

Sexual Intricacies, Patriarchal Voices and the Question of Masculinity in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*

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Abstract

In Ethan Frome Edith Wharton has captured the progress of the narrative in terms of sexual development of its protagonist and various dilemmas posed by sex in the lives of its characters. The plot of the narrative develops with the sexual maturation of Ethan Frome which is sometimes supported and sometimes obstructed by various external and internal forces like society, family, environment, religion, money, gender, human nature, instincts etc. In Ethan Frome Edith Wharton has closely examined the role of all these external and internal forces in governing the sex-life of an individual. She has questioned whether in the field of love and marriage their effects are inevitable or there is a viable option to escape them. The present study aims at weighing the magnitude of these forces and the credibility of the options provided by the tragic destiny of Ethan Frome and the tragic married life of Edith Wharton.

Ethan Frome was notable, as Edith Wharton claimed, for its structural unity and for its theme which captured the progress of the narrative in terms of sexual development and various dilemmas posed by sex in the lives of its characters. The plot of the narrative developed with the sexual maturation of the protagonist which was sometimes supported and sometimes obstructed by various external and internal forces like society, family, environment, religion, money, gender, human nature, instincts etc. In *Ethan Frome* Edith Wharton has closely examined the role of all these external and internal forces in governing the sex-life of an individual. She has questioned whether in the field of love and marriage these effects are inevitable or there is a viable option to escape them. Perhaps a close reading of the emotional turmoil Edith Wharton faced in the years surrounding 1910, during which she was writing *Ethan Frome* provided an answer when she recognized that to liberate her

sexual nature she must wrestle with her own reticence and break the iron-bars of her painful married life.

At the time when Edith Wharton was writing *Ethan Frome* she was reading an extremely popular book on the effects of external forces on the development of sex and the origin and genesis of sex, i.e. *Sex and Character* written by Otto Weininger. Many other theorists like Otto Weininger concentrated upon how and where sexual characteristics are divided and separated by external and internal forces. Critic Farland presented Davidson's views on the matter:

As sexologists, psychologists and scientists began drawing up elaborate categories and criteria by which masculinity and femininity could be analyzed and classified, sex was no longer exclusively and straightforwardly linked to anatomical structure or features, but increasingly became a matter of a wide range of an individual's tastes, actions, fantasies, and emotions. (709)

Davidson further suggested that differences between masculinity and femininity did not exist anatomically but psychologically. According to critic Maria Magdalena Farland, "absolute distinctions between all men on the one side and all women on the other do not exist" (710). In *Ethan Frome* the protagonist's promotions and demotions, forward and backward sexual journeys emphasised on the theme that sex had a chronology and history and could be narrated as a story. As the narrator began his minute probing into Frome's character and the reasons behind the "look in his face which ... neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there" he got ample evidence of his inborn manly instincts (Wharton 4). In fact the novel opened with the description of Ethan's physical outlook. "It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain" (Wharton 1). While talking to Harmon Gow the narrator looked out at "Frome's retreating figure, and thinking how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape" (Wharton 2). Ethan's genuine interest in a book of "popular science" and "on some recent discoveries in bio-chemistry", his unfulfilled prospects of becoming an engineer because he had to "stay and care for the folks" forced the narrator to think that all these factors might have contributed to his morose and gloomy looks (Wharton 6, 2):

Such tastes and acquirements in a man of his condition made the contrast more poignant between his outer situation and his inner needs, and I hoped that the chance of giving expression to the latter might at least unseal his lips. But something in his past

history, or in his present way of living, had apparently driven him too deeply into himself for any casual impulse to draw him back to his kind (Wharton 6).

When Ethan Frome came into contact with Mattie her very feminine qualities helped him to externalize his sensitivity to the “appeal of natural beauty” but which “had remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it”. Her lively beauty and "one of the wonders of their intercourse that from the first, she, the quicker, finer, more expressive, instead of crushing him by the contrast, had given him something of her own ease and freedom" (Wharton 14, 17). While walking with her in the stillness of the night he felt:

He was never so happy with her as when he abandoned himself to these dreams. Halfway up the slope Mattie stumbled against some unseen obstruction and clutched his sleeve to steady herself. The wave of warmth that went through him was like the prolongation of his vision. For the first time he stole his arm about her, and she did not resist. They walked on as if they were floating on a summer stream. (Wharton 21)

The novel was replete with various instances when Ethan realized his sexual impulses in his proximity with Mattie but the very tragic end of the novel suggested the cruel and brutal murder of these movements of sexual awakening and prospects of sexual freedom in his life. These inborn masculine and feminine instincts were shaped in the individual by external circumstances created by society and customs. On the one hand social customs and forces were helpful in shaping sexual instincts in the individual on the other hand these social forces obstructed the way of individual's sexual fulfillments. "Among the various responses of a developing organism to environment, those proving useless would persist as habits and eventually become organized as instincts" (Farland 714). Critics like R.B.Hovey supported this argument:

Mattie was spared the step by step conditioning into witchhood by the sledding accident, which, “like magic, swiftly turns the girl into a whining burdensome hag”. In one aspect, her death- in life is almost incidental. For, in any event, a young woman like Mattie, typically unequipped for an economically independent life, had no future...“She can work in a factory and lose her health; she can become a prostitute and lose her dignity as well: she can marry a farmer and lose her mind. Or she can be crushed in a sledding accident and lose all three at once ... The system is designed to keep her a parasite” ... The girl “exemplified all the dull anguish of the long line of women who, for two hundred years, had been buffeted by life and who had eaten out their hearts in the constricted and gloomy existence of the American Countryside”. (10, 11)

Not only the social system but other factors like climate, geographical details, environment, financial condition, heredity etc. also functioned as external forces shaping the destiny of human being. Critic R.B. Hovey in his essay has discussed it very clearly:

in the poverty of the soil and in the isolation of Starkfield, isolation deepened by long winters. Weather has other roles....Hardship pervades the social milieu. No Starkfielders are affluent, the Fromes close to poverty. Chill loneliness makes the people emotionally suppressed if not starved. Among the women it is not personal idiosyncrasy but a societal phenomenon that they become "sickly"; heart-longings have them running to doctors. (7)

The narrator's description of the "Solitary roof" of "Frome's saw mill" was very mournful:

It looked exanimate enough, with its idle wheel looming above the black stream dashed with yellow-white spume, and its cluster of sheds sagging under their white load. Frome did not even turn his head as we drove by, and still in silence we began to mount the next slope. About a mile farther, on a road I had never travelled, we came to an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe. Beyond the orchard lay a field or two, their boundaries lost under drifts; and above the fields, huddled against the white immensities of land and sky, one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier. (Wharton 7)

All these effects were doubled by a "severely limited economy and social landscape" of Starkfield (Hovey 12). In the words of Farland the novel presented, as the name of the region, Starkfield, suggested "the negative effects of such rural poverty, detailing the austere, bleak conditions brought by industrialization and urbanization to New England's farming towns ... Affecting both the "emotions" and the "blood," the psychical and physical capacities, Ethan Frome's environment depletes his bodily vitality" (715).

If we divided the term Starkfield we got two words, stark and field. Stark suggested something naked, factual and real and the term field suggested something which had the capacity and possibility of vegetation and fertility but which could remain barren too. Joined with the term stark it indicated its barrenness and bleakness. From the beginning of the novel we got glimpses of poor Frome household where we found "a kitchen chair which was the only piece of furniture in the hall" (Wharton 9). Frome's shabby dress, "his worn bearskin" and the information given to narrator by the local people affirmed his beliefs in the financial scarcity of the Fromes (Wharton 5).

Every description carefully connected Frome's prematurely "old" body to his "diminished" home suggesting the gradual deterioration of his physical as well as sexual prowess as a direct effect of his financial scarcity. Frome's house like his body was a mirror where the gradual loss of all vitality and virility, due to his economic impotency, was clearly reflected. Ethan Frome's sexual demotion not only pointed towards, his economic and social environment but also his genealogical history. Talking to the narrator Ethan himself revealed about his mother that:

When she got the rheumatism so bad she could'nt move around she used to sit up there and watch the road by the hour; and one year, when they was six months mending the Bettsbridge pike after the floods, and Harmon Gow had to bring his stage round this way, she picked up so that she used to get down to the gate most days to see him. But after the trains begun running nobody ever come by here to speak of, and mother never could get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died. (Wharton 8)

All these genealogical defects, deepened by his current economic problem after his father's death and the burden of his sick wife, snatched away from him all his prospects of sexual freedom and potentiality. Ethan's marriage to his cousin Zeena took him only a step ahead towards his unhealthy chain of heredity. Her lack of feminine beauty and sexlessness had been very vividly pictured by Edith Wharton in these lines:

She sat opposite the window, and the pale light reflected from the banks of snow made her face look more than usually drawn and bloodless, sharpened the three parallel creases between ear and cheek, and drew querulous lines from her thin nose to the corners of her mouth. Though she was but seven years her husband's senior, and he was only twenty-eight, she was already an old woman. (27)

Encumbered by all the other external circumstances he felt that she had started getting pleasure by inflicting "cruelty" on him. When he looked at her it seemed as if "the flame of the unshaded lamp bringing out with microscopic cruelty the fretful lines of her face"(Wharton 23). She looked "so hard" and "lonely" when she spoke the "retort was like a knife cut across the sinews and he felt suddenly weak and powerless" (Wharton 47, 50).

Zeena's unknown sickness was never clearly defined in the novel. It was psychosomatic and posed more problems than any other disease could. According to the Freudian theories she was hypochondriac. A duel was set in the household when Zeena with her sickness and sexual impotency created a domestic prison for him and Ethan with his dreams of sexual freedom lurking beneath the surface tried to break the iron bars of the prison. The main

interest of the story depended on how these two warriors responded to each other. Who lost and who won?

Apart from all these forces presented as vicious and evil in the novel by Edith Wharton another effect shaping the life and destiny of Ethan Frome was his upbringing in Puritan atmosphere. Though in the whole novel Edith Wharton has nowhere given any direct suggestion of Puritanism as a vicious force but joined with all the external circumstances and Ethan's own sharp sense of morality it did not get the scope to give new heights to his personality and simply worked as a supportive factor in crippling and confining his mental potentialities. From the beginning of the novel the narrator gave hints of his sharp moral sense "He was not the kind of man to be turned from his business by any commotion of the elements;" (Wharton 7). Commenting on the effect of Puritanism on his mentality and his own moral sensibility critic R.B. Hovey stated:

We should recall that the central action occurs in backcountry Massachusetts in the mid-1880s. Fittingly, then, a Puritan ethos pre-dominates throughout as both an individual and communal presence. I refer to features like these; wariness about the sensuous and the emotional, about tenderness, gaiety, love; rigorous stress on work, responsibility, conscience. Such a moral emotional ambience affects decisions made in the story and molds its characters. Sex among the Ethan Frome people was hardly casual; divorce, if not unthinkable, was a most unlikely proceeding. Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie are creatures of this time- clime ... But he is more fine grained, gentle and intelligent than his fellows, and stirred by cloudy yearnings for knowledge and a freer and larger life. His is a shy but genuine response to beauty ... In one more respect Ethan surpasses the average: his sense of duty, his reliability and strict probity. He is strikingly conscientious. This is, ethically, his finest trait. (7, 8)

All these arguments and reasons logically proved that sexual potency or impotency of a human being was greatly affected by several external forces. Though the whole development of the novel stressed on the influence of external forces on sexual development the novel's end asserted "the lurking presence or absence of invisible, latent ancestral characteristics encoded in the cell" (Farland 723).

Ethan's marriage to Zeena had not only crippled his physical entity but his psychical personality. Frome's household was always dominated by Zeena's "evil presence" whether she was physically present there or not. When Zeena had gone to Bettsbridge for her regular health checkup "the mention of Zeena had paralyzed him" and it "threw a chill between them" and the "name had benumbed him again, and once more he felt as if Zeena were in the

room between them" (Wharton 34, 35). Whether she was physically present in the room or not but Ethan and Mattie felt that she "took her accustomed seat between them" (Wharton 52). When these two lovers decided to opt for their last way to freedom i.e., death, Zeena's image destroyed all the possibilities very brutally. As Edith Wharton wrote:

As they flew toward the tree Mattie pressed her arms tighter, and her blood seemed to be in his veins. Once or twice the sled swerved a little under them. He slanted his body to keep it headed for the elm, repeating to himself again and again: "I know we can fetch it"; and little phrases she had spoken ran through his head and danced before him on the air. The big tree loomed bigger and closer, and as they bore down on it he thought: "It's waiting for us: it seems to know." But suddenly his wife's face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. (Wharton 72)

All these forces very emphatically drove Ethan Frome towards his tragic destiny. Through the character of Ethan Frome Edith Wharton had portrayed her own frustrations which occurred due to her unfulfilled sexual desires. What Edith Wharton wanted to suggest through the misery of Ethan Frome had been very clearly stated by Cynthia Griffing Wolff in her essay:

Ethan Frome is scarcely an explicit mirror of Wharton's own situation in 1910....The most telling, of course, had to do with her marriage. Like Frome, Edith Wharton was manacled to the merest ghost of a mate: every superficial pleasure in her marriage had been lost, and nothing remained except the crude and brutal armature of dependency upon which it had been founded. The novel of *Ethan Frome* offers an answer - perhaps several answers - to the predicament Edith Wharton confronted. There was an answer to the query: what has gone wrong. Adults who want a viable marriage must have the courage to make realistic demands, to establish independent identities and to negotiate differences, each recognizing the other as someone who also has an independent life, Passivity, withdrawal, inarticulateness, helpless dependency - all of these attitudes will eventually poison any relationship: they are the basis for Frome's misery just as they had become the basis for Edith Whaton's. (240)

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