

Ethan frome key passage analysis

[Environment](#), [Nature](#)



Thoughts on a section of Ethan Frome... (p. 33 -34) Edith Wharton quite deliberately brings together human emotion and the environment in her novella Ethan Frome. The characters are circumscribed by the environment in which they exist and the impossibility of escape from the environmental forces of nature, heredity and place shape the characters of the text. A moment of hope arises as Mattie and Ethan walk home together from the dance and a more romantic sense of possibility emerges. The reader is drawn to the love of Ethan and Mattie quite subtly — it grows almost organically from innocent moments shared and this is perhaps why the reader does not see their ‘ affair’ as adulterous. We share the hope that glimmers in the bleak cold that is Starkfield and its characters. Ethan’s sensitivity reflects an important aspect of his character that is shown to us in this section. His intelligence and the study in Worcester has exacerbated his isolation within the Starkfield community. Harmon Gow’s ironic observation that ‘ most of the smart one’s got away’ heightens the reader’s perception that Ethan is trapped. The ‘ appeal of natural beauty’ suggests a connection with the landscape that is romantic in its conception. Ethan ‘ communes’ with the environment and is able to see beyond the harshness in a way that the frame narrator cannot. The fact that he feels this appreciation of beauty as a silent and solitary emotion typifies the lack of communication within his world. Similarly, the night walks of Mattie and Ethan become moments of ‘ communion’. Wharton’s choice of diction suggests that their relationship is more than a response to the physical harshness of the environment or repressed emotions — the ‘ sweetness of this communion’ implies a genuine meeting of souls and minds that transcends the physical. The fact that

Mattie's 'spirit... trembled with the same touch of wonder' is inspiring for Ethan and the reader is encouraged to view the relationship as one of purity and innocence rather than adulterous. Wharton uses the environment as the meeting point for the lovers' 'wonder' — looking up to the stars (an image often synonymous with dreams and hope) or across the fields. It is interesting to note the descriptive language Wharton uses to describe Ethan's vision when he is with Mattie. The sunset is red with 'cloud flocks over slopes of golden stubble' with strong 'blue hemlocks' — the intensity of the colours reflect the intensity of his emotions and contrast with the blank, barren whiteness that has characterised descriptions of Starkfield up to this point. It is as if Mattie, whose surname sparkles with colour, transforms the landscape and Ethan sees the world anew when he is with her. His masculine ego is hinted at by Wharton in the admiration Mattie displays for his knowledge of the environment. We have been encouraged to view him as the powerless and emasculated husband, browbeaten by a shrewish wife. Mattie inspires a sense of manhood within him. This is interestingly displayed at the moment of crisis when the pickle dish is shattered as Ethan takes control and feels the 'thrilling sense of mastery' as he reassembles the dish. The symbolic nature of the dish representing the marriage of Ethan to Zeena is shattered and Ethan is liberated by the moment — however fleetingly. Wharton suggests that Mattie and Ethan are closely (and perhaps idealistically) suited to each other — she describes their walks as a 'communion'. Mattie's description of the landscape looking as it had been painted strikes a deep chord within Ethan and he feels that Mattie is able to articulate 'his secret soul'. The closeness and intensity of their relationship

is perhaps understated — depicted in the language of the environment rather than through eloquent dialogue. Wharton often plays upon Ethan's lack of eloquence to show the difficulty he has in expressing his emotions.

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