

The Role of Nature in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*: An Ecocritical Lens

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Abstract

This paper applies an ecocritical lens to Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, exploring the intricate relationship between nature and American identity. It examines how the novel portrays the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment, offering a fresh perspective on the influence of nature on personal and collective identities. Through an analysis of the characters, narrative developments, and the consequences of their decisions, the paper uncovers the deeper connections between the American psyche and the landscapes that shape it. Rooted in ecocriticism, the study underscores the role of literature in fostering ecological awareness and demonstrates how nature acts as both a shaping force and a reflection of cultural narratives. This research highlights how environmental factors influence both individual choices and societal values, contributing to a broader understanding of the American experience. Ultimately, the study aims to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between nature, literature, and the evolving story of American identity, while also recognizing the artistic depth of Wharton's work.

Keywords: American Identity, ecocriticism, nature, cultural narrative

1. Introduction

The natural world is used as both a setting and a character in stories about nations, and literature has often explored the role that nature has played in forming the American identity. The researcher uses the viewpoint of ecocriticism in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* to examine how nature shapes the formation of the American identity in this paper. While many studies have looked at the relationship between nature and American identity, few have focused on nature and influences the formation of personal identity and psychological development in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. This study seeks to address this vacuum by using ecocritical perspective to investigate how nature influences the character's lives and decisions, so contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of American identity. This essay examines and critiques loveless marriages that occurred in the New England area in the 1800s, as depicted in *Ethan Frome* (1911). The book explores a variety of human experiences, from cultural constraints to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversity (Abu Keshk & Farman, 2022; Al-Ghalith & Al-Sayyid, 2023).

As many know, nature can make one feel better emotionally but can also make us feel like doing things that we would not normally do. While being in nature, one may undergo both positive and negative aspects of life. In American culture, nature writings have contributed to the formation of American ethics and influenced public opinion on issues of ecological preservation (Al-Ghammaz, Al-Khatib, & AbuRas, 2022).

Ethan Frome tells the story of a man called Ethan Frome whose challenging life is shaped by the city where he lives. The impact of nature, particularly in winter, leads him to make the misguided choice of marrying a woman he does not love. After a while, however, he falls in love with his wife's cousin, and they both decide to commit suicide together, but after their attempt fails, they end up living the rest of their lives together in pain (Al-Ghammaz et al., 2024).

Edith Wharton emphasizes the significance of the narrator's perspective in her novel, which she describes as a tragedy. She carefully selected a suitable narrator to convey the main story she intended to tell, an engineer who has recently arrived in the town of Starkfield. Thus, the narrative of *Ethan Frome* becomes a frame story, with the main story being recounted by the engineer, who is an outsider with no prior knowledge of Ethan or the town. His interest in Ethan is piqued when they first meet at the post office (Al-Ghammaz, 2024). The engineer gathers information from various sources, including Harmon Gow, who drives the engineer to his worksite, and Mrs. Ned Hale, his host, with whom he lodges. The engineer also acquires details directly from Ethan himself when, due to a snowstorm, he is unable to find transportation, leading him to seek shelter at Ethan's house. He is Frome's first houseguest since a tragic accident occurred there in his home 25 years before.

Wharton aims to present the story from various angles, creating a vivid portrayal of a tragic tale (Al-Ghammaz, 2023). The novel explores the themes of unfulfilled love, isolation, and the harsh realities of rural life, leaving readers with a profound exploration of human suffering and the enduring impact of a New England winter on the human spirit (Al-Ghammaz, 2023). This paper will contend that the themes of nature and individual identity in *Ethan Frome* reflect the larger story of American identity, which is influenced by geographic, emotional, and cultural factors. With this in mind, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the

literature review, while the method and the theory of ecocriticism are provided in the third section. Section Four offers the textual analysis, and finally, the conclusion is furnished in Section Five.

2. Literature Review

This literature review looks at prior research on *Ethan Frome* and related topics, focusing on three main themes: ecocriticism and environmental responsibility, nature symbolism and psychological influence, and genre and identity.

The necessity of addressing climate change in literature through more complex viewpoints that transcend viewing the world as a simple backdrop is emphasized by Trexler and Johns (2011) in "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism." They stress a move away from conventional concepts of "nature" and "place" and support ecocritical approaches that take into account larger global-local connections. Their work adds a more comprehensive layer to the analysis and supports the study's aim on relating ecological aspects of *Ethan Frome* to more general enquiries about environmental responsibility. Consequently, it means that this study supports the idea of looking at different types of stories and going beyond traditional environment themes.

Moreover, Berto (2014) strongly believed that spending time in nature is beneficial for stress relief. According to her article, nature has positive effects on our physical and mental well-being, aiding in stress recovery and restoring attention. The author underscores the significance of restorative environments, especially those with natural settings, to rejuvenate our energy for daily challenges. Her study underscores the relevance of restorative environments, particularly natural settings, in enhancing resilience. This standpoint is clear by the novel that the researcher has selected for this paper, highlighting how nature positively influences individuals and contributes to their strength and well-being.

In the same context, Li (2014) explores color symbolism in *Ethan Frome*, analyzing how Wharton employs hues such as white, crimson, and grey to represent bleakness, passion, and purity, respectively. The relationship between the characters' inner conflicts and the external natural surroundings is highlighted by these hues, which are intricately woven into the terrain. This method supports the ecocritical idea that nature in *Ethan Frome* is not a passive element but rather actively engages with the characters' inner lives to represent greater human experiences.

In addition, the oppressive nature of Starkfield's winter is further examined by Zhang (2021), who portrays it as an agent that influences the protagonists' psychological states. More than just a setting, the harsh weather actually confines Ethan and adds to the larger concept of entrapment. This investigation supports the ecocritical theory, which holds that the landscape and environment shape character identities and have an impact on choices.

From a different perspective, De la Cruz and Khan (2023) argue that *Ethan Frome* belongs more in the Romantic genre and contest the traditional interpretation of it as a Naturalistic work. By exploring how landscapes promote emotional development rather than only misery, their thesis, which extends the ecocritical framework, focusses on the transforming power of love as a counterbalance to environmental determinism. This viewpoint from a different genre emphasizes how *Ethan Frome* uses Romanticism's emphasis on the individual's experience in the face of natural hardship to examine American ideals.

Another related study by Geriguis (2023) looked at how equity, disability, and ecoliteracy are portrayed in various *Ethan Frome* editions. It provides a comparative analysis of textual variations related to nature and offers insights into their diverse interpretations and representations. This enhances the present researcher's analysis of nature's effects on *Ethan Frome* and deepens the understanding of how it interacts with other themes in the book.

Likewise, Yoshino (2023) stated that *Ethan Frome*'s struggle to live up to the conventional standards of a protector and provider is shaped by his harsh, rural upbringing, challenging the stereotypes of masculinity prevalent in Wharton's day. Ethan's relationship with nature reflects his inner conflict and provides a prism through which to examine how his environment shapes his sense of self and masculinity. In conclusion, with this detailed literature review, this article examines the complex relationship between nature and American identity, concentrating on Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* through the use of the ecocritical methodology.

3. Methodology

Ecocriticism emerged as a critical framework in the late 20th century, but its roots can be traced back to earlier environmental movements. In his article, Mishra (2016) confirms that the term "ecocriticism" was first used in 1978 and examines how literature addresses the environment. It is not just about studying nature but also about considering our connection with the natural world in a responsible manner. Ecocriticism has two main aspects. The first part looks at how literature depicts nature and how we can value and safeguard the environment. The second part explores how environmental issues impact people in urban areas and those who are often overlooked in environmental discussions. Essentially, ecocriticism reveals the link between literature and our environment and encourages taking better care of nature.

The eco-criticism framework emphasized and explored the role of place in literature and other cultural texts. It gained recognition in the 1990s as a response to the growing environmental concerns and the need for literary and cultural analysis that addresses humanity's relationship with the natural world. It is sometimes called "green" or "environmental" literary criticism, looking at how nature is portrayed in literature and what that means for the environment. Critics have made this idea more important, showing how literature can both reflect and change the way we think about the environment. They have shown that what we read can have a big impact on how we see our connection to nature.

In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell (1995) delves into the historical and cultural aspects of nature writing in the United States and underscores the role of literature in shaping environmental consciousness. His book emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving the natural world. Moreover, in ecocriticism, there are some key things to understand. First, it says that nature is valuable on its own, and not just because of how it is useful to people. It believes that literature is a powerful means for getting people to think about the environment and change the ways they think and act toward it.

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Buell (2009) emphasized the importance of connecting the environment, particularly the natural world, with literary works. He suggests that early ecocritics sought to bridge the gap between literature and the environment, aiming to reintegrate writing and criticism with the actual experiences of the natural world. The idea is to emphasize a more interconnected relationship between literature and the environment. In their book, *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) state in the introduction that ecocriticism, regardless of its various approaches and complexities, all revolves around a core idea—the belief that human culture is intricately linked with the natural world. This relationship is two-fold: human activities influencing the environment and, in turn, being influenced by it.

Moreover, Hutchings (2007) explored how Romantic poets interacted with ecological science and environmental activism as it relates to British literature. It talks about their views on nature, artistic endeavors, and participation in causes like animal welfare and ecofeminism. The study also explores the connection between environmental concerns and Romantic literature, emphasizing recent fields of study such as urban ecology and colonialism's effects on natural senses. In essence, ecocriticism explores the interconnectedness between nature and culture, with a particular focus on the interaction between human beings and the nonhuman aspects of the environment as exemplified in the selected novel.

Ethan Frome's approach operationalizes ecocriticism by focusing on how the natural environment impacts the characters' behaviors and actions, notably the harshness of the winter landscape. This method entails viewing the physical surroundings as a reflection of the characters' emotional moods and investigating how the environment serves as both a source of entrapment and a catalyst for the characters' internal conflicts. Nature, through this viewpoint, is more than just a backdrop; it is a dynamic force that interacts with the human experience, providing a better insight of the characters' psychological and societal quandaries.

4. Textual Analysis

Ethan Frome, written by Edith Wharton and published in 1911, focuses on various themes, such as love, duty, and personal sacrifice within the boundaries of New England. It explores the fatal consequences of the characters' decisions in a setting of isolation and harsh winters. This story presents Ethan Frome, the main character, as an example of the feelings of people who are trapped in the rural environment of Starkfield. Wharton portrays Ethan as a character whose life is shaped by his crushed dreams, responsibilities, and hidden desires.

The setting of this story is not just a background; rather, it is like a life on its own that reflects the characters' desires. The farmhouse, in which Ethan and his family live, is a representation of the emotional attachment and the harsh winter that Ethan and his family suffer through. Their problems are more clearly developed by their cruel environment that somehow mirrors their personal struggles and unfulfilled wishes. From an ecocritical standpoint, the harsh winter impacts the characters' actions and feelings, demonstrating the connectivity of human life to the natural world. The heart of this story is the strong relation between Ethan and Mattie, the cousin of Ethan's wife, Zeena, which adds a feeling of warmth to the icy surroundings; nevertheless, the norms of their society prevent them from freely exploring their feelings, showing the restrictions imposed upon them by their landscape. In addition, their suicide attempt causes a terrible accident that leaves them trapped in a loveless marriage and a life without happiness, illustrating the finality of their situation.

Ethan Frome ultimately explores the profound impact of choices, the limitations imposed by the setting, and the unexpressed needs that affect the individual lives. Furthermore, their landscape tends to take on a powerful and symbolic meaning for the emotional and psychological struggles they encounter. The novel is still relevant today because of its deep consideration of human relationships and the challenging factors of farm life.

The characters find themselves in a tough situation. Ethan is in a sad marriage and not only has to take care of his sick wife, Zeena, but also has to run the farm by himself. Then, Mattie comes into their life and gives Ethan some hope for living a happy life. In the end, however, things get so bad and there is no happiness for anyone in the story. They live in a very cold place, which affects their behavior and makes them live a miserable life. Indeed, the story shows how difficult it can be to look for your happiness when life is very hard and you face many problems. This reflects an ecocritical perspective that emphasizes the restrictions that nature imposes on the characters, demonstrating how their surroundings hinder personal growth and enjoyment. Travis affirms that critics like Edwin Bjorkman thought it was unlike other stories of the time because it was so intense. The pain in the story held a bigger message about society. Critics like Lionel Trilling later thought that people liked it because they were interested in sad stories. Literary and social critic Riving Howe thought it was a powerful story that made people sad (Travis, 1997).

The novel events take place in the fictional town of Starkfield, Massachusetts, during a 19th-century winter. Starkfield is lifeless in the winter. Most events and scenes take place at the Frome's farm. The narrator says in reference to the distance: "The distance each way was barely three miles, but the old bay's pace was slow, and even with firm snow under the runners, we were nearly an hour on the way" (Wharton, 1911, p. 15). This indicates how difficult the reality of the setting is, which hinders travel and creates an inescapable barrier for the characters as they struggle against their challenges. This environment exhibits the ecocritical viewpoint that nature's harshness serves

as both a physical and psychological barrier, fostering feelings of isolation and helplessness. Those who are able to do so have a chance to improve their lives and manage to escape the tough conditions of the town. According to the narrator, “Most of the smart ones get away” (Wharton, 1911, p: 9), and this shows how the people of Starkfield try to leave it because of the unbearable life there. Zeena, Ethan, and Mattie are unable to escape due to the situation and the rural setting. This reflects the narrator’s observation about the tragic circumstances of the characters, and in particular, Ethan himself, who suffers through too many winters in Starkfield. In some ways, Wharton’s portrayal of a struggling New England was accurate. Moving west and into major cities, the local population left behind empty farms. The only reason Ethan Frome stayed behind was his duty to look after his elderly parents, and later his wife gets ill, again preventing him from leaving Starkfield in search of a better life (Wharton, 1995).

According to the narrator, “Guess who has been in Starkfield in many winters?” (Wharton, 1911, p. 6). This shows that Ethan has not been able to leave this town for many years; these winters have been very hard on him, and being in Starkfield for a long time has made his life very demanding. Moreover, the rural setting’s isolation makes it more difficult for the characters to flee their problems, which means that winter makes their life difficult, too. Starkfield’s environmental isolation highlights the ecocritical theory that humans are inextricably related to their surroundings—an isolated, harsh environment results in both physical and emotional imprisonment. The isolation of the Frome’s farm makes it even harder for the characters to escape their problems. So, both social loneliness and the distance between Frome’s farm and the village show Starkfield’s psychological separation. The narrator in this quotation states that “most of the smart ones get away” (Wharton, 1911, p. 6). This expresses how the environment restricts the characters’ abilities and keeps them living challenging lives. They want to seek out a different life beyond their confined circumstances. For example, since the information about Ethan’s life is acquired by the narrator through the oral narratives and conversations of the local townsfolk, the readers are told that Ethan did not want to stick it out here on the farms of New England, so before his difficult circumstances, he decided to head south, where the weather was warmer and job opportunities were plentiful.

The setting of the fictional town of Starkfield plays an important role in mirroring and shaping the characters’ experiences and emotions. For instance, the narrator remarks, “The village lay under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners” (Wharton, 1911, p. 28). This illustrates the claustrophobic environment, highlighting the emotional struggles of Ethan. The place is blanketed in deep snow, significantly complicating their lives. This quote shows us how the environment plays a crucial role in shaping the characters’ lives and decisions. Winter in Starkfield serves as more than just a backdrop; it is like a silent but strong character that shapes and forms the lives of people who live there. Indeed, the plot of the story relies heavily on the presence of winter, and without it, there is no story because it makes you feel the characters’ inner struggles and desires. Ecocriticism emphasizes how Starkfield’s external environment reflects the characters’ inner emotional world. Their imprisonment and loneliness are symbolized by the snow and severe winters.

The characters’ feelings, choices, and tragic consequences are also influenced by the harsh climate, the loneliness, and the dead surroundings. For instance, winter forces Ethan to make most of his erroneous decisions; one of his worst decisions is marrying Zeena because of his fear of loneliness, not because he loves her. Moreover, she is neither beautiful nor attractive. In addition, she is always complaining of being sick. The narrator confirms: “Zeena had always been what Starkfield called “sickly” (Wharton, 1911, p. 20). He also describes Zeena: “Against the dark background of the kitchen, she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing...He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like” (Wharton, 1911, p. 58). These quotations illustrate that she does not have any qualifications to make him fall in love with her. The researcher here gets an insight into how Zeena is described in a way that lets the readers feel she does not have feminine features; she is tall, very thin, with small eyes, tired all the time, and more than that, she is seven years older than Ethan. She does not leave her bed; she leaves her ugly false teeth headed with bacteria under the lamp next to his bed. The readers are also told that she has a black cat. It is like she only needs a broom to complete the image of a witch.

In general, if a woman wants to keep a husband, she should support him, socialize with him, manage the household, and more importantly, talk with him, be concerned about him, and take care of her appearance. Furthermore, she is always the one who decides family matters. Even when she is weak, or pretending to be weak, and sick all the time, she runs the household and assumes control of all decisions instead of her husband. Bakken confirms that she does not perform her duty as a 19th-century wife, which, back then, the husband was responsible for the household and the role of women was to raise their children and to do the housework (Bakken, 2016).

As the story progresses, Frome’s household is depicted as cold and starved (Wharton, 1911). This refers directly to the empty feelings towards Zeena. However, when Zeena’s cousin, Mattie, comes to their house, everything changes; she has different manners in comparison to the coldness he used to feel in his marriage to Zeena. These manners attract him to her and show that Mattie brings warm emotions to his ruined life. So, the setting of the story and the circumstances they face play a significant role in making their relationship meaningful and, yet, more complicated. When the readers notice their loving moments, like when Zeena goes out to another village to see the doctor, they spend that night together to have a meal. The readers notice how different the town is from their close moments. The weather is very cold and harsh, but their feelings for one another are warm and strong. So, the setting of Starkfield makes their relationship stronger because it is like a bright spot in a dark place, and this makes their emotions and their struggles to stay together play an important part of the story.

Indeed, the writer describes the connection between the natural world and the characters in a lovely and attractive way. The special moment is when Ethan and Mattie are walking home from a dance. The moonlight makes everything look great, the same as their feelings together. Ethan’s hand tingled where Mattie touched it, illustrating their strong feelings. The amazing view of the moon makes their feelings strong. Thus, nature in this case touches their emotions and makes their love and emotions more intense. Here, the researcher

understands a key point: that Wharton uses the winter landscape to show the characters' challenging and difficult moments, the place of Starkfield, and the harsh weather they face, yet she also presents moments of beauty, like the stolen moments between Ethan and Mattie. This contrast to the previous description of snow and how it becomes a symbol of danger and isolation shows nature with its two sides—it can be both harsh and beautiful, just like the characters' experiences.

Nature is not just natural views or bad weather, but humans can take all the useful things like food and drink. In addition, there is nothing better than clean air and water. According to the people of Starkfield, nature gives them physical strength as they work in their fields manually, which in turn makes them live longer and reach 100 years old, like the Frome family. In his article, Seymour (2016) examines how humans relate to nature, including different aspects like our preference for natural scenes, the sustainability of natural resources, and the positive effects associated with interactions with nature. His article sets up a deeper look at how nature influences our health.

On the other hand, the characters of this novel are under the mercy of nature due to the harshness of winter, yet they live for many years. Summer and spring are not seen in Starkfield, and if it experiences spring, Ethan does not marry Zeena then. According to the narrator, "I simply felt...and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it, as Harmon Gow had hinted, the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters" (Wharton, 1911, p. 16). This quote highlights the impact of the harsh winter environment on the characters' lives and decisions.

4.1 Winter

Winter is the cause of loneliness and isolation, which leads Ethan to make bad decisions, like his marriage to Zeena. The narrator describes his experience of a Starkfield winter as follows: "When I had been there a little longer and had seen this phase of crystal clearness followed by long stretches of without quarter..." (Wharton, 1911, p. 9). This description illustrates the narrator's metaphorical description of how Starkfield struggles against the harsh weather as a "siege like a starved garrison" (Wharton, 1911, p. 9). It is like an army surrounding it, and it cannot escape from this siege. This quote also shows how the harsh environment surrounds the characters and controls their acts. It is also surrounding their emotions as well as their spirits. As readers, we get an idea that Ethan's feelings and dreams are buried like Starkfield when it is covered by snow for six months every year.

In winter, their home is like a prison. They live alone and stay in their houses with no means of entertainment. They cannot move in winter because of the layers of snow. Even their horses cannot move. Moreover, the people of Starkfield cannot remove the snow because they did not have any machines to remove it at that time, and it was difficult to remove all of that snow manually. When summer does come around, the citizens of Starkfield spend all of their time preparing for the next bleak and dark days of winter ahead by canning food and cutting trees for wood to heat up their houses. Indeed, when people think about the six months of winter, it becomes like a hallucination.

Furthermore, winter contributes to the loneliness of Starkfield residents. People cannot communicate and seem to waste their mentality because life there is impossible. In her article "The Significance of the Sawmill: Technological Determinism in *Ethan Frome*," Gschwend (2000) asserts that the novel does not directly say that technology is the main reason for how society changes, but it does show that new inventions like electricity and trains can make things better. It also says that if a society does not use these new inventions, it might not get better and may, in fact, get even worse.

It is not only Ethan who is affected by the loneliness of winter, but also his mother. This loneliness makes her feel depressed and sick, and she becomes distant from others. This is because she feels a sense of nostalgia at the end of her life when the train is introduced at the end of the story. In his work "The Delusion of the Nostalgic Cure in *Ethan Frome* and *The Return of the Soldier*," Hunter (2012) defined nostalgia as "a particular sentimental longing, a deep ache to return home, to the familiar" (p. 1). Ethan's mother feels like things have changed because when she was younger, people used to travel on horseback. They used to come and visit her, talk with her, and water their horses, but after the railroad came to town, they stopped visiting her. As a result, she lost touch with people and became extremely lonely, which psychologically affected her. Even Zeena, who was an efficient nurse for Ethan's mother, was affected deeply and changed because of too many winters. She has no warm feelings for Ethan, which is completely clear from the obvious contrast between their interactions and those of Ethan and Mattie.

In simple words, Ethan and his family faced many challenges that have made their lives very hard, including loneliness and money problems. First, his father, who was the breadwinner, fell ill and was soon followed by his mother, and they had to spend most of their savings trying to get well. After marrying Zeena, she spent all the money on her medicine. Then the accident with Mattie, which made him crippled with broken legs and shoulders. Fate had its circumstances; it was not his decision to continue his education. Education needs money. Harmon Gow tells the narrator that Frome was not poor in the past. They had money and were able to send Ethan to study science (Wharton, 1911).

The novel provides a formation of identity based on circumstances. Thus, Ethan is a dutiful son, and he has a strong belief in moral rules; he is a Puritan to the core. He takes into consideration what people might think of him if he ever abandoned the farm and his parents. He feels that he has to do what people expect, even if it makes him miserable. Thus, he faces many challenges in following his own beliefs and sense of belonging. Ethan is a descendent of the Puritans and was raised in the Puritans' stronghold of New England; so strong, in fact, no one dares to go against it. "New England was the colony of the first immigrants, pilgrims, and Puritans when they came to America in the seventeenth century to build the city of God" (Al-Doori, 2023, p. 4). Although Puritans came to New England in the 17th century, their influence is still very strong in that region of America, as shown in the 19th-century novel *Ethan Frome*. All of the characters' desires are

affected by the Puritanism rules that control their decisions, for a Puritan's duty is something sacred. As for Ethan, his duty is to take care of his elderly parents, even leaving behind college and his dream of being an engineer to do so. The researcher believes that he could stay there and complete his study, but because he is a Puritan to the core, he would be considered a prodigal son should he do that.

The change in the characters happens when Ethan cannot leave or divorce Zeena because, according to the strict rules of the Puritans, he has to stay with her until death do they part. He tries to abandon her and writes a letter telling her he is going to leave her and the farm. He writes that he cannot stay with her any longer, and he is leaving with Mattie to Florida. Ethan does not have the ability to give her the letter and throws it in the fire. His duty is to stay with his wife in all aspects of life because of the sacred marriage bond between man and woman.

The researcher notices that Ethan sacrifices a lot for others. He knows and applies the rules of his town to all the members of his family. He gives them what they need and what his principles demand him to do. However, at the same time, he wants to live his own life happily with Mattie. He cannot divorce or love anyone else; he has to stick with someone who does not love just because of the rules or traditions. He is torn between his duty as husband to Zeena and his desire to stay with Mattie. Furthermore, the story takes place in New England, which is a stronghold for Puritans, affecting both Ethan and Mattie's feelings. They do not have the courage to express their feelings openly or to pronounce their feelings because it is considered a sin.

Ethan imagines life with Zeena as a living hell, but when Mattie suggests attempting suicide, he does not care about it at first, but he soon changes his mind when Mattie admits her love for him. He thinks it is better to be with a beautiful girl like Mattie in death than to be with Zeena in life. He does not want to commit suicide at first, but Mattie knows how to get him to change his mind by admitting her love to him.

This duty towards his social norms forces him to change his mind at the last moment, and a new identity is formed. The sad ending, where he and Mattie attempt to commit suicide through a sledding accident but fail, leaving Mattie paralyzed from the neck down and Zeena to care for her the rest of her life, illustrates that destiny works against their happiness, and they cannot change it. Ethan and Mattie are punished because they are considered sinners. First, they betray Zeena, and then they attempt to commit suicide. Rusch (1983) claims that Edith Wharton emphasizes the Puritanism that has been perceived as an underlying ethic in all of her work in *Ethan Frome*. Ethan's fate is complicated by the choices and decisions he must make throughout his narrative. Furthermore, the individuals' seclusion is intricately linked to their physical surroundings and not just a result of their personal situations, which reflects how ecocriticism functions in the narrative. The bleak, frozen landscape of Starkfield, which appears unforgiving and untenable, affects the protagonists' fates both literally and figuratively. Their sense of confinement is further reinforced by the harsh winter environment, which serves as a mirror to their inner conflicts. The region's lack of natural resources and lack of warmth cause them to deteriorate physically and emotionally, demonstrating how the environment actively contributes to the tragic conclusion of the story.

4.2 Characters

In this novel, the actions and emotions of the main characters, Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie, have such serious influence on them because they are strongly tied with their landscape. The way they socialize and communicate with each other exemplifies how their geographic location affects how they feel and how they make their decisions that make a sad ending to the story. The writer uses the farmhouse, which belongs to Frome, as a description of his isolation and the social norms of his life. All of these things show how the characters are affected by their environment. The researcher of this story witnesses the changes that occur within each of these individuals.

4.2.1 Ethan Frome

At the beginning of the novel, Ethan Frome, the protagonist, is described in the introduction by the writer as a man who is damaged because of all the circumstances that affect him, including his struggles and a series of his unfortunate and bad results. He appears to be somewhat inflexible in his movements. The narrator describes Ethan as "the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him... he was so stiffed and grizzled..." (Wharton, 1911, p. 3-4). This means that Ethan's appearance leads the narrator to believe he is an old man but later reveals he is only fifty-two.

Ethan is portrayed as living in darkness. Even when he accompanies Mattie to a dance, he stays in the dark and watches her through the window while she is with Denis Eady. His marriage to Zeena is very depressing, and he lives a life full of fear and strict rules, avoiding fun and happiness. He seems distant from the lively parts of life, as he is not really living life at all. Sugeha et al. (2021) affirm that Ethan feels unhappy and does not take steps to improve his life. Even though he recognizes his poverty, he does not seek new opportunities, relying solely on selling the farm. His frustration deepens when he becomes involved with Mattie.

His life with Zeena reflects his personality and his physical appearance, as he is physically very strong, but at the same time, he is mentally weak in his house. He cannot make any decisions or be decisive. The only time he makes a decision is when he decides to drive Mattie to the station because he wants to keep his promise of taking her to slide for the first time. He can take care of all the affairs of the farm alone, but when he decides to make a decision, he becomes rushed and quick, often changing his mind at the last moment.

As the story goes on, he falls in love with Zeena's cousin, Mattie Silver, and this love makes him feel that he is still alive and gives him a renewed feeling of hope that is better than even before he met Zeena. The narrator asserts: "It was a fact that, since Mattie Silver's coming, he had taken to shaving every day" (Wharton, 1911, p. 42). He enjoys being with her and escaping from his isolation; however, this feeling of hope is always in conflict with his sense of responsibility to his wife and his community's strict rules, making his character

even more complicated.

The turning point in his character happens when he decides to drive Mattie to the station, which is considered to be the first time he makes a decision on his own accord, because he wants to keep his promise of taking her to slide for the first time. This promise leads him to attempt his second poor decision when he tries to end his life by crashing his sled into a tree, stopping himself just before it happens. The narrator confirms that: "As they flew toward the tree... But 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" (Wharton, 1911, p. 184). This shows that even when he is very bothered, he cannot go through with his serious choices, which lead to his tragic end. It illustrates that when his life is so difficult, he does not follow through with his decisions. If he had listened to Zeena when she told him not to drive Mattie, they would not have had the crash. He decides to drive Mattie to the station, but he cannot stop Zeena from dismissing Mattie even though he is physically strong and he is the one who owns the house and the farm.

Although Ethan is not from the upper class and he is very poor, he is considered a tragic hero because of his hesitancy, isolation, and silence. His wife Zeena uses these traits to her advantage, manipulating his decisions, which is contrary to what readers might expect from a physically strong and well-educated man like Ethan, whose external appearance is supposed to reflect personal strength. Unfortunately, readers see the opposite. Ethan's internal conflict between desires and obligations is more than just a psychological fight; it is inextricably linked to his surroundings. The severe winters and gloomy solitude of Starkfield reflect his emotional and mental paralysis. His failure to break free from Zeena and his burdensome obligation can be interpreted as an example of how the environment limits individual liberty and choice. Ethan's marriage to Zeena and the geographical landscape are both prisons for him.

4.2.2 Zeena

As for Zeena, Ethan's wife, she does not give her husband any feelings of warmth. She often claims to be ill, and her constant complaints of illness are like the endless cold and harsh weather in Starkfield. Along with Ethan, other people cannot easily connect with her, let alone get close to her. She is a symbol of tragedy and the absence of life. She looks very ugly and always represents darkness, again, like the long, cold winters of Starkfield. When she brings Mattie at the beginning as a housekeeper, she is kind to her at first; however, when she questions Mattie's relations with Ethan, her personality becomes clearer. She becomes jealous of Mattie, which leads to the tragic ending to the story. The setting in which Zeena lives exacerbates her sense of mental and physical loneliness. Zeena's inner emptiness and resentment are reflected in Starkfield's dismal winters. Her disease can be viewed as a consequence of the severe climate, while the hardness of the landscape mirrors her uncompromising attitude. Zeena's character serves as an example of how the environment can both influence and reinforce unpleasant feelings and behaviors in addition to influencing individual behavior. Her own emotional and physical stagnation is symbolized by Starkfield's persistent coldness.

4.2.3 Mattie Silver

In contrast to Zeena, Mattie Silver embodies warmth and life. The way she reacts to the people around her illustrates how the setting affects her. She enjoys the beauty of nature, especially her moments with Ethan, and she enjoys light because they make her feel better in the cold and gloomy place where they live. When she comes to the Frome's house, everything changes. Ethan becomes more active and takes care of himself, and when she is with him, she really wants to be close to him and feel him. The narrator confirms this:

"Matt—oh, don't—oh, Matt!"

She started up, lifting her wet face to his. "Ethan—I thought I wasn't ever going to see you again!"

He took her in his arms, pressing her close, and with a trembling hand smoothed away the hair from her forehead (Wharton, 1911, p. 158).

This quotation reveals Ethan's wish to protect Mattie and show the growth of their feelings. Their secret feelings become stronger because they live together in the same house, and they change the coldness of Starkfield to a lovely and warm place. Nevertheless, their intense bond to that lovely, warm place leads to the terrible accident caused by their attempt to commit suicide via their sled ride together. The vibrant life of Mattie stands in stark contrast to Starkfield's icy, desolate surroundings. In a setting that encourages loneliness and hopelessness, her warmth represents a need for life and connection. Her very existence, which gives the Frome household a sense of life, is in stark contrast to the harshness of her surroundings, as ecocriticism demonstrates. Unfortunately, the story's terrible ending demonstrates how the heavy weight of the environment can overcome even the most dynamic forces. Instead of allowing Mattie's warmth to grow, the snow-covered terrain keeps it frozen in the clutches of fate.

Ultimately, these events help the researcher understand the characters' experiences and emotions, allowing them to envision that if positioned in the same scenario, individuals might likely respond in a completely different manner. For example, Zeena is considered to be the one who is making a lot of mistakes. She is constantly nagging and blaming Ethan for her bad health because he is taking care of his sick mother instead of her. In addition, she does not take care of her appearance and leaves her dirty false teeth under the lamp of her bedside table. She does not offer any help on the farm or even in their home, yet she is the one who makes the decisions and is incessantly bossing Ethan around. Conversely, readers cannot blame her alone because, after all, it was solely Ethan's choice to marry her because of his fear of being alone after his parents are gone. Ethan is not a wise man at all; thus, we cannot put the entire load on Zeena alone and say that she is the only one guilty. She helped his mother as an efficient nurse and did the housework as well.

At the end of the novel, Zeena helps Mattie and becomes a nurse for her even though she and Ethan have betrayed her and leave her alone when they decide to attempt suicide. Ethan is also guilty because he experienced how terrible loneliness is and decides to die with Mattie

instead of being denied her and happiness under his Puritan values. So, we cannot blame Zeena when she asked Mattie to leave, having no idea that they would attempt suicide. Indeed, any woman in her place would do the same if she felt her husband cheating on her with another woman.

Mattie is also guilty because she betrayed her cousin with her husband. The impression given by the narrator is that she should not have broken the bonds of familial trust. She is also the one who knows just what to say to make Ethan change his mind and attempt suicide when she admits for the first time that she loves him and cannot leave nor live without him. This researcher believes that Ethan is the guiltiest one of all because, from the beginning, he should not make wrong decisions. He is very weak and always hesitates before making yet another poor decision, which leads all three characters to suffer. If he were a wise man, he would not have made any of the bad decisions he made that have made him such a tragic figure.

5. Conclusion

In sum, *Ethan Frome* is a story that explores love, responsibilities, and loneliness in the harsh countryside. The characters' struggles and the tragic conclusion give a hint on how a society's oppressive rules can affect people. In his society, the titular character, Ethan Frome, is considered a sinner because he is married to Zeena and commits the sins of adultery and attempted suicide. However, these rules are not always fair because Ethan is stuck between what he wants and what his society wants him to do. The ecocritical exploration of nature's profound influence on the formation of American identity, as portrayed in the novel *Ethan Frome*, provides a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship among the environment, characters, and overarching themes. This analysis not only illuminates the enduring power of nature to shape and challenge but also defines the American identity but also unravels rich layers of interconnectedness. Ecocriticism enhances the understanding of nature as a transformative force in shaping characters' lives, offering new insights into the relationship between the environment and the human psyche.

The settings, portrayed as active participants rather than passive backdrops, emerge as pivotal forces in this narrative. The harsh New England winters in *Ethan Frome* transcend mere atmospheric depictions, serving as metaphors for emotional frigidity and the chilling consequences of life's choices. Amid this exploration of nature's influence, the narrative underscores the delicate balance between human progress and environmental preservation. This natural calamity serves as not only external challenges but also powerful metaphors for the internal struggles faced by the characters. The ecocritical lens unveils the symbolic weight of this calamity, revealing it as both catalysts for character development and reflections of broader environmental themes. By influencing the psychological and emotional states of its residents, the novel's setting takes on a vital role and offers a fresh perspective on American literature.

Characters, intricately woven into the fabric of their natural surroundings, undergo transformations influenced by the landscapes they inhabit. They embody the intricate connection between individual identities and the ecosystems that shape them. The characters' struggles and the tragic conclusion give a hint on how oppressive society's rules can affect the people. In his society, he is considered a sinner because he is married to Zeena and commits the sins of adultery and attempted suicide. Still, these rules are not always fair because Ethan is stuck between what he wants and what his society wants him to do. The ecocritical approach provides a new perspective on Ethan Frome by emphasizing the environmental influences that shape the characters' actions and identities.

The study further contributes to the understanding of how nature, as a literary device, transcends mere scenery, becoming a dynamic force that shapes characters, influences narratives, and offers profound reflections on the human experience. According to Kadhim, the symbolic richness of natural elements serves not only as backdrops but also as integral aspects of the storytelling, revealing the timeless connection between humanity and the environment. Symbols, as elements of figurative language, add depth and layers of meaning to literary works, contribute to the overall richness of the narrative, and allow for diverse interpretations by readers (Kadhim et al., 2023). In essence, the ecocritical analysis of these novels, amid the beauty and brutality of the natural world, reaffirms the enduring power of nature to shape, challenge, and ultimately define the rich tapestry of American identity. This exploration invites readers into a deeper appreciation for the ecological dimensions of literature and the timeless truths embedded in these narratives.

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Orabi was primarily responsible for writing the manuscript and leading the overall development of the paper. Zarkan contributed significantly to revisions and improvements. Additionally, AbuShihab proposed analyzing the novel through the lens of the ecocriticism framework and reviewed the references to ensure their consistency within the text. All three authors collaborated in finalizing the manuscript and approved the final version for submission.

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