

Ethan frome and desire essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Crystal Spears Professor Brown American Classics April 27, 2008 Frome's Desire and the Path to the Elm Of the many themes present in Edith Wharton's tragic novel, Ethan Frome that could be discussed at length, one of these that above all seem to drive the plot of the novel from event to event. This is the theme of desire. Each character in the novel has things that they long for privately and publicly.

They make decisions based on these longings and lead the reader on a path from an unhappy marriage and innocent love to tragedy at the bottom of an elm tree. Wharton's novel shows a variety of private desires within its characters and how this influences the outcome of this story. In his youth, Ethan is a bright young man who has an aptitude for technology and engineering. He is shown to have a deep attachment to nature and often finds comfort in the landscape around him despite its oppressiveness and isolation in winter. Ethan's farm is barren and provides little income for him, yet he often notes the beauty of his natural surroundings and seems to have an interest in knowing more than he can learn in Starkfield. Ethan's interests lead him to desire a life away from his home and the long winter season there.

Little is said about his time in Florida but it is implied that he was very happy there and got a taste of what life could be like for him. This time in his life shows him all of the things he does not have later in Starkfield. The first real taste of misfortune for Ethan comes when his father is kicked in the head by a horse. Wharton writes that after the accident Frome's father gave away money " like Bible text" and slowly left the family in poverty (Frome, p. 7).

Later, his mother is afflicted with an illness that causes her to fade both mentally and physically over the course of several years, leaving the Frome's with nothing but their farm. Ethan must return to Starkfield permanently to care for his parents, and the many doors that were open to him are closed. As the Fromes go on, the happiness that once filled the home fades away, leaving only its memory behind. Many of Ethan's private desires relating to his life and later to Mattie come from his family in childhood but are changed or reinforced by the time he spends caring for his parents. Wharton shows an example of this in the comparison of the Frome house under his mother's care, and then later under Zeena and Mattie's.

"The kitchen was a poor place, not "spruce" and shining as his mother had kept it in his boyhood; but it was surprising what a homelike look the mere fact of Zeena's absence gave it" (Frome, 29). In his description of how his mother used to keep the kitchen of their home, it's shown that Ethan has a desire for the comfort and love that existed there in his youth. The word "spruce" implies a kitchen that was properly organized and cared for. It leads one to imagine a room much used in a home tucked away in the woods and isolated by winter most of the year. In the lines following this text Ethan imagines how it will be to be alone in his house with Mattie for the first time.

His desire to recreate the happy relationship that his parents had years ago is not met in his relationship with Zeena. When Ethan is with Mattie he can see a future for himself as happy as the one he lost in Florida. As a wife, Zeena seems cold and controlling; she does not offer Ethan the warmth that he longs for. When his mother dies, Ethan marries Zeena out of a sense of

obligation and perhaps loneliness. The condition of the marriage does not seem to bother him until Zeena's orphaned cousin enters their lives.

Mattie is her opposite in almost every way. While described as frail, she is not sickly like Zeena, nor does she have the ever watching negative presence that Zeena projects. Mattie's character in the novel is loving and light. Despite the death of her parents and her desperate situation, she brings some happiness to the Frome house.

Though both Zeena and Ethan initially worry she will suffer in the isolated environment of Starkfield, she complains little and tries her best to learn the tasks Zeena presents her with. Many of Mattie's desires in the novel are basic. As she has no other family willing to take her in, she wants to be useful to Zeena and Ethan. Her previous attempt to work a job shows her to be weak and unable to provide for herself so when she arrives at the farm her greatest wish is to make a home there. After Mattie has lived at the farm for some time, she begins to develop a longing for Ethan as he does for her. These feelings are expressed in innocent ways, from holding his arm while they walk, to showing a preference for him over other young men in the town at a picnic.

When Zeena travels to a doctor out of town for medications, Mattie displays her desire by making the evening special for Ethan. She uses Zeena's pickle dish on the table; a gift given for she and Ethan's wedding. It is kept hidden among Zeena's things on top of her china cabinet where "[she] keeps the things [she] set store by, so's folks sha'n't meddle with them" (Frome, p.

52). The dish, broken by the cat, seems to signify Zeena's broken marriage to Ethan and maybe even her hold over him.

One could say it also the pivotal moment leading to the climax of the novel. After the pickle dish, Mattie and Ethan begin to discuss their feelings for one another openly, and her desire for Ethan grows into something more defined. The reality of their mutual affection will directly lead to the suicide attempt that brings permanent resolution of the situation that the two are trying to avoid: separation. In the moment Mattie and Ethan confess their love for one another, they set themselves on an unavoidable path that will lead down the sledding hill.

The confession comes just before their situation has turned desperate. When, on the night Zeena is away, the pickle dish is broken Ethan does his best to protect Mattie. He replaces the dish in its usual spot with the pieces all set together as if nothing had happened. When he does this Mattie is driven to confess her love, and Ethan pulls her into a kiss. The moment fulfills many of the desires that have existed between the two.

Mattie's need for protection is met and she tells Ethan of her nights spent laying in bed listening to him walk up the stairs. At another point Mattie talks about the joy she took from their walks together. Ethan realizes some of the warmth he remembers from his parents' relationship and from his home in childhood. He is able to be the protector to Mattie in the situation with the pickle dish, and the kiss between them is the culmination of his desire for her all along. When Zeena returns she makes her intentions towards Mattie

known, and Ethan begins to feel reality breaking up their moment of happiness.

When Zeena tells him her plans to remove Mattie and get a hired girl, Wharton shows many sides of Ethan's character. Anger and frustration are shown, but also the intimacy of a husband. Ethan knows Zeena's behavior after she returns from one of her trips, and tries to anticipate her emotionally, but mistakenly tries to console Zeena rather than comfort her (Frome, p. 45). Ethan sees his mistake and tries to correct it quickly, but the discussion ends badly. Later, dinner goes rather well and at one point Zeena even refers to Mattie as "Matt," a sign that the girl is in her good graces.

Just when things seem to be going well, Zeena discovers the dish and Mattie's fate is sealed. As the dominant figure in the home, Zeena knows that the decision to take Mattie in was hers, and that she will have her out. Throughout the novel several examples are used of situations where Zeena's physical presence is unnecessary to disrupt Ethan and Mattie's happiness. The desire to avoid the vivid image of Zeena's face causes Ethan to turn the sled at the last moment, maiming him and Mattie rather than killing them. Zeena, who has a desire to be in control of her immediate surroundings, leads Frome and Mattie with her silence.

She often creates points of high tension in the novel through specific inaction. In the article "Edith Wharton's Dream of Incest," Ferda Asya writes that this may be based on the role Wharton's mother played in childhood. Asya describes her mother as stifling and matter of fact, and that she responded little to imaginative interests. Wharton and her mother made little

attempts to bridge the gap between them, and was often greeted by silence. Zeena's character takes on many aspects similar to Wharton's mother. When Zeena travels to a doctor out of town regarding her illness, the narrator's description of Ethan and Mattie sitting around the fire "like a married couple" shows his desire to be married to Mattie and what he thinks their life would be like.

This moment is hopeful for Ethan, and happy. The passage is important because it shows his greatest moments of joy in the novel often are the times when he is imagining the life he and Mattie could have. In sections where they are physically together, they rarely act out their desire for one another, and only ever kiss and hold hands. The innocent nature of their relationship is changed by Zeena's announcement, and is turned desperate. The climax of both the desire of Ethan and Mattie, and of the novel itself is in the ride from the farm to the train station where the two are to be separated forever.

The ride is emotional for both, and their conversation reflects it. When, at the last moment Ethan remembers his promise of a sled ride to Mattie, he is breaking away from Zeena's control and trying to give Mattie one last memory or experience that she can remember. Wharton describes the sensation of flying, which exhilarates the couple and adds to Mattie's desperation. In the moment, she knows that she can never care for herself and will likely die alone and in the streets if she leaves Starkfield. The childlike nature of the relationship between the two is displayed tragically in her wish to go down one last time, and to never come up anymore (Frome, p. 68).

When Ethan agrees, their final desire to never be separated is a shared one and they take their final ride, which does not go as planned. In the end, the one wish that both Ethan and Mattie share comes to be in a way they could never expect. The couple wishes that she did not have to leave the farm and that they could be together always. When Ethan decides that he cannot leave Zeena, this becomes the closest thing to the romance that they will ever have. After the suicide attempt, Zeena's skills as a caregiver and her desire to control take the lead.

She has Mattie brought back to the farm, where the two women and Ethan live until twenty five years later in the telling of the story. Perhaps the darkest desire presented by Wharton is that Zeena wanted to punish both Ethan and Mattie for what she recognized as their plan to escape her. In a New York Times book review from 1911, an unnamed author writes that "retributions sit's at [Ethan's] fireside, in the shape of two haggard and witchlike figures. . . (Frome Reviews, p.

114). Zeena shows that only by forcing Ethan to watch Mattie's suffering in the same house his parents used to be so happy in could they be punished enough. Wharton's novel shows overall that all people hold secret wishes in their heart, and that these can drive them to actions both rational and irrational. Often the smallest act of decision in a situation where one has no control can be both empowering and desperate.

The desire for love, control, or the comfort of someone who will give unconditionally is real above all things, even death. Wharton shows this in a truly human way, using examples from her own childhood to provide a sense

of reality that touches readers deeply. One is left with wonder about their own longing, the path that lies before them and the hope that their desire will not end in tragedy at the base of a giant elm tree. Bibliography Lauer, Kristen O. , Wolff, Cynthia G.

Ethan Frome-Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995. " Edith Wharton's Dream of Incest: Ethan Frome.

" Studies in Short Fiction; Winter98, Vol. 35 Issue 1, p23.