



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Striking but Stifled: Ethan Frome in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*

Ms. Seetha Balakrishnan

Language Instructor, English Language Centre, Jazan University, Jizan, Jizan,
Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

In 1911, Edith Wharton published a short novel with which her name has since been linked and which sometimes threatens to obtain the whole of her niche in the history of American literature. In writing *Ethan Frome* Wharton felt for the first time the artisan's full control of the implements. *Ethan Frome* has an image of life-in-death, and of hell-on-earth. It portrays the "rigors of life in a harsh land, with its rocky soil, its cold winters, and its bleak, desolate beauty" (Mcdowell 72). The crippled Ethan, and Zeena, his dreadful wife, and Mattie Silver, the once charming girl he loved, now bedridden and querulous with pain, all live out their death in the kitchen of the desolate Frome farm. This reveals a perpetual suffering caused by a moment of passion.

Keywords

Ethan Frome; Desolation; *Ethan Frome*; Edith Wharton.

◆

In 1911, Edith Wharton published a short novel with which her name has since been linked and which sometimes threatens to obtain the whole of her niche in the history of American literature. In writing *Ethan Frome* Wharton felt for the first time the artisan's full control of the implements. *Ethan Frome* has an image of life-in-death, and of hell-on-earth. It portrays the "rigors of life in a harsh land, with its rocky soil, its cold winters, and its bleak, desolate beauty" (McDowell 72). The crippled Ethan, and Zeena, his dreadful wife, and Mattie Silver, the once charming girl he loved, now bedridden and querulous with pain, all live out their death in the kitchen of the desolate Frome farm. This reveals a perpetual suffering caused by a moment of passion.

Ethan Frome was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. Ethan Frome, a young man of good and gentle character is the only son of a New England farm couple. He has some intellectual gifts and some desire to know the world, and for a year he is happy attending a technical school. But when his father becomes disabled by a farm accident, Ethan dutifully returns to manage the failing farm and saw mill. After his father's death, his mother loses her mental faculties and during her last illness she is nursed by a female relative whom Ethan marries for no other reason than that he is in fear of loneliness. The new wife, Zeena, who is elder to Ethan, immediately becomes a shrew, and lives only to be ill. To help Zeena in her household work, the Fromes take into their home, a gentle and charming young girl, Mattie Silver, a destitute cousin of the wife. Ethan and Mattie fall in love, innocently but deeply. The wife, perceiving this, plans to send the girl away. At the thought of separation Ethan and Mattie decide to commit suicide. They mean to die by sledding down a steep hill and crash into a great elm tree. Their plan fail and they survive. Ethan is sorely crippled and Mattie is

bedridden in perpetual pain and Zeena becomes the devoted nurse and the jailer of the lovers.

The difference between the present and the recent past is emphasized by Wharton, by using a young narrator, who is made to look back twenty-five years into the past. Distressed by the duration into late spring of snow drifts and intense cold, the narrator, Mr. Lockwood, an engineer, imagines himself in the place of these people in the recent past when hardship and isolation would have been even more severe. Twenty-eight during the main part of the story in the engineer's retrospective narrative, Ethan is already fifty-two and prematurely aged by toil and by the bitter climate when the narrator first sees him. In the words of the narrator:

It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two. (EF 9)

Ethan Frome's outlook deepens the implications of his tragedy because time has only dulled Ethan's wounds and not cured them. He had to learn to endure, and time has only accentuated his suffering instead of alleviating it. As the tragedy continues to extend from the past into the present through the sensitivities of an imaginative narrator, mundane survival for Ethan and Mattie becomes more horrible in its impact than their sudden death would have been. As a result of their accident, Mattie and Ethan exchange a hope for life-in-death for a demeaning death-in-life when their attempt to commit suicide fails.

In *Ethan Frome*, growth is exchanged for regression. Refusal to participate in the process of change which is life, leads always to the extinction of the self. The tragic image portrayed is the death-in-life which is Ethan's

permanent fate. Edith Wharton's three chief figures, Ethan Frome, Zeena and Mattie Silver, seem to be extensions of the grim landscape. McDowell observes: "The ardent lover turned cynic, the beautiful woman turned soured cripple, and the protective mother figure emerging as a sinister dictatorial presence are all illuminating and arresting conceptions" (74-75).

The symbol clusters that appear in the novel – the house, the grave, light and darkness, winter and summer – externalize the states of mind. The emotions of the characters are revealed through the projection onto an external visual field. The visual world manifests the mental state. The moral sense of winter, the season of the dead seem to pervade the novel's frame. This symbolic meaning is internalized and used as a dominant image. Winter, the season of the novel, suggests contraction and immobility as Ethan Frome "seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface" (EF 12).

Ethan Frome looks frozen and seems to be dead and in hell. Ethan's stark simplicity is revealed by his daily calling at the post office, a connection with the outer world from which he never receives a communication. He is trapped by his marriage to Zeena, and the circumstances of his life. He becomes the victim of the grim side of New England life, which engulfs him into a state of inarticulateness.

Cold is considered an absence, a diminishment and finally death. Everything contracts in the cold. Wolff aptly remarks:

The "place" of the novel is defined by this contraction: from the world to Starkfield; from Starkfield to the thickening darkness of a winter night, "descending on us layer by layer"; from this "smothering medium" to the "forlorn and stunted" farmhouse that is a castrated emblem of its mutilated owner. (*Modern* 76)

Ethan Frome is the story of the "ruin of a man" (EF 9) who is marked with a scarred wound of "red gash" (EF 9) but is still the most "striking figure"

(EF 9) in Starkfield. The story of Ethan gains stature from the refinement of torture which Wharton inflicts on him. Ethan is treated with utmost sympathy. He is created more sensitive than the people about him, to the appeal of natural beauty. The sweetness of his communion with nature reveals:

His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moments fields and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion. But hitherto the emotion had remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it. (EF 18)

His other qualities such as kindness, generosity, and sociability, and his impressive physical appearance seem to be his gifts. For Ethan, the inherited sense of duty is strong enough to conquer.

In *Ethan Frome* the author's eye is bent not on the ennobling of a nature by adversity but on the tragic spectacle of man pursued by perverse fate. There are such persons, victims of a blind retribution for sins they have never committed. The novel represents a world of infertility and death-in-life in which the inarticulate landscape of New England and the family around the hearth are seen from the outside as constraining, crippling and entrapping.

In *Ethan Frome*, the procedure is extremely simplified; its chief, and virtually its only effect is to show that Ethan's hopes are doomed before they are recognized, and this is one reason the novel seems harshly fatalistic. Ethan becomes trapped between the woman who inspires him and the woman who drains him.

Works Cited

McDowell, Margaret, B. *Edith Wharton*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976.

Print.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Ethan Frome: The Vision of His Story." *Modern Critical*

Views: Edith Wharton. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. Print.

Wharton, Edith. "Ethan Frome." *Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome: The Story with Sources and Commentary.* Ed. Blake Nevius. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Balakrishnan, Seetha. "Striking but Stifled: Ethan Frome in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome.*" *Literary Quest* 2.1 (2015): 38-43. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.