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An interesting study of Edith Wharton and her works published before WWI reveals Wharton’s difficult transition from the older literary traditions prevalent in New York, where she lived when she was young, to the changing novelistic style in France, where she settled in 1907.

Modernism was taking over and Wharton was only partly moving with it. The new kind of writing reflected sympathy and commitment to the theories of naturalism, symbolism, and impressionism.

Wharton did not change even though works like Ethan Frome and The Reef (1911 and 1912 respectively) reflect an interest in such a change; she remained loyal to the pre-modernist style that shaped her as a young woman. Wharton developed a complex attitude toward Modernism – an attitude informed by a developed aesthetic recognition that all art, including literature, has evolved and must evolve if it is to be vital and serious. Modernism sought to accurately portray the world not as it is but as humans actually experience it.

Modernist literature, then, relied especially heavily on advances in narrative technique, for narration (a voice speaking) is the essential building block of all literature. Interestingly, the narrative techniques in modernist poetry and modernist fiction illustrate the same ideas about experience, but they do so in very different ways. Modernist fiction tends to rely on the streamof- consciousness or “ interior monologue” techniques.

This kind of narration purports to record the thoughts as they pass through a narrator’s head. The unpredictable connections that people make between ideas demonstrates something about them, as do the things they try to avoid thinking about.

In Ulysses, Leopold Bloom attempts not to dwell on his knowledge that his wife will cheat on him as he wanders the city, so thoughts of his wife, of Blazes Boylan (her lover), or of sex make him veer quickly in another mental direction.

Also, a number of small ideas and images recur throughout the book: an advertisement for Plumtree’s Potted Meat, for instance, and the Greek word metempsychosis. These ideas crop up without any apparent pattern and get stuck in Bloom’s head, just as a song or a phrase might resonate through people’s minds for hours and then just disappear. This narrative technique attempts to record how scattered and jumbled the experience of the world really is, and at the ame time how deeper patterns in thoughts can be discerned by those (such as readers) with some distance from them. That humans are alienated from true knowledge of themselves is the implicit contention of the stream-of-consciousness form of narration.

While sharing the novelists’ preoccupation with themes of alienation and ambivalence, Modernist poetry is chiefly known for its dependence on concrete imagery and its rejection of traditional prosody.

Considered a transitional figure in the development of modern poetry, W. B. Yeats rejected the rhetorical poetry that had gained prominence at the height of the Victorian era, favoring a personal aesthetic, natural rhythms, and spare style. American expatriate Ezra Pound, who with Richard Aldington and Hilda Dolittle founded the Imagist movement in poetry in 1910, favored concise language and free rhythms, and became a champion of avant-garde experimentalists of the era.

The thematic preoccupations and technical innovations of Modernist poetry are seen to culminate in The Waste Land, Eliot’s complex, erudite expression of modern malaise and disillusionment.

The decade of the 1910s in which Edith Wharton wrote Ethan Frome was characterized by economic prosperity in the United States and increasing political influence in the world, especially as it endured and triumphed in the First World War.

It was a time in which the country’s freedom became a principal feature of America’s identity, but also a time in which these values were questioned by the unfinished business of women’s suffrage. Competing values of labor and capitalism also continued to work themselves out, sometimes violently through riots and strikes, like the “ long-drawn carpenters’ strike” that is the reason for the narrator’s stay in Starkfield.

In literary theory, structuralism is an approach to analyzing the narrative material by examining the underlying unchanging structure, which is based on the linguistic sign system of Ferdinand de Saussure. The structuralists claim that there must be a structure in every text, which explains why it is easier for experienced readers than for non-experienced readers to interpret a text.

Hence, they say that everything that is written seems to be governed by specific rules, a “ grammar of literature”, that one learns in educational institutions and that are to be unmasked.

Structuralistic literary criticism argues that the “ novelty value of a literary text” can lie only in new structure, rather than in the specifics of character development and voice in which that structure is expressed. One branch of literary structuralism, like Freudianism, Marxism, and transformational grammar, posits both a deep and a surface structure. In Freudianism and Marxism the deep structure is a story, in Freud’s case the battle, ultimately, between the life and death instincts, and in Marx, the conflicts between classes that are rooted in the economic “ base. Literary structuralism often follows the lead of Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss in seeking out basic deep elements in stories, myths, and more recently, anecdotes, which are combined in various ways to produce the many versions of the ur-story or ur-myth.

As in Freud and Marx, but in contrast to transformational grammar, these basic elements are meaning-bearing. Ethan Frome is unique among Edith Wharton’s works in that it tells the tale of an isolated drama, far from the urban and societal concerns of her longer novels.

It is also distinctive in that it is a “ framework story,” that is, a story within a story. Wharton’s “ frame” takes the form of a narrator who introduces the end of the story (Ethan is seen in the present, at age fifty-two) and then provides a “ vision” of prior events that becomes the story proper. Although some framework stories never return to the frame, such as Henry James’s novel The Turn of the Screw (1898), Wharton’s narrator concludes the book with a return to the present and a chilling denouement that apparently explains the enigma of Ethan Frome and the hidden story of his past.

The narrator’s story is simultaneously a flashback and a re-creation. The reader never knows the “ truth”—that is, the story from a source that took part in it (Ethan, Zeena, or Mattie)—but instead receives data through the filter of the nameless narrator, who surmises the events and pieces together a tale from the comments of other minor characters and from his own imagination. Ostensibly, though, the story of Ethan Frome is a tragic and dramatic portrayal of irony, both as a literary technique and an authorial worldview.

Structured as a frame tale, the story unfolds from the point of view of Lockwood, a young engineer on assignment in the isolated New England village of Starkfield. His curiosity about one of the town’s characters, the physically deformed but striking Ethan Frome, drives him to construct a “ vision” of Ethan’s history, assembled from information gathered in conversation with various townspeople and from his own observations of the fifty-two-year-old farmer.

The significance of this structure cannot be overestimated; Wharton even adds an uncharacteristic introduction to explain her decision to employ this literary device, which achieves perspective by creating an educated, observant narrator to intercede between the simple characters and the more sophisticated reader. Wharton also adds poignancy by setting the novella twenty-four years after the main action occurs. Lockwood relates the simple but compelling story of twenty-eight-year-old Ethan Frome, a farmer and mill owner left nearly destitute after the death of his parents, both of whom suffered mental disorders.

After enduring lonely years of silence with his mother, who was too busy listening for imagined “ voices” toConversewith him, Frome marries Zenobia Pierce, seven years his senior, who had nursed Mrs. Frome in her dying days.

The sound of Zeena’s voice in his house is music to Ethan’s starved ears, and by marrying her he hopes to escape further loneliness. Soon after their marriage, however, Zeena becomes obsessed with her various aches and pains, and she concerns herself solely with doctors, illnesses, and cures, falling as silent as his mother.

At her doctor’s advice, Zeena takes in her homeless young cousin, Mattie Silver, to help with the housework. Although a hapless housekeeper, Mattie brings a vitality to the Frome house that has been absent for years, and she and Ethan fall in love. Trapped by circumstances, as well as by Ethan’s strong sense of responsibility toward Zeena, the two foresee no future together. On the evening that Zeena sends Mattie away for good, Ethan and Mattie decide to aim their sled straight for a giant elm tree so that they might find mutual solace in death.

Both, however, survive the plunge, which paralyzes Mattie and disfigures Ethan. Zeena takes responsibility for caring for Mattie and Ethan, and the three live on in the Frome house, as Mattie becomes as querulous and unpleasant as Zeena and Ethan attempts to scratch out a living from his failing farm and mill. As always in Wharton’s work, setting figures prominently, but in Ethan Frome the stark landscape of New England, rather than the elegant brownstones of New York City, provides the background.

Wharton draws a close parallel between the action and the emotions of the characters and the bleak landscape; the two are inextricably intertwined. Ethan “ seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface.

” Even Frome’s house, lacking the “ L” wing common to New England farm structures, reflects the emotionally stunted life existing inside, and the withering orchard of starvingAppletrees and crazily slanting gravestones in the family plot also mirror Frome’s blighted life.

Wharton uses irony, as well as landscape and imagery, to great effect in this work, often juxtaposing scenes for ironic effect. When Zeena greets Ethan at the kitchen door in the evening, “ The light . .

. drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins. ” Later, however, when Mattie stands “ just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. . .

[I]t drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child’s. ” Ethan Frome’s ultimate irony lies in the suicide pact which ends not in the mutual release of death but in endless years of pain and suffering and in the transformation of the vibrant young Mattie into a mirror image of the whining Zenobia. Wharton also uses the technique of contrast to emphasize her irony. She contrasts the prosperous, unrestricted life of the engineer-narrator with Ethan, who once studied such things at the university.

In reverberating scenes, the author first presents Zeena at the back door of the farmhouse with a lantern silhouetting her drawn and tight features; later she is contrasted with a similar scene of Mattie with lantern light highlighting her youthful and soft features.

Finally, the most powerful contrast, presented in the main versus the frame story, is of Ethan himself as young, vital, loving, and capable of so many unexpressed possibilities with the final grim, warped “ ruin of a man” that Ethan becomes—a sort of Sisyphus in the mythology of Wharton’s universe.

Today, Wharton remains one of the most prolific authors of the 20th-century. She feared that the attitude of 1920’s America would fall prey to the 1870’s and 1880’s – superficial, crude, and lost – and was able to write about New York society with a satirical eye. Best known for her depiction of Old New York in all of its social hypocrisy, Wharton portrayed New York’s acceptance or defiance of traditional standards. Wharton’s novels show the moral disintegration and unguided convention prevalent of the late 19th-century. Given her love of literature, her strength of character, and her creative power, she was able to make the most of her opportunities for self-cultivation and later to contemplate, understand, and describe ironically an isolated civilization in decline and transformation: As wife and hostess, she belonged to Society.

” (Walton 22). Works Cited Auchincloss, Louis. Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of Nine American Women Novelists. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965. Bloom, Harold, ed.

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