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Different Glances:

A Comparison of Criticisms of

Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was an American author of short stories and novels. Most of her fiction writing was about high society life with its unique challenges and failings. Wharton was herself a member of that high society world and her personal life experience is often reflected in her fiction, with a few notable exceptions. *Ethan Frome*, a novel which was published in 1911, is a complete departure from her stories about the wealthy aristocracy who live in major cities. This novel, which is set in a small town in New England, tells the story of people who live in abject poverty, who are supported only by their own labor where it is a constant struggle just to survive in a world with little or no hope. By examining critical essays that have been written about *Ethan Frome*, I hope to improve my own understanding of the novel and contribute to the understanding of others.

The first critical essay I will examine is "Ethan Frome as Fairy Tale" by Elizabeth Ammons. Ms. Ammons alleges that novel is "designed to read like a fairy tale" (145). Ammons casts Ethan as "the honest woodcutter," Mattie as "the silvery maiden," and Zeena as "the witch"—identifying them as "archetypes of the genre" (145). After casting the characters in these roles, Ammons discusses Wharton's use of ellipses and claims that the extended series of ellipses at the end of the prologue "exists to help establish genre" (145). On my first reading of

the essay, I made the assumption that Ammons was saying that the ellipses signaled a transition to a “flashback,” a common literary device used by a wide variety of literature, which has its origins in the ancient epic tradition of beginning a work *in medias res* or “in the middle of things” and then moving back in time to tell the beginning of the story (Murfin 167).

However, the body of the novel is *not* a flashback; it is a “vision”—a fantasy created by the anonymous narrator. Ammons concludes that a narration based on oral accounts of several people of questionable reliability and then told by an unknown newcomer who reported the complete story as a “vision” would qualify such a narration as a fairy tale:

As the narrator says in his opening statement: “I had the story bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story.” This tale, in other words, belongs to a community of people (ourselves now included) and has many variants. Also important is Wharton’s selection of the word “vision.” Not a documentary term, “vision” prepares us for the fact that Ethan’s story, with its vivid use of inherited symbols and character types, will seem a romance or fairy tale (Ammons 146).

Ammons identifies several number patterns she finds in the novel (146). Ethan is fifty-two in the present timeline; there are fifty-two weeks in one year. Zeena is seven years older than Ethan, who is seven years older than Mattie; there are seven days in one week. The events of the “vision” occurred twenty-four years in the past; there are twenty-four hours in one day. The connection of these number patterns to fairy tale genre, apparently, is what Ammons calls “generation and natural order,” which is only an illusion of order, since ironically “there is no generative natural order . . . no mother earth . . . only her nightmare reverse image . . . the witch . . .” (146).

I have read this essay very carefully, and in my opinion, Ammons’ original statement that *Ethan Frome* is “designed to read like a fairy tale” is unclear and confusing. Ammons’ thesis turns out to be that the novel is not a fairy tale at all, but a “reverse” (146) or “inverted” (157) fairy tale, which has elements of a fairy tale but is *not* a fairy tale because no one “lives happily

after.” Despite any other similarities, the lack of a "happy ending" disqualifies the novel for fairy tale status and makes it instead an inverted fairy tale. When I read the beginning of her essay, it appeared to me as if she was trying to identify *Ethan Frome* as an actual fairy tale, and when she listed the ways that it could not be a fairy tale, I drew the inappropriate conclusion that she was contradicting herself. When she inverted the image of fairy tale genre, she inverted her thesis as well. It would have been much less confusing if Ammons had stated, from the very first sentence that Ethan Frome “could be read as an inverted fairy tale that has similarities to a fairy tale but, unlike a fairy tale, ends in tragedy,” which is what she eventually says two pages later:

Most fairy tales reassure by teaching that witches lose in the end. Children and heroines (Snow Whites) do not remain the victims of ogres. Someone saves them. Here is a part of the horror of *Ethan Frome*: Wharton’s modern fairy tale is for adults. While true to traditional models in the way it teaches a moral about “real” life at the same time that it addresses elemental fears (e.g., the fear of death, the fear of being abandoned), does not conform to the genre’s typical denouement. The lovers do not live happily ever after. The witch wins (Ammons 147).

However, I do not agree with Ammons’ premise that the “witch” wins. In this novel, no one wins. Zeena is forced to live out the rest of her miserable life taking care of a helpless invalid—the woman who her husband loved more than he loved her. How is that winning? I do not even agree that Zeena is fairly cast in the role of the witch. She may not be the most pleasant person, but she is a victim of the situation as much as the other two major characters. Blake Nevius expresses a similar sentiment:

Zeena may not be a sympathetic character, but there is a moment when she makes us forget everything but her wronged humanity. As she confronts the guilty lovers, holding the fragments of her beloved pickle dish, her face streaming with tears, we have a sudden and terrible glimpse of the starved emotional life that has made her what she is (Nevius 136).

Zeena exercises extremely poor judgment by bringing Mattie, a beautiful young woman, into her home in the first place. She is then naïve enough to leave this beautiful young woman

alone with her husband overnight. In my opinion, Zeena is not inherently evil as Ammons suggests—she just is not very bright.

Ammons casts Mattie in the role of a “fairy maiden, a princess of nature” (147)—terms that connote innocence. Mattie may be a virgin, but she is not entirely innocent. She knows better than to touch Zeena’s prized pickle dish, just as she knows that Zeena’s husband is not hers to touch. Mattie could have easily arranged to spend one night with Ruth Varnum or another neighbor, which would have been the respectable thing to do. Mattie chooses instead to put herself and Ethan in a compromising position.

Ammons’ essay utilizes techniques of more than one school of literary criticism. The overall tone of the essay reflects *Feminist Criticism*, since she expounds upon the dilemma of women of the era, especially those who lived in poverty-stricken rural areas. Women such as Zeena and Mattie were virtually unable to survive without a man to provide basic needs such as food and shelter. Apparently, the primary purpose for the essay is Ammons’ commentary on the plight of such women; the fairy tale analogy is mentioned significantly less in the latter part of the essay.

When Ammons makes her case that the novel represents fairy tale genre, she does so in a manner consistent with *Structuralism*. Tyson states that “Structuralism seeks . . . the *langue* of literary texts, the structure that allows texts to make meaning, often referred to as a *grammar* because it governs the rules by which fundamental elements are identified . . . for example, the hero, the damsel in distress and the villain . . .” (220). By casting the three lead characters as fairy tale characters, Ammons is engaging this process.

Ammons also uses techniques of *Classical Historicism* when she considers the following text from the novel:

“Then you don’t want to leave us, Matt?” He had to stoop his head to hear her stifled whisper: “Where’d I go if I did?” (Wharton, *Ethan* 31)

Ammons cites information from the novel—that Mattie “has no immediate family and no salable skills” and that her previous attempts at self-support were unsuccessful, and seriously damaged her health (151). Ammons then expounds on historical research of the period that supports the realistic nature of Mattie’s plight. Ammons quotes Anna Garland Spencer’s

Woman’s Share in Social Culture:

. . . [E]ven young women who worked only during the unmarried years between fourteen and twenty often lost their health permanently. The fact is because young women must all work for pay between their school life and their marriage in the case of the poverty-bound, the poorest-paid and many of the hardest and most health-destroying of employments are given to them . . . (qtd. in Ammons 151-52).

Ammons then concludes that:

Mattie’s prospects are grim. She can work in a factory and lose her health; she can become a prostitute and lose her self-dignity . . . [or] she can marry a farmer and lose her mind . . . [Mattie] has not been prepared for an economically independent life. The system is designed to keep her a parasite or drudge, or both (152-53).

The next critical essay, from which I have already quoted, and that I will now examine in greater depth, is “On Ethan Frome” by Blake Nevius. Mr. Nevius examines recurrent themes in Wharton’s fiction such as “the vanity of self-sacrifice [and] the limits of individual responsibility” Nevius places Ethan in a list of six other of Wharton’s protagonists who are “confronted by . . . [a situation in which] the inherited sense of duty is strong enough to conquer, but the victory leaves in its wake the sense of futility which self-sacrifice entails” (131). Since I have not read the novels to which Nevius refers, I am unable to evaluate his comparisons, but this theme does seem to apply to Ethan.

When Nevius begins to apply the theme to *Ethan Frome*, he makes some good points. Nevius observes that Ethan’s sense of self-sacrifice for the behalf of others results in his continuing descent into a life without hope. Ethan was a man who had the potential to be much

more than what he eventually became. Ethan was studying to become an engineer when his father died and he returned to care for his mother. When his mother died, Ethan could have made his escape, but instead chose to marry Zeena. When he met Mattie, it was already too late for Ethan; he was “already trapped by circumstances and unable to extend the horizon of his future beyond the family graveyard” (Nevius 131-132).

Nevius discusses the origin of *Ethan Frome*. As Wharton describes in her autobiography, while living in Paris, she began to write a story as an exercise in writing in French, as a part of her study of the language with a tutor. When the French lessons were abandoned, the story was abandoned as well. It was a few years later that she decided to resurrect the story as a novel written in English and set in New England (Wharton, *Backward* 295-96). Nevius paraphrases the story of the novel’s origins then comments that there was a “widespread feeling that [Wharton’s] human sympathies were hobbled by her rationalism. . . [and] that the best touches in the story are there because she felt her subject deeply enough to be able to charge it with conviction . . .” (135). Despite Nevius’ concern for the history of the creation of the novel and Wharton’s emotional contribution to the story, his analysis of theme would most closely identify his essay as *New Criticism*.

Nevius ends his essay the way that he began it, by comparing *Ethan Frome* to other works by Wharton. His final statement, however, is relevant to the uniqueness of the novel:

Only in *Ethan Frome* . . . is the symbolism sustained by every element in the setting. It is the one occasion in her longer fiction when her imagination worked freely and without faltering in this extra dimension....

The last critical essay that I will discuss is “The Narrator’s Vision” by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. As the title implies, Wolff is primarily concerned with the unnamed narrator who heard stories from different members of the community, then filled in the details with his imagination. Wolff observes that Wharton begins the novel by “assaulting us with the narrator’s presence in

the very first word.” Wolff then states that doing so is “a decidedly unusual way to open a fiction” (130). Wolff draws the inevitable conclusion that “the man whom we come to know as the young Ethan Frome is *no more than a figment of the narrator’s imagination*” (italics Wolff’s, 130). Wolff states that “the ‘story’ of Ethan Frome is nothing more than a dream vision, a brief glimpse into the most appalling recesses of the narrator’s mind” (131).

Ammons finds significance in the narrator as well. As I previously stated, Ammons comments that since the body of the novel is only a vision or fantasy of the unnamed narrator, it could be interpreted as a fairy tale.

Wolff comments on the layers of fiction—*Ethan Frome* is a fiction within a fiction. Only a few facts about Ethan, Zeena and Mattie are known to the townspeople and are reported to the narrator. These events are “real” in the context of the whole novel. The narrator then creates a “fictional” vision of specific details that he had absolutely no way of knowing in the “real” world within the “fictional” world of the novel (131-32). However, not everyone embraces this narrative structure. Wolff, in a footnote, quotes John Crowe Ransom:

We are allowed to anticipate the reporter who is gathering the story, and then we go back and see him make slight detective motions at gathering it; but we are forced to conclude that he did not gather it really; that, mostly, he made it up. Why a special reporter at all? And why such a peculiar chronological method? (qtd. in Wolff 131)

Wolff claims that such criticism of Wharton’s narration structure has “consistently missed the point” and that it has “marred so many readings of *Ethan Frome*” (Wolff, footnote 131-32). Nevius mentions Ransom as well, stating that Ransom is “raising difficulties where they do not necessarily exist,” and that, out of necessity, Wharton “invented a special reporter for Ethan in the person of a young man of sensibility and education very like her” (Nevius 134).

When Wolff leaves the narrator, and enters the vision story, she observes that there are even deeper layers of fiction in the novel. Just as Wharton imagined the narrator, who imagined

Ethan as a physically whole young man, we find that same Ethan imagining a life where he and Mattie are living together in complete happiness (Wolff 137-38). Wolff's primary concern with the narrative structure of the novel identifies her essay as *Structuralist Criticism*—in particular, *narratology* (Tyson 224-25).

The inference that I draw from Wolff's essay is that there are only two possible conclusions that can be drawn from the novel's narrative structure. The first conclusion, which Wolff espouses, is that Wharton knew exactly what she was doing when she created the narrative structure as she did. Wharton intended that the reader consider the significance of the anonymous narrator. Wolff states that "the structure demands that we take him into account . . . he demands it. It is *his* story, ultimately his 'vision' of Ethan Frome that we will get" (Wolff 131). For Wolff, the novel's meaning is inextricably connected to the novel's narrative structure.

There are other critics, such as Ransom, who find the novel's narrative structure to be awkward and unnecessary and believe that Wharton is "wrestling with an unaccustomed undertaking . . ." Ransom apparently would rather ". . . [f]orget . . . the [p]reface, and the exterior or developing story [and] . . . attend strictly to Ethan's story . . ." (qtd. in Wolff 131).

I tend to agree with the latter conclusion. I find the body of the story to be the "real" story, and the most important. To represent the major section of the novel as the fantasy of an unnamed newcomer, who has very little factual information, seriously compromises the integrity of Ethan's story. We all know that *Ethan Frome* is a work of fiction. When we read a good novel, we depend on our *suspension of disbelief* to transport us into reality as it exists in the novel's fictional world. Even if we know that it is not really true, we want to pretend that it is. This is difficult to do when Wharton comes right out and tells us that it is only a vision. It is as if Wharton presented us with a slice of hot apple pie, right out of the oven, then told us just before

we put it in our mouths that there were no apples or sugar in the pie—that it was made with “textured vegetable protein and aspartame .”

I do not have a problem with the point of view of the narration being that of a character of the novel, who is presenting events from the past. I do, however, have a problem with the fact that we are told that his narration is not to be trusted. Wharton’s use of this narrative structure detracts from our ability simply to read the novel—she is expecting us to think too much in a novel in which feelings and emotions are more important. By forcing us to navigate through this complex structure, Wharton has put us in danger of losing the full dramatic effect of the body of the novel—which is an extraordinary story.

One may agree with the premise that the narrative structure is awkward and detracts from the understanding and enjoyment of the novel, but maintain that there is no solution to the problem. Wharton wrote the novel a century ago, and it is what it is; nothing can be done short of re-writing Wharton’s original work.

The film version of *Ethan Frome* was released in 1993. As is the case of any film adaptation of a literary work, changes were necessary to accommodate the film medium. Some film adaptations are better than others, but I really liked the film version of *Ethan Frome*. The most significant change is the narrative structure.

In the film, the “newcomer” is given an identity. The film begins when Ned Hale meets a young man at the train station, who is identified as Reverend Smith, Starkfield’s new minister. Rev. Smith sees the crippled Ethan on several occasions and fails to understand why the townspeople avoid him. After expressing his frustration at the town’s lack of Christian charity and compassion to Ruth Hale, she tells him the story of Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie. As in the novel (Wharton, *Ethan* 95), Ruth reports that Mattie was taken to the Hale residence after the

“accident,” and we are left with the impression that Ruth had more than superficial knowledge about the events of the past, presumably told to her by Mattie. In the film, Ruth Hale is the sole narrator of what is now a flashback story, and the newcomer, Rev. Smith, is her audience. It could be considered literary heresy to change a classic literary work; but in this case, I believe the shift to a more traditional narrative technique makes the story more coherent and accessible to the audience.

The three essays I examined look at different literary components of *Ethan Frome*. Ammons considers the genre of the novel, Nevius identifies the theme, and Wolff analyzes the narrative structure. The subjects of the essays were quite different, but had a few things in common; I identified the similarities when I discovered them. I found Ammon’s original premise that *Ethan Frome* is “designed to read like a fairy tale” to be ambiguous, and when I read the essay initially, I thought that she was contradicting herself. I agreed with Nevius’ premise that the theme of “the futility of self-sacrifice” applies to *Ethan Frome*. Ironically, after reading Wolff’s quotation of Ransom, whom she cited as an example of an inappropriate judgment regarding the novel, I found myself to be more in agreement with Ransom’s opinion that the vision of the narrator was unnecessary and detracted from the body of the novel.

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