

# Vested Reading: Writing the Self through Ethan Frome

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## Vested Reading: Writing the Self through Ethan Frome

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### ABSTRACT

This essay builds on the work of Wolfgang Iser, Janice Radway, E. H. Gombrich, and other theorists of reading to argue for a new approach to the reading encounter, which I call vested reading. Vested reading is a means of engaging with the literary text in a way that reads the self into the book one holds in one's hands while also attending to issues of literary form. I turn to Edith Wharton's novella *Ethan Frome* and its popular reception in order to flesh out my understanding of vested reading as a practice that realigns life-worlds, while reconstructing the world of the text in ways relevant to readers' lives.

### KEYWORDS

Anthropology of literature;  
reader-response theory; Edith Wharton; women's studies; marriage; divorce; Wolfgang Iser; Janice Radway; E. H. Gombrich

It was not until five years after she had divorced my father that my mother revealed to me the major stimulus behind her decision to put an end to a relationship that had dragged on for 28 years. Reading Edith Wharton's classic novella *Ethan Frome* on her daily commute from work, she explained, had given her the courage to seek a divorce. After she shared this recollection with me, I reread Wharton's text, seeking insight into how it could have stirred my mother to action. The reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser (d. 2007), working in the phenomenological tradition of Ernst Gombrich, came to my aid. Iser's seemingly tautological observation that 'a second reading...often produces a different impression from the first' (9) suggests a new phenomenology of the reading encounter. While recognising that the distinctive quality of a second reading derives from 'the reader's own change of circumstances', Iser insists that 'the text must be such as to allow this variation' (55–6). Hence variations in reading experiences are already latent within the text itself. 'On a second reading', Iser adds, 'familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched' (56). This essay builds on Iser's precedent.

In the pages that follow, I pursue the type of second reading that is foundational to the literary encounter. With Rachel Morley, I aim to show how renewed encounters with once-read texts at later stages in our lives enable us to recreate 'life within the body of a text' (79). I refer to this kind of reading as 'vested,' so as to distinguish it from other approaches to literature, which isolate the text from the world, and the work from the reader, and yet which comprise the bulk of mainstream literary studies. Vested reading is driven by preoccupations that may appear to bear only a tangential relation to the

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text, yet which are grounded in the reader's life experience. Although the techniques peculiar to this method have not yet been adequately addressed within literary scholarship,

vested reading characterises the majority of reading experiences to this day. Outside the academy, people read for reasons that are not easily typologised according to existing literary theories. To adapt Morley's claims for biography, vested reading 'can help its readers to live and to make meaning out of life' (79). Reading, I argue here, is an exercise in writing the self, and an attempt to read the self into the book one holds in one's hands.

When I asked my mother why she was afraid of divorcing my father when the benefits of staying married appeared so negligible, she replied that she was unaware that life after marriage was possible. My mother's scenario echoes the sense of doom that prevented Ethan from cutting his ties with his wife Zeena and eloping with his beloved Mattie. At many points throughout the narrative, Ethan wonders why he and Zeena married and why they stayed together for so long. Ethan does not hesitate to call his marriage a mistake; he is unprepared however to overcome the consequences of that mistake. In terms of Gombrich's phenomenology (in Iser's application of it to literature), Ethan lacks the ability to observe himself having an illusion, even when such an experience might enable him to break through his will to passivity. He lacks the reflexivity that literature could have nurtured, had he been exposed to the cognitive processes to which the readers of his story were exposed.

As I read *Ethan Frome* for the second time and through an interpretive lens that differed from the one that framed my first adolescent encounter with the text, I was better able to discern how this text could have conveyed to my mother a sense of her own agency. During my first encounter with the text, I took it for a bleak narrative about one man's moral inertia. 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. Over the course of my first encounter with the text, it was only possible to relate to it as an alien story from another time and place. With each new reading, the novella entered more fully into my life, and into the lives of those who constituted my life. The conventional view that literary texts simply reflect worlds obscures the process through which worlds are constructed on the basis of what we read and write. Wharton's novella resonated with my mother when she read it for the first time, as it did with me during my second reading. In the week that spanned her daily commute to work as she read this text, my mother's awareness of her life options was radically expanded. After three decades of marriage, reading *Ethan Frome* made visible to her for the first time the shackles that had been imperceptible a decade earlier. Perceiving Ethan's failure to act enabled her to conceive of how she might revise the script of her life, and avoid Ethan's fate.

In her sociology of late twentieth century North American reading habits, Janice Radway evokes a period in her own reading life when 'the act of reading was propelled more by a driving desire...to connect, to communicate, and to share than by the desire to evaluate, to explicate, to explain, to discriminate, and to judge' (*A Feeling* 7). Radway characterises this moment in her reading life as an expression of a popular aesthetic that she was alienated from through her professionalisation as a literary scholar.

Radway's popular aesthetic approaches a novel less with the goal of evaluating it than to enter its life-worlds, and to reconstruct these worlds in ways relevant to the reader's

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life. The popular aesthetic is relevant to all social classes, and even though it is most commonly associated with the middle class, Radway's own example suggests that this type of reading is not alien to the professoriate, even when they fail to theorise this aspect of their reading lives. Vested reading of the sort embodied in my mother's reading practices exemplifies reading habits that Radway affiliates with the 'common reader'. For common readers, literacy serves as 'a tool or a technology...a device for doing something, for bringing about change' ('Book-of-the-Month' 535) in their own lives.

Radway's purposeful aesthetics of the novel is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of affect. In his study of the role of class hierarchies in generating taste, Bourdieu notes that the popular aesthetic is more likely to perceive congruence between art and life than are aesthetics aligned with high culture. Such congruence need not be purely mimetic. It

moves in multiple directions, with art inflecting life and life inflecting art. While the directionality of this relation is not over determined, it is ethical to the extent that it intervenes directly in daily life. According to Bourdieu, the continuity between art and life that characterises the popular aesthetic subordinates 'form to function' and depends on 'a refusal of the refusal' which inaugurates 'the high aesthetic, i.e., the clear-cut separation of ordinary dispositions from the specifically aesthetic disposition' (32). Grounded as it is in an aesthetic of reception that realises textual meaning during—rather than prior to—the readerly encounter, vested reading bridges the art/life divide.

Radway's and Bourdieu's popular aesthetic diverges from the aesthetic animating high culture by embedding the text within the world. To adapt Morley again, vested reading turns to literature, whether high or low, in order 'to understand and transform the self' (79). My mother turned to *Ethan Frome* as a text to live and think with, not to evaluate. Her interest in the narrative was a function of its ability to stimulate changes in her life. By contrast, in the type of institutionalised literary studies that dominate the academy, texts are read for their complexity, their genealogies of influence, and their locations in history. In transposing the lessons she gleaned from the Wharton's text onto the text of her life, my mother's vested reading confounded a tendency prevalent within institutional literary studies, whereby literary form is alienated from the worlds through which it is constituted.

Bourdieu notwithstanding, it would be oversimplifying to suggest that the popular aesthetic perceives only content while the high culture approach perceives only form. Radway postulates that the category of the general reader has 'evolved historically precisely as a rejection and critique of some other reader, presumably a reader not general but focused, professional, technical, and specialized' (*A Feeling* 10). In applying the text of *Ethan Frome* to the text of their lives, the reading method pursued here calls into question normative academic reading practices. At the same time I propose a phenomenology of the reading process attuned to the reader's cognitive and biographical experience. When read as a means of writing, and rewriting, the self—rather than for a degree, a career, or a publication—literary texts have the greatest impact in and on the world. The readings delineated here give the lie to any claim that fiction reaches no further than the events it narrates. Oblivious as she was to the academic instrumentalisation of literature, yet compelled by the story Wharton had to tell, my mother deployed Ethan's will to failure to defy social norms that had been inculcated into her from birth and socially inscribed onto her body.

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### Ethan's failures

To its detractors, *Ethan Frome* represents an ethical failure, and its author stands condemned of moral turpitude. 'There is a certain inexorableness about Mrs. Wharton', complained a contemporary reviewer, 'as if she herself were constitutionally opposed to happiness, as if she were somewhat compelled to interpret life in terms of pain' ('Experiences'). Decades later, the influential critic Lionel Trilling deemed *Ethan Frome* a moral failure. Shocked by the all-too visible paucity of feminine virtues in Wharton's aesthetics, Trilling called Wharton 'a woman in whom we cannot fail to see a limitation of heart' (332).<sup>1</sup> Unconcerned with *Ethan Frome*'s aesthetics, Trilling evaluated the text as a moral treatise, in which capacity he found it lacking. Deploring the story's resistance to 'moral discourse' (334), Trilling deemed *Ethan Frome* a 'dead book' (333). Trilling argued that Ethan's story could never constitute a tragedy because, while tragedies enshrine the will at the basis of their plots, no one in *Ethan Frome* can summon the courage to act.

From John Updike to Jonathan Franzen, male critics have long regarded Wharton as a ruthless writer, lacking in compassion for her characters.<sup>2</sup> Such confluences of biography and imagination tend to obscure the emotive force of works such as *Ethan Frome*, which thematise the failure of the will in affective terms, and deduce from this failure a species of moral catastrophe. This exercise in vested reading revisits *Ethan Frome* at the juncture between the failure of the will and moral catastrophe in Wharton's aesthetic. I read *Ethan Frome* as a text to live with, to debate, argue against, and, ultimately, as a narrative that equips its readers to translate the dilemmas they encounter in the text into choices

they face in their lives.

By identifying new connections between texts and their readers, often at the intersections of popular, material, and visual culture, recent scholarship has enabled us to better appreciate the relevance of Edith Wharton's fictions to our understanding of gender in contemporary contexts.<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging this general trend, literary theorist Rita Felski argues that 'thanks largely to feminism, more people now think of Wharton as an important writer' (149). Although the popular reception of films based on Wharton's novels has been registered in scholarship, the feminist reclamation of Wharton has yet to take account of readerly encounters with Wharton's texts.<sup>4</sup> While it has long been acknowledged that Wharton's subtle fictions are seminal contributions to the female literary canon, less attention has been given to the ways in which her texts (and not simply the films based on her texts) generate new cognitive horizons within contemporary readers' lives.

As a story with a male protagonist, *Ethan Frome* may appear to be an unlikely candidate for feminist recuperation. However, it is precisely the failure of Ethan's will that makes his story usable from a feminist point of view. As Gavin Jones has argued, for Wharton's fictions, 'the plot of decline was an integral part of a debate over the meaning of success and failure, the extent of freedom, and the possibility of fulfillment for women in society' (115). Ethan's inertia thus indexes a more profound crisis in the capitulation to 'lassitude and inaction' that characterised the experience of an entire generation within the world in which Wharton's aesthetic was formed.<sup>5</sup> This essay reads Ethan's failure of will heuristically, and treats it as a means of intervening within a broader philosophical and methodological problem. Although its protagonist is constrained by a kind of inertia, the text of *Ethan Frome* inculcates a productive ethics of inertia within the reader. The raw story,

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which Russian formalists called the *fabula*, diverges in this instance from the reader's encounter, which closely aligns with the form of narrative refashioning these same formalists described as the *sjuzhet*.<sup>6</sup> Stated programmatically, the inertia induced in the reader transforms the failure of fictional wills into stimuli for real-world action. As it constructs a framework for theorising the will, *Ethan Frome* provokes its readers to action, just as it provoked its author to action a century ago. *Ethan Frome*'s readerly afterlives place the charge of authorial inertia levied by Trilling in a new light, and reveal how an encounter with failure may be intrinsic to the reading experience.

The remainder of this essay adopts a literary-anthropological approach to the study of the readerly encounter in order to bring to light what *Ethan Frome* has to offer the common reader. Conjoining literature and ethnography, this approach advances the literary-anthropological project pioneered most recently by Wolfgang Iser, but grounded in prior interdisciplinary interventions into the phenomenology of aesthetic perception.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, I seek to formalise literary anthropology methodologically by refining a reader-response approach to the study of the literary text. In my view, the conjuncture of the phenomenology of the reading process with the ways in which this process inflects the reading of specific literary texts is one of the most exciting new frontiers within the study of life writing today.<sup>8</sup> This essay builds on recent trends within this field to revisit one of the most familiar, if least understood, texts in Wharton's oeuvre.

### Passive characters, active readers

Although the story is well known, a brief recitation of the plot will assist in identifying how a phenomenology of the text can serve a hermeneutics of the reader's response. Ethan Frome of Starkfield is embroiled in an unhappy marriage to Zeena Frome. Convinced that she is afflicted with a terminal illness, Zeena uses her illness to sap the joy out of Ethan's life. The story's plot is propelled by Ethan's love for Zeena's 20-year-old cousin Mattie Silver. Lacking the means to support herself independently and hoping to make herself useful in the Frome household, Mattie has moved to Starkfield following her father's death. Zeena soon suspects that Mattie's arrival has stirred hitherto unknown forms of desire in Ethan's heart. After a doctor informs her that she needs a new hired girl to look after her, Zeena arranges for Mattie's departure. The night of Mattie's scheduled departure does not go according to plan: Ethan and Mattie are seriously wounded

from a sled accident on the way to the train station, leaving Zeena to nurse them for the rest of their lives.

Famously infected by a failure of the will, Ethan epitomises the critical axiom that 'Wharton's males are weak, rather than reprehensible' (527). In terms that ramify across genders, Ethan belongs to that class among Wharton's tragic heroes who, according to Edmund Wilson, are 'victims of the group pressure of convention; they are passionate or imaginative spirits, hungry for emotional and intellectual experience' (198). 'Locked into a small closed system', these characters 'either destroy themselves by beating their heads against their prison or suffer a living death in resigning themselves to it' (198). Notwithstanding their relevance to certain aspects of Wharton's ethical universe, these critical assessments fail to explain—or even to acknowledge—how Wharton's meticulous evocation of spiritual claustrophobia has liberated subsequent readers from their own confinements.

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Among *Ethan Frome*'s many mysteries are the reasons for Ethan's passivity through the duration of his long marriage. Why, generations of readers have asked, does Ethan not rebel? Why does he allow his wife to crush his aspirations for a bigger, better, world? While the victim label is often affixed to Wharton's male protagonists, this term does not capture the full panorama of Ethan's ethical horizons, nor does it represent his life choices. Equally inadequate is the response that Ethan was simply responding to the call of duty when he failed to imagine life beyond Starkfield's narrow horizons, for, as Trilling correctly notes, there is little to suggest that Ethan is inhibited on moral grounds: Ethan's 'duties as a son are discharged because he is a son; his duties as a husband are discharged because he is a husband. He does nothing because he is a moral man' (44). Unlike his female counterpart Ann Eliza Bunner, who features in Wharton's *Bunner Sisters*' (written in 1892; published in 1916), Ethan is not given to debating the ethics of his actions. Ann Eliza sacrifices her happiness in order to make possible her sister's marriage and continually questions the virtues of this sacrifice. Her inner oscillation is reflection in the comparison of her to a ticking clock on into a crowded city street. Congruously but also contrastively, Ethan denies himself the satisfaction of being with his beloved not because he is compelled by any moral vision, but simply because he cannot imagine acting otherwise.

That Ethan could have acted differently—by arranging for Zeena to live alone, for example—but chose not to suggests that, rather than being a victim, Ethan is haunted by a failure of the will. His failed will resonates with that of many heroines in the naturalist fictions of the 1890s, whose lives, according to Jennifer Fleissner, were marked by 'an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion back and forth, around and around, on and on that has the distinctive effect of seeming also like a stuckness in place' (9). But whereas prior scholars have discerned in Ethan's inertia merely the 'morality of habit' (Trilling 337), these moral habituations are grounded in a deeper ethical agency. Attesting to the peculiar contradictions that inflect the modern will, they resonate with particular power within the American naturalist canon. More than a story of a failed will, *Ethan Frome* narrates the genesis of a will to failure. Ethan's will to failure resonates across Wharton's oeuvre and across the gender of her characters, from the 'Bunner Sisters' onwards. In that story, penned 15 years before *Ethan Frome* but published five years after, a series of tragic events leads the self-sacrificing female protagonist to discover 'the awful problem of the inutility of self-sacrifice' (Nevius 124).

In the 'Bunner Sisters', the protagonist Ann Eliza, who 'had never thought of questioning the inherited principles which had guided her life' () suddenly begins to question the value of her sacrifices. 'Self-effacement', asserts the semi-omniscient narrator, had always seemed to her both natural and necessary; but then she had taken it for granted that it implied the securing of that good. Now she perceived that to refuse the gifts of life does not ensure their transmission to those for whom they have been surrendered. (Wharton *Ethan* 353)

Like Ann Eliza, Ethan discovers that no one benefits from his refusal of happiness for himself. Both *Ethan Frome* and the 'Bunner Sisters' astutely assess 'prevailing gender and

sexual ideologies' (Solan 136), in terms specific to their protagonists' genders but also with profound cross-gender implications. The two texts together offer parallel accounts of the impact of marriage norms on working-class life.

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After he crashes into the tree with Mattie in his arms, the burgeoning love affair that had brightened Ethan's life is exposed to the world. The pain this public revelation might have inflicted on Zeena, along with countless other complications, is easy to imagine. But, as happens with so many of Wharton's characters, Ethan's discovery of the 'inutility of sacrifice' comes too late. Indeed, as with the Bunner sisters, this discovery is external to the trajectory of Ethan's life. And yet, here as generally in literature, events that transpire outside the text become implicated in its reception across generations of readers. Borges underscores this dimension of readerly reception when he has a protagonist reflect on the many variant readings that attached to an early Arabic verse in its journey across space and time: 'Time widens the circle of the verses, and I myself know some verses that are, like music, all things to all men' (76). Just as poetry can mean 'all things to all men', so does Ethan's will to failure admit of continual reinterpretation on every new reading. With an ethics generated from the readerly encounter, **Ethan Frome** acquires force as its readers critique the protagonist's willed passivity. When **Ethan Frome's** readers are provoked to critical reflection, their life stories become internal to the text and ultimately reconstitute its meaning from within. This reading process substantiates Jane Tompkins' argument that literary meaning 'has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader' ("An Introduction" ix).

Faced with what he conceives of as a choice between abandoning the only love of his life to an indifferent fate and the ecstasy of dying in her embrace, Ethan opts for the latter (as it turns out, he achieves neither goal). Although his passions are restrained by his sense of husbandly duty, Ethan cannot resist Mattie's plea: 'Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again...So't we'll never come up anymore' (Ethan 67). Desperately, Ethan tacitly consents to Mattie's plan to crash into the elm at the foot of the hill. And yet, when confronted with the most decisive act in the entire narrative, an act that brings both him and Mattie to the threshold of death and scars them for life, Ethan avoids taking responsibility. Once he agrees to Mattie's plan, Ethan insists on sitting in front as they coast toward the elm tree, making Mattie, who drives the sleigh from behind, not Ethan, the architect of their destruction.

There are many ways to narrate the contretemps that culminate in Ethan's and Mattie's injury. While the story's narrative power resides in its ambiguity, the protagonist's surge towards death demonstrates that Ethan's will to failure rivals that of the heroes of classical tragedy in its intensity. Ethan demands that Mattie crash into the elm, even when confronted with her resistance. Far from lacking a will, Ethan's passivity is inflected by choice. His so-called moral inertia is a will to inertia, rather than an inertia of the will. The fateful lead-up to Ethan's and Mattie's brush with death exposes Ethan's tendency to wilfully render himself passive and to project agency onto his female partners: 'Get up! Get up!' he urged her; but she kept on repeating: 'Why do you want to sit in front?' 'Because I—because I want to feel you holding me,' he stammered, and dragged her to her feet.

The answer seemed to satisfy her, or else she yielded to the power of his voice. He bent down, feeling in the obscurity for the glassy slide worn by preceding coasters, and placed the runners carefully between its edges. (Ethan 69).

Just as Ethan enthusiastically assents to Mattie's request to take himself and his beloved on a fatal journey towards death, so does he ultimately evade death for both himself and

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Mattie. His will is manifested selectively, and concealed behind the wills of others, but is never entirely in abeyance. The inner monologue that accompanies the couple's race towards the elm tree is fraught with the sense of Ethan's (and Mattie's) moral agency, as well as of his culpability.

Whereas Ethan was prepared, for the sake of duty, to bring about his own death, he is soon implicated in Mattie's permanent injury. As he coasts down the hill with Mattie behind him, he sees his wife's face, streaked with 'twisted monstrous lineaments' (69),

hovering above him. Ethan swerves the sled to the side and prevents it from colliding with the elm. At this point, Ethan could have chosen the easy path: he could have avoided death for himself and his beloved. He could have subdued his will through his natural fear of death. But Ethan's will rears itself against this injunction to passivity: 'he righted [the sled] again, kept it straight, and drove down on the black projecting mass' (69). Ethan's oscillations suggest that it is less a will that Ethan lacks than a strategy for using his will to get what he wants. Ethan's will to passivity overpowers his will to act. Because the specter of Zeena's face obstructed Ethan's path to the elm, the couple is permanently injured rather than killed. Even though it does not result in death, this outcome is shot through with a sense of Ethan's moral culpability. The least that can be said is that, like Mattie, Ethan was entirely in control of his fate, even and especially when he felt himself powerless, and when the text—superficially read—portrays him as such. *Ethan Frome* demonstrates in the flesh that moral inertia is a product of the will, and therefore is as susceptible to the will's control as any other act. In her pioneering reading of the naturalist text, Fleissner introduces the concept of compulsion to 'name an understanding of agency in which individual will and its subjection to rationalizing "forces" [are]...deeply intertwined' (*Women* 9). Although Fleissner focuses on Wharton's female protagonists, Ethan's will to failure is internal to the conception of agency entailed in her concept of compulsion. As readers, we are made privy to how Ethan's sense of entrapment causes him to scar his own life and the lives of others. Precisely because the larger picture is more visible to readers from without than it is to the characters within the text, readers who encounter Ethan in the text of his life are better positioned to hold him accountable for his will to failure.

Ethan's actions leading up to the collusion with the elm tree reveal the strength of his character. Although he justifies his own passivity by contorting logic, such logic is unpersuasive, as in the following interior monologue: 'Mattie was [Zeena's] relation, not his: there were no means by which he could compel her to keep the girl under her roof' (48). Ethan passively objects to Mattie's departure. And yet when confronted with his wife's decision to send Mattie away, he feels overpowered and helpless, to the extent that he is prepared to compromise on his own ethical values. Here, Ethan actively subdues his will to inertia to Zeena's will to command.

Skilled in the art of using language to wound, Zeena's sharp rhetoric outwits her husband's willed passivity. Indeed, when Ethan alludes to the cruelty of sending a relation away when there is no one else she can turn to, Zeena's verbal barbs effectively silence any objection Ethan can conjure. Ethan asks Zeena what her relations will think of her if she sends Mattie away. Never less than clever, Zeena alludes to her suspicions of her husband's attraction for her cousin: 'I know well enough what they say of my having kep' her here as long as I have' (48). Surreptitiously, these words suggest that Ethan's attraction for Mattie has captured her attention and earned the community's scorn.

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Even when faced with Zeena's verbal polemics, it is ultimately Ethan's will to passivity that compels him to obey. Confronted with his wife's determination to send Mattie away, Ethan could have pressed his point further by distinguishing between ethical imperative and social convention. He could have pointed out that while it was his moral duty to support his wife financially, he was not thereby obliged to bring about his own misery. Zeena needed his money; she did not require his physical proximity to be happy. Zeena could legitimately expect to be taken care of like a member of his family, but there was no ethical warrant for, and, arguably, no possibility of, feigning love. Because the text affords little evidence that Zeena requires Ethan emotionally, we are left to assume Ethan could have fulfilled his spousal duties while loving Mattie at the same time. That Ethan conflated social convention and ethical responsibility to the point of being unable to distinguish between the two gives the lie to the stereotype of Ethan as a man constrained entirely by duty. Nor is there any license in the text for inferring that Ethan's response to the awakening of his desires constitutes a universal recommendation on the author's part to all humanity. Ethan's will to passivity merely reveals him as a man who, although gifted with the potential to dream, is stricken by a lack of vision concerning

how to implement his dreams. Ethan may have been unlucky in life, but he was nonetheless a free agent. He could have travelled to the cities where he longed to make a career in engineering, and sent his earnings back home to Starkfield. That he did not choose these options attests less to his moral purity than to the will to passivity that was part of his New England Calvinist inheritance, but which he could have overcome. Far from being a victim, Ethan is a morally culpable agent.

One of Wharton's greatest aesthetic achievements is her success in evoking the reader's sympathy for a character whose culpability makes his fate tragically, if peculiarly, just. Wharton does not endorse Ethan's will to passivity. She simply shows, truthfully, how humans behave, without moralising over what they should have done. Wharton's aesthetics open onto the world, creating spaces for writing Ethan's story into the text of the reader's self. Although hardly populist, Wharton's own resistance to moralism makes her texts integral to what Rita Felski has denominated 'a general theory of the female reader' (*Literature* 47). Such feminist inquiries could usefully be seen as a subfield within reader-response studies. When the narrator of *Ethan Frome* is first introduced to his story by a character from Starkfield who remembers the events from long ago, he observes: 'there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps' (7). Within these gaps between the 'facts' and the story's unarticulated 'deeper meaning', the reader is born and grows.

### Readings and revisions

While Ethan himself inhabits a radically constricted world, the text of his life derives its importance in part from its identification of an alternative to the marriage plot that recasts 'the seeming abyss of endlessness...as the calendrical time of the modern everyday' (Fleissner "Wharton" 459). Although this alternative is not fully fleshed out within the plot of *Ethan Frome*, it can be deduced from a more comprehensive engagement with Wharton's oeuvre. In a preface to *Ethan Frome* written 11 years after the text's original publication, Wharton insisted that the only authorial intervention relevant to interpreting a text is the author's account of why he 'decided to attempt the work in question, and why

he selected one form rather than another for its embodiment' (xii). Countering the moralism that pervaded her era, and that systematically opposed duty to desire, Wharton's deepest aesthetic concern is with the formal strategies through which her hero's trials and tribulations are rendered. She cultivates a reader who responds to these aesthetic triggers.

In Wharton, form determines content. Form—not content—facilitates the alchemical transubstantiation of life into literature. Form is the means through which *fabula* becomes *sjuzhet*. Wolfgang Iser underscored this dimension of literary form when he argued in his seminal essay on the phenomenology of reading, 'The Reading Process' (1972), that an aesthetically successful literary text 'provokes certain expectations which in turn we project onto the text in such a way that we reduce the polysemantic possibilities to a single interpretation in keeping with the expectations aroused, thus extracting an individual, configurative meaning' (59). As Wharton aestheticises Ethan's dilemmas, and portrays his predicament from the outside, the constraints under which her protagonist labours come to appear as transient and surmountable.

From another point of view, form for Wharton is the 'equipment for living' that Kenneth Burke celebrates as the *raison d'être* of literary art. In its role as equipment for living, literature in Burke's words offers strategies for 'selecting enemies and allies, for socialising losses, for warding off [the] evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another' (304). Instead of producing moral parables, Wharton's narratives crystallise paradox, contradiction, and thwarted desire. Rather than telling her readers what to think, Wharton propels her readers towards independent judgment, and towards the application of her fictions to their lives. With respect to these aspects of her aesthetic, Wharton's fictions epitomise Burke's conception of literature as equipment for living, much as they illustrate Gombrich's understanding of the aesthetic as a process through which illusions are broken.

Inasmuch as Wharton's aesthetic resists conventional morality, it is well suited to the fluctuating ethics that guided her life choices, and which formally complement her aesthetic vision. 'Even among stories and novels published in the same year', McDowell notes, Wharton adopted 'a relativistic view' on divorce and marriage, 'considering the moral implications of the individual situation presented in each work' (534). While Wharton's novels such as the *Valley of Decision* (1902) were cited in the mainstream media to support arguments for the sanctity of marriage, a comprehensive engagement with her oeuvre suggests a belief in marriage's futility. In her life as in her fiction, Wharton 'knew what it felt to be a woman trapped by marriage, and hence to see the modern escape hatch of divorce as a godsend' (Fleissner "Wharton" 462). Her first-hand knowledge of marriage helped her extract aesthetic meaning from recalcitrant experience.

As Wharton understands it, the writer's only responsibility is to create an aesthetically fulfilling work of art. Wharton never compromised on the critical analysis for the sake of gratifying readerly sentiment. 'I can only say that the [writing] process, though it takes place in some secret region on the sheer edge of consciousness, is always illuminated by the full light of my critical attention', Wharton wrote in her autobiography (*Backward* 205). Literature in Wharton's rendering aestheticises experience so as to activate readerly agency. Insofar as the reader selectively and strategically incorporates narrative forms into her life, a text's popular reception hinges on the integrity of its formal execution. The most

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aesthetically fulfilling texts are those that are usable to the greatest diversity of readers. As Wharton affirms, the text's formal perfection alone determines 'that imponderable something which causes life to circulate' in the text and 'preserves it for a little from decay' ("The Writing of *Ethan Frome*" xii).

Art's conferral of clarity amidst life's fragility functions as the exact inverse of the will to passivity exemplified by many of Wharton's characters. Literary form refracts social norms we are socialised to take for granted, thereby casting new light on our everyday lives. As noted by art theorist E. H. Gombrich, whose work has been influential with phenomenologists of the reading process such as Iser, even when we perceive intellectually that a given experience or belief is an illusion, we still require art to clarify our illusions because 'we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion' (5). As a work that stages the illusions that constrain its characters' lives, *Ethan Frome* calls on readers to break through their own wills to passivity when they see this passivity reflected in Ethan's life.

Wharton's story documents how an illusion of entrapment can suffuse a situation that is in fact unfixated and amenable to change. After Ethan's and Mattie's accident, Zeena is transformed into a source of strength and power. Ceasing to be an invalid, she is Mattie and Ethan's caretaker. A Starkfield resident comments on the sea change in Zeena's character: 'it was a miracle, considering how sick she was—but she seemed to be raised right up just when the call came to her' (73). Zeena, we learn, had 'the strength given her to care for those two for over twenty years, and before the accident came she thought she couldn't even care for herself' (73).

Like Ethan, Zeena fails to recognise her own latent power until events in her life make such recognition necessary. More than the accident that results in Ethan's and Mattie's physical deformity, the novella's ultimate plot twist is its revelation that the sick can be healed, given propitious circumstances. The tragedy of so many of Wharton's protagonists (in *Ethan Frome*, 'Bunner Sisters', *The House of Mirth*) is less that they are weak and helpless as that their 'terminally indecisive behavior' causes them to perpetually make the wrong choices (Fleissner *Women* 9). The sense of entrapment that pervades *Ethan Frome* is an illusion in Gombrich's phenomenological terms. Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena are freer than they realise, as only the reader can discern. It is only following the accident, when Mattie's and Ethan's physical impairment replaces Zeena's imagined illness, that freedom becomes doom. Even then, the darkness is only a temporary phase that ends soon for the reader, if not the characters. Read in this way, the novella's *sjuzhet* converges with the popular aesthetic approach championed by Radway.

The author as reader

Just as the anthropology of literature links close, critical reading with the popular aesthetic, so does it conjoin life writing with the type of reading that is inscribed into our lives.

Wharton began drafting the story that became **Ethan Frome** as an exercise for her French lessons while she was living in Paris in 1907.<sup>9</sup> Her tutor had suggested to her that she practice writing in French in order to advance her mastery of the language. As it was easier for her to compose stories than letters, she composed an earlier version of **Ethan Frome**. This early French version ‘ploughed its heavy course through a copybook or two’ before being abandoned (Wharton “Writing” 82). Two years later, in the

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throes of her own difficult progress towards a divorce from her husband of 28 years, Wharton picked up the thread of the story again, this time in English.

By the time **Ethan Frome** was published in serial form in 1911, Wharton had embarked on the final and most difficult stages of her marriage. Her husband Edward was 13 years her senior. Like Ethan’s wife Zeena, he was stricken by a disease that no doctor seemed able to cure. Although Wharton begins her autobiography by circumspectly denying any ‘sensational grievances’ and affirming that she ‘met with kindness’ ‘everywhere on my path’, in this eminently public form of life writing, the grief marriage inflicted on her life is palpable between the lines of the text (**Backward** xx). Wharton cites the gloom induced by her husband’s sickness as one of the causes behind her decision to abandon her beloved home in Lenox, Massachusetts and relocate to Paris. ‘Much as I loved the place, the glowing summer weeks, and the woodland pageantry of our matchless New England autumn’, Wharton recollected, her delight in this natural beauty was ‘all darkened’ by her husband’s ill-health. Wharton’s recollection of this stage in her life calls to mind her evocation of Ethan’s predicament:

Since the first years of our marriage his condition, in spite of intervals of apparent health, had become steadily graver. His sweetness of temper and boyish enjoyment of life struggled long against the creeping darkness of neurasthenia, but all the neurologists we consulted were of the opinion that there could be no real recovery; and time confirmed their verdict (**Backward** 326).

A quarter-century before she was able to bring herself to write these words about her deceased husband, Wharton planted similar thoughts into Ethan’s head concerning his wife Zeena: ‘She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him’ (53).

Such juxtapositions encapsulate the paradoxical proximity of her own life to the life of the text that Wharton kept assiduously hidden from public view. In their edition of **Ethan Frome**, Kristin Lauer and Cynthia Wolff reflect on these parallels between Wharton and Ethan. ‘Approaching fifty’, the editors write, Wharton ‘rejected the illusions of romanticism, felt keenly the crushing demands of the household invalid, and fought a valiant inner battle to remain active, involved, and strong like her framing engineer, who abandons the seductive numbness of resignation and despair’ (viii). While I have argued so far that vested reading creatively appropriates the script of a literary text and incorporates it into the reader’s life, the autobiographical dimension to **Ethan Frome** also reveals how the writing process crystallises experience and transmutes it into literary form in order to distil suffering. A fully-fleshed out anthropology of literature therefore entails, minimally, a three-way relation, from author to text to reader. At each end of this continuum, the author and the reader realise the work of literature by grafting it onto their lives, but they do so in structurally inverted ways.

While Wharton’s Parisian exile sensitised her to new possibilities in her personal life, her intellectual horizons were also broadened by contact with a foreign culture. While she was drafting **Ethan Frome** in France, Wharton was also immersed in philosophical corpus that she had hitherto neglected: the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, arguably modernity’s most lucid theorist of the will. Wharton explained to her friend Sara Norton that, until 1908, she had only glanced at **Zarathustra** and was not otherwise familiar with Nietzsche’s work. In 1908, immediately after drafting the French **Ethan Frome**, Wharton discovered **Beyond Good and Evil** (1886). Wharton enthused to Sara that Nietzsche’s book was ‘full of wit & originality & poetry’ (Lewis and Lewis 159). Nietzsche

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in her estimation ‘has no system and not much logic but wonderful flashes of insight & a power of breaking through conventions that is most exhilarating’ (159). Ethan could not

have been far from Wharton's mind when she concluded this letter with the comment: 'There are times when I hate what Christianity has left in our blood—or rather, one might say, taken out of it—by its cursed assumption of the split between body and soul' (159). In light of this remark, Ethan's passivity reads as a symptom of the moral sickness Nietzsche indicted in *Beyond Good and Evil*. During the argument between himself and Zeena that seals Mattie's fate, the narrator dwells on this will to passivity: 'His wife's retort was like a knife-cut across the sinews and he felt suddenly weak and powerless' (48). In Nietzschean terms, Ethan's lack of will constrains his own life as well as the lives of everyone he comes into contact with.

Like her role model George Eliot, Wharton experienced a tension between the morality that governed her life and the morality that suffused her fiction. In reviewing Leslie Stephen's *George Eliot* (1902), Wharton merged her voice with the earlier Victorian author. Quoting Eliot's statement that 'the great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it', Wharton commented that Eliot 'never ceased to revere the law she transgressed' ("Review" 250; qtd. from Eliot 497). Notwithstanding both writers' reverence for society's laws, Wharton had been elaborating an ethical justification for her divorce for many years in her fiction, including in works that appear to honour traditional morality. The unusually intimate relation in evidence here between the life of the text and the text of its author's life is also apparent in Wharton's statement in her autobiography that 'the book to the making of which I brought the greatest joy and the fullest ease was *Ethan Frome*' (Backward 293). How is it possible, we might reasonably ask, that a text so full of sorrow, and so intimately tied to Wharton's own personal grief, could also have been the source of her greatest joy? The tripartite relation of reader/text/writer entailed in the anthropology of literature helps to make sense of this paradox.

Unlike Ethan, Wharton's reverence for society's laws did not prevent her from fighting for her happiness. As her comments on Eliot suggest, Wharton pondered her deepest personal problems in fiction before she found their resolution in her life. In 1909, two years before her divorce and while immersed in drafting *Ethan Frome*, Wharton wrote to a friend: As I cast my eye backward over literature, I seemed to remember a few other neurotic women who were discontented with their husbands...one Clytemnestra, e.g., and Phaedra, and Iseult, and Anna Karenina, and Pia Tolomei, and Francesca da Rimini—who still live in the imagination...And I wonder, among all the tangles of this mortal coil, which one contains tighter knots to undo, and consequently suggests more tugging, and pain, and diversified elements of misery, than the marriage tie? (Lewis and Lewis 175).

Although divorce was immoral in the abstract for Wharton, it was ultimately the path she chose for herself. In order to arrive at the decision to divorce her husband, however, Wharton first had to write *Ethan Frome*. Similarly, throughout her oeuvre, the unbending morality that animates many of her fictional plots, from *The Touchstone* (1900) to *The House of Mirth* (1905), was undone by what Fleissner calls the 'calendrical time of the modern everyday' that interrupts and challenges abstract morality's ideal time.

Hermione Lee has detailed that Wharton's fiction is dense with 'husbands who are not on their wives' 'plain of thought', incarcerating marriages, claustrophobic partnerships

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and squalid or ridiculous divorces' (363). *Ethan Frome* stands out from the other works for its stark portrayal of the catastrophic consequences of one man's fear of divorce. The tragic habituation to incarcerating marriages predates Ethan within his own family line. This life pattern begins with Ethan's mother, who stayed with her husband until he went 'soft in the brain' (7), a process that led in turn to her own madness. Wharton no doubt situated herself within this lineage.

Wharton shared in common with New England Calvinism the perception of divorce as inherently evil. And yet, in exposing Ethan's failure to distinguish between social convention and ethical imperatives as a tragedy, she reframed literature's relation to the reader.

Wharton's text-world dialectic helpfully illumines the anthropology of the reading process. Wharton made divorce thinkable at a time when it was situated beyond the pale of ethical acceptability. Whereas the wealthy elite of *The House of Mirth* compare divorce to smoke on the grounds that 'both tend to obscure the moral issue' (257) at

stake in the sanctity of marriage, Wharton's tales of love and loss among the workingclass, including *Ethan Frome* and the 'Bunner Sisters', offer a less idealised account of marriage as a social institution. In this respect as well, the popular aesthetic refines and critiques the institution of literature, while extending its meanings in undertheorised ways. When her fiction played the role of equipment for living, Wharton broke through illusions she elsewhere endorsed. In terms of Gombrich's phenomenology, the shattering of illusions in Wharton's fiction stimulated action in her life. Much as it would later serve her readers (including my mother), fiction was a laboratory where Wharton could test her options without compromising the fidelity to tradition she embodied in her life. More important than its contribution to biographical criticism, the intersection between the life of a text and the text of a life revealed in this engagement with *Ethan Frome* offers a path forward for an emergent anthropology of literature that has often been sought among scholars of literature and anthropology alike, but which has only rarely been encountered in analytical form.

### Notes

1. Although Trilling's critique is arguably less than central to a contemporary discussion of Wharton's literary legacy, the currency of this particular essay is evidenced by its inclusion in the recent Norton Critical Edition of *Ethan Frome*.

2. See John Updike, "The Changeling: A New Biography of Edith Wharton" and Jonathan Franzen, "A Rooting Interest". Updike points to the recurrence of the term 'ruthless' in Hermione Lee's biography of Wharton.

3. For Wharton and popular culture, see Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920*, and Jennie A. Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*. For Wharton and visual culture, see Emily J. Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*. For Wharton and material culture, see Emily J. Orlando, *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*.

4. For a study of the film versions of Wharton's novels, see Parley Ann Boswell, *Edith Wharton on Film*.

5. For the problem of the will in American naturalism generally, and in Wharton's oeuvre specifically, see Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (see 161–200 for a detailed discussion of Wharton).

6. For a classic parsing of these two terms, see Jonathan Culler, "Fabula and Sjuzhet in the Analysis of Narrative: Some American Discussions".

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7. See Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology and Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, especially 262–284 for two classic statements.

8. For feminist reader-response theory that usefully combines historicism with a phenomenology of the reading process is the work of Jane P. Tompkins', *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, and *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, and Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*. In the context of these works, I would define the present investigation as being less interested in historicism and more in the phenomenology of the reading process.

9. For an edition of the full French text, currently held by Yale University's Beinecke Library, see W. D. MacCallan, "The French Draft of *Ethan Frome*".

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### Notes on contributor

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