
Outsider To The Society: Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome Versus Ian McEwan's Enduring Love

“The hero of the book is condemned because he doesn’t play the game. In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives” What is your view? Do the outsiders of your chosen texts live life according to the rules?

Ian McEwan's Enduring Love Versus Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome

An outsider is defined as ‘a person who does not belong to a particular organization or profession.’ In Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* the protagonist, Ethan Frome, is portrayed as an outsider of the early 1900s society as he contemplates his duty to his wife, Zenobia Frome, and his passion towards her cousin, Mattie Silver. Likewise, the protagonist in Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*, Joe Rose, develops into an outsider as he becomes enthralled with Jed Parry who believes that something has passed between him and Joe, something that sparks in Parry a deranged, obsessive kind of love. In both novels, different settings are constructed where society has a direct impact upon the lives of the protagonists.

Wharton emphasises the struggle Ethan has by being condemned through her descriptions of Mattie, as if she is some sort of ethereal being:

He had been straining for a glimpse of the dark head under the cherry-coloured scarf and it vexed him that another eye should have been quicker than his. (Wharton 16)

Ethan standing out in the snow while the dance goes on inside portrays his isolation from society which supports Jennifer Travis’s statement: ‘If it had no social side, if it implied only what it brought of suffering and sorrow to the partakers in it, then we could do little but cry out in self-protective impatience.’ (Travis 64) It is jealousy of Denis Eady’s wealth that shows his sense of inferiority as well as his tendency to blame external forces, for instance his poverty, for his situation in life. Money was of great importance in the 1900s and the United States’ global power was attributed to its economy. The ‘cherry’ scarf highlights the importance of Mattie’s character and how her persona contrasts that of the residents of Starkfield. The colour red connotes feelings of passion as well as danger which is foreboding seeing as Ethan’s eventual downfall was due to his passion for Mattie. Wharton, as a Romantic author, utilises darkness and light as a motif for the, as yet undiscovered, feelings that Ethan has for Mattie. Ethan keeps to the shadows knowing that he is morally wrong as a married man. The agent of light is used to represent morality, innocence and new found love. This novel can be seen as a reflection of Wharton’s own life as she herself had an affair with Morton Fullerton in 1908 but believed that she was the victim because her and her husband shared no intellectual or aesthetic interests and this victimisation she felt is reflected in her depiction of Ethan Frome. In a similar way, in *Enduring Love*, McEwan shows a similarly stark contrast between Joe Rose and Clarissa Mellon. After the ballooning incident, Clarissa insists that she and Joe “have to help each other”

(McEwan 33) by acting on their mutual feelings for each other. Joe realizes that by constantly rationalising every moment of the tragedy, he has “been trying to deny [himself] even the touch of her hand.” (McEwan 33) Clarissa, on the other hand, has “effected a shift to the essential” (McEwan 33) by leading Joe to bed she is trying to help her husband remember that their love is what truly matters. The reader sees here that McEwan sees love as a cure for desolation. This is the height of the power of love: it makes adversity in one’s life bearable by providing them an alternative emotional dimension into which to escape. As Michael Ruse appropriately states: “What McEwan suggests is that Joe, through his knowledge and love of science, has managed in some sense to transcend his purely biological nature” (Ruse 10). However, it is because of this that Rose has become an outsider, because he has transcended his biological nature, Joe only makes things worse: for himself, for Jed, and particularly for the relationship between himself and Clarissa. This occurs because Joe is at times reluctant to show affection to his wife. Thus showing how Joe’s rationalism can lead to him being condemned.

The titular characters in both novels are also condemned as they do not play by the rules of love. A critic of *Ethan Frome* has stated: “Ethan’s struggle is between passion and duty” Indeed it is, as such can be seen since Ethan has a duty to be Zenobia’s husband yet he has a burning passion to live his life with Mattie Silver. One may argue that this struggle is made more prominent when readers see that Ethan is reluctant to alter his situation. Zeena states: “I can’t go on the way I am much longer.” (Wharton 35) This implies that she is unhappy with her ill health and desires to get better, showing she is more committed to her marriage than Ethan. In contrast, her husband offers no pity upon learning of his wife’s pain. Instead Ethan’s mind is preoccupied with the thought of himself and Mattie alone in the home together, as he put it, ‘like a married couple’. (Wharton) Wharton utilises the silence between the couple to symbolise the absence of affection in their marriage. In the late 1800s, affairs became a target for more opprobrium and concern as the American society was defining itself morally. For this reason, Ethan can only fantasise about what life would be like with Mattie. Ethan is condemned as he does not commit to his marriage nor to his wife which is what was expected. Likewise in *Enduring Love*, Rose does not play the game of love but instead plays God. This is urged along by Jed Parry’s homoerotic obsession with Joe which Jed supports with his over zealous religious beliefs. He believes he has been chosen by God to evangelise Rose: “It’s not only that you deny there’s a God - you want to take his place.” (McEwan 136) Parry is referring to one of the seven deadly sins, pride. Pride is defined as an excessive view of one’s self without regard for others and is seen as many as the most serious of the deadly sins. Jeremiah 9:23-24 states, “...Let not the mighty man boast of his might...but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me...” Here Rose not only does not play the game, in this sense, he seems to be playing God. In turn Parry suppresses his homosexual urges while Joe is in denial. Michele Roberts responds to this by asserting: “Joe has to face the fact that he doesn’t, for all his scientific approach to life, understand loving a woman either.” (Independent) He cannot discuss the situation at hand with his wife due to his obsession with Parry which has broken their relationship. Despite at first appearing as an ideal relationship, their bond breaks as they cannot support each other. The 90’s were a dynamic battle for gay rights. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, Senator Jesse Helms, is well known for his public opposition to the 'homosexual lifestyle' and described such people as 'degenerates' and 'weak, morally sick wretches.' (Newsweek) These views from people with a higher social status would have projected a negative stereotype of the LGBTQ+ community.

Furthermore, Ethan may be struggling merely due to the fact that readers are only given Ethan’s point of view, thus we are given an unreliable narrator: “She slipped from him and drew

back a step or two, pale and troubled.” (Wharton 69) Judging by Mattie’s astounded response to Ethan’s audacious act, there may be some underlying guilt within Mattie as her reaction casts doubt on her provocation for flirting with Ethan. If the novel was written from Mattie’s point of view or Zeena’s, the struggle would shift to them. From Mattie’s point of view, and to some extent Ethan’s, this move would be considered as something alluding to an affair. Adultery was subversive in a way that the 1950s middle class would not have condoned, especially in a town such as Starkfield. This is similar to Joe’s encounter with Logan’s wife, each have their own narrative. On one hand, Joe is disturbed by his own cowardice while Logan’s wife is desperate in finding the truth about her husband’s death, employing her own narrative:

...That's what he would have done without her, and it's pathetic. He was showing off to a girl, Mr. Rose, and we're all suffering for it now. (McEwan 123)

This supports Zohreh Ramin’s statement that: “Joe wishes to exercise his power by constantly imposing his beliefs to what he himself believes has happened.” (Ramin 4). Although a stark rationalist, at times he cannot even provide proof for his hypothesis, which is alarming to the passionate Clarissa. This suggests that Joe may not be used to being argued against due to his intellect and career as a science writer. His way of thinking emotionally distances him from those he knows, straining their relationships. Without seeing the point of view of other characters, readers are led to believe that Joe Rose is condemned because he does not play by the same rules as the other characters.

Ethan is known to have somewhat of a dispassionate demeanor about emotional circumstances, for example, the tragic loss of his parents:

His father’s death, and the misfortunes following it, had put a premature end to Ethan’s studies; (Wharton 15)

Rather than seeing the death of his father as an emotional loss, he saw it as an end to a life that may have been, for this reason he may harbour some negative feelings toward his parents for being destined to live his life in Starkfield. Ethan chose to stay perhaps due to the reactions the townsfolk would have to his departure:

It was a long time since anyone had spoken to him as kindly as Mrs. Hale. Most people were either indifferent to his troubles or disposed to think it natural that a young fellow of his age should have carried without repining the burden of three crippled lives. (Wharton 80)

The word ‘somebody’ and the phrase ‘There wasn't ever anybody but Ethan’ shows readers how the villagers expect Ethan to become a caretaker without regard to his aspirations. In the 1900s, a woman's place was in the home – women gave up work after marrying, and husbands were the breadwinners but Ethan had to take up both the roles after his parents passed, emphasising that he was an outsider as he had not married yet. This justifies Bjorkman’s critical response: ‘...after all, the tragedy unveiled to us is social rather than personal... Ethan Frome is to me above all else a judgment on that system which fails to redeem such villages as Mrs. Wharton’s Starkfield.’ (Bjorkman 54) Ethan is broken physically and emotionally since the beginning of the novel. His misery captivates the narrator as the whole novel represents the narrator’s effort to reconstruct the tragic circumstances of Ethan’s life. Ethan is an outsider in this circumstance because he had aspirations and actually left Starkfield when he was a young man while the other villagers have been unable to leave. This is also seen in *Enduring Love*.

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt suitably states: "As a scientist he simply can't deviate from the facts of the case. But this suggests that his point of view is limited and that there may be more to the story than he can see." (The New York Times). Rose's inability to relate to emotional situations and deviate from facts causes him to be an outsider, as seen in Chapter One:

If one ever wanted proof of Darwin's contention that the many expressions of emotion in humans are universal, genetically inscribed, then a few minutes by the arrivals gate at Heathrow's Terminal Four should suffice. (McEwan 4)

Instead of thinking of this situation from his heart, Rose instead uses 'Darwin's contentions' to project his emotions. The fact that Rose knows that 'the many expressions of emotion in humans are universal' suggests that he himself may know that he is an outsider due to his apathy at times.

Another way one may say that Ethan Frome is an outsider as he doesn't play the game, making him an outsider to the society in which he lives, is through the way he victimises himself to justify his love for Mattie. Ethan does not play the role of a loving husband and victimises himself by demonizing his wife:

Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. (Wharton 66)

The imagery that Wharton associates with the confrontation between Ethan and Zeena reflects the motif of darkness. Repeatedly, Ethan utilises words connoting to a demonic presence, 'creature', 'alien presence' and 'evil energy' presents a negative depiction of Zeena which makes Ethan seem like an innocent victim in the game of love. The confrontation of the married couple occurs in their bedroom, a room which Zeena is easily able to assert her dominance. Notably, Zeena has previously asserted herself over Ethan in the bedroom, such as when she made a derisive comment to him about shaving every morning since Mattie's arrival, and that Ethan thinks best when he is not in his own home with his wife. Wharton points out Ethan's awareness that he is trapped in a loveless marriage. She alludes that Ethan will not violate his marriage vows and the rules of society. Ethan is aware of the control Zeena has over him. There was a lot of social pressure from the elites who penalised and as late as the 1950s and '60s, a man who wasn't married or who was divorced was often passed over for a promotion. During Ethan's desperate time of need, being married for the sole reason of having company would eventually take a toll on his marriage. Joe Rose in *Enduring Love* also believes himself to be a victim to justify his actions which in turn caused him to be an outsider. During the events following the accident, Joe has a brief conversation with Jed Parry. In this exchange Jed develops an obsessive infatuation in Joe. Joe rationalizes Parry's infatuation by classifying it as a pathological condition which he wants to see as:

...a dark, distorting mirror that reflected and parodied a brighter world of lovers whose reckless abandon to their cause is sane. (McEwan 128)

[bookmark: _heading=h.gjdgxs]After diagnosing Parry with de Clérambault's syndrome, Joe contemplates the impact it had and will have on his life, this reveals the importance of emotion within *Enduring Love*. Also known as erotomania, de Clérambault's syndrome is distinguished by the delusion, usually in a young woman, that a man who is considered to be of higher social

standing has romantic feelings towards her. Rose hopes to use Parry's love as means to bring Clarissa back to him. Rose uses the definition to understand the love he and his wife share by comparing it to Parry's obsession. This approach is a reference to the good and evil division shown in *Paradise Lost*, a text that Clarissa speaks of during the balloon incident. Logan's fall from the sky causes Joe and Clarissa's fall from their love, which is a necessary step for them to truly understand their emotions. By contradicting their true love to Parry's delusional love, their love grows stronger and ultimately survives. However, according to Adam Mars-Jones "...his own experience calls into question any so confident a separation of healthy from diseased." (Guardian). As Mars-Jones correctly states, Joe is an outsider as he is unable to properly diagnose Parry with a suitable disease, despite his education. The critic's statement suggests that Rose's 'experience' is not enough for him to fully comprehend the situation at hand so he cannot discern a healthy mind from what has become diseased. The reason why Rose found it difficult may have been due to the fact that mental illness in the 90's had a lack of awareness. A study conducted in 1998 revealed that Londoners did not consider themselves well informed about mental illness but do think they should know much more. Only one in four respondents said they are very well informed.

In conclusion, the two novels present readers with different perspectives of both the outsider and the society in which he lives. Joe Rose's analysis of events takes force from his interest in science and rationalism. For him, it is the narrative that is explainable through reason and information, in other words, scientific facts that count as important. This in turn makes him an outsider to the important feelings he has with his wife. Ethan Frome's indecisive nature and reluctance to act on his powerful relationship with Mattie and his contrasting emotions to his wife makes him an outsider in the relationships he has with both women. As mentioned earlier, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt states: "But this suggests that his point of view is limited and that there may be more to the story than he can see." This provides more questions rather than answers; if we are all unique in our own way, are we outsiders because we do not play the game society intends us to play?

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