



UNVEILING WHARTON'S HEARTS: LOVE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract: Renowned American novelist and short story writer Edith Wharton (1862–1937) is recognised as a literary great whose writings offer sharp social commentary on the intricacies of the Gilded Age and early 20th-century America. Wharton, who was raised in New York's elite society, was affected by her affluent upbringing and astute observations of social subtleties in her widely read novels and short tales. Wharton's creative contributions are distinguished by an examination of the societal restraints that people, especially women, endure within the inflexible systems of class, marriage, and tradition. She was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her ability to shed everlasting light on the human condition is just as important to her lasting legacy as her creative accomplishments. Edith Wharton's novels intricately dissect the theme of love within the societal confines of the Gilded Age and early 20th-century America. Her nuanced exploration of relationships brings to light the profound influence of societal expectations, class divisions, and personal choices on the characters' experiences of love. Wharton's works consistently portray how social norms and class distinctions shape romantic relationships. Characters, particularly those in higher social strata, grapple with restricted choices imposed by societal expectations. The pursuit of love becomes entangled with considerations of wealth, status, and reputation.

Key words - Love, Society, Relationships, Sexuality, Struggles

I. INTRODUCTION

The books of Edith Wharton frequently offer a critical analysis of love in the context of Gilded Age and early 20th-century American society. Her careful examination of relationships shows how the characters' experiences of love are impacted by personal decisions, social expectations, and economic differences. The impact of social conventions and socioeconomic differences on love relationships is a recurring theme in Wharton's writing. Characters frequently discover that social expectations limit their options, especially those from higher social classes.

The search for love becomes complicated by factors like reputation, riches, and prestige. Themes of unrequited or forbidden love are common in Wharton's books. Characters may find themselves drawn to people from different social classes or encounter criticism from society if they pursue relationships that are not normal. The conflict between one's own wishes and social conventions complicates how love is portrayed. In Wharton's books, marriage is frequently shown as a social compact rather than as a relationship founded only on love. Characters may get married to fulfil expectations from family, society, or money, which can result in tense and unhappy marriages.

Wharton frequently explores love in tragically poignant ways. Characters who follow forbidden romantic relationships or disobey social norms risk grave consequences; this reflects the hard reality of living in a society that upholds rigid standards. Wharton regularly sets the demands of society against the desires of the individual. Characters struggle with the tension between following social conventions and pursuing their own interests, making decisions that may result in rejection by others or in isolation. Emotional repression is frequently required due to prevailing social expectations, especially when it comes to romantic relationships. Characters may hide their own emotions or stay in unhappy relationships, illustrating the psychological cost of following social norms. Wharton is renowned for her delicate and nuanced writing. Subtext, gestures, and the unsaid are commonly used to illustrate the complexities of love, which adds layers of complexity to relationship portrayals.

II. LOVE IN EDITH WHARTON'S NARRATIVES

Edith gives us with a lovely romance between *The House of Mirth* (1905), one of her other great novels, and its two central characters, Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart. It is remarkable that the novel's main narrative motif revolves around their unrequited romance. However, Selden's masculinity and Lily Bart's femininity are flimsy constructs, and the narrative presents their heterosexual passion in an unclear way. Compared to her passion for objects, Lily Bart's passion for men is far less convincingly portrayed. As for him, both Wharton's feminist readers and herself denounce him for his general lack of courage when it comes to love and his emotional instability with Lily.

Lawrence Selden is especially enthralled by the magnificent spectacle of Lily Bart. Selden is a refined lawyer with exacting tastes who enjoys his spectatorship as a kind of slow entertainment. In actuality, Selden better captures the mechanics of visual desire in modern culture because he cannot purchase Lily, despite his appreciation for her. Upon initial observation, Selden could

appear to be an improbable embodiment of masculine dominance and control. He has little money and, as Wharton points out, "nothing to give" Lily; he informs her that he cannot afford Lily. (72). But Selden is a collector and connoisseur who invests in beautiful things just as much as a man with no money to spend; he learnt to enjoy the "luxury and charm" (152). Selden received this appreciation from his mother. In actuality, Selden better captures the mechanics of visual desire in modern culture because he cannot purchase Lily, despite his appreciation for her. She has the ability to make or break her fortunes, but she cannot keep going in the same direction.

At this point, she unintentionally witnesses her exit from Gus Trenor's house and is abruptly confronted with his raw sexuality. He comes to the conclusion that Lily is uncontrollably irresponsible with her reputation after learning that Gus's wife is abroad. He storms out of town in disgust, offering no marriage proposal or reason for his abrupt change of heart. And so, the joyful ending to this lovely love story was not possible. Lily is punished in *The House of Mirth* for her inability to recognize societal trends. As Edward Wagerknecht points out,

"Lily is not punished for her sins but for her beauty. Mrs. Wharton understood that society, which is profoundly corrupt, never objects to evil but only to indiscretion. You may be as wicked as you like, but you must play the game according to the rules. This Lily cannot do because she is above it. In the scandal which wrecks her she is wholly innocent, the victim of an unscrupulous woman inside her, who was not worthy to undo the latches of her shoes. If she had been able to stoop the vulgar weapon of blackmail which chance had put into her hands, she could have crushed her adversary, or, failing that have made herself impregnable. And the man she loved could not save her for he was a poor creature." (259-58)

The era in which Edith lived was evolving quite quickly. The Industrial Revolution and 'The Bill of Rights' encouraged women to pursue individual freedom. Her two novels, *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Reef*, describe love even if financial pleasure was taking precedence over practically every aspect of life and the concept of "love" became less important. Ammons comments, "---- in *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Reef* love as we have been taught to expect it, as it is our fairy tales with their eternally happy endings, is Wharton's subject." (57)

Wharton's personal love poetry may seem clichéd or conventional, but that's likely because she chose the ideal person to provide her with the traditional experience, which is what she was really searching for. Having relationships was almost a vocation for her lover, Morton Fullerton. He was being blackmailed by a lady he had slept with when he started seeing Edith Wharton, and he was also formally betrothed to his cousin—a woman half his age who had grown up thinking she was his sister.

Melodrama is not an extravagant term to describe Wharton's love affair with Fullerton, which for three years combined the usual stress of secrecy with the novel ingredients of blackmail, peripheral incest and letters pulse - taking. They amicably parted as lovers probably sometime in 1910; Fullerton's young cousin married someone else, learning him restless and prompting him to change a number of relationships in his life, including the one with Edith Wharton. She in her time, not to be too blunt, had also by 1910 got what she wanted out of the liaison and, as Lewis puts it, she began to take a fresh and clear-eyed look at her lover. She appears to have observed not only Fullerton's obvious flaws but also her own illusions. Once more, Edith could no longer rely on Lewis since by the summer of 1910, Morton Fullerton had become the man of her dreams. The man Fullerton had loved and who had loved her remained untrustworthy, feeble, and alluring. However, they were not to engage in any further close business." (287) Edith Wharton's romance, her magnificent love affair, lost its allure after she managed to break out from the dream.

Wharton's evolving argument on romantic love is enriched by *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Reef*, two novels written soon after the affair with Fullerton. Specifically, they examine fairy tale fantasies of romantic rescue and escape. Wharton was not wholly unfamiliar with the subject. Apart from the initial short stories that portrayed love as a false method to flee from personal sorrow, *The House of Mirth* is a reversal of the classic "Cinderella" tale, with the heroine falling from grace to poverty rather than the other way around. Yet" Wharton liked to say that fairy-tales did not have much effect on her as a child, that she was more influenced by the classics." (60)

Fairy tale vision permeates both *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Reef*, which first address love from a male perspective before shifting to a female one. Ethan envisions moving west to a new location and a fresh life after marrying Mattie Silver, a virgin. In *The Reef*, Sophy Viner—who is generally against marriage—intends to wed Owen Leath in order to fulfil her dream of financial independence thanks to his princely wealth. The more traditional Anna Leath, on the other hand, never doubts the institution of marriage and thinks that by marrying George Darrow, she will experience life to the fullest, something she was not in her first, loveless marriage.

Wharton's conclusion is the same in both books—fairy tale visions of love and marriage enslave rather than free men and women—and none of these illusions withstand reality. This book is a true love story because to *Ethan Frome* (1911) 's vivid images. In particular, this book's visual network makes reference to Snow White from the classic tale. There are clear similarities between the traditional fairy tale about a young girl whose jealous step-mother tries to prevent her from growing up to be a healthy, married young woman and the frozen landscape, the emphasis on sevens, Mattie Silver's physical attributes (black hair, red cheeks, white skin), her persecution by a witch like Zeena (an older woman who takes the girl in after her mother dies), and Mattie's role as housekeeper. Even though Wharton is not copying this well-known fairy tale; rather, she uses well-known aspects of Snow White as touchstones for a fresh, unique fairy tale, the implicit comparison between Zeena's victory in *Ethan Frome* (1911) and the stepmother's defeat in Snow-White undoubtedly adds to the story's terror for many readers without their even realizing it. The lesson most fairy tales impart is that witches ultimately lose. Ogres no longer prey on children and Snow-White heroines. They are saved by someone. Here's a taste of *Ethan Frome* (1911) 's horror:

Wharton's modern fairy tale for grownups does not follow the genre's usual structure, even while it is faithful to conventional models in that it confronts fundamental fears while also imparting a lesson about actual world. The couple's happily ever after is short lived. The sorceress triumphs.

Conversely, *The Reef* has been described as a drama. It is perhaps Mrs. Wharton's longest, most Jamesian book. After being delayed by unforeseen events on his way to France to meet the woman he intends to marry George Darrow in Paris, he lets himself get sucked into a reckless relationship with a young girl. A few months after joining Mrs. Leath, he discovers that Sophy Viner has been integrated into her family as a governess and fiancée of Mrs. Leath's stepson. The circumstance that all four of them find themselves in is examined in this novel; although no marriage occurs, the girl is finally awarded a palm tree for her bravery and kindness. It is noteworthy that Charlotte Perkins Gilman expressed her dissatisfaction with the severely constrained

and skewed portrayal of adult experience in literature in *The Man-Made Word*, her 1911 work, just prior to the publication of *The Reef*.

Gilman comments briefly on contemporary adventure fiction and moves on: "Now for the main branch - the Love Story. Ninety per cent of fiction is in this line; this is pre-eminently the major interest of life- given in fiction. What is the love-story as rendered by this art? It is the story of the pre-marital struggle. It is the Adventures of Him in Pursuit of Her -and it stops when he gets her." (96-97) Gilman continues, "The 'love' of our stories is man's love of woman.... Woman's love for man, as currently treated in fiction is largely a reflex; it is the way he wants her to feel, expects her to feel. Love and love and love - from 'first sight' to marriage. There it stops -just the fluttering ribbon of announcement-'and lived happily ever after'." (96-102)

The love story is the subject of Wharton's book, which is why Gilman found the "lived happily ever after" cliché so irritating. Despite *The Reef*'s many wonderful fairy-tale moments and aspirations, it does not finish pleasantly, much less happily ever after. It ends disastrously for everyone involved. *The Reef* is a work that stands in contrast to the upbeat adventure and love stories that dominated the literary landscape in the 1910s, with Harold Bell Wright's 1911 bestseller *The Winning of Barbara Worth* being the worst example. It is a plodding psychological book about love that is unambitious and unlovely. *The Reef* was not started earlier and set aside, in contrast to *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Custom of the Country*, the books that surround it in this incredibly busy moment in her career. Wharton wrote the novel entirely from scratch in a very short amount of time and under very difficult circumstances, the most significant of which being the total breakdown of her marriage. Just a few months before *Ethan Frome* (1911) made his debut in the August 1911 issue of Scribner's magazine; she began work on the novel in the spring of 1911 and completed it in August of that same year.

In actuality, love occurs in a state of tension throughout Edith Wharton's works. Love doesn't end with marriage; it doesn't exist outside of it. The two don't seem to be real. Being a woman is strongly weighed against sexual prejudice. The two most fitting characters that Wharton designed to suffer for their misperception of love are Lily Bart and Charily Royall. There are overtly sexual overtones to Ethan's dreams of Mattie in *Ethan Frome* (1911), including luxuriant flora, panting lips, and dewy tendrils. For a year, they have resided in the same home. They are definitely attracted to each other physically. They take pleasure in going on rides together, appreciating the outdoors, and spending time together. Maybe because they are not married, one can see their love blossoming.

The family was previously viewed in *The House of Mirth* as serving as both a source of communal authority and a constructor and transmitter of values. Because the woman in Edith Wharton's early fiction has not grown up sufficiently, her ability to love is inhibited, and love becomes a serious issue. In her fiction, the capacity for love is inextricably linked to the capacity to look a loved one in the eye and to face truth head-on. Because she avoids facing reality, Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* is a loser. Selden has been evaluating and critiquing Lily nonstop during their relationship. Selden predicts what she will do or say almost before she does or says it. However, there isn't a single time in which Lily gives him a critical glance. As a result, she is never able to evaluate him fairly and instead follows his idealistic vision of life mindlessly, which is also extremely dissimilar from the reality that she has been avoiding.

There are love-filled, stable partnerships in some of Edith Wharton's works of literature. The greatest illustration is Nettie Struther from *The House of Mirth*, who is a woman of the streets. Her spouse married her despite being aware of her past and created a small haven of bliss for their family. Lily sees existence as a continuous cycle for the first time in Nettie's kitchen, holding her baby. And according to Edith Wharton, a successful relationship can only be achieved when a man has faith and a woman has bravery.

The status of the American woman has evolved during the past century. They were no longer restricted in their lifestyle and conduct by social and familial norms, but rather enjoyed some degree of freedom. Edith Wharton recognized and captured this independence in her fiction. Lily and Mattie are connected via family and society. Not even members of one's own immediate family may enforce or gather societal critique. Women may now engage more fully as equals in a dynamic social structure, and the male-oriented culture is no longer able to repress them. The way that Edith Wharton portrayed love in her books, such as *The House of Mirth* (1805), *Ethan Frome* (1911) (1911), and *The Reef* (1912), shows a sophisticated examination of the difficulties and complications that love might present in the social settings in which her characters live. Wharton explores the complexities of romantic relationships in all of these works, illuminating how the characters' experiences of love are impacted by social expectations, class disparities, and individual decisions.

III. CONCLUSION

Wharton explores early 20th-century New York high society in *The House of Mirth* (1905). Lily Bart, the main character, aspires to love and social approval but is restricted by the strict demands of her class. The representation of love is entwined with themes of social conventions, riches, and prestige. Lily's romantic decisions and the ensuing fallout show how unstable love is in a culture that values appearances above all else.

In a little New England village, *Ethan Frome* (1911) examines the fatal results of unfulfilled love. Ethan, the main character, finds himself in a loveless marriage and grows fond of Mattie, the cousin of his wife. The book explores how the protagonists' ability to pursue and feel love is hindered by morality, responsibility, and cultural expectations. The harsh winter environment serves as a metaphor for the protagonists' lives' pervasive emotional coldness.

In the context of societal expectations, *The Reef* (1912) explores the issue of love and its complexity. The lives of Anna Leath and her romantic relationships are followed throughout the book. Wharton examines the effects of previous relationships and the difficulties of balancing one's own aspirations with those of society. The protagonists struggle with the fallout from their decisions, emphasizing the conflict between following social norms and finding personal fulfilment.

Edith Wharton deftly crafts a story that highlights the frailty of love in the face of societal constraints in each of her three works. Love is portrayed with more nuance in her works as characters negotiate society expectations, class limitations, and personal aspirations. This makes love an intriguing and central theme in all of her works. Together, the books provide a moving commentary on the difficulties and costs associated with finding love in the context of the era's social milieu.

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