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Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*

In Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*, the protagonist Ethan Frome undergoes an emotional struggle over his marriage. He shifts his mind from formulating a beautiful, heavenly illusion of moving to the West and starting a new life, leaving his wife Zeena behind, to fully recognizing the financial limit of such an unrealistic idea. The use of various rhetorical devices such as diction, syntax, and figurative language demonstrates the complexity of Ethan’s attitude towards his marriage.

The author frequently uses figurative language that involves multiple rhetorical devices to skillfully portrait Ethan’s thoughts and feelings towards his marriage. First of all, Mattie and Zeena set up a character foil for each other. Mattie’s sweetness and warmness contrast with Zeena’s bitterness and coldness. The author puts similar contrast to the environment as well. The “cold dark ‘study’” contrasts with Ethan’s inner thought - the impulsive, zealous yet ridiculous idea of leaving for the West with Mattie. “The cold paper and dead words'' contrast with “the warmth of her voice” that Ethan recalls. Ethan’s imagery like this continues to occur as he imagines escaping “such a life of misery by going West with the girl he cared for”, until Ethan realizes that the cost makes the mission simply unachievable.

Specific details like descriptive diction and parallel structure show Ethan’s desperate attitude towards his marriage. “He was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman?...” “Sap” means energy. Ethan considers himself “young”, “strong”, energetic, and full of potential to grow and shine. His life has barely started. Repetitive use of “too” forms a parallel structure that emphasizes Ethan’s unwillingness to “submit” to Zeena, “the bitter querulous woman”. “Querulous” describes someone characterized by complaints. Here Ethan speaks sarcastically to himself, asking this rhetorical question with great indignation.

And this is where Ethan’s idea of leaving Zeena, going to the West, and marrying Mattie springs out. However, such a preposterous thought quickly subsides. Life - Ethan’s real life - smashes his fantasy like a shredder. “His pen paused on the word, which brought home to him the relentless conditions of his lot.” “Relentless” describes a state of uneasiness or harshness. Ethan now realizes that if he leaves, Zeena may not find someone to sell the farm because its value has been mortgaged already. Ethan worries if Zeena can make a living herself alone. Surprisingly, the tone has shifted from complaint and fantasy to hesitation and concern. Emotionally, Ethan has become more reserved. In the last two paragraphs, the “inexorable facts” of life such as the shocking price of such a trip to the West crush Ethan’s last hope from a logical perspective. The passage ended in a distressed, reluctant tone when Ethan is forced to face the truth.

As if going through an emotional roller coaster ride, Ethan Frome’s attitude towards marriage changes so dramatically - from “anguish” and “misery” to “impulse” and “hope”, then to “prisoner” and “convict” in the end. The author uses rhetorical devices and detailed descriptions to exhibit how Ethan goes through such a change, climbing to a climax at the strongest will to leave the marriage and dropping back down to the silent resignation to retain in the marriage.