

Book analysis: ethan frome by edith wharton



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Many people long to escape their own lives when faced with hardship. These people tend to lead unfulfilled, empty, cold lives. In Edith Wharton's novella, *Ethan Frome*, the main character, Ethan, is trapped in Starkfield, a cold barren place and a reflection of Ethan's own empty life. Ethan constantly tries to escape the hardships and cold landscape which holds him captive. As Ethan obsesses over the idea of escaping his own sad life, he ruins the lives of those around him, and blinds himself from the wonderful possibilities his life already holds. Every major character in *Ethan Frome* attempts to evade the hardships which are thrust upon them, but each character learns that hardship is not something one can escape; it is something one must embrace, for one cannot escape hardship without escaping life. Ethan tries to escape the difficulties of his life through the women who have appeared, but rather than freeing himself, Ethan is never able to escape his own hardship. Ethan's First attempt of escape involves his sickly mother. Before Ethan met his wife, Zeena, he felt trapped by his mother and by Starkfield's emptiness. Ethan had hoped to become an engineer, but despite attending school, his dreams were never fulfilled, because of his mother who had grown sick after his father's death, and Ethan was left to care for both his mother and his family's farm. Ethan's obligation to care for his mother materializes into a hefty, oppressive burden until, Zeena, his cousin, rescues him and substantially lifts his burden off his shoulders. Zeena's appearance in Ethan's life saves him, for as she appears "human speech was heard again in the house" (Wharton, 35). Zeena's appearance brings life into Ethan's lonely world. When Ethan's father died, his mother grew increasingly silent, and rarely spoke. Because of this, he lacked human reaction, and in turn, grew lonely as well. As his mother became more silent, Ethan's world

became emptier and colder. But because of Zeena, Ethan is saved from the cold, lonely silence which imprisons him; Zeena brings warmth into his life once again. The narrator tells his audience, "Zeena's volubility was music in [Ethan's] Ears. He felt he might have 'gone like his mother' if the sound of a new life had not come to steady him" (Wharton, 35). Had Zeena not step into Ethan's life, he might have become like his mother, a woman dying from silent loneliness. Ethan is afraid of becoming so emersed in his loneliness that he will never be able to overcome it, like his mother. This fear is why Ethan is inclined to bind himself to Zeena. After Ethan's mother passes away, "when he [sees Zeena] preparing to go away, he [is] seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing, he had asked her to stay there with him" (Wharton, 36). Because Ethan is so afraid of loneliness he traps Zeena in Starkfeild as well. Without feeling love, Ethan selfishly asks Zeena to stay with him, which traps both himself and Zeena in Starkfeild. By asking Zeena to marry him, Ethan does not escape the Starkfeild, nor does he escape hardship. Rather than evading either, he traps himself once again. But as he traps himself, he also traps Zeena. When Zeena becomes trapped by Starkfield and her sickness, she attempts to escape by pushing every workload onto Ethan and constantly complains despite how hard Ethan may try to keep his family afloat. Zeena constantly complains about her financial status and having to do house work and other chores despite already having assistance from Mattie, her younger orphan cousin. At one point Zeena says, "You're neglecting the farm enough already . . . ' Better send me off to the almshouse and done with it . . . I guess there's been Fromes there afore now" (Wharton, 58). Zeena spews hurtful words towards Ethan. She fails to

show appreciation for what he has done for her and what he will do for her. She not only insults Ethan, but she also insults Ethans family. Zeena is in no way grateful. But this is how Zeena copes with being stuck in such a lifeless place. Zeena has nothing to do, and she has no way to advance herself. She can do nothing except complain of her own condition. Like Ethan, She too becomes selfish. Zeena hates Starkfield but she feels as if she cannot leave it. The narrator writes, " She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. Even Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity" (Wharton, 36). Zeena has a hard time adjusting in any location. What Zeena is afraid of is being of no significance. She does not want to feel as if her existence is meaningless; she wants to be known, but even though she wants this, she cannot make anything of herself. Although Zeena is in part responsible for her own suffering, it is Ethan's fault as well. Ethan is the reason that Zeena has stayed in Starkfield all this time, and he is the reason that she cannot be happy.. Ethan takes no notice of Zeena despite being married to her, for he merely proposed to her out of fear of loneliness. While trying to escape loneliness, Ethan caused Zeena to become lonely. Because of Ethan, Zeena too fell silent just as Ethan's Mother had. Zeena falls victim to the loneliness which a loveless, empty marriage creates. Because Ethan is unable to draw out the light which Zeena once had when he first met her, Zeena begins to conform to the iciness of Starkfield. By the end of the novel, no one is able to escape Starkfeild. The more each character struggles to evade the challenges they are faced with, the more each character becomes stuck in their own hardship. By not embracing the challenges life brings the

characters of Ethan Frome are unable to live. Ethan constantly tries to find an easy way out, and in doing so, he ruins not only his but Mattie and Zeena's lives as well. Even Mattie tries to find a way to escape hardship. As Mattie and Ethan prepare to sled Mattie says, " Right into the big elm. You said you could. So't we'd never have to leave each other anymore" (Wharton, 86). Mattie suggests a suicide attempt to escape every challenge that gets in her way. Mattie wants to escape life itself; She wishes to die with Ethan. But although Mattie wishes to die, she does not. She cannot escape life, and her wish goes unfulfilled. She is unable to accept the hardships she has and will face, and because of this, she too becomes trapped and imprisoned by Ethan, her environment, Zeena and herself. No character in the novella is able to make something out of nothing. Each character remains stuck in the cold wintry landscape which imprisons them. Hardship is not something which one can evade it is something one must embrace and work through. There are no shortcuts to deal with challenges, for one may only become more trapped in their despair. Like Ethan, Zeena and Maddy, many people in the world think that they can liberate themselves of their burdens without actually dealing with them, but that is not how life works. One cannot simply run away from the challenges that block them from their goals; one must defeat and overcome those challenges. Life is not a fairy tale, nor will it ever be. There will never be a knight in shining armor or a witch to hold one back. The only witch that exists in one's life is oneself, and the only knight is oneself. It is futile to believe that one can evade life and its hardship. Wharton, Edith. *Ethan Frome with Connections*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2001. Print.