

***HITTING THE RIGHT NOTE IN ADAPTING EDITH WHARTON FOR THE SCREEN:
JOHN MADDEN'S ETHAN FROME (1993)***

Oana Alexandra Alexa, PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: As a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, Edith Wharton provided great stories for several film productions. Ethan Frome (1911) is a perfectly-rounded novella centred on the moral conflict of a poor man living in a closed community and his tragic choice. It stands out as Wharton's most intense and painful story, with an excruciating ending that has horrified readers with its naturalistic circumstance.

With such a literary success in mind, John Madden's 1993 adaptation, starring Liam Neeson as Ethan Frome, Patricia Arquette as Mattie Silver and Joan Allen as Zeena Frome, needed to come very close to perfection in order to satisfy Wharton's readers. This paper discusses the issue of hitting the right note in film adaptation in relation to this movie and its literary source, focusing on the illustration of moral and social conflicts on screen.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, film adaptation, John Madden, moral conflict, right note.

Introduction

Edith Wharton's 1911 novella tells the story of Ethan Frome, his wife Zenobia and her cousin, Mattie Silver, as it is narrated by an engineer who works in the small village of Starkfield for a few winter months. After he commissions Ethan to be his daily driver, a snow storm forces him to spend a night at the Frome farm, where he meets the two women. The state of affairs at the Fromes urges the engineer to find out more about their life story, and this allows the reader to get acquainted with their tragedy. Some twenty-five years before, Ethan and Zeena had only been married for a couple of years when her distant cousin Mattie came to live at the farm. Zeena was a hypochondriac and wanted a helper around the house, while Mattie had no other place to go after her father's death. Her arrival brings a ray of light into Ethan's existence, who was facing poverty alongside his ever-complaining wife. He had been forced to give up his studies in the city when his mother fell ill and, after her death, for fear of loneliness during the long, hard winters, he married Zenobia, who had previously come to the farm to help nurse his mother. Inevitably, Ethan and Mattie fall in love, but their feelings are closely guarded in Zeena's looming presence. One day, however, she decides to see a new doctor in the nearby town and spends the night away from home, leaving Ethan and Mattie alone for the first time. Mattie prepares dinner and even brings down Zeena's most prized possession, a red pickle-dish, to make the table prettier. But they can hardly enjoy each other's company, since the cat breaks the dish and reminds them of the living obstacle in their way. The next day, Zeena returns to discover the dish broken and announces that Mattie must leave immediately, since she is to be replaced by a qualified helper. Hearing the news, Ethan plans to elope with Mattie, but soon realises that he has no means to do it, while also feeling responsible for his wife. So the two take one last ride together, towards the railway station. On their way, Ethan offers to take Mattie coasting as he had previously promised. They finally get to express their feelings for each other and, with no alternative in sight, they suddenly decide to commit suicide by intentionally steering their sleigh into a tree.

Unfortunately, their attempt fails, leaving Mattie paralyzed and Ethan disabled. Zeena takes them both back to the farm, where they are still living together when the engineer meets them.

John Madden is an English theatre, film, television and radio director who is best known for the Oscar-winning movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). *Ethan Frome* (1993) was in fact his first film as a director, but it was received well by both Wharton critics and the general public, especially due to its cast and the traditional style adaptation, which matches the story. The film is very powerful in its apparent simplicity. Parley Ann Boswell notes the film's standard shots and smooth sequencing, as it "tells us Ethan's story like a Massachusetts Puritan preacher might have delivered a cautionary sermon: in New England plain style, with little embellishment. [...] Madden also relies on Puritan simplicity of narrative and unadorned comparisons." (Boswell 2007: 118) So, even though the story is told in flashback, the director chose to present it in chronological order, unlike in the book, which makes it easy for the audience to follow.

Probably the most important change in the story is visible in the two (not one) love scenes that Mattie and Ethan share. It is implied that they make love and, to some critics, this destroys the power of Wharton's story. Linda Constanzo Cahir suggests that "the filmmakers are either too unpracticed or too distrusting of an audience's capacity to follow depths of meaning to explore Frome's aching intricacies," and so they "give the audience what they think we should see and would enjoy: soft-hued lamplight, openmouthed kisses, and gentle sex." (qtd. in Boswell 2007: 121) This is why we wonder if Madden managed to hit to right note with this film adaptation. To us, while the scenes seem unnecessary, the film still manages to capture Ethan's inner struggle with sexuality and the fact that the ending stays true to Wharton's story is infinitely more important in the rendering of moral conflicts than what is suggested in these two short scenes.

Setting the Social Background

The film introduces the main character straightaway, as we see a disabled man (Ethan Frome, played by Liam Neeson) dragging his right foot with obvious effort and slowly making his way over a snow-covered railroad crossing, towards a village that we cannot yet see. His appearance from behind the heightened crossing in the sound of an approaching train is quite shocking, and we wonder whether he will be able to cross it in time, since he obviously walks very slowly. As he approaches the camera, we see that his clothes are in poor condition and his head is covered with a scarf that hides most of his face. The sight of the poor man alone in the apparently freezing, though sunny, landscape is not a pleasant one, but it does present the viewer with a mystery that needs to be unveiled.

Setting, both in Wharton's novel and in Madden's movie, plays an important part in exacerbating inner conflicts. The entire action unfolds during the winter (both the frame and the actual story share the rural landscape covered in snow), a time of the year when people perceive hardships twice as strongly. The movie was filmed in Northeast Kingdom, Vermont, and the location served its purpose beautifully. Bobby Bukowski's cinematography makes the most of the surroundings. The small village, the remote and shabby Frome farm, the hill where children go coasting, all seem to evoke Wharton's descriptions in detail. Even when it is not snowing, the sky is overcast most of the time, which means that the indoor scenes are dark, too. The atmosphere is overall gloomy and tense, especially when Zeena is present, and

the cold weather makes everyone less kind and more impatient. Critics have in fact rated the choice of filming location and the films' photography among its best features, given their capacity to visually accentuate the overall feelings of pain and torment that the characters experience throughout the movie.

After Neeson passes our line of sight, the camera moves to a different scene. The one-carriage train arrives in Starkfield, and a young passenger, though confused by the absence of the actual village in sight, gets off in the cold. While he watches the disabled man moving further, the newcomer seems both curious and affected by his suffering. The passenger is the new Starkfield minister (played by Tate Donovan). Madden's choice to make the narrator a reverend instead of an engineer does not really affect the story, even though it ignores Wharton's attempt to create a larger social background which would shed more light on the physical and spiritual isolation of Starkfield. It may be justified, however, if his intention was to present an example of Divine justice: Ethan and Mattie sin and they receive their punishment, which would turn the story into an easily comprehensible biblical parable.

The minister is shortly greeted by Ned Hale (Stephen Mendillo), his host, and driven into town. On their way, they pass the disabled Ethan Frome, but while the minister would like to give him a ride, Hale enigmatically answers that the man wouldn't take it anyway. For the moment, the mystery is put to rest as the reverend attends a welcoming party where he is forced upon meeting all the young girls in town. Starkfield slowly unveils itself, and he soon discovers that its inhabitants are not fervent church-goers and, as they themselves admit, all the smart ones have gone away. The welcoming party scene is not present in the book but it is meant to create a background for the upcoming events.

A week later, while at the hardware store, reverend Smith meets the disabled man once again. He introduces himself to him but only gets 'Frome' in return. While the other customers silently ignore him, reverend Smith readily expresses his views on Christian charity and social inclusion to Mr. and Mrs. Hale (played by Katharine Houghton), who share the general opinion that the Fromes are best left alone. The reverend takes the matter into his own hands the next day and he pays a visit to the Frome farm. He is received with suspicion by Ethan, so he feels the need for an excuse. As a result, he commissions the man to be his driver.

Soon enough, bad weather leads Smith to the Frome farm again. He and Frome had picked up some of the reverend's belongings from the station and the old man is fascinated by the scientific journals he sees in one of the boxes. But when a sudden blizzard hits, they have no choice but to head to the farm, where the reverend spends the night. While he is eager to meet the invisible Mrs. Frome, Ethan remains undisturbed by his allusions and leaves him alone by the fire. The director prefers not to let us, or the reverend, see old Zeena Frome at this point in the film and postpones this scene until the very end. This way, the mystery dose is increased and we grow even more eager to find out the story.

Madden's Reverend Smith is obviously too curious, straightforward and quick to judge in the eyes of this remote community, but this is justified by his youth and the increasing mystery enveloping Ethan Frome's appearance and behaviour. Tate Donovan is successful in rendering a quick-tempered young man who was brought up in a different environment and has no clue about life in such a remote community. His initial haughtiness allows him to be more daring than the villagers might like. The next day, he delivers a

passionate sermon about leaving childish considerations aside and showing charity towards the less fortunate, alluding directly to the Fromes. If for the leisure-class the place to see and to be seen is at the Opera, the main place of social gatherings in poor Starkfield is the church. The image of the minister giving his speech alternates with shots of the people present in the church and some frames showing Ethan Frome struggling with his daily chores. Unlike the others, Frome is obviously not present at the sermon, which immediately sets him apart as an outcast. In fact, he does not take part in any of the social activities in Starkfield, hence his isolation. After the sermon, Mrs. Hale explains to the reverend that matters are more complicated than they seem. This is not simply the case of some people rejecting one of their own on grounds of poverty or social inadaptation. According to her, everyone in Starkfield had wrestled with what was or wasn't the best thing to do about the Fromes for a long time, before they decided that it was easiest to ignore them. The reason for this exclusion is different from the ones Wharton has accustomed us to in her leisure-class novels.

Since the reverend insists to know, Mrs. Hale begins to unfold the story of Ethan, Zeena and Mattie to him and to the movie audience. The action of the film will now be moved in the past. To illustrate this transition, the film subsequently superimposes the voiceover of Katharine Houghton narrating the events with images of her playing old Mrs. Ruth Hale in the story frame, as she leads the reverend on the road to the Frome farm. On their way, they pass by the hill where children are coasting and they stop near the tree where the accident took place. This sight springs memories from the past, towards which we now turn.

Preserving the Essence of Wharton's Moral Conflicts

Together with reverend Smith, the audience slowly gets acquainted with the story which explains everything and meets the younger Ethan Frome, whom we visualise attending his mother's funeral together with Zenobia Pierce (played by Joan Allen). A little older than her husband, Zeena stands out by giving the impression that she is in full control of the arrangements, which obviously pleases Ethan. Even though he announces his intention to sell the farm and move to Florida in order to resume his studies, Zeena's presence in the house becomes more noticeable after the funeral and her intention to leave determines him to change his plans. In opposition to the book, John Madden presents Neeson and Allen in some intimate situations, suggesting growing passion. Ethan is clearly attracted to her, so she stays and becomes his wife.

Five winters on, as Zeena grows more and more ill, talks about moving to Florida are abandoned altogether. As she announces that a distant cousin is coming to stay and help with the chores with no pay, we start seeing a new face of things. The couple no longer shares laughs, but rather Ethan cannot argue with her because he feels responsible for her declining health. He is pictured sadly removing the books and maps from his room, which he obviously cherishes, (hence his interest in the reverend's books in the story frame) to make it available for the guest, while Zeena's condition curiously improves with the anticipation of something new in their lives.

The director slowly helps us visualise how life unfolds at the Fromes' farm after Mattie's arrival. At the beginning, Arquette appears ill and fragile, with dark circles around her eyes, and while Ethan complains that she will be of no help in her state, Zeena seems to know better and ignores him. Gradually, Mattie's health improves, to the point that the entire

village notices the change in her and even awaits for the announcement of her engagement with Eady's son (who has been wooing her for some time). But the romance between her and Ethan is already blooming. Zeena's presence, however, is too strong for the moment, and as a series of images show the two working separately throughout the day, him attending to the chores in the barn and cutting down trees in the woods and her preparing food in the kitchen, we gather that love is on their mind the entire time.

At this point, Madden subtly introduces some shots of a bottle of poison which Ethan uses in the barn against pests. This is to forebode Mattie's attempt at using the poison to commit suicide, which we will witness later on. In the novel, Wharton does not make use of this suicide attempt on Mattie's part, but it seems that the director wanted to be more explicit about the effect of Zeena's presence (both direct and indirect – through symbolic objects, like the red pickle-dish, or beings, like the cat which breaks it) on the two lovers.

The film is successful in visually rendering some other details that help us understand the characters much better. This enables the viewer to get attached to their personality (so that the shock of the ending is much grater), but also to understand the motives behind their later actions. Thus, we see Mattie cooking while she is distracted by thoughts about Ethan and we notice that her housekeeping and cooking abilities are still not very good, not even after a year at the farm. Zeena's initial satisfaction with her arrival has turned into annoyance and Mattie's personality is too fragile to handle a confrontation with her cousin, thus justifying her later desperate gesture of ending her life.

That evening at dinner, Zeena dominates the scene from the head of the table as Mattie (almost eagerly) announces to Ethan her departure for Bettysbridge to see a new doctor. Jotham Powell is also present, and he and Mattie are silent observers of the exchange between the spouses. In this scene, Joan Allen is particularly expressive. She feigns victimization, reminding the others that her nondescript illness is as severe as ever, but she doesn't really seem in pain judging by her upright posture and firm voice. Her going to the doctor is not debatable and, to make that very clear, she scrupulously takes out an eye-catchingly blue bottle of medicine, from which she pours into a spoon. With great pleasure, and an almost sarcastic look, she takes the time to swallow the drug until its last drop, then hands the bottle to Mattie to be used for pickles. Alongside her red glass pickle-dish, this blue bottle is a very much praised possession for Zeena, because her repressed passion and her illness are the two main elements which define her.

While Zeena expects some opposition to her trip, Ethan lies that his employer has promised to pay him 30 dollars in advance, as an excuse not to join her to the station and seems impatient to see her gone. The two lovers only exchange a few short glances and, the next morning, after Zeena's departure, they both silently turn to their daily chores.

Later, while at the store, Ethan receives a ribbon as a gift for Mattie from her suitor, a scene which Madden includes in an attempt to remind us of the existence of a male counterpart for Zeena. Also in opposition with the book, the director doesn't picture Frome pleasantly previewing his night alone with Mattie, and this takes away some of the next scene's intensity. Ethan's daydreaming is actually one of his most important features in Wharton's novel. He is the type of imaginative man who does not prove capable enough to put his dreams into practice, so we consider that this particular omission was a mistake on

Madden's part. His Ethan is more action-oriented, and this might explain why he does consummate his affair with Mattie.

Back at home for dinner, Ethan initially fails to deliver Eady's gift. Alone in the softly-lit kitchen, the two are not at ease with each other and it takes some time for the viewer to perceive the intensity of the situation. Gradually, tension is diminished as Ethan reveals his easygoing nature and even makes Mattie laugh. He also compliments her on her cooking, which we know she has been struggling with since she arrived. Ethan even lets it slip that they should eat dinner together "like they were..." He stops before "married." The climax of the scene, as Wharton had intended, is when the cat breaks the red pickle-dish. While in the book this moment destroys the charm of their moment together, in the film it seems to signal the expression of more passion. After supper, they settle down to a quiet talk, Mattie sewing and Ethan lighting a cigar. We hear the clock ticking and the cat (a symbol of Zeena's presence) also disturbs the silence, but they are both ignored, because the two are becoming increasingly preoccupied with each other's presence. To make Mattie feel better about the incident, Ethan gives her the ribbon after all, together with some sweets he had bought himself. In the book, Ethan does not offer Mattie any gifts, which reduces the expression of his feelings to a minimum. Wharton's character prefers to keep his passion to himself because he is generally a man of few words, but on screen feelings are easier to be made visible.

After hearing that the ribbon was in fact a present from Dennis Eady, Mattie turns to the sweets instead, as if to show whom she favours. Not knowing what to do next, she shyly returns to her work. Only now, as we witness Ethan kneeling and kissing the fabric she is sowing in the silent, dark kitchen, do we grasp the lingering passion between the two. The camera moves up from Ethan's face to Mattie's, as they both indulge, eyes closed, in the pleasure of this gesture, which is even stronger in meaning since they are not even touching. As the evening ends, they move towards the staircase. Again, close-ups on their faces, significantly lit only by a lamp and the embers in the fireplace, reveal burning desires on both sides. After Mattie had previously admitted that she knew how to sing and play the piano (a sign of her genteel education Madden wanted to include, as if to differentiate her even further from Zeena), she now starts to recite a poem that Ethan also seems to know. They seem to take great pleasure in reciting together. After that, the two bid goodnight in the stairway, and Ethan's hesitation to close the door of his room is dispelled by the draft which suddenly draws open the door to Mattie's bedroom and invites him to enter. The scene ends with them kissing passionately, which brings to a more definite end their night alone than Wharton had intended.

The next day, they go to town together (something that Wharton does not allow Mattie to do), and we see them entering Eady's store in the sound of her joyful laughter. A few townspeople silently watch as they giggle at the counter while waiting to buy glue for Zeena's pickle-dish. Sensing the awkward looks, Ethan wants to try at the other store. They finally buy glue, and their joyous sleigh ride through the woods is an occasion for Ethan to share his pleasant memories about Florida, but as they arrive home, Jotham Powell lets them know that Zeena is back earlier than expected.

The couple's happiness quickly turns into despair. Following the doctor's recommendations, Zeena had already hired a girl to help around the house and Mattie is to leave the next day. At dinner, after a domestic fight (which Mattie only witnesses from

downstairs) about Zeena's newly-discovered complications, the three can barely exchange a few words. Neeson and Allen are shown alternatively, throwing angry looks at each other, while Mattie is sitting between them and trying to strike a conversation. Ethan is mostly silent. Zeena had dominated the fight and continues to do so when she discovers the broken pickle-dish. She is like an unforgiving judge, looking down on both Mattie and Ethan as she shouts her sentence: "You're a bad person, Mattie Silver! [...] It'll be good when you're gone!" (*Ethan Frome*, dir. John Madden, 1993) The camera stays on Ethan's face as she speaks these last words and for a few seconds afterwards, to show that the decision to banish Mattie has the deepest effect on him.

A few frames on, another close-up shows Ethan sitting on the bed with Zeena asleep next to him. Undressing in the dark, he looks baffled and desperate. Images of Mattie in her bed next door intermingle, and we suddenly see him firmly entering her room. With Zeena listening eyes wide open from next door, they make love. This scene is shocking to Wharton's readers for two reasons. Firstly, we are not sure how to react to the consummation of the affair because it is debatable whether this makes the subsequent events more powerful or not. Secondly, the fact that Zeena witnesses all of this from next door takes everything to the extreme, and we cannot help feeling sorry for her.

The next day, as Zeena goes through Mattie's trunk to check if she hadn't stolen anything, the girl turns towards the window and sees Ethan next to a dead fox he had previously tried to poison in order to protect his chicken. The dead animal and the snow around it are stained in blood, a frame which may suggest a number of things. Firstly, the dead fox stands for Mattie herself, who was turned into a victim by her cousin, but also by her love. The blood could also signify the forbidden relationship, the sin committed by a married man and his wife's relative. It may also anticipate the two subsequent attempts at committing suicide. It is a naturalistic image, and it is further stressed as Ethan nails the dead body to the barn wall, as a warning to other foxes (and to us) that bad things are still to come. When he comes inside, the camera pictures Ethan washing the blood off his hand (a symbol of his sin), as his wife mentions that she had heard noises the previous night and caustically expresses her satisfaction that the fox (which she says was the source of those noises) is finally dead.

At the breakfast table, Zeena speaks, as usual, about her illness, but instead of complaining, she seems to have renewed energy in preparing Mattie's departure. Jotham Powell is, again, a slightly embarrassed yet silent observer of Zeena's sourness. The Fromes are obviously not used to entertaining guests, and his presence in the house is mostly ignored. We also notice that Neeson's looks towards Zeena have changed from indifferent to anxious and now to hateful, following Mattie's banishment. In turn, Allen seems ignorant of his feelings, but not of the facts, and she betrays her satisfaction at her cousin's departure.

When Ethan heads back to the barn after sending away Mattie's trunk, she finds her about to take some of the poison he had been using against foxes. This suicide attempt may prove that she is desperate, but also weaker than the Mattie we know from the book. Ethan stops her in time, while Zeena is shown hearing her cries from the house and seeing to her preparations as if nothing happened. Ethan's final attempt to stand up to his wife is announcing that he will drive Mattie to the station himself.

On their way, he stops the sleigh to tell her about a man who had left his wife and gone West together with his new love. Both his new family and his spouse were now doing

well, so Ethan hopes that Mattie would agree to this plan. Ethan is desperately trying to solve his moral conflict between responsibility for his wife and love for Mattie, and this is the first idea that comes up. She refuses, sensing that such an idea is very unlikely to succeed. Wharton's women are usually those who understand the consequences of such actions better than men. Wharton had Frome try to borrow money for his escape plan by himself, and described his tragic realisation that his morality wouldn't have let him go through with his lying to both Zeena and the Hales. In the movie, Ethan and Mattie drive into town together, but only after she had dismissed his idea, which makes the scene less focused on his moral conflicts and more on a shared, though tacit, conclusion that there is nothing more to be done. But before continuing on their way to the station, Ethan insists on taking Mattie to Eady's store to buy her yet another gift. Seeing Dennis', Mrs. Varnum's and even young Ruth's stares, she is eager to leave, but this time Ethan is ready to stand up to them and buys her a red haircomb for everyone to see. People had already noticed that the two have feelings for each other, and Mrs. Varnum is intrusive enough to directly remind Ethan that he owes Zeena his mother's health. In the rare scenes where other people from Starkfield appear, they usually stare and judge. Most of them favour Zeena, and they feel free to criticize Mattie even in her presence, just like upper-class society would in some of Wharton's other novels. Indeed, the social component is not at the core of *Ethan Frome*, but Ethan's moral responsibility does stem from the social conventions that shape his environment.

Back on their way to the station, Ethan decides to take Mattie coasting as he had promised. With the red comb in her hair, a symbol of their passion, they take a few joyous rides. But as darkness falls, the churchbell reminds them of their destination. After they share a kiss, Mattie asks him to take her down the hill one last time. This is clearly their last goodbye before they hope to meet again after death. This time, with grim countenances, we see them sliding down the hill in slow motion, Ethan in front because he wanted to feel her hug. Snow has started to fall, and a few children are approaching with their sleighs. The image is cut at this point and what we see next is the lovers' broken sleigh moving in slow motion in the air and then smashing to the ground along the two bodies which had crashed into a tree. A trail of blood stains the snow and the scene ends with the image of the children running towards the village.

The next scene brings us back to the story frame, as we see old Ethan dragging his foot through the snow towards his farm and we hear Ruth Hale's voiceover once again, explaining what happened after the accident. We continue from the point where the reverend and old Mrs. Hale have stopped next to the tree for her to tell the story and we now follow Frome to the farm, where Smith finally meets the two women. Zeena has not changed much over the years, but Mattie seems twice her age, as she sits, half paralysed, in a bed next to a curtain-covered window. The scene is even more shocking than the previous one showing the "accident," as we experience it through the young reverend's eyes. The room downstairs is dark and dirty, the two women are dressed in rags, have sallow faces and seem to have been bickering, while Ethan's devastated look says it all: he can barely put up with the current situation. The minister can hardly find his words as they leave the old crippled Ethan at the door.

The film begins and ends with the image of old Ethan Frome, to remind us that the story is about him, after all. After a prolonged close-up on his face, the camera draws back,

showing him slowly turning the corner of the house and disappearing from sight. Finally, the camera zooms out from the image of the farm surrounded by snow, with the recurrent music theme (composed by Rachel Portman) which has accompanied all the tragic events in the story and, with this backdrop, the film ends.

Conclusions

Overall, John Madden's adaptation is traditional in style, even though his two major changes to the story (the fact that the narrator is a reverend and the suggestion that Ethan and Mattie consummate their love) spoil its fidelity to the source. The question asked here is, however, if the movie preserves the underlying themes of social and moral conflicts present in the book and how it renders them.

In terms of social conflicts, one might say that poverty in a small, isolated community like Starkfield usually brings people closer together. Even though the Fromes live on a farm situated outside of town, they interact with the local community just as anyone else does. By including the welcoming party at the beginning of the film, the director hints, however, at some distinctions between those like the Hales, the Eadys and even the reverend, who formed some sort of a "higher-class society" and the mere workers like the Fromes. After the accident, their isolation was somewhat self-imposed. Ethan's tragic fate was too much to handle for both him and his visitors, so a tacit decision was reached to avoid their company as much as possible. This is the reason why every time we see Frome in public, he is silently stared at, with a mixture of pity and curiosity, and this is also why reverend Smith's impatient inquiries are not readily welcomed. As previously mentioned, changing the narrator's profession in the movie reduced the number of background social details, which leads to a less accurate framing of the events in space and time. Rita Kempley is even more drastic in her criticism: "The film, directed plainly by John Madden, also is a cultural bastard, a period piece that does not re-create the social order or its underlying principles. The props may be authentic, but the mores are suspect." (Washingtonpost.com) As expected, the focus is on the love story, not on the social background.

Anyway, the strongest conflicts in *Ethan Frome* lie within the main character himself. Liam Neeson has managed to express the pain of both having and losing the one he loves, and above all, the despair of having to live with their failed suicide attempt for the rest of his life. Neeson and Allen are perfect choices for their roles. Patricia Arquette seems a little less expressive, and the fact that she and Neeson are suggested to make love takes away some of the intensity of their affection. She doesn't seem young and lively enough to be in total contrast to Joan Allen.

Some may also object to the film's generally slow pace and its lack of proper action. This is, in the end, the nature of the story, and we are left to infer more from what remains unsaid than what is actually done. In this context, the fact that the director introduces the love scene, the attempted suicide and the dead fox scene may be his way of counteracting the lack of variety and action. When adapting Wharton, one must take a close look at the details. Here, the surrounding exterior and interior are too bare for us to infer much from them, except desolation. No filming techniques stand out as particularly well-chosen, and there are usually only a couple of angles from which the scenes are shot. As such, our attention is focused on the characters, because we hope that they are the most expressive part of the film.

Critics have mostly appreciated Neeson and Allen's acting, together with the choice of filming location. With Arquette, on the other hand, it is hard to be sympathetic. She simply isn't young and attractive enough when we compare her to Allen (and even to Neeson), and she even seems less clever than Wharton has suggested her to be. In short, we do not understand why Ethan likes her so much.

Most of the critics also agree that the love scenes were not necessary, but the film does justice to Wharton's novel to a pretty good extent. Grim and shocking at first, the story told by Madden can be considered a success in both the eyes of film critics and of the general audience of cinema-goers and Neeson fans. And they will all be pleasantly surprised at the end by the depth of the story.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

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