

# “Ethan Frome- the Victim of his Isolated Surroundings” in Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome

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**Abstract**—Subjects for stories were apt into Edith Wharton’s head so fast that she found it difficult to push them away and go on with what she was writing. Her vision is highlighted through her protagonists. Sometimes she actually did set aside what she was doing to outline or partly develop a new theme. Fairly often she kept an idea in mind and brooded on it while characters, names and incidents gathered around it. The worm of Ethan Frome developed in this way. Edith Wharton had the ability to depict people whose daily routines and circumstances were different from her own, and to recreate the life of earlier generations, whether in Italy, New York, or Western Massachusetts. In Ethan Frome, the author’s eye is bent not on the ennobling of nature by adversity but on the tragic spectacle of man pursued by a perverse fate. There are such persons, victims of a blind retribution for sins which they had 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. The idea of Ethan Frome is universally true. A man or woman can be caught by poverty and the demands made by sickness where it seems impossible for him or her to be the person they wish to be. To escape they must make a superhuman effort. Ethan Frome, the protagonist is a victim, because of his suppression of feelings, and inarticulateness. The pain experienced mentally and physically is projected by the gloomy atmosphere and background picture of the winter. Ethan Frome has an image of life-in-death, and of hell-on-earth. Ethan Frome portrays the “rigors of life in a harsh land, with its rocky soil, its cold winters, and its bleak, desolate beauty” (Mcdowell 72). The novel depicts the tragedy caused by the challenging convention. The difference between the present and the recent past is emphasized by Wharton, by using a young narrator, Mr. Lockwood, an engineer, who is made to look back twenty-five years into the past. 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. 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. 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 seems to share the mortal problems and mortal pain. The unknown interior of Frome’s house represents the structure of the human body; it contains the story of female bareness and relentless infertility. The characters in the novel suggest untold sufferings. The object of this paper is to highlight Edith Wharton’s view that human beings always seem to

prove inadequate, always fail each other, always are victims of an innate disharmony between love and response, need and capacity. A great deal of attention has been given to some of the major aspects such as Symbols, Images, Conventions, Moralities, Alienation, Injustice, Social manners etc. The paper analyses how Ethan Frome falls prey to the snowbound village Stark field and how he struggles to overcome his static life but fate leaves him only as a victim to suffer a death-in-life.

**Keywords**—world of infertility, death-in-life, hell-on-earth, the house, the grave, light and darkness, winter and summer, moral isolation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS Edith Wharton, the most distinguished woman writer of American fiction before World War II, was the chief disciple of Henry James. Like James, she considered the novel “as a vehicle for presenting a moral problem involving personalities in a highly civilized background” (Sands 19). She was not only a critic of American life but also a seminal critic of American literature. She was one of the few Americans of her time who cared about serious literature. A long time friend of Henry James, Wharton regarded him as a master contemporary novelist and her work had marked resemblances to his, both in theme and technique. She started writing at the turn of the twentieth century. It was around the time that women writers in America started making a serious contribution to the field of literature. According to John Cournos and Sybil Norton, Edith Wharton began writing fiction “on the advice of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, an author of note himself, to relieve the mental and nervous tension created by her husband’s ailing condition, his care devolving upon her” (170). Edith Wharton added Henry James to her formidable collection of notable men. Their acquaintance began in a manner typical of Wharton with a couple of false starts. But, within no time she grew up, and was ready to meet Henry James on common grounds. When they met, Edith Wharton states: “It seemed as we had been always friends” (Coolidge 99).

Subjects for stories were apt into Edith Wharton’s head so fast that she found it difficult to push them away and go on with what she was writing. Her vision is highlighted through her protagonists. Sometimes she actually did set aside what she was doing to outline or partly develop some new theme. Fairly often she kept an idea in mind and brooded on it while characters, names and incidents gathered around it. The worm of Ethan Frome developed in this way. Edith Wharton had the ability to depict people whose daily routines and circumstances were different from her own, and to recreate the life of earlier generations, whether in Italy, New York, or Western Massachusetts. In Ethan Frome, the author’s eye is

bent not on the ennobling of nature by adversity but on the tragic spectacle of man pursued by a perverse fate. There are such persons, victims of a blind retribution for sins which they had 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. The idea of *Ethan Frome* is universally true. A man or woman can be caught by poverty and the demands made by sickness where it seems impossible for him or her to be the person they wish to be. To escape they must make a superhuman effort. Ethan Frome, the protagonist is a victim, because of his suppression of feelings, and inarticulateness. The pain experienced mentally and physically is projected by the gloomy atmosphere and background picture of the winter. Ethan Frome has an image of life-in-death, and of hell-on-earth. Ethan Frome portrays the "rigors of life in a harsh land, with its rocky soil, its cold winters, and its bleak, desolate beauty" (Mcdowell 72). The novel depicts the tragedy caused by the challenging convention. The difference between the present and the recent past is emphasized by Wharton, by using a young narrator, Mr. Lockwood, an engineer, who is made to look back twenty-five years into the past. 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. 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. 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 seems to share the mortal problems and mortal pain. The unknown interior of Frome's house represents the structure of the human body; it contains the story of female bareness and relentless infertility. The characters in the novel suggest untold suffering. The object of this paper is to highlight Edith Wharton's view that human beings seem always to prove inadequate, always to fail each other, always to be the victims of an innate disharmony between love and response, need and capacity. A great deal of attention has been given to some of the major aspects such as Symbols, Images, Conventions, Moralities, Alienation, Injustice, Social manners etc.

The outstanding feature in Edith Wharton's novels is the importance that she gives to her women characters. Her readers and critics acknowledge that whatever their roles are, all these women characters are central to the novel. In many of her novels there recur two complex and basically irresolvable themes. The first is provided by the spectacle of a large and generous nature trapped and left in a state of despair by

circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature. There is no accounting for such disastrous unions except as a result of the generous but misguided impulses of the larger nature; there is no justifying their waste of human resources. Moreover, there is no evading the responsibility they entail, and this acknowledgement opens the way for the second theme – Wharton tries to define the nature and limits of individual responsibility, to determine what allowance of freedom or rebellion can be made for her trapped protagonist without threatening the structure of society. The malaise which troubled so many intelligent people during Wharton's life time was the feeling that they were living in an age when energies had run down, meanings collapsed, and the flow of organic life being replaced by the sterile and mechanical – is quite as acute in her novels.

*Ethan Frome* depicts the tragedy caused by the challenging convention. 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 a 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 chores, the Fromes take into 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 fails and they survive. Ethan is sorely crippled, Mattie is bedridden in perpetual pain and Zeena becomes the devoted nurse and the jailer of the lovers.

The arrival of Zeena as a nurse to his ailing mother restores the lost balance. Zeena is made to stay back after his mother's death, because Ethan is not prepared to be in loneliness. Ethan's marriage to Zeena "might not have taken place if it had been spring instead of winter" (Gimbel, *Ethan Frome* 72). The grotesque quality of the marriage between Zeena and Ethan is shown through the image of the house. The bedroom marks only stagnation instead of fertility. As the couple retires to the marital bed, an aura of death is produced by their silent use of the place. Without a word, Zeena lies down "with her face turned away" (EF 29). Ethan blows out the light so that he need not see her when he takes his place at her side. The house with its unlit hearth has the annihilating power of the grave to which it is symbolically linked. Thus marriage to Zeena is a submission to the regressive lure of the unconscious world. It is the fulfillment of an infantile longing to remain with the mother. Marriage to Zeena marks the triumph of isolation. It leads to a duplication of the experience in which Ethan found himself during his mother's illness. Once again, there is a withdrawal of love as Zeena's disappointment drives her into a similar world of sickness and self-absorption. Within the

symbolic structure of the story, sickness aptly reveals Zeena's troubled emotional state. A result of her disappointing marriage, her malady goes back to the first manifestations of estrangement – "Perhaps it was the inevitable effect of life on the farm, or perhaps, as she sometimes said; it was because Ethan never listened (EF 28).

Ethan's fantasy is the restoration of the house. He, as a desperate child receives Mattie Silver in the same spirit in which he once greeted Zeena. He experiences Mattie's coming to the house as "the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth" (EF 18). There is no erotic component to his longing for her; it is solely a desire for the maternal. Though Mattie had no natural turn for housekeeping he dreams of transforming her into a mother: "Ethan had an idea that if she were to marry a man she was fond of, the dormant instinct would wake and her pies and biscuits become the pride of the country" (EF 18) Mattie's passivity allows her to become whatever others need her to be. To be housed, she takes on the shape of any structure which she inhabits. Mattie's background provides the psychological basis for this code of being. As the author states, "She could trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite 'Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight', and play 'The Lost Chord' and a potpourri from Carmen" (EF 25). On the surface this training is a parody of the formative process. The ability to trim hats is of no use in the world – 'The Lost Chord' is a metaphor of the note which Mattie strikes in the world. 'Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight' is a pseudo-poetic exercise in a sentimental code to which she remains addicted.

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 engineers' 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

stokier 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 sensitives 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 they attempt to commit suicide. In Ethan Frome, growth is exchanged for regression. Refusal to participate in the process of change which is life, leads to the extinction of the self. The tragic image portrayed is the death-in-life which is Ethan's permanent fate.

The main theme seen in Wharton's novels is the frustration of a potential pair of lovers by social or domestic obstructions. 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 and scape, 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 Frome's stark simplicity is revealed by Ethan daily calling at the post office, a connection with the outer world from which he never receives a communication. Ethan Frome is trapped by his marriage to Zeena, and the circumstances of his life. He becomes a victim of the grim side of New England life, which engulfs him into a state of inarticulateness. The journey of Mattie begins in the winter landscape of Starkfield, moves into the Frome's constricted house and finally returns to the "frozen external world" (Gimbel, Ethan Frome 63). The crippled heroine Mattie is forever within a confined diminished dwelling. It is a state of death-in-life. Ethan Frome presents the struggle of Mattie Silver in almost parable form. There is the typical setting of the prison world – here Starkfield, a place of desolation, a living death. It is a town of eternal winter, for in it nothing changes, nothing develops or grows. Images of death and stasis crowd this novel; in the countryside the occasional farmhouse stands isolated, "mute and cold as a grave stone" (EF 22) and the very tombstones seem to call out mockingly to the passerby: "we never got away – how should you?" (EF 22). Starkfield's chief prisoner is Ethan Frome, the typical Wharton male, a man of greater perception and sensitivity than those around him, trapped by his weakness and by marriage to Zeena, a living symbol of Starkfield and its paralysis.

When society in the form of the silent and vicious Zeena, expels Mattie Silver, Ethan is offered a chance to escape from Starkfield himself. But, again like the typical Wharton male Ethan cannot free himself, for he has never left his winter world except in fantasy. Ethan has never acted or planned to make his fantasies real, but instead has only imagined that he

will always go on living here with Mattie. He was never as happy with her as when he abandoned himself to these dreams. It is Mattie who must take the initiative, who must make one last attempt to keep Ethan and to free him in the only way she can think of – in death. Mattie suggests the attempt, and takes her lover down the hill, encouraging, pushing and forcing him to take the only way out. But the escape through death is denied the pair for, as Ethan is about to hit the fatal tree, the real world intrudes: “his wife’s face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal” (EF 56). Stark field has won. It has gained a new prisoner for its frozen world. The novel ends, as it began, with paralysis; not only Mattie’s physical paralysis but the living death results when one cannot change and cannot act. Ethan Frome demonstrates that the failure to gain independence results in death – or worse, maiming.

Cold is considered as 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 Stark field; 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)

The Frome house looks forlorn and stunted because it has lost the limb which the narrator associated with the image of a life linked with the soil enclosing in itself the chief sources of warmth and nourishment. When the falling snow blocks the view of the house, the narrator feels that Frome’s silence too falls with it, letting down between them the old veil of reticence. As Ethan Frome drives in silence, he becomes the main focus of attention. He is “like the bronze image of a hero” (Waid, *The Woman* 65). There is nothing unfriendly in Ethan’s silence, but he lives in a depth of moral isolation. His loneliness is not merely the result of his personal plight, but has in it the intensely accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters. This depth of moral isolation, divides Frome from the narrator’s efforts to know him and discover the reason for his muteness and silence. One day the narrator accidentally leaves a book on biochemistry on the sleigh. When Frome returns the book at the end of the day, Frome looks at the narrator and speaks: “There are things in that book that I didn’t know the first word about” (EF 13). Hoping for speech from Frome and some entry into knowledge of the man, the narrator lends the book to Frome. He is intrigued by Frome’s interest in the book where he finds:

such tastes and acquirements in a man of his condition made the

contrast more poignant between his outer situation and his inner

needs, and... something in his past history, or in his present way

of living, had apparently driven him too deeply into himself for

any casual impulse to draw him back to his kind. (EF 13)

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. “Mattie and Ethan seem to think that the best they can hope for is to be able to continue living together with Zeena and seeing each other as often as possible” (Shmoop.com). Passivity, withdrawal, inarticulateness, helpless dependency- are the basis for Frome’s misery and consequently Ethan Frome becomes the victim of his isolated surroundings.

## II. CONCLUSION

Udpike The treatment both of setting and character in *Ethan Frome* shows Edith Wharton in perfect command of the methods of Literary realism: in its grim and unrelenting way *Ethan Frome* is a classic of the realistic genre. At the same time, it is Edith Wharton’s most effectively American work; her felt affinities with the American literary tradition were never more evident. Certain Melvillain grandeur went at the configuration of her tragically conceived hero. Despite her early disclaiming, the spirit of Nathaniel Hawthorne pervades the New England landscapes of the novel and lies behind the moral desolation of *Ethan Frome*. The role of the inquisitive city-born narrator is deployed with a good deal of the cunning and artistry of Henry James. But the great and durable vitality of the tale comes at last from the personal feelings Edith Wharton invested in it, the feelings by which she lived her life, active. *Ethan Frome* portrays Wharton’s personal situation, as she had come to comprise it, carried to a far extreme translated to a remote rural scene, and rendered utterly hopeless by circumstance. As she often did, Edith Wharton shifted the action in devising her three central characters. Like Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* married an ailing spouse, a number of years older than him and has been married for about the same length of time as Edith had been tied to Teddy. Ethan sometimes wonders about Zeena’s sanity and he daydreams about her death, possibly by violence. He looks about frantically to some avenue to freedom, but his fate is conveyed to him in Wharton’s regular results for her own condition- the inexorable facts closed in on Ethan like prison guards handcuffing a convict. He becomes a prisoner for life. Edith Wharton has always believed that the artist is a responsible citizen and not a passive victim. She has portrayed her characters with a formidable drive and determination to survive and her protagonist experiences outward defeats, but gains inward, spiritual victory. In *Ethan Frome*, the protagonist, *Ethan Frome* is helpless, dependent and becomes the victim of his isolated surroundings.

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