An Analysis Of Feminism In The Novel Ethan Frome

In the 1890’s and early 1900’s feminism and rights were being fought for and were not prominent during the time. In the early 19th century, a feminst political movement became visible. The first visible movement of feminism became official in 1850. Feminism is a movement about value and respect. The movement continues in modern day. In the novel Ethan Frome, written by Edith Wharton demonstrates a motif about feminism and psychoanalytic ways. Ethan Frome is a naturalist novel, an American tragedy, but more importantly a piece of feminist literature. The novel has two female characters who are empowered. Both Zeena and Mattie are shown to have power over Ethan, while the men are shown to not have any power over themselves. This was the case of Ethan. The female characters are influenced by false societal values and traditions accepted by the society’s mores, but their ‘awakening’ is caused by different events and life fortunes. The setting of the story is the town of Starkfield, Massachusetts; a place which is cold, desolate, barren, not festive at all, and limiting due to its weather and lack of everything. The novel discusses how the setting weather and other elements add on to the main themes of the novel. Zeena has absolute power and Mattie has power over him. The main character, Ethan Frome, introverted, socially awkward, adheres to society, impulsive, loves knowledge. He is incredibly affected by the females around him. By portraying the character of Ethan Frome as an atypical male, Edith Wharton shows just how absurd the demands of a society are on women. Ethan was shown as someone who was unable to make decisions and listened to others with little to no retaliation. Furthermore, some of these decisions were forced upon him, like when he was obligated to stay in his hometown to take care of his sickly mother. Two females are strongly shown as strong characters. This makes this novel a feminist piece of literature. In the 1890’s, feminism shows how greatly supportive of the females lives Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver and shows their power throughout the novel.

The word ‘feminism’, is a term for supporting women’s rights which did not enter the English language until the 1890s. Feminism works towards equality, and not just female superiority. Feminist believe in indivdual choices, and most importantly respect. Education is a very important factor that affected women’s lives in the early 19th century. Feminism can be looked at in the social, political, and economical ways. Females were being paid less than males in most countries but that soon started to change as the years went by. The graph below shows the economic gender gap between the years of 1970 to 2016. In most countries the economic gender gap has decreased. Male gaze is an act of depicting women and representing them as objects rather than women. In the 1970’s male gaze originated in the film theory and it refers to the way we look at visual representations. In the male gaze, woman is visually positioned as an “object” of heterosexual male desire, and during this her feelings, thoughts and her own sexual drives are less important than her being “framed” by male desire. The concept of ‘male gaze’ was created by Laura Mulvey in her famous 1975 essay, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.

Zenobia Frome is hypochondriac, manipulative, narcissistic, quiet. Zeena did not comply with a women's responsibility during the 19th century. Zeena only causes Ethan problems by complaining about her health and spending money on medicines. A woman was not supposed to cause her husband any financial problems like Zeena did to Ethan. Zeena believes she does not have to do household chores because it is Ethan’s duty to pay her back for all the caring

she did for his parents. “As her young brown head detached itself against the patch-work cushion that habitually framed his wife’s gaunt countenance, Ethan had a momentary shock. It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder” (Wharton 48) Although she is physically disabled, Zeena exerts mental domination over Ethan. Being a woman in this feminist novel, she influences the man’s thoughts to such an extent that he has a recollection of her “superseded” face against his desire. The power attributed to her and the effect it has on Ethan’s thoughts especially when he is around Mattie, a girl he’d much rather be with, proves the prominence of feminism in this novel. Despite Ethan being a man, he is still portrayed as inferior to the women in his life. For instance, Zeena, his wife, is able to control Ethan and make him do what she wants. This is shown through the fact that Zeena is indigent. This can be seen through the fact that Zeena makes Ethan pay for her expensive treatments, even though there is a lack of evidence to support the existence of Zeena’s sickness. She is very passive aggressive. Zeena makes the decisions in the relationship and often whines and complains until Ethan listens. These instances of when Ethan complies to Zeena’s demands go directly against the standards of a patriarchal society. Ethan is submissive and acts according to Zeena. To summarize, Ethan has onerous duties to fulfill Zeena’s needs. This results in Ethan to have an inability to have power and take lead in his own life.

Mattie Silver is young, cheerful, and outgoing. She has all the power in order to take control of what she wants. Ethan is very attracted to her and that almost makes him an enervated man. Mattie is also extremely clever and furtive when she is manipulating other characters. She uses the concept of indirect interaction to create the same effect. Mattie left for Ethan “a scrap of paper torn from the back of a seedsman’s catalogue, on which three words were written: “Don’t trouble, Ethan.” (Wharton 86). This note shows the depths of manipulation expressed by Mattie. She is manipulating Ethan into doing more than he planned to by elevating their level of communication and emotions, as this was the first time she had ever written him a note. This shows how simpler messages can have astounding effects on whoever is receiving it. Wharton especially shows how people can even be manipulated through external locations instead of just from direct speech. Throughout, Wharton stresses the key value of manipulation on the environment to be able to reveal the true emotions and desires. It is shown that manipulation is necessary to invoke certain feelings about any particular topic. Mattie has full control over Ethan and even his thoughts. She can make him think about things while being a woman. “Ethan felt confusedly that there were many things he ought to think about, but through his tingling veins and tired brain only one sensation throbbed; the warmth of Mattie’s shoulder against his. Why had he not kissed her when he held her there?” (Wharton 24). This occured at the start of the novel when Ethan walked Mattie home. After getting home, Ethan layed in bed thinking for hours if she felt the same way towards him. He regretted not kissing her when she had the chance to. This demonstrates how all his thoughts revolve around Mattie and how she has control over his thoughts. This is ironic because Ethan is a man, and therefore shouldn’t be controlled by women. Men are known to be stable and think and act forthemsleves, but here Ethan is not shown to be. This shows how distracted Ethan’s thoughts were by Mattie and how revolved his thoughts are around her. He analyzed everything about her. This shows how overly obsessed Ethan is with Mattie. Usually men are attracted to women to a certain extent; however Ethan went overboard and now his life revolves around a woman.

Ethan Frome, the story of a sensitive and intelligent man trapped in a loveless marriage with a manipulative and self-absorbed hypochondriac is the result. Even though the narrator of Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome, as well as the main character, are males, the novel could fall under the

genre of feminist literature due to its presentation of women as individuals with particular wants and needs, but without any possibility to fulfill them. This is an alternative use of first wave feminism, which treats the topic of the inequality among women in the UK, USA, and Canada at the dawn of the 20th century, within a male-dominated society that lacks the resources and services that women need to live a quality life. Regardless of whether the narrator and the main character are males, it is the female characters of Zeena and Mattie who serve as the agents of change that move forward the events that transition Ethan's life, from chaotic, to nearly catastrophic. Moreover, the women's influence on Ethan occurs as a result of the women's dissatisfaction with their own lives.

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