Bloom's Literature

isolation in Ethan Frome

Sent to the area by his employers, the narrator of Wharton's novel spends most of a winter in Starkfield, Massachusetts, "the nearest habitable spot," because a carpenters' strike has delayed work efforts at Corbury Junction. Though the outsider finds the town "habitable," he also notes "the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community." Snow settled underneath an open blue sky should evoke the senses, the narrator contemplates, but the setting does not have a positive effect on the inhabitants of Starkfield. Rather than experiencing an inspiring winter, the townspeople encounter the monotony of the falling snow and icy conditions, year after year. The narrator is an outsider cut off from inside information; like Ethan's farm, he is far removed from the rest of the town. Unlike Ethan, however, the narrator initiates social exchanges with the residents of Starkfield, but it takes time to get the locals to open up about Ethan's tragic story.

Though the narrator learns bits of Ethan's history from various people in town, when he gains the opportunity to talk with Ethan one on one, he has trouble obtaining further details. Ethan's isolation is evident in their conversation: "He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe … he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access." Not only is Ethan's isolation comparable to the landscape, but Ethan's weathered body also resembles the condition of his dilapidated house. The narrator observes that the house is missing the "L," a structure that commonly connects the house with the barn. The "L" portion of the home is "the centre, the actual hearth-stone of the New England farm," and Ethan's body, family, home, and community are disjointed, disconnected from "the chief sources of warmth and nourishment." The narrator stays at Ethan's unhappy home and learns more of his sad saga. As the story unfolds, he gleanes more information about the isolation that Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie have endured.

Ethan Frome married his cousin, Zenobia Pierce, because he did not want to be alone. He also feels he owes Zeena for having taken care of his dying mother. The marriage, however, makes him feel further removed from happiness. When Ethan's mother died, he was "seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing he had asked her to stay there with him." Though Ethan's story, as told to the narrator, does not paint Zeena in a sympathetic light, it is important to realize that she, too, has been isolated. Zeena grew up in a town that in her mind was better than the one she now shares with Ethan. She claims to be sick much of the time, and her illness further isolates her from her husband. Resting on an unsteady foundation, the Frome marriage experiences further challenges when Mattie Silver, Zeena's cousin, arrives from Stamford to assist the sick woman with her household duties. Ethan's attentiveness to Mattie clearly separates him from his wife, but Zeena isolates Ethan herself by focusing on her various ailments, exiling herself to the bedroom, and not caring about her appearance.

Upon the death of her parents, Mattie at 20 has nobody to care for her, and when Zeena and Ethan take her in, none of the parties bring much comfort to the others. As Mattie's relationship with Ethan warms, in fact, her contact with Zeena grows colder. Zeena goes so far as to throw Mattie out of the house, banishing her for Ethan's interest in her. When Ethan is faced with the obligation of driving Mattie away, he cannot face the possibility of returning to the house without her. The narrator learns by the story's end that, after the accident, Mattie does stay at the farm, but in her stricken condition, she shares it with Ethan and Zeena. Mrs. Hale explains the final state of affairs as Wharton leaves the three: "[T]hey're all shut up there'n that one kitchen. In the summertime, on pleasant days, they move Mattie into the parlour, or out in the door-yard, and that makes it easier … but winters there's the fires to be thought of; and there ain't a dime to spare up at the Fromes." In the first chapter of the novel, the narrator wonders what "obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome," and by the last chapter, he realizes the depth of isolation that Ethan has experienced and continues to endure.

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