

Candidate A evidence

Prose fiction

Discuss some of the ways in which the theme of oppression is explored in two novels or three short stories. (SQA 2021 literary study assessment resource)

'Ethan Frome' and 'Summer' by Edith Wharton are two novels with settings of important thematic significance, most notably looking at the theme of oppression. and the effect it has on setting and the characters' life choices. Both novels are set in the economically depressed and geographically isolated New England during the late 19th century where Charity longs to escape the boredom and oppressive atmosphere of North Dormer. Ethan is also isolated and stuck in the lifeless town of Starkfield. The contrast in setting between Starkfield and Springfield, as well as North Dormer and Nettleton, emphasises the significance that the theme of oppression has on the characters. Wharton is masterful in conveying this theme in her use of setting and, in particular, the juxtaposition of setting which creates tensions that will define the main protagonists.

The oppressive setting of winter clearly plays a key role in Ethan Frome's life choices and is even the reason he is stuck in a loveless marriage with Zeena: "It would not have happened if his mother died in spring instead of winter." Our first introduction to Ethan shows us how Wharton uses the oppressive setting as a metaphor for the character's inner struggles: "[Ethan] seemed a part of the mute melancholic landscape", and "guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters". This highlights how the theme of oppression is used to further characterise Ethan's feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The main conflict is revealed during Ethan's two mile trek through the snowy hills to escort his wife's cousin Mattie home from a dance. His feelings for Mattie are revealed however, he is married to another woman, Zeena. The contrast of feelings towards Zeena and Mattie, as well as the oppressive nature of their marriage is revealed through setting. Ethan clearly likes Mattie's natural beauty and this is suggested by setting: "there were other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, that drew [Ethan and Mattie] together". The powerful imagery that follows this statement reflects Ethan's passionate feelings and shows how he views Mattie as pure and youthful. However, this is heavily contrasting with his view of Zeena. When they arrive home, Zeena greets them at the door, and she appears angry and witch-like. Zeena's final words of the night reflect her power and how oppressive she is on Ethan's happiness: "You might a shook off that snow outside", her casual comment instantly kills the magic of the night.

When Ethan picks Mattie up from the dance, she mentions she saw Ned hale and Ruth Varnum sledding that evening and how happy they looked Ethan relates that to him and Mattie and promises to take her, but he doesn't and it acts as a symbol of possibility and excitement. This shows how setting impacts Ethan – the exhilarating winter sport mirrors Ethan's pent-up emotions.

The oppressive nature of his relationship with Zeena is highlighted after she demands Mattie leaves, causing Ethan to be heart-broken and lose all happiness. Ethan and Mattie end up at the top of the sledding hill, but this time it is no longer a symbol full of majestic beauty and hope, but the oppressive setting only reflects their despair: "they might have been in their

coffins underground.” The use of snow and the elm tree as a means of suicide holds great significance – the place that once offered hope and possibility now offers nothing but death.

Wharton successfully uses the oppressive nature of setting to illustrate the budding relationship between Ethan Frome and Mattie, and Ethan’s inner suffering caused by his oppressive marriage and the despair and hopelessness of the characters.

Like Ethan, Charity Royall is bound to a small, empty town that’s oppressive setting causes her to be miserable and alienated. Not only does North Dormer have connotations of sleepiness, but when Charity sees an outsider in town, it highlights the smallness and insularity of North Dormer as well as the unsophisticated nature of the people living there who are devoid of life, culture, excitement and are completely isolated from the world around them.

The oppressive nature of Charity’s past and her background of “being brought down from the Mountain” illustrates her alienation and role as an outsider in North Dormer. Her dissatisfaction is highlighted as she repeats “how I hate everything” and this idea is emphasised in her reference to the library where she works as a “prison house”.

The only place Charity feels a slight sense of belonging is in a threshold between the Mountain and North Dormer. The summer meadows illustrate how when she is away from the oppressive setting that is North Dormer, she feels a better sense of belonging, and it is instead a place of warmth where Charity can grow.

Charity’s oppressive view of status and superiority is used to emphasise her feelings of isolation and not belonging. As Lawyer Royall is from Nettleton, he “ruled in North Dormer” and is high on the social hierarchy. And therefore Lucius – the focus of Charity’s affection and a visitor to North Dormer – is higher up as he is from somewhere bigger than Nettleton. This causes Charity to feel worthless, inferior to those around her.

Charity’s wish to escape the oppressive life of North Dormer is what drives her to make Lucius go to “the glittering streets of Nettleton” with her. Charity views Nettleton as the embodiment of sophistication and big city life, and to a small degree can see herself as Annabel Balch. This shows the effect of North Dormer and how its oppressive nature is used to highlight Charity’s feelings of isolation and alienation. It is here that tension is created in the characterisation of Charity, as although she doesn’t want to be like the other girls who manipulate men for material gifts and rewards, the events and actions thus far show that she is falling into a trap that many other girls, like Julia Hawes, have fallen for before. When Charity is able to escape the oppression of North Dormer at the deserted cottage, this is once again another threshold where she can truly be happy – highlighting the effect setting has on her emotions.

The theme of oppression is shown in the role status plays in Charity’s life and the limitations it has on her. When Lawyer Royall confronts Charity and Lucius at the cottage, “they all know what she is and what she came from”. Her whole world flips from a bright and life-affirming one, to a cold colourless one which is grim. The change in setting illustrates Charity’s realisation that her ‘relationship’ is coming to an end and her status means she can never truly be with Lucius forever.

Charity has a moment of epiphany while Lawyer Royall is asleep in their hotel room after their small intimate wedding. She’s due to Lucius’s baby, but Royall wishes to take care of

her. For the first time, she sees Royall's strength, kindness, and an understanding in his actions. He is offering her what she needs, but not what she wants. Her inability to achieve her desires highlights the theme of oppression and how it affects her chance at happiness and life choices.

The final line of 'Summer' puts the entire story into a juxtaposition with the opening line. The girl standing on the doorstep is doing so under the sky of a warm summer afternoon. She is alone outside of the house belonging to Lawyer Royall. Here is the same girl and the same red house but under the sky of a cool autumnal night. The girl and the owner are no longer separated, but united as 'they'. This shows that only when she accepted the limits placed on her by her oppressive social status and her isolating setting, was she able to have a slight sense of belonging.

Through the use of oppressive settings in each of the novels – Starkfield in 'Ethan Frome' and North Dormer in 'Summer' – the main protagonists are limited from growth. Ethan ends up becoming more isolated than ever before, and Charity has to learn to just accept her fate and let go of her dream of escaping her lonely, lifeless town. Ethan is an anti-hero who lacks action and his toxic marriage and failed relationship causes him to become nothing but a "ruin of a man" who is bound to the oppressive town life in Starkfield. Therefore, the theme of oppression is explored through setting and relationships and has a significant effect on Ethan and Charity's tragic and miserable outcomes.

Candidate B evidence

Prose fiction

Discuss some of the ways in which the theme of oppression is explored in two novels or three short stories. (SQA 2021 literary study assessment resource)

The novels 'Ethan Frome' and 'Summer', by Edith Wharton, explore the theme of oppression. Both protagonists, Ethan and Charity, are trapped in a repressive New England setting, lacking in any real importance and significance, similar to many of the people who live there. Ethan Frome is mainly oppressed by his vindictive wife Zeena, and his sense of duty and obligation towards her. Charity Royall is oppressed by her lack of identity and belonging which consumes her and leaves her unable to develop beyond being quite a plain and unestablished character. In both 'Ethan Frome' and 'Summer', the oppression of the protagonists has dire consequences: Ethan ends up trapped in Starkfield, forced to look after his wife and her cousin, and Charity ends up trapped in North Dormer, married to her father-figure and doomed to lead a life of unfulfilling subservience.

In Starkfield, as the name suggests – a place symbolically devoid of life, bare and empty – we are introduced to the character of Ethan Frome. Wharton's clever use of setting runs cohesively with her development of her characters. She uses the narrator, the outsider to Starkfield, to describe Ethan as "towering" and a "ruin of a man" with a face that is "bleak and unapproachable". This compares with the descriptions of Starkfield, a place where "the vitality of the climate" so clearly contrasts with "the deadness of the community". Starkfield, as a setting, is oppressive, as it is a place devoid of hope and opportunity. We have reason, as a reader, to believe that Ethan, despite living in this backwards, dead-end place, at one point had dreams of escape, dreams of being free from this oppressive place. We are told that he went to college, where ultimately he tried and failed to "jolly" women, but nonetheless, this idea that he wants to be educated and intelligent, as a way to escape Starkfield is created. However, Ethan is presented as being quite dull and definitely uneducated. He fancies Mattie, his wife Zeena's cousin, and in his attempts to woo her, he comes across as inarticulate and stupid. When walking back home to the Frome farm, after collecting Mattie after a local dance, he tries to think of something interesting and bold to say, but instead all that comes out is "Come along." Frome's inability to articulate his thoughts and feelings is a result of his oppression and subsequently add to it.

Ethan's wife, Zeena, is a cruel and calculating character, the antagonist to his protagonist, the villain to his hero and is largely responsible for much of Ethan's oppression. The grounds for their marriage are built on shaky foundations, as Ethan only asked Zeena to marry him after his parents had died and he didn't want to be "alone" on that "bare and empty" farm. Zeena, knowing this, uses Ethan's fear of being alone as a tool to impose her superiority in their relationship. When Zeena "too fell silent", Ethan ends up just as alone as he was when he was by himself, so when Mattie, a "bit of hopeful young life" comes to the farm, he latches on to her as a mental escape. His attraction to her comes about as she is everything Zeena deprives him of: love, warmth, and affection. Zeena is "tall and angular", with a "projecting wrist and puckering throat", whereas Mattie has a "light figure" and is described as birdlike. Despite, to the reader, it being seemingly obvious, if not morally conflicting that if Ethan is to get his shot at happiness, he should leave Zeena and escape with Mattie – he doesn't. He doesn't do the obvious thing because he is so entrenched in his duty to Zeena; his passivity is directly related to his wife's oppressive nature.

The climactic moment in the novel, occurs when Zeena tells Ethan that Mattie has to leave, which is clearly another act of oppression. Despite Ethan being so naïve and passive throughout, he finally clicks that it is a “plot hatched” and becomes self-aware that he does not, and will not, ever have the power in his relationship. He despises his wife for this, and they seemed to “dart venom” at each other and he realises that “she was no longer the listless creature that had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding.” This realisation that he has been manipulated by his wife should evoke at least a somewhat fiery response, some action, but Ethan is defeated. The next day, however, he does have some fire in him, as he insists on taking Mattie to the train station. The “whiny” resistance from Zeena is shut down by Ethan, as he finally articulates that he is “taking her” with some power and dominance in his tone. At this point, it seems to be increasingly possible that Ethan could escape with Mattie, yet his kind nature and obligations to Zeena, once again, thwart him. Even though Mattie confesses her love to Ethan: “I used to think of it sometimes, summer nights, when the moon was so bright I couldn’t sleep.” This confession should drown out any thoughts of Zeena and the farm, yet when Ethan and Mattie decide to kill themselves: “Right into the big elm, so’t we’d never have to leave each other”, yet Zeena is still there and he thinks of her face with its “monstrous lineaments” and it causes the path towards their goal, the big elm and death, to wobble and ultimately fail. Ethan’s failing in what he believes to be his final actions are due to his oppression outweighing his desire to escape.

The tragic consequence of the “Big Smash”, leave Mattie and Ethan’s relationship in tatters, Ethan’s chance of escape completely ruined and yet, Zeena, is left completely unscathed. Right after the crash, she went and took Mattie and “brought her back to the farm”, which made Ethan follow in pursuit and get everyone back into her domain where she holds the power. Ethan, back in the oppressive and unrelenting Frome farm, is described to have had “the worst” of it all as he carries the suffering of three on his shoulders. The last thing we hear of the Frome’s, is that “there’s not much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard”, which is a truly miserable ending as Ethan may as well be dead in this oppressive outcome.

In North Dormer, the place “left of men” that has “no connection to modern communities”, we are introduced to the self-centred and naïve, Charity Royall. When Charity was a young girl, Mr Royall “brought her down from the mountain” and introduced her to the apparently more sophisticated North Dormer. Charity, due to her abstract parentage and unusual appearance, sticks out in North Dormer like a sore thumb, causing her to feel like she doesn’t belong and causing her to feel oppressed. Like ‘Ethan Frome’, Charity also seems to want education, as she manipulates Lawyer Royall into getting her a job at the library. It is here where Charity meets Lucius Harney, an outsider to North Dormer and partly responsible for Charity’s oppression. Lucius Harney sees Charity for what she is, an outsider, and sees her through the same lens he looks at the old houses in the area through, with a sordid fascination. Charity, not aware that Lucius isn’t interested in her romantically, entirely misconstrues his seeming interest and thinks it is love. She craves “the sweetness of dependence” and “all the old frozen woes seemed to melt in her”, meaning that she is opening herself up for love, however this will not be the case and Lucius will not remove her oppression but will only fuel it.

The major contrast between Lucius and Charity is due to their different backgrounds. Charity is “humiliated” that she came from the Mountain, yet Lucius, who comes from the city, will

never understand this feeling of non-belonging. Charity eventually becomes self-aware that they are too different to be together as “education and opportunity had divided them by a width that no effort of hers could bridge” and that her “ignorance” only heightens her lack of identity. Throughout the novel, Charity becomes more mature, less innocent through her affair with Lucius Harney. Charity believed that her connection to him would free her from oppression but rather it just destroyed her chance to escape. When the relationship between the two breaks down, Harney’s true nature is revealed, “his face was a dim blur” and “his voice seemed like a stranger’s”, reinforcing to Charity that she does not belong anywhere and her sense of oppression reaches its peak.

The aftermath in which Charity decides to flee up the mountain to reconnect with her mother only to find her dead adds to Charity’s hopelessness and keeps her oppressed despite her trying to escape. Pregnant and alone on the mountain, not “wanting to add another life to the rest of misery”, it seems Charity is out of options. That is until Lawyer Royall comes to ‘rescue’ her. Charity is so alone and desperate that she is glad to have “someone near her in the awful emptiness” and is appreciative of their “sudden nearness to each other”. In contrast to the beginning of the novel, when Charity feels “a sense of disgust” towards him due to his attempted seduction of her when she was 15, and in spite of two rejected proposals of marriage, she is now too entirely oppressed and broken down to resist him. This forced acceptance and the “ineffable relief” she feels, seems like it could be Charity’s happy ending. However, the ending is far from happy. This young girl has been tricked and used, is manipulated using her desperation to belong and will now forever be trapped with Lawyer Royall, living a life which will no doubt be entrenched in duty, obligation, unhappiness, and oppression.

‘Summer’ and ‘Ethan Frome’ are collectively powerful in exploring the theme of oppression and the dire consequences it has on Charity and Ethan. By the end of the novels, both outcomes are similar, except Charity’s is dressed up a little better, but both of them are still equally oppressed in their inability to escape duty and obligation. The complete and utter misery in ‘Ethan Frome’ and ‘Summer’ is prominent as it has been brought about through many aspects of the novels – the setting, the relationships, and the backgrounds are so entrenched in the characters themselves that the oppression is – ultimately – inescapable for both of these characters.