

**EDITH WHARTON'S "SCHEME OF CONSTRUCTION"
IN ETHAN FROME: A STATEMENT ABOUT WRITING**

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ÖZET

Amerikalı yazar Edith Wharton, 1911 tarihli Ethan Frome adlı kısa romanını, diğer romanlarından tümüyle farklı bir bakış açısıyla kaleme almıştır. Gerek karakter, mekan ve işlenen temalar, gerekse kurgu açısından bu romanın Wharton'ın yapıtları arasında özel bir yeri vardır. Romanda anlatıcının yazar/anlatıcı ilişkisini belirginleştiren ayrıcalıklı konumu, ana hikayeyi içine alan bir dış hikayenin olması, Wharton'a bir New England kasabasında kaybolmuş ümitler, yıpranmış istekler ve hayat şartlarından yorgun düşmüş insanların hikayelerini anlatmanın yanı sıra, yazınsal anlamda bir hikayenin nasıl kurgulandığı ve değerlendirildiği konusunda yorum yapma olanağı sağlamıştır. Kendi kendisine atıfta bulunan, kendi işleyişi hakkında açıklık getiren bu romanın kurgusu, Ethan Frome'u kronolojik olarak Modernizm akımının içine yerleştirmese de, modernizmi önceliyen özellikler taşır.

Edith Wharton's 1911 novel Ethan Frome is an unusual book. In this extraordinary novel, Wharton steers away from her upper-class New York society setting to the miserable realities of Starkville, where cold weather and poverty kill emotion, ambition, and passion. Although she returns to the subject of New England village life later in 1917 with Summer, Ethan Frome continues to attract its readers' attention not only by this change of scenery but especially by its structure and narrative technique, which Wharton herself refers to as her "scheme of construction." After its first publication, a number of critics focused on the frame story and the presence of the narrator in Ethan Frome. Wharton, in A Backward Glance, defends the structure of her book:

It was not until I wrote "Ethan Frome" that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements. When "Ethan Frome" first appeared I was severely criticized by the reviewers for what was considered the clumsy structure of the tale. I had pondered long on this structure, had felt its peculiar difficulties, and possible awkwardness, but could think of no alternative which would serve as well in the given case; and though I am far from thinking "Ethan Frome" my best novel, and I am bored and even exasperated when I am told that it is, I am still sure that its structure is not its weak point. (qtd. In Lauer 78)

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Cynthia Griffin Wolff states that this comment by Wharton “points directly to the heart of it: the structure of Ethan Frome different from any other of her major fictions—is in an ultimate sense the true subject of the tale” (160). I agree that the formal aspects of Ethan Frome constitute the strongest and most interesting part of the novel. Through the presence of the narrator and the frame story, Edith Wharton comments on the nature of writing; Ethan Frome is ultimately a statement about writing.

Peter Barry, in his Beginning Theory, points out that one of the important characteristics of literary modernism is “a tendency towards ‘reflexivity,’ so that poems, plays and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status, and role” (82). A Modernist work of art has been seen as a self-reflexive or self-conscious artwork whose matter consists of defining its own structuring, its own creation. Through the narrator, Edith Wharton defines the act of writing, the act of creating a story. Even though chronologically we cannot locate Ethan Frome within the Modernist movement, we can argue that the novel has modernistic elements. It is an example of Edith Wharton’s experimentation with widely differing characters, settings, and structural patterns.

Edith Wharton began writing Ethan’s story in 1906 or 1907 as an exercise in French for her tutor in Paris. The original sketch had neither the narrative frame nor the narrator. Later Wharton used Balzac’s “La Grande Breteche,” and Browning’s The Ring and the Book as models for her novel’s narrative method. She acknowledges her debt to these works in her introduction for the 1922 edition of Ethan Frome and states that “[her] one merit is, perhaps, to have guessed that the proceeding there employed was also applicable to [her] small tale” (Wharton 1151).

In Ethan Frome, the frame story and the presence of the narrator function in several ways. The use of an outsider narrator provides Wharton the necessary distance from her subject. She has been criticized by readers and critics for her attempt to understand and portray a class of people completely different from her own. In Ethan Frome, through the use of a narrator who is from a different educational and economical background from the people of Starkville, she is able to penetrate the lives of the unfortunate and the miserable.

Edith Wharton voices her own argument about the narrator in the introduction to the 1922 edition of the novel:

If [the writer/narrator] is capable of seeing all around them, no violence is done to probability in allowing him to exercise this faculty; it is natural enough that he should act as the sympathizing intermediary between his rudimentary characters and the more

complicated minds to whom he is trying to present them. But this is self-evident, and needs explaining only to those who have never thought of fiction as an art of composition. (Wharton 1151)

For Wharton, the presence of the educated, upper class narrator is only natural because "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 among his larger categories" (1151). Only the writer has the imagination and the creativity to put together a vision from scattered fragments.

According to Margaret B. McDowell, another function of the narrator is to provide "a complicated time scheme by means of which [Wharton] could dramatically envision the contrast between the bleak existence of her characters in the present with their youthful expectations in the past" (McDowell 68). The narrator looks back at the past twenty-five years of the characters and envisions the ordeals they went through.

The choice of a male narrator is also worth noting because for Wharton, it distances her further away from her subject. Blake Nevius presents the practical reasoning behind this choice:

The choice is particularly defensible in Ethan Frome, first, because the narrator must have a pretext for visiting Starkfield, and this is more easily supplied for an engineer than for a woman with the requisite 'sensitivity and education,' and second, because there must be some probability established for Ethan's inviting the narrator into his home—over and above, that is, the accident of the storm. (Nevius 123)

Kathy A. Fedorko, in her book Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton, focuses on the biographical aspect of Wharton's choice: "[her] passionate affair with Fullerton, which so tested her sense of her controlled, intellectual, 'masculine' self, no doubt provided the impetus for her creation of an educated male character, an engineer, who tells a story about his fearful yet alluring inner life" (Fedorko 48). According to Fedorko's interpretation, the narrator acts like a double for Edith Wharton herself. He is the writer.

The opening lines of Ethan Frome uttered by the nameless narrator invite us to observe the creation of a story; "I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story" (351). The narrator in Ethan Frome is a young engineer whose job takes him to Starkfield to spend the winter. Through the narrator, we learn how a writer

approaches his subject, collects information and fragments about his subject, and weaves these various fragments into a single vision that tells us as much about his own mind as the characters' he is presenting.

In The Writing of Fiction, Wharton mentions how she generates ideas and characters for her stories: "In my own case a situation sometimes occurs to me first, and sometimes a single figure suddenly walks into my mind" (qtd. in Nevius 130). Ethan Frome walks into the mind and the life of the narrator in the same way:

It was there, several years ago, I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. (351)

Ethan Frome strikes the narrator with his difference from the rest of the town folk. The narrator is almost instantly attracted to this strange character that promises him mystery, emotions, pain, and ultimately a story. He anticipates the value of finding out more about Ethan. Edith Wharton once said of Ethan Frome that "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" (qtd. in Ammons 67). The narrator, as the writer at work, starts gathering information at once. He, like Wharton, also has faith in himself to put together a powerful 'vision' of Ethan's story.

Even though Ethan looks "as if he was dead and in hell now," he carries himself with heroic dignity. He is more than a man for the narrator. According to Wolff, "Ethan Frome becomes, in the eyes of the teller of his tale, an emblem of vanquished heroism, defeated strength, and foreclosed potentiality—not merely a crippled man, but manhood brought low" (167). In the narrator's eyes, Ethan becomes a tragic hero instead of an ordinary man.

Margaret McDowell calls this fictional quality of the characters "mythic dimension":

Her three figures have achieved in the years since it was written a mythic dimension and seem to be extensions of the grim landscape itself. The ardent lover turned cynic, the beautiful woman turned a soured cripple, and the protective mother figure emerging as a

sinister dictatorial presence are all illuminating and arresting conceptions. (McDowell 67)

Although all three of these characters are attractive in different ways to the narrator, he feels a powerful attachment towards Ethan. We can find the reason for his attraction in the parallels between their lives. The narrator discovers Ethan's failed ambitions, his thirst for knowledge, and intellectual curiosity. Ethan attended a technical school and showed interest in the same subjects. They both have been in Florida and enjoyed the memory of that experience. In Edith Wharton's *Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons states that "[the narrator] serves as a surprising double for Ethan. Young and well educated, he is the engineer that Ethan hoped to become, until a series of women blighted his world" (74). The parallels between the narrator and his main character suggest that the narrator is exploring the dark corners of his own mind while entering into Ethan's.

Even though we have a male narrator acting as the double of the male character, the book also invites a female vision. His two informants, differing in gender and social position, are significant in the sense that they represent feminine and masculine sides of the narrator. Harmon Gow, "who had driven the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days and knew the chronicle of all the families on his line," (351) provides him with the basic facts of Ethan's life. On the other hand, Mrs. Ned Hale, who is the narrator's landlady for the period he spent in Starkfield, gives him a "more delicately shaded version of the Starkfield chronicle" (354). Her reluctance to talk about Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena, and her sadness for their present situation tell a lot about the tragedy of their lives.

Although when we read Ethan Frome's story we sympathize with his moral dilemma, and see him as the victim of a series of women starting with his mother and continuing with Zeena and Mattie, the real victims of Starkfield are the women. The male narrator's vision does not preclude a feminist interpretation of the story. As an efficient writer, he is offering us a single vision while opening up possibilities for different interpretations. While reading the novel within the framework of a fairy tale, Elizabeth Ammons' interpretation also focuses on the social situation of women in the novel:

If Ethan's life is hard, and it is, woman's is harder yet; and it is sad but not surprising that isolated, housebound women make men feel the burden of their misery. He is their only connection with the outer world, the vast economic and social system that consigns them to solitary, monotonous, domestic lives from which their only escape is madness or death. (72)

Without economic independence, the choices for women will always be limited to the domestic area. Unskilled, inexperienced, and without money, the women are “prisoner[s] for life” even more than the men. (419) Mattie has no life skills to survive or determine her future. When Zeena decides to send her away from Frome’s home, Ethan realizes the harsh realities awaiting her:

Despair seized him at the thought of her setting out alone to renew the weary quest for work. In the only place where she was known she was surrounded by indifference and animosity; and what chance had she, inexperienced and untrained, among the million bread-seekers of the cities? (413-4)

Ethan’s despair also applies to other women characters in Wharton’s fiction. Lily Bart ends up dying a timeless death, Zeena turns ‘queer’ like Ethan’s mother, Mattie is confined to an immobile, impotent, passive existence. The three characters of Ethan Frome suffer through a “hell in life” in what seems to be eternal poverty and misery.

Even though the story of Ethan-Mattie-Zeena is a fabrication of the outsider narrator, the stark realities of their lives and the social determinants of their situation cannot be denied. The presence of the narrator increases the fictional element in Ethan Frome but at the same time his vision provides us with a representation of reality. The narrator works through his story and the characters with the careful attention of a social historian. This quality of his ‘vision’ signifies Edith Wharton’s understanding of the novel and the role of the writer as a social historian.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out the importance of the narrator in Ethan Frome for reflecting the function of art:

Not situation alone, nor narrator alone, but each illuminating the other; the situation filtered through the larger categories of a narrator’s consciousness (the author outside the work, controlling the delicate relation) –this is to be the subject of the work. In the end, such a method focuses our attention more clearly and precisely on the narrator than on anything else. Refracted thus, a particular event may gain significance beyond the limitations of its time and place, may finally tell us about human consciousness itself. That is the function of the art. (163)

The frame story and the presence of the narrator in Ethan Frome enable the writer Edith Wharton to describe, evaluate, and comment on the nature of fiction.

Ethan Frome is not only about the poverty and the misery of New England village but also writing itself. Together with its successful portrayal of unsatisfied ambitions and passions, and lost lives, this self-conscious or self-reflective quality sets Ethan Frome apart from the rest of Wharton's novels.

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