



## IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: MATTIE SILVER IN EDITH WHARTON'S *ETHAN FROME*<sup>1</sup>

BAKANIN GÖZÜNDE: EDITH WHARTON'IN "ETHAN FROME" İSİMLİ  
ROMANINDA MATTIE SILVER

**Olgahan BAKŞI YALÇIN**

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Biruni Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi,  
Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi, oyalcin@biruni.edu.tr

### Abstract

This paper examines Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* as a work depicting the female confinement/entrapment in traditional roles, as well as of the limitations and expectations placed on women who are raised to become nothing more than domestic servants and companions for men in nineteenth-century American society, and also argues that young women, like Mattie Silver, are treated as beautiful objects for the male aesthetic appreciation and whether they are married or not they are expected to conform to the ideals of nineteenth century American womanhood. Set in the fictional New England town of Starkfield, Massachusetts, Ethan Frome tells the story of a taciturn farmer, Ethan Frome, whose dreams and desires end in a tragic way. Neither his wife Zeena Frome nor her distant cousin Mattie Silver is a center of interest in *Ethan Frome* as they are mostly excluded from the narration. Accordingly, an attractive young woman who has been recently orphaned, Mattie Silver is introduced as a weak, vulnerable person who is forced to move in to help Zeena with the household chores, and she is financially dependent on the Fromes for existence. This paper further argues that, Mattie's economic dependence has obvious narrative effects as she is not given an individual narrative section or point of view to articulate her own story; instead in the eyes of her admirer, she emerges vividly against the infertility, sickness and ugliness of the older Zeena. In other words, as Gilbert and Gubar (79) contend, Mattie is portrayed as an angel, a charming young woman full of joy and life with a sparkling personality in line with her name as if to justify Ethan's infatuation with her while Zeena is depicted as a monster, a witch or a madwoman.

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Edith Wharton'un *Ethan Frome* isimli romanını on dokuzuncu yüzyıl Amerikan toplumunda kadınların geleneksel rollere sıkışıp kalmalarının yanı sıra erkeklere hizmet etmek üzere yetiştirildikleri ve yaşamlarını bir dizi kısıtlama ve beklentiler çerçevesinde geçirmek zorunda oluşlarının anlatıldığı bir eser olarak incelemektedir. Ayrıca bu romanın, Mattie Silver gibi genç kadınların erkeklerin estetik beğenisini karşılayan güzel objeler olarak değerlendirildiği ve ister evli ister bekâr olsunlar kadınların on dokuzuncu yüzyıl Amerikan kadınlık kriterlerine/kurallarına uymak zorunda oluşlarını yansıttığı düşünülmektedir. Massachusetts'te Starkfield isimli kurgusal bir New England kasabasında geçen *Ethan Frome* isimli kısa roman, hayalleri ve arzuları trajik bir şekilde sona eren ketum bir çiftçinin, *Ethan Frome*'un, hikâyesini anlatır. Romanda ne çiftçinin eşi Zeena Frome ne de eşinin uzak bir akrabası olan Mattie Silver ön plandadır ki zaten anlatıda çoğunlukla yer almazlar. Buna uygun olarak da, yakın zamanda anne ve babası vefat eden Mattie Silver, Zeena'ya ev işlerinde yardımcı olmak üzere *Frome* çiftliğine gelmek zorunda kalmış, hayatta kalmak için ekonomik olarak *Frome*'lara bağımlı zayıf, korunmasız bir kişi olarak tanıtılır. İlaveten, bu çalışma, kendi hikâyesini aktarabileceği bir bakış açısına ya da ayrı bir bölüme sahip olmadığı için Mattie'nin ekonomik bağımlılığının romanın anlatısında gözle görünen etkileri olduğunu savunur: kendi hikâyesini anlatmak yerine, hayranının gözünde adeta kendisinden çok daha yaşlı Zeena'nın kısırlığı, hastalıklı hali ve çirkinliğini ön plana çıkarıncasına vücut bulur. Diğer bir deyişle, Gilbert ve Gubar'ın (79) kavramlaştırmasına uygun olarak, adı belirsiz erkek anlatıcı, *Ethan*'ın Mattie'ye olan yasak aşkını haklı çıkarmaya çalışıncasına Mattie'yi bir melek, neşe ve hayat dolu, Silver (Gümüş) soyadına uygun olarak göz alıcı bir kişilikte, genç bir kadın olarak tasvir ederken, Zeena'yı ise bir canavar, cadı ve hatta deli bir kadın olarak gösterir.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the revised version of the second chapter in my unpublished PhD dissertation entitled "Sex, Silence and Isolation: Edith Wharton's Entrapped Women," (Kadir Has University, 2017).

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is a transatlantic writer who witnessed unprecedented social, economic and political transformations both in America and in the world at large. Deeply concerned with the issues of her day, Wharton produced fiction about the effects of change at all levels of society – not only the upper – class New York society, of which she herself was a member, but also that of New England villages. With an emphasis on human “powerlessness” and “suffering” before the overwhelming forces of environment and heredity, Wharton portrays these villages as a stark, barren landscape reflecting the emotional and cultural starvation of women in rural New England. This not only limits the perceptions of the female characters but ironically also promotes their inability to maintain an independent existence outside of marriage. Superficially Wharton’s novellas of New England villages may seem straightforward and familiar but beneath the surface, each contains an unpleasant and disturbing subject. In *Ethan Frome* (1911), it is the love triangle consisting of a young farmer called Ethan Frome, his wife Zeena Frome and her cousin Mattie Silver.

Set in the fictional New England town of Starkfield, Massachusetts, *Ethan Frome* tells the story of a taciturn farmer whose dreams and desires end in a tragic way. The narrative structure of the novel is established when a visiting engineer, who serves as Wharton’s unreliable, anonymous male narrator, encounters Ethan Frome at the post office, feels intrigued by the story behind his physical deformity and strives to learn more about him and the accident that left him lame twenty-four years ago.<sup>2</sup> When the narrator begins by stating he “*put together this vision of his [Ethan’s] story*” (EF 42) complete with a beginning, middle and end, it becomes clear that he knows the closure of the narrative: a “*sickly*” wife (EF 47), Zeena, is caring for a paralyzed, homeless cousin, Mattie and a crippled husband, Ethan in the poverty-stricken Frome household after a “*smash up*” (EF 33) which had happened somewhere in the middle. Thus when the male narrator is forced to take shelter in Frome House during a blizzard at the end of the prologue, he takes Ethan’s side rather than that of those same two women there in the kitchen, whom he subsequently marginalizes.

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<sup>2</sup> See “Edith Wharton’s “Scheme of Construction” in *Ethan Frome: A Statement About Writing*” by Çiğdem Pala Pull for a discussion of the reasons Wharton might have had to choose an educated male narrator from the upper-class for the narration of her story (1-7). See also *A Feast of Words* by Cynthia Wolff who points out the importance of the narrator in *Ethan Frome* for reflecting the function of art (163). See also “The Slippery Slope of Interpellation: Framing Hero and Victim in Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*” by Johanna M. Wagner and Marysa Demoor for a discussion on the role of the narrator (433).

Neither Zeena Frome nor Mattie Silver is a center of interest in *Ethan Frome* as they are mostly excluded from the narration. This seems to be an indirect criticism of female confinement/entrapment in traditional roles, as well as of the limitations and expectations placed on women who are raised to become nothing more than domestic servants and companions for men in nineteenth-century American society.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, this paper argues that an attractive young woman who has been recently orphaned, Mattie Silver is introduced as a weak, vulnerable person with few prospects for an independent existence outside of marriage. Inefficient and unskilled, her growing desperation to remain on the farm may reflect more than her romantic attraction to Ethan Frome: she is aware that she is incapable of supporting herself in the modern city as she has already failed to earn her living in the Stamford store. Before the novel begins, Mattie is already a social outcast isolated both by the deaths of her parents and by the ill-will of relatives who mistreat her at the time when she needs support most. When forced to move in to help Zeena with the house chores, beyond the Fromes and church socials she has very little human contact and is financially dependent on the Fromes for existence.

As this paper further argues, Mattie's economic dependence – in other words, her financial insecurity – has obvious narrative effects as she is not given an individual narrative section or point of view to articulate her own story. Instead in the eyes of her admirer, she emerges vividly against the infertility, sickness and ugliness of the older Zeena who is also marginalized in the narrative. To use Gilbert and Gubar's (79) terminology, Mattie is described as an angel while Zeena is portrayed as a monster, a witch or even a madwoman. Accordingly, the anonymous male narrator portrays Mattie Silver as a charming young woman full of joy and life with a sparkling personality in line with her name as if to justify Ethan's infatuation with her. All the natural images and descriptions of Mattie seem to be filtered through the narrator's (in other words, Ethan's) consciousness: therefore, the reader follows how she must have appeared to Ethan and what she must have meant to him, but the reader does not see far into her character except when she speaks. Only towards the end of the novel, in the scene she suggests suicide, does Mattie appear to take control over her narrative. Marginalized and underdrawn in the narrative – as indeed is Zeena – Mattie relies on Ethan's (and the narrator's) point of view for representation, which causes her to remain a timid, doubtful, and

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough introduction to *Ethan Frome* and Wharton, see also *Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome: A Reference Guide* by Suzan Fournier, which is a helpful companion to the novel illuminating the most important themes and symbols as well as discussing the narrow range of possibilities for women in *Ethan Frome*.

clingingly dependent character throughout the story befitting the ideals of nineteenth century American womanhood.<sup>4</sup>

**“Where’d I go, if I did [leave]?”**

The male narrator’s perspective starts in Chapter One with Ethan Frome, young and vigorous, setting off to collect Mattie Silver, his wife’s cousin, from a church dance in the village and return her safely home on a cold winter’s night. The first two chapters portray Ethan as a figure preoccupied with watching pretty and sparkling Mattie Silver at a distance: in other words, not only is Mattie dependent on Ethan’s eyes for representation but also she is trapped in his gaze from the very beginning as will soon be discussed in this study. On his way to the church dance in Starkfield, Ethan seems to be eager for conversation with her on the two-mile walk back to the farm; however, he does not enter the brightly-lit church full of neighbors and friends when he reaches it; instead he positions himself near a window where he cannot be seen and remains in the shadows as *“the hidden watcher”* (EF 51) observing as the dark haired girl with a red scarf leads a Virginia reel with Denis Eady, the Irish grocer’s son whom he regards as a rival.<sup>5</sup>

From his dark post, Ethan’s jealousy intensifies quickly as he notes the gaiety of Mattie in motion: *“her laughing panting lips, the cloud of dark hair about her forehead, and the dark eyes which seemed the only fixed points in a maze of flying lines”* (EF 45). The reader is also invited to share Ethan’s admiration and voyeurism when Ethan even notices *“two or three gestures which, in his fatuity, he had thought she kept for him: a way of throwing her head back when she was amused, as if to taste her laugh before she let it out, and a trick of sinking her lids slowly when anything charmed or moved her”* (EF 47).<sup>6</sup> This sight makes Ethan unhappy as he thinks the way she laughs and talks to Denis Eady is reserved only for him alone. *“[H]er gaiety seemed plain proof of indifference”* (EF 47) to Ethan’s feelings and at the same time plain proof of her flirting with Denis Eady, which is, in fact, quite

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ideals of nineteenth century American womanhood, see Barbara Welter’s “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.”

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of light and dark imagery, see “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” Kenneth Bernard (180-181). As Bernard argues Ethan lives in the dark and represents darkness as a weak character who rejoices in Mattie’s helplessness when she says she has nowhere to go (180-182).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of admiration and voyeurism as well as representations of sexual feeling in Wharton, see *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton* by Pamela Knights (83-84).

appropriate for a young girl who is expected to marry soon and leave the Frome Farm.

However, later in the chapter, during Mattie's first conversation with Ethan, he raises the question of her departure by referring to the village gossip about her future plans with Denis Eady: "*It's natural enough you should be leaving us*" (EF 53). Here – although only a minute previously, Mattie had walked on without him "*with a rapid step*" (EF 52) appearing to be fearless and independent – she immediately demonstrates her anxieties over losing the only home she has. Instead of sharing her own plans with him, she leaps to the painful conclusion that Zeena has decided to send her away: "*You mean that Zeena—ain't suited with me anymore?*" (EF 53). Here, obviously, Ethan wants assurance that Mattie will not marry Denis Eady but he fails to understand the fundamental insecurity of her life. Her reaction to him actually shows how fearful and dependent she is: "*There's lots of things a hired girl could do that come awkward to me still—and I haven't got much strength in my arms. But if she'd only tell me I'd try. You know she hardly ever says anything, and sometimes I can see she ain't suited, and yet I don't know why*" (EF 53); "*Where'd I go, if I did [leave]?*" (EF 54) Also in the dinner scene when Ethan once again brings up the subject of Mattie's marriage prospects, she questions him whether Zeena has got anything against her or not (EF 75). From the very beginning, presented as a vulnerable figure who has nowhere to go, Mattie lives with constant dread of dismissal from the Frome Farm. In order to understand the reasons for her financial insecurity, one should first look at her family history provided by the narrative vision in Chapter Three.

**“I wouldn't ever have it said that I stood in the way of a poor girl like Mattie marrying a smart fellow like Denis Eady”**

Wharton clearly critiques social limitations and expectations for women as much via Mattie Silver's family history as via repeatedly referring to her as unskilled, inefficient and weak. As the daughter of Zeena's cousin, Mattie was raised for a life more genteel than that of "*indentured servant on a barren farm like Fromes*" (EF 58). Her father, Orin Silver had been "*the envy and admiration of his relatives*" (EF 58) as he had moved to Connecticut, "*married a Stanford girl and succeeded her father's thriving drug business*" (EF 58) and led everyone to believe his business ventures were successful. After his death, the family found out that he had mismanaged their fortune and all their money was gone. The shame of this revelation contributed to the death of Mattie's mother soon after. Mattie, an orphan

at the age of twenty, was now “left alone to make her way on the fifty dollars obtained from the sale of her piano” (EF 58). The piano symbolizes the education and privilege of someone raised to occupy a relatively high rank in society; this destiny is subverted by a father’s fruitless and clandestine dealings in pharmacy, resulting in a daughter addicted to painkillers and patent medicine, a lifelong invalid after an attempted suicide with Ethan.<sup>7</sup>

Mattie’s relatives punished her for her father’s mismanagement of their money by refusing to give her financial assistance. Alone for the first time in her life, she had to struggle vainly to take her place in the modern work force: “When she tried to extend the field of her activities in the direction of stenography and book-keeping her health broke down, and six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store did not tend to restore it” (EF 58). Without training or proper skills, she found escape from the only alternative of physically exhausting work in Zeena’s offer to live on the farm as an indentured servant in exchange for a roof over her head and food to eat. Thus Wharton articulates the struggles of a single woman trying to survive when few employment opportunities are available in *fin de siècle* American society. In several important ways, it is emphasized how unprepared Mattie is for any sort of independent existence, which in a way foreshadows her tragic entrapment as an invalid on the Frome Farm.

When Mattie comes to live with them, it is Zeena who suggests that “some chance of amusement” such as the dance night at the church “should be put in her [Mattie’s] way” “not to let her feel too sharp a contrast between the life she had left and the isolation of a Starkfield farm” (EF 45). Zeena, understanding the importance of a possible courtship between Mattie and any eligible suitor, sends Mattie to these dance nights. Confined to a remote farm for much of her year in Starkfield, Mattie is expected to marry the grocer’s son as the first scene of the novel identifies him as her most promising suitor, with Ethan resenting what he perceives as Denis Eady’s “almost impudent ownership” of her (EF 45). It is again Zeena who sends her husband to fetch Mattie home “on the rare evenings when some chance of amusement drew her to the village” (EF 45) and the fact that she “had never shown any jealousy of Mattie” (EF 47) also shows her expectation of a marriage between Mattie and Denis Eady. One day Zeena even reminds Ethan of the need to find “a hired girl” for the housework when the expected marriage between Denis Eady and

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of drug taking in *Ethan Frome*, see “Wharton’s ‘Others’: Addiction and Intimacy” by Dale Bauer in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (119-27).

Mattie is to occur: *"I wouldn't ever have it said that I stood in the way of a poor girl like Mattie marrying a smart fellow like Denis Eady"* (EF 48).

In this scene, Zeena also makes it clear that she has observed her husband not only shaving every day but also neglecting the mill since Mattie's arrival at the farm: *"I guess you're always late, now you shave every morning"* (EF 48), which is more disturbing, even frightening, than *"any vague insinuations about Denis Eady"* (EF 48). Clearly, Zeena or anybody from the community of Starkfield would expect Mattie to explore good chances in her quest for marriage in order to survive. As seen in the opening scene of the narrator's vision, she has already been flirting with Denis Eady going to the church dances regularly; therefore, she could easily have married and joined the well-fed matrons of Starkfield village. However, Mattie Silver is attracted to a married man: Ethan Frome, the husband of her distant cousin and the only one to offer shelter at a time when all other relatives turned away.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, after the church dance, as Ethan observes, Mattie refuses Denis Eady's offer to drive her back to the farm in his cutter although *"she let Denis Eady lead out the horse, climb into the cutter and fling back the bearskin to make room for her at his side"* (EF 51). In the meantime, Ethan waits anxiously as she scans the darkness for him; only after Mattie refuses Eady's offer for a second time and starts walking alone in the darkness does Ethan appear in the black shade of the Varnum spruces, slipping *"an arm through hers, as Eady had done"* (EF 52), which – as soon will be shown – indicates a dependence on him beyond walking on snow or doing daily housework.

**"There's lots of things a hired girl could do that come awkward to me still"**

Ethan does his best to assist Mattie by completing as many of her chores as possible. Yet he knows that she remains unsuited for the housework required of her and lately his wife Zeena started to *"grumble increasingly over the housework and found oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl's inefficiency"* (EF 47). It appears Zeena is not wrong in her complaints as not only is she quite *"forgetful"* and *"dreamy"* (EF 47) but also she does not *"take the matter [housekeeping] seriously"* as domesticity *"did not interest her"* (EF 47). As a result, Mattie, who did not have any

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<sup>8</sup> As Elizabeth Ammons in her work *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* suggests, Mattie's choice of men has consequences: *"The fact that Wharton cripples Mattie, but will not let her die, reflects not the author's but the culture's cruelty. Like Lily Bart at the opposite end of the social scale, Mattie Silver has not been prepared for an economically independent life. The system is designed to keep her a parasite or a drudge, or both"* (152–153).

talent or training for housekeeping, is constantly supported by Ethan who “*did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire, carrying in the wood overnight, and neglecting the mill for the farm that he might help her about the house during the day*” (EF 47). She rarely completes her daily tasks; however, rather than listening to Zeena complain, Ethan steps in and “*supplement[s] her unskilled efforts*” (EF 47) as Ethan relates. Knowing that Mattie has neither natural aptitude nor training for the housework required of her, Ethan fetches wood, washes floors and even churns butter (EF 47). Gradually, Zeena realizes that her husband has been completing many of Mattie’s chores as he neglects his duties in the mill.

As Zeena gradually realizes both her husband’s infatuation with Mattie and her intolerable inefficiency in the household, she becomes more vocal in her dissatisfaction, which makes Mattie’s situation even more precarious. As Ethan contemplates, Mattie cannot support herself in the modern world because for this purpose [of making her way in the world] her equipment, though varied, was inadequate. She could trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite ‘Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight,’ and play ‘*The Lost Chord*’ and a *pot-pourri* from ‘*Carmen*’” (EF 58). Here it is clear that Mattie’s accomplishments are distinctly genteel in nature, intended to charm a husband rather than impress an employer or maintain a household. When Mattie first entered Starkfield a year previously, as Ethan remembers, Mattie had been a “*colorless slip of a thing*” (EF 57) at the train station, frail from months of work in Stamford. Ethan cannot imagine how she would help Zeena with the household chores (EF 47). The subsequent year on the farm seems to restore her however, but she remains financially insecure and still entirely dependent on Zeena for her board.

The anonymous male narrator associates her fragile, vulnerable situation with the images of birds. For example, during their walk home after the church dance, “[t]he motions of her mind were as incalculable as the flit of a bird” (EF 53).<sup>9</sup> And when she sews in the romantic dinner scene in Zeena’s absence: “*while he sat in fascinated contemplation of the way in which her hands went up and down above the strip of stuff, just as he had seen a pair of birds make short perpendicular flights over a nest they were building*” (EF 74). Birds have connotations of gentleness, liveliness and joyfulness but at the same time timidity and fragility. To Ethan,

<sup>9</sup> For more detailed information on the symbolism of birds, see *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* by Michael Ferber (25). See also “Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*,” by Bernard (180).



Mattie is not a “fretter” (EF 46), in other words, she does not complain like his wife Zeena. Since her arrival, Mattie has become healthier and prettier and at the same time with her youth and positive energy, she warmed and brightened Ethan’s life. The fact that birds can also fly can be associated with freedom and independence, which is something Ethan has been yearning for since he came back to the farm upon his father’s sudden death. Therefore, Mattie seems to be the symbol of freedom and all the things he has always wanted to achieve. However, as Ethan regains consciousness after the accident, he hears “a small frightened cheep like a field mouse” (EF 109, Wharton’s emphasis). The noise comes from Mattie – his last hope for escape – who is actually in terrible pain. As a result of the unsuccessful suicide attempt, bird-like Mattie now becomes a furtive creature, soft and defenseless but at the same time common and earthbound, being trapped on the farm with her broken body, just like Zeena and Ethan. The imagery conveys Mattie’s fragility and vulnerability, which are qualities that might have awakened a protective instinct in Ethan.

**“I guess we’ll never let you go, Matt,”**

Associated with imagery of summer and nature, Mattie evokes youthful vigor and beauty. Her surname, associated with feminine energy, suggests luster which soon attracts not only Ethan Frome, for whom “the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth” (EF 46) but also Denis Eady. Ethan’s perception of Mattie’s face is “like a window that has caught the sunset” (EF 47) when he watches her dancing in the church. Later, when Ethan reveals to Mattie that he had been hiding while she was talking to Denis Eady, “her wonder and his laughter ran together like spring rills in a thaw” (EF 52). During their romantic dinner in Zeena’s absence, when Ethan reminds her of their plans of coasting the following night: “She laughed with pleasure, her head tilted back, the lamplight sparkling on her lips and teeth” (EF 73). In the same scene, Ethan thinks her face seems “like a wheat-field under a summer breeze” when “he [Ethan] kept his eyes fixed on her, marvelling at the way her face changed with each turn of their talk” (EF 73). Once again, Ethan is transfixed by Mattie, just as he had been when Zeena – sitting at the table in her best dress, with a small piece of luggage at her side – had tried to explain why she must immediately visit a new doctor in Bettsbridge (EF 60).

The color red attributed to Mattie also stresses the image of her as a young, attractive and eye-catching woman who arouses passion especially when she wears a red scarf or puts a red ribbon on her hair. The color red has always carried connotations of passion and sexual sin, hence there are terms like “scarlet woman” (in the contemporary moral climate, a “whore” or “promiscuous woman”). The color red also implies the threat of Mattie’s attractiveness as her sparkling presence in the story stands out against the dark, cold setting of the village, Starkfield.<sup>10</sup> She wears the red scarf at the dance and afterwards while walking home with Ethan, who finds in Mattie’s presence “life-giving warmth” (EF 54). To Ethan, even the family graveyard, hitherto a reminder of his entrapment, seems a pleasing symbol of “continuance and stability” (EF 54). He desires no changes in his life as long as he keeps Mattie with him: “I guess we’ll never let you go, Matt,” (EF 54) he whispered, as though even the dead, lovers once, must conspire with him to keep her. Also, brushing by the graves, he thought: “We’ll always be living here together, and some day she’ll lie there beside me” (EF 54). Here Mattie’s situation becomes a dark and hopeless fantasy, her dependence is underscored by the expression “let you go.” It is also notable how “we” have authority over Mattie. The triangle has already established a structure and a destiny, foreshadowing the entrapment of all three on the Frome Farm.

Then in Chapter Four, when Zeena leaves the town overnight to see a doctor the next morning, Ethan starts fantasizing about an evening alone with Mattie. For example, as soon as Zeena leaves the town, Ethan thinks, the kitchen looks “warm and bright” in the winter sunshine while Mattie is “washing up the dishes, humming one of the dance tunes of the night before” (EF 62). It is interesting here that Ethan must have watched Mattie many times to learn the right order of her actions, as is revealed by the words, “watching her tidy up and then settle down to her sewing,” (EF 62). Mattie is presented to the reader most of the time through Ethan’s love-stricken gaze and here the narrative invites the reader to join in his admiration and even voyeurism. All day anxious to return before nightfall, Ethan contemplates how the kitchen with Mattie moving in it looks “homelike” again (EF 62).

Approaching his house on the same evening, he sees “a light twinkling in the house above him” (EF 67) and imagines Mattie preparing herself for dinner: “She’s up in her room,” he said to himself, “fixing herself up for supper” (EF 67). When he finds the door locked, he rattles the handle “violently” (EF 67) and then stands “in

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<sup>10</sup> For more detailed information on the symbolism of the color red, see Ferber (169).

*the darkness expecting to hear her step*" (EF 68); he even calls out her name with joy: "Hello Matt!" (EF 68) Here it is obvious that the scene of the previous night is repeated: "So strange was the precision with which the incidents of the previous evening were repeating themselves that he half expected, when he heard the key turn, to see his wife before him on the threshold" (EF 68). But when the door opens, it is the glowing Mattie who faces him:

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. (EF 68)

As clearly seen above, the narrative stresses the image of Mattie as a young and attractive woman, whose appearance at the kitchen door seems to kindle Ethan's lust and passion for his wife's cousin. The repetition of the scene perhaps also reinforces the contrast between his *de-feminized, dried-up* and *overly thin* wife, and Mattie – who epitomizes fertility and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Smiling on the spot where Zeena stood only the night before, Mattie appears radiant to him: "through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon" which "transformed and glorified her" and thus she "seemed to Ethan taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion" (EF 68). Ethan often thinks Mattie's hair is one of her most beautiful features representing love and sexuality – for instance, Ethan wants to touch her hair and "tell her that it smelt of the woods" in the scene where they declare their love for each other at Shadow Pond just before the sledding accident (EF 103). When Zeena had opened the door the previous evening, the kitchen had "the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night" (EF 56). Under Mattie's influence it now exudes a sunny uplifting vitality. Here one must note how Ethan's romanticized image of Mattie conforms to the ideal of nineteenth century American womanhood with its four principal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on female barrenness in *Ethan Frome*, see *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing*, Chapter Two (The Woman Behind the Door) by Candace Waid (53-83).

<sup>12</sup> See Barbara Welter's essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," for True Womanhood and the Cult of Domesticity and her work, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

festive table Mattie has set for their meal together also fills him with quiet satisfaction: “it was carefully laid for supper, with fresh dough-nuts, stewed blueberries and his favorite pickles in a dish of gay red glass” (EF 68). The closing image, the sensuous coloration, is practically erotic.<sup>13</sup>

**“Oh, Ethan, Ethan—it’s all to pieces! What will Zeena say?”**

Mattie admires Ethan’s observations, thoughts and knowledge of the stars and rock formations and shares his appreciation of nature with wide-eyed wonder: “She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will” (EF 46). There was one time when she described “the cold red of sunset behind winter hills, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow” (EF 46) as it is also clear in the line “it looks just as if it was painted” (EF 46), which makes Mattie “his secret soul” (EF 46). It is Mattie, not Zeena, who helps Ethan fulfill contemporary gender codes and expectations by feeling manly and strong.<sup>14</sup>

The episode of the broken pickle dish is a significant example of her submissive nature, one of the desirable traits in a true woman mentioned earlier. At the supper table, “the two leaned forward at the same moment and their hands on the handle of the jug. Mattie’s hand was underneath, and Ethan kept his clasped on it a moment longer than was necessary” (EF 69). As if trying to stop “this unusual demonstration” Zeena’s cat leaps from her chair onto the table and the pickle dish falls to the floor and shatters. Mattie immediately starts crying “on her knees by the fragment” (EF 70) and trying to explain why the case is so serious: “she [Zeena] never meant it should be used, not even when there was company; and I had to get up on the step-ladder to reach it down from the top shelf of the china-closet, where she keeps it with all her best things, and of course she’ll want to know why I did it—” (EF 70). It is clear that although Mattie knew its value to Zeena, she removed it from the closet to please Ethan, a married man who displays a “sudden authority” and commands Mattie: “Here, give them to me” (EF 70). When he sees “how his tone

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on the imagery of the red-pickle dish, see Bernard (182).

<sup>14</sup> See *Women in Literature: Reading Through the Lens of Gender*, “Frozen Lives: Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome (1911)” by Melissa McFarland Pennel for a discussion of the gender codes and expectations in New England rural society at the turn of the century (102-04). See also *The Young Ladies Book* (1830) in which the passive virtues necessary in the nineteenth century women are summarized as: “It is certain that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind are required of her” (28).

*subdued her*" (EF 71), he feels a *"thrilling sense of mastery"* (EF 71) because she obeys him and *"she did not even ask what he had done"* (EF 71) with the broken bits. The narrator suggests this thrill over Mattie is similar to Ethan's feeling of *"steering a big log down the mountain to his mill"* (EF 43). Perhaps Ethan's attraction to Mattie depends in part on her submissiveness to him, which makes him feel commanding, powerful and assertive.

To avoid any crisis, he restores the dish to its cupboard, placing the *"pieces together with such accuracy of touch that a close inspection convinced him of the impossibility of detecting from below that the dish was broken"* (EF 70). He plans to glue the glass together before Zeena's return and then to replace it with a lookalike, which looks like a brilliant, master plan, but he cannot heroically fix the broken dish before Zeena returns, and he is unable to come up with a plausible excuse when he is confronted about it. Likewise, when Zeena announces her decision of replacing Mattie with a hired girl, Ethan tries to shame Zeena into agreeing to keep Mattie on as he says: *"you may forget she's your kin but everybody else'll remember it. If you do a thing like that what do you suppose folks'll say of you?"* (EF 85) However, Zeena silences him by referring to the village gossip about Mattie's continuing presence in their home: *"I know well enough what they say of my having kept her here as long as I have"* (EF 85). These words of Zeena's strike him with the force of *"a knife-cut across the sinews,"* and he is rendered as helpless and weak as Mattie (EF 85). Throughout the novel, as the narrative reveals, Mattie struggles with the household chores; hence, she is in constant fear of displeasing Zeena and several times she asks Ethan if Zeena's intention is to send her away as discussed earlier. Mattie might have heard the gossip surrounding herself and Denis Eady as well as the rumors about her stay with the Fromes; one might surmise that her fear of dismissal from the Farm stems in part from her understanding of the destructive potential of small-talk in a place like Starkfield.

Upon discovering that her most treasured wedding gift is used by Mattie to *"make the supper-table pretty"* (EF 89), Zeena cannot help expressing her feelings of anger, disappointment and betrayal: *"you waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use it, not even when the minister come to dinner, or Aunt Martha Pierce come over from Bettsbridge"* (EF 90-91).<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the extra effort Mattie has made to impress Ethan with

<sup>15</sup> In "Frozen Lives: Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome (1911)" Pennel asserts that believing Ethan's power to provide her security in the farm, Mattie makes the most of her opportunity to "play house" with Ethan and uses Zeena's red pickle dish (103).

a pretty table can be interpreted as an attempt to express her feelings of love and passion for him, but at the same time it proves their infidelity indirectly and underlines that Zeena should have listened to her folks: *“If I'd 'a' listened to folks, you'd 'a' gone before now, and this wouldn't 'a' happened”, she said; and gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body* (EF 90). Believing that Mattie is responsible for the breaking of both the pickle dish and her marriage, Zeena rightfully blames her: *“You’re a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it. It’s the way your father begun, and I was warned of it when I took you, and I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at ‘em – and now you’ve took from me the one I cared for most of all –”* (EF 90). Obviously, this scene fuels Zeena’s determination to replace Mattie with a hired girl and the sins of the father once again rob Mattie of any status among the family.

After Zeena’s departure with the broken pickle-dish, Mattie temporarily disappears and the narrative only follows Ethan, alone in his study, where he decides that he and Mattie should go to the West like the *“young fellow of about his own age”* from a different Berkshire village did a few years earlier when he divorced his wife for another woman (EF 92). Ethan seems to be charmed by the memory of this couple’s recent visit home to Shadd’s Falls as they are also accompanied by their daughter *“with fair curls who wore a gold locket and was dressed like a princess”* (EF 92). Here, Ethan struggles between his desire for Mattie and his sense of duty toward his wife who is deliberately framed as horribly shrewish and devoid of any redeeming attributes. On the other hand, throughout the novel Mattie is portrayed as kind, gentle, radiant and fertile befitting the traditional gender roles in any society; therefore, it is as if Ethan’s desire to leave Zeena for Mattie should be completely justified.

However, as soon as Ethan sees the train fares, he acknowledges his complete entrapment in Starkfield once again since the farm and mill are already heavily mortgaged, which means he has nothing to leave Zeena and he lacks the money even to pay for the train tickets that they will need for a new life together: *“The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders hand-cuffing a convict. There was no way out—none. He was a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished”* (EF 93). When Ethan says *“his one ray of light was to be extinguished,”* he obviously means the end of his hopes of a happily married future with Mattie, but at the same time he might be foreshadowing their suicide attempt,

as a result of which, Mattie's life as a young, lively and radiant woman will be "extinguished."

**"Ethan, where'll I go if I leave you? I don't know how to get along alone"**

In the next two chapters, the reader follows again only Ethan who is presented as a lifelong prisoner struggling ineffectually against his bonds. It is painfully clear to him that Mattie has nowhere to go when she leaves his farm and that he cannot do anything to rescue her. When he watches his neighbor depart for the station with Mattie's trunk, he himself feels he is in the grip of forces beyond his control: "It seemed to Ethan that his heart was bound with cords which an unseen hand was tightening with every tick of the clock" (EF 99). He resents that he is forced to play the role of "helpless spectator at Mattie's banishment" (EF 95; my emphasis). Yet, because of his strict code of ethics, he chooses not to lie to the Hales to get the money to run away with Mattie. Instead, "he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him" (EF 97). Even though he writes his goodbye letter to Zeena and talks to Mrs. Hale afterwards, his conscience does not allow him to follow his wishes; hence, in a way, he chooses to be a *spectator* watching Mattie even when she is on the verge of being dismissed from the farm, as he has always done.

Ethan struggles against the customs and rules of society, fighting an inner battle between what he feels he needs in order to be happy and what he feels he must do to appease his family and society. Mattie also seems to recognize the struggle/dilemma he finds himself in as her note to him reveals after the scene where Zeena announces her dismissal of Mattie: "Don't trouble, Ethan" (EF 91). As both Mattie and Ethan understand, there is no actual escape from social imprisonment; thus Ethan repeatedly assures Mattie he would act decisively only if he could. On one occasion he, for instance, says, "You know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you if I could," and adds, "Oh, Matt ... if I could ha' gone with you now I'd ha' done it" (EF 103). As darkness falls, he grows more conscious about the limitations on his freedom: "I'm tied hand and foot, Matt. There isn't a thing I can do" (EF 104). On the other hand, Mattie, who has always been insecure about her position at the Fromes, seems to experience an internal conflict as she does not know what she will do as she insists more and more forcefully that she cannot survive on her own: "Ethan, where'll I go if I leave you? I don't know how to get along

*alone*” (EF 107). Aware of her bleak future Mattie, who is not trained to be a part of the urban working class, has no money and no connections to support and help her find employment as Ethan contemplates: “Despair seized him [Ethan] at the thought of her setting out alone to renew the weary quest for work. In the only place where she was known she was surrounded by indifference or animosity; and what chance had she, inexperienced and untrained, among the million bread-seekers of the cities?” (EF 87). Here Wharton seems to highlight the notion that women, as weak and delicate creatures, could easily fall prey to temptations, violence and vulgarity inherent to the world of work. Obviously, she also criticizes the ideals of womanhood that restrict women to home where they took charge of all housework and childcare, submitting to duty and to men.

Although Ethan yearns for feelings of manliness and power throughout the novel, he is not described as a heroic figure or a romantic male protagonist who saves a poor female protagonist from death or any kind of disaster; he cannot even save himself.<sup>16</sup> Every time Ethan seems to be on the verge of action, he finds himself facing some obstacle and instead of facing it, he gives in, all the while blaming the external forces that are thwarting him without ever recognizing his own lack of courage. At the novel’s climax, it is interestingly Mattie – confronting her inability to part from Ethan – who takes control, suggesting a suicide pact whereby Ethan kills them both at the foot of the icy hill:

She remained motionless, as if she had not heard him. Then she snatched her hands from his, threw her arms about his neck, and pressed a sudden drenched cheek against his face. “Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!”

“Down where?”

“The coast. Right off,” she panted. “So 't we'll never come up any more.”

“Matt! What on earth do you mean?”

She put her lips close against his ear to say: “Right into the big elm. You said you could. So 't we'd never have to leave each other anymore.” (EF 107)

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<sup>16</sup> In “Imagery and symbolism in Ethan Frome,” Bernard describes Ethan as a weak character who is not tragic “because he is a man of great potential subdued and trapped by forces beyond his capacity” but rather “his tragedy is entirely of his own making” (180).



When Ethan assents to her proposal of suicide, he insists on sitting in the front of the sled, using the excuse of wanting to feel Mattie holding him (EF 109), which could be seen as a chivalrous act, a masculine one showing that Ethan attempts to protect Mattie from the impending collision since whoever sits in the front of the sled is most likely to “fetch it” (EF 109). “Yielding to the power of his voice” (EF 109; my emphasis), Mattie sits behind him “obediently” (EF, 105; my emphasis) clasping her arms about him (EF 109), which may have saved her from death but assured her physical mutilation. Here Ethan’s and Mattie’s failed suicide underlines their lack of control over their destinies: Mattie is trapped on an isolated farm for the next twenty four years. Mattie dreams of spending her life with Ethan and ironically, her illusion becomes a reality. Once afraid to leave Ethan, paralyzed in her chair, she does spend her life with Ethan, but as an invalid cared for by Zeena, not as Ethan’s wife, as she had imagined.

**“I thought I’d be frozen stiff before I could wake her up”**

When Ethan and Mattie fail in their suicide attempt, their lives change irrevocably. One of the more ironic consequences is the reversal in the two women’s roles as invalid and caregiver. When the narrator crosses the threshold out of his vision into the Frome kitchen, Mattie has become the hated woman who waits at home. Obviously, the accident forces Zeena to exchange her “sickly” identity with Mattie, who now assumes the permanently dependent state. In time, the two women in Ethan Frome’s life come to resemble each other closely: living in isolation and entrapment for more than twenty years, they become so indistinguishable that Ethan’s introductions on the night of the blizzard actually confuse the narrator. Mattie’s appearance makes this similarity explicit: “Her hair was as gray as her companion’s, her face as bloodless and shrivelled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples” (EF 111).

Obviously, pain transforms Mattie into an old woman before her time and all she could offer now is woe and complaint. Accordingly, the woman “droning querulously” (EF 42) at the end of the prologue, as the men enter the house, turns out to be not Zeena but Mattie whining about her: “It’s on’y just been made up this very minute. Zeena fell asleep and slep’ ever so long, and I thought I’d be frozen stiff before I could wake her up and get her to ‘tend to it” (EF 111). It is particularly striking that when Mattie – now almost demonized by the male narrator with her “bright witch-like stare” (EF 111) – has exchanged places with Zeena, she has become more vocal while Zeena serves her “without appearing to hear the accusation

brought against her" (EF 111). Here Mattie's central irony is this: Only when her economic reliance becomes extreme physical need, does she secure her place in the Frome household, almost at Zeena's expense.<sup>17</sup> This transformation into Zeena is foreshadowed in the romantic dinner scene where Ethan suggests Mattie sit on Zeena's rocking-chair so that he can see her better: however, Ethan is momentarily alarmed as Mattie's head "detached itself against the patchwork cushion that habitually framed his wife's gaunt countenance" (EF 72; my emphasis) because "it was almost the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder" (EF 72). Transformed Mattie is now associated with witches and witchcraft, hinting at a kind of mysterious and fearful power over people like the narrator.

As already mentioned, when the male narrator starts forming his prejudiced vision, Mattie Silver is presented as a charming young woman full of joy and life with a sparkling personality whereas Zeena Frome is portrayed as a mean, grumpy and sickly figure who stops her husband from realizing his hopes, aspirations, and dreams. In Gilbert and Gubar's (79) mind, Zeena is a monster, a witch or a madwoman while Mattie is an angel. However, both marginalized in the narrative, Zeena Frome – once the professional, autonomous nurse "doctoring in the county" (EF 37) and Mattie Silver – once the unskilled, inefficient but young and genteel woman – are portrayed as witchlike figures in the epilogue. It is particularly striking that just like Zeena, Mattie is also demonized by the narrator as her face is "as bloodless and shriveled" (EF 111) like her companion's and "her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare" (EF 111) after she has exchanged places with Zeena.

At the end of the novel, Wharton seems to be parodying the binary opposition of angels and demons in Victorian novels: Zeena and Mattie who are presented as rivals are equally trapped and powerless in their dependency on the single male figure, Ethan Frome. This can be interpreted as part of Wharton's criticism of the conservative New England villages where isolation as well as hard farm conditions

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<sup>17</sup> In the epilogue, the narrator attributes to Mattie's eyes "the bright witch-like stare" which can result from spinal injuries (EF, 111); in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Ammons interprets *Ethan Frome* as a fairy tale. When the novel begins, as she argues, Mattie is described as a fairy tale princess but ends as a witch who "becomes Zeena's double rather than Ethan's complement" (67). Ammons also reads Mattie's transformation into Zeena as Wharton's criticism of modern American society: "Stated simply, Zeena Frome is the witch that conservative New England will make of unskilled young Mattie; and Wharton's inverted fairy tale about the multiplication of witches in Ethan's life, a story appropriately told by a young man whose job is to build the future, finally serves as a lesson in sociology. Witches do exist, Wharton's tale says, and the culture creates them" (77).

turn young women into witch-like figures.<sup>18</sup> Within *Ethan Frome*, the intertwined fates of Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver dramatize the inescapable influence of the social environment on female personality and behavior in the disparate settings of Berkshire villages, which seems to convey Wharton's view of modern New England. Concerned with women's inability to maintain an independent existence outside of marriage, Wharton also seems to criticize the expectations and limitations that *fin de siècle* American society imposes on young, helpless women like Mattie Silver. Young women are treated as beautiful objects for the male aesthetic appreciation and whether they are married or not, they are expected to conform to the ideals of nineteenth century American womanhood with its principles – piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. Women who fall short in any of these virtues tend to be demonized like the witch-like figures Wharton depicts in *Ethan Frome*.

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<sup>18</sup> Ammons' interpretation of the story also focuses on the social situation of women in the novel: "If Ethan's life is hard, and it is, woman's is harder yet; and it is sad but not surprising that isolated, housebound women make men feel the burden of their misery. He is their only connection with the outer world, the vast economic and social system that consigns them to solitary, monotonous, domestic lives from which their only escape is madness or death" (72).

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