on his freedom: “I’m tied hand and foot, Matt. There isn’t a thing I can do” (*EF*, 104). On the other hand, Mattie, who has always been insecure about her position at the Fromes, seems to experience an internal conflict as she does not know what she will do as she insists more and more forcefully that she cannot survive on her own: “Ethan, where’ll I go if I leave you? I don’t know how to get along alone” (*EF*, 107). Aware of her bleak future Mattie, who is not trained to be a part of the urban working class, has no money and no connections to support and help her find employment as Ethan contemplates: “Despair seized him (Ethan) at the thought of her setting out alone to renew the weary quest for work. In the only place where she was known she was surrounded by indifference or animosity; and what chance had she, inexperienced and untrained, among the million bread-seekers of the cities? (*EF*, 87)

Throughout the novel, Ethan is not described as a heroic figure or the romantic male protagonist who saves the poor female protagonist from death or any kind of disaster; he cannot even save himself.¹³ Every time Ethan seems on the verge of action, he finds himself facing some obstacle and instead of facing it gives in, all the while blaming the external forces that are thwarting him without ever recognizing his own lack of courage. At the novel’s climax, it is interestingly Mattie – confronting her inability to part from Ethan - who takes control, suggesting a suicide pact whereby Ethan kills them both at the foot of the icy hill:

She remained motionless, as if she had not heard him. Then she snatched her hands from his, threw her arms about his neck, and pressed a sudden drenched cheek against his face. "Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!"

"Down where?"

"The coast. Right off," she panted. "So 't we'll never come up any more."

"Matt! What on earth do you mean?"

She put her lips close against his ear to say: "Right into the big elm. You said you could. So 't we'd never have to leave each other anymore" (*EF*, 107).

When Ethan assents to her proposal of suicide, he insists on sitting in the front of the sled, using the excuse of wanting to feel Mattie holding him (*EF*, 109), which could be seen as a chivalrous act, a masculine one showing that Ethan attempts to protect Mattie from the impending collision since whoever sits in the front of the sled is most likely to "fetch it" (*EF*, 109). "Yielding to the power of his voice" (*EF*, 109), Mattie sits behind him "obediently" (*EF*, 105) clasping her arms about him (*EF*, 109), which may have saved her from death but assured her physical mutilation. One can argue here that Ethan's and Mattie's failed suicide underlines their lack of control over their destinies: Mattie is trapped on an isolated farm for the next twenty four years. Mattie dreams of spending her life with Ethan and ironically, her illusion becomes a reality. Once afraid to leave Ethan, paralyzed in her chair, she does spend her life with Ethan, but as an invalid cared for by Zeena, not as Ethan's wife, as she had imagined.

As already explained in the previous Chapter, Zeena's frigidity and silence are caused by her marriage to Ethan and her residence on his land. At first glance, he seems to have been caught in the toils of a lifeless partnership, unable to escape into the life-giving warmth of Mattie Silver who briefly radiates/brightens his life. Since Mattie has come, Ethan has started to see his surrounding in a brand new way and all his desires, hopes and aspirations for change seem to vanish since "all his life was

lived in the sight and sound of Mattie Silver” and “he could no longer conceive of its being otherwise” (*EF*, 49) as Mattie with her “kindled face” and “laughter” which “sparkles though her lashes” (*EF*, 68) is the source of life for Ethan. But Ethan’s escape from his dark deadening world is impossible, not because of Zeena, but because he was born into captivity; “there was no way out – none. He was a prisoner for life” (*EF*, 70). One cannot help noticing the history of damaged women in the Frome family as explained in the previous chapter, and accordingly, Ethan and all the previous Ethans unwittingly injure the women in their lives as Zeena also puts into words when she demands a hired girl for the housework: “better send me over to the almshouse and have done with it...I guess there’s been Fromes there afore now” (*EF*, 83). At the end of the Chapter Nine, the sledding accident, in other words, their attempted suicide, has converted Mattie into a second Zeena. One can here argue that Ethan is the cause of his own tragedy as well as Mattie Silver’s, which lies in the deeper meaning of the gaps the narrator fills in his vision.

2.7 “I thought I'd be frozen stiff before I could wake her up”

When Ethan and Mattie fail in their suicide attempt, their lives change irrevocably: one of the more ironic consequences is the reversal in the two women’s roles as invalid and caregiver. When the narrator crosses the threshold out of his vision into the Frome kitchen, Mattie has become the hated woman who waits at home: obviously, the accident forces Zeena to exchange her “sickly” identity with Mattie, who now assumes the permanently dependent state. In time, the two women in Ethan Frome’s life come to resemble each other closely: living in isolation and entrapment for more than twenty years, they become so indistinguishable that Ethan’s

introductions on the night of the blizzard actually confuse the narrator. Mattie's appearance makes this similarity explicit: "Her hair was as gray as her companion's, her face as bloodless and shrivelled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples" (*EF*, 111).

Obviously, pain transforms her into an old woman before her time and all she could offer now is woe and complaint: accordingly, the woman "droning querulously" (*EF*, 42) at the end of the prologue, as the men enter the house, turns out to be not Zeena but Mattie whining about her: "'It's on'y just been made up this very minute. Zeena fell asleep and slep' ever so long, and I thought I'd be frozen stiff before I could wake her up and get her to 'tend to it'" (*EF*, 111). It is particularly striking that when Mattie – now almost demonized by the narrator with her "...bright witch-like stare" - has exchanged places with Zeena, she has become more vocal while Zeena serves her "without appearing to hear the accusation brought against her" (*EF*, 111). Here one can also argue that Mattie's central irony is this: only when economic reliance becomes extreme physical need does she secure her place in the household, almost at Zeena's expense.¹⁴ This transformation into Zeena is foreshadowed in the romantic dinner scene where Ethan suggests Mattie sit on Zeena's rocking-chair so that he can see her better: however, Ethan is momentarily alarmed as Mattie's head "detached itself against the patchwork cushion that habitually *framed* his wife's gaunt countenance", because "it was almost the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder" (*EF*, 72). Transformed Mattie is now associated with witches/witchcraft, hinting a kind of mysterious and fearful power over people like the narrator.

As already mentioned, when the male narrator's prejudiced vision starts, Mattie Silver is *presented* as a charming young woman full of joy and life with a

sparkling personality whereas Zeena Frome is *framed* as a mean, grumpy and sickly figure who stops her husband from realizing his hopes, aspirations and dreams. To use Gilbert and Gubar's (1984, 79) terminology, Zeena is a monster, a witch or a madwoman while Mattie is an angel. However, as one can easily observe, both marginalized in the narrative, Zeena Frome - once the professional, autonomous nurse "doctoring in the county" and Mattie Silver - once the unskilled, inefficient but young and "genteel" woman- are portrayed as witchlike figures in the epilogue. It is particularly striking that just like Zeena, Mattie is also demonized by the narrator associated with witches/witchcraft, hinting a kind of mysterious and fearful power over people with her "bright witch-like stare" after she has exchanged places with Zeena.

Therefore, as the end of the novel reveals, Wharton seems to be parodying the binary opposition of angels and demons in Victorian novels: Zeena and Mattie who are presented as rivals are equally trapped and powerless in their dependency on the single male figure, Ethan Frome. This can be interpreted as a part of Wharton's criticism on the conservative New England villages where isolation as well as hard farm conditions turn young women into witch-like figures.¹⁵ Therefore, within *Ethan Frome*, the intertwined fates of Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver dramatize the inescapable influence of social environment on individual personality and behavior in the disparate settings of Berkshire villages, which seems to convey Wharton's view of modern New England. Wharton criticizes the expectations and limitations that turn of the century American society imposes on young women: the "purpose" reserved for young women at the end of nineteenth century American society is marriage for survival, as we shall discuss further in the following chapter.

NOTES

¹ See “Edith Wharton’s “Scheme of Construction” in *Ethan Frome: A Statement About Writing*” Muğla University Graduate School of Socail Science, Fall 2001 No 6 by Çiğdem Pala Pull for a discussion of the reasons Wharton might have had to choose an educated male narrator from upper-class for the narration of her story. 1-7. In her work, *A Feast of Words*, Cynthia Wolff points out the importance of the narrator in *Ethan Frome* by reflecting the function of art: “Not situation alone, nor narrator alone, but each illuminating the other; the situation filtered through the larger categories of a narrator’s consciousness (the author outside the work, controlling the delicate relation) –this is to be the subject of the work” 163. See also “The Slippery Slope of Interpellation: Framing Hero and Victim in Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*” by Johanna M. Wagner and Marysa Demoor for a discussion on the role of the narrator: for example, “as the authority figure of the text, he attempts to interpellate and meticulously frame the broken subject, Ethan, in his vision”. This is not the first time a narrator has attempted to redeem a maimed figure” 433.

² See also *Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome: A Reference Guide* by Suzan Fournier for a thorough introduction to *Ethan Frome* and Wharton, which is a helpful companion to the novel illuminating the most important themes and symbols as well as discussing the narrow range of possibilities for women in *Ethan Frome*.

³ For a detailed discussion of light and dark imagery, see “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” Kenneth Bernard. 180-181. As Bernard argues Ethan lives in the dark and represents darkness as a weak character who rejoices in Mattie’s helplessness when she says she has nowhere to go. 180-182.

⁴ For a discussion of admiration and voyeurism as well as representations of sexual feeling in Wharton, see *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton* by Pamela Knights, 83-84.

⁵ For a discussion of drugging in *Ethan Frome*, “Wharton’s “Others”: Addiction and Intimacy” by Dale Bauer in *Ethan Frome: Sex Expression and Sex addiction*.135.

⁶ As Elizabeth Ammons suggests, Mattie’s choice of men has consequences: “The fact that Wharton cripples Mattie, but will not let her die, reflects not the author’s but the culture’s cruelty. Like Lily Bart at the opposite end of the social scale, Mattie Silver has not been prepared for an economically independent life. The system is designed to keep her a parasite or a drudge, or both” 152–153.

⁷ For more detailed information on the symbolism of birds, see *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* by Michael Ferber. 25. See also “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” by Kenneth Bernard. 180.

⁸ For more detailed information on the symbolism of the color red, see Ferber. 169.

⁹ For a discussion on female barrenness and infertility in *Ethan Frome*, see *Edith Wharton’s Letters From the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing*, Chapter Two (The Woman Behind the Door) by Candace Waid, 53-83.

¹⁰ For a discussion on the imagery of the red-pickle dish, see Kenneth Bernard.182-182.

¹¹ See *Women in Literature: Reading Through the Lens of Gender*, “Frozen Lives: Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911)” by Melissa McFarland Pennel for a discussion of the gender codes and expectations in New England rural society at turn of the century. 102-104.

¹² In “Frozen Lives: Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911)” Pennel assert that believing Ethan’s power to provide her security in the farm, Mattie makes the most of her opportunity to “play house” with Ethan and uses Zeena’s red pickle dish. 103.

¹³ Kenneth Bernard describes Ethan as a weak character who is not tragic “because he is a man of great potential subdued and trapped by forces beyond his capacity” but rather “his tragedy is entirely of his own making” 180.

¹⁴ In the epilogue, the narrator attributes to Mattie's eyes "the bright witch-like stare" which can result from spinal injuries (*EF*, 111); in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons interprets *Ethan Frome* as a fairy tale: when the novel begins, as she argues, Mattie is described as a fairy tale princess but ends as a witch who "becomes Zeena's double rather than Ethan's complement" 67. Ammons also reads Mattie's transformation into Zeena as Wharton's criticism of modern American society: "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 young man whose job is to build the future, finally serves as a lesson in sociology. Witches do exist, Wharton's tale says, and the culture creates them." 77.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Ammons' interpretation of the story also focuses on the social situation of women in the novel: "If Ethan's life is hard, and it is, woman's is harder yet; and it is sad but not surprising that isolated, housebound women make men feel the burden of their misery. He is their only connection with the outer world, the vast economic and social system that consigns them to solitary, monotonous, domestic lives from which their only escape is madness or death." 72.

CHAPTER 3:

Becoming *Mrs. Charity Royall: Summer*

3.1 “The tragic possibilities of life, nothing more”

Summer, (aka *Hot Ethan, Letters*, 385)¹ and *Ethan Frome*, are Wharton’s two New England novellas which reveal some shocking elements about the harsh conditions of the characters’ lives in the New England villages. With an emphasis on human “powerlessness” and “suffering” before the overwhelming forces of environment and heredity, Wharton portrays these villages as a stark, barren landscape reflecting the emotional and cultural starvation of rural New England.² This not only limits the perceptions of the characters but ironically also promotes their inarticulateness. Superficially these novellas of New England may seem straightforward and familiar but beneath the surface, each contains an unpleasant and disturbing subject; in *Summer*, it is the treatment of sex³ (including sexual awakening, pregnancy out of wedlock, abortion and even incest) and the depiction of the impoverished outlaws on the mountain.

Set in the Berkshire village of Starkfield one summer, it is a richly sensuous book which starts with a chance encounter, has a passionate affair at its center, and ends with a wedding in North Dormer - another local village. It appears similar to hundreds of other “sentimental” novels of the period depicting “a young woman struggling to make her way in life without the support of a traditional family” (Crane,

113).⁴ While the novella also *seems* to follow a traditional plot line leading to the inevitable end/fate - either marriage or death - for a young woman who ignores moral and social norms and codes, I would argue that it does not attempt to engage the reader's tearful sympathies as the reader actually follows the story of a young girl, Charity Royall, who, after becoming pregnant by a visiting New York architect, Lucius Harney, is forced to marry the lawyer Royall, the most powerful man in North Dormer and her own step-father. I also argue that the female protagonist is treated as a disposable object by the man she falls in love with while fighting against the lecherous attempts of the only father she knows. Thus the conventional, morally acceptable happy ending whereby the female protagonist is saved from ruin and prostitution by her lover or her male guardian, is subverted via a semi-incestuous marriage and becomes thereby a parody of contemporary sentimentalism.⁵

Considering Wharton's startling subject matter, one cannot help noticing her realist efforts to distinguish herself from the sentimental "rose-and-lavender pages" of New England local color writers like Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett.⁶ *As A Backward Glance* reveals, her characterization seems to be shaped by her perception of "the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts" as "grim places, morally and physically" where "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 neighboring hills..." (294-295). One can even say that Wharton shares with Frank Norris's *McTeague* and Stephen Crane's *Maggie* a taste for excess and shock; at the same time Wharton seems to comment on the tragic unpredictability and insecurity of life. Perhaps what really matters is how well individuals navigate their unique sets of hardships.

Wharton has created yet another tragic female figure to call attention to the lack of viable alternatives and choices for women in modern American society. Taking the nature of her upbringing and the narrowness of her prospects into consideration, Charity Royall is another recognizable Wharton character who has few prospects for an independent existence outside marriage no matter whether it lies on the border of incest or not. Although she yearns for a fuller, truly independent life in a larger town, she is trapped in a claustrophobic small town with a dissolute step-father who constantly tries to seduce her and an opportunistic lover who leaves her pregnant and with no choice other than abortion, prostitution or a return to the poverty and lawlessness of the mountain. Thus Charity, enduring crucial moments of intense suffering, seems to be Wharton's most unfortunate heroine. To better appreciate the shocking elements Wharton employs, certain significant scenes should now be analyzed.

3.2 “How I hate everything!”

In accordance with Wharton's stipulations in *The Writing of Fiction*, the first two chapters contain “the germ of the novel” (39). The initial words “A girl came out of lawyer Royall's house, at the end of the one street of North Dormer, and stood on the doorstep” introduce a young female protagonist (*S*, 1)⁷ whose actual birth name remains secret throughout the novel. “Charity”⁸ is named thus as an infant after being “brought down from the mountain” (*S*, 4) by Lawyer Royall, the guardian who “had not legally adopted her” (*S*, 14). Since then “everybody spoke of her as Charity Royall” (*S*, 14). As we shall see later, the girl introduced anonymously becomes Charity Royall legally only when she returns “home” married to her foster father,

Lawyer Royall, who thereby becomes the legal adoptive father of her illegitimate child. Charity, standing on the threshold of lawyer Royall's house, both foreshadows her inevitable return as Mrs. Royall to the only home she has ever known, and evokes the gulf between her law-abiding adoptive hometown and her lawless mountain-folk origins.

The reader is introduced to this central character by becoming privy to her thoughts: Charity is a daughter of outlaws from the Mountain, the "...scarred cliff that lifted its sullen wall above the lesser slopes of Eagle Range, making a perpetual background of gloom to the lonely valley," "it rose so abruptly from the lower hills that it seemed almost to cast its shadow over North Dormer" (*S*, 4) and it is described as *a malicious force* that turns just the glimmer of a cloud into a powerful storm: "And it was like a great magnet drawing the clouds and scattering them in storm across the valley" (*S*, 4) and it is as if it casts an evil spell over the town, as Charity informs Harney in one of their afternoon walks: "It's over the Mountain; and a cloud over the Mountain always means trouble" (*S*, 55). Then for Charity as well as the citizens of the town, it is "a bad place, and "a shame to have come from" and therefore, "whatever befell her in North Dormer, she ought, as Miss Hatchard had once reminded her, to remember that she had been brought down from there, and hold her tongue and be thankful" (*S*, 4). Royall's description of the mountain not only disturbingly arouses the curiosity of the reader about the outlaws and outcasts of the Mountain but also contributes to the shocking depiction of the drunken funeral of Charity's mother towards the end of the novel:

"The Mountain? The Mountain?" she heard Mr. Royall say. "Why, the Mountain's a blot—that's what it is, sir, a blot. That scum up there ought to have been run in long ago—and would have, if the people down here hadn't been clean scared of

them. The Mountain belongs to this township, and it's North Dormer's fault if there's a gang of thieves and outlaws living over there, in sight of us, defying the laws of their country. Why, there ain't a sheriff or a tax-collector or a coroner'd durst go up there. When they hear of trouble on the Mountain the selectmen look the other way, and pass an appropriation to beautify the town pump. The only man that ever goes up is the minister, and he goes because they send down and get him whenever there's any of them dies. They think a lot of Christian burial on the Mountain—but I never heard of their having the minister up to marry them. And they never trouble the Justice of the Peace either. They just herd together like the heathen” (*S*, 49).

As one can easily observe, despite the disturbing description of the lawlessness of the people on the Mountain, it also suggests social and sexual independence, for which Charity has always yearned. A year before the story begins, when Mr. Miles, the reverend, takes Charity and “the young people down to Nettleton to hear an illustrated lecture on the Holy Land,” (*S*, 2) she realizes that “North Dormer was a small place” (*S*, 3). As the opening scene reveals, before she can cross the threshold, Charity notices “a stranger” who “wore city clothes” and “was laughing with all his teeth, as the young and careless laugh at such mishaps” (*S*, 1) while chasing his hat, which awakens the old longings and imagined stories about life in “modern communities” (*S*, 3). We should also mention that Harney - introduced via Charity’s gaze - remains a central character representing independence conflated with temptation, as we shall see. Therefore, feeling miserable because of her entrapment in a small village like North Dormer and of her forced dependence on her foster father Lawyer Royall, she retreats back into Lawyer Royall’s house: “How I hate everything” she murmurs as her first words in the novel (*S*, 2) revealing her terrible dissatisfaction with life.

After meeting Lucius Harney who has come to North Dormer to stay the summer with his relative, Miss Hatchard, Charity becomes more curious about her background and the Mountain where her mother, a woman who was once a prostitute, and her folks live: “all that had happened to her within the last few weeks had stirred her to the sleeping depths. She had become absorbingly interesting to herself, and everything that had to do with her past was illuminated by this sudden curiosity” (*S*, 41). Although Harney has never been to the Mountain, he conjures up a picture of the place. Furthermore, he speaks of the Mountain inhabitants with some kind of admiration, telling Charity, “There’s a queer colony up there, you know: sort of outlaws, a little independent kingdom...who don’t give a damn for anybody” (*S*, 44-45) and “they have nothing to do with the people in the valleys - rather look down on them, in fact” (*S*, 45) and when Charity admits that she was born on the Mountain, Harney adds affectionately, “I suppose that’s why you’re so different” (*S*, 46). Charity reads his comment as praise; for the first time in her life she feels proud to be from the Mountain. In this context, freedom from social convention seems to be a positive part of her “outlaw” heritage.

On the other hand, Charity is keenly aware of the fact that “North Dormer represented all the blessings of the most refined civilization” (*S*, 3) although she feels contempt for the town because “there it lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities” (*S*, 3). What is more, the town “... had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no ‘business block’; only a church that was opened every other Sunday if the state of the roads permitted, and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves” (*S*, 3).⁹ Charity longs for the great metropolis where

she believes she can lead a fulfilling life. Compared to the mountain, North Dormer - with its Lawyer Royall and Reverend Miles - seems to be representing the patriarchal order in which the mountain people are labeled as promiscuous, lawless and dissolute. At this point one can also argue that the binary opposition between law, representing order and security, and lawlessness, symbolizing independence and freedom, seems to be precisely demarcated in space.

It is strikingly ironic that most of the North Dormer girls who appear in the novel are also sexually active. To begin with, Charity, as the town librarian, refuses to allow the local girls to use the library for their lovers' meetings: "I wouldn't let Bill Sollas from over the hill hang around here waiting for the youngest Targatt girl, because I know him . . . that's all . . . even if I don't know about books all I ought to," she tells Harney (*S*, 31, Wharton's ellipses). Next, standing outside Harney's window late one night, hides herself from his sight because "she had suddenly understood what would happen if she went in. It was the thing that *did* happen between young men and girls, and that North Dormer snickered over on the sly. It was what Miss Hatchard was still ignorant of, but every girl of Charity's class knew about before she left school" (*S*, 71, Wharton's emphasis). In the same scene, on her way home, Charity also spots "two figures in the shade" (*S*, 73), although she cannot clearly make them out. In the whole town, Charity's friend Ally Hawes seems to be the only girl who is not sexually active; her face is described as "the ghost of wasted opportunities" (*S*, 84) as she peers over Charity's shoulder into a mirror. At this point, one cannot help noticing the hypocritical attitude of patriarchal societies towards sexuality and the independent mountain community.

3.3 “This ain't your wife's room any longer”

Lawyer Royall - “the biggest man in North Dormer” (*S*, 12) - as his name somewhat eponymously suggests seems to be the novel’s embodiment of patriarchal laws and the ruling order. However, at the same time, he is depicted as an alcoholic and a failed lawyer who, as we see later, can only find sexual satisfaction in the company of prostitutes. Therefore, when he ostensibly takes Charity under his wing by bringing her in the so-called civilization and the law of the town, he does not actually provide a loving home; instead he takes her to a faded red house, a symbol of his lust for younger women. Charity’s contempt for the hypocritical morality of North Dormer society might have increased when “the outstanding incident of her life had happened” (*S*, 16). When the novel starts Mrs. Royall is already dead and Charity has taken her room: one night, after getting quite drunk, Lawyer Royall attempts to enter Charity’s room to seduce her but she calmly stops him saying: “I guess you made a mistake, then. This ain’t your wife's room any longer” but she goes to bed, “cold to the bone” (*S*, 17).

Obviously, this disturbing incident not only frightens but also deeply “disgusts” Charity (*S*, 17); the next day, when Lawyer Royall proposes to her: “as he stood there before her, unwieldy, shabby, disordered, the purple veins distorting the hands he pressed against the desk, and his long orator’s jaw trembling with the effort of his avowal, he seemed like a hideous parody of the fatherly old man she had always known” (*S*, 20). Charity, who has never developed a close bond with Lawyer Royall, responds scornfully for just the idea of marrying this “fatherly old man”: “Was that what you came to ask me the other night [when he tried to seduce her]? What’s come over you, I wonder? How long is it...since you’ve looked at yourself in

the glass?" (S, 20) Obviously Charity feels disgusted and motivated thereafter both to assert herself at home, and make plans to leave North Dormer for good: she starts the librarian job, hoping to earn enough to realize this.¹⁰

Compared to aging Lawyer Royall, young Lucius Harney with his *city clothes* is a much better option: "she (Charity) had liked his short-sighted eyes, and his odd way of speaking, that was abrupt yet soft, just as his hands were sun-burnt and sinewy, yet with smooth nails like a woman's" (S,12). Therefore, Charity who "had always kept to herself, contemptuously aloof from village love-making, without exactly knowing whether her fierce pride was due to the sense of her tainted origin, or whether she was reserving herself for a more brilliant fate" (S, 42), chooses Harney for an affair rather than some local man or even her step father Lawyer Royall. From the very beginning, there is an immediate infatuation between them but even before she meets Harney she cannot help but compare their two situations, making herself feel ignorant, inarticulate and dull¹¹; yet, as soon as she sees him, Charity wants to be more than she is. When he enters the library to ask for books about the local architecture, the local old houses, he also appears to be struck by Charity's beauty: "The sight had made him forget what he was going to say; she recalled the change in his face" (S, 25). His questions about the library's holdings remind Charity how little she knows about books: "Never had her ignorance of life and literature so weighed on her as in reliving the short scene of her discomfiture" (S, 25) but still she can dream of being his bride one night, looking at the mirror admiringly, which undermines the reliability of the narrative when she:

...lit a candle, and lifted it to the square of looking-glass on the white-washed wall. Her small face, usually so darkly pale, glowed like a rose in the faint orb of light, and under her ruffled hair her eyes seemed deeper and larger than by day. Perhaps after all it was a mistake to wish they

were blue. A clumsy band and button fastened her unbleached night-gown about the throat. She undid it, freed her thin shoulders, and saw herself a bride in low-necked satin, walking down an aisle with Lucius Harney. He would kiss her as they left the church.... She put down the candle and covered her face with her hands as if to imprison the kiss (S, 25).

This is the first erotic scene that portrays Charity's growing awareness of her own sexual desire as well as her desirability. As his guide and driver, Charity shows him around the area, pointing out the old houses he might wish to sketch for his publisher; Harney finds himself gradually attracted to her.¹² However, while Harney is drawing his sketches, "she often strayed away by herself into the woods or up the hillside" (S, 42). As the narrative explains, "it was partly from shyness that she did so: from a sense of inadequacy that came to her most painfully when her companion, absorbed in his job, forgot her ignorance and her inability to follow his least allusion, and plunged into a monologue on art and life" (S, 42). On the other hand, on the 4th of July Independence Day Festivities, in Nettleton, a nearby town, when Harney pays for her first taste of wine: "Charity did not think the wine as good as sarsaparilla, but she sipped a mouthful for the pleasure of doing what he did, and of fancying herself alone with him in foreign countries" (S, 93). It is interesting to note that, although Charity - on account of her origins and lack of education - repeatedly feels inferior and inadequate in his presence, she cannot help dreaming of a future with him. In the same scene, when Harney finds out that his watch has stopped, they go to a small jeweler's shop where Harney buys her first piece of jewelry, the blue brooch; she secretly desired an engagement ring rather than a token of friendship¹³:

With ten dollars he might have bought her an engagement ring; she knew that Mrs. Tom Fry's, which came from Springfield, and had a diamond in it, had cost only eight seventy-five. But she did not know why the thought had occurred to her. Harney would never buy her an engagement ring: they were friends and comrades, but no more. He had been perfectly fair to her: he had never said a word to mislead her. She wondered what the girl was like whose hand was waiting for his ring....
(S, 98)

At this point, one can argue that her judgment of Harney - as partial and incorrect- stems from her feelings of inferiority and inadequacy when she compares her lowly origins to his privileged background. Therefore, she keeps reminding herself that they are only friends and nothing more, which makes the reader wonder how much the narrator should be trusted and how the story should be interpreted. Harney may not have promised anything, but even from the very beginning he is never quite honest with Charity. For instance, in the opening chapters, he denies that he has given a bad report of her about the books in the library to Miss Hatchard;

“Was that what you were told? I don't wonder you're angry. The books are in bad shape, and as some are interesting it's a pity. I told Miss Hatchard they were suffering from dampness and lack of air; and I brought her here to show her how easily the place could be ventilated. I also told her you ought to have someone to help you do the dusting and airing. If you were given a wrong version of what I said I'm sorry; but I'm so fond of old books that I'd rather see them made into a bonfire than left to moulder away like these” (S, 33).

At this point, one cannot be certain he is telling the truth, again contributing to the unreliability of the narrative story; it is his word against Lawyer Royall's who, despite the flaws and vices to be revealed, personifies law and order in North Dormer.

In the same scene, while Charity is trying to explain how desperate she is to get away from North Dormer and how much she needs the money to achieve that, Harney does not seem to care about her worries and grievances; he cares only about his own passion as an architect of improvement, to put another way, an architect who does renovations and restorations (S, 33). Then, he prepares to leave the town without saying goodbye, after all the afternoons they spent together for his sake, drawing sketches of old houses for his publisher. When confronted by Lawyer Royall, he simply chooses to leave the town but -as his letter shows- keeps seeing her secretly: “Dear Charity, I can’t go away like this. I am staying for a few days at Creston River. Will you come down and meet me at Creston pool? I will wait for you till evening” (S, 84). Moreover, Harney secretly takes Charity to the 4th of July Celebrations in which: “the seats were at the end of a row, one above the other. Charity had taken off her hat to have an uninterrupted view; and whenever she leaned back to follow the curve of some dishevelled rocket she could feel Harney's knees against her head” (S, 100). As the narrative relates, these pleasures seem to be commonplace for Harney, but interestingly he seems to be enjoying Charity’s company under the name of “simple friendship.”(S, 88): What is more is that in the same scene he gives her her first kiss during the fireworks display:

The picture vanished and darkness came down. In the obscurity she felt her head clasped by two hands: her face was drawn backward, and Harney's lips were pressed on hers. With sudden vehemence he wound his arms about her, holding her head against his breast while she gave him back his kisses. An unknown Harney had revealed himself, a Harney who dominated her and yet over whom she felt herself possessed of *a new mysterious power*. (S, 102).

“Lucius” of course is a Latinate variation of “light”; Charity is drawn to him from the outset, as to the radiance of a metropolis promising everything North Dormer lacks. At the same time, it is possible to say that his name, Lucius, derives from Lucifer, a name for the devil and befits the dishonesty and selfishness of the “city fellow” (*S*, 43) “laughing with all his teeth” (*S*, 1) as described in the opening page. One can further argue he represents temptation; he certainly manipulates Charity into having sex with him in an abandoned house somewhere between the town and the mountain when she feels most vulnerable and ashamed after the most humiliating scene for Charity, as we shall see now.

3.4 “You whore—you damn—bare-headed whore, you!”

On the day of the 4th of July Independence Celebration, Charity wears a white hat symbolizing her purity and virginity; yet the “cherry-colored lining” and “red roses” on the brim may suggest her budding sexuality.¹⁴ As if she recognizes the connotations of the scarlet-lined bonnet, she has lied to Lawyer Royall about her trip to Nettleton with Harney, saying that “...she was going down to the Band of Hope picnic at Hepburn” (*S*, 86) rather than the Fourth of July festivities in Nettleton. One automatically notes here the dichotomy of *Hope* versus *Independence*: yearning for freedom and independence since the beginning of the novel, Charity chooses independence over hope: accordingly, “to avoid attracting notice, she carried her new hat carefully wrapped up, and had thrown a long grey veil of Mrs. Royall's over the new white muslin dress which Ally's clever fingers had made for her” (*S*, 87). Only after she leaves the town does she proudly put the hat on, which makes her face

“...glow like the inside of the shell on the parlour mantelpiece” (*S*, 85) and contributing to her beauty and attractiveness: when Harney jumped out of the buggy to meet her, his eyes conveyed just how evident was her success.

“Determined to assert her independence,” (*S*, 86) Charity was possessed of “a great longing... to walk the streets of a big town on a holiday, clinging to his arm and jostled by idle crowds in their best clothes” (*S*, 87). At this point, one can easily say that she still yearns for a better life away from the small town but by lying to her foster father and continuing to see Harney - “a city fellow” (*S*, 43) - in secret, she is breaking the norms and codes of a small town society¹⁵ and is on the verge of ruining herself like Ally Hawes's sister Julia, who ended up as a prostitute in Nettleton, and “people's never mentioning her name” (*S*, 71).

On their return from the lake – where they kiss-, Charity and Harney encounter drunken Lawyer Royall, in the company of a heavily made-up Julia Hawes wearing “a large hat with a long white feather” (*S*, 99). Julia earning her living as a prostitute seems to represent sexual and social independence, but at the same time she appears to be the embodiment of the consequences of any kind of female independence in rural New England. When Julia says: “Here’s grandpa’s little daughter come to take him home” (*S*, 103), Charity sees that Royall’s “face, a livid brown, with red blotches of anger and lips sunken in like an old man's, was a lamentable ruin in the searching glare” (*S*, 103). Apparently, Lawyer Royall must have felt jealous of Harney and at the same time infuriated at Charity’s display of sensuality and independence as she was not wearing her hat, symbol of her purity and virginity; believing that she has lost her virginity, he twice shouts: “You whore - you damn - bare-headed whore, you!” (*S*, 103). Then suddenly Charity “has a vision of herself, hatless, disheveled, with a man's arm about her, confronting that drunken crew, headed by her guardian's pitiable

figure” which “filled her with shame” (*S*, 103). At this moment, it is clear that Charity indeed sees herself as “a whore” who displays her sexuality publicly like the group of prostitutes they have just encountered.

That is why she decides to return to the Mountain the next day. She sees Ally - who “represented North Dormer, with all its mean curiosities, its furtive malice, its sham unconsciousness of evil” (*S*, 107) - approaching the red house of the Royalls. Believing that reports of the scandalous scene of the wharf, “exaggerated and distorted” (*S*, 107) are probably already circulating in North Dormer, she decides “...instant flight, was the only thing conceivable”; as “it was as if her guardian's words had stripped her bare in the face of the grinning crowd and proclaimed to the world the secret admonitions of her conscience” (*S*, 107). Here, Charity might have become aware of her sexual awakening and indeed the first kiss Harney and she exchanged during the fireworks seems to be signaling a possible sexual affair in the near future if they continue to see each other. Therefore, “she had come to see the impossibility of meeting him again” as a sign that “her dream of comradeship was over” and “she did not want, ever again, to see anyone she had known; above all, she did not want to see Harney....” (*S*, 109).

It would be useful to remember that “realist novels self-consciously strive for an unvarnished, more accurate representation of everyday life, speech, and manners and move away from religious certitude and toward a more skeptical and secular point of view” (Crane, 149). We can observe this attitude in the scene where, on her way up to the Mountain, she is stopped by an evangelist who emerges from a gospel tent and asks: “Sister, your Saviour knows everything. Won't you come in and lay your guilt before Him?” he asked insinuatingly, putting his hand on her arm. When Charity replies: “I on'y wish't I had any to lay!” (*S*, 110), it is clear that she relies on her

innocence and purity as she is still the virgin girl seen on the threshold of the red Royall house; however, one must be careful what to wish for as right after this conversation, Harney catches her up before she reaches the abandoned house to spend the night: "...penetrated with the joy of her presence that he was utterly careless of what she was thinking or feeling..." (S, 111); again, as in the library however, Charity is trying to explain her desperation and reasons for not returning to the red house.

When Harney is introduced to the story, the reader falsely expects him to rescue Charity from the barren life she is leading under the roof of lustful and drunk Lawyer Royall by marrying her. It does not happen so. Instead, he takes advantage of her most vulnerable moment when she deeply feels humiliated and ashamed after their first kiss followed by their encounter with Royall who "publicly dishonored her" (S, 107).¹⁶

There is no one to offer refuge from Lawyer Royall's incestuous desires for his foster daughter.

Their sexual passion eventually spans the chasm of her ignorance and Charity feels Harney "carried away into a new world" of communication and connection as she blossoms sexually and emotionally (S, 125); in this new sensual world, she discovers "the wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils" (S, 123). But at the same time once she starts her sexual liaison with Harney in the abandoned house, she steps out of the confines of citizenship in North Dormer by breaking the norms and codes of the society. In fact, the abandoned house where Charity meets her lover is also symbolic in that it exists in the middle, on the road between these two places, between the law-abiding town and the lawless mountain as if demarcating the border between civilization and savagery.¹⁷ Although Harney is perfectly aware of the hypercritical small-town attitude North Dormer holds towards sexual behavior for women, and the dire

consequences a premarital sexual affair would inevitably entail, he nonetheless reveals his selfish and opportunist character by initiating Charity into a sexual relationship.¹⁸

3.5 “Come back for good”

As the narrative picks up six weeks after the start of her affair with Harney, we see Charity and some other young women busy helping with the decorations for North Dormer’s Old Home Week festival, which is mostly designed for those who have left and wish to return for a short visit. The day of the festival is another scene worth mentioning in which Mr. Royall voluntarily presents the keynote address and moves his audience deeply by rallying them in support of their town: “Some of us, who went out from here in our youth... went out - like you - to busy cities and larger duties... have come back in another way - come back for good. I am one of those, as many of you know....” (S, 133).¹⁹ Although his speech appears to address the community of the town, it could also be directed at only Charity who has been longing to leave the town for bigger and better opportunities. While Charity is striving to see Harney around the corner of the screen of foliage masking the harmonium, “gradually she found her attention arrested by her guardian's discourse” (S, 133). It is interesting that when his speech is over, Royall takes his seat in the row of chairs in front of the harmonium where Harney is sitting next to Annabel Balch hidden from Charity’s sight. At this point, Royall might have pushed back his seat deliberately in order to uncover the engaged couple at the end of the row, chatting and smiling happily. Not only Charity but also the reader realizes that:

...in a flash they had shown her the bare reality of her situation. Behind the frail screen of her lover's caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people—with other women—his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man's life is entangled. Of all these she knew nothing, except what he had told her of his architectural aspirations. (*S*, 135).

One can argue that from the very first scene, Charity constantly thinks about the insurmountable “gulf” separating her from Harney, “a city fellow” (*S*, 43): “Education and opportunity had divided them by a width that no effort of hers could bridge, and even when his youth and his admiration brought him nearest, some chance word, some unconscious allusion, seemed to thrust her back across the gulf” (*S*, 52). Yet, she has struggled ineffectually to bridge this gulf and establish a lasting personal connection, even if that means to risk her whole life by giving all she has: “She had given him all she had but what was it compared to the other gifts life held for him? She understood now the case of girls like herself to whom this kind of thing happened. They gave all they had, but their all was not enough: it could not buy more than a few moments...” (*S*, 136, Wharton’s ellipses). Therefore, Charity must have felt shocked and overwhelmed by the sudden revelation of her lover’s secret engagement; at the same time, she experiences: “a terror of the unknown, of all the mysterious attractions that must even now be dragging him away from her, and of her own *powerlessness* to contend with them” (*S*, 136, my emphasis).

The combination of these feelings and thoughts along with Royall’s speech secretly asking her to come back home - as she has stepped out of the threshold and on the verge of ruining herself - must have made the heat “suffocating” and “intolerable” for her as Royall was also sitting “close to her, his eyes on her face” (*S*, 136). At first “a feeling of physical sickness rushed over her” and then Charity

“dropping her flowers, fell face downward at Mr. Royall's feet” (*S*, 137). Here one can say that Lawyer Royall, as befits his profession, finally reveals the truth about her lover’s secret life and intentions. At the same time, the act of falling downward (as well as implications of the word “d(t)own” – “ward”) at Royall’s feet perhaps foreshadows her inevitable submission to the order and law of the town, as represented by Lawyer Royall.

Four days later, suspecting Charity’s sexual liaison with Harney, Royall goes to the abandoned house they use for their secret meetings: in this scene, it becomes clear that Harney, confronted by the angry lawyer, never had any intention of proposing marriage. Asking sarcastically and rhetorically whether that is the home he proposes to bring her to when they get married, Royall answers his question once again humiliating Charity by referring to her mother, who was a prostitute, and to her lawless origins on the Mountain:

“And you know why you ain't asked her to marry you, and why you don't mean to. It's because you hadn't need to; nor any other man either. I'm the only one that was fool enough not to know that; and I guess nobody'll repeat my mistake—not in Eagle County, anyhow. They all know what she is, and what she came from. They all know her mother was a woman of the town from Nettleton that followed one of those Mountain fellows up to his place and lived there with him like a heathen. I saw her there sixteen years ago, when I went to bring this child down. I went to save her from the kind of life her mother was leading—but I'd better have left her in the kennel she came from....” (*S*, 144).

According to Lawyer Royall, representing order and law of North Dormer society, Charity is a dog from a bitch in a “kennel”; one can here say that like the morality of North Dormer, as her guardian and father figure, Royall is also bogus and hypocritical.²⁰ Here instead of protecting Charity from the dangerous consequences of any possible sexual relationship, he boasts that he “saved her from the kind of life her mother was leading”; however, as readers, we know that he attempted to seduce her before he proposed and he enjoys the company of prostitutes, which reveals his probable motivation in intervening as plain sexual jealousy. Both Harney and Charity learn here for the first time that her mother was a woman “from Nettleton, that followed one of those Mountain fellows up to his place and lived there with him like a heathen” (S, 144). No wonder he abruptly decides to leave the town with vague promises to marry her once he settles things: “I shall have to go off for a while - a month or two, perhaps - to arrange some things; and then I’ll come back... and we’ll get married” (S, 145). When he speaks, his voice sounds like a stranger’s and the candle light throws “a queer shadow on his frowning forehead, and made the smile on his lips a *grimace*” (S, 146, my emphasis) as if revealing his true ugly face, his insincerity.

3.6 “Private Consultations”

The abortion clinic that Charity’s friend Ally associates with Nettleton functions as another disturbing yet significant scene in the novel. When Charity plans to sneak away with Harney to Nettleton for the Fourth of July, she asks her friend, Ally Hawes, if she ever “feels like going down to Nettleton for a day” (S, 85). Ally shakes her head saying she “always remember that awful time I went down with Julia

– to the house that advertises “Private Consultations” where Julia “came as near as anything to dying” (*S*, 86) because of the abortion she had to have (the word, abortion, is never explicitly stated). Ally tells Charity its precise location. It lingers in her mind for a moment as a warning but she dismisses it quickly as irrelevant as she thinks she is not like Julia “who did not know how to choose, and to keep bad fellows at a distance” (*S*, 86). She was going to spend the next day, the Fourth of July, in Nettleton with “a friend whom she trusted and who respected her” (*S*, 86); therefore, she thinks, she could not suffer Julia’s fate for sure. However, when Charity finds herself in Julia’s position, she ironically goes down to the same abortion clinic.

After Dr. Merkle examines her, she suggests that, in a month’s time she can help Charity with an abortion. Dr. Merkle is described as “a plump woman with small bright eyes, an immense mass of black hair coming down low on her forehead, and unnaturally white and even teeth” (*S*, 155). The doctor’s physical description, her fancy black dress and the gold chains and charms, seems to be contributing to the negative attitude to her profession.²¹ Accordingly, Charity wonders, “this woman with the false hair, the false teeth, the false murderous smile—what was she offering her but immunity from some unthinkable crime?” (*S*, 155).²² One asks, was the crime having an abortion or getting pregnant out of wedlock? In both cases, Dr. Merkle seems to be offering to erase evidence of it ever happening, which may also mean erasing her love affair with Harney. Obviously, Charity sees the abortion as a betrayal of her affair with Harney but at the same time seems to be reflecting the attitude of North Dormer society towards birth control and abortion as a kind of unthinkable crime.

Therefore, in a state of horror, Charity leaves the clinic; she is convinced that she came to see the doctor only to make sure that she really was pregnant. She even feels disgusted that “the woman had taken her for a miserable creature like Julia” (*S*, 156). Throughout the novel, Charity compares herself with Julia Hawes, who also had an illicit romance and became pregnant, as mentioned earlier. Here once again Charity reassures herself that she is not like Julia and her sudden flight from the abortion clinic is partially based on the decision that she cannot end up like Julia who acted against the norms and codes of North Dormer society and fell into being labeled a “whore,” “unmarriageable” and “a threat”. Julia only exists for the sake of being a reminder, a warning of what life may become for those who dare to act against the norms. When Charity contemplates what to do with her pregnancy, she asks herself: “Only - was there no alternative but Julia’s? (*S*, 162). Apart from Julia Hawes, Rose Coles also became pregnant out of wedlock although their fates differ as the narrative relates. While Julia becomes a prostitute after the abortion, Rose becomes trapped in a marriage of necessity. Charity considers the fates of these unwed pregnant girls: “[she] had always suspected that the shunned Julia’s fate might have its compensations” (*S*, 71) but when it comes to Rose’s life:

Distinctly and pitilessly there rose before her the fate of the girl who married “to make things right.” She had seen too many village love stories end in that way. Poor Rose Coles’ miserable marriage was of the number; and what good had come of it for her or for Halston Skeff? They had hated each other from the day the minister married them; and whenever old Mrs. Skeff had a fancy to humiliate her daughter-in-law she had only to say, “Who’d ever think the baby’s only two? And for a seven months’ child—ain’t it a wonder what a size he is?” (*S*, 162).

At that moment she realizes that her “individual adventure” is not so individual as she faces the same choices as every girl who gets pregnant out of wedlock and “in the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure...” (*S*, 162). Here it is striking that she is still convinced that Harney is not a “bad fellow,” which demonstrates her partial and incorrect judgement of him further. After her visit to the clinic, she even believes it is her sovereign right to marry Harney because she is pregnant with his child: “She no longer had any difficulty in picturing herself as Harney's wife now that she was the mother of his child; and compared to her sovereign right Annabel Balch's claim seemed no more than a girl's sentimental fancy” (*S*, 157): however, she has already sent a letter asking Harney to keep his promise to Annabel Balch and in return Harney proves more than ready to accept his release:

DEAR CHARITY:

I have your letter, and it touches me more than I can say. Won't you trust me, in return, to do my best? There are things it is hard to explain, much less to justify; but your generosity makes everything easier. All I can do now is to thank you from my soul for understanding. Your telling me that you wanted me to do right has helped me beyond expression. If ever there is a hope of realizing what we dreamed of you will see me back on the instant; and I haven't yet lost that hope (*S*, 158).

Interestingly, as if blinded by Harney's radiance, Charity interprets his letter as an honest attempt to reveal “his struggling between opposing duties. She did not even reproach him in her thoughts for having concealed from her that he was not free” (*S*, 159). Therefore, instead of forcing Harney to marry her, Charity chooses to seek out her mother on the Mountain where she can find comfort as well as support among her

own kind to “whom the harsh code of the village was unknown” (*S*, 165) and “she supposed it was something in her blood that made the Mountain the only answer to her questioning, the inevitable escape from all that hemmed her in and beset her” (*S*, 163). In other words, she is looking for some alternative place away from the town and its established order and rules to “save her baby, and hide herself with it somewhere where no one would ever come to trouble them” (*S*, 165) or make them feel humiliated and ashamed.²³ Before she sees her mother’s dead body and the people living up there, she thinks that: “she herself had been born as her own baby was going to be born; and whatever her mother's subsequent life had been, she could hardly help remembering the past, and receiving a daughter who was facing the trouble she had known” (*S*, 167). In other words, she expects her mother to sympathize with her situation and support her in difficult times like this.

3.7 “In my flesh shall I see God”

Charity’s approved pregnancy and Harney’s disappointing letter increases the tension in the novel between the laws of North Dormer, Charity’s adopted home, and the lawlessness of the Mountain, Charity’s birthplace. The drunken funeral of Charity’s mother, emphasizing the poverty-stricken, grim circumstances of the mountain colony, is another disturbing scene. When she discovers herself deserted and pregnant and faced with the options of abortion, life as an unwed mother in North Dormer, or forcing Harney to marry her, she believes that going to the Mountain is her only salvation. As she travels to the Mountain top, the first snow falls, the wind blows fiercely, and the air becomes increasingly chilled, the land is described as “bleak”, “barren” and “starved”; she passes “fields of faded mountain grass bleached

by long months beneath the snow” (*S*, 170). On the Mountain's “lonely hillside,” a few houses “lay in stony fields, crouching among the rocks as if to brace themselves against the wind” (*S*, 170). The scenery seems to be symbolizing “the sense of unescapable isolation” which is “all she could feel for the moment” (*S*, 168). Fifteen Miles away from North Dormer or away from any other civilized village, the community living as outlaws and outcasts on the Mountain are depicted like savages: ignorant, coarse and beast-like. When Charity arrives at her mother's house with Mr. Miles, the reverend and Liff Hyatt, she notices the dead woman lying on a bed in ragged and disordered clothes:

...they stood before a mattress on the floor in a corner of the room. A woman lay on it, but she did not look like a dead woman; she seemed to have fallen across her squalid bed in a drunken sleep, and to have been left lying where she fell, in her ragged disordered clothes. One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled down about the ankle. The woman lay on her back, her eyes staring up unblinkingly at the candle that trembled in Mr. Miles's hand... (*S*, 172)

The appalling description of her dead mother “who do not look like a woman” but “rather like a “dead dog in a ditch” (*S*, 173) is a reminder of Royall's words in the abandoned house, recounted above. In that scene, Charity lying on the mattress like a sexually active woman with her “hair hanging loose across her breast” (*S*, 142) as her loose hair indicates her open sexuality; therefore, “it seemed as though she could not speak to him till she had set herself in order. She groped for her comb, and tried to fasten up the coil. Mr. Royall silently watched her” (*S*, 142). Likewise, Charity tries to compose her mother's body to arrange it for burial²⁴:

He (Mr. Miles) knelt down by the mattress, and pressed the lids over the dead woman's eyes. Charity, trembling and sick, knelt beside him, and tried to compose her mother's body. She drew the stocking over the dreadful glistening leg, and pulled the skirt down to the battered upturned boots. As she did so, she looked at her mother's face, thin yet swollen, with lips parted in a frozen gasp above the broken teeth. There was no sign in it of anything human: she lay there like a dead dog in a ditch. Charity's hands grew cold as they touched her. (*S*, 172-173)

In cold pitch-darkness, Charity's mother is buried, like an animal: without a coffin in the frozen earth. At this point, one can argue that the descriptions of the Mountain community have associations with the animal world; they are not even “half-human” as Royall informs Harney in one of the earlier scenes (*S*, 50); “sodden and bestial” (*S*, 56) they “live like vermin in their lair” (*S*, 58). Mr. Miles lights the candle in the funeral scene: “in a moment or two a faint circle of light fell on the pale anguished heads that started out of the shadow like the heads of nocturnal animals” (*S*, 172). When “the drink-dazed creatures” (*S*, 175) speak, their utterings barely sound like human speech. The emphasis on animal imagery might point out the inarticulate nature of mountain folk, the general inability to express themselves and the social isolation caused thereby. In a diary entry from the mid-1920s, Wharton comments on her own choice of animal imagery as follows: “I think it is because of the *usness* in their eyes, with the underlying *notusness* which belies it, and is so tragic a reminder of the lost age when we human beings branched off and left them: left them to eternal inarticulateness and slavery” (Lee, 746).

It is clear that, as a woman from Nettleton, her mother also degraded herself to a more primitive existence and Charity realizes that by going to the mountain, she is repeating her mother's life: “she herself had been born as her own baby...” (*S*, 167).

At this point, it would be also true to say that Charity's journey to the mountain helps her to grasp the true nature of her separation from her mother:

Then she remembered what Mr. Royall had said in telling her story to Lucius Harney: "Yes, there was a mother; but she was glad to have the child go. She'd have given her to anybody...."(S, 180)

Well! after all, was her mother so much to blame? Charity, since that day, had always thought of her as destitute of all human feeling; now she seemed merely pitiful. What mother would not want to save her child from such a life? Charity thought of the future of her own child, and tears welled into her aching eyes, and ran down over her face. If she had been less exhausted, less burdened with his weight, she would have sprung up then and there and fled away.... (S, 180)

Obviously, Mary Hyatt was not an evil or bad mother but a poor mother who had no other choice other than giving her child away in order to save her from poverty, cold and hunger. Her mother must have felt the same dilemma as Charity: whether to stay on the Mountain among the people who are depicted as "herded together in a sort of passive promiscuity in which their common misery was the closest link" (S, 180) or to choose Julia's alternative to provide financial support for the baby.²⁵ After the funeral, refusing to back with Mr. Miles, Charity spends the night with Liff Hyatt's mother: "Charity lay on the floor on a mattress, as her dead mother's body had lain. The room in which she lay was cold and dark and low-ceilinged, and even poorer and barer than the scene of Mary Hyatt's earthly pilgrimage" (S, 179). Lying in her corner staring at the dirty floor, she saw "the clothes line hung with decaying rags, the old woman huddled against the cold stove, and the light gradually spreading across the wintry world, and bringing with it a new day in which she would have to live, to choose, to act, to make herself a place among

these people—or to go back to the life she had left” (*S*, 180-181). Unable to establish any relation to these people, she chooses to lead the life of Julia’s: thinking of her unborn child, she feels “anything was better than to add another life to the nest of misery on the Mountain” (*S*, 181).

The unrelenting quality of the descriptions of the bleak conditions of these lives gives one a feeling of “hopelessness” and “powerlessness.” Charity feels no kinship with anyone; she feels alone, like “a mere speck in the lonely circle of the sky” (*S*, 183) and since her visit to the abortion clinic, “the events of the last two days seemed to have divided her forever from her short dream of bliss. Even Harney's image had been blurred by that crushing experience: she thought of him as so remote from her that he seemed hardly more than a memory” (*S*, 183). When she leaves the mountain, she is emotionally and physically in such an exhausted and desperate state that she cannot fight against Lawyer Royall. Although he seems to be extremely kind and understanding when he offers marriage to a woman impregnated by another man, he actually takes advantage of her most vulnerable moment to marry her. Back to the scene where Charity answers Royall’s warning back with “a slight laugh” (*S*, 142) and “Better wait till I'm in trouble”(S, 142) and he says “Well—I'll wait” (*S*, 143) : indeed he does not lose one last chance to convince her to be his bride when he catches her on the way back from the Mountain.

3.8 “I'm married to Mr. Royall. I'll always remember you”

Another scene worth mentioning is when they stop at Mrs. Hobart's place to have breakfast on their way back to the town. Here when Charity feels the warm coffee flow through her veins and revive her, her resistance to Lawyer Royall seems

to start melting as “she began to feel like a living being again; but the return to life was so painful that the food choked in her throat and she sat staring down at the table in silent anguish” (S, 186). Lawyer Royall offers her safety, warmth, food, and shelter; in other words, the conditions of a livable life that will allow her to escape following her mother’s fate into the desolate and barely human conditions of the Mountain. While, the Mountain represents poverty, coldness, and isolation, the Royall house with “its scrubbed floor and dresser full of china” and its “high-backed horsehair chair, the faded rag carpet, the row of books on the shelf, the engraving of ‘The Surrender of Burgoyne’ over the stove, and the mat with a brown and white spaniel on a moss-green border” seems, on many counts, “the very symbol of household order” – creating “a vision of peace and warmth” (S, 58). Back in the carriage, Charity’s resistance gradually melts: she finds “herself sinking into deeper depths of weariness,” (S, 189): at this point one can argue that she cannot help but succumb to middle class values and materialism, as “they descended through the bare woods there were moments when she lost the exact sense of things... For the most part she had only a confused sensation of slipping down a smooth irresistible current... and she abandoned herself to the feeling as a refuge from the torment of thought” (S, 189).

At this point one can easily observe that increasingly as the narrative progresses, Charity finds “peace”, “warmth” and “silence” in relinquishing her will: “Mr. Royall seldom spoke, but his silent presence gave her, for the first time, a sense of *peace* and *security*. She knew that where he was there would be *warmth*, rest, *silence*; and for the moment they were all she wanted” (S, 188, my emphasis). In other words, Charity chooses safety and security by agreeing to marry Mr. Royall, who embodies the law, which he guards by profession, and who will now guard her legally.²⁶ As the narrative story tells, Charity feels like a person “to whom something

irreparable and overwhelming had happened, but the traces of the steps leading up to it had almost vanished” (S, 189). Therefore, “in a *confused dream*” she finds herself “sitting with him (Royall) in a pleasant room, at a table with a red and white table-cloth on which hot food and tea were placed” (S, 190 my emphasis). The next thing she knows is that they were in front of the clergyman in “a low vaulted room with a cross on an altar, and rows of benches” (S, 191), which has obvious associations with death, closure and lifelessness.

One can easily observe that before and after their wedding ceremony, Charity is described as *confused*, in a state of *dream-like* as if she does not know what she is doing: “she followed Royall as passively as a child” (S, 190): “she had followed him to the buggy when they went out of Mrs. Hobart's kitchen” (S, 192); “she had the feeling that if she ceased to keep close to him, and do what he told her to do, the world would slip away from beneath her feet” (S, 192). When the lady on the bench puts her hand in Mr. Royall's, she “felt a ring that was too big for her “and only then did she understand “...that she was married...” (S, 192, Wharton’s ellipses). At this point it is possible to argue that Charity is finally obliged to submit to the bourgeois ethic she was brought up with since being retrieved from the mountain-folk where one is stripped of all rights that a human is entitled to. Thus, Charity has always been on the threshold of the Royall house, representing her limbo between an establishmentarian upbringing and an anarchic origin; thus she feels little kinship with anyone.

When she meets the young Lucius Harney from his more privileged background, she suddenly becomes class conscious; yet, tempted to free herself from the strict codes and norms of North Dormer, she yields to Harney’s seduction, a temptation symbolizing a promise of an independent and more fulfilling existence,

which pushes her from the threshold of the Royall House - peace, warmth and silence – back to the mountain. Her wedding threshold is the threshold to which she had retreated in the opening scene. Marriage, for many, is considered a happy ending; however, this marriage signals only an incestuous life for the unfortunate female protagonist, Charity Royall who becomes Mrs. Royall, although the two newlyweds have not yet consummated their union.²⁷ One can say of Charity it means the death of her dreams of escape, of fulfillment and independence as she could not be liberated from North Dormer and its suffocating norms and codes.

Chained to Lawyer Royall by law, Charity, like Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver and many other female characters of Wharton, becomes a prisoner for life just because she has no other place to go. Therefore, although some critics read Charity's decision to marry Mr. Royall not as a bad thing at all, I can argue that *Summer* is a story of enclosure, of failure and withdrawal rather than stepping out. No matter how hard and hopelessly one can struggle against forces beyond his/her control, it is inevitable not to fall victim to the ruling order, patriarchal order, embodied in Lawyer Royall, who at last gains control over the rebellious young woman whose origins depend on the outlaw territory, outside the boundaries of patriarchal control. It is obvious that Wharton criticizes the expectations and limitations that turn of the century American society imposes on young women like Zeena Frome, Mattie Silver and Charity Royall: the "purpose" reserved for young women at the end of nineteenth century American society is not "freedom and independence" but "marriage," in other words, "social entrapment" for survival as we shall see in *The House of Mirth* as well.

NOTES

¹ An often cited anecdote: In a letter to her friend Gaillard Lapsley, Wharton calls *Summer* her “hot Ethan” in a reference to *Ethan Frome*, which is her only other novel set in New England. Both works were influenced by the time she spent in Lenox, Massachusetts at “The Mount,” where she notes “every detail about the colony of drunken mountain outlaws described in *Summer* was given to me by the rector of the church at Lenox (near where we lived), and that the lonely peak I have called ‘the Mountain’ was in reality Bear Mountain, an isolated summit not more than twelve miles from our own home” (*Backward Glance*, 294)

² In her work “Cold Ethan and “Hot Ethan,” Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out the obvious similarity between the winter and summer novels as their location: however, she also adds the contrasts between these New England novels as follows: “*Ethan Frome* is a tragedy of wintery emotional starvation, while *Summer* is a richly sensuous book set in the season named by the title. *Ethan Frome* tells the tale of a man’s renunciation of sexuality-indeed, of his symbolic castration; *Summer* gives the account of a young woman’s sexual initiation.” 232.

³ For many critics, such as Kathy Grafton, the relationship between Charity Royall, and her lover, Lucius Harney, depicts a kind of feminine sexual awakening that is profoundly original in literature. 350. Likewise, Cynthia Griffin Wolff in her introduction to the book asserts: “*Summer* is not the first Bildungsroman to focus on this awakening to maturity as it occurs in a woman’s life; however, it is the first to deal explicitly with sexual passion as an essential component of that process” x. See also “Seduction and Language in *Summer*,” by Dianne L. Chambers who interprets Wharton’s narrative about a woman caught up in the emotional turmoil of sexual passion as Wharton’s discovery of her own sexuality and her own development as an author: “What is most fascinating about Wharton’s *Summer* is the transmutation of a story about the awakening of sexuality into an exploration of the seductive power of language.” 98. See also “Any Change May Mean Something”: *Summer*, Sexuality, and Single Women” in *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* by Jennifer Haytock who examines “Edith Wharton’s exploration of the changes that occurred in social attitudes toward women and women’s sexuality, particularly in the decade leading up to the perceived debauchery of the Jazz Age.” 46. It is also worth mentioning that Haytock focuses “particularly on *Summer* as a novel engaged with female sexuality and the surrounding issues of birth control and prostitution”: she further argues that “the radical vision of the novel comes less from Charity’s growth into a sexual woman and more from Wharton’s anger at the treatment of women as disposable objects of men’s pleasure” 46. See also Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class and Culture* (1978).

⁴ For a detailed description of sentimental novel tradition in American Literature, see *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth Century American Novel*, by Gregg Crane, especially Chapter 2 (The Sentimental Novel) 103-148. One can summarize the main characteristics of this genre as follows:

- Sentimental novel aims to produce an overwhelming emotional reaction in the reader.
- The idealism of sentimental fiction stems from its belief in absolute and fixed values, which is reflected in the unambiguous nature of its characters – their relative transparency and typicality.
- The religious and emotional ideals of the sentimental novel are static and unchanging, and the protagonist in a typical sentimental novel tries to attain a kind of spiritual and emotional calmness by means of faithfully sticking to these moral absolutes.
- The sentimental novel’s protagonists are inherently good,- buy still these characters frequently must go through some process of growth, steadily improving themselves and moving toward the full realization of their good natures.
- The plot of the sentimental novel is organized around the main character’s reversal of spiritual fortunes (a reversal which often has material and social aspects as well) with an emphasis on prudence, thrift, hard work, and education.
- The narrative template or storyline most associated with the sentimental novel is that of a young woman struggling to make her way in life without the support of a traditional family.
- Targeted at young people, young women in particular, these novels are didactic, instructing readers in the development of good character and the reciprocal nature of emotional connections and moral obligations.

- The domestic ideal of finding and maintaining a caring and healthy home is central to the sentimental novel's drama.

⁵ For some critics Charity's decision to marry Mr. Royall can be seen as a positive one: Kathy Grafton, for example, notes that "the options for a young girl of her class in such a predicament during this time were few" and "marriage to Mr. Royall may at first seem like a kind of surrender on Charity's part, it actually further reveals her maturity and clear vision." 364. In her work, "Degradation and Forbidden Love in Edith Wharton's *Summer*," Grafton further argues that Charity's true feelings for Mr. Royall motivate her to consent to marriage, as best expressed in the thoughts she has when he brings her down from the Mountain: "Mr. Royall seldom spoke, but his silent presence gave her, for the first time, a sense of peace and security. She knew that where he was there would be warmth, rest, silence; and for the moment they were all she wanted" 187. See also *A Feast of Words* by Wolff who declares that "the incest motif per se does not figure prominently in *Summer*: it is not a "bad" thing that Charity eventually marries Lawyer Royall"; see "Edith Wharton's *Summer* and 'Women's Fiction'" by Barbara A. White who calls Royall "a prince" and "the only choice for Charity;" see *Edith Wharton's Letters From the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* by Candace Waid who argues that Royall "has saved Charity from reliving the (prostitute's) life of her mother;" Royall "serves as a representative of the paternal hierarchies that are designed to protect women and the young" as also quoted in "Becoming a "Good Girl": Law, Language, and Ritual in Edith Wharton's *Summer*" by Rhonda Skillern. See also "The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton's *Summer*," by Carol Wershoven who also argues that "the marriage of Charity and Royall is not incestuous" as "Charity is no innocent childbride, no ornament to be displayed and broken by New York aristocrats" and "when Royall offers Charity his name and his life, he does so with sensitivity and compassion, so that Charity may salvage her dignity and pride from the shambles of her pain." 9. See also "Charity begins at home: *Summer* and the erotic tourist" (Chapter Five) in *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* by Jennie A. Kassanoff who asserts that "from Wharton's standpoint, *Summer* was not a dark, cautionary tale about incest and sexual repression, but instead an uplifting account of eugenic reproduction, timely legitimization and racial restoration." 113.

⁶ As Candace Waid in *Edith Wharton's Letters From the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* relates, some readers interpreted Wharton's exposé of New England village life as too realistic and pessimistic. 89. As Wharton also notes in *A Backward Glance*, parts of *Summer* were "received with indignant denial" and *Ethan Frome* was "frequently criticized for being 'painful'" 294-295; she attributes the negative critical reception of her New England novels to the disturbing power of her realism arguing that: "not the least vociferous (of her critics) were the New Englanders who had for years sought the reflection of local life in the rose-and-lavender pages of their favorite authoresses" 294. While some critics, such as Black Nevius (see *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*. 25.), find Wharton's judgment of Wilkins and Jewett to be unjustified, some others, like Cynthia Griffin Wolff (see *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. 162.), affirm Wharton's criticism of the local colorists. It is worth mentioning that Waid, for example, reads *Summer* as "a revision and rewriting of Wilkins's story", "Old Woman Magoun" and in Chapter Three (Wharton and Wilkins: Rereading the Mother) discusses in detail that both are "about the failure of mothers' stories and the failure of mothers to provide a place on earth for the potential female poet" 91. For another account of Wharton's relation to Jewett and Wilkins, see Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's Tradition*. 44, 105. See also, Mary V. Marchand. "Cross Talk: Edith Wharton and the New England Women Regionalists" 369-95; See. "Rewriting the 'Rose and Lavender Pages': *Ethan Frome* and Women's Local Color Fiction" by Campbell, Donna M. 263-77.

⁷ For another account of the opening scene in the narrative, see Chambers who also highlights the fact that the reader follows Charity's point of view and gaze of the male protagonist, Lucius Harney throughout the novel. 99.

⁸ For a brief discussion on the biblical allusions of the name, *Charity*, see "The Law of Sex and Death: Religious Language and Practice in Edith Wharton's *Summer*" by Laura E. Rutland. 433.

⁹ For a discussion of the imagery and symbolism in *Summer*, see "The Desolation of Charity Royall: Imagery in Edith Wharton" by Linda Morante who argues that the images of isolation contribute to the cultural deprivation and emptiness of the small town, North Dormer. 2-3.

¹⁰ In “Decorating Fiction: Edith Wharton’s Literary Architecture,” Liisa Stephenson comments on the village library Charity works reluctantly : “the small public library where Charity Royall serves as reluctant librarian is a claustrophobic “prison-house” (*S*, 5) and “its dusty, tomb-like space mirrors Charity’s sense of paralysis within the limiting boundaries of North Dormer.” 1099. See also “The Law of Sex and Death: Religious Language and Practice in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*” by Laura E. Rutland, 433.

¹¹ For a discussion of Wharton’s inarticulate female protagonists in *The House of Mirth*, *The Reef*, and *Summer* “who are unable to generate their own stories of self—experience tragic consequences,” see “Seduction and Language in *Summer*” in *Feminist Readings of Edith Wharton* by Dianne L. Chambers. 97-124.

¹² For a discussion of Lucius Harney as an outsider/visitor who acts like an anthropologist with an interest in old houses as well as the tales of the mountain people including Charity Royall, see “Ethan Frome and Charity Royall: Edith Wharton’s Noble Savages” by Pascha Antrece Stevenson. 414-415.

¹³ Rhonda Skillern argues that “the thing that makes [Charity’s] desire different from that portrayed in most male-authored novels is that she manages to keep it apart from the cultural imagining of feminine desire. She does not expect their romance to last forever; she does not consider sex a reason for marriage; and ironically, after actually having sex, she is no longer ashamed of herself” 125. However, I disagree with her on the grounds that Charity has always secretly wished to be his bride as obvious in two scenes I have just mentioned: when she dreams of being his bride one night, looking at the mirror admiringly and when she secretly desired an engagement ring rather than a token of friendship; also as we shall see later, when she finds out that she is pregnant with Harney’s child, she believes that it is her sovereign right to marry him.

¹⁴ For more detailed information on the symbolism of the color red, see *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* by Michael Ferber. 169 and for more detailed information on the symbolism of the rose, again see Ferber. 173.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Charity’s sexual transgression, see “Seduction and Language in *Summer*” by Dianne L. Chambers. 101-102.

¹⁶ In her work “Degradation and Forbidden Love in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*,” Kathy Grafton who argues that Harney needs “a certain degradation of Charity” to occur so that “he can find her sexually accessible” and “his subconscious need(s) to separate feelings of sexual desire and attraction from feelings of genuine tenderness and high esteem” and Charity needs “to experience her sexuality as a forbidden pleasure, constitute driving forces in the revelation of their relationship within the novel.” 350. Grafton especially finds Freud’s 1912 essay “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” insightful in her analysis of the relationship between Charity and Harney—“particularly with regard to the factors that contribute to Harney’s perspective and involvement.” 350.

¹⁷ For another discussion of the abandoned house between the town and the mountain, see *Edith Wharton’s Social Register* by Claire Preston who argues that the old derelict house “seems to embody a lost propriety in its fine proportions and ornaments, a no-longer-tenable code of life which might have insisted that Harney stand by Charity” as “this compromised house is sited in a liminal place between a wilderness of ‘people who don’t give a damn for anybody’ and a civilization where ‘the whole place’ would instantly condemn her.” 63.

¹⁸ In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton comments on the lingering effects of Puritanism in American society and especially criticizes the different attitude towards the equality between men and women in French society: “The long hypocrisy which Puritan England handed on to America concerning the danger of frank and free social relations between men and women has done more than anything else to retard real civilization in America.” 112-113.

¹⁹ In her work, “Between the Town and the Mountain: Abortion and the Politics of Life in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*” Karen Weingarten argues that Mr. Royall’s keynote speech at the North Dormer Festivity looks like a war time rallying cry as “he sounds like a leader attempting to coalesce his people , to guide them into recognizing their citizenship, to see themselves as citizens.”355. For another discussion on Mr Royall’s speech in the Old Home Town Festival, see also “The Divided Conflict of

Edith Wharton's *Summer*" by Carol Wershoven who interprets Royall's speech as directed at only two people - Charity and himself: "it is an oral resolution of his own conflicts, an acceptance of his own shortcomings, and a plea to Charity to "come home" to reality, to abandon her fantasies and accept herself." 8. In her work, Wershoven further argues that Royall invites Charity to "look at things as they are" and "to seek growth and identity in the real world of "home," rather than to escape into dangerous illusions." 8. See also "Charity begins at home: Summer and the erotic tourist" in *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* by Jennie A. Kassanoff. 125-128.

²⁰ For another discussion on the role of Lawyer Royall as Charity's guardian, see "The Law of Sex and Death: Religious Language and Practice in Edith Wharton's *Summer*" by Laura E. Rutland who argues that Royall is not trustworthy in this role as "knowing her circumstances in the community, a truly fatherly man would have insisted that Charity leave for her education, even if her departure left him "lonely" at home. He would have made sure that she went to school somewhere that no one knew her origins, thus, giving her a chance for a fresh start. Had he been fully charitable and disinterested, he would never have given her a name that permanently marked her difference from others in the community, he would have reduced her marginalization by adopting her, and he most assuredly would not have tried to use her sexually when he had been in the place of a father to her for ten years." 438.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of anti-abortion climate at the time, see Weingarten. 357-358.

²² Weingarten again notes that "the language Charity uses to express her horror resonates with the language used in war: Not only is Dr. Merkle's name German, but Charity interprets the abortionist's offer as a betrayal in language that hints of war crimes and sabotage." 356.

²³ In the same work, Weingarten draws an analogy between "the conditions of life for both Charity and the foetus she carries" and "the conditions of the World War I Wharton experienced as she wrote the novel", which "constructed new categories of human life through the refugee crisis." 354. Weingarten further argues: "Charity's world is analogous to Wharton's during the war, where the security of law, while often confining and limiting, was the only protection against a more frightening fate: the open-ended possibilities of lawlessness" 354. See also "Charity begins at home: *Summer* and the erotic tourist" in *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* by Jennie A. Kassanoff. 112-152.

²⁴ Regarding the funeral service for Mary Hyatt, Rhonda Skillern argues: "yet because of her overt corporeality, she does not look human by the light of the Reverend Miles's candle or his religion: "human" women should not look so—well, nasty. But clearly she is a woman—too much of a woman to be human, perhaps, so that according to patriarchal thought she spills over into the animal category, just as "kennel"- begotten Charity did when Lawyer Royall caught her on a mattress with Lucius Harney." 131. Here Rhonda Skillern asserts that this funeral scene functions primarily, for Charity, to indicate that the patriarchal hierarchy devalues women because it devalues the body.

²⁵ See *The Traffic in Women* (1970) by Emma Goldman who argues that "the economic dependence of women as a sexual class and not the circumstances, moral, personal and social, causes them to turn to prostitution": and also see, *Sex, Class and Culture* (1978) by Lillian S. Robinson who notes that working class women are often identified with a capacity for sexual enjoyment and availability, which leads them to prostitution while sexually indiscreet bourgeois or upper class women are merely considered as financially dependent upon men as working class whores.

²⁶ Weingarten also notes that when Charity consents to marry Mr. Royall, she lets Mr. Royall set "the conditions for the state, conditions that will ultimately enable it both to contain and control female sexuality, fertility, and reproduction" 355.

²⁷ Some critics read *Summer*'s incest plot as a sinister patriarchal trap of *Ethan Frome*ian doom. For example, in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons argues that "*Summer* is the most severe criticism of America's patriarchal sexual economy. The final union between Charity and Royall is not merely depressing; it is sick", 133. Sandra Gilbert and Kathleen Pfeiffer agree: for Gilbert, Charity's marriage serves as a prime example of patriarchy's insidious ability to stifle a daughter's "natural" desires for lover/brother, mother and self by eroticizing the father. 371. and for Pfeiffer, *Summer* "reverberates with strong feminist anger." Charity's growing intimacy with Royall marks the heroine's "evolving failure" and "her willing abdication of independence and autonomy" 152, 147. See Lev Raphael, in *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame* who agrees Ammons by claiming

that Royall at last gets the control of Charity via tactics of humiliation. See “The Law of Sex and Death: Religious Language and Practice in Edith Wharton's *Summer*,” by Rutland who also notes that “the sense that Charity is borne away by Mr. Royall, at her most vulnerable, is disturbing” although “within the world of the novella, this marriage may be the best thing available:” yet “it is not compatible with life and spirituality at its fullest.” 447. See *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* by Linda C. Cahir who notes that “...as Lucius Harney leaves forever, and Charity Royall, unmarried, pregnant, and sunk in the depths of unshakable weariness, marries the man who has acted as her father since she was five years old” 136; the man whose “pattern of behavior has been to be compassionate, tender, and decent when his *solitude a deux* alliance with Charity is strongest and to be quite cruel at moments when he feels that relationship is weakening.” 138; yet, “Royall's incestuous desire is a corrupting literalization of the soul seeking its likeness.” 138.

CHAPTER 4

Lily Bart in *fin de siècle* America: *The House of Mirth*

4.1. “Isn’t marriage your vocation?”

Wharton is concerned with women’s inability to maintain an independent existence outside of marriage not only in New England villages, as we have seen in previous chapters, but also in 1890s New York high society, the backdrop of *The House of Mirth* (1905) - Wharton’s contemporary era (about 1900). *The House of Mirth*¹, presenting the exact details of the high society Wharton herself belongs to, seems to be an indictment of the Gilded Age’s objectification and social entrapment of women at the end of 19th century American society²: a new society of getting, spending and then getting more. Not even the most sheltered woman of *fin de siècle* America could live detached from the new world of wealthy men which was transforming and shaping society as they could exist only when they were in some sort of close relationship with a man; in other words, women were completely dependent on the opposite sex for survival. In this social world, marriage functions mainly as a business contract whereby women receive social status and financial security in exchange for a decorative/ornamental function alongside their spouses, bringing social status and influence to the marital unit. In such a setting, described as an artificial but at the same time exquisite “hot-house” of traditions and conventions (*HM*, 133), there seems to be only two possibilities for women: marriage or death.

Accordingly, the reader follows the misadventures of beautiful ill-fated Lily Bart, finally exiled to the working class where she perishes after failing in her matrimonial designs.

As the opening pages of Book I reveals, Lily Bart³, the heroine of the book, is introduced to the reader through the gaze of an admiring man, Lawrence Selden when he runs into her by chance at Grand Central as an aging yet still beautiful woman on the quest for marriage in order to survive; it is made clear that Lily Bart acknowledges her “purpose” - to find a suitable husband - wholly aware that for her there can be no independent existence outside marriage. In the opening scene, after encountering Selden by chance at Grand Central station, Lily accepts his invitation to tea, where she frets about her friends who say that she should have married by now. Seldon responds with unexpected bluntness: “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re all brought up for?” (*HM*, 9). Lily sighs and agrees, “I suppose so. What else is there?” (*HM*, 9). From the way she dresses up, to the parties she attends and to the conversational topics she chooses, it is clear that she is brought up to maximize opportunities to attract eligible men; in other words, within the domain of the novel, the sole reason for her existence is for “husband-hunting;” yet, she fails to achieve her objective, which leaves the reader wondering about the reasons for her failure.⁴

A number of commentators have interpreted Lily’s failure to participate in such a system as a result of her refusal to be merely a decorative object of exchange in the world of the late Gilded Age New York⁵; some others have argued that she is a “modern” woman who smokes, gambles and desires an independent existence⁶; however, I would argue that Lily Bart has two major flaws instilled in her character from a very early age, leading to a tragic demise: her exaggerated self-esteem/worth (vanity, even narcissism) and her overvaluing of material resources in her quest for

marriage (greed), which causes her to be entrapped by the hypocritical yet glittering values of wealthy Gilded Age New York high society at the turn of the century; in addition, as an orphan without a true home like Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome* Lily, deprived of financial and emotional support and therefore doomed immediately, her matrimonial designs fail.

4.2 “Taste for Splendour”

To identify and understand the process that leads Lily Bart into fatal mistakes, poverty and finally death, we must look at the scene where Lily remembers the circumstances of her upbringing, after losing almost \$300 at bridge⁷, (the main social activity at the Bellomont) in Chapter Three. As the family history reveals, the earliest and most important influence on Lily comes from her mother who always gave the appearance of living beyond the family’s limited means.⁸ Mrs. Bart is described as “...famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means; and to the lady and her acquaintances there was something heroic in living as though one were much richer than one's bank-book denoted” (*HM*, 26) while her father was out of the picture for much of her youth: “Lily seldom saw her father by daylight: All day he was “down town”” (*HM*, 26). Here Lily’s father, a shadowy and silent figure in her childhood memories, seems to be exhausted by the financial stress imposed on him as even on vacation at Newport or Southampton, “it seemed to tire him to rest, and he would sit for hours staring at the sea-line from a quiet corner of the verandah, while the clatter of his wife’s existence went on unheeded a few feet off” (*HM*, 26).

Her only real memory of her father is the day when he came home from work and announced to the family that he was financially ruined. Her mother tried to conceal their lack of money not only from the servant but also from Lily: “Your father is not well - he doesn't know what he is saying. It is nothing - but you had better go upstairs; and don't talk to the servants” (*HM*, 29) and she blamed her husband for ruining the family even after he died: “Every look and act of Mrs. Bart's seemed to say: “You are sorry for him now - but you will feel differently when you see what he has done to us” (*HM*, 29). After her father's death, Mrs. Bart and Lily “wandered from place to place, now paying long visits to relations whose house-keeping Mrs. Bart criticized” (*HM*, 30). Here it is important to note that Mrs. Bart seeks help from relatives but at the same time she looks down on the way they prefer to live. Naturally when Mrs. Bart dies, the family council “...composed of the wealthy relatives whom she had been taught to despise for living like pigs...” is not willing to help the nineteen-year-old Lily (*HM*, 31). Mrs. Peniston, her father's widowed sister, is the only relative who offers her protection “simply because no one else would have her” (*HM*, 31). Lily seems to be “grateful for the refuge” as Mrs. Preston “belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else” (*HM*, 33), which are the qualities Lily cherished; all the same, she does not hesitate to ignore her advice, violate her principles and act against her disapproval (e.g., gambling, borrowing money from Gus Trenor, staying at home to save money, joining the Dorsets' Mediterranean cruise).

The moment Lily's father lost everything, she became a homeless figure, a wanderer in need of shelter all her life, just like Mattie Silver in *Ethan Frome*: “Lily had no heart to lean on. Her relation with her aunt was as superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs” (*HM*, 240). Therefore, transience and impulse, rather

than resolution, become the themes of Lily's comings and goings throughout the novel. Although she seems to be "everywhere" (in the society pages as Nettie Struther informs us, at the best parties, at restaurants as well as on park benches and in bachelor apartments, later towards the end walking aimlessly in the streets), she is actually nowhere. Although Selden likes to think of her as having plans in the opening pages of the novel (*HM*, 3) when they encounter one another at Grand Central Station, Lily has no designs and no place. The symbolic status of Grand Central Station which resonates throughout the novel is also worth mentioning since it references arriving and leaving but never staying in one place, and from the beginning of the story emphasizes the limbo Lily occupies. One can also say that after her father's death, Lily never experiences attachment to location at any level; for instance, "She had always hated her room at Mrs. Peniston's - its ugliness, its impersonality, the fact that nothing in it was really hers" (*HM*, 13); thus, transience, one might say, is her only permanence. It seems that there is no place in the world that she loves more than any other. In the opening scene, Lily confesses that she *would* be a better woman if she were able to establish some sort of foundation for herself (which might, as in her musings, include decorating a room of her own): "If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman" (*HM*, 7). It is clear that from the very beginning, Lily is presented as a person without a setting of her own, in other words, rootless and thus full of self-doubt and doomed to fail.

The fact that Lily seems to exist as a kind of nomadic guest, a rootless wanderer also contributes to her desperate situation as a homeless figure that needs a rich man to marry her for survival. As the narrative reveals, Lily spends a lot of time at the Bellomont, the out-of-town estate of the prosperous Trenors but "in the last year she had found that her hostesses expected her to take a place at the card-table. It was

one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality” (*HM*, 23). Having lost all her money in gambling, Lily goes back to her aunt but then she who “had so long been accustomed to pass from one country-house to another” (*HM*, 88), leaves her aunt to spend a season on the *Sabrina*, the Dorset yacht, a home in transit all over the Mediterranean which touches solid land only to visit places like Monte Carlo, the Grand Central of European wanderers; however, her voyage on the *Sabrina* turns into a disaster when Bertha falsely accuses her of having an affair with her husband and expels her from the yacht. Bertha Dorset shows no hesitation at all in impugning Lily’s reputation in order to mask her own adultery, which brilliantly demonstrates the ruthlessness beneath the polite surfaces of the Gilded Age high society in New York: “like the gleam of a knife in the dusk” (*HM*, 181).⁹

When she is disinherited by her aunt, she loses the only home she actually has and is reduced to a shabby hotel on the edge of a fashionable New York neighborhood, only to be rescued by Mrs. Fisher. Then Lily stays with the Gormers in their rented country-house although “The Gormer MILIEU represented a social outskirts which Lily had always fastidiously avoided” as she sees them as: “only a flamboyant copy of her own world, a caricature approximating the real thing as the “society play” approaches the manners of the drawing-room” (*HM*, 204). Lily compares the Gormers to the Trenors, the Van Osburghs and the Dorsets: “the difference lay in a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the pattern of the men's waistcoats to the inflexion of the women's voices. Everything was pitched in a higher key, and there was more of each thing: more noise, more color, more champagne, more familiarity” (*HM*, 204). Like her mother, Lily “was accepting the hospitality and courting the approval of people she had disdained under other conditions” because “for the moment she must yield to the refreshment her senses craved” after “the

sudden escape from a stifling hotel in a dusty deserted city to the space and luxury of a great country-house fanned by sea breezes” (*HM*, 205). Obviously, Lily has contempt for the Gormers, who are like “a caricature” of the world of the Dorsets and Trenors Lily desires to be a part of; yet, she goes to Alaska with them in their private train, a household on wheels befitting her migratory status as a kind of social fugitive throughout the novel.

At this point, it is important to remember that it is again her mother who “had hated dinginess” (*HM*, 31), trained Lily to have expensive habits and expectations. Following her mother, therefore, Lily has developed not only “taste for splendor” but also “a sense of ... superiority” (*HM*, 27) as a result of which, Lily has also condemned not only the Gormers but also her own relatives, especially her cousins who “lived like pigs” and “inhabited dingy houses” (*HM*, 27) believing “that if people lived like pigs it was from choice, and through the lack of any proper standard of conduct” (*HM*, 27). Therefore, feeling superior in every way to her cousin, Grace Stepney, Lily condemns her too - seeing her as an “insignificant” and “comic” figure with “a freckled nose and red eyelids”- and dismisses Grace’s sincere admiration for Mrs. Peniston’s old-fashioned drawing-room (*HM*, 108). Lily fails to show her even “scant civilities” (*HM*, 108) being “... quite aware that she was of interest to dingy people, but she assumed that there is only one form of dinginess, and that admiration for brilliancy is the natural expression of its inferior state” (*HM*, 108).

Therefore, by causing Grace to be excluded from one of Mrs. Peniston’s dinner parties, Lily deliberately hurts her feelings and makes an active enemy of her while it would have been so easy for Lily to turn Grace into a “friend for life” (*HM*, 108). In return, the next day not only does Grace inform Mrs. Preston about Lily’s “gambling debts” (*HM*, 111) but also the rumors of Lily’s flirtation with Gus Trenor

for money: “People say that Gus Trenor pays her bills” (*HM*, 111). As a result, Lily loses her anticipated inheritance as well as any social and material support from her aunt and her relatives at difficult times. For instance, after she is back from Europe, Lily asks Grace to loan her money to be able to pay Gus Trenor back so that she can regain her social status among friends but Grace simply refuses Lily by accusing her of disgracing herself and, indirectly, Mrs. Peniston (*HM*, 202).

When Lily remembers the circumstances of her upbringing, she also remembers what her mother used to say after they had lost their money: “But you’ll get it all back – you’ll get it all back, with your face...” (*HM*, 25), indicating the unusual emphasis her early upbringing placed on material resources and beauty. Her mother finds consolation in “the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (*HM*, 30). Under the influence of her mother, Lily also acknowledges that money functions as a powerful social force in the world of the Trenors and Dorsets of late Gilded Age New York, while her extraordinary beauty is the vehicle to attain power and social status and regain the family’s lost fortune.

4.3 “One or Two Good Chances”

The exaggerated weight Lily places on economic resources causes her to eliminate all but the richest men from serious consideration in her quest for marriage. At the beginning of the novel, Percy Gryce is introduced as the potential husband for Lily in terms of wealth and social status but at the same time he is shy, prudent and constrained: “Every form of prudence and suspicion had been grafted on a nature

originally reluctant and cautious, with the result that it would have seemed hardly needful for Mrs. Gryce to extract his promise about the overshoes, so little likely was he to hazard himself abroad in the rain” (*HM*, 20). In other words, he is the kind of man who “promised his mother never to go out in the rain without his overshoes” as Lily’s cousin Jack Stepney once defines him (*HM*, 17). As Lily contemplates, the reader learns the origins of the Gryce fortune: “The Gryces were from Albany, and but lately introduced to the metropolis, where the mother and son had come, after old Jefferson Gryce's death, to take possession of his house in Madison Avenue” (*HM*, 19). Despite his personal “limitations,” such as “dullness” and “lack of imagination,” (*HM*, 17) in Lily’s terms, the appearance of Percy Gryce in New York society “had fluttered the maternal breasts of New York” (*HM*, 19). Accordingly, when Judy Trenor learns that Lily is interested in a marriage to Percy Gryce, “Lily found herself the center of that feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season. A solitude was tacitly created for her in the crowded existence of Bellomont, and her friends could not have shown a greater readiness for self-effacement had her wooing been adorned with all the attributes of romance” (*HM*, 41).

It is clear that Lily who has no mother “to contrive opportunities without conceding favours” (*HM*, 80) for her, a mother “whose unerring vigilance and foresight” would enable her to “land . . . safely in the arms of wealth and suitability” (*HM*, 81) knew that she must be “on the alert for herself” (*HM*, 19) in the search for a rich husband to maintain her existence in New York High society. Therefore, she deploys “delicate” (*HM*, 17) but deceptive maneuvers in order to attract Percy Gryce: for example, she pretends to enjoy his company and feigns interest in his collection of Americana: “Miss Bart, it appeared, really did want to know about Americana; and moreover, she was already sufficiently informed to make the task of farther

instruction as easy as it was agreeable. She questioned him intelligently, she heard him submissively (*HM*, 18). She also claims that she goes to the church regularly with the Trenor girls, Muriel and Hilda (*HM*, 45). She conceals her habits of smoking cigarettes (*HM*, 21) and gambling at the bridge table claiming that “she had been dragged into it” (*HM*, 45). In short, in order to maximize the “opportunities” her physical attractiveness brings her, throughout her career, Lily has learned to display social intelligence and well developed interpersonal skills as well; accordingly, she deceptively presents herself to Gryce as the perfect match for marriage.

However, interestingly, once she feels a proposal of marriage is forthcoming, Lily loses interest, and therefore her advantage, by spending the day with Lawrence Selden instead of with Gryce, as planned. Her attention to Selden interferes with Bertha Dorset's amorous plans for him: in return Bertha- as Judy Trenor had warned - takes her revenge by scaring off Gryce with stories about Lily's husband hunting and gambling debts (*HM*, 67). Lily ruins her chances with Gryce just as she ruins her “chances” for eleven years with every eligible man who wants to marry her¹⁰. For example, as her friend Carry Fisher tells Selden, ten years prior to the start of the novel an Italian Prince - “rich and the real thing” - had “wanted to marry her; but just at the critical moment a good-looking step-son turned up, and Lily was silly enough to flirt with him while her marriage-settlements with the step-father were being drawn up” (*HM*, 164). As Mrs. Fisher observes, the same thing happens every time Lily is about to receive a proposal of marriage: “she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (*HM*, 164). Mrs. Fisher guesses correctly that Lily ruins her chances of marriage deliberately; her speculation that she does so “because,

at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (*HM*, 164) could be one explanation for her self-destructive behavior.

One can easily speculate that for a young woman husband-hunting for over 11 years, the examples of unhappy marriages warn of a similar dismal future if she married someone like Percy Gryce. Even during courtship she laments that she "must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all for the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life" (*HM*, 23). In other words, marriage to Gryce would be like a live burial for Lily. The fact that Wharton denies the traditional plot of domestic happiness in New York high society where the Trenors and Dorsets rule contributes to her criticism of the artificial values and norms of the new modern society. As one can easily observe, none of the couples in the novel are happily married. To begin with, Gus and Judy Trenor, the most socially prominent couple, seem to cohabit as Judy is willing to let female friends entertain her husband but at the same time resents their exacting favors:

Lily, dear, if you've nothing special to do, may I tell Carry Fisher that you intend to drive to the station and fetch Gus? He will be back at four, and I know she has it in her mind to meet him. Of course I'm very glad to have him amused, but I happen to know that she has bled him rather severely since she's been here, and she is so keen about going to fetch him that I fancy she must have got a lot more bills this morning. It seems to me, "Mrs. Trenor feelingly concluded, "that most of her alimony is paid by other women's husbands!" (*HM*, 80).

It is interesting to note that Judy has a strong “hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself” (*HM*, 36) while she remains indifferent to her husband and marriage. As the narrative further explains, after “some forty years of futile activity,” Judy can “exist only as a hostess, not so much from any exaggerated instinct of hospitality as because she could not sustain life except in a crowd” (*HM*,36).

On the other hand, George and Bertha Dorset are another extremely wealthy couple trapped in a loveless marriage. Bertha Dorset shows a more active discontent in her marriage to George as she engages in affair after affair - Lawrence Selden and Ned Silverton explicit in the novel - and always manages to hide her infidelity. At this point, one is struck by Wharton’s critique of the marriage system, which not only highlights the economic dependency of women but also the loneliness and even dehumanization of men – explicit in Mr. Bart, Gus Trenor and George Dorset who are seen only as a source of funds for their wives’ indulgence in luxury. Despite the loss to Lily, one cannot help even feeling relieved for the shy Percy Gryce who chooses to marry Evie Van Osburgh, “a quiet stay-at-home kind of girl and it seems he has just the same tastes; so they are exactly suited to each other” (*HM*, 80) in Mrs. Farish’s words.

Lily’s overvaluing of material resources is encouraged and even ratified by her environment as her social circle is dedicated to extravagant consumption of fashion and entertainment - dinners, country-house parties, cruises, theatricals, clothing and jewels. In this social context, she believes that “she was not made for shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in” (*HM*, p.23). Therefore, in order to dress well and play at tables she must

hunt for a man, who can provide for her sartorial extravagances, her need for jewelry and lifelong gambling. Unfortunately, she mistakenly thinks she can find one both very rich and spiritually developed. As her history of husband-hunting reveals, the rich men she aimed at for marriage seem to fail to engage her feelings as they are only “good chances” based on only financial considerations: “She would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money” (*HM*, 31). In other words, she can imagine *enjoying* bestowed luxury, but she cannot exert herself to achieve it and her failure to find a prosperous husband can be attributable to her inner conflicts that, as Mrs. Fisher also speculates, sabotage her own matrimonial schemes.

On the other hand, Lily who “had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called ‘decently dressed’ ” (*HM*, 27) cannot accept Lawrence Selden’s love and proposal. In the scene where Lily spends the afternoon with Selden at Bellomont, she simply declares that she will “look hideous in dowdy clothes” and will have to “trim her own hats” (*HM*, 65) if she accepted his proposal. In the opening scene where she takes tea in Selden’s rooms, without feeling embarrassed, she even admits that she is deliberately seeking a husband who can offer her “a great deal of money” as she is “expensive” (*HM*, 14) for “a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself” (*HM*, 11) in New York high society. As one can easily notice, Lily thinks the level of the material comfort Selden may offer seems to be insufficient for her beauty which should deserve expensive clothes, hats and even jewels.¹¹ At this point, it is important to note that the family history of Lily provided in the opening chapters provides the rationale of Lily’s false values and behaviors: therefore, one can only blame her early upbringing which puts extreme emphasis on material resources in her quest for marriage in order

to lead a luxurious life style. Hence, as a result of her taste for splendor and overvaluing of material resources, Lily borrows from Gus Trenor in order to be “dressed decently” and to pay her accumulated bills to the dressmaker, which is not acceptable for a young woman in the search for a husband.¹² Here one can argue that her tastes and desires push her towards social ruin; her social descent starts especially when rumors circulate that Lily recompenses Gus’s loan with sexual favors as we shall see later.

4.4 “Jewel-like” beauty

As the family history reveals, Lily’s beauty is her greatest “asset,” in her ambitious mother’s words, but at the same time her greatest obstacle: she arrogantly passes up many chances on the grounds that she can always “do better.”¹³ However, “younger and plainer girls had been married off by dozens, and she was nine-and-twenty, and still Miss Bart” (*HM*, 34) having spent more than eleven years in the marriage market for a more desirable man; each time she fails. At this point it would be helpful to remember that her looks are repeatedly emphasized in the novel as more than sufficiently striking. The physical descriptions of Lily emphasize “freshness and slenderness” (*HM*, 71); her skin has a “girlish smoothness” (*HM*, 3); she has a radiant complexion that makes other girls look “sallow-faced” (*HM*, 4); her hair is “vivid” in color with a “crisp upward wave” (*HM*, 5); her eyes are “charming,” “lovely” with “thick” “straight black lashes” (*HM*, 5). In Selden’s eyes, “everything about her” is “at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her” (*HM*, 5). Even Gerty

Farish, Lily's childhood female friend, thinks "everything about her" is "warm and soft and scented" (*HM*, 147).

In order to understand the effect of her beauty, we must look at the scene where The Wellington Brys have given a "general entertainment" in an attempt to ensure their new position in New York society. In this scene, a "dozen fashionable women" have been induced to participate in a series of *tableaux vivants*, posing themselves after the paintings of such Old Masters as Titian and Van Dyck. Here Lily's *tableau* performance as Joshua Reynolds's 1775-1776 *Mrs. Lloyd* causes the audience to gasp with awe¹⁴:

...the unanimous "Oh!" of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush-work of Reynolds's "Mrs. Lloyd" but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart. She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace (*HM*, 119).

As it clear above, nobody in the audience thinks of Joanna Lloyd at all since the picture before them is "simply and undisguisedly the portrait" (*HM*, 119) of Lily Bart. Watching her performance, even Gerty Farish comments on her beauty as: "Wasn't she too beautiful, Lawrence" adding that the dress makes her "look like the real Lily- the Lily I know" (*HM*, 119). Clearly, Farish means that the scene reveals Lily with a radiant inner beauty. Male spectators, on the other hand, comment on the ideal shapeliness of her "outline" while getting their coats at the end of the evening: "What's a woman want with jewels when she's got herself to show?" says the old

rake Ned Van Alstyne, adding that “I never knew till tonight what an outline Lily has” (*HM*, 122). It is worth mentioning that the outline of her costume shows especially her legs: the robe in Reynolds’s portrait models each limb separately, from the thigh to the ankle, and with a triangular fold of the cloth bunched between them. Her posture puts her on display, deliberately showing what she has to impress the audience: hence, she has turned herself into a commodity¹⁵, the finest product of her world, an embodiment of a grace and beauty, for the marriage market of New York high society:

The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting—she had thought for a moment of representing Tiepolo’s *Cleopatra* — had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm (*HM*, 119).

Here one can easily observe that Wharton criticizes the transformation of women into beautiful objects for the male aesthetic appreciation: in the society which formed Lily, to survive she has to be as much a *tableau vivant* in the daily routine of her social life as she is in her representation of Reynolds's portrait. She always wants to produce an effect of idealized beauty; hence she is very deliberate in her exploitation, not just of costume, but of facial expression and setting as well. For example, in the opening chapters, she leans against the balustrade of the terrace at Bellomont and notes that Percy Gryce has spotted her from the midst of his reluctant *tete -a -tete* with Mrs. Fisher: “He cast agonized glances in the direction of Miss Bart,

whose only response was to sink into an attitude of more graceful abstraction. She had learned the value of contrast in throwing her charms into relief, and was fully aware of the extent to which Mrs. Fisher's volubility was enhancing her own repose" (*HM*, 42). She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the diffusion of refinement and good taste. She was fond of pictures and flowers, and of sentimental fiction, and she could not help thinking that the possession of such tastes justified her desire for worldly advantages. One can observe an interesting contrast here between a woman having a cultivated taste for beauty and being 'an ornament to society' herself. In one sense Lily is the possessor and arbiter of beautiful things; in the other, she becomes the thing possessed.

Lily is also well aware of the power of beauty and youth especially in the glittering New York high society she desires to be a part of: "Ah, it was good to be young, to be radiant, to glow with the sense of slenderness, strength and elasticity, of well-poised lines and happy tints" (*HM*, 103). Hence, Lily assumes that it is her birth right to lead a luxurious lifestyle which is the "existence to which she felt herself entitled" and which "she craved" (*HM*, 229). Accordingly, she believes that "her own jewel-like rareness" (*HM*, 80) deserves the best "setting" in which "every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty" (*HM*, 97). Here the scene where Lily gazes at the Van Osburgh wedding jewels with an "envious throb" (*HM*, 97) is worth mentioning so as to point out her high ambitions/expectations: "More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness" (*HM*, 80). One cannot also help noticing her narcissistic inclination as she "was always

inspired by the prospect of showing her beauty in public” (*HM*, 103) especially with “all the added enhancements of dress” (*HM*, 103); she derives pleasure from being “in the general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself the centre” (*HM*, 103), which shows her desire to be admired and viewed without being touched like a piece of art, like *a rare jewel*.

One can also argue that Lily’s desire not to be touched is particularly apparent in her interpersonal relationships. While her avoidance of physical contact with unappealing, predatory men like Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale is quite understandable, Lily doesn't like being touched even by her attractive female friends either. For example, in the opening chapters, when “Mrs. Trenor, glowing with her sex's eagerness to smooth the course of true love, enveloped Lily in a long embrace,” Lily “extricate(s) herself” from Judy Trenor's embrace during a conversation between the two women at Bellomont (*HM*, 41-42). Another example can be given from the scene where Lily meets Mrs. Fisher after leaving Mrs. Peniston’s house to Grace Stepney upon her will: “Mrs. Fisher, springing to the street, had folded her in a demonstrative embrace” (*HM*, 202) but Lily immediately “drew back” from Carry Fisher's “clasp” (*HM*, 202). As Gerty Farish also knows, “Lily disliked to be caressed,” and therefore, Gerty “had long ago learned to check her demonstrative impulses toward her friend” (*HM*, 147). She cannot help “shrinking to the outer edge of the narrow couch to avoid contact with her bed-fellow” in the scene where Lily seeks comfort in Gerty’s friendship after she realizes Trenor’s trick on her.

Another important scene is where Lily and Selden do make physical contact on one occasion following the *tableaux vivants* at the Brys, in a transcendental background: “The magic place was deserted: there was no sound but the splash of the water on the lily-pads,” and the “drift of music” from the nearby house seems as if it

“might have been blown across a sleeping lake. Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as part of their own dream-like sensations” (*HM*, 121).

Then, as they sit in quiet conversation:

“The only way I can help you is by loving you,” Selden said in a low voice. She made no reply, but her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched. She drew back and rose from her seat. Selden rose too, and they stood facing each other. Suddenly she caught his hand and pressed it a moment against her cheek.

“Ah, love me, love me—but don't tell me so!” she sighed with her eyes in his; and before he could speak she had turned and slipped through the arch of boughs, disappearing in the brightness of the room beyond.” (*HM*, 122)

Up to this point, Lily's conflict seems to have been between her desire for wealth and her desire to avoid marriage to the rich men who could provide it. However, at this moment, one can easily speculate that Lily's failure in matrimonial designs stem from her love for Selden: Lily's “love me - but don't tell me so!” may refer to the conflict between her desire to marry him and her desire for the luxurious life he cannot supply. As the omniscient narrator also observes, she fails to exploit her greatest asset, her unusual beauty, to achieve her objective not because she exaggerates its worth or because of the sense of superiority she has developed since her childhood, but perhaps because of her need to be loved by a man in whose presence she does not have to act, pose or protect herself: as Lily tells Selden in the opening scene: “I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you” (*HM*, 8).

4.5 “I am bad - a bad girl”

The moment she recognizes and acknowledges her own feelings as well as her flaws, she gains sympathy as well as pity from the reader. In the aftershock of her disastrous encounter with Gus Trenor who tricks her into visiting his empty city residence, Lily becomes aware of the existence of “two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained” (*HM*, 131). One can here argue that this new abhorrent self is the product and the embodiment of the artificial, prosperous Gilded Age high society in which an exaggerated emphasis on material resources/wealth and beauty is the dominant forces shaping individuals’ lives deeply.¹⁶ In the scene where Lily seeks Gerty Farish’s comfort and friendship, she displays a kind of moral enlightenment and honesty regarding the false values she has had: “But I am bad - a bad girl - all my thoughts are bad - I have always had bad people about me. Is that any excuse? I thought I could manage my own life - I was proud - proud!” (*HM*, 145).

Now that she is aware of her sense of superiority and taste for splendor she has developed in her early upbringing, she further states: “I am bad through and through—I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money - ' yes, MONEY! That’s my shame, Gerty - and it’s known, it’s said of me – it’s what men think of me - If I said it all to him - told him (Selden) the whole story - said plainly: ‘I’ve sunk lower than the lowest, for I’ve taken what they take, and not paid as they pay’ - (*HM*, 147). Later in the chapter, she decides that her flaws are not the work of her environment but the hereditary traits in her blood: “I won't blame anybody for my faults: I’ll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to

be back at the court of the Charleses” (*HM*, 197). Here it would be true to say that Lily experiences a full awakening of her flawed character shaped by a combination of heredity and environment, by means of which the reader for the first time gets the chance to know “real” Lily Bart, who has been presented as aloof and distant even to the reader.

Another scene worth mentioning is towards the end of the novel, after her last visit to Selden and after receiving the estate check, where she discovers the nature of her existence as homeless, rootless, without tradition: lacking past, present and even future. Now that she tries to survive in the “dingy communal existence of the boarding house”¹⁷ (*HM*, 279), which is her final shelter, “a sense of deeper impoverishment—of an inner destitution” possesses her as she starts to see herself as “being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them” (*HM*, 279). It is because as she further contemplates: “...there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts” (*HM*, 279). Here it is clear that towards the end of the novel Wharton discourses on rootedness, tradition and belonging when she depicts the self, living in a land-of-no-past, stunted by deprivation and entrapped in isolation: “there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood... it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving” (*HM*, 280). Because Lily is deprived of any past,

tradition and roots, she is borne to her destruction “like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current” (*HM*, 279) sinking down to the working class in New York society.

4.6 “Brought up to be Ornamental”

In her encounter with Rosedale towards the end of the novel, she simply accepts that she has “joined the working classes,” (*HM*, 254) where Lily could see “the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in, reflected in the mirror of the working-girls’ minds” (*HM*, 250). Here Wharton extends the social panorama she has created by showing the image of high society in the eyes of the working class community¹⁸, the “underworld of toilers who lived on their vanity and self-indulgence” (*HM*, 250). At this point, it would be helpful to mention that after her successful *tableau* performance at the Brys’ entertainment, Lily finds herself “drawn ...into the circle of Miss Farish’s work” (*HM*, 133); when “her visit to the Girls' Club had first brought her in contact with the dramatic contrasts of life,” (*HM*, 133) she imagines the whole social hierarchy as “the dreary limbo of dinginess... all around and beneath that little illuminated circle in which life reached its finest efflorescence, as the mud and sleet of a winter night enclose a hot-house filled with tropical flowers (*HM*, 133). It is clear that the hothouse metaphor expresses the artificiality of the upper class New York society as the only setting where Lily’s exquisite beauty has a value. In this hothouse, Lily was “like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (*HM*, 278).

When Lily tries to “become a worker among workers” at the milliner’s (*HM*, 264), she fails, as the artificial world in which the combination of heritage and her early training have made her: “an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast?” (*HM*, 264) Lily seems to be unequipped to survive, like the transplanted anemone to which she is compared, after she is pushed outside of the privileged class of New York. Having failed to earn her own living and fired as a milliner for poor performance and attendance at the end of the season, Lily further contemplates her inefficiency and uselessness:

She was conscious of having been forgetful, awkward and slow to learn. It was bitter to acknowledge her inferiority even to herself, but the fact had been brought home to her that as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability. Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose; but the discovery put an end to her consoling sense of universal efficiency (*HM*, 260).

As Lily cannot imagine a role for herself other than as decorating a drawing room, “diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume” (*HM*, 89) befitting her name Lily, she shows full awareness of her decorative/ornamental existence¹⁹, which is expensive and yet useless. Accordingly, once she is out of the shelter of the hothouse, where she is a “highly specialized product,” the exquisite ornamentality of her body begins to decline: first her luxuriant hair begins to “thin”, as Carry Fisher notices (*HM*, 219); then her radiant complexion becomes “dull and colorless” like the other sallow, tired women in the millinery workshop (*HM*, 247). In the opening scene,

while Selden observes her hands as “polished as a bit of old ivory” (*HM*, 7), in her last visit to Selden, he first notices “shadows on the pallor of her delicately-hollowed face,” (*HM*, 268) and then sees “how thin her hands looked” and “under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity ... how the red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes” (*HM*, 272). At this point, one cannot help noticing the corpse-like physical description of Lily, which foreshadows her tragic death at the end of the novel. That Selden has “a strange sense of foreboding” and the pair “looked at each other with a kind of solemnity, as though they stood in the presence of death” (*HM*, 271) also reinforces the end of her life.

4.7 “A few gold-topped boxes and bottles”

At the end of the novel, it is not clear whether Lily commits suicide or not, which contributes to the complexity of her story.²⁰ The reader only knows that she has a strong desire for the “brief bath of oblivion” (*HM*, 282) the drug chloral, “magic formula” (*HM*, 279) gives her: on the other hand, she deliberately refrains from considering the risk she is taking when she increases the dose to compensate for her growing immunity to its effect: “She did not, in truth, consider the question very closely - the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation. Her mind shrank from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light - darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost” (*HM*, 282). The fact that it does not look like a suicide, but rather a slight risk she takes, is consistent with the

calculations she is incapable of making from the beginning till the end of her story. It looks like Lily again falls into the hands of fate while increasing the dose,

-she remembered the chemist's warning. If sleep came at all, it might be a sleep without waking. But after all that was but one chance in a hundred: the action of the drug was incalculable, and the addition of a few drops to the regular dose would probably do no more than procure for her the rest she so desperately needed.... (*HM*, 282, Wharton's ellipses)

Although she is no longer in debt, as she has received the check to pay Trenor back and all other debts, she sees no way out of her current situation, which promises only a long life of dinginess she has always hated, as her mother had. On the other hand, she has promised Nettie Struther, whom Lily saved from an illness while participating in Gerty's charity organization and now is enjoying a successful marriage with her husband and their newborn child, to get together again. After warming herself in Nettie's gleaming kitchen (a symbol of life and warmth), Lily holds Nettie's baby in her arms briefly (a symbol of continuity and rootedness)²¹, which seems to give her some kind of hope and energy to fight for survival: "she felt stronger and happier: the little episode had done her good. It was the first time she had ever come across the results of her spasmodic benevolence, and the surprised sense of human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart" (*HM*, 277). Yet, she dies in her sleep of an overdose in a boarding house where: "there was no other token of her personality about the room" except "the shabby chest of drawers...spread with a lace cover", and "a few gold-topped boxes and bottles, a rose-colored pin-cushion, a glass tray strewn with tortoise-shell hair-pins," the blank surface of the toilet-mirror (*HM*, 286) as Selden observes when he comes to her place to propose marriage hours after

her death.²² From opening to concluding scene, Selden claims to see “the real Lily” in his detached observation of her ideal, rare beauty; despite his growing affection and love for Lily, he fails to respond vigorously,²³ which also contributes to the tragedy of a young woman who could have been saved by a man who could actually see “the real Lily” behind her ornamental function imposed on her by the patriarchal society.

In conclusion, one can easily argue that as the end of the novel reveals, *The House of Mirth* becomes a kind of moral tale via the wrong doings/ mistakes of Lily Bart, a figure introduced as never having been able “...to understand the laws of a universe which is so ready to leave her out of its calculations” (*HM*, p. 24) although she thinks she is a great calculator of her advantages. An aging yet still exceptionally beautiful woman on the quest for marriage, Lily Bart is a product, even a commodity of her society, a society shaped and ruled by the older upper class and the rising new money in Gilded Age New York at the turn of the century. As seen above, Lily is unwise and uncertain in estimating her worth as the ornamental woman she was fated to be and the extreme value she has put on material resources on her quest for marriage, two flaws inherited from her mother. Sadly when she fails in her matrimonial designs, she also fails to achieve an existence independent of the society which had formed her. Wharton's novel seems to convey the feminist social message that women bred to be mere decorations run risks of various sorts of death. One can argue further that death (accidental or not) can be seen the only way to escape from her entrapment in false values of wealthy Gilded Age New York high society.

I further argue that Wharton throws her heroine, Lily Bart, into a world of chance, in which she has made her own choices from the very beginning; spending the afternoon with Selden instead of Percy Gryce, borrowing money from Gus Trenor, boarding the Sabrina, the Dorset yacht, refusing Selden's proposal twice, refusing

Rosedale's proposal once,²⁴ not using the love letters she bought once to blackmail Bertha Dorset to regain her social standing, as suggested by Rosedale, are several worth mentioning. Therefore, as already stated above, Lily Bart cannot be simply perceived as the innocent victim of heredity and environment;²⁵ to put it another way, she cannot be a victim of changing economic and social circumstances over which she has no control or a classic tragic figure who falls due to her own inborn flaws since she has made her own choices from the very beginning: yet, the reasons for her failure to achieve her objective to marry a rich yet cultivated man is controversial, open to discussion as it is not an easy task to reveal the truth lying behind the scenes in Lily's life as she is presented at a distance. One can only infer that Lily seems to be more like a person of conscience whose scruples ultimately won't allow her to join with the corrupt system for which she has been trained. One can only be sure of Wharton's severe critique of the artificiality she closely observed in an American society in which extreme emphasis on wealth and beauty are the two dominant forces shaping and affecting individual lives deeply: while women are forced to compete for the richest husbands in the marriage market for survival²⁶, men seek wealth as well as beautiful and elegant wives to augment their social status. Ironically enough though, as already mentioned, the ones who seem to achieve both –like the Gormers, the Trenors, the Dorsets- lead miserable lives, devoid of love, affection and hope of continuity and rootedness in a country bereft of cultural heritage.

NOTES

¹ In her work *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Singley relates that, the title, as reviewers at the time also noted, is taken from Ecclesiastes 7:4: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” 4.; it seems to allude to the vanity of human wishes which underlines the novel’s moral as well as social importance.

² See *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) co-authored by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner who illustrate the outwardly showy, and inwardly corrupt nature of American society during the industrialization of the late 1800’s. See also *The Incorporation of America* by Alan Trachtenberg who characterizes the Gilded Age with the following features: “the new immigrant work force, the doom of the countryside and rise of the great city, the mechanization of daily life, the invasion of the marketplace into human relations, the corruption and scandal of a political universe dominated by great wealth” 143-44; and obviously, *The House of Mirth* seems to reflect this ongoing invasion and assimilation of the newly rich people – the Welly Brys, Gormers, Simon Rosedale and Mrs. Hatch “who rose to the surface with each recurring tide, and were either submerged beneath its rush or landed triumphantly beyond the reach of envious breakers” as the traditional Mrs. Peniston relates (*HM*, 106).

³ For a detailed discussion of the name, Lily, see “The Death of the Lady (Novelist),” by Elaine Showalter. 47-48. See also Cynthia Griffin Wolff who has shown, the name “Lily” referred to a central motif of art nouveau: the representation of female purity as lilies adapted from Japanese art themes, “Easter lilies, tiger lilies, water lilies, liquescent calla lilies, fluttering clusters of lily-of-the-valley.” 114-115. Wolff also notes that Wharton herself was called “Lily” as a girl. 110; and see “The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton’s Feminism(s)” by Frances L. Restuccia. pp. 223-238.

⁴ For another detailed discussion on the reasons for Lily’s failure in husband-hunting, see *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens*, Judith Saunders; especially Chapter 1 provides an insightful analysis of mate searching and how Lily fails in her own mate search. 7- 34.

⁵ See *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* Cynthia Griffin Wolff who reads the novel as “the psychological disfigurement of any woman who chooses to accept society’s definition of her as a beautiful object and nothing more.” 109-111. See also “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” by Wai-Chee Dimock who examines the economic relations and the problem of exchange in the novel: for instance, Dimock “interprets much of Lily’s self-destructive behavior as a protest against the ethics of exchange.” 783,791; also see “Edith Wharton and the Fiction of Marital Unity,” by Laura K. Johnson who argues that marriage in Lily’s (and Wharton’s) cultural environment is a “contract” in which exchange value is regulated by force of law: 947-976.

⁶ See *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton* by Pamela Knights who argues that “Lily is a “modern” woman in her smoking, gambling and desire for independence; she ruins her chances through deviating from nineteenth-century rules of conduct.” 71.

⁷ Pamela Knights comments on this amount as: Lily loses in an evening’s bridge a sum equivalent to the annual income of many Lower East-side families.” 60.

⁸ See *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* by Carol J. Singley who points out, “the seeds of Lily’s conflict are planted long ago, first by a managerial mother and then by peers,” 69.

⁹ See “The Death of the Lady (Novelist)” by Elaine Showalter who comments on Wharton’s rejection of “sentimental conventions of nineteenth century women’s literature” as “women’s relationships in *The House of Mirth* are distant, formal, competitive, even hostile. . . . Lily sees and treats other women as her allies, rivals, or inferiors in the social competition.” 137-138. In *Edith Wharton’s Women*, Goodman also notes that the “lack of female community in Wharton’s work” has been a source of dissatisfaction to some readers, 48. Julie Ollin-Ammentor, in “Edith Wharton’s Challenge to Feminist Criticism,” argues that strong female characters like Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset illustrate Wharton’s perception that women do, in fact, wield power and influence in a public forum. 237-244.

¹⁰ See *Edith Wharton's Argument With America* by Elizabeth Ammons who suggests that Lily lets prospective husbands slip away not only “because she does not love them,” but because she “fears ... proprietorship” and “does not want to be owned by any man.” 35, 36; see also *Novel of Admonition* by Wagner-Martin who similarly dubs Lily a “maverick young woman who resists the social code that would coerce her into wifehood.” 31; In *Feminist Dialogics*, Dale M. Bauer concurs with this assessment of Lily: “she cannot accept the restrictions that marriage would place upon her.” 93; In “Beyond Her Self,” in *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. Deborah Esch. Thomas Loebel also discusses Lily as a “misfit” who resists unethical “transactions.” 109-110.

¹¹ For a brief discussion on the financial consequences of a possible marriage between Lily and Selden, see *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens*, Judith Saunders, 22; see also Marilyn Jones Lyde, *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist*. 134.

¹² In her work, “The Bachelor and the Baby,” Maureen Howard states Lily lives “at the edge of permissible behavior” 141. In *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Ammons similarly argues that Lily “transgresses... moral and social regulations with which society expects compliance” but interestingly Ammons interprets this as a result of “her real ambitions” as “nonconformist.” 32. However, I find it difficult to find any evidence of conscious sociopolitical rebellion in Lily’s character. Judith Saunders also questions whether Lily really wants to escape from fashionable New York life, or whether she aspires to command so much social power (based on status and recourses) that she can afford to criticize lower-ranking members of her community.

¹³ See *Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* by David M. Buss who comments on the female mating strategies as follows: “a woman who overestimates her own value...suffers costs on the mating market. By setting her standards too high, she ensures that fewer men (will) reach her threshold, and those who (do) might nor desire her because they could obtain more desirable women.” 88-89; and see also Maureen Howard, “*The House of Mirth: The Bachelor and the Baby*,” 141.

¹⁴ For another discussion on the portrait, *Mrs. Lloyd*, see “The Portrait of Miss Bart” by Michael Gorra who argues that Joshua Reynolds’s 1775–1776 *Mrs. Lloyd* shows “a woman in profile with her hair piled high, carving her husband’s name on a tree and dressed in an ivory robe that looks diaphanously loose and provocatively clinging at once;” for a helpful account of the painting, see the catalog entry by David Mannings in *Reynolds*, edited by Nicholas Penny. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986. 275-276.

¹⁵ For discussions of Lily’s beauty as “commodity,” with emphasis on identity as a product of social construction rather than evolved adaptations, see “Beyond Her Self” by Thomas Loebel, 107-112; “The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart,” in *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. Deborah Esch by Ruth Bernard Yeazel, 15-18; “Angel of Devastation: Edith Wharton on the Arts of the Enslaved,” in *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 139-154.

¹⁶ For discussions of American wealth and privilege – and of the American woman who was its icon, see Pamela Knights, 67.

¹⁷ In her work, *Edith Wharton and Conversations on Modernism*, Jennifer Haytock argues that “the other characters’ appalled reactions to her living situation stem from not only horror at Lily’s poverty but also at the sexual implications of her living on her own” 68.

¹⁸ For a discussion on the the lives of single working class women, see Jennifer Haytock, who notes that “none of these women are encouraged to build a career for themselves; girls like Nettie Struther might work, but they cannot support themselves financially or emotionally. Wharton insists that the new freedoms offered to women of the 1910s and 1920s are simply window-dressing that hide the basic fact that women must marry” 68-73.

¹⁹ Two influential books published at the end of the nineteenth century offer us insights into the historical situation of the women as decorative objects: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898) and Thorstein Veblen published his *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899) Pamela Knights also comments on Lily’s pure ornamental existence by referring to *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in which women are presented as the ‘chief ornament’ – “The most

important of the status symbols through which the wealthy elite validated their credentials in the eye of the spectators” 63.

²⁰ Wolff argues that the end of the novel condemns society for allowing women the role of “self-creating artistic object” but not the role of “productive artist.” 109-111; see also Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa*, 55-61, 75-80, and 91; and See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death,” *American Literature* 46 1976, 16-40; and Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination*, 324-25; in her work, “The Death of the Lady (Novelist),” Elaine Showalter calls *The House of Mirth* “a fictional house of birth for the woman artist” and contrasts Lily’s death to Wharton’s survival as an artist: “The death of the lady is thus also the death of the lady novelist, the dutiful daughter who struggles to subdue her most powerful imaginative impulses” 134-147; see also *Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* by Candace Waid; especially Chapter 1 (Women and Letters: *The House of Mirth*) provides an insightful analysis of *The House of Mirth* as a complex allegory about women and art of writing. 17-49.

²¹ For a critical discussion of the baby as metaphoric representation of Lily, see *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* by Carol Wershoven 53-54; *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, 181; *Edith Wharton’s Women: Friends and Rivals* by Susan Goodman, 57-59; *Edith Wharton* by Katherine Joslin, 63; *Novel of Admonition* by Linda Wagner-Martin, 47-48; “Beyond Her Self,” by Thomas Loebel, 126-130; “Lamarckism and the Construction of Transcendence in *The House of Mirth*,” by Sharon Kim, 186-190. Also in “Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in *The House of Mirth*,” *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth: A Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley, Joan Lidoff argues that Lily’s “visit to the working girl Nettie Struther and her infant and the death scene that concludes the novel are both stock sentimental pieces substituted for scenes of emotional climax or resolution” 184. For another discussion on the death scene where Lily imagines/hallucinates holding Nettie Struther’s baby, see *The Flirt’s Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* by Richard A. Kaye, who argues that when Lily dies, she is barren, without any children, which “enforce(s) a sense of Lily as a female who has forsaken her proper role in a Darwinian procedure...the principle purpose of which is procreation.” 171-172.

²² For a discussion on the structure of the novel which generates fairy-tale expectations, see “Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in *The House of Mirth*” by Joan Lidoff who argues that “we are bewitched by the beauty of her grace and vitality of spirit, as well as her appearance” and we wish a happy ending in which “a prince transport(s) her from her troubled poverty to the paradise of wealth and security she craves” and they “live happily ever after” but “Lily dies at the novel’s end, destroyed by the tyranny of social manners, but she is first the victim of the limitations of Wharton’s fictive world”. 182.

²³ For many commentators, Selden is considered as weak, fearful, egocentric or uncommitted: for discussions of his perceived flaws, see the following critical commentaries: Grace Kellogg, *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work*, 118-119; Linda Wagner-Martin, *The House of Mirth: Novel of Admonition*, 18-19, 30-40, 64; David Holbrook, *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man* 21-37; Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, 59; Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton*, 52; Susan Goodman, *Edith Wharton’s Women: Friends and Rivals*, 72; Carol Wershoven, *Female Intruder*, 44-54; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Feast Of Words*, 111, 120-133; Shari Benstock, “‘The Word Which Made All Clear’: The Silent Close Of *The House Of Mirth*,” in *Edith Wharton’s The House Of Mirth: A Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley, 138-140; Edmund Wilson, “Justice to Edith Wharton,” in *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Irving Howe, 26-27; Lori Merish, “Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction,” in *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth: A Casebook*, 236-249; Margaret B. McDowell, *Edith Wharton* 22,45-46; Judith H. Montgomery, “The American Galatea,” 897-898; Helen Killoran, *Edith Wharton: Art and Allusion*, 21-24. See “Man or Mannequin? Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*,” by Joseph Colombe who offers a more positive view of Selden as “a nontraditional male character who challenges the dominant literary tropes and cultural stereotypes of (Wharton’s) time.” 4; see “A Mole in the House of the Modern,” in *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. Deborah Esch by Lynne Tillman who examines the mutual attraction that draws Selden and Lily together and concludes that “their attraction to each other is unstable,” though “compelling”: she also argues that “the contradictory logic that might make them lovers—both are ambivalent, both want freedom – is precisely what makes them unfit for each other.” 149-151.

²⁴ See, *Edith Wharton's Evolutionary Conception": Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels* by Paul J. Ohler who points out that "what is in her blood is inexpressible" in a social environment which "suppresses the biological will that Lily displays in refusing to marry someone unsuitable." 67.

²⁵ See *Convention and Morality* by Lyde who argues that one effect of Wharton's determinism is to win reader sympathy for Lily's infatuation with wealth: since she has been "formed by circumstances beyond her control," her greed and narcissism may be judged less harshly. 135; see also *Edith Wharton's Social Register* by Claire Preston who interprets Lily as "the Lamarckian victim of Darwinian universe: no amount of wanting to adapt herself, of willed behavior toward survival and success, can help her in her struggle with a hostile environment." 57; in his work, "The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," Donald Pizer argues that "Wharton juxtaposes this conscious deterministic theme of victimization by one's familial and social environment... with... alternative forms of belief and value" 243.; In "Lamarckism and the Construction of Transcendence in *The House of Mirth*," Sharon Kim points to "the prophetic dimension of Lily Bart as an ontogenetic recapitulation of the civilization that produced her." 206; Amy L. Blair, in "Misreading *The House of Mirth*," offers an intriguing analysis of Wharton's original audience and identifies a tendency on the part of many middle class readers who "idealize Lily's Environs" and thus "see Lily's career not as a warning against social aspiration but as a road map..." 166, 168.

²⁶ In her work, *Female Intruder*, Carol Wershoven observes that "the women in the novel... are in perpetual competition with one another for the best marital deal."56.; see also Judith Fetterley's analysis in "The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*," 199-211; and see Pamela Knights who refers to the social activist and feminist Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman and her analysis of "the leisure-class woman's angle in the widely read *Women and Economics* (1898);" as Knights relates, "she (Gilman) debunked myths of romantic love, to uncover the market forces which drove women to compete for the richest husbands, and of men to fight for the trophy wife. Lily echoes Gilman's awareness both of the economic dimensions of her ambitions, and of the moral degradation of dependency (as akin to that of the harem)" 63.

CONCLUSION: Wharton's open endings

Edith Wharton's career spans a period of significant development in American letters, bridging a number of literary aesthetics and yet synthesizing from them a unique fictional practice. For example, Wharton is associated prominently with literary realism which began to reshape American fiction in the decades following the Civil War, but she also appears to have adapted certain essential features of naturalistic fiction in her novels. Throughout her career, she was attentive to the pressures of social and physical circumstances on character; hence, there is little or no God in Wharton's world; the environment – natural, cultural or situational- decides individuals' fate, creating a sense of "helplessness" and "powerlessness" in their entrapment. On the other hand, I can also say that Wharton's heroines are not hapless victims as they are aware of their helplessness, which may deepen their tragedy but at the same time allows them to retain dignity, as we have seen in each chapter. All the female characters analyzed in this study are individuals locked up in hopeless social entrapment: either in the form of marriage (e.g.: Zeena Frome and Charity Royall), hope for marriage (as in Mattie Silver) or failure in exerting oneself to achieve marriage, the embodiment of the false values of wealthy Gilded Age New York (as in Lily Bart).

One cannot help noticing the devastating and isolating effects of the harsh winters or the barrenness of the suffocatingly hot summers in New England villages, as we have seen in Starkfield in *Ethan Frome* and in North Dormer in *Summer*. The isolation of New England villages seems to be particularly hard on women, who are confined to their houses with domestic chores, whereas the men have more opportunities to socialize when they are out on business. It would be true to say that like her husband Ethan Frome and her cousin Mattie Silver, Zeena Frome in *Ethan Frome* falls victim to the unrelenting conditions of these villages, where people are hardened and beaten down by life. Likewise, Charity Royall in *Summer* feels miserable because of her entrapment in a small village like North Dormer and of her forced dependence on her foster father Lawyer Royall. As explained in previous chapters, these precisely denoted settings also refer to psychological qualities or states of characters, rendering her imagery more complex than typical naturalism. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* is entrapped in isolation and the false values mentioned above: extreme emphasis on wealth and beauty, the two dominant forces shaping and affecting individual lives deeply. At this point, one is reminded of the metaphor Wharton employed earlier in “The Fullness of Life” (1891) to express the overwhelming sense of isolation that marks her own life:

I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned; no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.

In the works analyzed in this study, the female characters not only embody the same feeling of *isolation* and but also the *entrapment* within the traditional gender roles in American patriarchal society. In her fiction, reflecting how social norms and codes restrict individuals and set boundaries for their roles, Wharton comments on the tragic unpredictability and insecurity of life, which comes especially in the form of unhappy and shocking endings of her novels. As Derrida argues, “any text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be (or may have been) seen by criticism as a single, stable ‘meaning’” (Quoted in Cuddon, 2013). In the light of this information, I would like to conclude that there are various meanings inherent in the text and one cannot guess which one Wharton intended to convey. Wharton - an acute reader herself - grants the reader a lot of latitude, and so her novels, especially their endings, are open to many interpretations.

For instance, as many commentators would agree, in *Ethan Frome* the reader follows the story of a man, Ethan, who lives a dream turned nightmare as he is trapped with a bitter spouse he cannot escape from, and a crippled lover who resembles his complaining wife more each day. When the unnamed male narrator encounters Ethan Frome at the post office in Starkfield, he feels intrigued with the story of Ethan’s life and as a subjective tale-teller takes his side rather than that of the women he sees in the Frome Farm kitchen. Therefore, by collecting bits of information from the reticent and even inarticulate residents of the town, he pieces together his biased vision which demonizes Zeena Frome, a witch or an evil force blocking her husband’s dreams and aspirations. However, when one follows the techniques of deconstruction, it is possible to find hidden alternative meanings in the

text: accordingly, a close reading has revealed the untold truth about the story of the Fromes: it is not Ethan but his wife Zeena who is the secret sufferer in the Frome Farm as she had to spend the rest of her life not only with a crippled spouse who does not love her any more but also with her husband's paralyzed lover.

As the story of *Ethan Frome* is told with a single voice, the male narrator's, both Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver are marginalized and underdrawn in the narrative: they depend on Ethan's (and the narrator's) point of view for representation as they do not speak in their own voices. I argue that there are other stories to be told and other perspectives not given voice in the narrator's version of the story in which he fills in the gaps according to his own male judgment in order to grasp the deeper meaning of the story - the inarticulateness, reticence and silence of rural New Englanders.

At this point, I should mention once again the broken ellipses Wharton employs throughout the novella as they not only punctuate the novel but also frame the vision of the narrator, presented to the reader as the story of Ethan Frome. At the end of the prologue, where the male narrator is standing on the threshold of the Frome kitchen, there are fifty-six ellipses which take up nearly three full lines and thirty three ellipses before the concluding chapter. One can here argue that the elliptically marked spaces between the prologue and the concluding chapter might indicate the events that remain unknown or unrecorded, in other words, the untold story of the characters on the Frome Farm, including Zeena Frome. By means of ellipses - gaps to fill in - Wharton seems to be inviting the reader to take an active role in discourse with the text, to question the narrator's perspective and the taken-for-granted world from which he has constructed the characters' lives and roles: in other words, his reliability. Thus the internal structure of the narrative undermines the seeming

authority of the narrator, inviting the reader to be skeptical of his reliability and his limited perspective.

Some critics such as Ammons find the male narrator quite appropriate and even convincing in his telling of the story, believing that as a man he can share and understand Ethan's feelings better. However, I argue that when the narrator in *Ethan Frome* makes his masculine partiality clear from the very beginning, it is to serve Wharton's critique on the male point of view and perspective towards women not only in rural New England villages but also in portrayals of the rural life in literature. To this end, as a visiting engineer, the narrator's gender and even occupation (a profession attributed to men mostly) rather than his name is revealed to the reader. Moreover, his upper-class origin as well as his education sets him apart from most of his rural interlocutors. I believe his obvious unreliability also seems to be contributing to this criticism.

At this point, one cannot help noticing the obvious unreliability of all the male characters in the works presented in this study: Ethan Frome in *Ethan Frome*, Lucius Harney and Lawyer Royall in *Summer*, Gus Trenor and Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*. As discussed in detail in Chapter 1, Ethan remains weak, ineffective and taciturn throughout the story: not only does he fail to meet the expectations and requirements of his marriage to a smart professional woman like Zeena with high expectations, but also as a married man, he fancies his wife's young cousin and hence gives false hopes to her, which makes Mattie's situation on the farm even more precarious when Zeena starts realizing the infatuation between them. As already discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Charity is treated as a disposable object by the man she falls in love with - Lucius Harney - while fighting against the lecherous attempts of the only father she knows - Lawyer Royall. In Chapter 4, Lily is introduced to the

reader through the gaze of the admiring Lawrence Selden who can be considered as weak, fearful, egocentric or uncommitted since he does not believe in Lily's innocence (although he proposes twice) when he hears the rumors circulating that Lily recompenses Gus's loan with sexual favors.

In her fiction, Wharton calls attention to the limitations and expectations placed on women who are raised to become nothing more than domestic servants and companions for men - whether reliable or not - in nineteenth-century American society. One can conclude that Mattie Silver is a representative of the preference of powerful, white, usually upper-class men for childish dependent women who cannot survive outside marriage. Therefore, inefficient and unskilled, her growing desperation to remain on the farm may reflect more than her romantic attraction to Ethan Frome: just like Lily Bart, Mattie is also aware of the fact that she can exist only when she is in some sort of close relationship with a man, in her case the man closest to her: Ethan.

Mattie's economic dependence – in other words, her financial insecurity- has obvious narrative effects as she is not given an individual narrative section or point of view to articulate her own story; instead in the eyes of her admirer, she emerges vividly against *the infertility, sickness and ugliness of the older Zeena* who is also marginalized in the narrative. However, when the narrator crosses the threshold out of his vision into the Frome kitchen, Mattie has become the hated woman who waits at home: obviously, the accident forces Zeena to exchange her “sickly” identity with Mattie, who now assumes the permanently dependent state. In time, the two women in Ethan Frome's life come to resemble each other closely: living in isolation and entrapment for more than twenty years, they become so indistinguishable that Ethan's introductions on the night of the blizzard actually confuse the narrator. When Ethan

and Mattie fail in their suicide attempt, their lives change irrevocably: one of the more ironic consequences is the reversal in the two women's roles as invalid and caregiver. Pain transforms her into an old woman before her time and all she can offer now is woe and complaint: accordingly, the woman "droning querulously" (*EF*, 42) at the end of the prologue, as the men enter the house, turns out to be not Zeena but Mattie whining about her. Here Mattie's central irony is this: only when economic reliance becomes extreme physical need does she secure her place in the household, almost at Zeena's expense.

Neither Zeena Frome nor Mattie Silver is a center of interest in *Ethan Frome* as they are mostly excluded in the narration, which is also an indirect criticism of female entrapment under the male gaze and traditional gender roles. In the male narrator's prejudiced vision, Mattie Silver is *presented* as a charming young woman full of joy and life with a sparkling personality whereas in contrast to the unflattering depiction of Zeena Frome is as a mean, grumpy sickly obstacle. To use Gilbert and Gubar's (1984, 79) terminology, Zeena is a monster, a witch or a madwoman while Mattie is an angel. However, as one can easily observe, both marginalized in the narrative, Zeena Frome - once the professional, autonomous nurse "doctoring in the county" and Mattie Silver - once the unskilled, inefficient but young and "genteel" woman- are portrayed as witchlike figures in the epilogue. It is particularly striking that just like Zeena, Mattie is also demonized by the narrator associated with witches/witchcraft, hinting a kind of mysterious and fearful power over people with her "bright witch-like stare" after she has exchanged places with Zeena, who serves her now. Therefore, as the end of the novel reveals, Wharton parodies the binary opposition of angels and demons in Victorian novels: Zeena and Mattie, presented as

rivals, are equally trapped and powerless in their dependency on the single male figure, Ethan Frome.

I even further argue that Wharton's criticism of the conservative New England villages where isolation as well as hard farm conditions turn young women into witch-like figures. Therefore, within *Ethan Frome*, the intertwined fates of Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver dramatize the inescapable influence of social environment on individual personality and behavior in the disparate settings of Berkshire villages, which seems to convey Wharton's view of modern New England. Wharton also criticizes the expectations and limitations that turn of the century American society imposes on young women: the "purpose" reserved for young women at the end of nineteenth century American society is marriage for survival – marriage means a kind of confinement/entrapment for many of them as we have also seen in *Summer*.

Set in the Berkshire village of Starkfield one summer, *Summer* is a richly sensuous story which seems to follow a traditional plot line leading to the inevitable end/fate - either marriage or death - for a young woman who ignores moral and social norms and codes. As already discussed, I argue that it does not attempt to engage the reader's tearful sympathies as the reader actually follows the story of a young girl, Charity Royall, who, after becoming pregnant by a visiting New York architect named Lucius Harney, is forced to marry her own step-father, the lawyer Royall, the most powerful man in North Dormer. Taking the nature of her upbringing and the narrowness of her prospects into consideration, like Mattie Silver, Charity Royall is another recognizable Wharton character who has few prospects for an independent existence outside marriage, even if it comes perilously close to incest.

Just like Zeena Frome, Charity yearns for a fuller, truly independent life in a larger town, but she is trapped in a claustrophobic small town with a dissolute step-father who constantly tries to seduce her and an opportunistic lover who leaves her pregnant and with no choice other than abortion, prostitution or a return to the poverty and lawlessness of the mountain. She is also treated as a disposable object by the man she falls in love with while fighting against the lecherous attempts of the only father she has known. Thus the conventional, morally acceptable happy ending whereby the female protagonist is saved from ruin and prostitution by her lover or her male guardian, is subverted via a semi-incestuous marriage and becomes thereby a parody of contemporary sentimentalism.

Charity has always been on the threshold of the Royall house, representing her limbo between an establishmentarian upbringing and an anarchic origin. When she finally yields to Lawyer Royall by agreeing to marry him, she actually feels obliged to submit to the bourgeois ethic she was brought up with since being retrieved from the mountain-folk where one is stripped of all rights that a human is entitled to. When she meets the young Lucius Harney from his more privileged background, she suddenly becomes class conscious; yet, tempted to free herself from the strict codes and norms of North Dormer, she yields to Harney's seduction, a temptation symbolizing a promise of an independent and more fulfilling existence, which pushes her from the threshold of the Royall House - evoking peace, warmth and silence - back to the mountain. Her wedding threshold is the threshold to which she had retreated in the novella's beginning. Marriage, for many, is considered a happy ending; however, this marriage signals only an incestuous life for the unfortunate female protagonist Charity, who becomes Mrs. Royall, although the two newlyweds have not yet consummated their union. One can say for Charity it means the death of her dreams of

escape, of fulfillment and independence as she could not be liberated from North Dormer and its suffocating norms and codes.

Chained to Lawyer Royall by law, Charity, like Zeena Frome, Mattie Silver and many other female characters of Wharton, becomes a prisoner for life just because she has no other place to go. Therefore, although some critics read Charity's decision to marry Mr. Royall not as a bad thing at all, I argue that *Summer* is a story of enclosure, of failure and withdrawal rather than stepping out. No matter how hard and hopelessly one can struggle against forces beyond his/her control, it is inevitable to fall victim to the ruling patriarchal order, embodied in Lawyer Royal. He at last gains control over the rebellious young woman whose origins lie in outlaw territory, outside the boundaries of such patriarchy. It is obvious that Wharton criticizes the expectations and limitations that turn of the century American society imposes on young women like Zeena Frome, Mattie Silver and Charity Royall: the "purpose" reserved for young women at the end of nineteenth century American society is not "freedom and independence" but "marriage," in other words, "social entrapment" for survival as we have also seen in the character Lily Bart, in *The House of Mirth*.

When the reader follows the wrong doings/mistakes of the female protagonist, Lily Bart, an aging yet still exceptionally beautiful woman on the quest for marriage, one cannot help wondering about the reasons of her failure in matrimonial designs. To begin with, Wharton throws her heroine, Lily Bart, into a world of chance, in which she has made her own choices from the very beginning just like Charity Royall who chooses to spend her summer afternoons with the visiting architect, Lucius Harney. Spending the afternoon with Lawrence Selden instead of Percy Gryce, borrowing money from Gus Trenor, boarding the Sabrina (the Dorset yacht), refusing Selden's proposal twice, refusing Rosedale's proposal once, not using the love letters

she bought once to blackmail Bertha Dorset to regain her social standing, as suggested by Rosedale, are some of the decisions she has made.

Therefore, Lily Bart cannot be simply perceived as the innocent victim of heredity and environment; to put it another way, she cannot be a victim of changing economic and social circumstances over which she has no control or a classic tragic figure who falls due to her own inborn flaws since she has made her own choices from the very beginning: yet, the reason for her failure to achieve her objective to marry a rich yet cultivated man is open to discussion as it is not an easy task to reveal the truth lying behind the scenes in Lily's life. Relying on the techniques of deconstruction, I can argue that just like the stories of Zeena Frome, Mattie Silver and Charity Royall, Lily's story and its meanings are indeterminate as she is presented at a distance: there may be many other possible readings of her circumstances.

From my reading, Lily seems to be more like a person of conscience whose scruples ultimately won't allow her to join with the corrupt system for which she has been trained. Obviously, Wharton severely criticizes the artificiality she closely observed in an American society in which extreme emphasis on wealth and beauty are the two dominant forces shaping and deeply affecting individual lives. While women are forced to compete for the richest husbands in the marriage market for survival, men seek wealth as well as beautiful and elegant wives to augment their social status. Ironically enough though, as already mentioned, the ones who seem to achieve both - like the Gormers, the Trenors, the Dorsets - lead miserable lives, devoid of love, affection and hope of continuity and rootedness in a country bereft of cultural heritage.

Lily Bart is a product, even a commodity of her society, a society shaped and ruled by the older upper class and the rising new money in Gilded Age New York at the turn of the century. Lily is unwise and uncertain in estimating her worth as the ornamental woman she was fated to be and the extreme value she has put on material resources in her quest for marriage, two flaws inherited from her mother. Sadly, whatever the reasons are, when she fails in her matrimonial designs, she also fails to achieve an existence independent of the society which had formed her. Wharton's novel seems to convey the feminist social message that women bred to be mere decorations – *objects of desire* for men- run risks of various sorts of death. One can argue further that death (accidental or not) can be seen the only way to escape from her entrapment in false values of wealthy Gilded Age New York high society.

In conclusion, as a transatlantic writer, Edith Wharton witnessed unprecedented social, economic and political transformations both in America and in the world at large: post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era and World War I during her life time. Deeply concerned with the issues of her day, she produced fiction about the effects of change at all levels of society- not only the upper-class New York society of which she herself was a member but also New England villages. To this end, she kept creating tragic female figures to call attention to the lack of viable alternatives and choices for women in modern American society: the inner complexities of women's lives derived from their subservient position as *objects of desire* for men; their emotional distress and physical pain in their *entrapment* in traditional gender roles as well as societal norms and codes; the vulgarity of the nouveaux riches; the repression of the established upper class; the inequality and repression of women in patriarchal culture; the hostility and rivalry between women; the confining nature of marriage, especially for women; the

preference of powerful, white, usually upper-class men for childish dependent women; the repression of women's sexual desire, the structure of patriarchal power; the financial insecurity and economic dependence of women for survival; a sense of *homelessness*- rootlessness in a country bereft of a cultural heritage are some of the themes discussed in this study. It is also crucial to highlight that Wharton, an observant chronicler of her time, maintains a realist's view of social conventions by merely exposing *the tragic possibilities of life*: she does not offer solutions but instead creates awareness about how we actually live.

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