

“Intolerable Ugliness” in Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*

Yuan Zhang

Introduction

Edith Wharton was appalled by ugliness of New York after years of living in Europe. “The intolerable ugliness of New York, of its untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery.”¹ That intolerable ugliness finds a quintessential reification in her novella, *Ethan Frome*. Published in 1911, *Ethan Frome* is unique in Wharton’s oeuvre, for it is her first audacious, if not valiant, attempt to disrupt any appreciation of conventional aesthetic values. The ugly as a motif is woven into the plot of the novella with the physical deformity of its characters, stifling sterile built-environment, and dissonant narrative structure. Ugliness in the novella is a channel for articulating distinction, discomfort and disconformity.

The conspicuous protrusion of ugliness in *Ethan Frome* cannot be disentangled from its social context at the turn of the twentieth century. The cult of the ugly became a signature of newly rising modernism at the early twentieth century. Before World War I, as Higgins notes in the inspiring book *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness*, an obsession with ugliness “was believed to foreground—thematically and technically—the disorder, instability, and lack of regulation and control perceived in the world at large.”² Nietzsche notifies the rising dark force of the ugly in his book *Human, All Too Human*, in which he underscores the proliferating power of the ugly: “its sphere of power especially in the domain of the sublime, dreadful and mysterious has therewith increased astonishingly.”³ Later, Bernard Bosanquet incorporates three dimensions as intricacy, tension, and

Yuan Zhang is an associate professor in the School of English Studies, the Xi’an International Studies University, Xi’an, China.

¹ Edith Wharton, ‘A Backward Glance’, in *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, ed. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: Library of America, 1990), p. 824.

² Lesley Higgins, *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetic and Gender Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 21.

³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human* 1878, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 100.

width, into ugliness “Intricacy, tension, and width account for a very large proportion of so-called ugliness, that is to say, of what shocks most people, or else seems to them repellently uninteresting, or overstrained, or fantastic.”⁴ This article strives to single out social and cultural connotations that such a switch to the ugly in *Ethan Frome* proffers, and marks out Wharton’s perceptive construal of ugliness as a force of resistance in the context of poverty, disease, and providence. Turning the spotlight on ugliness, this essay unfolds Wharton’s realist aesthetic interpretation of New England and its people who are trapped in the inescapable dilemma.

“Disgust, the Ugliest of the Ugly”: Zeena and Mattie

Wharton’s contemporaneous art connoisseurs regarded beauty as the supreme priority of art representation. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, announced: “Art should create nothing but what is beautiful and leave real life to the rest.”⁵ *Ethan Frome* comes at odds with such the statement, revealing that art should create nothing but real life and leave what is beautiful to the rest. Instead of scrutinising picturesque beauty, *Ethan Frome* presents the intolerable disgust of the people who are clogged by New England’s frigidity, in particular the two women, Zeena and Mattie.

Sianne Ngai in the conclusion to *Ugly Feelings* regards disgust as “the ugliest of ‘ugly feelings’” and “the disgusting is ‘true Kantian sublime’—more sublime than the sublime itself.”⁶ Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* delineates the destroying power of disgust as one kind of ugliness upon aesthetic satisfaction: “There is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction, and consequently artificial beauty, viz. that which excites disgust.”⁷ Zeena and Mattie in *Ethan Frome* are vivid reification of “the ugliest of the ugly”.

Images of women in *Ethan Frome* utterly overthrow the stereotype of Wharton’s women featuring breathtaking, exquisite beauty, like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905), who is a quintessential incarnation of evanescent beauty in Wharton’s familiar old New York society. Instead, Wharton

⁴ Bernard Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1915), p. 95.

⁵ F. Brett Cox, “‘What Need, Then, for Poetry?’: The Genteel Tradition and the Continuity of American Literature”, *New England Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 2 (1994), p. 215.

⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 334-335.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 334.

presents the disgusting, repugnant and abhorrent pictures of Zeena and Mattie, who are trampled down by inescapable social, economic, and ethical entanglements.

In the eyes of Frome, his wife Zeena is disgusting, ugly, and vicious, for her invalidation obliterates his dream of finding an engineering job in a town. The coming of young vigorous Mattie drowns Ethan in the torrents of love. Mattie is Zeena's cousin and enters Frome's household as Zeena's maid. She is young, energetic, and beautiful, "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth."⁸ Quite often Ethan fetches Mattie back from a church dance. Their walks together are some of Frome's happiest moments, with the pair speaking to each other affectionately. Zeena is waiting up for them when they return, and the contrast between Zeena and Mattie is striking.

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 wristbone 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.⁹

Her flat breast, puckered throat, and hollow, high-boned face indicate her lack of sexual appeal to Frome. To him, Zeena is the incarnation of the disgusting.

Further conflict arises when Zeena leaves for Bettsbridge to see a doctor, due to her deteriorating health. For the first time since Mattie arrived, Frome and Mattie are left alone together for a night. However, the conversation between Frome and Mattie becomes strained and awkward, because everywhere reminds them of Zeena's omniscient presence even as she is physically absent. Zeena returns the next day. The doctor has told her that she has "complications" regarding her condition. She has already hired a new girl to come to replace Mattie, who she blames for her decline. That night, Ethan kisses Mattie for the first time. The next day, Ethan takes Mattie to the train station. They take a long ride and do some walking together, and both confess their love for each other. They decide to go sledding, something they planned on but never got around to. The first ride down the hill is

⁸ Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 78.

⁹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, pp. 89-90.

exhilarating. On the way back up, both break down into tears. Mattie asks Ethan to take them down on a second ride, but this time she wants him to steer them into the big elm tree at the bottom of the hill in a double suicide. Ethan does as she asks, but the suicide attempt fails. Both of them survive.

The last section of the novel begins with the narrator entering Ethan's home. In the kitchen there are two women: one tall and severe, and the other shrivelled and paralysed. The paralysed woman is foul and hateful: Ethan introduces her as Miss Mattie Silver. The novel ends with the narrator talking to Mrs Ned Hale, the old widow with whom he lodges. Mrs Hale tells him that after the accident, Mattie had nowhere to go. The Fromes took her in, with Zeena, once so sickly, somehow finding the strength to take care of all of them. Not many people go to the Frome farm anymore; Mrs Hale is an old friend of theirs, and she visits once or twice a year, but she always finds the experience painful. She cannot bear the expression of suffering on Ethan's face. Mrs Hale confides to the narrator that she thinks it would have been better if Mattie had died. Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena are three ruined and bitter people, doomed to spend the rest of their lives together in the ugly house.

In contrast with Zeena, who from the very initial presents intolerable disgust, Mattie demonstrates a radical change from the disgusted to the disgusting. At the inception, the young vital image of Mattie comforts and energises Ethan:

Frome's heart was beating fast. He had been straining for a glimpse of the dark head under the cherry-coloured scarf....As she passed down the line, her light figure swinging from hand to hand in circles of increasing swiftness, the scarf flew off her head and stood out behind her shoulders, and Frome, at each turn, caught sight of her laughing paniting lips, the cloud of dark hair about her forehead, and the dark eyes which seemed the only fixed points in a maze of flying lines.¹⁰

Yet some ominous signs foreshadow the change. When Zeena leaves to see a doctor, Frome is back from work and finds the scene, which happened in the previous day when he and Mattie were coming back from a church dance and Zeena waited for them, is repeating itself but it is Mattie when the door opens:

She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. Then, striking upward,

¹⁰ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 77.

it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows.¹¹

Another sign foreseeing Mattie’s change emerges when Zeena is away, and Ethan and Mattie will for the first time spend the night together. Ethan asks Mattie sit in Zeena’s rocking chair.

Zeena’s empty rocking-chair stood facing him. Mattie rose obediently, and seated herself in it. As her young brown head detached itself against the patch-work cushion that habitually framed his wife’s gaunt countenance. Ethan had a momentary shock. It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder. After a moment Mattie seemed to be affected by the same sense of constraint. She changed her position ...¹²

The failed suicide leaves Mattie paralysed, and transforms her from the disgusted to the disgusting. Mattie in the end becomes Zeena’s double:

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 shrivelled, 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.¹³

Mattie is so akin to Zeena that the narrator cannot recognize her.

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 colour as her face.¹⁴

Ethan’s fear that women will turn into witches becomes true; first his mother, then his wife, Zeena, and in the end his love, Mattie. Elizabeth Ammons interprets that it is the culture that turns them into witches: “Zeena Frome is the witch that conservative New England will make of unskilled young Mattie.”¹⁵

¹¹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 103.

¹² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 107.

¹³ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 152.

¹⁴ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 152.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Ammons, ‘Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* and the Question of Meaning’, *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1979), p. 138.

Emily J. Orlando points out that the misrepresentation of women in today's mass culture, "be beautiful, be thin, be sweet, be simple," is what Wharton criticised nearly a century ago: "Wharton's scathing critique of these misrepresentations of women, as opposed to what some have read as Wharton's disregard of women themselves."¹⁶

When the glance is cast on the negation of disgust, tolerance, a more panoramic view on Wharton's representation of disgusting women will be achieved. Condescending tolerance leaks its agency's contempt towards inferiority of its object under the guise of charity. Facing up to disgust reified first in Zeena and then Mattie, tolerance is Ethan's way to resist repulsion. His charitable tolerance reflects his superiority to his women. If he is not the cause for the disgusting of these women, he should be blamed for intensifying the extent of disgust.

"All its plaintive ugliness": The Ugly Built Environment in *Ethan Frome*

Fully aware of impacts upon psyche elicited by built environment, Wharton attributes invincible horror to such insufferable ugliness of built environment. In *Ethan Frome*, ugly built environment, like Ethan's sawmill, his orchard, and in particular his house, is the ugliness of powerlessness, personified as a frail person in his worn coat shivering in the cold.

Wharton entitled the novella's French translation *L'Hiver*, meaning 'winter', to evince the intrinsic role of bleak winter in foreshadowing its characters' pathetic tragic fates, and "draw life as it really was." "In those days the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighbouring hills."¹⁷To articulate truths of New England life, Wharton employs ugliness as a vehicle of resistance against unauthoritative varnish imposed by administered society. Her remorselessly depressing rendering of ugliness which has disturbed her contemporaneous prudish readership.

The unnamed narrator "I," as a spectator, starts his story with his first encounter with Ethan Frome. At that time the "I," an engineer, worked for a power plant in rural Massachusetts. The closest town to the plant is Starkfield, and there the narrator experiences a taste of life in rural New

¹⁶ Emily J. Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), p. 4.

¹⁷ Wharton, 'A Backward Glance', p. 1002.

England. The narrator becomes obsessed with reading the enigmatic Ethan. He gathers bits of the tale from various sources around town. "I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story."¹⁸ By chance, Ethan ends up being his sleigh driver to work every morning. After a week of riding with Frome, a terrible blizzard makes the trek all the back to the narrator's home impossible. The narrator has to take shelter at Frome's home. Sheltering in Ethan's house is crucial in constructing the narrator's story for there he gets the clue to Frome's tragedy: "It was that night I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story"¹⁹. The bitter tone of the narrator unforgivably exposes "all its plaintive ugliness" of Frome's house: "The snow had ceased, and a flash of watery sunlight exposed the house on the slope above us in all its plaintive ugliness. The black wraith of a deciduous creeper flapped from the porch, and the thin wooden walls, under their worn coat of paint, seemed to shiver in the wind that had risen with the ceasing of the snow."²⁰ In sunlight, the ugliness of the house is fully revealed.

There is no repulsive disgust aroused by ugliness of powerlessness, but instead pathetic sadness. Ethan's sawmill is drained of vigour and energy. "It looked exanimate enough, with its idle wheel looming above the black stream dashed with yellow-white spume, and its cluster of sheds sagging under their white load."²¹ Pale, dingy colours like black, yellow, and white project strikingly atmosphere of lethargy, stagnation, and listlessness. The orchard is rife with desolation and stiffness. "We came to an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe."²² Inarticulateness is a leitmotif of *Ethan Frome*, shedding light on characters' trapped estrangement, forced reticence, and obsequiousness to domineering environment.

The following detailed descriptions of Ethan's ruined typical New England L-shaped house once again reveal as an architectural connoisseur Wharton's obsession with architecture and her deep-seated conviction that a house can reflect its residents' life.

I saw then that the unusually forlorn and stunted look of the house was partly due to the loss of what is known in New England as the "L":

¹⁸ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 63.

¹⁹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 74.

²⁰ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 71.

²¹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 71.

²² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 71.

that long deep-roofed adjunct usually built at right angles to the main house, and connecting it, by way of store-rooms and tool-house, with the wood-shed and cow-barn. Whether because of its symbolic sense, the image it presents of a life linked with the soil, and enclosing in itself the chief sources of warmth and nourishment, or whether merely because of the consolatory thought that it enables the dwellers in that harsh climate to get to their morning's work without facing the weather, it is certain that the "L" rather than the house itself seems to be the centre, the actual hearthstone, of the New England farm. Perhaps this connection of ideas, which had often occurred to me in my rambles about Starkfield, caused me to hear a wistful note in Frome's words, and to see in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body.²³

The narrator attributes the cause of the ugliness of the house partly to the loss of L-shape, as Ethan admits: "The house was bigger in my father's time: I had to take down the 'L,' a while back."²⁴ Renée Somers, in the insightful book *Edith Wharton as Spatial Activist and Analyst*, elucidates Wharton's theories "about how the built environment contains and expresses human meaning."²⁵ The forlorn look of the house ominously foreshadows Frome's unfortunate life. The lost L-shape house symbolises the physical deformity as well as distorted life of its residents.

The prevailing ugliness, however, is sporadically interrupted by natural beauty. Surrounded and intimidated by ugliness of stifling winter and houses, picturesque natural beauty comes as cherished and rare, projecting the subtle suppressed yet passionate affections between Ethan and Mattie.

Incoherence in Point of View

In addition to nuanced delineation of the disgust incarnated in the images of women and ugly built environment, an unconvincing shifting point of view collapses the unity of beauty in the construction of the story. The "I", the unnamed first-person narrator, does hold a dual position, for his point of view is represented from different perspectives; in other words, his point of view is shifting. At the opening, the unnamed narrator, who does not witness any event in Ethan Frome's story as it occurs, displays Ethan from limited first-person narrative. "It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first

²³ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 72.

²⁴ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 71.

²⁵ Renée Somers, *Edith Wharton as Spatial Activist and Analyst* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 129.

time, and the sight pulled me up sharp.”²⁶ From Chapter I to IX, however, a limited omniscient perspective is applied, presenting in minute detail the scene twenty-four years ago: “Young Ethan Frome walked at a quick pace along the deserted street, past the bank and Michael Eady’s new brick store and Lawyer Varnum’s house with the two black Norway spruces at the gate.”²⁷ In the end the point of view shifts once again back to first-person: “The querulous drone ceased as I entered Frome’s kitchen, and of the two women sitting there I could not tell which had been which had been the speaker.”²⁸ All this gives rise to a double focalisation effect. The focalisation of the first-person narrator is represented from two positions: that of several years ago when “I” first saw Ethan, and that of twenty-four years ago when the story of young Ethan was portrayed.

Wharton’s application of a shifting point of view remains polemical among her scholarship. Orlene Murad attacks Wharton for the failure to maintain the first-person point of view and “Wharton creates here a condescending, pallid, unconvincing narrator.”²⁹ Orlando notifies the adoption of a male narrator with an unconvincing perspective:

Wharton’s consistent use of an untrustworthy, condescending male narrator, whose perspective is never neutral, is less a device that reflects the writer’s male identification than it is Wharton’s method of delivering her social commentary. These often egregiously arrogant male reflectors are reliably unreliable, and so Wharton compels us to question what she repeatedly calls their ‘unseeing’ gazes.³⁰

Wharton offers an explanation of this narrative method in her 1922 edition *Ethan Frome*. Lighting on Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* and Balzac’s “La Grande Breteche,” Wharton declares her confidence in mastering their method for her theme:

The real merit of my construction seems to me to lie in a minor detail. I had to find means to bring my tragedy, in a way at once natural and picture-making, to the knowledge of its narrator. I might have sat him down before a village gossip who would have poured out the whole affair to him in a breath, but in doing this I should have been false to two essential elements of my picture: first, the deep-rooted reticence and inarticulateness of the people I was trying to draw, and secondly

²⁶ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 63.

²⁷ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 75.

²⁸ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 152.

²⁹ Orlene Murad, ‘Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome’, *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1983), p. 93.

³⁰ Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*, pp. 9-10.

the effect of “roundness” (in the plastic sense) produced by letting their case be seen through eyes as different as those of Harmon Gow and Mrs. Ned Hale. Each of my chroniclers contributes to the narrative just as much as he or she is capable of understanding of what, to them, is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger categories.³¹

Wharton claims that her sophisticated narrator is capable of interpreting his rudimentary characters.

At the outset, the outside first-person narrator comes to know Frome while working for a local power plant and staying in the harsh rural town of Starkfield, Massachusetts. His position as internal focalisation, as participant in the story, is a limited one. It is limited to his actual ability to see, hear—where he is placed in relation to the depicted event. The restrictive nature of his perspective is obvious when he observes Ethan, “Such tastes and acquirements in a man of his condition made the contrast more poignant between his outer situation and his inner needs, and I hoped that the chance of giving expression to the latter might at least unseal his lips.”³² His angle of vision is narrow because of his location.

After offering his vision of young Ethan’s story in an omniscient vision, the narrator brings the reader back to the opening and his perspective switches to first-person point of view once again. When he enters Ethan Frome’s house, two old women are sitting. “Frome stood hesitatingly before her as she advanced; then he looked at me and said: ‘this is my wife, Mis’ Frome.’ after another interval he added, turning toward the figure in the armchair: ‘And this is Miss Mattie Silver.’”³³ The remainder of Ethan’s story is completed through the mouth of Mrs Hale.

A panoramic bird’s-eye view is adopted when the first-person narrator spends the night taking shelter at Frome’s home. There he gets a clue to Frome’s tragedy. His point of view tends to a limited omniscient one, describing panoramically the main story. Young Ethan Frome, for instance, walks through the heart of town to fetch Mattie back from a church dance. It is a cold and crisp winter night, and the feeling reminds Frome of a concept he learned from his studies in science about five years ago: “The effect produced on Frome was rather of a complete absence of atmosphere, as though nothing less tenuous than either intervened between the white earth

³¹ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. viii.

³² Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 70.

³³ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 86.

under his feet and the metallic dome overhead. Ethan thought: 'It's like being in an exhausted receiver.'³⁴ Here, the narrator seems to serve as a kind of invisible witness positioned over Ethan's shoulder with the additional privilege of occasionally being able to offer brief inside views of him. He breaks the limitations of his position and tells something that cannot theoretically be available to him.

Evidently, the narrator goes beyond the limitation of his stance as the first-person narrator and describes something that cannot theoretically be available to him. The narrator shows evidence of narrative omniscience in this novel—he knows too much about the story, passes beyond the frame of that narrating position available to him. The reader can see how such transgression operates by looking briefly at the narrative sequence from Chapter I to IX. This sequence traces events that occur when the narrator is absent from the scene. He recreates the story from the clue he finds when he takes shelter at Ethan's home and puts together "this vision of his story,"³⁵ telling it in his voice. He seems, at one time, an omniscient narrator. The direct description of the scene distracts the reader from the narrator's absence, though speculating on his information source is quite possible.

The violation of the reliability by converting the first person narrator to nearly omniscient one, this chapter claims, is the enactment of the diversity of potential functions the first person narrator in *Ethan Frome* within the space of single narrative. Such the deliberate construction of inconsistency reflects the ugly world its characters are living in to "draw life as it really was."³⁶ The first-person narrator displaying the tragic story of Ethan transgresses his position. Wharton has the narrator render in his own voice the scene which he has no ability to see or hear. That is, the diction and syntax of the tragic story between Chapter I and IX is still the narrator's: the harshness of the Starkfield winters, for example, is perfectly consistent with the voice echoed at the beginning of the narrative. At the beginning of Chapter I, for instance, the village in the winter is shown as following:

The village *lay* under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners. In a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion *flashed* his cold fires. The moon had set, but the night was so transparent that the white house-fronts between the elms looked grey against the snow, clumps of bushes *made* black stains on it, and the

³⁴ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 75.

³⁵ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 3.

³⁶ Wharton, 'A Backward Glance', p. 1002.

basement windows of the church *sent shafts* of yellow light far across the endless undulation.³⁷ [Emphasis added]

The similar description can be spotted at the outset of the narrative when the narrator holds first person point of view:

But at sunset the clouds *gathered* again, *bringing* an earlier night, and the snow began to *fall* straight and steadily from a sky without wind, in a soft universal diffusion more confusing than the gusts and eddies of the morning. It seemed to be a part of the thickening darkness, to be the winter night itself *descending on* us layer by layer.³⁸ [Emphasis added]

The two passages portray, between them, the winter night of Starkfield. In terms of lexical and grammatical features, the two passages are narrated in the same voice. Verbs in lexical perspective are frequent in the two passages. Most verbs are dynamic, and many indicate movement: flashed, looked, made, gathered, brought, fall. Even static elements of the landscape have implications of movement: the windows “sent shafts,” the winter night “descending on.” Verbs that are static generally have implications of movement, indicating physical position of posture: lay, hung. In grammatical features, in contrast to her other works, Wharton seems to prefer simpler and more homely sentences in this novella. Compound sentences are most frequently used in both passages. In a manner of speaking, the voice of the narrator is perfectly consistent throughout the narrative no matter what kind of point of view he holds.

The way Wharton is in violation of the term of her narrative can be expressed in the following question: how can a witness-narrator narrate what he doesn't witness? The reader is not directly told who gives the narrator this information, who tells him the story happened twenty-four years ago. Obviously, Wharton never bothers to have the narrator explain how he learned what happened. In essence, Wharton arranges two other sources of information, namely Harmon Gow and Mr. Ned Hale, in this narrative to complement the limits of the narrator. At the end of the story, the point of view shifts back to the first-person's angle of vision.

Conclusion

In a letter to W. Morton Fullerton in 1911, Wharton proudly admitted her delights in qualified praises for *Ethan Frome* poured in from New York

³⁷ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 76.

³⁸ Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, p. 73.

reviewers: “They don’t know why it’s good, but they are right: it is.”³⁹ This essay attempts to unfold a particular reason “why it’s good” by anatomising this novella’s unusual incarnation of ugliness. In stark contrast with Wharton’s other works featuring meticulous scrutiny of picturesque beauty, *Ethan Frome* conspicuously stands forth with its singular practice in nuanced renderings of ugliness, audaciously exploring polemical topics as lower-class poverty, deformity, disease, extramarital affair, and suicide, all that can be subsumed under the category of ugliness. Ugliness in the novella becomes a force of resistance.

³⁹ Edith Wharton, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (London: Scribner, 1988), p. 261.