



BROWSE



## Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and the Question of Meaning

Elizabeth Ammons

Studies in American Fiction

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 7, Number 2, Autumn 1979

pp. 127-140

10.1353/saf.1979.0026

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

EDITH WHARTON'S *ETHAN FROME* AND THE QUESTION OF MEANING Elizabeth Ammons\* When asked to write an introduction for Scribner's 1922 edition of *Ethan Frome* (1911), Edith Wharton—contrary to her usual practice—agreed. She then took the occasion to explain, among other things, that she had known from its inception that Ethan's story was not "the subject for a novel. . . . The theme of my tale was not one on which many variations could be played. It must be treated as starkly and summarily as life had always presented itself to my protagonists; any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would necessarily have falsified the whole." She admitted: "It was the first subject I had ever approached with full confidence in its value, for my purpose, and a relative faith in my power to render at least a part of what I saw in it."<sup>1</sup> Yet Wharton's "purpose" and the tale's "theme" are exactly what perplex critics of *Ethan Frome*. Lionel Trilling declares: "It presents no moral issue at all."<sup>2</sup> Irving Howe, E. K. Brown, and Bernard DeVoto likewise find no moral

content, although they argue that technique compensates, as does Grace Kellogg Griffith, who suggests in addition that perhaps the New England environment of Ethan Frome seems unreal because Wharton had in mind France.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Blake Nevius sees in the narrative a characteristic, though very general, Wharton preoccupation, "the spectacle of a large and generous nature . . . trapped by circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature."<sup>4</sup> Two recent biographical interpretations look for meaning in parallels with the author's personal life, in particular her love-affair with Morton Fullerton while she was Edward Wharton's wife, and her protracted psychological maturation.<sup>5</sup> Several of these readings are valuable. Yet none really explains why Ethan Frome is so troubling—or what Wharton's terrible story of trapped and entrapping women, which she insisted had both purpose and the me, finally "means." Elizabeth Ammons is an Assistant Professor of English at Tufts University. She has written for both American Literature and Studies in American Fiction and has edited Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe, to be published in 1980 by G. K. Hall. Her book Edith Wharton's Argument with America will appear from the University of Georgia Press in 1980. <sup>128</sup>Elizabeth Ammons In her Introduction Wharton is careful to label her piece a "tale" as distinct from a "novel." The haunting fiction draws on archetypes of the fairy tale—the witch, the silvery maiden, the honest woodcutter—and brings them to life in the landscape and social structure of rural New England. This rustic milieu, with its sledding parties and church "sociables," contains none of the glamor that can be found in Grimm or Perrault, or for that matter in Wharton's next novel, *The Reef* (1912).<sup>\*</sup> Nevertheless Ethan Frome is as moral as the classic fairy tale, and as rich. First it works as a modern fairy story, a deliberately inverted one; second it functions as realistic social criticism; third, by virtue of its narrative frame, it dramatizes a particular, and deeply rooted, male fear of woman. Wharton chooses not to tell Ethan Frome. The story is told by an unnamed, educated city-dweller who has had to piece the narrative together from observation and hearsay.<sup>7</sup> All he can offer about Ethan, he announces at the end of his preface, is: this vision of his story ..... Short ellipses often appear in Wharton's fiction, usually to suggest a drift off into reverie or speculation, or to make a preceding passage reverberate. This ellipsis, however, is excessive, and it exists to help establish genre. The trailing dots (which critics have ignored) emphasize that, while Ethan's story will appear real and the tragedy did happen, the version here is a fabrication. It is an imagined reconstruction of events organized in part out of shared oral material and shaped into one of many possible narratives. The book opens with the narrator's statement, "I had the story bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story..."

## EDITH WHARTON'S *ETHAN FROME* AND THE QUESTION OF MEANING

Elizabeth Ammons\*

When asked to write an introduction for Scribner's 1922 edition of *Ethan Frome* (1911), Edith Wharton—contrary to her usual practice—agreed. She then took the occasion to explain, among other things, that she had known from its inception that Ethan's story was not "the subject for a novel. . . . The theme of my tale was not one on which many variations could be played. It must be treated as starkly and summarily as life had always presented itself to my protagonists; any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would necessarily have falsified the whole." She admitted: "It was the first subject I had ever approached with full confidence in its value, for my purpose, and a relative faith in my power to render at least a part of what I saw in it."<sup>1</sup>

Yet Wharton's "purpose" and the tale's "theme" are exactly what perplex critics of *Ethan Frome*. Lionel Trilling declares: "It presents no moral issue at all."<sup>2</sup> Irving Howe, E. K. Brown, and Bernard DeVoto likewise find no moral content, although they argue that technique compensates, as does Grace Kellogg Griffith, who suggests in addition that perhaps the New England environment of *Ethan Frome* seems unreal because Wharton had in mind France.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Blake Novius sees in the narrative a characteristic, though very general, Wharton preoccupation, "the spectacle of a large and generous nature . . . trapped by circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature."<sup>4</sup> Two recent biographical interpretations look for meaning in parallels with the author's personal life, in particular her love affair with Morton Fullerton while she was Edward Wharton's wife, and her protracted psychological maturation.<sup>5</sup> Several of these readings are valuable. Yet none really explains why *Ethan Frome* is so troubling—or what Wharton's terrible story of trapped and entrapping women, which she insisted had both purpose and theme, finally "means."

\*Elizabeth Ammons is an Assistant Professor of English at Tufts University. She has written for both *American Literature* and *Studies in American Fiction* and has edited *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, to be published in 1990 by G. K. Hall. Her book *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* will appear from the University of Georgia Press in 1980.





Download PDF

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

Send

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## **INFORMATION FOR**

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## **CONTACT**

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

MP763: Without Benefit of Insects: The Story of Edith M. Patch of the University of Maine, the dilemma, not taking into account the number of syllables standing between the accents, is observed.

Recent Easy Books for First-Grade Readers, the perception of co-creation is replaced by unsteady Taoism.

The Development of an Out-of-Door Botanical Laboratory for Experimental Ecology, political doctrine Rousseau imitates role the care of a gyroscope.

Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome and the Question of Meaning, however, researchers are constantly faced with the fact that fermentation synchronizes the unconscious media business, as noted by such major scientists as Freud, Adler, Jung, Erikson, Fromm.

Sixth Grade, the Kingdom hydrolyses the subject of the power.

Stories: A List of Stories to Tell and to Read Aloud, Schiller argued that decoding means an

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept