

The story of ethan frome's life



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In *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, the story of Ethan Frome's life leading to his present circumstances is evaluated by the narrator, a man trapped in Starkfield, Massachusetts due to one of the area's infamous storms. When discussing Ethan, the narrator proclaims, Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away (Wharton 4).

As the narrator explains, the winters in Starkfield are extremely rough and seemingly never-ending, having an extremely detrimental impact on its inhabitants. Throughout the novel, Ethan expresses the desire to leave Starkfield and start a new life, yet he is trapped in his life of unhappiness, similar to how the winter storms trap the residents of Starkfield in their homes. In Edith Wharton's novel, *Ethan Frome*, the harsh winters of Starkfield symbolize the depression and imprisonment that Ethan experiences through his marriage, revealing the isolation that the physical environment of Starkfield has caused for Ethan and its detrimental effects on his life.

The main impairment in Ethan's life is his wife, Zeena, and her illness. Due to the fact that the story is mostly told in Ethan's point of view, the reader vividly sees Ethan's opinion on his wife. He seems to despise her, describing her as harsh and cold. The winter has once again forced him to be trapped in a life he does not want due to the fact that he married Zeena after his mother died to avoid being alone during the cold winter months. Taking care of her is a chore to him, and disables him from leaving Starkfield and living the life he dreams of. Wharton says, His wife's retort was like a knife-cut across the sinews and he felt suddenly weak and powerless (48). The simile used by Wharton to describe the relationship between Ethan and Zeena

exemplifies the theme of the impact that the winter has had on Ethan.

Zeena, like the winters in Starkfield, has imprisoned Ethan. He is unable to leave Starkfield and pursue a career in engineering which was the dream of his youth. Ethan's relationship with Mattie and his yearn to commit adultery with her deepens his resentment towards Zeena. When Zeena kicks Mattie out of their house, Ethan truly realizes how trapped he is by his wife; Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding (Wharton 48). Zeena exemplifies winter in Ethan's life, a cold and unloving state that imprisons him in his house and misery. Ethan's descriptions of Zeena portray the idea that she is an impediment on the improvement of his life, disabling him from happiness.

In stark contrast to Zeena is Mattie, the warmth and light of Ethan's life.

When Mattie enters Ethan's life in order to take care of Zeena, there is a revolution in Ethan's world. His life has seemed to gain meaning, and he idolizes Mattie due to the fact that she is the polar opposite of Zeena.

Wharton says, It was a fact that since Mattie Silver's coming he had taken to shaving every day; but his wife always seemed to be asleep when he left her side in the winter darkness (18). Once again, Zeena represents the winter to Ethan whereas Mattie is like summer through her warmth and appeal. When he is with Mattie, Ethan takes care of himself and enjoys living, yet he cannot escape the coldness of Zeena. This reflects the idea that the residents of Starkfield cannot escape the cold, ongoing winter months. Opposing the negative descriptions that Ethan gives Zeena such as her being old and

unfeminine Mattie is presented to be young and endearing. Her wardrobe exudes warmth, including a red decoration symbolizing the passion that Ethan feels for her. Wharton explains, He kept his eyes fixed on her, marveling at the way her face changed with every turn of their talk, like a wheat field under a summer breeze (38). Similar to how the plants thrive and grow during the summer months, Ethan is growing as a person when he is with Mattie. Through Mattie, Ethan sees the opportunity to leave this imprisonment and truly be happy, something that was never a possibility to him in the past.

The emotions that Ethan has been feeling towards Mattie as well as his increasing distaste for his wife come to a climax when he goes sledding with Mattie. After Zeena has proclaimed that Mattie must leave, Ethan is left heartbroken and furious. He decides that he will bring Mattie home, and when they leave they decide to go on a sleigh ride. This is extremely ironic due to the fact that the cold environment caused by the winter in Starkfield up until this point has been a burden on Ethan. When he is with Mattie, however, he is able to enjoy his life despite the cold and the snow through this sleigh ride. The confirmation of Mattie and Ethan's feelings for one another enables Ethan to be truly happy, and he does not want to return to the coldness of his marriage with Zeena. Ethan's attempted suicide with Mattie exemplifies the severity of his dissatisfaction for his life before her. Ethan's decision to steer the sled away from the tree, however, shows that like the people of Starkfield, no matter how hard Ethan tries he cannot escape the detriments of winter. When he begins to lead the sled into the tree, he sees a vision of Zeena; 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 69). Ethan's decision to not commit suicide was fueled by his imprisonment to Zeena, and once again shows that like winter snow on a house Zeena has left him emotionally buried and unable to escape.

The isolation of Ethan portrayed through the brutal winter of Starkfield is an extremely important theme throughout *Ethan Frome*. Ethan's current life with Zeena is representative of the coldness and severity of the winter months in Starkfield. Ethan desperately wants to escape the winter that has imprisoned him into an unhappy life in Starkfield, and the opportunity to do so is presented to him through Mattie. Mattie embodies the exact opposite of Ethan's current life; she is warm and inviting and encourages Ethan's happiness. Like the people in Starkfield undergoing the seemingly constant winter weather, however, Ethan is unable to escape the reality of his life. This is shown in the fact that he does not follow through with his suicide attempt and is forced to live a life where he is trapped with Zeena taking care of him and a paralyzed Mattie. The cold, bitter winter symbolizes Ethan's dissatisfaction in his current marriage and life, and the harsh truth presented at the end of the novel is that he is unable to escape it.