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**Social and Moral Conflicts in Edith Wharton’s Novels and  
Their Film Adaptations**

**THESIS ABSTRACT**

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## Motivation and Personal Contribution

Judging by Edith Wharton's success as a writer, the fascination for her characters equals the interest of her readers in the American society as it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of Edith Wharton's critics have qualified her as a novelist of manners, and indeed she is one. But this is not to say that this is all there is to it, since she is also a novelist of morals. (Singley 1998: 1) Wharton illustrates the social and the moral conflicts of her time, thus contributing to our image about turn-of-the-century America. More recently, probably influenced by the film adaptations in the 1990s and the publishing of the author's personal letters, other approaches can also be identified, which address the diversity and complexity (both thematic and narrative) of her works.

At the moment of the author's birth, in 1862, the world was still unaware of the great transformations to come at the social and mentality levels. Surprisingly, the upper-class, despite being the most educated social group, was the last to accept such changes. This can be explained, however, by their extreme conservatism and financial autonomy which permitted them, for a time at least, to remain detached from the social and moral crisis at the turn of the century. Consequently, as a member of the American leisure class and a descendant of two of its most prominent families (the Joneses and the Rheinlanders), Edith Wharton could only have a limited perspective on the chain of events which brought her country on the path to modernity. Had she remained within the limits of her closed circle, novels like *The Age of Innocence* or *The House of Mirth* would not have been so successful, because they are defined by the author's subtle irony towards the upper-class.

The last few decades have brought a significant diversification in the approaches to Wharton's works. This has led to a reconsideration of her status in the American literary history, since they involve feminist perspectives and a general preoccupation for what stands beyond her initial categorisation of novelist of manners. However, she remains fairly unknown in Romania, with only a couple of studies on feminism and the gothic in some of her works (two recently published Ph. D theses), and there are only a few translations of her books.

Our thesis narrows its focus to the social and moral conflicts in Edith Wharton's novels in an attempt to show that she is not only a novelist of manners but also one of morals. This choice of theme is part of the recently-renewed interest in Wharton's literary contribution. The issue of social and moral conflicts is complex and always current, because the concepts of society and morality lie at the basis of human existence and inevitably intersect. Starting from Carol J. Singley's statement, in her book titled *Edith Wharton. Matters of Mind and Spirit* (1998), that Wharton was, and continues to be, mistakenly seen as a novelist of manners, we must also recognize that she is also a novelist of morals, not in a didactic way, but due to her belief that any literary creation has a deeper layer of meaning which sends the reader back to a morality problem. Moreover, this thesis aims to identify, define and

describe the evolution of these conflicts over time, as they gain new connotations along the way to modernity. Our analysis will show that, as society and mentality evolve, only the appearance of these conflicts is modified, but not their essence, as the characters struggle to cope with them.

In order to illustrate this evolution, and also for the purpose of variety, we selected five of Wharton's novels to be analysed here. We have included four of her best works: *The House of Mirth* (1905), her first big literary success, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize (both novels are set in turn-of-the-century leisure class New York), *Ethan Frome* (1911), her perfectly-rounded novella set in small town Massachusetts and *The Reef* (1912), a novel on leisure class Americans in France. Each is a sample of the author's mastery of different themes, settings and perspectives and they all contribute to our depicting the typology of social and moral conflicts in her works.

Also, in an attempt to broaden our perspective on the matter, we have included a brief analysis of the four most recent film adaptations of these novels, which have also been the most successful ones so far. Our intention in doing so was not to provide a fully-rounded study of novels turned into films (as it is obvious from its limited length and theoretical examination), but it rather aimed only to focus on the ways in which directors chose to illustrate such conflicts (if they did so at all) on screen. Therefore, our analysis of the way social and moral conflicts appear on screen will comment on the respective directors' choice of actors, setting, props, use of camera techniques like close-ups, slow-motion, wide-angle framing and also, very important, on their modifications to the stories to accentuate or diminish the significance of certain conflicts. For example, directors John Madden (*Ethan Frome*, 1993), Robert Allan Ackerman (*Passion's Way*, 1999) and Terence Davies (*The House of Mirth*, 2000) preferred to focus more on the inner (moral) conflicts of their characters, leaving the social component on the second place, while Martin Scorsese (*The Age of Innocence*, 1993) was very meticulous in rendering the hidden social conflicts as well as the moral ones and, with this in mind, he used a significant number of details, including a voiceover narrator to fill in the (historical and cultural) gaps for the viewer.

Despite the fact that there is no film adaptation of Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), the analysis of this fifth novel was also included in our thesis, for two main reasons. Firstly, it is the only one of her novels which deals explicitly with the two issues on focus here. In fact, Wharton was criticised for not choosing one single theme that she would follow through in the novel. She included both the topic of social reform and the morality of euthanasia into one story, which seems broken half-way. However, this work is valuable to us for another reason: it contains, quite explicitly, Edith Wharton's views on both moral and social conflicts. The social conflict in her novels will mostly be between the leisure class and the newly-risen middle-class, rather than dealing with the empowering of the working-classes. In terms of the moral component, this novel shows that ethical dilemmas are

common to both the rich and the poor and that people must live with the consequences of their decisions, while hoping to learn something in the process. Wharton's novels almost never have happy-endings and relationships usually end up in divorce; even when reconciliation is possible, the compromises are too big to take things back to how they were.

Our thesis combines the analytical and synthetical approaches into a complex study of the social and moral conflicts underlying Edith Wharton's novels. The methodology applied here is in accordance with our objectives and it is based on a logical construction, combining theoretical explanations with demonstrative methods which make use of processes like analysis, synthesis and analogy drawing. The study of both literary texts and films is proof of the eclectic approach to our subject and it can be included in the field of cultural studies, since it comprises sociological, philosophical and American civilization elements.

## **A Detailed Presentation of the Thesis**

### **Chapter 1. Morality and Society – Definitions and Delimitations**

Chapter one is the most theoretical from our thesis, as it sets out to define morality and society in the context of their interdependence, from an ideological point of view. This segment of our thesis is based on the theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Bernard Williams, in the attempt to formulate an ideological framework for the subsequent in-depth analysis of the novels. After defining the terms 'morality' and 'society' and distinguishing between morality and social convention, the discussion moves to social stratification and conflict theory, in order to cover the subject of moral and social conflicts. Marx and Weber talk about social strata and the conflicts among them. Within a society in which some rules are changed subjectively, it is inevitable that the same happens with the concept of morality. Bernard Williams emphasizes in his 1972 work, titled *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics*, the fact that the issue of morality is influenced, on the one hand, by the limitations and inconsistencies of the human perception and, on the other hand, by the realisation that its theorisation may mislead those facing a moral dilemma and relying on an accepted moral code to take a decision. Whatever the source of such conflicts, they change with time as both social and moral rules are modified. Consequently, a general look at the greater historical context of turn-of-the-century America is needed in order to explain their nature at that particular time and to justify their influence on Wharton's novels.

### **Chapter 2. Social and Moral Conflicts in Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America**

Industrialisation turned the USA into a nation of city dwellers, who were forced to adapt quickly to the new living environment. As a consequence, the social order changed radically with the appearance of the powerful middle-class and, since more money meant more freedom, the old concept of morality was also drastically challenged. This was a period of excesses, discrimination, violence and confusion, but also one of prosperity and fulfilled possibilities for those who followed their American dream. Amidst this unprecedented turmoil, one social group was still trying to preserve the status quo. This was the American leisure class Edith Wharton was born into. The last part of this chapter shows that, in the world of the elite, conservatism was a virtue, which explains the nature of the social conflicts in her novels.

Thorstein Veblen's theory of the leisure class, which proposes concepts like "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption," finds perfect illustration in Wharton's most praised novels. His 1899 work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, contains the terminological distinction between "leisure class" and "working class," with all the historical, economic and social implications leading to it. The reader finds here an indispensable theoretical basis for the analysis of Wharton's world. While she describes her own family as mostly middle-class, Wharton writes about people who are anything but that, a fact which betrays either modesty or ignorance of the real state of affairs. The fact is that even though she is critical of the elite's ways, she favours them over the aggressive middle-class or the poorly educated lower-class workers.

### **Chapter 3. Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*. Major Themes**

With this chapter, proper text analysis begins, as *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) places us face to face with the author's quite clearly-stated opinions on both social and moral conflicts, namely social reform and the morality of euthanasia, two very actual debate subjects at that time. This is not considered one of her best novels, mainly because it has construction issues which make the story less powerful. Consequently, a film adaptation was not justified, at least so far. For our purposes, however, it clearly states where Wharton stands (and her attitude is no different from that of her class) in relation to the working-class, proper leadership and the result of moral choices. The second main issue in the novel addresses the morality of ending a life, however justifiable the circumstances are. The underlying conclusion is that common sense should be applied in both cases, social and moral.

### **Chapter 4. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*: The Novels versus Their Film Adaptations**

This chapter covers the author's two most famous novels, *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), together with their film adaptations. Since they share the type of social and moral conflict (with *The House of Mirth* widening our perspective on the working-class and

independent women), the two stories are discussed within the same subchapters, instead of separate sections. In Wharton's world, roles are clearly delineated and thus her characters either move according to their preset route or are simply expelled from the social circle. There is no halfway measure for either Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, or for Lily Bart. While Archer, May and Ellen are able to live with the consequences of their actions, Lily Bart is not, because she is a more specialised product of her world. She dies poor and lonely, but with her reputation restored, which does at least bring resolution to her moral conflict. Julius Beaufort in *The Age of Innocence* and Simon Rosedale in *The House of Mirth* also play a big part in the novels' conflict scheme. They are 'new money' representatives and their position on the social pyramid places them into a love - hate relationship with the 'old money' tribe, that is they are tolerated outcasts until they make a mistake. The inclusion and exclusion rituals are characteristic of the leisure class, in the same way that they are defined by conservatism, hypocrisy, moral hollowness and rigidity. Things, however, are about to change on the path to modernity.

With the two films, we remarked different approaches. They both do justice to the novels, only not in the same way. Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* (1993) is a visual feast for Wharton's fans, because it is as faithful to the novel as it can be. Every frame, every filming technique and every line were used in such a way that they would illustrate visually exactly what the novelist had intended them to: the opulence of the leisure class and an underlying irony meant to criticize its ways. In *The House of Mirth* (2000), on the other hand, director Terence Davies chose to be more symbolic, reducing the amount of details in favour of suggestively poorly lit frames and a strikingly limited soundtrack, in order to show his focus on the moral component. The social one (which is, ironically, more extensive in this novel than in *The Age of Innocence*) is left on the secondary level, as it is here that he operates some significant changes to the story.

### **Chapter 5. From Navigating on *The Reef* (1912) to Choosing *Passion's Way* (1999)**

With chapter five, we move away to a slightly different setting. *The Reef* (1912) is still about leisure class Americans, but they live in France, and, as society slowly evolves towards modernity, so do social conflicts. The modern, independent woman, who may aspire to a career on the stage, becomes a more familiar figure than the upper-class might like. With the novel's open ending, Wharton may tell us that the inner circle has reached a point where it can no longer deny access to its core to working people. The film adaptation, titled *Passion's Way* (1999), was designed for television, which involves some loss in the substance of the story. The choice of actress to play Sophy Viner is debatable, and so is the ending, which is reduced to a pathetic reconciliation. The limited budget is reflected in the choice of filming locations, the costumes and, sometimes, in the film editing process, but the movie is still worth considering, especially because it is the only adaptation of this novel.

## **Chapter 6. The Other End of the Social Spectrum: Moral Choices in *Ethan***

### ***Frome***

For this upper-class novelist of manners, the other end of the social spectrum might have been a little out of reach, as some inaccuracies and the general feeling of ignorance in relation to the life of the workers in *The Fruit of the Tree* stand as proof. However, the next chapter is devoted to Edith Wharton's gem: the perfectly-rounded novella called *Ethan Frome*, a masterpiece of her authorship. Essentially, this work is about a terrible tragedy and the moral conflict leading to it, but it also contains references to social aspects in small town America, an insight that we wouldn't have thought the writer capable of, considering her limited experience outside her social group. Here, she manages to capture the limitations imposed on a poor, overworked and ill-fated man living in a remote community as skillfully as she would scorn the social conventions of her upper-class world. The eternal moral dilemma of passion versus duty acquires new connotations in the unforgiving environment of Starkfield and conflict resolution is impossible to achieve, not even in the shape of death, like in Lily Bart's case.

Liam Neeson was chosen to play Ethan Frome in the 1993 homonymous film adaptation of this novel, and this proved to be an inspired pick. The movie also excels in the choice of setting and music, but one controversial change in the story may affect our perception of the character's inner conflict. It involves the relationship between Ethan and Mattie Silver, which becomes sexual in the film. To many, this takes away some of the intensity of feelings, in the same way as making the narrator a priest in the movie instead of an engineer, and thus discussing the affair in terms of a religious sin rather than a social one, means that the amount of Wharton's social details is reduced because it is rendered less relevant.

### **Conclusions**

The last chapter of this thesis concludes on the achievement of our stated goals by taking one last look at Wharton's literary universe. The films it inspired will be judged in terms of being too much or too little in comparison, if the directors have gone to a great length in illustrating the social and moral conflicts or they have just remained at a "good story to use" level. Also, starting from what has been achieved so far, this chapter will propose new directions for future research, as our topic can be extended to all of the author's novels and encourage more studies and translations of her works. One of our objectives is to inspire further studies of Wharton's work and to increase her popularity among the Romanian readers, who, in the light of recent adaptations of classic stories, might want to associate the movies they have already seen with their book sources.

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