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### Edith Wharton and the Variable of Illness

In *Ethan Frome* and *The Custom of the Country*, Edith Wharton deconstructs the idea of illness as a monolithic condition within the American republic. Instead, she suggests that its meaning depends on who is ill. Illness is a source of power for the disenfranchised, like Zeena Frome, but it is a delegitimized one by both the general male gaze and the medical profession. As part of that delegitimization, women who owned their illness, like Edith Wharton, were dismissed as disruptive to domestic norms. Illness is a powerful social tether that can ensnare even the most able, like Undine Spragg. The specter of illness becomes a contagion, even when it is not contagious: an all-consuming classification of silence.

Zeena Frome is not a powerful person. She is a childless woman. Her husband is a subsistence farmer. She lives in the middle of some New England nowhere: Starkfield. However, she has cultivated, within her tiny sphere, an identity of power. What is that identity? The identity is illness. Through the identity of illness, Zeena demands several things from Ethan. First of all, Zeena demands exemption. Zeena uses the identity of illness to demand that she be exempt from the traditional female working-class duties of maintaining the house and sex—and thus, child-bearing (Lagerwey 126). Secondly, Zeena demands accommodation. If disability is an identity, rather than a defect, society must work to include the disabled person (Weingarten 590). If Zeena is exempt from maintaining the house on account of her disability, her disability also calls for someone else to perform that role for her, so she can still be included in the cast of working-class wives—and as a wife, she still has ownership over her husband's sexuality, even if she herself is exempt from sexual activity. Lastly, in her accommodation, Zeena demands a

master-servant relationship, despite her socioeconomic status. “But when Zenobia's doctor recommended her looking for someone to help her with the house-work the clan instantly saw the chance of exacting a compensation from Mattie. Zenobia, though doubtful of the girl's efficiency, was tempted by the freedom to find fault without much risk of losing her; and so Mattie came to Starkfield” (EF 26). Zeena’s doctor grants her the legitimacy to seek a servant, but, even in her search, Zeena is aware of her socioeconomic status. Thus, she can not hire someone who will drain their savings and leave when criticized. When Mattie, then, enters the picture, Mattie, a young dependent cousin with no parental figures to support her, Zeena sees not a relation in need of help but a servant who can neither leave her nor exact too much of a wage. On these three fronts, Zeena is a successful negotiator.

However, even before the accident that forces her into a caretaker role, as opposed to her sick role, something is wrong with the power she demands: Ethan doesn’t respect it. “Of late, however, since he had reasons for observing her more closely, her silence had begun to trouble him. He recalled his mother's growing taciturnity, and wondered if Zeena were also turning “queer.” Women did, he knew.” (EF 31) Ethan does not respect the power Zeena demands because Ethan views illness as feminine. It is not an association that comes from nowhere. As the medical profession consolidated power in the early 20th century, it sought to medicalize female behavior. “Hysteria” became a common diagnosis, being a catch-all term for problematic women. The diagnosis was shaped by the class of the woman: “...physicians saw hysteria as caused either by the indolent, vapid, and unconstructive life of the fashionable middle-and upper-class woman, or by the ignorant, exhausting, and sensual life of the lower or working-class woman” (Lagerway 129). Middle- and upper-class women suffered because of the ignorance of their lives. Poor and working-class women, by contrast, suffered because of their sexuality.

Either way, these women are not figured as sympathetic, both by the male gaze of the medical profession and by the male gaze of their husbands and the other men who orchestrated their lives. Perhaps the proper response to illness exercised as a means of control is not submission, but this dual male gaze does not even recognize this illness as coming from a place of real pain. The suffering, in other words, is seen as an invention at worst or an exaggeration at best: the result of an overly-emotional woman thinking too hard, not letting the men in her life steer her towards what she needs to do: reproductive adulthood. As a result of illness being tied to femininity, it is delegitimized. Ethan, in explaining the situation to Mattie, takes away even the agency of Zeena's emotions. No, she is not angry at Mattie. It is the doctor's fault; he has scared her (EF 49-50). The doctor, however, obviously does not know about the sexual tension in the Frome household—and even if he does, resolving that is not where his responsibility lies. The doctor may have told Zeena to get a hired girl, but it was Zeena's decision to initially hire Mattie, despite her lack of skill, and it is Zeena's decision to fire Mattie now that she threatens her with sexuality.

Illness, then, becomes tied to marriage. The details of Edith Wharton's biography corroborate this connection. Wharton writes about her mother as setting her up for failure in marriage. How did her mother fail her? Her mother failed to educate her about sexuality. On her wedding day, the young Edith Jones famously pleaded with her mother to tell her what would happen on her consummation bed: "I'm afraid, Mamma—I want to know what will happen to me!" (Lee 76) Her mother gave her a non-answer. Edith Wharton, then, refigures the "purity" of virginity—and sexual ignorance—as a form of illness itself. According to Wharton, purity culture is not an "inoculation" against the illness- and discord-making forces of sexual promiscuity but a faulty treatment that weakens one's defenses against a toxic sex life. If one

knows what a healthy sex life looks like, then they can work to create that healthy environment in their marriage, feeling protected by that knowledge to feel protected in that relationship. If one does not know what a healthy sex life looks like, on the other hand, how can one make that in the first—and only—sexual relationship that she is supposed to have? In this context, Wharton's marriage itself can be considered ill. Edith Wharton, despite never having asthma as a child, suffered from many respiratory problems as an adult. Wharton wrote that her asthma was triggered when she needed to share a bed with her husband, Teddy (Lee 79). It got so bad that the couple ended up having separate beds. In this way, it can be considered that Edith Wharton, like Zeena Frome, used illness to claim exemption from sexual activity in marriage. However, unlike Ethan Frome, Ethan Frome before the accident, Teddy Wharton was also unwell. In fact, for much of their marriage, he was the sicker one of the two. In the summer of 1903, he suffered a “nervous collapse”: being described as being in a “state of disintegration” (Lee 192). When *Ethan Frome* was published in September 1911, doctors told Edith Wharton that Teddy had “psychosis” and was prescribed care in a sanatorium: a grim prognosis (Lee 392). Even so, his family insisted to Wharton that he was fine (Lee 375). Edith Wharton knew better: This was a deliberate ploy “to relieve his family of any responsibility. They *know* his real condition, and the impossibility of living with him” (Lee 399). The “stability” of marriage, then, becomes an exchange for lost health, even when that marriage is not stable. Zeena was backed into the same corner: “...I'd 'a' been ashamed to tell *him* that you grudged me the money to get back my health, when I lost it nursing your own mother!” “*You* lost your health nursing mother?” “Yes; and my folks all told me at the time you couldn't do no less than marry me after—” (EF 46) The distinction lies in the women's socioeconomic class. Edith Wharton could afford a divorce and escape to France to escape the press. Zeena Frome could not afford two hired girls.

In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg is presented as “...a monstrously perfect result of the system...” (Custom 131). The system that she is the result of is the American capitalist system, in which all value is in the ability to constantly present oneself as more and more wealthy. When she realizes that she can “upgrade” to a better husband, Peter van Degen, Undine leaves her obsolescent old-money husband, Ralph Marvell, and their son, who is a drain on her ability to court, as all children are. When Ralph discovers that Undine’s supposedly temporary travel is not so temporary, he consents to let her go. Arguing with her is too exhausting. All of a sudden, though, Undine receives a message about him: Ralph is gravely ill; Undine needs to return home! Undine ignores the message, however, deciding that it is a trap: a ploy by the Marvell women to drag her back (Custom 186). This decision constitutes Undine’s first major failure in the novel. Ralph truly *was* ill, and by not returning to him, she is recast not as “monstrously perfect” but a “monster.” It is Undine’s refusal to return to tend to her gravely ill husband that wards Peter Van Degen away—if she could ignore her husband in her illness, she could ignore *him* in his illness—and repulses her previously stalwart ally, her childhood friend Indiana Frusk (Custom 225). The two were not repelled by her leaving of Ralph itself. What they could not accept was Undine’s refusal to take the caregiver role. The caregiver role is the essential opposite of the sick role. Regardless of the casting of the sick role—the “indolent, vapid, and unconstructive” (Lagerway 129) middle- and upper-class or the “ignorant, exhausting, and sensual” (Lagerway 129) poor and working-class—the caregiver gets figured as a martyr: self-sacrificing and loyal. The caregiver role is even enshrined in the vows of marriage: “...in sickness and in health.”

Thus, after this failure, for the first time, Undine is left without a clear route to societal advancement. She decides to remarry, despite the difficulties in navigating society as a (known)

divorcée. She does not decide to remarry out of love for someone else—the man she was pursuing, Peter Van Degen, has left the picture. No, she embarks on this course merely to regain what she has lost.

Her one desire was to get back an equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife. Her new visiting-card, bearing her Christian name in place of her husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity. Her restricted means, her vacant days, all the minor irritations of her life, were as nothing compared to this sense of a lost advantage. (Custom 227)

For Undine, this lack of status is a crisis, even though she is secure from a financial standpoint. Up until this point in the novel, Undine has always been able to chart her “next step” and has always succeeded in her plans for upwards mobility. However, here her plan, to “upgrade” to Peter Van Degen, has fallen through, and she has no backup plan in the wings. It is the perception of a crisis, not its actual severity, that creates panic, desperation, and, yes, an illness itself: “Since ill health was the most plausible pretext for seclusion, it was almost a relief to find that she was really growing ‘nervous’ and sleeping badly” (Custom 227). While Undine does not get physically sick, her separation from the power and status afforded to her as Ralph Marvell’s wife is figured as an illness.

Meanwhile, Ralph Marvell continues to suffer from the effects of his long illness. His marriage to Undine Spragg caused a shift in socioeconomic status: Now no longer able to subsist off of his family’s store of money, Ralph joins the capitalist system. Upon his inauguration, he is introduced to the crux of the capitalist system: the *need* of the wages:

He was not only the youngest and most recent member of the firm, but the one who had so far added least to the volume of its business. His hours were the longest, his absences, as summer approached, the least frequent and the most grudgingly accorded. No doubt his associates knew that he was pressed for money and could not risk a break. They "worked" him, and he was aware of it, and submitted because he dared not lose his job. (Custom 194)

It does not matter to his employer whether he is descended from the venerable Dagonet line or is an orphan. It does not matter to his employer that he is a single father. Nothing matters to the employer, to the system, except the employee, just another cog in the machine's, ability to generate capital. Ralph Marvell is not good at generating capital. Thus, he is not a valued member of the firm, and what he lacks in selling during regular hours, he must make up for in selling beyond regular hours. It is an emasculating situation: the antithesis of Mr. Bowen's theory of "Homo Americanus" (Custom 130-131). He is not the man whose passion is "the big steal." Thus, he is not a man at all. Still, Ralph has no other system that he *can* engage with, so he presses on. Ralph Marvell's overworking causes frailty, which causes illness, and to recover from lost work time, he must work more. It is a vicious cycle.

Meanwhile, in order to escape from *her* illness of lack of marital status, Undine demands payment from Ralph. In the world of mercantile nuptials, she needs money to pay for an annulment, so she can be Raymond de Chelles' wife. She issues a threat he can not ignore: If he does not pay her, she will take their son. When he is unable to pay to keep Paul, "the all-sufficient reason" for his existence (Custom 265), Ralph commits suicide. Undine, crucially, considers this too a failure: "...even since her remarriage, and the lapse of a year, she continued to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price

for it” (Custom 305). The combination of illness and capitalism, tied as part of one system whose purpose is to create crises—people in crisis are dependent—is deadly.

The Frome household is a household in crisis, marred by both poverty and illness. The concept of illness consumes Ethan’s entire perception of Zeena. She ceases to be a woman. Instead, she becomes a hag figure: “...the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste...” (EF 53) Lost is the memory of her company as a salvation from the isolation of his mother’s illness. Lost is the pain that Zeena herself might be feeling—physical or psychological. Zeena becomes Pestilence itself. Ethan’s instincts of self-defence against such a creature are “healthy.” This imagining seems to be corroborated when Zeena’s absence seems to give Ethan health (EF 29). If Zeena is Pestilence, then the best treatment is to avoid her, so as not to get infected. The imagining of Zeena as Illness, however, gets complicated when her infection appears to spread beyond her physical presence.

This subsuming starts even before Zeena leaves to consult her doctor out of town. Zeena notices Ethan’s interest in Mattie, and, thus, views her as a threat. Despite not engaging with Ethan sexually, claiming her illness as an exemption, Zeena claims ownership of his sexuality. How does she, middle-aged and ill, compete with the sprightly young Mattie Silver? She presents Mattie as unavailable, saying that Mattie and Denis Eady are matched. Thus, even when Ethan claims that “[a]ll his life was lived in the sight and sound of Mattie Silver” (EF 18), since Denis Eady is now part of that “sight and sound,” Zeena still claims control. The power of this control becomes apparent when Zeena leaves for her doctor’s appointment, and it should be that Ethan and Mattie have the house to themselves. Ethan urges Mattie to take the role of wife, making dinner for just the two of them and claiming the 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. (EF 37)

The rocking chair has no supernatural power. It does not reject Mattie. What supersedes Mattie is the specter of Zeena, who controls Ethan's perception of Mattie. Zeena's presence is described as "paralyzing" Ethan and a "contagion" that Mattie notices as well (EF 35). The review from *The New York Times*, "Three Lives In Supreme Torture," concludes that Mattie becomes Zeena's witch-double: "Retribution sits at the poor man's fireside in the shape of two haggard and witchlike figures—the gaunt wife and the wreck of the girl that was" ("Three Lives In Supreme Torture," 603). The conclusion is not that Mattie transformed but that Zeena corrupted.

Zeena subsumes Ethan as well, not as a witch but as the equally inescapable title of martyr. Ethan decides that he can not live with Zeena anymore. He and Mattie need to escape out west. They will make a new life together! But he needs money to do that. The Hale family is kind; they will give him some money if he asks for it. Before Ethan can ask, though, Mrs. Hale lavishes praise on him: "I don't know anybody round here's had more sickness than Zeena. I always tell Mr. Hale I don't know what she'd 'a' done if she hadn't 'a' had you to look after her; and I used to say the same thing 'bout your mother. You've had an awful mean time, Ethan Frome." (EF 58) More than praising Ethan for staying with Zeena, Mrs. Hale praises Ethan for staying with his mother: someone he never tried to leave. Thus, she ties the two women together. Never mind the complexities of their individual relationships: In the eyes of the community,

Zeena is Ethan's mother, part two. Ethan is so self-sacrificing to care for *two* invalids! Perhaps this praise was meant to make Ethan feel better—his self-sacrificing *is* noticed, not ignored. At this moment, though, what Ethan wants is to slip away unnoticed. Furthermore, Mrs. Hale's praise gives him a valuable piece of information. It is one thing for some doctor who he never interacts with to see Zeena as legitimate. It is another thing entirely for his community—Ethan's livelihood is dependent on his interactions with his fellow residents of Starkfield—to see Zeena as legitimate. Sympathy legitimizes both Zeena's sick role... and Ethan's responsibility to her. If Zeena is legitimately ill, then Ethan is legitimately a monster for leaving, just as Undine Spragg is.

“That was a plain statement of the cloudy purpose which had driven him in headlong to Starkfield. With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him.”

(EF 58-59)

Ethan's “healthy instincts of self-defence,” (EF 53) then, become something else—unhealthy, a type of illness itself, even: madness. If Ethan is ill, then that also means that the Narrator, as a healthy man, is qualified to categorize him—as an other. The Narrator arrives in Starkfield as someone outside of its insular culture. He is intrigued by the crippled man at the post office, and at the start of *Ethan Frome*, he proclaims, “I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story” (EF 3). It is an authoritative statement, leaving no room for discussion: the Narrator has solved the case, or at least made a

coherent fiction out of it—even though he admits that the story is fluid. Moreover, the Narrator has done precious little research: All he knows is that Ethan took a book from him, had a lineage of illnesses in his family, and had a “terrible smash-up.” Nevertheless, he still feels comfortable with his declaration. Why is that? The answer is simple: Whoever Ethan Frome might have been, all he is now is that curiosity of a crippled man at the post office. Death would have left the memory of Ethan Frome, of Ethan Frome’s able-bodiedness, intact (Geriguis 62), but after 26 years of disability, that memory is fleeting and eclipsed by 26 years of Ethan Frome as what Starkfield remembers him as: a martyr.

Edith Wharton configures illness not as a static status but as a condition shaped by gender and class. For upper-class women, illness is a sign of her husband’s success. For middle-class men, illness makes them a defective *Homo Americanus*. For poor and working-class people, illness is a luxury that they can not afford, even though it is a feature of the capitalist system that they are forced to be on the bottom of. For all people, the claiming of a disability is not actually the empowerment of claiming an identity. The concept of disability as an identity is not accepted in Edith Wharton’s time. That movement only began to emerge in the 1970s. Instead, Edith Wharton warns of the political danger of illness: Disability shunts all people into a non-speaking role in their story, albeit a different non-speaking role depending on gender and class.

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