

Analysis of an extract from Ethan's Frome (Chapter iV, pp. 104-106-108 Alia Editrice, 2010)

The text belongs to chapter four and the scene refers to Ethan's thoughts on the very first occasion his wife Zeena has just set out for Bettsbridge with Jotham.

The protagonist feels reassured and revived and he is looking forward to his first evening alone with Mattie. His mood sounds totally different from his usual one: the narrator's word choice highlights his expectations: "sweetness", "relief" "sent up his spirits" together with his behaviour "whistled" and "sang aloud" convey his feelings and provide a different impression of the character.

Expressions like "*a slumbering spark of sociability*" offer Ethan's portrait under a new light. Indeed the idea of having a more intimate space with Mattie sounds as if a ray of light were crossing his house and life. The image is magnified by the contrast with the weather conditions that have always hindered his chance of an escape from hard reality. The intelligent reader cannot help remembering Harmon Gow's comment on Ethan's hard existence when addressing the narrator he said: "*Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters*".

Therefore the contrast between the surrounding cold snowy winter and his intimate perception of a glimpse of freedom in his house reinforces the transformational role Mattie plays in his everyday routine.

The narrator insists on the opposition light *versus* reminding the reader of Ethan's his grave and inarticulate nature. To tell the truth he feels pleasure in considering Mattie's "*recklessness and gaiety*" and *feels warm by human intercourse*. The narrator refers to the protagonist's glory when while attending high school he was proud of "*being clapped on the back and hailed*".

Lingering on the description of the landscape in Starkfield the narrator wants to symbolically communicate how outside nature and Ethan's inner reality seem now in tune. The protagonist is doomed always to carry a different burden: from his family to the mill he is still there and his destiny sounds doomed to carry heavy burdens over and over again. Since his mother's death everyday routine has not changed and he looks an oppressive life devoid of any conviviality occasion. He enjoyed his mother's talks and suffered when due to her illness his voice could no longer be heard. When Zeena came to help her voice sounded as "*music to his ears*". The protagonist's rare moments of a happy existence seem always to come from the outside, from sociable people whose company he has enjoyed.

The narrator brings Ethan's nature to surface so that the reader can better compare it to his wife's, a woman that always knew what to do inside the house and considered him a loser and "*she seemed to possess by instinct all the household wisdom that his long apprenticeship had not instilled in him*".

Zeena has all the strength he lacks and the skill to immediately perceive the protagonist's weaknesses. When Ethan realises she is going to leave the house just after his mother's death he is "*seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone ...*". The fear of silence and solitude pushes Ethan towards wrong directions that will affect all his future life. His life is a winter life and one can very well understand his comment "*it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring*".

Winter and spring, sound and silence, shyness and liveliness are responsible for Ethan's choices more than any personal desire and indeed he seems to be the victim of his inability to fight for his real desires. Furthermore his existence shows to be the result of forces operating outside himself as if he were dragged by the external world one apparently able to compensate for all his most inner needs.

Taking now stock of the ideas conveyed by the extract the intelligent reader understands Ethan's life seems to be driven by external forces and stimuli as if he weren't able to seize his life which has apparently found a reason to be always at the service of others. He reminds the typical antihero, one who never finds the

conviction to take action and face a new life both for a certain feeble nature and because of a Puritan surrounding environment that adds to his fear and uncertainties.

The fictional organisation into sequences is suitable to provide the reader with two terms of comparison that perfectly pave the way to the next sequence that seems to underline once and again how Ethan seems more suitable to be a character in a fairy tale where dreams nourish all his desires and never ever seems he able to evaluate the real and concrete nature of reality. Rather his expectations about his marriage to Zeena, his turn out to be genuine chimeras confirmed by the poor quality of his married life.

His dream to become an engineer and leave Starkfield recall the dreamy-like nature of a child's tale where everything seems to bring to a happy ending, which is really the farthest thing to his true reality. And this feeling is the result of the writer suitable organisation of sequences and a use of language that conveys the sense of pity the reader may probably feel by reading about a character that seems to be a victim of forces he is unable to control while a more detailed reading between the lines allows a more objective evaluation of Ethan's mistaken choices mainly the result of his instinctive reactions to people and circumstances. He does not seem to be experienced with the ups and down of life: the narrator's words clearly unveil his naiveness when he says "he felt sure that with a 'smart' wife like Zeena it would not be long before he had made himself in it [Florida] a place. Never could an idea be farther from reality. It is understood that Ethan is more a child than a grown up man able to evaluate his surrounding environment and be ready to fight for what he wants.