

# Ethan frome: the power of setting



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Ethan Frome and Things Fall Apart are found in two dramatically different settings, with each plot relying heavily on the setting of the novel to tell its story. The setting of a story is a broad term and can contain many layers. While each story may not rely on the same elements of the setting, they each pull from different areas in order to bring their messages to the audience. The historical time period, location, and season all factor into these two stories and make them what they are.

Ethan Frome used the winter season as a major symbol throughout the novel. Without the harshness of winter, Edith Wharton would not be able to tell the same tragic story. The narrator describes Ethan Frome as a very lonely man, which he explained “ was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it, as Harmon Gow had hinted, the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters” (Wharton 10). The stifling cold seems to emotionally repress not only the main character, but the whole town of Starkfield. Throughout the entire novel, readers do not get a glimpse into the warmer months, as winter seems to take control of their lives and acts as a force that holds them back. The bitterness of this cold could not be explained if the novel took place in any other setting. More specifically, the month of February has a significant impact on the novel. February is the month in which Ethan and Mattie’s sledding accident occurred, a tragic end to their love story (Wharton 94). February is typically the last brutal month of winter, meaning that spring is right around the corner. This symbolizes just how tragic their suicide was. They had lost all hope in the bitterness of winter, that they could not stick around to feel that sense of hope.

The city of Starkfield itself, while imaginary, was incredibly important in conveying the lack of hope in this story. It seems that Starkfield is a place where people cannot escape, no matter how badly they want to. This place feels oppressive, with the narrator saying 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” (Wharton 10). The people in Starkfield seemed to have taken everything that used to be bright and vibrant about them and shoved it away, with only bitterness and cold remaining. They seem to live in dullness all year. Although Starkfield is not a real place, it is very important to the setting as it sets the tone for the entire story. In contrast, Springfield is where Zeena gets her medicine, which illustrates how far from spring – a symbol for vibrance and hope – the Starkfield residents are. (Wharton 63). This helps readers understand the significant difference between the two towns, with one full of despair and the other full of hope. Most can never seem to escape Starkfield in order to lift themselves of their own self-made tragedies.

Things Fall Apart, on the other hand, relies on a more general time period to convey the importance of its story. The novel takes place in Nigeria around 1900, which was around the time of European colonization. The story of Okonkwo and the Igbo people could not be told at any other time due to how westernization had such a direct impact on their lives. The Christian missionaries are what causes much of the downfall for the Igbo people. As Okonkwo stated, “He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe 112). As a tragedy, Things Fall Apart could not have shown this steady downfall without the harsh realities of the Igbo

culture being destroyed during this specific time period. Okonkwo met his tragic fate when his own son converted to Christianity, which broke him as a person as he saw not only his tribe, but his family torn apart because of the missionaries (Achebe 107). If it weren't for this historical time period, his story wouldn't be told. Achebe gave a voice to the Nigerian people who lost their way of life due to colonization. The physical setting is also incredibly important in *Things Fall Apart*. From the beginning, the novel emphasized how growing yams made an impact on Okonkwo's life, which required a specific geographic location. The rain in their climate was thought of as incredibly important, " And so nature was not interfered with in the middle of the rainy season" (Achebe 54). It was etched into their culture that rain played an important role in their survival. The tribes base much of their rules and lifestyles around the Earth goddess, which is an important part of their culture. Much of what motivates them is in fear of the Earth goddess, which was a major factor in Okonkwo's exile after he killed a clansman. While they may not completely understand why they needed to do certain things, " if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and now just on the offender" (Achebe 102). They were obviously very in tune with the nature around them and saw it as a very powerful force. While nature is found all around the world, I believe that the connection felt in their forests could not have happened in any other landscape.

It is evident that both *Ethan Frome* and *Things Fall Apart* would not be the same stories if they were told in different settings. Whether it be the season and town of *Ethan Frome* or the time period and location of *Things Fall Apart*,

different elements of the setting in each novel play a critical role in telling the individual stories. While minor elements could have changed in each novel, neither story could have told their tragic tale if it weren't for the big picture of each setting. Each author was very strategic and intentional about how they told their stories in order to convey the strong messages that they were trying to tell.