

Desolation, Desperation and Death in Starkfield: Conversational Analysis of *Ethan Frome*

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Edith Wharton created the grim and desolate landscape of Starkfield, her imaginary village in Massachusetts, to depict the equally harsh and hopeless relationships between the three characters in *Ethan Frome*. Their relationships fail because there is no true love between them.

Especially, the male protagonist, Ethan Frome, is completely unable to love others. He does not love his wife, Zeena. His emotion towards Zeena's cousin, Mattie Silver, is not true love, either, but merely an immature infatuation. Ethan has no compassion for these two women. He is only preoccupied with what pleases him. When he talks with his wife, Zeena, for instance, he shows no interest in what she says and how she is, but is obsessed with his own thoughts. In his conversations with Zeena, he does not give relevant responses to what she tells him because he has no concern for her. In this sense, Ethan's replies to Zeena violate the maxims of conversation suggested by the philosopher, H. Paul Grice, in his "Logic and Conversation." Grice's maxims are as follows:

Maxims of quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxims of quality

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of relation

1. Be relevant.

Maxims of manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

(45-46)

When a conversation conforms to these maxims, the speaker is giving relevant and sufficient information to his conversational partner. Otherwise, his responses are irrelevant or insufficient. The analysis of the conversations between Ethan and Zeena by the application of Grice's maxims reveals how Ethan's lack of compassion for her mars the communication between the two.

Already in chapter two, the way Ethan responds to Zeena shows that he does not even want to communicate with her, but rather, wants to avoid her. One night, he feels that it is "peculiarly repugnant" that Mattie Silver should see him following Zeena to their bedroom. He tells Zeena that he will not come up to the room for a while, and pretends to go back to the kitchen. His awkward behavior prompts Zeena to ask him, "For the land's sake — what you going to do down here?" At that moment, he does not have anything in particular that he urgently needs to do in the kitchen. So he either has to tell her a lie or suddenly come up with something to do; he says, "I've got the mill accounts to go over." If he tells her a lie, his statement violates the first maxim of quality of not saying what one believes to be false. If he has decided on the spot that he will go over the accounts, it is not because he absolutely must; even if his answer may not have been a lie, it still lacks the adequate reason for

his having to do it then. His statement, lacking adequate evidence, if not a lie, violates the second maxim of quality. Zeena is startled by the oddity of what her husband says. She asks, "At this time o'night?" and warns him that he might catch cold since the fire has been put out (Wharton 54). Now Ethan completely opts out from the conversational interaction with his wife; he stops saying anything and starts to move away toward the kitchen. Anything he tries to tell Zeena then will have violated some maxim of conversation.

In the next chapter, the relationship between Ethan and Zeena becomes even more unnatural and colder. The way Ethan responds to Zeena shows starker violation of conversational maxims. In this chapter, Zeena is suffering from acute pain and tells Ethan of her plan to drive over to another town to see a new doctor. To Ethan, his wife's health is not important. He is only worried about the extra medical expense, and does not say anything for a while. As if expecting her husband's opposition in his silence, she tells him in a sad tone that she will ask somebody else to drive her over if Ethan is too busy hauling lumber. Again Ethan opts out from the conversational interaction that Zeena is trying to have with him and does not say anything. This time, he is not even thinking of Zeena. He calculates time and starts to dream of the evening that he might spend alone with Mattie without Zeena in the house for the first time. Zeena continues to talk by herself since Ethan does not reply at all. She tells him that she would walk to the station if her pain was not so bad. She says that she would not mind walking some if Ethan cannot drive her over: "But I'd sooner 'a' done it, even with this cold, than to have you say —" Ethan abruptly interrupts her and says, "Of course Jotham'll drive you over" (64). He is forcing himself to say at least a few words finally because he suddenly becomes conscious that he has been looking at Mattie while Zeena has been talking to him. This is the only reason why he suddenly opens his mouth, but not because he finally starts to be concerned. Ethan does not give the slightest mention about what he himself is willing to do for Zeena. He does not even tell her that he is worried about her sickness. While trying to tell

him that she will somehow arrange the ride without bothering him, Zeena wants Ethan to drive her over if at all possible, or to at least tell her that he is willing to, but that he is too busy. She wants from him some compassion for her, and wants to know what Ethan is ready to do for her and whether or not he cares for her. His simple reference to somebody else with no mention of what he might do and what he thinks of her does not satisfy her. His interruption does not give Zeena enough of the information that she wants from him. He fails to make his contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange; his statement violates the first maxim of quantity. He shoves the simple responsibility of driving on Jotham and wants to forget about Zeena. At this moment, the only thing Ethan thinks about Zeena is how much uglier and older she looks compared to Mattie. He is dazzled by the prospect of having the evening alone with Mattie and even wonders if Mattie is also thinking about it. In such a state of mind, he keeps failing to find appropriate words to say to his wife. He wants to come up with an apt excuse for not taking her because he notices the tension between him and Zeena. Finally, he tells her a lie; he says that the reason why he cannot come with her is because he has to collect the wage for lumbering at Hale's. He immediately regrets having said what he knows to be false; the pretext violates the first maxim of quality. Zeena does not seem to hear his excuse and gives no reply. Her attempt to tell her husband how ill she is has failed. She realizes that her husband's mind is not on the subject she has been trying to discuss with him. She has tried to have a mutual conversation with her husband and wanted to communicate to him about the state of her health, but his reactions have only violated the maxims of cooperative conversation.

In chapter seven, Zeena comes back from the doctor's office and is feeling very sick. In the beginning of the chapter, she is sitting by the window in a rigid posture, not having taken off her travelling dress. When Ethan comes home and enters the hallway to hang his wet clothes, he listens for her step and, not hearing anything, calls her name. Again, he does this not because he

is concerned. He is afraid of her and again wants to avoid her. The previous night, when he and Mattie were alone at home, Mattie broke a dish that Zeena had treasured dearly. Ethan and Mattie desperately want to conceal the incident. When Ethan hears no answer from Zeena from upstairs, he hesitates for a while, painfully remembering this. But he wishfully assumes that they can somehow keep the accident secret, and forces himself to go upstairs and opens the door of their room. Then he sees his wife stiffly sitting against the window pane. "Well, Zeena," he ventures[s]." He forces himself to say something. His true desire is not even to see her. He manages to say just that much standing stiffly at the threshold, not even entering the room to go near Zeena, who has come back a long way from the doctor's office. From the beginning, the communication between Ethan and Zeena is thwarted this night. Ethan's first short utterances and action show that he is not welcoming sick Zeena back home. He does not have the slightest desire to say a few comforting words. In this way, his first words and attitude are again not appropriate for the occasion. Since she does not move despite being addressed thus, he continues, "Supper's about ready. Ain't you coming?" He still does not inquire about her health. To Zeena, who is so ill now, it is not important if the supper is ready or not. She has no appetite and does not feel like having a bite. In the opening part, Ethan's mention of the supper without any reference to her health misses the point. Ethan is losing the ground for a cooperative communication. His reference to supper then situationally violates the maxim of quality of being relevant. When Zeena tells Ethan that she cannot eat, he just assumes that she is complaining as usual and does not notice that she is actually very sick this time. He expects that she will soon rise and go downstairs to eat. She still does not stand up, so he feels compelled to say something but can think of "nothing more felicitous" than to say "I presume you're tired after the long ride." By this time, it might have occurred to him that she is seriously ill, but he does not want to admit the fact because he does not even care to think about her; he wants to drive away from his

consciousness that Zeena might be very sick. He tries to assume lightly that she is tired just because of the long ride. His light reference to her trip is irrelevant as a response to Zeena's plea that she has completely lost her appetite. In saying that maybe she is not so sick, he is not even trying to console her. His second exchange with Zeena has also violated the maxim of quality of being relevant. Being exasperated by her husband's insincere reaction, Zeena finally turns her head and tells him solemnly that she is much more ill than Ethan seems to think. If she is really that sick, Ethan feels obligated to care for her. This is the last thing he wants to do, his mind being entirely filled with his infatuation with Mattie. He wonders if he finally needs to face the reality and start caring for his wife. He is not yet ready to accept that responsibility, so her pronouncement that she is very sick gives Ethan "a strange shock of wonder." Again, he does not even say a few words of comfort. Instead he wishes that her words were not true. In his fear that he might have to turn his thoughts away from Mattie and back to Zeena, he briefly says, "I hope that's not so, Zeena." This time, he makes a step or two into the ill-lighted room, but this is not because he wants to get closer to Zeena, but because he has been so startled and frightened. Again his statement completely lacks concern for Zeena and is totally the opposite of what she wants him to say. His words severely violate the maxims of a cooperative communication; he wants to escape from the subject, so he is completely incapable of being as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. The next thing Zeena tells her indifferent husband is that she has complications. In their neighborhood, just having "troubles" with their health is common, but having "complications" is considered fatal. Just for a short while, Ethan feels sorry for Zeena; she looks "so hard and lonely" in the darkness. He lowers his voice and asks her if that was what the new doctor told her. Then she tells him that she has to have an operation. Again what comes to Ethan's mind immediately is not Zeena's welfare. He feels stunned by the prospect of a new large expense. He feels so disturbed by

that possibility that he suddenly seeks a “consolatory short cut,” and says, “What do you know about this doctor anyway? Nobody ever told you that before.” As soon as he has said this, he himself sees that he has made a “blunder” (107-109). His words are not based on any motive whatsoever to be sympathetic. He merely wants to find an easy way out from the gravity of the subject. Now Zeena bursts out, telling Ethan that everybody except him could see the drastic decline of her health and that everybody knows about this doctor.

In all these exchanges between Ethan and Zeena, Ethan averts all the appeals from Zeena to show some concern for her. Every one of Ethan’s reply violates maxims of cooperative communication. These violations manifest Ethan’s lack of love towards Zeena.

In not loving his wife, Ethan is escaping from reality. He fails to see his own share in causing the difficulty of their present circumstance. His contention is that life with an old, ill, silent and ugly wife is unbearable and that he is a victim entrapped with such an unattractive partner. He does not realize that he himself is considerably responsible for his wife’s illness and reticence. The lack of compassion and love from Ethan has precipitated the decline of Zeena’s physical and mental health.

When Zenobia Pierce first came to Frome’s to take care of Ethan’s mother, she used to be a talkative young woman and appeared to be “the very genius of health” (72). Ethan then even felt that her cheerfulness was “music in his ears” (69). In the beginning, Zeena was like Mattie: healthy, cheerful and pretty.

When she married Ethan, she did not expect her life at Frome’s to be so lonely and isolated. Ethan has cut her off from an active human life both by entirely shoving the household chores and caretaking on her and by not having communication with her. She had to “slave” all by herself and could not have any spare time to have active interaction with people outside their household. To make such an isolation worse, in their house, her husband

“never listened” to her (72). He never gave her words of consolation and appreciation for the entire domestic responsibility she shouldered. Without any chance to meet people and to be appreciated by Ethan, Zeena has been badly emotionally deprived. She has not been given an opportunity to revitalize herself through healthy communication with others and her husband. Eventually she too fell silent like Ethan’s mother and has grown “a hundred times bitterer and more discontented” than when they married (131).

Once Zeena has fallen sick and grown older, Ethan still could have tried to improve the relation between him and her, by softening her and helping her regain the cheerfulness and the health she originally had. But failing to see his own guilt in having made her silent, rigid and ill, it does not occur to Ethan that he himself could do something to improve Zeena’s health and their relationship. Instead of extending a helping hand or saying some kind words to her, Ethan keeps on putting her down. By then he even forgets how healthy and helpful Zenobia was to him and his sick mother at first. In his immature brooding, he thinks that he might not have asked her to marry him if his mother had died in spring, not in winter. Instead of appreciating how kind and merry Zenobia was, he now thinks that he rushed into this marriage just because the climate was too oppressing to endure by himself. He has grown resentful and bitter and now hates Zeena. His self-centered one-sided view is that his bright possibilities as a young man have been “sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena’s narrow-mindedness and ignorance.” His beclouded mind now even thinks that the only pleasure left for Zeena is to inflict pain on him. It is narrated that “all the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste” (131). It never dawns on him that such a self-defensive, self-only-centered resentment against her makes her more rigid and unhealthy, which consequently will make it harder for himself.

Ethan Frome is not entrapped in the situation as he thinks he is, but is caught in the vicious cycle of his own escapist egoism. At first when Zenobia came, he escaped immediately from the hardship of day-to-day plodding at

Frome's. He completely shut his eyes and ears to the hardships that young Zenobia started to have there. So Zenobia quickly became sick both emotionally and physically, which in turn made it hard for Ethan, too. When Zenobia became sick, he again refused to attend to her suffering, and her illness aggravated, which made it even more difficult for himself. Next he even started to hate her, seeing her as a pain inflicter and seeing himself as her victim. This has made Zeena much sicker and bitterer, which has made the situation unbearable for himself.

At this point in the novel, Ethan takes a fatal step in this vicious cycle and irrevocably destroys the situation and his relationship with his wife; he is now blindly infatuated with Mattie. Ethan makes Mattie Silver his escape, while Zeena, his wife, is his reality. The more he struggles to escape from the reality, the worse the reality becomes; the more he thinks of Mattie, the less he becomes able to love Zeena. Now just the mention of Zeena paralyzes and benumbs him. By this time he has begun to wish that Zeena is dead. The day Zeena is gone to see the doctor, Ethan indulges himself in thinking how "homelike" the kitchen looks without her. Such thoughts of his freezes Zeena's heart and she grows fatally sick.

In his fantasy about Mattie Silver, he quickly loses his reason and sanity and completely loses his foothold on reality. He "abandons himself" to "dreams" (50). His head becomes "heavy with dreams" (51). He sets "his imagination adrift on the fiction" (90). Shortly before the sleigh incident, he is seized by an "illusion" that he is a single man and is wooing Mattie to marry her (155).

When Ethan and Mattie completely cut themselves off from reality and attempt a complete plunge into their fantasy, the only choice left for them is to commit suicide. Even their suicide, however, fails to take them to "an alternate underworld of death" (Waid 78). Candace Waid states that the cost of "vision" in *Ethan Frome* is "a failure of mortality as well as immortality"; after that incident, Ethan and Mattie are left imprisoned in a living-death, a

fate worse than death. Mattie breaks her spine in this incident and has to live the rest of her life as a maimed person in Ethan and Zenobia Frome's house.

Mattie is the third woman in *Ethan Frome* imprisoned in an isolated living-death. First, Ethan's mother was isolated from people when they stopped to "come by to speak" to her after she was ailed by rheumatism and could not move around anymore (22). Next, Zenobia Pierce became sick and is sacrificed by the neglect of her husband, Ethan Frome. Finally, Ethan sacrifices Mattie. Mattie is robbed of her health and youth in a more drastic way than sickness, in a moment of a suicide attempt.

Ethan, however, would have sacrificed Mattie as he had Zeena even if there had not been the sleigh incident. Mattie is turned into a sick, aged woman ultimately as the result of Ethan's attempt to escape from reality. Even if the two had not tried to kill themselves, Mattie eventually would have lost her youth and health in being involved in a dissatisfying, unhappy triangle relationship. Ethan would not have taken any action to break the triangle, for instance, a divorce, and Mattie would have discovered soon that she too is not loved by him. She has been just used as a pleasant but false dream. To Ethan, Mattie is not a real woman, but merely an illusion to cling to, to turn his eyes from reality. Yet he would have done all he could to keep Mattie. Mattie might have started to ask him to get a divorce, but he is not capable of that, either, because then he would have had to go through the reality of divorce procedure. Even if Ethan somehow would have managed to part with Zeena, or even if Zeena would have died and left Ethan and Mattie free to marry to start a new life by themselves, they would then have had to accommodate themselves to that life. That new life would have been just another reality with works and responsibilities to be taken care of. Mattie would have needed to be truly loved by Ethan. But the way Ethan is egotistic and irresponsible, he would not have succeeded in dealing well with the new reality, either. So he would have easily caused Mattie to lose her cheerfulness and happiness anyway. He would just have repeated the same thing he did to Zenobia

Pierce.

Ethan From's relationship with any woman would not have been fruitful. Critics point out to the unrelenting infertility in the story (Joslin 45; Waid 73-75). They observe the barren vicious cycle of repetition and sameness in the damage done to Zenobia as well as to Mattie Silver.

The sterile relationships and life of the characters in *Ethan Frome* are caused by the immaturity of Ethan and Mattie. Although they are both over twenty years old, they still have not established their identity, have not grown independent, and have not gained a foothold on the reality of life. Susan Goodman points out that Ethan is more child than husband and that Mattie is more suited to be a child of Ethan and Zeena than to replace Zeena as a grown-up spouse (71, 77). Mentally remaining children, Ethan and Mattie crave to escape to a womb-like world of unreality, where there seems to be no labor and striving for living. They do not know that they cannot truly consummate their romance in a fertile life on this earth unless they become ready to accept reality.

In their escape, as Joslin observes, they annihilate themselves and lose their own identity, because they will not be able to find their identity outside the reality they are placed in now (45). Mattie Silver ruins her own identity and life, not being able to let herself go of Ethan. She chooses not to search for her own life, to grow and to establish her own identity, but continues futilely to try to take the place of Zeena. It would have been a sound way out for Mattie to leave Frome's, although then she would have had to strive either to live by herself or to establish a new life with a prospective husband. Such choices would have been much healthier and more fertile for all three of them. These possibilities are strongly suggested by Zeena in the beginning of the novel. Goodman says that, as the only adult in the story, Zeena does her best to give Mattie a chance to leave Frome's. Zeena encourages Mattie to go to young people's dances and thinks that Denis Eady is a nice man as Mattie's suitor (Goodman 77). Zeena says that Ethan and she should not detain Mattie just

for themselves if she has a chance to go somewhere else. But Ethan emphatically denies such possibilities. He contemptuously laughs at the idea, "Denis Eady! If that's all, I guess there's no such hurry to look around for another girl" (38). Ethan's desire to possess Mattie is so strong that shortly before running into the elm, he says to Mattie that he would rather see her dead than letting her marry some other man. On the other hand, however, he knows that he cannot do a thing for her. He admits this saying, "I can't lift a hand for you!" (159).

In this way, Ethan's romantic fantasy for Mattie is not true love, but the manifestation of his self-centeredness. His emotion towards her is mostly a sexual desire for a younger, healthier, better-looking woman than his present wife. His obsession for Mattie is driven by physical sensation. Also he finds her desirable as his maid to take care of his house and his meals. When he spends time alone with Mattie, he is delighted to see the carefully laid table and enjoys hearing Mattie singing over dishes. He thinks that if he keeps this pretty girl as his housewife, his house will be "homelike." To Ethan, Mattie is just a dainty-looking, domestic object to satisfy his physical desire and to make his house physically comfortable. He just wants to use her for his satisfaction without any attempt to base sexual desire and domestic comfort on true love. He does not see that for sexual pleasure to be truly consummated and for domestic comfort to be genuine, there needs to be true love between the members of the family, and that to love his partner, he has to see her as an individual person. Ethan does not think of Mattie as an individual with her own thoughts, and is never truly concerned about how she is and what she thinks.

Mattie is also used to satisfy Ethan's desire for power. He delights in telling her things in an authoritative tone. Just after Mattie broke Zeena's dish, Ethan places the pieces on the shelf in a way that it cannot be easily discovered to have been broken. He thinks that he will glue it later. He tells Mattie that it will be all right and "commands" her to come back and finish

supper. When he sees her assured and relieved by his own words, he feels proud. He has never tasted “such a thrilling sense of mastery” except when he steers a big log from the mountain to his mill (87). Ethan’s joy in exercising authority over Mattie is nothing more than his satisfaction in hauling a log down. He wants to assure himself that he has some power by gaining authority on something or somebody he can totally have control over. He needs such an assurance because he is not mentally mature and secure. Mattie is as convenient as an inanimate log for giving Ethan a false sense of authority.

Goodman observes Mattie to be “possibly the most inarticulate heroine in American literature” (73). She is just a “serviceable creature” (33). In the beginning of the story, she is depicted as having not even enough household skills. She is not able to leave Frome’s unless somebody asks her to marry her because she does not have any skill to earn a living. She is “forgetful and dreamy, and not disposed to take the matter seriously” (36). She is not independent economically and emotionally. Her inability to take care of herself has driven her to the tragedy of clinging to Ethan, who in actuality has done her no service. Having no sensibility to see the reality, she is in an illusion that Ethan has loved her. Before their suicidal attempt, she cries to Ethan, “There’s never anybody been good to me but you” (159). Zeena has been good to her in being willing to let her go and encouraging her to go outside to develop herself and pursue her own life. Denis Eady has been nice to her. But having no strength of character to get out of the womb-like fantasy at the Frome’s, Mattie Silver loses the chance to make her own way out to a healthy adult life.

Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver destroy each other’s life by confining the other in the escapist fantasy world. They do not see that such a world does not exist on this earth nor in the underworld. They have refused to stand on reality and have chosen to remain completely passive like embryos.

In her introduction, Cynthia Griffin Wolff states that *Ethan Frome*

addresses “the lethal inclination to passivity that dwells deeply buried in every human heart.” “The insidious call of deadly inertia” allures human hearts to passivity and idleness. She points to the temptation of retrogression and even states that there is a “sensuous attraction in the notion of annihilation — of comforting nothingness.” She questions if the story is “a lesson about the brutal forces at work in every human life” (xiii-xvi). It is. There is always a call of Siren either to death itself or to a non-existent fantasy world. In both death and fantasy, one remains completely passive and idle, being completely exempted from daily responsibilities. These two possibilities are both sensuous to essentially idle human hearts.

But the lesson in *Ethan Frome* is that the price of succumbing to this call is dear. The dearest part of the price of yielding to passivity and idleness is to lose the strength of will to truly love others and oneself, as we see in *Ethan Frome*. The consequence is death or the utmost desolation. The barren landscape in *Ethan Frome* symbolizes the infertility and the hell of the lack of true love, brought about by escaping to passivity and idleness of mind.

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