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From Retreat to Revelation - A Prismatic Study of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*

Seetha Balakrishnan, M.A., M.Phil. , Ph.D. Candidate



Edith Wharton 1862-1937

A Disciple of Henry James

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Edith Wharton, the most distinguished woman writer of American fiction before World War II, was the chief disciple of Henry James. A long-time friend of Henry James, Wharton regarded him as a master contemporary novelist, and her work has marked resemblances to his, both in theme and technique. Like James, she considered the novel “as a vehicle for presenting a moral problem involving personalities in a highly civilized background” (Sands 19).

Edith Wharton started writing at the turn of the twentieth century. It was around that time that women writers in America started making a serious contribution to the field of literature. According to John Cournos and Sybil Norton, Edith Wharton began writing fiction “on the advice of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, an author of note himself, to relieve the mental and nervous tension created by her husband’s ailing condition, his care devolving upon her” (170).

Outstanding Feature: Importance of Women Characters

The outstanding feature in Edith Wharton’s novels is the importance that she gives to her women characters. As Khan observes:

They may be seen in various roles, that of a social parasite like, Lily Bart in ‘*The House of Mirth*’; a Madame de Treymes who represents the solidarity of the French family system in the novel ‘*Madame de Treymes*’; the social climber like Undine Spragg in ‘*The Custom of the Country*’; the exotic Ellen Olenska with an estranged marriage behind her in ‘*The Age of Innocence*’; the humble Ann Eliza Bunner who sacrifices her happiness for the sake of her sister in ‘*The Bunner sisters*’. (81)

Her readers and critics acknowledge that whatever their roles be, all these women characters are central to the novel.

From a Conservative Family

Born in 1862, Edith Newbold Jones was brought up within the graceful, wealthy yet conservative, confining circle of New York society, which fostered sexual repression and prided itself on the innocence of its young girls. Edith Wharton herself was discouraged from expressing her emotions or developing her intellect which was supposed to be very unbecoming traits in a woman. This is the reason why she stressed in her fiction the need for growth, and has shown how painful and frustrating this process can be for a woman. This process of growth and development is revealed in her major works *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *Summer* (1917).

Individual Constrained by Traditions

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The situations in Edith Wharton's novels are usually that of an individual thrown against the rigid conventions of a small social group. They emphasize the honor of the family at all costs. The family must stick together and protect its women at all costs. Divorce, she viewed as a tragedy, but from a social, not a human or personal viewpoint.

Like many women, Edith Wharton knew that the claims of the outside world, of marriage and the woman's duty to home and society could be merciless and that the inner life could become a source of strength. This experience and knowledge enabled her to write her best novels which are like "inspired rooms, places which create for us with a completeness of moral and psychological detail" (Howard 29).

Ethan Frome and Summer



The two novels that proclaim Edith Wharton's psychological and artistic emancipation from the internalized voices of the past are ***Ethan Frome* (1911)** and ***Summer* (1917)**. In them, she attempts to do personally and aesthetically to see "beyond an unpleasant subject" (Goodman 67). On the surface these texts seem straightforward and familiar but beneath the surface, however each contains a story about an unpleasant subject: "incest" (Goodman 67).

Ethan Frome and ***Summer*** are clearly related to the author. ***Ethan Frome*** in its original version is entitled "Hiver" while Wharton called ***Summer*** the "Hot Ethan". Despite the correspondence between these two New England novels, ***Summer*** marks a change in Wharton's view of America and the world. The two novels do not represent parts of the same seasonal life cycle. In the impenetrable and infertile landscape of ***Ethan Frome*** "sexual passion offers a siren call to smash upon the rocks" (Waid 78).

The narrator constructs a vision of cold hearth and a rocky landscape that offer the "lure of death, a world barren of the fruit that would generate other fruit" (Waid 78-79).

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Summer includes the possibility of cyclical passage that would escape dangerous repetition. It reveals “a more fertile world that offers growth, flowering, fruit and a reseeded that takes place after a period of necessary dormancy” (Waid 79).

Unlike the vision of *Ethan Frome*, *Summer* represents a cycle of growth in which repetition is welcomed as necessary renewal. The juxtaposition of love and suffering in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* reflect in some degree the intensity that Wharton gained from direct sexual experience as well as some of the ambivalence she experienced in love from 1907 to 1911.

Use of Symbols

Dealing with the themes analogous to the incidents that took place in her own life in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* Wharton has made use of symbols to express her ideas. In *Ethan Frome* the gloomy atmosphere is highlighted by using winter as the seasonal background. In *Summer* the seasonal background is summer. These symbols reveal not only the minds of the characters described in the novels but the suppressed and expressed views of Edith Wharton as well. In *Ethan Frome* Ethan’s denial of sexuality is revealed by his withdrawal from sexual relationship. In *Summer* Charity’s revelation is revealed by her sheer ecstasy and joy at having experienced sexual relationship.

The Protagonist in *Ethan Frome*

Ethan Frome, the protagonist in *Ethan Frome* is a victim, because of his suppression of feelings, and inarticulateness. The pain experienced mentally and physically is projected by the gloomy atmosphere and background picture of winter. Ethan Frome is a man set apart from his neighbours by education, intellect and feeling, but lacks the force or courage either to impose him or to get away. This retreat leads to a kind of stasis in his life. As Lubbock observes: “Ethan’s history was just a flash of inarticulate passion, thrown against the blinding whiteness of the New England Winter” (54).

Ethan Frome depicts the tragedy caused by the challenging convention. Ethan Frome, a young man of good and gentle character is the only son of a New England farm couple. He has some intellectual gifts and some desire to know the world, and for a year he is happy attending a technical school. But when his father becomes disabled by a farm accident, Ethan dutifully returns to manage the failing farm and saw mill. After his father’s death, his mother loses her mental faculties and during her last illness she is nursed by a female relative whom Ethan marries for no other reason than that he is in fear of loneliness.

The new wife, Zeena, who is elder to Ethan, immediately becomes a shrew, and lives only to be ill. To help Zeena in her household work, the Fromes take into their

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home, a gentle and charming young girl, Mattie Silver, a destitute cousin of the wife. Ethan and Mattie fall in love, innocently but deeply. The wife perceiving this, plan to send the girl away. At the thought of separation Ethan and Mattie decide to commit suicide. They mean to die by sledding down a steep hill and crash into a great elm tree. Their plan fail and they survive. Ethan is sorely crippled and Mattie is bedridden in perpetual pain and Zeena becomes the devoted nurse and the jailer of the lovers.

Issues in *Summer*



Charity, the protagonist, in *Summer* is caught in the stifling environment of North Dormer. Trapped in a society she scorns and in lives she despises, Charity resorts to a consolation – the fantasy of escape.

Charity Royall a young woman of obscure parentage is reared by foster parents, Lawyer Royall and Mrs. Royall. Mrs. Royall is dead when the narrative begins. Charity lives with Royall in a small Massachusetts town called North Dormer. Although she yearns to escape she turns down a chance to attend boarding school because she feels obligated to Lawyer Royall, who will be too lonesome without her. However, Royall eventually tries to seduce his foster daughter, and then twice asks her to be his wife, but Charity revolts. She instead falls in love with a young urban architect named Lucius Harney.

As Charity becomes more sexually experienced through her affair with Harney, her interest in her own origins grows. She eventually becomes pregnant with Harney's child, only to learn that he is engaged to a girl of his own, more privileged class. In desperation, Charity seeks her own mother, who lives with a group of outlaws on the mountain, but her mother dies before the two could reconcile. Charity assists the local minister at a nightmarish burial, spends one night on the mountain, then leaves, hungry, cold and upset.

While making her weary way down the mountain, Charity encounters Lawyer Royall, who knowing she is pregnant, immediately takes her to a nearby city and marries her. "You're a good girl" (S 216) Royall tells Charity the day after their marriage. "I

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guess you're good too" (S 216) she responds. Charity returns with Royall to his house in North Dormer, married to the only father she knows.

Seasons in Contrast, Symbols in Contrast

Summer is portrayed in contrast to winter, where the characters undergo rebirth rather than stagnation. The protagonists Charity and Lawyer Royall experience their desires without suppression in the stimulating season summer which leads to revelation in their lives.

Ethan Frome and *Summer* unfold the tragedy of circumstance. The former is the symbolic presentation of winter-frozen-life held in abeyance. The latter is its antithesis, lush, bursting with every rebellious life force. In the desolate communities which witness the agonies of Ethan Frome and Charity Royall, not only is there a stubborn village decorum, but there are also the bitter compulsions of a helpless poverty which binds feet and wings as the most ruthless decorum cannot bind them. This dulls all the hues of life to an unendurable dinginess. Wharton considers these two novels as "one conception-literary twins" (Kellogg 221).

Ethan Frome symbolically referred to as 'Cold Ethan' reveals suppression leading to death in life. In *Summer*, the protagonist, though faces defeat in life, is able to overcome and accept the fate, leading to happiness in life. *Summer* is symbolically referred to as 'Hot Ethan'. The symbolic terms reveal that 'Cold Ethan' is a tragedy of wintry emotional starvation, while 'Hot Ethan' is a richly sensuous book set in the season summer.

Life begins unhappily for the deprived; they move through crucial moments of intense suffering, and they simply continue to live after the single drama of life for them has dissipated. Neither villains nor heroes emerge in these novels. Edith Wharton's protagonist Ethan Frome faces intense suffering and simply continues to lead a retreated life. On the other hand Charity Royall is able to cope up with her fate and overcome it, even after her life seems a crisis. Charity's revelation makes her a successful woman. The final uncompromising message seen in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* is "freedom can never be absolute, and in so far as joy can be sustained it must accommodate the limiting demands of circumstances" (Wolff 411).

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