

EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS- THE ARROGANCE, THE AVARICE, THE COWARDICE OF THE MAIN FEMALE CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

The world presented in Edith Wharton's novels *The Custom of the Country*, *Ethan Frome* and *The House of Mirth*, is predominantly the world of late 19th century New York upper class society. The portrayal of the characters in all three novels has one common feature. While the male characters are mostly unimpressive, weak and inadequate, the portrayal of female characters reveals a wide array of deeply flawed human beings. The presence of the silent, secretive Zenobia Frome in *Ethan Frome* is defined as evil and alien, a mysterious force which hold her husband and his life prospects back. Lilly Bart, the protagonist of *The House of Mirth*, is luxury loving, arrogant at times and parasitic at instances - more than one page of the novel depicts her boarding with friends and living with people she despises, simply because this is the only way she can afford aesthetics and luxury surrounding her. Perhaps the worst, at least from the characters depicted for the purpose of this study, is Undine Spragg. *The Custom of the Country* main character depicts a woman who is merciless, inconsiderate and deprived of any capacity to love, even when it comes to her own child. These characters raise a question about the author of the novel: was Edith Wharton a misogynist? What motivated her to write novels about women from her own social setting characterizing them as villains at worst and cowards at best? This article will attempt to answer this question by analyzing the novels and the female characters.

Key words: *female characters, Edith Wharton, novels, misogyny, negative traits.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton was on January 24, 1862. As a young girl, she travelled a lot through Europe, chiefly through France, Germany and Italy, which influenced her love for beauty, aesthetics and art, her literary career started at the age 16, when she has published privately her volume of poems *Verses*. One year later, she started her social life in Newport and New York. It would be her first glimpse into the social norms of the narrow, privileged world she belonged to and the world she would depict in such dark colors in her novels. Five years later, she married Edward Wharton. The marriage was not a happy one, partially due to her husband's mental instability. Several years after their wedding, the couple moved from Newport to the estate they bought – The Mount. Here, the Whartons will live for 10 years, a decade which would be prolific for her career as a writer and during which she would produce *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*. The Whartons divorced in 1913. Following the divorce, Edith Wharton moved permanently to Paris, France. Her masterpiece *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1921. For the rest of her life, Edith Wharton would live in France, spending her time on writing prolifically, traveling and gardening.

This biography provides no insight into the underlying causes of Wharton's misogyny, or at least her inclination to perceive the negative traits in women only. As stated in the New York Times article by Jenet Malcom, *The Woman who hated Women* (1986), the male characters, although not positive exclusively, are not comparable to the destructive female characters. As Malcom states: "There are no bad men in Wharton's fiction. There are weak men and there are foolish men and there are vulgar New Rich men, but

no man ever deliberately causes harm to another person; that role is exclusively reserved for women.” A close friend of Edith Wharton, Mrs. Gordon Bell, describes her attitude towards women in Percy Lubbock's memoir, "Portrait of Edith Wharton" Many women who only knew her slightly have said to me, ‘She looks at me as if I were a worm.’ (in Tyson, 1992).”

With several exceptions, one of them being Zenobia Frome in *Ethan Frome*, the majority of the female characters described in Wharton’s novels belong to her social milieu and context: the wealthier part of the New York society, dominated by men who either earn or inherit a fortune and women who are focused on spending the same fortune. However, the deeply flawed female characters depicted in her novels, display more than ordinary greed. Instead, they display cruelty, lack of moral judgment and superficiality, which fuel their avarice and the selfishness.

2. LILY BART IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

One of the most complex female characters in Wharton’s novels is Lily Bart, the female protagonist of the novel *The House of Mirth*. Described as an extraordinary beautiful and captivating woman, Lily moves through the wealthy New York society largely relying on her friends for financial support, boarding and access to comfort and esthetics. It is of vital importance for Lily to be surrounded by beautiful things and luxury. Her passion for stylish clothes and jewelry, fashionable furniture and accessible cash, make her a parasite and a victim at the same time. Lily is aware that luxury and beauty do not come for free. Continuously, she is confronted with the only possibility for her to gain them forever: to marry a wealthy man who will provide luxury for her- even though she marries a man whom she doesn’t love, like or respect. Contemplating the possibility of marrying Percy Gryce, Lily has no doubts that a marriage with a wealthy person brings a number of benefits:

The certainty that she could marry Percy Gryce when she pleased had lifted a heavy load from her mind, and her money troubles were too recent for their removal not to leave a sense of relief which a less discerning intelligence might have taken for happiness. Her vulgar cares were at an end. She would be able to arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate. She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset. She would be free forever from the shifts, the expedients, the humiliations of the relatively poor. Instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered; instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. There were old scores she could pay off as well as old benefits she could return. And she had no doubts as to the extent of her power.

(The House of Mirth, p.51)

In the novel, we witness Lily acting in line with societal and established rules of the New York society, which solidifies her path and her fate. As she is described at the beginning of the novel: “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.”

Wagner (2016, p.118) describes the effect that Lily has on her surroundings and the rest of the characters in the novel: “Each person in The House of Mirth is confronted with the flawless visage of Lily Bart, just as the public at the time was being inundated with images of the unattainable spectacle of the ideal woman in mass-produced public notice.” Yet, we see that this perfect countenance accelerates Lily’s fate, as if her beauty leads her into a series of wrong decisions, gambling in reality and metaphorically with her life, situations which tarnish her reputation and finally, societal exclusion.

Defining this effect, Wagner (2016, p.119) writes:

Regrettably, however, the effortlessness with which her feminine façade is created is her decisive undoing, for it is this ease that in the end triggers society’s collective refusal to comprehend her. The facility with which she incorporates herself into the overall illusion of an archetypal femininity – not to mention her exquisite beauty – compels a hyper-visibility, a vision of an ideal.

The portrayal of Lily in *The House of Mirth* is presented in the balance of moral opposition of two different worlds depicted in the New York society. One is the world of Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset: superficial, luxurious, yet meaningless. The second world is the “... rarified, spiritual world she associates with Lawrence Selden (Tyson, p. 3).

Lawrence Selden enjoys Lily’s company mostly due to her physical beauty, as described in the first chapter of the novel:

As she moved beside him, with her long light step, Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modeling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair—was it ever so slightly brightened by art? —and the thick planting of her straight black lashes. Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her.

(The House of Mirth, p.5)

Even though Selden never offers any significant support for Lily (until the day it is too late and he finds out that she is dead), he is still presented as her salvation, a second chance which is offered to Lily through a relationship and a potential marriage to him- a marriage which Lily rejects in advance, even before being asked, due to Selden’s poverty.

We witness, once again, a female character portrayed as flawed and materialistic, even though the support was never explicitly stated and the protection was never offered. Lily dies as a result of sleeping drug overdose- it is unclear if this is suicide or unintentional act. Her character is slightly redeemed at the end of the novel- as Selden reveals, the last dime of her inherited money is spent on paying the debts that Lily accumulated during her life. However, even her debts are a product of her wasteful and parasitic life, including gambling debts and debts to people who speculated on the stock market, thus emphasizing Lily’s meaningless existence. In the novel, Lily is simply reduced to an ornament, a trinket in New York’s society, easily replaceable and hardly missed.

3. UNDINE SPRAGG IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

Even among the many of the negative depictions of female characters in Wharton’s works, one certainly stands out. Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* is an essence of avarice, self-centeredness and thoughtlessness.

The novel’s plot is based on contrasting two different societies in the milieu of New York and Paris upper class world. One is the society of highly regarded and well-connected families and individuals, Marvells, Dagonets, De Chelles. The other society is the society of newly arrived, newly rich and hotel accommodated families: Spraggs, Van Degens and Elmer Moffatt. The property they own and the places they live define them, creating a rift between two classes. Sassoubre (2003, p.5) defines this rift: “The Invaders (including Undine's first and fourth husband Moffatt, her lover Van Degen, and the Spraggs themselves) populate the thin end of the spectrum. While the constituents of this group are different in important ways, they all operate in a universe where everything is potentially for sale. Throughout the novel, characters are rendered in terms of the things they own and the places in which they live. “

It is to be expected that in a society which is defined by property, the success can be attained by obtaining property. Therefore, Undine Spragg does not hesitate to pursue a husband and property. Yoshino (2005, p.39) describes the motive behind Undine's four marriages: "In a society where women have no choice but to find a protective husband to survive, Undine, indeed, fits into the patriarchal society almost too well, always seeking something with better quality and more quantity: a better husband with more money."

Still, each of these marriages ends in disappointment- an expected outcome of the marriage transactions Undine Spragg undertakes. Perhaps there is a justification. Undine's decisions are predetermined by the norms and expectations of the society she lives in. She is desperately seeking approval, attention and confirmation. After all, bridging the gap between Invaders and the old families does not always yield in financial success. Undine frequently explains to her parents that she seeks improvement- an euphemism which in her mind justifies her extravagancies and excessive spending. As Yoshino (2005, p.40), concludes: "Every time she marries, Undine discovers this reality only too late, always finding herself frustrated and angry about a shortage of money, which eventually ends in her whimsical decision to divorce her husband. We must note that the anger provoked within her mind is partly due to her ceaseless desire for material wealth, which could not be easily satisfied. On the other hand, Undine is in one way a victim and a product of the of the consumerist society she grew up in, or as Ouyang defines her (2017, p.43): "Undine Spragg is more of an embodiment of American culture that features pragmatism and consumerism than a rebellious gesture towards patriarchal society."

One of the reasons Undine is so disappointed in her marriages is that her values and perceptions are in stark contrast to those of her husbands', with the exception of Elmer Moffat, who is her first and last husband in the novel. Ouyang (2017, p.45), states that: "In her four sequential marriages, Undine Spragg demonstrates great cognitive disparity with her husbands' in terms of personal identity and personal possession. The novel resembles an arena where contradictory views compete for domination."

Undine's second husband, Ralph Marvell in some ways looks down on Undine- once he is able to see beyond her dazzling, almost crude beauty, he has to accept that there is nothing to see. He also believes that it is up to him to improve her- a condescending perspective to say the least.

An imagination like his, peopled with such varied images and associations, fed by so many currents from the long stream of human experience, could hardly picture the bareness of the small half-lit place in which his wife's spirit fluttered. Her mind was as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie school-house in which she had been educated; and her ideals seemed to Ralph as pathetic as the ornaments made of corks and cigar-bands with which her infant hands had been taught to adorn it. He was beginning to understand this, and learning to adapt himself to the narrow compass of her experience. The task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience; and he would not yet own to himself that her pliancy and variety were imitative rather than spontaneous.

(The House of Mirth, p.718)

Undine's marriage to Ralph Marvell ends, rather conveniently for her, with his suicide, which is triggered, among other factors, by his knowledge that she had been married to Elmer Moffat prior to her arrival in New York. Undine proceeds with her life in France, marrying a French aristocrat and being immersed in the country life at his estate- symbolically named Saint Desart. Bored and lonely, disappointed again to learn that an old family name is not necessarily connected with money, Undine desperately seeks ways to obtain money and go to Paris. This marriage, again, reminds the reader of the disparity between Undine's and her husbands' views on marriage and property. When Undine sells ancestral and almost sacred tapestries which belong to Reymond's de Chelles family for centuries, his words reveal his anger, but also his opinion of Undine's and American values:

You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in—if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about—you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have—and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!

(The Custom of the Country, p. 982)

The final marriage depicted in the novel, to Elmer Moffatt again, presents probably the best version of Undine in the novel—perhaps because she is surrounded by material wealth. However, she is still a negligent, but somewhat tolerant and bearable mother and wife. Mrs. Moffatt is still discontented and dreaming of being an ambassador, the “one part she was really made for (The Custom of the Country, p. 1014).”

The depiction of Undine Spragg as a beautiful dazzling monster and essence of self-centeredness still points out to Wharton's misogyny. The novel portrays Undine without a single positive character trait— even as mother, Undine almost defies biological maternal instincts. The only moment she cares about her child is when she uses him to manipulate Marvell. She never displays any human feeling beyond selfishness, greed and self-absorption. Yet, these extreme characteristics are not evident if we analyze Marvell, Raymond de Chelles or even Elmer Moffatt, who are described as loyal (Marvell), family and tradition oriented (Raymond) and good-natured and friendly (Moffatt). Undine is the ultimate anti-hero and villain, almost to the point of being unnaturally repulsive character.

4. ZEENA FROME IN *ETHAN FROME*

The setting of the novel *Ethan Frome* is the imaginary village Starkfield in rural Massachusetts, a symbolic name which foreshadows the stark life and barren existence of Ethan Frome, his wife Zenobia Frome and her younger cousin Mattie Silver. The novel introduces the village of Starkfield during winter, which seems to be never ending. The relationship between Ethan and Zeena is as cold and loveless as the winter in Starkfield. They met during Ethan's mother illness – Zeena is her caregiver. Confronted with unbearable solitude and a prospect of a long, cold winter, Ethan proposes to Zeena after his mother dies. The portrayal of Zeena emphasizes her lack of beauty. She is described as an old woman, seven years her husband senior, wrinkled and ugly. The reader is aware of her unattractiveness, her untidiness and her repulsive manners, thus setting, almost in advance, the defense for Ethan Frome. The first impression of Zeena is created as follows:

Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins. To Ethan, still in the rosy haze of his hour with Mattie, the sight came with the intense precision of the last dream before waking. He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like.

(*Ethan Frome*, p.40)

Throughout the novel, the reader becomes aware of Zeena's hypochondria and constant complaints. Her obsession with illness and symptoms, her self-absorption and analysis of her own health, portray a woman who is physically repulsive and emotionally unreliable. Even her speech resembles a whine— again, the

reader is reminded how repulsive she is. Thus, Ethan feels that his career prospects are haltered since it is impossible to move with Zeena to a different town, that his farm is neglected since she is not able to help and that his dreams are suffocated since he is trapped in a marriage with a woman he does not love. It is almost justified, in the eyes of the reader, that he is in love with Mattie, almost from the first moment he sees her upon her arrival in Starkfield.

Yet, we see only Zeena's negative impact on Ethan's life. Gould (2016, p.2) describes her own reaction to Ethan Frome and the relationships depicted in the novel: "Reading Ethan Frome for the second time showed me how it is possible to feel trapped in a relationship that presents many escape routes when viewed from outside but which seems like the only option when viewed from within. Arima (1992) describes the relationship between Zeena and Ethan, emphasizing that Ethan never accepts his responsibility for their poor relationship.

Very soon, Ethan discovers that he is in love with Zeena's young cousin Mattie: a penniless girl who comes to assist Zeena during her numerous illnesses, similarly to Zeena herself. The reader always sees Mattie through Ethan's eyes: vigorous, full of life and kind- the opposite of Zeena. Yet, it is impossible not to ask oneself, while reading, what would become of Mattie if she lived for years in the same circumstances as Zeena, on an isolated farm, a husband who is not interested and surrounded by poverty. The reader finds the answer at the end of the novel, in the final chapter, encountering the first description of Mattie decades after the coasting accident and attempted suicide with Ethan:

The other woman was much smaller and slighter. She sat huddled in an arm-chair near the stove, and when I came in she turned her head quickly toward me, without the least corresponding movement of her body. Her hair was as grey as her companion's, her face as bloodless and shriveled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples. Under her shapeless dress her body kept its limp immobility, and her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives.

(Ethan Frome, p.127)

In this novel, similarly to the previous ones, Wharton doesn't provide any moral absolution for Zeena, despite the fact that Zeena nurses both Ethan and Mattie back to life. Ethan is depicted merely as a victim of his life and unbearable circumstances, even as a hero who tried to stay loyal to his wife. Still, even the last sentences in the novel, stir the readers' hatred towards Zeena:

One of them, on my appearing, raised her tall bony figure from her seat, not as if to welcome me—for she threw me no more than a brief glance of surprise—but simply to set about preparing the meal which Frome's absence had delayed. A slatternly calico wrapper hung from her shoulders and the wisps of her thin grey hair were drawn away from a high forehead and fastened at the back by a broken comb. She had pale opaque eyes which revealed nothing and reflected nothing, and her narrow lips were of the same sallow color as her face.

(Ethan Frome, p.127)

The reader can empathize with Ethan, but never with Zeena. In line with the rest of the novels by Edith Wharton, Zeena is depicted as a villain: a woman whose existence is reduced to hypochondriac episodes and selfish complaints.

5. CONCLUSION

This study attempted to analyze some of the prominent characters in Wharton's works, through the lens of Wharton's hypothetical misogyny. Malcom (1986), defines Wharton's works in the following way: "Her books are pervaded by a deep pessimism and an equally profound misogyny." It can be argued that Wharton's female characters are complex and cannot be simply defined as archetypal fairytale villains. Underneath the arrogance and parasitic existence, Lily Bart is still able to distinguish right from wrong. Despite her illnesses, imaginary or real, and even though she is quite possibly aware of the reason her husband and Mattie end up severely injured, Zeena is able to rise herself above her position and to provide both with the necessary care and save their lives. Even the bejeweled monster, Undine Spragg, can still feel remorse or guilt. However, it can be concluded that if we analyze the negative characters in Wharton's works, both male and female, the true villains are identified chiefly among the female characters.

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