

# The concept of human suffering depicted by edith wharton in ethan frome



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Within Edith Wharton's novel *Ethan Frome* there is one consistent ideal that stands out, the ideal of human suffering. Ethan Frome is chained to his horrible, nagging wife Zeena and has to take care of her constantly. Frome had suffered the same treatment at the hands of his mother as well and the transition of suffering from his mother to Zeena is almost seamless. When it seems that he may escape his sufferings with the temptress, Mattie Silver, he is humbled back down to his lowly position. Zeena herself suffers as she is constantly ill and cannot care for herself. Mattie as well suffers abysmally and she is almost completely crippled and forced to be taken care of by Zeena and Ethan. However as one can see, out of the three circumstances they all suffer badly, Ethan suffers the worst. Ethan Frome, throughout the titular novel, suffers horribly and is only responsible for very little; he is a simply victim of circumstance.

One of the major ways in which Ethan Frome himself suffers is the fact that he constantly slaves over his wife and mother. Ethan had an assumably normal childhood, however, when he tries to escape Starkfield for good, he is brought back from college to care for his ailing mother who treats him badly. As said by Harmon Gow, "Somebody had to stay and care for the folks. There warn't ever anybody but Ethan"(Wharton 6). It is during this time he meets Zeena, who eventually becomes his wife. Soon after his mother dies, Zeena takes the same place of Ethan's mother adding to his misery and suffering. Ethan cannot control the events that happen to him. He is a victim of a horrible circumstance and is completely trapped by his morals of decency. The fact that Ethan is a decent man is the only thing that can be controlled by him, and by making the moral choice to stick by his morals he

is put in a position of agony. The reader can see his apprehension to leave Zeena because of his morals, and even after his near death experience Ethan says that he “ought to be getting him his feed” showing his compassion towards a simple horse and if we delve deeper his compassion to the awful Zeena. This continuous prolonging of Ethan’s horrible human condition and the abusive treatment from both his mother and Zeena lead Ethan to dream and hope of escape from Starkfield which leads to more pain and suffering.

The suffering of Ethan Frome continues and even still is caused not by Ethan but by the temptress, albeit unintentional at that, Mattie Silver. Mattie is everything Ethan dreams of and lusts after, however he cannot escape the horrible tyrant Zeena who keeps him under her thumb. Ethan dreams of escape, as any natural person in his situation would, and sees Mattie as his true love and his chance to escape. This is not the fault of Ethan because he has been suppressed and tortured so long that all he has is hope and Mattie personifies hope herself. Ethan sees her as “taller, fuller and more womanly in shape and in motion”(Wharton 71), and she is everything his life lacks. This causes massive suffering to Ethan because his hope and love for Mattie grow, only to be horribly snatched away as the fruit from Tantalus. This creates a suffering so horrible and none of it is directly the result of Ethan.

Another major way that Ethan suffers as a victim of circumstance is in the abysmal results of the great starkfield smash up. Ethan himself is physically crippled and maimed for life adding great pain to his daily sufferings, and he no longer has the ability to walk unhindered by great pain. In addition to that his dreams of escape are completely quashed and the woman who

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symbolizes his hope is so physically maimed that he almost doesn't recognize her anymore. She is described post smash up as " bloodless and shriveled" and " under her shapeless dress her body kept its limp immobility, and her eyes had the bright witch-like stare that the disease of the spine sometimes brings" (Wharton 151), a large fall from her previous beauty. Now one might say, that Ethan had a choice to go down that hill, however, in honesty he does not. Ethan literally has not known happiness in a long time and has only hope left. At this point he is completely unable, as would anyone in his position, to think rationally and wants to follow hope to wherever it will lead him. It is in this way that he is completely a victim of circumstance in his sufferings.

Obviously, any reader of Ethan Frome can see and understand the massive sufferings that constantly burden Ethan Frome throughout Wharton's novel. Ethan himself suffers physically, as his body is destroyed, and he suffers mentally as his hope is crushed. In addition his love, Mattie Silver, maimed physically, and he ends up back at the abysmal beginning, living essentially as an ant under the boot of the dominating Zeena. Ethan also is a horrible victim of circumstance and none of these things really are his fault, he has just been so destroyed after years of abuse he cannot fight back. It is in these ways that Ethan Frome suffers throughout the novel and to the highest degree he is a victim of circumstance. As Mrs. Hale said when referring to who suffers the most of the three, " When I see that I think it's him that suffers the most"(Wharton 156). However, one must ask, does Mattie suffer worse? She had the death of her parents and became physically maimed for life.....