

The Power of Words: The Use of Language in *Ethan Frome*

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To my husband, Scott—thank you for your endless support and encouragement throughout the completion of this thesis, and thank you for not allowing me to take the alternative route. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Ava, who completed the entirety of the thesis process with me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Language is significant as a basis for and the advancement of civilization, influencing all facets of life: trade, religion, education, and predominantly, communication. Written and spoken words are mediums of communication rooted deeply in human nature and are intricately connected to the Divine nature of God, the institutor and originator of language. Due to man's sinfulness, there is a complex relationship between one's language and one's intended meaning. Perfect communication cannot exist, but this reality and man's finiteness do not purge language and words of their meaning; rather, it makes the relationship between the author, the text, the reader, and the world more complex. Literature still communicates meaning. Language has been divinely instituted by God, and mankind has been given the ability to communicate meaning is both a gift and a responsibility. In the Garden of Eden, Adam was given the responsibility to use language to name the animals. Scholarly research bears responsibility as well: the opportunity to analyze literature responsibly and to ascertain an author's intended meaning. As a text, what literature communicates is an integral part of the ongoing debate surrounding the meaning of language, and, necessarily, is an integral part of not only responsible scholarly research but on a much larger scale, it is part of being an educated reader. If meaning is not located in language and literature, then language as a form of communication is hackneyed; understanding is merely a product of chance, and authorial intent is both unknowable and irrelevant. These issues are directly related to the credibility of language, and as language continues to be debased, it is imperative to study literary works like *Ethan Frome*, a novel which emphasizes the power of language and

the truth which language can convey. *Ethan Frome's* powerful message regarding the power of language contributes to the substantiation of language and literature.

The current trend in English scholarship, which glorifies the reader and minimizes the text and the language contained within, can be attributed to the movement from structuralism to post-structuralism (deconstruction). As the reader has become the determiner of meaning, the power inherent in language is jeopardized and objectivity is lost; language itself is situated at the center of this controversial debate. Terry Eagleton, in his work, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, comments on this shift and illustrates the direct connection between tenets of deconstructionist theory and indeterminacy:

The movement from structuralism to post-structuralism is in part, as Barthes himself has phrased it, a movement from 'work' to 'text'. It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning. (120)

Some literary critics still emphasize and defend the meaning inherent in language and literature; however, deconstructionist tenets dominate the conversation and emphasize the emptiness and utter meaninglessness of words due to the insufficiency of language itself. The deconstructionist approach views all literature as unstable, intertextual; there are no definite boundaries and no scientific objectivity in its approach, effectively disassociating political and historical influences from texts (119). Deconstruction emerged during a time of extreme political contrasts and views all systematic thought as suspect and all conceptual meaning as repressive; all structure is viewed with skepticism, all meaning

becomes subject to the interpretation of the reader (116; 123-24). Structuralists managed to demystify language and make meaning less of a private affair or divine revelation. Structuralism's scientific emphasis on form and the meaning which lies between the signified and the signifier, however, led to the next step taken by the deconstructionists: the conclusion that there is no meaning between the signified and the signifier. The reader became merely a transcendental subject (no longer an individual) absolved from all limiting social determinants or historical change, which opened the door to an actual rewriting of history (126-27). This shift has infiltrated the university and affected theories of language and literary criticism, and the consequences of this shift outside of the university are just as pervasive and detrimental. In *Modern Literary Theory*, editor Philip Rice comments on the shift noted above: "This shift, sometimes referred to as post-structuralism (though it is more than that), inaugurated a period of radical questioning of all the previously dominant categories of modernity: the relationship between language and the world, the nature of subjectivity, the possibility of knowledge and the nature and function of the aesthetic" (177). If language itself does not contain meaning, if meaning cannot be "nailed down," (120) then meaning becomes subjective, dependent upon the reader.

Complexities related to language are not limited to an understanding of language itself but exist in the nature of literature, its universal subject matter: life. Language is "a socially generative phenomenon," and it is the foundation necessary for authorship to exist. One of the unique aspects of language, its "essence," is how it is able to be both "basically social and intensely individual" (Rosenblatt 20). Eagleton makes another important connection between language and humanity in his work *Literary Theory: An*

Introduction: “When we understand the ‘intentions’ of a piece of language, we interpret it as being in some sense *oriented*, structured to achieve certain effects; and none of this can be grasped apart from the practical conditions in which the language operates. It is to see language as a practice rather than as an object; and there are of course no practices without human subjects” (99). Attempting to understand the authorial intentions behind *Ethan Frome* leads one to believe that it is indeed “oriented” and “structured,” (99) rooted in the power of language. Ethan Frome’s story powerfully affects the reader. God himself uses stories to reveal abstract truths because “[t]he beginning of human knowledge is through the senses,” located in the realm of reality, the physical material world (O’Connor 67); and because mankind is created *Imago Dei*, man creates. Written language, specifically literature, is communicated primarily through the genre of the novel, a medium which reflects universal truths about humankind, manifest in the written words of the novel, and truths are evident in the characters’ speeches which are messages constructed of words. Truths are both socially recognizable and, as Rosenblatt states, “intensely individual” (20). The complexity of language and literature has led to the myriad of interpretations and theories regarding language’s meaning. Consequently, schools of criticism are also multifaceted in their attempts to bring clarity and answers to the numerous questions surrounding language.

With this abundance of literary critics, each with his or her own personal biases, critical preferences, and critical allegiances, objectivity in criticism becomes infinitely more complex. On a larger scale, all readers bring unique attitudes and presuppositions to literature and to their understanding of language. Nina Baym’s article, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” makes an

important point regarding the relationship between readers and texts; she notes that criticism is that which gives a name to the process which all readers apply to texts: “[W]e never read American literature directly or freely, but always through the perspective allowed by theories. Theories account for the inclusion and exclusion of texts in anthologies, and theories account for the way we read them” (123). Each reader, whether a distinguished literary critic or an individual reading something for the first time, operates under presuppositions and from diverse perspectives. Whether identified or not, readers bring to texts and incorporate into their frameworks for criticism presuppositions related to authorial intent. Annette Kolodny states in “Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism,” that “what we are taught to read well and with pleasure, when we are young, predisposes us to certain specific kinds of adult reading tastes. For the professional literary critic, the process may be no different, but it is at least more conscious” (11). Baym reminds her readers that it is impossible to read a text completely objectively; and equally important, she notes the crucial role that theories have been given. Baym’s statement regarding imperfect objectivity in reading reflects a similar view, a view first posited by Derrida, which is the idea that meaning in “‘Literature’” does not exist apart from criticism (Rice 179). Derrida’s ideas have greatly influenced current deconstructionist critics’ thought patterns. Literary criticism and its language theories reflect the ontological and epistemological questions assigned to language, those intricately woven into the language of literature. Trends in literary theory are built upon conjecture related to language: current literary theory reflects the debasement of language.

Schools of criticism have underlying tenets which are specific to its language theories, and the emphasis each school of criticism places on the author, text, reader, and world determines where meaning lies, if meaning is obtainable. The terms author, text, reader, and world are defined differently¹ within these schools of criticism, and the definitions affect the schools' attitudes and presuppositions related to language and literature: "Although any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories, we shall see, exhibit a discernable orientation toward only one. That is, a critic tends to derive from one of these terms his principal categories for defining, classifying, and analyzing a work of art, as well as the major criteria by which he judges its value" (Abrams 6). Deconstructionist² criticism at its basest level states that meaning in language is indeterminate, and the influence of deconstructionist thinkers has greatly impacted the study of literature as well as the definition of literature:

For literary criticism the implications of deconstruction, and of Derrida's work in general, are profound. Literary studies has traditionally been concerned with the interpretation of texts, with revealing the 'meaning' behind the text . . . If the meaning of the text is unstable, undecidable, then the project of literary interpretation is compromised; interpretation is doomed to endlessly repeat the interpretive act, never able to reach that final explanation and understanding of the text—it is haunted by the continual play of difference. (Rice 183)

Deconstructionist theory places the emphasis on the reader rather than on the author, and on the world rather than on the text. The role of the author and the relationship between the author and the text have become irrelevant. For the deconstructionist, criticism itself

is more important than the work of literature, and literary critics, readers, have become more important than authorial intent.

Deconstructionists limit the role of the author and remove the author from the context for literary analysis. Once the author is removed, the existence of objective truth in literature becomes jeopardized. An example of the connection between the removal of the author and a decrease in objectivity is seen in Louise Rosenblatt's work, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Rosenblatt is concerned with limitations on both the text and the reader, but not the author (34). Her work exemplifies a deconstructionist mode of thought: acclaim for the role of the reader and disdain for objectivity. Not only is the author's role lost in the shadow of the reader's presence, but her work also illustrates the deep-seated relationship between a loss of authorial intent and a loss of objectivity. To fully understand Rosenblatt's viewpoints, one must understand how Rosenblatt defines "poem"; she argues that the poem, "the whole category of aesthetic transactions between readers and texts . . . is not an object or ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text" (12). The "transactio[n]" is a crucial part of Rosenblatt's overall thesis. Independently of the reader, the text does not exist. Additionally, her position does not acknowledge the original 'compenetration' (12) of the poem, that of the author and the text; the author is not considered a reader. As Rosenblatt continues to articulate her position, it is clear that when she loses sight of the author, she next loses sight of objectivity. The lines become blurred, the personhood of the author is threatened, and objectivity is threatened: "Sharp demarcation between objective and subjective becomes irrelevant, since they are, rather, aspects of the same transaction—the reader looks to the

text, and the text is activated by the reader. A 'subjective' response assumes an 'object' at the other transactional pole; it is better to avoid the use of either in characterizing the reading and criticism of the literary work" (18). If the author is removed from the context for criticism, objective authority is lost; criticism becomes personal and subjective, and meaning becomes indeterminate.

If one removes objectivity and suspects all reason and logic to be biased, then the only thing that matters is the reader's perception of truth, not what is truth. Gertrude Himmelfarb, author of "The New Advocacy and the Old," expounds upon the loss of objectivity she has observed within the university and the relationship between the loss of authority and the loss of objectivity championed by Rosenblatt. Himmelfarb explains that although advocacy has been a controversial issue within the academic community many times before, for the first time it is meeting with broad acceptance from many professors in many departments, "and not in the name of truth but in a show of disdain for the very idea of truth" (86). Denying reason, objectivity, and truth in the academic realm as not only unattainable, but also undesirable, has led to an embrace of the postmodernist agenda. The subjective is favored in the academic realm. The shift from the traditional scholarly voice to the personal voice is further evidence of this shift: a new type of advocacy is advanced, the professor's agenda. The only means of interpreting texts, since objectivity and truth have been removed, is via the professors' motivating interests at the time. Removing the author from the context of literary criticism and establishing the reader as context are both equally dangerous; each leads to a substitution of self in place of authority: "In the absence of any idea—or ideal—of truth, objectivity, or disinterested knowledge, how can scholarly merit be judged?" (88); the answer is, it cannot. Replacing

the logos with the pathos diminishes the importance of the text and exalts the feelings, emotions, and personal experiences of the advocate. Without objectivity, there are no standards for judging the professor's agenda. Himmelfarb goes on to state that if continued unchecked, "[t]his is a prescription not for academic freedom but for intellectual nihilism" (88). The evolution from the authority of the author to the personal "I" of the reader has consequences which transcend the classroom, the English department, *and* the university. Himmelfarb's observations further support how the loss of the author as part of the context for literary criticism has contributed to the loss of objectivity and meaning in language.

Objectivity requires critics to analyze the dynamic relationships between the author, the reader, the text, and the world, but in addition to the analysis and study of these essential relationships, it is imperative to acknowledge that meaning is intrinsic in language because of its divine creation. Meaning is not found solely in the author, the reader, the text or the world, but it is located in and ascertained through literature. Language has both social and personal implications because it is intricately connected to humanity and distinguishes mankind from all other life forms; written language, literature, connects mankind through its permanence.

Literature uses the medium of language to unite an author and a reader, which makes the relationship between the author, the reader, and the text essential. Deconstructionists, however, deemphasize the author and minimize the relationship between the author and the text. Kevin L. Vanhoozer clarifies the importance of the relationship between that of the author and the text. Chapter five of Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in This Text* points out just how fundamental the relationship between the

author and the text is. Vanhoozer supports Ricoeur's³ "mediating position between the tradition that focuses on the author's intent and Derrida's undoing of it" (215).

Vanhoozer notes that "meaning of a text emerges only against the backdrop of the author's intended action and the background of the author's context" (252); the author as a part of the larger historical context of the text must be examined, but so too must the author's intentions. There is an inherent relationship between author and text: "we only understand what someone has done when we have some sense of what they thought they were doing and their reasons for doing it . . . To inquire into what the text means is to ask what the author has done in, with, and through the text" (216; 218). If the author is removed from the context for criticism, then criticism is not objective and meaning becomes contingent upon the reader. Not only does Vanhoozer note the importance of authorial intent and objectivity, but he also defends the relationship between an author and reader; he insists that shared meaning is possible through language and obtainable when reading. Language is "inextricab[ly]" linked to humanity⁴ (214). Writing itself, he asserts, *is* the medium for shared meaning:

When language constitutes a world of its own, it no longer appears as a medium between mind and world . . . Texts are able to preserve at a distance because writing preserves discourse. Writing, in other words, does not alienate authors from readers but makes shared meaning possible. Indeed, it is humanity's chief resource for overcoming spatial, temporal, and cultural distance. (214)

God himself uses literature, the Bible, as a means of communication, a way to reach man and teach His abstract truths and divine nature to a fallen world. As a creator of literature,

man does so because “When it comes to having a need to orient all beliefs within a story, mankind is incorrigible. And we do this for the same reason that we stick to the ground when we walk—this is how our Creator decided to do it” (Wilson n. pag.). Due to the fallen nature of man, he cannot create perfection; only traces of truth can be reflected in man’s works. Yet literature, constructed of language, can contain truth consistent with the Bible, the ultimate source of truthful revelation. If one does not subscribe to the idea that truth can be found in literature, however, then one is left with the precarious conclusion that the reader, mankind, is the maker of meaning, a grave consequence.

According to Rosenblatt and the deconstructionists, literature can have different meanings depending on whom is reading a text and when he or she reads it: truth becomes dependent upon an infinite range of variables. Evidence of this dependency is illustrated in Rosenblatt’s work: “As with the elements of an electric circuit, each component of the reading process functions by virtue of the presence of the others. A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event, a different poem” (14). The most important refutation against this indeterminacy of meaning in language is the origination of language itself, its divine authorship. Language can convey truth because God instituted it. John 1:1 states that “[i]n the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.” Therefore, if language is important because God instituted it and became the word, then texts which contain language are important because they may contain truth: truth is independent of the author, the reader, the text, or the world. Deconstructionists harp upon the miscommunication and misunderstanding which can occur in language; this miscommunication and misunderstanding, however, are not flaws

within language itself, but reflections of man's depravity and finiteness. Proponents of language who maintain that meaning is inherent in language are not blind to its complexities nor to the reality that there are numerous variables which create misunderstanding and miscommunication in language: "Many ambiguities, resulting from distance of the reader in time or cultural context, can often be dispersed by good scholarship" (Vanhoozer 281). Asserting that confusion and misinterpretation exist does not necessitate that all meaning is indeterminate.

Language is complex, but this does not annihilate truth and meaning in literature. Renowned author, John Searle, expounds upon the power, functions, and roles of language, and although *Mind, Language, and Society* and *Consciousness and Language*, two of Searle's works, both fail to recognize God as the Creator and institutor of language, nevertheless, they defend the power of language. Searle substantiates the importance of language and upholds inherent meaning; he opposes the deconstructionist tenet of indeterminacy while clearly illustrating an implicit link between language and one's conscious. Searle's work lends further support to the position which maintains that truth can be inherent in language. In *Mind, Language, and Society*, Searle defines and illustrates the importance of illocutionary acts, those acts which are the "minimal complete unit[s] of human linguistic communication. Whenever we talk or write to each other, we are performing illocutionary acts . . . When the speaker says something, and means something by what he says, and tries to communicate what he means to a hearer, he will, if successful, have performed an illocutionary act⁵" (136-37). Illocutionary acts, intentionality, and meaning are distinctively aligned. Authors perform illocutionary acts: "unit[s] of meaning in communication" (137), and furthermore, Searle points out that

illocutionary acts must be understood as separate from the results of the illocutionary act itself. An illocutionary act can “orde[r],” “persuade,” “convince,” and “recoun[t]”; however, the results of these actions are “perlocutionary” (137). The author behind the illocutionary act may or may not be successful in achieving his desired effect, but this does not lead to the conclusion that the meaning is indeterminate; rather, illocutionary acts defend intentionality and meaning in communication. Searle elaborates further upon the important connection between intentionality and meaning: “The key to understanding meaning is this: meaning is a derived form of intentionality. The original or intrinsic intentionality of a speaker’s thought is transferred to words, sentences, marks, symbols, and so on. If uttered meaningfully, those words, sentences marks, and symbols now have intentionality derived from the speaker’s thoughts” (141). An author’s statements, recorded in his works of literature can successfully relate his or her intended meaning, which can be comprehended by readers. Communication is possible in writing, and understanding is possible in writing and reading.

Literature is a powerful medium of communication, and the enduring effect that *Ethan Frome* has on its audience is inseparable from the power of its language and the language of its characters. *Ethan Frome* depicts the story of Ethan Frome and his wife Zeena. Set in the rural New England community of Starkfield, Massachusetts, Ethan’s story is recounted as the novel unfolds, revealed through the eyes of the narrator, an outsider travelling through Starkfield, as well as through the insight the narrator receives from the townsfolk and his stay on the Frome farm. The narrator becomes consumed with understanding the history which lies behind Ethan’s physical deformities, and the weather creates the perfect opportunity for Ethan and the narrator to become acquainted.

Consequently, the narrator is taken to the Frome farm where he is able to more fully understand the tragedy of Ethan's malformation. After the death of Ethan's mother, Ethan and Zeena Pierce, his cousin who came to the farm to help nurse Ethan's mother, are married. Zeena positions herself at the head of the household, and she maintains this position throughout the novel. Ethan is filled with contempt and unhappiness, yet he is never able to escape from Zeena's control. Ethan toils on the farm where he barely turns a profit, and any profits he does make must go towards Zeena's doctor bills. Zeena exploits her sickness, a subset of her power, throughout the novel. Zeena determines that she needs someone around the house to do the chores necessary to maintain a farm, so she sends for her cousin Mattie. Mattie's disposition is contrasted with that of Zeena's: Mattie is young, cheerful, and submissive to Ethan. Ethan finds himself falling in love with Mattie, and he desires to leave Zeena for Mattie. When Zeena, aware of the situation between Ethan and Mattie, sends Mattie away, Ethan is forced to make a decision. Ethan, however, is unable to confront the reality of his situation. Ethan is never able to successfully confront Zeena and obtain a position of authority in the household. Ethan and Mattie, faced with Zeena's ultimatum that Mattie leave the farm, decide that suicide is their best alternative. Ethan and Mattie's suicide attempt fails, however, and leaves both of them physically deformed. At the close of the novel, Ethan and Mattie are still living at the Frome farm under Zeena's control. The tragic ending of Wharton's novel epitomizes mankind's condition apart from Christ.

Ethan Frome, while not written by someone claiming to be a "Christian," contains language which clearly illustrates the importance of language while substantiating truths about mankind's finiteness and depravity. Consistent with good literature, that is,

literature which wrestles sin and truth, *Ethan Frome* unites the concrete physical material reality with abstract truth, emulating the Incarnation of Jesus: flesh and word. At first glance, however, Wharton's novel may be defined as a pessimistic, deterministic portrayal of humanity and the world, and Wharton has been criticized for her tragic ending and her lack of morality by several critics, most notably by Lionel Trilling in his essay "A Morality of Inertia." Trilling asserts in his essay that Wharton's work is "factitious" and "cruel": "Whenever the characters of a story suffer, they do so at the behest of their author—the author is responsible for their suffering and he must justify his cruelty by the seriousness of his moral intention"; Trilling expounds further, stating that *Ethan Frome* is "a dead book," lacking "moral reverberation" (127). Trilling acknowledges that Wharton's work is memorable, in that its images and characters remain ingrained in one's memory, yet he asserts that Wharton's intentions for this novel included nothing analogous to morality (126); her depictions of suffering are devoid of purpose, inconclusive. Trilling's argument focuses on the "suffering" and "cruelty" (126) present in the novel, yet fails to recognize the all-encompassing truths present in Wharton's presentation of suffering: it is precisely her macabre descriptions and dark representations of evil which force the reader to stand back and reflect upon the characters' actions, thus considering objective truth. As a reader, one assumes the position of judge and critic regarding Wharton's fatalistic ending. At the end of the novel, determinations must be made. Either Ethan is justified or he is not; either it is acceptable to commit adultery and suicide or it is not; either there should be consequences for Ethan's actions or there should not be; either Wharton's punishes the characters too severely or she does not. Wharton confronts these issues from a secular vantage point and

illustrates the depravity and reality of man's nature. Man is depraved and is capable, even culpable, of committing the same sins depicted in this novel, and there is indeed "moral reverberation." Wharton's novel, filled with language, contains truths which reveal powerful statements about human nature apart from Christ: mankind is not and *cannot* be fulfilled through anything of this world. Ethan ultimately seeks a love which will fulfill all his desires, a void only Christ can fill.

The harsh realities contained within this novel combined with its tragic ending affect and de-center its readers, causing them to question reality and confront objective truth. Another critic of Wharton's work, Elizabeth Ammons, concludes in her article, "Ethan Frome as Fairy Tale," that Zeena is the witch in the Ethan Frome fairytale. While Ammons makes several interesting parallels between *Ethan Frome*, the novel, and fairy tales, her conclusion that Zeena is the witch contributes further to the accurate depiction of human nature evident throughout this novel: "Ethan Frome: Wharton's modern fairy tale for adults, while true to traditional models in the way it teaches a moral about 'real' life at the same time that it addresses elemental fears (e.g., the fear of death, the fear of being abandoned), does not conform to the genre's typical dénouement. The lovers do not live happily ever after. The witch wins" (147). Ammons points out that this novel does not end happily ever after. It portrays, rather, a realistic ending, rooted in the truth of man's depraved condition: deep down inside every creature is the same "witch" Zeena epitomizes. Zeena and Ethan Frome personify the fortune and fate of a woman and man separated from their Creator.

There is a strong consensus between critics and scholars that *Ethan Frome* contains stark contrasts to Wharton's personal experiences and relationships, experiences

which undoubtedly affected the novel, yet the hopelessness, futility, and despair depicted in this novel are more than literary devices or even instances of association between Wharton as individual and Wharton as author. They hold deeper significance: they reflect biblical truth. Harkening back to the important connections Vanhoozer makes between an author and his or her work, Alfred Kazin suggests that the fatalistic elements in *Ethan Frome* are not simply manifestations of Wharton's subconscious. He notes in his work, "The Theme of Illicit Love," an observation similar to that of Ammons'; however, Kazin shifts his focus slightly. His thesis concentrates more on the connection between Wharton's life and work, how her personal life impacted her work. Kazin states that "what fascinated her [Wharton] about Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie was as always a chance to display her underlying sense of fatality" (105). Richard Lawson, author of *Edith Wharton*, also notes that *Ethan Frome* is a manifestation of Wharton's life (67). Lawson comments on how the important events which occurred in Wharton's personal life during the work's creation affected the contents of the novel: "In a time of despair over her husband and her marriage, over her relationship to Walter Berry and her love affair with Morton Fullerton, Edith Wharton wrote—or rewrote—*Ethan Frome*" (67). Kazin and Lawson are not alone. R.W.B. Lewis, in an excerpt from his work *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, also emphasizes the connections between character, setting, plot and Wharton's own life (308). The author is intricately connected to his or her work, and when determining meaning, the author cannot be removed from the context for literary criticism.

As the author and creator of this novel, Wharton is intricately connected to its subject matter; therefore, the intentions which lie behind Zeena's powerful female role

are acutely connected to authorial intent. Tied to the powerful use of language and powerful truths is the novel's main character, Zeena. Her powerful role in this novel has been analyzed from many diverse perspectives, and various aspects of her characterization are credited with this power. Specifically, most critics attribute Zeena's power to either her gender or her sickness, and the complex issue of Zeena's powerful use of language in *Ethan Frome* is further enhanced by feminist theory: "Feminist theory can be divided into two distinct varieties . . . The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with woman as writer—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with its history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (Rice 147).

Specifically, in this thesis, the second type of feminist theory which is related to the woman, Edith Wharton, as the writer and "producer" (147) of themes is essential.

Literature is social; it is a common bond which unifies humanity. Wharton's novel contains cogent realities about society and the power of language within society. An article published in *The Sociological Quarterly*, written by Mary D. Lagerway and Gerald E. Markle comments on the importance of feminism in regards to Wharton's work: "In recent years, feminist scholars have given her works increased attention for their detail and accurate depictions of the restricted lives of women around the turn of the last century. Wharton rejected the popular genre of her day: the female domestic novel and the male pastoral. Instead, she examined the tensions within social bonds and between individuals and society" (122). Understanding the importance of Zeena's power in relation to her gender is indispensable.

Wharton gives power to the lead female character, Zeena: the lead character in this novel, a woman, silences her husband by using silence, but also speech and body

language, and her emasculation of Ethan and supremacy in their marriage is intricately linked to her use of language. A feminist critic, H len  Cixous, discusses women’s writing in her piece titled “The Laugh of the Medusa”: “I shall speak about women’s writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away . . . Woman must put herself into the text” (875). From a feminist perspective, Zeena’s power is directly related to the reasons she is successful and Wharton’s motives for giving Zeena the power. Feminist criticism acknowledges that women have an important societal role; unfortunately, most feminist critics, and even Wharton, avoid biblical implications regarding woman’s distinct role: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Genesis 2:18). Nevertheless, Cixous and Wharton formulate incredibly important statements regarding the power of women.

Feminist and psychoanalytic theories are closely related—both in this novel and in practice. In the introduction to the section pertaining to feminism in *Modern Literary Theory*, editors Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh comment on this relationship: “Psychoanalysis has been important to feminism because it tries to explain why people invest in behaviours which seem irrational, counter-productive and against their best interests . . . Psychoanalysis provided a vocabulary for the description of defences such as splitting and Freud had shown in his work on phobias” (145). “Zeena had always been what Starkfield called ‘sickly,’” and this characterization of Zeena has lead many critics to examine sickness in relation to Zeena’s power (Wharton 35). Critics have suggested neurosis as one possible solution to Zeena’s seemingly irrational phobias: why it is that Zeena invests so much of her time and energy into sickness. Eagleton discusses Freud’s

theory of psychoanalysis and its connections to neurosis, stating that “we must repress some of our tendencies to pleasure and gratification . . . We are prepared to put up with repression as long as we see that there is something in it for us; if too much is demanded of us, however, we are likely to fall sick. This form of sickness is known as neurosis” (131-32). Zeena does repress some of her “tendencies for pleasure and gratification” (131)—even spurning sexual intimacy with her husband. Zeena is willing to forgo pleasure because she sees that “there is something in it for [her]”: control (132). Zeena does not become overwhelmed by demands, however; she does not “fall” into sickness (132). Her conscious decision to forgo pleasure in order to maintain control is evidence that Zeena does not have neurosis. Lagerway and Markle’s article states that “[a]s Zeena becomes aware of their [Ethan and Mattie’s] attraction for each other, she claims the rights of her sick role to exert her only power; her doctor, she claims, has told her to replace Mattie with a more competent housekeeper” (123). Even Lagerway and Markle, supporters of Zeena’s powerful sick role acknowledge that “[i]nterestingly, Zeena maintains some control over which role-related responsibilities she relinquishes and which she maintains” (126). Zeena does employ sickness, but sickness is not Zeena’s only power. Zeena is not consumed by her sickness: *she* controls her sickness; *she* determines when and how she wants to utilize her sickness; this is quite different from the definition of neurosis above. While undeniably imperative in a thorough analysis of Zeena, neither gender nor sickness is the key to understanding her power. Gender and sickness are subsets of her power. Zeena is only able to obtain certain power from her gender and her sickness. Her sickness is only a means of power, not her source of power.

Language is foundational to communication, and throughout the novel, as the characters react to and become involved in conflicts, Zeena, Ethan, and Mattie each reflect specific theories of communication which help define their uses of communication within the larger framework of language. In *Managing Conflict through Communication*, authors Dudley D. Cahn and Ruth Anna Abigail state that “Researchers have identified five different conflict strategies that people use in problematic situations” (58). Zeena is the aggressive communicator throughout the novel, and she represents a “competi[tive]” (59) theory of communication, which is defined as “the ability to force one’s will (i.e. wants, needs, or desires) on another person through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts done in a way that violates socially acceptable standards, carried out with the intention or the perceived intention of inflicting physical or psychological pain, injury, or suffering” (61). This type of communication-conflict style also has specific physical markers: “invading posture,” “loud[ness],” “abrasive[ness],” “intimidati[on],” and “sarcas[m].” Ethan’s nonassertive and passive-aggressive communication styles are contrasted with that of Zeena’s. As a nonassertive communicator, Ethan avoids confrontation: “We define nonassertive communication as the ability to avoid a conflict altogether or accommodate to the desires of the other person through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts that conceal one’s opinions and feelings” (60); Ethan’s indecisiveness and low self esteem are the main markers for this type of communication style. In addition to his nonassertive style of communication, he employs passive-aggressive communication: “[T]he ability to impose one’s will on others through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts that appear to avoid an open conflict or accommodate to the desires of others, but in actuality are carried out with the intention (or perceived intention) of inflicting physical

or psychological pain, injury, or suffering (65). Mattie also exhibits a passive-aggressive style of communication, yet, additionally, she has moments of assertive communication styles, which is “the ability to speak up for one’s interests, concerns, or rights in a way that does not interfere with the interests or infringes on the rights of others . . . the appropriate expression of one’s point of view” (67-8). Zeena’s mastery of language is essential to the development of the plot throughout the entire novel, and her primary source of power lies in her ability to manipulate Ethan and Mattie; to accomplish this, she uses an aggressive style of language communication.

Zeena’s powerful use of language can also be analyzed through Kenneth Burke’s understanding of the relationship between language and rhetoric⁶: “‘the use of language in such a way as to produce a desired impression upon the reader or hearer.’ Hence, accepting the lexicographer’s definition, he [Burke] concluded that ‘effective literature could be nothing else but rhetoric’” (qtd. in Nichols 255). To further understand Burke’s view of language, it is important to note his definition of rhetoric. According to Burke, ‘Rhetoric [comprises] both the *use* of persuasive resources . . . and the *study* of them.’ The ‘basic function of rhetoric’ is the ‘use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents’” (36). Zeena has a desired effect no matter how she chooses to use language. In section two of his work, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke analyzes the history of rhetoric, specifically in regard to its relationship to persuasion; he outlines the views of such orators as Cicero, Aristotle, and Augustine. Zeena understands that language is persuasive. “As for ‘persuasion’ itself: one can imagine including purely logical demonstration as a part of it; or one might distinguish between appeals to reason and appeals to emotion, sentiment, ignorance, prejudice, and the like” (Burke 51);

Zeena's power lies in her ability to determine when and how to appeal to her listener.

Additionally, she understands the powerful relationship between language and one's subconscious. Zeena has mastered how to speak, which words to speak, when to speak, when to remain silent, and when to utilize body language.

Chapter 2

Zeena and Ethan

Throughout the novel Zeena asserts and maintains her position at the head of their household, and Zeena and Ethan's roles in the novel, specifically their roles as wife and husband, are intricately connected to their use of language. Zeena's powerful, cold, critical language mirrors her barren, callous character and her aggressive style of communication. On the other hand, Ethan's weak, inept language contrasts his powerful physical stature and represents his passive-aggressive style of communication. In *Ethan Frome*, there is a deep-seated relationship between language and the human psyche, and while this relationship is directly associated to Zeena's power, it also contributes to a defense of language. Zeena's source of power in this novel comes from her flexibility and adaptability of language; her power is not limited to verbal language, the presence or absence of spoken words; she also employs body language: staring, posture, even glances, elements of nonverbal language. Zeena's language reflects her character, both complex and powerful: "In so small a space as the Fromes', patterns of human behavior become very complex" (Fryer 168). Ethan is incapable of utilizing language advantageously. Ethan's character is sharply contrasted with Zeena's, because unlike Zeena, Ethan does not have control of his language. Ethan's, inarticulate, uncalculated, incompetent uses of language are contrasted with Zeena's powerful uses of language. Wharton's novel is an example of powerful rhetoric, and her main character, Zeena, understands the nature of language and uses rhetoric to produce action throughout the novel.

Zeena's first objective in the earliest stages of her relationship with Ethan is to use language to acquire a marriage proposal. Foundationally, chapter four serves to guide the reader, and illustrates how central themes of the novel, desire, gender roles, and marriage, are vitally connected to Zeena's power. In this chapter Zeena's power and manipulation is at its zenith, and one can see her complete control of Ethan. The narrator reveals the nature of Zeena and Ethan's relationship: Zeena was seeking a husband whom she could control, and Ethan was looking for someone to talk to. As the novel commences, many years have passed since Zeena and Ethan first met, and the narrator is relaying the story as he learns the details of Ethan Frome's history. Harkening back to when Zeena and Ethan first met, the narrator learns that it was during the months which Ethan's mother was ill that Zeena first arrived at the Frome farm. Zeena was asked to come to the farm to nurse Ethan's mother, and Ethan, relieved to hear human speech in the house again, becomes attached to the concept of dialogue: "It was only when she [Ethan's mother] drew toward her last illness, and his cousin Zenobia Pierce came over from the next valley to help him nurse her, that human speech was heard again in the house" (Wharton 69). Consequently, it is after Ethan's mother's death, when Ethan, overwhelmed with the idea that he will once again have to live in silence, asks Zeena to marry him: "His mother had been a talker in her day, but after her 'trouble' the sound of her voice was seldom heard, though she had not lost the power of speech. Sometimes, in the long winter evenings . . . in desperation [he] asked why she didn't 'say something,' she would lift a finger and answer: 'Because I'm listening'" (69). Fryer comments on Ethan's "loneliness": "[O]nce his mother had fallen ill, the loneliness of the house [was] even more oppressive than that of the fields, Zenobia's volubility must have been 'music

in his ears' after the mortal silence of his long imprisonment" (159). At this point, Ethan obtains something he believes that he desires, companionship and communication, and he does so through language; however, this is not an example of Ethan's persuasive use of language; rather, it further supports Zeena's powerful persuasive language. Zeena had ulterior motives for establishing a permanent residence on the Frome farm; Zeena is the aggressor; she pursues her own desires. At this point, Zeena has been staying at the Frome farm long enough to be familiar with Ethan's weaknesses she plans to exploit.

Ethan is both submissive and responsive to Zeena's commands. Zeena must be in control of Ethan at all times, and she understands that Ethan is incapable of using language as a method of defense, and his passive-aggressive style of communication contribute to his indecisiveness. Thus, after they are married, she is able to use language more fully to emasculate him, empowering herself, obtaining what she desires next: power over Ethan *in* their marriage: "His manhood was humbled by the part he was compelled to play" (Wharton 139-40). Zeena continues to use language to satisfy her needs and desires, another marker of her verbally-aggressive communication (Cahn and Abigail 61). Zeena, however, does not find it necessary to respond to Ethan: "He listened for Zeena's step, and, not hearing it, called her name up the stairs. She did not answer, and after a moment's hesitation he went up and opened her door" (107). Ethan is trained to respond to Zeena who does not feel she needs to respond to Ethan. One critic who argues that Zeena is clearly in control of the household is Judith Fryer, author of "The Spaces of *Ethan Frome*." Fryer notes that in the Frome household "Ethan is trapped . . . in this house which seems an image of his own shrunken body, but which is really Zenobia's domain: he moves from her bedroom, where he lies beside her without

moving, staring at the ceiling, to her kitchen, where he eats her meager portions and listens not to conversation but to querulous droning” (165). Another critic notes that Zeena has completely “bur[ied] his manhood” (Bernard 182). Not only does Ethan’s emasculation affect his behavior, as noted by Fryer, but it affects his ability to use language articulately. Lev Raphael, in his article titled “From Edith Wharton’s Prisoners of Shame,” expounds upon the reasons behind Ethan’s inept use of language and assigns blame to the emasculation he undergoes throughout the novel. Ethan’s shame at his “inadequacies as a man,” contributes to his inability to employ language effectively: “[S]hame itself is an impediment to speech” (qtd. in Raphael 175). Once Zeena has taken control of the household, she maintains her control utilizing emasculation, and Ethan’s shame, in turn, affects his ability to use language as a defense. As a marker of nonassertive communication, Ethan’s low self esteem is perpetuated through Zeena’s verbally-aggressive communication. Both emasculation and demeaning language produce submissive responsive behavior from Ethan, but they are not the only forms of control Zeena exploits.

Zeena controls the finances, and accordingly, controls Ethan’s freedom, and Zeena’s “sickness” is the medium by which she is able to accomplish this. Financially, Zeena and Ethan are not well off, a situation which is frequently a topic of dissension. Ethan works hard in an attempt to provide financial stability, yet, no matter how hard he works, he is unable to control their financial situation. Marriage is only a legality for the Fromes; there is no indication that Zeena and Ethan have ever had an intimate relationship on any level: ““That Frome farm was always ‘bout as bare’s a milkpan when the cat’s been round’”; the farm itself symbolizes the emptiness of their relationship

(Wharton 13). It seems ludicrous, then, that an able-bodied man, denied all forms of intimacy with his wife would remain, yet even before Mattie arrives and Ethan seriously considers leaving Zeena, Zeena's constant drain on Ethan's farm earnings combined with his embedded submissiveness guarantees that Ethan would never have enough money to leave her. Zeena never places them in a position where they cannot pay their bills, yet she always ensures that her medicinal expenditures deplete any additional funds Ethan brings in: evidence of her complete control. Later in the novel when Ethan does contemplate leaving Zeena, he is forced to confront his financial situation: "now he saw that he had not even the money to take her [Mattie] there [west]. Borrowing was out of the question: six months before he had given his only security to raise funds for necessary repairs to the mill . . . There was no way out—none. He was a prisoner for life (134). Zeena is already aware of Ethan's newfound reality.

In everyday conversation Zeena's controlled use of language leaves Ethan defenseless. As illustrated in one fight between Ethan and Zeena, Ethan is able to state what is on his mind, but because his words, and his thoughts, are rash and uncalculated, he has no control over the situation or its outcome. In another instance, Zeena reacts severely to Ethan's proposition that he can work more around the house to help out: "You're neglecting the farm enough already," and this being true, he found no answer' . . . The taunt burned into him" (Wharton 112-13). Zeena's superior use of language defeats Ethan. Ethan cannot sufficiently react to Zeena's logic, wit, or sarcasm: he is left speechless and utterly helpless. She quickly and mercilessly defeats Ethan. Zeena relates her situation to Ethan and discusses the plan that she has already devised for attaining a hired girl. Zeena informs Ethan that the doctor supports this decision: "He [the doctor]

wants I should have a hired girl. He says I oughtn't to have to do a single thing around the house.' . . . Everybody said I was lucky to get a girl to come away out here, and I agreed to give her a dollar extry to make sure'" (111). Zeena does not hesitate to make arrangements which will affect Ethan's living accommodations, nor does she hesitate to spend the extra money. Ethan begins to fume and cannot believe that Zeena would burden them with additional financial expenses: "He had foreseen an immediate demand for money, but not a permanent drain on his scant resources. He no longer believed what Zeena had told him of the supposed seriousness of her state: he saw in her expedition to Bettsbridge only a plot hatched between herself and her Pierce relations to foist on him the cost of a servant" (111); Ethan begins to piece together Zeena's intentions, yet he cannot formulate a logical and rational response; he can only react emotionally "'Oh, Dr. Buck—' Ethan's incredulity escaped in a short laugh. 'Did Dr. Buck tell you how I was to pay her wages?' Her voice rose furiously with his . . . I'd'a' been ashamed to tell *him* that you grudged me the money to get back my health, when I lost it nursing your own mother!' . . . Through the obscurity which hid their faces their thoughts seemed to dart at each other like serpents shooting venom (112). Zeena's calculated and pointed language is contrasted by Ethan's flippant outbursts. As the aggressive communicator, Zeena intentionally "inflict[s] . . . psychological pain, injury or suffering" (Cahn and Abigail 61); therefore, even in a situation where Ethan has a valid reason for articulating his anger, his sarcasm and flippant remarks are no match for Zeena's potent indictment of guilt.

Ethan is faced with a similar situation later in the novel, and in another instance of heightened emotions, Ethan has the opportunity to tell Zeena that their marriage is broken

and irreparable, to tell Zeena that he loves Mattie, and to tell Zeena that he is leaving. Yet confronted with this opportunity to openly state his feelings, the only words that he can utter in defense of his position are an accusation against the cat, a defenseless, languageless creature: “‘I want to know who done this,’ she quavered. At the challenge Ethan turned back into the room and faced her. ‘I can tell you, then. The cat done it’” (127); when confronted with her accusations, he cannot form the words needed to tell Zeena the truth about the pickle dish; he is too spineless, too scared. Ethan is incapable of verbally expressing his defense and he.

Ethan’s cowardice and inept use of language are deeply ingrained in his character; his behavior is cyclical. Ethan has a flashback in chapter four where he remembers a moment in which he asked his mother why she would not speak; he recalls her answer: “Because I’m listening,” a striking parallel to Zeena’s behavior in this chapter (Wharton 69). Zeena’s sickness and associated silence parallel that of Ethan’s mother’s, and while Wharton does not give much information regarding his mother’s power in relation to her silence, his mother’s silence did affect him in a similar way to that of Zeena’s silence. The sick role becomes yet another way for Zeena to assert power over Ethan. The reference to “listening” (69) in this passage is very important. The act of listening is an important distinction between Ethan and Zeena. Zeena silently listens to obtain information which can be used later to her advantage: “Zeena, while he [Ethan] spoke, seemed to be following out some elaborate mental calculation” (114). Ethan, on the other hand, while he is perceptive of both his mother’s and Zeena’s silence, is forced to listen to others because he is incapable of expressing himself through language. Zeena not only chooses her words carefully, but she listens intently; therefore, understanding the mental

aspects related to silence is essential to a complete understanding of Zeena's effective use of silence.

Zeena understands the connection between language and consciousness, the internal and mental component of language; words impact thought processes. Zeena does not only know how to criticize and complain to acquire what she desires, but she knows the powerful effects of silence. Her silence causes Ethan to question the reasons which may lie behind her silence; thus, Ethan becomes consumed with thoughts pertaining to her silence and what it could mean: his thoughts are once again focused and concentrated on Zeena. Searle discusses this relationship between consciousness and intentionality in his work, *Consciousness and Language*. First Searle defines "consciousness" as, "inner, qualitative, subjective states and processes of sentience or awareness . . . It includes all of the enormous variety of the awareness that we think of as characteristic of our waking life" (38). Specifically in regard to language, Searle points out that some conscious states have "intentionality" (44). Language, then, as an element of consciousness, has intentionality: "So let us grant that, in some important sense of 'language,' humans have language, and as far as we know, no other species does. What follows about the mind? Well one thing follows immediately: If there are any intentional states whose possession requires a language, animals cannot have those states, and *a fortiori* they cannot have thought processes reflecting those states" (65). As mentioned earlier, there is no desire or intimacy between Zeena and Ethan, so when Zeena recognizes that her mode of verbal language, in this instance, complaining, is not working and she is no longer effectively controlling Ethan, she transitions to nonverbal language, silence, to maintain control: "When she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to

remedy . . . 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. Of late, however, since he had had reasons for observing her more closely, her silence had begun to trouble him” (Wharton 72). In the above passage, the narrator states that “her silence had begun to trouble him” (72); when Zeena is silent, she is doing so purposefully, intentionally. The most important revelation in the above quote lies in its illustration of how Zeena manipulates Ethan through language to achieve the power she desires. For Zeena, the mental aspect related to silence becomes an effective means of exerting control. Zeena affects Ethan’s thoughts, compelling him to expend energies and faculties determining possible reasons which may lie behind her silence. “Of late there had been other signs of her [Zeena’s] disfavour, as intangible but more disquieting . . . He had supposed her to be asleep, and the sound of her voice had startled him, though she was given to abrupt explosions of speech after long intervals of secretive silence” (36-7). Raphael makes an important statement which supports the power of silence in *Ethan Frome*: “[Zeena’s] power over Ethan manifests itself in critical silence” (178).

Zeena’s power is not limited to spoken words and silence; she also employs body language, an element of nonverbal language which is closely connected to silence. Zeena’s aggressive communication style is reflected in her domineering posture: “aggressive communicators tend to interrupt, subordinate, and stereotype others. They engage in intense, glaring eye contact, put forward an invading posture as they bear down on others, and emit an arrogant air about them” (Cahn and Abigail 62). Zeena’s character is complex and multifaceted, comprised of aspects Ethan cannot even comprehend: “I never knew myself what Zeena thought—I don’t to this day. Nobody knows Zeena’s

thoughts” (Wharton 178). The word “secretive” here reiterates Zeena’s complex nature. Wharton reminds the reader of Zeena’s complexity. Unlike Ethan, Zeena is capable of concealing motives and intentions, capable of entertaining thoughts that Ethan is unaware of. Ethan, however, is simplistic; his intentions and motives are evident to both Zeena and the reader. Each different facet of language that Zeena employs affects Ethan: “At times, looking at Zeena’s shut face, he felt the chill of such forebodings. At other times her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess. That supposition was even more disturbing than the other; and it was the one which had come to him the night before, when he had seen her standing in the kitchen door” (73). In another example, Zeena looks at Ethan and affects him powerfully: “Zeena answered darkly, with one of her secret looks” (124). Throughout the novel, many other instances of Zeena’s body language are illustrated and the powerful effects they have on Ethan are significant. “She [Zeena] drew aside without speaking, and Mattie and Ethan passed into the kitchen, which had the deadly chill of a vault after the dray cold of the night” (53). Zeena’s movements create a foreboding atmosphere, one filled with hostility and uncertainty for Ethan: “Once or twice in the past he had been fairly disquieted by Zenobia’s way of letting things happen without seeming to remark them, and then, week afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inferences” (39). Ethan is clearly affected by Zeena’s silent study. Her silence encompasses a realm of possibilities that Ethan can only conceive:

At times, looking at Zeena’s shut face, he felt the chill of such forebodings. At other times, her silence seemed deliberately assumed to

conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess. That supposition was even more disturbing ... and it was the one which had come to him the night before, when he had seen her standing in the kitchen door. (73)

Even Zeena's actions remind Ethan that she is still in control: "He and Zeena had not exchanged a word after the door of their room had closed on them. She had measured out some drops from a medicine-bottle on a chair by the bed" (56); her actions remind Ethan that she is still in control of his fate. Her medicine consumption is a powerful silent reminder that she controls both their finances and whether or not Mattie continues to work and live in their home; Mattie remains in their household as long as Zeena's sickness determines. Zeena is able to effectively utilize silence while Ethan can utilize neither language, silence, nor body language.

Verbal language is the predominant form of language utilized in the novel, and while it is a means of power for Zeena, conversely, for Ethan, it is a source of inadequacy. Ethan's inadequate mastery of language affects his ability to obtain power and affect change throughout the novel; he employs a nonassertive style of communication. Kenneth Bernard suggests in his article, "Imagery and Symbolism in *Ethan Frome*," that Ethan's mutability and inarticulateness are rooted in the landscape:

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 . . . Finally there is Frome's inarticulateness. Not only are his feelings locked, frozen;

his very speech is also, beyond the natural reticence of the local people.

Neither he nor the landscape can express its warm and tender part. (179)

Ethan's character does reflect the landscape in many ways, but his "hard" and "frozen" (179) language is influenced predominantly by the power which Zeena exerts over him. Bernard, continuing his analysis of Ethan's language, points out the ineptness of Ethan's language: "Not only are his feelings locked, frozen; his very speech is also, beyond the natural reticence of the local people. Neither he nor the landscape can express its warm and tender part (179). Ethan's language, like the landscape, is rigid and inflexible. His language represents the defeated, isolated character which Ethan embodies.

The novel begins, and the narrator is introduced and identifies Ethan's defeated nature: "I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man" (Wharton 3). Physically, traces of Ethan's powerful physique are "striking," yet Ethan's "ruin" is overwhelmingly apparent (3). The earliest pages of the novel establish Ethan's deficient use of language, before Ethan's story has been revealed to either the reader or the narrator. As a nonassertive communicator, Ethan is marked by his "poor eye contact, poor posture, and a defeated air . . . we may recognize the nonassertive communicator by his or her indecisiveness" (Cahn and Abigail 60). As the narrator observes Ethan's behavior, he notes that "[e]very one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own grave mien; but his taciturnity was respected and it was only on rare occasions that one of the older men of the place detained him for a word. When this happened he would listen quietly, his blue eyes on the speaker's face, and answer in such a low a tone that his words never reached me" (Wharton 3). This is a powerful

description of Ethan. Even though he answers, it is imperative to note that “his words never reached me” (3); Ethan’s words are not powerful enough to affect change, to reach people, revealing Ethan’s inept use of language. Ethan does not speak often because not only do words do not come easily to him due to his inadequacy regarding language skills, but his words also do not carry weight or authority. Townspeople speak to Ethan, yet Ethan can only listen. Ethan is used to listening; moreover, he is used to being controlled and manipulated. He is unable to use language effectively.

As the story continues to unfold and Ethan’s character is described more fully, Wharton’s powerful imagery and language suggest the deeper meaning behind Ethan’s silence, Ethan’s absolute lack of control and power in his life:

Ethan Frome drove in silence, the reins loosely held in his left hand . . . He never turned his face to mine, or answered, except in monosyllables, the questions I put, or such slight pleasantries as I ventured. He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence . . . He said no more, and I had to guess the rest from the inflection of his voice and his sharp relapse of silence.

(Wharton 14-15)

Ethan manifests the lack of control reflected in his life: “the reins loosely held in his hand” (14). As the narrator interacts with Ethan further, he is confronted with Ethan’s silence yet again. The narrator converses with a local townsman, Harmon Gow, and Harmon makes another important statement regarding Ethan’s inept use of language. In response to the narrator’s question regarding why Ethan is still in Starkfield, Harmon

replies, ““Most of the smart ones get away””; this response leads to the narrator’s subconscious query: “how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?” (9). Another comment by Harmon supports Ethan’s powerlessness: ““When a man’s been sitting around like a hulk for twenty years or more, seeing things that want doing, it eats inter him, and he loses his grit”” (12). Ethan sees things that he wants, sees things that he wants changed, but cannot affect change. Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out in her work, “The Narrator’s Vision,” that “[a]gain and again Ethan ‘struggled for the all-expressive word’; and again and again he fails to find utterance. Speech is the bridge that might carry Ethan Frome to a world beyond Starkfield ... Without it, he is literally unable to formulate plans of any complexity” (138-9). Even in the very few instances in the novel where Ethan attempts to communicate his ideas, feelings, and longings through language, he fails.

Ethan wants to live in a larger town, he wants to pursue engineering, he wants Zeena to stop spending all of their income on medicine, he wants to leave Zeena, he dreams that he, like a man he has heard of, can successfully leave and divorce his wife, allowing him to live happily ever after with Mattie, the one he truly desires to be with (Wharton 132), but he cannot verbalize his desires, and cannot change. Initially, Ethan would need to confront his own inadequacies, those which have contributed to his current situation. Secondly, Ethan would need to confront Zeena. Wolff notes that “one mark of maturity is the ability to translate desire into coherent words, words into action; and Ethan Frome is incapable of all such translations” (139). Ethan’s own desires become amalgamated into Zeena’s:

When they married it was agreed that, as soon as he could straighten out the difficulties resulting from Mrs. Frome's long illness, they would sell the farm and saw-mill and try their luck in a large town . . . He had always wanted to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and 'fellows doing things' . . . She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. (Wharton 71)

Zeena tells Ethan what he wants to hear; they 'agreed' that after they sold the farm they would move to a large town, yet it is blatantly obvious that Zeena never intended to fulfill this agreement (71); Zeena only needed to convince Ethan that she was sincere. Not only do words not come to Ethan when it is imperative that he speak, often when he does utter a phrase or sentence, he is incapable of uttering what he wishes to say: "Ethan tried to say something befitting the occasion, but there was only one thought in his mind" (65). What is worse, at times Ethan speaks brashly, unable to capitalize on his moments of vocalization: "As soon as the words were spoken he regretted them" (65). In another instance of impulsiveness, Ethan finally utters a response to Zeena in an attempt to assert his control, to reaffirm that he has the money Zeena needs for her medicine, and to demonstrate that he can provide, yet his reckless outburst creates a worse situation for him. Because Ethan too hastily responds to Zeena, he failed consider the effects of prematurely telling Zeena that he has money. Ethan contemplates what it is he must do, and he realizes that he is going to have to go and speak with Andrew Hale. Ethan is going to have to request an advance on the money Hale owes him. Ethan realizes that he is faced with a predicament whereby he must convince Hale, someone notorious for being

'behind,' (74) that it is urgent that he get his money early: "Only one thing weighed on him, and that was his having told Zeena that he was to receive cash for the lumber. He foresaw so clearly the consequences of this imprudence that with considerable reluctance he decided to ask Andrew Hale for a small advance on his load" (73-4). Hale is astonished at Ethan's request, and Ethan, unwilling to beg, insistent on maintaining his pride, and incapable of using language as a persuasive mechanism, is denied his request: "Ethan felt that if he had pleaded an urgent need Hale might have made shift to pay him; but pride, and an instinctive prudence, kept him from resorting from this argument . . . if he wanted the money he wanted it, and it was nobody's business to ask why. He therefore made his demand with the awkwardness of a proud man who will not admit to himself that he is stooping" (75-6). Once again, language fails Ethan. Shortly after this incident, Ethan determines that he must leave Zeena, yet even as he drafts a plan for leaving Zeena, he plots an alternative to confrontation. His plan is to write a letter which he will leave behind when he disappears; he plans to avoid any instances of confrontation with Zeena: "He would hide his valise under the seat of the sleigh, and Zeena would suspect nothing till she went upstairs for her afternoon nap and found a letter on the bed" (132). Ethan's dreams and fantasies fall short of becoming realities because Ethan is powerless to confront his adversary, incapable of articulating his position.

The closest Ethan comes to successfully bringing any of his desires to fruition through his employment of language is illustrated in a scene towards the end of the novel, a scene in which even after Zeena demands that Ethan remain at home he affirms that he *is* taking Mattie. Ethan declares that he is going to take Mattie himself: "'I'm going to drive her over myself' (Wharton 149); Ethan's statement, however, does not affect

Zeena: “Zeena continued in the same even tone: ‘I want-ed you should stay . . . Zeena persisted with the same monotonous mildness’” (149). Finally, Ethan, “turning to Mattie . . . added in a hard voice: ‘You be ready by three, Matt,’ (149) and it seems that Ethan has defied Zeena and accomplished something important through his use of language.

Zeena’s momentary annoyance with Ethan’s emotional declaration, however, is overcome by Zeena’s reaffirmation: she knows that the errand Ethan is going on will take Mattie away from the farm permanently.

At the end of the novel, Zeena seems to have regained her strength: “‘Zeena’s done for her [Mattie], and done for Ethan, as good as she could. It was a miracle, considering how sick she was—but she seemed to be raised right up when the call came to her. Not as she’s ever given up doctoring, and she’s had spells right along; but she’s had the strength given her to care for those two for over twenty years, and before the accident came she thought she couldn’t even care for herself’ (Wharton 179). Zeena’s “socially valued end” has changed (Eagleton 132), and Zeena’s role at the conclusion of the novel is proof that Zeena’s neurosis and sickness are subsets of her power and not the source of her power. When it is no longer necessary for Zeena to use her sick role to obtain power, she suddenly regains her health and strength. In striking contrast to Zeena, Ethan’s language is his primary weakness. Ethan’s lack of control and lack of power in his life are rooted in his primary weakness: language. In the opening pages of the novel, Ethan’s ineptness in regards to his use of language is apparent even to an outsider, and as the novel continues and concludes, it is evident that Ethan’s aptitude for language remains static.

Chapter 3

Ethan and Mattie

Mattie and Ethan's relationship illustrates a different type of relationship than that of Zeena and Ethan's; the contrasts are related to Zeena and Mattie's opposite dispositions. Mattie represents a young, cheerful, and submissive female, and Mattie and Ethan's relationship, unlike his and Zeena's, is based upon affection and mutual respect. Paradoxically, Ethan desires Mattie, yet Zeena's powerful control inhibits his gratification of this desire. Zeena also desires complete control over Ethan, yet her own power becomes threatened by Mattie's presence. Ethan falls in love with Mattie, and he fantasizes that he can leave and divorce his wife, which would allow him to marry Mattie, the woman that he truly desires and whom he believes will make him content. Ethan's fantasy, however, falls short of becoming a reality because Ethan is incapable of the confrontation needed for his success; his powerful physique is no substitute for his inept use of language. Ethan's failure in his relationship with Mattie also stems from his incapacity to employ language: he is a nonassertive communicator. Zeena maintains consistent control over Ethan, and by extension, Mattie. The language which Ethan needs to confront Zeena is not accessible to him.

Mattie's character is a stark contrast to that of Zeena's, and Ethan's images of Zeena and Mattie are diametrically opposed:

As she passed down the line, her light figure swinging from hand to hand in circles of increasing swiftness, the scarf flew off her head and stood out behind her shoulders, and Frome, at each turn, caught sight of her laughing panting lips, the cloud of dark hair about her forehead, and the

dark eyes which seemed the only fixed points in a maze of flying lines”
 (Wharton 29-30);

Ethan references Mattie’s delicate femininity in this passage. On the other hand, when

Ethan describes Zeena, his impressions reflect her powerful, yet grotesque nature:

“Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting 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” (52-3). Ethan’s subconscious impression of Zeena’s character is essential to a broader understanding of her character, yet this passage also symbolizes their marriage roles: Ethan looks up at Zeena, who, at this moment is holding the lamp, the source of power. Wharton chooses language which is harsh, rough, and emphasizes Zeena’s power. Words such as “dark,” “puckered,” and “clutched,” reflect Zeena’s astringent nature while; “projecting” and “prominenc[e]” (53) allude specifically to her power. In this passage, Wharton substantiates the power of language, both her own and Zeena’s.

Apart from their disparate appearances, Mattie and Zeena share the ability to use language effectively. Ethan longs to see someone defy Zeena, yet due to his inept use of language, he is unable to defend either himself or Mattie. Ethan hopes that Mattie will, however, have the courage and strength to defy Zeena: “Zenobia’s fault-finding [related to Mattie] was of the silent kind, but not the less penetrating for that. During the first months Ethan alternately burned with the desire to see Mattie defy her and trembled with fear of the result” (Wharton 60). In a moment of intense emotion Zeena and Mattie are

able to employ language. In this scene, Mattie's language reflects an assertive style of communication which allows her to "speak up for [her] interests, concerns or rights in a way that does not interfere with the interests or infringes on the rights of others" (Cahn and Abigail 66-7); Mattie further illustrates this style of communication in that in this instance, she is "not intimidated in that they choose to confront others rather than avoid them" (68). Ethan, however, cannot verbalize his defense, and at a crucial point in the novel Zeena confronts Ethan who answers Zeena's probing questions by both shifting the blame and lying: "Ethan turned back into the room and faced her [Zeena]. 'I can tell you, then. The cat done it.' 'The *cat*?' 'That's what I said' . . . 'I'd like to know how the cat got into my china-closet,' she said. 'Chasin' mice, I guess,' Ethan rejoined" (Wharton 126). Zeena catches Ethan in his lie, but Mattie steps in to explain the truth: "It wasn't Ethan's fault, Zeena! The cat *did* break the dish; but I got it down from the china-closet, and I'm the one to blame for its getting broken' . . . 'You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it'" (127); Mattie assumes responsibility for the incident and defends Ethan who stands by and helplessly watches Mattie answer Zeena's stringent accusations. Even though Mattie is able to use language and articulate a line of defense against Zeena's accusations, Ethan's autonomy cannot be purchased by Mattie's courageous confrontation with Zeena: Ethan must confront Zeena.

Ethan and Mattie's desire to be together distinguishes their interactions from those of Ethan and Zeena's. Ethan cares what Mattie thinks of him and desires Mattie's affection; on the other hand, Ethan does not seek Zeena's approval and does not desire Zeena's affections. Ethan becomes frustrated when Mattie does not look at him admiringly or longingly as he looks at her, and because he is incapable of using language

to describe his feelings, he envisions that she is moved by him or has special charms for him: “He even noticed two or three gestures which, in his fatuity, he had thought she kept for him: a way of throwing her head back when she was amused, as if to taste her laugh before she let it out, and a trick of sinking her lids slowly when anything charmed or moved her” (Wharton 35). Later in the story, after Zeena determines that Mattie must be sent away, Ethan cannot fathom what Mattie must think of him: “His manhood was humbled by the part he was compelled to play and by the thought of what Mattie must think of him (139-40); Mattie is “banish[ed]” (139) from the Frome farm and Ethan is unable to affect the situation. In Ethan and Zeena’s relationship, neither one desires affection, but both desire power: “Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena’s narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? . . . the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose of up in him against such waste . . .”; as Ethan reflects upon his relationship with Zeena, he concludes that he has “waste[d]” (131) many precious commodities that he cannot gain back: advancement, time, and desire.

Early in the novel Ethan’s desire for Mattie is clear; he remains unassertive, his language powerless. And as Wharton describes Ethan, her language illustrates Ethan’s weak nature:

The young man, skirting the side of the building, went down along the slope toward the basement door. To keep out of range of the revealing rays from within he made a circuit through the untrodden snow and gradually approached the farther angle of the basement wall. Thence, still hugging

the shadow, he edged his way cautiously forward to the nearest window . .
. (29-30)

Ethan is an outsider who stands in the shadows, and when he arrives to escort Mattie home from the town dance, he watches the villagers; it is as if he is not part of their society, and his lack of language inhibits him from becoming part of this world. Ethan's language here reflects his character, and his communication style is one of apprehension, which is the "level of anxiety a person feels in response to interpersonal, group, or public communication situations" (Cahn and Abigail 61). Ethan remains hidden in the darkness and watches others obtain what he can only dream of: "[H]e stood there in the silence instead of making his presence known to her . . . He hung back" (Wharton 41). His domineering physique is lost in the shadows just as his voice cannot penetrate the silence. In another instance Ethan attempts to once again articulate what is on his mind, coming close, treading around the subject of his relationship with Mattie; he fails, however, to use language to articulate his feelings: "'Say, Matt,' he began with a smile, 'what do you think I saw under the Varnum spruces, coming along home just now? I saw a friend of yours getting kissed'" (92). Ethan's futile attempt to initiate and control a conversation reflects the awkward nature and timing of his language: "The words had been on his tongue all the evening, but now that he had spoken them they struck him as inexpressibly vulgar and out of place . . . Ethan had imagined that his allusion might open the way to the accepted pleasantries, and these perhaps in turn to a harmless caress, if only a mere touch on her hand" (92). He hopes his question will lead to a deeper discussion pertaining to his and Mattie's relationship, yet in his attempt to insinuate romantic objectives, to

bring him and Mattie closer together, his language embarrasses Mattie and creates division rather than unity in their relationship.

Even though there are fundamental differences between Ethan and Mattie and Ethan and Zeena's relationships, Ethan's language remains static and constant. His uncontrolled use of language and flippant outbursts are not isolated to his conversations with Zeena. After Zeena informs Ethan of her decision to send Mattie away from the farm, Ethan "brutal[ly]" informs Mattie of her fate: "Ethan was overcome with shame at his lack of self-control in flinging the news at her [Mattie] so brutally" (Wharton 120). Ethan's angry words and frustration are misdirected: Ethan's words and tone do not match his situation and audience: Ethan reacts to Mattie as he could not to Zeena. In another instance Ethan searches for words: "To prolong the effect he groped for a dazzling phrase, and brought out, in a growl of rapture: 'Come along'" (44). After Zeena has decided that Mattie must leave, Mattie probes Ethan, begging the question of whether or not he wants her to leave as Zeena does, but he cannot decisively and imperatively issue a statement which denotes his feelings: "'Unless *you* want me to go too—' Unless he wanted her to go too! The cry was balm to his raw wound . . . Again he struggled for the all-expressive word, and again, his arm in hers, found only a deep 'Come along.' They walked on in silence through the blackness" (49). Another opportunity for Ethan to articulate his feelings for Mattie passes. Moments later Ethan is incapable of even remembering what he was going to say to Mattie: "He forgot what else he had meant to say . . . Ethan stood behind the door, his head heavy with dreams, his arm still about Mattie. 'Matt—' he began, not knowing what he meant to say" (49). Ethan's inept use of

language continues to thwart his efforts to verbally express his feelings to Mattie, to unite them.

Because Ethan is never able to consummate his relationship with Mattie, his ultimate desire, he directs all his energies towards farm work: action. Eagleton, references Freud's views on psychoanalysis and states that "[o]ne way in which we cope with desires we cannot fulfil is by 'sublimating' them, by which Freud means directing them towards a more socially valued end" (132). Ethan works from dusk until dawn performing strenuous manual labor, his 'socially valued end' (132). Ethan attempts to accomplish through actions what his words cannot, but no amount of labor, however, can compensate for his deficient language. "He did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire, carrying in the wood overnight, and neglecting the mill for the farm that he might help her about the house during the day. He even crept down on Saturday nights to scrub the kitchen floor after the women had gone to bed; and Zeena, one day, had surprised him at the churn and had turned away silently, with one of her queer looks" (Wharton 36). Ethan's decision to ignore his farm work is a direct affront to Zeena's power and reflects a passive aggressive communication style: "the ability to impose one's will on others through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts that appear to avoid an open conflict or accommodate to the desires of others, but in actuality are carried out with the intention (or perceived intention) of inflicting physical or psychological pain, injury, or suffering" (Cahn and Abigail 65). Ethan demonstrates that his desire for Mattie is greater than his concern for maintaining the farm that he and Zeena own, and Ethan performs many other tasks willingly for Mattie: "Ethan had planted them [geraniums] in the summer to 'make a garden' for

Mattie” (Wharton 67). Ethan gets pleasure from performing tasks for Mattie: it is a form of intimacy for him. Working on the farm to provide for him and Zeena, however, is drudgery: “Ethan's love of nature did not take the form of a taste for agriculture. He had always wanted to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and "fellows doing things” (71); farm work is a daily reminder of another unfulfilled aspiration. In an important scene toward the end of the novel Ethan is driving Mattie to the station, but he cannot find words to express his desire for her; he is only capable of reiterating that he would *do* anything for her: ““You know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you if I could’ (157). Ethan cannot verbalize his dissent, and Ethan refuses to accept the reality of his situation.

In place of acceptance, Ethan chooses to fantasize and pretend. While Zeena is away visiting the doctor in another town, Ethan and Mattie are left alone to “play” house: “The scene was just as he had dreamed of it that morning. He sat down, drew his pipe from his pocket and stretched his feet to the glow. His hard day’s work in the keen air made him feel at once lazy and light of mood, and he had a confused sense of being in another world, where all was warmth and harmony and time could bring no change” (Wharton 88). Wolff also acknowledges Ethan’s use of fantasy in her work “Cold Ethan and ‘Hot Ethan’”: “Frome weaves elaborate, unrealistic fantasies about their [Ethan and Mattie’s] love; in truth, he explores no avenues that might give their love the adult, social context it requires for survival” (240). Ethan consistently makes decisions to avoid his reality rather than to accept or confront it: “From the beginning of the discussion he [Ethan] had instinctively avoided the mention of Mattie’s name, fearing he hardly knew what: criticism, complaints, or vague allusions to the imminent probability of her

marrying. But the thought of a definite rupture had never come to him, and even now it could not lodge itself in his mind” (Wharton 115); Ethan avoids Mattie’s name because he does not want to hear Zeena critique and criticize the one person in his life whom he loves, and he cannot fathom Mattie marrying and leaving the farm, because she is not just leaving the farm, she is leaving him. And, when presented with an opportunity to defend Mattie and defend any chance of her remaining with him on the farm, Ethan chooses to relinquish his oppositional stance: “He continued with rising vehemence: ‘You can’t put her out of the house like a thief—a poor girl without friends or money. She’s done her best for you and she’s got no place to go to’” (117). Ethan’s angry words do not affect Zeena: “Zeena waited a moment, as if giving him time to feel the full force of the contrast between his own excitement and her composure” (117)—Zeena is in complete control of her language; she knows the difference between her self-control and his indiscretion. Still in control of the situation, Zeena responds “in the same smooth voice: ‘I know well enough what they say of my having kep’ her here as long as I have’”(117); Zeena’s restrained use of language leaves Ethan speechless: he is left to contemplate how he envisioned that the conversation would go: “Ethan’s hand dropped from the door-knob, which he had held clenched . . . His wife’s retort was like a knife-cut across the sinews and he felt suddenly weak and powerless. He had meant to humble himself, to argue that Mattie’s keep didn’t cost much . . . but Zeena’s words revealed the peril of such pleadings. (117). Ethan’s denial cannot change the reality of his situation: Zeena maintains her control: “There had never been anything in her that one could appeal to; but as long as he could ignore and command he had remained indifferent. Now she had

mastered him and he abhorred her” (118). Zeena’s powerful control of language allows her to dominate Ethan and Mattie.

If only Ethan could master it, language could help Ethan overcome his situation. Bernard analyzes Ethan’s inept use of language and suggests that it reflects the New England landscape:

Not only are his feelings locked, frozen; his very speech is also, beyond the natural reticence of the local people. Neither he nor the landscape can express its warm and tender part. When Mattie once pleases him immensely, he gropes ‘for a dazzling phrase,’ but is able to utter only a ‘growl of rapture:’ ‘Come along.’ Later he is again thrilled by her: ‘Again he struggled for the all expressive word, and again, his arm in hers, found only a deep ‘Come along.’ He is truly a man of ‘dumb melancholy.’ (179)

Ethan’s language in many ways parallels his environment; like the landscape, his words and thoughts are ‘frozen.’ In place of language, Ethan turns to another defense mechanism: pretending: “He said to himself that he had doubtless exaggerated the significance of Zeena’s threats, and that she too, with the return of daylight, would come to a saner mood” (Wharton 137). As Ethan continues to reflect upon his situation, the reality that Mattie is leaving, he maintains avoidance, an element of nonassertive communication: “Ethan, looking slowly about the kitchen, said to himself with a shudder that in a few hours he would be returning to it [the farm] alone. Then the sense of unreality overcame him once more, and he could not bring himself to believe that Mattie stood there for the last time before him” (151). Ethan’s struggle to overcome his language

barrier is not limited to instances where Zeena is physically present; Ethan is unable to employ language even when she is away.

Mattie and Ethan are left alone together, and both anticipate that in Zeena's absence the fulfillment of their desire for one another will come to fruition, yet after Zeena's departure, two scenes illustrate the breadth and depth of her power. Immediately after Zeena leaves for Bettsbridge, Ethan and Mattie feel that, unaffected by Zeena's influence, they have control over the decisions and choices. In her absence, however, freedom, control, and happiness are fleeting, merely illusions. Even the community and scenery of Starkfield are affected by Zeena's absence. Starkfield, a community depicted for most of the novel as a harsh, bitterly cold climate, changes drastically while Zeena is away: the sun is shining, one can feel warmth, and fresh vegetation is even alluded to: "It was warm and bright in the kitchen. The sun slanted through the south window on the girl's moving figure . . . and on the geraniums" (Wharton 67). The usual silence and subdued demeanors of Ethan and Mattie also disappear during Zeena's absence: "[Ethan] who was usually so silent, whistled and sang aloud as he drove through the snowy fields [and] Mattie was washing up the dishes, humming" (73). Ethan feels that he has some control over his decisions, his happiness, and his life. While Zeena is away, Ethan and Mattie can relax because they feel that they are no longer controlled by Zeena; both are able to successfully employ elements of assertive communication style in the absence of the aggressive communicator (Cahn and Abigail 68): "her departure for Bettsbridge had once more eased his [Ethan's] mind, and all his thoughts were on the prospect of his evening with Mattie" (Wharton 73). In Ethan and Mattie's conversations during Zeena's absence, "All constraint had vanished between the two, and they began to talk easily and

simply. They spoke of every-day things . . . The commonplace nature of what they said produced in Ethan an illusion of long-established intimacy . . . and he set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so . . .” (90). Notably, even as they are able to converse without “constraint,” they can only speak of “commonplace” things: feelings, emotions, and the reality of their situation are not mentioned or discussed (90), and as Ethan and Mattie are enjoying Zeena’s absence, talking and socializing at the dinner table, dreaming of what life would be like without Zeena, the simple utterance of Zeena’s name overcomes their desire for one another: “Ethan was suffocated with a sense of well-being . . . The name threw a chill between them, and they stood a moment looking sideways at each other . . . Ethan, a moment earlier, had felt himself on the brink of eloquence; but the mention of Zeena had paralysed him . . . the name had benumbed him, and once more he felt as if Zeena were in the room” (83-4). Ethan is mute and frozen, and when he finally gets himself together, he is only able to utter a weak and statement: ““Look’s as if there’d be more snow”” (84). Mattie then mentions Zeena’s name again, and Ethan is once again thrown into a state of ill-composure: “The name had benumbed him again, and once more he felt that Zeena were in the room between them” (84). At a crucial point in the novel, Zeena’s absence from the farm, her power and influence remain because her words have a strong psychological influence over both Ethan and Mattie: her words are seared into their consciousness. Significantly, although Ethan and Mattie are still controlled by Zeena while she is away, Ethan is able to use language successfully in her absence, if only for a moment.

While Zeena is away and is not present to criticize, condemn, and emasculate Ethan, he has one moment of power, yet as fleeting as the moment of Zeena's absence is, so too is Ethan's moment of mastery. Shortly after the dinner conversation in which the utterance of Zeena's name dispels all remaining hopes for an idyllic evening, Mattie breaks Zeena's treasured pickle dish, and as Mattie anxiously questions what she is to do, what Zeena will say, how she will be able to fix the dish, and how she will explain the incident to Zeena, Ethan is able to use language to subdue Mattie: "'Here, give them to me [the pieces],' he said in a voice of sudden authority. She drew aside, instinctively obeying his tone . . . 'It's all right, Matt. Come back and finish supper,' he commanded her.' Completely reassured, she shone on him through tear-hung lashes, and his soul swelled with pride as he saw how his tone subdued her" (Wharton 86); Ethan is successful; he feels the power of language, but he is unfamiliar with this power: "Except when he was steering a big log down the mountain to his mill he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery" (87). The interaction between Ethan and Mattie reflects the acute distinction between their relationship and that of Ethan and Zeena's. In this exchange Ethan has the "authority" and Mattie "obey[s]" him (86). The roles have been reversed; for one moment Ethan finds power in language and is able to speak words which match his desires and feelings; he is assertive. Unlike Zeena, however, his control of language is intermittent. And, significantly, immediately after Ethan's moment of mastery, his initial response to Mattie regarding his solution is to avoid telling Zeena they have broken her treasured pickle dish. Ethan wants to avoid confrontation because he knows that his words and use of language are insufficient, far inferior to the criticism and condemnation Zeena can bestow: "'She needn't know anything about it if you keep

quiet” (86). If Ethan could successfully communicate his desire through his words consistently, then maybe he too could have, through language, obtained power, yet Ethan remains rooted in his incapacity to control language for the remainder of the novel. Even in Ethan and Mattie’s final moments before Zeena returns, Ethan cannot muster the words he desires to speak to her: “Ethan looked at her, his heart in his throat. He wanted to say: ‘We shall never be alone again like this.’ Instead, he reached down his tobacco-pouch from a shelf of the dresser, put it into his pocket and said: ‘I guess I can make out to be home for dinner’ (99). Fryer touches on the importance of language in the novel, particularly in regard to Ethan’s desire to employ it lucratively: “Ethan Frome dreams, in the narrator’s version, of being able to speak . . . Words, he senses, can overcome his imprisonment” (170), and even Ethan does “sense” that language inhibits him: “It was intoxicating to find such magic in his clumsy words, and he longed to try new ways of using it” (170; 91). Ethan’s moments of “intoxication” and desire are relentlessly interrupted by the reality of his situation: “‘She’ll be rocking in it herself this time tomorrow,’ Ethan thought. ‘I’ve been in a dream, and this is the only evening we’ll ever have together.’ The return to reality was as painful as the return to consciousness after taking an anaesthetic. His body and brain ached with indescribable weariness, and he could think of nothing to say or to do that should arrest the mad flight of the moments” (Wharton 95); Ethan and Mattie’s brief moments of pleasure, conversation, and Ethan’s solitary moment of mastery are fragmented by reality: Zeena is coming back and that she will always have something to say while Ethan is unable to successfully overcome his “imprisonment” (Fryer 170).

Early in the novel Ethan's limited, terse use of language is contrasted to Mattie's more beautiful, articulate phrases. Ethan comments on Mattie's more skilled use of language: "It had been one of the wonders of their intercourse that from the first, she, the quicker, finer, more expressive, instead of crushing him by the contrast, had given him something of her own ease and freedom" (Wharton 41). Fryer discusses Ethan's use of language compared with that of Mattie's. Fryer describes Ethan's relationship with language as "by nature grave and inarticulate," (169) and she expounds upon her argument and illustrates Ethan's reaction to Mattie's more developed use of language: "[A]nd in the dark vastness of the out-of-doors [he] [is] moved by such locutions as Mattie's description of the starry sky—'It looks just as if it was painted!'—believing, as Ethan does, that 'the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul'" (169). Fryer concludes, then, that Ethan cannot contend with Mattie's language, so he remains silent: "then the lamplit room 'with all its ancient implications of conformity and order,' the only order you know, bids you out of habit hold your tongue and not touch that which you have no right to touch" (169). Fryer suggests that Ethan is more deeply restricted in his belief that language is not intrinsically his; Ethan claims no ownership over his language; rather, emotions and circumstances direct his use of language. In a moment of passion, Ethan resolves to inform Zeena of what he thinks, but he cannot follow through: "'You can't go, Matt! I won't let you! She's always had her way, but I mean to have mine now—'" before the words are barely out of his mouth Zeena enters and his courage and resolve has diminished: "Ethan sat speechless" (Wharton 24). Zeena comes into the room, and "[w]ords of resistance rushed

to Ethan's lips and died there" (146). The inability to verbalize his position has once again come between Ethan and his objective: Mattie must go.

As Ethan takes Mattie to the station, he decides to take a detour, and it is here, together in the woods, away from the farm, outside of Zeena's presence, far away from her, that Ethan and Mattie share the most intimate moments of their relationship: "They had never before avowed their inclination so openly, and Ethan, for a moment, had the illusion that he was a free man, wooing the girl he meant to marry. He looked at her hair and longed to touch it again, and to tell her that it smelt of the woods; but he had never learned to say such things" (Wharton 155). Ethan fulfills his promise to take Mattie sledding and takes her to the community's remote sledding spot, and although isolated from Zeena's physical presence, Ethan remains incapable of adequately expressing his feelings to and for Mattie; the landscape and scenery reflects Ethan's incapacity to materialize the words he longs to speak: "It was a shy secret spot, full of the same dumb melancholy Ethan felt in his heart" (154). Faced with the overwhelming reality of their fate, Mattie suddenly exclaims that they must leave the place at once: "'We musn't stay here any longer.' . . . There were things he had to say to her before they parted, but he could not say them in that place of summer memories, and he turned and followed her in silence to the sleigh" (155); neither one wishes to negatively alter his or her idyllic memories of that location with vain attempts to utilize language.

Mattie not only initiates conversation which relates to their situation, but she asks the leading questions and establishes parameters: she communicates assertively, but Ethan remains nonassertive. Ethan needs to react but does not. In a moment of heightened passion and intense desire, a situation in which they must state their feelings or remain

silent forever, Mattie proclaims her feelings to Ethan while Ethan becomes self-deprecating: “‘You must write to me sometimes Ethan.’ ‘Oh, what good’ll writing do? I want to put my hand out and touch you. I want to do for you and care for you. I want to be there for you when you’re sick and when you’re lonesome’” (Wharton 158-59). On their ride to the station Mattie questions Ethan regarding the letter which Ethan wrote to Zeena, the one that he intended to leave on Zeena’s bed for her to read and discover after he and Mattie had left; Mattie gives Ethan yet another chance to proclaim his feelings. Even as he drafts a plan for leaving Zeena, he plots an alternative to confrontation: he writes a letter to leave in his place; his plan is an attempt to avoid any instances of confrontation with Zeena: “He would hide his valise under the seat of the sleigh, and Zeena would suspect nothing till she went upstairs for her afternoon nap and found a letter on the bed” (132). Ethan decides that when he leaves, his best course of action is to leave a letter; this way, Zeena does not have a chance to respond to Ethan; Ethan proposes a situation which would not require him to defend and articulate his position. Not only is Ethan’s plan non-confrontational, but his irresoluteness is reflected in his failure to follow through with this plan. “‘If she [Zeena] says it tonight she’ll say it tomorrow.’ Both [Ethan and Mattie] bowed to the inexorable truth: they knew that Zeena never changed her mind, and that in her case a resolve once taken was equivalent to an act performed” (122); unlike Zeena, Ethan does not have “resolve.”

Ethan is unable to speak his mind, unable to use language as a constructive medium of communication, incapable of using language as a means of forging a different reality, powerless to suggest an alternative remedy. Imperatively, then, it is *Mattie* who suggests suicide: “‘Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!’ ‘Down where?’

‘The coast. Right off,’ she panted. ‘So ‘t we’ll never come up any more’” (Wharton 165). Mattie’s direct implication is inconceivable to Ethan, and he can barely comprehend her proposition: “‘Matt! What on earth do you mean?’ She put her lips close to his ear to say: ‘Right into the big elm. You said you could. So ‘t we’d never have to leave each other any more.’ ‘Why, what are you talking of?’ ‘You’re crazy!’” (165). Ethan cannot communicate his feelings; he is incapable of verbalizing even the suggestion of suicide: “‘Come,’ Mattie whispered, tugging at his hand. Her somber voice constrained him: she seemed the embodied instrument of fate. He pulled the sled out” (167); in this scene filled with Mattie’s intense, compelling, and powerfully-articulated language which reflects her feelings and desires, Ethan performs an action: he determines that he can drive the sled into the tree.

Ethan, unable to overcome his static position, unable to overcome his inferiority as a speaker, unable to assert a position of authority for himself in his home, is ultimately unable to use language to overcome the demon which haunts him: Zeena: “The big tree loomed bigger and closer, and as they bore down on it he thought: ‘It’s waiting for us: it seems to know.’ 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 171). Ethan and Mattie’s moments of assertive communication cannot contend with Zeena’s aggressive style of communication. Ethan’s actions are not sufficient; he is no match for his opponent: Zeena wins.

Chapter 4

Zeena and Mattie

Complex power structures exist in the relationships between Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie. Although Wharton initially establishes her two primary female characters, Zeena and Mattie, as foils and emphasizes their dissimilar motives, appearances, actions, and beliefs, they share an important role in the novel: both are dominant female characters in Ethan's life, and each "forces" Ethan to "reexamine his world" (Wershoven 14). Zeena's intense desire for complete control over Ethan is fueled by Ethan's desire for Mattie, which creates a complicated relationship between Mattie and Zeena, one rooted in their familial ties: Mattie is Zeena's cousin, and Mattie's presence in the Frome household is due to Zeena's attempt to fulfill her familial obligation and duty. Therefore, Zeena maintains power over Mattie not only due to Mattie's necessity of shelter, income, and food: "[Mattie] is the daughter of a cousin of Zeena's, whose misfortune has 'indentured her' to the Fromes," to Zeena (176), but Zeena also controls Mattie psychologically: Mattie knows that at any moment Zeena may decide to banish her due to Zeena's insecurities regarding Ethan and Mattie's relationship. Linguistically, Zeena and Mattie share a more advanced language than Ethan, yet Zeena's aggressive language governs Mattie's passive aggressive and assertive language—evidenced by Mattie's transformation at the end of the novel: Mattie is the weaker female. While Mattie and Ethan both share small moments of attainment in regard to language, Zeena and her mastery of language ultimately prevail over both Mattie and Ethan. Zeena's ability to use language in a variety of ways to attain power is exemplified further in her relationship

with Mattie: Zeena uses language in conjunction with her sick role to exert the most power.

Zeena's internal need to control those around her is not limited to her relationship with Ethan, and Zeena's desire to control Mattie affects how Zeena treats Mattie. Zeena needs to feel that in some aspect she is superior to Mattie, because she knows that she cannot contend with Mattie's age or appearance. Throughout the novel it is evident that Mattie is incapable of performing any of the household tasks as well as Zeena: "Mattie had no natural turn for housekeeping, and her training had done nothing to remedy the defect" (Wharton 36). Zeena continually reminds Mattie and Ethan of their inferiority and inability to satisfy her; she utilizes language similarly in her communication with Ethan and Mattie. Zeena embodies the aggressive theory of communication; "They [those who employ aggressive communication] try to dominate others by being loud, abrasive, blaming, intimidating, and sarcastic" (Cahn and Abigail 62). Zeena's employment of language in conversations with Mattie further exhibits Zeena's condescension: "adding, as she pushed the empty bottle toward Mattie: "*If* you can get the taste out it'll do for pickles'" (Wharton 66). Here, Zeena suggests that Mattie may be incapable of correctly performing the simple task of washing a medicine bottle. In another instance, Zeena complains that she does not feel well, so Mattie offers her assistance which Zeena quickly dismisses: "I'm so sorry, Zeena! Isn't there anything I can do?' 'No; there's nothing.' Zeena turned away from her" (53). Mattie cannot possibly alleviate Zeena's pain. Not only is Zeena unsatisfied with Mattie's work, but Mattie is aware of Zeena's disapproval, and her comments to Ethan illustrate her awareness of Zeena's unhappiness: "You know she hardly says anything, and sometimes I can see she ain't suited, and yet I

don't know why,'" (47-8) and when Zeena decides to send Mattie away, Mattie assumes that Zeena's decision must be based in part on her inadequacies: "'And she wants someone handier in my place? Is that it?'" (121). Ethan is also aware of Zeena's treatment of Mattie: "His wife had never shown any jealousy of Mattie, but of late she had grumbled increasingly over the house-work and found oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl's insufficiency" (35). Zeena is able to capitalize on her control over Mattie and employ stringent and demeaning language because Mattie needs Zeena.

In addition to Mattie's dependence on the Frome's for survival, Mattie's desire for Ethan empowers Mattie to tolerate Zeena's asperity. Mattie's dependence on Zeena is similar to Ethan's feeling that he "owe[s]" Zeena: "The mere fact of obeying her [Zeena's] orders, of feeling free to go about his business again and talk with other men, restored his shaken balance and magnified his sense of what he owed her. Her efficiency shamed and dazzled him" (Wharton 70). Ethan comments on Mattie's desire to make the most of her situation and maintain her position on the farm: "He had been afraid that she would hate the hard life, the cold and loneliness; but not a sign of discontent escaped her. Zeena took the view that Mattie was bound to make the best of Starkfield since she hadn't any other place to go to; but this did not strike Ethan as conclusive" (58); Ethan hopes that part of Mattie's resolve can be attributed to her desire to remain with him. Mattie is willing to bear Zeena's sarcastic comments and disapproving language because Mattie's more 'socially valued end' is subjecting herself to Zeena's critical subjugation (Eagleton 132): one "need[s] to know how much repression and deferred fulfillment a society is likely to tolerate; how it is that desire can be switched from ends that would value to ends which trivialize and degrade it; how it comes about that men and women are sometimes

prepared to suffer oppression and indignity.” From a communication standpoint, Mattie and Zeena exhibit characteristics of “compromising,” which “occurs when no one totally wins or loses, each getting something (perhaps) of what he or she wanted” (Cahn and Abigail 59). Mattie remains on the Frome farm and is able to be close to Ethan, and Zeena is able to acquire power over Mattie while she is on the farm, yet Mattie and Zeena are both compromising. Manipulating language is Zeena’s more ‘socially valued end.’

Although Zeena dominates Mattie, Wharton gives both Zeena and Mattie power over their male counterpart, Ethan. Carol Wershoven discusses the role of the female intruder in her work *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, and she defines this character as “the woman who is in some way outside of her society; she is different from other women, whether because of her background or lack of social status or because she has violated some social taboo . . . Her presence in the novel is central to both the social criticism the book contains and the values it advocates” (14). Wershoven develops her argument, and she articulates six “functions” of this female character, many of which either Zeena or Mattie performs (14-5), and Zeena and Mattie both reflect this “intruder” in different ways at different points in the novel. Neither Zeena nor Mattie represents all six “functions,” but they do share one important “function”: “forc[ing]” the male character, Ethan, to “reexamine his world, which often results in shattering his complacency” (14). When Zeena first comes to stay on the Frome farm to nurse Ethan’s mother, Ethan is “force[d]” to confront his situation, and he realizes that his “complacency” in regard to living on the farm with his mother’s perpetual silence is no longer desirable. And later in the novel when Mattie arrives on the farm, Ethan is once again “force[d]” to reevaluate his situation with Zeena, and he realizes that he desires

something more. Another important “function” which Mattie performs is that “in contrast to other women in the novel . . . [she] shows how trapped and suffocated other women in society are” (14). Additionally, directly related to the first “function,” Mattie also “teac[hes] him about alternative ways to live, exposing him to options and attitudes that may puzzle and attract him” (14-5); Mattie not only destroys Ethan’s “complacency,” but she shows him an “alternative.” Mattie represents a different type of female, a different type of companion, and a different attitude and outlook; Mattie’s way of life appeals to Ethan and “attracts” (15) him. Zeena and Mattie both affect Ethan, yet they share another important role in the novel.

In regard to Wershoven’s female intruder, Zeena and Mattie both represent societal restrictions which Wharton is concerned with. The difference lies in their nature and reflects their utilization of language: Zeena rises above her oppression and takes control while Mattie succumbs to her oppression. Zeena’s authoritative control throughout the novel reflects her deep-seated desire to control situations as well as others. As a female, Zeena is able to obtain freedom and control in a male-dominated society. Mattie, however, is the archetype of the typical Victorian-American female and represents a larger faction of females. She is limited by her circumstances, and by what she is able to do: her survival is contingent upon others. As a single female, she is virtually powerless to sustain a living on her own, which indentures her to the Frome’s. As a dependent female with no other family, Mattie has little alternative when it comes to leaving the Frome farm: [w]hat chance had she, inexperienced and untrained, among the million bread-seekers of the cities?” (Wharton 122). Wershoven questions Wharton’s choice to use a female intruder rather than a male intruder, and she concludes that it must

be a female who manifests Wharton's "social criticism" because "it was easier for a woman to become an outsider in the world of Wharton's novels, and it was far more likely that a woman would judge the world harshly" (15). While Zeena and Mattie both share important characteristics related to Wershoven's idea of the female intruder, fundamentally their roles are opposed.

Differences in Zeena and Mattie's actions are rooted in the different motives of each character; these distinct motives are reflected in their appearances. In contrast to Zeena, Mattie's actions and her attention to her appearance are aimed at receiving Ethan's attention and pleasing him. Ethan recalls his impression of Mattie when she first arrived: "And he remembered Zeena's sarcastic stare when Mattie, on the evening of her arrival, had come down to supper with smoothed hair and a ribbon at her neck" (Wharton 79). In this moment both Ethan and Zeena realize the differences between Zeena and Mattie: the contrast between Zeena's age and homeliness and Mattie's youth and beauty. Mattie takes time to fix her hair and add accoutrements to her appearance; she desires Ethan's attention. Zeena does not make time for these types of indulgence. Although she desires to control Ethan, she does not utilize aspects of her femininity to control Ethan as Mattie does. As Zeena prepares to go to Bettsbridge is the only time in the novel where Zeena intentionally expends energy and time altering her appearance. Ethan is shocked: "Her husband stopped short at sight of her. Instead of her usual calico wrapper and knitted shawl she wore her best dress of brown merino, and above her thin strands of hair, which still preserved the tight undulations of the crimping-pins, rose a hard perpendicular bonnet" (61). In this same scene, Ethan has to force himself to look at his wife: "Ethan roused himself to answer. He became suddenly conscious that he was looking at Mattie

while Zeena talked to him, and with an effort he turned his eyes to his wife” (64). Zeena takes out her best dress only when she is leaving Ethan, because as she leaves the farm she needs to make sure that her outward appearance and attire establish authority. On the farm her role and control are already established; when she leaves the farm and enters into an unfamiliar area, however, she must appear to have the power; thus, she utilizes the medium of dress. Even in her best dress, Zeena’s outward appearance cannot compare with Mattie’s beautiful disposition, and as Ethan reflects on Mattie’s presence in the household, Wharton reinforces essential, internal differences between Zeena and Mattie: “But it was not only that the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lightning of a fire on a cold hearth. The girl was more than the bright serviceable creature he had thought her” (33); Mattie’s presence on the barren cold farm represents new “life” and warmth. Mattie’s desire to impress Ethan is not only reflected in her appearance, but also in her actions.

Similarly to Ethan’s use of actions to illustrate his feelings for Mattie, Mattie performs actions which reflect her desire for Ethan’s approval. While Zeena is away, Mattie assumes the role of wife and lovingly makes dinner for Ethan and carefully arranges the table:

She wore her usual dress of darkish stiff, 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 . . . She set the lamp on the table, and he saw that it was carefully laid for supper, with fresh

donuts, stewed blueberries and his favorite pickles in a dish of gay red glass. (Wharton 82)

Ethan's reaction to this "unusual" event augments his admiration of Mattie. The color red in this passage also symbolizes the desire and passion between Ethan and Mattie. When Mattie chooses to bring out Zeena's most prized possession, her pickle dish, Mattie chooses to disregard Zeena's imperative command that this dish never be used; her active insubordination reflects her deep desire to impress Ethan and her decision to avoid verbal confrontation with Zeena. Mattie's passive-aggressive communication style is exhibited in this scene; Mattie confronts Zeena through an action which avoids direct confrontation (Cahn and Abigail 65). Olene Murad comments on the failure of Mattie's actions, however: "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" (91). Ethan and Mattie's language are inferior to Zeena's: just as Ethan's actions are not a substitute for the power of words, Mattie's actions cannot satisfy the necessity for assertive communication.

Zeena and Ethan do not have mutual regard for one another which is reflected in their communication: their marriage is broken. Therefore, Mattie's implicit role in the breaking of the pickle dish is vital due to the symbolic importance of the pickle dish, its symbolic representation of Zeena and Ethan's marriage. In this scene, Mattie disobediently ignores Zeena's command that her pickle dish not be used and she chooses to use the dish while Zeena is absent from the household; the dish is broken during

Zeena's absence, and when Zeena returns to the farm and discovers that her treasured dish has been used without permission and is irreparably damaged, she becomes infuriated with Mattie. This dense scene with its abounding symbolism has been analyzed by many critics, and one critic, Fryer, discusses the symbolic importance of the pickle dish: "If you have only two dresses, one for good and one for everyday [sic], if you only have one special dish among the common ones, then the putting on of that best dress as Zenobia does when she goes to town, the setting of the table with that special dish as Mattie does when she and Ethan have supper alone, are actions that acquire a great, even an ominous significance" (168-69). Mattie, who is usually subordinate and obedient, is insubordinate and disobedient only to Zeena, which reflects her deep-seated desire to displace her. Mattie and Ethan did not just use any one of Zeena's dishes; they used Zeena's most valuable dish, the one she specifically requested that no one touch. Importantly, in Mattie's frantic exposition regarding what will occur when Zeena learns of this incident, Mattie's first question is "'What will Zeena *say* [italics mine]?"' (Wharton 85); Mattie may be concerned about Zeena's actions and potential punishments, but she is foremost concerned about Zeena's words, not her actions. Zeena's mastery of language has clearly affected Mattie. Mattie's apprehension is well-founded, and when Zeena returns to find her authority disregarded and her dish broken, she verbally assaults Mattie: "'*You* got down my pickle-dish . . . You're a bad girl Mattie Silver, and I always known it" (128); Zeena immediately berates Mattie when she learns of Mattie's implicit role in this incident, noting that she waited until Zeena was absent, which reinforces the dish's deeper symbolism: "'[A]nd you waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use

it” (128). Zeena and Ethan’s marriage is fractured, irreparable, and symbolically, Ethan cannot find the glue to fix the pickle dish before Zeena returns: “He thought by starting out again with the lumber as soon as he had finished his dinner he might get back to the farm with the glue before Jotham and the old sorrel had had time to fetch Zenobia from the Flats . . . after considerable search, and sympathetic questions as to what he wanted it for, and whether ordinary flour paste wouldn’t do as well if she couldn’t find it, the widow Homan finally hunted down her solitary bottle of glue” (100-01, 02). When Ethan finally gets the glue to fix the dish, Zeena is already home, and she has resumed her position: ““Oh, Ethan—Zeena’s come,’ she said in a whisper, clutching his sleeve . . . They stood and stared at each other, pale as culprits” (104); Wharton’s language here, specifically her use of the word “culprit” symbolizes Ethan and Mattie’s cognizant recognition of the deeper meaning behind the broken dish.

Mattie’s desire to take out and use the pickle dish and Zeena’s desire to keep it hidden and unused reflect Mattie and Zeena’s disparate beliefs of marriage, another vital difference which affects their behavior in the novel. For Zeena, marriage is a means to an end: control; thus, she is the dominant authority figure in her and Ethan’s relationship. Many characteristics which Zeena exudes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discusses in an excerpt from her work, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, titled, “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America.” Smith-Rosenberg discusses the roles of women and the disparagement of characteristics associated with hysteria: “[w]omen were sharply discouraged from expressing competitive inclinations or asserting mastery in such ‘masculine’ areas as physical skill, strength and courage . . . Rather, they were encouraged to be coquettish,

entertaining, nonthreatening, and nurturing” (103). Zeena is none of these, and as Zeena sustains control of Ethan throughout the novel, she embodies many more masculine attributes than feminine ones. Furthermore, Zeena’s idea of marriage is not associated with mutual regard for one another, and Zeena does not respect Ethan. Lev Raphael comments on Ethan’s shame and powerlessness in an excerpt from *Edith Wharton’s Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on her Neglected Fiction*:

Ethan Frome is chained to an even darker fate . . . he doesn’t escape into death, yet his story too is one of disappointment, failure, powerlessness and shame . . . The physical burden is matched by an emotional chain that constantly pulls Ethan short, that silences him, that constricts his life: shame over a life of disappointments, culminating in being trapped . . . and over his deep inadequacies as a man. (175)

Interrelated to this, Zeena and Ethan’s marriage is void of intimacy and desire. The dead, barren farm and landscape mirror the Frome’s barrenness: “[T]he shutterless windows of the house were dark. A dead cucumber-vine dangled from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death” (Wharton 51). Zeena’s decisions and language reflect her foundational views of marriage, and her demeaning and emasculating comments contribute to Ethan’s passive submission throughout the novel.

Even though Mattie and Ethan are not married, Mattie’s perception of how a female should behave in a heterosexual relationship is contrasted with Zeena’s aggressive and demeaning methods. Murad reflects upon Ethan’s indecision and inaction in regard to his physical location to Zeena and states that “Ethan needs a distant place to bring his wild dream to fruition; he could never, steeped in inhibition as he is, give in to his

physical need for Mattie anywhere near Zeena” (99). Not surprisingly, moments in the novel in which Ethan most resembles a dominant male authority figure occur in scenes with him and Mattie, when Zeena is not present. One example of Mattie’s submission to Ethan’s authority occurs in the scene in which Mattie and Ethan discuss what they must do in regard to the broken pickle dish: “‘Here give them to me [the pieces of broken dish],’ he said in a voice of sudden authority. She drew aside, instinctively obeying his tone . . . It’s all right, Matt. Come back and finish supper,’ he commanded her.

Completely reassured, she shone on him through tear-hung lashes” (Wharton 86-7). In another similar example during Zeena’s absence, Ethan tells Mattie to switch from her present position to a position in Zeena’s rocking chair: “Zeena’s empty rocking chair stood facing him. Mattie rose obediently, and seated herself in it” (89). With Mattie, Ethan has confidence and control as he commands Mattie, and Mattie obeys Ethan’s commands: she is submissive. After Mattie attempts to take Zeena’s position in her rocking chair, another symbolic representation of Mattie’s passive-aggressive style of communication, a symbolic representation of Mattie’s desire to take Zeena’s position in the household, Ethan and Mattie are reminded of Zeena’s control: “As her [Mattie’s] young brown head detached itself against the patch-work cushion that habitually framed his wife’s gaunt countenance, Ethan had a momentary shock. It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder” (89). The image of Zeena’s body haunts Ethan, and Mattie is unable to overcome Ethan’s recollection of Zeena. Mattie also notes the change: “After a moment Mattie seemed to be affected by the same sense of constraint” (89). Ammons establishes several concrete correlations between *Ethan Frome* and the poetics of a fairy tale. Specifically, she

comments that, analogous to a fairy tale, there is a witch, Zeena, and a princess in distress, Mattie, whom she compares to Snow White, yet the novel is foundationally unlike a fairy tale in that “[c]hildren and heroines (Snow White) do not remain the victims of ogres. Someone saves them”; the figure that most resembles a prince and should save Mattie: Ethan, is incapable of overcoming the “ogre” (147). He and Mattie’s attempts to displace Zeena fail, and even in her absence they cannot successfully and permanently overcome Zeena’s authoritative control.

Towards the end of the novel on their way to the station where Ethan is to take Mattie, Ethan, again, away from Zeena’s presence, has another instance of authority with Mattie; they are again able to communicate assertively with one another. Mattie tells Ethan that there is not enough time for them to go sledding before he takes her to the station. Ethan reacts boldly to Mattie’s insinuation that they are not in control of how they utilize their time: “‘There’s all the time we want. Come along!’ his one desire now was to postpone the moment of turning the sorrel toward the Flats”; Mattie persists, stating that “[b]ut the girl,’ she faltered. ‘the girl’ll be waiting at the station.’ ‘Well, let her wait. You’d have to if she didn’t. Come!’” (Wharton 161). Mattie responds submissively to Ethan’s command: “The note of authority in his voice seemed to subdue her, and when he had jumped from the sleigh she let him help her out . . . She seated herself obediently” (161). Even in this moment of authority, Ethan and Mattie are not free from Zeena’s control, however. Zeena’s deliberate language and actions throughout the novel consistently remind Ethan and Mattie that she has the power to displace their relationship: “Mattie lifted her hand with a quick gesture, and he heard his wife’s step behind him . . . Zeena came into the room . . . and quietly took her accustomed seat

between them . . .” (123). Both intrinsically realize that they can take as much time as they want getting to the station, but the reality remains: Zeena has made arrangements for Mattie to leave, and they are still acting in concordance with Zeena’s command.

Mattie’s tone and her choice of language are additional elements connected to Mattie’s desire to gain Ethan’s affection and approval. Mattie’s submissive role and regard for Ethan are reflected in her tone: “Her [Mattie’s] tone was so sweet that he took the pipe from his mouth and drew his chair up to the table” (Wharton 91). And in another instance, Mattie’s “sweet treble” (47) is alluded to by Ethan. Mattie’s tone creates closeness for her and Ethan: Ethan wants to remain and listen to Mattie. Contrarily, Zeena’s caustic tone divides and separates. Mattie’s language also unifies, and later in the novel as she and Ethan are sledding down the hill (before their attempted suicide) Mattie tells Ethan that “I [am] never scared with you,” and Ethan, unfamiliar with accolade, responds positively: “The strange exaltation of his mood had brought on one of his rare fits of boastfulness. ‘It is a tricky place, though. The least swerve and we’d never ha’ come up again’ . . . ‘I always say you’ve got the surest eye’” (163); Mattie fosters his pleasure, and her language begets closeness. With Mattie, Ethan is able to assume the role of protector and provider because Mattie allows him these opportunities. In another example, Ethan tells Mattie that he wants her to switch positions with him on the sled, and when she questions his motives, his answer pacifies her: “The answer seemed to satisfy her, or else she yielded to the power of his voice” (168). Zeena, on the other hand uses her language to maintain control over Ethan and continually chooses to emasculate him, so he is unable to exude modes of masculinity. While Mattie aims to flatter Ethan and develop his masculinity, conversely, when Zeena speaks to Ethan her language and

tone are harsh and bitter, mirroring her antipathy towards Ethan and her objective, control: “He was struck by a new note in her voice. It was neither whining nor reproachful but drily resolute” (110). Ethan reveals that Zeena’s tone is often “reproachful,” (110) yet here Zeena’s tone reflects her determination to affirm her control over Ethan and Mattie’s happiness.

In addition to Zeena’s employment of tone, she uses illness, another subset of her power, to enhance her successful employment of language, and her utilization of illness is extremely important in the analysis of Zeena and Mattie’s relationship. Illness is the basis for her initial request for Mattie’s presence on the farm. Zeena is presented with the opportunity to not only receive the assistance she needs, but to acquire the maximum amount of power. Mattie is resigned to all the household duties, and she is occupied from dawn until dusk under the premise that Zeena’s doctor has ordered Zeena to remain on complete bed rest. Zeena knows how to choose individuals over whom she can exert the most control, and just as Zeena pursued a proposal from Ethan, knowing that he could be easily controlled and manipulated, Zeena chooses Mattie as her household servant. Mattie needs Zeena. Mattie submits to Zeena’s control knowing that she has nowhere else to go: “He felt all the more sorry for the girl because misfortune had, in a sense, indentured her to them. Mattie Silver was the daughter of a cousin of Zenobia Frome's, who had inflamed his clan with mingled sentiments of envy and admiration by descending from the hills to Connecticut, where he had married a Stamford girl and succeeded to her father's thriving "drug" business” (Wharton 58). Zeena realizes that Mattie is the best option because she can exhibit the most control over her: “But when Zenobia’s doctor recommended her looking about for someone to help her with the house-work the clan

instantly saw the chance of exacting a compensation from Mattie. Zenobia, though doubtful of the girl's efficiency, was tempted by the freedom to find fault without much risk of losing her; and so Mattie came to Starkfield" (59). Lagerway and Markle support the idea that the "sick role" is invented by Zeena in an attempt to "exert her only power" (123); however, this is not her only power; it is merely one facet of her power. Furthermore, Zeena uses her sickness to sustain her power as Ethan and Mattie's relationship evolves and her power becomes threatened.

At the end of the novel Zeena's sickness again becomes important: she uses her sickness as the grounds for eliminating Mattie. Zeena utilizes her power, evicting Mattie and infuriating Ethan, who is still unable to communicate effectively: "Exerting her right to run the household as her sphere and to protect her marriage, Zeena orders Mattie's departure. Although Ethan resists Zeena's will for as long as he can, he sees no real possibility of circumventing her plans" (Pennell 103). It is clear to Zeena that Mattie must be sent away; therefore, Zeena informs Mattie and Ethan that she needs a hired girl: "He [the doctor] wants I should have a hired girl. He says I oughtn't to have a single thing around the house'" (Wharton 110). As Ethan and Zeena argue about the expense of a hired girl, Zeena informs Ethan that it will not cost him as much as he thinks; here she reiterates Mattie's insufficiency: "There'll be Mattie's board less, anyhow—," to which Ethan reacts, dismayed: "He stopped short, not grasping what he heard," and when Ethan questions Zeena's decision regarding Mattie, "Zeena laugh[s]. It was an odd familiar sound . . . 'You didn't suppose I was going to keep two girls, did you? . . . 'She's a pauper that's hung onto us all after father'd done his best to ruin us. I've kep' her here a whole year: it's somebody else's turn now'" (115). In this moment, Ethan is forced to

reflect upon the way the events have unfolded, and he comes to the realization that Zeena has had control of the situation from the beginning: ““She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others”” (118). The night before Mattie’s departure, Zeena’s actions continue to reinforce Zeena’s control. Zeena feels that she does not need to acknowledge that Mattie is leaving: ““Didn’t she say goodbye to you [Mattie]?’ ‘No”” (151); rather, Zeena simply complains of sickness, the reason that Mattie is leaving, and goes to her room: ““Where’s Zeena?’ he [Ethan] asked. ‘She went right upstairs after dinner. She said she had those shooting pains again, and didn’t want to be disturbed”” (151). Zeena has sustained her position of authority in the household and affirmed her superiority in regards to Mattie. Shortly after Zeena’s powerful assertion whereby she informs Ethan that Mattie is leaving, her health becomes rejuvenated, and she decides that she feels well enough to sit at the table with them, which she does haughtily, conscious of her power: ““Zeena had an air of unusual alertness and activity. She drank two cups of coffee . . . She ate well, declaring that the mild weather made her feel better, and pressed a second helping of beans on Jotham Powell, whose wants she generally ignored. She looked straight at Mattie as she spoke, a faint smile deepening the vertical lines between her nose and chin”” (138, 148, 124). The good weather is not what lifts Zeena’s spirits; rather, it is the knowledge that she is in control and that her plan is coming to fruition: Mattie is leaving.

Mattie’s presence will no longer threaten Zeena’s power, and by the end of the novel, Zeena has asserted her authority through her employment of language and has used language to continually assert control over Mattie and Ethan’s lives; her role as an aggressive communicator is static. Ethan is left ““suddenly weak and powerless””

(Raphael 179). Symbolically, after Zeena pronounces that Mattie must leave, Zeena goes upstairs and leaves Ethan and Mattie below to contemplate the reality of their situation. For much of the novel the upstairs bedroom is where Zeena has remained, and her location not only symbolically represents her superior position, but it also allows her to listen to Ethan and Mattie's movements and conversations below. Zeena is not resigned to the upstairs bedroom because she is too weak to walk downstairs and sit at the table or in her rocking chair; she chooses her location upstairs, above them; she places herself in this advantageous and superior position. If Ethan or Mattie wants to speak with Zeena, he or she must climb up to Zeena's physical and symbolic position in the household: "He listened for Zeena's step, and not hearing it, called her name up the stairs. She did not answer, and after a moment's hesitation he went up and opened her door" (Wharton 107). When Zeena does come downstairs at one specific point in the novel, Wharton emphasizes Zeena's position "between" (123) Ethan and Mattie; she maintains her control.

Zeena's strategic location in the household also symbolizes her superiority; this location allows her to control Ethan and Mattie more fully. Throughout the novel, Ethan and Mattie are constantly forced to check themselves and their communications; many times they are forced to speak in whispers because they know that Zeena is right above them. At any moment she might choose to come downstairs and interrupt them. Additionally, Zeena chooses Mattie's bedroom for her, placing her across the hall from her and Ethan's bedroom. Each night as Mattie and Ethan climb the stairs to their bedrooms, they are forced to sleep across the hall from each other. Their rooms are proximally contiguous, yet their desires for one another are vastly divided.

Further evidence of Zeena's complete control over Mattie is manifest in Mattie's changed appearance at the end of the novel. The narrator comments on Zeena and Mattie's appearances: "[t]wo women were sitting there I could not tell which had been the speaker" (Wharton 173). Just as strikingly different as their appearances were at the beginning of the novel is how similar their appearances are at the end. Zeena's power has subsumed Mattie, and Mattie has lost all semblance to the young and beautiful woman she was at the beginning of the novel: "Her hair was as grey as her companion's, her face as bloodless and shriveled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples. Under her shapeless dress her body kept its limp immobility, and her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives" (173-74). Unable to evade or overcome Zeena's power, Mattie's resolve is obliterated in the sledding accident: Mattie has contracted Zeena's "disease" (174). Mattie no longer imagines what her life would be like apart from Zeena's control; she has succumbed to Zeena's caustic outlook, which is manifest in her severely altered appearance and disposition: "Mattie Silver becomes Zeena's double rather than Ethan's complement" (Ammons 149). Another critic, Wolff, argues in "Cold Ethan and 'Hot Ethan'" that Mattie is actually the weakest character in the novel. "Mattie Silver's lustrous youth but thinly disguises the core of her nature: she too is essentially passive—even more helpless than either Zeena or Ethan" (239); Mattie's more serious injuries in the sledding accident seem to support Wolff's assertion that Mattie is "more helpless." Ethan is visibly affected by the sledding accident; however, Zeena's powerful control in his life remains constant. Before the accident Zeena already had complete control over Ethan's life: "And they ain't any of 'em easy people either. Mattie *was* before the

accident; I never knew a sweeter nature. But she's suffered too much—that's what I always say when folks tell me how she's soured" (Wharton 180); until the accident, Mattie's happiness and spirit had remained untainted by Zeena's control. Although the ending may have surprised some readers, after a closer look at the power Zeena has throughout the novel, not surprisingly, it is she who still holds the power over both Ethan and Mattie at the end.

Wharton foreshadows the fate of both Ethan and Mattie early in the novel. Ethan makes a potent statement as he and Mattie pass by a graveyard: "We'll always go on living here together, and some day she'll lie there beside me," (50) and at the end of the novel after Ethan and Mattie's attempt at double suicide fails, their attempt to escape Zeena's powerful influence in this world, Ethan and Mattie, both crippled, are resigned to live in constant torment under the same roof as Zeena, neither one able to evade her power. "[T]here is victory, human, recognizable Freudian, and of course Zeena's. Her deepest wishes are fulfilled. She wins her power struggle with Ethan" (Hovey 139). Ethan's language and character are limited, and one critic, Wolff comments on Ethan's inhibited acumen: "Frome has perceived the two women in his life as essentially different from each other; his tragic insight comes when he is forced to recognize that each would play the same complimentary role—all three linked to death finally comes mercifully to part them" ("Cold" 241). Ethan and Mattie are fated to live forever under the watchful eye of Zeena, no longer able to escape her cold critical words of contempt; Zeena is now able to listen and observe their every word. Zeena's powerful language reflects her use of aggressive communication and goes beyond the conventional uses of verbal and nonverbal communication.

Conclusion

As an essential element fundamental to humanity, language will continue to be a topic of intense debate and discussion, specifically the relationship between what one says and what one means, and Wharton's powerful uses of language in *Ethan Frome* contest the deconstructionist tenet that meaning is indeterminate. Many deconstructionist critics and scholars in the field of English attempt to disparage language and diminish and redefine the role of the author, the text, and the reader, and some have disassociated language and meaning, maintaining that each individual's interpretation is as valid as the next: "The work of Derrida and others cast strict doubt upon the classical notions of truth, reality, meaning and knowledge, all of which could be exposed as resting on a strictly naively representational theory of language" (Eagleton 124). Strict adherence to deconstruction, however, leaves no objective, ultimate authority, and the impact this has on both literature and literary criticism is manifold: subjective interpretation has led to the exploration of sexual, hedonistic, and feminist pursuits as academic studies. Eagleton spends a great deal of time explaining the developments and evolution of literary theory, and in his chapter titled "Post-Structuralism," he concludes that "Western philosophy" has been both 'phonocentric' and 'logocentric,' in search of the "ultimate 'word', presence, essence truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience" (113). Eagleton maintains that the answer to this ongoing quandary must lie in something "beyond that system, untainted by its play of linguistic differences . . . it must somehow be anterior to these discourses, must have existed before they did" (113): God is the only being whose existence preceded language; language is rooted in his nature and sustained through his power; he is the objective and ultimate

authority. Language affects all disciplines as well as those both inside and outside of the university due to its powerful origin. Therefore, those who have been called into the field of English must be prepared to defend language, meaning and objectivity. Wharton's work constructs an argument against language's indefiniteness and indeterminacy; it is a defense of language.

Those who attempt to discredit language attempt to discredit literature. And while many discredit language and attest that it is indeterminate, *Ethan Frome* illustrates the power of language on relationships, mental states, and communities. Each character utilizes a different type of communication style as he or she faces conflicts throughout the novel. Zeena understands that language has both power and meaning, and she uses it intentionally; her communication style is aggressive, and the "competing" which is associated with this style divides her and Ethan (Cahn and Abigail 62): "[I]ntentionality, and meaning are distinctively aligned" (Searle 137). Zeena understands that the power of language lies partly in its diversity. Language divides and unifies: as a form of communication, it can be used to demean, debase, and emasculate, while, conversely, it can unite mankind, allowing speakers and listeners to communicate meaning and affect change. Without a medium of communication, the discipline of English itself, with its foundations firmly rooted in language, texts, literature, and words, does not exist. Although Rosenblatt is a primarily a proponent of reader response and praises the subjectivity dominant in deconstructionism over an objective authority, she makes an important comment on the important role of language to the creation of a text: "[L]anguage is a socially generated and socially generative phenomenon. Obviously, no one would become an author (whether of an oral or written text) without the possession

of a social medium of a language system. And literary art is in itself a social institution” (20). Communication is social, and language allows the communicator to express him or herself. The complex relationships between Zeena, Ethan, and Mattie are rooted in language. The nature of each character is reflected in his or her ability to use language, and the fate of these characters is intricately connected to their employment of language throughout the novel.

Zeena’s fate is tied to her employment of language: she dominates Ethan and Mattie because she has mastered language. Zeena is able to adapt her language to different situations based on both her objectives and to whom she is speaking. Her linguistic control is not limited to one type of language or one situation. Zeena intentionally institutes persuasive language to receive a marriage proposal from Ethan, critical language to emasculate and demean Ethan, caustic language to berate and belittle Mattie, and imperative commands to institute her authority. Zeena also utilizes silence: she understands the power of language on one’s subconscious. Zeena maintains her control throughout the entirety of the novel, yet her suppression of her own desire for love is the expense of her more ‘socially valued end’ (Eagleton 132): linguistic control; she too is repressing desires of her own: “[one] need[s] to know how much repression and deferred fulfillment a society is likely to tolerate; how it is that desire can be switched from ends that [one] would value to ends which trivialize and degrade it; how it comes about that men and women are sometimes prepared to suffer oppression and indignity” (132). Manipulating language is Zeena’s more ‘socially valued end’; through manipulation she obtains power. Zeena is not the only static character. Zeena maintains her power and linguistic control throughout the novel.

Ethan's fate is tied to his inability to employ language: his situation and his language are static; his communication style is nonassertive and passive-aggressive. Ethan is inept at utilizing language, and his incapacity to employ language, combined with his rash and uncalculated language, affect his inability to overcome Zeena's more mature and advanced uses of language: "Passivity, withdrawal, inarticulateness, helpless dependency—all of these will eventually poison any relationship: they are all the basis for Frome's misery" ("Cold" 240). Ethan cannot comprehend the advanced uses of language which Zeena institutes. When Ethan communicates with Zeena, he struggles to control his emotions, which in turn affects his ability to clearly and deliberately articulate language. His passivity and submissiveness are also connected to his inability to articulate his feelings and desires through language. Zeena's aggressive and emasculating language has a powerful effect on Ethan and is illustrated in his low self esteem, and he is unable to confront his dominant wife; he remains trapped and is forced to remain under her control. Ethan's desire to be free from his wife's control, free to fulfill his desire to be with Mattie never comes to fruition because Ethan is unable to confront Zeena. In instances of communication with Mattie, Ethan is also unable to verbalize his emotions; he is resigned to use actions rather than words to express his desire.

As the only dynamic character, Mattie's language is limited as is her character; therefore, she is indentured to Zeena and her passive-aggressive and minimally assertive styles of communication ultimately succumb to Zeena's more powerful nature and aggressive language. Initially, Mattie's bright, cheery disposition reflects her language: her presence is a welcome change to Ethan who falls in love with her youth and vibrancy. By the end of the novel, however, Mattie's appearance and language mirror those of

Zeena's. Mattie is no longer a striking contrast to Zeena, but a mirror image of her.

Mattie's character and language are transformed: she has become like Zeena. Mattie is unable to contend with Zeena's more powerful uses of language, and her fate is rooted in her weaker nature: both her nature and her language are weaker than Zeena's. Both Ethan and Mattie's desire for freedom remains unfulfilled at the end of the novel; language is unable to liberate them; they are unable to employ it advantageously.

Due to the complexity and intricacies of the questions related to human nature which Wharton raises, her laden questions related to the meaning of human existence and one's purpose in life, there are many additional avenues for continued research in regard to *Ethan Frome*. In connection with the analysis of the unanswered questions, there is the complex issue of gender and power dynamics throughout the novel. Power is complicated due to its divisive nature; it necessarily creates a hierarchy. Wharton's distribution of power is calculated and purposeful, and Wharton has specific roles for both the females and males in her novel, specific identities for each. This is an area that this thesis has only begun to develop and address. Related to Wharton's use of gender dynamics, there is also the social and historical context during which Wharton was writing and that which Wharton is writing about, both tied to her use of gender dynamics; this is yet another area which could be explored further. Wharton also raises questions related to community: how community affects individuals, how individuals affect and fit into their communities, and what the role of each should be. Due to the overwhelming number of critics who have commented on Wharton's fatalistic ending, the possibility of researching Wharton's views on fatalism could be a very interesting and enlightening study also. While the connections between an author's life and work can be both difficult to establish and

speculative, the numerous and striking similarities between Wharton's novel and her personal life could be analyzed; archival evidence could establish more definite, concrete connections in this project.

Ethan Frome not only tells a compelling story and depicts universal conditions of mankind; it accomplishes something more powerful through its narrative. Edith Wharton's novel defends language. Zeena's intentional and persuasive language contests the meaninglessness and relativity supported by deconstructionists. So too, Ethan and Mattie's struggle to successfully employ language reflects the complex nature of language: their struggle suggests the power which language has if, and when, it is engaged. As a work of literature, *Ethan Frome* defends that which it is built upon: the written word.

 Notes

¹ Work, artist, universe, and audience were originally presented in M. H. Abrams' work *The Mirror and The Lamp: Romantic Theory and The Critical Tradition*: "Four elements in the total situation of a work of art are discriminated and made salient, by one or another synonym, in almost all theories which aim to be comprehensive. First, there is the *work*, the artistic product itself. And since this is a human product, an artifact, the second common element is the artificer, the *artist*. Third, the work is taken to have a subject which, directly or deviously, is derived from existing things—to be about, or signify, or reflect something, which either is, or bears some relation to, an objective state of affairs. This third element, whether held to consist of people and actions, ideas and feelings, material things and events, or super-sensible essences, has frequently been denoted by that word-of-all-work, 'nature'; but let us see the more neutral and comprehensive term, *universe*, instead. For the final element we have the *audience*: the listeners, spectators, or readers to whom the work is addressed, or to whose attention, at any rate, it becomes available" (6).

² According to Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Post-Structuralism completely abolishes all scientific objectivity in its reaction against the Structuralists' overemphasis on the system of language, with its inherent threat of abolishing the materiality of the text and reducing the reader's interaction; this ultimately leads to meaninglessness (110-30). Vanhoozer also comments on this 'postmodern condition', quoting Kierkegaard: "We can sum up the so-called 'postmodern' condition that is the context of contemporary discussions concerning the theory and practice of interpretation in a single phrase: 'incredulity toward meaning'" (16).

³ Paul Ricoeur states that "[t]he concept of meaning allows two interpretations which reflect the main dialectic between event and meaning. To mean is both what the speaker means, i.e., what he intends to say, and what the sentence means, i.e., what the conjunction between the identification function and the predicative function yields. Meaning, in other words, is both noetic and noematic. We may connect the reference of discourse to its speaker with the event side of the dialectic. The event is somebody speaking. In this sense, the system or code is anonymous to the extent that it is merely virtual. Languages do not speak, people do. But the propositional side of the self-reference

of discourse must not be overlooked if the utterer's meaning, to use a term of Paul Grice's, is not to be reduced to a mere psychological intention. The mental meaning can be found nowhere else than in discourse itself. The utterer's meaning has its mark in the utterance meaning"

(Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning 13).

⁴ Decisions about meaning, about how to interpret a text are inextricable from questions about what it is to be human" (Vanhooser 22).

⁵ "Illocutionary Acts" were "baptized" by the British philosopher J.L. Austin (Searle 136).

⁶ In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke expands upon the relationship between language and rhetoric: "For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (43).

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