

Alienation, Loss and Despair: An Analysis of Modernist Strains in *Ethan Frome*

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Abstract

This paper looks at Ethan Wharton's haunting novella Ethan Frome from the lens of modernism. The alienation and sense of loss were very keenly felt at the turn of the century and writers emulated them. Wharton's story explores the themes of social institutions, marriage in this case, as being suffocating, as well as issues like coping with the dizzying pace of technological advancement and skilled labor and the matter of women's place in this new world where she has to suddenly rely on her own skills and adapt quickly. The paper also finds that Wharton's writing itself, the form it took, is indicative of its modernist background which includes the use of the unreliable narrator. Modernist symbolism is found in the shape of the train, a mode of transportation synonymous with change.

Keywords: modernism, *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton, alienation,

Modernism as a movement centered around the concept, and perhaps the realization, of alienation and disillusionment in the established institution, whether social or historical. This is a break from norms and traditions, particularly against religious, political and social views. Writings in this movement concerned itself with the individual and celebration of their inner-strength in front of alienating life. The focus, too, was on the relativity of truth as well as the randomness of life in general (Habermas & Ben-Habib, 1981). Modernist period is generally agreed upon to be initiated as early as the 1880s and into the mid-1940s. This time period underwent a profound change and every level in society and the publications of the time reveals that. The individual was devalued in the face of industrialization and war. The world had shrunk due to advances in global communication, all of which was ushered in at a dizzying pace.

In such a turnaround from Victorian mores, many writers from different parts of the world penned works related to their perception of the despair and loss the modern man inherits. Modernist writers explored how individuals adapted to changing world and featured characters who were barely surviving rather than thriving (Waugh, 2013). Among the giants of

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this age, which include, but are not limited to, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, a rather lesser known author, but equally representative of Modernism is Edith Wharton.

Edith Wharton was a prolific writer who holds the honor of being the first woman in history to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1921. Most of her writing focuses on the upper echelons of American society because she herself was from a well-off family. But the work that is being explored in this paper deals with the lower class. The themes of Modernism had affected America in roughly the same manner, no matter what the class. Ware (2004) in *The Architecture of the Short Story: Edith Wharton's Modernist Practice* speaks about Edith Wharton's modernist tendencies thusly, stating that,

her attraction to the slow, almost inevitable dissolution of old forms ... also explains much of Wharton's own literary practice, where the forms and traditions may be preserved, but where there is a surging moral, intellectual, and aesthetic movement of defiance beneath the surface. (p.18)

Ethan Frome (2017), originally published in 1911, is one of Wharton's most famous novellas, partly because of its portrayal of the raw poverty-stricken people of Stark field, Massachusetts, a fictional town. The story introduces us to Ethan Frome through the narrator's search for him, which was started by the rather intriguing backstory that was hinted at to the narrator. After meeting him, we are suddenly in the story itself, set some twenty-four years before. Along with Ethan, the other main characters are Zeena, Ethan's sickly and hypochondriac wife, and Mattie Silver, her young and single cousin. Through the continuation of the story, we get to find that Ethan is disillusioned with his marriage, regretful of his past decisions, and has no way to escape from his plight. His wife is demanding and domineering, and Ethan is quickly infatuated with Mattie, who had been hired by the Fromes to help around the house because Zeena herself was not able to. His love for Mattie blooms and he fantasizes about a happy life with her. We learn along the way that Mattie too has fallen on hard times and doesn't have any special skills to make do in a changing world. Zeena goes to the next town over for a medical checkup and Ethan finally gets to spend time with Mattie. When Zeena returns, she declares that Mattie has to leave so that they can hire a housekeeper. Ethan is angry but unable to speak up. He drives her to the train station, and along the way they decide to go sledding as they had planned to do before. There is an elm tree at the end of the sledding route which has been foreshadowed throughout the story. After riding the sled once, Mattie suggests they

deliberately ram into the tree, spending their last moments together. They crash and then the story moves back from the flashback. The narrator finds that all three of them still live together and the roles have reversed where Zeena now has to look after Mattie and Ethan because of their debilitating spinal injuries sustained due to the attempted suicide.

Society and Social Mores as Obstacles to the Fulfillment of Desire

The constraint on individual desire is perhaps the most prominent theme of the novel, since the plot of *Ethan Frome* (2017) is concerned with the desire of Ethan for a woman who is not his wife. The conflict doesn't come from Ethan's own heart — his feelings for Mattie never waver. Therefore, there is a dispute between his desires and the restrictions that society places on him, which regulates his consciousness and prevents his desires from being fulfilled. Nevius (1951), speaks of this “anti-romantic tradition” in Edith Wharton’s writing and the conundrum of choosing love or social obligation thusly, “she proceeds directly to the question: What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of manners, conventions, taboos, apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty? (p.199)”

Wharton displays time and again the grip that social convention has on the desires of Ethan. Although he has one night alone with Mattie, as he sits in his kitchen, he cannot help but be reminded of his domestic duties. He's planning to elope and run to the West, but he can't get himself to lie to his neighbors to get the money— and so on. Ethan eventually opts out of the conflict between his interests and social and moral obligations. In the absence of the bravery and determination to confront their force, he decides to surrender the pressures of life by giving up on life itself.

Economic and Financial Constraints and the Technological Rat Race

Haytock (2002) in *Marriage and Modernism in Edith Wharton's Twilight Sleep* expands the framework of Modernism from the devastation of the Great War to now include and be, “a response to changing economics and gender relationships.” The concept of wealth, or lack thereof, is the biggest obstacle in front of the residents of Stark field, particularly Ethan Frome.

Because the train station is situated outside the town, business has slowed to a crawl and the place has a static feel to it. Ethan’s farm is barely enough to feed them. Zeena’s medical bills are always expensive. The need for a housekeeper to help around, too, is an expense that cannot be forked over unless Mattie is fired. Mattie herself had only fifty dollars or so to her name, her father having swindled people out of their money. When Ethan decides that he is willing to run away with Mattie, leaving the

farm to his wife, the realization that the farm wouldn't be profitable, stops him, as well as the horrifying realization that even the cheapest tickets out to the west were well out of his range.

Composition of *Ethan Frome* (2017)

A telling sign of the modernist movement is the technique of changing and inconsistent point of views as well as the unreliability of the narrator, which have been used by Wharton in *Ethan Frome* (2017). Arnold Weinstein (1981), in *The Fiction of Relationship* suggests that, "authorial choices made in ... fictions—point-of view narrative, first-person lyricism, style indirect libre, delayed discourses, stream of consciousness, surreal environment, even word play—both form and inform the story of relationship. (p.25)" Similarly, the unnamed narrator of *Ethan Frome* (2017), and his unreliability too are indicative of deliberate authorial choice. This aspect of the narrator hints at the untold story inside *Ethan Frome* (2017). The gaps are in the shape of Zeena and Mattie. The reader is never told of their thoughts and feelings. The narrator's fascination with Ethan results in him romanticizing him in the story. In the prologue, the narrator freely tells us that the story is his "vision" of Ethan's story, which he had pieced together from his imagination as well as what little the townsmen and Ethan told him. The decision to use this technique is indicative of another modernist thought, that of the truth being unreliable. The Ethan we are shown is most likely not the man as he is, nor Zeena nor Mattie. As Ware (2004) states, when speaking about Wharton's usage of modernist techniques of form and voice, that, the possibilities presented by Wharton's manipulation of form and voice ... and the aesthetic ramifications of such manipulation, look forward into the twentieth century rather than back to the nineteenth century, and they constitute Wharton's often unrecognized and subtly modern contribution to the theory and practice of the American short story. (p.22)

Modernist Symbolism in *Ethan Frome* (2017)

The train, which is the major reason for Stark field's dilapidated state due to lack of access, is essentially the vehicle of modernism and technology and innovation, which has passed this town by. As is stated in the introductory chapter of the book, ""But after the trains begun running nobody ever come by here to speak of and mother never could get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died (Wharton, 2017, p. 29)." The alienation that the Fromes had felt was a feeling not restricted to Ethan. His mother fell ill because of the

isolation brought about by the changing world, which had decided to ignore Stark field in favor of other towns. This town had been forgotten and its inhabitant, resultantly, stagnated and decayed, afraid of the rest of the world. The introductory chapter, when speaking of Ethan's situation, comments that "Guess he's been in stark field too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away" (Wharton, 2017, p. 100). The town is shown as a trap from which one either escapes or gets stuck into, and Ethan is one such man who has been stuck here for so long that time itself has forgotten him.

Ethan is portrayed as a man who had grand designs upon this brave new world, appreciating the modern inventions and conventions and his desire for progress. "Ethan's love of nature did not take the form of a taste for agriculture. He had always wanted to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and "fellows doing things" (Wharton, 2017, p. 100). He is willing and hopeful of integrating into the new modern society, armed with the knowledge of engineering, but unfortunately, when faced with choosing either his future education and caring for his ailing parents as well as looking after the farm, duty bounds him to do the later.

Another aspect of the dilemma of the modern man is that of the frailty of his inner-self in front of this new world as well as the sense of all-consuming pessimism. Ethan is a man who is constantly at conflict with his desire and duty as well as an almost chronic level of inaction. "Deep silence had fallen with the starless dusk, and they leaned on each other without speaking; but at every step of their climb Ethan said to himself: "It's the last time we'll ever walk together" (Wharton, 2017, pp. 237-238). Life has been hard on Ethan and his response has been to close himself off into a shell and to not be tempted by optimism.

The Alienated New Woman

The new women who had no more utility and opportunity in the rural life where everything worked in a smooth and simple way and thereby the individuals were literally at home. But with the coming of Industrial Revolution and its aftermath, the role of women changed and they were forced to leave the comforts of the farm and the home for an unknown destination in a growing metropolis where people worked and have no fulfilment (Milkman & Kessler-Harris, 1983). This has been one of the key subjects of modernist writers, where the plight of these lonely individuals have been focused. These characters, come out of the comforts of home, and search in the cities in search of their own version of the American Dream, but end up in a far more precarious situation. The

thematic treatment of such women are in fact, tragedies because not very many of them realize themselves and in comparison, with men, their suffering is more intense. These tragic endings are there in modernist novels and in *Ethan Frome*, Mattie is one such character, who is penniless, homeless and has nothing to hold on to. We are told of her struggles in the new era in finding gainful employment when, “she tried to extend the field of her activities in the direction of stenography and book-keeping her health broke down, and six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store did not tend to restore it (Wharton, 2017, p. 84).” A woman, unprepared and unused to hard labour, is unable to cope with it in a timely manner, and in the case of Mattie falls ill because of it. She tried to diversify her skillset to better help her but the pressures surrounding her stopped her from this strain of self-improvement. In the end, the only option she thinks is left to her is that of suicide. Edith Wharton, like many other novelists of this age, takes on this subject of suicide and one's own life as a key factor of alienation in world which best of development, progress and happiness.

Conclusion

In *Ethan Frome* (2017) Edith Wharton, portrays the man's inability and alienation from the realities of life, in the symbolically agrarian setting of stark field. The protagonist's existence is as stark, bleak and lonely. That he attempts to have the last laugh, ends up in deeper tragedy, remnant of *Wuthering Heights* and its gothic environment. The train, not only signifies technology, advancement, progress and modernization, but also is a key element of alienation in the otherwise comfortable, idyllic life of the town, where the unfortunate Fromes lived, the screaming, moaning and lamenting from the Frome residence, echoes the loneliness and trauma of modern man, whose dream remain unrealized and lives unfulfilled.

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