

ANALYSIS

Ethan Frome (1911)

Edith Wharton

(1862-1937)

“I had known something of New England village life long before I made my home in the same country as my imaginary Starkfield; though, during the years spent there, certain of its aspects became much more familiar to me.... Even before that final initiation, however, I had had an uneasy sense that the New England of fiction bore little--except a vague botanical and dialectical--resemblance to the harsh and beautiful land as I had seen it. Even the abundant enumeration of sweet-fern, asters and mountain-laurel, and the conscientious reproduction of the vernacular, left me with the feeling that the outcropping granite had in both cases been overlooked. I give the impression merely as a personal one; it accounts for *Ethan Frome*, and may, to some readers, in a measure justify it.

So much for the origin of the story; there is nothing else of interest to say of it, except its construction. The problem before me, as I saw in the first flash, was this: I had to deal with a subject of which the dramatic climax, or rather the anti-climax, occurs a generation later than the first acts of the tragedy. This enforced lapse of time would seem to anyone persuaded--as I have always been--that every subject (in the novelist's sense of the term) implicitly *contains its own form and dimensions*, to mark Ethan Frome as the subject for a novel. But I never thought this for a moment, for I had felt, at the same time, that the theme of my tale was not one on which many variations could be played. It must be treated as starkly and summarily as life had always presented itself to my protagonists; any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would necessarily have falsified the whole. They were, in truth, these figures, my *granite outcroppings*; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate....

It was the first subject I had ever approached with full confidence in its value, for my own purpose, and a relative faith in my power to render at least a part of what I saw in it.... My scheme of construction--which was met with the immediate and unqualified disapproval of the few friends to whom I tentatively outlined it--I still think justified in the given case.... Each of my chroniclers contributes to the narrative *just so much as he or she is capable of understanding* of what, to them, is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place... I make no claim for originality in following a method of which ‘La Grande Bretche’ [Balzac] and ‘The Ring and the Book’ [Browning] had set me the magnificent example; my one merit is, perhaps, to have guessed that the proceeding there employed was also applicable to my small tale.”

Edith Wharton
Introduction
Ethan Frome (1911)

“In *Ethan Frome* (1911), inside the framework provided by the imaginary narrator, the point of view is exclusively that of Ethan Frome. Thus Edith Wharton followed exactly the evolution of James in this matter, even to the first application of the restricted point of view in stories long enough to be published each in a single volume, though not long enough to be classified securely as novels.... Her impeccable taste never permits her a lapse into the ridiculous. In *Ethan Frome* she has even risen, for once, into a simple and tragic realism which can stand comparison with almost anything in fiction.”

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 294, 311

“The tragic qualities of this story are enhanced by Mrs. Wharton's careful workmanship. Having to deal with the events of a whole generation, yet seeing that her theme would not bear the slow, expansive method of the full-length novel, she adopted the device of having the story built up, retrospectively, in the mind of

an observer who is intelligent enough to comprehend the motives of all the actors. Not until after the apparent climax has been passed does she bring the reader himself face to face with the two women and thereby reveal, suddenly, the full extent of their calamity.”

Walter Fuller Taylor
A History of American Letters
(American Book Company 1936)

“This grim story is told by a middle-aged engineer, who pieces together the history of the inhabitants of a bleak Massachusetts farm. Zenobia (Zeena) is a whining slattern who hugs imaginary ailments to her barren breast, and spends upon quacks and patent medicines the scant substance her husband, Ethan Frome, manages to wring from the grudging earth. Her cousin Mattie Silver is left destitute and comes to live with them. The friendship of Ethan and Mattie arouses Zeena's jealousy, and after a year Mattie is ousted to make way for a strong hired girl. On their way to the railroad station, Ethan and Mattie realize that they cannot bear to part, and when they are coasting down their favorite snow slide he purposely steers their sled into a great elm. Instead of being killed, they are crippled for life, and spend the remainder of their unhappy days on the barren farm under Zeena's surveillance.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“When, as in that piece of perfect craftsmanship, *Ethan Frome* (1911), she gets her theme in the harsh stoicism of the New England hills, it is not Ethan, or his unhappy lover or still more unfortunate wife, who gives the story its final direction, so much as the horror of the final scene of sordid misery for an observer coming from a world where the spiritual effects of crude poverty are unknown.”

Henry Seidel Canby
Literary History of the United States I, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 1211

“A short novel often singled out as her best work though she herself did not consider it that.... While she knew little at first-hand about people like Ethan Frome, his nagging wife Zenobia, and Mattie Silver whom he loves, Edith Wharton had felt some resemblance between their community and hers. If a metropolis had its hard decorum, so had a village. And in a village there was the further compulsion of a helpless poverty which could bind feet and wings, and dull life to an appalling dinginess. Suppose a man desperately trying to escape from a loveless marriage should by a cruel accident be forced back into it, and have to spend the rest of his years in the same house not only with his vindictive wife but also with the other woman, now a whining cripple... In her brilliant construction the consequences appear first, not understood by the spectator who acts as narrator. Then the early events are told, with a bitter tragic irony in the light of what the spectator increasingly realizes about the horror of the consequences.... Event follows event with such a look of iron logic that the reader has no chance to think of possible acts by the characters which might have saved or relieved them. This was far from the episodic art of the local color writers.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-40) 278-79

“To the author's own intense annoyance, *Ethan Frome* was often called her masterpiece. It is a cool, spare tragedy of a sensitive farmer in the back hills of New England, who is married to a mean, hypochondriac woman. Life renews itself for Ethan when Zeena's cousin Mattie comes to the house as a 'hired girl.' Confronting separation, the lovers choose death instead, by way of a sled steered down a steep hill, straight against a tree. By the irony of fate, they achieve only mutilation, and all three live out their long lives in the frustration-filled farmhouse, where the wife is forced to undertake the lifelong care of the now helpless and querulous Mattie.... In the stern, wintry integrity of *Ethan Frome*...misery...is turned into beauty.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952)

“*Ethan Frome*, when I read it again, turned out to be pretty much as I had recalled it, not a great book or even a fine book, but a factitious book, perhaps even a cruel book.... But the high and solemn repute in which it stands is, I am sure, in large part a mere accident of American culture.... *Ethan Frome* was admired because it was ‘stark’--its action, we note, takes place in the New England village of Starkville--and because the fate it describes is *relentless and inevitable*.... I am quite unable to overcome my belief that *Ethan Frome* enjoys its high reputation because it still satisfies our modern snobbishness about tragedy and pain.... My new reading of the book...did not lead me to suppose that it justified its reputation, but only confirmed my recollection that *Ethan Frome* was a dead book, the product of mere will, of the cold hard literary will. What is more, it seemed to me quite unavailable for any moral discourse. In the context of morality, there is nothing to say about *Ethan Frome*. It presents no moral issue at all.”

Lionel Trilling
“The Morality of Inertia”
Great Moral Dilemmas, ed. Robert MacIver
(Harper 1956)

“This is usually reckoned to be Mrs. Wharton’s masterpiece, though she herself did not think so. It is an ironic tragedy of love, frustration, jealousy, and sacrifice. The scene is a ‘typical’ New England village, where Ethan barely makes a living out of a stony farm and exists at odds with his wife Zeena (short for Zenobia), a whining hypochondriac. Mattie, a cousin of Zeena’s, comes to live with them, and love inevitably develops between her and Ethan. They try to end their hapless romance by steering a bobsled into a tree; but both end up cripples, tied for a long life of despair to Zeena and the barren farm. Zeena, however, is transformed into a devoted nurse as Mattie becomes the nagging invalid. George Snell said of Zenobia, ‘Seldom in our fiction has the embittered, unloved, shrewish wife been better portrayed.’”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)