

BODY AS MENTALITY IN EDITH WHARTON'S *ETHAN FROME*

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In the introduction to *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton discusses her stylistic intention as an author to portray complex theory through relentlessly “simple” characters. Where “any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would have falsified the whole,” the characters’ representations are circumscribed through lack of education, finances, and communication reciprocated by their snowy, barren environment. The isolated figure emerges “scarcely more articulate” than his origins (4). Although bombarded with simplifying forces, the characters’ incapacity to express their “sentiments” “articulate[ly],” or possess strong communicative abilities, is one of the key strategies Wharton employs for a psychologically simple yet intense character who personifies his mute landscape. The townspeople first lack effective discourse, where conversation surrenders to colloquial language, brief description, and even silence. Wharton then parallels the characters’ stunted expression to restrained emotion, a pivotal reciprocity for her final dynamic. Finally, the characters’ emotionality, because they could not express it through verbal dialogue, cannot be experienced through internal monologue. Wharton does not lend lengthy introspective passages to Ethan’s philosophizing his emotions but, instead, renders his psychology through the language of the body.

In a life overcome by a treacherous, frozen environment and hard labor, awareness of the body’s needs supercedes that of the mind. Ethan’s physical deformity, Zeena’s ill health, and Mattie’s physical demise frame the text as focused, almost elementally, on bodily survival in an unforgiving setting. Going beyond the narrative device of having the characters’ bodies relay their thoughts (such as a blush expressing embarrassment or desire), Wharton instead applies the language of the body to reflection. Wharton is not using a physical reaction to express an underlying emotion but reversing the directional and recasting the mental/emotional within physical terms to

narrow her characters' psychological parameters. Wharton's hidden rhetorical strategy thus creates a new, subversive example of "environmental discourse." At the expense of limiting Ethan's "sentiments" to the only metaphor he's experienced, Wharton creates a character whose contemplative simplicity portrays the complex repercussions of a harsh, isolated atmosphere.

Wharton's introduction to *Ethan Frome* gives a synopsis of the "simple" character type she intends for the townspeople. While she later emphasizes their simplicity through *Frome's* themes of isolation, lack of education, and financial hardship, one can infer from the introduction's rhetoric that these more obvious elements are secondary to her deeper intention, as her word choice indicates, of their inability to communicate effectively. From the book's many simplifying themes, Wharton chooses to address discourse in her introduction:

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. They were, in truth . . . scarcely more articulate . . . This was my task, if I were to tell the story of Ethan Frome . . . while an air of artificiality is lent to a tale of complex and sophisticated people . . . there need be no such drawback if the looker-on is sophisticated, and the people he interprets are simple. (4)

As an author, Wharton's "task" is to "treat" the characters narratively as their thematic life presents them. Meaning, because the townspeople live a "stark . . . life," an author who "complicates" their expression, or "sentiments," ultimately contradicts the story's true rendering and thus "falsifie[s] the whole." Wharton specifically focuses on communication to portray their simplicity. By choosing words and phrases like "sentiments" and "scarcely more articulate," Wharton points to verbal expression as her first, and possibly most important, venue for representing characters who lack "complex and sophisticated" properties. Wharton's "scheme of construction" is to portray "rudimentary characters" whose language would be naturally shaped, and therefore stunted, by their simple existence. While attributing colloquial language to small town folk seems an unnecessary explanation for Wharton to make, I believe this emphasis on inexpressibility develops into the characters' psychology as Wharton foreshadows a more complex narrative turn. She will ultimately inhibit their internal monologue to parallel a stunted external monologue by taking physical terminology, which reflects their life's focus on bodily survival, and apply it to their introspection.

Evidence of this development from external to internal dialogue must first be seen in regular speech. Wharton's characters' "senti-

ments” are in keeping with their necessary simplicity. The townspeople lack effective discourse, where conversation becomes less intelligible from colloquialism, brevity, and silence. Because Wharton frames the text with a narrator’s visit to the town and his attempts to understand Ethan’s story, the focus on recitation between people is immediate. Our narrator only picks up brief impressions of Ethan’s past from numerous townspeople’s disjointed stories: “I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story [...] Nevertheless, I might have contented myself with the story pieced together from these hints” (9,13). The people’s stunted dialogue consists of “bit[s]” and “hints” and their inconsistent storytelling is “different” every time. Therefore, the narrator only successfully receives the story, and undertakes the continuation of the book, by physically encountering Ethan and his home. Critics recognize the dialogue’s brevity as resulting from the friction between a quieted internal self and the pull for external expression for the narrator’s and the text’s advancement: “A novel that is subtly informed [...]. The work is profoundly concerned with the problem of an interior story that cannot be told. The common critical aim is to complicate the function of Wharton’s narrator” (Hutchinson 220-221). Ethan’s coworker, Jotham, mirrors both the colloquial language and its small vocabulary when he tries to refuse Ethan’s invitation to dinner:

“I’m obliged to you, but I guess I’ll go along back.” Ethan looked at him in surprise. “Better come up and dry off. Looks as if ther’d be something hot for supper.” Jotham’s facial muscles were unmoved by this appeal and, his vocabulary being limited, he merely repeated: “I guess I’ll go along back.” (58)

Peppered with contractions (“ther’d”) and incorrect grammar (“I’ll go along back”), Jotham’s ineffectual first rebuttal towards dinner is lost on Ethan. As if Jotham cannot construct a second sentence that more adequately explains his exit, he returns once again to the previous (“I guess I’ll go along back”). Even in this instance we see Wharton expressing the characters’ introspective moments through the language of the body. When “Jotham’s facial muscles were unmoved by this appeal,” he is both emotionally “unmoved” by standing firm to his original decision as well as intellectually “unmoved” when he cannot maneuver in his mind for new words or phrases.

Jotham’s and the townspeople’s speech, an expression of their emotionality, suffers from environmental constraints. Their dialogue’s “unmoved” “bits” are the manifestation of a simplified life that creates “simple” people. Many of Wharton’s themes, more obvious than the rhetoric of her characters, are limiting forces on her characters. Most

of these forces elevate the body's needs to the highest degree, even above intellect. Once Wharton establishes the metaphor of the body as above the mind, it now trumps the mind's expression and recolors it in physical language. Hence, our characters' speech, which denotes their emotions, is stunted as their later internal voice, or actual emotions, also become reformed within the constraints of their environment. First, Wharton makes the necessary connection between a character's dialogue as a surface expression of his deeper feelings. As an author, she recognizes that the characters' limited discourse ran the risk of interpreting them as unfeeling and entirely ignorant. Consequently she presents Ethan early in the piece as a silent figure, taciturn not because of his lack of understanding or emotionality but from a lifestyle set in restraint. The narrator recognizes Ethan's simple language and tells the reader that it masks a complex psychology:

He never turned his face to mine or answered, except in monosyllables, the questions I put [...] but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence. I simply felt he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access [...] I hoped this incident might set up some more direct communication between us. Frome was so simple and straightforward [...] Such tastes and acquirements in a man of this 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 had apparently driven him too deeply into himself. (15)

Ethan's "monosylla[bic]" speech and "silence" is immediately paralleled with his "moral[ity]." Therefore, the narrator wants us to know that his silence does not reflect emptiness but, instead, mirrors very present yet muted morals. He possesses "such tastes and acquirements" that seem unfitting for an intellect isolated, physically and psychically, in a place "too remote for casual access." Because this comment immediately precedes the men's difficult journey in the snow where the weather prevents them from reaching their destination, "casual access" of Ethan and the landscape are juxtaposed to relay their interconnection. Ethan's "outer situation" and his "inner needs" are linked to a point at which climate, physical isolation, and ill education constrict his inner psychology.

Ethan explains his brief exposure to education that he abandons for Starkfield's small population, rough weather, and similar sense of desertion. His intellect, though still present, is consequently constricted: "'There are things in that book that I didn't know the first word about,' he said [...] 'I used to'" (15). Although the narrator knows Ethan has not been rendered completely ignorant because he "was sure his curiosity about the book was based on genuine interest," there is still a discrepancy between Ethan's previous and later abilities

(15). “More direct communication” and “expression” with Ethan beyond his “simple and straightforward” manner becomes impossible as Wharton, after giving her characters intellectual dimension, shows how it is restricted and somewhat lessened by their surroundings by making these shortcomings manifest in their speech. The final parallel between discourse, intellect, and environment occurs in the narrator’s first analyzed impression of Ethan: “He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe” (14). Ethan is a “part” (or result) of the “landscape” (his climate and external forces) which leave him “mute” (or voiceless). Because Ethan “wouldn’t be sorry to earn a dollar,” has had “Sickness and trouble: that’s what Ethan’s had,” and “his loneliness was not merely the result of personal plight [...] but had in it the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters,” his poverty, physical despair, and harsh climate leave him incommunicable (13-14). For Ethan’s survival, bodily needs dominate the intellectual as his introspection takes on physical description to reinforce his lifestyle’s limiting influence.

Wharton’s final stylistic device to portray simplicity is having Ethan internalize his voicelessness and only express his emotions in physical terminology. His psychology is not only constricted but reformatted within the only metaphor available to him in a physically trying existence. This method delivers necessary character insight while staying true to the theme of constriction: “In *Ethan Frome*, Wharton developed techniques to probe a character’s inner consciousness and incapacitating sense of isolation” (Singley 8). It is impossible to note the characters’ “consciousness” without coupling it with their general sense of “incapacitat[ion].” Thus, Wharton’s “technique” must reconcile the antithesis of explaining characters that cannot explain themselves. Wharton is not using the common narrative method of having characters’ bodies relay their emotions, such as a blush expressing embarrassment or desire. She is essentially reversing this device and applying the language of the body to reflection, not expressing reflection through the body. The common second technique allows the intellect freedom by using a physical reaction to express a greater underlying emotion that cannot be contained and therefore shows itself through the body. Wharton does not want such freedom for her simple characters and thus restricts burgeoning emotions by moving the body metaphor inward to the characters’ introspection instead of outward as a physical manifestation. The majority of her resultant word choices connote contemplation, not just unconscious emotion, to portray Ethan as a thinking yet inescapably constricted being.

Critics recognize this physical language as “speaking” for Ethan’s

consciousness: "Ethan becomes defined by the 'impulses near the surface' of his conscious responses. [...] The literary suicide, as Maragret Higonnet analyzes, is a metaphor for 'speaking silences'—a passion unexplored or unspoken, a mute and muted critique of sexual possibility. [...] Here, as elsewhere, Wharton substitutes the language of physical pain for the language of unfulfilled passion" (Singley 136). Ethan and Mattie's "unfulfilled passion," or feelings and emotions, are "substituted" for "the language of the physical." Hence, Ethan reads as a character with only "surface" expression, where his bodily "responses" connote mental realizations. His psychology is "unspoken," "mute," and "silen[t]" by adhering to this narrative template. While Singley argues the primary thoughts being suppressed are sexual, I believe she ignores Ethan's many scenes where he, albeit through physical language, nonetheless displays holistic, evaluative thought. He is aware of the numerous influences limiting his union with Mattie, including financial and moral circumstances. In the "suicide" scene, it is because of this hopelessness, reached by exploring his options (writing letters, borrowing money), that the final decision is reached. It is dangerous to limit Ethan's primary repressed emotion to sex because passion straddles the line between the psychological and physical. Therefore, when his emotions are expressed through physical language, it does not reflect a restricted mind but just the appropriate rhetoric for purely physical (sexual) thoughts. While "unfulfilled passion" may be Ethan's primary driving force, he nonetheless hints toward various other emotions and concerns which are not normally centered on the physical body.

Ethan's and Mattie's dinner scene applies physical wording to their questions of love for one another and subsequent conflicted emotions:

"Why, Puss! I nearly tripped over you," she cried, the laughter sparkling through her lashes.

Again Ethan felt a sudden twinge of jealousy. Could it be his coming that gave her such a kindled face? [...]

She nodded and laughed, "Yes, one," and felt a blackness settling on his brows. [...]

Her eyes danced with malice. "Why, Jotham Powell. He came in after he got back, and asked for a drop of coffee before he went down home."

The blackness lifted and light flooded Ethan's brain. (47)

Mattie's "laughter" denotes happiness she does not arrive at through rumination but, instead, only grasps as "sparkl[e] through her lashes." Ethan, in turn, "felt" his jealousy, not understood it. He wonders if his affection is reciprocated by analyzing Mattie's face, not her

words: "Could it be his coming that gave her such a kindled face?" When suspecting Mattie was visited by a suitor, Ethan's distress is described as "a blackness" he once again feels ("felt"), instead of a sadness he recognizes. It is impossible for Ethan's "brows" to express, or take on the look of, blackness. Wharton is not using Ethan's body to express his feelings because this image is too abstract. She purposefully chooses a physical expression that cannot be executed to differentiate how she imposes physicality on the mind, not the mind onto physicality. Putting the focus on Ethan's eyebrows, an almost physical semblance of the brain or just the feature most closely located, reinforces the theme of reflection. When finally "the blackness lifted and light flooded Ethan's brain," the darkness once associated with his brows is now likened to his mind, connecting the two images and their dynamic as one. When learning Jotham was the actual visitor, not a suitor, Ethan's happiness is a "light," an equally intangible image to blackness. It "flooded his brain," the closest Wharton will come to allowing Ethan a realization. She chooses the word "brain," not mind, to almost stay within scientific bodily terms and not enter psychological ones. Mattie's eyes "danced with malice," a figurative motion impossible to physically occur, as she consequently recognized Ethan's initial "scorn." Mattie's intelligent assessment of Ethan's feelings surrenders to the bodily realm of her eyes, not to dialogue or internal monologue.

Wharton comes full circle in a passage that traces her focus on reflection's physical rhetoric back to its original presence in discourse. Immediately following Ethan's regained happiness ("light"), the subject of Zeena arises and his intellect, described through bodily language, feels distraught and he is rendered inarticulate. The theme of inexpressibility resurfaces when Zeena is named:

Ethan, a moment earlier, had felt himself on the brink of eloquence; but the mention of Zeena had paralyzed him. Mattie seemed to feel the contagion of his embarrassment, and sat with downcast lids, sipping her tea, while he feigned an insatiable appetite for dough-nuts and sweet pickles. At last, after casting about for an effective opening, he took a long gulp of tea, cleared his throat and said, "Looks as if there'd be more snow." (47)

"On the brink of eloquence," Ethan almost grasps the capacity to speak philosophically to Mattie, not just through stunted conversational dialogue. He is about to break from his metaphor's constraints and reveal his emotions not in "simple and straightforward" language but in a newfound "eloquence." However, the subject of Zeena "paralyzed him." Wharton chooses the specifically physical word "paralyze" to abort Ethan's thinking as if his thoughts exist in

a strictly physical, not psychological realm. Because Ethan later becomes partially paralyzed with Mattie's physical strength also on this "brink," Wharton is not afraid to actualize her metaphors to reinforce their influence. Mattie "feels," instead of recognizes, Ethan's embarrassment. Accordingly, she feels, or experiences, this embarrassment through "downcast lids." Wharton links contemplation and bodily terms back to their root in dialogue when Ethan cannot find "an effective opening" and, from lacking communicative skills, gives a mundane comment on the weather. "Looks as if there'd be more snow" is not only a common expression about the weather but an inevitability for Starkfield. The comment is satirically biting in its obviousness yet tragically ineffectual for the true issues at hand regarding love, sex, finances, and marriage between Mattie and Ethan. Because there are not many options for the lovers and one cannot ignore legal and financial truths, it is almost poignantly astute to change a subject that cannot be rectified. Wharton's "simple" characters, by realizing their physical (symbolic of the actual) restricted life, seem to intelligently accept their limitations. Whether or not this is a conscious acceptance, Wharton's statement on the mind/body connection reinforces the subversive qualities of such absorption.

Ethan Frome is often coupled with Wharton's short story *Summer* because of the texts' numerous overlapping themes. Wharton writes, "The fact that *Summer* deals with the same class type as those portrayed in *Ethan Frome*, and has the same setting" often prompts critics to juxtapose their analyses (272). The texts share themes of environmental influence over self-definition, constricted realities, and inevitable capture: "The weather is warmer in *Summer* than *Ethan Frome*, but are not the two works the product of the same spirit of reductiveness in Wharton? [...] Escape for both Charity Royall and Ethan Frome is impossible" (Vita-Finzi 105). While these thematic similarities would seem to predispose Charity to Ethan's "reductive" physical metaphor, Charity's narrative expression is much freer and continually attributes her thoughts to her own understanding. Charity, while feeling both a liberating connection to the countryside and an oppressive one from her Mountain birth, is not intellectually circumvented through an environmental and, hence, bodily medium. While her naivete and limited education from her small town life results in a more "simple" interior, she is allowed to express that interior without symbolic constraints. Charity claims ownership over her realizations when Wharton uses philosophical, not physical, terminology for her main character. Comparing texts recognized as similar in this respect reveals a divergence in Wharton's stylistics that submerges Ethan even deeper into his physical self by contrast with a female counter-

part whose realizations, unfortunately, cannot free her either.

Psychology-based terminology describes Charity's mentality. While, as in Ethan's case, the environment limits Charity's understanding, Wharton instead describes these limitations directly, keeping them from "subtly" manifesting in other areas and undermining her character. Additionally, these limitations are paired, often within the same sentence, with Charity understanding a different aspect of the topic in question. Wharton describes Charity's rumination directly, not through a metaphor that subverts her control:

Charity was disappointed; but she understood. [...] Charity suspected him of being glad of the chance to make a little money [...] and she immediately guessed that the unwonted present—the only gift of money she had received from him—represented Harney's first payment. [...] She wondered what if he were musing on what Mr. Royall had told him, and if it really debased her in his thoughts. [...] And she knew it was out of regard for her that he had kept silent. (108,131,137)

Charity "understood," "suspected," "guessed," "wondered" and "knew" the various situations. These particular verbs show her domain over her own intellect, where she consciously recognizes circumstances instead of unconsciously displaying that recognition. Her understandings are direct, not expressed indirectly through metaphor. Additionally, Charity's contemplation becomes more layered and complex when she considers the "thoughts" and "musing[s]" of other individuals. She is not only able to think, but to think philosophically. Ethan does think but loses control over his thoughts through metaphor and its displacing dynamic. Charity, like Ethan, is extremely constrained by many forces, and her intellect suffers from lack of scholastic knowledge and varied experience. However, Wharton states Charity's shortcomings directly, often with Charity's own knowledge of her limitations.

Charity is aware of her deficiencies and gains at least some degree of power from that awareness. Additionally, Wharton often matches her confusion with realizations, subduing the severity of complete obliviousness: "Charity had only a dim understanding of her guardian's needs; but she knew he felt himself above the people among whom he lived. [...] She was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and color, every drop of blood in her responded. [...] Charity was never very clear about the mountain, but she knew it was a bad place (101,131,106). Charity's "dim understanding" of Mr. Royall's and the mountain's specific relevance to her future leads her to difficult experiences in the end. However, she knows Mr. Royall "felt himself above the people" and the mountain "was a bad place," pertinent

information about Royall's superior status and subsequent feelings of entitlement to marry Charity as well as the mountain's ominous influence over Charity's return to her poor, ignorant past. Many of Charity's decisions show her reverting psychically, like returning to the mountain to face her animalistic birth and childhood as well as forfeiting her power over Royall to a "blind" marriage. However, some of the confrontations she consciously seeks out as she retains awareness over her emotional self: "But though her actual behavior may be regressive, her self-awareness, including ashamed bewilderment at her own behavior, shows how far she has developed in spirit. To complete her emotional education, she has after all, paradoxically to go back to her beginnings" (Walton 268). While seemingly moving backward in "regressive" actions, Charity is nonetheless "self-aware" of her "developed" spirit and emotionality, even when her decisions and resultant feelings are negative, "shame." This portrays an "emotional education" even within seemingly uneducated, poor decisions. Ethan never obtains dominion over his emotions because they are displaced to his physical, not mental, self. Most importantly juxtaposed are Charity's general "blind[ness] and insensibil[ity] to many things" against her more enlightened feelings toward nature, "but to all that was light and air, perfume and color, every drop of her blood responded." Inescapably connected with nature, Charity, like Ethan, finds her life defined by the environment.

Charity's association with the land is intrinsically antithetical because her "regressive" connection with the mountain matches her liberating bond with the landscape. While positive and negative environmental sketches holistically define her, Ethan remains one-sided (in setting and mentality) and cannot benefit like Charity in her summer surroundings. Critics view *Summer* as framed by its setting: "The emotional arc of this tale is figured by the landscape itself- the long vistas over the hillsides, the fragrance of wildflowers, the heat of the sun" (Singley 39). Charity's "emotional" self is "figured" by natural elements of "air, perfume, and color." While Ethan's physical contact with the landscape causes strife and ultimately disfigurement, Charity takes "pleasure" in the sensations of inviting grass and hills:

She loved the roughness of the dry mountain grass under her palms, the smell of the thyme into which she crushed her face, the fingering of the wind in her hair and through her cotton blouse, and the creak of the larches as they swayed to it. She often climbed up the hill and lay there alone for the mere pleasure of feeling the wind and rubbing her cheeks in the grass. (106)

This passage's language presents Charity as interacting with her surroundings. Ethan, however, is acted upon by his surroundings.

Hindered by the snow, his journey with the narrator must prematurely end, his home becomes an isolating prison, and his emotions are “frozen woe.” One could argue that the weather imposes a stationary life and fixed emotionality on Ethan. His one attempt to interact or use the landscape for his benefit results in an ironically crippling accident; almost a lesson against manipulating nature that leaves him even more succumbed to it. Nonetheless, Charity “loved,” “smell[ed],” “climbed,” and “lay” in her natural surroundings in no way victimized. Furthermore, her “pleasure” is so heightened by sensation, one might argue the scene is sexual in nature. The language is sexually charged by verbs that connote stimulation: “roughness,” “crushed,” “fingering,” “swayed,” “feeling,” “rubbed.” Also, the particular areas of Charity’s body that experience these sensations imply sex: “palms,” “face,” “cheeks,” and “through her cotton blouse.” If Wharton not only liberates Charity through the environment but sexually liberates her, *Ethan Frome*’s primary theme of sexual repression is even further intensified.

Summer includes *Ethan Frome*’s themes of difficulty in verbal expression and the body expressing interior emotions. However, like the shared environment theme, their use dramatically diverges from *Frome*’s. When Charity cannot communicate her feelings she is again aware of these limitations. She recognizes her silence and considers the consequences for her listener’s interpretation. *Frome*’s characters are not only unaware that the unintelligible “bits” of their stories are often contradictory but cannot predict they will not suffice a complete story to our narrator who ultimately abandons this dialogue altogether. Charity is also intellectually aware in scenes in which her body indicates her feelings. This is impossible for Ethan’s interpretation as only psychically present through his body. Additionally, only one part of Charity’s physicality expresses her emotions, so that her entire body does not become a primary theme from repeated and varied references. Charity cannot articulate herself yet is conscious of this failure: “She felt the pitiful inadequacy of this, with a sense of despair, that in her inability to express herself she must give him an impression of coldness and reluctance; but she could not help it” (206). Not directly addressed within *Frome* except from a more objective stance in the introduction, Wharton writes poignantly of the “pitiful inadequacy” and “sense of despair” in the simple characters of *Summer*. “[Charity’s] inability to express herself” is charged with emotional language where the reader too “piti[es]” this shortcoming. Critics will later argue that *Frome*’s lack of sentiment, either due to the author’s interjection or to the character’s interiority, is “relentless” and “cruel” (Trilling qtd. in Killoran 49). However, I relate this criticism

to others which insist that “sensibility” is present but in indirect ways (as in my theory on the physical body). Nonetheless, Charity, possibly like the author, is aware of and saddened by her “inadequate” communication. Allowing more intellectual depth for Charity, she analyzes the “impression” her silence will give. Charity is not only conscious of her silence, but the impact of that silence. Although “she could not help it” like *Frome*’s characters, she can contemplate it.

Similarly, Charity also “understood” a scene’s complexity when, viewing Harney from his bedroom window, Charity’s body reflects her feelings yet her mind is still actively addressed: “Charity’s heart sank. [...] Her heart jumped and then stood still. He was there, a few feet away; and while her soul was tossing on seas of woe [...] but something kept her from moving. It was not the fear of any sanction, human or heavenly; she had never in her life been afraid. It was simply that she had suddenly understood what would happen if she went in” (138,150). Only Charity’s “heart” reveals her emotions, unlike *Frome*’s many mentions of minute, almost inconsequential parts like “eyelids.” Charity’s feelings are rendered in larger metaphoric items, like the traditional “heart” and “soul.” These mentions are not meant to lend focus on her body but, because the two items are internal, point more towards her interiority and feelings than her external physicality. Even in a reference to Charity’s body the focus is redirected to her psychology. When “the mention of Zeena paralyzed him,” Ethan’s fear prevents further interaction with Mattie. However, Charity “had never in her life been afraid” and, unlike Ethan, “it was not the fear of any sanction” that precluded her contact with Harney. In these similar scenes of lovers in close proximity yet restraining their contact, Charity is much more liberated in her physical depiction and how she “simply [...] understood,” or exhibits conscious awareness of, the consequences. Ethan, while also understanding why he cannot interact intimately with Mattie, is nevertheless shown as recognizing this through his body by becoming “paralyzed.” Wharton employs many of the same themes in the two texts but *Summer* allows moments of direct introspection, enjoyment and desired contact with the environment, and the freedom to move in and out of physical metaphor. When read as lacking the opportunities *Summer* exhibits in the very themes the texts share, *Ethan Frome* becomes even more “paralyzed” by Wharton’s intentionally restrictive narrative.

In light of the freedoms *Summer* portrays, critics argue that *Ethan Frome* lacks this sensibility towards Ethan’s plight. The characters’ circumscribed interiority presents the reader with verbal and psychological brevity that leave the characters no room to solve problems and the readers no emotionality from which to build a connection.

Thus, Lionel Trilling states “the mind can do nothing with” *Ethan Frome* because Wharton finds “nothing to say of the events of her story” (qtd. in Hutchinson 223). The reader cannot analyze beyond the story’s concise instances because Wharton does not allow her characters or the narrator to analyze them. The text’s philosophical void inhibits the reader simultaneously with the characters. In addition, the lack of emotionality which (I argue as present yet projected through the body) constitutes a second critique against an author creating “morally inert” characters. However, a popular opposing argument focuses on the narrator as possessing, instead, the “sensitivity of a poet.” While the text realistically coincides with the harsh restriction of its environment, our narrator’s storytelling abilities differ dramatically from the rudimentary townspeople. Thus, *Ethan Frome* must be told through an outside party with eloquent “professional” skill that contrasts its simple subject matter. Therefore, the text is poetic, sentimental writing about sentimentally constricted people. While the two theories differ on the rhetoric’s ultimate impression, both recognize the inherent division between the narrator and the characters’ skills. This discrepancy stems from Wharton’s immediate premise in the introduction that “there is no such drawback if the looker-on is sophisticated, and the people he interprets are simple.” Therefore, critics analyze this narrative philosophy as either satirically written, or telling of Wharton’s decision to create an “outsider” narrator as a medium for the piece.

The first set of critical dialogues on *Frome* responds to the characters’ one-dimensional personalities, and their lack, as well as the narrator’s, of “sentiment:”

Ethan is ‘helpless as a child to combat the forces that bind him.’ [...] ‘Banality’ is the sum of Mattie’s personality. In Trilling’s view, ‘The mind can do nothing with’ Ethan Frome, since Wharton herself finds nothing to say of the events of her story: ‘nothing whatever.’ [...] A writer thoroughly suspicious of sentiment [...] barrenness [...] The passage had an immediate force, but since Wharton makes no attempt to place what it says, immediacy is all there is. The narrator, who would aid perspective, is invisible, leaving us to conclude that Wharton herself wants this moment to be an absolute explanation. (Hutchinson 223)

For this interpretation one must ignore the expression of psychological complexity through other media besides directly stated introspection. However, on a superficial reading (no less important than an analytical one), Ethan is “helpless” and “the sum of Mattie’s personality” is “banality.” Wharton has “nothing to say” philosophically about the characters because philosophy and introspection are not present, on the narratorial level, within the text. Therefore, “nothing

whatever” comes of “sentiment” in the characters and accordingly elicits only a sense of “barrenness” in the reader. Wharton “makes no attempt to place what it says” and, therefore, stunts the reader’s own analytical interpretation. Finally, the “narrator” does not “aid perspective” in this unsentimental, direct recitation. He is therefore “invisible” leaving only the “immediacy” of the scene’s factual happenings without an explanation of its more complex, layered implications. When “Wharton herself wants this moment to be an absolute explanation,” I argue that one must turn to the rhetoric itself for depth. In the short story, instead of dismissing its brevity for incompleteness or insubstantial characters, I find Wharton’s psychology encoded in the very “suspicious[ly] sentiment[al]” language critics decry. It is too extreme to label *Frome* as without merit: “Lionel Trilling, well respected in academia, tagged *Ethan Frome* a ‘dead book’ because he found it morally inert” (Killoran 49). While Ethan’s and Mattie’s demise is “cruel,” it is not without moral implications toward self-empowerment, self-fulfillment, and the valuing of one’s mortality. Also, it can be read as a sketch on the moral stance of Wharton’s society. Finally, if we must find morality within the text and not through inference, Ethan’s hesitancy to abandon his sick wife in poverty and borrow money under false pretenses reveals a moral side that, although not directly pondered by our narrator, is nonetheless thematically present. In conclusion, I place my argument against the concept of *Ethan Frome* as a “dead book” by referencing physical metaphor as revealing character psychology and “sentiment.”

However, I do not completely surrender to the theory of an all-expressive narrator argued by a second vein of criticism. These critics’ emphasis on sensibility, while correct, is not written as straightforwardly by Wharton as they imply. As stated before, it is indirect through environmental, bodily, and even animal metaphors. Arguing against “Odd structural patterns and unsatisfactory detail” in *Frome*, a second theoretical stance does not believe “the narration poses serious difficulty because ideally Ethan would tell his own story” but views the surrogate narrator as enlightening the storyline and its stylistics (Killoran 53). The once “invisible” narrator who complicates the narrative because “ideally Ethan would tell his own story” is conversely viewed as a highly skilled writer and undeniable presence. “Unsatisfactory detail” becomes “thoroughly informed [...] sensibility” when critics view Wharton as implementing an outside narrator, not a town member, to introduce a more elevated spoken and written voice:

For the close reader readily discerns that the engineer-narrator did not readily gather this story “bit by bit, from various people,” but having been inspired by a few bare hints and scraps of information, created

his "vision" [...] out of the stuff of his vivid imagination. In short, the narrator who presents himself as an engineer in the realistic framework of the novel is actually a writer in disguise with the technical skill of a professional novelist and the sensibility of a poet. (Brennan 261)

The "engineer-narrator" uses his more sophisticated standing, according to Wharton, to create a "vision" not a fragmented recitation. The narrator's "vivid imagination," while written into the "realistic framework" of the novel, extends beyond any other character's capability. He expresses Ethan's story almost in an oral format, directly to the reader, which is a fitting rendition against his less communicative company. While simple characters speak in "bare hints and scraps of information," our narrator "is actually a writer in disguise." Whether Wharton is writing herself into the text we cannot know. However, she continually divides the character and reader's abilities, both in the introduction and in her narrator's "technical" and "professional" skill. It is difficult to read her introduction as satirical when she immediately presents us with a sophisticated narrator who is reliable for the remainder of the story. While he cannot delve into character psychology, it would be both unrealistic and contradictory to Wharton's constrictive tone for him to reveal those interiors.

The question of Ethan's self-expression cannot be separated from the narrator's identity: "We have to deal here with an overt fiction within a fiction. [...] The account of Ethan's tragic love, in fact, is so thoroughly informed by the sensibility and imagination of its narrator that the story can be adequately analyzed only in terms of that relationship" (Brennan 265). The narrator's "sensibility and imagination" imply a fused relationship with the text, where it is "informed" through, and only through, this sophisticated voice. Ethan himself could be interpreted as divided into his actual, incommunicable self versus his unrealized future self—the learned, articulate narrator. Why Wharton must displace Ethan's story from him into the hands of another is controversial. Criticism asks if the subaltern can speak, so we must ask why Ethan is powerless to portray his own story. I argue that the poignancy of Ethan's story influences the narrator and, hence, Ethan's individual mark does touch the piece directly. While the narrator and Ethan physically interact, I believe there are emotional exchanges and understandings as well. Therefore, Ethan influences the narrative by impacting its writer. While the teller maintains narrative control, Ethan posits the emotional germ of the piece. Just as Wharton subscribes Ethan's feelings to physical metaphor, so does the narrator speak for Ethan's incommunicable past. Silent emotion passes through literary stylistics to gain a voice: "to convert intellectual and moral experience into the material of art, means that

the pictures of conscious and unconscious processes of story-telling are blurred," Wharton explains (qtd. in Vita-Finzi 51). Therefore, while Ethan is not a "conscious" writer or even character, like our narrator, his "unconscious" influences the "story-telling" as well. In addition, because Ethan's unconscious mind is continually expressed in a "material" realm, i.e., the body, it is consistent to manifest his "muted[ness]" in an indirect yet material narrative. The text must partly consist of Ethan's voice because the body metaphor is the only language in which he can speak and the primary one presented to us. Therefore, when critics argue whether the writing is limited or expressive, whether the narrator and characters are distant or united, I argue they are both.

The physical self is a predominant metaphor of a text filled with illness and labor. Wharton's characters internalize this focus, speaking in a more rudimentary manner and thinking within physical language. Because escape cannot be made psychically, Ethan's and Mattie's attempted suicide is fitting. However, Wharton does not release them from their bodies but plunges them deeper into its awareness through injury. Compared with *Summer's* similar themes though liberating dynamic, Wharton appears even more intensely aware and purposeful in limiting *Ethan Frome*. Critics interpret this as being either a "morally inert" text or "thoroughly informed by sensibility and imagination." Interpretive differences do concede that the narrator is divided from the text. I feel that in this division one can find a balance between absence of sentiment into restricted sentiment, and an all-knowing narrator into an influential yet character-driven one. These reconciliations are originally present and operating when Wharton portrays real and present character psychology filtered through literary metaphor.

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