Lonely in Lenox: Edith Wharton’s Literary Life in the Berkshires

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Abstract

Through Edith Wharton’s literary works, we discover and analyze Wharton’s feelings of entrapment, loneliness, and isolation in the Berkshires during her life at The Mount (her estate in Lenox, Massachusetts). We focus primarily on Ethan Frome, The Fruit of the Tree, and The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton to develop honest reflections of her character and the sense of her life in the Berkshires within her works. Without her experiences in the Berkshires, her literary legacy would not incorporate the aforementioned aspects of her works.

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ENGL 500: Edith Wharton

Life in the Berkshires: Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome

Edith Wharton’s literary legacy was enhanced and enriched by her brief time in the Berkshires. At her residence, the Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts, Wharton witnessed the lives of Berkshire people and the overall effects Berkshire living had on such citizens. Wharton’s decision to record her experience in the Berkshires through fiction reflected her belief that “previous literary renderings of the region had presented only a partial picture that failed to capture the harsh effects of its forbidding landscape” (Ljungquist xvii-xviii). Ethan Frome,
published in 1911, presents a direct picture of Berkshire life and illustrates certain autobiographical qualities, revealing Wharton’s innermost feelings about her stay at the Mount and her isolation and entrapment in Lenox.

_Ethan Frome_ provides a clear representation of Wharton’s impressions of Berkshire citizens and the Berkshire landscape. The characters in _Ethan Frome_ are ordinary citizens conditioned by the harsh Berkshire weather. The characters presented are lower and middle class people, counting the years of their lives in Starkfield, Massachusetts with each passing winter. In Wharton’s autobiography, _A Backward Glance_, she notes:

My two New England tales, ‘Ethan Frome’ and ‘Summer,’ were the result of explorations among villages still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence, and sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians. (153-154)

A member of the New York aristocracy, Wharton did not establish relationships with the people of Lenox, Massachusetts, which likely contributed to her sense of isolation in the Berkshires and accounts for the lack of upper-class characters in _Ethan Frome_. The novel is told through the point-of-view of a visiting narrator. To narrate Frome’s story, “Wharton chose someone from outside New England…a looker-on, an observer” much like herself (Ljungquist xix). Wharton establishes a sense of being isolated from the people of Starkfield as her narrator is the only one excluded from the secrets of Frome’s life. The drive to reveal the truth and to be welcomed into the secret knowledge of Starkfield life motivates the narrator to piece together the fragments of Frome’s story.
As the story progresses, the narrator arrives at Frome’s dilapidated home after attempting to travel through the harsh winter weather. The narrator becomes, in a sense, trapped at Frome’s home for the night, as the New England storm rages outside. The name “Starkfield” is applied to Wharton’s illustration of Lenox to enhance the barrenness of the Berkshire landscape and the harshness of the winters Frome endures. The story opens in the winter, and when it moves back in time to reveal the tragedy of Ethan Frome’s life, the story remains in the winter. This seasonal permanence illustrates “How much the wintry landscape has influenced the inner and outer lives of its inhabitants. Here, as with much of Wharton’s New England fiction, the lines between life and death are blurred” (Ljungquist xxxiii). While the narrator is new to the nature of Berkshire weather, Frome is described as having “…been in Starkfield too many winters” (Wharton 9). Frome’s entrapment in Starkfield is further emphasized when the narrator observes that “he seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface” (Wharton 13). Frome has gradually formed a unity with Starkfield - an unfortunate result of both his accident and his social class.

In addition to the overall Berkshire setting, the conditions of Frome’s life also illustrate elements of entrapment and reflect Wharton’s own situation during her Berkshire residence. Ethan Frome is a poor farmer, trying to produce a meager profit off of the family land. Despite his interest in science and the opportunity to study at a college, familial obligations to his sick mother prevent him from leaving Starkfield or the farm. He is prohibited by both his social class and his familial responsibilities. Wharton’s entrapment in Lenox is quite similar. Although her social class differed substantially from that of Frome’s, her inability to establish friendships with the Berkshire people left her lonely and isolated. Her obligations to her marriage also presented an obstacle in the way of her freedom. At the Mount, Wharton and her husband, Edward Robbins
Wharton, lived in relative mutual disdain. Wharton’s failing marriage is paralleled in *Ethan Frome* through Ethan’s marriage with Zenobia. Zeena Frome is both cold and callous, and prevents Ethan from pursuing his romantic interest in Mattie Silver, Zeena’s cousin. Mattie is hired to care for the ailing Mrs. Frome, and Ethan quickly finds himself enchanted by her youth, beauty, and radiance Ethan is trapped within his marriage and his poverty prevents him from affording two hired girls when Mrs. Frome decides to send Mattie away and hire a replacement. Ethan is destined to maintain nothing more than a friendship with Mattie Silver, a fact that sparks the climactic tragedy of his life.

Wharton’s own life in the Berkshires is reflective of Ethan Frome’s fictitious struggles. Entrapped by an unsavory marriage, Wharton searched elsewhere for a romantic spark. Although love was of interest, “To Mrs. Wharton friendship, in the long run, was the steadier rock on which to base a life” (Auchincloss x). Her most notable affair was shared with her close friend Walter Berry. Like Ethan and Mattie, Wharton and Berry were deeply united by their bonds of friendship:

I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one’s self, the very meaning of one’s soul. Such a friend I found in Walter Berry, and though the chances of life then separated us…whenever we did meet the same deep understanding drew us together. (Wharton 115)

Wharton was later buried besides Berry in France upon her death in 1937. Despite her romantic relationship with Berry, Wharton also experienced another intimate friendship with Henry James. Although Wharton claims to have met James before moving to Lenox, she asserts that “it
is at the Mount that he first comes into the foreground of the picture” (Wharton 171). James’ “long visits to the Mount” mark the nature of their friendship and closely resembles the relationship between Ethan and Mattie (Wharton 176). Wharton recalls her attempts to make herself beautiful enough to capture James’ attention, a behavior translated to Ethan as he spends extra time grooming himself in the mornings since Mattie’s arrival (Wharton 172-173). Although Wharton never admits to having an affair of any kind with James, she does acknowledge that “Henry James was perhaps the most intimate friend [she] ever had” (Wharton 173). Wharton’s frustration in her suffocating marriage and her desire to escape through friendly affairs is paralleled in Ethan Frome.

Furthermore, Wharton illustrates her continued feelings of entrapment in the final tragic events of Ethan Frome. As Ethan and Mattie realize that their hopes to escape together are unrealistic and impossible, they decide to pursue the ultimate freedom through death and suicide. The lovers carry out their plan by sledding down School House Hill and crashing into a large elm tree at the foot of the slope. Despite the speed and severe impact of the collision, Ethan and Mattie’s plan is foiled when the two survive and are forced to remain in Starkfield due to the complicated nature of their injuries. Their plan to escape only further entraps them in Starkfield with Mrs. Frome, who inherits the responsibility of caring for the pair. The plan, however, presents a paradox despite its seeming promise of escape. Had Ethan and Mattie been successful, then they certainly would have escaped their situations and the burdensome realities of everyday life. They would not, however, have escaped Starkfield, the ensnaring town that never releases its citizens. Ethan would have been planted directly in the Frome family graveyard, becoming a part of the Starkfield soil, and a permanent fixture in the Berkshires – a fate that haunts him with each passage by the Frome headstones. Ethan’s inescapable fate is sealed even before he and
Mattie attempt their suicides – in death Ethan remains in Starkfield, and in life Ethan remains in Starkfield.

Wharton’s crafting of the final entrapment in *Ethan Frome* reflects a true event Wharton experienced while living in the Berkshires. On March 11, 1904, five teenagers took a sled down Court House Hill in Lenox, and “at the foot of the hill the sled veered and crashed into a lamp-post” (“Lenox High School Girl”). The crash resulted in the death of a Lenox High School student, Miss Hazel Crosby, and the severe injuring of her sledding partners. In *Ethan Frome*, death, represented by Crosby’s experience, is the goal the couple hopes to achieve. Instead, they meet the same fate as Crosby’s friends, enduring varying types of injuries. Although this accident occurred in 1904, Wharton did not choose to write about it until she began writing *Ethan Frome*, published in 1911. This particular event seems to have deeply impacted Wharton, remaining in her memories for many years until she immortalized the incident in her novel. Perhaps the death of Miss Hazel Crosby enhanced Wharton’s feelings of entrapment. The young girl’s death represents the inability to ever escape Lenox. Dying before graduating high school, Crosby likely never experienced life outside of Lenox, an idea that must have devastated Wharton. Like Crosby, Frome never truly experiences life outside of Starkfield, and both reflect Wharton’s unbearable entrapment in the Berkshires.

Wharton’s literary life in the Berkshires was undoubtedly shaped by her experiences with the people, landscape, and her own period of self-examination. Despite her feelings of isolation and entrapment, Wharton claims: “Though I liked New York well enough it was only at the Mount that I was really happy” (Wharton 149). Perhaps her entrapments in the Berkshires actually freed her from other entrapments elsewhere. Unfortunately, Wharton’s legacy does not reveal such complicated weavings, and readers are left to decide just how much validity rests
with Wharton’s statement. Wharton decided to leave the Mount in 1911 and settled in Paris after her bitter divorce from Mr. Wharton. After settling in France, Wharton never again returned to the Mount.

Works Cited


Alyson Carey

ENGL 500: Edith Wharton

A Closer Look at Wharton’s *The Fruit of the Tree*

In the early 1900’s, Edith Wharton relocated from New York to Lenox, MA. It was in this small secluded region of the Berkshires, that Edith Wharton created many of her literary masterpieces. Under some pressure from her editor, Wharton began to explore writing in different literary genres during her time at the Mount in Lenox, MA. One of the literary works
that sought to incorporate new aspects unfamiliar to her previous writings was *The Fruit of the Tree*. This novel centers on themes including the role of a nurse in the early 1900’s, euthanasia, the complexity of marriage, and the conditions of mill workers during the time period. Through an in-depth look at *The Fruit of the Tree*, one reveals an inside look at Wharton’s hidden struggles with her own marriage, societal role, and ethical dilemmas.

Wharton, despite the societal construct of femininity at the time, went against societal norms and chose to write. Born into a wealthy family, it was naturally expected of Wharton to present herself as the stereotypical high society woman, concerning herself with more superficial things rather than intellectually stimulating activities. In *Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton depicts two perspectives of women during the early 1900’s. She introduces Bessy, a cliché, wealthy woman of the time period who is beautiful, and purely concerned with superficial and materialistic things. To contrast Bessy, Wharton creates Justine, a nurse who is empathetic, but can maintain her professionalism.

Bessy exhibits the submissiveness and dependence expected of a woman during the 1900’s, by remarrying Amherst and eventually surrendering all decision making capabilities to him. She is dependent and is easily manipulated by her husband, Amherst. Her ignorance of her husband’s mill work is used to her disadvantage, allowing her husband to further his goals and ambitions, while disregarding hers.

Soon after the opening of the novel, Justine completely contradicts her identity as a nurse. While treating a mill worker who has lost his hand, “she did not use, in speaking the soothing inflection of her trade: she seemed to disdain to cajole or trick the sufferer. Her full young voice kept its cool note of authority, her sympathy revealing itself only in the expert touch of her hands and the constant vigilance of her dark steady eyes” (Wharton 5). This healthy balance between
the nurse as a professional and as an empathetic caregiver is then disrupted when Justine breaches confidentiality to talk to Amherst, the assistant manager of the mill on a personal level outside the hospital. Justine progresses throughout the novel as an emerging “working” woman who is more independent than the women of the time period. It marks the start of Justine’s journey as well as Wharton’s journey to find where they fit into society.

As the plot develops, the relationship of empathy, Justine’s role as a nurse and status begin to distort themselves. Wharton first expresses in the opening that she believes it better to die than to not be able to do your profession. This is shown in her agreement with Amherst that the mill worker with the loss of a hand would be more profitable dead. Euthanasia reappears again in Fruit of the Tree when Bessy undergoes a spinal injury, a result of her destructive decision to ride a horse known to be life-threatening. Justine is “an ideally sympathetic nurse—expert at identifying suffering in others, and finding ways to provide comfort” (Garden 227). This is also her downfall; since Justine is too emotionally involved, she is unable to be a nurse. Justine displays this when she gives Bessy an overdose of morphine to end her suffering. Her inability to consistently maintain her nursing profession without getting emotionally involved parallels Wharton’s inability to write without her personal reflections and desires getting involved.

One of the central aspects of Wharton’s personal life featured in Fruit of the Tree is her outlook on marriage and happiness. She creates a dejected marriage between Bessy and Amherst who isolate themselves from each other due to their incapability to connect on the same intellectual level. While writing this in her estate at Lenox, MA, Wharton’s marriage undergoes the same hindrances. She relied on her friendships with others such as Henry James, a writer and acquaintance to fulfill her need for intellectual stimulation. Wharton’s misery of her loveless
marriage can be seen in Amherst’s constant travels to avoid Bessy. The novel takes a turn when Justine and Amherst get married. Within the literary relationship of Justine and Amherst, Wharton stores her desire to find someone who she can connect with and share her interests with. The extensive suffering she then causes these characters reflects that although Wharton may desire more for her own love life, she feels that she is confined to her current situation. While she may push societal norms exploring a writing career, divorce was not acceptable at the time. It is not until she leaves Lenox, MA that Wharton has an affair and divorces her husband.

Like Wharton herself at her estate in Lenox, Justine also secludes and isolates herself. Creating a mirror-like image of herself, Wharton depicts Justine as a woman who avoids large crowds in such situations as the extravagant parties Bessy holds for her fellow socialites. After a private visit to the Mount, we learned that Edith Wharton loved to throw parties like the ones described in *Fruit of the Tree*. Wharton, however, through the architecture of her estate displayed her preference for isolation and privacy. What seems like a view into her home is actually a mirror image of the surrounding scenery of the Berkshire landscape. This contradictory behavior is comparable to the behavior of Bessy and Justine. While writing the novel it is evident Wharton tried to incorporate mill work, yet exhibited vague knowledge of life in the mills suggesting her self-isolation in the Berkshires.

Despite her sometimes bitter tone and notions of sacrifice in *Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton successfully conveys her internal struggle with her marriage and societal role. Her self-isolation and exposure to the emerging career woman in the Berkshires cultivated her writing and presented readers with an honest reflection of what Wharton was feeling in a time where she was secluded from most of society. Without incorporating reflections of her life into her literary works produced at the Mount, we would not have a sense of Edith Wharton’s personal situation.
Edith Wharton and Her Ghost Stories

**Edith Wharton and the Supernatural at The Mount**

In 1902, Edith Wharton bought the property on which The Mount would be built in Lenox, Massachusetts. The Mount was Wharton’s creation bred from her love of architecture, gardening, and nature. However, according to The Mount’s website, she had left her estate in 1911, when her husband’s health began to deteriorate along with their marriage. In spite of the Whartons’ short residency at The Mount, the supernatural had made a home for themselves at the estate as well; it was Edith who felt their presence.

The Mount historians describe Wharton as “no stranger to the supernatural…she was inordinately sensitive to forces she could never quite see or escape” (“The Mount”). Even as a married woman at The Mount, she still feared ghosts to the extent that she “could not sleep in a room with a book containing a ghost story. She actually said she burned books containing ghost stories because ‘it frightened [her] to know that they were downstairs in the library’” (“The Mount”).
However, it wasn’t only in literature that Wharton experienced the supernatural at her estate: The Mount was a breeding ground for ghosts and eerie happenings, as it is isolated from society and set back into the woods far from the road. In addition to being isolated, Wharton was lonely, which was caused by her failing marriage and amplified by oftentimes being one of few people present at such a large estate.

Wharton’s feelings of isolation and loneliness that she experienced at The Mount are ideal for the creation of ghost stories. She wrote, “Ghosts, to make themselves manifest, require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity…What the ghosts really need is not echoing passages and hidden doors behind tapestry, but only continuity and silence” (Wharton 9). Continuity and silence were abundant at her estate: these characteristics enabled her to utilize her imagination, which is evident in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, a collection of eleven ghost stories. Many of these stories connect to aspects of Wharton’s life at The Mount.

**Reflections of Wharton’s Life in Ghost Stories**

Visitors of The Mount (which includes myself and my colleague Alyson) quickly learn that the estate is where the Whartons’ marriage dissolved. Edith Wharton was trapped in a miserable relationship and simultaneously trapped (and lonely) in the home of her dreams. Her feelings towards her dissipating marriage and suffering at The Mount are best depicted in her ghost story *Kerfol*, which is about a woman named Anne de Barrigan who relies on dogs to restore happiness to her life and fill the void that her husband cannot, as he is constantly away from their estate, Kerfol. Wharton describes it as “a lonely place,” and it isn’t until Yves de Cornault, Anne’s wealthy husband, brings back a puppy from his travels that she feels less lonely (Wharton 110). To “personalize” the dog, she fastens a bracelet with pearls and rubies around its
neck, which was also another expensive present from Cornault. However, upon learning that one of her gentleman friends was leaving to live abroad, Anne removes the bracelet from the puppy’s neck and gives it to her friend as a token of remembrance. That evening, when Cornault came home and noticed that the puppy did not have the bracelet around its neck, Anne claims the dog lost it as it was playing in the park. The following night, when Anne was preparing to go to sleep, she saw the dog on her pillow, choked to death by the bracelet. The dogs that Anne had regularly brought home continued to be strangled by her husband, until his mysterious death. The story is a recollection of the trial of Yves de Cornault’s death, with this story as Anne’s testimony to prove that she did not kill her husband, even though she said “that her married life had been extremely lonely: ‘desolate’ was the word she used…he kept her like a prisoner at Kerfol” (Wharton 114).

It is the researcher’s best guess that dogs were incorporated into this story because Edith Wharton was smitten with them; she had several of her own, and she had written several stories about dogs as well. It is likely that they served as her companions at The Mount during the times of a draining and disappointing marriage, just as they had for Anne de Barrigan. Wharton may have used Kerfol to depict the loneliness in her own marriage and the joy of owning dogs to get through her “imprisonment” at her estate.

**Rumors Stirred by Ghost Stories**

There had been a rumor that one of the Whartons’ servants at The Mount hanged herself in her living quarters after discovering that she was pregnant. While this rumor was investigated and deemed false (publicly by the show Ghost Hunters), Wharton’s story *The Lady’s Maid’s Bell* provokes curiosity about the truth of the tale. Wharton writes from the perspective of a woman
named Alice Hartley, who is replacing a former servant, Emma Saxon, at an estate called Brympton Place (which, based on Wharton’s description, sounds similar to The Mount). Immediately upon arriving at Brympton Place, Alice notices a woman standing in a doorway, silent and speculating. After several weeks of working there, she realizes that she hasn’t seen the woman since then—she brings up the mysterious womanly figure to one of the other servants, Mrs. Blinder, who denies the presence of the figure in the house. It isn’t until Alice is dusting in Emma Saxon’s former room that a photograph of Saxon lands on her lap, and she makes the connection that the woman she had seen on her first day was the ghost of Emma Saxon.

Everyone refuses to inform Alice about Saxon’s death, but Saxon continues to haunt her. Once in a while in the middle of the night, Alice’s “maid’s bell” would ring incessantly, though when she got up and arrived to Mrs. Brympton’s room, she would be dismissed. Mrs. Brympton, who struggles with mental and emotional anxiety, considers Alice ill until she sees the ghost of Emma Saxon for herself, at which point she faints and dies.

In writing *The Lady’s Maid’s Bell*, Wharton had left a tremendous amount of detail up to readers’ imaginations. Had she experienced a similar encounter with one of her deceased servants? Did a servant actually die in her house? This story was written in 1902—when Wharton had first settled at The Mount—leaving more room for speculation.

**The Effects of Wharton’s “Haunted” Estate on Society Today**

In addition to the supernatural’s effects on Wharton’s literature, it has affected the curious minds of those who have visited The Mount. There have been many reported incidents of paranormal activity in the servants’ quarters and the stables. It wasn’t until Ghost Hunters, a television show about TAPS investigations, arrived to The Mount that any supernatural activity
was officially detected. However, according to the Ghost Hunters website, “TAPS are ambiguous as to whether or not the Edith Wharton estate is haunted,” as there were several positive signs of paranormal activity (large handprint caught on thermal camera, high K2 meter readings, black box response) and several signs that proved to be explainable with natural causes, such as “high EMF levels in the butler’s pantry that are capable of causing hypersensitivity people to temporarily hallucinate,” and working with new equipment (“Edith Wharton Estate”). During ghost tours sponsored by the Edith Wharton Estate, visitors can determine for themselves if there really is an unexplained presence.

**Wharton’s “Berkshire” Contributions to Ghost Stories**

Wharton’s time at home in the Berkshires, although brief, contributed to patterns in her ghost stories. The marriages described in several of her stories were like her own—falling apart—and the characters in these marriages intensify the emotions of loneliness and desolation that contribute to the chilling plots. Furthermore, most of the stories take place at extravagant mansions and estates quite similar to her own—usually set back in the woods far from the roads—and the architecture was always described in great detail, as architecture and home design were Wharton’s passions. In utilizing these kinds of settings for her ghost stories, Wharton causes the reader to question the experiences that she had been through to write so richly and in-depth about the ghosts that haunt estates. The reader can surmise, for certain, that her entrapment in her failing marriage and feelings of loneliness at her estate in the Berkshires add to the realness of her supernatural literature.
Works Cited

