

# Moral inconsistencies in ethan frome

Experience, Human Nature



Moral Ambiguity is defined as a lack of clarity about whether something is right or wrong, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, this is often attractive to readers as they find them easier to relate to because a morally ambiguous person shows inconsistency in their morals. It is uncommon that someone would have consistent morals in real life because people experience frequent changes in emotion and point of view; Therefore, as they go through life, they change their definition of right and wrong countless times. Ethan Frome by Edith Wharton is a perfect example of moral ambiguity because the main character, Ethan, is extremely inconsistent in his morals.

His constant shift between wanting to be loyal to his wife, Zeena, and the desire to be with Zeena's young and beautiful cousin, Mattie Silver, show how inconsistent his thoughts are. Ethan's moral ambiguity is important to the plot because it adds depth to the conflict and lengthens the plot, while making his character more believable.

Ethan is extremely concerned with his own morals, and often second guesses his own desires. One interpretation of his uncertainty would be that he is aware of how selfish it is to leave Zeena and be with Mattie. He chooses to avoid thinking about the situation as often as possible, but only when he is alone after rather tempting moments with Mattie does he let himself think of it, as a few hours earlier he would not have asked himself the question (page 37). Ethan knows it wouldn't be right to leave Zeena to be with Mattie which is why he refrains from fully acting on his desires, showing that he doesn't have the intent of hurting Zeena. This proves that he has good qualities because he is prioritizing protecting other's feelings before making himself

happy; therefore, showing his moral ambiguity because he is not openly acting badly, but he is aware that he wishes to do something bad.

Ethan struggles to maintain his morals; however, as he is so unhappy in his marriage, that he has practically stopped seeing his wife as a living person. Zeena has become background noise to him, and had faded into an insubstantial shade (page 26). His lack of attention towards his wife, Zeena, is especially shown when he expects her not to notice his new habit of shaving, and the constant attention and help he is giving to Mattie. He is so consumed with his feelings for Mattie, that he forgets that he should be attempting to fix his marriage. He is now infatuated with Mattie, and all his life was lived in the sight and sound of Mattie Silver, and he could no longer conceive of its being otherwise (page 26). Ethan is blinded by his obsession with Mattie, and he is now neglecting his marriage; therefore, his actions are not entirely good either. Ethan's lack of consistency in his morals proves that he is a strong example of a morally ambiguous character.

The final part of Ethan's story that proves his moral ambiguity, was his and Mattie's attempted suicide. The suicide was provoked by their desire to be together without embarrassing Zeena, So t we'd never have to leave each other anymore (page 107). This proves that Ethan wanted to be good, but still wanted to be with Mattie. That is why he and Mattie chose a solution that would help them escape their problem, without such a large moral conflict. Ethan thinks of, the hated vision of the house he was going back toof the stairs he would have to go up every night, of the woman who would wait for him there (page 108). This is the moment when he realizes he can

never be content with Zeena, and Mattie's pleas push him over the edge. He goes along with Mattie's idea to sled down the hill into the tree, but this plan doesn't work, and the couple ends up surviving, and being forced to face their problem anyway, making the suicide a pointless attempt on their part. Ethan's refusal to confront his problems shows that his morals are inconsistent, and that he is a morally ambiguous character.

Moral Ambiguity allows the conflict in the story to last longer, because Ethan doesn't make a definite decision. He continues to long for Mattie, and stay with his wife, Zeena, because of his moral inconsistency. He makes note of a tomb stone sharing his name and how, he used to think that fifty years sounded like a long time, but now it seemed to him that they might pass in a flash (Page 52). But when Zeena intends to kick Mattie out, he quickly plans to move west with Mattie, forgetting his intentions to be loyal, now that his relationship with Mattie has been threatened. Without this aspect of the story, the plot line would be vastly shortened and less interesting for the reader. The conflict moral ambiguity provides is the main focus of the novel and removing this would remove the purpose of the book, and most of the depth in the plot. Ethan's moral ambiguity also makes him a more realistic character because most people naturally have ambiguous morals. This way readers can relate more to Ethan's struggle with what is right and wrong.

In Conclusion, a morally ambiguous person is someone who has inconsistent moral views or actions. Ethan Frome is a morally ambiguous character due to his inconsistent morals, in which he switches frequently from wanting to be loyal to his wife, Zeena, and wanting to leave her to be with Zeena's cousin,

Mattie Silver. He avoids this issue and refuses to think about the consequences of his feelings for Mattie for most of the book, and eventually attempts suicide in order to escape this problem. This provides a stronger conflict and lengthens the plot of the novel and creates a believable and more relatable character for the readers.