Ethan Frome Study Guide

Ethan Frome by Edith Wharton

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Introduction

Critics have called *Ethan Frome* the most carefully constructed of Edith Wharton's novels, and have praised the economy of its language and its intensity. The novel is a naturalistic-that is, unsentimental-portrait of emotional frigidity set in the New England winter. Young Mattie Silver arrives in the mountain village of Starkfield to help with housekeeping for her cousin Zeena, the sickly, cantankerous wife of Ethan Frome. Ethan, who has long been resigned to the care of his ailing wife and farm, is drawn to Mattie's youthful beauty and good humor. When Zeena realizes their mutual attraction, she arranges to engage a less attractive companion and to have Mallie sent away. Unable to bear the idea of parting, the lovers attempt to kill themselves by sledding into a tree. The attempt is a failure, and it leaves Mattie and Ethan crippled for life and condemned to Zeena's care. Early reviewers praised Wharton's style but were dismayed by the novel's bleakness and the inability of her characters to find a way out of their situation. Later critics were even harsher in their evaluations, citing numerous inconsistencies and debating whether Ethan Frome himself is truly tragic or simply morally inert. All the same, this study in frustration, loneliness, and moral responsibility became a popular favorite, somewhat to the surprise of its author, and is frequently taught at the high school and college level.

Author Biography

Edith Wharton was born January 24, 1862, to a wealthy New York family. She showed an interest in writing and literature from an early age. Despite the attempts of her family to discourage her, Edith regularly wrote poems and short stories, some of which were published in magazines such as *Scribner's* and *Harper's.* Walter Berry, a family friend, encouraged her ambitions and would remain her lifelong confidante. Although she recognized that the culture of New York's established gentry was anemic and repressive, Edith was just as repulsed by the philistinism of the newly rich who replaced it. She preferred traveling with her parents to Europe, where she met Henry James, who became her mentor and critic. In 1885 Edith married a Boston banker named Edward Wharton. Although her parents approved the choice, Edward was ten years older than Edith was, and physically and emotionally fragile. Edith's aversion to society life and her disappointment over her marriage drove her to devote more time to her writing.

Wharton's first book, which discussed house decor, was published in 1897 and launched her career as a writer. From 1902 until the end of her life, Wharton would publish a book a year. *The House of Mirth,* the Story of a girl who cannot reconcile her position in society with moral respect, appeared in 1905 and became a best seller. *Ethan Frome,* the most often read of Wharton's novels, was published in 1911.

The years from 1905 to 1913 were tumultuous ones for Wharton. Edward's diagnosis as a manic-depressive and his increasing instability led to the couple's divorce in 1913. In 1907 Wharton began a deeply satisfying three-year love affair with Morton Fullerton, a friend of Henry James. Although she would maintain an estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, after 1913 Wharton made Europe her permanent home. During and after the First World War she worked tirelessly to raise funds for a variety of causes in France and Belgium. She wrote several novels based on these experiences, but they are not considered among her best. Wharton's literary triumph was *The Age of Innocence* (1921), which won her a Pulitzer Prize.

Wharton is known especially as a novelist of manners, but she also composed poetry, criticism, short stories, and travel pieces. Her themes include the corrupting power of wealth, social pressure among the poor, and the essential rightness of moral action. Her work was sometimes lost in the shadow of that of Henry James, and her later writing never matched the quality of her earlier efforts. Some critics objected to her negative portrayals of men. But the complex psychology of her characters and her keen satiric sense are unparalleled in American literature. In 1921 Wharton became the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Yale. She died of a heart attack on August II, 1937, in St. Brice-sous-Fort, France.

Plot Summary

Ethan Frome is the story of a man who, following the death of his father, gives up his education and other opportunities to return to the family farm in Starkfield, Massachusetts, to support his ailing mother. When his mother dies, Ethan, overcome by loneliness, impulsively marries Zeena Pierce, an older cousin who helped nurse his dying mother. Within a year of their marriage, Zeena becomes ill and Ethan must again assume the role of caregiver and give up his dreams of moving to a large town and becoming an engineer. Ethan's outlook changes, however, when Zeena's cousin, Mattie Silver, comes to live with them as Zeena's aid. She shares Ethan's sense of wonder and sensitivity to the appeal of natural beauty. Mattie is every thing that Zeena is not. She restores Ethan's ability to imagine happiness and, before long, a mutual but unexpressed passion develops.

The story is told by an unnamed narrator who is sent to Starkfield on business. He first meets Ethan in the town's post office and, finding the fifty-two-year-old "ruin of a man" the "most striking figure in Starkfield," becomes fascinated by his life story. He learns from a local resident that Ethan has looked this way ever since his "smash-up" twenty-four years ago. Bit by bit, the narrator hears fragments of Ethan's story and constructs a narrative based on the paradoxical accounts of his life. His task is facilitated when, one stormy winter night, he is given a rare invitation to spend the night at Frome's farm. It is there, after hearing a woman's voice drone querulously as he approached the house, that the narrator claims to have found the "clue to Ethan Frome." The chapters that follow constitute the narrator's "vision" of the story.

This "vision" goes back twenty-four years to the days leading up to Ethan's smash-up and begins on the night of a church dance. Ethan, arrived to accompany Mattie back to the farm, waits outside while the musicians playa final tune. As they are walking home Mattie mentions that, earlier in the evening, some of her friends had gone coasting down the hill behind the church. Ethan asks if she too would like to go coasting and proposes that they go tomorrow if there is a moon. Their path leads them by the Frome gravestones, a place that, in the past, has made Ethan feel as though his restlessness and desire to get away were being mocked. But, on this night, he is filled with a "sense of continuance and stability" and finds pleasure in the thought that Mattie will one day be lying there beside him.

When they arrive home, Ethan discovers that the kitchen door is locked. He and Mattie are trying to account for this unprecedented occurrence when Zeena suddenly opens the door and says: "I just felt so mean I couldn't sleep." Although Zeena has never shown any signs of jealousy, there have, of late, been disquieting "signs of her disfavour." As a result, this incident, combined with complaints about Mattie's inefficiency as a housekeeper and suggestions that a hired girl may become necessary, instill in Ethan a "vague dread." This dread is relieved, however, when Zeena announces the next morning that she is going to stay with her Aunt to see a new doctor. The news convinces Ethan that the previous night's explanation was merely a sign that

Zeena is absorbed in her own health and that his "vague apprehensions" of troubles with his wife are unfounded.

To mark their first-ever evening alone together, Mattie prepares a special dinner and wears a ribbon in her hair as a "tribute to the unusual." Although the mood of the evening is threatened when Zeena's beloved pickle dish-a never-used wedding gift-is accidentally broken, the cozy after-dinner scene by the stove produces in Ethan the "Illusion of long-established intimacy." Without knowing what he is doing, Ethan stoops and kisses the end of the "stuff [Mattie is] hemming." In response, Mattie gets up, puts away her work and retires to her room.

When Zeena returns the next day, she informs Ethan that she is a great deal sicker than he thinks and that she has hired a girl to take care of her. Ethan objects on financial grounds but Zeena, explaining that they will no longer need to worry about Mattie's board, effectively tells him that her cousin will be leaving tomorrow. A few moments later, Ethan is alone with Mattie in the kitchen. Sensing that something is wrong, Mattie melts against him in terror and asks him what it is. Instead of answering, Ethan kisses her and cries out: "You can't go, Matt! I'll never let you!" It is on this night that Zeena discovers the broken pieces of her pickle dish and accuses Mattie of taking from her the thing she cared for most of all.

That night, alone in his private study, Ethan recalls the case of a man who escaped from a similar life of misery by going West with the girl he loved. Believing for a moment that he and Mattie could do the same, he begins to write a letter to Zeena. However, economic realities thwart his plans and oblige him to concede that he is a "prisoner for life." Rebellious passions resurface the following morning, but again his plan is aborted when he realizes he would have to deceive someone.

When the time of Mattie's departure finally arrives, Ethan delays their separation by bringing her to Shadow Pond, the location of a church picnic they attended together. They reminisce about the event and Ethan imagines that he is a "free man, wooing the girl he meant to marry." He begins to tell Mattie that he would do anything, would even go away with her if he could, when Mattie pulls out the letter he had started to write the night before and forgot to destroy. She reveals that she too has dreamed of going away with him but Ethan still feels unable to prevent their separation.

As they approach the church, they are reminded that they were to have gone sledding the night before. Ethan finds a sled and, finally, the two get to enjoy their long-awaited coast. On their way back up the hill, Mattie flings her arms around Ethan's neck and kisses him. Then, in despair over their lack of options, she leads Ethan back to the sled and instructs him to steer them directly into the big elm at the bottom of the hill so they will "never have to leave each other any more." Tragically, Mattie's plan proves imperfect: while it does prevent the lovers' separation, both Ethan and Mattie survive the crash and are left lying in the snow, crippled and in pain.

The novel ends with the resumption of the narrator's account of his overnight stay at Frome's farm. As he enters the kitchen, the "querulous drone" stops and he is unable to

determine which of the two old women before him had been the speaker. One of the women gets up to prepare Ethan's meal while the other, whose hair is Just as gray and whose face just as bloodless and shriveled as her companion's, remains seated and limp by the stove. Ethan introduces the first woman as his wife, and the other as Miss Mattie Silver. Upon hearing their Voices, the narrator concludes that it was Mattie's voice he heard as he approached the house. He learns the next day that Zeena has been caring for Mattie and Ethan ever since the accident twenty-four years ago.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Ethan finds a job with opportunities for travel, but the illness of his parents draws him back to his home. He enjoys studying for its own sake and has changed a small parlor into his library. The trip this night to the church brings him a dose of reality. He sees Mattie smiling and laughing in ways he thought she reserved for him. He doesn't realize that his wife Zeena has been picking up on the changes in him and noticing the excuses he makes to spend time with Mattie.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The author begins to explain the characters by going back in time twenty years. The stage is being set for the complications that will arise between Ethan and his wife over Mattie. There is the contrast between the young napve woman who is guileless and the older woman who is jaded and suspicious of anyone and anything.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

A man lurks in the shadows outside a church. He is watching a dance go on inside. He watches a young man dancing with a pretty young woman. He is jealous. It is a very cold night, and there are horses and sleighs by the church to take people home after the social. Mattie, the young lady, comes out with Denis, the young man with whom she has been dancing. The man in the shadows is Ethan Frome. He has come to walk Mattie home. She works for his wife. Zeena Frome is a hypochondriac who thinks she needs help with the chores. Mattie stays with them for room and board only, so Zeena, as a way to keep her happy, encourages Mattie to socialize in town.

Mattie talks briefly with Denis and then declines his offer of a ride home. They discuss the fact that with the ice on the road, it can be dangerous. The road slopes downward and takes a sharp turn at the bottom, just in front of a stand of trees. When Denis drives off, Ethan comes out of the shadows and joins Mattie.

Ethan mentions that he is afraid she won't be with them much longer. Mattie assumes that Zeena is not satisfied with her work. He tells the truth, that they assume she will get married soon. Zeena does not want to be without help. Mattie is devastated. She has worked other jobs and knows that her financial situation is tenuous. On the walk home, they draw nearer so that Ethan can steady her on the irregular spots on the road. As they enter the farm, they go past the family graveyard. Ethan used to hate it because it reminded him that he would probably be stuck there until he died. Now, he views the graves as a sign of continuity. When they get to the house, he looks up to see his wife holding a lamp and looking out at them. The magical time with Mattie is over. Ethan is shocked at how old Zeena looks. He lets Mattie go in first. He doesn't know exactly what to say, as he expected Zeena to be asleep. He sheepishly follows Zeena and Mattie upstairs.

Chapter 2 Analysis

There is tension emerging between the husband and wife. Ethan is feeling emasculated. It is unrealistic of him to care so much for Mattie. Her continued residence in the home is bound to lead to problems. Ethan clearly has regrets over his choices in life. The change in his view of the graveyard indicates a change in his character. As a young man, he wanted to escape his hometown. Now, he finds some comfort in the stability of this rural New England place. Still, his attraction to Mattie shows his restlessness. The plot is set to now develop either happiness or disaster for these three characters.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Ethan goes out very early the next morning to cut some wood to sell. Mr. Hale has offered to buy the wood, and Ethan needs the money. He thinks about Mattie and how she seems enthusiastic in her job and content with her lot. He has never heard her complain. He knows that she is in dire circumstances economically and socially. Mattie's late father was a cousin of Zeena's. He married well to a woman from a prominent Connecticut family. Unfortunately, when he died suddenly and when the executors reviewed his business records, the creditors and his family realized that he was a fraud. Mattie's mother died soon thereafter. Mattie was left with a meager amount of money. All assets had been sold to pay creditors, and since then Mattie has lived with a succession of relatives. She has held some short-term jobs as a sales clerk, but she can't stand on her feet ten to twelve hours a day and can't do math calculations very well. Living with the Fromes is really her only option until she marries.

Zeena knows the girl is vulnerable and also knows it would be very hard economically for Ethan to pay decent wages. Mattie is the solution that seems best. Zeena knows she can push Mattie and that Mattie has no way to leave. At first Zeena was very fussy, but as Mattie worked harder and seemed to be getting the hang of Zeena's methods, Zeena has lessened her criticisms.

Ethan decides to let his helper Jotham take the wood to the builder so that he can go home. He is shocked to see Zeena dressed up for travel. She asks Ethan to take her to a train stop so that she can go visit a new doctor. Ethan thinks of the cost of the doctor as well as what could happen when he spends the night alone in the house with Mattie.

Ethan tells Zeena that Jotham will give her a ride because he needs to take the lumber to the builder so that he can get paid. He instantly regrets saying this since Zeena will feel free to spend what she wants on the consultation with the doctor and any remedies he recommends. Mr. Hale always takes a long time to pay. In order to get any cash, Ethan will have to offer to sell the wood at a steep discount. Mr. Hale is well known for his stinginess. Ethan can tell by Zeena's look that this will come back to haunt him.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The author is foreshadowing events that will lead to catastrophe. The reader learns more about the precariousness of Mattie's circumstances, as well as the reaction of Zeena to events that bothered her.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Ethan daydreams about the coming evening. Ethan has been a loner. He sings and whistles as he drives over to see Hale to deliver the lumber. He feels his life changing for the better with Mattie in it. Ethan thinks back on his relationship with his mother. As she aged, she withdrew into herself and was not talkative with Ethan. When he asked her why she didn't talk, she said it was because she was busy listening and pointed in the direction of the family graveyard. After his mother died, Ethan knew society would frown on Zeena staying unless they were married. He could not face living alone. Zeena was his logical choice. Ethan still dreams of becoming an engineer. However, Zeena started having her "sickly" spells within a year of the marriage, and Ethan cannot find a buyer for the farm.

Ethan delivers the lumber to Mr. Hale and asks for payment. Hale reminds Ethan that he normally pays in about ninety days. Ethan cannot bring himself to admit that money is tight. Mrs. Hale is very nice to Zeena. She is a local woman who has the skills to nurse Zeena at times. He will do without before he will tell Mr. Hale the truth.

Ethan sees Denis Eady on his father's sleigh. Ethan fears that Denis is on his way to see Mattie. He runs into Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum in the shadow of the trees near the church. They are kissing but pull away from each other when they hear Ethan approach. He is amused at their embarrassment. He feels a brief pang that he has to hold back his caring for Mattie.

The evening is getting dark when Ethan arrives home. He goes by the graves and sees a headstone for some ancestors who were married for fifty years. He wonders if he will be with Zeena that long. He sees a light up in Mattie's room, and he hopes that she is dressing up for him. He is pleased when he sees that she has put a crimson ribbon into her combed hair.

Mattie has set the table using some of Zeena's fancy dishes. She has also prepared his favorite foods. They visit over supper. The cat jumps up onto the table and knocks Zeena's favorite bowl off, breaking it. The two know that Zeena will be livid if she finds out. Mattie becomes very upset and cries. Zeena has warned her never to use that bowl. Ethan consoles her and tells her he will buy the right glue before Zeena comes home. The magic Ethan and Mattie feel that evening is shattered. Mattie looks up with trust in her eyes, believing Ethan when he tells her he will fix the problem.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Ethan moves further into his fantasies of wanting to replace Zeena with Mattie. He feels that she is the love he always longed for. He is frustrated with Zeena and mad at himself for having married an older woman. Mattie is young and trusting, the type of woman he

should have married in the first place. The shattered bowl represents the destruction of the daydream that both Mattie and Ethan have of being able to live in a fantasy world. The graveyard also emerges again as a symbol of the past. His dying mother listens to the sounds of the graveyard, looking back to the past. When Ethan sees the graves of a couple married for fifty years, this contrasts to his desired unfaithfulness. Ethan's tragic flaw is emerging as his yearning desires to attain things that he cannot have, whether a career or a woman.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Mattie and Ethan sit near the stove. A sense of warmth and comfort fills them. However, when Mattie sits in Zeena's chair, it feels as though Zeena is there with them. Both feel uncomfortable. Mattie says that she cannot see to sew and moves back to the chair next to the table lamp. Ethan tends the fire so that he can move his chair to watch Mattie.

Ethan brings up the notion of the thrill of coasting down the steep road. He hopes that the next night it might be possible. They chat in a casual manner. Mattie blushes when Ethan mentions that he saw Nathan and Ruth kissing. He realizes that he has touched upon a subject a woman would not want to discuss, especially alone in the house with him.

Ethan brings the subject back to the practicalities of the impending wedding of Nathan and Ruth. Ethan jokes that it will probably be Mattie's turn to plan a wedding next. Mattie asks Ethan questions about Zeena's satisfaction with the job she is doing. They both discuss how difficult it can be living with Zeena. They lock up and put out the fire before they go to bed. He feels very close to Mattie without ever touching her hand. He is left only to his dreams of what might have been as he watches her retire.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The two main characters of the book explore their feelings for one another. They each know that the time they have alone together is highly constrained, both by society in general as well as by Zeena in particular. Ethan's comments about Mattie leaving reveal his jealousy. There is no actualization of any desire. Zeena is even more present in her absence.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The next morning, Jotham arrives to assist in taking more lumber to the builder. The roads are icy and dangerous. Both Ethan and Jotham expect it to warm up enough later in the day to take the lumber into town. They decide to load the sled and wait until later to move it. Jotham will go pick up Zeena while Ethan goes to town. He means to drop the lumber off and then get the glue.

The weather worsens. One of the horses slips on the ice and cuts himself. Jotham goes to the barn and gets the material to wrap the horse's leg. After loading the wood, Ethan and Jotham head back to the house for the dinner. Ethan knows he is pushing the time to get the glue before Zeena returns. Now he can only hope that Zeena will come home so tired that she will take to her bed for a few days, giving him time to fix the bowl.

Ethan heads into town. He finally finds a bottle of glue, but he is not sure if it will work on glass. As he hoped, Zeena has come home and gone straight to their bedroom. He invites Jotham to stay for supper, hoping Zeena will be more hospitable with company there. However, Jotham begs off and goes on home, making Ethan worry that Zeena was mean and cranky on the ride home.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Bad weather has ruined Ethan's plans. He has to admit he had made plans with no room for error. He and Mattie both have to face the return of Zeena, the person who makes life miserable for everyone around her. The bowl emerges as a source of suspense and tension as well as a symbol of Ethan's unfaithfulness. Through Ethan's illicit desires, he has hurt Zeena, even though she does not know yet. Ethan is unable to mend the damage, and Zeena seems doomed to learn of his unfaithful thoughts. The author is setting the time up for the climax of the book.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Ethan goes upstairs to see Zeena and finds her sitting in her chair with her traveling clothes still on. She tells him that the doctor said she has complications and needs an operation. Zeena tells him that she has hired a girl to come work for them so that she won't have to do anything. He is dismayed that she would cause a long-term drain on finances by hiring someone.

Ethan and Zeena have their first open fight. Ethan says that he will help do anything that Zeena can no longer do. She claims she lost her health caring for his invalid mother. Ethan has to admit that he has gotten no money from Mr. Hale. He feels weak at this admission, and he knows Zeena will throw this up against him forever.

Zeena discusses the wages of a new hired hand because she means to let Mattie go. Zeena claims that she has done Mattie a favor by letting her stay with them. Ethan fights with Zeena about keeping Mattie. Ethan goes down to supper alone. Ethan knows that Mattie is Zeena's relation and not his. He is furious with Zeena. He considers this action by her to be outright viciousness.

Mattie can tell that something is very wrong. He blurts out that he will not let Zeena force her to leave. Mattie knows that Zeena never changes her mind. Ethan is broken-hearted that he has delivered the news to her. He wants to hold her and kiss her. Zeena is determined that Mattie will go the very next day.

Zeena joins them. She goes to the cabinet to find a medicine. She returns livid that she has found the broken pickle bowl. She demands to know how it was broken. Ethan tells her the cat broke the dish when it jumped up on the table. Mattie admits she got it down to decorate the table. Zeena uses this dish as an excuse to tell Mattie how unhappy she is with her and her work. Zeena, openly weeping, leaves the room still clutching the broken pieces.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The author is bringing to a climax the conflicts between the three main characters. When Zeena finds the bowl, she realizes that Ethan is unfaithful in his heart. Her marriage, like the bowl, is shattered. She fights back, dismissing Mattie. The fact that Ethan has yet to see payment for his lumber is another denied gratification. Everything Ethan wants is withheld from him, including his money, his career, his ability to travel and a young, personable wife. Ethan realizes that he has become emasculated by his wife as well as by society. His wife's illness harks back to the illness of his mother, which forced Ethan to give up the life of traveling he desired and return to the town. Ethan feels trapped by his life in this small New England town. The author is building the

tension in such a way that we cannot help but wonder if Ethan will break free of societal limits.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Ethan goes out to the barn. When he returns, he goes to his little library off the kitchen. He finds a note from Mattie telling him not to trouble himself. He feels too young to be stuck in his position. Ethan thinks of a man in the area who deserted his wife to go west with a younger woman. The wife has divorced him and sold the farm. Ethan starts a letter to Zeena, telling her he is leaving for good. The farm is mortgaged to the hilt, and Zeena will never look for work. He knows that at present he can't even put ten dollars together. The reality of it sinks in. He lays back on his makeshift day bed and cries.

Ethan awakes to see Mattie. She feels bad that he slept without heat all night. Ethan starts a new fire so that Mattie can make breakfast. At the barn, Jotham talks to Ethan about taking Mattie to the train. Ethan tells Jotham not to make plans since he isn't sure the decision is final yet. At breakfast, Zeena confronts Mattie about items missing from around the house and wants to know what Mattie has done with them before she leaves. They all knew that Zeena would never change her mind. Zeena has planned for Mr. Byrnes, who has a bigger sleigh, to come around to transport Mattie's trunk to the depot. Ethan knows he will have to help carry Mattie's large trunk down the stairs and be a part of her banishment. He announces that he is walking to town. He hopes that fresh air will help clear his mind so that he can think of a way to keep Mattie.

Ethan decides to ask Mr. Hale one more time for the money that is due him. He sees Mrs. Hale in the family sleigh, and he waves at her to stop. She leans out, extending her sympathies to him for having such a hard time over the ills of Zeena, and before that his parents. He begins walking toward the Hale home, but then he realizes that he would have to lie to Mr. Hale to get money out of him. He could never lie to them. He finally knows that all avenues of escape with Mattie are closed to him.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Ethan's character is reaching a climactic choice in wanting to flee his life. He knows he is young enough to start over with Mattie, but he also knows that it would cost Zeena everything. He has manly desires, but he is too good to deceive so many people in order to be with Mattie. At every turn, his desires are frustrated.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

When Ethan returns, he finds Mr. Byrne in front of the house. Zeena has sent Jotham to the barn to do some chores. Ethan knows the trunk is too big and heavy for Mattie to handle. He finds her crying as she sits on the trunk. They take the trunk to the sleigh and go in for dinner. Zeena mentions to Jotham that she wants him to take Mattie to the train. She tells Ethan to fix the furnace in the spare room. Ethan announces that he will take Mattie, and they openly fight. He tells Mattie to be ready to go at three, and he storms out of the house.

Ethan gets his sleigh ready, and they ride toward town. At the turn toward town, Ethan takes another road out through the country by a pond. Mattie has been there before for a church picnic. They get out of the sleigh and reminisce. For the first time, Ethan talks to Mattie as if he were courting. He admits that he has thought of leaving Zeena. She pulls out the letter that Ethan started to write to Zeena. Ethan asks her if she would have run away with him, and she admits she has thought of the two of them together. Ethan tells her that he hopes she will write and that he is afraid that she will meet someone and marry. He tells her he would rather think of her dead than with another man. She denies wanting to be with anyone else and says she has been wishing all day that she was dead. As Mattie openly cries, Ethan tries to calm her and to tell her that they must not talk that way.

Mattie and Ethan talk about missing a chance to coast down the steep hill they are approaching. Ethan suggests that they do it right then. He steps out of the sleigh and finds a toboggan. Mattie joins him. It is getting dark, but he assures her he has sledded down this hill many times. They hop on and go faster and faster. They avoid a large elm and other trees. As they begin their walk back up the hill, they stop and talk among the trees where Ethan saw Ruth and Nathan kissing. Mattie reaches up to kiss him. He returns her kisses, and they profess their love. Mattie suggests that they go for one more ride and intentionally crash the sled into a tree so that they can die together.

Ethan does not want to live without Mattie. He tells her that he wants to be in front so that he can feel her arms around him. They kiss as they begin the descent. They go faster, and at the last moment, Ethan looks up at the stars. They crash into the big elm. Ethan comes to and realizes that there is some animal crying in deep pain. He slowly realizes that it is Mattie. He tells her they almost "fetched it," and then he passes out again.

Chapter 9 Analysis

For the first time, Ethan and Mattie speak openly of their love and how impossible life will be apart. Throughout the story, because of the foreshadowing at the very beginning,

the reader is waiting for the moment of the accident, so their conversation is tinged with suspense. When Mattie and Ethan first start out on their journey, the reader knows disaster is approaching. During the first sled-ride, the reader is on edge. The plot climaxes as Ethan and Mattie make the fateful decision that will forever alter their lives. The "accident" is not accidental. Mattie and Ethan would rather die than separate. They make the decision to kill themselves so that they can be together throughout eternity. Even in this, Ethan is not successful. At the beginning of the story, his neighbors credit his survival to his tough New England stock. It is Ethan's New England heritage that deprives him of all he desires, even death.

Afterward

Afterward Summary

The author returns to the time of the narrator. The narrator has been invited into the house by Ethan Frome so as to avoid a blizzard. He sees the poor condition of the home and how meagerly the family is surviving. A tall woman has prepared some food and has just stoked the fire. A small woman who seems paralyzed tells Ethan that she thought that she would freeze but that Zeena has just woken from a nap and stoked the fire.

After the narrator returns to town the next morning, he talks to various people about his stay at the Frome place. He realizes that many people are curious because they have not been there in many years. Mrs. Hale tells the narrator that she felt that Mattie would have been better off dead. She knows that they are cooped up in the house. Zeena seems to have risen to the occasion, taking care of them and sending off for potions to try to make Ethan and Mattie feel better. Many neighbors wonder why they took a notion to go sledding after dark. Mrs. Hale tells the narrator that she feels that there is no difference between the Fromes in the cemetery and the Fromes at home, except for the fact that they can talk.

Afterward Analysis

This novella was written when society deplored divorce and abandonment of one's spouse was rare. The author is exploring the reality of life without love in an impoverished situation, both financially and emotionally. Ethan and Mattie will never be apart, but the life that unfolds for them is certainly devoid of any happiness.

More than this, the story of Ethan Frome, as the author first explains, is a story of New England. Ethan Frome is a man of disappointment, and his tragic flaw is his constant desire to escape his New England life and heritage, always seeking something outside his grasp. At every turn, he is pulled back to the New England life he struggles against. In his final act, seeking death, he is finally and forever forced back to his life and his wife. The finality of this act creates a strange reversal. Ethan's love, Mattie, becomes the sickly and helpless woman his wife once was. She personifies his desires, and his desires are now defeated. His wife, after this defeat of desire, regains health and strength. The hypochondriac becomes the caretaker. As a New Englander, Zeena endures. The quality of endurance through time harks back to the graveyard, where inhabitants stay in their resting place for eternity. As those in the cemetery, the inhabitants of the house are in their resting place, rural New England, for eternity.

Characters

Dennis Eady

The son of Michael Eady, an ambitious Irish grocer. Dennis has a reputation for applying the same techniques ills father used so successfully in business in pursuit of the young women of Starkfield.

Ethan Frome

Ethan Frome is twenty-eight years old and physically impressive at the time the events in the novel take place. A series of family crises put a premature end to his engineering studies and force him into agriculture, for which he has no inclination, and now he must also care for Zeena, ills cranky, hypochondriacal wife of seven years. Ethan's brief studies made him "aware of the huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things," and because he is "by nature grave and inarticulate," he is "warmed to the marrow by friendly human intercourse" He cannot expect this from Zeena, who basically stopped speaking a year into their marriage. So when Mattie Sliver comes to live with the Fromes as a companion to Zeena, Ethan takes to her immediately. "Always ... more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty," Ethan delights in showing Mattie the stars in the sky and rock formations, and in accompanying her to and from her social outings. He is "never gay but in her presence." His generosity is evident in his taking time from his own chores to cover for her inadequate housekeeping by creeping down late on Saturday nights to scrub the kitchen floor.

Though he has longed despairingly for years for change and freedom, his sole desire now is to have things remain the way they are, with Mattie near him. In fact, as Kenneth Bernard wrote, "Throughout the book, Frome recognizes his futility and accepts it rather than trying to fight his way out of it." An example of this kind of acceptance is Ethan's penchant for daydreaming about Mattie. When Zeena's overnight trip to the doctor leaves Ethan and Mattie alone for an evening, instead of trying to touch her, he "set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so." The next morning, he is "glad ... that he bad done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture." Although Ethan's first reaction to Zeena's sudden decision to send Mattie away is that he is "too young, too strong, too fun of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes," he cannot bring himself to lie to the Hales to get the money he would need to run away with Mattie. Many critics see Ethan as a weak and negative person. At the end of the novel. it is Mattie who suggests the suicide pact. Blake Nevius maintains that Wharton intended "to invest her rather unpromising human material with a tragic dignity," but according to Bernard "his character never changes. Both before and after the accident he is the same." "No hero of fantastic legend," wrote *The Nation* on publication of the novel, "was ever more literally bag-ridden than was Ethan Frome."

Zeena Frome

See Zenobia Frome

Zenobia Frome

Zenobia (Zeena) is Ethan Frome's unhappy, malady-plagued wife. She is thirty-five at the time the events of the novel take place, and "already an old woman." Her hair is gray, her clothing is de scribed as "slatternly," and she makes a "familiar gesture of adjusting her false teeth" before eating. Zeena first came to the Frome farmhouse to help Ethan nurse his ailing, deranged mother, and he was "shamed and dazzled" by her efficiency. The couple's plan on marrying was to sell the farm and sawmill and to move to a large town. But although Zeena had no desire to live on an isolated farm, neither could she tolerate the loss of identity that moving to the sort of city Ethan had in mind would mean Within a year of the marriage she turned peevish and sickly, then silent, just like his mother. Her sole pleasure, as Ethan sees it, is to make him miserable.

It is Zeena who suggests that her cousin Mattie Silver come to live with them as her aid. But once the attraction between Ethan and Mattie becomes apparent, Zeena begins to find fault with the girl. Zeena is hard to figure, in fact; she appears hardly human. As Mrs. Ned Hale remarks, no one knows her thoughts To Ethan, her silence seems "deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess." Indeed, Zeena arranges both Mattie's departure and her replacement without consulting Ethan. The only emotional outburst Zeena gives into happens when she discovers the broken pickle dish and breaks into sobs. But once she has prevailed in her decision to be rid of Mattie, she reverts to her self-absorption. When Ethan comes into the house to take Mattie to the station, he finds Zeena with her head wrapped in her shawl, "reading a book called 'Kidney Troubles and Their Cure.'" After the accident, Zeena has both Ethan and Mattie brought back to the farm. In what many critics cite as a supreme irony of the story, Zeena ends up having to take care of her rival.

Harmon Gow

The narrator of the story calls Harmon Gow the "village oracle." He drove the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days, and knows the history of all the families along his route. It is from Gow that the narrator first begins to piece together the enigma of Ethan Frome.

Andrew Hale

Andrew is a builder, Ned Hale's father, and an old friend of Ethan's family. To avoid having to drive Zeena to the Flats, Ethan pleads that he has to collect cash for lumber from Hale. The lie forces him to go to see Hale and ask for an advance, which "the

builder refused genially, as he did everything else." In a desperate attempt to procure money so he can run away with Mattie, Ethan considers approaching Hale a second time. But he cannot bring himself to deceive Hale and his wife, "two kindly people who had pitied him."

Mrs. Ned Hale

Ruth is Andrew Hale's daughter-in-law. She is a middle-aged widow with whom the narrator stays while he is in Starkfield. Twenty-four years earlier, she had been a friend of Mattie Silver's, and Mattie was to have been her bridesmaid. Like Harmon Gow, Mrs. Ned Hale helps the narrator to piece together the story. Normally voluble, on the subject of Ethan Frome the narrator finds her "unexpectedly reticent." However, she is a kindly soul who looks in on the Frome household twice a year, "when Ethan's off somewheres. It's bad enough to see the two women sitting there-but *his* face, when he looks round that bare place, just kills me."

Narrator

The entire story of *Ethan Frome* is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. Sent to the area in connection with an engineering project at Corbury Junction, he is obliged to stay most of the winter in Starkfield on account of unexpected delays. When he encounters Ethan Frome at the post office, he is so intrigued by this "ruin of man" that he begins to ask around and eventually "[has] the story, bit by bit, from various people." The narrator feels sympathy for Ethan, and tends to think of him in heroic terms, as when he is driving in the buggy with him and sees Ethan's "brown seamed profile, under the helmet-like peak of the cap, relieved against the banks of snow like the bronze image of a hero." An indication of the extent of the narrator's fantasizing is that when Harmon Gow remarks that "Most of the smart ones get away," the narrator wonders how "any combination of obstacles [could] have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome." But a single winter in the mountains is sufficient for the narrator to begin to imagine what "life there-or rather its negation-must have been in Ethan Frome's young manhood." And when a blizzard forces the narrator to take shelter at Ethan's farmhouse for the night, he finds "the clue to Ethan Frome, and [begins] to put together this vision of the story." The narrator's use of the word "vision" here is significant. According to critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "the 'story' of Ethan Frome is nothing more than a dream vision. The overriding question becomes then-not who is Ethan Frome, but who in the world is this ghastly guide to whom we must submit as we read the tale."

Some critics make the point that in this kind of storytelling, there is inevitably a confusion of sensibilities. Indeed, Wolff perceives the questions the narrator asks the locals about Ethan Frome "projections of his own morbid imagination." His romanticism, most evident in his associating Mattie with delicate things in nature such as field mice and small birds, and Zeena with predators such as cats and owls, lessen the credibility of his account. Ultimately, wrote Allen F. Stein, it is possible to conclude that *Ethan Frome* "is irresolvable ambiguous."

Jotham Powell

The Fromes' s hired man.

Mattie Silver

Mattie Silver is a beautiful young relative of Zeena Frome's who is sent to provide help for Zeena after her father dies, leaving her penniless. She is ill-prepared to seek economic independence, and in the past, attempts at stenography and bookkeeping threatened her health. As the story opens, Mattie has been with the Fromes for a year. When Ethan first goes to meet her, he thinks, "She don't look much on housework, but she ain't a fretter, anyhow." Mattie is "quick to learn, but forgetful and dreamy," and her friendship with Ethan evolves from their shared laughter at her initial efforts. Mattie's sweetness is contrasted with Zeena's sourness, and her strength with Ethan's helplessness. For example, the first time Ethan proposes that they go sledding and asks her whether she would be afraid, Mattie responds, "I told you I ain't the kind to be afraid." When Zeena confronts Ethan and Mattie with the broken pickle dish, and Ethan tries to cover for her, Mattie says, "It wasn't Ethan's fault, Zeena! The cat *did* break the dish; but I got it down from the china-closet, and I'm the one to blame for its getting broken." Mattie is self-possessed as Ethan takes her to the train to leave Starkfield, although she has no idea where she is going. "You mustn't think but what I'll do all right," she comforts him. The suicide attempt is Mattie's idea, and when Ethan changes places with her on the sled at the last minute "because I want to feel you holding me," she agrees. Critics cite as one of several ironies in the novel the fact that after the accident, Mattie turns as querulous as Zeena.

Ruth Varnum

See Mrs. Ned Hale

Themes

Frustration

The theme of frustration is central to *Ethan Frome.* Sometimes the frustration is a product of the oppressive environment, and sometimes it stems from their personalities. Ethan's early plans to become an engineer are frustrated by the need to care for his father and mother as well as for the farm. He had always wanted to "live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and 'fellows doing things.'" His marriage to Zeena is a study in frustration, not only because of her hypochondria and the fact that they are childless, but because their interests are so different. "Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it?"

Mattie, in turn, is limited by her poverty and lack of skills. Even Zeena is frustrated. As the narrator of the story tells it, "She had let her husband see from the first that life on an isolated farm was not what she had expected when she married." But though Zeena is contemptuous of Starkfield, she would never have been able to live in a new town that looked down on her, and as a result the couple never moves. The theme of frustration is reinforced by the inarticulateness of all of the characters in *Ethan Frome.* None of these people are very good at expressing themselves. In fact, Wharton referred to the characters in the novel as her "granite outcroppings." Walking Mattie back to the farm, deliriously happy in her company, Ethan gropes for a "dazzling phrase" to impress her with, but can only growl "Come along." Frustration is evident also in Ethan and Mattie's longing for each other. Their physical contact is passionate but mostly limited to furtive handholding. When Ethan surprises Ned Hale and Ruth Varmus kissing under the Varnum spruces, he feels "a pang at the thought that these two need not hide their happiness."

Individual Responsibility

Related to the theme of frustration is that of individual responsibility, insofar as it is Ethan's sense of duty that chains him to his circumstances. Critic Blake Nevius defined the "great question posed by Ethan Frome" as "What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of manners, conventions, taboos, apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty?" Responsibility interrupts Ethan's studies and brings him home to the farm to care for his parents, and self-sacrifice characterizes his marriage to Zeena, whose "one pleasure... was to inflict pain on him." Toward the end of the novel, it is duty that prevents Ethan from asking the Hales for money so he can run away with Mattie. The reality, he tells himself, is that he is a poor man, "the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute." Critics have disputed whether Ethan's choices constitute moral decisions, that is, decisions that are guided by moral principles, as opposed to need or expedience. Lionel Trilling wrote, "Choice is incompatible with

[Ethan's] idea of his existence; he can only elect to die," whereas according to K. R. Shrinivasa Iyengar, "It would be an oversimplification to say that the chief characters in Ethan Frome are only moved by blind necessity." Marius Bewley saw Ethan's decision to die with Mattie as a clear moral decision that "entails tragic consequences because it is the *wrong* decision."

Loneliness

The theme of loneliness pervades the novel. At the outset, the narrator remarks of Ethan Frome, "I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it, as Harmon Gow had hinted, the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters." Ethan's home is "one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier." After the coming of the railroad, local traffic diminished, a change Ethan's mother was never able to comprehend. "It preyed on her right along till she died," he tells the narrator. As Ethan's mother's dementia increases, she grows so silent that Ethan begs her to "say something." And in fact, it is Ethan's dread of being left alone on the farm after his mother's death that drives him to marry Zeena. When Mattie first comes to stay with the Fromes, Zeena encourages her to find diversion because "it was thought best... not to let her feel too sharp a contrast between the life she had left and the isolation of a Starkfield farm."

Style

Point of View

Critics hail *Ethan Frome* as the most carefully constructed of Wharton's novels. The story relates events that occurred twenty-four years previously within a narrative frame of the present, similar to Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights.* Of the story-within-a-story structure, the *Nation* wrote in 1911, "Such an approach could not be improved" A single, unnamed narrator tells the entire tale. Wharton frankly acknowledged that she borrowed the technique of the narrator as omniscient author from Honore de Balzac's *La Grande Bretche.* The pieces of the story the narrator is able to glean from the inhabitants of Starkfield are presented within this narrative frame. Critics emphasize that the story the reader reads is at best the narrator's vision of events. As biographer Cynthia Wolff writes, "Everything that the reader can accept as reliably true can be found in the narrative frame; everything else bears the imprint of the narrator's own interpretation." The difficulty inherent in a complex structure of this sort is that it makes the story ambiguous. As Allen F. Stein maintains: "One cannot be sure that the real Ethan Frome ever felt anything alien to what the narrator attributes to him or did the things he did for the reasons the narrator either consciously or inadvertently offers."

Imagery

A universally acclaimed strength of the novel is Wharton's use of imagery and symbolism. According to critic Kenneth Bernard, these elements, particularly the compatibility of setting and character, reveal the novel's "true dimensions." Like the frozen landscape around him, Ethan is cold and unapproachable. The narrator observes that Ethan "seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface." There are many references to darkness, and darkness is Ethan's element. For example, when he goes to fetch Mattie from a dance, he hangs back in the shadows, watching her through a window. Later, he wishes he could "stand there with her all night in the blackness." When they return to the farmhouse, the windows are dark, and they strain to see each other "through the icy darkness." On the night of the accident, Mattie confesses to Ethan that she first dreamed of going away with him at a picnic they both attended at Shadow Pond. Images of warmth and brightness in the novel are associated with Mattie, and are contrasted with Ethan's frozen self and Zeena's soulnessness. Even her name, Mattie Silver, connotes something bright. Her "fresh lips and cheeks" and "slim young throat" are contrasted with Zeena's "gaunt countenance," "puckered throat," and "flat breast."

Mattie is also associated with images of birds. Wharton makes repeated references to voices. At first, in comparison to his mother's silence, Zeena' s gregarious nature was music in Ethan's ears. But her voice has become a "flat whine," unlike Mattie's "sweet treble," though at the end of the novel Mattie's voice, too, becomes a querulous drone.

Even the kitchen reflects the contrasts between the two women. It is a "poor place, not 'spruce' and shining as his mother had kept it in his boyhood; but it was surprising what a homelike look the mere fact of Zeena's absence gave it." Images of death are evident in the "black wraith of a deciduous creeper flagged on the porch," the missing "L" in Ethan's farmhouse, and a "dead cucumber-vine" dangling from the porch.

Symbolism

Critic R. Baird Shuman writes that "there is probably no more pervasive single element in *Ethan Frome* than the symbolism." The landscape and farmhouse are closely related to elements of the story's action. For example, the missing "L" in Ethan's farmhouse gives the house a "forlorn and stinted" aspect and symbolizes the lack of life within. An obvious symbol is the name of the town, Starkfield, which Shuman calls "a cemetery for those who are still physically living."

Many critics point to the sexual symbols in the novel. "Barrenness, infertility, is at the heart of Frome's frozen woe," asserts dramatist and critic Kenneth Bernard. The red pickle dish, for instance, unbroken and unused, symbolizes the Fromes's marriage. Once it is broken, it represents Mattie and Ethan's disloyalty. Shuman notes the "Freudian overtones of the shutterless windows and of the dead cucumber-vine." And biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff refers to Frome and the narrator entering the kitchen through a small, dark back hallway at the end of the novel as "a perverse and grotesque inversion of the terms of birth." The elm tree is seen as both plant and symbol. Shuman frankly sees it as a phallic symbol, "a representation of sexual temptation." The sled Mattie and Ethan are riding when they collide into the elm is borrowed, one that, like their passion, "technically they have no right to."_

Setting

The setting for *Ethan Frome* is the fictional town of Starkfield, located in the mountains of western Massachusetts. In the words of Edith Wharton: "Insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighbouring hills.'" The cold and snow in particular had a wearying effect on the inhabitants. One of the first things the narrator hears about Ethan Frome is a remark made by Harmon Gow: "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters." The narrator at first fails to understand the burden of winter in these parts. When the snows of December are followed by "crystal clearness," he notices the "vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community." But once he has passed a winter there, and has "seen this phase of crystal clearness followed by long stretches of sunless cold; when the storms of February had pitched their white tents about the devoted village and the wild cavalry of March winds had charged down to their support; I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter.'"

The Frome farm itself is "kinder side-tracked.'" Traffic that used to pass by ceased once the railroad was carried through to an area beyond called Corbury Flats, a distance of three miles that took an hour by horse and carriage. The Frome farm house is a building of "plaintive ugliness." The building has lost its "L," a deep-roofed section that normally connects the main house with the woodshed and cow barn, enabling the inhabitants to avoid having to go outside to get to their work. So integral is the setting to the action of the novel, that a review published in the *Nation* in 1911 credited Wharton with having chronicled "a consciousness of depleted resources, a reticence and self-contained endurance that even the houses know how to express, retired from the public way, or turned sideways to preserve a secluded entrance."

Irony

Irony is an incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and what we might normally expect that result to be. Margaret B. McDowell cites the many ironies in *Ethan Frome:* "The dish that is treasured is the one that is broken; the pleasure of the one solitary meal that Ethan and Mattie share ends in distress; the ecstasy of the coasting ends in suffering; the moment of dramatic renunciation when Ethan and Mattie choose suicide rather than elopement ends not in glorious death but in years of pain" At the time of publication, the *Nation* reported that "the profound irony of [Ethan's] case is that it required his own goodness to complete [Zeena's] parasitic power over him." When Ethan goes to the widow Homan's store to buy glue to repair the broken pickle dish, the widow tells him, "I hope Zeena ain't broken anything she sets store by " There are other such ironies. Beautiful Mattie becomes ugly and peevish. Zeena ends up having to care for her rival. Critics have noted irony in the narrator's account of Mattie's attempts to support herself. And Kenneth Bernard cites Ethan's fantasy that he and Mattie would spend their evenings together as they had the night Zeena was away from home. "Ironically, this is just about what he achieves by crippling instead of killing himself and Mattie."

Historical Context

Expansion and Reform in the 1910s

The decade of the 1910s in which Edith Wharton wrote *Ethan Frome* was characterized by economic prosperity in the United States and increasing political influence in the world, especially as it endured and triumphed in the First World War. It was a time in which the country's freedom became a principal feature of America's identity, but also a time in which these values were questioned by the unfinished business of women's suffrage. Competing values of labor and capitalism also continued to work themselves out, sometimes violently through riots and strikes, like the "long-drawn carpenters' strike" that is the reason for the narrator's stay in Starkfield.

Tensions between conservative and liberal Ideals became more apparent from the 1890s, and they came to a head during the decade of the 1910s. The progressive movement was not confined to a single party. It was advanced by the Republican former president Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, the Democrat president elected in 1912; and the Socialist party presidential candidate in that election, Eugene V. Debs. Wilson's term of office advanced the progressive movement through a series of landmark legislative accomplishments. These included setting up the Federal Reserve System, regulating trusts, providing credit to farmers, restricting child labor, and establishing a graduated income tax. In addition, constitutional amendments were adopted governing direct election of senators, the federal income tax, woman suffrage, and Prohibition. These laid the foundation for the New Deal of the 1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s

Innovation in Industry and the Arts

Industrial growth and the use of new technologies were two of the reasons for the explosive economic expansion of the 1910s The first direct telephone link between New York and Denver was opened in 1911, the year *Ethan Frome* was published Examples of these developments are evident in the narrator's remarks about having come to Starkfield in the "degenerate day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery" and easy communication between the mountain villages," which he contrasts with conditions twenty-four years earlier. Although Ethan Frome is still driving a horse-drawn buggy, Ford Motor Company's moving assembly line was typical of the kinds of innovations in the automobile industry that made the United States the decade's world leader in producing cars. Productivity in this and other industries was further enhanced by application of scientific management theory and new manufacturing techniques. The "personnel management" of the 1910s was incorporated into the welfare capitalism of the 1920s, which used measures such as profit-sharing plans and grievance procedures to improve relations between workers and employers. This period of prosperity mostly benefited a new middle class of professionals and managers. The poor remained poor, particularly rural Southerners, urban immigrants, and African Americans.

A prosperous middle class was a boon to the arts, which enjoyed a period of great vitality during the 1910s. Inspired by European modernists such as Vaslav Nijinsky, Igor Stravinsky, Marc Chagad. Gabriele D' Annunzio, and Walter Adolf Gropius, American painters, photographers, poets, dramatists, writers, and dancers broke free of tradition and experimented with both form and subject Magazines such as *The Masses* and *The New Republic* reflected the radical vision of this generation of artists. In *Ethan Frome,* the narrator's ironic recitation of Mattie's cultural accomplishments illustrates the disdain of the rebels of the 1910s for the tastes of their parents.

The First World War (1914-1918)

America's attempts at neutrality became irrelevant as the efforts of American manufacturers to capture world markets drew the United States into the affairs of other nations. U.S. economic interests were particularly strong in Latin America and the Caribbean, exemplified by Bethlehem Steel's purchase of Chile's *Tofo* Iron Mines in 1911, and the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914. The policies of interventionist presidents like Roosevelt and Taft contrasted with those of Woodrow Wilson. But Wilson was not blind to international realities and the need of U.S. industries for open markets. American economic ties were behind U.S. intervention in the Mexican Revolution of 1911 and the landing of U.S. Marines in Honduras, Cuba, and Nicaragua the same year. They were also what ultimately drew the United States into the First World War.

The war created tensions among a nation of immigrants, who in 1911 constituted a quarter of the U,S. population in every area of the country except the south. But the war also spelled opportunities for American bankers and businessmen. In addition. the commitment of millions of men called into service opened the doors to jobs for women and African Americans. Four hundred thousand blacks left the south for jobs in the north, beginning the "Great Migration" that was to affect not only African American life but American culture as a whole. In a move that would also have profound economic repercussions, close to a million American women joined the labor force for the first time. The government became an increasing presence in the lives of Americans, most notably in matters related to economic policy, production decisions, and labor disputes. Government-fostered xenophobia, backed by the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918, resulted in the abusive treatment of German Americans and of anarchists, communists, and socialists, particularly following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in November 1917.

The conclusion of the war brought not the long hoped for serenity but widespread disorder President Wilson's design for the League of Nations foundered. Workers and employers were at loggerheads. The Red Scare resulted in the deportation of alien radicals and the expulsion of radical labor organizers from the New York State legislature. Conflicts between returning African American soldiers and other migrant southern workers, and their white counterparts in the North, led to race riots in several major northern cities.

Critical Overview

Critics generally regard *Ethan Frome* as a departure from Wharton's usual subject matter. Wharton herself remarked that "it was frequently criticized as 'painful,' and at first had much less success than my previous books." The enduring popularity of the novel has somewhat cynically been attributed to its brevity and its place in the high school and college curriculum. Yet, wrote the critic R. Baird Shuman, it "remains a monument in the Edith Wharton canon." According to Allen F. Stein, the novel represents "the fullest treatment of the disasters that can occur when one attempts to leave even a repellent marriage." And biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls *Ethan Frome* "a tantalizingly literary work.".

At the time of the novel's publication in 1911, a review in the *Nation* praised the style as "assured and entirely individual." In a review titled "Three Lives in Supreme Torture," the *New York Times Book Review* reported that "Wharton has... chosen to build of small, crude things and a rude and violent event a structure whose purpose is the infinite refinement of torture." The *Saturday Review* called the writing "singularly beautiful," but asserted that Wharton had gratuitously marred the work by allowing Mattie and Ethan to live. The review also made a point that other critics, particularly Lionel Trilling, would take up: "The end of Ethan Frome is something at which we cover the eyes. We do not cover the eyes at the spectacle of a really great tragedy."

Later critics found the novel too contrived and its characters unmotivated. Margaret B. McDowell was a dissenting voice, calling the characterization "subtle, strong, and masterful," and Richard H. Lawson called the characters Wharton's "best yet." To Blake Nevius, the novel counted for no more than a minor classic. J. D. Thomas took issue with the story's inconsistencies and what he called Wharton's fundamental ignorance of rural life and "uncertainty... about the occupational concerns of men." He wrote, "It is regrettable that she felt obliged to narrate her story from the masculine point of view." R. Baird Shuman admitted that there were inconsistencies, as well as "digressive" passages, but wrote that "they have not been so great as to reduce the popularity of the work."

Lionel Trilling declared the novel morally bankrupt, and claimed that if it had anything at all to say, it was "this: that moral inertia, the *not* making of moral decisions, constitutes a very large part of the moral life of humanity." Gerald Walton agreed: "It is not difficult to criticize Ethan Frome," he wrote, citing the bleakness of the setting and the grotesqueness of the characters. He called the end "unrelievedly wretched."' Marius Bewley, on the other hand, saw moral choices both in Ethan's plan to ask the Hales for money so he could run away with Mattie, and to die with her rather than to be parted from her. K. R. Shrinivasa Iyengar also saw moral intention in Wharton's message that "to fail in love... is to set up evil currents."' Critic David Eggenschwiler concurred: "Ethan's refusal to cheat Andrew Hale is his last decisive act in the novel."'

Critics have praised the use of symbolism and irony in the novel, the development of characters, and the economy of language. Bernard called the use of imagery and

symbolism to get around the problem of the characters' inarticulateness "masterful."' In what sounds like a backhanded compliment, R. Baird Shuman found the book to be "such a mixture of good and bad Writing technique that it is a valuable book to use for discussions of writing."' Bernard repeats an early criticism that Ethan lacks a tragic dimension in the Greek sense. "His tragedy is entirely of his own making." But others disagreed. Edwin Bjoerkman argued that Ethan lives "between those two spectres of his lost hopes: the woman he needed and the woman he loved. All other tragedies that I can think of seem mild and bearable beside this one."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Jeffrey M. Lilburn, M.A (The University of Western Ontario) is the author of a study guide on Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman *and of numerous educational essays. In the following essay, he discusses the narrative and moral ambiguity in* Ethan Frome.

First published in 1911, *Ethan Frome* is now considered a classic of twentieth-century American literature. A tale of lost opportunity, failed romance and disappointed dreams ending with a botched suicide attempt that leaves two people crippled and dooms another to a life of servitude, *Ethan Frome* immerses its readers in a world of unrelenting pain and misery. To some, the suffering endured by Wharton's characters is excessive and unjustified; to others, the novel addresses difficult moral questions and provides insightful commentary on the American economic and cultural realities that produced and allowed such suffering. Others still look to the novel for clues about the author's own life. However, no explanation is completely satisfying because regardless of the meaning one chooses to find in the novel, this meaning, like the vision put together by the narrator, will inevitably be shrouded in mystery and ambiguity.

Much of the discussion about *Ethan Frome* involves the frame story with which the novel begins. Although the framing narrative and the story embedded within it are told by the same unnamed narrator, the reliability of the latter is made problematic by the various and varying sources used to construct it Also, by introducing his story as a "vision," the narrator makes very clear the fact that what we are about to read is not a factual record of the occurrences leading up to Ethan's accident, but his own impressions of what those occurrences may have been As several critics have pointed out, the only "facts" of Ethan's story are to be found in the narrative frame; the information contained within the frame cannot be considered reliable because, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains, It "bears the imprint of the narrator's own interpretation." His vision is a "hypothesis," one vision among many possible others. Wolff argues that Wharton's novel is not about Ethan Frome, but about the narrator and his reaction to the story he tells. Pointing to the "disconcerting similarities" between Ethan and the narrator, she suggests that the narrator's vision depicts his own "shadow self, the man he might become if the reassuring appurtenances of busy, active, professional, adult mobility were taken from him."

Jean Franz Blackall offers another possibility. Blackall agrees that the narrator's knowledge is based on inference but believes there is evidence in the text to support his story He finds this evidence in the final pages of the novel, arguing that Mrs. Hale, who was with Mattie on the morning after the accident, corroborates the narrator's intuitive discovery. According to Blackall, the ellipses representing Mrs. Hale's unfinished report of what Mattie told her signifies that she knows about the love affair between Mattie and Ethan and their subsequent suicide attempt However, it is important to remember that Mrs. Hale never actually tells the narrator what it is she heard Mattie say; a sense of shared secret knowledge between her and the narrator is suggested but never confirmed.

Complicating the debate over the novel's narrative structure even further is Orlene Murad who, believing that a biographical tie exists between Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome, argues that it is the author herself who narrates the "vision." Murad believes there is nothing in the narrator's character that would make him capable of so lyrically articulating Ethan's thoughts and actions. Instead, she believes that Wharton abandons the "engineer narrator" of the first part of the novel and "continues her story as its omniscient narrator." Murad even suggests that Wharton "becomes" Ethan Frome, explaining that the author can so well enter into Ethan's point of view because she is experiencing Ethan's dilemma herself. By creating a character "who painfully takes on the burdensome care of those for whom he is responsible," Murad claims that Wharton "has fashioned a scapegoat" and has pushed onto Ethan the grueling life that her own marital circumstances might easily have pushed onto her.

Despite the biographical similarities between the author and her fictional character, readers and critics continue to seek additional justification for the interminable suffering depicted in the novel. Biography may provide insight into the inspiration for the characters and their particular dilemmas, but it cannot reveal all of a text' s meaning. Consequently, the novel's conclusion leads many readers to ask: Do Ethan, Mattie and Zeena deserve their horrible fate? For many, the answer to this question is no. Lionel Trilling, for example, argues that Wharton is unable to lay claim to any justification for the suffering her characters experience. Moreover, he contends that in *Ethan Frome,* Wharton presents "no moral issue at all." He thinks the ending "terrible to contemplate," but says that "the mind can do nothing with it, can only endure it."

Other readers find much to do with Wharton's ending. Marlene Springer believes that *Ethan Frome* explores the possibility that life can offer equally strong conflicting choices. Among the moral choices she identifies are: "perceived duty versus genuine love; personal happiness for two versus Righteous loneliness and penury for one; and the pressure of social structures versus the particularly American desire to 'light out for the territory.'" Springer also contends that *Ethan Frome* offers a "stark realization of what life can be like if you accept circumstances with resignation-refusing ... to look at the variety of moral options to its dilemmas." Read in this fashion, the narrator's vision becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of inaction and moral paralysis.

Recalling that Wharton was careful to label *Ethan Frome* a "tale" instead of a "novel," Elizabeth Ammons searches for meaning by comparing the work to the archetypes of fairy tales What she finds is a "modern fairy story" that is "as moral as the classic fairy tale" and which functions as "realistic social criticism." Specifically, she believes that a network of imagery in the novel "calls up the fairy tale *Snow White".* the frozen landscape, Mattie's physical appearance, her role as housekeeper, and her persecution by witchlike Zeena all have "obvious parallels in the traditional fairy tale about a little girl whose jealous step-mother tries to keep her from maturing into a healthy, marriageable young woman."_ The difference is that in Wharton's "inverted fairy tale," it is the witch who wins. This victory is then amplified by the failed suicide attempt that transforms Mattie into "a mirror image of Zeena." According to Ammons, in Wharton's modern fairy story, witches not only win, they multiply.

Whereas Trilling and other critics have found *Ethan Frome* to be without moral content, Ammons argues that Wharton's moral "emerges cold and grim as her Starkfield setting." She explains this moral as follows: "as long as women are kept isolated and dependent. . Mathe Silvers will become Zeena Fromes: frigid crippled wrecks of human beings.. .." To her, the fact that Wharton cripples Mattie but does not let her die reflects not the author's cruelty, but the culture's. Without a family or skills she can utilize in the workplace, Ammons believes that Mattie's fate is unalterable-she will live in poverty, will become prematurely old, and her dreams will be shattered no matter what she does. The sledding accident merely accelerates the process, sparing Mattie the "gradual disintegration into queerness that Ethan has witnessed in Zeena and his mother."

Ammons's reading of the novel suggests that witches are made, not born. In Zeena's case, the transition appears to have begun soon after her marriage to Ethan. Like her beloved but never-used pickle dish, Zeena's life was also put on a shelf the day she was married. The lack of communication between husband and wife, the absence of intimacy, and the isolation of life on a farm in a rural community make Zeena's a very lonely existence. To her husband, preoccupied by dreams of Mattie, Zeena has "faded into an insubstantial shade." Blake Nevius draws attention to the scene in which Zeena, face streaming with tears, confronts Ethan and Mattie with the shattered remains of her pickle dish. In this scene, Nevius argues, "we get a terrible glimpse of the starved emotional life that has made her what she is." We also get a glimpse, a vision, of the life Mattie would have known had she replaced Zeena as Ethan's wife.

What makes Ethan's and Mathe's fate so frustrating for so many readers are the many wasted opportunities to invent for themselves a new one. Over and over, Ethan is stormed by feelings of rebellion, words of resistance rise to his lips, instincts of self-defense intensify, but each time, the feelings wane, the words remain unspoken, and the instincts fade away. Ethan's decision not to ask Andrew Hale for the money that would give him and Mattie the opportunity to begin a new life together is particularly troubling. Nevius views this scene as the turning point of the novel. Ethan has been and continues to be "hemmed in by circumstances," but here, it is his own "sense of responsibility that blocks the last avenue of escape and condemns him to a life of sterile expiation."' Why does Ethan choose not to ask Hale for the money? The answer to this question might have more to do with Ethan's reluctance to actualize his dreams and visions than it does with a sudden attack of conscience.

Throughout the novel, Ethan continually shifts his attention from his immediate surroundings to another moment, another space existing in his imagination. We are told, early in the novel, that it is when abandoning himself to these dreams that Ethan is most happy. At various times before the accident, Ethan imagines that he and Mattie will one day in the future lie side by side in the Frome graveyard, that they have and will continue to enjoy a long-standing intimacy and, just moments before their impending separation, that he is "a free man, wooing the girl he meant to marry." He even imagines the means through which he might once again become a free man. A cucumber vine dangling from his porch "like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death" leads him to imagine that it is Zeena who has died. The news that she is "a great deal sicker" than he thinks has a similar effect, causing him to wonder if at last her words are true.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Ethan retreats "from life into a 'vision'" because, to him, the "uncompromized richness of the dream is more alluring than the harsher limitations of actual, realized satisfactions." And indeed, to Ethan, nothing can compete with ills own visions of what life with Mattie would be like. On the morning after his evening alone with Mattie, he is glad that he "had done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture" he had created in his mind Consequently, when circumstances force upon him a situation in which he must act and make a decision, he is unable to do so, leaving to Mattie the final decision to sled down the hill into the big elm. According to Wolff, Ethan is "like a man who has become addicted to some strong narcotic, [savoring] emotional indolence as if it were a sensual experience."

Perhaps the most difficult moment for readers to understand is Ethan's lack of reaction when he discovers that Mattie has long shared his feelings and desires. The news gives Ethan a "fierce thrill of joy" but does not incite action. Mattie's love represents the renewal of opportunity, a second chance to become one of "the smart ones [who] get away." But because of the novel's structure, we know that Ethan does not get away. We know there will be a "smash-up," that Ethan will suffer crippling injuries, and that he will spend "too many Winters" in Starkfield Perhaps it is this predictability which reveals the novel's ultimate meaning. Perhaps Wharton reveals Ethan's fate early in the novel so her readers may share the sense of helpless resignation that her characters feel with respect to their miserable fates. Then again, Ethan's unrealized visions of a new life with Mattie-themselves the visions of a man who reminds Ethan of the life he could have had-may be the true source of the novel's tragedy.

Source: Jeffrey M. Lilburn, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999

Critical Essay #2

Addressing the opposing viewpoints of fellow Critics, Ammons gives evidence supporting Ethan Frome *as a modern but inverted fairy tale of substance, moral content, and theme.*

In her Introduction Wharton is careful to label her piece a "tale" as distinct from a "novel." The haunting fiction draws on archetypes of the fairy tale-the witch, the silvery maiden, the honest woodcutter-and brings them to life in the landscape and social structure of rural New England.... *Ethan Frome* is as moral as the classic fairy tale, and as rich. First it works as a modern fairy story, a deliberately inverted one, second it functions as realistic social criticism; third, by virtue of its narrative frame, it dramatizes a particular, and deeply rooted, male fear of woman....

As in most fairy stories, plot in Wharton's tale is simple. After seven miserable years married to sickly Zeena, a woman seven years his senior, Ethan Frome (who is twenty-eight) falls in love with twenty-one-year-old Mattie Silver. She is the daughter of Zeena' s Cousin and works as the childless couple's live-in "girl." When Zeena banishes Mattie because she knows that Ethan and the girl have fallen in love, the young lovers resolve to kill themselves by sledding down a treacherous incline into an ancient elm. The suicide attempt fails, leaving Ethan lame and Mattie a helpless invalid The narrator reconstructs this story when he Visits Starkfield twenty-four years after the event, Ethan is fifty-two and the three principals have been living together for almost two and a half decades, Zeena taking care of Mattie and Ethan supporting them both.

The numbers that accumulate in Wharton's story suggest natural cycles: fifty-two (the weeks of the year); twenty-four (the hours of the day and a multiple of the months of the year); seven (the days of the week) which echoes in the multiples twenty-one, twenty-eight, thirty-five; three (among other things, morning, afternoon, night). This numerical pattern, though subtly established, is carefully worked out; and its implication of generation and natural order ironically underlines Wharton's awful *donnee.* Expressed figuratively: in the frozen unyielding world of Ethan Frome, there is no generative natural order; there is no mother earth. There is only her nightmare reverse image, the witch, figured in Zeena Frome.

Specifically, a network of imagery and event in *Ethan Frome* calls up the fairy tale *Snow White.* The frozen landscape, the emphasis on sevens, the physical appearance of Mattie Silver (black hair, red cheeks, white skin), her persecution by witchlike Zeena (an older woman who takes the girl in when her mother dies and thus serves as a stepmother to her), Mattie's role as housekeeper: all have obvious parallels in the traditional fairy tale about a little girl whose jealous step-mother tries to keep her from maturing into a healthy, marriageable young woman. Although Wharton is not imitating this well-known fairy tale-rather, she draws on familiar elements of *Snow White* as touchstones for anew, original fairy tale-still, the implicit contrast between Zeena's victory in *Ethan Frome* and the step-mother's defeat in *Snow- White* subtly contributes to the terror of Wharton's story. Customarily fairy tales reassure by teaching that witches

lose in the end. Children and heroines ("Snow White) do not remain the victims of ogres. Someone saves them. Here is part of the horror of *Ethan Frome:* Wharton's modern fairy tale for adults, while true to traditional models in the way it teaches a moral about "real" life at the same time that it addresses elemental fears (e.g., the fear of death, the fear of being abandoned), does not conform to the genre's typical denouement. The lovers do not live happily ever after. The witch wins. .

Zeena's face alone would type her as a witch. Sallow-complexioned and old at thirty-five, her bloodless countenance is composed of high pr0truding cheekbones, lashless lids over piercing eyes, thin colorless hair, and a mesh of minute vertical lines between her gaunt nose and granite chin. Black calico, with a brown shawl in winter, makes up her ordinary daytime wear, and her muffled body is as fleshless as her face....

In contrast, Mattie Silver seems a fairy maiden, a princess of nature in Ethan's eyes. Her expressive face changes "like a wheat-field under a summer breeze," and her voice reminds him of "a rustling covert leading to enchanted glades." When she sews, her hands flutter like birds building a nest; when she cries, her eyelashes feel like butterflies. Especially intoxicating is her luxuriant dark hair, which curls like the tendrils on a wildflower and is "soft yet springy, like certain mosses on warm slopes."...

Hurting young people and depriving them of hope and joy is the fairy-tale witch's job, and Zeena does not shirk the task. She constantly finds fault with Mattie, and for seven years she bas tortured her youthful husband with whining complaints about her various ailments....

The horror of the story is that the suicide attempt transforms Mattie into a mirror-image of Zeena.. ..

The end of *Ethan Frome* images Zeena Frome and Mattie Silver not as two individual and entirely opposite female figures but as two virtually indistinguishable examples of one type of woman: in fairy-tale terms, the witch; in social mythology, the shrew. Mattie, in effect, has become Zeena. Shocking as that replicate image may at first seem, it bas been prepared for throughout the story. Mattie and Zeena are related by blood. They live in the same house and wait on the same man, and they came to that man's house for the same purpose: to take the place of an infirm old woman (Zeena takes over for Ethan's mother, Mattie for his wife). The two women, viewed symbolically, do not contrast with each other....

As a fairy story, *Ethan Frome* terrifies because it is inverted. Incredibly, the witch triumphs. Mattie Silver becomes Zeena's double rather than Ethan's complement.

Wharton's moral, her social criticism, emerges logically from tills fairy tale. *Ethan Frome* maintains that witches are real. There are women whose occupation in life consists of making other people unhappy. *Ethan Frome* includes three. Ethan's mother, housebound and isolated for years on a failing farm, lived out her life an insane, wizened creature peering out her window for passersby who never came and listening for voices that only she could hear. Her frightening silence oppressed Ethan until Zeena

joined the household to care for her. But then Zeena too fell silent... . Zeena's hypochondria, her frigidity, her taciturnity broken only by querulous nagging, her drab appearance-these make her an unsympathetic character. They also make her a typically "queer" woman of the region, a twisted human being produced by poverty and isolation and deadening routine... .

In reality, Mattie had no future to lose. Ethan asks for assurance that she does not want to leave the farm, and "he had to stoop his head to catch her stifled whisper: 'Where'd I go, if I did?'" There is nowhere for her to go. She has no immediate family and no saleable skills;... Ethan thinks of Mattie "setting out alone to renew the weary quest for work What chance had she, inexperienced

and untrained, among the million bread seekers of the cities? There came back to him miserable tales he had heard at Worcester, and the faces of girls whose lives had begun as hopefully as Mattie's.. " (final ellipsis Wharton's). Mattie's prospects are grim. She can work in a factory and lose her health; she can become a prostitute and lose her dignity as well; she can marry a farmer and lose her mind. Or she can be crushed in a sledding accident and lose all three at once. It makes no difference. Poverty, premature old age, and shattered dreams comprise her inevitable reward no matter what she does. The fact that Wharton cripples Mattie, but does not let her die, reflects not the author's but the culture's cruelty Mattie Silver has been prepared for no economically independent life. The system is designed to keep her a parasite.

Ethan himself is only slightly less trapped.... "He was a prisoner for life." The prison, Edith Wharton makes clear by setting the story at the simplest and therefore most obvious level of society, was the American economic system itself, which laid on most men a killing load of work and responsibility and on most women barely enough variety and adult human contact to keep one's spirit alive... At least Ethan meets fellow workers when he carts his timber to sale or goes in to town for supplies and mail. Farmers' womenfolk normally went nowhere and did nothing but repeat identical tasks in unvaried monotony. To make that isolation of women stark and to emphasize the sterility of life at the level of *Ethan Frome,* Wharton gives the couple no children; and the woman's name she chooses for bold-faced inscription on the only tombstone described in the Frome family-plot is also instructive: "ENDURANCE." If Ethan's life is hard, and it is, woman's is harder yet; and it is sad but not surprising that isolated, housebound women make man feel the full burden of their misery. He is their only connection with the outer world, the vast economic and social system that consigns them to solitary, monotonous domestic lives from which their only escape is madness or death

Ethan Frome departs from traditional fairy tales by showing that life does not contain happy endings. Good girls do not grow up into happy wives, and good-hearted, worthy lovers do not ride off into the western sun with the maiden of their dreams. For, in Wharton's fairy tale, witches do not get vanquished and disappear. They multiply. First there is Ethan's mother, then Zeena, then Mattie; and they represent only three of the many women gone "queer" in this wintry American landscape. Wharton's moral emerges cold and grim as her Starkfield setting. *Ethan Frome* mocks the fantasy that witches will disappear and romance with a woods-nymph will liberate man into a

miraculous world of masterful love and erotic fulfillment. As long as women are kept isolated and dependent, *Ethan Frome* implies, Mattie Silvers will become Zeena Fromes: frigid crippled wrecks of human beings whose pleasure in life derives from depriving others of theirs.. . .

The narrator exists to unlock the deepest, the psycho/sexual, level of *Ethan Frome.* Empathically, he projects himself into young Ethan's situation and sees in it the realization of a specific male fear: the fear that Woman will turn into Witch. The fear that Mother will turn into Witch (love into hate, day into night, life into death) everyone has known Precisely this inversion occurs in *Ethan.*

Frome, and because the terror is man's it makes emotional and intellectual sense to have a man, and one temperamentally close to Ethan, visualize the sinister fairy tale in which man, in this case Ethan, can be caught.

Women's nightmare shift from a positive to a negative force in man's life is the theme of *Ethan Frome.* In part Wharton treats fear of maternal rejection. First Ethan's mother abandons his needs and then Zeena, his mother's replacement, does the same. But airy Mattie Silver is not a mother-figure and her transformation moves the pattern beyond fear of maternal betrayal to fear of female betrayal in general. Male fear of woman and perpetuation of the social system that makes that fear well founded-Mattie Silvers *do* turn into Zeena Fromes-are the combined focus of *Ethan Frome.* The tale looks at man's romantic dream of feminine solace and transport and, with a hideous twist, allows Ethan's fantasy to materialize. Mattie Silver does become "his" but with, rather than without, Zeena; and the two witchlike women hold him prisoner for life in the severely limited economy and social landscape which traps all three of them....

Ethan Frome-as a fairy tale, as social cynicism, as fictive psychohistory--expresses a coherent moral. In her French draft Edith Wharton explicitly states that Mattie "exemplified all the dull anguish of the long line of women who, for two hundred years, had been buffeted by life and who had eaten out their hearts in the constricted and gloomy existence of the American countryside." In the finished version of *Ethan Frome* Wharton is more subtle but no less clear Witchlike Zenobia Frome, a terrifying and repulsive figure archetypally, is in social terms not at all mysterious. It is a commonplace of scholarship about the persecution of witches that many of them were ordinary women bent and twisted by the conditions of their lives as women, their isolation and powerlessness. Stated simply, Zeena Frome is the witch that conservative New England will make of unskilled young Mattie; and Wharton's inverted fairy tale about the multiplication of witches in Ethan's life, a story appropriately told by a horrified young man whose Job is to build the future, finally serves as a lesson from the past. Witches do exist, Wharton's tale says, and the culture creates them.

Source: Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome and the Question of Meaning," in *Studies in American Fiction,* Vol. 7, No 2, 1979, pp. 127-40

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Bernard cites Wharton's substantial use of imagery and symbolism in Ethan Frome *as a successful method to establish depth in a tale inhabited by reticent and inarticulate characters.*

A common criticism of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* is that it is too contrived. In the last analysis, the characters seem peculiarly unmotivated, put through their paces in a clever, but mechanical, way. Such an opinion can only be the result of a cursory reading. It is true that the book has a kind of stylistic and organizational brilliance. But it is not merely a display; it is invariably at the service of plot and character The nature of her subject imposed certain difficulties on Wharton, particularly her characters' lack of articulation. How could she, without over-narrating, get at a deep problem involving such characters when they do not speak enough to reveal that problem? Frome's character and his marital relationship are at the heart of the novel, but they are revealed only indirectly. Wharton solved her difficulty in a masterful way by her use of imagery and symbolism. It is in her use of imagery and symbolism that the depths of the story are to be found. Without an understanding of them, a reader *would* find the characters unmotivated and the tragedy contrived. For easy discussion, the imagery and symbolism may be divided into three parts: the compatibility of setting and character, the uses of light and dark, and the sexual symbolism. A survey of these three parts in the novel will, it is hoped, clarify the real story in *Ethan Frome* by adding a new dimension of meaning.

The beginning of this new dimension of meaning is the first mention of the New England village-Starkfield. On many levels the *locus* of the story is a stark field. The village lies under "a sky of iron," points of the dipper over it hang "like icicles," and anon flashes "cold fires" The countryside is "gray and lonely." Each farmhouse is "mute and cold as a grave-stone." This characterization of Starkfield is consistent throughout the book. Frome, in all ways, fits into this setting. On several occasions his integration with it is described. The narrator, upon first seeing him, sees him as "bleak and unapproachable." Later he says of Frome, "He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him bound fast below the surface... he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access." Frome, unhappily married to Zeena, and pining for her cousin Mattie, is indeed parallel to the Starkfield setting. Everything on the surface is hard and frozen. His feeling, his love, for Mattie cannot break loose, just as spring and summer are fast bound by winter's cold...." Finally there is Frome's inarticulateness. Not only are his feelings locked, frozen; his very speech is also beyond the natural reticence of the local people. Neither he nor the landscape can express its warm and tender part. . "Again he struggled for the all expressive word, and again, his arm in hers, found only a deep 'Come along.'" He is truly a man of "dumb melancholy."

The separation of feeling from its expression, the idea of emotion being locked away, separated, or frozen, just as Starkfield is bound by ice and snow, is demonstrated also by the Frome farm. The house seems to "shiver in the wind," has a "broken down gate,"

and has an "unusually forlorn and stunted look." More important, though, is the "L.pond"... Frome casually mentions to the narrator that he had had to take down the "L." Thus Frome's home is disjointed, separated from its vital functions, even as he is Just as Frome is emotionally trapped, just as Starkfield is frozen in the winter landscape, just as Frome's home is cut off from its vitals, so too is he cut off physically from his former strength, trapped in his crippled frame. Images of being caught, bound, trapped are frequent. "He was a prisoner for life." "It seemed to Ethan that his heart was bound with cords which an unseen hand was tightening with every tick of the clock.". Thus the setting of the novel, the landscape and the farm, is parallel to Frome's condition and serves to illuminate it. But Wharton does not stop at this point.

There is hardly a page throughout the book that does not have some reference to light and dark. Wharton uses all of them with effect. The supreme light image is Mattie Silver, as her name implies. She is in contrast to everything in Starkfield; her feelings bubble near the surface. Frome, on the other hand, is all dark. He lives in the dark, especially emotionally. At the beginning of the novel, when he has come to meet Mattie, she is dancing gaily in a church filled with "broad bands of yellow light." Frome keeps "out of the range of the revealing rays from within." "Hugging the shadow," he stands in the "frosty darkness" and looks in. Later he catches up to her "in the black shade of the Varnum spruces," the spot from where they finally begin the attempted suicide that cripples them. He stands with her in "the gloom of the spruces," where it is "so dark... he could barely see the shape of her head," or walks with her "in

silence through the blackness of the hemlock shaded lane." Blackness is his element. As they walk back to the farm he revels in their closeness. "It was during their night walks back to the farm that he felt most intensely the sweetness of this communion." Their love is a bloom of night "He would have liked to stand there with her all night in the blackness" He does not see Mattie so much as sense her: " ... he felt in the darkness, that her face was lifted quickly to his." "They strained their eyes to each other through the icy darkness." Frome's favorite spot is a secluded place in the woods called Shadow Pond. On their last visit there "the darkness descended with them, dropping down like a black veil from the heavy hemlock boughs." Frome cannot seem to get out of the dark. And often, as in quotations above, the dark is pregnant with suggestions of death and cold. Frome's kitchen, on their return from the village, has "the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of night." As Ethan settles in his tomblike house, Mattie's effect on him dies away. He lies in bed and watches the light from her candle, which

sending its small ray across the landing, drew a scarcely perceptible line of light under his door. He kept his eyes fixed on the light till it vanished Then the room grew perfectly black, and not a sound was audible but Zeena's asthmatic breathing.

Without Mattie's "light" he is left with the ugly reality of his wife. In numerous small ways also Wharton makes the light and dark images work for her. When Mattie relieves Ethan's jealousy at one point, "The blackness lifted and light flooded Ethan's brain." When Mattie is told by Zeena she must go, and she repeats the words to Ethan, "The words went on sounding between them as though a torch of warming flew from hand to hand through a dark landscape." Before their suicide plunge, "The spruces swatched

them in blackness and silence " A bitter argument between Ethan and Zeena is "as senseless and savage as a physical fight between two enemies in the darkness." After, Zeena's face "stood grimly out against the uncurtained pane, which had turned from gray to black." The cumulative effect of all these images is to tell us a great deal about Frome and his tortured psyche.

The most important thing the images of light and dark reveal about Frome is that he is a negative person. Frome is a heroic figure: nothing less than the entire landscape can suffice to describe him effectively; his agony is as broad and deep as that of the winter scene. But he is not tragic because he is a man of great potential subdued and trapped by forces beyond his capacity. His tragedy is entirely of his own making. He is weak. His character never changes. Both before and after the accident he is the same. Like his environment he has a kind of dumb endurance for harsh conditions. There are several indications of his weakness besides his identity with darkness. Frome married Zeena because she had nursed his mother through her final illness. He was twenty-one and she twenty-eight. He married her less because he loved her than because he needed a replacement for his mother. Certainly it is Zeena who cracks the whip in the household, and Ethan who jumps. What Zeena says, goes. Frome "had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter... " When he and Mattie are about to attempt suicide, Mattie sitting in front of Ethan on the sled, he asks her to change places with him. She asks why. Quite sincerely he answers, "Because I want to feel you holding me." He wants to die being cuddled and comforted, leaving to Mattie the role of protector and shelterer.

Throughout the book, Frome recognizes his futility and accepts it rather than trying to fight his way out of it. He does not ever realistically reach for a solution. His love inspires little more than dreams. He thinks of another man who left his wife for another woman and invests the event with fairy tale qualities: "They had a little girl with fair curls, who wore a gold locket and was dressed like a princess." Once he imagines Zeena might be dead: "What if tramps had been there-what if ... " When he spends ills one night alone with Mattie, instead of thinking of a way to achieve permanence for their relationship he "set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so.. ." Ironically, this is just about what he achieves by crippling instead of killing himself and Mattie. He did not, however, envision that Zeena would be a necessary part of the arrangement, as a nurse to Mattie.

The negation, the blackness, in his character is revealed also in his funereal satisfactions. When Mattie says she is not thinking of leaving because she has no place to go, "The answer sent a pang through him but the tone suffused him with joy." He rejoices in her helplessness; he is pained and thrilled at the same time because she has nowhere to go, because she too is trapped. Frome's aspirations do not finally go beyond darkness. His final acceptance of suicide is the culmination of his negative instincts: death is the blackest blackness.

Although the meaningful use of light and dark is pervasive in the book and is illuminating, it is the sexual symbolism that cuts deepest. The sexual symbolism is more dramatic than the two elements already discussed because it revolves around the key

scenes in the book, Ethan and Mattie's night together and Zeena's return. It is also more significant because without an understanding of it the source of Zeena and Ethan's estrangement and antagonism remains unknown. After all, what *is* the deep gulf that lies between them? There is no explicit revelation in the book. In part, Wharton's use of symbolism to clarify the book's central problem is compatible with the inarticulateness of the characters. But perhaps also it represents a reticence or modesty of the author's. Ethan and Mattie's night together is ostensibly a mild affair. Wharton might well have revealed then the true relationship between Frome and his wife and demonstrated overtly Mattie and Ethan's transgression. But was it really necessary for her to do so? Even as it is, the evening progresses with the greatest of intensity. Every action, every word, even every silence quivers. It is because these apparently innocent actions and words exist in such intensity that they must be scrutinized. There are disproportions of feeling, particularly centering around the pickle dish, that are revealing. A proper understanding of the events of that evening sheds light throughout the book, and particularly makes the light and dark imagery more meaningful.

Barrenness, infertility, is at the heart of Frome's frozen woe. Not only is his farm crippled, and finally his body too; his sexuality is crippled also. Zeena, already hypochondriac when he married her, has had the effect of burying his manhood as deeply as everything else in him. In seven years of marriage there have been no children. Within a year of their marriage, Zeena developed her "sickliness." Medicine, sickness, and death are, in fact, rarely out of sight in the book. The farm itself, with its separation of its vital center, its regenerative center, suggests of course the sexual repression. The name Starkfield also connotes barrenness. However, Ethan and Zeena's sexual relationship is suggested most by the incident of the pickle dish, a dish which, unless understood, lies rather unaccountably at the very center of the book.

The red pickle dish is Zeena's most prized possession. She received it as a wedding gift. But she never uses it. Instead she keeps it on a shelf, hidden away. She takes it down only during spring cleaning, "and then I always lifted it with my own hands, so's 't shouldn't get broke." The dish has only ceremonial, not functional, use. The sexual connotations here are obvious. The fact that the wedding dish, which was meant to contain pickles, in fact never does, explains a lot of the heaviness of atmosphere, the chill, the frigidity. The most intense scenes of the book, the most revealing, center around this dish. For example, Zeena never does discover an affair in the making between Ethan and Mattie, nor does she ever say anything, except for one hint not followed up, that reveals such knowledge. Her only discovery (and it is *the* discovery of the book) is of her broken (and used) pickle dish. It is this which brings the only tears to her eyes in the entire book. When Zeena is gone for a day, Mattie, significantly, brings down and uses the pickle dish in serving Ethan supper. Only if the dish is properly understood can it be seen how her violation is a sacrilege, as Zeena's emotions amply testify. The dish is broken, and Ethan plans to glue it together. Of course the dish can never be the same. This kind of violation is irrevocable. Zeena does not discover that the dish is broken until she gets, again significantly, heartburn, the powders for which she keeps on the same private shelf as the pickle dish. The scene following is a symbolic recognition of the fact that Mattie has usurped her place, broken her marriage, and become one with Ethan, though in fact it was the cat (Zeena) who actually broke

the dish. The fact that Zeena never truly filled her place, acted the role of wife, and is herself responsible for the failure of the marriage does not bother her. Ethan is hers, however ceremonially, and she resents what has happened.... The evening that Mattie and Ethan spend together, then, is not as innocent as it seems on the surface. That Mathe and Ethan's infidelity is so indirectly presented, whether because of Wharton's sense of propriety or her desire to maintain a minimum of direct statement, does not at all lessen the reality of that fact. If the overt act of infidelity is not present, the emotional and symbolic act is. The passage is full of passion; the moment, for example, when Frome kisses the piece of material Mattie is holding has climatic intensity.

The sterility of their marriage, Frome's emasculation, is represented elsewhere For example, just before Zeena leaves for the overnight trip to a doctor, she finishes a bottle of medicine and pushes it to Mattie: "It ain't done me a speck of good, but I guess I might as well use it up .. If you can get the taste out it'll do for pickles." This is the only other mention of pickles in the book. Significantly, it is the last word in the chapter before the one devoted to Ethan and Mattie's night together. The action might be interpreted as follows: after Zeena has exhausted the possibilities of her medicine for her "trouble," she turns to sex-but she passes on that alternative to Mattie. Mattie may use the Jar for pickles if she wishes. The action is a foreshadowing of Mattie's use of the pickle dish. In a sense, Zeena has urged her to that act, for she is abdicating the position of sexual initiative.

Again, in *Ethan Frome* each word counts But there are some descriptions, obviously very particular, that do not fit in with any generalizations already presented. However, in the light of an understanding of the pickle dish incident, they are clarified. When Frome first points out his home, the narrator notes "the black wraith of a deciduous creeper" flapping on the porch. Deciduous means shedding leaves, or antlers, or horns, or teeth, at a particular season or stage of growth. Frome has indeed shed his manhood. Sexually he is in his winter season. Later, another vegetation is described on the porch: "A dead cucumber vine dangled from the porch like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death. .." A cucumber is no more than a pickle. The pickle dish is not used; the cucumber Vine is dead. That it should be connected with crape (black) and death is perfectly logical in the light of what has already been discussed about Frome. Frome's sexuality is dead. There is, of course, in all this the suggestion that Frome could revive if he could but reach spring, escape the winter of his soul. Mattie is his new season Mattie, as Zeena never does, makes Ethan feel the springs of his masculinity. But he never overcomes the ice of accumulated Starkfield winters. His final solution is to merge himself with winter forever.

Thus Ethan Frome, when he plunges towards what he considers certain death, is a failure but not a mystery. His behavior is not unmotivated; the tragedy is not contrived. The very heart of the novel is Frome's weakness of character, his negation of life. Behind that is his true, unfulfilled, relationship with Zeena. Wharton's economy of language in the novel is superb. There is hardly a word unnecessary to the total effect. Her final economy is the very brevity of the book it fits the scene and character There were depths to plumb; her people were not simple. To overcome the deficiencies of their natural reticence (and perhaps her own), to retain the strength of the severe and rugged

setting, particularly the "outcropping granite," she resorted to a brilliant pattern of interlocking imagery and symbolism, three facets of which have been outlined here, to create a memorable work.

Source: Kenneth Bernard, "Imagery and Symbolism in Ethan Frome," in *College English,* Vol. 23, No 1, October, 1961, pp. 178-84.

Adaptations

A dramatization of *Ethan Frome* by Owen and Donald Davis was produced in New York in 1936.

A 1993 screen version directed by John Madden starred Liam Neeson as Ethan, Joan Allen as Zeena, and Patricia Arquette as Mattie. It was co-produced by American Playhouse, Companion Productions, and BBC Films and released by Miramax.

Richard Krausnick adapted and directed the novel as a full-length stage play for Shakespeare and Company, who first performed it in 1995 in Lenox, Massachusetts, where Wharton had a home.

An unabridged audio recording read by C. M. Herbert is available from Blackstone Audiobooks.

Topics for Further Study

Explore the various options young people have today for getting an education and making their own way in the world, and explain how the lives of the characters in *Ethan Frome* might have been different if these opnions had been open to them.

Investigate the trend to urbanization of the 1920s and explain how it would have affected towns like Starkfield.

How has the worldwide lumber industry changed since the late 19th century, and is there any role in it for small operators like Ethan Frome?

Research the technology available to today's amateur astronomers for exploring the night sky, and describe the kinds of things Ethan would have been able to show Mathe if he had had access to that same technology.

Compare and Contrast

1880s: People in New England farming communities led a difficult, culturally void existence.

1911: Innovations in transportation made communication easier between the villages and gave residents access to recreational activities in the bigger towns.

Today: Videocassettes, radio, cable television, and the Internet have made the world a global village.

1880s: The era of railroad building made earlier methods of transportation in the United States largely obsolete.

1911: Automobiles (and later buses and trucks) came to exceed the railroad in importance.

Today: Jet travel makes it possible to travel almost anywhere in the world in a day, and supersonic transport reduces long-distance air travel by half.

1880s: Although Thomas Edison patented an incandescent lamp in 1879, most lighting was still by candlelight, oil lamp, or gas jet.

1911: Electricity was increasingly available in homes, which used incandescent lighting. French physicist Georges Claude developed the neon lamp, which was used in commercial signs

Today: Variations of Thomas Edison's incandescent lamp (light bulbs) are used to light homes, whereas factories, offices, stores, and public buildings generally use fluorescent lighting; street and highway lighting is still an evolving technology.

1880s: Techniques based on photography and spectroscopy (a method of measuring the wavelength and intensity of spectral lines) revolutionized astronomy.

1911: The main ideas about the evolution, that is, the life history, of stars become clear

Today: Since its launch from the shuttle Atlantis in 1990, the Hubble Space Telescope has provided a flood of new images of the universe. For example, It shows star clusters 22 million light years away, springtime dust storms at the Martian north pole, and (for the first time) the surface of Pluto.

What Do I Read Next?

A spinster romance writer exiled to a stately hotel in Switzerland ponders love, work, and the lives of her fellow residents in Anita Brookner' s *Hotel du Lac* (1984).

In *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869), Robert Browning's tale in blank verse based on a 1698 Roman murder trial, a beautiful young woman's attempt to escape an unhappy marriage ends in tragedy.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is a classic moral study of adultery and revenge set in Puritan New England.

The Age of Innocence (1920) is Edith Wharton's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of frustrated passion set in 19th-century New York high society.

Edith Wharton Abroad. Selected Travel Writings, 1888-1920 is a collection of Wharton's observations over a thirty-year period from her journeys through Europe, Morocco, and the Mediterranean, edited by Sara Bird Wright.

Further Study

Ehzabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's 'Ethan Frome' and the Question of Meaning," in *Studies in American Fiction,* Vol. 7, 1979, pp. 127-40

Ammons discusses *Ethan Frome* in relation to the classic fairytale, arguing that the novel works as modern fairy story, as social criticism, and that it dramatizes male fear of woman.

Shan Benstock and Barbara Grossman, in *No Gifts from Chance A Biography of Edith Wharton,* Scribner's, 1994 An investigation into Wharton's work and personal relationships from a feminist perspective, drawing on many previously unavailable sources.

Jean Frantz Blackall, "Edith Wharton's Art of Ellipsis," in *'Ethan Frome" Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism,* edited by Krisnn O. Lauer and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Norton, 1995, pp. 170-74.

Blackall discusses Wharton's use of the ellipsis, showing how they may represent (among other things) the inexpressible or that which a character is unwilling to express They might also be used to entice the reader into imaginative collaboration with the writer.

Anthony Burgess, "Austere in Whalebone,'" in *Spectator,* No 7171, December 3, 1965, p. 745.

A review of three of Wharton's works, including *Ethan Frome,* which novelist and critic Burgess calls too pessimistic to be true.

Dorothy Yost Deegan, "What Does the Reader Find?: The Synthesis-Portrait in Miniature,'" in *The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels,* King's Crown Press, 1951, pp. 40-126.

Examines Mattie Silver as a literary type, that is, the young single woman who ends up in an unfortunate position Owing to her inability to make her own way in the world economically.

R W. B. Lewis, "Ethan Frome and Other Dramas,'" in *Edith Wharton- A Biography,* Harper and Row, 1975, pp. 294-313.

Argues that *Ethan Frome* reflects features of Wharton's own experience, exaggerated and transplanted to a hopeless rural selling.

Orlene Murad, "Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome,'" in *Modern Language Studies,* Vol 13, No 3, Summer, 1983, pp. 90-103.

Murad explores the biographical ties between Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome

Blake Nevius, "On 'Ethan Frome,'" in *Edith Wharton A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Irving Howe, Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 130-36.

An excerpt from Nevius's *Edith Wharton* in which he discusses, among other things, Ethan's heroic possibilities and Wharton's handling of point of view. Alan Price, in *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith What on and the First World War,* St. Marlin's Press, 1998.

A book-length chronicle of Wharton's wartime relief and chanty activities and her wartime writings. Marlene Springer, in *Ethan Frome. A Nightmare of Need,* Twayne, 1993.

A book-length study of *Ethan Frome* that includes discussions on the literary and historical context of the novel, characterization, style and symbolism. Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia,'" in *Edith Wharton' A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Irving Howe, Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp 137-46.

Trilling argues that the one Idea of considerable Importance to be found in Wharton's novel is that moral inertia, the not making of moral decisions, constitutes a large part of the moral life of humanity.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "The Narrator's Vision,'" in *'Ethan Frome'. Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism,* edited by Kristin O. Lauer and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Norton, 1995, pp 130-44.

Arguing that *Ethan Frome* is about its narrator, Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the novel's narrative structure and the Implications of the narrator's vision.

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Manns Bewley, "Mrs Wharton's Mask," in the *New York Review of Books,* Vol 3, No 3, September 24, 1964, pp. 7-9.

David Eggenschwiler, "The Ordered Disorder of 'Ethan Frome,'" in *Studies in the Novel,* Vol. 9, No 3, Fall, 1977, pp 237-45.

K. R. Srinivisa Iyengar, "A Note on 'Ethan Frome,'" in *Literary Criterion,* Vol. 5, No 3, Winter, 1962, pp 168-78.

Margaret B. McDowell, in *Edith Wharton,* Twayne Pub lishers, 1976, pp 67-9

The Nation, Vol. 93, No. 2147, October 26, 1911, pp 67-9.

Blake Nevius, "'Ethan Frome' and the Themes of Edith Warton's Fiction,"_ in *The New England Quarterly,* Vol. 24, No.2, June, 1951, pp. 197-207.

"Three Lives in Supreme Torture,'" in *New York Times Book Review,* Vol. 16, No 40, October 8, 1911, p. 603.

The Saturday Review, Vol. 112, No 2925, November 18, 1911, p. 650.

R. Baird Shuman, "The Continued Populate of 'Ethan Frome,'" in *Revue des langues Vivantes,* Vol. 37, No 3, 1971, pp. 257-63.

Allen F. Stein, "Edith Wharton: The Marriage of Entrapment,"_ in *After the Vows Were Spoken- Marriage in American Literary Realism,* Ohio State University Press, 1984, pp 209-30

J D Thomas, "Margnalia or 'Ethan Frome,'" in *American Literature,* Vol 27, No 3, November, 1955, pp 405-09.

Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia,'" in *A Gathering of Fugitives,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, pp 34-44.

Geoffrey Walton, in *Edith Wharton A Critical Interpretation,* Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971, pp. 78-83.

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Edith Wharton, in *Ethan Frome,* Penguin, 1987, p. XVIII.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in *A Feast of Words: The Triump of Edith Wharton,* Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 18384.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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