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SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN SCORSESE'S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* AND  
MADDEN'S *ETHAN FROME*: FILMIC ADAPTATIONS OF TWO NOVELS BY  
EDITH WHARTON

por

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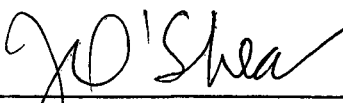
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## ABSTRACT

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The New York writer Edith Wharton (1862-1937) published sixty works in a literary career of almost fifty years. The recurrent theme of her novels is the ironic treatment of the interplay of her characters with the society that produced them, mainly upper class New York. *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome* are probably Wharton's most famous works. The former can be considered the writer's most characteristic novel, while the latter diverges from her other literary works because of its Naturalistic focus--it deals with a poor New England community and their continuous struggle with the hostile environment. Besides sharing the same theme of social critique, the same historical time, and very similar plots, *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome* have one more aspect in common: both novels have recently been adapted to the screen by directors Martin Scorsese and John Madden, respectively. This dissertation discusses these adaptations in what concerns the transposition of the theme

of social critique from the novels to the films. In this way, the mise-en-scene and the voice-over narration of both adaptations are analyzed considering their importance for the conveyance of the theme. Through the different aspects of the mise-en-scene that have been emphasized in the adaptation and through the use of a third person female voice-over narrator, *The Age of Innocence* succeeds in transposing to the screen the novel's main thematic element. In the adaptation of *Ethan Frome*, however, this transposition is just partially achieved. If, on the one hand, the mise-en-scene conveys the environmental entrapment of the characters, on the other Madden's change of the extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator's profession--from an engineer in the novel to a clergyman in the film--gives the film a religious morality that is absent from the novel. Thus, while Scorsese's adaptation transposes to the screen the social texture of its source through a detailed mise-en-scene and an emphatic third-person voice-over narrator, Madden's adaptation introduces a religious and moralistic tone by deviating from Wharton's narrative scheme. As a result, the central theme of the novel is directly affected. The resulting conclusion of the analysis indicates that both films deal with the theme of social critique in two diverse ways.

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## RESUMO

A escritora nova-iorquina Edith Wharton (1862-1937) publicou sessenta obras durante sua carreira literária de aproximadamente cinquenta anos. O tema recorrente em seus romances é o tratamento irônico da relação entre seus personagens com a sociedade que os produziu, principalmente a elite de Nova Iorque. *A Época da Inocência* e *Ethan Frome* são, provavelmente, as obras mais famosas de Wharton. *A Época da Inocência* pode ser considerado o romance mais característico da escritora, enquanto que *Ethan Frome* diverge das suas outras obras literárias devido ao seu foco naturalista--o pequeno romance retrata uma pobre comunidade da Nova Inglaterra e sua luta contra o meio ambiente hostil. Além de compartilharem o mesmo tema de crítica social, retratarem o mesmo período, e terem enredos muito semelhantes, *A Época da Inocência* e *Ethan Frome* têm um outro aspecto em comum: ambos os romances foram recentemente adaptados para o cinema pelos diretores Martin Scorsese e John Madden, respectivamente. Esta dissertação discute estas adaptações no que se refere à transposição do tema de crítica social dos romances para os filmes. Sendo assim, o "mise-en-scene" e a narração em "voice-over" de ambas as adaptações são analisados considerando sua importância para a elaboração da temática dos romances. Através de diferentes aspectos do "mise-en-scene" que foram enfatizados na adaptação e através do uso de uma narradora em "voice-over", *A Época da Inocência*

obtém um bom resultado na transposição do principal elemento temático do romance para a tela. Na adaptação de *Ethan Frome*, no entanto, esta transposição é alcançada apenas parcialmente. Se, por um lado, o "mise-en-scene" de *Ethan Frome* transmite o confinamento de seus personagens ao seu meio ambiente, por outro a mudança na profissão do narrador extradiegético-homodiegético dá ao filme uma moralidade religiosa que inexistente no romance. Portanto, enquanto a adaptação de Scorsese transpõe para tela a textura social de sua fonte através de um "mise-en-scene" detalhado e de uma enfática narradora de terceira pessoa em "voice-over", a adaptação de Madden insere um tom religioso e moralístico ao filme quando diverge do esquema narratológico de Wharton. Como resultado, o tema central do romance é diretamente afetado. A conclusão resultante desta análise indica que ambos os filmes lidam com o tema de crítica social de duas formas divergentes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton, a New York writer who lived from 1862 to 1937, had her publications either praised or criticized by readers and by the academic world. According to Millicent Bell, Wharton's literary sophistication was sometimes confused with snobbishness or intellectualism. She was also often considered a follower or imitator of her personal friend Henry James, since, like him, she wrote psychological novels which were usually related to the problems faced by women who belonged to the upper class American society (Bell 1). Wharton's published works include fourteen novels, eighty-six short stories, thirteen novellas,<sup>1</sup> nine nonfiction books, three small volumes of poetry, and many magazine articles and reviews (McDowell 1, 69). Some critics divide her literary production in two halves: the first fifteen years, from *House of Mirth* (1905) to *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and the last seventeen years, which end with *The Buccaneers*, unfinished because of her death. Besides *House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, in the first half of her career she produced other important novels such as *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), and *Summer* (1917). After the success of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton started writing popular fiction, which was published

serially in women's magazines. This popularization of her works is considered by some critics the reason for the professional decline in the second half of her career. Despite this controversial decrease in the quality of her works, economically speaking Edith Wharton was a very successful writer. She profited not only from the publication of her works, but also from the staging and filming of some of her novels.

The majority of Edith Wharton's novels are set in the puritanical and Victorian<sup>2</sup> world of the upper class, mainly the New York upper class of her youth. Under the surface, however, there is an ironic treatment of a social class which claimed to be highly moral, but whose actions and desires often rejected this morality. There is a certain negativism in Wharton's sophisticated view of the world, which is expressed in the characters' attempt to fight against the pressure of their social environment. The social texture of her novels, as well as the characters' power to choose their destinies by weighing the consequences of their acts, places Wharton among the realist writers of the beginning of the twentieth century.

Critical consensus has defined Realism as the movement that had as one of its tenets the attempt to show reality as it really was, without romanticizing, idealizing, or giving a picturesque frame to its portrayal.

Emory Elliot, in his *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, explains that, as it first appeared in France, Realism "designated an art based on the accurate unromanticized observation of life and nature, an art often defiant of prevailing convention"(502). The author mentions the prose of Gustave Flaubert and the paintings of Gustave Courbet as examples of realist art.

The social reality presented in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, for example, is that of an upper-class society, a subject which is far from lower-class life depicted in most of the realist literature of the period; however, Wharton defies conventions by introducing a female protagonist, Countess Olenska, who rejects the formal conventions of the social web in which she lives. In most of her novels--*The Age of Innocence* is probably the best example--Wharton concentrated her criticism on the hypocrisy of the social system of the upper class. Two of her works, however, can be considered exceptions to the rule: *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*.

In *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, two naturalistic novels, Wharton abandoned the world of upper class society and portrayed New England country people entrapped by their environment and circumstances. In *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vernon Louis Parrington defines Naturalism as a literary movement that reveals two major characteristics: a

sociological study of background in which characters are "dwarfed" by the milieu, and a psychological study of individual character(323). The pressure upon the naturalist characters may come either from outside (through the milieu) or from inside (through domineering desires). The outcome of these pressures "is usually hopeless sorrow - sometimes stolid resignation, sometimes fierce protest, but with no other end than annihilation"(324). Considering that the central characters of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* are deprived of autonomy (their actions are controlled by internal and external forces,) and that in both novels the end is a tragic one, these two novels can be characterized as naturalist texts. In his comparison of both literary movements, Lee Mitchell states that what distinguishes realist from naturalist texts is restraint, not action. He writes: "naturalist characters act out of a similar set of motives and desires, and they differ from their realist counterparts only in being unable to resist the conditions that press upon them" (Elliot 530). Compared to realist texts, the absence of free will is these novels' differentiating element.

*The Age of Innocence* was probably Wharton's most famous novel. Its importance to the literary world was demonstrated when, in 1921, it was awarded the Pulitzer prize.<sup>3</sup> In very general terms, it is the story of the

impossible love between Ellen Olenska, an unconventional woman who goes back to New York to seek for her freedom through divorce, and the rich Newland Archer, engaged and later married to May Welland, Countess Olenska's cousin. The novel shows the behavior and social values of the New York society of the end of the 19th century, when people from aristocratic families behaved according to strict social rules, which were always followed and never questioned. In relation to these rules and morals, R. B. Lewis writes in his preface to the first edition of *The Age of Innocence*:

*The Age of Innocence* is a novel of considerable moral complexity, and nothing is more impressive than the way in which the moral problems shift and evolve, difficult as it may be in our day to grasp the hard, firm, inescapable reality of those problems (x).

The development of the plot shows how Newland and Countess Olenska fall in love with each other, and how this love proves to be impossible since they placed their social responsibilities and moral obligations above their personal desires. In short, it is the story of how they were separated by a variety of social forces and moral values. The story is told by a third person omniscient narrator who informs the reader about the inner feelings and thoughts of the characters, as well as about the complexity of the social patterns in which they are involved. Considering that *The Age of Innocence* presents the intricate codes of

conduct of late nineteenth century New York society, it is primarily a novel of manners.<sup>4</sup> However, "it probed beneath [these] external codes of conduct--especially those surrounding marriage and divorce--to examine the underlying moral values that help shape human behavior" (McMichael 821).

Another of Edith Wharton's masterpieces is the already mentioned *Ethan Frome*, a novel whose social milieu diverged from the pattern presented in her fiction. Instead of writing about the upper class, in this novel the writer portrays the life of a poor New England farming family.<sup>5</sup> The tragic plot evolves along these lines: Ethan Frome falls in love with Mattie, his wife's cousin, and because of their impossible love, they try to commit suicide by causing a sled accident. Their attempt is not successful and both become crippled. Ethan grows even poorer because he cannot run the farm as he did before. Mattie loses her beauty and becomes an embittered and mournful woman who is taken care of by her cousin Zeena, Ethan's wife. The love affair is thus transformed into a triangle of despair. By presenting characters that are unable to resist the social, biological, and psychological conditions that press upon them, by ending her novel tragically, and by choosing the country as its setting, Wharton moves away from the territory of New York high society and brings "the dark



naturalist's focus to bear upon New England in *Ethan Frome*..." (Elliot 597).

Despite important differences, there are several aspects in common between *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence*: both tell the stories of men who fall in love with their wives' cousins, and both show how unhappy their lives become because of their involvement with these women. In terms of temporality, both take place at the end of the 19th century, and both show the protagonists' lives after a span of about twenty years. In both novels, the characters are controlled by internal and external forces, their sensuality is visible, and there is a good amount of self-sacrifice. Another aspect that can be observed in both novels is that there is a search for a utopian place where economic and social sanctions do not exist: a place where only true love would be enough and the private and public lives would not be in conflict. Therefore, both novels also share the same theme: a criticism of the strictly followed social patterns of the end of the 19th century.

The major contrast between both novels has to do with economics. While *The Age of Innocence* shows rich, sophisticated and well educated New Yorkers, *Ethan Frome* portrays poor New England dwellers, with their financial difficulties, their local accent, and their isolated community. In *The Age of Innocence* there is a surplus of

commodities, while in *Ethan Frome* scarcity is evident. Newland Archer is a lawyer who works in a conservative law office. For Thomas Burns, Newland works in the office not for the money, but because it is proper for a man of his class to have a profession. Burns goes on to argue that, like other characters in the novel, Newland Archer has either inherited his fortune or made it through good connections among the well-bred families (Burns 33). Ethan Frome's labor, however, is indispensable for the financial support of his family. His studies in Engineering had to be interrupted because of his sick mother and the need to run their farm after his father's death. In spite of the fact that they belong to opposite economic classes, Wharton shows that Newland and Ethan are chained to moral and social rules from which they unsuccessfully try to get free.

#### 1. Film versions of Wharton's novels

According to Louis Giannetti, literary texts have been the source for one fifth to one fourth of all feature films (335). The production of a filmic adaptation provides viewers with images and sounds, constructing the scenes for the spectators. Despite the fact that one's visual imagination is less stimulated by a film than by a novel, a facial expression unaccompanied by a text or context stimulates the viewers' conceptual imagination in

a way that a written text can not. As Tom Gunning explains in his *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*: "[a]lthough a filmmaker can make images relatively abstract, they will still contain a plethora of information compared to a verbal description" (17).

There is also the aspect of time involved in seeing a certain scene or reading about it. Obviously, the reader devotes much more time in reading the text than the viewer spends in watching a scene based on a literary passage. In his article "What Can Novels Do that Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," Seymour Chatman points out some of the differences between watching a film and reading a novel: "[t]he number of details that we could note is potentially large, even vast. In practice, however, we do not register many details" (406). Chatman suggests that the film goes by too fast, and we are too preoccupied with the meaning of certain scenes, with what is going to happen next, to dwell upon the physical details. Consequently, the degree of attention devoted to details in the written narrative is greater, compared to what is involved in watching a film. Besides, different audiences perceive different aspects in both art forms, i. e., different viewers interpret films differently in the same way that different readers make different readings of a text. In this sense, every production of a film which is based on a literary work is a

reading of it, more specifically the director's reading of it, his/her personal interpretation of a text which is shown to an audience.

According to Gerald Mast, there are three problems in filming a novel: 1) to enclose it within an approximate two-hour form, 2) to convert its purely verbal text into a succession of sights and sounds, and 3) to dramatize its narrated scenes (289). Directors deal with these problems posed by Mast with more or less difficulty, and their ability to overcome these difficulties successfully is one of the ways to evaluate their work. The quality of the novel is another aspect to be taken into consideration. In *Understanding Movies*, Louis Giannetti considers that more skill and originality are required when a director adapts a novel or a play, instead of working with an original screenplay. In *Coming to Terms- The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Seymour Chatman writes that "good adaptations of good novels are not a plentiful commodity" (160). For him,

The central problem for film adapters is to transfer narrative features that come easily to language but hard to a medium that operates in "real time" and whose natural focus is the surface appearance of things-hence film's traditional difficulty with temporal and spatial summaries, abstract narratorial commentary, representation of the thinking and feelings of characters, and so on (162).

According to Millicent Bell, out of the great literary production of Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), and *Twilight Sleep* (1927) are the novels that were transformed into films. In 1927-9, *The Age of Innocence* was adapted into a play and was as successful as the play versions of *The Old Maid* and *Ethan Frome*, which were presented in New York in 1935 and 1936 (ix-xiii, 14). The most recent filmic adaptations are John Madden's *Ethan Frome*, and Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*, both released in 1993. Due to these films, there is a renewed interest of the readership and of the critical-academic world in Wharton's novels. It is common knowledge that good adaptations of literary works arise the interest of the viewers to read the original text. What happened to these novels was no exception. The paperback edition of *The Age of Innocence*, which shows Michelle Pfeifer's picture on the cover, went to the top of the best-seller list in the fall of 1993 in the United States. The success of this new edition is an example of the efficiency of the marketing industry in using famous actors and actresses to increase the selling of books which have been adapted to the screen.

It was previously mentioned that among many aspects in common, both novels *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome* share one major theme which allows them to be defined as,

respectively, realist and naturalist texts: a criticism of the social values of American puritan societies. Being faithful adaptations of the literary works, Madden's and Scorsese's films maintain this thematic element. Within this context, the aim of this study is to discuss how the theme, the crisis between social structures and the individuals' will, is communicated in a different medium, the cinema. In this way, it is my purpose to investigate in which ways the social critique revealed in the development of the novels' plots is modified or maintained in both films. Since the social critique that Wharton's novels foreground (conveyed mainly through the author's implied irony) is a common theme in Realism and Naturalism, it is important to observe how this theme is translated in such contemporary filmic adaptations as Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* and John Madden's *Ethan Frome*.<sup>6</sup> In order to do so, I will focus on two filmic devices: mise-en-scene, and voice-over narration. At the same time that these filmic techniques help to recreate Wharton's historical time and ironic perception, they also enhance the differences between the film medium and the literary medium. Thus, this thesis investigates the ways in which Wharton's realist and naturalist themes were adapted into a different medium, film.

## 2. Mise-en-scene

In the filmic adaptations of *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*, most of Edith Wharton's words were transformed into moving images. Gerald Mast writes that "any filmed version of a literary work must take something out - words- and put something else in - sights and sounds" (281). In this way, verbal narrative is transformed into non-verbal narrative, since the descriptions of settings and characters in a literary work are transformed into images in the cinematographic form. These images involve elements of mise-en-scene (a French theatrical term which means "staging an action") such as setting, lighting, costumes, behavior of the figures, and ways in which the action is photographed. Throughout *Understanding Movies*, Louis Giannetti provides the following definitions of the cinematic mise-en-scene: "a blend of the visual conventions of the live theater with those of the plastic arts" (37), "[t]he arrangement of visual weights and movements within a given space" (446), and the encompassment of "both the staging of the action and the way that it is photographed" (446). Giannetti also compares mise-en-scene in the movies with the art of painting, since, both in paintings and in films, images and shapes are shown on a flat surface enclosed within a frame. However, he ponders, instead of fitting the frame to the

composition, like a painter, the film director fits his/her composition to a single-sized frame. The cinematic frame is "essentially an isolating device, a technique that permits the director to confer special attention on what might be overlooked in a wider context" (42). Different sections of the cinematic frame can be exploited for symbolic or metaphoric purposes (43).

In *The Age of Innocence*, Martin Scorsese transformed the verbal narrative of Wharton's text into a non-verbal narrative in the film. Some parts of the novel were obviously omitted, few were changed, but above all what calls the attention of the viewer who has also read the novel is the arrangement of sights and sounds created by the director. In this way, the fully detailed descriptions in Wharton's novel were very appropriately characterized and explored in the film. Besides, the sustained presence of a voice-over narrator adds to the detailed mise-en-scene important social, emotional, and psychological aspects that would not be learned had voice-over narration been omitted.

Unlike the luxury suggested by the mise-en-scene of *The Age of Innocence*, in Madden's *Ethan Frome*, the social aspect is communicated through the simplicity of the characters' way of life, their local speech, their modest clothing, Ethan's lack of a comfortable house, and the extremely cold winter that ruled the lives of Starkfield's



inhabitants. Besides the information provided by the mise-en-scene, the viewer is informed about the story world not only through dialogues but also through the voice-over narrator. Also unlike *The Age of Innocence*, there are elements which were added to the mise-en-scene in order to convey certain ideas. A poisoned fox, for example, was included in the film as a foreshadowing of Mattie's and Ethan's attempt to commit suicide. Important information about the behavior of Mattie is provided when she tries to kill herself with strychnine, the poison that had killed the disturbing fox. By showing Mattie trying to use the poison, the viewer is informed about the suicidal aspect in her personality. Had this element not been included, the tragic end of the film would lack a context for a better understanding. In other words, the main characters' performance, as well as the dialogues exchanged between them, seem not to be sufficient to convey the idea of despair, which eventually led them to attempt suicide.

In spite of the elements that were included or omitted, both films are faithful to the novels on which they were based. In fact, regarding the degree of fidelity between a literary work and a film, Louis Giannetti proposes three types of adaptations: the loose, the faithful, and the literal. The loose adaptation takes an idea, a situation, or a character from the literary source

and develops it independently. Faithful adaptations attempt to re-create the literary source in filmic terms, keeping as close as possible to the spirit of the original. Literal adaptations are restricted only to plays. This kind of adaptation, however, would only happen if the camera were fixed at a certain point of the theater, without the use of any filmic technique, for it would add a different dimension to the dialogues (362-365). Therefore, Martin Scorsese's and Madden's adaptations of Wharton's novels are undoubtedly faithful ones in what concerns plot. In what concerns narrators, however, only Scorsese was faithful to the source. Madden chose one of the minor characters, Mrs. Hale, and gave her power to be responsible for the telling of the events in the embedded narrative, while the narrator of the framing story, the engineer, was eliminated. Despite the differences, both filmmakers opted to have their stories told by female voice-over narrators.

### 3. Voice-over

The use of voice-over in film is controversial and has raised some discussion among scholars. John Belton, in *American Cinema/American Culture*, defines voice-over narration as

the speech that accompanies a previously filmed sequence but does not come from the sequence itself.

The voice may be of a character within the film who is describing onscreen events that are seen in a flashback or it may be that of an omniscient, unseen, offscreen commentator whose voice accompanies onscreen images, as in newsreels and certain forms of documentaries (353).

Chatman considers voice-over narration as an artifice which may be used by filmmakers to avoid difficulties in transferring narrative features from one medium to another. Chatman writes that, historically, the best filmmakers have preferred purely visual solutions and, when voice-over is used, it is generally done in "an intermittent rather than [in] a sustained way" (*Coming to Terms* 161-2). Louis Giannetti seems to share the same opinion about the use of voice-over in film, he writes: "Most documentary theorists are agreed that one cardinal rule in the use of [voice-over] is to avoid duplicating the information in the image. The commentary should provide only what is not apparent on the screen" (209). It is possible to notice a certain degree of discredit when Chatman and Giannetti refer to the use of voice-over in film, as if it were an artifice used by unskillful filmmakers to overcome difficulties and, as such, should be avoided or used in very small doses. In John Belton's definition it can also be noticed that he limits the technique to certain genres of films like documentaries and newsreels. This restriction is misleading considering that

there is a great amount of films that include voice-over and do not belong to these genres.

Aware of the fact that the technique of voice-over has long been overlooked or dismissed by many scholars, Sara Kozloff wrote *Invisible Storytellers*--a study that aimed at proving that the prejudices against voice-over are ill-founded. In her book, she traces the historical development of the technique and analyzes its subtleties, specially its capacity to create sophisticated irony. Formally, she defines voice-over narration as "oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen"(5). She also writes that the term "voice-over narration" has often been used quite loosely. To avoid confusion and inaccuracy, she provides another definition of the term in which the fully operative words are dismembered and analyzed separately: *voice* determines the medium (we must hear someone speaking), *over* applies to the relationship between the source of the sound and the images (the viewer does not see the person whose voice he/she is listening to), and *narration* refers to the content of the speech (someone is recounting a series of events to an audience)(2-3). As for the different types of voice-over narrators, Kozloff opts for the terminology "third-person" and "first-person" narrator in spite of the fact that these

terms are considered imprecise and misleading by some theorists. She argues that "third-person" and "first-person" are the most common and instantly recognizable terms, and that they are used "as a shorthand method for referring to the different relationships a narrator may have with the story he or she relates" (6 n.).

In John Madden's *Ethan Frome*, the story of the male protagonist is told by Mrs. Hale, a character who narrates the facts that she witnessed when she was twenty four years younger. The narrative takes place because Mr. Smith, Starkfield's new reverend, wants Ethan's story to be unveiled since the careless attitude of the local inhabitants towards the crippled man upset him. Compared to the novel, the director opted for a different way of narrating the events. Wharton's narrator is an engineer who is working in a power plant when a carpenter's strike forces him to stay in Starkfield longer than he had planned. During his stay in the village, he is a guest at Mrs. Ned Hale's house and becomes interested in Ethan's story. Talking to different people, mainly to Mrs. Hale, he gathers pieces of Ethan's tragic story. In an often cited essay on the narrator of *Ethan Frome*, Elizabeth Ammons claims that the engineer serves as a double for Ethan:

Young and well educated, he is the engineer that Ethan hoped to become, until a series of women blighted his world. (To impress the parallel, they also have in common their compassion for animals,

their interest in pure science, and fond memories of a trip to Florida each of them has taken.)(154)<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, one can perceive the engineer as the perfect audience for Ethan's story: besides empathizing with Ethan, he does not belong to Starkfield's community.

In Scorsese's adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*, the novel's narrator becomes the film's third-person voice-over narrator. The director's choice of a disembodied female voice-over narrator, or frame narrator, is considered by specialized authors as practically non-existent. Kozloff mentions that the two American films known to her in which there are never-seen female narrators are Mankiewicz's *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and Michael Chapman's *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1986). Kozloff has a feminist explanation for the predominance of a narratorial gender. She writes,

The barriers against women serving as third-person narrators in feature films have been so many and so high that their thorough exclusion ultimately seems overdetermined. If a woman were to serve as a third-person narrator, not only would she be allowed dominion over the public sphere as opposed to private, not only would she potentially wield great power and authority, not only would she speak as the film's image-maker, but she would escape being objectified and eroticized (101).

The fact that both adaptations present female voice-over narrators is, therefore, an interesting aspect to be considered since the directors' choice of using the technique of voice-over through which the narrators tell

their stories consists of an uncommon characteristic of feature films. This aspect that both adaptations have in common leads to some questions which this study will try to answer. What kinds of narrators are present in the novels and in the films? Do the filmic narrators contribute for the conveyance of the thematic meaning of their literary counterparts; that is, Wharton's ironic treatment of the social codes of nineteenth century American society? If so, how is it done? If the voice-over of the narrators were eliminated from the sound track, would there be any loss in the conveyance of the theme?

This dissertation is organized as follows: besides this introduction, there are three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter I is divided in two sections. The first presents an analysis of some aspects of the mise-en-scene in Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* which are important for the conveyance of the ambivalent social norms of behavior. The second section discusses how editing has been used to enhance the novel's theme. Chapter II presents an analysis of John Madden's filmic adaptation of *Ethan Frome*. The objective of this chapter is to observe how the mise-en-scene conveys the social entrapment of the characters. In the analyses of both adaptations, the novels will be used as referential. Chapter III is divided in four sections. The first section presents important aspects of Gérard Genette's theory which are helpful for the discussion and

analysis of the narrators in both novels. Section 2 provides theoretical information for the analyses of the film narrators. Sections 3 and 4 analyze, respectively, the literary narrators and the film narrators of both *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*. The Conclusion looks backwards to determine whether Wharton's social critique is maintained in the verbal and non-verbal narratives of both filmic adaptations. The works of Edith Wharton and the films directed by Scorsese and Madden are listed in the appendix. It can also be found in the appendix the voice-over narrated parts of both films.



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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton herself defines novellas as "a long short story, a form of tale which is available for any subject too spreading for conciseness yet too slight in texture to be stretched in a novel" (44).

<sup>2</sup> According to *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, Victorianism relates to the reign of Queen Victoria of England (1837-1901) or to the art, taste and strict moral standards of her time.

<sup>3</sup>A prize, established by Joseph Pulitzer, awarded yearly to outstanding journalistic and literary works. Wharton was the first woman to receive it.

<sup>4</sup> In *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Richard Chase discusses *The Age of Innocence* in his chapter about novels of manners in American literature (pp. 157-184).

<sup>5</sup>Region in the Northeastern USA formed by six states: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> Despite not being inside the scope of this study, it could also be argued, since these are period films, that these adaptations imply a transposition not only of medium but also of time, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Ammons' and other essays are included in the critical edition of *Ethan Frome*, edited by Kristin Lauer and Cynthia Wolf, cited in the bibliography.

## CHAPTER I

“They all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world. The real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of ordinary signs.”

Narrator's voice-over  
in Scorsese's *The Age  
of Innocence*.

### WHARTON'S AND SCORSESE'S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

This chapter aims at analyzing how mise-en-scene and editing in Martin Scorsese's filmic adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* convey the theme of social critique webbed in Wharton's homonymous novel. The chapter presents an analysis of general and specific aspects of the mise-en-scene which, in addition to editing and voice-over narration (discussed in the third chapter), are the most illustrative aspects for the film's conveyance of the novel's social critique.

Martin Scorsese is presently considered one of the most important and talented American directors. Since most of his films show violence, gangsters, Mafia, and hostility, Scorsese's decision to make a “period”<sup>1</sup> film surprised most of his viewers. However, a careful observer will

notice that, in a way, the themes of *The Age of Innocence* are the same as those that have attracted the director since his 1969 *Who's that knocking at the door?*: culpability, desire, and obsession. Nonetheless, in *The Age of Innocence*, these feelings are a result of a social conditioning that the characters choose not to fight against. Besides these recurrent themes, in *The Age of Innocence* Scorsese had the chance to explore his hometown's social history through the novel of another New Yorker, Edith Wharton. It is common knowledge that New York has exerted a considerable influence on the production of both the director and the writer.

Before analyzing mise-en-scene, it is necessary to introduce a few of Scorsese's modifications in the plot of the adaptation. These changes affect the original's core, therefore, to observe the director's choice of keeping or eliminating some passages of the novel consists of an important means to be taken into consideration when the focus of the analysis is the representation, in the film, of the novel's central theme of social entrapment. As already mentioned in the Introduction, few parts of the novel *The Age of Innocence* were omitted or changed in Scorsese's adaptation. One of the eliminated parts which seems to have enabled the director to explore more deeply the feelings of the two main characters is when Newland and

Ellen meet alone for the first time. In the novel, Wharton's description of their first private meeting in Ellen's "funny house" is interrupted by the unexpected visit of the Duke of St. Austrey and Mrs. Struthers<sup>2</sup>. In the film, the exclusion of this interruption would not be important had it not changed the atmosphere of Newland and Ellen's first private encounter. It is in this occasion that, for the first time, Newland calls Madame Olenska by her first name. It is also in this occasion that he touches Ellen's hand as a way to comfort her and make her stop crying. Both characters are visibly disturbed by this physical contact. Since they are not interrupted by visitors, their private encounter becomes more emotional and confidential. Thus, the viewer perceives how attracted to each other they are from this early scene. When Newland kisses Ellen's hands caressingly before leaving her house, she ironically calls him 'cousin' in order to remind him of their condition--a reference to the control that society and their families exert upon them. Despite not being married to May yet, Newland and Ellen are already separated by their kinship.

Another important modification in Scorsese's adaptation of the novel refers to what happens when Mrs. Manson Mingott, the matriarch of the clan, suffers a stroke.<sup>3</sup> In the novel, May sends a note to Newland's office asking him

to go to her grandmother's house, since the old lady had suffered a slight stroke and his presence there was wanted. Following her grandmother's instructions, she also sends a telegram to Ellen, who was living in Washington, urging her to come back to New York to be with their grandmother. But when the family discuss who should pick Ellen up at the New Jersey City train station, Newland promptly offers help. In the film, this passage is presented in a different way: at the moment Newland is lying to May that he has to travel to Washington on business, his wife receives a message saying that Mrs. Mingott had a stroke. The purpose of Newland's lie was to meet Ellen in Washington, therefore, considering that Ellen was going to New York, his plan had failed. However, Scorsese attributes to Mrs. Mingott the decision of sending Newland to the train station. In this way, both in the novel and in the film, Newland and Ellen are successful in being alone in the carriage that goes from the station to the old lady's house. What precedes their encounter, however, changes the way Newland's interest in fetching Ellen is viewed by May, by her family, and by the viewer. Scorsese seems to protect Newland by transferring to Mrs. Mingott the decision of who should go to the station to pick Ellen up. Wharton's Newland could barely hide his despair in seeing that they would be traveling in opposite directions. In this way, at the same time that the film presents a more careful Newland (he does

not propose to go to the station), it also presents him as having a more daring character (he does not hesitate in telling his wife a lie in order to go to Washington to meet Ellen). It is important to notice that in the novel Newland also lies to May. However, the way the lie is presented in the film seems to aim at justifying its use: Newland tells May he has to go to Washington on business at the moment they are going to their separate bedrooms. There is no reference in the novel to the fact that they do not share the same bedroom. The strengthening of Newland's character in the film has two implications: first, it stresses Newland's attraction towards Ellen showing that he would not hesitate in deceiving his wife in order to be with her cousin, and second, Scorsese seems to protect his male character by granting him a stronger personality, something that Wharton did not do.<sup>4</sup>

Scorsese's few changes in the plot seem to function as ways to intensify and haste the attraction between Newland and Ellen. The faster narrative pace of the film seems authorized by the medium itself: while the novel can develop the love affair in a slower pace, the film has to conform to an approximate two-hour schedule. However, Scorsese's changes contribute for the prevailing atmosphere of psychological suffering imposed by society. Furthermore, for an audience unaware of the novel, it is the film's

mise-en-scene--especially its emphasis on hands, dinners, paintings, and fire--that directly conveys the novel's main theme: the social critique of the blind obedience and unquestioned conformity to the social and moral standards of the late nineteenth century. These aspects are further discussed below.

## 1. Elements of the mise-en-scene

### 1.1 Hands

According to Jim McWilliams, Wharton mentions Ellen's hand or hands more than thirty times. In his article, he also notices that in six different passages of the novel Newland kisses or holds her hands (270). This frequency is, in itself, an indication of their meaningfulness. In the film, Scorsese's awareness of the significance of hands is perceived in different scenes. In their first private encounter, for instance, when Newland kisses Ellen's hands before leaving her house, both realize that he is not simply doing what the rules of etiquette would tell a gentleman to do before leaving a lady's house. As a matter of fact, he should not kiss the hands of a married woman, something that he makes clear when they first meet at the opera and he shakes her right hand elegantly instead of kissing it. In fact, this sequence in Ellen's house shows the characters' awareness of their attraction to each other

in two different shots: the first is the one in which Newland touches Ellen's hand and calls her by the first name (she avoids this contact by using this hand to dry her tears), the second is when Newland is leaving the house and the camera shows, in a medium shot, Newland kissing Ellen's hands slowly and sensitively (as if they were her lips). At this point, as I have mentioned above, Ellen reminds Newland of their kinship as a way to call his attention to the awkwardness of the situation.

It is in the carriage trip from the train station to Mrs. Mingott's house that the reader will find one of the most sensual passages of the novel, which was transferred to the film as, in Lesley Stern's words, "a passionate, achingly poignant" (226) scene in which Newland seems to be making love to Ellen's hands. In the novel, their sensual meeting in the carriage is described as follows:

Her hand remained in his, and as the carriage lurched across the gang-plank on the ferry he bent over, unbuttoned her tight brown glove, and kissed her palm as if he had kissed a relic (238-239).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Ellen's hands function as the utmost representation of forbidden passion and desire. Her hand is turned into an artistic object to be admired, or even touched, but never really possessed. In this way, there is a clear relationship between hands and paintings--they emblemize reality. In the film, much more than in the novel,



paintings have been used to convey the idea of the framing of society into cultural codes.

## 1.2. Paintings

The paintings presented in the film undoubtedly deserve comments. At the time *The Age of Innocence* was published, Europe experienced a transition of one school of art to another; from Realism to Impressionism. Like in literature, realist painters represented the world in the way it really was, as if they were observing it through the frame of a window. In 1864, Renoir and a group of other painters organized an exposition in Paris. Light, color, the sun, and the movement of the moment were the new elements that their paintings displayed. Their aim was to reproduce only the immediate impression made by the subject on the artist. In 1874, Impressionism became a school of art. Ample brush movements and the mixture of the colors on the canvas characterized impressionist paintings in the beginning. Later on, these movements became narrower and shorter, like tiny points of pure color that blended together when observed from a distance, producing a luminous effect. This technique was called pointillism, a characteristic of Neo-Impressionism.<sup>6</sup>

This short summary enables us to analyze one of the most important and beautiful sequences of the film: the

pier scene. Once the viewer is aware of the concepts that permeate this school of art, its association with a neo-impressionist painting is unavoidable. On a visit of May and Newland to Mrs. Mingott's summer house, Newland is sent by the old woman to fetch Ellen outside, so that both women could "gossip about Julius Beaufort."<sup>7</sup> Newland finds Ellen standing on the pier near her grandmother's house, observing a beautiful sunset on the water. From the pier, a lighthouse can be seen, and behind it a boat sails slowly. Looking at the scene, Newland imposes a signal. If Ellen turned before the boat passed by the lighthouse he would meet her, otherwise he would not. The intense color of the sunset is reflected by the water, and this image seems to penetrate Newland's eyes as well as the eyes of its observers--the film's audience. In this sequence, Scorsese's mastery in transferring to the film all the narrative power of the novel's passage is evident. Like a painter, the director frames Ellen in a full size picture, i.e., her image on the pier is transformed into an artistic portrait since the scene is framed as if it were a neo-impressionist painting. The little waves on the surface of the water become little dots when the sun light is reflected, resembling the works in which pointillism can be observed. Besides, the pier scene includes all the impressionist elements: light, color, the sun, and movement. In this way, in a POV (point of view) shot,

Newland "frames" Ellen into a painting. She turns out to be like one of the neo-impressionist works of art in a museum; it can be admired and loved from a distance, but never possessed--the outcome of their socially transgressive love. Later in this chapter I will comment on the transposition of this scene to the end of the film (by means of a flashback) and its implications. The pier scene described above is just one example, among many, of the interrelation between scenes and paintings and paintings and scenes. These interrelations become important not only for their artistic effect but also because they seem to emphasize what is not directly stated by the characters or by the narrator: the 'framing' of the characters into codes of conduct.

Starting with the controversial realist nude placed daringly in the entrance of the Beauforts' ball room, a sequence of paintings is presented in almost all the indoor scenes. Scorsese seemed to be so concerned with the artistic element provided by paintings that besides the scene that resembles a painting (the pier scene), there is also a painting which becomes a scene, and paintings which are 'doubled' by characters standing near them. One of these personifications of painted subjects can be observed in the Archers' farewell dinner offered to Madame Olenska. A real size portrait is placed in a position that the

woman dressed in black in the picture looks just like another party guest, standing next to the also black clad Mrs. Van der Luyden. In the ballroom scene, a group of guests double the action in the painting above them, and there are also the five different portraits of Mrs. Van der Luyden which are doubled by the character sitting under them. Michael Ballhaus notes that "the use of this visual symbolism creates a strong sense of the characters' imprisonment within the framework of the social convention" (*Cinematic Invention*, 40). This visual symbolism is used in the film as a way to clue the characters' hidden thoughts and motivations, since their emotions are kept private. The descriptions of the paintings in the novel, though detailed, do not convey the character's emotions in the way the film does. The descriptions of the paintings in Ellen's and Mrs. Mingott's houses, for example, unveil part of these women's unconventional personalities. In the film, this association becomes visual. Furthermore, one can notice that the effect of the doubling of characters works as a subliminal way of showing how entrapped and framed by the social aspect the characters are. This doubling is not in the novel. For instance, in the film, the first painting seen in the Beauforts' house is a huge portrait of Mrs. Beaufort in which she stands solemnly and aristocratically. The picture is strategically placed at the entrance of the ball room as if its owner stood in a higher social position

than the guests who, once a year, paraded under it. The low-angle positioning of the camera enhances this association by showing first the aristocratic portrait of Mrs. Beaufort and then moving downwards to the shot of its living subject greeting her guests. The viewers' information about the high social status of the character is partially provided by the painting. There is no reference to this picture in the novel.

Another painting which is not mentioned in the novel but whose effect in the film deserves comments is the last one to be shown in the sequence in which the interior of Mrs. Mingott's house is presented to the viewer. At the moment the voice-over narrator is commenting on the lady's excitement regarding the importance of her grand-daughter's marriage to Newland Archer, the camera shows the painting of a woman being scalped by two savages. This painting can be seen as an ironic reference to the similarities between New Yorkers' social rituals and the tribal rituals of primitive cultures. As a matter of fact, both in the novel and in the film, the New York clans are often referred to as tribes.

Towards the end of the film, a sequence shows Ellen being portrayed by an artist in a Boston park--a setting that can be associated with Georges Seurat's 1884-1886 famous neo-impressionist painting "Sunday Afternoon on the

Island of La Grande Jatte."<sup>8</sup> The camera first focuses the unfinished painting of a woman reading a book under a parasol, the next shot shows Newland looking at the work, moving to the shot of Ellen sitting on the park bench. In this way, the painting is transformed into a scene. Once again, through Newland's point of view, Ellen is associated with a work of art. Ellen's image sitting on the bench is 'frozen' in the painting in the same way that the image of Ellen standing on the pier is imprinted in Newland's memory. It is important to notice again that, in the novel, there is no reference to the painting by Seurat or to Ellen being portrayed by an artist.

Shooting day exterior scenes, according to Michael Ballhaus, is one of the most difficult aspects of a period film. Special effects have to be employed because there are many indications of the present time that have to be eliminated. One of the ways to do it is to use matte paintings, a dull finished painted reproduction of a scenery. There is one scene on Fifth Avenue, in which the lower part of a famous building was used, and the rest was painted in. Another painting was used to show Central Park when it was just wilderness. Technically, the pier scene described above required special effects: Ellen was shot standing on a pier in front of a matte picture of a lighthouse. The passing boat and the setting sun were shot

separately and composited afterwards. The result of this artistic scene was beautifully presented twice in the film, as I discuss later in this chapter.

### 1.3. Looks and appearances

As part of the mise-en-scene, it is important to observe Scorsese's choice of actresses, especially if one takes into consideration that the director did not follow Wharton's physical characterization of Ellen as dark haired and May as a blonde woman.

Throughout the centuries, American and English writers have written many pages establishing a difference between dark-haired and blonde female characters. The stereotyped vision of dark-haired females being rebellious, more aggressive, more sexually liberated seems to have a very diffuse origin. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, Shakespeare presented Hermia as a dark-haired woman who would rebel against her father and the Duke, and who was several times called a "shrew". Helena, on the other hand, was the blonde woman who would not rebel against the established moral patterns. Charlotte Brontë also seems to have played with these stereotypes, when the readers would empathize with a pale Jane Eyre and have bad feelings towards the black-haired mad woman in the attic. Hawthorne's Zenobia, in *The Blithedale Romance*, is a

remarkably beautiful dark-haired woman, whose deficiency of softness and delicacy is contrasted with Priscilla's virginal and angelical appearance. Wharton's Zenobia, nicknamed Zeena, is not beautiful, but this powerful manipulative woman is also dark. Jill Plumley, the blonde main character of Joy Fielding's non-canonical recent novel *The Other Woman*, had her husband literally stolen by a silky black-haired, young and pretty woman, with large breasts and a surprisingly husky voice. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska is "the dark lady" whose painful past and unconventional behavior threatens May's marriage. May happens to be blonde, "Diana-like", and virginal even after being married. Many other characters could be listed here to illustrate the tendency of associating certain patterns of behavior with certain physical characteristics of women. Would not this be a disguised, minor kind of racism institutionalized by literature throughout the centuries? In an article entitled *Wharton and Race*,<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Ammons wonders whether Martin Scorsese's refusal to follow Wharton's color coding, willfully casting Ellen as a blonde and May as dark-haired, is an evidence of the director's non-acceptance of a hidden race narrative. She writes:

Reversing Wharton's script, Scorsese effectively unwrites it, showing himself to be as frightened and resistant to its implied study of race - its tale of worn-out white power clinging to its exclusionary



supremacy - as his utterly obedient pale hero, Newland(83).

It is important to consider that, unlike what happens in literature, in American film tradition blondes are often presented as more sexually aggressive than dark-haired women. Hollywood actresses Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe are just two of a long list of examples. However, Scorsese seems to be much more concerned with the physical features of the actresses Winona Ryder and Michelle Pfeiffer than with any racial aspect. In an interview for HBO cable TV, the director mentioned that he chose Winona Ryder for the role of the angelical-looking May when he and his producer saw her having dinner at a restaurant in Los Angeles. They concluded that she was perfect for the role because "she looked pale, fragile, and yet strong." As for Michelle Pfeiffer, I suppose she combines a series of elements that characterize Ellen Olenska very properly; a sensual beauty, a daring personality, an intelligent look, and the unconventional self-conscious attitude he needed for the role of the Europeanized countess.

#### 1.4 Dinners

Besides Scorsese's treatment of hands and paintings as elements of the mise-en-scene that emblemize the characters' repressed desires, dinners are also wisely

manipulated throughout the film. Dante Ferretti, the Production Designer, was the one who told Scorsese that three elements could not be left out of the film: color, painting and food. In *The Age of Innocence: a Portrait of the Film*, he writes:

There were 65 sets, but I felt, in them all, one or more of these elements was vital: color, which characterized the moods and personalities; painting, which portrayed the characters of the people who owned them; and food. There are seven dinner scenes in the film, and each of them is dramatically crucial (181).

In fact, Edith Wharton describes the meals in a very careful and detailed way. These social gatherings are perfect examples of the strictness of the social conventions, the blind obedience to etiquette, and the emptiness and superficiality of what was spoken during these meals. In *The Rituals of Dining in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence*, Joy L. Davis states:

The power of the tribe is most clearly defined and dramatized in *The Age of Innocence*, where Wharton uses dining rituals to translate the characters' conflicts into a language of behavioral codes which signify the moral laws of the society that controls them. Dining scenes in the novel record the tensions that arise when characters' desires subvert ritual by employing it to conceal dangerous defiance. The scenes go still further in unfolding the retaliations effected when an individual opposes the social order (466).

This disturbance of social order can be observed in different dinners. In one of Newland's domestic dinners, to which "the specialist on family" Mr. Sillerton Jackson is

the only guest, Ellen's privacy is insistently invaded by the small group gathered around the table. Joy Davis explains that Newland sees his mother, his sister and his friend as civilized cannibals, since "the fastidiousness of their conversation conceals the characters' voracious appetite for devouring reputations"(469). This figurative cannibalism is also noted in the first dinner offered by the newly wed Archers, which is the last one both in the novel and in the film.

The "foreignness" of Countess Olenska entitled her to sit on the right hand side of the host (Newland Archer) during the farewell dinner offered to her by May (and, supposedly, also by her husband). Ironically, Newland and Ellen's unavoidable separation is intensified by their proximity at the table. The tribe is gathered for a ritual which aims at eliminating Ellen Olenska, as if she were one of the carefully displayed dishes on the table. "There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these in the Old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (*The Age of Innocence* 279). At a certain point of this dinner Archer realizes that, for all those people around his table, he and Ellen were lovers.

As his glance went from one placid well-fed face to another he saw all the harmless-looking people

engaged upon May's canvas-backs as a band of dumb conspirators, and himself and the pale woman on his right as the center of their conspiracy. And then it came over him, in a vast flash made of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to 'foreign' vocabularies (279).

In the film, the dinner scenes present an extra meaning. Besides observing the importance of the meals in the novel as a way to translate a language of behavioral codes, the rich decoration of the tables (the rare china, the silver utensils, the exquisite food, the flower ornaments) is an aspect carefully presented by Scorsese. The beauty of the dinner scenes shows society's mastery in organizing social gatherings. Unless the reader has specific historical knowledge about what an aristocratic dinner looked like at the time the story takes place, one could hardly picture these meals in the same way that they are presented in the film. In Scorsese's book *The Age of Innocence: A Portrait of a Film*, Robin Standefer, the visual research consultant, has noted that every historian to whom she spoke had an opinion on what social standing a particular piece of china or silver represented. A very specific time in American history was signified by their abundance and importance (182). As a matter of fact, by working with renowned professionals like Dante Ferreti, the Italian production designer, the German photographer Michael Baulhaus, the costume designer Gabriella Pescucci, and the veteran

musician Elmer Bernstein, Scorsese ensured a perfect characterization of the historical moment.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.5 Fire

The fire is another important element of the mise-en-scene to be considered since, like paintings and dinners, it communicates social entrapment. In the film, fireplaces are included in almost all scenes in which Newland and Ellen meet alone indoors. The effect of the colored, moving light from the fireplace is atmospheric, as it inspires coziness, warmth, and desire to be closer to each other. At the same time, one can notice that the fire is being controlled behind the bars of the fireplace in the same way that the characters' love is controlled by the bars of the moral standards and social values.

Like what can be observed in the novel, there are two scenes in the film that associate the movement of the burning wood in the fireplace with an intense emotion experienced by the characters: when Ellen accepts Newland's suggestion not to get divorced, and when May tells Newland that Ellen has decided to go back to Europe. In the second scene, a piece of coal falls out of the fireplace. May takes it very carefully from the floor and puts it back in its place. The gesture seems to echo May's behavior towards Ellen: she is sending her cousin back to the place where

she belongs, that is, Europe. Furthermore, the gesture also indicates May's skills to control and deal with nature-- here being represented by Newland's passion. In fact, later on, Newland discovers that his wife was clever enough to announce her suspected pregnancy to her cousin in order to impose one more barrier between Ellen and him. Ironically, and intentionally, May's announcement happens exactly when Ellen accepts (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) to "come to [Newland] once, and then go home." In other words, May announces her pregnancy precisely when Ellen decides to meet Newland illicitly. May wisely counterbalances Newland's passion for Ellen with his responsibility as a father-to-be. And he opts for the latter.

## 2. Editing

Martin Scorsese agrees with Stanley Kubrick, the director of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when he says that editing is the only really original element in movies, when the director manifests him/herself artistically. When Scorsese compared editing with the other elements involved in the making of a film he said "all the rest finds similarities in the other artistic fields. Lighting in painting, movement in dance. But editing is what characterizes the cinematographic art."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this cinematic device was used very artistically throughout Scorsese's film. As a matter of fact, as Professor John

Caughie suggested in a lecture about the adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*, Scorsese's editing is as disturbing in this film as it is in his most violent ones. The abrupt cuttings and the restlessness of the camera provide a dynamic development of the plot, characteristic of most of his films.

During the presentation of the opening credits, created by Elaine and Saul Bass, an artistically beautiful sequence of blooming flowers is observed. These flowers are shown as if they were seen through the filtering of a lace, while an energetic music compasses the rhythm of their blooming. In some parts, the background consists of a manuscript, which resembles a letter. Besides the unquestionable beauty of its creative effect, this credit sequence introduces the mood of the film. In my opinion, the laces, the red flowers and the intense music lead the viewer to expect romance and passion. The manuscript can be related to all the written messages exchanged throughout the film. The lace not only sends us to the time of the narrative (even the title suggests that the film will deal with a historical past,) but also veils the vision of the total beauty of the flowers. As part of the film's mise-en-scene, the lace can be seen as a filter through which the nineteenth century New York society can be perceived: in this society, everything was filtered because "the real

thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs'' (*The Age of Innocence* 41). Through the editing of this credit sequence, the viewer can anticipate the dynamic rhythm of the cinematic narrative, a characteristic of Scorsese's films.

Thus, from the very beginning of the film, the viewer can observe how editing was used to establish a link between the red hibiscus blooming during the presentation of the cast, the yellow flowers on the stage of the opera house, and the flower on Newland's lapel. A careful observer will notice that the other men in the theater are also wearing the same flower on their lapels. This is just the first hint that people gathered in this opera house lived according to the strict social rules of form and behavior.<sup>12</sup> It is also in the opera house sequence that Scorsese avoids the conventional way of showing the theater audience and the stage through the round lenses of binoculars. Instead, to simulate a point of view (PVO) shot of an audience member scanning the rest of the crowd, the filmmakers used frame-by-frame exposures that resemble stop-motion. In this way, by shifting abruptly from one audience member to the other, a detailed description of jewels, clothes, and behavior of the theatergoers is provided. As Ballhaus declares, "[W]ith a flash pan, for instance, you don't really see



anything very well.<sup>13</sup> The method we used provides more visual information and little details, like the jewelry in the audience"(Balhaus 42). It is important to notice that, in the novel, the information provided about the audience in the opera house is relatively restricted. In the first two chapters, whose setting is the Academy of Music in New York, Wharton introduces the main characters and some of their social codes of conduct. However, not too much attention is devoted to the audience in general. By providing a more detailed description of the other members of New York society gathered in the opera house, Scorsese seems to have enabled a better perception of the sophisticated world of upper class. Besides, it was for this New York audience that the Mingotts, the Archers, the Beauforts, and other New York clans performed their social roles.

In terms of associative meaning, there is one sequence in which the film seems to acquire an extra dimension if compared to its equivalent passage in the novel: it is when, through the technique of editing, there is the transposition of the previously discussed pier scene to the end of the film. Thus, the audience establishes a relationship between the signal provided by the reflection of the sun on the water and its reflection on the glass of Ellen's window in her Parisian apartment.

In both opportunities, Newland Archer waited for a signal. The link between the scenes is, therefore, easily captured by the viewer, without the need of any verbal narrative. The audience seems to see through Newland's eyes; when the brightness of the reflection forces the closing of his eyes, the same sensation is experienced by the viewers in the dark movie theater, since they also react to the sudden brightness of the scene. The reflection on the window sends Newland back to the image of the reflection on the water, and both represent signals which will determine whether or not Newland and Ellen will be together. This time, however, in a medium-close-up, the woman in his memory turns around, looks at him and smiles. Her smile may represent her willingness and availability to meet him after so many years. In spite of this, he stands up and walks slowly away. The joining of both scenes conveys the information that Newland prefers not to spoil the memories from youth. Again, his relationship with Ellen is suppressed by the power of the framed image, of Newland's connivance to social codes that, even after so many years, still imprison him. In his memory, Ellen is kept on a framed picture, untouched. The visual power of this final scene, only possible on a screen, connects past and present

artistically. It is the director's signature, in this film strategically placed at the very end.

I have chosen to analyze this last scene of the film because it calls our attention to the cinematographic possibility of articulating, through editing, the flashback of the pier scene to the last one of the film in which Newland is in Paris, thirty years later. The linking of these two scenes is both beautiful and tragic, for through its beauty the viewer experiences how difficult it is for Newland to move towards Ellen and abandon his life of codes, norms, and images of a lost love. Memories had become indispensable, since he had spent thirty years of his life living with them. In the novel, the very last paragraph refers to a signal, but makes no allusion to the first signal on the pier. In order to make the last paragraph more comprehensible, the one that precedes it is also presented below.

[Newland] sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters.

At this, *as if it had been the signal he waited for*, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel (*My italics*, 301).

It is important to observe that the flashback inserted at the very end of the film not only supplies the information

inscribed in the novel but also goes beyond it. It suggests that Newland's decision not to meet the woman he loved for so many years is a consequence of his obedience to New York society's codes of behavior. Within the context of a critical decision, he prefers to return to a world that seems protected from change. There is no need of dialogue, narrator's or character's voice-over to convey the idea that he prefers to go on living with his memories. As a matter of fact, this is a case in which verbal narrative would be redundant, and, as a consequence, totally dispensable. In this scene, Martin Scorsese plays with editing to exploit the tragic incapacity of Newland to break the chains that imprisoned him in the past.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A film which represents a certain historical moment.

<sup>2</sup> The reason for their visit was, first, to introduce Mrs. Struthers to Countess Olenska, since the lady had been excluded from the list of guests of the Van der Luyden's revengeful welcome dinner for the countess (and for the duke), and, second, to invite Ellen for a performance of a famous pianist at the lady's house. Later on, Ellen would be blamed for having joined such a group of different people in the house of a woman whose husband worked in the unfashionable shoe polishing business (*The Age of Innocence*, 68-69).

<sup>3</sup> In her article "The Windings of Destiny: The Tribal Image in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*", Aimara Resende includes the family trees of the Mingotts and the Archers, which are useful for the visualization of how the characters are related to each other (29). Reference in the Bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> Another character that is granted with extra features in the film is Mrs. Mingott, who works as a sort of accomplice when she gives her grand-daughter Ellen and Newland a chance to be alone in the carriage. As a matter of fact, this is not the only occasion in which Mrs. Mingott uses her incontestable matriarchal power to arrange situations in which Newland and Ellen would be by themselves. The pier scene is another one.

<sup>5</sup> From this point on, all the references from *The Age of Innocence* are transcribed from the Penguin Edition.

<sup>6</sup>The information provided here is in the pedagogical series of video tapes *Arte de Ver. Projeto Arte na Escola*. Videocassete. Prod.

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Fundação Iochpe, 1992. Tapes 74 and 75. Centro de Artes - UDESC, 30 min.

<sup>7</sup> As mentioned previously, Mrs. Mingott's request is another evidence of the lady's awareness of Newland's and Ellen's desire to be together.

<sup>8</sup>This painting can be seen in Ricardo Barletta's book on neo-impressionist art. Reference in the Bibliography.

<sup>9</sup>This article consists of chapter 3 of *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, edited by Millicent Bell, p. 68-86. See bibliography.

<sup>10</sup>The information about these professionals was obtained in *Video News magazine*, cited below. My translation.

<sup>11</sup> From the interview given to Wladimir Weltman in *Video News* number 138, page 23. My translation.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Wharton, through the ironical character of Mrs. Manson Mingott, compares people's fear of being different to their fear of smallpox, a serious illness of her time.

<sup>13</sup> Short form of *panorama*, a revolving horizontal movement of the camera, usually from left to right.

## CHAPTER II

"Maybe if it'd been  
spring it might have  
been different... but  
it was winter... and so  
they married."  
Narrator's voice-over in  
Madden's *Ethan Frome*.

### WHARTON'S AND MADDEN'S *ETHAN FROME*

For over fifty years, Hollywood had been trying to film *Ethan Frome*. There was an aborted project starring Gary Cooper and Betty Davis in the 40's, probably motivated by the successful dramatization of the novel in 1936.<sup>1</sup> When, in 1989, Wharton's short novel entered public domain, five companies were interested in filming it.<sup>2</sup> It was executive producer Lindsay Law who succeeded in doing it. The screenwriter Richard Nelson and the movie director John Madden were brought together to develop the project of adapting *Ethan Frome* to the screen. Both Madden and Nelson had been successful in previous Broadway projects, and the former had also worked for the British television.<sup>3</sup> The leading roles of *Ethan Frome* were performed by Liam Neeson, the actor who played Ethan's role, Patricia Arquette as

Mattie Silver, and Joan Allen, who performed the role of Ethan's hypochondriac wife Zeena. In spite of what seems to be a careful choice of professionals, the resulting film is not considered, at least by the specialized criticism available, a "good adaptation". Therefore, the number of articles written on the film is considerably small compared to, for example, what can be found about Scorsese's renown *The Age of Innocence*.

As it was previously stated in the "Introduction" of this dissertation, naturalist texts are characterized by restraint. The characters' lack of free will is the result of the control that biological, psychological, and environmental forces exert upon them. Since the objective of this work has been to observe how the thematic transposition from the novels to the films occurs, the study of how these three elements are presented in the filmic adaptation of Wharton's naturalist novel *Ethan Frome* are of relevant importance. Following the procedure of Chapter I, in which the film *The Age of Innocence* is analyzed on the basis of its use and expanding of the novel's major social thematics, this chapter discusses the different aspects of the mise-en-scene in John Madden's *Ethan Frome* that contribute to the transposition of the major theme of the novel, i.e., the social critique imbued in Wharton's portrayal of the rigid moral patterns that



governed the lives of the characters in the nineteenth-century rural New England. Moreover, besides presenting some parallels between Scorsese's and Madden's adaptations in what concerns plot and mise-en-scene, this chapter also addresses the film's negative criticism. In the following paragraphs, I discuss Madden's reworking of the plot, specifically in what concerns Wharton's depiction of the sexual attraction between Mattie and Ethan.

In Madden's adaptation, different emphasis is given to the biological, psychological, and environmental aspects that permeate the short novel. In the transposition from the text to the screen, the characters' psychological suffering loses strength and becomes a consequence of the biological and environmental forces that press upon them. Ethan's abandoning of his educational dreams in order to take care of the land (*Ethan Frome* 27, 71), and his impulse to marry Zeena out of fear of being alone in the winter (70) are examples of environmental forces, while Ethan's guilty attraction to Mattie, his wife's cousin, is an example of the power that biological forces exert upon the characters. Furthermore, the unsuccessful suicide attempt is a perfect example of the characters' absence of free will, since not even in trying to assure eternal happiness through death are Ethan and Mattie successful. As Roger Ebert puts it, "their brief moment of paradise turns into a

lifetime of penance"(1). "Penance" seems to be a good word to define the characters' lives after the accident: Ethan becomes severely crippled, Mattie is confined to a bed, and Zeena is, once again, in her role as nurse. Once her cousin's opposite, Mattie becomes like Zeena in more ways than one: she is sick, bitter, unfriendly, ugly, and reclusive. The change in her is shown in a scene towards the end of the film in which the reverend, during a short visit to the Fromes' home, offers to open the curtains to let the sun light illuminate the room where both women are. Zeena immediately refuses it by saying: "We prefer it dark, Mr. Smith." Her sentence is not only a reference to their likeness in taste but also to how gloomy their lives have become.

#### 1. The enhancement of sex in Madden's adaptation

If on the one hand the psychological side is minimized in the film, on the other the biological side is emphasized. An important fact to be considered at this point is the implied reference to the fact that Ethan and Mattie have sexual contact during the night that Zeena is out, something that is not accomplished in the novel. Not only does the film suggest the first sexual contact but also it adds to the script a second one, this time while Zeena is pretending to sleep in her bedroom across from Mattie's, on the night that preceded the girl's imposed

departure from the Fromes' house. In this sequence, the camera shows Ethan going upstairs, entering his bedroom and sitting on the bed where his wife is supposedly asleep. Through a sequence of shot-reverse-shot, the viewer sees Mattie in her bed and Ethan in his, as if they were reading each other's thoughts. Despite Mattie's fearful reaction to Ethan's daringness, he goes to her room and lies on her bed. In this scene, however, sex is not as implied as it is in the previous one--besides kissing Mattie passionately, Ethan starts to undress. At this point, there is a cut to show Zeena, awake in her bed, overhearing the sounds the lovers make. In the next morning, Zeena pretends she did not notice them by blaming a fox for the noises she heard during the night.

The film's images connoting sexual intercourse extend the power of the biological forces, since, unlike the novel, the characters' desires become uncontrollable in the film. As the passage below shows, in the novel they do not even touch each other in the only night that they are alone indoors:

When [the] nightly duties were performed there was nothing left to do but to bring in the candle-stick from the passage, light the candle and blow out the lamp. Ethan put the candlestick in Mattie's hand and she went out of the kitchen ahead of him, the light that she carried before her making her dark hair look like a drift of mist on the moon.

"Good night, Matt," he said as she put her foot on the first step of the stairs.

She turned and looked at him a moment. "Good night, Ethan," she answered, and went up.

When the door of her room had closed on her he remembered that he had not even touched her hand (*Ethan Frome* 97).

For Elizabeth Ammons, the reason for Ethan's denial to follow his instincts and make love to Mattie in the novel is his characterization as "an unsophisticated and conscientious man [who] does not want to 'ruin' Mattie, nor spoil his romantic fantasy by turning their relationship into a furtive backstairs affair" (148). At this point it might be important to consider the fact that when *Ethan Frome* was first published in the beginning of the century, Wharton was heavily criticized for the drastic ending that she gave to her short novel: Ethan and Mattie's failed suicide attempt as a way to escape from their oppressing reality. In 1911, for example, the *New York Times* published a review which read: "Mrs. Wharton prefers to present life in its unsmiling aspects, to look at it with the eye of the tragic poet, not with the deep sympathy, smiling tenderness, and affectionate tolerance of the greatest novelists" (in Lauer 113). In the same year, the English newspaper *The Saturday Review* published: "[t]he end of Ethan Frome is something at which we cover the eyes. We do not cover the eyes at the spectacle of a really great tragedy" (in Lauer 120). Peter High observes that most readers thought that Wharton punished her characters for their desires (112-113). As a matter of fact, Ethan and

Mattie went against the moral and social codes of the time the story took place, the end of the nineteenth century, when New England still lived under the influence of strict Puritan patterns of behavior. It is likely that if sex had been included in the novel, Wharton's critics and public would also have blamed her for excessive audacity. Overt reference to sex is not always absent from Wharton's works though. In *Summer*, for example, after a short love affair, Charity faces pregnancy alone. As for *Ethan Frome*, the characters' physical pleasure is restricted to innocent touches and to the exchanging of a few kisses. The passage below shows the description of the first physical contact between Ethan and Mattie in the novel:

Half-way up the slope Mattie stumbled against some unseen obstruction and clutched his sleeve to steady himself. The wave of warmth that went through him was like a prolongation of his vision. For the first time he stole his arm about her, and she did not resist. They walked on as if they were floating on a summer stream (*Ethan Frome* 51).

Considering the sexual revolution that has taken place after Wharton's era, there is another aspect that should be taken into consideration regarding Madden's enhancement of sexual desires: in the end of the twentieth century, film audiences more attuned to Hollywood patterns might consider unrealistic if a man and a woman who were clearly in love, physically attracted to each other, and spending a cold winter night alone in an isolated farmhouse

resisted having sexual intercourse. In this way, the inclusion of (implicit) sex in the film does not spoil the characters' "romantic fantasy", as Ammons suggests regarding the novel, but works as an updating ingredient which is included in the film to meet the expectations of a modern public. One may argue, however, that the novel's idea of social oppression loses strength in the film with the inclusion of sexual fulfillment. In my opinion, Zeena is the personification of oppression. She emblemizes the social, not to mention religious, barriers that separate Ethan and Mattie: marriage, kinship, gratefulness for taking care of his dying mother, remorse, and pity. Zeena's earlier return home, and the sudden acknowledgment of reality that her presence implies, acquire extra strength in the film because Ethan has had a glance of what a complete relationship with a woman he really loves can offer. In this way, the fact that Ethan and Mattie make love, especially on the night Zeena is home, seems to enhance the viewers' understanding of how powerful and uncontrollable their passion is.

It is also important to notice that John Madden was careful to present sex in a rather "natural" way so that there would not be the risk of vulgarization: neither Ethan nor Mattie can be directly responsible for the first move towards sex. The camera shows Ethan on the way to his

bedroom after wishing Mattie good-night. He turns when he listens to the creaking sound of her bedroom door, which opens by itself while she is undressing. The camera shows him walking towards her and, in a medium shot, it shows them kissing first delicately and then passionately. What follows this kiss is inferred by the viewer when there is a cut and the next scene shows, in the morning, the couple's happiness while riding the sled on their way to the village.

## 2. The red dish

Despite the absence of sexual contact, Wharton's novel presents sexual symbolism. The red pickle dish that is broken by Zeena's cat during Mattie and Ethan's private dinner is one of the most discussed issues in the novel's sexual imagery. Zeena had received the dish as a wedding present, but kept it on the shelf with the other precious belongings she had. In order to set the table nicely for the especial dinner that Mattie prepared for Ethan while Zeena was out, the pickle dish was taken from its shrine and placed on the table. The cat, as if it were a substitute for Zeena during her absence, jumped to the table, broke the dish, and spoiled the couple's private moment. Darryl Hattenhauer considers the accident with the dish as "emblematic of Ethan and Zeena's failed union,"(226) since the broken dish can be seen as a symbol

of what is eventually going to happen to their marriage--rupture. Still regarding the red dish, Margaret McDowell suggests that Zeena is "a deprived woman who grieves over lost beauty when the red pickle dish she has saved since her wedding is used by Mattie and broken"(74). Not only would Zeena be grieving over lost beauty but also over lost youth and health, since Mattie, her cousin and rival, is younger, healthier, and much livelier than she is.

In the film, the often mentioned and much discussed dish also deserved attention. It not only functions as an element that spoils the couple's opportunity to be alone, but it also works as a reminder that the figure of Zeena would always be oppressing them, and that even in her absence this oppression could be felt. However, at the same time that the broken dish disturbed their private romantic dinner, the accident with it brings Ethan and Mattie closer together, working as a preparation for their love making later in the same evening. Interestingly, quite opposite to what happens in the novel where the broken dish can be seen as a punishment for their atmospheric dinner and, therefore, a separating element, in the film it works as an element of complicity. This complicity leads to their first sexual contact, exactly what the broken dish seems to prevent from happening in the novel.



Still concerning the dish, another aspect to be considered is its color, since it is one among several articles whose color is red. Throughout the novel, Mattie is associated with red in the same way that May Welland in the novel *The Age of Innocence* is always associated with white. Red is the color of Mattie's lips, of her cheeks, of her scarf, and of her ribbon. Red is also the color that defined Mattie's changing from a sickly girl to a blossomed woman, as the two passages from the novel exemplify:

[Ethan] remembered what a colourless slip of a thing she had looked the day he had met her at the station (57).

As the narrative develops, she is presented as follows:

She wore her usual dress of darkish stuff, and there was no bow at her neck; but through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon. This tribute to the unusual transformed and glorified her. She seemed to Ethan taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion (*Ethan Frome* 82).

Besides the recurrent connotation of red as the color that best symbolizes passion, in *Ethan Frome* it is inevitably associated with Ethan's and Mattie's blood spread on the white snow after the sledding accident--the symbol of their attempt to be free. In the film, in addition to the novel's references to red there is the inclusion of another red article; a hair pin that Ethan gives Mattie as a farewell present. In fact, this present

implies that in the film Ethan is more daring than in the novel, since the present is given to her publicly at the town's best grocery store. The sequence shows that, on the way to the train stop, Ethan takes Mattie to the grocery store owned by the father of Denis Eady, the economically promising young man who is interested in marrying her. In the store, they meet Mattie's best friend Ruth (who is, in fact, the character who is telling the embedded story) shopping with her mother. Through a series of cuts, the camera shows the reaction of both women to the fact that Ethan wants to buy Mattie a present despite the fact that it was not her birthday. Against Mattie's will, Ethan gives her an expensive hair pin as a farewell present. It happens to be red as well.

### 3. Parallels between Madden's and Scorsese's adaptations

#### 3.1. Similar scenes in both films

Besides this intriguing aspect regarding gender, there are some other less subtle comparisons that can be established between both films. Two scenes in *Ethan Frome* can be associated with similar ones in *The Age of Innocence*: when Ethan kisses Mattie's embroidering as if her work were the extension of her body, and when Mattie closes her eyes expecting to be embraced from behind by Ethan while he is trying to reach the stove. The former

resembles the carriage scene in which the camera shows Newland, in a medium-shot, unbuttoning Ellen's brown glove and kissing her wrist as if it were her body. The latter can be easily associated with the scene at the Van der Luydens' cottage when Newland closes his eyes and imagines he is being embraced by Ellen from behind. In both films, the embrace is just imagined. Also in both films the characters' effort to control their passion is evident. Since there is almost no dialogue, the performance of the actors in these sequences is fundamentally important to transmit the idea of (controlled) passion and suffering.

### 3.2. Plot

Another interesting parallel to be established between both films concerns plot. The specific moments when the wives decide to act in order not to lose their husbands to their cousins can be observed in both films. In *The Age of Innocence*, May devises a plan in which she lies to her cousin about being pregnant exactly when Ellen has agreed to meet Newland in a private place before leaving New York. In other words, May acts in defense of her marriage when Ellen accepts to be Newland's lover. Her plan is revealed not only through what she says to Newland, but mainly by the mixture of naiveté and self-confidence in her expression. In the same way, Zeena uses the doctor's advice to hire a helping girl in order to send Mattie away. This

advice, however, is unlikely to be true, since Zeena already had Mattie to help her. Yet, the distance to the doctor's office would prevent Ethan from checking the veracity of the doctor's "prescription". Zeena's and May's plans go understated, therefore the actresses' performance and the mise-en-scene become crucial in order to transmit to the audience their clever plans without directly referring to them. In fact, these plans can be grasped by the audiences not through what the wives say to their husbands, but through a set of elements used to show what is really being said while they talk. In his article entitled *A Culture of Adaptation*, John Caughie advises the viewer not to trust what the characters say, but what the viewer sees. He writes: "it is the mise-en-scene - the shadow which crosses the face, the angle of the camera - that gives to the spectator an understanding of the characters' situation which the characters themselves do not have"(17). In the scene in which Zeena tells Ethan about the visit to the doctor, for example, the mise-en-scene enhances the tragic moment. The scene starts when Ethan enters the bedroom and sees Zeena sitting on her chair on one corner of the room. As the discussion about hiring a helping girl develops, Zeena stands up and moves towards Ethan. Both speak loudly and a fast cut shows the reaction of Mattie and Jothan downstairs. The scene ends with Zeena lying in bed, coughing. The movement of the

character around the room is important to transmit Zeena's handling of the situation. By coughing now and then she emphasizes what she (or the doctor?) is demanding--a helping girl that would assure both her cure and her husband's separation from Mattie. This sequence from the film exemplifies how the mise-en-scene can be used to unveil what is not directly stated by the character.

### 3.3. Meals and dance

Still regarding mise-en-scene, there are two more aspects that Madden's adaptation has in common with Scorsese's that should not be left aside: the meals and the dance. It was already argued that the meals in *The Age of Innocence* are important because they emblemize the importance of social rituals for the members of the upper class New York society. The invitations, the carefully decorated tables, the elegant and expensive clothes worn by the members of the clans, and the superficiality of the conversation carried out by the people who are gathered around the tables are fundamental to set the critical tone of the film. The meals in *Ethan Frome* are used to convey exactly the opposite: simplicity and straightforwardness. Important matters are discussed when Zeena, Mattie and Ethan are joined around the modest kitchen table. Their only eventual guest is Jothan, the man who works for Ethan in the farm. The simplicity of the food, the table

arrangement, the way the food is displayed, and Ethan's manners reflect the simple life at the farm. Furthermore, during these sequences, Zeena's hypochondria is stressed. She uses the meals to inform about her health, her pains, and her medicines. In one of these dinner scenes, Zeena tries to get the very last drop from a medicine bottle, as if it were a very precious and tasteful liquid. After the container is emptied and the spoon is completely clean, she gives the bottle to Mattie and says: "if you can take the taste out of it, it will do for pickles." Throughout the film there are six occasions in which the characters are gathered to eat--an expressive number indeed. In four of them Zeena refers to her health.<sup>4</sup>

Starkfield also had its "ball", a social gathering at the community church where villagers of all ages danced. In the film, the dance sequence starts with the sound of the music heard at the end of a shot in which Zeena is observing Mattie's inability to deal with household matters. The music becomes louder while the next scene shows Mattie, in the improvised ball room, accompanying the fast movement of the lively folk dance. The editing of both scenes emphasizes the contrast between Mattie's unskillfulness for housekeeping and her ability to dance. Outside the church, Ethan observes Mattie as she dances. In a wordless shot where Liam Neeson's facial expression is

utterly meaningful, the audience witnesses the very moment that Ethan realizes he is in love with Mattie.

The similarities between both films demonstrate that Madden and Scorsese emphasized similar aspects in their adaptations: passion, sex, meals, dance, and the wives' manipulation of the truth. These elements suggest the existence of two opposing forces: the characters' personal feelings, like passion and sexual attraction, and the strength of social institutions, such as marriage and society. Madden is certainly not as prominent a film director as Scorsese, but he has proved to be as skillful when he efficiently transposed to the screen important components of Wharton's novel like the ones mentioned above. In fact, it is in the perfect characterization of winter in Starkfield that he seems to have achieved one of the most important features of his film.

#### 4. Winter in Starkfield

From the aspects that are emphasized in Madden's adaptation, one is particularly related to the novel's presentation of naturalistic codes: the environmental entrapment. From the very early sequences, the viewer observes the characters' struggle against the extremely cold winter of Starkfield. Throughout the film, the landscape is totally covered with snow. The spareness of

the landscape and the endlessness of winter are fundamental to convey the idea of environmental entrapment, which is well exemplified by Ethan's decision to marry Zeena because it was winter.

In order to find the best location to film *Ethan Frome*, the filmmakers searched the states of New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. Peacham, in Vermont, was finally chosen because "it offered a more rustic, mountainous setting, and because of a town ordinance restricting the renovation of historic structures."<sup>5</sup> The location found is indeed one of the high points of the production, since it successfully conveys the environmental entrapment depicted in the novel. In the same way, the farmhouse where most of the indoor action develops seems to be a perfect setting for the characters' growing anxiety inasmuch as its walls had not been painted since the beginning of the century, when the house was last inhabited. The abandonment of the house provides an undeniable authentic look to it.

Besides the authenticity of the setting of the indoor scenes, there is another aspect to be observed: the metamorphosis of the house related to the changes in the lives of the characters who live in it. In the beginning of the film it is a typical modest little farmhouse of New England countryside. In spite of being old, the house is



organized, clean, and cozy. As the film develops, however, it grows darker, as if it were a reflection of its dwellers' obscure destiny. The darkness in the house reflects the gloominess of the characters' lives. Concerning the indoor scenes in the farmhouse, Stanley Kauffmann wrote that "the low-ceilinged, lamplit rooms almost smell of constraint"(28). Since constraint, or restraint to use Lee Mitchell's words, is the main characteristic of a naturalist text, in what concerns setting, John Madden's adaptation is certainly successful in transmitting the idea of claustrophobia (the farmhouse) and restriction (the frozen land) depicted in the novel. In this sense, the film focuses on environmental and biological issues. In what concerns the overall transposition of the novel's theme, however, the success is just partial.

##### 5. The film's negative criticism

In the novel, the critique of the moral and social patterns is expressed in the restraint that such patterns impose on the characters. Wharton's ironic treatment of norms and social rules is not in the narrative voice itself, as in the case of *The Age of Innocence*, but in how the characters are entrapped in a situation whose outcome is exactly the opposite of their initial intention and how society has to put up with the final outcome. Fate worked

against Ethan's and Mattie's plan to escape from their oppressing reality. Therefore, considering that restraint is the central characteristic of naturalist texts, and that this characteristic is present in Madden's film, it is possible to conclude that the director was successful in transferring to the screen the novel's main theme. Despite this fact, *Ethan Frome* is considered by most critics a plain film. I propose two explanations for this negative criticism. The first is that the film lacks the novel's emphasis on the psychological development of the characters. In the film, the director tried to show what goes understated in the novel by emphasizing aspects that are easier to be transposed to the filmic medium: 1) the biological aspect, by emphasizing the sexual attraction between Ethan and Mattie, and 2) the environmental aspect, by presenting Starkfield as almost an inhabitable place where only the ones who are not "smart" stay. Thus, what harms the adaptation seems to be the way in which the detailed descriptions of the literary text are transposed to the screen. The growing psychological pressure that Ethan and Mattie experience, which culminates with their choice of committing suicide, is an example of important textual information that is not efficiently transposed to the screen. To help solve this problem, the artifice of the poisoned fox was used as a foreshadowing of Mattie's willingness to die. However, it is not enough to transmit

to the audience Mattie's psychological pressure, so efficiently described throughout the novel by its narrators.

The second reason for the film's negative reception by the critics, in my opinion, is the modification in the role of the narrators. While in the novel the psychological pressure imposed on the characters is mainly conveyed through the information provided by the narrator, in the film it becomes subjective, since it relies exclusively on the actors' performance and on the mise-en-scene. This seems to be too heavy a burden. In this way, I partially agree with most of the reviewers when they consider Madden's adaptation disappointing when compared to the novel. However, I do not blame the actors, as some critics do, because I think their performance, in the context of acting today, can be considered outstanding. Nor do I blame the mise-en-scene. What the adaptation lacks, in my opinion, is empathy. As Peter Rainer has noted: "You watch these people suffer without wanting to suffer right along with them"(14). The audience is not sufficiently involved with the story world to understand Mattie and Ethan's decision to die together because the psychological aspect, fundamental in the novel, is minimized in the film. Louis Giannetti is unquestionably right when he states that "the cinematic form inevitably alters the content of the

literary original''(362). However, (and here I use the unsuccessful suicide attempt as source for vocabulary), some alterations seem to affect the 'spine' of the literary original, and, when it happens, the resulting filmic adaptation tends to be disappointing. I suppose the most important reason for the 'accident' in the adaptation of *Ethan Frome* is directly related to the narrators. The 'spinal column' of the original was harmed, therefore the resulting adaptation became 'handicapped'. In the following chapter, I discuss the function of the narrators in the novel and in the film in detail.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The play, directed by Owen Davis and Donald Davis, has a foreword by Wharton in which she approves the dramatic version of her novel.

<sup>2</sup> Public domain: when a work is available for appropriation or use by the public because it is no longer protected by copyright.

<sup>3</sup> In "Ethan Frome", a film review by Roberta Green in Magill's Survey of Cinema, Internet online, p.1-2. Reference in the bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> This number includes the welcome dinner offered to the new reverend and the lunch offered to the villagers after Ethan's mother's funeral.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid note 3. The information about the settings of the film was obtained in this source.

## CHAPTER III

### THE NARRATORS

In spite of the fact that Gérard Genette's studies in the area of narrative concern literary analysis, his contributions have been very influential to scholars in the field of cinematic narration. According to Robert Burgoyne, cinematic narration is "the discursive activity responsible for representing or recounting the events or situations of the story" (Stam, *New Vocabularies* 95). Considering that the aim of this chapter is to analyze the narrators in Scorsese's and Madden's films as elements that convey the thematic meaning of social critique, it is important to present here some of Genette's concepts and terminology as well as their equivalence in film narratology.

#### 1. Types of literary narrators

Whenever Genette refers to first or third person narrative, he does so by using "quotation marks of protest." For him, these terms seem inadequate because they stress variation in an invariant element of the narrative situations, i.e., for him, the narrator is present only in

the first-person narrative. In this way, the novelist chooses between two narrative postures, not between two grammatical forms. It is his/her choice whether the story will be told by one of its characters or by a narrator outside the story. He writes:

The novelist's choice, unlike the narrator's, is not between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures (whose grammatical forms are simply an automatic consequence): to have the story told by one of its "characters", or to have it told by a narrator outside of the story. The presence of first-person verbs in a narrative text can therefore refer to two very different situations which grammar renders identical but which narrative analysis must distinguish: the narrator's own designation of himself as such,...or else the identity of person between the narrator and one of the characters in the story. Insofar as the narrator can at any instant intervene as *such* in the narrative, every narrating is, by definition, to all intents and purposes presented in the first person....The real question is whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate *one of his characters* (*Narrative Discourse- An Essay in Method* 244).<sup>1</sup>

Gérard Genette defines narrators who are characters in the stories they tell as **homodiegetic**, while narrators who are absent from the story they tell are labeled **heterodiegetic**. Considering that there are texts that contain embedded stories, it is also important to establish from what level the narrator speaks. Genette explains that the distance between events in narrative may occur not only because of difference in time and space but also because of difference in narrative levels. For instance, if a character tells another character

about an event that happened in the past, the distance between the narrated event and the narrating act lies in narrative levels, not only in time or space. The narrated event is inside the narrative, while the event itself is outside. In Genette's words: "*any event that a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed*" (his italics, 228). To refer to narrative levels the theorist proposes three terms: **extradiegetic**, **intradiegetic**, and **metadiegetic**. The narrative level is extradiegetic when the narrating act is carried out in the first level (the frame story), intradiegetic when the events are told inside this first narrative (embedded narrative), and metadiegetic, when there is a transition to the second level, that is, to the diegesis within the diegesis. This doubly embedded narration takes place when a character starts narrating his or her story followed by another character who starts telling his or her story within the frame of the first one, and so on. In this way, still following Genette, in every narrative, the narrator status is defined by its narrative level (intra, extra or metadiegetic), and by its relationship to the story (homo or heterodiegetic). This ground clearing is important in order to understand the four basic kinds of narrators that Genette proposes:

- 1) **extradiegetic-heterodiegetic**: a narrator in the first



level (framing story) who tells the story he/she is absent from, 2) extradiegetic-homodiegetic: a narrator in the first level who tells his/her own story or someone else's in which he/she is a minor participant, 3) intradiegetic-heterodiegetic: a narrator in the second level (embedded story) who tells stories he/she is absent from, and, finally, 4) intradiegetic-homodiegetic: a narrator in the second level who tells his/her own story (248). Examples from literary texts are useful to illustrate Genette's categories of narrators. Jane, the character-narrator of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is an example of an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. Scheherazade, the (second level) narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, tells embedded stories from which she is absent--therefore she is an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator. Ellen Dean, one of the narrators of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, exemplifies the category of intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrators since she tells an embedded story in which she is a character. When the narrator is extradiegetic-heterodiegetic, it merges with the implied author, therefore all literary texts whose narrator is in the first level and is non-participating in the story being told exemplify the broad category of texts with extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators.

Along with the examples above, the concept of the narratee that Genette introduces towards the end of *Narrative Discourse* also clarifies the complexity of his scheme. The theorist explains that "to an intradiegetic narrator corresponds an intradiegetic narratee" in the same way that the extradiegetic narrator "can aim only at an extradiegetic narratee, who merges with the implied reader and with whom each real reader can identify" (259-260). In this way, the narrator in one level of narrative can only address the narratee in the same level because moving from one to another goes against the rules of plausibility. To put it in other words: the narrator is extradiegetic when the narratee is the implied reader, intradiegetic or metadiegetic when the narratee is a character within the diegesis, not the reader, who is necessarily outside.<sup>2</sup>

Sara Kozloff, whose concepts in *Invisible Storytellers* I will be frequently referring to in my study of voice-over narrators, considers Genette's terms "tongue-twisting and obscure to the uninitiated," and adds that there may be confusion unless his criteria are kept firmly in mind (42). Therefore she opts for the terms "frame" and "embedded" narrators, since they are acceptably descriptive. Kozloff is also aware of Genette's and other narrative theorists' rejection of the terms third and

first-person narrator. However, she has opted to use this terminology due to the simplification of understanding that it offers compared to, for example, authorial narrator x character narrator, undramatized narrator x dramatized narrator (whose meanings are also misleading and imprecise), and heterodiegetic x homodiegetic narrator (technical terms which, according to her, may be pedantic and obscure to most readers.) Therefore, in order to avoid the awkwardness of Genette's terminology, Kozloff refers to homodiegetic voice-over narration as **first-person narration**, and to heterodiegetic voice-over narration as **third-person narration**.<sup>3</sup> In my analysis, I will use Genette's terminology to refer to the literary narrators and Kozloff's to refer to the voice-over narrators in both films.

## 2. Types of filmic narrators

Robert Burgoyne establishes two basic sites or zones in which a narrator operates in a film. The first one is the personified character-narrator, equivalent to Genette's **intradiegetic** narrator in literature, who tells the story from within the frame of the fictional world. Still borrowing Genette's terminology, if the character-narrator appears as an actor in his/her own story, he/she is labeled a **homodiegetic** narrator, while the character-narrator who does not participate as an

actor in the story he/she tells is called **heterodiegetic**. The second zone refers to the overall control of the visual and sonic registers exerted by the film narrator. This external, impersonal narrator is manifested through cinematic codes and channels of expression, not through verbal discourse (96-98). David Allan Black writes that "extradiegetic agency in film may be defined as *that which narrates the entire film*" (his italics, 22). In what concerns narrative, here lies the main difference between both mediums: in literature the narrator's discourse may contain the entire story in an extradiegetic level, while in film the narrator's discourse is *always* embedded within a larger narration produced by the cinematic codes. Sara Kozloff refers to this external, impersonal cinematic narrator as the **image-maker** (Kozloff 44), whereas Chatman uses the term **cinematic implied author** (Chatman, *Coming to Terms* 130).

The category of voice-over narration belongs to an area of ambiguity among film theorists. Some writers consider voice-over narrators extradiegetic, since this impersonal, external narrator would be in a superior position compared to the other characters in the story (Stam, *New Vocabularies* 96-97). Contrastively, David Alan Black has referred to this type of narrator as intradiegetic. In order to explain why voice-over

narrators are as intradiegetic as any character at any point in the film, Black writes:

The voiceover is a false friend; for even voiceover narrations that imitate the language and enjoy a spatio-temporal abstraction of the novelistic extradiegetic narrator are, nonetheless, entities of a secondary fictional order, included within an enveloping discourse. They are contingent on the prior narrating act of the actual filmic text itself - prior in necessity, whether or not in time. The conventional borrowings of the verbal trappings of novelistic omniscience and authority do not bear on the structural position of voiceovers; they are not extradiegetic because the persistence does not hinge on their activity. They do not instigate or cause the film. Even if it is the first thing we hear, with a blank screen facing us, the voiceover is enclosed within the causative threshold of the text (21-2).

Therefore, the addition of oral narration in film can be considered as an evidence of the double-layering of story and discourse. The narrator's discourse is always embedded within the broader discourse of the film itself. In this way, following the terminology used by different film narratologists, which was adapted from Genette's, voice-over narrators can be seen as intradiegetic (or metadiegetic, or even meta-metadiegetic, depending on the layers of narrative levels), but not extradiegetic.

In the following sections, I will be analyzing how the narrators of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome* were transposed to the films and if in this transposition the thematic meaning of social critique was affected. The narrators of the novels will be analyzed

using Gérard Genette's concepts presented in the first section of this chapter. In the same way, the concepts related to film narratology, which are presented in section two, will be useful for the analyses of the voice-over narrators of the films. Furthermore, it is important to notice that "voice-over is just one of many elements, including musical scoring, sound effects, editing, lighting, and so on, through which the cinematic text is narrated" (Kozloff 43-44). Consequently, the following sections on the voice-over narrators are directly related to the two previous chapters in which I have analyzed some other important elements of the cinematic texts that help to convey the theme of social critique in Wharton's novels.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The voice-over narrator in *The Age of Innocence*

According to Genette's classification, one can conclude that in the novel *The Age of Innocence* the story is told by an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, considering that 1) the narrator is not a character in the story, and 2) the narrator is narrating events in the first level (frame story). The function of Wharton's omniscient narrator was partially performed by Scorsese's use of the voice-over of a third-person non-participating female narrator. This voice-over narrator has a triple role in the film: to provide significant information about the

complexity of the social and moral rules of the time of the narrative, to inform the viewers about the characters' ambiguous feelings and thoughts, and to convey the irony that permeates the novel. The irony in the film is created by the narrator's stressing of the codes of conduct and the moral patterns followed by New York well-bred families. As a consequence, the characters' apparent acceptance of these codes and patterns is questioned mainly because of the interpolations of the voice-over narrator. In fact, Sara Kozloff points out that "voice-over narration extends film's ironic capabilities" (109). Considering that irony is present in Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* not only in the images constituted by the mise-en-scene, as already discussed in chapter II, but also in the content of the narrated parts, and in the inflections and tone of the narrator's voice, this adaptation illustrates Kozloff's view.

In an interview given to *Video News* magazine, Scorsese said that he tried to recreate for the audience the same sensations he had when he read Wharton's novel. Therefore, in his film, he attempted to keep as close as possible to the original. One of the ways of doing it was to keep the element of narration, so that whole parts of the novel were transported to the film. In his words: "Edith Wharton practically took me by the hand."<sup>5</sup> Almost

all the sentences uttered by the narrator are directly taken from the novel and very rarely there is an alteration in the choice of vocabulary. By having the story told by a woman, it is as if the writer herself were telling the story of the geographical and social New York she grew up in.

Scorsese's use of a female voice to narrate the film is an important aspect to be considered. It is common knowledge that when there is voice-over narration in a film most directors prefer to use male voices. Scorsese's unconventional choice is an important fact in itself. Not only does he use a female voice to provide important information, but this voice is heard fifty-seven different times throughout the film. The amount of voice-over narration consists of another unconventional choice. The frequency of narrated insertions is higher in the beginning of the film, especially during the opera and the ball scenes, and at the end, when the important facts of the twenty next years of Newland's life are told by the narrator while the camera moves around his office, the setting of these events. The first two scenes, at the opera and at the ball, will be used here to observe how the voice-over narrator functions throughout the film. There is a great amount of narration mainly in the second one, which was entitled by Scorsese "The ballroom comes to life."



In the first chapters of *The Age of Innocence* the reader is introduced to almost all characters, since they are joined in the opera house for the annual performance of Gounod's *Faust*. This is the place where Newland Archer and Countess Ellen Olenska meet after "centuries and centuries." More information about the characters is provided during the traditional annual ball offered by Julius Beaufort and his wife, right after the opera. In the same way, Martin Scorsese presents the most important characters of his film in the ball. But it is at a certain point of the opera that the viewer is introduced to the voice-over narration of the actress Joanne Woodward, whose role, throughout the film, is to provide important information about the main characters' feelings and thoughts and, mainly, about the contradictions engendered by the social conventions that ruled their lives. She says:

It invariably happened, as everything happened in those days, in the same way. As usual, Mrs. Julius Beaufort appeared unaccompanied by her husband, just before the Jewel Song and, again as usual, rose at the end of the third act and disappeared. New York then knew that, a half-hour later, her annual opera ball would begin.

Outside the Academy of Music, a line of carriages waits for their owners. The narrator adds:

Carriages waited at the curb for the entire performance. It is widely known in New York, but never acknowledged, that Americans want to get away

from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it.

The ball scene starts showing the dark and empty ballroom. The camera pulls back from a covered chandelier and, through a series of dissolves, "the ballroom comes to life." While it happens, the voice-over narrator explains:

The Beauforts' house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ballroom. Such a room, shuttered in darkness three hundred and sixty-four days of the year, was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past. Regina Beaufort came from an old South Carolina family, but her husband Julius, who passed for an Englishman, was known to have dissipated habits, a bitter tongue and mysterious antecedents. His marriage assured him a social position, but not necessarily respect.

The camera shows Newland entering the Beauforts' house, greeting Regina Beaufort and moving slowly through the first drawing room. The comments of the narrator can be regarded to be redundant at certain points, considering that what the viewer sees on the screen is what is being narrated. However, the irony in the narrated sentences would be missed without these comments:

The Beaufort house had been boldly planned. Instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to the ballroom, one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms...But only actually passing through the crimson drawing room could one see "Return of Spring", the much-discussed nude by Bouguereau, which Beaufort had the audacity to hang in plain sight... Archer enjoyed such challenges to convention. He questioned conformity in private, but in public he upheld family and tradition. This was a world balanced so precariously that its harmony could be shattered by a whisper.

It is important to notice that the last shot of the sequence described above reinforces the narrator's last statement. It shows a portrait of several people in a social gathering where a woman in the foreground is whispering something on someone's ear. This picture ironically represents the voice-over narrator's words: a simple whisper can unbalance this society's fragile world. Since privacy is at odds with the public world of conventions, their private and social acts are always being evaluated by others.

During the ball scene, the camera is usually placed behind Newland and it is through his POV shot that the viewer sees the guests. Details about the personal characteristics of different characters are presented by the voice-over narrator while the dancing couples move elegantly around the ball room. Between the narrator's introduction of one character and the next, the music grows louder, and the dancing couples which are framed in the background come to the foreground, when their movements become a little slower. The first character to be presented is Lawrence Lefferts, who is deep in conversation with a young woman. The voice-over explains:

On the whole, Archer was amused by the smooth hypocrisy of his peers. He may even have envied them. Lawrence Lefferts, for instance, was New York's foremost authority on "form". And his opinion on pumps versus patent-leather Oxford had never been

disputed. On matters of surreptitious romance, his skills went unquestioned.

Amusing a small group of old women Newland sees Sillerton Jackson, who is introduced by the narrator as

Old Mr. Sillerton Jackson was as great an authority on "family" as Lawrence Lefferts was on "form". The mean and melancholic history of Countess Olenska's European marriage was a treasure that he hastened to excavate. He carried like a calling card a register of the scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of society for the last fifty years.

Julius Beaufort crosses the ball room in front of Newland talking with a guest. The narrator observes:

Julius Beaufort's secret was the way he carried things off. He could arrive casually at his own party as if he were another guest, and might also leave early for a more modest and comforting address in the East thirties. Beaufort was intrepid in his business, but in his personal affairs, absolutely audacious.

The last character to be presented in this sequence is May, who moves towards Newland with a very expressive look in her eyes; she is happy and proud of the announcement of their engagement.

Archer's fiancée was innocent of all these intrigues and of much else. May Welland represented for Archer all that was best in their world, all that he honored. And she anchored him to it.

The function of voice-over narration in *The Age of Innocence* is not only to introduce and provide information about the characters but to inform the viewer about the important rules of the social game in which the characters

participate. Had this narrator been omitted, the essence of the theme of social critique would be seriously affected and considerable modifications would be necessary, though insufficient, to convey the social entanglements that surrounded the characters. In this way, I believe that the presence of a female voice-over narrator in this film is fundamental for the conveyance of the theme of the novel on which it was based. The narrator functions not only as an informant of the complex moral and social aspects that permeate the text but also as an element that has authority to emphasize the theme. In the same way that editing plays an important role in the last scene of the film, as I argue in chapter I, the third-person voice-over narration becomes emblematic as a device wisely used to highlight the intertwining of romance and social critique present in Wharton's novel.

#### 4. Voice-over in John Madden's *Ethan Frome*

Unlike Martin Scorsese, in *Ethan Frome* John Madden restricts the use of voice-over to a few scenes. Also unlike Scorsese, Madden was not faithful to his source in what concerns narrators. Wharton's story has two levels: in the extradiegetic level the story is told by an engineer who learns about Ethan from different inhabitants of Starkfield, the community where he is living temporarily. Within this first narrative there is the engineer's

embedded story of Ethan's life until the accident happened. Therefore, the novel presents an extradiegetic and an intradiegetic level. In Genette's classification of narrators, the nameless engineer in the framing story is an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, since he is a character in the story he tells. In the embedded story, he is an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, considering that he is absent from the story he reports. The following passage illustrates the narrating act of the extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator:

During my stay at Starkfield I lodged with a middle-aged widow colloquially known as Mrs. Ned Hale. Mrs. Hale's father had been the village lawyer of the previous generation, and "lawyer Vernum's house," where my landlady still lived with her mother, was the most considerable mansion in the village (*Ethan Frome* 9).

But it is in the last lines of the extradiegetic narrative that the reader learns that he will be given the narrator's version of Ethan's story: "It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of the story" (25).

The passage below shows a part of the engineer's embedded narrative, which starts at the moment he enters Ethan's house.

They finished supper, and while Mattie cleared the table Ethan went to look at the cows and then took a last turn around the house. The earth lay dark under a muffled sky and the air was so still that now and then he heard a lump of snow come thumping down from

a tree far off on the edge of the wood-lot (*Ethan Frome* 88).

The difference between the passages above lies in narrative levels; the engineer's framing narrative is in the extradiegetic level, while his embedded narrative is in the intradiegetic level. As a matter of fact, the transition to the second level is stressed by Wharton by means of emphatic ellipses, which signal the departure and return to the frame narrative. There are three lines of dots at the beginning of the embedded story plus three other lines at the end of it.<sup>6</sup>

Before moving on, there is an aspect that deserves comments: the profession of the character-narrator was changed in the film version. The novel's engineer was replaced by Rev. Smith, a clergyman. The film reviewer James Stolee argues that Madden's adaptation has some good points and some not so good ones. He considers "the chief bad point [the] replacement of the kindly engineer, who slowly uncovers Ethan Frome's mystery in the novel, by a do-gooder clergyman fresh from Boston and anachronistically full of social gospel." This is the most important fact to be considered when the objective is to observe whether or not the thematic meaning of the literary source was transposed to its adaptation. The implications of this change are religious and conservative, changing the naturalist emphasis on scientific knowledge enhanced by the

engineer in the novel. In addition to that, because of this change of professions, other elements of the naturalist novel were modified or eliminated. An important aspect that had to be eliminated was the reason why the engineer stayed in Starkfield longer than he expected; a laborers' strike at the power plant where he worked. Strikes are recurrent subjects in naturalist texts, but they are never mentioned in the film.

Another important modification in the film consists of the reason why Mrs. Hale unveils her part of Ethan's story. After spending the stormy winter night in the Frome household, the engineer persuades his hostess to tell him about her version of the accident. The following passage from the novel shows how the engineer succeeded in getting the information he wanted:

Beneath [Mrs. Vernum's and Mrs. Hale's] wondering explanations I felt a secret curiosity to know what impressions I had received from my night in the Frome household, and divined that the best way of breaking down their reserve was to let them try to penetrate mine...Mrs. Hale glanced at me tentatively, as though trying to see how much footing my conjectures gave her; and I guessed that if she had kept silence till now it was because she had been waiting, through all the years, for someone who should see what she alone had seen (*Ethan Frome* 72).

The film's reverend, however, uses his ecclesiastic power to blackmail Mrs. Hale by saying that he will go back to Boston because his parishioners are not as charitable in relation to Ethan Frome as he expected them



to be. The reverend's sense of doing good suggests that the villagers' unkindness towards Ethan is the reason for the crippled man's silent suffering. It is also implied in his threat that the villagers would have difficulty finding another reverend who would be willing to move to such an isolated place as Starkfield. In other words, Rev. Smith uses his position as a clergyman to have Ethan's story told by Mrs. Hale.

In the film, the framing narrative of the novel's narrator becomes the external, "impersonal" narrative manifested through the cinematic codes. The novel's engineer moves from his position of character-narrator in the novel to a position of a character in the film (a clergyman) whose role is to trigger the report of the actual first-person narrator of the film, Mrs. Hale. However, this first-person narrator is responsible for a part of the flashback narrative--the image-maker tells the rest. How would Mrs. Hale report events that she could not possibly have witnessed, such as, for example, Ethan and Mattie's private dinner, their love making, and even their decision to provoke the sleigh accident? The gaps in the narrator's story are fulfilled by the image-maker, that is, the character-narrator's limited perception gives way to the "unlimited" powers of the image-maker, whose perception exceeds hers in knowledge and capacity.

The two passages below, transcribed from the film, show part of the embedded story told by Mrs. Hale. The first was selected since it is a sample of the purely descriptive content of the narrative, while the second shows how the environment controlled the characters' lives. While the viewer listens to the narrator's voice-over, the corresponding image is shown on the screen--an indication of the narrator's reliability. Unlike *The Age of Innocence*, there is no irony in the content of the voice-over narrated parts of *Ethan Frome*. In the same way, it is absent from the narrator's inflections or tone of voice. Yet, irony is present in the plot itself, in its unexpected (and shocking) resolution. In order to provide a comprehensive view of Mrs. Hale's narrative, all the voice-over insertions in *Ethan Frome* are transcribed in the appendix of this dissertation.

As mentioned before, in the film Mrs. Hale starts telling the story because she felt blackmailed by the minister, who said that he would go back to Boston because he considered the careless attitude of Starkfield dwellers towards Ethan as lack of Christianity. She then sits down and starts telling him how the lives of Ethan, Zeena and Mattie were brought together. With a strong New England accent, she starts saying that "Ethan and Zeena are distant cousins. She grew up in a town ... I forget which one..."

At this point the camera shows a funeral on a snowy day, and the voice-over starts:

It is a good ways from here. And she was sent to take care of Ethan's mother. Then, after some time, his mother died.

The next sequence is inside Ethan's house. There is a small reception after the funeral. One of the guests asks Ethan about his plans for the future. He answers that he plans to sell the farm and maybe move to Florida, a place he once visited and where he planned to continue his Engineering course. The next scene shows Zeena packing her belongings because her presence at the house was no longer necessary. When she is taking her trunk downstairs it gets stuck and Ethan comes to help her. The voice-over narrator then explains:

I think Zeena Pierce should be noticing Ethan Frome for more than just that one afternoon. He was a big strong man and he was going to need someone sometime to do the work his Mama had been doing. And if there is one thing that every woman looks for in a man is to be needed....She never did leave. Maybe they shouldn't have stayed together. Maybe if it had been spring it might have been different. But it was winter...and so they married.

Physical attraction and the characters' incapacity to fight against the forces of the environment can be easily noticed in this passage. Ethan gives up his dream of going to a warmer land and of pursuing a career because he was weaker than these forces. He is entrapped by the

environment and by the circumstances that followed his mother's death.

In Madden's adaptation, there are aspects that emphasize the thematic meaning of social critique present in its naturalistic source--the sexual attraction between Ethan and Mattie, for example--and aspects which minimize it--the novel's engineer becoming a reverend in the film. As a matter of fact, this modification consists of one of the main aspects that contribute to the deviance from the main theme of the literary source; the critique of moral and social patterns of the end of the nineteenth century. Whereas in the novel the engineer is imbued with a neutral curiosity in relation to Ethan's past, the film's reverend incorporates the dogmas of the church in his desire to unveil the reasons for the community's uncharitable relationship towards Ethan. In this way, the introduction of a reverend among the characters, whose role is to investigate the town's dark secret, adds to the plot of the film a religious morality. As a consequence, the tragic end of Ethan and Mattie's love story becomes a celestial punishment for their unforgivable sins: adultery and (the attempted) suicide.

The importance of religion for the inhabitants of Starkfield is established in the beginning of the film: the cheerful welcome party for the reverend, the community's

massive attendance to his sermon (except by the Fromes,) and the fear of losing him. In the last scenes of the film, the reverend seems pleased and comforted to know about Ethan's story. At the moment that he becomes acquainted with the reason why Ethan is a silent crippled man, he is able to understand why the villagers keep a distance from him. By sharing Ethan's tragic story with the villagers, the reverend becomes one of them. One more person in Starkfield to let Ethan, Zeena and Mattie lead their lonely and isolated lives. In this way, the community's attitude towards Ethan can be easily associated with the idea that they silently understood and agreed that Ethan and Mattie were deservedly punished for their sinful actions. Something of which the novel is guiltless.

Another aspect that minimizes the theme of the novel, in my opinion, is the minimal use of voice-over in the film. Madden was conventional in its use, that is, he used voice-over economically and in an intermittent way. The result of this thriftiness is the viewer's lack of involvement with the story world, which leads to a certain disappointment with the film. Film critics Peter Rainer, Roberta Green<sup>7</sup>, and James Stolee have criticized the filmic adaptation of *Ethan Frome* by using terms such as "little", "bare", "stark", "not entertaining", "too conventional", and "too religious". When the film reviewer Denis Seguin

wrote that *Ethan Frome* "is handicapped by its narrative devices," he referred to the excessive time (about twenty minutes) spent in setting up the framing story. Benjamin Breakstone shares the same opinion and adds that "a viewer who has not read the book would think that the minister is the main character due to the time spent in introducing him to the townsfolk." No critic, to my knowledge, has blamed the narrator for the disappointing result of the film.

In my opinion, the narrators in Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence* are fundamental keys for the conveyance of the idea of social oppression. Since the narrator of *Ethan Frome's* framing story was eliminated from the film, the embedded narrator gained a greater responsibility. But director John Madden and the screenwriter Richard Nelson granted the intradiegetic narrator with little voice, and this economy certainly harmed the transposition of the major theme depicted in Wharton's naturalistic novel.

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, Genette's concepts in this study are in *Narrative Discourse - An Essay in Method*, 1980. Full reference will be given in the bibliography of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup>In "Genette in Film: Narrative Level in the Fiction Cinema", David Alan Black considers Genette's model of narrative levels confusing to many readers and provides a useful visual mnemonic device: "a house, in which each 'story' rests on, and could not have come into being without every 'story' below it. The extradiegetic level, then, corresponds to the invisible but deducible and necessary foundation" (21). I suppose that Black's comparison would become even clearer if the word "house" were substituted by "building". In this way, the double meaning of "story" (narrative and floor) would be grasped more easily, considering that many readers, depending on their cultural backgrounds, may picture a one-story house.

<sup>3</sup>Kozloff, Sara. *Invisible Storytellers*. University of California Press, 1988. p. 6 (note). All other references to Kozloff are from this source.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to ponder that there are a few other voice-over insertions in the films besides those of the narrators. However, considering that these voices belong to characters who are temporarily off-screen, they will not be included in my analysis.

<sup>5</sup>For further information on the interview see pages 22, 23, 24, and 25 of the section entitled "Vini, Vidi, Vinci", in *Video News Magazine*. My translation.

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<sup>6</sup>Jean Frant Blachall has published an essay entitled "Edith Wharton's Art of Ellipsis" whose main source is *Ethan Frome*. In *Ethan Frome*, edited by Lauer and Wolf, p. 170-175.

<sup>7</sup>In *Margill's Survey of Cinema*, Salem Press, Jan. 1st, 1994.



## CONCLUSION

I agree with Gabriele Annan when she writes that "Wharton's novels and stories are ready-made for the screen: each episode, interior monologues included, is a drama with a climax followed by a cut, and comes complete with details for the set" (Annan 3-4). To summarize Annan's statement, one could say that Wharton's novels are "cinematic".<sup>1</sup> This is certainly the case of the two texts studied in this dissertation: *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*. In both cases, the possibility of being easily transposed from one medium to the other--from novel to film--is assured not only by Wharton's construction of the novel in an episodic manner but also by the novels' narrators, whose descriptions provide important information for the film's setting, mise-en-scene and acting. In other words, the narrators of the novels are extremely important for the film making because it is through their narrative that fundamental bits of information for the development of the action, psychological development of the characters, setting, and mise-en-scene are perceived. Despite the fact that Wharton's texts can be considered "cinematic", the final quality of the adaptations (which are regarded to be

faithful ones) depended on the ability of the film directors to go beyond mise-en-scene and acting. It seems to me that the success of an adaptation is measured by the director's ability to transfer to the screen what is not directly stated in the text but is present throughout it: the novel's underlying theme.

The conveyance of a novel's central theme is such a weighty aspect that there are examples of unfaithful adaptations--in what concerns plot, characters, or even characterization of time--that keep the central theme of the literary texts on which they were based. Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a loose adaptation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Kurasawa's *Ran* (1985), based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, are examples of adaptations that maintain the central theme of the literary text while setting and story time totally differ from the originals.

In this way, instead of evaluating the quality of Scorsese's and Madden's adaptations, which could easily lead to a personal and dangerous ground, the objective of this dissertation has been to observe how the core of Wharton's texts--the intelligent and subtle social criticism that permeate *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*--was transposed to their filmic adaptations.

In the case of Scorsese's adaptation, the thematic meaning of the film was not only transposed to the screen, but also emphasized through the medium's capacity of providing the visual and sonic elements that are obviously not available for the reader of the novel. This is to say that the filmmaker provided the audience with information that could not be obtained in the novel because of the distance between the viewers' contemporary life experience and the reality portrayed in the film. In other words, the filmmaker functions as a mediator between the contemporary viewer and the original text in terms of the distance separating them and all the thematic social critical perspectives involved in the novelist's elaboration of her text. In this way, through different elements of the mise-en-scene (paintings, dinners, fire, hands) and through cinematic devices such as editing and camera movement, the understated narrative of the novel became visual. Therefore, Wharton's characteristic criticism of social conventions and moral principles can be grasped by the viewer through cinematic devices that have been wisely manipulated by the filmmaker.

In addition to the elaborated mise-en-scene and editing, the use of voice-over narration in *The Age of Innocence* assured the effective transposition of the novel's theme from one medium to the other in three ways:

1) the voice-over narrator provides important information about social conventions and moral codes that could not be (effectively) obtained otherwise, 2) the content of the narrated parts is intrinsically critical, and 3) irony is conveyed in the intonation, inflections, and tone of the narrator's voice. Besides these aspects, the fact that Scorsese used a third-person female voice-over narrator not only suggests that Wharton's narratorial voice is telling her story to the audience, but it also shows that the director deviated from what could be called a chauvinistic pattern of using male voices for voice-over narration.

In spite of also succeeding in transposing the theme of social critique to the screen, Madden's adaptation of *Ethan Frome* differs from Scorsese's adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* in certain ways. While Scorsese emphasized the irony in Wharton's text as a way to convey the novel's theme, Madden emphasized the naturalist focus of the source of his film, since it enhances the environmental and biological aspects. However, the adaptation lacks the psychological development of the characters which enables, in the novel, the real understanding of the main characters' attempt to escape from social and moral pressures. In my study, I point at the narratorial voice as the reason for this drawback. First because the novel's extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator--an engineer who is

unwillingly kept in Starkfield because of a strike--becomes a character whose role is to trigger the unveiling of Ethan's story through blackmail, and, second, because there is a change of professions (from an engineer to a reverend) that jeopardizes one of the tenets of naturalism: the overvaluation of the scientific knowledge. At the moment that the engineer becomes a clergyman, a religious morality, absent from Wharton's naturalistic novel, is added to the adaptation. These modifications harm the soul of the novel.

A renowned critic of Wharton, Cynthia Griffin Wolf, argues that the novel's narrator is granted with such an important role that "*Ethan Frome* is about its narrator," the nameless engineer, because "the novel begins with him, begins insistently and obtrusively" with him (Wolf 130). At the moment that the novel was adapted to the filmic medium, there had to be a solution for the extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. Madden's solution was its elimination. As a consequence, the engineer's role of telling how he unveiled Ethan's story was transferred to the cinematic narrator and to Mrs. Hale, whose embedded story is presented in a flashback. In Genette's terms, this embedded narrative would be in the metadiegetic level, which holds true if we consider that 1) the narrative of the cinematic narrator is in the extradiegetic level, 2)

Mrs. Hale's narrative outside the flashback is in the intradiegetic level, and, as a consequence, 3) her embedded narrative is in the metadiegetic level.

Most theorists in the area of film narratology have adapted Gérard Genette's concepts to systematize approaches to film narrative. Following these theorists, I also used Genette's classification of narrators in my study of the film's "invisible storytellers", despite the fact that his system was designed specifically for literary narrative. However, the same breakdown can hold true for film if we consider that, in this medium, the enveloping narrative of the cinematic narrator is in the extradiegetic level. Consequently, everything that is within this first narrative belongs to a different narrative level, including, as David Alan Black argues, voice-over narration. The first adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* illustrates this overarching discourse of the cinematic narrator. In 1924, Warner Bros. Pictures released what can be considered the first filmic adaptation of a novel written by Edith Wharton. It was directed by Wesley Rulles and adapted to the screen by Olga Pritzlau. The main difference between this early version and the ones that follow it is the fact that it was silent.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it tells the story of a man who sacrifices a great love and marries his fiancée in order not to wound the strict conventions of

their social milieu. Despite the absence of verbal narrative, the plot develops through the discourse of the external cinematic narrator. Both in silent and non-silent films, the cinematic narrator's discourse renders the text in a non-verbal form. Unlike literature, then, this constitutes the extradiegetic level in film.

Some critics believe that "if a work of art has reached its fullest artistic expression in one form, an adaptation will inevitably be inferior" (Giannetti 362). I disagree with this view. *The Age of Innocence* is a good example of a novel that "has reached its fullest artistic expression" and, at the same time, its filmic adaptation can be considered a masterpiece. If, on the other hand, the adaptation of *Ethan Frome* is not totally successful in what concerns the transposition of the major theme, it is fundamentally important not to discredit the film as a whole. In my analysis of Madden's adaptation, I intended to observe a specific aspect--the theme. I observed that the theme was partially marred by the film's minimization of the psychological aspect. In the transposition from the text to the screen, the characters' psychological suffering lost strength and became a consequence of the biological and environmental forces that pressed upon them. Therefore, the adaptation lacks the psychological development of the characters that is emphasized in the novel. As a result,

the audience is not sufficiently involved with the story world to understand Mattie and Ethan's decision to die together. However, Madden has succeeded in other ways. As for one, the perfect characterization of the environmental entrapment can be noticed from the beginning to the end of the film.

The *Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome* are good examples of how stories with simple plots, like love triangles, can become masterpieces when manipulated by the hands of skillful fiction writers and film directors. Scorsese's large experience as a film director was certainly a fundamental aspect for the good acceptance of the film by the public and by the critics. The use of voice-over, dynamic camera movement, detailed mise-en-scene, and abrupt cuttings are recurrent aspects in Scorsese's films that have also been wisely employed in *The Age of Innocence*. Unfortunately, not much of Madden's professional production as a film director is available in order to establish a comparison between *Ethan Frome* and his previous works. What can be concluded, however, is that both directors have chosen the novels of one of the most skillful American female writers of the beginning of the century to be the source of their adaptations. This choice, per se, ensured part of the quality of their films. The other part depended on the directors' skills, and they,



especially Scorsese, have successfully explored the thematic and social issues critically presented by Wharton.

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<sup>1</sup> This term was used by professor John Caughie (Glasgow University) during a course at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina in September 1996, to whom I acknowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Director Philip Moeller adapted *The Age of Innocence* for the screen in 1934. It was also black and white, but this version was not silent.

## APPENDIX A

### VOICE-OVER IN *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

It invariably happened, as everything happened in those days, in the same way. As usual, Mrs. Julius Beaufort appeared unaccompanied by her husband, just before the Jewel Song and, again as usual, rose at the end of the third act and disappeared. New York then knew that, a half-hour later, the Beaufort's annual opera ball would begin.

Carriages waited at the curb for the entire performance. It is widely known in New York, but never acknowledged, that Americans want to get away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it.

The Beauforts' house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ballroom. Such a room, shuttered in darkness three hundred and sixty-four days of the year, was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past. Regina Beaufort came from an old South Carolina family, but her husband Julius, who passed for an Englishman, was known to have dissipated habits, a bitter tongue and mysterious antecedents. His marriage assured him a social position, but not necessarily respect.

Newland Archer had not stopped at his club as young men usually did. He went directly to the Beaufort's. He wanted the announcement of his engagement to divert gossip away from the countess, and show his most ardent support for May and for the whole family.

The Beaufort house had been boldly planned. Instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to the ballroom, one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms.

But only actually passing through the crimson drawing room could one see the "Return of Spring", the much-discussed nude by Bouguereau, which Beaufort had had the audacity to hang in plain sight.

Archer enjoyed such challenges to convention. He questioned conformity in private, but in public he

upheld family and tradition. This was a world balanced so precariously that its harmony could be shattered by a whisper.

On the whole, Archer was amused by the smooth hypocrisy of his peers. He may even have envied them. Lawrence Lefferts, for instance, was New York's foremost authority on "form". And his opinion on pumps versus patent-leather Oxford had never been disputed. On matters of surreptitious romance, his skills went unquestioned.

Old Mr. Sillerton Jackson was as great an authority on "family" as Lawrence Lefferts was on "form". The mean and melancholic history of Countess Olenska's European marriage was a treasure that he hastened to excavate. He carried like a calling card an entire register of the scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of society for the last fifty years.

Julius Beaufort's secret was the way he carried things off. He could arrive casually at his own party as if he were another guest, and might also leave early for a more modest but comforting address in the East thirties. Beaufort was intrepid in his business, but in his personal affairs, absolutely audacious.

Archer's fiancée was innocent of all these intrigues and of much else. May Welland represented for Archer all that was best in their world, all that he honored. And she anchored him to it.

Even if she had not been grandmother to May, Mrs. Manson Mingott would still be the first to receive the required betrothal visit. She had not only been matriarch to this world--she was nearly its empress. Much of New York was already related to her, and she remained so by marriage or reputation. Though brownstone was the norm, she lived majestically in her large house of controversial pale cream-colored stone, in an inaccessible road near the Central Park. The burden of her flesh had long since made it impossible to go up and down the stairs, so, with characteristic independence, she had established herself on the ground floor of her house. From the sitting room, there was an unexpected vista of her bedroom. The visitors were startled and fascinated by the foreignness of this arrangement, which recalls sceneries in French fiction. This is how women with lovers lived in the wicked old societies. But if Mrs. Mingott had wanted a lover, the intrepid woman would

have had him too. For now, she was contented simply for life and passion to flow northward to her door and to anticipate eagerly the union of Newland Archer with her grand-daughter May. In them, two of New York's best families would finally and momentously be joined.

Three days later, the unthinkable happened. Mrs. Manson Mingott sent out invitations summoning everyone to a "formal dinner." Such an occasion demanded the most careful consideration. It required the appropriate plate...It also called for three extra footman, two dishes for each course and a Roman punch at the middle.

The dinner, New York read on the invitation, was "to meet Countess Olenska." And New York declined.

They all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world. The real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs. Archer knew these signs. They were not subtle. They were not meant to be. They were more than a simple snobbing, they were an eradication. There was a single court of appeal. He would plead the case before the van der Luydens.

The van der Luyden dwelled above all the city's families in a kind of superterrestrial twilight. Archer appealed to their exquisitely refined sense of tribal order. And he spoke plainly.

The occasion was a solemn one but the Countess Olenska arrived rather late, signaling a carelessness of which she was entirely unaware. She entered without haste or embarrassment the drawing room in which New York's most chosen company was somewhat awfully assembled.

The Trevenna George II plate was out. So was the van der Luyden Lowestoft, from the East India Company, and the Dagonet Crown Derby. Dining with the van der Luyden was at best no light matter. Dining there with a Duke who was their cousin was almost a religious solemnity. When the van der Luydens chose, they knew how to give a lesson.

It was not the custom in New York drawing rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another. But the Countess did not observe this rule.

The next day, Newland Archer searched the city in vain for yellow roses. From his office he sent a note to Madame Olenska asking to call that afternoon and requesting reply by messenger. There was no reply that day. Or the next. And when yellow roses were again available, Archer passed them by. It was only on the third day that he heard from her, by post, from the van der Luyden's country home.

He had received an invitation from the Lefferts' for a weekend at the Hudson and he hoped it was not too late to reply. Their house was not too far from the van der Luydens'.

That night he did not take the customary comfort in his monthly shipment of books from London. The taste of the usual was like cider in his mouth, and there were moments when he felt as if he were being buried alive under his future.

He could feel her dropping back to inexpressive girlishness. Her conscience had been eased of its burden. It was wonderful, he thought, how such depths of feeling could co-exist with such an absence of imagination.

There had been wild rumors, right up to the wedding day, that Mrs. Mingott would actually attend the ceremony. It was known that she had sent a carpenter to measure the front pew in case it might be altered to accommodate her. But this idea, like the great lady herself, proved to be unwieldy, and she settled for giving the wedding breakfast.

The Countess Olenska sent her regrets - she was traveling with an aunt - but gave the bride and groom an exquisite piece of old lace. Two elderly aunts in Rhinebeck offered a honeymoon cottage, and, since it was thought "very English" to have a country-house on loan, their offer was accepted. When the house proved suddenly uninhabitable, however, Henry van der Luyden stepped in to offer an old cottage on his property nearby.

May accepted the offer as a surprise for her husband. She had never seen the house, but her cousin Ellen had mentioned it once. She had said it was the only house in America where she could imagine being perfectly happy.

They traveled to the expected places, which May had never seen. In London, Archer ordered his clothes. And they went to the National Gallery, and sometimes to the theater.

In Paris, she ordered her clothes. There were trunks of dresses from Worth. They visited the Tuileries.

May's hands were modeled in marble in the Rochée studio. And occasionally they dined out.

Archer embraced to his new marriage even if he reverted to his old inherited ideas about matrimony. It was less trouble to conform with tradition. There was no use trying to emancipate a wife who hadn't the dimmest notion that she was not free.

With a chill he knew that, in the future, many problems would be solved for him in the same way.

The first six months of marriage were usually said to be the hardest, and after that, he thought, they would have pretty nearly finished polishing down all the rough edges. But May's pressure was already wearing down the very roughness he most wanted to keep. As for the madness with Madame Olenska, Archer trained himself to remember it as the last of his discarded experiments. She remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts.

No one could ever be jealous of May's triumphs. She managed to give the feeling that she would have been just as serene without them. But what if all her calm, her niceness, were just a negation, a curtain dropped in front of an emptiness? Archer felt he had never yet lifted that curtain.

He had heard her name often enough during the year and a half since they had last met. He was even familiar with the main incidents of her life. But he heard all these accounts with detachment, as if listening to reminiscences of someone long dead. But the past had come again into the present, as in those newly discovered caverns in Tuscany, where children had lit bunches of straw and seen old images staring from the wall.

He gave himself a single chance. She must turn before the sail boat crossed the Lime Rock light. Then he would go to her.

He would see her again, at the theater or at a reception. Perhaps he might be seated next to her. Perhaps they might have another moment alone somewhere. But he could not live without seeing her.

He had written to her once in Washington. Just a few lines asking her when they would meet again. And she wrote back: "Not yet."

He knew it was two hours by ferry and carriage from the Pennsylvania terminus in Jersey City back to Mrs. Mingott's. All of two hours. And maybe a little more.

But then he realized, I am dead. I've been dead for months and months. Then it occurred to him that she might die. People did. Young people, healthy people did. She might die and set him free.

It was the custom, in old New York, for brides to appear in their wedding dress during the first year or two of marriage. But May, since returning from Europe, had not worn her bridal satin until this evening.

It was, as Mrs. Archer said to Mrs. Welland, a great event for a married couple to give their first dinner, and it was not to be undertaken lightly. There was a hired chef, two borrowed footmen, roses from Henderson's, Roman punch and menus on gilt-edged cards. It was considered a particular triumph that the van der Luydens, at May's request, stayed in the city to be present at her farewell dinner for the Countess Olenska.

Archer saw all the harmless-looking people at the table as a band of quiet conspirators, with himself, and Ellen, the center of their conspiracy.

He guessed himself to have been, for months, the center of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears. He understood that, somehow, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved. And he knew that now the whole tribe had rallied around his wife.

He was a prisoner at the center of an armed camp.

And the key to his release had been returned the day before, by mail, unopened.



The silent organization which held this whole world together was determined to put itself on record. It was never for a moment questioned the propriety of Madame Olenska's conduct. It had never been questioned Archer's fidelity. And it had never heard of, suspected, or even conceived possible, anything at all to the contrary.

From the seamless performance of this ritual, Archer knew that New York believed him to be Madame Olenska's lover.

And he understood, for the first time, that his wife shared the belief.

It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened.

Their eldest boy, Theodore, too delicate to be taken to church in midwinter, had been christened there.

It was here that Ted took his first steps. And it was here that Archer and his wife always discussed the future of all their children. Bill's interest in archeology. Mary's passion for sports and philanthropy. Ted's inclination towards "art" that led to a job with an architect, as well as some considerable redecoration.

It was in this room that Mary had announced her engagement with the dullest and must reliable of Larry Leffert's many sons. And it was in this room, too, that her father had kissed her through her wedding veil before they motored to Grace Church.

He was a dutiful, loving father, and a faithful husband. When May died of infectious pneumonia after nursing Bill safely through, he had honestly mourned her. The world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever noticing.

This hard bright blindness, her incapacity to recognize change, made her children conceal their views from her, just as Archer concealed his. She died thinking the world a good place, full of love and harmonious households like her own.

Newland Archer, in his fifty-seventh year, mourned his past and honored it.

Whenever he thought of Ellen Olenska, it had been abstractly, serenely, like an imaginary loved one in a book or picture. She had become the complete vision of all he had missed.

After a while he did not regret Ted's indiscretion. It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied...And that it should have been his wife moved him inexpressibly.

## APPENDIX B

VOICE-OVER IN *ETHAN FROME*

Ethan and Zeena are distant cousins. She grew up in a town ... I forget which one...

It is a good ways from here. And she was sent to take care of Ethan's mother. Then, after some time, his mother died.

I think Zeena Pierce should be noticing Ethan Frome for more than just that one afternoon. He was a big strong man and he was going to need someone sometime to do the work his Mama had been doing. And if there is one thing that every woman looks for in a man is to be needed....She never did leave. Maybe they shouldn't have stayed together. Maybe if it had been spring it might have been different. But it was winter...and so they married.

After five winters had passed, Ethan found himself with a wife that had become quite ill. Folks said about Zeena that she caught every illness she'd ever heard of. And leaving Starkfield was no longer something to talk about...to dream about.

Mattie Silver was the daughter of Zeena's cousin. And she'd had her share of hardship: her father's death, the disclosure of his many debts, her mother's death. She was left with fifty dollars to make a way, from the sale of her old piano. All of which made her kind of fragile and shaken. Hardly the best choice to take over the chores that Zeena was too sickly to attend to. But Mattie Silver needed somewhere to live, and Zeena needed someone to help. And so, these three were brought together.

I guess a year went by. Mattie never did get the feel for housekeeping, but she was worried Zeena would send her away, so she kept trying...

...and Mattie got better. Spring came, then summer, and instead of getting sicker she got better.

And by the next winter everyone began to notice that this pale fragile girl had become a healthy,

youthful, and very alive young woman. The whole village had noticed the change in her. Even me.

My mother and I were the first ones to reach them. We were walking home. They laid Mattie in our house, upstairs, in my room. We were great friends.

## APPENDIX C

## CHRONOLOGY OF WHARTON'S PUBLICATIONS

- 1877 Writes *Fast and Loose* (published in 1937).  
 1878 *Verses* (privately published).  
 1889-1898 Publishes two stories and three poems. Writes  
 "Bunner Sisters," a novella published in *Xingu* in  
 1916.  
 1897 Publishes *The Decorations of Houses*, written with  
 Ogden Codman.  
 1899 Publishes *The Greater Inclination*, a collection of  
 stories.  
 1900 Publishes *The Touchstone*, a novella.  
 1901 Publishes *Crucial Instances*.  
 1902 Publishes *The Valley of Decision*, *Es Lebe das Leben*,  
 titled by Scribners' *The Joy of Life*, translation  
 from German of Hermann Sudermann's tragic drama.  
 1903 Publishes *Sanctuary*, a novella.  
 1904 Publishes *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* and  
*Italian Villas and their Gardens*.  
 1905 Publishes *Italian Backgrounds* and *The House of*  
*Mirth*.  
 1907 Publishes *Madame de Treymes* and *Fruit of the Tree*.  
 1908 Publishes *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* and *A Motor*  
*Flight through France*.  
 1909 Publishes *Artemis to Actaeon*.  
 1910 Publishes *Tales of Men and Ghosts*.  
 1911 Publishes *Ethan Frome*.  
 1912 Publishes *The Reef*.  
 1913 Publishes *The Custom of the Country*.  
 1915 Publishes *Fighting France*.  
 1916 Publishes *Xingu and Other Stories* and *The Book of*  
*the Homeless*.  
 1917 Publishes *Summer*.  
 1918 Publishes *The Marne*.  
 1919 Publishes *French Ways and their Meaning*.  
 1920 Publishes *In Marroco* and *The Age of Innocence*.  
 1922 Publishes *The Glimpses of the Moon*.  
 1923 Publishes *A Son at the Front*.  
 1924 Publishes *Old New York*.  
 1925 Publishes *The Mother's Recompense* and *The Writing of*  
*Fiction*.  
 1926 Publishes *Twelve Poems*.  
 1927 Publishes *Twilight Sleep*.  
 1928 Publishes *The Children*.  
 1929 Publishes *Hudson River Bracketed*.  
 1930 Publishes *Certain People*.  
 1932 Publishes *The Gods Arrive*.

- 1933 Publishes *A Backward Glance*.  
1934 Publishes *The World Over*.  
1937 *Ghosts* published posthumously.  
1938 *The Buccaneers*, though unfinished, is published and edited with an afterword by Gaillard Lapsley, her literary executor.

Source: McDowel, Margaret B., ed. *Edith Wharton, Revised Edition*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990, pp. xv-xviii.

## APPENDIX D

## SCORSESE'S FILMOGRAPHY

- 1963 *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?*
- 1964 *It's Not Just You, Murray!*
- 1967 *The Big Shave*
- 1969 *Who's Knocking at my Door?*
- 1970 *Street Scenes*
- 1972 *Boxcar Bertha*
- 1973 *Mean Streets*
- 1974 *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*
- 1974 *Italianamerican*
- 1975 *Taxi Driver*
- 1977 *New York, New York*
- 1978 *The Last Waltz*
- 1978 *American Boy: A Profile of Steven Prince*
- 1980 *Raging Bull*
- 1982 *The King of Comedy*
- 1985 *After Hours*
- 1985 *Amazing Stories (TV): 'Mirror, Mirror'*
- 1986 *The Color of Money*
- 1986 *Armani Commercial #1*
- 1987 *Bad*
- 1988 *The Last Temptation of Christ*
- 1988 *Armani Commercial #2*

- 1988 *Somewhere Down the Crazy River*
- 1989 *New York Stories: Life Lessons*
- 1990 *Made in Milan* (Emporio Armani)
- 1990 *GoodFellas*
- 1991 *Cape Fear*
- 1993 *Age of Innocence*
- 1995 *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through  
American Movies*
- 1995 *Cassino*

Source: Lesley Stern's *The Scorsese  
Connection*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press,  
1995, p.253.



## APPENDIX E

## MADDEN'S FILMOGRAPHY

- 1985 *Grown-Ups* (TV)  
1986 *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (TV series)  
1987 *A Wreath of Roses* (TV)  
1990 *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* (TV series)  
1993 *Ethan Frome*  
1994 *Golden Gate*  
1995 *Prime Suspect 4: The Lost Child* (TV)

Source: David Glickman  
Manager Interactive Media  
Miramax Films

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*The Age of Innocence.* Dir. Martin Scorsese.  
With Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer,  
and Winona Ryder. Columbia, 1993. 136 min.

*Ethan Frome.* Dir. John Madden. With Liam  
Nesson, Patricia Arquette, and John Allen.  
American Playhouse Theatrical Films and Miramax  
Films, 1993. 100 min.

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