

# March 27, 2013

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



March 27, 2013 Starkfield Ethan Frome is set in turn-of-the-century New England in the fictitious town of Starkfield, Massachusetts. A time when women were still dependent on men and the goal of attainment for men was survival. Survival meant whether that goal was achieved through the male as the designated bread winner or as a female via the means of securing a proper marriage. In the story of Ethan Frome, by Edith Wharton, the theme involved the challenges of the conflict between passion and social convention, and the constricting effects that a harsh winter climate can have on the human spirit, it takes place in the cold, bleak winter farmlands of Massachusetts. Ethan Frome, a poor farmer, has a hard life tending to his land, trying to make a meager living, and taking care of his ungrateful, demanding, sickly wife, Zeena. The theme of this story almost seems to conspire to make Ethan a passive, unhappy victim of circumstance, weighed down by his duty to his wife, his bitter existence as a poor farmer, and the strain that Starkfield's frozen landscape places on his soul. Edith Wharton portrays the theme of failure in Ethan Frome through the main character's inability to escape moral and social struggles. Ethan Frome is a grizzled old man with a tortured expression on his face. Ethan is a sensitive character with a deep appreciation for nature, and who is drawn to the beauty of Mattie Silver, his wife's younger cousin. Though Ethan would rather leave Starkfield, poverty and the responsibility to care for his wife force him to stay. He is physically isolated from the world at large and is also cut off from the possibility of any human fellowship that life in a village might afford. Towards the end of the novel, Ethan becomes overwhelmed and decides to try suicide instead of face the consequences of any other decisions he has

made. He survives and spends the next 24 years caring for Mattie and Zeena. His entire life becomes a series of dreams destroyed by circumstance. Zeena's illness and his poverty crush his desire for wider horizons, in his hope to leave Starkfield and in his interest in chemistry and engineering. His desire for Mattie is likewise crushed by his inability either to break free of Zeena or to muster the courage to defy convention and risk ruin. During this Era, men would take care of the women while they stayed home, had children and take care of the house and family. Ethan was the main bread winner for his family and with the death of his parents and his wife's illness, this affected that provider ship. He viewed himself as substandard as did his family eventually. These were the consequences that are the result of living according to the rules of society. Men of that era were the dominant role and viewed as the stronger sex. They were deemed more intelligent and dependent on achieving success via whatever means necessary. The consequences of having to take over the farm and sawmill created room for feelings of inferiority and insecurity. The actions of not being able to keep up with the farm and his financial security only added to his detachment from his masculinity. The setting and time of the story also sets the mood for this novel. Symbols in Ethan Frome enrich the themes found in the novel as well as Wharton's characterizations. A symbol functions literally as an object and figuratively as a representation of an idea. Symbols allow writers to compress complicated ideas or views into an image or word. The most important use of symbolic imagery in Ethan Frome is the winter setting, which is first described in the prologue and is carried throughout the main story. Harmon Gow's assessment of Ethan Frome early in the prologue

is that he has endured too many Starkfield winters. From that point on, winter presides over the tragedy in all its manifestations of snow, ice, wind, cold, darkness, and death. The Narrator speculates that the winters in Ethan's past must have brought about a suppression of life and spirit. Winter is also symbolic of the isolation, loneliness, and immobility that Ethan experiences. The name of the town, Starkfield, symbolizes the devastating and isolating effects of the harsh winters on the land and the men who work the land. The name is also symbolic of the stark and carefully composed prose used to write the story. Other symbols include the dead vine on the front porch of Fromes' farmhouse that symbolizes the dead and dying spirits that inhabit the house and its adjacent graveyard, the farmhouse itself that has lost the "L" seems to be symbolic of Ethan (the house looks "forlorn" and "lonely"), it stands alone without support - isolated and lonely. The image of the butterfly, which has defied the cold and death of winter symbolizes freedom; freedom that Ethan is unable to attain because he is trapped in a loveless marriage. The cushion that Ethan throws across his study is the only cushion that Zeena ever made for him. Throwing it across the floor symbolizes his growing rejection of Zeena and his desire to run away with Mattie. Ethan thinks Mattie's hair is one of her most beautiful features; it is symbolic of her free, happy, and open personality. Zeena's hair, on the other hand, is always unattractively crimped and confined with pins, just as her personality seems pinched and constrained. The symbolic use of Mattie's hair is more important at the climax of the novel, when it represents beauty and love, to which Ethan is willing to give his love but can't. The symbols used by Wharton in Ethan Frome reinforce the themes of

silence, isolation, and entrapment; feelings that Ethan experiences in his marriage. Illusions are also an important in the story. They are an escape from the reality of the silent and isolated lives they lead. Ethan would " . . . imagine that peace reigned in his house" when Zeena stopped watching Mattie so closely after her arrival. He wants to believe that Mattie's smiles and certain gestures are just for him. Ethan dreams of being with Mattie always; in fact, " he was never so happy with her as when he abandoned himself to these dreams." The night that Zeena went to Bettsbridge, Ethan imagines them (Mattie and himself) sitting " on each side of the stove, like a married couple." When Zeena insists that Mattie leave their household, Ethan tries to convince himself that Zeena will change her mind. His illusion about running away with Mattie fizzles when he faces reality - he cannot afford one ticket, much less two. The imprisonment experienced by an individual living according to the rules of society is a major theme in Ethan Frome. The message that Wharton conveys through Ethan is that when people fear they are violating the rules of society, they risk becoming enslaved by those rules. Ethan doesn't leave his wife because he feels bound by his marriage vows. He dreams about being married to Mattie; however, even as he writes his goodbye letter to Zeena, and subsequently talks to Mrs. Hale, his conscience does not allow him to follow through with his wishes. Instead, the rules of society rule his life and he remains entrapped in a loveless marriage. " Ethan Frome By Edith Wharton Critical Essays Themes in Ethan Frome." Ethan Frome: Critical Essays: Themes in Ethan Frome. N. p., n. d. Web. 13 Mar. 2013. " Gender Roles and Men in America." Yahoo! Contributor Network. N. p., n. d. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. Miller, Jean. " What

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