



RESEARCH PAPER

Ethan Frome: Naturalism's "Scapegoat," or Romantic Hero?

Denise B. de la Cruz^{1*} Zeeshan Khan²

1. MA, Tutor, Retired, Tutoring Center, University of Utah Salt, Lake City, USA

2. M. Phil, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author | imaginative165@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton's novel *Ethan Frome* is usually but inaccurately classified as Naturalistic. Naturalistic works typically feature characters constrained by their environment, social circumstances, or personal struggles. This article rejects that characterization. Careful application of the naturalistic model indicates that the novel's major elements of setting, structure, characters, and theme do not fit that model. Close reading and careful analysis provide convincing evidence that the novel's focus is the transformative power of love. This study hypothesizes that such a focus places the novel within the Romantic genre. Further close analysis indicates that the characters' other-worldly, idealized love leads to an outcome more tragic than death, and that these consequences represent love's consummate triumph. The study concludes that *Ethan Frome* therefore incorporates one of the highest values of Western society, regularly embodied in its religions and its art.

KEYWORDS Ethan Frome, Naturalistic, Romantic, Tragic, Western Society

Introduction

Edith Wharton's first major work has been characterized as a naturalistic novel/novella, although less identifiably so than her later ones. One commentator described *Ethan Frome* as a novel in which the lovers represent "scapegoats" of the natural forces impinging upon them and dragging them inevitably towards their tragic fate (Debra Joy Goodman, *The Scapegoat Motif in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, 17-18). From a more philosophic perspective, Masanao Furuhashi found *Ethan Frome* dominated by a deterministic tendency leading towards amorality, asserting that both determinism and amorality are "two cornerstones of literary Naturalism (Masanao Furuhashi, "Anagnorisis in *Ethan Frome*: in the Aporia of Determinism and Moral Inertia," 69)."

Questions about factors identified as central Naturalist elements spin around like white noise in the background of my encounter with *Ethan Frome*, Mattie Silver, and Zeena Frome. Naturalist critics of *Ethan Frome* would undoubtedly describe both the novel's protagonist and his young love as inherently weak, unable to effect changes in their environment or to embrace the love that has arisen between them. They would claim that unfavorable environmental circumstances have created in Ethan a dreamer, a man who has escaped the negativity of the bleak life he leads through illusory flights of fancy, and his young love as similarly delicate and sensitive, and given to things other than survival.

I ask in response: what circumstances about the New England of their time exert such unyielding pressure on the protagonist and his love that no actions of theirs can conceivably matter? Is our attention focused on these controlling aspects of the environment, or do other elements of the narrative seem more compelling? Does the lovers' final situation represent the triumph of environmental forces, or does it arise as the natural outcome of the characters' interactions?

After an unpredictable lifetime lack of familiarity with Edith Wharton, my immersion in her first work has led me to a decidedly different conclusion about it than the usual one. The evolving circumstances surrounding Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver do not resemble the wise holding Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy's naturalistic final novel whose central character spirals ever downwards towards inevitable doom. Rather, Wharton's central characters behave and respond to each other in ways reminiscent of the lovers in Pope's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; of Mimi and Rudolpho in Puccini's *La Boheme*, and Aida and Radames in Verdi's *Aida*; of Maria and Tony in *West Side Story*; of Oliver Barrett IV and Jennifer Cavilleri in *Love Story*; of Marcellus and Diana in *The Robe*; and of Elise McKenna and Richard Collier in *Somewhere in Time*. Consider another clear example of a Naturalistic scapegoat: the circumstances-beset William Foster, an unemployed defense engineer who in the 1983 film *Falling Down* tries against excruciating odds to make his way across Los Angeles to reach his daughter's birthday party. *Ethan Frome* simply does not play out against the same background of overwhelmingly hostile forces.

***Ethan Frome* as Romantic Tale Par Excellence**

Unlike the two named Naturalist works, the story of Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver seems to me a Romantic tale 'writ large.' Second and third readings of the novel reinforce this impression. I contend that *Ethan Frome* is regularly but inaccurately characterized as a Naturalist work when it is in reality a Romantic tale of tragic love. Like other literary, operatic, and film lovers who come from rival families or social classes, Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver experience an attachment to each other stronger than anything else in their lives, an attachment that requires them to turn their backs on social constrictions and seek transcendence through death. Such is the demand of their love. That demand and its strange consequences bring readers a dimension of tragedy that I think literary Realism/Naturalism can never quite achieve.

Major Reasons

What are my reasons? The major one is that *Ethan Frome* simply does not fit the naturalistic model. As Hugh Holman and William Trent define this offshoot of Realism, Naturalism concentrates on the compelling environmental, social, and personal conditions of its characters, finding in the interaction of the underlying forces a "clue or a key to the scientific law which undergirds it and...the relationships" that emerge as a result (*A Handbook to Literature: "Naturalism,"* 337) Edith Wharton does not present her first work as though it were that kind of disinterested scientific description; rather, what she gives readers is a story whose focus falls on subjective responses, implied meanings, and the extended symbolic significance of relationships and events. This is precisely what Romanticism does.

Secondly, at least one other astute reader has found elements of Romantic idealism in Wharton's novels. During his insightful analysis of the relationship between the chief characters of *The Reef* in the light of letters written about her passionate love affair with Morton Fullerton, James Tuttleton asserts that Edith Wharton "never abandoned that ideal of perfect love the poets describe..." an "ideal that insists on itself in the utter absence of sentimentality." (Tuttleton, 469) He further asserts that Edith Wharton had found a "tragic sense of life in the classical version of the *Oedipe* consistent with the "deep fatality" underlying the relationship of *The Reef's* two central characters, and that the novel subtly but clearly revealed that tragic sense: "What (Henry) James saw in the novel was a new depth of moral and aesthetic understanding engaged with that ancient fatality which classical tragedy so terrifyingly portrays." (Tuttleton, 471-472) He concludes that because

these letters reveal the heights of a transcendental passion and the depths of the darkest despair, and because they also reveal the author's rejection of compromise about what "the fullness of love might be," Edith Wharton provides a "supreme demonstration of how, by holding out for this ideal, the individual may mock the fate that mocks desire." (Tuttleton, 472)

Supporting Evidence

Pattern of the Novel

For Naturalists, heroes may loom larger than life at the beginning of any tragic tale, but those heroes subsequently fall into a specifiable psychological and societal abyss. Naturalists would describe Ethan Frome's downward descent as beginning with his father's death, his mother's illness, and his mother's being nursed by Zenobia; a second downward plunge with his marrying Zenobia and Zeena's subsequent withdrawal into herself; a third decline with Mattie Silver's adoption into the couple's household and the growth of the young man's attraction towards her; and his fourth and final collapse in his compliance with Mattie's request that they coast down the last hill they will ever ascend together. Does such a downward spiral really happen in *Ethan Frome*? I propose rather that he moves in the opposite direction, and that our responses as readers reflect the trajectory of his upward progress.

When the story begins, we are surprised but amused at Ethan Frome's innocence; we pity him during the long time he spends in the wasteland of his dead marriage; we share his deepening attraction to Mattie during her early days with the Fromes; we hope for the full reciprocity and joy of his dawning love; we resign ourselves to his choice to remain with Zeena; we accept, albeit painfully, his acquiescence to Mattie's proposal that they coast downhill as they had earlier planned; we rejoice, although sadly, the lovers' implementation of Mattie's proposal; and we look with shock but admiration at that decision's final tragic outcome. Throughout this narrative, especially the time after Mattie's arrival in their home, Ethan Frome impresses us as a man who, rather than being overwhelmed by external forces as would a Naturalist scapegoat, rises up to overcome the challenges he encounters. For me, these successes identify him as a Romantic hero.

Perspective of Presentation

How are these supposed Naturalist circumstances and events presented to readers – as the results of natural forces acting on hero and heroine, or as the consequences of their own choices and actions? Environmental conditions in which our hero and heroine move and act acquire a certain allure commensurate with the love that arises between them, as though they were the first human beings walking together in the Garden of Eden. Their personal circumstances motivate Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver to continually seek one another's empowerment and happiness, and their love moves them upwards into another place, one of mutual care and concern, of shared aesthetic and social experiences, until finally: "All his life was lived in the sight and sound of Mattie Silver, and he could no longer conceive of its being otherwise (Wharton, I, 28)."

Like other Romantic heroes, Ethan becomes jealous because of Mattie's interactions with Denis Eady and other young men: "Ethan was ashamed of the storm of jealousy in his breast. It seemed unworthy of the girl that his thoughts of her should be so violent."⁵ (IV, 56). He transcends these early predictable responses, eventually suggesting that he and Mattie take the coast downhill on the community sled that he had promised her in spite of Zeena's doubtless objections. Later, he accepts difficult challenges and rises

beyond his and Mattie's expectations to meet them: he glues the pieces of the treasured but broken pickle-dish back together to shield Mattie from Zeena's wrath; he refuses Zeena's demand that Jotham take Mattie to the train depot; he concurs with Mattie's proposal that they slide down their chosen hill for the second final time. Are these circumstances evidence of forces at play in Frome's life that lie totally outside his control? No, no more than they were for Romeo. Consider that the death of Romeo and Juliet began with similar circumstances, predictable because of the monumental differences between the people and places where those Romantic lovers lived: Juliet's being pressured to choose a suitor, Romeo's love-related conversations with Horatio and other friends, duels culminating in deaths of close relatives, and the masked ball. These phenomena occur. Those who participate in them find connections that engender subsequent action and promote reasonable interpretations. Neither situation comes to us as overwhelmingly restrictive or overwhelmingly chaotic, but simply as the normal state of affairs.

Setting: Climate and Environment

Applying the Naturalist model in greater detail to Wharton's first novel, our first major questions are these: does the harsh New England climate make it impossible for Ethan Frome to eke out an adequate living from the soil? Do the conditions surrounding his operations in the mill make it impossible for him to adequately supplement whatever livelihood farming brings him? Do his family circumstances impose such a heavy financial burden that he cannot succeed in spite of his best efforts? Close reading of the text tells us that the answers to those questions are No.

The New England setting provided for Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena does reflect that area's unyielding climate, but that environment comes to the reader as hardly threatening or pregnant with some foreboding of terrible things to come. Climatic conditions do not arise as harsh or damaging—certainly not catastrophic—but as what people there regularly encounter and have adapted to: winters bring social interactions like dances, and fun and games like coasting down huge snow-packed hills; rather than impinge like sweat boxes on the characters, summers leave burnished memories; spring seems the time for weddings; and fall brings harvesting, but nothing extraordinary, threatening, or damaging. In fact, in most of the spaces into which the author projects these characters, the ambience seems idyllic and aesthetically appealing, appropriate for the unfolding love of Ethan Frome and his Mattie: "The winter morning was as clear as crystal. The sunrise burned red in a pure sky, the shadows on the rim of the wood-lot were darkly blue, and beyond the white and scintillating fields patches of far-off forest hung like smoke (III, 41)."

Ethan and Mattie move in a time reminiscent of Adam and Eve leaving Eden after the original loss of human innocence: "They drove slowly up the road between fields glistening under the pale sun, and then bent to the right down a lane edged with spruce and larch...The lane passed into a pine wood with boles reddening in the afternoon sun and delicate blue shadows on the snow...Here the snow was so pure that the tiny tracks of wood animals had left on it intricate lace like patterns, and the bluish cones caught in its surface stood out like ornaments of bronze (IX,110)." Even after the accidental fall of Zeena's pickle-dish from their shared table has shattered the innocence of their love, even after the time for choice and action has spread its harsh metallic demands upon them, that lovely and loving ambience remains: "The early mist had vanished and the fields lay like a silver shield under the sun...Every yard of the road was alive with Mattie's presence, and there was hardly a branch against the sky or a tangle of brambles on the bank in which some bright shred of memory was not caught. Once, in the stillness, the call of a bird in a mountain ash was so like her laughter that his heart tightened...and all these things made him see that something must be done at once (VIII, 101)."

Depiction of Romantic Hero

What kind of man is this who can elicit our strong affirmative responses? What differences do the two key relationships of his life make? What are the stages of his attraction to Mattie Silver? How does he manifest that attraction, and to what does it lead? To what extent – and why – have these consequences labeled this work a Naturalistic one, with its deterministic implications? Can a different and more accurate characterization emerge from carefully considered observations? What about personal and social factors that Naturalists might insist bring Ethan and Mattie to their doom? When carefully considered, answers to these question seem to me to point the narrative in an upward direction.

As a young man, Ethan Frome receives technical training, and later maintains his intellectual curiosity and the ability to satisfy it, without untoward difficulties. His interest in things astronomical is marked enough that he can pursue that interest wherever it leads. With a wife whose interest lies not at all with him and their marriage, his circumstances are hardly so restrictive that he cannot choose other ways to find companionship. His relationship with Mattie, while predictable, does not seem like the action of an unavoidable force acting on some non-resistant object. Yes, Ethan Frome does capitulate to his deepening attraction towards Mattie, but that attraction never seems so overpowering that he can do nothing but succumb to it.

What about Ethan Frome's economic circumstances? Do unusual conditions within his family drive him to predictable and necessary actions necessary to relieve his financial burdens? He maintains his farm and his mill as best he can. Although no huge success has blessed his efforts, neither have major successes happened to the village's other farmers, and only one city-dweller enjoys noteworthy affluence: Denis Eady's father, the town pharmacist. Zeena Frome's continual use of medications and frequent trips to one doctor or another does deplete the Fromes' assets, but not unduly, and Mattie's sojourn with them not only reduces some of the physical demands Zeena confronts, but also alleviates Zeena's psychological distress. All in all, this young man does not seem ground down by economic circumstances beyond his control. This is just what life is in the New England of his day.

The Naturalists, though, would probably concentrate their focus on Ethan Frome's unfulfilling marriage, his deepening awareness of a possible anodyne, and the circumstances that make that anodyne continually more palliative. Soon after their marriage, Ethan's wife withdraws from a normal, healthy relationship with him – or more accurately – returns to a pre-occupation with preservation of her own health: "And within a year of their marriage she developed the 'sickliness' which had since made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances. When she came to take care of his mother she had seemed to Ethan like the very genius of health, but he soon saw that her skill as a nurse had been acquired by the absorbed observation of her own symptoms (III, 52)." She becomes prematurely old: "She sat opposite the window, and the pale light reflected from the banks of snow made her face look more than usually drawn and bloodless... Though she was but seven years her husband's senior, and he was only twenty-eight, she was already an old woman (II, 47)."

Yes, the conditions are ripe for development of another relationship when Mattie arrives, but other temporary escapes have existed for Ethan Frome before. While social constraints have held him to the life he has embraced, several things in his emotional wasteland have helped relieve his natural hungers: in the small room just off the kitchen,

he keeps his books of science and poetry, and he often comes there for stimulation and satisfaction.

Like other Romantic heroes, Ethan Frome continually seeks the empowerment and happiness of his beloved. Almost from the beginning, he becomes aware of Mattie's inexperience and lack of strength, and like the Romantic hero he is, he assumes the additional burden of helping her in whatever ways he can best do that: "He did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire, carrying in the wood overnight, and neglecting the mill for the farm that he might help her about the house during the day (I, 25)." Like any other 28-year-old man, Ethan Frome responds emotionally to this naïve young woman, and like most Romantic lovers, he becomes possessive and jealous of her at various times. Jealousy rises up in him when he sees her respond to men with whom she's dancing in what he had considered "unique gestures reserved for him (I, 24)." Jealousy arises almost beyond his control when confronted with her seeming involvement with Denis Eady, his young rival who offers her a ride home from the dance. Mattie's light-hearted refusal of Eady's invitation and her reassuring behavior, though, relieves him of his concern.

Depiction of Romantic Heroine

Mattie seems particularly unsuited to surviving in a harsh, demanding world: "Mattie, at twenty, was left alone to make her way on the fifty dollars obtained from the sale of her piano. For this purpose, her equipment, though varied, was inadequate. She could trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite 'Curfew shall not ring to-night,' and play 'The Lost Chord' and a pot-pourri from 'Carmen.' When she tried to extend the field of her activities in the direction of stenography and book-keeping her health broke down, and six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store did not tend to restore it (III, 43)." Mattie displays an alertness and cognitive skills that both attract and frighten Zeena's young husband: "He kept his eyes fixed on her, marvelling at the way her face changed with each turn of their talk, like a wheat-field under a summer breeze. It was intoxicating to find such magic in his clumsy words, and he longed to try new ways of using it (V, 66)." Again, "These alterations of mood were the despair and joy of Ethan Frome. The motions of her mind were as incalculable as the flit of a bird in the branches. The fact that he had no right to show his feelings, and thus provoke the expression of hers, made him attach a fantastic importance to every change in her look and tone. Now he thought she understood him, and feared; now he was sure she did not, and despaired (II, 33-34)."

Ethan Frome also receives from Mattie a precious gift: an intensified awareness that he is a man: "Completely reassured, she shone on him through tear-hung lashes, and his soul swelled with pride as he saw how his tone subdued her. She did not even ask what he had done. Except when he was steering a big log down the mountain to his mill he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery (IV, 63)." Mattie makes him feel wanted, a man capable of bringing happiness to a woman he increasingly perceives as perceptive and desirable: "He remembered the shyness he had felt at approaching her in his uncouth clothes, and then the lighting up of her face, and the way she had broken through the group to come to him with a cup in her hand. They had sat for a few minutes on the fallen log by the pond, and she had missed her gold locket, and set the young men searching for it; and it was Ethan who had spied it in the moss... That was all; but all their intercourse had been made up of just such inarticulate flashes, when they seemed to come suddenly upon happiness as if they had surprised a butterfly in the winter woods (IX, 111)." Again, "It had been one of the wonders of their intercourse that from the first, she, the quicker,

finer, more expressive, instead of crushing him by the contrast, had given him something of her own ease and freedom... (II, 30)."

This is a man whose wife does not respond to him in the normal ways, a man hungering for some connection in a cold, desolate psycho-social environment. Is it surprising that he, like Romeo much earlier, responds to the one person who offers him warmth amidst the emotional ice of his life? Mattie shares his curiosity, his overwhelming awe for the glories of nature and of evolutionary history: "It was during their night walks back to the farm that he felt most intensely the sweetness of this communion: that at his side, living under his roof and eating his bread, was a creature to whom he could say: 'That's Orion down yonder; the big fellow to the right is Aldebaran, and the bunch of little ones—like bees swarming—they're the Pleiades...' or whom he could hold entranced before a ledge of granite thrusting up through the fern while he unrolled the huge panorama of the ice age, and the long dim stretches of succeeding time (I, 23-24)."

With Ethan Frome, though, the natural urges receive reinforcement and a certain transcendence because of his heightened aesthetic sensitivity. He soon realizes that Mattie shares his love for all things beautiful, his sensitivity to the wonders of the stars that sparkle overhead and the life that spreads luxuriantly all around them. She responds to him in a way that reinforces his responsiveness, in a way that encourages him to speak and share meaningful aspects of his life: "He 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. 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. Then he learned that one other spirit had trembled with the same touch of wonder (I, 23)."

Again, "And there were other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, which drew them together with a shock of silent joy: the cold red of sunset behind winter hills, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow. When she said to him once: 'It looks just as if it was painted!' it seemed to Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul (I, 24)." Their New England surroundings reinforce the chill of Ethan's pre-Mattie life, and the desolation that awaits him after her departure: "They walked on in silence through the blackness of the hemlock-shaded lane, where Ethan's sawmill gloomed through the night, and out again into the comparative clearness of the fields. On the farther side of the hemlock belt the open country rolled away before them grey and lonely under the stars... Here and there a farmhouse stood far back among the fields, mute and cold as a grave-stone. The night was so still that they heard the frozen snow crackle under their feet. The crash of a loaded branch falling far off in the woods reverberated like a musket-shot, and once a fox barked, and Mattie shrank closer to Ethan, and quickened her steps (III, 35)."

In the same way that love transforms Juliet into a Romantic heroine capable of enrapturing the worthiest man in Venice, so also is the once naïve, inept girl who has come into Ethan's life gradually transmuted into a beautiful, desirable woman, clothed and adorned by love: "She wore her usual dress of darkish stuff, and there was no bow at her neck; but through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon. This tribute to the unusual transformed and glorified her. She seemed to Ethan taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion. She stood aside, smiling silently, while he entered, and then moved away from him with something soft and flowing in her gait (IV, 59)." This is a fully mature Mattie, the beloved who greets Ethan Frome for their shared, revelatory dinner on the

night of Zeena's absence, a night when Mattie defies common sense to climb high for the forbidden pickle dish to "make things look pretty" for the man she has come to love. This is the Romantic heroine par excellence.

Romantic Culmination of Love

Consider the culmination of the lovers' Romantic attraction. In one of the most erotically implicit sets of actions described in an early American novel, Ethan and Mattie become fully aware of their profound attachment for each other: "Her glance fell on his hand, which now completely covered the end of her work and grasped it as if it were a part of herself. He saw a scarcely perceptible tremor cross her face, and without knowing what he did he stooped his head and kissed the bit of stuff in his hold. As his lips rested on it he felt it glide slowly from beneath them, and saw that Mattie had risen and was silently rolling up her work. She fastened it with a pin, and then, finding her thimble and scissors, put them with the roll of stuff into the box covered with fancy paper which he had once brought to her from Bettsbridge...When the door of her room had closed on her he remembered that he had not even touched her hand (V, 69-70)."

How completely and totally Romantic this is—a love so selfless, so unearthly, so removed from any hint of sensuality, that it transcends the physical to unite the inner beings of those whose lives it has touched! This fantastically erotic sense remains with the two lovers in the morning, and into the remainder of the day: "He did not know why he was so irrationally happy, for nothing was changed in his life or hers... He told Jotham to go out and harness up the greys, and for a moment he and Mattie had the kitchen to themselves. She had plunged the breakfast dishes into a tin dish-pan and was bending above it with her slim arms bared to the elbow, the steam from the hot water beading her forehead and tightening her rough hair into little brown rings like the tendrils on the traveller's joy.... Ethan stood looking at her, his heart in his throat. He wanted to say: 'We shall never be alone again like this.' Instead, he reached down his tobacco-pouch from a shelf of the dresser, put it into his pocket and said: 'I guess I can make out to be home for dinner... (VI, 72).'"

Romantic Dilemma

Critics from the Naturalist camp would surely maintain that Edith Wharton has created here a situation out of which the inevitable must occur:

1. hero needs astute lady who shares his intellectual/aesthetic sensibilities
2. hero's circumstances provide such a lady
3. hero loves the lady that circumstances provide
4. hero cannot have two ladies: one whom he does not love, and another whom he does love
5. hero remains with the lady he does not love, and turn his back on the lady he does love
6. hero chooses the lady he loves, and turns his back on the lady he does not love

Yes, Ethan Frome weighs the alternatives and briefly entertains option 6, intending to leave Zeena a letter explaining what he has done: "'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 —' "(VIII, 95). He is, though, a man whose sensitivity and compassion can only emphasize the "ugly truth" about the plan he has conceived for himself and Mattie: "With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him (the Hales) (VIII, 103)." His keen awareness makes him then choose option 5, the conventional acceptable moral choice. For a short time, he lives with that alternative.

That decision becomes a difficult one for him to sustain after the lovers' one blessed evening without Zeena. Although his resolve weakens momentarily when his wife, returning home unexpectedly, insists that Jotham Powell drive Mattie to catch the train, the force of his need and love for Mattie rises up in him: "Ethan looked at her with loathing...She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others. For a moment such a flame of hate rose in him that it ran down his arm and clenched his fist against her. He took a wild step forward and then stopped (VII, 85)." This intense response reflects his determination that his love relationship will not end. Instead of capitulating to Zeena's demand, he declares that he himself will drive Mattie away.

During that seemingly endless ride, Mattie's love-dominated prescience and her expressed fear of leaving precipitate her surprising declaration of love. Conventional morality falls by the wayside, compassion for Zeena fades away, and the two "star-crossed lovers" confess their mutual desire to go away together: "'Matt —' he cried; 'if I could ha' done it, would you?. She was silent for a moment; then she said, in such a low tone that he had to stoop his head to hear her: 'I used to think of it sometimes, summer nights when the moon was so bright. I couldn't sleep'.... His heart reeled with the sweetness of it...." "As long ago as that? (IX, 113-114)' "

Romantic Resolution

It is Mattie who proposes their way forward: "She remained motionless, as if she had not heard him. Then she snatched her hands from his, threw her arms about his neck, and pressed a sudden drenched cheek against his face. 'Ethan! Ethan! I want you to take me down again!... 'The coast. Right off,' she panted. 'So 't we'll never come up any more. (IX, 119).' " Like Juliet's confession of love overheard by Romeo hiding below the balcony, a confession which draws him forever to his Juliet, it is Mattie's impassioned admission of her love and her insistence that they coast down the hill with full awareness of what they are doing, that proves conclusively to me that these characters are not driven by external forces. At this moment, Mattie transcends her fear of having nowhere to go and no one to care for her to broach their final solution to the man she has dreamed about for so long. Her transformation in her beloved's eyes into the most desirable woman in the world, his soul-mate, has given her the strength necessary to propose their tragic destiny. Similarly, Ethan Frome's gradual empowerment has allowed him to take on challenges formerly too difficult, and in the supreme moment of decision-making, he embraces the option Mattie proposes: "Her sombre violence constrained him: she seemed the embodied instrument of fate (IX, 120)." The lovers have now found another choice, one that transcends both previous options:

7. hero and the lady he loves seek heaven, leaving the lady he does not love free, blameless, and prospering in this world

Were such changes inevitable? Hardly. Instead of dragging Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver down into inevitable failure, circumstances have emboldened them to overcome the weakness of isolation and displacement, and to triumph as Romantic lovers. Ethan and his Mattie will not capitulate; they will be together forever. Predictably, tragedy strikes when their sled, carrying them like the innocents they have remained down the white, white snow of a hill in a children's playground when their sled crashes into the huge elm tree at the bottom of the run. They do not die in one another's arms; rather, they survive to live in an even more horrifying way: Ethan Frome, whose injuries have made him stunted if not deformed, and Mattie, whom the accident has made an invalid, spend the remainder of their days attended by Zeena. As their nurse, Zeena preserves the lives of the two people whose death was designed to free her for a better life. Tragedy upon tragedy upon tragedy!

Conclusion

To me, there is little about Edith Wharton's first novel/novella that makes it Naturalistic. I do not see close observation and explication of various unyielding forces acting upon Ethan Frome and his Mattie. Rather, I see and feel their subjective responses to each other, and I perceive the significance of events cascading towards tragedy. It is these things that Holman and Thrall ascribe to Romanticism: "Romanticism will tend to see in the entire operation an illustration or symbol or suggestion of a philosophical truth and will so represent 'object and operations'...that the idea or ideal that it bodies forth is the center of the interest (Holman and Flint, *A Handbook to Literature: "Naturalism,"* 337)." Whether altruistic or romantic or erotic, whether in philosophic treatises or in the exhortations of religious figures or in artistic works, love in its many manifestations has often represented our highest human ideal. Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver, and Zeena Frome—each in their own way demonstrates that ideal every day of their lives. Even tarnished, that ideal moves me to tears.

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