

Ethan Frome Notes

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Character Analyses

Ethan Frome is not a tragic hero. I don't mean to say that he isn't tragic, but I do not believe that he is in any way heroic, even in his intentions. His closest swipe at heroism is when he thinks of moving out West with Mattie. Yet even this idea is not heroic but merely wishful and rather pathetic. If he moved West, he would be leaving Zeena with yet more Troubles to go with her Complications.

There are no heroes in this story. Heroes tend to pop up in action stories. *Ethan Frome* is definitely not an action story. There are, however, villains. The evil mastermind of the story is Winter. Winter is not easy to plot against. Movements become less precise and directable in winter. For instance, it is much harder to walk through snow than it is to walk on, say, concrete. What's more, winter's cold makes it difficult to move at all. All manner of activities are depressed by winter. All manner of people are depressed by winter, too. Like any good evil mastermind, winter subverts others (Zeena) to its malevolent will. Zeena is a lesser villainess—a mere pawn.

As villain of the story, Winter would be responsible for the sad fate of Ethan Frome.

If Zeena told the story, it would probably be even more depressing—what fun! If Mattie told the story, it would be truly unbearable. By choosing a narrator who is not involved in the main action of the story, Wharton saved her readers a good bit of pain by taking us a level of description away from the action.

Everyone controls their own destiny to some extent. There is always some way out of a situation, provided that restrictions on the consequences are lifted. For instance, Ethan could run off with Mattie, but he would have to make do with no money. It seems likely to me that Ethan and Mattie would be much happier as beggars in, say, New York City, than as cripples at home.

The minor characters are just that—minor. They are not extensively developed, nor are they very important to the story.

Today's feminist movement is quite varied. The hyper-extremists who say that all sex is rape and so on would certainly find fault in the book because it contains (*gasp*) a man. They might, however, find a redeeming note in that the book's outlook on marriage is not especially optimistic. More moderate feminists would probably not raise too many objections, except that Ethan is awfully old to be getting it on with Mattie.

The novel's setting is certainly a full-blown character—in fact, it could be said to be the subject of the novel.

Motifs and Symbols

Reality versus illusion?

Winter is a character in the novel, so it seems perfectly natural that the novel be set in winter.

Death shapes the novel by being ever-present. Zeena showed up because of the death of Ethan's mother, and near the end of the story Ethan and Mattie decide on death as the best of their immediate choices. Death isn't so bad, compared to winter in a small town in New England with no friends and a wife set on making your life miserable.

Wharton's choice of symbols makes the novel depressing. One symbolic example is the pickle dish. It symbolizes Ethan's relationship with Zeena. Their relationship is always kept away, it is beyond his control. Their relationship is full of sourness, as is a pickle dish. It was quite surprising that, when the dish was broken, Ethan did not end up consummating his relationship with Mattie—it breaks the usual meaning of that symbol's destruction. Perhaps the dish better represents Ethan's pretense of being loyal to Zeena.

Lack of money, and the belief that money's lack prevents all manner of activities (such as moving out of the vicinity of Zeena) shapes the story by preventing an ending which remotely resembles happiness. It is interesting to note, however, that when Ethan accidentally gives the idea that he will collect a down payment, Zeena feels free to use the imaginary money, landing Ethan on the hill headed straight for the figurative tree.

Language and Structure

The language of the novel is depressing, too—surprise! Is there anything about the novel that *isn't* depressing?

Wharton chose to set the tale in the past because knowing some part of what happens

to Ethan helps build the suspense. Also, if the novel were set in the present, it would be yet more depressing because the pain of the ending would not have been given years to numb. Count your blessings.

The framing of the story lets the reader know little fragments of the plot before they happen. It is a great device for foreshadowing. If the reader did not know that Ethan was going to end up permanently maimed, what a great surprise it would be when Ethan woke up after smashing into the tree!

The narrator adds a nice little touch of depression to the beginning and end of the novel, to top off the great lump of depression that is the main portion–frosting on the cake.

Starkfield is obvious. None of the other names jump out at me as interpretable.

The main instance of foreshadowing that Wharton uses is when Ethan describes the sledding hill for the first time and comments to Mattie about how the tree could really do some damage, should anyone hit it.

Meanings of Ethan Frome

Of course the novel is a tragedy. When a novel ends with the main characters mostly dead, maimed on one side, and paralyzed from the neck down, respectively, it's usually a good indication that the novel is a tragedy. Will any of the main characters have another happy moment in their lives?

The reader knows from the very beginning that Ethan will end up maimed, so there's not much contradiction of expectations that can happen. The one time when irony plays an important role is when Ethan and Mattie finally get a night together, but don't do anything

with it. Quite sad. What a surprise!

No, the novel's view of life is not totally pessimistic. There's one solace. Maybe, if your life is miserable enough, you can be perverse and tell its story to millions of readers! Other than this comforting note, however, I would say that Yes, the novel's view of life is totally pessimistic.

The novel says that marriage in and of itself is not Good, that it is important to marry the right person, and that married couples should not live in New England.

Wharton's message is debatable, as is the concept of Morality. I have no moral objections to what I interpret to be Wharton's message. I simply disagree with it wholeheartedly.

I doubt that New England would still be populated if *Ethan Frome* accurately depicted life in New England in the early 1900s.