

## Narrative technique: Point of View in Ethan Frome

In works of fiction, the narrator shapes our understanding of the story. All facts flow through them and what they choose to share with the reader. Their interpretation of events is all that readers can share. These are not true stories; there is nowhere to go and look up the actual event so you can determine if the narrator is giving you the whole truth. The reader must depend completely on the facts that the narrator chooses to share.

**Point of view consists of two factors: focus**, which is **the viewing aspect** and **voice**, which is **the verbal aspect**. Where does the narrator want us to be paying attention? What characters and settings are important to them? The narrator steers our focus to those areas. And how does the narrator tell the story; what **voice** does the narrator use, what **words, symbols, hints and clues**? Such factors shape the point of view that the novelist chooses to use to tell the story.

In *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton, employs **two narrative schemes** to tell the tale. In the **Prologue** and **Epilogue** the narrator, unidentified and only known as **an engineer sent to work on a job and temporarily in Starkfield, Massachusetts**, is speaking **in the first person**. He refers to himself as “I”. This narrator is referred to as **omniscient**, meaning that he has complete and unlimited knowledge, awareness, understanding and perception of all that happens. It will be through his eyes that the reader can see the story, which may or may not be how the actual events took place or why. **The narrator then drops out of the story completely and the point of view shifts to the third person limited – the thoughts and feelings of one character**, Ethan Frome, referred to as **he**, because the reader is seeing the events through his eyes. The narrator returns to **the first person point of view in the Epilogue** and again offers his interpretation of the events.

### Structure

The analysis of **narrative structure** helps understanding. The novel is arranged into three parts **Prologue, Chapters** and **Epilogue**

In the **Prologue**, the narrator immediately lets the reader know that the story will be about **trying to find out who Ethan Frome really was**. The tense of the narration is important as **narration in the present tense is thought to be more dramatic** than past tense narration. The narrator speaks in the present tense in the Prologue and **thereby focuses all your attention on his story**. It's life actually happening, right now and your interest is thoroughly piqued by the time the chapters start. The narrator also uses many **descriptive phrases, words and adjectives to lay the groundwork** for the story to be told. They are thought provoking, interesting words such as *sinister, reticent, insurmountable, melancholy, woe, inflection, aggrieved, poignant, allusion, forlorn, consolatory, wistful, floundered, obscurity and querulously*. But they all point to the fact that **this will be a sad story**; they are sad words, cautious words. **The reader wants to know more**. This is the narrator's version of the events that took place. “*It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story...*” (*Ethan Frome*, Prologue). The 1<sup>st</sup> person narrator makes it clear that **it will be his “vision” of the story of Ethan Frome**.

**The story only gives the reader the facts that the narrator wants us to have**. Cynthia Wolff writes, “Everything that the reader can accept as reliably true can be found in the narrative frame; everything else bears the imprint of the narrator's own interpretation.” This story may or may not be what has actually happened to Ethan Frome. Allen F. Stein writes: “One cannot be sure that the real Ethan Frome ever felt anything akin to what the narrator attributes to him or did what he did for the reasons the narrator either consciously or inadvertently offers.” (Novelexplorer.com, Novel Summaries Analysis, p 1)

**As to the narrator's omniscience**, here, in *Ethan Frome*, the narrator appears to know nothing. **The story itself is a journey, as told by the narrator, to try to piece together the circumstances that led to Ethan's accident and disfigurement**. No information comes easily. **The narrator is portrayed as an engineer who, by**

**his trade, is responsible for developing a final product and dissecting the mechanisms that put it together.** He seems to be doing it throughout the entire story. **Little bits of information** gleaned from his questioning of the residents of Starkfield about Ethan Frome **are put together to tell the story.**

The narrator draws many conclusions right from the start. He sees Ethan the first time and thinks, “*how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape.*” Yet, he has nothing to base this on; he never saw Ethan before that moment and had absolutely no idea about Ethan’s former self. He decides at the very beginning what Ethan was like before and so the theme of the story is already set: **a strong man falls to ruin.** He constantly seems to tell this story from how he perceives life. “I began to see what life there – or rather its negation – must have been in Ethan Frome’s young manhood.” **The narrator knows nothing whatsoever about Frome youth is, yet he surmises and thereby leads the reader to surmise also.** He talks about the “sinister force of Harmon’s phrase: ‘*Most of the smart ones get away.*’ But if that were the case, how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?” Such statements were all made early in the Prologue before the narrator had even met Ethan Frome, so it seems very obvious that **the reader is going to get only the narrator’s version of things.** [These are all direct quotes from the Prologue accordingly]

**The Epilogue** is the resolution of the novel, or tale as Edith Wharton was careful to call it. The end of the story, which was foreshadowed in Chapter 1, has come to be. **Even though Ethan deserved happiness, he does not get it.** There are clues left all throughout the novel that the ending was not going to be a happy one and the reader is left to wonder, through the “vision” of the narrator, if things could have turned out differently. Because almost all of the information and the interpretation of that information is the “**vision**” of the narrator, **the reader is left to speculate about how much of it is true.** The strength of the story is that it **leaves you to ask questions and examine issues that are as relevant today as they were in 1911 when it was written.** The narrator tells the story exactly as he wanted to tell it to leave the reader wondering about the bigger picture and the choices one makes in life.

**The narrator’s occupation as an engineer leads the reader to believe most of what he is telling.** Engineers are, by their trade, very curious individuals. Everything has a perfect order and a reason for its existence and if something appears broken, there must be reasons why. This is seemingly what the narrator seeks to discover. He talks to everyone he can and asks many questions of the townspeople and Ethan himself to try to reason why Ethan Frome ended up as he did. He makes observations about the town and community, how the people interact with one another under the extremely **harsh winter conditions** during which the story takes place. He gives **vivid descriptions of what he perceives** his surroundings to be **so that the reader feels that they are there with him.** So they can see it exactly as he sees it.

**The first person narrative point of view sets forth an eyewitness account of a story giving it a sense of immediacy and realism.** By using this technique, the writer, can create dramatic irony and **the narrator can be the unifying element of the story.** **The narrator’s perspective becomes the story.** Disadvantages to this point of view are that there is no direct interpretation by the novelist because **the story is based solely on the bias or limited knowledge of the narrator.** This creates the danger that the narrator may transcend his or her knowledge.

**The third person limited omniscient narrative point of view lets the reader see the story through the eyes of one character, in this case Ethan Frome.** This allows for a unifying element throughout the story. This tends to encourage an emotional involvement between the reader and the character. A disadvantage to this point of view is that there is difficulty having the character aware

of all important events that are taking place in the story that may not directly, but indirectly affect him.

**The narrator in Ethan Frome shapes the story itself.** He is deciding what is important and what is not important by virtue of those "facts" that he sets forth. **He sets the scene and mood of the novel** by giving the reader his interpretation of those snippets of conversations with the townspeople and Ethan Frome, himself. **He never actually meets Frome's wife and wife's cousin until the Epilogue of the novel**, but somehow includes them in the actual chapters, all as seen through Ethan Frome's eyes. You, as the reader, are left to wonder a bit as to how he knows about these characters because his discussions about his conversations with Ethan Frome do not really focus at all upon the wife and the wife's cousin. So, how much of what he is telling you is actually the truth. According to the **Epilogue**, there are only a few sentences spoken by Zeena Frome or Mattie Silver and they have absolutely no interaction at all with the narrator.

**The opinions of the narrator color the entire story.** He sets forth a conversation with Mrs. Hale about Ethan Frome's situation and quotes her thoughts that "I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues."