

## **The Unity of Form and Content in Edith Wharton's *Ethane Frome***

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### **Abstract**

*Too often known only as “that society lady author,” a writer of irrelevant and obsolete books, Wharton cannot be dismissed so easily. Although primarily dealing with a narrow social range and short historical span—the upper echelons of New York society from the 1870’s to the 1920’s—she mines verities about the whole of human nature from these small, seemingly unrepresentative samples of humanity. Far from being anachronistic or irrelevant, Wharton’s novels go deeper than their surface manners and mores to reveal universal truths about individuals in relation to their society, and she explores themes relevant to any era. Regarded as one of America’s finest realists, along with her friend and literary inspiration Henry James, Wharton emphasized verisimilitude, character development, and the psychological dimensions of experience, all of which placed her in this tradition, although with some significant variations.*

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*Ethan Frome*, neither a commercial nor a critical success when first published, actually offended many of Wharton's contemporaries by its harsh portrayal of New England life and its characters' failure to triumph over adversity. Nevertheless, its popularity gradually increased until, by 1920, it had become the best-known and most widely read of Wharton's works. Wharton herself believed that too much attention was paid to *Ethan Frome* at the expense of her other novels. Indeed, to judge her career solely by this single novella would prove misleading, because it is very unlike her other major works in setting, tone, and characterization.

Like much of her other work, however, it deals with the relationship between an individual and that individual's society. Structured as a frame tale, the story unfolds from the point of view of Lockwood, a young engineer on assignment in the isolated New England village of Starkfield. His curiosity about one of the town's characters, the physically deformed but striking Ethan Frome, drives him to construct a "vision" of Ethan's history, assembled from information gathered in conversation with various townspeople and from his own observations of the fifty-two-year-old farmer.

The significance of this structure cannot be overestimated; Wharton even adds an uncharacteristic introduction to explain her decision to employ this literary device, which achieves perspective by creating an educated, observant narrator to intercede between the simple characters and the more sophisticated reader. Wharton also adds poignancy by setting the novella twenty-four years after the main action occurs. Lockwood relates the simple but compelling story of twenty-eight-year-old Ethan Frome, a farmer and mill owner left nearly destitute after the death of his parents, both of whom suffered mental disorders. After enduring lonely years of silence with his mother, who was too busy listening for imagined "voices" to converse with him, Frome marries Zenobia Pierce, seven years his senior, who had nursed Mrs. Frome in her dying days. The sound of Zeena's voice in his house is music to Ethan's starved ears, and by marrying her he hopes to escape further loneliness.

Soon after their marriage, however, Zeena becomes obsessed with her various aches and pains, and she concerns herself solely with doctors, illnesses, and cures, falling as silent as his mother. At her doctor's advice, Zeena takes in her homeless young cousin, Mattie Silver, to help with the housework. Although a hapless housekeeper, Mattie brings a vitality to the Frome house that has been absent for years, and she and Ethan fall in love. Trapped by circumstances, as well as by Ethan's strong sense of responsibility toward Zeena, the two foresee no future together. On the evening that Zeena sends Mattie away for good, Ethan and Mattie decide to aim their sled straight for a giant elm tree so that they might find mutual solace in death. Both, however, survive the plunge, which paralyzes Mattie and disfigures Ethan. Zeena takes responsibility for caring for Mattie and Ethan, and the three live

on in the Frome house, as Mattie becomes as querulous and unpleasant as Zeena and Ethan attempts to scratch out a living from his failing farm and mill.

In Ethan, “the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man,” Wharton fashions a character of heroic proportions. He is a country man who would have preferred the intellectual stimulation of the city, a sociable man doomed to silent suffering, a man whose misshapen body mirrors his thwarted intellectual and emotional life. Like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, he is “more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty” but finds little of it in his own life. Like Lily, he feels trapped by society’s demands on him: “The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-wardens handcuffing a convict. There was no way out—none. He was a prisoner for life.”

As always in Wharton’s work, setting figures prominently, but in *Ethan Frome* the stark landscape of New England, rather than the elegant brownstones of New York City, provides the background. Wharton draws a close parallel between the action and the emotions of the characters and the bleak landscape; the two are inextricably intertwined. Ethan “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.” Even Frome’s house, lacking the “L” wing common to New England farm structures, reflects the emotionally stunted life existing inside, and the withering orchard of starving apple trees and crazily slanting gravestones in the family plot also mirror Frome’s blighted life.

Wharton uses irony, as well as landscape and imagery, to great effect in this work, often juxtaposing scenes for ironic effect. When Zeena greets Ethan at the kitchen door in the evening, “The light . . . 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.” Later, however, when Mattie stands “just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. . . . [I]t drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child’s.” *Ethan Frome*’s ultimate irony lies in the suicide pact which ends not in the mutual release of death but in endless years of pain and suffering and in the transformation of the vibrant young Mattie into a mirror image of the whining Zenobia.

Wharton’s main thrust in this much-disputed and problematical work is the presentation of a universe of moral ambiguity hemmed in by a physical universe that seems clear-cut in its starkness and finality. Images of death, frozen submission, imprisonment, and sterility imbue *Ethan Frome* with a sense of grim determinism. Yet it is not a deterministic work. Events seem ordained by both the nature and harshness of the characters’ lives, but Ethan is able to make, at least momentarily, a distinct decision as to what is right (not just “proper”) when he chooses not to lie to

the Hales or to desert Zeena. His moment of truth comes with his sudden and melancholic realization of who he is and what he must do: . . . the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him.

It is Wharton's mastery of her subject matter that enables her readers to see both the grim inevitability of Ethan's life and, at the same time, the grandeur of his moral choice in this grimmest of worlds. Her work is more properly termed tragic irony because, although Ethan decides not to abandon and humiliate Zeena by running away with Mattie, he weakens and decides (with her tacit consent) to commit mutual suicide. The irony exists in that he opts, finally, for an end to life through death and instead receives, in the vast indifference of Wharton's universe, a death-in-life. He, Mattie, and Zeena continue to exist in the same entrapped, triangular relationship as before but without hope, without the vitality of Ethan and Mattie's love. Furthermore, not only are the roles reversed, but the sick (Zeena) has become well, and the healthy or vital (Mattie and Ethan) have become maimed, crippled, and scarred (there is a red gash in Ethan's forehead).

In many ways, the novel unites content and form through stylistic and metaphoric comparisons of the cold and frozen landscape as part and parcel of the character's moral framework. Isolated, "frozen" in their poverty, barren (the Fromes are childless), and unhealthy in outlook (Zeena is obsessed with her diseases and "complications"), the characters reflect the countryside itself. It is this very sense of isolation that causes Ethan to marry Zeena—he fears being left alone, with silence—after his mother dies. Silence and absence are also powerful metaphors. It is by silence that Zeena manipulates best, spreading unknown fears among Mattie and Ethan. Further, Zeena becomes more powerful in her absence: when the pickle dish is broken, when Mattie sits in Zeena's rocking chair, and when the cat inadvertently starts the chair rocking and the specter of Zeena fills the room. Even in the final moments of his suicide attempt, the image of Zeena invades Ethan's mind and almost subverts his actions.

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