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Teaching Edith Wharton's

Ethan Frome

from

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General Introduction to the Work

About the Author

EDITH WHARTON was born Edith Newbold Jones to the wealthy New York family that is often credited as being *the* Jones family in the phrase “Keeping up with the Joneses.” She received a marriage proposal at a young age, but the wedding was put off by her fiancé’s parents, who were put off by what they considered to be the Jones family’s unsurpassed snobbery (they were, after all *the* Joneses to keep up with). In 1885, at the age of twenty-three, she married Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton, twelve years her senior. Wharton was from a well-established Boston family. He was a sportsman and a gentleman, and the Joneses approved of him as being of their social class. Edith and her husband did share a love of travel, but Edith eventually concluded that they had little in common intellectually. He eventually began conducting a series of dalliances with younger women. This took its toll on Wharton’s mental health, and her doctor suggested that she write as a means of relieving some of her tension. *Ethan Frome*, the story of a sensitive and intelligent man trapped in a loveless marriage with a manipulative and self-absorbed hypochondriac is the result.

Edith and Wharton divorced in 1913, after he suffered a nervous breakdown and was confined to a hospital. She never relinquished his family name.

In addition to her writing, Edith Wharton was a well-respected landscape architect and interior designer. She wrote several influential books, including *The Decoration of Houses*, her first published work, and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.

In 1921, Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for her acclaimed novel *The Age of Innocence*, making her the first woman to win the award. Edith Wharton died in 1937 in her villa near Paris at the age of seventy-five.

Ethan Frome was released in 1911 and has been viewed negatively by some critics as morally or ethically insignificant. The somewhat autobiographical novel was possibly not intended to be a moralistic piece. Viewed this way, Ethan can be seen as analogous to Wharton, Zeena to her husband Teddy, and Mattie to Edith’s lover at the time—she had been conducting secret affair with journalist Morton Fullerton. It is one of the few pieces of Wharton’s fiction that does not take place in an urban, upper-class setting. Her normally lush and luxurious settings are replaced by the stark and foreboding descriptions of rural working-class New England, especially unusual given the fact that Wharton herself was a woman of leisure, living in the luxury of a French villa. Wharton claimed to have based *Ethan Frome* on an accident that had occurred in Lenox, Massachusetts, an area with which she was familiar, and had actually met one of the victims of the accident.

Formalist Theory Applied to *Ethan Frome*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining the Imagery in the Novel

1. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
2. Assign each pair or group or allow each to choose one or more chapters of the novel, including the introduction and epilogue, so that the entire book is covered.
3. Have each group reread its assigned chapter(s), noting all of the visual images and answering the following questions:
 - How many individual visual images do you find in your chapter?
 - Approximately what percentage of language is devoted to visual imagery?
 - Is the imagery primarily associated with setting? Character? Something else? (Specify.)
 - What is the predominant color associated with the imagery?
 - What is the predominant item associated with the imagery?
 - What is the predominant mood created by the imagery?
4. Redistribute the groups so that each group now covers the entire book.
5. Have students share their findings from their original group and consider the following questions:
 - How many individual visual images do you find in the book?
 - Approximately what percentage of language is devoted to visual imagery?
 - Is the imagery primarily associated with setting? Character? Something else? (Specify.)
 - What is the predominant color associated with the imagery?
 - What is the predominant item associated with the imagery?
 - What is the predominant mood created by the imagery?
6. Reconvene the entire class and discuss: How does the imagery contribute to the theme of the novel?

Feminist Theory Applied to *Ethan Frome*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Comparing Three Women: Zeena, Mattie, and Mrs. Hale

1. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
2. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the women in question.
3. Have each group peruse the book and answer the following questions:
 - What female stereotypes, if any, does your character display?
 - What *male* stereotypes, if any, does your character display?
 - Does your character exert any power? What type of power? Over whom?
 - Does your character tend to be dominant, equal, or subservient in her relationships with:
 - other women in the novel?
 - men in the novel?
 - Is your character, in general, sympathetic or unsympathetic?
 - What are the sources of your sympathy?
 - What are the sources of your lack of sympathy?
 - What are your character's strengths? Weaknesses? Are these strengths and weaknesses at all related to gender? How?
4. Redistribute the members of the groups so that each new group has at least one representative for each character.
5. Have students discuss their findings from their previous groups and then answer the following questions:
 - Who is the most "feminine" of the three characters?
 - Who receives the most reader sympathy? Why?
 - Who receives the least? Why?
 - Overall, can *Ethan Frome* be regarded as an example of "feminist literature"? Why or why not?
 - Overall, is *Ethan Frome* sympathetic to women? Why or why not?
6. Reconvene the full class and discuss.

Mythological/Archetypal Theory Applied to *Ethan Frome*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested" ("The Problem of Types in Poetry" 1923). He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories-when studied comparatively-are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining Mattie as Temptress

1. Have students individually, in pairs, or in small groups, peruse the book and review scenes that involve Mattie, her backstory, and her interactions with Ethan.
 - At Mattie and Ethan's first meeting, who speaks first?
 - What preparations does Ethan make for his evening alone with Mattie to be special?
 - What preparations does Mattie make for her evening alone with Ethan to be special?
 - Who first broaches the idea of sledding on the day Mattie is to leave?
 - Who first broaches the idea of committing suicide?
2. Reconvene the class and discuss the extent to which Mattie can be seen as an archetypal Temptress. For any students who feel that Mattie is *not* a Temptress, press them to articulate why she is not.