SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN THREE NOVELS
BY EDITH WHARTON

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Michael A. Gillespie
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Dr. Jennings Mace
Director of Thesis

Master's Committee:

Dr. Jennings Mace, Chair

Dr. Layne Neeper

Dr. Sarah Morrison

Date
Recent criticism concerning Edith Wharton concentrates on her letters and hints of possible extra-marital affairs contained in them. When critics do choose to discuss her fiction, the majority work is from a strictly feminist point-of-view to the exclusion of other meanings in the novel. While Wharton does discuss feminine issues and the feminine power structure of her society, her scope is much broader. I discuss three of her novels and Wharton's commentary on society and its mores in those novels. I contend that Wharton concentrates her criticism in two areas that are linked: the "high-society" power structure especially where it concerns women and social mores concerning love and marriage.

The first novel, The House of Mirth, discusses the
social status power structure that is created by the rich
women of late nineteenth century New York. Wharton
traces the downfall of Lily Bart as Lily first tries to
live her own life within the power structure and, when
the power structure turns against her, how she proves her
personal value system to be superior to those who
rejected her. The point that Wharton ultimately makes
here is that while Lily is superior to her peers, Lily is
unable to function outside of the social structure.
Because her life training has been so specialized, Lily
suffers failure after failure after being forced from
society until she unconsciously commits suicide. Put
simply: one cannot be removed by society and hope to make
reforms; instead one needs to change society from within,
a point that she explores more fully in The Age of
Innocence.

The Age of Innocence takes the form of a protracted
Hegalian dialectic, in which Wharton uses her three main
characters as the three main points of the dialectic.
May Welland functions as the thesis of the dialectic, the
representative of social norms. Ellen Olenska, the
antithesis to May, refuses to follow social traditions.
Newland Archer (and his children) serves as the synthesis
of these two sides--attempting to live in both worlds at
the same time but eventually having to choose one. May's
position is the strongest—she represents the old traditions of social innocence (pretending to ignore minor social offenses). Ellen adds vitality and the ideals that Newland has come to value. Newland struggles to resolve the problem that he is faced with—to be traditional and reject Ellen or to reject society and pursue Ellen's vitality and difference. The choice is made for him as May's craftiness forces him to reject Ellen. However, the changes that attracted him to Ellen are passed down to his children whose generation is better able to tolerate the openness that she represents.

Ethan Frome takes Wharton's social criticism in a new direction. It is a negative fairy tale using symbols to discuss Puritanical mores regarding love. As in The Age of Innocence, Frome's three main characters function as the primary symbols. Frome is the anti-hero, a bumbling fool who tries to do the right thing but does not know how. Mattie is the helpless princess unable to survive on her own. Zeena represents society and appears to be the weakest character who finally triumphs. However, Zeena requires the assistance of the rigid Puritanical social system as symbolized by the sledding run and the elm tree at its base. Here the run is the path of love and marriage and the elm tree is society's judge. Lovers able to survive the run are sanctioned by
society and those who crash into the tree are destroyed.

These three novels discuss Wharton's opinion of American Victorian society and of the Puritanical influence on sociological constructs in New England. She reveals the power of society and the foolishness of rebelling against it. While the rebel may be in the right, society does not always recognize the right; valuing, instead, tradition.

Accepted by:  

[Signature]
Jennings R. Mac
Chair

[Signature]
Sylvia Hugin
Sarah Morrison
Introduction

Over the last ten years, Edith Wharton's popularity has exploded both publicly and critically. Since 1990, new editions of most of Wharton's novels have been published (most recently a new edition of *Glimpses of the Moon*--which had not been in print for several years--and an edition containing *The Buccaneers*, her unfinished novel, and *Fast and Loose*, her first novel) and two of her novels (*Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence*) have been adapted for film. These two factors have brought Edith Wharton back into the public's attention and have brought her out from the shadow of Henry James. Wharton's critical resurgence can be credited to the feminist movement and its returning of "lost" female literary figures to prominence.

In a 1990 bibliographic essay, Alfred Bendixen wrote that "it is now harder to make generalizations about the current state of Wharton criticism, but some trends have emerged": *The House of Mirth* is the most popular of Wharton's novels, but an increasing amount of attention is being paid to lesser known novels and stories, and feminist-oriented criticism continues to dominate Wharton
criticism (18). The trends that Bendixen delineated in his essay continue in the current criticism: *The House of Mirth* is still the most popular novel; the body of criticism on *Custom of the Country*, *The Children*, *The Reef*, and *The Mother's Recompense* has grown; the publication of R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis's *The Letters of Edith Wharton* and Candace Waid's publication of *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* have expanded our knowledge of Wharton's personal life; and feminist perspectives still dominate the critical writings.

In 1989, James W. Tuttleton reacted to the domination of feminist perspective in Wharton criticism by calling it "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton." Tuttleton attacks feminist critics in his article by asserting that feminists essentially "jumped on the bandwagon" and are not in any way responsible for the growth of Wharton's popularity. In his article, he also chose to attack the methods and goals of feminist scholarship. He, of course, has been countered many times by different scholars. The scholar to do so most calmly, with the most precision, and with the most influence on my work here was Julie Olin-Ammentorp in her article "Edith Wharton's Challenge to Feminist Criticism." Olin-Ammentorp discusses "the one point where feminist
criticism seems particularly weak" by considering Edith Wharton's fiction in light of the role of men and their victimization under the frivolous society of New York's rich (237), a point that most recent criticism of Wharton ignores.

In the following chapters I discuss the role that social oppression plays in the choices the main characters make whether they are male or female. I believe, as Olin-Ammentorp does, that men as well as women suffer under their social obligations in Wharton's fiction. For Wharton's characters patriarchy does not exist. Her worlds are not ones where men have created a structure to deny women access to power. The male dominated world is instead replaced by a genderless force that controls and limits everyone's choices despite their sex or social class, labeled here for lack of a better term as society. While a male power structure still exists, it is dominated by a more powerful code of social conduct. In *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton explores the oppression of the upper class in New York where "Society, rather than God or Satan, is the tyrant of the universe" (Nevius 56). God, or at least a Puritan ethos, dominates in *Ethan Frome* "both as an individual and a communal presence" (Hovey 7). In all
three novels the view of society, whether it be based on
money or based on the religious precepts of Puritanism, affects and limits the choices the characters can make.

The House of Mirth explores the effects of a money­
based power structure on the choices that Lily Bart can make. At first it is her desire to attain money, and therefore power, that limits her choices and lead her to discover her mistakes. However, Lily's superior moral character transcends the power structure, and this moral strength undermines all of her conscious efforts to attain power. In the second part of the novel, she learns what the power of society can do to those who reject it. She learns that "power resides in the ability to define the terms of exchange" (Dimock 784). Money and power create truth in the world of The House of Mirth.

In The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer discovers the power of the social world to dominate the choices he wishes to make. He is forced by society to choose to conform and reject Ellen Olenska (and his love for her) or to reject all that he has known and live as an outcast from his own home. While Ellen leads him to realizations that Society dominates his every action, he is torn between his love for her and his sense of duty to May Welland and the rest of his world. He ultimately
discovers that he has no choice. Society will not let him reject what he has known. He must leave Ellen behind because of his duty as May's husband and sublimate his rejection of social conventions.

Money is not the dominating social factor in *Ethan Frome*. In Frome's world, society controls the actions of its members through a Puritanical ethic. Frome is torn between a sense of duty and a desire for happiness. He is, according to Hovey, above average with regard to the rest of Starkfield in "his sense of duty, his reliability and strict probity" (8). Where the discussions of society's oppression of all its members is direct in the other two novels discussed, Wharton comments on the oppression of the lower classes mostly through sign and symbol. In this short fairy tale, almost every scene becomes significant in understanding why Frome is limited by his society. In the end he is the only one of the three main characters to completely refute society's claim on his choices as he refuses to submit to it. While Lily and Newland seem to quietly go about their business after being forced to recognize society's power over them, Frome reluctantly lives through his ordeal. Mattie Silvers helps him realize society will never let him escape, and he attempts suicide. However, his
incompetence is capitalized on by society, and he survives to become an example to the rest of his society.

The theme of social oppression and freedom from that oppression can be found even in Wharton's earliest writings. At the age of sixteen, she published, privately, a book of poetry titled *Verses* in which the following poem appeared:

**The Last Token**

One minute more of life! Enough to snatch
This flower to my bosom, and to catch
The parting glance and signal overhead
From one who sits and waits to see me dead.

One minute more! Enough to let him see
How straight the message fell from him to me,
And how, his talisman upon my breast,
I'll face the end as calmly as the rest.—

Th' impassive wall of faces seems to break
And shew one face aquiver for my sake * * *
How different death seems, with a hand that throws
Across the pathway of my doom a rose,
How brief and paltry life, compared to this
O'ertoppling moment of supremest bliss! * * *
Farewell! I feel the lions' hungry breath, 
I meet your eyes ** beloved, this is death. 
(quoted from Auchincloss 34)

In this poem we see a young person, presumably female, facing death, but a death for what? I believe that this is one of the first examples we have of Wharton's realization of the oppressive quality of society. Her narrator stands before the lions and looks to the one who has commanded her death. The scene is reminiscent of the lion pits of the Roman Empire where Christians were sent to their death by the state for committing crimes against society. With this realization, the poem becomes more than a mourning of the loss of a love. It reveals the fate of a person who chooses to transgress the laws of society. The lions become society and its justice; the people in the crowd become society's members watching the just destruction of one of their own. The person she looks to is her father and the talisman of his teachings of the "correct way to act." The narrator finds only one face "aquiver for [her] sake"--the person who aided her in her journey to transgress social law. She is being put to death because she has attempted to reject some of the teachings of society. She is in effect being lobotomized or brain-washed. However, there is one
glorious moment of freedom before her destruction, a moment of "supremest bliss," in which she is able to grasp her dreams of being free from society's constrictions. This very theme of destruction for rebellion is found from Wharton's earliest work to her last. The characters of this poem return in all three of the novels to be discussed here. Each contains a protagonist who is destroyed in the end by society and experiences a moment of freedom and realization just prior to his/her destruction. There is at least one character who represents society and spearheads its justice. All three novels contains a character who looks on and has pity on the doomed. All three of Wharton's questors die either physically or mentally under the pressures of the society that is judging them.
Chapter One:
The Social Exchange System in The House of Mirth

In A Backward Glance, Edith Wharton described the problem she faced in writing The House of Mirth as one of how to capture a society of "irresponsible pleasure-seekers" in a true light. Her answer was that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals" (207). To reveal the frivolity of the society in which she was raised, Wharton creates Lily Bart. Neither Lily nor the frivolous society that she lives in constitutes the focus of the novel; rather, it is the destructive effect that this society has on Lily's life which Wharton explores in The House of Mirth.

Wai-Chee Dimock believes that Lily Bart's world is "a social world predicated on business ethics" (284), and she is correct, to some extent. It is a world created and sustained by the business world which has supplied the money necessary for this society to no longer have monetary concerns and to become frivolous. However, only in the idea of an exchange of product does Lily's world
resemble the male dominated business world. The House of Mirth is a novel of society not business, of women not men, of power not money. In the whole of this society, money and business are the realm of men; women are not allowed to participate in this circle. Society is the circle for women; and, like the business circle of men, they create a system of exchange to give reason to their actions. Since they do not have to be concerned with attaining money, the women have replaced it as the medium of exchange with social status, or power. The most powerful women, like Mrs. Trenor and Mrs. Dorset, set the rate of exchange and everyone must follow it. Men in this social exchange system are expected to "settle up" with money because it is their recognized method of exchange. Simon Rosedale pays for his entrance into society by increasing the money supporting the power (he routinely gives a "half-a-million tip for a dinner") (87). Jack Stepney pays his debts by invitations to dinner and is "roundly snubbed" for his attempt (19) because his payment is unacceptable. Women pay a variable price according to their social status. Lily, whose status is low because she is not married nor is she independently wealthy, is forced to become a servant for her hostesses (43) and is "expected to take her place at
the card table" (30) to remain a part of their society. Yet, the powerful women "pay nothing at all" (Dimock 784) since their presence is an honor to their hostess because they increase the status of the hostess by their presence.

Attaining the power to not have to pay for a dinner is the ultimate goal of every woman in the novel and the way to gain that status is marriage, as Selden points out: "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" (HM 11). Like work and money for men aspiring to enter the leisure classes, women attain power through a marriage to a rich man, powerful in his circle. Such a marriage is what is expected of the women in Lily's world. Through it, women gain power to expect invitations to dinner and to demand the fealty of their friends who have a lower status.

Appearances also play a large role in Lily's society because, as Rosedale says, "the quickest way to queer yourself with the right people is to be seen with the wrong ones" (265). This necessity of proper appearances and Lily's occasional disregard of these expectations eventually cause society to eject Lily from its inner circle. She is caught in the middle of Bertha Dorset's attempt to maintain power and status after being caught
having an affair. Lily is ejected from her social circle solely because she is in the wrong place at the wrong time and does not have enough power in the system to defend herself. The most interesting aspect of Lily's downfall is that in possessing Bertha's intimate letters to Selden she has the means to defend herself, but because of a higher moral standard refuses to use them. This higher moral standard not only costs Lily her status but her life as well.

However, Lily does not always appear to be morally superior to her friends. In the first half of the novel, she is instead a willing participant in the power exchange system. From her childhood, Lily has been trained to participate in the exchange of her society. "[Her mother] is entirely familiar with the rate of exchange in the world in which she lives, and she nurtures and indulges Lily's beauty--first as the visible sign of the family's station . . . and finally as its one remaining asset" (Woolff 116). Through Lily's beauty her mother seeks to regain the family's lost social power. Her mother teaches Lily to be a willing participant in the marriage "game" because her beauty which, as Selden observes, "must have cost a great deal to make" and for which "many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious
way, have been sacrificed to produce" (HM 7), will attract the richest men of her set and provide her with a great deal of power in the social exchange for which she has been groomed. Lily has become very adept at the game herself because, given the ambition to move socially upward with a rich marriage, "Lily seems to have the capacity to fulfill it; she is lovely, charming, flexible to adapt herself to another's egotism, [and] able to move smoothly and seemingly effortlessly toward a conventional marriage" (Wershoven 43). This ability to achieve her goal is seen in the way that she manipulates Percy Gryce into almost proposing to her. However, even here we see some hints that Lily is not happy with her position or the way she has to act to attain what she wants:

She returned wearily to the thought of Percy Gryce, as a wayfarer picks up a heavy load and toils on after a brief rest. She was almost sure she had "landed" him; a few days' work and she would win her reward. But the reward itself seemed unpalatable just then; she could get no zest from the thought of victory. (HM 32)

Wharton leaves us with no doubt that Lily, at least at some level, is not happy with her position earlier in the novel when Selden notices that "she was so evidently the
victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (9). She has indeed been raised for one purpose--to marry a rich man--and Selden, who acts as a moral guide for her later in the novel, recognizes that Lily is a slave to the system that produced her.

While she seems to accept her role in the marriage game, Lily rebels against the rules of appearances that dominate the exchange. At the beginning of the novel, she has tea at Selden's apartment--an extremely risky venture because Selden is a single man, and she risks damaging her reputation by doing so. Lily is aware of her transgression of the rules and regrets that "she always [pays] for her rare indiscretions" (15). After being caught leaving Selden's apartment by Rosedale, she wonders "why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (18). Lily also knows that this indiscretion will cost her dearly because Rosedale is a social climber and will use any advantage to gain more power in the social exchange (thus his willingness to give a half million dollar tip to be invited to a dinner party).
However, Lily does not regret her indiscretion; she only regrets that she did not take appropriate action:

If she had had the presence of mind to let Rosedale drive her to the station, the concession might have purchased his silence. He had his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values, and to be seen walking down the platform at the crowded afternoon hour in the company of Miss Lily Bart would have been money in his pocket, as he might himself have phrased it. (18)

This is only the beginning of her rebellion against the system of exchange which demands her subservience if she is to maintain her position.

While at a Trenor weekend party, Lily unconsciously rebels against the system's requirement of marriage. After attracting the attentions of Percy Gryce and putting herself in position to marry him, Lily suffers what Nancy Topping Bazin labels an "impulse for freedom and self-respect" (97) when she goes for a walk with Selden rather than attending church with Percy. This transgression costs Lily in two ways: first, she loses the opportunity of attaining what she wants (and needs) by alienating Percy after promising to attend church with
him; second, as Mrs. Trenor says, Lily makes an enemy of Bertha Dorset:

"If you hadn't told me you were going in for him seriously--but I'm sure you made that plain enough from the beginning! Why else did you ask me to let you off bridge and to keep away Carry and Kate Corby? I don't suppose you did it because he amused you; we could none of us imagine your putting up with him for a moment unless you meant to marry him. And I'm sure everybody played fair! They all wanted to help it along. Even Bertha kept her hands off--I will say that--till Lawrence came down and you dragged him away from her. After that she had a right to retaliate--why on earth did you interfere with her? . . . I told you Bertha was dangerous."

(MM 80)

Mrs. Trenor's declaration that Bertha is dangerous is prophetic. Bertha, the second most powerful woman in New York society, not only destroys Lily's marriage prospects with Percy Gryce but also destroys Lily's life in society. After Lily's destruction of her latest marriage attempt, Lily takes her furthest step away from the accepted rules of exchange. Knowing that Gus Trenor dabbles in the stock market and that he makes investments
for Mrs. Fisher, Lily decides that this would also be an avenue through which she could liberate herself financially. Lily convinces Gus to invest a small amount of money for her, understanding "only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself" (90). This action puts her in jeopardy not only because she becomes indebted to Gus but because she has no husband, even an ex-husband as in Mrs. Fisher's case, to protect her honor. It is unacceptable in Lily's society for a woman to be financially independent and still respected if she has not at some point been married (the business realm is, of course, open solely to men).

Lily's transgressions surpass the unconscious, impulsive, or accidental when she chooses her scene for a tableau vivant to be shown at a party thrown by the Brys. In her scene she intentionally draws attention to her sexuality by choosing a portrait that was "without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings" and in which "her pale draperies and 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" (142). Her portrait elicits the following response from Ned Van Alstyne: "Deuced bold
thing to show herself in that get-up; but gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (142). This is not only the response that she expected but the one that she wanted because she knows that "this was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured" (142). Lily is aware that the men judge her by her physical appearance, she knows that her position in society is at best tenuous, and she knows that showing off her beauty will attract the attention that she needs to secure her position.

Lily's rejection of social convention is almost unwilling--she rebels against convention only to further her happiness (as in her visit to Selden's apartment) or to attempt to increase the stability of her position. She is still imbued with the goals of her upbringing, and still strives to meet her goal of a prosperous marriage to bring her power in her society so that she will no longer have to be the slave of her hostesses. However, with the help of Selden, Lily is able to see the social convictions of her world as a gilded cage in which she is trapped (59). She knows that the people around her are trivial, yet she still strives to become one of them.

Mrs. Peniston, Lily's aunt and guardian, who is described
as a "Dying Gladiator" (104), is the staunch champion of the system of appearances and is disgusted to find out that Lily's minor transgressions are causing a flurry of rumors: "it [is] horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made" (134). It is this idea of appearances being assumed as truths that destroys Lily. She is caught in several situations where the more powerful make truth, where what is believed is the word of those of higher status. Lily is first caught by Gus Trenor's sexual advances that he considers "fair play" for giving her money (rather than having invested the money as she asked him to) (154). Lily, of course, is completely unaware of the reason for Trenor's demands as she responds: "Pay up?... Do you mean that I owe you money?" (153). Lily is ignorant of the ways of business exchange and has no other way of responding to his demands. This exchange and Lily's subsequent refusal of Trenor is seen by no one, but an indiscretion is assumed when she is seen leaving the Trenor house escorted by Gus and is condemned for the appearance of impropriety because, according to Ned, "when a girl's as good-looking as that she'd better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly
organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations" (153). The end result of this incident is that she is removed from Judy Trenor's circle because Judy can do no less and still protect her own power in the social system. And because of Mrs. Trenor's powerful position, everyone else assumes the rumor to be true.

Having lost her position in the most powerful social circle, Lily's second encounter with the powerful's ability to define truth occurs when she joins the Dorsets' social circle. Lily still does not give up on her dream to improve her standing in the power exchange of her society, and she behaves as society expects and is "subservient to Bertha's anxious predominance, good-naturedly watchful of Dorset's moods, brightly companionable to Silverton and Dacey" (199). As with the Trenor incident, Lily again is placed in a position where the powerful create what society accepts as truth from assumptions and appearances. The reason Bertha invites Lily to Europe is to keep George Dorset's attention while Bertha keeps up her affair with Silverton. When Bertha is caught by George, she has no recourse but to defend herself by accusing Lily of having an affair with George.
Even though this is a lie, Bertha is believed because she is in a position of power and Lily is not. While Lily's fall from the Trenors' circle is accomplished quietly, Bertha must be more dramatic, more public in her ousting of Lily, to retain her position in the social exchange system because Bertha is in a position to lose face because it is she, not Lily, who has been caught. Bertha chooses to eject Lily from her traveling party at a dinner party in a public restaurant in the presence of a society reporter (226). Lily realizes most of the extent of her fall from grace while she is still in Europe, but she does not realize the full extent of ejection from the exchange until she returns to New York.

When Lily returns to New York, she knows that she is no longer welcome in the two most powerful circles but is still hopeful of a reconciliation with the Trenors by repaying Gus. She expects to inherit money enough to do so from her aunt with enough left over to establish herself in a higher station in the exchange because of her wealth. Despite desiring freedom, Lily still hopes to gain a higher position in the social exchange. Her dream of redemption fails, however, because Mrs. Peniston has heard the rumors about her ward and has written Lily almost out of her will. Lily inherits only about enough
money to repay Gus. She is denied her last avenue to return to the society that she was trained to succeed in. While discussing her situation with Gerty, Lily reveals her understanding of her position and why she was ejected by society:

What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her. . . . [The] truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks. (233-234, my emphasis)

Lily knows what has caused her fall from society, knows that she is no longer to be a member of her society, and knows what truth means in her society and what its value is on the exchange. Nothing. Truth in her society is only what its most powerful members say it is. Lily has the power to clear herself with the letters written by Bertha to Selden, but she refuses to use them because, even when she first acquired the letters, she felt "disgust with a confused sense of triumph" and the disgust increased until "her strongest sense was one of
personal contamination" (110). Rosedale does not hold this same disgust at the idea of possessing the letters or with using them. He offers to return Lily to high standing but makes the use of the letters a condition toward marrying her when he suggests that she "use [Bertha's] letters . . . bought last year" (266) to assert her innocence of Bertha's charges. By rejecting Rosedale's proposal, Lily proves her moral superiority to the rest of society. Other members of her society would not hesitate to use the letters to clear their names even though it would mean harming a friend. She refuses to hurt a friend, Selden, to clear her name even if it would give her all that she desires.

With Lily's refusal to redeem herself in her society, she begins to progress through subsequently lower levels of society. With each of her attempts to understand and participate in the social exchange of a level, Lily is haunted by her past. Whenever she becomes comfortable something (or someone) from her past causes her to slip into a lower level. At first, she joins the Gormers' set and acts as a trainer for the upward movement into more fashionable society. Lily's declared guilt in the Dorset incident haunts her again as the Gormers move up in society and she loses her position
with them because she has become a liability to their movement. Lily's next attempt to maintain some position in society carries her into the service of Mrs. Hatch, who has a "questionable" background of divorce and develops a "questionable" relationship with Freddy Van Osburgh. Lily has descended to the very fringes of society yet maintains an air of superiority to her position. When Selden comes to warn her of the tenuous position of her reputation, Lily reacts severely, turning comments Selden has made about society against him. However, she realizes that Selden is correct and removes herself from her position with Mrs. Hatch in a vain attempt to salvage some of her reputation.

Lily has been reduced to working class by her society. Having lost all semblance of social connection, she begins to work for the millinery where she once came to buy her hats. She finds this work completely dehumanizing and realizes that her "training" to survive in society has given her no marketable skills. She is in effect unable to support herself outside the social exchange system. Mme. Regina, the owner of the millinery, also quickly realizes this and releases her. Lily has been reduced to something completely unrecognizable to the people that she once associated
with, as seen when Rosedale visits her at the boarding
house in which she now lives. He shows the most
compassion of any character other than Selden and Lily
when he offers to clear her debt to Trenor for her and to
set her "up over them all...where [she] could wipe
[her] feet on 'em" (310). She again refuses his help
because she "can never again be sure of understanding the
plainest business arrangement" (310). This rejection of
Rosedale's last proposal represents Lily's total freedom
from the social exchange system she was raised to survive
in. Lily has become an outsider to the only system that
she has known.

Free of the twisted morality of her society, Lily is
able to live independent of the standards that have
limited her actions. She decides to end any temptation
to return to society by destroying the means of her
return—Bertha's letters. After burning Bertha's letters
in Selden's fireplace and leaving, Lily finds herself
spiritually dead. Her ideal of social success has been
destroyed and she is left with nothing: "her will-power
seemed to have spent itself in a last great effort, and
she was lost in the bland reaction which follows on an
unwonted expenditure of energy" (323). Lily's dreams are
now dead and she lacks a goal to direct herself towards,
she lacks an ideal. Completely empty of all vestiges of her society and left with only a sense of moral superiority, Lily is presented with a new ideal that represents what she unconsciously wanted all along: unconditional acceptance and love. Where she once sought it in the malicious social exchange in which she was raised, Lily finds what she wants cannot exist in that power-hungry world. She finds it, however, in the life of Nettie Struther, a poor working woman whom Lily helped to start over again. Through Nettie, Lily sees a woman who experienced some of the same problems she did but who transcended them with the help of unconditional love. Wharton re-emphasizes this point when Lily goes to sleep that night (for the last time) and imagines that she feels Nettie's baby in her arms—symbolic of the new ideal that she has found. This ideal changes Lily's perception of money when she receives her inheritance that evening:

Ten months earlier the amount it stood for had represented the depths of penury; but her standard of value had changed in the interval, and now visions of wealth lurked in every flourish of the pen. . . . It was no longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the
greatest shrinking. She had a sense of deeper impoverishment, of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance. (330)

According to Bazin, "What Lily has to confront and recognize before her death is the exact nature of her socialization and its role in her destruction" (101). Lily has come to this realization and knows that the social exchange and its respect of power have destroyed her. Her destruction has been precipitated by rejection of some of the exchange systems rules and her higher moral standards.

The House of Mirth portrays the destruction of Lily Bart as caused by the social exchange system that she was raised to participate in. The novel presents "a vision of a corrupt, hypocritical society that forces all those within it to conform or be destroyed" (Wershoven 43). Because Lily refuses to conform to society and is powerless to stop being "talked about," she is ejected by society. With the exceptions of Selden and Rosedale, society makes a conscious effort to destroy her by denying her the money to live as she is accustomed. Her only recourse is to realize a new ideal, which she does just before the society that created her destroys her.
Lily's significance extends beyond herself because she "represents not just herself, not even her sex, but the whole group of women and men destroyed by a grappling and vicious social system which they are intelligent enough to understand but too weak to change" (Olin-Ammentorp 241). Lily, with the help of Selden, recognizes the evils of her society, but she does not even have the power to save herself, let alone the power to change the short-comings that she recognizes. Her personal sympathies have placed her in opposition to her society, and, as it does the narrator of "The Last Token," society has condemned her.
Chapter Two:
The Age of Innocence and Evolution

As with The House of Mirth, "people in [The Age of Innocence] force themselves to mold their lives and responses to the form of conventional cultural expectations" (Jacobson 72). In The House of Mirth, the reader is exposed to the destructive force of the social exchange system when it encounters someone like Lily Bart who refuses to participate in its exchange system under its rules. The Age of Innocence does not give the reader another image of destruction, but gives an image of the evolution and transformation of the system. In this novel, Edith Wharton generates characters that symbolically represent the three stages of an Hegelian dialectic. The three main characters form the three parts of the dialectic and their interaction reveals the change in sympathies that Wharton wants her readers to grasp. Similar to The House of Mirth, the women in The Age of Innocence control New York's aristocratic society because "lacking in value or status to the extent that they are confined to domestic activities, cut off from the social world of men and from each other," (Fryer 130)
the women have been left no other recourse than to create their own society. At one point, Newland Archer comments on this created society by realizing that "he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" (AI 45). The "factitious purity" that Newland feels oppressed by is the created rule of innocence. Newland Archer is a prolific reader of European books and because of them he has become "European" in his thinking. He desires to be free to express his thoughts, ideas, and emotions; however, he knows that he must respect the social traditions he was raised with because he does not have the strength to defy society alone.

Like Lily Bart, Newland lives in a world where unpleasant things are not mentioned, where a construct of innocence and purity is upheld in public. Under this system, Newland and his mother cannot openly discuss their thoughts because "it was against all the rules of their code that the mother and son should ever allude to what was uppermost in their thoughts" (37). The code denies the ability to openly discuss anything; instead the verbal exchange system uses indirection to discuss anything with the slightest hint of unpleasantness
because the illusion of innocence "can be maintained only by deliberate effort" (Jacobson 72). In Lily's New York, "truth" is controlled by the powerful (HM 233); but in Newland's New York, truth is more elusive because society demands a system of maintained public innocence. This is illustrated by Ellen Olenska's comment to Newland, "Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these people who only ask one to pretend" (AI 77).

According to Jim McWilliams, "the primary theme of Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence is that of freedom stifled by rigid social convention" (268). This rigid social convention caused by "the terror of the real, the fear of the truth, of the unpleasant" has kept New York in a state of arrested development" (Wershoven 77). The novel discusses the end of this arrested development, the change from a system of indirect exchange to open discussion of all subjects. Symbolically, the three main characters of the novel, May Welland, Ellen Olenska, and Newland Archer, form a Hegelian dialectic for the change from public innocence to public knowledge. May represents the thesis or current system--innocence in the public realm. Ellen is the antithesis or the extreme opposition of the system--she does as she pleases and
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says what she pleases with no regard for social
customs of innocence and ignorance. Newland is the
synthesis--wanting to express his thoughts freely but
recognizing the power of social convention. Newland
begins as a true believer in the social conventions. He
believes them to be comfortable and necessary to keep
order. Through his relationship with Ellen, Newland
expands the portion of his being that desires freedom of
expression. Despite his progressive ideas and after
Ellen's departure for Europe, Newland returns to the
system that created him because he is "old-fashioned" and
illusion is more real for him than reality (AI 361,362).
For his generation, the code of innocence and illusion is
more fit for "survival." However, Archer does not allow
his desire for freedom of expression to die and instills
those beliefs in his children, permitting his children to
attain what he could not.

May Welland is the main example of public innocence
in the novel. Through her, unlike the other participants
we meet, we see that the nature of this innocence is
superficial and that just below the surface lies her
potential to perceive truth and act on it. With extreme
pleasure Newland notes after worrying over the appearance
of Ellen at the opera that "nothing about his betrothed
pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant' in which they had both been brought up" (25). Ignoring the unpleasant is the source of the innocence in *The Age of Innocence* and May's aptitude for performing it socially cannot be denied. Her act of innocence in society has also so convinced Newland that he cannot think of giving her yellow roses, instead of the lilies-of-the-valley that he always sends to her, because "there was something too rich, too strong" about them to be appropriate for May (79). He can only associate her with the color white, with innocence and purity.

Newland believes in her innocence so much that he relishes the idea of revealing the great works of literature to her on their honeymoon and destroying the "factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured" by May's ancestresses "like an image made of snow" (7, 45). Newland desires to destroy this image of innocence in May after they are married. He is unable to see May's is a public facade because it is demanded of her. He does not realize the reason "there [is] no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (195) is that she is not bound by society
in any way that she does not want to be bound. May is quite comfortable with her position of public innocence and only occasionally reveals through her suspicions of Newland and Ellen's relationship that she is not wholly the innocent that Newland and society perceive her to be. Her lack of personal innocence is first revealed when Newland wants to move up the date of their marriage and May says, "Is it--is it because you're not certain of continuing to care for me? . . . is there some one else?" (146), and she adds "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices--one has one's feelings and ideas" (148). Even at this early stage of Newland and Ellen's affair, May is suspicious that something is wrong. After the affair has escalated and Newland has married May, she again reveals that she is not as innocent as she seems when she suspects that Newland is lying to her about going to Washington to assist on a case so that he may see Ellen. Hinting to Newland that she knows, she suggests that he see Ellen while he is there. Her simple suggestion that he "must be sure to go and see Ellen" means much more when seen through "the code in which [she and Newland] had both been trained" (267). By giving him permission to see Ellen, May is also saying that she knows that he
is having an affair with Ellen and that he has encouraged Ellen not to return to her husband. May is also telling Newland that this is his last opportunity to end his relationship with Ellen and to begin to tell her to do as the family wishes. Both of these instances involve only a recognition of unpleasantries involving her husband and her cousin. May reveals herself as a cunning person whose innocence is only a surface feature when she takes action to remove Ellen from any influence upon Newland. Knowing that the only way to ensure Newland will not leave her for Ellen or continue having an affair with her is to start a family, May tells Ellen that she is pregnant despite not knowing for sure if she is. This act accomplishes her goal: Ellen leaves for Europe and never sees Newland again, and Newland returns to the system of social innocence to become a good husband.

May's innocence and her training "to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile" (293) are juxtaposed by Ellen's openness and refusal to conform to New York's conventions, which result in Newland remarking that she is "the most honest woman [he] ever met" (287). Ellen is the rebel of the novel and the antithesis to all that May represents. Judith Fryer suggests that Ellen represents disorder to the New York social system and her
"disorder is dangerous because it threatens to displace the existing pattern with some powerful other pattern" (138). The disorder Ellen presents to New York is a disorder of honesty. This disorder threatens May, as the representative of New York, by causing her husband to want to openly discuss unpleasantries they had both been trained to ignore.

Upon her return to New York, Ellen presents a threat to the system of innocence. She returns to New York because it represents freedom and peace to her and it is like coming home (AI 171). She has, though, returned in scandal. She has left her abusive husband who was having extra-marital affairs and has lived with her husband's secretary. Newland upon first seeing her remarks that she has had her case tried by the New York social set where any misstep or misplaced comment could damage her (and her family's) standing in the group before all the facts are known (17). Almost immediately, she commits the "missteps" that position her as a rebel against the system. First, she attends the opera shortly after arriving in New York while her case is still being tried. Even her dress, "which had no tucker" and "sloped away from her thin shoulders" (15) at the opera reveals the openness she will reveal later. Her rebellion against
the convention of innocence is revealed in other simple ways as well: she lives among artists (known for their openness of opinion), she befriends Julius Beaufort renowned for having multiple affairs, she walks across the parlor to talk with Newland after a society dinner instead of letting him come to her, and she invites him to visit her despite his having just announced his engagement to May. Her biggest departure from the convention of innocence is her decision to divorce her husband. The testimony to be given in the divorce proceedings would make public the circumstances of her separation from her husband. Because of this, her family encourages her at first and then almost demands that she not proceed with the divorce and return to her husband. Their reasons for doing this are two-fold: to prevent a scandal in the family (to preserve the family's appearance of innocence), and to preserve some of Ellen's reputation (to keep the rumors of her separation only rumors). Because Mrs. Welland believes Europe to be more honest publicly than America and more receptive to scandal (144), she explains Ellen's deviations from the convention of innocence as Ellen's being Europeanized. The openness of her affairs, desire for more freedom, and questionable relationship with Newland result in Ellen
becoming isolated from New York society. This isolation of Ellen "whose experiences have carried her beyond the acceptable borderlines of her family's cultural standards" is, according to Irving Jacobson, "a natural consequence of [New York's] ignoring the unpleasant" (74). Eventually, because of her isolation, Ellen realizes that the freedom that she desires is not to be found in New York and decides to return to Europe where she was free to act as she pleased. When Ellen explains to May her reason for deciding to leave, we see that even she realizes the necessity for misdirection and innocence in conversations with others:

"May dear, I have at last made Granny understand that my visit to her could be no more than a visit; and she has been as kind and generous as ever... I am hurrying back to Washington to pack up, and we sail next week. You must be very good to Granny when I'm gone--as good as you've always been to me."

(325)

This last statement is highly ironic and evidence of Ellen's recognition of New York's society of innocents because May is the most responsible for Ellen's decision to leave. May's public innocence and private cunning
have driven Ellen from New York and ended her influence on Newland.

Newland Archer begins the novel as a willing participant in the society of innocents he has been raised in, and he evolves through the influence of Ellen to despise the code of innocence and to desire the freedom to express himself. He acts in the end to synthesize the two worlds into a new whole. He maintains a belief that freedom is important and realizes that he must maintain the illusion of innocence to be able to bring about any change. Throughout, Newland remains an idealist desiring change. While he is still under the influence of social tradition, Newland views himself as progressive. He believes that women should be as "free" as men. He reads extensively and has an active imagination--things that his peers do not do. However, while he prides himself on his difference from his peers, he also knows that it "would be troublesome--and also rather bad form--to strike out for himself" (8). Newland sees his role in marriage to reveal certain truths to May. He wants to reveal the truths that he has found in literature to May in order to make her (in his opinion) a better person. He wants to remove "the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and [bid] her look forth on the
world" (81), but he accepts all that society dictates regarding taste and form, feeling that "few things seemed...more awful than an offence against 'Taste,' that far-off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere visible representative and vicegerent" (14). Newland wants to bid May to look forth on a world of his own imagining while still respecting and living under the conventions of society. According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "His reading and active imaginative life have brought other worlds and other customs to his attention; but his reflex for conformity has been too strongly developed to permit him easily to measure his own traditions against these others" (316). This freedom of thought and conformity to convention allow Newland to believe there is no "honest reason...why his bride should not have been allowed the same freedom of experience as himself" (AI 46) while feeling that his marriage to May would be good because he would have her "whiteness, radiance, [and] goodness" by his side (23). Ellen Olenska stirs up "old settled convictions and [sets] them drifting dangerously through his mind" (43) as she causes him to doubt the validity of social convention and to want to bring his fantasy world to life.
At first, Newland pities Ellen for her position and then comes to agree with her convictions after realizing that she represents what he would like to have May become. Throughout the first half of the novel, Newland wavers between his conformity to society and his urge to see his ideals realized. When he is around Ellen, he basks in her freedom and comes to love her for her belief in her right to act and say as she will. Yet, his need for the stability of convention is still strong and leads him to visit May to convince her to marry him sooner than they planned. He travels to St. Augustine, where the Welland family is vacationing, because the conventions of society tell him that "here [is] the truth, here reality, here the life that belong[s] to him" (140). He runs from Ellen because he is not able to accept the radical change in his convictions that she represents, and he turns to marriage with May in hopes of changing her and making her more open and honest. He envisions an open exchange of ideas between them in his marriage but quickly realizes that it will never materialize because "May's only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration" (196). He also realizes that the first six months of marriage are the hardest because the couple are, as he reflects,
"rubbing off each other's angles," and he fears that "May's pressure [is] already bearing on the angles whose sharpness he most [wants] to keep" (204). He is afraid of having his belief in freedom and disgust with the code of innocence worn away, the very angles that Ellen fostered and sharpened.

By fighting to keep his freedom from the code of innocence alive, Newland begins to become the synthesis between the worlds of May and Ellen. His fear of his convictions returning to the old acceptance of society causes him to return from his honeymoon with a new perspective on his society, and he cannot understand why others do not see the need to change: "Archer looked down with wonder at the familiar spectacle. It surprised him that life should be going on in the old way when his own reactions to it had so completely changed" (205). This new-found conviction to maintain his desire for change and not to slip back into the old convictions of maintaining the appearance of innocence drive him to intensify his relationship with Ellen and his love for her, and he begins to idealize the potential of their life together just as he had done with his life with May. Ellen almost grudgingly accepts his advances until he says to her:
"I want--I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like [mistress]--categories like that--won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter." (290)

In response to this, Ellen, who has always been realistic about her rejection of innocence, sighs, laughs, and responds, "Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there?" (290). Ellen knows, and attempts to have Newland realize, that his idealistic view of their love can never be realized. She, unlike Archer, has experienced the "real" world that exists outside the idealized innocence Newland has known all his life and knows that his dreams can never be realized. Ellen leaves New York and Newland as much because of his refusal to see reality as because of May's lie about being pregnant. She knows that his idealism will in the end destroy them both because he will want to escalate their relationship beyond what society will bear, and she leaves in the hope that Newland will return to living a life of simple happiness and return to "conformity to the discipline of a small society [that] had become almost his second nature" (321). And this is exactly what
Newland does. In his old age, after being happily married to May for many years and raising a family, he reflects that there is "something he knew he had missed: the flower of life," but that "after all, there was good in the old ways" (347). Throughout his life after Ellen returns to Europe, Newland has retained a belief in freedom of action and speech, instilled that belief in children, and has happily seen society change around him to accept open dialogue and to reject the code of innocence that his generation held so dear. Newland recalls "the cool composure with which [his son Dallas] had announced his engagement [to Fanny Beaufort, a woman of low social status], and taken for granted that his family would approve" (353), and he revels in the freedom his son has, the freedom that Newland was forced to hide from his generation. However, he cannot return to his old strong faith in freedom and cannot go and see Ellen at the end of the novel. He is "old-fashioned" and "the anticipation of a pleasure, the fantasy, is safer and more enjoyable than the realization (and risk) of the pleasure itself" (Wershoven 90). Newland can only fantasize about freedom. He has become too set in the old traditions to challenge them openly any longer. It is not so much that he is "old-fashioned" as simply old;
he no longer has the strength or courage to change openly.

Newland's synthesis of the opposition presented to him by May and Ellen is incomplete because it remains an idealization. He, in the end, almost wholly returns to his old convictions, only keeping an open and honest relationship with his children. He is unable to totally deny his upbringing and instead teaches his children, at first, to reject innocence in private and, when society is ready, reject it in public. Dallas Archer, Newland's eldest son, reveals the strength of the change when he openly criticizes Newland's cultural system:

"No. I forgot. You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact!" (356)

Newland has lived to see the fall of his deficient generation and to see the rise of what he and Ellen had wanted to establish. As society stopped Newland's dreams from becoming reality, he has lived to see society as he knew it die out. People, through the advent of various technologies, gain more access to people's private lives making the public innocence in which Newland was raised
much harder, if not impossible, to maintain. Newland's children find themselves able to accomplish what Newland only dreamed of--they can express themselves freely.
Chapter Three: 

*Ethan Frome* and Social Destruction

In the first two chapters, I have explored the upper-class world that Edith Wharton creates in her novels and the social exchange system's effect on the life of Lily Bart and the dialectical change society undergoes in *The Age of Innocence*. In these two novels, Edith Wharton concentrates her social criticism on the aristocratic world in which she was raised, upper-class New York at the turn of the century. Her concerns for the oppressive qualities of life and communication in this milieu are obvious, but the social criticism in her corpus of works is not limited to the "frivolous classes." In *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton turns her critical eye to the concerns of the poor. In this novel, she deals with the social oppression that also occurs in the lower-class. Despite the paradisaical vision that Lily Bart has while visiting Nettie Struther where Lily assumes Nettie's freedom because she has unconditional love and trust from her husband, Wharton reveals a similar concern for conformity to social dicta in the lower-class that exists in the upper-class. Indeed, about the writing of *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton wrote
that "it was the first subject [she] had ever approached with full confidence in its value. . .and a relative faith in [her] power to render at least a part of what [she] saw in it" (EF viii). The theme which she tries to communicate in Ethan Frome is "the fear that there is no escape from stifling convention, that the brave life-wonderer will only be destroyed" (Wershoven 22). This stifling convention arises in the prison-world of Starkfield, "a place of desolation, of living death" (20) caused socially by "a Puritan ethos [that] predominates throughout as both an individual and communal presence" (Hovey 7). Ethan's belief in these conventions surpasses the average Starkfield resident, according to R. B. Hovey, because of "his sense of duty, his reliability and strict probity" as well as his striking conscientiousness (8). The novel centers upon Frome and his attempted rebellion against the system he believes in. The other two main characters also play an important role in Ethan's rebellion. Mattie Silvers is the object of Ethan's love and his hope for the future. Zeena is the embodiment of Ethan's responsibilities, and she acts ultimately as both his doom and his tormentor. Ethan Frome is an allegory on social mores concerning love and marriage and the interplay of its three main characters
and the symbols that surround them are the keys to interpreting the novel's social criticism.

Elizabeth Ammons correctly states that Ethan Frome is a fairy tale vision reminiscent of Snow White (129). However, the novel is a modern fairy tale that deviates significantly from its precursors. Ethan is somewhat like the traditional woodcutter/prince, but he does not have the strength to succeed. He cannot escape his situation. Mattie is the fairy princess Ethan must save; however, she is not the traditionally pristine virgin because she is sexually aware and aggressive (EF 30-31). Zeena becomes the witch of the marchen simply because she serves to torture the two lovers and is the only one that always upholds the traditions of the witch; she even has a cat. The tale on the whole modifies the traditions of the fairy tale because "Wharton's modern fairy tale for adults, while true to traditional models in the way it teaches a moral about 'real' life at the same time that it addresses elemental fears... does not conform to the genre's typical denouement. The lovers do not live happily ever after. The witch wins" (Ammons 129). What is the moral proposed by Ethan Frome? Lionel Trilling in "The Morality of Inertia" asserts that there is no moral in the tale since there is no argument concerning
morality because Ethan has no choices (43). Kenneth Bernard reveals that the moral of Ethan Frome is one of tragedy about "a man of great potential subdued and trapped by forces beyond his capacity" (181). Ammons believes that it is about women being forced by Society into the role of witches because of the lack of opportunities for them. I believe that Ammons is only partially correct. It is a novel about the constrictions put on women by society, but it is also a novel about the constrictions put on men by society through the limitations put on couples and love. Understanding the fairy tale's moral is paramount to understanding the allegory that Wharton weaves in Ethan Frome.

Society has, by the time the novel begins, begun to destroy Ethan. He has become intellectually deadened by his stay in Starkfield: "His father's death, and the misfortunes following it, had put a premature end to Ethan's studies" (EF 19). It has as well destroyed his dreams of a future (his memories of Florida have become snowed under over the years). His marriage to Zeena has significantly destroyed his feelings of love as he considers that the marriage (one done out of a sense of social duty) would not have happened if his mother had died in the spring (51). His only hope to escape his
entrapment caused by Starkfield, Zeena, and his sense of duty is the love that he feels for Mattie.

The growth of Frome's attraction to Mattie parallels his increasing association of her with freedom from his restrictive world. He becomes so obsessed with her that "all his life was lived in the sight and sound of Mattie Silver" (28). Mattie attracts Ethan because "her weakness makes him feel strong, her ignorance makes him proud of his knowledge, and her dependence makes him feel authoritative in small matters" (Eggenschwiler 239); she makes him feel like a "man." Ethan is able to feel at the same time like an embarrassed, nervous youth and like a strong, knowledgeable adult as he watches Mattie outside of the church social and as they walk home. On this walk home, Ethan, in his own socially inept way, professes his love for Mattie as the two pass the family grave yard:

"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 go on living here together, and some day she'll lie there beside me." (36)
This is also a morbid foreshadowing of the fate that awaits the two if they allow their love to grow and become public because, should this happen, the only way they can be together is in the grave. After their night together, the narrator reveals the extent of Ethan's attraction to Mattie: "He did not know why he was so irrationally happy, for nothing was changed in his life or hers. . . . But their evening together had given him a vision of what life at her side might be, and he was glad now that he had done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture" (71). Despite his repeated urge to kiss her, he restrained himself. What was it in him that restrained him? Ethan knows that he is committed to Zeena by marriage and does not want to do anything to violate that bond. He feels responsible for her and cannot eject her completely from his life, despite the hope of a better one with Mattie. Besides, he does not feel an immediate need at this point to act to preserve his relationship with Mattie. He has the best of both worlds, a wife to preserve his sense of duty and a young love to maintain his sense of youthful freedom.

Zeena's return, suspicious of Mattie and Ethan's relationship, and announcement that Mattie will be
leaving forces Ethan to choose between the two and to act. Ethan decides to find a way to retain the joy he has felt with Mattie. He runs through several possible actions and even argues with Zeena regarding Mattie's position in the house. All of these things fail him. His intellect has been buried by too many winters; Ethan has gone too long without attempting to countermand any of Zeena's demands. He is left with a vague hope of borrowing money to run away with Mattie. By the next morning, Ethan has felt the "passion of rebellion" (100) and decided that he must do something because society has made him into a mere spectator in the banishment of Mattie.

Unfortunately for Ethan and Mattie, his resolve and his Puritanical self-reliance fail him when he is pitied by Mrs. Hale (the wife of the man that he sought to borrow money from). Social obligation has once again defeated him. Society has first robbed him of his intellect, then his dreams, and now his love. There is no escape left for him except for death, and Ethan does not even have the will to suggest it himself—he has to have Mattie suggest suicide to him: "'Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!' 'Down where?' 'The
Throughout the novel, Mattie is seen as a helpless young woman who is doomed by society to have no useful skills. She can only trim a hat (reminiscent of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*), recite one poem, and play a couple of piano pieces. She does not have any training to survive on her own. She had tried to survive on her own before coming to work for the Frames, but failed when she worked as a stenographer and book-keeper, "both of which exhausted her," and then as a department store clerk, which "did not bring her strength back" (Ammons 133), again reminiscent of Lily's physical collapse when she works at a milliner's shop. Even while she works for the Frames, she is completely ineffective (so much so that Ethan begins getting up early in the morning to do Mattie's chores for her). She knows that there is nothing she can do, that there is no escape. She responds, for example, to Ethan's question about wanting to leave by asking: "Where'd I go, if I did?" (EF 36). She does have some "skills": she is attractive, she can sew, she knows how to flirt, and given the opportunity could probably marry relatively well. The true worth of these skills is seen to be very little in the small rural
town of Starkfield (their worth is only recognized by the frivolous high-society found in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*). If she were to leave, Mattie would most likely only be able to survive by becoming a prostitute because she is not qualified to do anything else in lower-class society.

Ethan, however, does not understand her circumstances. He merely sees a woman who can offer him something that he lacks, love. For him, Mattie is the opposite of everything that Zeena has come to be. When the two return from the church social, Ethan looks at his wife and feels "as if he had never before known what his wife looked like" (38). Zeena is described by Wharton at this point as witch-like and haggish: "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" (38). This image is in sharp contrast with a later one of Mattie in similar lamp light:

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. (59)

Where Zeena was all shadow and fright in the light of the lamp, Mattie is transformed into an angelic beauty by the imagination of Freme. This highlights the difference between Zeena and Mattie and furthers the irony of the description of Mattie after the accident where her face is "bloodless and shrivelled" and shadows sharpened her nose and hollowed her eyes (125). She has become another Zeena, arriving under similar circumstances, as help for a bed-ridden family member, and remaining only to appear and act as much like a witch as Zeena ever did.

Zeena functions as the witch in the fairy tale and the social tormentor of Ethan and Mattie in the symbolic moral of the tale. Her physical description is one of darkness and shadow. Her cat seems to take up her position when she is absent; it sits in her chair and breaks the pickle dish when Zeena is out of town at the doctor's. Zeena also has an uncanny knowledge of Mattie and Ethan's love for each other: she notes and mentions
Ethan's habit of shaving every day since Mattie has arrived, she mentions to Ethan the idea of Mattie getting married, she removes the key from under the door when the two are returning after the church social, she plots to remove Mattie from the house, and she takes pleasure in seeing Mattie leave.

Zeena tortures Ethan in many ways, all meant to destroy his dreams. She forced him into a marriage with her by playing to his sense of duty because everything that she did for his mother "magnified his sense of what he owed her" (51). Zeena's hypochondriac illnesses keep him too financially strapped to do anything other than subsist. Her "illnesses" coupled with her need to be socially known keep him on the family farm and in Starkfield despite his dreams of leaving with her for a larger town. Zeena further demoralizes Ethan by robbing him of his sexuality--because of their lack of children, we can assume a lack of sexual intimacy. Also the pickle dish symbolizes sexual intimacy and Zeena's placing of it on the shelf symbolizes their lack of sexual intimacy. The breaking of the pickle dish symbolizes Ethan's rejection of marital duty to Zeena in order to achieve intimacy with Mattie, or, taken further, his rebellion against the Puritanical principles with which he was
raised. Because of Zeena, he cannot leave to be with Mattie, and her image causes him to alter the course of the sled during their suicide run. In short, Zeena controls Ethan by assaulting his senses of duty and social obligation, and she uses these senses of Ethan's to torture him into broken submission.

Zeena's torture of Mattie is much more subtle. She has brought Mattie into Starkfield and away from any hope that she could lead a happy and successful life as the wife of an affluent man in a larger town. Zeena tortures Mattie with all of the household duties which she knows Mattie is neither competent at or trained for, and then Zeena complains when Mattie does not complete these chores to her satisfaction. After the accident, the intensity of Zeena's psychological torture of Mattie increases. She is able to remind Mattie constantly that Mattie has failed to take Ethan away, and that she is now more horrible than Zeena ever was.

Also after the accident, Zeena becomes the beacon of society in the Frame household. She finds new energy and forgets her sickness when Ethan and Mattie return after the accident. Her new-found strength is grounded in the Puritan tradition of strength through suffering. Zeena finds strength in her reminder of her husband's
indiscretion with Mattie. There is also a more malicious reason for her strength: her assumption of the role of torturer of Ethan and Mattie. The person who suffers the most torture from Zeena after the accident is Ethan. He is faced every day with the knowledge that the woman that he loves has been reduced into a mirror image of the witch that he tried to escape. This is why Zeena had Mattie brought back to the house afterwards: to remind Ethan of his sin against society. She would have been well within her social rights to have Mattie removed from her house. However, Zeena knows of Ethan's relationship with the girl and chooses to have her remain as a reminder of his failed attempt at rebelling against social conventions of marriage and duty.

Central to revealing the novel as a commentary on society's response to rebellion against duty and illicit love are the images of the sledding run and the elm tree at its bottom. The sled run is a central gathering place for the community of Starkfield and is the physical representation of Starkfield's social code. The fact that it is winter is paramount to the cold response of the residents of Starkfield to those daring enough to challenge the code represented in the run. The elm tree at the bottom of the run represents society's justice.
Those choosing to challenge the code must face certain death if they do not change their course in time and return to living within the code. The elm almost causes the destruction of two other lovers in Starkfield: "Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum came just as near running into the big elm at the bottom. We were all sure they were killed" (33). Ned and Ruth, like Ethan and Mattie, are lovers whose courtship had become illicit (Ethan witnesses them kissing in public before they are married or even engaged—a serious social transgression to the Puritan mind). They are spared from the full brunt of society's justice because they are young, in love, not married, and they soon become engaged to each other.

Ethan and Mattie are not so lucky. Their love affair is a much greater transgression than that of Ned and Ruth's. The actions of Ethan and Mattie constitute psychological adultery, and society will have them punished despite the fleeting image of Zeena that causes Ethan to make "an instinctive movement to brush it aside" (122). This remembrance of his duty only spares the two from death and condemns them to something much worse, living death. In the novel there is a discussion of the differences between "troubles" and "complications." One can survive "troubles," but one almost always dies from
"complications." If the love between Mattie and Ethan had not been adulterous or had been complete (if Ethan had not had a flash of duty), they would have had "complications" and died from the accident. However, they only have "troubles" because their love is adulterous and Ethan does not commit himself entirely to it, making their transgression not as severe as it could have been. Ethan's sense of duty allows him to survive with the least physical harm because it was this sense of the wrongness of his and Mattie's actions that caused him to change the sled's path. He knows his social duties, has followed them throughout most of his life, and remembers them at the critical moment. Mattie's commitment to their love affair is much deeper: she reminds Ethan of his promise to take her sledding (115), initiates their first kiss, and she suggests the suicide run so that they will never be separated (119). For these reasons she is crippled more severely than Ethan by the confrontation with society (the accident). Mattie survives to serve as a means for society to torture Ethan. Mattie serves as a reminder of Ethan's failed rebellion, a reminder that he will never escape his duty. Zeena makes sure that Ethan's torture will not end
because it is she who requests that Mattie be returned to the Frome house.

In *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton writes an inverted fairy tale to comment on society, illicit love, and justice. The three main characters turn their traditional roles on their ear. Ethan, the prince and hero, is ineffective and fails in his duty. Mattie is completely empty, serving only as an object for Ethan to save. Zeena reverses the role of witch from an object of evil to the servant of social justice. In addition, the big elm represents society and its justice. It punishes the transgressors with a fate worse than death because there is not "much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard" (130). On the whole, "*Ethan Frome* demonstrates that the failure to gain independence results in death—or worse, maiming" (Goodman 77), which makes the moral of the inverted fairy tale the idea that a society's conventions of love and marriage are not to be challenged because there is no independence—it is only an illusion. *Ethan Frome* 's allegory discusses the consequences of challenging social conventions regarding love and marriage. As in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, the transgressors are destroyed (Lily
physically, Newland emotionally); Mattie is physically broken and Ethan has his will destroyed by society.

From her first poetry through her final (and unfinished) novel her main characters struggle to gain independence from society. The three novels discussed here are her most famous and are prime examples of this theme in her writing. There needs to be a refocusing of Wharton criticism to once again explore the meaning of her works and not her personal life. While her personal experiences undoubtedly supplied her with fuel to discuss society, it is in the end only a contributor to larger themes to be found in her fiction.


