Analysis Of Ethan Frome Essay, Research Paper

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Analysis of Ethan Frome

Ethan Frome is a story of ill-fated love, set during the winter in the rural New England town of Starkfield. Ethan is a farmer who is married to a sickly woman named Zeena. The two live in trapped, unspoken resentment on Ethan’s isolated and failing farm. Ethan has been caring for his wife for six years now. Due to Zeena’s numerous ailments they employ her cousin, the animated Mattie Silver, to help in the house. With Mattie’s youthful presence and attitude in the house, Ethan?s bitterness of his youth’s lost opportunities and the dissatisfaction with his life and empty marriage are reawaken. This resentment leads to Ethan and Mattie in turn, falling in love. However, they never follow their love due to Ethan’s morals and the respect he has for his marriage to Zeena. Ethan eagerly awaits the nights when he is able to walk Mattie home from the town dances. He cherishes the ground she walks on and would do anything for her.

After a visit to the doctor, Zeena is told that she needs more appreciable hired help. Thus, she decides to send her incompetent cousin away and hire a new one. Ethan and Mattie are desperate to stay together. However, Ethan’s lack of financial means and Zeena?s health are the deciding factors that will never allow him to leave Starkfield to be with his love.

When the two are unable to find any plausible solutions to this issue, Ethan and Mattie decide to commit suicide by sledding into a tree. They figure it is the only way they can be together. The attempt fails, and the two are left paralyzed. Now Ethan’s wife must care for the two for the rest of their lives.

There were many themes found in Ethan Frome, but the greatest of them all is loneliness and isolation. In college Ethan acquired the nickname “Old Stiff” because he rarely went out with the boys. Once he returned to the farm to care for his parents, he couldn’t go out with them even if he wanted to. Whatever he’s done has kept him apart from others: tending to the farm and mill, nursing his sick mother and caring for Zeena. Ethan’s isolation is intensified, because he is often tongue-tied. He would like to make contact with others but can’t. For example, when he wants to impress Mattie with beautiful words of love, he mutters, “Come along.”

In their own ways, Zeena and Mattie are solitary figures, too. For years, Zeena rarely leaves the house. She’s consumed by her illness. Mattie, on the other hand, seeks refuge from loneliness at the Fromes’ farm. A year later she chooses to die rather than return to a world of solitude.

Edith Wharton uses characters such as Mattie, to express the theme of loneliness and isolation. Mattie Silver is unlike any of the other characters in Ethan Frome. The town of Starkfield is very colorless and dull. When Mattie enters she is wearing bright clothing and ribbons tied in her hair. From her first appearance, the reader becomes aware that Mattie is very different from Ethan’s wife. Of all the characters in this novel, Mattie is the most tragic. She was so energetic and full of life that she wanted to free Ethan from this terrible society he lived in. She suggested suicide as a means of escape for the two of them. When the attempt failed, she became paralyzed. She is now stuck in the cold, colorless, world of Starkfield which unto itself is extremely tragic and ironic.

The setting of Ethan Frome also expresses the isolation. Around the turn of the century, in Ethan Frome’s time, the town of Starkfield was a cold and lifeless place. Life is dreary and cheerless in Starkfield. People stay indoors and keep to themselves. Weeks pass between visits with friends or neighbors. Wharton calls Starkfield a small farming community, and the town does live up to its name. It’s barren and it’s people are poor. Ethan can barely scrape a living off the land.

The town Starkfield afflicts Ethan and helps to shape his destiny. Like the town, he is sullen and run-down. Starkfield sits alone in its valley, isolated from the world around it. Ethan is also isolated. He left the lonely valley to go to college, but since returning he has gone scarcely more than few miles from his remote farm. Physically, and therefore, emotionally, he is trapped by his wife, his farm, and his poverty. Ethan is in some ways, a piece of the scenery, or as the narrator says, “a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of frozen woe.”

He lacks the strength to shake himself loose before it’s too late. The author is able to clearly portray the themes of isolation and loneliness through the characters and the setting.

In conclusion, I feel that Ethan Frome should be included in a list of works of high literary merit, because it is a classic. The book is about society in general and this attracts many readers. I think that the magnificence of Ethan himself attracts many readers. His character was so carefully thought out and brilliantly painted in the reader?s mind. Although Ethan Frome was not a commercial success when it was first written, many critics praised the novel.

Dr Kinnicuttt said that Ethan Frome was “a classic that will be read an re-read with pleasure and instruction.” Henry James told Edith Wharton that the novel “contained a beautiful art and tone and truth — a beautiful artful kept downness.”

Many critics also disliked the book. People said that it was too pessimistic to be recommended to the general reader. A critic in The Bookman could not forgive Wharton for her cruelty toward both her characters and her readers.

The novel shows how one will not follow their heart due to what society may think. It shows how much society’s beliefs in the 1900’s were valued. Despite low sales when this book first became published and unfavorable remarks about Ethan Frome, the novel is still read and loved by many people, in many countries and languages, today. All of these factors attribute to wonderful teachers, just like Mrs. Verrastro, assigning it as a required report and analysis to help our young and budding minds and persons develop into well educated and productive members of society.