

**King Saud University
Deanship of Higher Studies
Department of English**

**A Study of Edith Wharton's Treatment of the Conflict between
Responsibility and Freedom in The House of Mirth, Ethan
Frome, and The Age of Innocence**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Department of
English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master's Degree in Literature**

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معالمة إديث وارتنون

للصراع بين المسؤولية والحرية الشخصية في بيت المرآة ، إيثان فروم ،
وعصر البراءة

by
Wafa Nagem Aba Hussain

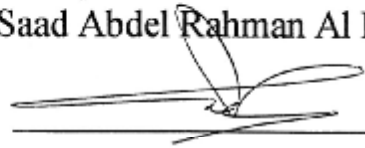
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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine Edith Wharton's treatment of the conflict between responsibility and freedom in her fiction. The analysis of the three representative novels shows that the characters that can maintain a balance between renunciation and self-satisfaction achieve an inner peace whereas those who fail to do so face a tragic end.

The House of Mirth is examined in Chapter One. Lily Bart is beautiful and intelligent but addicted to the pleasures of the moneyed world of luxury. She becomes a defamed woman because of several bad choices that she makes. The study highlights the fact that Lily is the agent of her down-fall because she seeks fulfillment entirely free from social constraints.

Ethan Frome is examined in Chapter Two. Ethan is a married man who falls in love with Mattie, his wife's cousin. His passivity and social isolation lead to his emotional

starvation which is tantamount to a form of death. The study suggests that Wharton's intention is to show that an individual has to have a meaningful and rewarding social role to play. Moreover, to Wharton, an individual has to explore ways to give his love the adult, social context it requires for its survival.

The Age of Innocence is examined in Chapter Three. Wharton represents the intricacies of a love triangle in this masterpiece. Newland Archer is married to May and is strongly drawn to Ellen Olenska. Archer resolves this conflict by accepting the responsibilities of a married man. He evades catastrophe by casting his life in terms of Old New York morality. The study shows that his happiness is circumscribed because, according to Wharton, joy is always limited in real life.

The Conclusion highlights the fact that whereas Wharton is not superficially didactic, she has a moral aim in her treatment of the conflict between responsibility and freedom. The Conclusion also sheds light on Wharton's achievement as a novelist who holds the

interest of her readers by her balanced and sober understanding of the human condition.

To Wharton, the desire for absolute personal fulfillment and utter freedom is an illusion that eventually leads to a catastrophe. The characters that can maintain a balance between renunciation and self-satisfaction achieve an inner peace that transcends time and place altogether. Thus, they gain more than they lose.