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Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Teaching Unit
Individual Learning Packet

Ethan Frome

by Edith Wharton

Written by Rebecca Grudzina

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Ethan Frome

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the symbolic use of color
2. explain the significance of imagery in the novel
3. analyze the creation and use of irony
4. analyze the impact of setting on character and plot
5. analyze the point of view, the narrative voice, and the narrative techniques used by the author

Introductory Lecture

Author's Biography

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones to the wealthy New York family that is often credited as being *the* Jones family in the phrase, “keeping up with the Joneses.” She received a marriage proposal at a young age, but the wedding was called off by her fiancé’s parents, who were upset by what they perceived as the Jones family’s unsurpassed snobbery. In 1885, at the age of twenty-three, she married Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton, twelve years her senior. Wharton was from a well-established Boston family. He was a sportsman and a gentleman, and the Joneses approved of him as being of their social class. Edith and her husband shared a love of travel. Eventually, however, Edith concluded that they had little in common intellectually. He eventually began conducting a series of dalliances with younger women, which took its toll on Wharton’s mental health. Her doctor suggested that she write as a means of relieving some of her tension. *Ethan Frome*, the story of a sensitive and intelligent man trapped in a loveless marriage with a manipulative and self-absorbed hypochondriac is the result.

Edith and Edward divorced in 1913, after he suffered a nervous breakdown and was confined to a hospital. She never relinquished his family name.

Besides her writing, Wharton was a well-respected landscape architect and interior designer. She wrote several influential books, including *The Decoration of Houses*, her first published work, and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.

In 1921, Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for her highly esteemed novel *The Age of Innocence*, making her the first woman to win the award. Edith Wharton died in 1937 in her villa near Paris at the age of seventy-five.

Ethan Frome was released in 1911 and has been viewed negatively by some critics as morally or ethically insignificant. The novel, however, seems more autobiographical than moralistic in intent. Ethan is analogous to Edith, Zeena to Edward, and Mattie to Edith’s one-time lover, journalist Morton Fullerton. It is one of the few pieces of Wharton’s fiction that does not take place in an urban, upper-class environment. Her normally lush and luxurious settings are replaced by the stark and foreboding descriptions of rural working-class New England, which is especially unusual given the fact that Wharton herself was a woman of leisure, living in the luxury of a French villa. Wharton claimed to have based the story of *Ethan Frome* on an accident that had occurred to an acquaintance in Lenox, Massachusetts—an area with which she was familiar.

The Problem of Narrative Reliability

Critics have hailed *Ethan Frome* as the most carefully constructed of Wharton's novels, and one cannot discuss the novel without examining the frame story with which it begins and ends. Wharton admitted she got the idea for the frame narrative and the long flashback from Honore de Balzac's *La Grande Bretche*.

Both the frame narrative and the embedded story are told by the same narrator, an unnamed engineer, stranded in Starkfield, Massachusetts, during its long and brutal winter. This narrator's reliability—especially while telling the embedded story—is suspicious because of the variety of sources used to construct it and the fact that the narrator himself calls his account of the tale a “vision.” Clearly, the story presented to us is not a factual record of the events leading to Ethan's accident but the narrator's impressions of what those events might have been. The only verifiable facts of Ethan's story are revealed in the frame narrative. The story itself is tinged by the narrator's interpretation. It is, at best, a hypothesis, informed by the facts revealed in the frame, the impressions the narrator gathered during his night with the Fromes, and his lengthy conversation with Mrs. Hale.

Critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that the novel is not about Ethan Frome at all, but about the narrator and his reaction to the story. Wolff emphasizes the similarities established between Ethan and the narrator (e.g., the narrator is an engineer and Frome once hoped to be an engineer) and suggests that the narrator's “vision” is really his view of the man he might become if deprived of his profession and his independence.

Jean Franz Blackall agrees that the narrator's story is based solely on inference, but asserts that there is evidence in the text to support his account. Blackall draws our attention to the fact that, at the end of the book, Mrs. Hale corroborates the narrator's assumptions. And Mrs. Hale, who was with Mattie on the morning after the accident, is the closest thing to an eyewitness that we have. Her conclusion that, if Mattie had died, Ethan might have lived, suggests that she knows about the couple's secret love and possibly that the “accident” was really a suicide attempt.

Still, as Mrs. Hale never tells the narrator what Mattie told her (which the narrator never tells us), we must accept the sad tale of Ethan's life as largely conjecture and supposition.

The Moral Dilemma In and Surrounding the Novel

First published in 1911, *Ethan Frome* presents its readers with scenes of unmitigated misery. Many consider the suffering endured by Wharton's characters to be excessive and unjustified. Others argue that the novel attempts to tackle difficult moral and social questions. Still others still look to the novel for clues about the author's own life, especially her unfulfilling marriage to the much-older and ailing Edward Wharton.

At the book's initial release, reviewers praised Wharton's style, but criticized the novel's utter bleakness and the inability of her characters to find a way out of their situation. Later critics went so far as to ask whether Ethan Frome was a truly tragic figure or simply emotionally and morally paralyzed.

The novel's disastrous conclusion requires the reader to ask: *Do Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena deserve their horrible fates?* Many readers, of course, answer with a resounding *no*. Critique Lionel Trilling wrote that Wharton offered no justification for the suffering of her characters. He continued to argue that the novel presented "no moral issue at all."

Other critics, however, have found much significance in the novel's ending. Marlene Springer writes that *Ethan Frome* illustrates the notion that life sometimes presents us with equally strong but conflicting choices. Among the moral choices presented to the characters in the novel are: whether to pursue genuine love or remain "faithful" to what one perceives as his "duty;" whether the personal happiness of two people would justify condemning one person to utter aloneness and poverty; and whether it is "more right" to obey strict social conventions or pursue the American ideal of the rugged individual.

Springer also argues that Ethan's apparent moral inertia is exactly the point. His story is an example of what happens when one refuses to choose.

Elizabeth Ammons bases her reading on the fact that Wharton labels *Ethan Frome* a "tale." Looked at as a variation on the archetypal fairy tale, *Ethan Frome* tells a story not unlike "Snow White" or "Cinderella."

To support her thesis, Ammons points to the frozen landscape, Mattie's physical appearance, her role as housekeeper, and her persecution by the witchlike Zeena—all parallels to the archetypal tale of the young girl whose jealous stepmother oppresses her and tries to keep her dependent, without friends and resources. The important difference, according to Ammons, is that in *Ethan Frome*, it is the witch who wins. And the victory is intensified by the failed suicide attempt that turns Mattie herself into a version of her tormentor and, at the same time, turns the tormentor into the caretaker.

Ammons then takes her fairy tale moral one step further and concludes, “as long as women are kept isolated and dependent, Mattie Silvers will become Zeena Fromes: frigid crippled wrecks of human beings.” The fact that Wharton cripples Mattie but does not allow her to die reflects not Wharton’s cruelty, but that of the culture in which she lived and wrote. Ammons believes that Mattie’s fate is inevitable—without a family or marketable skills, she must live in poverty, become prematurely old, and have her dreams shattered. The sledding accident merely hastens the inevitable. Ammons is careful to point out that Ethan has seen this same disintegration into “queerness” in both his mother and his wife.

Thus, according to Ammons, Zeena is herself a victim, a product of the society in which she lived. Zeena’s descent into Witchdom began soon after her marriage to Ethan. Like her treasured pickle dish, Zeena’s life was also put on a shelf the day she married. It is interesting to note that the pickle dish is red—a color associated in the novel with passion and Mattie—and that this symbol of passion is hidden away and never taken down.

Thus, the fact that this treasured dish is broken by Mattie and Ethan takes on a new significance and makes Zeena, perhaps, a little more sympathetic.

But do Ethan and Mattie deserve the fate Wharton assigns them? Perhaps the novel really is a cautionary tale, warning against wasting those opportunities to seize the day and invent for ourselves new destinies. Time and again, Ethan is overtaken by the urge to rebel, but each time he checks himself. His decision not to ask Hale for the money is probably the most troubling.

In every other instance, there is a plausible justification for Ethan not to act or speak. But in this one instance, his justification not to act is so weak as to seem almost ridiculous. Blake Nevius suggests that Ethan’s not asking might have more to do with his fear of actually achieving his dreams than it does with his conscience. This would indeed illustrate emotional paralysis.

Because of the novel’s structure, we know that Ethan does not escape from Starkfield or his cold and loveless marriage. We know there will be a “smash-up,” that Ethan will suffer crippling injuries, and that he will become “the ruin of a man.” And it is probably just this predictability that suggests the novel’s ultimate meaning. Perhaps our knowing Ethan’s fate from the very beginning lulls us into believing that this outcome is inevitable, and we, too, resign ourselves to the notion that no action on the part of any of the characters would ultimately have made any significant difference.

Free-Response (Essay) Items

Practice Free–Response Item 1

The settings of many novels and plays, while establishing the time and place of the action, are also symbolic of character and theme. In a well–organized essay, analyze the potential symbolic significance of Starkfield in winter as the setting for the action in *Ethan Frome*.

Practice Free–Response Item 2

Often the proximity of a novel’s narrator to the characters and events of the novel points to theme and meaning. Write a well–organized essay analyzing the narrative technique and its impact on the overall effect of *Ethan Frome*.

Practice Free–Response Item 3

The inescapability of Fate is a theme common in literature. Write a well–organized essay in which you discuss how characters’ belief in Fate affects their attitudes and decisions.

Avoid plot summary.

Practice Free-Response Item 4

The passage below is from the very beginning of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the sources of suspense in this episode.

Avoid plot summary.

If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade: and you must have asked who he was.

It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two. I had this from Harmon Gow, who had driven the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days and knew the chronicle of all the families on his line.

"He's looked that way ever since he had his smash-up; and that's twenty-four years ago come next February," Harmon threw out between reminiscent pauses.

The "smash-up" it was—I gathered from the same informant—which, besides drawing the red gash across Ethan Frome's forehead, had so shortened and warped his right side that it cost him a visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post-office window. He used to drive in from his farm every day at about noon, and as that was my own hour for fetching my mail I often passed him in the porch or stood beside him while we waited on the motions of the distributing hand behind the grating. I noticed that, though he came so punctually, he seldom received anything but a copy of the Bettsbridge Eagle, which he put without a glance into his sagging pocket. At intervals, however, the post-master would hand him an envelope addressed to Mrs. Zenobia—or Mrs. Zeena—Frome, and usually bearing conspicuously in the upper left-hand corner the address of some manufacturer of patent medicine and the name of his specific.

These documents my neighbour would also pocket without a glance, as if too much used to them to wonder at their number and variety, and would then turn away with a silent nod to the post-master.

Practice Free–Response Item 5

Read the following passage from Chapter VI of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the sentence structure and narrative techniques Wharton uses to create a scene of rapid-paced suspense and drama.

Avoid plot summary.

He had driven his load half-way to the village when Jotham Powell overtook him, urging the reluctant sorrel toward the Flats. "I'll have to hurry up to do it," Ethan mused, as the sleigh dropped down ahead of him over the dip of the school-house hill. He worked like ten at the unloading, and when it was over hastened on to Michael Eady's for the glue. Eady and his assistant were both "down street," and young Denis, who seldom deigned to take their place, was lounging by the stove with a knot of the golden youth of Starkfield. They hailed Ethan with ironic compliment and offers of conviviality; but no one knew where to find the glue. Ethan, consumed with the longing for a last moment alone with Mattie, hung about impatiently while Denis made an ineffectual search in the obscurer corners of the store.

"Looks as if we were all sold out. But if you'll wait around till the old man comes along maybe he can put his hand on it."

"I'm obliged to you, but I'll try if I can get it down at Mrs. Homan's," Ethan answered, burning to be gone.

Denis's commercial instinct compelled him to aver on oath that what Eady's store could not produce would never be found at the widow Homan's; but Ethan, heedless of this boast, had already climbed to the sledge and was driving on to the rival establishment. Here, after considerable search, and sympathetic questions as to what he wanted it for, and whether ordinary flour paste wouldn't do as well if she couldn't find it, the widow Homan finally hunted down her solitary bottle of glue to its hiding-place in a medley of cough-lozenges and corset-laces.

"I hope Zeena ain't broken anything she sets store by," she called after him as he turned the greys toward home.

Multiple Choice Questions

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 1 - 10

Carefully read the following passage from the Introduction of *Ethan Frome* before selecting the best answer to the multiple-choice questions below.

Every one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own grave mien; but his taciturnity was respected and it was only on rare occasions that one of the older men of the place detained him for a word. When this happened he would listen quietly, his blue eyes on the speaker's face, and answer in so low a tone that his words never reached me; then he would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand and drive slowly away in the direction of his farm.

"It was a pretty bad smash-up?" I questioned Harmon, looking after Frome's retreating figure, and thinking how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape.

"Wust kind," my informant assented. "More'n enough to kill most men. But the Fromes are tough. Ethan'll likely touch a hundred."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. At the moment Ethan Frome, after climbing to his seat, had leaned over to assure himself of the security of a wooden box—also with a druggist's label on it—which he had placed in the back of the buggy, and I saw his face as it probably looked when he thought himself alone. "That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!"

Harmon drew a slab of tobacco from his pocket, cut off a wedge and pressed it into the leather pouch of his cheek. "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

"Why didn't he?"

"Somebody had to stay and care for the folks. There warn't ever anybody but Ethan. Fust his father—then his mother—then his wife."

"And then the smash-up?"

Harmon chuckled sardonically. "That's so. He had to stay then."

"I see. And since then they've had to care for him?"

Harmon thoughtfully passed his tobacco to the other cheek. "Oh, as to that: I guess it's always Ethan done the caring."

Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps. But one phrase stuck in my memory and served as the nucleus about which I grouped my subsequent inferences: "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters."

Before my own time there was up I had learned to know what that meant. Yet I had come in the degenerate day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery, when communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys, such as Bettsbridge and Shadd's Falls, had libraries, theatres and Y. M. C. A. halls to which the youth of the hills could descend for recreation. But when winter shut down on Starkfield and the village lay under a sheet of snow perpetually renewed from the pale skies, I began to see what life there—or rather its negation—must have been in Ethan Frome's young manhood.

I had been sent up by my employers on a job connected with the big power-house at Corbury Junction, and a long-drawn carpenters' strike had so delayed the work that I found myself anchored at Starkfield—the nearest habitable spot—for the best part of the winter. I chafed at first, and then, under the hypnotising effect of routine, gradually began to find a grim satisfaction in the life. During the early part of my stay I had been struck by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community. Day by day, after the December snows were over, a blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, which gave them back in an intenser glitter. One would have supposed that such an atmosphere must quicken the emotions as well as the blood; but it seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of Starkfield. When I had been there a little longer, and had 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. Twenty years earlier the means of resistance must have been far fewer, and the enemy in command of almost all the lines of access between the beleaguered villages; and, considering these things, I felt the sinister force of Harmon's phrase: "Most of the smart ones get away." But if that were the case, how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?

During my stay at Starkfield I lodged with a middle-aged widow colloquially known as Mrs. Ned Hale. Mrs. Hale's father had been the village lawyer of the previous generation, and "lawyer Varnum's house," where my landlady still lived with her mother, was the most considerable mansion in the village. It stood at one end of the main street, its classic portico and small-paned windows looking down a flagged path between Norway spruces to the slim white steeple of the Congregational church. It was clear that the Varnum fortunes were at the ebb, but the two women did what they could to preserve a decent dignity; and Mrs. Hale, in particular, had a certain wan refinement not out of keeping with her pale old-fashioned house.

1. The narrator observes that the residents of Starkfield tend to greet Ethan Frome in what manner?
 - (A) warmly
 - (B) gravely
 - (C) coldly
 - (D) familiarly
 - (E) indifferently
2. As it is used in this passage, the word *taciturn* means
 - (A) talkative.
 - (B) short-tempered.
 - (C) reserved.
 - (D) long-lived.
 - (E) unfriendly.
3. The passage suggests all of the following about Ethan *except* that he
 - (A) was once strong and hearty.
 - (B) had sandy-blond hair.
 - (C) had a strong constitution.
 - (D) was a human wreck.
 - (E) is unhappily married
4. When Harmon asserts, “Most of the smart ones get away,” he is implying that
 - (A) Ethan is not one of “the smart ones.”
 - (B) Starkfield winters are long and harsh.
 - (C) living in Starkfield is a last option.
 - (D) Ethan tried to leave but had to return.
 - (E) the smash-up kept Ethan in Starkfield.
5. The narrator confesses that Harmon’s supposition that Ethan had been in Starkfield for “too many winters” became the
 - (A) impetus for his desire to know Ethan’s story.
 - (B) central focus of all of his suppositions about Ethan.
 - (C) source of information about Ethan’s story.
 - (D) crux of Ethan’s story.
 - (E) narrator’s chief obsession.

6. The narrator suggests that all of the following were factors in the unfolding of Ethan Frome's story *except*
- (A) human decadence and apathy.
 - (B) transportation technology.
 - (C) communications technology.
 - (D) weather and climate.
 - (E) social opportunities.
7. The narrator mentions his assignment at the powerhouse in Corbury Junction and the carpenters' strike in order to
- (A) emphasize the isolation of Starkfield.
 - (B) lend credibility to his role as narrator.
 - (C) establish the verisimilitude of his account.
 - (D) explain his presence in the town to learn the story.
 - (E) connect the tiny Starkfield with the broader community.
8. The narrator compares the long and harsh Starkfield winters to a
- (A) hypnotic and satisfying routine.
 - (B) village of white tents.
 - (C) long, drawn-out siege.
 - (D) hungry company of surrendering soldiers.
 - (E) an exodus away from the town.
9. How do Mrs. Hale and her house reflect the rest of the atmosphere of Starkfield?
- (A) Mrs. Hale and her house are both generally more refined than the rest of the village.
 - (B) All are pale and evidently in dwindling fortunes.
 - (C) The lawyer Varnum's house was the "most considerable" mansion in the village.
 - (D) Mrs. Hale is middle-aged and widowed.
 - (E) The Varnum fortunes are "at the ebb."
10. The narrator's pondering Harmon Gow's statement, "Most of the smart ones get away," ultimately leads him to wonder
- (A) why Ethan was not "smart" enough to leave.
 - (B) what role the Starkfield climate played.
 - (C) who left, who stayed and why.
 - (D) how did Ethan Frome come to be in his current circumstances.
 - (E) what tragic combination of forces kept Ethan in Starkfield.

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 11 - 15

Carefully read the following passage from the Introduction of *Ethan Frome* before selecting the best answer to the multiple-choice questions below.

Abreast of the schoolhouse the road forked, and we dipped down a lane to the left, between hemlock boughs bent inward to their trunks by the weight of the snow. I had often walked that way on Sundays, and knew that the solitary roof showing through bare branches near the bottom of the hill was that of Frome's saw-mill. It looked exanimate enough, with its idle wheel looming above the black stream dashed with yellow-white spume, and its cluster of sheds sagging under their white load. Frome did not even turn his head as we drove by, and still in silence we began to mount the next slope. About a mile farther, on a road I had never travelled, we came to an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe. Beyond the orchard lay a field or two, their boundaries lost under drifts; and above the fields, huddled against the white immensities of land and sky, one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier.

"That's my place," said Frome, with a sideway jerk of his lame elbow; and in the distress and oppression of the scene I did not know what to answer. The snow had ceased, and a flash of watery sunlight exposed the house on the slope above us in all its plaintive ugliness. The black wraith of a deciduous creeper flapped from the porch, and the thin wooden walls, under their worn coat of paint, seemed to shiver in the wind that had risen with the ceasing of the snow.

"The house was bigger in my father's time: I had to take down the 'L,' a while back," Frome continued, checking with a twitch of the left rein the bay's evident intention of turning in through the broken-down gate.

I saw then that the unusually forlorn and stunted look of the house was partly due to the loss of what is known in New England as the "L": that long deep-roofed adjunct usually built at right angles to the main house, and connecting it, by way of storerooms and tool-house, with the wood-shed and cow-barn. Whether because of its symbolic sense, the image it presents of a life linked with the soil, and enclosing in itself the chief sources of warmth and nourishment, or whether merely because of the consolatory thought that it enables the dwellers in that harsh climate to get to their morning's work without facing the weather, it is certain that the "L" rather than the house itself seems to be the centre, the actual hearth-stone of the New England farm. Perhaps this connection of ideas, which had often occurred to me in my rambles about Starkfield, caused me to hear a wistful note in Frome's words, and to see in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body.

“We’re kinder side-tracked here now,” he added, “but there was considerable passing before the railroad was carried through to the Flats.” He roused the lagging bay with another twitch; then, as if the mere sight of the house had let me too deeply into his confidence for any farther pretence of reserve, he went on slowly: “I’ve always set down the worst of mother’s trouble to that. When she got the rheumatism so bad she couldn’t move around she used to sit up there and watch the road by the hour; and one year, when they was six months mending the Bettsbridge pike after the floods, and Harmon Gow had to bring his stage round this way, she picked up so that she used to get down to the gate most days to see him. But after the trains begun running nobody ever come by here to speak of, and mother never could get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died.”

As we turned into the Corbury road the snow began to fall again, cutting off our last glimpse of the house; and Frome’s silence fell with it, letting down between us the old veil of reticence. This time the wind did not cease with the return of the snow. Instead, it sprang up to a gale which now and then, from a tattered sky, flung pale sweeps of sunlight over a landscape chaotically tossed. But the bay was as good as Frome’s word, and we pushed on to the Junction through the wild white scene.

In the afternoon the storm held off, and the clearness in the west seemed to my inexperienced eye the pledge of a fair evening. I finished my business as quickly as possible, and we set out for Starkfield with a good chance of getting there for supper. But at sunset the clouds gathered again, bringing an earlier night, and the snow began to fall straight and steadily from a sky without wind, in a soft universal diffusion more confusing than the gusts and eddies of the morning. It seemed to be a part of the thickening darkness, to be the winter night itself descending on us layer by layer.

The small ray of Frome’s lantern was soon lost in this smothering medium, in which even his sense of direction, and the bay’s homing instinct, finally ceased to serve us. Two or three times some ghostly landmark sprang up to warn us that we were astray, and then was sucked back into the mist; and when we finally regained our road the old horse began to show signs of exhaustion. I felt myself to blame for having accepted Frome’s offer, and after a short discussion I persuaded him to let me get out of the sleigh and walk along through the snow at the bay’s side. In this way we struggled on for another mile or two, and at last reached a point where Frome, peering into what seemed to me formless night, said: “That’s my gate down yonder.”

The last stretch had been the hardest part of the way. The bitter cold and the heavy going had nearly knocked the wind out of me, and I could feel the horse’s side ticking like a clock under my hand.

11. The imagery of the first paragraph emphasizes all of the following *except*
- (A) the isolation of Ethan's home and mill.
 - (B) the severity of the climate.
 - (C) the Fromes' poverty.
 - (D) Ethan's reticence.
 - (E) the ugliness of the setting.
12. How does Ethan's house symbolize his life and circumstances?
- (A) Both are diminishing .
 - (B) Part of the house had to be torn down.
 - (C) Both are described as "forlorn and stunted" looking.
 - (D) The "L" represented a life close to the soil.
 - (E) The living center of the house has been torn down.
13. Ethan explains to the narrator that his mother's decline and death were accelerated by
- (A) rheumatism.
 - (B) lack of exercise.
 - (C) anger.
 - (D) isolation and loneliness.
 - (E) depression.
14. To the narrator, the lowering of Ethan's "veil of reticence" is a contrast to Ethan's
- (A) usual quietness.
 - (B) shabby and isolated house.
 - (C) wrecked and crooked appearance.
 - (D) talk of his mother's illness.
 - (E) somber demeanor.
15. The storm's increasing intensity serves as a vehicle to
- (A) get the narrator into Ethan's house.
 - (B) establish Ethan's silence.
 - (C) emphasize Starkfield's weather.
 - (D) explain Ethan's backstory.
 - (E) introduce the inciting incident.

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 16 - 20

Carefully read the following passage from Chapter I of *Ethan Frome* before selecting the best answer to the multiple-choice questions below.

Chapter I

The village lay under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners. In a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires. The moon had set, but the night was so transparent that the white house-fronts between the elms looked gray against the snow, clumps of bushes made black stains on it, and the basement windows of the church sent shafts of yellow light far across the endless undulations.

Young Ethan Frome walked at a quick pace along the deserted street, past the bank and Michael Eady's new brick store and Lawyer Varnum's house with the two black Norway spruces at the gate. Opposite the Varnum gate, where the road fell away toward the Corbury valley, the church reared its slim white steeple and narrow peristyle. As the young man walked toward it the upper windows drew a black arcade along the side wall of the building, but from the lower openings, on the side where the ground sloped steeply down to the Corbury road, the light shot its long bars, illuminating many fresh furrows in the track leading to the basement door, and showing, under an adjoining shed, a line of sleighs with heavily blanketed horses.

The night was perfectly still, and the air so dry and pure that it gave little sensation of cold. The effect produced on Frome was rather of a complete absence of atmosphere, as though nothing less tenuous than ether intervened between the white earth under his feet and the metallic dome overhead. "It's like being in an exhausted receiver," he thought. Four or five years earlier he had taken a year's course at a technological college at Worcester, and dabbled in the laboratory with a friendly professor of physics; and the images supplied by that experience still cropped up, at unexpected moments, through the totally different associations of thought in which he had since been living. His father's death, and the misfortunes following it, had put a premature end to Ethan's studies; but though they had not gone far enough to be of much practical use they had fed his fancy and made him aware of huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things.

As he strode along through the snow the sense of such meanings glowed in his brain and mingled with the bodily flush produced by his sharp tramp. At the end of the village he paused before the darkened front of the church. He stood there a moment, breathing quickly, and looking up and down the street, in which not another figure moved. The pitch of the Corbury road, below lawyer Varnum's spruces, was the favourite coasting-ground of Starkfield, and on clear evenings the church corner rang till late with the shouts of the coasters; but to-night not a sled darkened the whiteness of the long declivity. The hush of midnight lay on the village, and all its waking life was gathered behind the church windows, from which strains of dance-music flowed with the broad bands of yellow light.

The young man, skirting the side of the building, went down the slope toward the basement door. To keep out of range of the revealing rays from within he made a circuit through the untrodden snow and gradually approached the farther angle of the basement wall. Thence, still hugging the shadow, he edged his way cautiously forward to the nearest window, holding back his straight spare body and craning his neck till he got a glimpse of the room.

Seen thus, from the pure and frosty darkness in which he stood, it seemed to be seething in a mist of heat. The metal reflectors of the gas-jets sent crude waves of light against the whitewashed walls, and the iron flanks of the stove at the end of the hall looked as though they were heaving with volcanic fires. The floor was thronged with girls and young men. Down the side wall facing the window stood a row of kitchen chairs from which the older women had just risen. By this time the music had stopped, and the musicians—a fiddler, and the young lady who played the harmonium on Sundays—were hastily refreshing themselves at one corner of the supper-table which aligned its devastated pie-dishes and ice-cream saucers on the platform at the end of the hall. The guests were preparing to leave, and the tide had already set toward the passage where coats and wraps were hung, when a young man with a sprightly foot and a shock of black hair shot into the middle of the floor and clapped his hands. The signal took instant effect. The musicians hurried to their instruments, the dancers—some already half-muffled for departure—fell into line down each side of the room, the older spectators slipped back to their chairs, and the lively young man, after diving about here and there in the throng, drew forth a girl who had already wound a cherry-coloured “fascinator” about her head, and, leading her up to the end of the floor, whirled her down its length to the bounding tune of a Virginia reel.

Frome’s heart was beating fast. He had been straining for a glimpse of the dark head under the cherry-coloured scarf and it vexed him that another eye should have been quicker than his. The leader of the reel, who looked as if he had Irish blood in his veins, danced well, and his partner caught his fire. As she passed down the line, her light figure swinging from hand to hand in circles of increasing swiftness, the scarf flew off her head and stood out behind her shoulders, and Frome, at each turn, caught sight of her laughing panting lips, the cloud of dark hair about her forehead, and the dark eyes which seemed the only fixed points in a maze of flying lines.

The dancers were going faster and faster, and the musicians, to keep up with them, belaboured their instruments like jockeys lashing their mounts on the home-stretch; yet it seemed to the young man at the window that the reel would never end. Now and then he turned his eyes from the girl’s face to that of her partner, which, in the exhilaration of the dance, had taken on a look of almost impudent ownership. Denis Eady was the son of Michael Eady, the ambitious Irish grocer, whose suppleness and effrontery had given Starkfield its first notion of “smart” business methods, and whose new brick store testified to the success of the attempt. His son seemed likely to follow in his steps, and was meanwhile applying the same arts to the conquest of the Starkfield maidenhood. Hitherto Ethan Frome had been content to think him a mean fellow; but now he positively invited a horse-whipping. It was strange that the girl did not seem aware of it: that she could lift her rapt face to her dancer’s, and drop her hands into his, without appearing to feel the offence of his look and touch.

Frome was in the habit of walking into Starkfield to fetch home his wife's cousin, Mattie Silver, on the rare evenings when some chance of amusement drew her to the village. It was his wife who had suggested, when the girl came to live with them, that such opportunities should be put in her way. Mattie Silver came from Stamford, and when she entered the Fromes' household to act as her cousin Zeena's aid it was thought best, as she came without pay, not to let her feel too sharp a contrast between the life she had left and the isolation of a Starkfield farm. But for this—as Frome sardonically reflected—it would hardly have occurred to Zeena to take any thought for the girl's amusement.

When his wife first proposed that they should give Mattie an occasional evening out he had inwardly demurred at having to do the extra two miles to the village and back after his hard day on the farm; but not long afterward he had reached the point of wishing that Starkfield might give all its nights to revelry.

Mattie Silver had lived under his roof for a year, and from early morning till they met at supper he had frequent chances of seeing her; but no moments in her company were comparable to those when, her arm in his, and her light step flying to keep time with his long stride, they walked back through the night to the farm. He had taken to the girl from the first day, when he had driven over to the Flats to meet her, and she had smiled and waved to him from the train, crying out, "You must be Ethan!" as she jumped down with her bundles, while he reflected, looking over her slight person: "She don't look much on housework, but she ain't a fretter, anyhow." But it was not only that the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth. The girl was more than the bright serviceable creature he had thought her. She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will.

It was during their night walks back to the farm that he felt most intensely the sweetness of this communion. He had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion. But hitherto the emotion had remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it. He did not even know whether any one else in the world felt as he did, or whether he was the sole victim of this mournful privilege.

16. The imagery in the first paragraph can best be summed up as
(A) cold and colorless.
(B) starkly beautiful.
(C) forbidding.
(D) romantic and celestial.
(E) black and white.
17. As used in this passage, the word *pitch* refers to
(A) the sap of spruce trees.
(B) the slope of a hill.
(C) an intense darkness.
(D) a type of country dance.
(E) the tonal quality of dance music.
18. As used in this passage, the word *coasting* refers to
(A) sledding downhill.
(B) maintaining speed.
(C) moving without effort.
(D) dancing.
(E) nighttime courting.
19. All of the following describe the contrast between the imagery inside the church with the outdoor imagery *except*
(A) energetic contrasted with passive.
(B) glowing contrasted with shaded.
(C) heated contrasted with cold.
(D) loving contrasted with lonely.
(E) crowded contrasted with solitary.
20. The color of the scarf is suggestive of the girl's
(A) Irish ancestry.
(B) passion.
(C) innocence.
(D) energy.
(E) fevered activity.

21. Ethan's dislike of the young Denis Eady seems most likely to stem from
- (A) envy of the young man's money.
 - (B) suspicion of the store owner's business methods.
 - (C) jealousy about Denis's dancing with Mattie.
 - (D) distrust of the young man's boldness.
 - (E) dislike of Denis's womanizing.
22. Zeena's allowing Mattie evenings out to attend amusements in town is an example of her
- (A) overall generosity.
 - (B) selfish practicality.
 - (C) gratitude.
 - (D) plain lifestyle.
 - (E) fortitude.
23. Ethan's reflection of what Mattie's coming meant to the atmosphere in the Frome house advances the novel's motif of
- (A) Ethan and Zeena's charity.
 - (B) love as a spiritual communion.
 - (C) Mattie as light and heat.
 - (D) weather as destiny.
 - (E) love as unattainable.
24. The narrator describes Ethan and Mattie's growing relationship in terms that are almost
- (A) saccharine.
 - (B) emotional.
 - (C) paranormal
 - (D) spiritual.
 - (E) narcissistic.
25. The final paragraph juxtaposes sadness and beauty in an example of
- (A) malapropism.
 - (B) oxymoron.
 - (C) anadiplosis.
 - (D) pun.
 - (E) anaphora.

Practice Multiple - Choice Questions 26 - 30

Carefully read the following passage from Chapter IV of *Ethan Frome* before selecting the best answer to the multiple-choice questions below.

When they married it was agreed that, as soon as he could straighten out the difficulties resulting from Mrs. Frome's long illness, they would sell the farm and saw-mill and try their luck in a large town. Ethan's love of nature did not take the form of a taste for agriculture. He had always wanted to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and "fellows doing things." A slight engineering job in Florida, put in his way during his period of study at Worcester, increased his faith in his ability as well as his eagerness to see the world; and he felt sure that, with a "smart" wife like Zeena, it would not be long before he had made himself a place in it.

Zeena's native village was slightly larger and nearer to the railway than Starkfield, and 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 purchasers were slow in coming, and while he waited for them Ethan learned the impossibility of transplanting her. She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. Even Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity. And within a year of their marriage she developed the "sickliness" which had since made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances. When she came to take care of his mother she had seemed to Ethan like the very genius of health, but he soon saw that her skill as a nurse had been acquired by the absorbed observation of her own symptoms.

Then she too fell silent. Perhaps it was the inevitable effect of life on the farm, or perhaps, as she sometimes said, it was because Ethan "never listened." The charge was not wholly unfounded. When she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to remedy; and to check a tendency to impatient retort he had first formed the habit of not answering her, and finally of thinking of other things while she talked. Of late, however, since he had reasons for observing her more closely, her silence had begun to trouble him. He recalled his mother's growing taciturnity, and wondered if Zeena were also turning "queer." Women did, he knew. Zeena, who had at her fingers' ends the pathological chart of the whole region, had cited many cases of the kind while she was nursing his mother; and he himself knew of certain lonely farm-houses in the neighbourhood where stricken creatures pined, and of others where sudden tragedy had come of their presence. At times, looking at Zeena's shut face, he felt the chill of such forebodings. At other times her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess. That supposition was even more disturbing than the other; and it was the one which had come to him the night before, when he had seen her standing in the kitchen door.

26. The opening paragraph of this passage suggests what about the potential quality of Ethan's life?
- (A) He will always long to finish his studies.
 - (B) He will only eke out a bare existence on his farm.
 - (C) He will rise to prominence in Starkfield.
 - (D) He will never achieve any of his dreams.
 - (E) He will grow to resent his "smart" wife, Zeena.
27. The passage suggests that one reason Ethan and Zeena did not move to a larger city was that
- (A) Zeena soon grew too ill to travel.
 - (B) they could not sell the Frome farm for a high-enough price.
 - (C) Zeena felt too at home at Starkfield to leave.
 - (D) she had not counted on spending her life on an isolated farm.
 - (E) Zeena would not have adjusted to an anonymous life in a city.
28. The passage suggests that one factor contributing to Zeena's illness was
- (A) the effects of caring for Ethan's mother.
 - (B) the desire to stand out.
 - (C) an epidemic that swept the community.
 - (D) her preoccupation with her own health.
 - (E) her anonymity in Starkfield.
29. The paragraph describing Ethan's realization that Zeena's medical knowledge came from her preoccupation with her own health contains an example of (a)
- (A) verbal irony.
 - (B) poetic justice.
 - (C) dramatic irony.
 - (D) fallacy.
 - (E) paradox.
30. Each of the following is offered as a reason for Zeena's silence *except*
- (A) the utter isolation of the farm.
 - (B) her habit of chronically complaining.
 - (C) the nature of the Starkfield community.
 - (D) her complaint that Ethan did not listen to her.
 - (E) some odd resentment Ethan did not understand.

Multiple Choice Questions

Answers with Explanations

1. This easy question requires no more than a surface-level reading of the text. The passage begins with the narrator's observing, "Every one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own **grave mien**," **thus establishing (B) as the correct answer.**
2. The word is used in reference to Ethan's *taciturnity*. Two clues for those who do not already know the definition are the fact that the people greet him gravely, *but* they respect his taciturnity. Thus, Ethan's taciturnity stands in contrast to either the gravity of his demeanor or the fact of being greeted at all. That we are told Ethan is detained for conversation only on "rare occasions" and that his answers are short and virtually inaudible excludes (A). Ethan's behavior, looking at the speaker with his blue eyes and listening, does not support either (B) or (E). (A) might be tempting except for the fact that the greetings are "grave" and the occasions of conversation are "rare." Nothing in the passage supports (D). **Thus (C) is the only plausible answer. Ethan carries himself gravely, is greeted gravely, is rarely drawn into conversation, and, when he is, he listens and responds quickly and quietly.**
3. While we know from the novel that Ethan is, indeed, unhappily married (E), nothing in this passage suggests this. **Thus (E) is the correct answer.** The narrator does reflect, "how gallantly his *lean brown head*, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his *strong shoulders* before they were bent out of shape," thus eliminating (A). The "lean brown head" and "shock of light hair," suggest (B). Harmon Gow's reflection that, Ethan's injuries in the smash-up would have killed most men, but "the Fromes are tough. Ethan'll likely touch a hundred" clearly eliminates (C). Finally, the vivid descriptions of Ethan throughout the passage eliminate (D).
4. This observation of Gow's follows his supposition that Ethan has "been in Starkfield too many winters," thus making (B) and (C) the most probable choices. Nothing else in the passage points to (A). We know (D) to be true, but not from this passage, and we can also assume (E), but this would have nothing to do with Starkfield's winters. Of the two remaining, (B) might be implied by the first half of the statement ("too many winters"), but the idea of smart ones getting away clearly makes (C) **stand out at the best answer.**
5. The narrator explains that, as he tried to piece together Ethan's story, the "nucleus" around which all of his other suppositions formed was Gow's assertion. **Thus, (B) is the correct answer.** (A) is eliminated by the fact that the passage begins with the narrator already curious about Ethan. (C) is clearly implausible as there is no "information" to be had in this statement. (D) is tempting, but the narrator is reflecting on his curiosity, not on the story he does not yet know. (E) is also eliminated by the fact that, while the narrator might be obsessed by Ethan, he is not obsessed by Ethan's long stay in Starkfield.

6. The narrator tells us that, isolated as Starkfield was when he was there, “in the degenerate day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery,” it must have been far worse twenty years earlier, thus eliminating (B). The same holds true for (C) and (E): “communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys, such as Bettsbridge and Shadd’s Falls, had libraries, theatres and Y. M. C. A. halls to which the youth of the hills could descend for recreation.” (D) is eliminated by the narrator’s telling us, “when winter shut down on Starkfield and the village lay under a sheet of snow perpetually renewed from the pale skies, I began to see what life there—or rather its negation—must have been in Ethan Frome’s young manhood.” Thus, (A) is the only plausible answer.
7. As the narrator—an educated, unbiased, observant outsider—will convey the story to us, it is important that Wharton provide sufficient motivation for this outsider’s being in town in the first place. (D) is the correct answer. Starkfield’s isolation might actually be *questioned* by the presence of an outsider (A). The narrator’s being an outsider does affect his bias, but not necessarily his credibility (B). By the same token, the presence of a stranger in town might affect the story’s objectivity, but it has no bearing on the story’s verisimilitude (C). And connecting the tiny village to the outside world is actually the *opposite* of the effect Wharton wants (E).
8. The narrator tells us that *he* found satisfaction in the hypnotizing effect of routine (A). The snows of February (not the entire winter) seem to have “pitched their white tents about the devoted village” (B). The people of the village emerge from their winter like hungry soldiers (D), and it is winter that, perhaps, motivates the “smart ones” to leave (E). The narrator does say, however, that the village emerged from winter as if “from its six months’ siege...” thus establishing (C) as the correct answer.
9. (A) and (C) simply are not logical. They cannot reflect the village by being bigger and grander. (D) and (E) make accurate statements about the characters, but do not show a connection to the village. (B) is the correct answer in that it provides a comparison, not just an observation.
10. This is another fairly easy, surface-level question. The narrator muses, “I felt the sinister force of Harmon’s phrase: ‘Most of the smart ones get away.’ But if that were the case, how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?” Thus (E) is the correct answer.

11. (A) is excluded by the last line of the paragraph, “huddled against the white immensities of land and sky, [stood] one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier.” (B) is excluded by the images of “hemlock boughs bent inward to their trunks by the weight of the snow... the black [mill] stream dashed with yellow-white spume, and its cluster of sheds sagging under their white load...an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe...a field or two, their boundaries lost under drifts.” (D) is eliminated by the narrator’s noting “the old veil of reticence” that fell with the snow. And (E) is clearly eliminated by the narrator’s use of words and phrases like, “an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside....the house...in all its plaintive ugliness...black wraith of a deciduous creeper...the unusually forlorn and stunted look of the house....tattered sky...over a landscape chaotically tossed.” (C) is suggested, but not clearly emphasized, as all of the ugliness and privation implicit in the imagery might merely indicate the severity of climate, not necessarily personal poverty. Thus, (C) is the correct answer.
12. Ethan tells the narrator that the house was bigger in his father’s time, but that he had to tear down the “L.” Similarly, Ethan’s life once included school in Concord, work in Florida, and the hope of leaving Starkfield. But, first his father’s illness, then his mother’s, and then Zeena’s, and, finally, the devastating results of the smash-up have left Ethan with a tiny existence—reduced largely to riding into town every day to fetch his junk mail. Thus, (A) is the best answer. (B) is probably the easiest to eliminate in that there is no clear and necessary connection with the torn-down “L” and Ethan or his life. The house is indeed described as “forlorn and stunted” looking ” (C) but Ethan is still a large man, twisted, but not stunted. (D) is tempting in that the narrator does say the “L” symbolizes a life close to the soil, but this does not explain how the house—even with the “L” torn down—would symbolize Ethan. The narrator says that the “L” is the “centre, the hearth-stone itself” of the New England *farm* not merely of the house itself, thus eliminating (E).
13. Ethan’s mother’s complaint was indeed rheumatism (A), but it was not until the arrival of the railroad and the resulting lack of passersby that the mother’s health declined, and she died. (B) might be tempting, but requires reading too much into the subtext to support convincingly. (C) is likewise tempting, given Ethan’s explanation that “mother never could get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died.” Still, there is more of sorrow or bewilderment in Ethan’s tale than anger. (D) and (E) are almost equally tempting, and (D) would be the best answer were we told only that Ethan’s mother died after the railroad came through and visitors stopped coming. Ethan tells us, however, that his “mother *never could get it through her head what had happened,*” and that it “*preyed on her*” until she died. Thus, (E) is the best answer.

14. There is no contrast between Ethan's usual quietness (A) and his "veil of reticence." (B) is eliminated by the fact that the view of Ethan's house actual spurs the uncharacteristic talk, rather than renewing his silence. (C) is almost a giveaway in that the one is not logically connected to the other, and (E) is nearly a repetition of (A) with hints of (C). Ethan regains his reticence, however, *after* talking in some length about his mother's illness and death. **Thus, (D) is the correct answer.**
15. (B) has been long established, and this passage also contains sufficient clues to suggest that Ethan is a normally quiet man. (C) might be tempting, but the harshness of Starkfield's weather has already been established and is not the focus of this passage. (D) would be tempting if the only part of Ethan's backstory we were curious about were his mother's illness. (E) is possibly even more tempting, but the technique of the storm does not allow the action of the plot to begin; it presents the occasion for the narrator to learn the facts of the plot. **Thus, (A) is the best answer.**
16. The first paragraph reads: "Abreast of the schoolhouse the road forked, and we dipped down a lane to the left, between hemlock boughs bent inward to their trunks by the weight of the **snow (white)**. I had often walked that way on Sundays, and knew that the solitary roof showing through bare branches near the bottom of the hill was that of Frome's saw-mill. It looked exanimate enough, with its idle wheel looming above the **black** stream dashed with yellow-white spume, and its cluster of sheds sagging under their **white** load. Frome did not even turn his head as we drove by, and still in silence we began to mount the next slope. About a mile farther, on a road I had never travelled, we came to an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of **slate (dark gray or black)** that nuzzled up through the **snow (white)** like animals pushing out their noses to breathe. Beyond the orchard lay a field or two, their boundaries lost under drifts; and above the fields, huddled against the **white** immensities of land and sky, one of those lonely New England farm-houses that make the landscape lonelier." Clearly, (E) is the correct answer.
17. The word *pitch* is used in reference to the Curbury road, which "falls away" toward the valley. Later in the passage, we are told that this Corbury hill is a "long declivity" along which the youth of Starkfield sled. Thus, when the passage refers to the *pitch* of the road, **it can refer only to the slope of the hill (B).**
18. Given the sentence, "[The hill] was the favourite **coasting**-ground of Starkfield, and on clear evenings the church corner rang till late with the shouts of the **coasters**; but to-night not a **sled** darkened the whiteness of the long declivity," coasting is clearly sledding downhill (A).

19. Inside, the church is abuzz with musicians and dancers, while outside, Ethan is standing alone, passively watching the scene (A). The lamps and candles inside make the social hall almost brilliant compared to the starlit but moonless outdoors (B). Similarly, the stoves are warming the dancers inside with “volcanic fires,” while outside, it is dark, windy, and cold, with two feet of snow. Finally, the social hall is full of young people dancing, while outside, Ethan is alone. The streets are deserted, and even the coasting hill is deserted (E). **Only (D) is not suggested in the passage. The reader might infer that Ethan is lonely, but there is no strong suggestion of love between Mattie and Denis Eady.**
20. While we know of Denis Eady’s Irish ancestry (A), we know nothing (yet) of the girl. In Western tradition, white is the color most associated with innocence (C). Were the red associated with the girl’s cheeks or some other flushed or blushing part of her body, (D) or (E) might be tempting. **Red, however, is a color that has long been symbolically associated with passion, thus making (B) the best answer.**
21. While the tone of the description of the Eadys’ business practices might be mildly sarcastic, and the narrator tells us that Ethan never really liked Denis, the intensity of his dislike in this scene—that he was deserving of a horse-whipping—stems from Eady’s dancing with Mattie (C). We are told that, while watching the dancing, “[Ethan] turned his eyes from the girl’s face to that of her partner, which, in the exhilaration of the dance, had taken on a look of almost impudent ownership...It was strange that the girl did not seem aware of [Eady’s insolence and impudence]: that she could lift her rapt face to her dancer’s, and drop her hands into his, without appearing to feel the offence of his look and touch.” **Thus, (C) is the correct answer.**
22. (A) and (C) are plausible only from the standpoint that the narrator tells us that, “it was thought best, as [Mattie] came without pay, not to let her feel too sharp a contrast between the life she had left and the isolation of a Starkfield farm.” But this same sentence states that Ethan realizes, “it would hardly have occurred to Zeena to take any thought for the girl’s amusement,” thus contradicting any notion of Zeena’s gratitude or generosity. **(B), therefore, emerges as the best choice.**
23. (A) is eliminated by the fact that Zeena is never portrayed as a charitable person. (B) is tempting by the end of the passage, but is more a description of Ethan’s feelings than Mattie’s effect on the home. (D) does not pertain to Mattie, and there is nothing in the passage to support (E). We are told, however, that part of Ethan’s regard for Mattie was that she was “a bit of hopeful young life...like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth.” **Thus, C is the best answer.**

24. The narrator describes Ethan and Mattie's relationship as a "communion," that—more than her physical presence and the help she renders with the chores—she has something of the same aching love of natural beauty that Ethan has. **(D) is the correct answer.**
25. A malapropism (A) is the intentional misuse of a word (or use of the wrong word) for comic effect (e.g., My sister has bad anathema. Whenever she tries to exercise, she has trouble breathing"). (C) Anadiplosis is the repetition of a word or phrase from the end of one sentence to the beginning of the next. A pun (D) is any unexpected and unusual use of a word based on its sound or meaning (e.g., The teenager wanted to change her hair color, but her parents insisted she was too young to dye"). Anaphora (E) is emphasis achieved by the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences (e.g., Their's not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die"). **Ethan's experience of the "mournful privilege" of enjoying nature in solitude is an instance of oxymoron, making (B) the correct answer.**
26. Most of the first paragraph deals with the "present time" of the reflection: the couple intends to sell the farm and move to a town, Ethan desires to be an engineer. While a reader might *infer* a continued longing to study (A), this is not specifically indicated. While we know that he never achieves his dreams (D), and that he grows to resent Zeena (E), these are not foreshadowed in this passage. The only presentiment of future strife is Ethan's reason for wanting to sell the farm: his "love of nature did not take the form of a taste for agriculture." Thus, it is suggested that he dislikes farming, is not good at it, and will not succeed as a farmer. **(B) is the best choice.**
27. The passage explains the "impossibility of transplanting" Zeena even before she became ill, thus eliminating (A). (B) is excluded by the passage's saying, "purchasers were slow in coming." (C) is eliminated by the fact that we are told that Zeena "chose to look down on Starkfield." (D) would more support success in moving, not inability. **The passage does say, however, that "Even Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity," thus establishing (E) as the correct answer.**
28. In telling Ethan that she is sending Mattie away, Zeena claims that she ruined her health nursing Ethan's mother (A), but this occurs later in the novel. (C) is based on a misreading of the sentence, "Zeena, who had at her fingers' ends the pathological chart of the whole region, had cited many cases of the kind while she was nursing his mother;.." (D) is an exmple of circuitous logic, and (E) is excluded by the fact that Starkfield was the one place Zeena was *not* anonymous, and that was why Zeena did not want to leave. **Only (B) is fully supported by the text: "within a year of their marriage she developed the "sickliness" which had since made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances."**

29. Poetic justice (B) is the character's receiving what he or she deserves in the course of the action. Dramatic irony (C) occurs when the audience has information that the characters do not; this is not the case here. Neither is there a fallacy (D) in the paragraph. Paradox (E) is tempting, but the source of Zeena's medical knowledge being her own hypochondria is not a real case of contradictory truths. **There is, however, a good deal of sarcasm or verbal irony (A) in the paragraph describing Ethan's realization that Zeena learned how to nurse Ethan's mother by nursing herself.**
30. The passage that discusses Zeena's silence says, "Perhaps it [the silence] was the inevitable effect of life on the farm (A), or perhaps, as she sometimes said, it was because Ethan 'never listened.' (D) ... He recalled his mother's growing taciturnity, and wondered if Zeena were also turning "queer." Women did, he knew. Zeena, who had at her fingers' ends the pathological chart of the whole region, had cited many cases of the kind while she was nursing his mother; and he himself knew of certain lonely farm-houses in the neighbourhood where stricken creatures pined (C)... At times, looking at Zeena's shut face, he felt the chill of such forebodings. At other times, her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess" (E). Her habit of chronically complaining (B) is identified as the only talking Zeena does, not a possible reason for her silence. **Thus, (B) is the correct answer.**

Ethan Frome

Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Teaching Unit

Study Guide Teacher's Copy

Prologue

1. What does the beginning of the novel suggest about the reliability of the information presented in the story?

The narrator tells us that he got the story in bits and pieces from different sources, and each account was different. Therefore, we are led to expect that the account will be subjective at best.

2. How does the narrator's imagery establish the reader's first impression of Ethan?

Ethan is described as dragging himself across the pavement into the post office. His horse, described as "hollow-backed" adds to our impression of a deformed and decrepit Ethan.

3. What is our first clue to the key event of the story?

When Harmon Gow mentions Ethan Frome's "smash-up" that happened twenty-four years ago, we know that that event holds the key to the situation the narrator finds in Starkfield.

4. What clues do the contents of Ethan's typical mail delivery suggest?

Ethan receives virtually no personal mail addressed to himself, so he has no distant family or friends. When there is mail, it is addressed to a woman—presumably his wife—and bears the return address of various "patent medicine" producers, indicating that the woman might be chronically ill.

5. What key words establish the image of the broken and crippled Ethan?

He has a "red gash" across his forehead. His right side is described as "shortened and warped," and the narrator says it looks as if "it cost him a visible effort to take [a] few steps." His shoulders are described as "bent out of shape."

6. To what does Harmon attribute Ethan's problem? What does the comment suggest about the relationship between setting and character?

Harmon's comment that Ethan has been in Starkfield for too many winters, alludes to the harshness of the village's New England winters and suggests the isolation they impose on the residents of the village. Setting, to a large extent, determines what the characters are and what they can do.

7. What does the name of the town, "Starkfield," suggest?

The name Starkfield suggests the town is a bleak, isolated, and depressing place. "Field" also implies a rural community, somewhat dependent on farming and manual labor.

8. What does the narrator mean when he mentions the "contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community"?

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

9. What is suggested by Mrs. Hale's reticence about Ethan and his wife?

Mrs. Hale admits that she knew "them both." The narrator observes that Mrs. Hale is not above gossiping about her neighbors, so her unwillingness to talk about the Fromes must suggest either that she genuinely cared for them or that their story is particularly tragic.

10. What is suggested by Mrs. Hale's last name?

The word "hale" means "hearty" or "healthy." The name suggests that somehow Mrs. Hale and her late husband will serve as foils to contrast Ethan and his wife.

11. What does the narrator mean when he says, "[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?"

He is suggesting that the look on Ethan's face is so intensely mournful that the cause of his suffering transcends the physical and is elevated to the plane of the psychological, emotional, or spiritual.

12. What metaphoric motif does the narrator strengthen when he says, "He 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"?

This description of Ethan continues the motif of equating the climate with the people—suggesting that the people are, in many ways, the products of their environment.

13. 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.

14. How does the imagery describing Ethan's property echo his own appearance?

The narrator describes the house and orchard as a "starving," "writhing," "wraith" which seems to shiver. Finally, the narrator concludes that he saw "in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body."

15. On what suspenseful note does the Prologue end?

The narrator enters Ethan's home and hears "a woman's voice droning querulously." This leads the reader to wonder who the woman is, but to also suspect that the woman's querulousness might be a factor in Ethan's apparent misery.

16. What is suggested by the narrator's saying, "It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story."

The narrator's calling the account that is to follow, "this vision of his story," suggests that what he is going to tell is not necessarily the factual truth but is a supposition pieced together from facts and impressions.

Chapter I

1. What is the first clue to the cause of Ethan Frome's misery?

Very early in the chapter, we learn that, four or five years earlier, Ethan was studying physics, but had to leave his studies when his father died.

2. What is the significance of the cherry-colored scarf?

The color red is symbolic of passion in this story.

3. Contrast the imagery used to describe the setting outside and the description of the inside of the church during the dance.

Outside is described as having a "sky of iron." The night is "transparent." It is colorless: the "elms looked gray against the [white] snow, clumps of bushes made black stains on it." Ethan walks past "the deserted street." The night is "perfectly still," and Ethan senses "a complete absence of atmosphere." Thus, Ethan is alone in the crystal darkness, in contrast to the bright, warm, crowded inside of the church. On the street, "not another figure moved," and the pure and frosty darkness is compared to the church's interior, which is "seething in a mist of heat." The lamps and their reflectors send "waves of light against the whitewashed walls." The stove is "heaving with volcanic fires," and the floor is "thronged with girls and young men." The supper-tables at one end of the hall are piled with the remains of a feast, described as "devastated pie-dishes and ice-cream saucers." The crowd preparing to leave is described as a "tide" and a "throng." So, while Ethan stands, alone, in the dark and cold shadows outside, the scene inside is bright and warm and crowded.

4. What is suggested by the narrator's observing, "Hitherto Ethan Frome had been content to think him a mean fellow; but now he positively invited a horse-whipping. It was strange that the girl did not seem aware of it: that she could lift her rapt face to her dancer's, and drop her hands into his, without appearing to feel the offence of his look and touch"?

The narrator is suggesting that Ethan has feelings for the girl in the cherry-colored scarf and is jealous of Denis Eady for being able to dance with her.

5. What is being symbolized by Ethan's standing, alone, in the dark and watching the girl in the cherry-colored scarf dance?

Ethan is alone, isolated, apart from society and social functions. There is also, likewise, something that separates him from the girl.

6. What is suggested by the fact that Ethan finds Mattie's presence to be "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth"?

Ethan's home is a cold home, and his marriage is probably a loveless one.

7. What is ironic about Ethan's love of nature and natural beauty.

On the one hand, his love of Beauty brings him great joy in even his most sorrowful moments. But, on the other hand, his lack of someone with whom to share his joy causes him a deep unhappiness. Thus his love of Beauty causes him both intense joy and intense sorrow.

8. What oxymoron does Wharton employ to describe Ethan's combined joy and sorrow?

Wharton calls the emotion Ethan's "mournful privilege."

Chapter II

1. What is suggested by Ethan's noting that Mattie, while waiting for Denis Eady to bring his cutter around, "no longer turned her head from side to side, as though peering through the night for another figure"?

The suggestion is that, now that Eady has offered to drive her home, she is no longer looking for Ethan.

2. Given what we have been told about Ethan's "smash-up," what is significant about the account of Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum's sledding near accident?

Ned and Ruth's near accident might foreshadow what happens to Ethan and Mattie.

3. As a couple, how do Ned and Ruth compare to Ethan and his wife?

Mattie comments about how happy Ned and Ruth are, while Ethan seems miserable in his marriage.

4. What theme is introduced by Ethan's pondering his ancestors' gravestone?

Ethan ponders the gravestone and concludes that—like his ancestors, named Ethan and Endurance—he was doomed from birth to a life of mere endurance. This introduces the theme of human destiny as the determining agent of people's lives.

5. 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—almost makes him wish for his wife's death.

6. 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..." What do you think Ethan is thinking.

Again, he seems to be considering the possibility of his wife's death.

7. How do the description of Zeena, standing in the kitchen doorway, holding the lamp, and the kitchen fit?

Zeena is described as almost corpse-like, with her "puckered throat," and "the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face." The kitchen is described as having the "deadly chill of a [burial] vault." Zeena, then, is dead while alive, and she has turned her home into a living tomb.

Chapter III

1. How does the imagery at the beginning of this chapter point to the theme that setting reflects character?

The morning sun is a passionate red, like the red of Mattie's scarf the night before. The trees cast "darkly blue" shadows on the snow, cold and dark like Ethan's home.

2. Trace the development of Mattie's association with light and warmth.

In Chapter I, while Ethan stood in the cold and dark, Mattie was dancing in the light and heat inside the church. In the beginning of this chapter, Ethan is watching a shaft of light from Mattie's room across the landing. He cannot fall asleep until the light goes out, but even then, he thinks about "the warmth of Mattie's shoulders against his." In the morning, he sees her face as "part of the sun's red."

3. Explain what the narrator means when he says that Zeena "was already an old woman," at the age of thirty-five.

In addition to 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.

4. Why did Mattie come to live with Ethan and Zeena after the death of her father?

No one else in the family would take Mattie in because of the money they had lost investing in her father's business. Zeena, however, had been told she needed help with the housework, and Mattie could be had for free.

5. What is suggested by the narrator's saying, "Zenobia, though doubtful of the girl's efficiency, was tempted by the freedom to find fault without much risk of losing her"?

Zeena's temperament was such that she knew she would never be satisfied with a hired girl. Since Mattie was as dependent on Zeena's "kindness" as Zeena was on her "help," Zeena would be able to criticize Mattie to her heart's content with no repercussions.

Chapter IV

1. What ironic difference does Zeena's absence make in the Frome's kitchen?

The kitchen, while not grand and sparkling as it was when Ethan's mother was alive, seems homier and warmer with Zeena not there.

2. What do we learn about Ethan's character during his reflections while hauling wood?

Ethan is himself a shy and serious man, but he admires those who are able to have fun. While he was in school, he was starved for friendship and gloried in the occasional slap on the back and affectionate greeting. It was the loss of these bits of comradeship that made Ethan's return to Starkfield even more difficult.

3. What is significant about Wharton's word choice when she writes, "such familiarities had increased the chill of his return to Starkfield"?

Again, Starkfield is cold, while the outside world is warm and companionable.

4. What does Ethan realize when he speculates that he would not have married Zeena if his mother had died in the spring?

It was not love, but the absolute dread of being alone and isolated on his farm in the harsh winter that drove Ethan to ask Zeena to stay with him and marry him.

5. What trait of Zeena's is reinforced by the discussion of where she and Ethan would live after their marriage?

The fact that Ethan wanted to live in a large town or city, but Zeena would not consent to live anywhere where she was not "notable," the center of attention indicates that she is thoroughly self-centered.

6. What words best describe the author's tone during this passage of exposition?

This passage can best be described as bitter and sarcastic.

7. What does Ethan's response to seeing Denis Eady riding toward the Frome farm and his startling Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale under the spruces reveal about his character?

This incident reveals Ethan's jealous streak.

8. What is the significance of the ancestors' names on the gravestone?

The husband's name is Ethan and the wife's name is Endurance. Ethan reads the headstone and thinks it predicts that he and Zeena will "endure" for at least fifty years—that that is his destiny.

9. What jumble of emotions does Ethan's anticipated evening alone with Mattie create for him?

When he first arrives home and finds the door locked, he shakes the doorknob violently. Afterward, when he calls out her name, his voice shakes with joy.

10. What is the first image associated with Mattie that Ethan sees?

He sees a "line of light" around the door frame, like the ray of light that shone from her room the night before.

11. On his return home, Mattie's presence at the door echoes Zeena's earlier presence at the same spot. What contrast is made between the two?

Zeena looked ghostlike and forbidding the night before. Mattie looks glowing, "lustrous."

12. What other visual image that has come to be associated with Mattie is used in this passage? What does it suggest?

Mattie is wearing a crimson ribbon in her hair, just as the night before she wore a "cherry-colored" scarf. Red is the color of passion.

13. How powerful is Zeena's presence in the room?

Her presence is so powerful that just the mention of her name paralyzes Ethan and casts a pall over the mood in the room.

14. What is the significance of the red pickle dish?

Again, the dish is red—the color of passion—and it is Zeena's favorite possession, a wedding present that came all the way from Philadelphia. Zeena has never used it and never intended that it be used. Instead she set it high on the top of the china cabinet.

Chapter V

1. 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. Continuing the "witch" comparison, it can be inferred that the cat is Zeena's "familiar," spying on Mattie and Ethan.

2. How is Zeena's presence felt in the quiet evening after dinner?

When Mattie sits in Zeena's chair by the fire, Ethan believes he sees Zeena's gaunt face superimposed over Mattie's. Mattie also feels dwarfed in the chair by the thought of Zeena.

3. What does Ethan's mention of the curve and the elm tree at the bottom of the coasting hill foreshadow?

The curve and tree have already been identified as the place where Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale nearly crashed their sled, and we already know that Ethan was disfigured and crippled in a "smash-up." This further mention of this dangerous spot, therefore, suggests that Ethan, and possibly Mattie, will be severely injured at this spot while coasting.

4. Why does Ethan's mentioning that he saw Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale kissing put a damper on the mood?

First, Ruth and Ned's open love and happiness contrasts sharply with Mattie and Ethan's secret longings. Second, the open mention of the happier couple's expression of affection makes Mattie uncomfortable in the close aloneness with Ethan.

5. Why does Ethan's teasing Mattie about her probable marriage bother Mattie?

First, Mattie suspects that Zeena is displeased with her and would like her to leave. This would be accomplished by Mattie's marrying. Second, Mattie clearly feels affection for Ethan, and the thought of having to marry someone else is painful to her.

Chapter VI

1. What is unusual about Ethan's joy the next morning?

Ethan's joy is inexplicable because there is no real reason for it. He and Mattie did not touch. They did not even make full eye contact. Nothing has changed in either of their lives.

2. What is "traveller's joy" to which the author compares the ringlets in Mattie's hair?

Traveller's joy is a flowering, climbing vine, similar to the clematis.

3. How does Wharton establish suspense and tension in the after-breakfast kitchen scene?

Suspense and drama are created by emphasizing what the characters are not doing and saying—Ethan's not saying, "We shall never be alone again like this." The closest thing to direct communication they have is Mattie's singing over her dish-pan. Suspense is also built by Wharton's telling us at the beginning of the misadventure, "everything went wrong from the start."

4. What theme does the sleet storm emphasize?

The sleet storm emphasizes the theme of the imposition of outside factors on human destiny.

5. What does the phrase ironic compliment" suggest about Ethan's treatment at the Eady's store?

The youth in the store greet Ethan kindly—possibly even warmly—but they are secretly mocking him.

6. How does Wharton intensify the suspense and drama during Ethan's search for the glue?

The suspense and drama are intensified by using a rapid-paced narration, rather than a slower-paced scene with action and dialogue. The clutter in Widow Homan's store is established in a single sentence describing where the glue was ultimately found. The episode ends with the only line of dialogue: the widow's foreboding wish, "I hope Zeena ain't broken anything she sets store by."

7. How does Zeena's unexpectedly early return alter the mood of the house?

The kitchen, which the night before had been warm and homey, now looks "cold and squalid in the rainy winter twilight."

Chapter VII

1. What does Jotham Powell's declining Ethan's invitation to stay for supper forebode?

Jotham is not one to pass up the chance for free food, so Ethan concludes Zeena must be in an angry state.

2. What is ironic about Zeena's refusal to come to supper.

Ethan knows full well that, after her initial insistence that she could not eat, she will be down for supper. Wharton describes this behavior as a "consecrated formula."

3. How would you describe the tone of the discussion of Zeena's illness and "complications"?

This passage can be described only as ironic or sarcastic.

4. What is the distinction between "sympathy" and "consolation" in Ethan's realization that Zeena "wanted sympathy, not consolation"?

"Consolation" is comfort; it implies some practical attempt to help the sufferer overcome the difficulty, as Ethan offers when he asks whether Zeena should trust a doctor she knows nothing about. "Sympathy" is mere pity. Zeena does not want to be made to feel better; she wants to be felt sorry for.

5. What is Zeena's agenda in her conversation with Ethan?

Zeena actually has two goals in this conversation. First, she will no longer have to do a single bit of housework. Second, she will be able to evict Mattie from her home.

6. What do we learn about Zeena's character in this scene?

We learn that Zeena is truly selfish and manipulative. Ethan's inability to pay a "...servant changes into his begrudging Zeena the money." Now, Zeena's story is that she lost her health while nursing his mother, and that Ethan was therefore indebted to her. .

7. How does this scene raise the stakes and propel the plot toward its climax?

This conversation marks the beginning of Ethan's personal strength. It is the "first scene of open anger between the couple in their sad seven years together." Surely, as we have seen, Zeena has no trouble speaking her mind. But, we have also seen that Ethan does not speak his. This newfound strength will likely lead Ethan to some form of rebellion against the situation in which he finds himself.

8. How has Zeena changed in Ethan's eyes during this scene? How have his feelings for her changed?

Prior to this conversation, Zeena was a presence he could more or less ignore, but now she seems to be a vital, evil force. Before he merely resented her, but now he abhors her.

9. Is Wharton trying now to make Zeena a sympathetic character by showing her reaction to the discovery of the broken pickle dish? How sympathetic is Zeena in this scene?

While the reader may feel pity for the woman holding her broken treasure, Zeena does not achieve reader sympathy, nor does Wharton want her to. Throughout the novel, Zeena has been shown to be cold, self-centered, and manipulative. Now she has been hurt, but the one thing she treasures is a dish. After trampling on Mattie's and Ethan's feelings and creating a cold and loveless home, the loss of a broken dish is not sufficient to achieve true sympathy.

Chapter VIII

1. How do Ethan's reflections about Mattie develop one of the key motifs Wharton has established for her?

While reflecting on his life, he considers Mattie to be his "one ray of light."

2. What does the moon emerging from the mist make Ethan remember?

The night of Zeena's return and the news of Mattie's imminent departure was the night that Ethan was supposed to take Mattie coasting.

3. How do we know that the woman who finds Ethan in his study is Mattie and not Zeena?

Although she is described as "small and pinched," wearing a "poor dress," standing in "cold light" that makes her look pale and "sallow," and her eyes are described as "lusterless," she is wearing a red scarf. Red clothing has always been associated with Mattie.

4. How does Wharton establish the tortuously slow pace of the morning of Mattie's departure? Compare it to the earlier scene in which Ethan was trying to buy the glue to repair Zeena's pickle dish.

The frantic pace of the earlier scene was achieved by total narration uninterrupted by dialogue. The painstaking pace of this scene is established by quick descriptions of routine activities punctuated with short lines of almost trivial dialogue.

5. Ultimately, why does Ethan decide that it is impossible for Mattie and him to escape Starkfield and go west?

Not only does Ethan not have the money to establish himself and Mattie in the West, he does not even have the money to buy train tickets to get them there. When he thinks of getting the money from Mr. Hale, he realizes that he would be accepting the money under false pretenses, playing on the sympathies of the only people in town who are more than indifferent to him.

Chapter IX

1. Why does the narrator make it a point to tell us that Zeena had to pay extra postage on the book she is reading?

Once again, we are reminded that, impoverished as the Fromes are, Zeena is so thoroughly self-involved and preoccupied with her health that she wastes money they can ill afford to spend.

2. What is significant about the after-lunch conversation between Zeena and Ethan?

This is the first time in their marriage that Ethan has stood up to Zeena and spoken back to her.

3. What is significant about the spot where Ethan and Mattie have their first kiss? Why is this significant?

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

4. What clues throughout the novel have foreshadowed Ethan and Mattie's suicide attempt?

From our first sight of the crippled Ethan, we have been told of his smash-up. Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale's near-accident, when they nearly collided with the elm tree and died, has also been mentioned several times. Several of Ethan and Mattie's conversations have involved her insisting that she is not afraid when she is with him, and his insisting that he can steer a sled so precisely that he could collide head-on with the elm tree, and neither of them would get up.

5. How does the final run down the hill emphasize the theme of human events being controlled by Destiny?

Rather than steer the sled—and Ethan has boasted how well he can steer—he simply lets the sled follow the track.

Epilogue

1. How does the beginning of the Epilogue return us to the place where the flashback began? Who do we think is the speaking woman?

The Introduction ended with the narrator's entering Ethan's house and hearing a woman speak in a "querulous drone." The Epilogue begins with that same drone. We probably assume, at first, that it is being made by Zeena.

2. How are the two women similar? How are they different?

Both women are old, frail, and nearly colorless. One of the women, however, is able to stand and move. The other is apparently paralyzed.

3. Who turns out to be the paralyzed, complaining woman?

The paralyzed, complaining woman turns out to be Mattie. The woman who is able to move is Zeena.

4. What is ironic about Zeena's ability to care for the injured Mattie and Ethan?

Zeena had insisted that she was too ill to do any of the housework, and now she does all of it, caring for the paralyzed Mattie as well.

5. Why does the narrator conclude that Mrs. Hale has chosen him as the person to whom she will break her silence?

The narrator concludes that Mrs. Hale did not want to gossip about people she cared for, so she was waiting to share her burden with someone who had been in the house and had seen the Fromes' circumstances for him or herself.

Ethan Frome

Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Teaching Unit

Study Guide Student Copy

Prologue

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2. How does the narrator's imagery establish the reader's first impression of Ethan?
3. What is our first clue to the key event of the story?
4. What clues do the contents of Ethan's typical mail delivery suggest?
5. What key words establish the image of the broken and crippled Ethan?

6. To what does Harmon attribute Ethan's problem? What does the comment suggest about the relationship between setting and character?
7. What does the name of the town, "Starkfield," suggest?
8. What does the narrator mean when he mentions the "contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community"?
9. What is suggested by Mrs. Hale's reticence about Ethan and his wife?
10. What is suggested by Mrs. Hale's last name?
11. What does the narrator mean when he says, " "[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?"

12. What metaphoric motif does the narrator strengthen when he says, “He 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”?
13. On the ride to the junction, what does the narrator find that he and Ethan have in common?
14. How does the imagery describing Ethan’s property echo his own appearance?
15. On what suspenseful note does the Prologue end?
16. What is suggested by the narrator’s saying, “It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story.”

Chapter I

1. What is the first clue to the cause of Ethan Frome's misery?

2. What is the significance of the cherry-colored scarf?

3. Contrast the imagery used to describe the setting outside and the description of the inside of the church during the dance.

4. What is suggested by the narrator's observing, "Hitherto Ethan Frome had been content to think him a mean fellow; but now he positively invited a horse-whipping. It was strange that the girl did not seem aware of it: that she could lift her rapt face to her dancer's, and drop her hands into his, without appearing to feel the offence of his look and touch"?

5. What is being symbolized by Ethan's standing, alone, in the dark and watching the girl in the cherry-colored scarf dance?
6. What is suggested by the fact that Ethan finds Mattie's presence to be "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth"?
7. What is ironic about Ethan's love of nature and natural beauty.
8. What oxymoron does Wharton employ to describe Ethan's combined joy and sorrow?

Chapter II

1. What is suggested by Ethan's noting that Mattie, while waiting for Denis Eady to bring his cutter around, "no longer turned her head from side to side, as though peering through the night for another figure"?
2. Given what we have been told about Ethan's "smash-up," what is significant about the account of Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum's sledding near accident?
3. As a couple, how do Ned and Ruth compare to Ethan and his wife?
4. What theme is introduced by Ethan's pondering his ancestors' gravestone?
5. What does the image of the dead cucumber-vine bring to mind for Ethan?
6. 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..." What do you think Ethan is thinking.
7. How do the description of Zeena, standing in the kitchen doorway, holding the lamp, and the kitchen fit?

Chapter III

1. How does the imagery at the beginning of this chapter point to the theme that setting reflects character?
2. Trace the development of Mattie's association with light and warmth.
3. Explain what the narrator means when he says that Zeena "was already an old woman," at the age of thirty-five.
4. Why did Mattie come to live with Ethan and Zeena after the death of her father?
5. What is suggested by the narrator's saying, "Zenobia, though doubtful of the girl's efficiency, was tempted by the freedom to find fault without much risk of losing her"?

Chapter IV

1. What ironic difference does Zeena's absence make in the Frome's kitchen?
2. What do we learn about Ethan's character during his reflections while hauling wood?
3. What is significant about Wharton's word choice when she writes, "such familiarities had increased the chill of his return to Starkfield"?
4. What does Ethan realize when he speculates that he would not have married Zeena if his mother had died in the spring?
5. What trait of Zeena's is reinforced by the discussion of where she and Ethan would live after their marriage?
6. What words best describe the author's tone during this passage of exposition?
7. What does Ethan's response to seeing Denis Eady riding toward the Frome farm and his startling Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale under the spruces reveal about his character?

8. What is the significance of the ancestors' names on the gravestone?
9. What jumble of emotions does Ethan's anticipated evening alone with Mattie create for him?
10. What is the first image associated with Mattie that Ethan sees?
11. On his return home, Mattie's presence at the door echoes Zeena's earlier presence at the same spot. What contrast is made between the two?
12. What other visual image that has come to be associated with Mattie is used in this passage? What does it suggest?
13. How powerful is Zeena's presence in the room?
14. What is the significance of the red pickle dish?

Chapter V

1. What is strange about the cat's behavior?
2. How is Zeena's presence felt in the quiet evening after dinner?
3. What does Ethan's mention of the curve and the elm tree at the bottom of the coasting hill foreshadow?
4. Why does Ethan's mentioning that he saw Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale kissing put a damper on the mood?
5. Why does Ethan's teasing Mattie about her probable marriage bother Mattie?

Chapter VI

1. What is unusual about Ethan's joy the next morning?
2. What is "traveller's joy" to which the author compares the ringlets in Mattie's hair?
3. How does Wharton establish suspense and tension in the after-breakfast kitchen scene?
4. What theme does the sleet storm emphasize?
5. What does the phrase ironic compliment" suggest about Ethan's treatment at the Eady's store?
6. How does Wharton intensify the suspense and drama during Ethan's search for the glue?
7. How does Zeena's unexpectedly early return alter the mood of the house?

Chapter VII

1. What does Jotham Powell's declining Ethan's invitation to stay for supper forebode?
2. What is ironic about Zeena's refusal to come to supper.
3. How would you describe the tone of the discussion of Zeena's illness and "complications"?
4. What is the distinction between "sympathy" and "consolation" in Ethan's realization that Zeena "wanted sympathy, not consolation"?
5. What is Zeena's agenda in her conversation with Ethan?

6. What do we learn about Zeena's character in this scene?
7. How does this scene raise the stakes and propel the plot toward its climax?
8. How has Zeena changed in Ethan's eyes during this scene? How have his feelings for her changed?
9. Is Wharton trying now to make Zeena a sympathetic character by showing her reaction to the discovery of the broken pickle dish? How sympathetic is Zeena in this scene?

Chapter VIII

1. How do Ethan's reflections about Mattie develop one of the key motifs Wharton has established for her?
2. What does the moon emerging from the mist make Ethan remember?
3. How do we know that the woman who finds Ethan in his study is Mattie and not Zeena?
4. How does Wharton establish the tortuously slow pace of the morning of Mattie's departure? Compare it to the earlier scene in which Ethan was trying to buy the glue to repair Zeena's pickle dish.
5. Ultimately, why does Ethan decide that it is impossible for Mattie and him to escape Starkfield and go west?

Chapter IX

1. Why does the narrator make it a point to tell us that Zeena had to pay extra postage on the book she is reading?
2. What is significant about the after-lunch conversation between Zeena and Ethan?
3. What is significant about the spot where Ethan and Mattie have their first kiss? Why is this significant?
4. What clues throughout the novel have foreshadowed Ethan and Mattie's suicide attempt?
5. How does the final run down the hill emphasize the theme of human events being controlled by Destiny?

Epilogue

1. How does the beginning of the Epilogue return us to the place where the flashback began? Who do we think is the speaking woman?
2. How are the two women similar? How are they different?
3. Who turns out to be the paralyzed, complaining woman?
4. What is ironic about Zeena's ability to care for the injured Mattie and Ethan?
5. Why does the narrator conclude that Mrs. Hale has chosen him as the person to whom she will break her silence?

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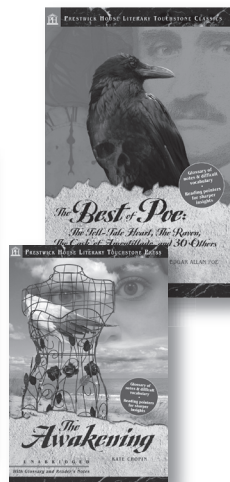
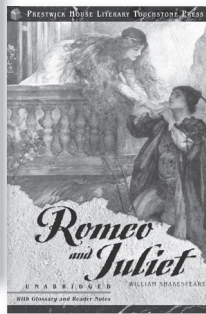
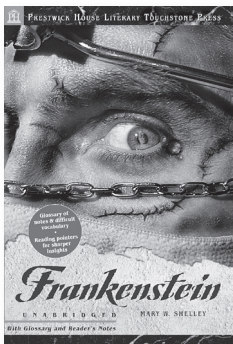
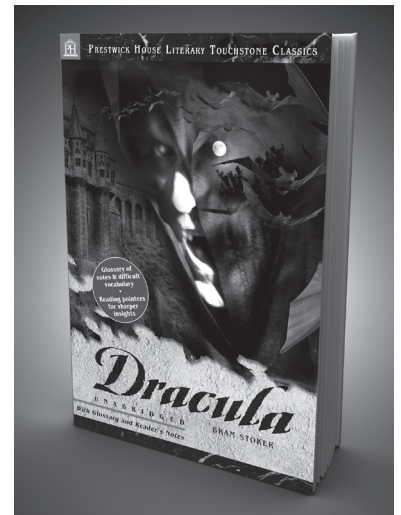
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