

A GUIDE TO Ethan Frome

Edith Wharton

*He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape,
an incarnation of its frozen woe.*

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Ethan Frome is a bitter and ironic tragedy of three people trapped in a setting they cannot escape.

Setting: The main action of the novel takes place in the late nineteenth century in Starkfield, Massachusetts. It is recounted by a narrator some twenty-four years later.

Protagonist: Ethan Frome, an inarticulate small farmer and sawmill operator, who struggles to express his love for a young woman who comes to live with him and his mean-spirited, hypochondriacal wife.

Conflicts: Ethan's internal conflict between his longing to fulfill his secret romantic dreams and his inability to articulate those dreams, even to himself; an external conflict between Ethan's domineering wife, Zeena, and the lovers, Ethan and Mattie; an external conflict between some of the characters and their crushing burden of poverty.

Resolution: Ethan and Mattie, forced to part, decide to commit suicide; their attempt fails, Mattie is paralyzed, and they end up living in meager circumstances, watched over by Zeena.

Themes: People struggle in vain to realize their dreams. Poverty imprisons people and forces them to lead lives of "quiet desperation."

Of Special Note: *Ethan Frome*, unlike Wharton's novels of high-society manners, has been compared to Greek tragedy, and students may find it similar to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the way circumstances bring the two lovers to a tragic end.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The vocabulary of *Ethan Frome* should pose few difficulties for students reading at grade level, although making inferences about the characters' feelings and motives can sometimes be difficult. Some students may need help following the time sequence of the plot. Wharton employs some New England dialect, and a few contemporary cultural references may need to be explained.

Students may find the psychological realism of the novel slow-moving but intense. Just as playgoers can be exhilarated by a tragedy such as *Romeo and Juliet*, so readers of *Ethan Frome* can find it an uplifting experience.

BACKGROUND

Historical Incident. Students may be interested to know that Edith Wharton was most likely influenced by a real-life coasting (sledding) accident that took place in Lenox, Massachusetts, in 1904. Four girls and a boy, each about eighteen years old, went coasting after school on a Friday afternoon. They crashed into a lamppost at the bottom of the steep Courthouse Hill in Lenox. One of the girls, Hazel Crosby, was killed, and another, Kate Spencer, had her face badly scarred. Edith Wharton's country home was in Lenox, and she later came to know Kate Spencer when they both worked at the Lenox Library.

Urban Poverty. Why is Mattie so terrified of moving out on her own to the city? As grueling as farm life was at the time of the novel, city life for young women was usually no better. According to *The Working Girls of Boston*, by Carroll D. Wright, director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor in 1877, young women who worked in shops and factories in Boston had to stand all day in poorly ventilated rooms with little light. They were usually not allowed to talk, were given little time for lunch, and suffered a wide variety of health problems, both physical and mental. Wages were extraordinarily low. In 1880, for example, Wright reported that the average *yearly* income for a "working girl of Boston" was \$269.07 and that basic expenses (food, clothing, lodging, medical care) averaged \$261.30—"leaving a margin for everything outside of the absolute necessities of life of \$7.77."

Nathaniel Hawthorne. Critics have pointed out that the shadow of the masterful novelist and short-story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) falls across *Ethan Frome*. Hawthorne's short story "Ethan Brand" (1851) tells the tragic tale of a New England man who discovers the secret of the Unpardonable Sin—the separation of mind and heart—and knows he is guilty of it. He commits suicide by incinerating himself in a

limekiln; when he is found, all that is left of him is a piece of marble in the shape of a heart. Zeena's name recalls Zenobia in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). The historical Zenobia, queen of Palmyra in the latter part of the third century A.D., arrogantly and unwisely confronted the Roman Empire. Hawthorne's Zenobia (modeled also on the writer and social reformer Margaret Fuller) is a proud and commanding woman who is defeated in love and drowns herself.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Narrator, a young visiting engineer who pieces together the story of Ethan Frome from various sources in Starkfield.

Ethan Frome, an impoverished New England farmer and sawmill operator, twenty-eight years old at the time of the main story. He is an inarticulate man of passionate feelings, romantic longings, and unrealized dreams.

Harmon Gow, former Starkfield stagecoach driver and "village oracle."

Mrs. Ned Hale (Ruth Varnum), the narrator's talkative widowed landlady.

Denis Eady, cheerful young man who admires and flirts with Mattie in the main story and later becomes a well-to-do grocer.

Mattie Silver, Zeena Frome's cousin who comes to live with the Fromes. Lively yet delicate, she becomes the object of Ethan's romantic yearnings.

Zeena (Zenobia) Frome, Ethan's wife, seven years his senior. A bitter, domineering woman, jealous and fearful, obsessed with her own illnesses.

Andrew Hale, Starkfield house builder who, like Ethan, has fallen on hard times.

Jotham Powell, Frome's hired hand, a man of few words.

PLOT

The short novel, or novella, opens in Starkfield, Massachusetts, as the narrator, a visiting engineer, tells the **frame story** from the first-person **point of view**. He says that he first saw Ethan Frome several years earlier and gradually gathered bits of Frome's story from various people. Harmon Gow told him that Frome's terrible "smash-up" had occurred twenty-four years earlier. The narrator emphasizes the effect of the bare, wintry **setting** on the "deadness of the community." He then describes his meeting with Frome, who is hired as his driver. He lends Frome a book but cannot penetrate the farmer's reticence. When Frome and the narrator are caught in a snowstorm, however, they take shelter at Frome's farm. Then ellipses indicate a **flashback** to twenty-four years earlier.

Chapter 1. The **inner story** begins, told from the third-person point of view. The **exposition** reveals the

novel's central **external conflict**—Ethan's silent battle against his wife, Zeena, over his love for Mattie, who has come to live with the Fromes as Zeena's helper. When Ethan goes to town to escort Mattie home from a church dance, he stands alone outside the church and secretly watches her whirling with young Denis Eady. In Mattie, Frome has discovered someone with whom he can talk and express his wonder at nature. Mattie, however, is unsuited to farm work, and Ethan often does her chores for her. Zeena, sickly and whiny, has become suspicious and has suggested that Mattie may soon leave to marry Denis Eady. Still looking in at the dancers, Ethan is filled with misgivings.

Chapter 2. Ethan watches with secret exultation as Mattie talks with Eady but rejects his offer of a sleigh ride. Ethan catches up to Mattie, and, as they stand arm in arm, Mattie remarks that she would like to go coasting (sledding) one night. Ethan agrees to go coasting with her the following night, and Mattie **foreshadows** the end of the novel when she says that her friends Ned and Ruth were almost killed coasting into an elm tree. In the novel's main **internal conflict**, Ethan's love for Mattie fills him with elation, but he is unable to express his feelings openly. Ethan and Mattie arrive home, and seeing the Frome family graveyard—a **symbol** of the burden of the past that Ethan carries, the long chain of ancestors that binds him to the land—gives Ethan a sense of stability. Zeena, who says she feels "too mean" to sleep, meets them at the door, and Ethan reluctantly follows Zeena into their bedroom.

Chapter 3. The tension rises as a surprising **complication** develops. When Ethan enters the house at midday, Zeena is dressed and packed, ready to spend the night with her Aunt Martha Pierce in Bettsbridge. Absorbed in the details of her own illnesses, Zeena says she is going there to see a new doctor. Ethan, thinking only of the possibility of a night alone with Mattie, makes an excuse so that he will not have to drive Zeena: He says that he needs to see the builder Andrew Hale to collect a payment and that Jotham, the hired man, can drive Zeena.

Chapter 4. Zeena leaves. She is further **characterized** as we learn that she had nursed Ethan's mother and won his gratitude. Zeena and Ethan then married and planned to move to a town where Ethan could pursue a career as an engineer. They could not sell the Frome farm, however, and Zeena, disappointed and resentful at her married life, grew taciturn and sickly. The main story continues as Ethan, regretting that he mentioned obtaining cash from Hale, drives to Hale's lumberyard to ask for a small payment. He is not surprised when Hale refuses. Ethan returns home, and at supper that evening, Zeena's name keeps disconcerting both Ethan and Mattie. The house cat, a **symbol** of Zeena, knocks one of Zeena's precious possessions, a pickle dish, to the floor, and it shatters. Mattie fears the consequences when Zeena discovers the broken dish, but Ethan plans to glue the pieces together and later buy a replacement.

Chapter 5. The single scene in this chapter is tense with repressed emotion, and Wharton uses several methods of **characterization**: She shows us Ethan's and Mattie's actions; she reveals the characters' effects on each other (when Mattie blushes, for example); she tells how they look and how they speak ("uncertainly," for example); and she reveals Ethan's (but not Mattie's) private thoughts and feelings. After dinner, Ethan tells Mattie to sit in Zeena's chair. She does so but seems uneasy and moves to another chair to see her sewing better. The cat jumps into Zeena's chair and watches the couple "with narrowed eyes." Ethan and Mattie converse easily, and Ethan feels as if they were married. When Ethan reaches out to touch the fabric Mattie is sewing, the cat suddenly springs at a mouse and sets Zeena's chair rocking, as if Zeena were somehow present in the room. Ethan kisses the fabric in his hand, but Mattie stands up and puts away her sewing things. They put out the lamp and bid each other goodnight. Ethan realizes that during the entire evening he has never even touched Mattie's hand. Mattie has not indicated openly that she recognizes Ethan's feelings for her.

Chapter 6. At breakfast the next morning Ethan is happy with his vision of how life with Mattie might be. He plans to haul a load of lumber to the village in the afternoon, when the icy roads may be more passable, and to send Jotham to pick up Zeena. Icy rain and an injury to one of the horses delay the trip to the village, where he also wants to buy glue to repair the broken pickle dish. He eventually drives to the village and unloads the lumber as fast as he can but loses time buying the glue. When he returns home, Zeena has already arrived and gone to her room.

Chapter 7. When Ethan asks Zeena to come to supper, she tells him that she is suffering from "complications," that she needs an operation, and that the new doctor told her to hire a girl to do all her work. She announces that the hired girl will arrive tomorrow and that she has agreed to pay her one dollar extra. This news fills Ethan with anger and dismay, and they argue fiercely. When Zeena says she intends to send Mattie away, Ethan is overwhelmed by his hatred for Zeena, yet he makes no effective response. He sits down to supper with Mattie but, unable to eat, embraces her, kisses her, and reveals that Zeena wants her to leave. Zeena appears, eats a substantial supper, and discovers the broken pickle dish. Ethan blames the cat, but Mattie admits taking the dish to set a pretty table. Zeena, infuriated, rages at Mattie for taking the one thing she most treasured.

Chapter 8. Ethan rages inwardly against the prospect of being tied to such a bitter woman for the rest of his life. He remembers a man who escaped to the West with the woman he loved; the man's wife divorced him and prospered. He begins writing a note to Zeena outlining such a plan but realizes that the farm and the mill are mortgaged and that he has no money at all to start a new life. Trapped, he sees himself as "a prisoner for life." He falls asleep thinking of coasting with Mattie.

In the morning, Ethan is unable to stop Zeena's plan to have Mattie's trunk sent on ahead with Daniel Byrne. He thinks of going to the West with Mattie, but he needs funds to pay for the trip. On his way to approach Hale again for money, he meets Mrs. Hale, who speaks to him kindly. Suddenly Ethan realizes that he was going to try to take advantage of the Hales' sympathy. He turns and walks slowly back to the farm.

Chapter 9. The plot comes to a **climax**. After dinner, Ethan asserts that he, not Jotham, will drive Mattie to the train, directly contradicting Zeena. They leave in the sleigh, but Ethan drives to Shadow Pond, where they reminisce about a church picnic. As the sun sets, they return to the Starkfield road. Mattie tells Ethan she found the letter he had started to write the night before, and she shows it to him. He tells her that he wishes he could go with her, but he cannot—and she tears up the letter. They profess their deep feeling for each other, and Ethan says he would almost rather she were dead than married to someone else.

They remember their plan to go coasting, and Ethan suggests they do it now. They find a sled among some spruces and coast down the hill. Exhilarated, they climb back up the hill and embrace, unable to part, as the clock strikes five. Suddenly, Mattie says that she wants Ethan to take her down the hill again, this time not missing the elm tree—so that they will "never come up any more." Ethan is astounded, but the thought of his life with Zeena is unbearable. He takes the front seat on the sled and crashes head-on into the tree. A few moments later, he regains consciousness, hears Mattie whisper his name, and moans. Ironically, the lovers have not died.

In the **resolution**, the narrator resumes the first-person **frame story** at the point where he left off in the prologue—entering the Frome house during the snowstorm. He is introduced to a tall, slatternly woman—Zeena—and to a smaller woman sitting immobile in a chair—Mattie. The narrator returns the next day to talk with Mrs. Hale. She says that she stayed with Mattie all night after the crash, but she breaks off before revealing what Mattie said to her. Zeena stayed with Ethan and eventually took Mattie back to the farm, where she has remained ever since. Mrs. Hale feels that Mattie has soured, that Zeena has shouldered the burden of caring for Ethan and Mattie, and that Ethan has probably suffered the most, especially when the two women argued. She reveals that she thinks Mattie would have been better off dead, implying that this is what Mattie said to her on the night of the smash-up. She sees little difference between the Fromes in the farmhouse and the Fromes in the graveyard.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The major elements of *Ethan Frome*—characters, conflicts, theme, style—seem to have grown naturally out of its **setting**:

- The harsh New England landscape dominates the lives of those forced to battle it every day. Some **characters** are as hard and as unforgiving as their environment; those with weak or romantic temperaments are destroyed.
- Rural poverty underlies one of the novel's **conflicts**; the setting also reinforces our sense that the characters are trapped, just as surely as the Fromes' farm is frozen in the winter snow.
- The **style** is as spare, straightforward, and unadorned as the granite landscape.

Students in discussion groups or doing individual research projects might focus on some of the following activities.

1. Investigating the Historical Background

One of the interesting questions raised by the character of Mattie in the novel concerns the position of women in turn-of-the-century American society. Students could investigate any of the following topics:

- the economic and social problems women faced (such as low wages and health concerns) and the psychological effects of the limited options open to them
- the differences between the conditions of urban and rural women at that time (farm workers and factory workers, for example)
- the social and cultural changes that have taken place since and how the world of *Ethan Frome* compares with the world today

2. Evaluating Characters and Decisions

Discussion groups might focus on one or more of the following questions dealing with the novel's characters:

- Are the characters of Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena true to life?
- Do Ethan and Mattie make wise decisions? What alternatives might they have considered?
- How are Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena like or unlike other characters in books or movies?

3. Making a Time Line

Students might make a time line that identifies the sequence (not the exact dates) of the major events of the frame and inner stories of *Ethan Frome*.

MEET THE WRITER

Edith Newbold Jones Wharton (1862–1937) was born in New York City into a wealthy and distinguished family and was educated by private tutors. In 1885, she married Edward (“Teddy”) Wharton, and the

couple maintained residences in New York; Newport, Rhode Island; Paris; and Lenox, Massachusetts. After their divorce in 1913, Edith Wharton settled permanently in Paris where, during World War I, she was actively involved in war-relief work.

Wharton published a variety of books, beginning with a collection of short stories in 1899. Her best-known novels, besides *Ethan Frome* (1911), include *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Age of Innocence* (1920, Pulitzer Prize), and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). Strongly influenced by Henry James, Wharton believed, as she wrote in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), “every great novel must first of all be based on a profound sense of moral values, and then constructed with a classical unity and economy of means.” Wharton also wrote travel books, poems, essays, and an autobiography.

READ ON

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton’s celebrated novel of manners tells a story of thwarted love in New York’s highest social circles. A noted film version appeared in 1993.

Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*. Feature film starring Liam Neeson and Patricia Arquette (available from Buena Vista Home Video, 1992).

Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*. Sound recording of the novel on four audiocassettes, read by Richard Thomas (Dove Audio, 1993).

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*. A great novel (1847) of thwarted love set on England’s Yorkshire moors. Wharton said she was influenced by this passionate novel when she was writing *Ethan Frome*. There are obvious similarities between the two novels.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand.” A classic short story, featuring a tragic hero whose heart is literally made of stone.

Kate Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings.” A short story of a woman’s assertion of independence and individuality.

Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. “Local color” sketches (1896) of Maine that Wharton considered too “rose-colored” to be authentic, compared with the heart-rending realism of *Ethan Frome*.

Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man.” A dramatic lyric in blank verse about a defeated man who is not at home in the modern world.

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