

Ethan frome: tragic figure that functions as an instrument of the suffering of ot...

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Unit Four: Ethan Frome

In the novella *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, main character Ethan Frome is a man that faces many disappointments as well no self-assurance. Ethan Frome is definitely a tragic figure that functions as an instrument of the suffering of others in the novel. *Ethan Frome* overall is a very tragic tale of misery and suffering, and any of the main characters involved can be connected to that suffering. Wharton makes Ethan not only the victim, but the function of all the other characters suffering to truly get in depth with the flaws that Ethan possesses.

Zeena, Ethan Frome's wife experiences much suffering due to Ethan. Ethan spent his whole life never being able to stand up for himself. He chose to marry Zeena for the sole reason that she would end his loneliness. It could have also been the fact that he felt bad that she dedicated her life to taking care of Ethan's mom. Next, Ethan decided to give Zeena a loveless relationship. Never in the text does Ethan show any sort of emotion toward his wife, nor does she show any towards him. Ethan is somewhat awful towards the one in which he personally chose to be his wife. He chooses to go to "work" rather than drive her to the doctor, he decides to pursue another woman who is his wife's cousin, and lastly, he chooses to kill himself for the sake of his own independence and his "love" for Mattie.

Zeena however, can be aggravating at times which causes Ethan to act certain ways. Zeena tragically has "hypochondria" which brings out the cold, unhappy, domineering woman who whines and complains incessantly. Ethan lets Zeena dominate him which shows his flaw of being subordinate.

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These mistakes eventually lead to his fall. It is clearly seen that Zeena uses illness to get Ethan's attention and love he hasn't been giving. Zeena makes it hard for Ethan to show how he feels about Mattie in his heart, because when she comes around, Ethan is blindsided by her thoughts in his head. "... but there was only one thought in my mind: the fact that, for the first time since Mattie had come to live with them, Zeena was to be away for the night. He wondered if the girl were thinking of it too..." (40). Another main character is Mattie Silver, who is the desired woman Ethan wants to be with rather than his wife. From early descriptions of Mattie, she appears to be the silvery maiden whose arrival into Ethan Frome's desperate life provides love and hope.

Wharton describes Mattie as being a lively and happy young woman, before her suicide attempt that leaves her an invalid and a former shadow of herself. Her name, Mattie Silver, symbolizes the glistening and beauty of a piece of sterling silver. Wharton also states " The pure air, and the long summer hours in the open, gave life and elasticity to Mattie" (Wharton 60). This quote give Mattie the image of someone with great beauty and personality. Ethan has strong feelings for Mattie and it turns out that the maiden has mutual feelings. Because she has feelings for him, and the sweetness of spirit to interest him in return, the resulting tragedies occur. She develops a catastrophic attitude. She had the mindset that if she couldn't be with Ethan, and be happy, then she doesn't want to live. She then encourages Ethan to take the sled down and commit suicide with her. Her spontaneous and drastic emotions that are tied up with Ethan lead to much suffering. The fact that Ethan quickly agrees to commit suicide shows

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that he isn't really self-reliant and doesn't think for himself. Wharton shows a flaw that Ethan possesses which in turns cause much suffering for him and Mattie.

Ethan Frome is definitely painted as a tragic figure in his crippled state of misery. His tragic flaw could be that he is too indebted to family, and feels too much obligation to them. This brings him home to care for his parents, and won't allow him to leave his wife to seek happiness. It's a good trait, loyalty, but in this case it keeps him shackled in a miserable situation, that, because he won't resolve it in a different way, leads to his tragic and spontaneous decision on the day he decides to go sledding with the women he truly desired. Although Ethan may have suffered, his suffering impacted the people around him. Ethan and his wife represent a broken relationship. It is very ironic how the pickle dish Zeena cherishes is broken. The fact that Zeena's cat breaks the pickle dish is significant. The cat is already symbolically linked with Zeena.

Ethan feels that the shattered dish reflects his ruined night with Mattie and symbolism of the marriage, which has finally broken under the stress of the relationship between Ethan and Mattie. Ethan's relationship brought suffering for the fact that the ecstasy of the sledding ride ends in suffering; the moment of dramatic renunciation when Ethan and Mattie choose suicide rather than elopement ends not in glorious death but in years of pain.

Tragic heroes are indeed "so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them..." (Critic Northrop Frye). A characteristic of a tragic hero that applies

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to Ethan is that he must fall from great heights or high esteem. We learn that Ethan is a physically strong man, but he lacks force of personality. A very important quote stated in the epilogue is “ There was one day, about a week after the accident, when they all thought Mattie couldn’t live. Well, I say it’s a pity she did . . . if [Mattie] ha’ died, Ethan might ha’ lived; and the way they are now, I don’t see’s there’s much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; ’cept that down there they’re all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.”

Ms. Hale’s comment seals the mood of brutal despair permeating the conclusion. Ethan is trapped not only with Zeena but with a Mattie who has been transformed into a copy of Zeena. The comparison between the Fromes’ life and the corpses’ existence in the graveyard emphasizes certain aspects of Ethan’s fate. It shows the permanence of his situation, implying that his imprisonment is irreversible just like death. Ethan’s suffering truly affected other characters and Wharton uses these various situations to show how much flaws Ethan really possesses.