

Imagery in ethan frome essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Ethan Frome, the title character of the novel by Edith Wharton, lives in a world that constrains him; one that he is unable to escape from. The prominent use of winter imagery throughout this novel conveys this ideas of detachment and isolation. Winters in Starkfield, the setting for this story, are ones of unimaginable length and vigor.

In the prologue, the narrator notices, "(...) when the storms of February had pitched their white tents about the devoted village and the wild cavalry of March winds had charged down to their support; I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter. " This demonstrates very clearly the effects of winter on Starkfield, likening it to a war, and shows how it inevitably cripples all those who suffer through it.

Ethan is no exception to the incapacitating strength of winter, one citizen remarking that he had " been in Starkfield too many winters. " The narrator described him as, " 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. " This clearly shows how Ethan's circumstances have hardened him into a shell of a person and how despite his fighting, the winter has consumed him completely. This cold, overbearing force of nature directly reflects Ethan's own overbearing force in his personal life, Zeena.

After his mother dies one winter, Ethan attaches himself to Zeena to ease his longing for warmth and compassion and to assure he doesn't spend the winter alone. Our first portrayal of Zeena describes her as " tall and angular" with a " flat breast", " puckered throat" and " projecting wrist"; a harsh

depiction akin to that of the previous portrayal of winter. We see this same comparison in the way the couple interacts with each other, that is, with a sense of indifference and hostility. Winter is also a barren season, one that brings no life and instead destroys it.

The marriage between Ethan and Zeena is also a barren one, the two having no children, and Mattie, much like the springtime, threatens that oppressive force with her liveliness. Mattie is often described using nature imagery, likening her mind to “ a bird in the branches” and her hair to “ certain mosses on warm slopes”. Yet throughout every moment Mattie and Ethan share, the force of the cold, of winter and of Zeena are always looming overhead. Winter and spring, or in this case Zeena and Mattie, are opposite forces acting on not only each other, but on Ethan. This culminates when Ethan contemplates leaving with Mattie. He looked out at the slopes bathed in lustre, the silver-edged darkness of the woods, the spectral purple of the hills against the sky, and it seemed as though all the beauty of the night has been poured out to mock his wretchedness. ” This line is particularly striking in that it combines Zeena’s wintry strength and despondency with the undeniable beauty that Mattie brings to Ethan’s life. At a point where Ethan is standing at a crossroads, unsure of what to do, he feels the two forces in his life pulling in opposite directions yet coexisting almost peacefully.

The beauty of this night reflected off the ever present snow serves as a strong reminder to Ethan of his entrapment. Another strong use of winter imagery are the scenes of Mattie and Ethan’s trip together and attempted suicide. While the two are en route to the train station to drop off Mattie, they sidetrack to a small beach where they had spent a moment before.

When they arrive, Ethan immediately notices the effects of winter on their “secret spot”. “ He looked up and down the little pebbly beach till his eye lit on a fallen tree-trunk half submerged in snow. This tree-trunk was where they had sat together the previous summer at a picnic, yet now it was completely covered by snow, and therefore their happy memory was covered by Zeena’s menacing presence. After this brief acknowledgment, Ethan moves on to think about other things, showing how used to the winter’s power he had already become. The image of a place once full of life now desolate and bleak has little affect on him. After this short recollection of a shared memory, they return to the cart to continue on their journey.

The two share a tender moment, exchanging words of love and desperation before they happen upon some children sledding near the end of the village. After sledding themselves a few times, Mattie demands that Ethan takes them right off the coast, “ so ‘ t we’ll never come up any more. ” The symbolism of a winter sport inevitably leading to their downfall ties back into the idea presented in the prologue and delivers a strong dose of dramatic irony to the reader. When the two are coasting down the hill towards the elm tree, awaiting their fate, Ethan recalls Zeena’s visage and swerves off course, causing their attempt to fail. But suddenly his wife’s face, with twisted and monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. ” Zeena not only appears before him, but she appears as a part of the elm tree itself, which had also been altered and damaged by the strength of winter. By the end of the novel, all three main characters are forced to succumb to the forces of the Starkfield winters—both the symbolic winter and the real one. Despite

their efforts to break free from the chains that held them, they were unable, much like one cannot avoid the changing of the seasons.