

# "ethan frome" by edith wharton

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Edith Wharton's novel, "Ethan Frome," the protagonist has consistently endured various torturous events. Due to their lack of courage to pursue what was self-fulfilling, Ethan Frome, the protagonist, had to constantly repressed his urge to do what he was once passionate about. Throughout the novel, the constant battle between pursuing a passion that is deemed negative or act upon what is "morally correct" according to society creates Ethan Frome to struggle with doing what could have possibly led to self-fulfillment. Here, Ethan Frome challenged his desires: the ability to love another woman while he is married, aiding his family instead of pursuing a possible career, finally, resulting in a complete state of isolation due to the lack of courage to have done something for himself. Having many possibilities to pursue his aspirations, Ethan Frome continued to withdraw from certain actions that were presumably selfish for he acknowledged what was at stake. Ethan Frome had consistently lived a life that did not belong to him; he attempted to please a society that constantly had Ethan refrain himself from acting upon his desires. Despite it seeming quite selfish to act upon one's aspirations, the novel tends to attempt an understanding of Ethan Frome's situation.

Frome has attempted pursuing what is ideal yet deters him from doing so because he realizes his responsibilities and other individuals are dependent on him. Realizing he fancied Mattie, "Oh, what good'll writing do? I want to put my hand out and touch you. I want to do for you and care for you. I want to be there when you're sick and when you're lonesome." (Wharton) Frome would attempt to act upon his desires, having passion overtake the rivalry between what was ideal versus reality. Contradicting Ethan's moral

responsibility to be there for his wife, Zeena, he let passion temporarily derail the ability to see the consequences that came from being with Mattie. This derailment led to having Mattie seduce Ethan, “ She put her lips close against his ear to say: ‘ Right into the big elm. You said you could. So ‘ t we’d never have to leave each other any more.’ ‘ Why, what are you talking of? You’re crazy!’ ‘ I’m not crazy; but I will be if I leave you.’ ‘ Ethan, where’ll I go if I leave you? I don’t know how to get along alone. You said so yourself just now. Nobody but you was ever good to me.’”(Wharton) Mattie consistently fed into the flame of Ethan’s passions letting him take control of his life and do what pleased him: something Ethan had never done before.

Consequently, having Ethan consider Mattie’s idea, a joint suicide to not only escape their misery of a life lived to please society, but to finally, remain together. This created a grand plot twist for Ethan decided to act upon his desires which resulted in sudden doubt. Thinking, “ But in a flash he remembered the alternative. She was right: this was better than parting.” Ethan Frome had the chance of finally holding the reins of his own life, yet had the thoughts of his responsibilities consume him, “ But suddenly his wife’s face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside.” (Wharton) Having his wife appear the second Ethan was to do something for himself assured Ethan’s morale is there to assure him he only serves others. Moreover, the brawl between Ethan’s urge to commit suicide, a way to suddenly terminate his misery, and knowing his wife is dependent on him resulted in having Ethan Frome doubt his decision to follow through with Mattie’s plan.

The constant quarrel between passion and one's responsibilities were clearly visible throughout the novel as Ethan Frome dealt with his indecisiveness. Persistently doubting whether or not it was worth taking the risk of engaging in an act Ethan himself wanted to do, cost him his own time. Preferring the ability to commit himself to serve the life of others displays the cowardice within Frome because being there for the others was more predictable. Being what society expected him to be, Ethan did not have to speculate over what he should be doing: serving his ill father and later, wife. Furthermore, " His father's death, and the misfortunes following it, had put a premature end to Ethan's studies," (Wharton) It's as if, despite ending the ability to have a future outside the town of Starkfield, Ethan preferred having the stability of living without future aspects because he constantly contemplated on excuses that kept him from enjoying a life he could have had, " He did not even know whether anyone else in the world felt as he did, or whether he was the sole victim of this mournful privilege," (Wharton) Frome pitied himself for the situation he had planted himself in because he chose to ignore what he was actually passionate about. For Ethan to follow a passion is uncertain, so following his responsibilities were roles expected of him.

Frome did his best to aid those he came back for, such as his wife Zeena, " But you know it now. I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. You're a poor man's wife, Zeena; but I'll do the best I can for you." (Wharton) but having chosen his drive to complete his responsibilities sabotaged his potential at having a fulfilling life. Ethan Frome, having dealt with his responsibilities caused him to disregard his passions which ultimately led to a life that was miserable. Having various opportunities to follow his intuition, realism would ultimately

deprive him of doing so. Ethan Frome spent his life having to deal with the consequences of any action he made; as a result, choosing to commit into a life without genuine decisions- but rather what was expected of him to do in society- caused a life of unhappiness and created a constant reminder of such a mistake. Thus, the novel itself caused the reader to see Ethan's ability to sabotage his own happiness for the well being of others, but also criticize the protagonist's actions for not following what he was passionate about. A constant battle between the soul and reason created a grand dilemma yet proved that both aspects came with the grand conflict of which one was more self-fulfilling.