

**Towards an Aristotelian Model of the Tragic Hero
in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome***

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Abstract

The tragic mode of Edith Wharton's 1911 novella *Ethan Frome* has long been recognized and celebrated but its critical reception remains rather appreciative and focuses almost exclusively on the physical setting rather than on character as the ultimate source of the work's tragic coloring. The novella was frequently compared to Greek tragedy but the comparison never goes beyond a general appreciation of its tragic magnitude and originality. The technicalities of the Aristotelian model of Greek tragedy are never present in any such comparison. This study tries to approach the character of Wharton's tragic hero from the vantage point of Aristotle's textual paradigm of the tragic hero as outlined in his *Poetics*.

Key Words: Greek Tragedy, Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*

المستخلص

على الرغم من إن النمط المأساوي لرواية اديث وارتن القصيرة والموسومة إيثان فروم (1911) كان مادة للدراسة والاحتفاء لفترة طويلة إلا أن ما كتب عنها من تقييم نقدي لم يتعدى حد الاحتفاء والشمسين مع التركيز شبة ألحصري على عزو مصدر النمط المأساوي في هذا العمل إلى المحيط المادي للحدث وليس إلى الشخصوص كما جرى العرف عليه في أدبيات الماساه. وغالبا ما تقارن هذه الرواية القصيرة مع الماسي الإغريقية لكن المقارنات لا تتعدى عموميات تقييم فخامتها وأصالتها كماساه بدون الدخول الى الجوانب التقنية للمقارنات. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تأسيس مقترح نقدي حول شخصية البطل المأساوي في هذا العمل من زاوية تنظير أرسطو النصي لشخصية البطل الماساوي في كتابة فن الشعر.

الكلمات الرئيسية: المأساة الإغريقية ، ادِيث وارتن ، إيثان فروم

Although *Ethan Frome* (1911) is a highly regional narrative in terms of setting and style, Edith Wharton succeeded to imbue her protagonist with a potentially universal tragic stature. Her sense of tragedy and the tragic transcend her novella over the boundaries of local color and regionalist fiction. She manages to rework her little tale of New England frustrated souls into a tragic drama with high universal appeal. Probably, the essence of her success lies in the construction of a tragic hero who is both regional in color and universal in scope. Yet, the tragic does not follow from the region as much as from the personality of Ethan Frome, the central character of this novella.

In fact, there is a disagreement among Wharton scholars as to the exact stature of the work's central character, Ethan Frome. Some believe that he is an antihero as he is thoroughly passive and is completely devoid of any sense of self-defiance or any clear-cut heroic attribute. He is oppressed by his marriage and the suffocating physical setting of the rural New England. His physical and spiritual entrapment epitomizes his failure as a heroic character. Even the one act of love which is supposed to lighten his life turns to be catastrophic. His attempt to elope with his cousin is doomed to failure after the fashion of Thomas Hardy novels in which place as fate dooms the defiant characters to tragic end.

Such reading of the character of Ethan Frome as an antihero is basically deterministic. It is the inevitable consequence of reading this novella in the context of American literary naturalism which dominated the American literary scene around the turn of the nineteenth century. This literary school reads determinism as the essential condition of human existence. But Ethan Frome bears no strong affinities with this condition. The man is not conditioned by heredity and is even minimally fashioned by environment. He was in and out the place scores of times in his youth. But later he was entrapped in his marriage to the abominable Zeena.

Furthermore, reading the character of Ethan Frome in terms of determinism raises the question of free will and self-responsibility in his final tragic fall. For unlike the tragic characters of the classic American naturalistic novels of the period

Ethan is in a degree responsible for his tragic fall. Blake Nevius (1953:121) makes this point clear when he states that "It is Ethan's own sense of responsibility that blocks the last avenue of escape and condemns him to a life of sterile explanation." The decision he makes are never affected by any external determinism as in the case of marrying Zeena or committing suicide in the sledge accident. More importantly, this question of free will and responsibility sheds questioning lights on the exact nature and identity of his opponent. Determinism presupposes environment as the opposing force of the individual. But in the case of Ethan the environment, in its harsh frozen winter, is less an enemy than an attribute of a stronger force of cosmic stature. Fate or Nemesis is more appropriate as enemy to Ethan than nature or environment. Grace Kellogg (1965:174) is speaking to this effect when she says that Edith Wharton "was putting down a story of Nemesis, a god she was very familiar with, a god less than of retribution than despite." Kellogg pins point Ethan's opponent as Fate but simultaneously qualifies its impact on Ethan. The retributive wrath of the Nemesis of Classical tragedy gives way to the more modern sense of spite.

The invocation of Greek tragedy in reference to *Ethan Frome* is not new. Analogies with Greek tragedy are fairly familiar in the critical reception of this novella ever since its first reviews. Suzanne J. Fournier provides an elegant survey of these reviews and studies in her book *Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome: A Reference Guide* (2006 :18-24). But in all these treatment of Ethan Frome as a Greek tragedy the emphasis remains on the genuine depth of the tragic elements of the story. The analogies with Greek tragedy are one of stature rather than of technicalities. No one of these items reviewed in Fournier's book explain, for instance, how might Ethan fits within Aristotle's paradigm of the tragic hero which is really the core of Classical tragedies.

Ethan Frome as a tragedy might fit within the general frame of Classical tragedy but any such approach to its hero should be more paradigmatic than literal for Ethan is neither of grand social or political stature nor his flaw, hamartia as well as catharsis are clear cut within the straight-jacket of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Yet, these precepts are subtly present in the construction of the tragic personality of Ethan. Wharton, for instance, strives to signal Ethan's uniqueness among his fellow villagers. Right from the beginning of the novella the narrator finds Ethan "the

most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man." (It is this distinguishing physical appearance and the sense of mystery and dignity which can be said to align Ethan with the cast of Classical tragic heroes. The narrator identifies the source of Ethan's tragic uniqueness to be that "something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled."(1996 (2011):3) This accurate observation takes place 23 years after the tragedy of Ethan and the narrator does not have yet any knowledge of and about this tragedy. However the narrator observation on the tragic potential of Ethan is further enhanced by further other meditations on the tragic potential inherent in the bond between man and place in the case of Ethan's new England. Ethan, observes the narrator, is "part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface" (1996 (1911):10). The symbolic resonance of the identification of man and landscape is furthered when the narrator notices that the traditional "L" architecture of this New England farmhouse, usually representing workrooms and store-rooms at a right angle to the living quarters, has been removed. The house has a "forlorn and stunted look," and the narrator, linking the lame Frome and other inhabitants of the harsh New England climate with their surroundings, observes "in the diminished dwelling the image of his [Frome's] own shrunken body" (2005 (1911):14). The disfiguring power of this natural landscape, which is meant to epitomize the absolute power of Nemesis, is further employed to distinguish Ethan from other people en route his tragic elevation. Ethan, we are told, "had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion."(2005(1911):23) This sensitivity to beauty and the cultivation education imparts into him are meant to fashion Ethan's nobility and essential humanity. This acute perception and aesthetic sensitivity elevates the tragic potentials in Ethan's character. His sensibility is unique to such an extent it alienates him from his human surrounding and in a sense victimizes him:

But hitherto the emotion had remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it. He did not even know whether anyone else in the world felt as he did, or whether he was the sole victim of this mournful privilege. (2005(2011):23)

The word 'privilege' is either ironic or symptomatic of a deeply moribund tragic sensibility. But this internal anguish and the melancholic temper of Ethan is characteristic of the great heroes of Classical tragedy. No wonder that Ethan appears terribly passive to the reader. He does not actively make decisions to take control of his life. Instead, he is driven by the events and circumstances of his life. He was born in an ordinary family whose parents were both farmers. Na Li (2014:118) argues that the pressure of social morality and convention is the irresistible barrier against Ethan's passion and desire. On the one hand, he feels that he has the obligation to be faithful to Zeena and look after her all her life. On the other hand, he longs to live with Mattie whose vigor gives rise to his hope for a new beautiful life. Finally, confined and disciplined by social morality, Ethan and Mattie have no other choice but commit suicide so as to fulfill their wish of being together forever.

The mutual affection between Ethan and Mattie is declared as a forbidden love by conventional codes and ideas of the backward Starkfield. Ethan faces a dilemma and cannot make a decision whether he should follow his heart to establish a new life or remain faithful to his wife. Sometimes, he is determined to get rid of the bondage to marriage. But later on, his determination is challenged and gradually dispelled. It is noted throughout the novel that Ethan's life would be largely determined by chance and circumstances. Circumstances come in different forms. He used to enjoy a happy childhood and college life until the death of his father. Later, life always goes against his wishes. He could establish a comfortable life in a big city after his graduation from college if his father did not pass away. He could marry a girl whom he really goes after if he were not dependent on Zeena, a woman older than him and looking after his sick mother. Through chance and circumstances also he meets Mattie who happens to enter his life because of her own difficult family circumstances. He could pursue his true love for Mattie and establish a new life with her if he were not restricted by social and conventional morality. In a word, Ethan's life turns out to be a fated tragedy.

But on a deeper level Ethan's tragedy is mainly a result of his own personal flaw. Critics have constantly highlighted Ethan's failure of communication as his ultimate flaw. (Chiefly; Kellogg(1965) and Nevius (1953)) Probably this comes mainly from Edith Wharton's own pronouncement that her novella is a "tragedy of

isolation" (Quoted in Dodson: 1999:10) both on the personal and communal levels. Ethan's inertia and his inability to communicate cause his tragic fall into a frozen marriage and ultimately a tragically executed attempt to escape the misery of his life. But since tragedy is a question of ethical choices rather than self-expression, Ethan's failure of communication cannot fit within the textual paradigm of Aristotelian tragedy since it is more psychological than ethical in implications. Such a flaw would cast Ethan as a reticent rather than tragic figure. A more appropriate flaw should be more agentive to his tragic fall. One such flaw would be Ethan's excessive self-sacrifice. Self sacrifice is ethical but when it is excessive it turns into a tragic flaw. Samuel Fisher Dodson (1999:14) offers an insight into this flaw:

At the core of Ethan's personality is a code of self-sacrifice which appears good until it progresses to the point of erasing his identity and his spiritual and emotional needs. Ethan's inability to distinguish between when self-sacrifice is noble and when it is martyrdom really constitutes the major part of his flaw- his failure to communicate his thoughts.

It seems that all Ethan's actions and decisions were motivated by this sense of self-sacrifice. He abandons his bright future promise and returned to Starkfield to tend his sick mother. He commits a big mistake when he marries the hypochondriac Zeena out of duty because she helped in taking care of his mother. That was really unnecessary self-sacrifice of his future. He sticks with her all these long miserable years out of duty and loyalty to family life. When Mattie opens a new hope in his life he had to sacrifice this hope. He could not leave her as she cannot manage the farm alone. But since he no longer is able to lead his miserable life with Zeena he decides to commit suicide with Matties as the only available escape. But in all this Ethan has the choice, but not the will, to correct the course of his life but he willingly fails to do so because of his excessive sense of self-denial.

The tragic pace of Ethan's life slows down with the arrival of Mattie to take care of Zeena. The impact of this girl was like " the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth." (1996(1911):22)This metaphor does not only reflect the sterility and aridity of Ethan's life with Zeena, it also reveal the abyss of silence Zeena had engulfed him into it Mattie "had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and

tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will."(1996(1911):22) What is at stake here is not emotions as much as the need to feel his humanity through communication with other. Zeena, who is constantly associated with winter and ice, had repressed his human spark. Mattie, who is constantly associated with summer and spring, is a rejuvenating force in his life. It is not Mattie's charm of physical appearance that appeal to Ethan as much as the intense sweetness of the 'communion' with her. Wharton used the word 'communion' instead of communication to assert that what Ethan needs is a spiritual redemption rather than a communal one.

But Mattie soon becomes agentive to Ethan's tragedy. The temporary moments of relief she provides Ethan with is a modern replacement of the absence of comic relief characteristic of Classical tragedy. Nemesis impinges to block Ethan's sense of happiness in the form of Zeena's insistence to fire Mattie out of the farm. The conflict between passion and social convention move hand in hand with the constricting effects that a harsh winter climate can have on the human spirit. They almost seem to conspire to make Ethan a passive, unhappy victim of circumstance, weighed down by his duty to his wife and his bitter existence as a poor farmer. Confused with emotions of rebellion, he thinks of leaving her and go West with Mattie to start a new life, but instead of facing his wife with this he thinks of writing a note to tell her everything. Again he fails to achieve this step. Being too young and strong he rejects to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes:

Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste. (1996(1911: 87)

Finally he takes a sheet of paper and writes to her what he is planning, "Zeena, I've done all I could for you, and I don't see as it's been any use. I don't blame you, nor I don't blame myself. Maybe both of us will do better separate. I'm going to

try my luck West, and you can sell the farm and mill, and keep the money –" (1996 (1911):87) . Yet, all he can do is pondering again over the fact that this will leave him without money to start with Mattie and his responsibility toward his wife. Again he finds himself trapped in desperate circumstances.

In the book Ethan is faced with multiple serious decisions. One of the most serious decisions Ethan is faced with is his suicide pact with Mattie. Mattie asks Ethan a very decisive question that she wants him to take her down again but this time she wants to go straight off of the coast. This is a decision between life or death which makes it very serious.

Her plan, to crash their sled into an elm at the bottom of a steep slope, is tacitly agreed to by Ethan. This is a tragic error which is motivated by Ethan's overriding sense of self-sacrifice. This plan of suicide proves a tragic error as much as Nemesis is Ethan's adversary. The two survive the death ride, and the lovers' suicide pact takes on a cruel twist. Mattie and Ethan, crippled and dispirited, share a living death in which their caretaker is the suddenly hardy Zenobia. After loving Mattie, though, Ethan cannot endure the thought of living as he had lived before her arrival. Again, chance and circumstance determine his fate. He is too poor to provide for Zeena and take Mattie away, and his suicide attempt fails when he does not succeed in driving the sled directly into the big elm tree. Consequently, he is crippled, Mattie is paralyzed, and Zeena becomes her caretaker. The three of them remain trapped together on the farm.

This tragic error is constructed in such a way as to emulate the paradigm of Classical tragedy in two ways. First, there is a strong presence of cosmic irony as the pair are denied the relief of death. Fate deliberately manipulates the events to create an anti-climax for the hopes and plans of the tragic hero. Death as salvation is thwarted by the working of Nemesis. All that they were granted is ironically death in life. Nemesis intrudes to thwart their suicidal plan in the image of Zeena. When Ethan was steering the sledge into the elm tree :

suddenly his wife's face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. The sled swerved in response, but he righted it again, kept it straight, and drove down on the black projecting mass. There was a last

instant when the air shot past him like millions of fiery wires; and then the elm ... (1996(1911): 113)

It is Nemesis putting Zeena's angry face which turns death into death in life. The torture she inflicts on his life is an inescapable logos. This cosmic irony is meant to magnify the tragic stature of Ethan's life. No wonder that the novel closes on a deeply ironic statement by Mrs. Hale as a final epitomization of this cosmic irony role in Ethan's tragedy:

And I say, if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues. (1996(1911: 120)

Nemesis is far more powerful than Ethan as Mrs. Hale seems to put it. They are not allowed to live together happily or even attain the relief of death. This is similar to the tragic irony of Romeo and Juliet except that Ethan and Mattie survive to lead a life full of suffering as sort of death in life. This is well revealed in Mrs. Hale's observation that Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie are no better than their dead ancestors who are buried in the graveyard of the village. Their death in life is even made intolerable by the nagging and torment of the abominable Zeena.

More importantly, Ethan final posture after this tragic event is made to emulate that of the heroes of classical tragedy. He leads a life of full resignation as he continues to take care of the two women. Mrs. Hale puts this clearly as a reliable observer of Ethan's tragedy: "It's him that suffers the most"(1996(1911:119) Dodson asserts this aspect in Ethan's tragic character when he declares that "Ethan's final resolve and acceptance of his lot place him among the great distinguished characters of tragic literature who have still found dignity and humanity in defeat." This is definitely an emulation of the tragic resignation of Oedipus who accepts his lot to take care of his two children/brothers. Heroically, some would say, Ethan struggled against forces he could not defeat, and once he was defeated, he endured.

Probably, this spirit of resignation that Ethan shows at the conclusion of the novel creates the textual space for catharsis. The man's tragedy is not over but the

temporal distancing of it over 23 years since its occurrence vents the reader's sense of pity and fear generated over the course of witnessing Ethan's tragedy.

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