



**‘TRAPPED SENSITIVITY’
A STUDY ON THE COMPLEX EMOTIONAL LIFE OF EDITH WHARTON AND HER
PROTAGONISTS**

Dr.SeethaBalakrishnan

Language Teacher, English, University College of Dayer, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

Edith Wharton perceived life not as a matter of abstract principles, but as a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old traditions, old beliefs, old tragedies, and old failures. As the most distinguished woman writer of American fiction before World War II, Edith Wharton considered the novel to be a vehicle for presenting a moral problem involving personalities in a highly civilized background. She explored the complex emotional life of her protagonists in her novels. In many of Edith Wharton’s novels there recur two complex and fundamentally irresolvable themes. The first is provided by the display of a large and generous nature trapped and left in a state of hopelessness by circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature. There is no reasoning or explanation for such disastrous unions except as a result of the generous but misguided impulses of the larger nature. Moreover, there is no escape from the responsibility they entail, and this acknowledgement opens the way for the second theme – Wharton tries to define the nature and limits of individual responsibility, to determine what allowance of freedom or rebellion can be made for her trapped protagonists without at the same time threatening the structure of society. This study establishes the view that though the tone of Edith Wharton’s novels is somber and negative the protagonists make a halting but authentic breakthrough from their almost despairingly trapped environment. Edith Wharton has portrayed her characters with a formidable drive and determination to survive.

Keywords: *Entrapment, Victimization, Responsibility, Society, Survival.*

Born in 1862, Edith Wharton was brought up within the sophisticated, affluent yet conventional, restricting circle of New York society, which encouraged sexual repression and prided itself on the innocence of its young girls. Edith Wharton herself was discouraged from expressing her emotions or developing her intellect which was considered to be very unbecoming traits in a woman. This is the reason why she stressed in her novels the need for growth, and has revealed how painful and frustrating this process can be for a woman. This process of growth and development is revealed in her major works *Ethan Frome, The Reef, Summer* and *The Age of Innocence*.

For Wharton society seemed a prison, despite its attraction of surface and order. Edith Wharton’s plots focus upon a clash between a stable society and a sensitive protagonist who half belongs to and half rebels against it. Her tragic heroines and heroes are the victims of the group pressure of convention. They are passionate or imaginative spirits, hungry for emotional and intellectual experience, who find themselves locked into a small closed system. At the end they must surrender to the social taboos they have momentarily challenged or wished to challenge, for they either have not been able to summon the resources of courage through which to act out their rebellion or have discovered that the punitive power of society is greater than they had supposed, or have learned that the convention they have assumed to be lifeless still retains a certain wisdom. Due to this general pattern of her fictional plots nearly every critic has concluded that “Mrs. Wharton was a hopelessly hidebound supporter of convention” (Lyde 4).



Edith Wharton chose to write, in various forms and with unequal success the one story she knew best, the story that constituted her basic experience - her own. Edith Wharton specialized in tales of victimization. To Wharton whose career as a novelist was the tenuous product of so many personal maladjustments, the novel became an involuted expression of self. In the words of Alfred Kazin "Edith's own loneliness and alienation gave her sympathy for erratic spirits and illicit emotions that was unique in its time"(90). Edith Wharton knew well enough that one dynasty had succeeded another in American life. The consequences of that succession became the great subject of her best novels. Edith Wharton's imagination was obsessed by the fellow spirits of her youth. Though she had been hurt by her class and had made her career by escaping its fundamental obligations, she could not, despite all her fertile power of invention, conceive of any character that was not either descended from that class or placed in some obvious and dramatic relation to it. At the bottom she could love only those who like herself had undergone a profound alienation but were inextricably bound to native loyalties and taste. Indeed, their very weakness endeared them to her: to rise in the industrial - capitalist order was to succumb to its degradations.

Sympathy, Wharton possessed by the very impulse of her imagination, but it was a curious sympathy which assumed that if life in her own class was often dreary the world below must be even more so. Whenever she wrote of that world, darkness and revulsion entered her work mechanically. She thought of the poor not as a class but as a condition. The qualities she automatically ascribed to the poor-drabness, meanness, anguish-became another manifestation of the futility of human effort. E. K. Brown remarks:

In Edith Wharton's fiction one finds a constituted social order of which each individual is a part and may be a center; a civilization and a culture against which heroic individuals must rebel but will be grievously wounded in rebelling; a morality which emerges from the social order and the civilization and cannot be imposed upon it. (96)

The sense of suffocation that so many Wharton characters endure was Wharton's birthright, for her childhood in rich, aristocratic old New York of the 1860's provided her not with the money to buy new and varied experience, but with the limiting shelter of privilege. Wharton's characters are faced with hostility, intolerance and repressiveness. Like Wharton, they rebel, often only to be punished for their rebellion. Their vitality, their spontaneity and their sense of being alive in the midst of a world designed to stifle that spirit make the characters reflectors of the conflicts of Wharton's own life. According to Edmund Wilson, "Edith Wharton's work is the record of a struggle between wealth and its advantages, on the one hand, and aesthetic and moral values, on the other. (175)

Edith Wharton was an unhappy human being. One even feels she was unhappy as a woman. Her society subjected women to special disadvantages. This society subjected a brilliant woman, like Wharton, to additional humiliation by simply not recognizing her brilliance or her literary accomplishments. Lawson opines:

Wharton was a feminist, however only in a limited way. Social class was more important to her than sexual equality. Wharton preferred to speak in fiction with a man's voice, to work from a fictional perspective which was male. That is, whenever she employed the device of the fictive narrative, that narrator was a male. And her narrators were in every way valid and convincing in their male perspectives. (97 – 98).



Ethan Frome, *The Reef*, *Summer* and *The Age Of Innocence* provide instances of Edith Wharton's experimentation with widely differing characters, settings and structural patterns. In all these novels, she focuses upon the lives of the people who must settle for survival and frustration when they can attain nothing else. All these novels reflect the deprivations of the preceding generation.

Ethan Frome portrays Wharton's personal situation, as she had come to comprise it, carried to a far extreme, translated to a remote rural scene, and rendered utterly hopeless by circumstance. As she often did, Edith Wharton shifted the action in devising her three central characters. Like Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome married an ailing spouse, a number of years older than him and has been married for about the same length of time as Edith had been tied to Teddy. Ethan sometimes wonders about Zeena's sanity and he daydreams about her death, possibly by violence. He looks about frantically to some avenue to freedom, but his fate is conveyed to him in Wharton's regular results for her own condition – the inexorable facts closed in on Ethan like prison guards handcuffing a convict. He becomes a prisoner for life.

Summer is a pendant to *Ethan Frome*. The setting is roughly the same, with the significant difference of the seasons and its means in terms of the inner drama. The chronicle is one of pinched, defeated lives, and the central characters are pitted against each other in a deadly and for the most part inarticulate struggle of wills that concludes in the usual pathetic compromise with fate – or with moral law, since that is Edith Wharton's conception of the real antagonist.

Edith Wharton thinks of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* as companion pieces. *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton thought of as a symbolic presentation of winter-frozen-life held in abeyance. *Summer* she thought of as its antithesis, lush, bursting with every rebellious life force. Edith Wharton was so conscious of the symbol that she used it for a title. Though the two stories were published six years apart she wrote of them on adjacent pages of her autobiography. Obviously she thought of them as one conception - literary twins.

Edith Wharton was still working on the echoes of *Ethan Frome* when she wrote *The Reef*, for it shows a more heightened awareness of the artificial quality of fiction than any other of her major novels. Wolff aptly remarks: "The principal characters are rendered with chiaroscuro sharpness that articulate them almost as if they were specimens mounted against a backdrop" (207).

The structure of *Ethan Frome* leads the reader into dream vision: the fictional world of that entire novel is the interior – a dizzying descent into the frozen depths of a soul in which passion had been extinguished – and for the presentation of such a world Wharton's limitation of narrative vantage is not only workable, it is necessary. In *The Reef* Wharton moves in quite the other direction. She deals with the complex personal and social implications of sexuality.

In her protest against the deliberately nurtured innocence of old New York, Edith Wharton continues in *The Age of Innocence* as she had done in *Ethan Frome* and *The Reef*, to rehearse her own complaint against the failures of education and opportunity that had hampered her growth as a human being and as an artist. But underlying her protest is the nostalgia evoked by the setting and manners familiar to her childhood, a nostalgia that was to grow with the years until it effaced what bitterness remained.



Wharton is personally and artistically tied to the two-women-one-man-plot as in *Ethan Frome*, *The Reef* and *The Age of Innocence*, which in her mind could be resolved only by an ‘either or’ choice. In her fiction, male and female worlds seldom intersect but women like Mattie Silver, Sophy Viner and Ellen Olenska strain to bridge the gulf. When they succeed they experience a double loss. They are still left awaiting the footstep that never comes and they lose the person with whom they are in truth most intimate – the other woman- Zeena, Anna Leath and May Welland respectively.

The Reef and *The Age of Innocence* show pairs of women who are more intimate with each other than they were or will ever be with their mates. Unlike her contemporaries, Willa Cather (1873 – 1947), Mary Austin (1868 – 1932) and Ellen Glasgow (1873 – 1941), Wharton does not allow her heroines to have a husband and a best woman friend. She believes that all human ties were subject to the society in which they were formed and any new tie realigned an old one.

In *The Reef*, Anna Leath is passionately jealous and possessive in her love and like May Welland in *The Age of Innocence* she is both limited and protected by convention and by belief in monogamous marriage. Though controlled and outwardly passive, both refuse to accept infidelity and are stern about the banishing of a rival, even a woman previously seen favorably as a member of the family. If both appear to be old fashioned both are ahead of their time in rejecting a double standard.

Just like Newland Archer who attempts to classify Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, Darrow tries to label Sophy Viner in *The Reef*. The open natural manners of the working girl beside him, leads Darrow to other criticisms of his intended, Anna Leath. In a meditation similar to Newland Archer over the photograph of his fiancée, Darrow wonders whether the sheltered girl’s training might not make her unfit for all subsequent contact with life.

Like Ellen Olenska, Sophy Viner represents the positive values of the novel. What Sophy responds to most fully in her visit to Paris is not “the beauty and mystery of the spectacle as much as its pressure of human significance, all its hidden implications of emotion and adventure” (*The Reef* 33). Just as Ellen Olenska seems to perceive Archer’s love for her, even before he faces it himself, so also is Sophy Viner honest enough to admit that the man she loves never loved her. Like Ellen who is unafraid of such unlady like words as ‘mistress’ and ‘adultery’ Sophy refuses to think in the abstract evasive terms of Anna and Darrow. She accepts that what she had with Darrow was to him a shameful little episode. From the beginning she refuses to disguise it even to herself as a romantic affair. Yet because it is the closest thing to love that Sophy has ever been offered, she accepts the offer without feeling ashamed. Both Ellen and Sophy have a capacity for honesty, self-appraisal which others, like Newland Archer and Anna Leath, only painfully and partially acquire.

Both Ellen Olenska and Sophy Viner seem able to perceive others not through a fog of wishful illusions, but as they are, imperfect people with emotions and needs like their own. This ability to perceive others realistically is never cynical or critical but rather a tolerant, often loving acceptance of them as they are. Thus, Ellen loves Archer despite his weaknesses and she is generous in her concern for his wife. Similarly Sophy continues to love Darrow even when he insults and demeans her by his conduct at Givre and is kind to her rival, Anna Leath.

Sophy and Ellen exemplify a natural and open attitude towards life in direct contrast to the closed society they encounter. Their innocence is born paradoxically of experience. Having been exposed to



some of the worst that life can inflict they cease to fear life. Rather than hiding from the world, they continue within it enormously receptive of and sensitive to its joys, appreciating whatever is to be appreciated unhampered by conventions that could restrain them. Their innocence lies in the fact that their presence in the real world makes them eternally vulnerable. They so bravely expose themselves to life, with trust in others and belief in human goodness, but are hurt or corrupted. Unlike the traditional New Yorkers Anna Leath or May Welland, Sophy and Ellen have little wariness, few hesitations about what could happen to protect them. Their openness is their innocence and their innocence is the quality that appeals to their lovers, which turns them into guileless temptresses. Sophy's exile foreshadows Ellen Olenska's departure for Europe in *The Age of Innocence*. She and Ellen represent all that Wharton remembers the old New York of her youth, lacking beauty, passion and danger.

Despite Anna's wish to make herself the shadow and echo of Darrow's mood in *The Reef*, she shares Charity Royall's fears of being subsumed as revealed in *Summer*. Anna, like Mattie Silver has the choice of living with her illusion of real life or experiencing it. When Anna anticipates her reunion with Darrow at the secluded chateau, the October sunlight gives the estate such luminescence that Anna seems to be opening her own eyes upon it after a long interval of blindness. Anna's situation is similar to that of Ethan's when fair Mattie Silver becomes the mirror – image of dark, bony, witch-like Zeena, who with black cat and the seeming power of sex, symbolizes, the futility of Ethan's longing for escape through romantic love.

Edith Wharton felt stifled by family and was defensive always in her family circle about her writing. This feeling of the family as destructive and oppressive is evident in her fiction - Trapping of a man and two women in a living tomb of coldness and silence in *Ethan Frome* (1911); full of incestuous attraction and distrust in *The Reef*(1912) and in *Summer*(1917); moral claims of family and of the individual are held in perfect tension in *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

In *The Age of Innocence* Newland's study expresses his whole attitude towards life. The private room is important to Wharton. Cabined off from the public space, it mirrors only the inner world of a single inhabitant. In *Ethan Frome*, the small room behind the best parlor modeled on the study of a minister reflects Ethan's submerged desire for a larger life of the mind and the spirit. The room at the top of Mrs. Archer's house which serves as equivalent personal space externalizes the conventional imagination of its occupant. The values of a cultivated world are projected in the trimmed lamps, the photographs of famous pictures and the row upon row of books. On the whole Archer's sanctuary might well be the study of a statesman – reflecting as it does the social values of civilization. But beyond mirroring its occupant's mental landscape the study provides the inner spaciousness necessary for meditation. In *Ethan Frome*, the hero retreats to his private place when he must decide between Mattie Silver and Zeena. Here, Newland Archer seals himself off when events force him to question the nature of society.

Like Edith Wharton, her protagonists Ethan Frome, Anna Leath, Charity Royall and Newland Archer wanted physical ecstasy and a lasting love that was a spiritual merging of the lovers. Edith Wharton's basic theme in much of her work is the spiritual value of failure. She makes it clear that for people who are unable to marry and who are of superior moral and intellectual sensitivity, for whom social ostracism is unimportant, an unconcealed relationship which would conventionally be termed adulterous, at least holds the possibility, perhaps the only one, of spiritual fulfillment.



Edith Wharton was until her decay, a tough minded, robust artist, not the shrinking minor writer or the lady-like talent. Edith felt that the dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast of authors, the encouraging atmosphere of her family and social circle, and the adverse reviews she received from outside, stimulated her talent. She also accepted the most inflicting professional criticism as valuable. This she accepted because she felt it was better for fostering literary ability.

The tone of Edith Wharton's novels as a whole is, of course, dark. A reader must face the fact, that, to a large extent, the tone is undeniably somber and negative and that it is both a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility. That is, the artist takes her coloring from her environment, though she may intensify it by adding a little mark of her own. However, there are elements in her novels which, although they are rooted in this negativity, transcend it. The protagonists make a halting but authentic breakthrough from their almost hopelessly trapped environment. The moment of affirmation neither denies the negative ground nor succumbs to it. Their victimization has become their empowering gifts of life. Through the horror of their lives, they have found the honor of their lives. Edith Wharton has always believed that the artist is a responsible citizen and not a passive victim. She has portrayed her characters with a formidable drive and determination to survive.

References

1. Lyde, Marilyn Jones. *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959. Print.
2. Kazin, Alfred. "Edith Wharton." *Edith Wharton : A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Irving Howe. New Jersey: Prentice – Hall, Inc., 1962. Print.
3. Brown, E.K. "Edith Wharton." *Edith Wharton : A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Irving Howe. New Jersey: Prentice – Hall, Inc, 1962. Print.
4. Wilson, Edmund. "Edith Wharton: A Memoir by an English Friend." *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Irving Howe. New Jersey : Prentice – Hall, Inc, 1962. Print.
5. Lawson, Richard H. *Edith Wharton*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977. Print.
6. Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Studies of Salamanders." *A Feast of Words : The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977. Print.
7. Wharton, Edith. *The Reef*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965. Print.