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Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

# *Ethan Frome*

by Edith Wharton

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# *Ethan Frome*

## Background Note

Edith Wharton grew up in New York City in a wealthy, fashionable family. At the age of twenty-three, she met and married a friend of her brother. The two were quite dissimilar, and it was clear very early that the marriage was a mistake. Because of the society in which they lived, however, a divorce was out of the question, and it was not until thirty years later that she obtained a divorce.

Significantly perhaps, the author's husband, who was fourteen years older than she was, began to have health problems. In her autobiography, she comments that he complained a great deal and verbally abused her when he was ill. In *Ethan Frome*, the parallels between Wharton's life and Ethan's are unmistakable.

All references come from the Prestwick House Touchstone Classic edition of *Ethan Frome*, published 2005.

# *Ethan Frome*

## Terms and Definitions

*Anti-hero* - the main character in a book who lacks the usual heroic qualities such as courage, wisdom, self-sacrifice etc.; the opposite of the traditional hero. **Examples:** Don Quixote, Yossarian from *Catch-22*.

*Flashback* - a scene that interrupts the ongoing action in a story to show an event that happened earlier. **Example:** The movie, *Citizen Kane*, tells its story almost exclusively through the memories of its characters, who all knew Kane before his death.

*Foreshadowing* - the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come. Foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense. **Example:** Two small and seemingly inconsequential car accidents predict and hint at the upcoming, important wreck in *The Great Gatsby*.

*Hero* - the central character, usually one who possesses noble qualities such as self-sacrifice, courage, wisdom, etc. **Examples:** Tarzan, King Arthur, Frodo.

*Imagery* - the use of words to evoke impressions and meanings that are more than just the basic, accepted definitions of the words themselves. **Example:** The quotation, "Get thee to a nunnery," from *Hamlet* implies that Ophelia must regain her purity and chastity and does not simply mean that she needs to go to a convent.

*Irony* - a perception of inconsistency, sometimes humorous, in which the significance and understanding of a statement or event is changed by its context. **Example:** The firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic Irony* - the audience or reader knows more about a character's situation than the character does and knows that the character's understanding is incorrect. **Example:** In *Medea*, Creon asks, "What atrocities could she commit in one day?" The reader, however, knows Medea will destroy her family and Creon's by day's end.
- *Structural Irony* – the use of a naïve hero, whose incorrect perceptions differ from the reader's correct ones. **Example:** Huck Finn.
- *Verbal Irony* - a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. **Example:** A large man whose nickname is "Tiny."

*Motif* - a situation, incident, idea, or image that is repeated significantly in a literary work. **Examples:** In *Hamlet*, revenge is a frequently repeated idea. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden continually comments on the phoniness of people he meets.

**Narrator** - the one who tells the story. The narrator must not be confused with “author,” the one who writes the story. If the narrator is a character in the book, the proper term is “first-person narration.” **Example:** *Moby Dick* is narrated by Ishmael, a crewmember. If the narrator is not a character in the book, the correct term is “third-person narration.” **Example:** *Sense and Sensibility*.

**Point of View** - the position or vantage point, determined by the author, from which the story seems to come to the reader. The two most common points of view are First-person and Third-person. **Examples:** First-person point of view occurs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; the reader receives all information through Huck’s eyes. An example of third-person point of view is Dickens’ *Hard Times*, in which the narrator is not a character in the book.

**Setting** - when and where the short story, play, or novel takes place. **Examples:** *Macbeth* takes place in the eleventh century in Scotland. *The Old Man and the Sea* has its main setting on the ocean outside Havana, Cuba, in an unspecified time in the middle-to-late 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

**Simile** - a comparison between two different things using either *like* or *as*. **Examples:** I am as hungry as a horse. The huge trees broke like twigs during the hurricane.

**Symbol** - an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. **Example:** The sea could be symbolic for “the unknown.” Since the sea is something that is physical and can be seen by the reader, and also has elements that cannot be understood, it can be used symbolically to stand for the abstraction of “mystery,” “obscurity,” or “the unknown.”

**Tragic hero** - the main character in a tragedy; in order to fit the definition, the hero must have a tragic flaw, which causes his or her downfall. **Examples:** Hamlet’s main character weakness is his indecision; Lear’s is his pride.

# *Ethan Frome*

## Objectives

*By the end of the unit, the student will be able to:*

1. explain how the setting of the story relates to Ethan Frome's character.
2. write a character sketch of at least one of the three main characters, including personality traits, motivations in the story, and an opinion of the character.
3. define irony and discuss three examples in this story.
4. discuss the symbolic use of warm and cool colors.
5. explain why the ending of this story is memorable for most readers.
6. explain why the actions of the characters were appropriate for the time in which the story took place, despite seeming odd today.
7. provide details to prove that each of the following is a major motif/theme of this novel:
  - A. how loneliness and isolation affects an individual
  - B. situations without hope
  - C. marriage as a form of enslavement
  - D. the tyranny of illness inhibits individual growth
8. identify and analyze two major symbols in the novel.
9. identify the point of view of the story and explain why the author chose to use a visitor to the area as the narrator, rather than using one of the characters involved in the action.
10. explain how the setting of the story influences the plot.
11. define the terms hero, tragic hero, and anti-hero, and apply them to Ethan Frome.
12. identify at least three instances of foreshadowing in the novel.
13. identify and explain significant imagery in the novel.

# *Ethan Frome*

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does Ethan's poor financial status affect the actions of the plot?
2. Although not explicitly stated, there are suggestions that, try as he might, Ethan could not escape his fate. Argue for or against that theory.
3. Explain how the setting for this story—Starkfield, Massachusetts—influences this novel.
4. Point out how images of warmth and light contrast with images of cold and darkness in this story.
5. How appropriate is the ending of this story?
6. Discuss the role that ill health plays in Ethan's life.
7. Consider these terms: hero, tragic hero, and anti-hero. Which of these terms, if any, is appropriate for Ethan?
8. Write a character analysis of Ethan, Zeena, or Mattie. Be sure to include personality traits, motivations in the story, and your own opinion of each character.
9. In your opinion, how successful is the narrative format that the author uses in this story? Can the story be told as well in real time, rather than flashback?
10. Define irony, and point out three examples of it in this novel.
11. In what sense is the action of this novel locked into the novel's setting, New England in the late 1800s?
12. Provide the necessary details for each of these ideas and prove that each is a major theme in the story (or choose one):
  - how loneliness and isolation affects an individual
  - situations without hope
  - marriage as a form of enslavement
  - the tyranny of illness inhibits individual growth

# *Ethan Frome*

## Test

1. A major symbol in this novel is
  - A. the red pickle dish.
  - B. the sawmill.
  - C. the narrator's engineering book.
  - D. Ethan's eyeglasses.
  - E. Zeena's cane.
2. Ethan marries Zeena, primarily because he is
  - A. a victim of society's prejudices.
  - B. indebted to her for taking care of his mother.
  - C. under the illusion that she has money.
  - D. lonely and wishes to have someone to speak with.
  - E. forced into it by relatives.
3. We are told that Ethan would have never married Zeena
  - A. if she had not tricked him.
  - B. if he had realized her true personality.
  - C. if it had been spring.
  - D. if he had even a little money.
  - E. if he had not felt sorry for her.
4. Ethan and the narrator
  - A. have been to Florida.
  - B. have an interest in science and engineering.
  - C. have fathers who died violent deaths.
  - D. have unhappy marriages.
  - E. Both A and B
5. The one time we see Zeena cry is
  - A. when she hears about the accident.
  - B. when Ethan defies her and takes Mattie to the station himself.
  - C. when she tells Ethan she is much sicker than he thinks she is.
  - D. when the injured Mattie is carried into the Hale house.
  - E. when she finds her broken red pickle dish.
6. Which of the following is an example of foreshadowing in the story?
  - A. Ethan watching Mattie dance
  - B. the story of Ned and Ruth's near crash
  - C. the cat sitting on Zeena's chair while she is away
  - D. Zeena's false teeth
  - E. the cucumber vine hanging in the doorway



7. The narrator spends a night at Ethan's house because
  - A. he feels he cannot turn down the invitation without offending Ethan.
  - B. they could go no further in the snowstorm.
  - C. Mrs. Hale arranges it on the night she cannot put up the narrator.
  - D. he knows Ethan needs the money.
  - E. Both C and D
8. When Harmon Gow says that Ethan will live to be a hundred, the narrator thinks that
  - A. Ethan will be lucky to last a year.
  - B. Ethan looks a little older than he is.
  - C. Ethan looks as if he is already dead and in hell now.
  - D. Ethan is in good shape for a man his age.
  - E. Both A and B
9. Starkfield is an appropriate name for the town because
  - A. it is cold and barren all year.
  - B. it is not a pretty place.
  - C. it was named after the man who founded it.
  - D. many of its residents are lonely and live empty lives.
  - E. it contains many farms.
10. By the end of the novel, the reader realizes that the reason Mattie does not go with Denis Eady in his horse sleigh is because Mattie
  - A. is a very prejudiced person who could not stand Irish-Catholics.
  - B. is afraid of ruining her reputation.
  - C. is not sure she could control her own passion if left alone with him.
  - D. loves Ethan.
  - E. knows that Zeena had planned to trap and discredit her.
11. Ethan has to withdraw from college after one year because
  - A. his grades are too low.
  - B. his mother gets sick.
  - C. his father dies.
  - D. a fire destroys much of the family's belongings and all their money.
  - E. the bank is going to foreclose on the farm.
12. Within a year of their marriage, Zeena
  - A. became sickly.
  - B. told Ethan that she is not really going to have a baby.
  - C. told Ethan that she does not love him now, and has never loved him.
  - D. lost all her money.
  - E. took up with another man.

13. From his relationship with Mattie, Ethan gets
  - A. sensitivity.
  - B. warmth.
  - C. money.
  - D. bitterness
  - E. Both A and B
14. Mattie's main reason for coming to live with the Fromes is
  - A. to find a husband.
  - B. to go to a nearby college.
  - C. to enjoy a change of scenery.
  - D. to find shelter after her father dies.
  - E. to swindle them.
15. Ethan's plan to get some money from Hale and leave town with Mattie falls apart when
  - A. Mr. Hale suspects what he is up to.
  - B. Mr. Hale tells how he is about to die and has little money to leave his family.
  - C. Mrs. Hale speaks kindly to Ethan.
  - D. Mrs. Hale warns him of what will happen to Zeena if he leaves.
  - E. Ethan looks back and sees Zeena crying in the doorway.
16. The only time in the story when Ethan explicitly defies Zeena is when he
  - A. insists on taking Mattie to the train.
  - B. refuses to accompany Mattie home from the dances.
  - C. refuses to invite Denis Eady home for supper.
  - D. insists on firing the new girl.
  - E. refuses to say how the pickle dish got broken.
17. On those occasions when Ethan tells Mattie "come along," it reveals
  - A. his desire to control her.
  - B. his inability to express what he actually wants to say.
  - C. his reluctance to speak with her.
  - D. his jealousy of Denis Eady.
  - E. his need to communicate.
18. When Ethan sees Ruth and Ned kissing under the tree he
  - A. is jealous of their love.
  - B. is happy for Ruth, for whom he has always felt sorry.
  - C. is angered and disturbed by their public display of affection.
  - D. compares them to Mattie and himself.
  - E. is angry that Ned stole his girl.

19. Which of the following is NOT a reason Zeena might want to get rid of Mattie?
- A. Mattie is not very good at housework.
  - B. Zeena suspects something is going on between Ethan and Mattie.
  - C. Zeena cannot tolerate Mattie's incessant talking.
  - D. Mattie is expensive to keep.
  - E. The doctor has advised Zeena to hire professional household help.
20. It is ironic that the person now doing most of the housework in the epilogue is
- A. the new girl Ethan did not wish to hire initially.
  - B. Zeena.
  - C. Mattie.
  - D. Mrs. Hale.
  - E. Ethan.

Essays (Answer any two)

1. Discuss symbolism in the novel. Choose at least three symbolic objects in the novel and explain how Edith Wharton gives them significant meaning.
2. Identify the dominant point of view used in the novel and explain its effectiveness. Then, tell how the story might have been different if told with a different point of view.
3. Discuss the role of foreshadowing in the novel. Identify and explain at least three instances of foreshadowing.
4. Use your imagination to predict another way the story might have ended. Consider the following questions as possible prompts for your answer. What would have happened:
  - if Ethan and Mattie had not crashed the sled?
  - if Zeena had never found the broken pickle dish?
  - if Ethan had gotten the fifty dollars from Mr. Hale?

# *Ethan Frome*

## Test Answer Key

1. A	6. B	11. C	16. A
2. D	7. B	12. A	17. B
3. C	8. C	13. E	18. D
4. E	9. D	14. D	19. C
5. E	10. D	15. C	20. B

# *Ethan Frome*

## Study Guide Teacher's Copy

### Prologue

#### Vocabulary

**affected** – pretended

**aggrieved** – troubled

**allusion** – a reference to something else, usually something famous

**anecdote** – a short story of an interesting, amusing, or biographical subject

**assented** – agreed

**bay** – a reddish-brown horse

**beleagured** – worn out; exhausted

**capitulating** – surrendering

**chafed** – felt irritated or discontented

**chronicle** – a narrative or fictional account

**colloquially** – informally

**consolatory** – comforting

**conspicuously** – obviously

**deciduous** – shedding, not lasting

**ebb** – a decline

**exanimate** – spiritless; lifeless

**faculty** – ability, power

**fast** – firmly; tightly

**floundered** – stumbled

**forlorn** – sad; depressed

**gale** – a very strong wind

**garrison** – troops stationed at a military post

**habitable** – capable of being lived in

**incarnation** – a version

**inference** – reaching conclusions from factual knowledge or evidence

**inflection** – tone of voice

**innocuous** – harmless

**insurmountable** – incapable of being overcome

**intercourse** – contact; communication

**melancholy** – sad, depressed, dejected

**mien** – manner

**obscurity** – darkness

**oracle** – a person who gives wise or authoritative opinions; sage

**patent medicine** – a drug protected by a trademark

**perceptible** – obvious

**poignant** – affecting the feelings or emotions

## Vocabulary (Cont.)

portico – a doorway  
pretence – a claim or insincere attempt  
provocation – arousal, stimulation  
queer – strange, weird  
querulously – constantly whining or complaining  
rejoined – repeated sharply  
reserve – restraint with words or actions  
retarding – slowing  
reticent – uncommunicative in speech; reluctant to talk  
runners – blades on a sled or sleigh  
sardonically – mockingly scornful or cynical  
sentient – aware; perceptive of feelings  
shock – a thick, heavy mass  
spume – froth, foam  
taciturnity – habitual silence or reserve  
torrents – floods or outpourings  
touch – to reach  
wan – feeble, weak  
wistful – sad, melancholy  
woe – sadness  
wraith – a ghost; specter; shadow

1. We meet the main character right away. What is it that sets him apart from the other “natives”?

*Wharton writes, “There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man...he was not more than fifty-two.” (Pg. 11)*

2. For how long and why, according to Harmon Gow, has Ethan Frome looked as he looks now?

*Ethan has looked the same since “his smash-up...twenty-four years ago.” (Pg.11)*

3. Considering that Ethan has no urgent need to get mail, why do you suppose he bothers to go every day?

*Answers will vary, but a possible reason is to get out of the house.*

4. When Harmon Gow says that Ethan will probably live to be one hundred, what is the narrator’s reaction?

*“That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!” (Pg. 12)*

5. What does Harmon attribute Ethan’s problem to? What does the comment suggest about New England winters?

*Harmon says, “Guess he’s [Ethan] been in Starkfield too many winters.” (Pg. 12) The comment suggests that New England winters in small towns can age people and affect them negatively.*

6. What does the name of the town, “Starkfield,” suggest?

*The name Starkfield suggests the town is a bleak, isolated, and depressing place, at least in winter.*

7. Harmon’s comment, “Most of the smart ones get away” suggests that Ethan is either one of the smart ones who did not get away, or that he is not too smart. (Pg.12) With which interpretation do you agree? Why has he not left?

*Answers will vary as to each student’s opinion, but there has not been much information given yet as to Ethan’s natural intelligence. He has been caring for his sick mother; the smash-up has also prevented Ethan from leaving.*

8. Thinking of Harmon’s comment, the narrator wonders, “How could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?” (Pg. 13) What does this speculation of the narrator suggest to the reader?

*The reader wonders if there might not be other more compelling reasons that Ethan has never left Starkfield.*

9. What does the narrator mean when he mentions the “contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community”? (Pg. 13)

*The narrator refers to the beauty of a landscape so full of color and life, while the people of the town seem listless and desolate.*

10. Who is Mrs. Hale? How do you suppose she might function in the story?

*She is the narrator’s landlady and a lifetime resident of Starkfield. As such, she will have information about Ethan that few others will possess.*

11. What is Mrs. Hale’s reaction when the narrator brings up the topic of Ethan and his wife?

*“Yes,” she says, “I knew them both.” (Pg. 14) She is reluctant to say much more than that.*

12. The narrator says citizens of Starkfield have troubles of their own, but they all think Ethan’s go beyond the normal troubles. He continues, “[N]o one gave me an explanation of the look in his face which, as I persisted in thinking, neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there?” (Pgs 14-15) What do you suppose caused this look on Ethan’s face?

*A great and terrible pain or agony, perhaps, shows on his face. Earlier, the narrator had said that it looks as if Ethan is dead and in hell.*

13. Who is Denis Eady?

*He is described as the rich Irish grocer who supplies horses to the narrator. He will come up in later chapters.*

14. Harmon tells us that Ethan probably will be glad to drive the narrator to the junction each day because he can use the money. Why, according to Harmon, is Ethan in need of money?

*The farm does not bring in much money, and what little it does bring in is eaten up by his sick parents and later, his sick wife.*

15. On the ride to the junction, what does the narrator find that he and Ethan have in common?

*They both spent time in Florida. Ethan had spent a year there studying to be an engineer, which is also the narrator's occupation.*

16. On the day of the storm, the train to the junction cannot get through, so Ethan volunteers to take the narrator all the way (ten miles) to the junction. On the return trip that afternoon, what happens?

*The storm has gotten so bad that Ethan takes the narrator to his farm to spend the night.*

17. In what way does the imagery used to describe Ethan's house seem to echo his own appearance?

*One can tell the house was once large and thriving, but now it is run down, overgrown, and partially destroyed.*

18. What does Ethan attribute his mother's worsening condition to?

*When the railroad comes, the Frome family becomes extremely isolated on their farm because no one ever drives past it anymore. This isolation was further damaging to Ethan's mother's health.*

19. As Ethan and the narrator enter the house, how does the narrator describe the voice he hears?

*"I heard a woman's voice droning querulously." (Pg. 20)*



## Chapter I

### Vocabulary

**apprehensions** – worries  
**arcade** – an arched, covered passageway  
**declivity** – a descending slope  
**demurred** objected; hesitated  
**disquieting** – disturbing, alarming  
**effacement** – inconspicuousness  
**effrontery** – shameless boldness  
**fancy** – to imagine  
**fatuity** – foolishness  
**furrows** – narrow grooves or trenches in the ground  
**impudent** – bold, rude  
**incisively** – directly and decisively  
**intangible** – not being able to be touched  
**oblique** – devious or obscure  
**obstinately** – stubbornly  
**peristyle** – an opening surrounding a building or court  
**rapt** – wholly absorbed  
**revelry** – partying  
**suppleness** – adaptability, compliance  
**tenuous** – feeble, flimsy, weak  
**thronged** – crowded  
**tramp** – footsteps  
**undulations** – wavy appearances; waves  
**vexed** – annoyed

1. This chapter, in flashback, begins the story of the young Ethan Frome. We see him as a married man of twenty-eight walking through town to the church social hall. Why is he going there?

*He is to walk Mattie Silver, his wife Zeena's cousin, home from the dance.*

2. On the way, we learn that Ethan has withdrawn from college after one year, some four or five years before. Why?

*His father was injured and had fallen ill. Ethan has to return home to work the farm.*

3. Contrast the imagery used to describe the setting outside on pages 21-22 and the description of the inside of the church during the dance on pages 22-23.

*While the evening outside seems peaceful and beautiful, it is also barren, cold, and quiet. No one is outside except Ethan. However, inside the church, the dance floor was filled with dancing men and women and the room pulsed with excitement.*

4. What is Ethan's reaction when he sees Denis Eady dancing with Mattie?

*He is very jealous.*

5. Why has Mattie come to live with Ethan and his wife Zeena?

*His wife Zeena needed help in caring for the house because she is sickly. By taking in the poor relation (Mattie), she gets help but does not have to pay Mattie.*

6. At this point, Mattie has been living with them for one year. How does Ethan feel about having to walk her back from the church socials?

*At first, he resents it. Now, however, he cannot do it often enough because it is the best part of his day.*

7. When Ethan first sees Mattie at the train station, he observes "She don't look much on housework." (Pg. 24) Quickly, however, he feels her presence in the house is "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth." (Pg. 24) What does this comment suggest about Ethan and Zeena's marriage?

*It is both a cold house and a cold marriage, and Mattie is bringing some warmth into the home.*

8. In that same paragraph, what appears to be another reason Ethan likes Mattie's company?

*She is bright, and eager to listen to Ethan and understand the things he tells her. In effect, he appears to enjoy showing off his knowledge to her.*

9. Ethan has a love for nature that leaves him with an ache because there is no one with whom he can share these feelings. "Then he learned the one other spirit had trembled with the same touch of wonder." (Pg. 24) What is this meant to suggest about Mattie and Ethan?

*With Mattie, Ethan no longer feels alone; in Mattie, he has found someone to appreciate his love of nature and his extensive knowledge. In short, she pays much needed attention to him.*

10. As Ethan watches Mattie taking real pleasure in dancing, how does he feel?

*He feels foolish for thinking that his boring intellect would be enough for such a vibrant, exciting woman.*

11. Why has Ethan begun to do more of the housework?

*Mattie, although quite willing, does not get much done, so Ethan must help.*

12. Ethan reveals his suspicion about Zeena's illness. What is it?

*He feels that if she were as sick as she said, she would want more help than just Mattie, who is inept at times.*

13. How does Zeena feel about Ethan's neglecting the farm work to help Mattie with the housework?

*She finds it strange that he should be doing Mattie's work for her and perhaps is suspicious of his motives.*

14. At this point, what other sign indicate Zeena's suspicions of Ethan's feelings about Mattie?

*She notices that since Mattie has come to their house Ethan shaves every day. In the past, he had not. Ethan suspects that this may be the reason that Zeena has begun to talk about Mattie's leaving.*

## Chapter II

### Vocabulary

cutter – a light sleigh

discern – to detect

disdainfully – proudly, arrogantly

eluded – escaped

faltered – stammered; fumbled

incredulous – skeptical

irresolutely – unsurely, uncertainly

larches – pine trees

loutish – ill-mannered and graceless

misgivings – feelings of doubt or despair

pantomime – acting without speaking using gestures

prolongation – an expansion of scope of vision, emotion, etc.

quavered – shook, trembled

repugnant – disgusting

start – to move suddenly

suffused – spread over or through

tremulous – affected by timidity; trembling

1. As he jealously watches Denis Eady, why does Ethan stay back in the shadows rather than stepping forward and showing himself?

*Part of it may be that he is shy, but he also realizes he has no right to speak his thoughts of love to Mattie; such an action would be both inappropriate and wrong.*

2. What are we told almost happens to Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum on the hill?

*While sledding on the hill, they come too close to the big elm tree at the bottom and are almost killed.*

3. How does Mattie respond?

*“Wouldn’t it have been too awful? They’re so happy.” (Pg. 31) Ethan, we are told, cannot help believing that Mattie is thinking of the two of them, also.*

4. Ethan’s joy once again turns to despair; he says he guesses it is true what people say about Mattie’s leaving to get married soon. Faltering, what does she correctly read into this?

*Mattie asks if Zeena is unhappy with her work around the house.*

5. What is one compelling reason Mattie does not want to leave?

*She tells Ethan she has no place else to go. While her words disappoint him, her tone fills him with joy.*

6. At this point, how have Ethan's feelings about the gravestone changed? What literary term does Wharton use to depict Ethan's feelings?

*The gravestones used to depress him; they made him feel that he was doomed to stay on the farm. Now when he sees them, he thinks of remaining there happily forever with Mattie. Wharton writes, "They walked on as if they were floating on a summer stream." (Pg. 33) It is a simile.*

7. What does the image of the dead cucumber-vine bring to mind for Ethan?

*It reminds him of the "crape streamer" tied to a door when someone dies: "and the thought flashed through Ethan's brain: 'If it was there for Zeena—' " (Pg. 34)*

8. When Ethan and Mattie return home and the key is not where they expect, we are told, "Another wild thought tore through him. What if tramps had been there—what if..." (Pg. 34) What do you think Ethan is thinking.

*He might have been thinking any negative thought about the tramps and Zeena—an attack, kidnapping, murder, etc.*

9. Near the end of this chapter, Zeena opens the kitchen door and Mattie and Ethan enter. How is the kitchen described? How might the kitchen symbolize Zeena?

*It is described as having "the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night." (Pg. 35) The cold atmosphere of the kitchen echoes Zeena's cold demeanor, which is a stark contrast to Mattie's warmth.*

## Chapter III

### Vocabulary

**draughts** – [drafts] cold gusts of wind  
**exacting** – making severe demands  
**flux** – a state of change; a continuous flow  
**imperceptible** – unable to be sensed  
**imprudence** – lacking discretion or judgment  
**indentured** – contracted one person to work for another  
**laden** – burdened, loaded  
**merino** – soft wool  
**plaintively** – woefully, sadly  
**preclude** – to rule out  
**pretext** – an act to hide one's real intentions  
**scintillating** – sparkling, dazzling  
**sedentary** – usually sitting, idle  
**sorrel** – a reddish-brown animal  
**tangible** – able to be felt or touched; real  
**thrice** – three times  
**valise** – a suitcase; bag

1. In the third paragraph of this chapter, how is Mattie associated with images of light and warmth?

*Ethan lies in bed and watches the small ray of light coming from under Mattie's door, and not until the light goes out does he go to sleep. Before sleeping, however, he remembers "the warmth of Mattie's shoulder against his." (Pg. 37)*

2. On page 38, Ethan thinks to himself how much Mattie has changed since her arrival in Starkfield. How has she changed?

*At first, she was a "colourless slip of a thing," but now she radiates light, warmth, and purity. She has fully adjusted to her life with the Fromes and seems to be thriving.*

3. Mattie has no place else to go if she leaves Zeena and Ethan's place. Why does she not get a job and a place of her own?

*She has no job skills and is not strong enough for unskilled work.*

4. At this point, why does “a vague dread” bother Ethan? (Pg.39)

*His instincts tell him that Zeena is going cause trouble with Mattie. Students may notice that the word “dread” is repeated at least three times between pages 39 and the end of the chapter.*

5. Why does Ethan tell Zeena that he has to deliver the lumber himself, rather than drive her to the Flats?

*He tells Zeena he must drive the lumber because Mr. Hale plans to pay him today, which is a lie. He really wants Jotham to drive Zeena to the Flats so he can have more time alone with Mattie.*

6. As Zeena prepares to go to Bettsbridge to see a new doctor, why does Ethan immediately regret making an excuse about seeing John Hale to get some money?

*He is afraid that if she thinks money is coming in, Zeena will spend more on medicines in Bettsbridge than she would have spent otherwise.*

7. Zeena is thirty-five, we are told, “but she was already an old woman.” (Pg. 40) Explain.

*Other than her questionable health, Zeena lacks the energy and vitality of a typical woman her age. She seems content to distance herself from anything enjoyable, and being around her is saddening.*

## Chapter IV

### Vocabulary

**cessation** – a stop or pause

**contagion** – the spreading of an attitude or emotion

**convivial** – relating to good times; having friendly and light-hearted fun

**cupolo** – [*cupola*] a vaulted ceiling or roof

**discomfiture** – embarrassment

**disconsolately** – gloomily, sadly; unable to be consoled

**epitaph** – the inscription on a tombstone

**feigned** – pretended

**forebodings** – bad predictions or omens

**genial** – gracious and friendly

**implored** – begged

**inarticulate** – incapable of expressing oneself through speech

**inevitable** – unavoidable

**insatiable** – impossible to satisfy

**marrow** – the core

**opulence** – wealth; prosperity

**pathological** – caused by disease

**roan** – a reddish colored horse

**scrupulously** – meticulously

**subdued** – hushed, quieted

**unbidden** – uninvited; not wished or asked for

**unfounded** – groundless; lacking evidence

**volubility** – talkativeness

1. As this chapter opens, to what is Ethan happily looking forward?

*He anticipates spending the evening by the fireside talking with Mattie while Zeena is away.*

2. In what way does the house seem different to Ethan when Zeena is away?

*He says it looks more “homelike.” (Pg. 43)*

3. Since he does not seem to care for her now, why did Ethan marry Zenobia?

*After his father died and his mother fell silent, he had little social intercourse. When Zenobia came to nurse his mother, he welcomed the company. When his mother died, however, he was afraid of being alone again.*

4. Why do you suppose Ethan feels that if his mother had died in spring instead of winter, he would not have married?

*Starkfield winters are particularly lonely, lonelier than any other season.*



5. Explain how Ethan and Zeena disagreed about where to live when they were first married.

*Ethan felt confident he could find a good job in a city, but Zeena was afraid she would go unnoticed in a more populated area. While Zeena said she did not want to remain on the farm, they had trouble selling it, and they ended up staying there.*

6. What happens within a year of their marriage?

*Zeena becomes sick and “she too fell silent.” (Pg. 45)*

7. According to the narrator, what reason does Zeena give for her failing marriage? Is this true?

*Zeena says she stopped talking to Ethan because he never listened. This is partially true, because he tired of listening to all her complaints.*

8. Why does Ethan not press John Hale for the money he is owed?

*Ethan is too proud to admit he needs it. It was also Hale’s custom to pay at the end of three months, and it had always been done that way.*

9. Once more Ethan gets very jealous of Denis Eady. Why?

*He sees Denis pass in his horse sleigh and assumes Denis knows Zeena is away and is going out to see Mattie.*

10. On his return home, Mattie’s presence at the door echoes Zenobia’s earlier presence at the same spot. What contrast is made between the two?

*When Zeena stood there, it was described as cold and forbidding; Mattie, however, radiates soft warmth.*

11. The red pickle dish is broken. How did Zeena treat the dish, where did the dish come from, and what is Zeena’s expected reaction?

*Zeena had always cherished the dish, and she keeps it on a shelf, not to be used, even on special occasions. It was a gift from a special relative, and it is expected that she will be furious to find that anyone even touched it.*

12. What is Ethan’s plan for the dish, and how does he feel at the close of the chapter?

*Ethan has a plan to repair the dish so Zeena will not even know it is broken. He is pleased with his command of the situation.*

13. What is strange about the cat’s behavior?

*The cat seems to get between Mattie and Ethan frequently over the course of the evening and keeps a watchful eye on them, as if Zeena and the cat were one and the same.*

## Chapter V

### Vocabulary

**compunction** – anxiety from guilt

**countenance** – an appearance, expression

**gaunt** – extremely thin

**indolent** – lazy

**languidly** – lazily, slowly

**wainscot** – a paneling for walls (usually wooden)

1. How does the evening alone start out?

*They relax together by the stove and have a pleasant conversation.*

2. Explain how the cat's movements might hold a symbolic significance.

*The cat seems to cast a watchful, almost suspicious, eye on the pair, and sits in Zeena's chair as if to remind them of her absence.*

3. What does Ethan mention that puts a damper on the mood?

*Ethan mentions that he saw Ruth and Ned kissing. Mattie is uncomfortable because she and Ethan are alone in the house, and the conversation has taken, in Ethan's perception of her mind, an inappropriate turn.*

4. Why is Mattie anxious about Zeena?

*Mattie is afraid that Zeena dislikes her and will make her leave the house.*

5. We are told that Ethan's "return to reality was...painful." (Pg. 56) What does that mean in the context of the story?

*He is very happy pretending he and Mattie are together, but when he thinks of Zeena returning home the next night, her impending arrival pains him.*

6. This chapter is full of color. Find at least three significant uses of color imagery in the text, and explain the importance of each.

*Answers will vary. Example: There is a "streak of red in her hair" (Pg. 53)—Mattie has red hair, a warm, fiery color; "her cheeks burned redder" (Pg. 54)—Mattie seems to glow in Ethan's presence; "the sudden heat of his tone made her colour mount again" (Pg. 56)—she is clearly attracted to him and blushes when he is near.*

## Chapter VI

### Vocabulary

**aver** – to prove

**deigned** – lowered to a level considered inappropriate to maintaining one's dignity

**derision** – ridicule; scorn

**heedless** – unaware; oblivious

**loth** – reluctant

**ministrations** – attention

**mused** – considered thoughtfully

**ominous** – having a menacing or frightening aspect

**perfunctory** – routinely, automatically

**ponderous** – heavy and slow-moving

**squalid** – dirty and degraded

**stoicism** – an indifference to pleasure and pain

1. What is Ethan's mood the next morning? Explain.

*He is "irrationally happy." (Pg. 59) He cannot pinpoint why he feels so happy, as nothing has changed. However, he sees in Mattie the possibility of a better future.*

2. Why is Ethan's plan to fix the pickle dish unsuccessful?

*First, the weather creates problems for the animals, and Ethan is running behind schedule. Then, Eady's store does not have the glue, and by the time he gets home with the glue from Mrs. Homan's, Zeena is already home.*

3. The hired hand, Jotham Powell, uncharacteristically refuses a free meal. What does Ethan infer from this?

*Zeena is in a bad mood and, as usual, takes it out on the person closest, Jotham. He, consequently, does not want to be around her when he does not need to be.*

## Chapter VII

### Vocabulary

**abhor** – to hate strongly; to loathe

**affability** – pleasantness

**antipathy** – dislike

**benevolence** – good will or deeds

**checked** – stopped

**consecrated** – dedicated to a specific purpose; devoted

**desolately** – joylessly, sadly

**emitted** – uttered, voiced, expressed

**evocation** – the act of calling forth, evoking

**felicitous** – pleasant, delightful

**foist** – to impose (force) a burden on someone

**inexorable** – unchanging

**ingratiatingly** – pleasantly, agreeably

**peril** – a source of possible harm; danger, risk

**recrimination** – a counter accusation; returning one accusation with another

**regaled** – entertained, amused

**resolute** – bold and steady

**smote** – attacked sharply

**succumb** – to yield to an overpowering force

**vehemence** – intensity

**wrath** – anger

1. Zeena says, “I’m a great deal sicker than you think.” Then we are told, “Ethan’s heart was jerking to and from between two extremities of feelings...” (Pgs. 63,64) What are the two feelings Ethan has?

*He feels sorry for her because of her illness, but he also hopes the illness is serious enough that she may die. Students might also infer that the conflicting feelings are love for Mattie and loathing for Zeena.*

2. What does Zeena say the doctor has told her she needs? What is Ethan’s reaction?

*Zeena needs an operation. She also needs a hired girl to help with the housework. Ethan is angry when he thinks about the cost of hiring someone.*

3. In what way does Zeena try to make Ethan feel guilty?

*She tells him that she lost her own health when she was nursing his mother back to health.*

4. Why does Zeena feel they will be able to afford to hire a girl?

*She is sending Mattie away, so they will save on the expense of feeding her.*

5. Zeena says, in response to Ethan's question about what the neighbors will say when she sends a relative away, "I know well enough what they say of my having kep' her here as long as I have." What is the implication? (Pg. 67)

*The townspeople are talking about a possible relationship between Ethan and Mattie.*

6. Why is it necessary for Mattie to go at once?

*The new girl will be arriving the next day, and she will need a bed.*

7. We are told that "a flame of hate rose in him." Why? What does his "wild step forward" suggest? (Pg. 68)

*Ethan feels sorry for himself and angry with his wife. He blames Zeena for having taken everything away from him, and now she wants to take Mattie away. It appears that he has a desire to confront or possibly assault Zeena at this point. Again, Wharton uses the motifs of heat, light, and color to emphasize emotions.*

8. How does Mattie take the news that Zeena is sending her away?

*She tries to make light of it, for she knows that is the way it will be if Zeena has decided it. She does not want to upset Ethan further.*

9. What is the only option that Ethan can imagine for Mattie in Stamford?

*He is seized by despair because in the only town in which she is known, she will be met by animosity when she looks for a job she has no hope of finding. The only future that Ethan can see for her is that of many other unfortunate girls: forced by poverty into prostitution. Note that this conclusion is not explicitly stated in the book, but most students should understand the implication.*

10. What discovery does Zeena make? How does it affect her?

*She finds that her favorite red pickle dish is broken. She is furious, excited, sad, and suspicious of Ethan's explanation that the cat broke the dish.*

11. Why is it ironic that Zeena says, “and now you’ve took from me the one I cared for most of all—”? (Pg. 72) What other irony is expressed in the same speech?

*It is ironic because Zeena is speaking about the dish as if it means more to her than her husband, who has been taken from her also.*

*Zeena also says to Mattie, “[Y]ou...took the thing I set most store by of anything I’ve got...” This is ironic because Ethan is what Zeena should value most.*

12. In what way might the broken pickle dish symbolic?

*The dish is red, which throughout the novel has been the color used during interactions between Ethan and Mattie, signifying passion and love. It breaks when Zeena is away, immediately after Ethan and Mattie’s hands accidentally touch for a moment too long. This action, shattering something immediately after a show of affection, symbolizes their bad luck that is yet to come. Additionally, the fact that the dish is broken is symbolic of Ethan and Zeena’s shattered marriage.*

13. As Zeena stands and cries about her broken dish, some critics maintain she becomes a sympathetic figure. She is, after all, the wronged woman in this triangle. How much sympathy do you have for her at this point?

*Answers will vary.*

## Chapter VIII

### Vocabulary

**ebullition** – a sudden outburst

**huckabuck** – a coarse fabric

**injunction** – a command, direction

**lumbago** – a severe backache (usually located in the lower back)

1. As he stands in his makeshift study, what are Ethan's feeling about Zeena and the situation?

*He is angry at the thought of spending the rest of his life with a woman he does not love. He feels as though Mattie's warmth has been reduced to the cold scrap of paper she gave him, and even the cushion Zeena once made for him is no longer comfortable. All in all, nothing feels right.*

2. What decision does he make about the train?

*He will take Mattie to the train and get on it with her.*

3. As Ethan writes his note to Zeena, what depressing realization comes to him?

*He realizes that he does not have enough money to buy the train tickets.*

4. How does Ethan feel when he realizes he will not be going west?

*He feels trapped like a prisoner.*

5. Explain the significance of this quotation: "...and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished." (Pg. 75)

*The ray of light is a symbol for Mattie, the only source of light and warmth in his life. It could also foreshadow the end, the extinguishing, of Mattie's life in the Frome household.*

6. How does Mattie know that Ethan spent the night in his study?

*She spends the night listening for Ethan's steps on the stairs, which never come. She fears leaving and hopes that Ethan will find a way to save her.*

7. For what reason does Ethan feel more optimistic the next morning?

*He believes that with the return of daylight Zeena will be in “a saner mood.” (Pg. 76)*

8. When Jotham mentions that Dan'l will be picking up Mattie's trunk, what does Ethan tell him?

*Ethan claims, “Oh, it ain't so sure about Mattie's going—” (Pg. 77)*

9. When it is apparent that Zeena will not change her mind, what plan does Ethan have for getting some money?

*He will go to Mr. Hale and tell him he needs the \$50.00 he is owed in order to pay someone to look after Zeena.*

10. What causes him to abandon this plan?

*When Mrs. Hale speaks kindly to him, he realizes he cannot take advantage of them.*



## Chapter IX

### Vocabulary

**adjured** – pleaded

**audacity** – boldness; arrogance

**avowal** – a declaration

**boles** – trunks of trees

**contemptuously** – boldly

**cowered** – crouched, cringed, recoiled

**curtly** – using a short and rude tone

**discursively** – off the subject

**exultantly** – joyfully, happily, jubilantly

**facetious** – funny, humorous

**feint** – a pretension; ploy

**heeded** – obeyed

**indignation** – anger aroused by something unjust, unworthy, or mean; outraged

**mottlings** – clumps; blotches

**nigh** – nearly

**oxydized** – rusted; decayed

**uncouth** – plain; not fancy; common

1. When Ethan walks into Mattie's room, what is she doing?

*She is sitting on the trunk crying.*

2. What is the reason for her tears?

*From Jotham's comment, she concludes that Ethan left without even saying good-bye.*

3. Why does Zeena say she wants Jotham, not Ethan, to drive Mattie to the train? What other reason might Zeena not want Ethan to drive Mattie to the train?

*She says that Ethan should stay and fix the stove in the bedroom. One reason Zeena might not want Ethan to drive Mattie is that she is suspicious of them.*

4. Why does Ethan, turning right instead of left, drive past Shadow Pond?

*Although it seems innocent enough, Shadow Pond is where Ethan and Mattie had a special time.*

5. As they sit there discussing a summer day at Shadow Pond, we are told, “They had never before avowed their inclination so openly...” (Pg. 85) Why has neither one ever said anything before this?

*Given the age in which they live, it would have been difficult for either one to say anything. Perhaps a man less shy than Ethan might have spoken sooner about his true feelings.*

6. When Mattie pulls out the letter that Ethan started to write to Zeena, Ethan is thrilled by the fact that Mattie knows the depths of his feeling for her. He asks, “Matt—... if I could ha’ done it [asked her to run off with him] would you [have gone with me]?” (Pg. 87) What is her response?

*At first she responds, “[W]hat’s the use?” Then, however, she tells him she has had similar thoughts since the day at Shadow Pond.*

7. Why does Ethan suggest the initial coast down the hill?

*He is doing anything to postpone parting at the train station.*

8. Where do they have their first kiss, and what effect does it have on them?

*They kiss in the spot under the tree where Ned and Ruth kissed. This act of physical intimacy makes it ever harder for them to part. It also foreshadows the events to come and flashes back to Ned and Ruth’s near-accident.*

9. What is suggested as a solution, and why is the not suggestion not surprising?

*Ethan says that he would rather see Mattie dead than married to someone else, and she replies that she wishes she were dead. Three pages later, Mattie says that they should kill themselves by crashing into the tree: “Right into the big elm....So’t we’d never have to leave each other any more.” (Pg 90) It comes as no surprise because there have been many hints leading up to it.*

10. After the crash, what is the sound Ethan hears? Who or what has made the sound?

*He hears the small “cheep” sound of an animal, possibly a mouse, in pain. (Pg. 92) Mattie, who appears to be alive but injured, makes the sound, however.*

## Epilogue

### Vocabulary

**austere** – somber and grave

**drone** – a continuous monotonous sound

**slatternly** – drab and dirty

**swarthy** – dark

1. The woman who speaks in a “querulous drone” is described as follows: “...her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives.” (Pg. 95) Who is this woman, and what is her complaint?

*She is Mattie long after the suicide attempt. She is complaining that Zeena has fallen asleep and neglected the fire.*

2. Although the townspeople do not know, Mrs. Hale appears to have heard the whole story from Mattie the morning she awoke in her house. How much do you think Zeena knows of the accident?

*It is impossible to say, since Zeena has never let anyone know what she knows or feels about anything.*

3. How has Mattie physical appearance changed?

*Although her face is “amber-tinted,” it is also “bloodless” and “swarthy.” (Pg. 95) Her hair is gray and her eyes are pale, quite different from her flushed, warm radiance before the accident. She might as well be Zeena.*

4. How has Zeena changed?

*With Ethan crippled and Mattie confined to a wheelchair, Zeena becomes less ill and does what she has to do for both of them.*

5. Mrs. Hale says, “But sometimes the two of them get going at each other, and then Ethan’s face’d break your heart...When I see that, I think it’s *him* that suffers most... anyhow it ain’t Zeena because she ain’t got the time.” (Pg. 98) On these occasions, why do you suppose Ethan is so pained?

*It can be that he is simply upset with the arguing; it may be that he is now stuck with two complaining, argumentative, dependent women, and the prison he has been in is now twice as bad as it was before. It is also plausible that he suffers the most because he knows the life he and Mattie could have had.*

6. Why does Mrs. Hale think it is a pity Mattie lives?

*She goes on to say that if Mattie had died, “Ethan might ha’ lived.” (Pg. 98)*

7. Considering the last paragraph in the story, what is your opinion of Mrs. Hale’s theory?

*Answers will vary. Example: It is quite possible that Mrs. Hale is correct that Ethan is no better off than if he were in the grave: She says, “I don’t see’s there’s much difference...” (Pg. 98)*

# *Ethan Frome*

## Study Guide Student Copy

### Prologue

#### Vocabulary

**affected** – pretended

**aggrieved** – troubled

**allusion** – a reference to something else, usually something famous

**anecdote** – a short story of an interesting, amusing, or biographical subject

**assented** – agreed

**bay** – a reddish-brown horse

**beleaguered** – worn out; exhausted

**capitulating** – surrendering

**chafed** – felt irritated or discontented

**chronicle** – a narrative or fictional account

**colloquially** – informally

**consolatory** – comforting

**conspicuously** – obviously

**deciduous** – shedding, not lasting

**ebb** – a decline

**exanimate** – spiritless; lifeless

**faculty** – ability, power

**fast** – firmly; tightly

**floundered** – stumbled

**forlorn** – sad; depressed

**gale** – a very strong wind

**garrison** – troops stationed at a military post

**habitable** – capable of being lived in

**incarnation** – a version

**inference** – reaching conclusions from factual knowledge or evidence

**inflection** – tone of voice

**innocuous** – harmless

**insurmountable** – incapable of being overcome

**intercourse** – contact; communication

**melancholy** – sad, depressed, dejected

**mien** – manner

**obscurity** – darkness

**oracle** – a person who gives wise or authoritative opinions; sage

**patent medicine** – a drug protected by a trademark

**perceptible** – obvious

**poignant** – affecting the feelings or emotions

**portico** – a doorway

**pretence** – a claim or insincere attempt

**provocation** – arousal, stimulation

**queer** – strange, weird

**querulously** – constantly whining or complaining

**rejoined** – repeated sharply

## Vocabulary (Cont.)

**reserve** – restraint with words or actions

**retarding** – slowing

**reticent** – uncommunicative in speech; reluctant to talk

**runners** – blades on a sled or sleigh

**sardonically** – mockingly scornful or cynical

**sentient** – aware; perceptive of feelings

**shock** – a thick, heavy mass

**spume** – froth, foam

**taciturnity** – habitual silence or reserve

**torrents** – floods or outpourings

**touch** – to reach

**wan** – feeble, weak

**wistful** – sad, melancholy

**woe** – sadness

**wraith** – a ghost; specter; shadow

1. We meet the main character right away. What is it that sets him apart from the other “natives”?
2. For how long and why, according to Harmon Gow, has Ethan Frome looked as he looks now?
3. Considering that Ethan has no urgent need to get mail, why do you suppose he bothers to go every day?
4. When Harmon Gow says that Ethan will probably live to be one hundred, what is the narrator’s reaction?
5. What does Harmon attribute Ethan’s problem to? What does the comment suggest about New England winters?

6. What does the name of the town, "Starkfield," suggest?
7. Harmon's comment, "Most of the smart ones get away" suggests that Ethan is either one of the smart ones who did not get away, or that he is not too smart. (Pg.12) With which interpretation do you agree? Why has he not left?
8. Thinking of Harmon's comment, the narrator wonders, "How could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?" (Pg. 13) What does this speculation of the narrator suggest to the reader?
9. What does the narrator mean when he mentions the "contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community"? (Pg. 13)
10. Who is Mrs. Hale? How do you suppose she might function in the story?
11. What is Mrs. Hale's reaction when the narrator brings up the topic of Ethan and his wife?
12. The narrator says citizens of Starkfield have troubles of their own, but they all think Ethan's go beyond the normal troubles. He continues, "[N]o one gave me an explanation of the look in his face which, as I persisted in thinking, neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there?" (Pgs 14-15) What do you suppose caused this look on Ethan's face?

13. Who is Denis Eady?
14. Harmon tells us that Ethan probably will be glad to drive the narrator to the junction each day because he can use the money. Why, according to Harmon, is Ethan in need of money?
15. On the ride to the junction, what does the narrator find that he and Ethan have in common?
16. On the day of the storm, the train to the junction cannot get through, so Ethan volunteers to take the narrator all the way (ten miles) to the junction. On the return trip that afternoon, what happens?
17. In what way does the imagery used to describe Ethan's house seem to echo his own appearance?
18. What does Ethan attribute his mother's worsening condition to?
19. As Ethan and the narrator enter the house, how does the narrator describe the voice he hears?



## Chapter I

### Vocabulary

**apprehensions** – worries  
**arcade** – an arched, covered passageway  
**declivity** – a descending slope  
**demurred** objected; hesitated  
**disquieting** – disturbing, alarming  
**effacement** – inconspicuousness  
**effrontery** – shameless boldness  
**fancy** – to imagine  
**fatuity** – foolishness  
**furrows** – narrow grooves or trenches in the ground  
**impudent** – bold, rude  
**incisively** – directly and decisively  
**intangible** – not being able to be touched  
**oblique** – devious or obscure  
**obstinately** – stubbornly  
**peristyle** – an opening surrounding a building or court  
**rapt** – wholly absorbed  
**revelry** – partying  
**suppleness** – adaptability, compliance  
**tenuous** – feeble, flimsy, weak  
**thronged** – crowded  
**tramp** – footsteps  
**undulations** – wavy appearances; waves  
**vexed** – annoyed

1. This chapter, in flashback, begins the story of the young Ethan Frome. We see him as a married man of twenty-eight walking through town to the church social hall. Why is he going there?
2. On the way, we learn that Ethan has withdrawn from college after one year, some four or five years before. Why?

3. Contrast the imagery used to describe the setting outside on pages 21-22 and the description of the inside of the church during the dance on pages 22-23.
4. What is Ethan's reaction when he sees Denis Eady dancing with Mattie?
5. Why has Mattie come to live with Ethan and his wife Zeena?
6. At this point, Mattie has been living with them for one year. How does Ethan feel about having to walk her back from the church socials?
7. When Ethan first sees Mattie at the train station, he observes "She don't look much on housework." (Pg. 24) Quickly, however, he feels her presence in the house is "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth." (Pg. 24) What does this comment suggest about Ethan and Zeena's marriage?
8. In that same paragraph, what appears to be another reason Ethan likes Mattie's company?

9. Ethan has a love for nature that leaves him with an ache because there is no one with whom he can share these feelings. “Then he learned the one other spirit had trembled with the same touch of wonder.” (Pg. 24) What is this meant to suggest about Mattie and Ethan?
10. As Ethan watches Mattie taking real pleasure in dancing, how does he feel?
11. Why has Ethan begun to do more of the housework?
12. Ethan reveals his suspicion about Zeena’s illness. What is it?
13. How does Zeena feel about Ethan’s neglecting the farm work to help Mattie with the housework?
14. At this point, what other sign indicate Zeena’s suspicions of Ethan’s feelings about Mattie?

## Chapter II

## Vocabulary

cutter – a light sleigh

**discern** – to detect

**disdainfully** – proudly, arrogantly

eluded – escaped

faltered – stammered; fumbled

incredulous – skeptical

irresolutely – unsurely, uncertainly

larches – pine trees

**loutish** – ill-mannered and graceless

misgivings – feelings of doubt or despair

**pantomime** – acting without speaking using gestures

**prolongation** – an expansion of scope of vision, emotion, etc.

quavered – shook, trembled

repugnant – disgusting

**start** – to move suddenly

suffused – spread over or through

**tremulous** – affected by timidity; trembling

1. As he jealously watches Denis Eady, why does Ethan stay back in the shadows rather than stepping forward and showing himself?
2. What are we told almost happens to Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum on the hill?
3. How does Mattie respond?

4. Ethan's joy once again turns to despair; he says he guesses it is true what people say about Mattie's leaving to get married soon. Faltering, what does she correctly read into this?
5. What is one compelling reason Mattie does not want to leave?
6. At this point, how have Ethan's feelings about the gravestone changed? What literary term does Wharton use to depict Ethan's feelings?
7. What does the image of the dead cucumber-vine bring to mind for Ethan?
8. When Ethan and Mattie return home and the key is not where they expect, we are told, "Another wild thought tore through him. What if tramps had been there—what if..." (Pg. 34) What do you think Ethan is thinking.
9. Near the end of this chapter, Zeena opens the kitchen door and Mattie and Ethan enter. How is the kitchen described? How might the kitchen symbolize Zeena?

## Chapter III

### Vocabulary

**draughts** – [*drafts*] cold gusts of wind

**exacting** – making severe demands

**flux** – a state of change; a continuous flow

**imperceptible** – unable to be sensed

**imprudence** – lacking discretion or judgment

**indentured** – contracted one person to work for another

**laden** – burdened, loaded

**merino** – soft wool

**plaintively** – woefully, sadly

**preclude** – to rule out

**pretext** – an act to hide one's real intentions

**scintillating** – sparkling, dazzling

**sedentary** – usually sitting, idle

**sorrel** – a reddish-brown animal

**tangible** – able to be felt or touched; real

**thrice** – three times

**valise** – a suitcase; bag

1. In the third paragraph of this chapter, how is Mattie associated with images of light and warmth?
2. On page 38, Ethan thinks to himself how much Mattie has changed since her arrival in Starkfield. How has she changed?
3. Mattie has no place else to go if she leaves Zeena and Ethan's place. Why does she not get a job and a place of her own?

4. At this point, why does “a vague dread” bother Ethan? (Pg.39)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Why does Ethan tell Zeena that he has to deliver the lumber himself, rather than drive her to the Flats?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. As Zeena prepares to go to Bettsbridge to see a new doctor, why does Ethan immediately regret making an excuse about seeing John Hale to get some money?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Zeena is thirty-five, we are told, “but she was already an old woman.” (Pg. 40) Explain.

## Chapter IV

### Vocabulary

**cessation** – a stop or pause

**contagion** – the spreading of an attitude or emotion

**convivial** – relating to good times; having friendly and light-hearted fun

**cupolo** – [*cupola*] a vaulted ceiling or roof

**discomfiture** – embarrassment

**disconsolately** – gloomily, sadly; unable to be consoled

**epitaph** – the inscription on a tombstone

**feigned** – pretended

**forebodings** – bad predictions or omens

**genial** – gracious and friendly

**implored** – begged

**inarticulate** – incapable of expressing oneself through speech

**inevitable** – unavoidable

**insatiable** – impossible to satisfy

**marrow** – the core

**opulence** – wealth; prosperity

**pathological** – caused by disease

**roan** – a reddish colored horse

**scrupulously** – meticulously

**subdued** – hushed, quieted

**unbidden** – uninvited; not wished or asked for

**unfounded** – groundless; lacking evidence

**volubility** – talkativeness

1. As this chapter opens, to what is Ethan happily looking forward?
2. In what way does the house seem different to Ethan when Zeena is away?



3. Since he does not seem to care for her now, why did Ethan marry Zenobia?
4. Why do you suppose Ethan feels that if his mother had died in spring instead of winter, he would not have married?
5. Explain how Ethan and Zeena disagreed about where to live when they were first married.
6. What happens within a year of their marriage?
7. According to the narrator, what reason does Zeena give for her failing marriage? Is this true?

8. Why does Ethan not press John Hale for the money he is owed?
9. Once more Ethan gets very jealous of Denis Eady. Why?
10. On his return home, Mattie's presence at the door echoes Zenobia's earlier presence at the same spot. What contrast is made between the two?
11. The red pickle dish is broken. How did Zeena treat the dish, where did the dish come from, and what is Zeena's expected reaction?
12. What is Ethan's plan for the dish, and how does he feel at the close of the chapter?
13. What is strange about the cat's behavior?

## Chapter V

### Vocabulary

**compunction** – anxiety from guilt

**countenance** – an appearance, expression

**gaunt** – extremely thin

**indolent** – lazy

**languidly** – lazily, slowly

**wainscot** – a paneling for walls (usually wooden)

1. How does the evening alone start out?
2. Explain how the cat's movements might hold a symbolic significance.
3. What does Ethan mention that puts a damper on the mood?
4. Why is Mattie anxious about Zeena?
5. We are told that Ethan's "return to reality was...painful." (Pg. 56) What does that mean in the context of the story?
6. This chapter is full of color. Find at least three significant uses of color imagery in the text, and explain the importance of each.

## Chapter VI

## Vocabulary

**aver** – to prove

**deigned** – lowered to a level considered inappropriate to maintaining one's dignity

derision – ridicule; scorn

**heedless** – unaware; oblivious

loth – reluctant

ministrations – attention

**mused** – considered thoughtfully

**ominous** – having a menacing or frightening aspect

**perfunctory** – routinely, automatically

ponderous – heavy and slow-moving

squalid – dirty and degraded

**stoicism** – an indifference to pleasure and pain

1. What is Ethan's mood the next morning? Explain.
2. Why is Ethan's plan to fix the pickle dish unsuccessful?
3. The hired hand, Jotham Powell, uncharacteristically refuses a free meal. What does Ethan infer from this?

## Chapter VII

### Vocabulary

**abhor** – to hate strongly; to loathe

**affability** – pleasantness

**antipathy** – dislike

**benevolence** – good will or deeds

**checked** – stopped

**consecrated** – dedicated to a specific purpose; devoted

**desolately** – joylessly, sadly

**emitted** – uttered, voiced, expressed

**evocation** – the act of calling forth, evoking

**felicitous** – pleasant, delightful

**foist** – to impose (force) a burden on someone

**inexorable** – unchanging

**ingratiatingly** – pleasantly, agreeably

**peril** – a source of possible harm; danger, risk

**recrimination** – a counter accusation; returning one accusation with another

**regaled** – entertained, amused

**resolute** – bold and steady

**smote** – attacked sharply

**succumb** – to yield to an overpowering force

**vehemence** – intensity

**wrath** – anger

1. Zeena says, “I’m a great deal sicker than you think.” Then we are told, “Ethan’s heart was jerking to and from between two extremities of feelings...” (Pgs. 63,64) What are the two feelings Ethan has?
2. What does Zeena say the doctor has told her she needs? What is Ethan’s reaction?

3. In what way does Zeena try to make Ethan feel guilty?
4. Why does Zeena feel they will be able to afford to hire a girl?
5. Zeena says, in response to Ethan's question about what the neighbors will say when she sends a relative away, "I know well enough what they say of my having kep' her here as long as I have." What is the implication? (Pg. 67)
6. Why is it necessary for Mattie to go at once?
7. We are told that "a flame of hate rose in him." Why? What does his "wild step forward" suggest? (Pg. 68)
8. How does Mattie take the news that Zeena is sending her away?

9. What is the only option that Ethan can imagine for Mattie in Stamford?
10. What discovery does Zeena make? How does it affect her?
11. Why is it ironic that Zeena says, “and now you’ve took from me the one I cared for most of all—”? (Pg. 72) What other irony is expressed in the same speech?
12. In what way might the broken pickle dish symbolic?
13. As Zeena stands and cries about her broken dish, some critics maintain she becomes a sympathetic figure. She is, after all, the wronged woman in this triangle. How much sympathy do you have for her at this point?

## Chapter VIII

### Vocabulary

**ebullition** – a sudden outburst

**huckabuck** – a coarse fabric

**injunction** – a command, direction

**lumbago** – a severe backache (usually located in the lower back)

1. As he stands in his makeshift study, what are Ethan's feeling about Zeena and the situation?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What decision does he make about the train?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. As Ethan writes his note to Zeena, what depressing realization comes to him?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How does Ethan feel when he realizes he will not be going west?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Explain the significance of this quotation: "...and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished." (Pg. 75)



6. How does Mattie know that Ethan spent the night in his study?
7. For what reason does Ethan feel more optimistic the next morning?
8. When Jotham mentions that Dan'l will be picking up Mattie's trunk, what does Ethan tell him?
9. When it is apparent that Zeena will not change her mind, what plan does Ethan have for getting some money?
10. What causes him to abandon this plan?

## Chapter IX

### Vocabulary

**adjured** – pleaded

**audacity** – boldness; arrogance

**avowal** – a declaration

**boles** – trunks of trees

**contemptuously** – boldly

**cowered** – crouched, cringed, recoiled

**curtly** – using a short and rude tone

**discursively** – off the subject

**exultantly** – joyfully, happily, jubilantly

**facetious** – funny, humorous

**feint** – a pretension; ploy

**heeded** – obeyed

**indignation** – anger aroused by something unjust, unworthy, or mean; outraged

**mottlings** – clumps; blotches

**nigh** – nearly

**oxydized** – rusted; decayed

**uncouth** – plain; not fancy; common

1. When Ethan walks into Mattie's room, what is she doing?
2. What is the reason for her tears?
3. Why does Zeena say she wants Jotham, not Ethan, to drive Mattie to the train? What other reason might Zeena not want Ethan to drive Mattie to the train?
4. Why does Ethan, turning right instead of left, drive past Shadow Pond?

5. As they sit there discussing a summer day at Shadow Pond, we are told, “They had never before avowed their inclination so openly...” (Pg. 85) Why has neither one ever said anything before this?
6. When Mattie pulls out the letter that Ethan started to write to Zeena, Ethan is thrilled by the fact that Mattie knows the depths of his feeling for her. He asks, “Matt—... if I could ha’ done it [asked her to run off with him] would you [have gone with me]?” (Pg. 87) What is her response?
7. Why does Ethan suggest the initial coast down the hill?
8. Where do they have their first kiss, and what effect does it have on them?
9. What is suggested as a solution, and why is the not suggestion not surprising?
10. After the crash, what is the sound Ethan hears? Who or what has made the sound?

## Epilogue

### Vocabulary

**austere** – somber and grave

**drone** – a continuous monotonous sound

**slatternly** – drab and dirty

**swarthy** – dark

1. The woman who speaks in a “querulous drone” is described as follows: “...her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives.” (Pg. 95) Who is this woman, and what is her complaint?
2. Although the townspeople do not know, Mrs. Hale appears to have heard the whole story from Mattie the morning she awoke in her house. How much do you think Zeena knows of the accident?
3. How has Mattie physical appearance changed?

7. Considering the last paragraph in the story, what is your opinion of Mrs. Hale's theory?

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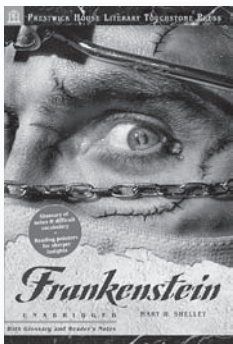
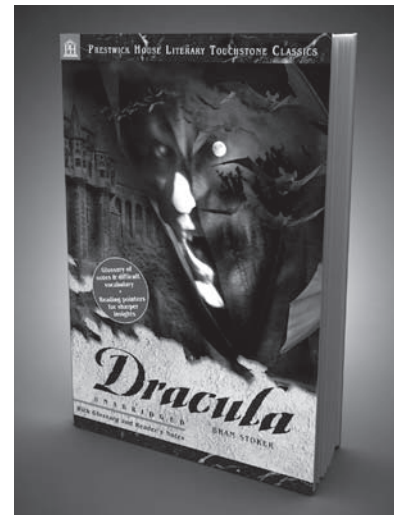
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