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BREAKING FREE: EDNA PONTELLIER AND ETHAN FROME

Abstract

Social norms and conventions are often presented in literature as limitations which curb the protagonists' personal development. When personal desires clash with societal expectations, the struggle to forge an identity for themselves constitutes the conflict in these literary works. Two such works are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Both Edna Pontellier and Ethan Frome feel oppressed by social conventions and try to break free from the chains society has placed on them. This paper will examine and analyse Edna Pontellier's and Ethan Frome's relationship to their respective societies, their attempts to rebel and the success of their endeavours to break free. It will consequently show that irrespective of the society in question and the gender of the protagonist, social conventions are iron-forged manacles that cannot be easily broken, leaving the protagonists of these works with one option: early death.

Key words: Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Edna Pontellier, Ethan Frome, society

Social norms and conventions are often presented in literature as limitations which curb the protagonists' personal development. Whilst a vast majority of characters appears to have no problem forging an identity within this framework, many protagonists in works of fiction find their personal desires in direct conflict with societal expectations. Their struggle to forge an identity for themselves constitutes the conflict in these literary works. Two such works from the turn of the twentieth century are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Both Edna Pontellier and Ethan Frome, the protagonists of the respective novellas, feel oppressed by social conventions and try to break free from the chains that society has placed on them. This paper will examine and analyse Edna Pontellier's and Ethan Frome's relationship to their respective societies, their attempts at rebellion and the success of their endeavours to break free. It will consequently show that irrespective of the society in question and the gender of the protagonist, social conventions are iron-forged manacles that cannot be broken, leaving the protagonists with one option: death.

The societies in *The Awakening* and *Ethan Frome* seem dissimilar at first. The Creoles in Chopin's *The Awakening* are wealthy and educated people; Wharton's Starkfield is predominantly inhabited by simple farmers. Both authors present the nature of both societies through the setting in their respective works. While sunny New Orleans and Grand Isle represent the warm and open nature of the Creoles, the harsh winter of Starkfield stands for the coolness and reserve of its villagers. However, both societies have one important thing in common – they both value and live according to social conventions and rules.

Chopin uses the Creole society in Louisiana as the antagonist to demonstrate Edna's struggle for independence and freedom. The Louisiana Creoles are descendents of the French and Spanish colonial settlers in Louisiana. They live in a world of etiquette and social status. Most of their free time is spent in lively entertainment: they love social gatherings, gambling, going out and life in general. They are very warm and open by nature, willing to show signs of affection and unwilling to express hardship. Families are patriarchal, with the men being the

breadwinners in the family, while women are expected to raise the children and run the household. Family ties are strong and a mother usually has a very close and loving relationship with her children. Women are represented as some kind of ideal: they are refined, beautiful and artistic, developing their social talents by improving their skills in singing, playing, painting and entertaining. They are, according to Mary L. Shaffter, “artistic by nature” (Shaffter, 1982: 137). Being polite, good housekeepers and having outstanding language skills are just some of their virtues. “As wives, Creole women are without superiors; loving and true, they seldom figure in domestic scandals” (Shaffter, 1982: 138). However, they do not have the same status as men: they are inferior to their husbands and are often considered to be their property. Every possession that a woman owns or that she has worked for is the property of her husband. Women do, nevertheless, contribute to their husband’s social status: the more beauty and talents a woman possesses the more prestigious her husband becomes.

Unlike the lively New Orleans in *The Awakening*, Starkfield, a small fictional village in Massachusetts where *Ethan Frome* is set, is a dull place where very little happens. The population is small, the townspeople are simple people, mostly farmers, who appear to be resigned to their lot. There are very few prospects in the town, as there is little room for development and, as Harmon Gow tells the narrator, “most of the smart ones get away” (Wharton, 1993: 6).

The dullness of Starkfield is further highlighted by setting the events in winter. It is not merely a season; it also stands for the spirit of Starkfield and its villagers. Every major event in the story happens during winter, like the “smash-up” that occurred in February or the death of Ethan’s mother, while events that occurred in spring or summer can barely be remembered. Ethan, who spent a short period of time working in Florida, finds it difficult to recall the warmth of Florida: “I was down there once, and for a good while afterward I could call up the sight of it in winter. But now it’s all snowed under” (Wharton, 1993: 15). Winter also gives Starkfield a prison-like appearance, since the snow often blocks roads and streets that lead to other places: “I began to understand why

Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter. Twenty years earlier the means of resistance must have been far fewer, and the enemy in command of almost all the lines of access between the beleaguered villages" (Wharton, 1993: 8 – 9).

Society, be it in the north or south of America, was not always detrimental to the development of the protagonists. Both Ethan and Edna used to dream in their youth, before the obligations and responsibilities of being an adult opened up a new reality. In the first chapters of *The Awakening*, neither Edna nor the reader is aware of the passion and the emotions lurking under Edna's reserved surface. It is not until Edna shares her past with Adele that she herself is reminded of her long-forgotten dreams and fantasies. Edna remembers a meadow through which she walked as a little girl after running away from prayers. The prayers symbolize social conventions: something that was expected of her and something that she had to obey. The fact that she was running away from them indicates her desire for independence and her arbitrariness. She compares the meadow to the sea, which is significant because, just like the sea, the meadow represents independence, identity and freedom. Edna "could see only the stretch of green" (Chopin, 1998: 14) before her, which could symbolise the many possibilities before her. She describes herself as "a little unthinking child [...] just following a misleading impulse without question" (Chopin, 1998: 14).

Edna experiences passion at an early age. She was first enamoured by a cavalry officer, and then fell in love with an engaged gentleman. Although both of these infatuations were short-lived, they were simultaneously Edna's first encounter with passion and unrequited love: "Edna was a little miss, just merging into her teens; and the realization that she herself was nothing, nothing, nothing to the engaged young man was a bitter affliction to her" (Chopin, 1998: 15).

Edna became something to someone when she met Leonce, who "pleased her and his absolute devotion flattered her" (Chopin, 1998: 15). Other than his entrancement with her, another reason for marrying him was "the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic" (Chopin, 1998: 15), which illustrates Edna's

willingness to contradict authority. However, her marriage pushed her hidden desires and romantic fantasies aside and “Edna found herself face to face with the realities. She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (Chopin, 1998: 15).

Ethan, on the other hand, was never rebellious in his youth. On the contrary, he always valued social conventions and tried to be a good and moral person. Despite his dream to pursue further education in a big town, which is partially realised when he starts studying engineering at Worcester and finds short-term employment as an engineer in Florida, he still fulfils his filial obligation when his father’s death and mother’s illness force him to return to the farm .

Although the deaths of his parents put his dreams on hold, Ethan still aspires to leave Starkfield. After his marriage to Zeena, they agree to sell the farm and move to a larger town, where Ethan could find employment as an engineer. In the beginning, Ethan believes that “with a ‘smart’ wife like Zeena, it would not be long before he had made himself a place in it [the town]” (Wharton, 1993: 71). However, the lack of interested buyers for the farm makes Ethan realise that his hopes for a new beginning in a big town can only remain a dream. Any move away from Starkfield requires capital which the failure to sell the farm renders impossible.

Ethan’s dream of escaping Starkfield was further thwarted by his wife’s hypochondria. Gradually falling ill within the first year of their marriage, Ethan believes that Zeena uses her health to manipulate him and force him to stay in Starkfield. Furthermore, he calls to mind Zeena’s sense of superiority with respect to other Starkfielders: “She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. Even Bettsbridge or Shadd’s Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity” (Wharton, 1993: 71 – 72). Whether Ethan’s suspicions are justified or not, he still uses them as an excuse. He gives up too easily, accepting his inability

to leave as something that was predetermined and believing that he had no influence on his fate. For him, it was easier to blame Zeena and her diseases for his immobility than to take any action that would lead to a resolution of his problem. There is no doubt that Ethan wants to leave Starkfield, but his passivity implies reluctance and perhaps a lack of self-confidence, so that the intensity of his desire to leave is indeed debatable.

Thus, marriage for both Ethan and Edna leads to them relinquishing any dreams they may have for the obligations and responsibilities of marital life. It is likewise the appearance of a third person which leads to the reawakening of passion and the desire for a different life, which would require both protagonists to rebel against social conventions. Edna, for example, settles down for the sake of her marriage, which makes her submissive and unable to express herself. She tries to live according to social rules and the customs of the Creoles. The effect that society has on her is presented through her marriage to Leonce, who oppresses and controls her. From the outset, Chopin illustrates Edna's relationship to her husband and the way their marriage functions. Leonce is a materialistic and self-absorbed person who loves order and regularity. All he really cares about is his social status and reputation, to which Edna's behaviour and appearance contribute. After seeing her coming from the beach, Leonce scolds her for being "burnt beyond recognition", while "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin, 1998: 4). Edna neither responds nor defends herself, which is apparently her habitual obedient behaviour when faced with Leonce's criticism. Since Leonce stands for the Creole community and their values, Edna's lack of expression in her marriage symbolizes her submission to social rules. At this point, she is still not aware that both her marriage and society are repressing her true identity.

The first time that the reader is privy to Edna's hidden unhappiness is when she cries after her husband has hinted at her being a bad mother. The scene illustrates the imperiousness of Leonce's character, as he only criticises Edna because she shows a disinterest in his gambling successes

of the evening, and although Chopin does not state explicitly, Leonce expects his wife to perform her marital duty as the crowning glory of his successful evening at the club. Edna's disinterest and desire to sleep irks Leonce and he retaliates by criticising her mothering skills. This scene and Edna's reaction to it implies Edna's concealed oppression by Leonce, and the recurrence of such scenes: "such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life" (Chopin, 1998: 7). It is, nevertheless, the first time that Edna openly expresses sorrow for her lack of resistance and her husband's dominant role over her. Yet, it seems that Edna is still not ready to admit to herself that she is unhappy: "She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself" (Chopin, 1998: 7).

While Edna's oppression is demonstrated through her marriage, Ethan's is symbolically represented by the winter landscape. It stands not only for his cold, passionless and childless marriage, but also for the Starkfield community and their values. The impact that winter has had on Ethan's fate is first mentioned in the prologue of the story, when Harmon Gow states that "he [Ethan] has been in Starkfield too many winters" (Wharton, 1993: 6). The narrator in the frame story even believes that Ethan's character has been formed by the harsh winter of Starkfield, or in other words, that Ethan is the result of social conventions:

He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface [...] I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it, as Harmon Gow had hinted, the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters. (Wharton, 1993: 14 – 15)

Ethan also seems to have assimilated some of the characteristics of winter: "Frome, unhappily married to Zeena, and pining for her cousin Mattie, is indeed parallel to the Starkfield setting. Everything on the surface is hard and frozen. His feeling, his love, for Mattie cannot break

loose, just as spring and summer are fast bound by winter's cold" (Kenneth, 1961: 179).

Indeed, it is winter which influences Ethan's major decisions. After his mother's death, winter precipitates Ethan's decision to marry Zeena: "He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter.." (Wharton, 1993: 70). Ethan's proposal is not based on love but initiated by his terror at the thought of being left alone during winter. It reveals his insecurity in the form of dependence on other people: "After the funeral, when he saw her preparing to go away, he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing he had asked her to stay there with him" (Wharton, 1993: 70). For him, winter symbolizes personal experiences such as isolation, loneliness, immobility and death. In contrast, Mattie Silver is often described in terms of spring and warmth: "But it was not only that the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth" (Wharton, 1993: 33). Not only does this emphasize Ethan's desire for Mattie, but also his desire to escape Starkfield, winter and social conventions.

Just like Edna, Ethan is also stuck in an oppressive marriage, which symbolically represents his oppression by society. Knowing Ethan's gentle nature, Zeena manipulates him with her illness and causes him to be even more reserved. Although he was always quiet and reticent, he enjoyed having open and cheerful people around him: "By nature grave and inarticulate, he admired recklessness and gaiety in others and was warmed to the marrow by friendly human intercourse" (Wharton, 1993: 68).

The fact that Ethan likes cheerful company further emphasizes the loneliness in his marriage. The long, cold winters force Ethan to spend the majority of his time with a gloomy wife who is always sick and only speaks to complain. After a while, Ethan's desires for social interaction disappear, and like Edna, he loses the ability to express himself. He avoids any conversation with Zeena, for "When she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to remedy; and to

check a tendency to impatient retort he had first formed the habit of not answering her, and finally of thinking of other things while she talked” (Wharton, 1993: 72). Although their marriage is dull and lifeless, divorce is not an option for Ethan, nor is adultery. This reveals his strong moral principles: although never a happy husband, he still wanted to be a good husband, as well as a good citizen. He tries to please his wife by avoiding any conflicts and his own moral obligation by staying with his wife.

The introduction of the “lovers” into Ethan’s and Edna’s lives plays a crucial role in their awakenings. First of all, they make Ethan and Edna see what is lacking in their lives and marriages. They are also the objects of desire, the reasons for potential rebellion against social conventions.

In *The Awakening*, Robert Leburn is the reason for Edna’s awakening. Robert is the opposite of Leonce: he is interesting, entertaining and capable of loving. He immediately captivates Edna with his sensuality and cheerful nature, and soon they become intimate friends. Unlike Leonce, Robert is interested in Edna’s stories and her paintings. The acme of their intimacy arises when they spend time together at Cheniere Caminada, far away from all the others. They feel like they are alone in the whole world, without anyone to interrupt or disturb their affection for each other.

Yet, Robert is not the only character who opens Edna’s eyes. The main trigger of Edna’s awakening is Adele: “That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her. There may have been—there must have been—influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle” (Chopin, 1998: 12). It is ironic that Adele, being the ultimate Creole woman, acts as one of the catalysts for Edna’s awakening. Their conversation makes Edna think of her past in a nostalgic way. She recalls her past infatuations, but also the green meadow and the “unthinking child,” who followed her impulses. In contrast, the adult Edna is relatively reasonable and steady: she is married, has two children and lives the life that everyone expects her to live. Still, she is not as happy as the “unthinking” Edna probably was. Edna’s statement that “sometimes she feels this

summer as if she was walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (Chopin, 1998: 14), implies that she wants to be the little girl again, following her impulses, and abandoning all the rules that exist in her life. However, her statement also foreshadows the problems that she will encounter after her awakening – she will be alone in her freedom.

Another crucial moment in Edna’s awakening is the first time she swims. Edna thinks about “how easy it is” and about the time she “has lost splashing about like a baby” (Chopin, 1998: 22). The sea represents Edna’s true self, and her first swimming is the moment of realization. She has lost so much time being someone she never wanted to be, but now that she finally finds the courage to swim and to be herself, a whole new world of possibilities opens up. When she is with Robert at Cheniere Caminada, she slowly begins to admit to herself that pleasant, unknown feelings have occurred within her soul and that she is in the process of development: “She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect” (Chopin, 1998: 31).

Unlike Edna, whose awakening is triggered by many factors, Ethan’s awakening is initiated by the arrival of Mattie. After he meets Mattie, he begins his transformation and starts to look at his life from a different perspective. He suddenly realizes how meaningless and dull his existence is. He also becomes aware of his inability to move forward with his life and develop. “By the time Mattie Silver appears on the scene, he is only twenty-eight but already trapped by circumstances and unable to extend the horizon of his future beyond the family graveyard” (Nevius, 1951: 205). Even his wife, with whom he had spent seven years, looks suddenly unattractive: “The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins [...] He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked

like” (Wharton, 1993: 53). He even goes a step further and dares to entertain hope in the potential death of his wife, Zeena, as a way out of his static life: “A dead cucumber-vine dangled from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death, and the thought flashed through Ethan’s brain: ‘If it was there for Zeena—’” (Wharton, 1993: 51).

However, not all of his new worldviews are negative: Ethan’s ancestors are buried on his property, including his namesake, who had been married to his wife, Endurance, for 50 years. The graves as a constant presence were always associated by Ethan with his inability to escape both Starkfield and his wife: “For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom. ‘We never got away—how should you?’ seemed to be written on every headstone; and whenever he went in or out of his gate he thought with a shiver: ‘I shall just go on living here till I join them’” (Wharton, 1993: 50). The presence of Mattie at this stage of his life changes his view of his prospects: his “desire for change had vanished, and the sight of the little enclosure gave him a warm sense of continuance and stability” (Wharton, 1993: 50). His dreams have changed from leaving Starkfield to staying there with Mattie, with the hope of her one day lying there beside him.

After their respective awakenings, Ethan and Edna act completely differently. Edna finds new ways of expressing herself and applying her new worldviews to everyday life. She starts talking openly about her new thoughts and feelings. In a conversation with Adele, she states: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin, 1998: 36). She realizes that herself is the most important thing in life; life without it is meaningless. Adele cannot comprehend Edna’s words, but Edna understands that she has wasted enough time as a slave to society.

Edna’s decision to rebel is followed by actions: she does not obey her husband anymore or run the household properly. Instead of receiving callers on Tuesdays or looking after her children, Edna prefers to spend her time painting. All the people around her seem like her enemies, since all of them try to oppress her newfound freedom: “The street, the children, the fruit vendor, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all

part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (Chopin, 1998: 40). She is now certain that she has lived a dull life and that she has sacrificed herself too often for the pleasure of others. After a visit to the Ratignolles, Edna even feels sorry for Adele’s ignorance: “She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium” (Chopin, 1998: 42). She also realizes that Adele’s whole lifestyle, which used to be similar to Edna’s, has become completely unappealing to her: “The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” (Chopin, 1998: 42). It is something to which Edna never wants to return.

The first stage in the assertion of Edna’s self is her desire to be equal. Consequently, she starts acting like a man: she bets on horse races, “talking like her father as the sleek geldings ambled in review before them” (Chopin, 1998: 55). Not only does she gamble, she also drinks alcohol “as a man would have done” (Chopin, 1998: 59). Edna wants to be treated equally to men, who are the superior gender in Creole society. While they can do whatever they like, such as drink, gamble or go out, without having to fear prejudice from others, women cannot. Edna also befriends the notorious Arobin, who can ruin a woman’s reputation by just being seen with her. Edna does not mind. On the contrary, Arobin evokes a new feeling in her: sexual desire. Although he means nothing to her in the emotional sense, “his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (Chopin, 1998: 58). Still, Edna feels guilty for having such thoughts, not because of Leonce, but because of Robert. Leonce has become nothing but her husband, which means nothing to Edna anymore: “Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (Chopin, 1998: 58). She does not consider herself his property, nor does she think that he has any claim on her, despite the fact that they never really separated.

The next stage to asserting her “self” is to relinquish all material ties with her husband. She realises that the house she lives in and most of the things in it, like herself, *are* Leonce’s property. As the house does not coincide with her new identity she decides to leave it. It “never seemed like hers - like home” and “the money that provides it, isn’t hers” (Chopin, 1998: 59). She moves to the pigeon house to become completely independent. She wants everybody to know that she has acquired “the feeling of freedom and independence” (Chopin, 1998: 59) and that she no longer belongs to her husband. Most of all, she wants Robert to know that she is now a free woman, both in the romantic and spiritual sense.

However, even though she feels obliged to Robert, Edna cannot ignore the desires that Arobin has inflamed in her. After she allowed him to kiss her, she feels that “it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin, 1998: 62). Edna, for the first time, experiences a completely new purpose to sex: pleasure. Although confused by her new desire for sex, imagining Leonce and Robert looking down on her and feeling irresponsible, she is overwhelmed by a new understanding: “She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse” (Chopin, 1998: 62). Deep inside, Edna understands that she has done nothing wrong, that it is in her nature to feel sexual desire. She feels like she understands life and her purpose in it. Moreover, she becomes aware of her whole being, her desires and wishes. It is probably the crucial moment in her awakening, the moment when she completely abandons social conventions and decides to stay loyal to herself:

There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to “feed upon opinion” when her own soul had invited her. (Chopin, 1998: 70)

In contrast to Edna, who physically acts upon her desires, Ethan's struggle has no physical manifestation. He still values social conventions and tries to be a good person. Although he loves Mattie sincerely, he cannot express his feelings, since it would mean betraying his principles. Mattie had been staying with the Fromes for over a year, but Ethan, other than helping Mattie with her household chores, never did anything that would reveal his desire for her. In the beginning, he was content just standing beside her, but later his passion became more difficult to control, but control it he did. For example, when he accompanies her home from the dance, he has a chance to confess his feelings, but does nothing. Later, when he is lying in bed with Zeena, he regrets not having taken any action: "Why had he not kissed her when he held her there? A few hours earlier he would not have asked himself the question. Even a few minutes earlier, when they had stood alone outside the house, he would not have dared to think of kissing her" (Wharton, 1993: 57). When Ethan was alone with his thoughts, he could do anything, but when he had the chance to actually do something, his moral principles and lack of self-confidence stopped him.

One of the biggest hindrances is obviously Zeena herself, who has always used her illness to control Ethan and to get what she wants. Having become suspicious of Ethan's hidden desires, Zeena claims to have become sicker than ever. She starts a conversation that implies her wish for a hired girl and sending Mattie away, but Ethan abruptly ends the conversation by saying "I haven't got the time now" (Wharton, 1993: 38). He either cannot stand the thought of Mattie's departure or he foolishly believes that Mattie would remain at his house forever. Whatever the reason, he never takes Zeena's wishes seriously, and instead of trying to convince her of Mattie's qualities, he just avoids any conversation that ends in conflict.

When Zeena suddenly announces her trip to Bettsbridge, the only thing on Ethan's mind is the knowledge that he and Mattie would be alone for the first time - he is aware that this was the ultimate chance to confess his feelings. However, his moral obligations to his wife once again hinder the admission of his desires. Despite the many plans Ethan

had for his evening alone with Mattie, besides small-talk, nothing happens. Zeena's presence is constantly felt in the room by both Ethan and Mattie. When he accidentally touches Mattie's hand, Zeena's cat pushes her prized pickle-dish from the table, which crashes to the floor, as if trying to warn them. The broken dish stands for his failure in his attempt to get closer to Mattie: "It seemed to him as if the shattered fragments of their evening lay there" (Wharton, 1993: 86). The pickle dish also symbolizes his inability to express his feelings and foreshadows his misfortune:

Mattie's use of Zeena's prized pickle dish for their memorable supper, the breaking of the dish by Zeena's cat, Ethan's attempt to repair it (frustrated by Zeena's unexpected early return) bring out the misery of Ethan's and Mattie's inability to communicate their mutual affection and portend the disaster that is to come when the declaration of mutual love brings on the suicide attempt. (Murad, 1983: 91)

For the rest of the evening, Ethan could only see signs of Zeena's presence: her chair that was rocking for a few moments too long, as if Zeena were sitting in it; the cat that seemed to be the reincarnation of Zeena herself, watching every move and trying to remind him of his obligations to his wife. Of course, all the signs of Zeena's presence are just a figment of Ethan's imagination. The real hindrance is his conscience and the awareness of the "crime" he was about to commit. This scene perfectly represents Ethan's insecurity and his inability to take any action, even when he knew that it was unlikely that he would ever get another chance like this. Although he is certain that Mattie was his ticket to happiness, he obviously cannot forget the consequences that would arise from their relationship. Ironically, the next morning he is even glad that he had not done anything: "He had not even touched the tip of her fingers or looked her full in the eyes. But their evening together had given him a vision of what life at her side might be, and he was glad now that he had done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture" (Wharton, 1993: 98). Not only is his behaviour cowardly, but he also accepts his inactivity as something good. He obviously believes that fantasizing about

the two of them being together was enough to make him feel complete, which indicates that, even if Mattie had lived forever in his house, he would have never exposed his feelings to her. His moral obligations to his wife and society are just too strong to be ignored.

Ethan's fear is best seen through his reaction to Zeena's proposal to replace Mattie by a hired girl. Desperately, Ethan tries to convince his wife that he does not have enough money to pay for a hired girl, but Zeena is determined. For the first time in seven years, Ethan does not try to avoid a conflict with his wife; instead he tries to persuade her to keep Mattie. But all of Ethan's courage vanishes when Zeena tells him "I know well enough what they say of my having kep' her [Mattie] here so long" (Wharton, 1993: 117). The statement and the implication behind it destroy all his willingness to fight for Mattie and his inferiority to his wife becomes clearer than ever. The thought that people may have noticed his affection for Mattie is unbearable and it makes him retreat. He is perfectly aware of the fact that he is about to lose the purpose of his life just because Zeena wanted it so, but he does absolutely nothing to stop it. The only reaction that Zeena's decision caused is that he finally confesses his feelings to Mattie. This, too, is done desperately, as if he were expecting Mattie to think of a solution to their problems. As soon as Zeena enters the kitchen, he falls silent, as if nothing ever happened.

The prospect of losing Mattie gives way to "[c]onfused motions of rebellion" (Wharton, 1993: 130) and he recalls a young man in a similar situation: "He knew a case of a man over the mountain—a young fellow of about his own age—who had escaped from just such a life of misery by going West with the girl he cared for. His wife had divorced him, and he had married the girl and prospered" (Wharton, 1993: 131). Enthusiastically, he starts writing a goodbye-letter to Zeena, but then he abruptly stops. As if looking for excuses not to run away with Mattie, he thinks of his financial situation, convincing himself that he would never be able to take care of both of them. He also feels sympathy for Zeena, wondering what her life would be like if he left her. "Even in the heat of his resentment he cannot disregard Zeena's plight: 'It was only by incessant labour and personal supervision that Ethan drew a meagre living

from the land, and his wife, even if she were in better health than she imagined, could never carry such a burden alone” (Nevius, 1951: 205). His sympathy for the person who is about to take his happiness away shows his gentle nature; he just cannot stand the thought of being guilty for someone’s sorrow, even though he had sacrificed all possibilities “one by one, to Zeena’s narrow-mindedness and ignorance” (Wharton, 1993: 131). Ethan would certainly face obstacles if he left Starkfield and Zeena, but it seems as if Ethan were trying to persuade himself to stay by coming up with excuses. The case of the young man shows that it is not impossible to escape, but Ethan’s fear of violating social norms once again gets the upper hand.

In the end, Ethan decides to ask Andrew Hale for an advance. Determined, he goes to Starkfield and runs into Mrs. Hale. Before he can say anything, Mrs. Hale starts to praise him for his kindness towards Zeena: “I always tell Mr. Hale I don’t know what she’d ‘a’ done if she hadn’t ‘a’ had you to look after her; and I used to say the same thing ‘bout your mother. You’ve had an awful mean time, Ethan Frome” (Wharton, 1993: 142). He suddenly becomes aware of the magnitude of crime he was about to commit: “This request for prepayment would mean playing on the sympathy of his friend and obtaining money from him under false pretenses. Ethan has his pride, his own measure of honor. His code of ethics does not allow the end to justify the means; his standards of righteous behavior do not permit him to be deceitful” (Murad, 1983: 99). He would deceive and disappoint his neighbors, as well as his wife. People would no longer call him kind or helpful, nor would they talk about him ever again in a good way; he would violate society’s as well as his own norms and therefore lose his reputation and self-respect forever. The truth was never as clear as it was now: “With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute” (Wharton, 1993: 143).

Not only do Robert and Mattie represent Ethan’s and Edna’s desires for independence, but they also play a crucial role in their suicides.

When Robert and Edna have dinner together in the pigeon house, Robert finally confesses his love for her and the true reason for his departure to Mexico: “You were Leonce Pontellier’s wife. I couldn’t help loving you if you were ten times his wife; but so long as I went away from you and kept away I could help telling you so” (Chopin, 1998: 79). He also tells her how he imagined her as his wife and that crazy ideas occurred in his mind, such as asking Leonce “to set her free”, which is the real reason for his return. This scene and his confession reveal the real Robert for the first time: he is a loving person and his abrupt departure had been caused by his love for Edna. On the other hand, this scene also reveals his selfishness and his loyalty to Creole social rules. By leaving Grand Isle, he not only hurt himself, but Edna. He never really cared about her feelings and how she was going to deal with his absence. However, now that both of them have confessed their feelings for each other, Robert has a choice: he can either be with Edna, or leave her forever.

In the end, he decides to leave her. When Edna returns home, hoping to find Robert there waiting for her, she finds her house empty. All that Robert left is a note, saying: “I love you. Good-bye —because I love you” (Chopin, 1998: 83). Although it is a very short note, it reveals Robert’s inner conflict and the victory of the Creole in him. He is not ready to break the rules for Edna, or to take away something that another man possesses. He probably does not want to be compared to Arobin, even though it would mean that he could be with the woman he loved. His decision to leave demonstrates again his selfishness and his weakness: although Edna loves him and she is ready to leave Leonce for good, he does not care about that. The only thing he cares about is that, if he stayed with Edna, he would violate social rules and act in an immoral and inappropriate way, ruining both his reputation and Edna’s. In the end, Robert is a true Creole, just like Leonce, loving his reputation more than his own happiness.

When Edna finds that Robert has left her, she decides to commit suicide. Robert is just the catalyst for her decision. The fact that he has left her for good opens her eyes: he cannot comprehend her new world-views and therefore her essence. Edna knows that he would never be

able to accept her, even if they ended up together. "He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand" (Chopin, 1998: 85). Just like Robert, no man would ever have understood her; she would be doomed to live in solitude like Mademoiselle Reisz does.

Ethan's situation is quite different: just like Robert, Mattie acts as the trigger for Ethan's attempt to commit suicide. However, Robert influences Edna's suicide because he leaves her, while Mattie influences Ethan's suicide attempt because she wants to be with him. She refuses to leave Ethan, which implies that she loves him sincerely, while Robert's love for Edna is not sufficient to make him violate social norms and stay with Edna.

The suicides themselves play a crucial role in Ethan's and Edna's attempts to break free from social conventions. By committing suicide, Edna is partially defeated in her fight for independence. Before she steps into the water, she arranges events so that her death does not look like suicide. In this way she tries to spare her children from scandal, which means that she still cares about what others think. She breaks her own rules by abandoning her own indifference to society's expectations. One of the last thoughts on Edna's mind is Mademoiselle Reisz's statement that "the artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies" (Chopin, 1998: 48). Edna has lost her courageous soul, since she is now escaping from her responsibilities to her children: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin, 1998: 85). She is not ready to return to her ordinary life and her family, so she flees into death.

On the other hand, by committing suicide, Edna stays loyal to herself: "She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (Chopin, 1998: 84). What Edna is doing now is giving up the unessential - her own life. She saves herself from being just a possession of both Leonce and her children, "they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and

soul” (Chopin, 1998: 85). By taking her life, Edna saves what she loves the most: herself. Another factor that contributes to her victory over society is the decision itself. The decision is entirely her own.

Ethan’s suicide attempt is different from Edna’s. In his desire to stay loyal to social conventions, yet not “wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman” (Wharton, 1993: 130 – 131), he sees dying as a more acceptable solution than running away and leaving his wife, staying with his wife, leaving Mattie to fend for herself in the world and living without Mattie. “Although he is neatly hemmed in by circumstance, it is Ethan’s own sense of responsibility that blocks the last avenue of escape and condemns him to a life of sterile expiation” (Nevius, 1951: 206). Through an apparently accidental death, he wants to escape the sad life awaiting him, but he also wants to free himself from his future decisions and responsibilities, which emphasizes his inactiveness. Instead of trying to find a way to live with Mattie, he rather wants to die with her and save his reputation.

Ethan cannot, however, escape from his sense of moral duty, which in the end determines his fate. While he and Mattie are sledding down towards the elm tree, Ethan tries to concentrate on the tree, thinking “it’s waiting for us” (Wharton, 1993: 170). However, as the tree looms larger, recalling Zeena’s face makes him swerve: “But suddenly his wife’s face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside” (Wharton, 1993: 170). Ironically, this movement saves their lives, but instead of finding peace with Mattie in death, Ethan condemns all three of them to a life of misery:

The attack is thwarted because Ethan chooses to remember Zeena during the swift progress of the intended fatal slide on the bobsled. It is the flashing image of Zeena’s distorted face that causes him to swerve the sled so that the result of the ride is not death but armchair invalidism for Mattie, incurable lameness for him, and suffering for them both under Zeena’s harsh care. (Murad, 1983: 99)

Ethan tries so hard to obey the rules of society and his own moral principles, that in the end he loses both Mattie and the opportunity to live the life he desired for so long. Instead, he lives the rest of his life like a zombie, with no meaning or purpose. The narrator is the first person to whom Ethan had spoken in a long time, probably because he realized that he could have been like him, he could have lived the life he was dreaming about.

During their awakenings, both Ethan and Edna believe that social conventions do not allow them to be who they truly are, which is why both attempt to break free from the chains of their respective societies. Edna's reaction to her awakening is rebellion against everything that hinders her independence. In a way, Edna succeeds in her attempt to break free, since she keeps her identity and freedom by committing suicide. She frees herself from social oppression, but the price for freedom is dear – her own life.

Ethan, on the other hand, does not succeed in his attempt to break free. Unlike Edna's, Ethan's awakening has not made him rebel against social conventions. On the contrary, he remains loyal to them until the end. Even his suicide attempt fails because of his sense of morality. In the end, Ethan remains a slave of social conventions, and loses his identity and dreams for good.

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