

# Naturalistic Color in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*

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**Abstract**—Edith Wharton is an outstanding American realistic woman writer. She is the first female writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921. Her first novel *Ethan Frome* vividly describes the miserable situation of the poor who are living in the New England town. This paper discusses family misfortune, poverty and the restriction of social morality that are the three factors contributing to the hero's loneliness and conflicting life. The paper also analyzes the tragic meanings conveyed by typical images and symbols in the novel, thus to fully present the deterministic naturalism manifested in *Ethan Frome*.

**Index Terms**—Ethan Frome, domestic misfortune, social morality, naturalism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the literary trend of naturalism had an influence on American writing. The greatest naturalist writers at that time such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser "directed attention to inherited attributes conditioned by social and economic forces, thus formed an attitude of despair which characterized American literature at the turn of the centuries" (Wu Dingbo, 1998, p.87). The younger generations of the 1890s were coming to the forefront. "In their works, readers can learn that people are strangled and ruined by a kind of irresistible power. And they can also learn that this power determines people's life and fate to certain extent" (Chang Yaixin, 2005, p.136). Edith Wharton was also among them.

Edith Wharton is the first female writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921. She has written a lot of world-famous novels such as *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* and so on. Most of her novels describe the luxurious and deceptive life of American upper class, which is her major concern. *Ethan Frome*, Wharton's first novel, was published in 1911. It reflects the poor people's brutal living condition in a small New England town called "Starkfield".

A number of scholars at home and abroad hold great interest in *Ethan Frome* and study it from different aspects. Some analyze the three major characters' personalities and psychology. Some explore the influence of Wharton's early life on the subject of her works. Some hold that the novel reflects Wharton's support of female rights. Most of the studies make a conclusion that *Ethan Frome* is a ruthless but real reflection of the poverty-stricken people's useless struggle for survival. This paper aims to focus on the naturalism conveyed in *Ethan Frome*.

## II. NATURALISM IN *ETHAN FROME*

*Ethan Frome* is Edith Wharton's first novel. It tells readers about the poor people's hard living condition in a small New England town called "Starkfield". Ethan Frome is the protagonist in the novel. He was born in an ordinary family whose parents were both farmers. 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. He could pursue his true love for Mattie and establish a new life with her if he were not restricted by social morality. In a word, Ethan's life turns out to be a fated tragedy.

The body of the paper is made up of four parts. The first part explains the negative influence of Ethan's family misfortune on his ambitious future life. The second part studies the influence of the extremely poor economic condition on his marriage. The third part describes how social morality clears up Ethan's courage to pursue a new life filled with passion and mutual love. And the last part is a further presentation of Ethan's unchangeable fate through a study of the typical images and symbols in the novel.

### A. Domestic Misfortune

Parents' death and the wife's illness, as two major incidents of Ethan's family misfortune, shape his loneliness and really bring him so much suffering. Ethan leads a happy life with his parents in his childhood. He is entitled to education and shows great interest in physics in a college in Worcester, a city bigger than Starkfield. He aims to work in a big city, because there are big libraries and he would have more opportunities to earn more money. However, his beautiful dream is broken by his father's death. "First his father got a kick, and went soft in the brain, and gave away money" (Wharton, 2004, p.17). For this reason, Ethan has to give up his study and returns home to take on the

responsibility of managing the whole family.

Doing hard work on barren lands all day long, Ethan becomes increasingly lonely and self-abased. When he studies in the college, though keeping silent most of the time, sometimes he merrily gives out a tune as he walks at night alone. However, even would not like to share with others his thoughts. What occupies his mind is just to work for money to support the whole family. In the eyes of his neighbors, Ethan lives in solitude and can seldom be approachable. He remains mysterious and removed apart from his world.

What's more, Ethan is anxious for his lack of the sense of security. Under that circumstance, he is easily misled and involved in a loveless marriage and his anxiety and sense of insecurity are strengthened. Ethan's mother, who used to be cheerful and talkative, becomes queer and feeble since her husband's death. At first, she is not isolated from the outside world because she likes to sit at the gate of the door to see the pedestrians walking by. Later on, for the development of industry, roads are built for transportation, so seldom does anyone go by frequently. She drags along for years as weak as a baby. Zeena, Ethan's cousin, is willing to take care of her sick aunt so that Ethan may devote all his energy to the land. Zeena has done an excellent job managing the housework and caring the sick old woman, which impresses Ethan a lot and gradually makes him rather dependent on his cousin. Consequently, when his mother dies, at the critical moment of Zeena's departure, Ethan is so anxious and frightened that he eagerly asks Zeena to live with him for the rest part of his life, regardless of the fact that Zeena is seven years elder than him. He feels sure that "with a 'smart' wife like Zeena, it would not be long before he had made himself a place in it" (Wharton 62). However, it turns out that Zeena is the last person to whom Ethan can confide with his thoughts and feelings. With the passage of time, Zeena becomes sick and fussy. Mutual affection and heart-to-heart communication do not exist between the couple. It is obvious that Ethan's solitude and anxiety originated from the death of his parents further strengthen his timidity, anxiety and weak mind, which paves a way for more suffering he will surely encounter in later years. To conclude, Ethan's family misfortune dispels his ambition and shapes his negative personalities. It is the most profound root of his tragic fate beyond his control.

#### B. Poor Economic Condition

People can hardly live in this world without money, thus economic condition determines whether we can enjoy a comfortable and carefree life. In Starkfield, a backward town where Ethan was born and lives throughout his life, people's social status and activities are closely associated with their economic condition. Each poor family has to apply themselves to hard labor work so as to feed the whole family. "In the book *Ethan Frome*, poverty is the most significant theme and recurs throughout the story" (Wang Hongning & Zhao Yuzhu 2006, p.41).

The Fromes struggle for survival with painstaking efforts. They own a few lands and a small saw-mill, from which they barely make the life go on. The family goes in heavy debt after the father's death and nearly all of the valuable goods are mortgaged. The serious economic situation forces Ethan to devote himself to the saw-mill from day to night. No wonder that his friend, Harmon says, "I don't know as he would; but I know he wouldn't be sorry to earn a dollar" (Wharton, 2004, p.17). Unfortunately, "people's awful living condition is determined by the industrialization" (Fang Cheng, 2007, p.125). No matter how diligent Ethan is, he still can achieve nothing from several barren lands without advanced instruments and more helpful hands. "The universe is cold, godless, indifferent and hostile to human desires. Life becomes a struggle for survival" (Wu Dingdo, 1998, p.86). Ethan's desire for a comfortable life is depressed due to his worsening economic condition, which he is unable to change.

Due to the poverty, Ethan leads a life filled with nothing but quarrels and complaints. As a matter of fact, Zeena's physical health is not as poor as she has pessimistically imagined. However, because of over sensitiveness to her health, she always buys medicine to cure her illness and even sometimes buys useless products. "Her last visit to Springfield had been commemorated by her paying twenty dollars for an electric battery of which she had never been able to learn the use" (Wharton, 2004, p.56). Therefore, expense of treatment, medicine and something else accounts for a heavy financial burden to the poor family. Still, Zeena complains that she is not allowed to receive good treatment. Ethan gradually realizes that his marriage is a marriage without love and that he has simply exchanged the responsibility of a sick mother for the responsibility of a sicker wife. Their daily life leaves little talks.

When she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to remedy; and to check a tendency to impatient retort he had first formed the habit of not answering her, and finally of thinking her of other things while she talked. (Wharton, 2004, p.63)

The pessimistic economic condition is a bondage to Ethan's pursuit for a truly passionate and meaningful life with Mattie, a girl his heart really goes for. It takes him long time to be determined to elope with Mattie. While considering certain amount of money left to Zeena as her allowance and expense for medicine, Ethan becomes timid and reluctant once again. He is quite aware of the fact that without money, he is by no means allowed to leave his sick wife and the isolated Starkfield. It can be predicted that his elopement with Mattie is to be hopeless and unblessed. The true reality is only found when the forces of environment are dominant in suppressing human wishes and preventing them from accomplishing their aspirations.

Throughout his life, Ethan is an honest and hardworking man and he wants to sell his house and lands to look for chances in big cities. But economic situation at that time becomes more and more serious. He has to stay in Starkfield living a hard and suffocating life with his stern, fussy and nagging wife.

### C. *Social Morality*

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.

To the minds of Ethan, Zeena and other local people, looking after the sick wife is Ethan's unshakable responsibility. Zeena always ascribes her poor health to the hard housework she has undertaken when caring for Ethan's sick mother. Consequently, Ethan feels he owes Zeena a lot and should be responsible for her forever. Although he is quite clear that their marriage is a terrible mistake and a kind of calamity, he may never betray and desert Zeena. When he tries to borrow from Mr. Hale money as Zeena's allowance and charge of medicine, the neighbour's inquiry about Zeena's health reminds him of his obligation to the wife. "Throughout Ethan's life, it is the factors like social convention and morality that make Ethan's effort in vain" (Quan Lan, 2006, p.147).

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. Sometimes, he is determined to get rid of the bondage to marriage. Later on, his determination is challenged and gradually dispelled.

Ethan's courage and confidence is regained by Mattie's arrival and accompany. The innocent girl brings not only her luggage, but also her impressive smile and energy which Ethan has been deprived for a long time and still long for. Most of people in the town occupy themselves in earning a life. Seldom can they afford the luxury of talking and share with each other the joy and sorrow. As time goes on, Ethan and Mattie get more familiar with each other. Accompanied by the girl, Ethan feels interior warmth and does his work more energetically. A sharp contrast between Mattie and Zeena promotes Ethan to tell what he really desires to get and deserves. On one hand, Mattie is young and vigorous, and she brings life to Ethan's family and wins Ethan's deep love for her.

The girl was more than the bright serviceable creature he had thought her. She 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. (Wharton, 2004, p.33)

On the other hand, Zeena passes like a feeble old woman and behaves like a ruthless witch:

The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins. (Wharton, 2004, p.49)

Aware of the strict social morality, Ethan dare not express his affection for Mattie directly. What he can do is to observe the girl and conceal his passion. In a cold and chilly winter night, he waits for Mattie outside the dancing hall. He watches young people dancing through a window and admires their happiness. On the way home, Ethan has several chances to express his love for Mattie, but he has no courage to do it eventually. Another occasion when Ethan loses the greatest chance to promote his relationship with Mattie is the precious night in which Zeena spends in Bettsbridge buying medicine. Ethan is very excited to enjoy the night with Mattie. He even thinks he and Mattie may enjoy the night just like a couple. But social morality is deeply implanted in their mind and constantly emerges. Ethan and Mattie feel uneasy, and their communication and actions become meaningless. It is only for the reason that Ethan has married and can do nothing to violate morality although the marriage is unjustifiable and unfortunate. "Human beings' nature is tortured by the forces of their environment" (Mao Xinde, 2004, p.124).

Zeena is the very representative of social morality. She supervises Ethan and Mattie as long as they stay at home. Noticing Ethan starts to pay attention to his appearance since Mattie comes, Zeena feels uneasy and jealous. She says to Ethan suddenly and incisively when he goes toward the door: "I guess you're always late, now you shave every morning" (Wharton, 2004, p.37). What's worse, the night when Zeena is out, her cat becomes her agent seating itself in her chair between Ethan and Mattie as if Zeena were there herself. Most importantly, the cat breaks the pickle dish that Zeena cherishes. This episode alerts the two lovers to the ill consequence of their forbidden love and puts a quick end to the night which should be quite romantic and beautiful. It also marks a turning point for Ethan and Mattie's life because Zeena insists on sending Mattie away. Ethan and Mattie could never get rid of supervision and grip from Zeena, who stands for the social morality and the punishment of the society they live in.

Ethan and Mattie eventually submit to social convention and make a fatal mistake. When Zeena forces Mattie to leave away, the triangular relationship comes to its peak. Ethan finds no good excuse to let Mattie stay with them. He believes that they can do nothing but commit suicide. What is more tragic is that they fail and become disabled. They are punished and get into the endlessly painful life. His wish is unfulfilled and behaviors unwise, which is pre-determined by the prevailing social morality.

### D. *Images and Symbols*

Wharton is good at creating symbols to implicate powerful and irresistible forces. Typical images and symbols can further disclose Ethan's tragic fate. Starkfield reveals a strong sense of infertility from the formation of the name. The image of "L" symbolizes Ethan's hopeless living state. Tombs and the dead cucumber-vine are associated with death.

Spruce is the witness of Ethan's forbidden love. All these imply that Ethan's tragic experiences are doomed. He is just a victim who cannot control his fate in the society.

Starkfield, the name of the town, is made up of "stark" and "field" which means a place devoid of hope and profit. "The story mainly happened in 'Starkfield', and it only has barren land here" (Pan Jian, 1999, p.98). The winter is rather long in Starkfield, lasting for half a year. And summer days are temperate. The harsh weather is not suitable for farming and planting, thus it barely brings profit for the local people. No wonder that Ethan's living condition goes from bad to worse. Besides, the snow which usually lasts for a long time in winter has already mastered people living there. Ethan has to transport woods to support his family in winter. Working from day to night on the road covered with ice and snow provides more chances of accidents for him. It is not hard to imagine that after years of living under such a harsh circumstance, people will be completely isolated from the outside world. Their will is sure to be turned down and passion frustrated. Therefore, the town becomes more and more silent and hopeless.

In Starkfield, "L" has a significant meaning, which symbolizes large quantity of food and something to support the family. But the lands here are not abundant and generous, and any living needs must be ruined by the soil. Meanwhile, Ethan once says to his hirer that "the house was bigger in my father's time: I had to take down the "L," a while back" (Wharton, 2004, p.23). When Ethan takes down the "L", it declares that his family is nearly coming to an end. "Ethan and Zeena have no child, which proves their infertility, just as the grey image implies" (Zhang Jianhong, 2007, p.102). Although Mattie's coming brings him hope and vigor, if they lived together, they would make this family continue. But all these are destroyed by Zeena as well as the cruel environment to which Ethan is forced to give in.

Tombs and cucumber-vine around Ethan's house symbolize death and the three major characters' miserable endings. Ethan comes across the side of the tombs everyday. "For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom" (Wharton, 2004, p.47). While there was no other sound he could feel his ancestors are beckoning him. It is very strange to see that Ethan and his wife's names had already been carved on the gravestone. Therefore, their tragic fate is predetermined. Since there are just two names on the gravestone, Ethan's love with Mattie is doomed to be impossible and forbidden. Moreover, the wagging dead cucumber-vine displays Ethan's unstable life. He does not know what will happen, but he has to work and then die without any attention by others.

Spruce that witnesses both the romantic and tragic love is another important symbol. It leaves Ethan and Mattie a good memory when the two lovers are standing shoulder to shoulder and hope to stand there forever. It is under the spruce that Mattie does not reject Ethan for drawing her arm. But on the other hand, When Ethan sees Mattie off and they go by the spruce, it just looks on their separation indifferently. The chilly and sad atmosphere created by the tree arouses their pessimism and reminds them of the extreme way to get rid of the suffering from being separated. In short, all these typical images and symbols foretell the doomed fate of Ethan and his family.

### III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper focuses on tragic people, incidents and symbols in *Ethan Frome* to illustrate the naturalistic color of the novel. The protagonist is molded by Edith Wharton as a simple, soft-hearted and hardworking but unfortunate man. Throughout his life, he never stops his endeavor to improve his life and change his fate, but all his efforts are in vain. Three factors contribute to Ethan's tragedy. Family misfortune, poor economic condition and strict social morality stop Ethan from getting what he wishes for and deserves.

Firstly, ambitious and optimistic as Ethan is, his family's misfortune forces him to give up his ideals and shoulder on the responsibility at an early age. Deprived of parents' love and care, Ethan suffers solitude and anxiety and falls in a marriage without consideration of the ill consequence.

Secondly, no matter how carefully he manages the saw-mill and how hard he works on the lands, poverty always haunts the whole family and strengthens Ethan's physical and mental burden. Lacking money to remedy for his wife if he really deserts her, Ethan has to stay in Starkfield, continuing the tedious and loveless life. He is confined in the backward and isolated small town.

Thirdly, stiff social morality suppresses his forbidden love with Mattie and keeps him in bondage to a tragic marriage with Zeena. He could have chances to change his unfortunate life, but he chooses to surrender to social convention at last.

Fourthly, typical images and symbols in the environment Ethan lives in leave the readers great space to study the naturalistic color manifested in the novel. These images and symbols remind the readers of death, hopelessness and infertility. Ethan spends his whole life in the endless winter in Starkfield. There is no hope for him to enjoy spring in his life.

To conclude, an idea is conveyed in *Ethan Frome* that people's life is controlled by the law of environment rather than themselves. "Wharton's understanding of God is very similar to Darwin's theory, and they also point out that people's fate are controlled by a kind of mysterious and undefeated power" (Wang Beng & Yao Zhenjun, 2006, p.25). Shockingly pessimistic as the novel is, *Ethan Frome* earns popularity for the writer, because it is a vivid depiction of people's frustrated ideals and unfulfilled wishes and a realistic reflection of the deterministic influences of the economic and social factors. From the study above, the naturalistic color is obviously manifested in the protagonist's pessimistic personalities, doomed tragic marriage and images symbolizing death.

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