

# Hester Prynne and Ethan Frome: Two Faces of the Same Tragedy

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## Abstract

Human tragedy is characterized by its continuity over and over in human history. Many writers elaborate different tragedies, each according his\her own experience and understanding of world tragedies. The present study shows a comparison of such tragedies between two novels; one by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and the other by Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. The study sheds light on the way each novelist presents different sorts of human agony, the points they meet and the points they differ.

Both Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804-64) *Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Edith Wharton's (1862-1937) *Ethan Frome* (1911) are compelling classics of American literature with characters trapped in tragic circumstances they seem unable to escape. Remarkably, the two novels represent turning points in the lives of their authors. Whereas his previous work suffered from popular indifference, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* gained him the attention he had formerly lacked, no small part of it negative. Actually a conservative in many regards, with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne became viewed as a radical and a subversive by conservative reviewers. (Bloom, *Bloom's Classic Critical Views*, p. 1) At the same time, Wharton's *Ethan Frome* has long held a canonical place as the most artistically perfect and formally accomplished of her fictions. (Lawson, 154) Moreover, both novels are based on real incidents. In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* "The Custom House", Hawthorne reports how he discovered by accident a decayed, embroidered "A" and some documents telling of its history and the story of one Hester Prynne:

[T]he object that most drew my attention to the mysterious package was a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded, There were traces about it of gold embroidery, which, however, was greatly frayed and defaced, so that none, or very little, of the glitter was left.

(*SL*, "The Custom House", p. 20).

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Similarly, Wharton's *Ethan Frome* is based on a real life incident that occurred in Lenox, Massachusetts, in 1904 when five children were killed when they crashed into a lamppost while sliding down Courthouse Hill. Edith Wharton would have learned of the event while working at the Lenox library with Kate Spencer, a survivor of the actual accident. (Shephred, xi)

Amazingly, both protagonists of these two novels, Hester and Ethan, respectively, have much in common. Hawthorne and Wharton use various language devices to accentuate the gain of dignity and respect of their characters through moral struggle. Both protagonists, despite gender variation, are victims entrapped in loveless, disabled marriages; both search passion in merciless worlds; and both end up disappointed in life losing their real loved ones either by death or by paralysis. Taking *The Scarlet Letter* into consideration as a portrait of human character in dramatic conflict with itself, one is bound to focus on Hester, whose power of endurance is almost frightening in its sustained intensity. She is superior to both her husband and her lover. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are so pallid in comparison with her that one may wonder, specifically in Dimmesdale's condition of how he has motivated an extraordinary passion in Hester with all her capacity for an authentic life. Hester exhibits immense strength of character during the course of the novel's events, accepting her punishment without resentment and without resigning her authority over herself, even over her own sin. She becomes a benefactor to the community that has judged her sternly and ostracized her for a not incomprehensible crime; she becomes a sign and a prophet, as well, to the Puritan community of Boston, accumulating different interpretations as time goes by. Hester is severely tested, not so much by the gross cruelty of her community toward her, but by her concern over the fate of Pearl, her daughter. (Bloom, *Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*, 17) Moreover, Hawthorne uses repetition and metaphors to establish Hester struggles to accept her consequences, which she believes are just and return to a society where no one trusts her. Hester accepts her punishment but wants to be within society though they shunned her. She imprisons herself, because she knows she deserves her punishment. Yet, she does not want to live in solitude. She is

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morally obliged to stay away from society though she wants to go. Furthermore, Hester describes that

Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forest-land, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne's wild and dreary, but life-long home. All other scenes of earth--even that village of rural England, where happy infancy and stainless maidenhood seemed yet to be in her mother's keeping, like garments put off long ago--were foreign to her, in comparison. The chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but could never be broken.

(*SL*, b. I, ch. V, pp. 38-9)

All Hester's attempts to rid herself of shame will only further remind her of the sin she has committed. By trying to break the chains, Hester is able to gain some respect from the town knowing that she has tried to redeem herself of her sin. (Bloom, *Novelists and Novels*, p. 92)

In Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, themes of commitment and imprisonment, whether physical or spiritual, recur. Ethan is obligated to his wife though he loves Mattie. Many people try to escape from their moral prison and yet some just accept their fate. Either one can fight the moral prison or they can accept it and try and move on with life. But to escape the imprisonment is to face the harsh reality of life. Wharton uses symbols and archetypes to create Ethan's anguish to his moral obligation to his wife Zeena who keeps Ethan from his true love, Mattie. His moral prison is established with the tombstone of him and his wife that extremely bores him: "He used to think that fifty years sounded like a long time to live together, but now it seemed to him that they might pass in a flash. Then, with a sudden dart of irony, he wondered if, when their turn came, the same epitaph would be written over him and Zeena." (*EF*, p. 27) (Ruland & Bradbury, pp. 245- 6) When Ethan feels Zeena's presence, coincidentally Zeena's grey cat

[U]nnnoticed, had crept up on muffled paws from Zeena's seat to the table, and was stealthily elongating its body in the direction of the milk-jug, which stood between Ethan and Mattie. The two leaned forward at the same moment and their

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hands met on the handle of the jug. Mattie's hand was underneath, and Ethan kept his clasped on it a moment longer than was necessary. The cat, profiting by this unusual demonstration, tried to effect an unnoticed retreat, and in doing so backed into the pickle-dish, which fell to the floor with a crash.

(*EF*, p. 29)

The color archetypes of the 'red' pickle-dish establish Ethan and Mattie's love while the 'grey' cat establishes Zeena who breaks their love, the dish. Ethan is always besieged by Zeena, even when lacking her presence. Ethan wants to stay with Mattie yet his obligation to his wife thwarts him from her. When Ethan and Mattie finally reach the point by his mill: "They had reached the point where the road dipped to the hollow by Ethan's mill and as they descended the darkness descended with them, dropping down like a black veil from the heavy hemlock boughs" (*EF*, p. 53). The "darkness" symbolizes Ethan's obligation and his moral duty to his wife. He cannot leave her though he scorns her, because he is his morally obliged to reside by her side. Ethan who is obliged to stay with the crippled and the sick gains respect out of the town and for himself by struggling with the duty imposed on him. His life is turned thus to almost a graveyard, spiritual death surrounds Ethan's house that his own neighbors "don't see there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard" (*EF*, p. 60). The symbol of the Fromes down in the graveyard establishes Ethan's similarities to the dead, illustrating his moral obligation to Zeena for eternity. ("*Scarlet letter, Ethan Frome, Lesson Before Dying.*" Cited in [www.123HelpMe.com](http://www.123HelpMe.com).)

Obviously, the two novels share the same vision of focusing on the interior and outer hell in which desire is doomed to be eternally frustrated by social convention of individuals pressed into a proximity that only mimics real intimacy. As Hester is victimized by her society, husband, and lover, Ethan is also a victim of his environment, wife, and his desperate passion towards Mattie. Accordingly, many of the features of the two novels are based on distressing contrast between inner needs and outer situation. The two stories take place against the cold, grey, bleakness of New England. The Puritan Salem, Boston is the setting of *The Scarlet Letter*, whereas Wharton's *Ethan Frome* is set in an isolated and rural Starkfield village, Massachusetts. Both

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Hester and Ethan are engaged by marriage and when both seek freedom, they are hit by the blind power of fate but with slight difference. Hester gets a sort of compensation in her dilemma that is her daughter Pearl while Ethan remains entrapped forever with his wife, feeling desperation and frustration every minute in his life as he sees his beloved, Mattie, helplessly crippled, ends as a "smash-up" man for twenty years when the story begins. (Lawson, 155)

The two novels also show another approximation concerning Dimmesdale and Mattie, the loved ones of Hester and Ethan respectively. The minister for the town of Boston, Arthur Dimmesdale has been educated in England, bringing with him to USA a great power of persuasive speech, extensive learning, and a simple, almost angelic faith. He has a soft yet penetrating voice; he does not hector and terrify his congregation in the course of his sermons but persuades and inspires them. Dimmesdale is handsome and, drawn as much by her inner nobility as by her outward beauty, commits adultery with Hester Prynne, who bears his child. He does not confess his crime to the community he serves in order to continue his good work, and, in fact, his secret sin makes him an even more effective minister; unlike all the other Puritan authorities, he is unable to sit in complacent judgment of others. Instead of facing public condemnation, Dimmesdale punishes himself in private, subjecting himself to torments that are ultimately far more damaging than the official punishment he would have otherwise faced. (Bloom, *Bloom's Classic Critical Views*, p. 69) He is not exactly a hypocrite, since, in the first place, the Puritan religion regards all people to be sinners unworthy of salvation and, in the second place, he does not deceive himself into believing in his innocence. In this regard, he stands in stark contrast to such characters as Governor Bellingham, who is callous and unforgiving in the name of Christianity. Dimmesdale, by preventing the Boston authorities from taking Pearl away from her, saves Hester from the damning temptation to hate and seek revenge on the community. Finally, as he feels his life ebbing away, Dimmesdale makes his confession and saves Pearl as well. (Bloom, *Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 17-18) Wharton's Mattie, on the other hand, can be viewed also as the main reason of Ethan's happiness and destruction as Dimmesdale is to Hester. Mattie's character constitutes

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the center on which the plot of *Ethan Frome* turns. All of the story's events are set in motion by her presence in the Frome household. Only through Ethan's eyes and his perception of her that are twisted by his passion that enables the reader to know of this character. With her grace, beauty, and vitality, she obviously embodies everything that he feels Zeena has denied him, and so becomes the focus of his aborted rebellion against his unhappy life. Mattie is distinguished by little other than the red decoration she wears, which symbolizes both passion and transgression. (Lawson, p. 155) At the climax of the novella, Mattie's true self does shine through; she is seen as an impulsive, melodramatic young woman, more adolescent than adult. Her most active deed of self-definition is persuading Ethan to attempt suicide, which reveals her as rather immature, ready to give in to whatever passionate or foolish thoughts enter her head. Yet, because the text has so strongly established Mattie as the horrid Zeena's polar opposite, one may forgive her childish delight in melodrama. Even in her recklessness, Mattie seems preferable to the shrewish, complaining, curmudgeonly Zeena: it is better that Ethan dies a quick death with Mattie. Nevertheless, one cannot help but suspect that Mattie may not be quite worth the passion that Ethan directs her way, and that the rebellion and escape she represents are more important than the pretty, flighty, and slightly absentminded girl she actually is. (Adamson, pp. 99-100)

The rivals of both Dimmedale and Mattie are the deformed Chillingworth (Hester's husband) and the unhealthy yet shrewish Zeena (Ethan's wife). Hester Prynne's husband, the slightly deformed Master Prynne, has dedicated his youth to study, only to find middle age lonelier than he has expected. Longing for a family, his eye settles on young Hester, and they have married. Having sent Hester to USA in advance of his arrival, Prynne comes shortly thereafter, only to be taken and held captive for a year by native peoples. Upon emerging at last from the forest, he discovers his wife being held up to public opprobrium for adultery; to avoid humiliation, and to better facilitate his search for the father of his wife's illegitimate child, he adopts the name "Roger Chillingworth." While he is able to forgive Hester, who promises to protect the secret of his identity as closely as she does that of her lover, he cannot bring himself to forgive the man who has

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wronged them both. In time, having set himself up as a doctor in Boston, he artfully discovers the true culprit and sets himself the task of hounding and provoking Dimmesdale's racked conscience into morbid and ultimately life-threatening personal torture. He perverts the purposes of medicine, seeking to prolong life only as a means of extending suffering. By adopting the role of Dimmesdale's self-appointed tormentor, Chillingworth unwittingly sets in motion his own decline. As the novel draws to a close, he is only the withered husk of the nobler man he had formerly been as he makes Pearl his own heir despite the fact that she is not his daughter, a point of courage that Dimmesdale lacks. (Petrus, pp. 20-1)

Wharton's Zeena is also presented as unhealthy companion. Though Zeena is not as rounded a character as her husband, the negative aspects of her personality emerge quite clearly, making her seem like the novel's villain. While she is technically the victim of Ethan's plans to commit adultery, the reader comes to sympathize much more with Ethan, because he feels imprisoned in his marriage to the sickly and shrewish Zeena. Wharton's physical descriptions make Zeena seem old and unfeminine. Furthermore, Zeena speaks only in a complaining whine, and all her actions seem calculated to be as mean as possible. Her illness might make some of this crotchety behavior forgivable, but she so relishes her role as a sufferer that the reader suspects her of hypochondria, or at least of exaggeration. Her only talent is caring for the sick, and the only time she displays any vitality or sense of purpose is when administering to Ethan and Mattie at the end of the novel. One imagines her taking a perverse delight in Ethan and Mattie's suffering, since she knows that they attempted to kill themselves to escape her. Thus, this woman is presented as horrible woman who plays the role of the classical goddess of fate who keeps watching innocent people's sufferings. (Ruland & Bradbury, p. 246)

After all, both Hester and Ethan suffer to get rid of spiritual and physical imprisonment but they neglect the power of fate that manipulates the destiny of both, forbidding them to be united with their loved ones except in one condition that is death. Hester chooses to be buried next to Dimmesdale and Ethan chooses to see his sweetheart everyday suffering death in life, a condition that might be bliss or damnation to both protagonists whose fate is very much close to that of tragic heroes.

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## **المخلص باللغة العربية**

تتميز المأساة الانسانية باستمراريتها على مدى التاريخ الانساني و لقد قدم العديد من الكتاب افكارهم المتعلقة بالمأساة في مختلف العصور حيث يقدم كل كاتب نظريته الشخصية عن المعاناة الانسانية. تسلط الدراسة الحالية الضوء على هذا الموضوع من خلال اجراء المقارنة بين روايتين, الاولى هي للكاتب ناثانيل هاوثورن (الحرف القرمزي) والاخري للكاتبة اديث هوارتون (ايثان فروم) من خلال اجراء مقارنة بين كل من النصين وكيفية معالجة موضوع المأساة الانسانية في كل منهما.