

Ethan Frome as a Tragic Hero

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"Ethan Frome drove in silence, the reins loosely held in his left hand, his brown seamed profile under the helmet-like peak of the cap, received against the banks of snow like the bronze image of a hero." Was this a misinterpretation on the part of the narrator, or did the author also see Ethan in this way? Is Ethan Frome a tragic hero, as defined in literature? Why or why not? If he is, would you consider passivity to be his hamartia tragic flaw? Does Ethan's passivity contribute to his eventual downfall? If he is not a tragic hero, why would you deny him that distinction?

There is a thin line when it comes to giving the author's perspective and the narrator. However, we can say that the narrator, being an engineer, can make his suppositions or judgments on an analytical or intuitive basis. That may make him depict Frome as heroic and almost mythical. Take, for example, this line: "It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome and began to put together this vision of his story." (Wharton, 1911). This is a scene where Ethan takes the narrator to spend a night at his place, giving him leeway for his life. The mere fact that the narrator is talking about the vision is enough to suggest that he is not talking from the point of factual conviction. This means that the story may not be totally objective and totally documented, making it have the imprint of the narrator's own interpretation.

The author sees Ethan from a different perspective than the narrator's. This is because, from the onset of the story, she tells of how Ethan attempts to pursue an engineering course and leaves halfway due to the demise of his father and ailing mother. It is through the author's revelation that we hear of how this man, Ethan, attempts to elope with his wife's cousin and attempts a suicidal mission that does not come to fulfillment (Wharton, 1911). It is this suicidal attempt that leaves him crippled for life. If looked at critically, these should not be tales that tell of a hero but one who has failed in life. The attributes discussed also qualify Ethan Frome as a tragic hero because of the many failures he has faced. Passivity contributes to his tragic flaw in Hamartia, as the author presents him as cold and withdrawn. His passivity contributes to his downfall. His fate is crippled for life.

"With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness has carried him, the madness fell, and he saw his wife before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, who 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" The perception here is an accurate one because when Ethan decides to elope with Mattie and leaves Zeena behind, he is stranded not because he fears to divulge the information of leaving to his wife, but because of financial constraints. Apart from being afraid of what will befall Zeena when he leaves, he has no means of getting even a portion of the money needed to go out West, where they have decided to go. Also, Zeena cannot have the capacity to sell the farm, not because of the sickness but because of the low value of the farm. This makes Ethan fall asleep and leaves the letter that he has just started to

write so as to inform Zeena of their departure halfway.

Edith Wharton is not attempting to tear apart the romantic fiction people so often use to justify sexual immorality, but she is trying to bring out the importance of communication in a family, even in the midst of turmoil. My point of argument is that if Ethan had been an outgoing man, the farmhouse would not have been isolated. This means he could have had a friend to share his predicaments and get solutions to some of their problems in the farmhouse rather than running away from reality.

Two of the leading symbols found in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* are the New England weather and farmhouse. The significance of the two stylistic devices to both the plot and the themes of the story is discussed. Three important themes in the story include love, sickness, and family. The wintry weather of New England is cold and snowy; this is what the narrator opines has shaped what he describes as the silent, sulky nature of Ethan Frome. He literally implies that the cold winter has shaped Frome's character. The cold nature of New England also causes the bonds of love to be developed. We see that Ethan Frome and Mattie warm up to each other for love. This is because Ethan's wife, who has been ailing for six years, cannot be in a proper position to provide the warmth that comes with being intimate during such cold moments. On the other hand, Mattie, who is constantly in the house, is still single and would offer a ready soul or shoulder to lean on to Ethan in order to get this much-needed warmth that comes from love.

The farmhouse is significant in this story as it provides the basis on which the stage is set. It provides a family set-up where we meet Ethan himself, his wife Zeena, their handmaid Zeena's cousin Mattie, and the farm worker (Wharton, 1911). It is this farmhouse where the narrator of the story is housed by the family of Ethan. It is at this farmhouse that the narrator comes to learn of the nature of the family that Ethan raises. He comes to learn of Zeena's sickness and the status of the farm. It is this farm that gives us the social status of the Ethans. The narrator describes the farmhouse as a poverty-stricken, lonely place. It is within this farmhouse that has been home to ailing Zeena for the past six years and later for the paralyzed Mattie. It is thus a farmhouse that is synonymous with sickness.

Zeena is central to the theme of family, sickness, and love, as we want to find out in the following paragraphs:

The woman I choose to discuss in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* piece is Zeena. Zeena's full-orbed personalities are presented in two scenarios. One scenario is Ethan's wife ailing and helpless, while another scenario is Frome's wife, who is full of life and helpful; Ethan and Frome are one person, and only the two different names are split to give the significance of time differences within which the scenarios present themselves. Twenty-four years before the author presents to us Frome, Zeena is depicted as one who lives on the mercies of her cousin Mattie, who takes care of her house chores, and a husband – Ethan – whose love seems to dissipate towards Mattie. She is ailing and spends most of the time by herself in the bedroom. In her ailing state, she even travels alone to seek medical attention in the next town – Bettsbridge (Wharton, 1911). This even gives her husband joy as he realizes that he at last gets a chance to be alone with Mattie and share their lovely time together. Her

vulnerability is even laid bare when she finds her husband kissing her cousin – Mattie – passionately but does not pick a fight with the two; she only suggests that she has arranged for Mattie’s replacement. This does not seem to bother her much as she proceeds to the dining table and shares with them the dinner that Mattie has prepared.

Zeena is a real person and cannot be depicted as an extreme character as may be perceived by the protagonist. This point can be explained using the following arguments:

First, she finds her husband in a compromising situation, passionately kissing her cousin, who should know better than to respect their marriage, but she does not pick a quarrel with either the husband or the cousin. This shows maturity in the midst of disappointment. Secondly, Zeena knows how to control her anger. After realizing that her favorite pickle dish is broken, she only decides to replace Mattie but does not throw tantrums. Lastly, even after Mattie and Ethan attempt suicide “rather than face parting from one another,” Zeena takes charge of being their caretaker in their crippled states. This last point also serves as a hint that the author gives to depict Zeena as not being a witch as the protagonist perceived. “Rather than face parting from one another” would mean that Frome has decided to run from the reality of life by leaving his ailing wife behind, thereby opting to take away his life in the name of loving another woman who is his wife’s cousin. It is a fact that shows Frome’s vulnerability, thus earning him the tag of a tragic hero.

Work Cited

Wharton, E. Ethan Frome. Courier Corporation. (1911). Print.