Summary

_Ethan Frome_ depicts a nightmarish world, completely empty of the warmth and joy to be found in loving human interaction. Set in the cold and harsh landscapes of Starkfield, Massachusetts, the story is told by a narrator who attempts to discover what tragedy caused the enigmatic Ethan Frome’s literal and spiritual crippling. Piecing together information, the narrator learns that years earlier Ethan married Zenobia Pierce, a distant cousin who nursed his mother during her final illness. Shortly after the wedding, Ethan realized that his was a marriage without love and that he had simply exchanged the suffocating responsibility of a sick mother for the suffocating tie of a sick wife. Ethan, once filled with aspirations, finds instead that he is lashed to a wife whom he loathes and to a near-sterile farm that he cannot sell.

With lightness and life, Mattie Silver (Zenobia’s younger cousin) comes to the Frome house to help with chores. Mattie and Ethan fall in love, yet the strictures of conventional morality and Frome’s own strong sense of duty and loyalty prevent him from doing anything more than voicing a tender, painfully pathetic love avowal. When Mattie is forced to leave, she decides that she would rather die than be separated from Ethan. Her plan, to crash their sled into an elm at the bottom of a steep slope, is tacitly agreed to by Ethan. However, the two survive the death ride, and the lovers’ suicide pact takes on a cruel twist. Mattie and Ethan, crippled and dispirited, share a living death in which their caretaker is the suddenly hardy Zenobia.

Ethan personifies the grievous waste of failed greatness. His body, a metaphor for his spirit, is described as “lame” and “warped,” and his once gallant and noble head rests on once “strong shoulders” which are now “bent out of shape.” In Ethan, the narrator confronts a prodigious soul grown weary, warped, and lame, and the narrator sees in Ethan’s ghastly alteration the suffering of a misspent life. Ethan, believing his renunciation of Mattie was motivated by a sense of honor, fails to see that the moral significance of the situation was not as clear and definable as he believed. Centering his choice on duty, not love, Ethan failed to consider the effect of his decision on Zenobia, in a marriage with a man who found her abhorrent, or on Mattie, who apparently did love him. Frome also never understood his own fear of change and of intimate sexual expression.

Despite its apparent bleakness, _Ethan Frome_ articulates Edith Wharton’s most humanistic theme: The contact that people make with others can be the most meaningful thing that emerges from the stark field of human existence. The greatest tragedy is the failure to establish meaningful involvement with another.

Summary

Ethan Frome is twenty-one years old when he marries Zenobia Pierce, a distant cousin who nursed his sick mother during her last illness. It is a wedding without love. Zenobia, called Zeena, has no home of her own, and Ethan is lonely, and so they are married. Zeena’s talkativeness, which was pleasing to Ethan during his mother’s illness, quickly subsides, and within a year of their marriage, Zeena develops the sickliness that is to
plague her husband all her life. Ethan becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his life. He is an intelligent and ambitious young man who hoped to become an engineer or a chemist. He soon, however, finds himself stuck with a wife he detests and a farm he cannot sell.

The arrival of Mattie Silver brightens the gloomy house considerably. Mattie, Zeena’s cousin, comes to Starkfield partly because she has no other place to go and partly because Zeena feels in need of a companion around the house. Ethan sees in Mattie’s goodness and beauty every fine quality that Zeena lacks.

When Zeena suggests that Ethan help Mattie find a husband, he begins to realize how much he is attracted to the girl. When he goes to a church social to bring Mattie home and sees her dancing with the son of a rich Irish grocer, he realizes that he is jealous of this rival and in love with Mattie. On his way home with her, Ethan feels his love for Mattie more than ever, for on that occasion, as on others, she flatters him by asking him questions on astronomy. His dreams of happiness are short-lived, however, for when he reaches home, Zeena is her nagging, sour self. The contrast between Zeena and Mattie impresses him more and more.

One day, Ethan returns from his morning’s work to find Zeena dressed in her traveling clothes. She is going to visit a new doctor in nearby Bettsbridge. Ordinarily, Ethan would have objected to the journey because of the expensive remedies that Zeena is in the habit of buying on her trips to town. On this occasion, however, he is overjoyed at the news of Zeena’s proposed departure, for he realizes that he and Mattie will have the house to themselves overnight.

With Zeena out of the way, Ethan again becomes a changed man. Later in the evening, before supper, Ethan and Mattie sit quietly before the fire, just as Ethan imagines happily married couples would do. During supper, the cat breaks Zeena’s favorite pickle dish, which Mattie used to brighten up the table. In spite of the accident, they spend the rest of the evening happily. They talk about going sledding together, and Ethan tells Mattie shyly—and perhaps wistfully—that he saw Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale, a young engaged couple, stealing a kiss earlier in the evening.

In the morning Ethan is happy, but not because of anything out of the ordinary the night before. In fact, when he went to bed, he remembered sadly that he did not so much as touch Mattie’s fingertips or look into her eyes. He is happy because he can imagine what a wonderful life he could have if he were married to Mattie. He gets glue to mend the pickle dish, but Zeena’s unexpected return prevents him from repairing it. His spirits are further dampened when Zeena tells him that the Bettsbridge doctor considers her quite sick. He advised her to get a girl to relieve her of all household duties, a stronger girl than Mattie. She already engaged the new girl. Ethan is dumbfounded by this development. In her insistence that Mattie be sent away, Zeena gives the first real hint that she may be aware of gossip about her husband and Mattie.

When Ethan tells Mattie of Zeena’s decision, the girl is as crestfallen as Ethan. Zeena interrupts their lamentations, however, by coming downstairs for something to eat. After supper, she requires stomach powders to relieve a case of heartburn. In getting the powders, which she hides in a spot supposedly unknown to Mattie, Zeena discovers the broken pickle dish, which was carefully reassembled. Detecting the deception and learning that Mattie is responsible for the broken dish, Zeena calls Mattie insulting names and shows plainly that the girl will be sent away at the earliest possible moment.

Faced with the certainty of Mattie’s departure, Ethan thinks of running away with her. His poverty and his sense of responsibility to Zeena permit no solution to his problem, only greater despair. On the morning Mattie is to leave Starkfield, Ethan, against the wishes of his wife, insists on driving Mattie to the station. The thought of parting is unbearable to both. They decide to take the sleigh ride that Ethan promised Mattie the night before. Down the hill they go, narrowly missing a large elm tree at the bottom. Mattie, who told Ethan that she would rather die than leave him, begs until Ethan agrees to take her down the hill a second time and to run the sled into the elm at the bottom of the slope; but they fail to hit the tree with force sufficient to kill
them. The death they seek becomes a living death, for in the accident Mattie suffers a permanent spine injury and Ethan an incurable lameness. The person who receives Mattie into her home, who waits on her, and who cooks for Ethan is Zeena.

Additional Summary: Summary

_Ethan Frome_, neither a commercial nor a critical success when first published, actually offended many of Wharton’s contemporaries by its harsh portrayal of New England life and its characters’ failure to triumph over adversity. Nevertheless, its popularity gradually increased until, by 1920, it had become the best-known and most widely read of Wharton’s works. Wharton herself believed that too much attention was paid to _Ethan Frome_ at the expense of her other novels. Indeed, to judge her career solely by this single novella would prove misleading, because it is very unlike her other major works in setting, tone, and characterization. Like much of her other work, however, it deals with the relationship between an individual and that individual’s society.

Structured as a frame tale, the story unfolds from the point of view of Lockwood, a young engineer on assignment in the isolated New England village of Starkfield. His curiosity about one of the town’s characters, the physically deformed but striking Ethan Frome, drives him to construct a “vision” of Ethan’s history, assembled from information gathered in conversation with various townspeople and from his own observations of the fifty-two-year-old farmer.

The significance of this structure cannot be overestimated; Wharton even adds an uncharacteristic introduction to explain her decision to employ this literary device, which achieves perspective by creating an educated, observant narrator to intercede between the simple characters and the more sophisticated reader. Wharton also adds poignancy by setting the novella twenty-four years after the main action occurs.

Lockwood relates the simple but compelling story of twenty-eight-year-old Ethan Frome, a farmer and mill owner left nearly destitute after the death of his parents, both of whom suffered mental disorders. After enduring lonely years of silence with his mother, who was too busy listening for imagined “voices” to converse with him, Frome marries Zenobia Pierce, seven years his senior, who had nursed Mrs. Frome in her dying days. The sound of Zeena’s voice in his house is music to Ethan’s starved ears, and by marrying her he hopes to escape further loneliness.

Soon after their marriage, however, Zeena becomes obsessed with her various aches and pains, and she concerns herself solely with doctors, illnesses, and cures, falling as silent as his mother.

At her doctor’s advice, Zeena takes in her homeless young cousin, Mattie Silver, to help with the housework. Although a hapless housekeeper, Mattie brings a vitality to the Frome house that has been absent for years, and she and Ethan fall in love. Trapped by circumstances, as well as by Ethan’s strong sense of responsibility toward Zeena, the two foresee no future together.

On the evening that Zeena sends Mattie away for good, Ethan and Mattie decide to aim their sled straight for a giant elm tree so that they might find mutual solace in death. Both, however, survive the plunge, which paralyzes Mattie and disfigures Ethan. Zeena takes responsibility for caring for Mattie and Ethan, and the three live on in the Frome house, as Mattie becomes as querulous and unpleasant as Zeena and Ethan attempts to scratch out a living from his failing farm and mill.

In Ethan, “the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man,” Wharton fashions a character of heroic proportions. He is a country man who would have preferred the intellectual stimulation of the city, a sociable man doomed to silent suffering, a man whose misshapen body mirrors his thwarted
intellectual and emotional life. Like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, he is “more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty” but finds little of it in his own life. Like Lily, he feels trapped by society’s demands on him: “The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-wardens handcuffing a convict. There was no way out—none. He was a prisoner for life.”

As always in Wharton’s work, setting figures prominently, but in *Ethan Frome* the stark landscape of New England, rather than the elegant brownstones of New York City, provides the background. Wharton draws a close parallel between the action and the emotions of the characters and the bleak landscape; the two are inextricably intertwined. Ethan “seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface.” Even Frome’s house, lacking the “L” wing common to New England farm structures, reflects the emotionally stunted life existing inside, and the withering orchard of starving apple trees and crazily slanting gravestones in the family plot also mirror Frome’s blighted life.

Wharton uses irony, as well as landscape and imagery, to great effect in this work, often juxtaposing scenes for ironic effect. When Zeena greets Ethan at the kitchen door in the evening, “The light . . . drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins.” Later, however, when Mattie stands “just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. . . . [I]t drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child’s.” *Ethan Frome*’s ultimate irony lies in the suicide pact which ends not in the mutual release of death but in endless years of pain and suffering and in the transformation of the vibrant young Mattie into a mirror image of the whining Zenobia.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As they approach the church, they are reminded that they were to have gone sledding the night before. Ethan finds a sled and, finally, the two get to enjoy their long-awaited coast. On their way back up the hill, Mattie flings her arms around Ethan's neck and kisses him. Then, in despair over their lack of options, she leads Ethan back to the sled and instructs him to steer them directly into the big elm at the bottom of the hill so they will "never have to leave each other any more." Tragically, Mattie's plan proves imperfect: while it does prevent the lovers' separation, both Ethan and Mattie survive the crash and are left lying in the snow, crippled and in pain.
The novel ends with the resumption of the narrator's account of his overnight stay at Frome's farm. As he enters the kitchen, the "querulous drone" stops and he is unable to determine which of the two old women before him had been the speaker. One of the women gets up to prepare Ethan's meal while the other, whose hair is just as gray and whose face just as bloodless and shriveled as her companion's, remains seated and limp by the stove. Ethan introduces the first woman as his wife, and the other as Miss Mattie Silver. Upon hearing their voices, the narrator concludes that it was Mattie's voice he heard as he approached the house. He learns the next day that Zeena has been caring for Mattie and Ethan ever since the accident twenty-four years ago.

Chapter Summaries: Introduction Summary

Everyone in Starkfield, Massachusetts, knows Ethan Frome and his tragic story—everyone but the narrator, who has arrived to work on an engineering project in nearby Corbury Junction. He gleans what he can in bits and pieces from the people in town with whom he comes in contact.

When he sees Ethan for the first time, he is stunned at this “ruin of a man.” Ethan is taller than most people in town, and he has a “lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain.” He has the look of someone who has lived a lot but would rather not have done so; though he is only fifty-two, Ethan seems much older since the “smash-up” twenty-four years ago. The narrator sees Ethan come to the post office every day to pick up his mail, though he rarely receives anything more than the local newspaper. Occasionally he carelessly pockets an envelope with the name Mrs. Zeena (or Zenobia) Frome from a patent medicine company. Although people say hello to Ethan, few engage him in conversation. When Harmon Gow tells the narrator that the Fromes are a sturdy bunch and he will probably live to be a hundred, the narrator exclaims, “He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!” Harmon explains that Ethan was an only child growing up in this bleak, New England town from which “most of the smart ones get away.”

The narrator has his lodgings in the mansion home Mrs. Ned Hale (Ruth) shares with her mother. Ruth gossips and expresses her views regarding almost everything, but she will not gossip about Ethan Frome. When the engineer asks Harmon Gow about Mrs. Hale’s reluctance to speak of Ethan, he is told that Ruth was the first one to see them and probably cannot bear to speak of it. His landlady’s reticence to speak coupled with his personal contact with Ethan make the narrator eager to understand this man’s life.

Dennis Eady arranges for the engineer’s ride to the train station at Corbury Flats. A local epidemic hits the town and spreads to the stables. For several days, the narrator has no way to get to the train depot; Eady suggests that Ethan may be interested in a little extra money and would probably drive him to the station. When the newcomer is surprised at the suggestion, Eady explains that the Frome farm and mill was never a prosperous operation, but Ethan’s parents made matters worse toward the end of their lives. Ethan’s father got kicked in the head and “gave away money like Bible texts” in his final days. Then his mother turned “queer” and needed help for the rest of her lingering life. Zeena came to help. For more than twenty years, the farm has done little more than allow Ethan to eke out a meager existence.

The next morning, Ethan and his sad-looking horse come to pick up the engineer. He delivers the narrator faithfully to and from the train depot for the next week. Each journey is only three miles, but the trip takes almost an hour each way. Ethan is taciturn but not unfriendly; he is simply living in a “depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access.” Several times, though, the narrator gets a glimpse of something more. Once the narrator mentions going to Florida for an engineering job, and Ethan remarks that he has been there. He says that for a time he could remember what it was like but “now it’s all snowed under.” Another time the engineer inadvertently leaves a science book in the sleigh; when he arrives back in Starkfield, Ethan is holding the book. On their drive home, Ethan shows some wistfulness regarding the material he has read in the book, so the narrator offers to let him keep it for a bit. Though he hesitates, Ethan keeps the book; nothing more is ever spoken about it.
One day there is a heavy snowfall, and the engineer is not sure if he will be able to make his usual journey. However, Ethan arrives on time, so they leave. Ethan takes them on an unusual route and, when asked, explains that the train is stuck and they are traveling the ten miles straight to the Junction. It will be a slow journey, but the horse will make it and the engineer is thankful he will be able to meet his obligation. Ethan points out his home as they drive by, a sad-looking farmhouse without the traditional L that marks the hearth of most New England houses. Ethan comments that this used to be a well-traveled path; when his mother was bedridden, she enjoyed seeing all the travelers as they passed. Ethan believes she lost her will to live once the train came in and the road became rather deserted.

They make it to their destination, and the engineer finishes his duties quickly so they can head back to Starkfield. Travel is difficult and they have trouble even finding the road. After much struggling, Ethan recognizes his gate and pulls in, tacitly inviting the young engineer to stay at his home for the night. They flounder through the snow by the light of Ethan’s lantern until they reach the door. Behind it, the narrator hears “a woman’s voice droning querulously.” After stomping the snow from his boots, Ethan opens the door and the droning grows still. This is the night when the narrator creates the following vision of Ethan Frome’s story.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 1 Summary**

It is evening, and a young Ethan walks through the darkness toward the church. He reflects on his time as a student of science. Although his father’s death several years earlier caused him to leave those studies, he is still intensely interested in the world around him. Light and the sound of dance music radiate from the church, and Ethan moves into the shadows to peer in the basement window. He sees young men and women on the dance floor surrounded by the older women and people playing instruments. The young people are preparing to leave. His eye is taken by a lively girl with a cherry-colored scarf tossed over her head, and his heart races. The young people have burst into one last dance, and the girl is in the arms of Dennis Eady, an Irishman with no lack of self-confidence. Ethan grows jealous and waits for her to appear. She is Mattie Silver, his wife’s cousin, and he regularly walks into town to escort her home.

Mattie is from Stamford and is now living with them because Zeena needs help at home. Mattie is working without pay because Zeena does not want Mattie to get used to having anything. The one concession is that Mattie be allowed to participate in occasional activities in town so she will not feel too isolated on the farm. She has been with them a year, living in the same house, but the moments Ethan most treasures are when he walks her home. When she arrived, she brought hope and light to his dark world. She is eager to learn, and he is eager to show her things and teach her things. When he explains about the constellations, for example, he is proud that he can teach her and is thrilled by her wonder and pleasure.

Zeena complains about Mattie’s ineptitude at housework. It is true that the young girl is not a good cook; neither is she particularly good at other common household chores. Ethan helps her around the house when he can. On Saturday nights he even scrubs the kitchen floor after the women are in bed. One day Zeena catches him churning butter, gives him an odd look, and silently turns away from him. Other indications of Zeena’s “disfavor” include a sly conversation regarding Mattie’s marriage plans with Dennis Eady (which do not exist) and taunting him about shaving every day, which he did not do until Mattie’s arrival. Ethan is stunned by these comments because he had no idea his wife noticed anything of his feelings. Zeena has a way of storing up her observations and then making cutting remarks weeks later at unexpected moments. This causes Ethan to feel continually uncomfortable in his wife’s presence.

As he looks again at the scene in the church, Ethan believes he sees Mattie being flirtatious with Dennis Eady.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 2 Summary

The dancers leave the church and prepare to walk or get into their sleighs for the journey home. When someone asks Mattie if she is riding home, Ethan anxiously awaits her reply. She laughs and says of course she will be walking; Ethan steps further back into the shadows, suddenly reticent in Mattie’s presence. She looks around expectantly, but still Ethan does not make his presence known to her. Dennis Eady begins some flirtatious banter with Mattie and then offers her a ride home in his father’s sleigh. She appears to hesitate a bit, though she is no longer looking around her expectantly. Eady brings the sleigh near and throws back the rug for her, but Mattie darts off and tells him to have a nice ride home. He follows her, gets out, and tries to coax her into the sleigh, but she is not interested and will not go. Eady rides off alone and Ethan finally makes his presence known, startling Mattie with his proximity.

Mattie had assumed Ethan could not come because Zeena had not been feeling well that day, and she was prepared to walk home alone. Ethan draws her arm through his (which Dennis Eady had tried unsuccessfully to do) and imagines a slight pressure in the gesture. He wants to prolong these moments alone with Mattie, but they begin their walk home. She pauses near a coasting hill and tells Ethan people had been sledding there earlier. Ethan asks if she would like to go coasting with him sometime. Mattie eagerly says yes, even though a young couple (Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum) had nearly crashed into a giant elm at the bottom of the run. Mattie tells Ethan she is not easily frightened. Ethan assures her he could get her down the hill safely, and perhaps they would go coasting tomorrow.

Ethan is not free to express his feelings for her openly, so he is tortured by every word and tone Mattie speaks, trying to find meaning and discover feelings. Ethan starts a floundering conversation about Mattie and Dennis Eady, trying to determine if she has feelings for him as Zeena has suggested. Rather than comment on Eady, Mattie says she is dismayed that she does not seem to suit Zeena. Her housework is not good, she explains, but she will try to do better. When she fears that Ethan might want her to leave, too, Mattie begins to cry. Unable to express his feelings to her, Ethan keeps them walking in the moonlight until they reach the gate of his house. When he asks Mattie if she wants to leave, she asks her own question: “Where’d I go, if I did?”

As they pass through the gate, Ethan notices the tombstones of long-dead relatives “slanted at crazy angles” in the moonlight. At times they seem to taunt him with the thought that he would be joining them one day soon; they never got away and neither would he. But now Ethan has no desire to be anywhere but here, so the stones symbolize a stability he appreciates. His vision of the future goes so far as to place Mattie in a grave next to his own one day.

As they walk around to the front door, Ethan has a vision of a dead Zeena—then an unappealing live Zeena. He begins to speak but has no words. As he reaches under the mat for the key, Ethan is surprised to find it is not there as it has always been on these journeys. He has the sudden hopeful idea that vagabonds have gotten into the house and done Zeena harm, but this is dispelled when Zeena opens the door. She looks haggard and worn in a sharp contrast to Mattie’s youthful exuberance. As she lets them in, Ethan jokes that she must have forgotten about them. Zeena replies, “No. I just felt so mean I couldn’t sleep.” Mattie rushes forward to offer some kind of help, but Zeena brushes her aside and prepares to mount the stairs. The two bedrooms are across the hall from each other, and tonight Ethan is repelled by the thought of having Mattie see him follow Zeena docilely up the stairs and into their room. He makes an excuse to stay downstairs; however, Zeena points out how cold it will be without a fire. Ethan and Mattie exchange looks, and Mattie heads up the stairs ahead of Zeena. Hanging his head in shame, Ethan follows Zeena to their room.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 3 Summary

The next morning, Ethan goes out early to work at the mill. He reflects on the night before and contrasts the sight of Mattie Silver in the glow of the lamplight with the sight of his wife—teeth in a glass near the bed, a flannel wrapped around her head, her raspy breathing, and her back turned ever toward him. He wonders why he did not kiss Mattie last night in the moonlight and thinks about the changes in Mattie since her arrival. Unlike most people in Starkfield, who grow more colorless and cold, Mattie has come alive and gained color since she has been here. Despite the austerity of her circumstances, she seems content. Perhaps, Ethan reflects, that is because of her family trials. Her father was involved in illegal financial activities that were discovered only after his lavish funeral. Her mother died of shame shortly thereafter, leaving a twenty-year-old Mattie at the mercy of her rather pitiless family. She had fifty dollars from the sale of her piano but was dependent on others for her livelihood. Her attempts to support herself as a stenographer, a bookkeeper, and a clerk caused her to become sick, and family members who had invested in her father’s illicit dealings and lost money soon wanted her out of their lives. Mattie came to her cousin Zenobia as a kind of “indentured servant,” her only skills being such impractical things as trimming a hat and playing the piano. Zeena was skeptical, but her doctor had told her she needed help around the house. Because she would cost them virtually nothing, Zeena allowed Mattie to come.

The first days were awful for both Mattie and Ethan because Zeena’s constant fault finding created tension in the small home. As Zeena began to concentrate on her own supposed ailments, though, things became more peaceful. As he reflects on the incident the night before, however, Ethan has an uneasy feeling that the peacefulness may be coming to an end. In an attempt to avoid finding out, Ethan plans to send their hired man, Jotham, back to the farm and drive the lumber into town himself later in the day.

When he finally returns to the house, he is surprised to find Zeena in her best clothes and traveling bonnet, her suitcase at her feet. Zeena tells him she plans to spend the night in Bettsbridge with her aunt to see the new doctor there in the morning. Ethan is aware that this, like so many similar trips before, is likely to result in more medicines and more cost to him. She anticipates a protest and explains she can no longer bear the pain and would even walk to the station if she were able, but surely he can spare Jotham to drive her to the station. Ethan calculates that she could not be back any earlier than the following evening. He interrupts her to say that Jotham can certainly take her to the station. As she continues to talk to him, he looks across the table at Mattie and compares her to Zeena. At thirty-five years old (seven years older than Ethan), Zeena is “already an old woman.”

Ethan tries to participate in the conversation but he only wonders if Mattie is also thinking about a night without Zeena between them. He feels the need to explain that Jotham must take her so he can take the lumber into town himself and collect the money. As soon as he says this, however, Ethan regrets it for two reasons. First, he is not going to collect any money for the lumber because that is not the agreement he has with Hale. Second, letting Zeena know he has money is certain to empower her to purchase more unnecessary medical remedies for her supposed ailments. Zeena seems not to hear. She takes a last draught of medicine from a bottle and hands it to Mattie, telling her it will do for pickles if she can get the taste out of it.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 4 Summary

After Zeena leaves, Ethan bids Mattie a cheery farewell and heads off to cart the load of lumber to town. While the kitchen is not a particularly welcoming place, the thought of Zeena being out of it gives it a more cheerful aspect in Ethan’s mind. He envisions himself and Mattie as a comfortable married couple this evening, sitting by the fire in cozy companionship. His fears about Zeena causing trouble have evaporated, and Ethan anticipates the evening ahead.
He used to be a more sociable man, but each year back in Starkfield after his time away seemed to deepen his solitude and silence. Working the farm after his father’s death has been difficult and leaves him little time or energy for nonessential things. Once his mother began losing touch with reality, the silence deepened. Only when his cousin Zenobia came to help nurse his mother did Ethan feel the awakening of a “slumbering spark of sociability.” With the practical and efficient Zeena to manage the house and his mother, Ethan had a weight lifted from his shoulders.

After his mother died and Zeena was preparing to leave, Ethan felt a desperate need not to be left alone and asked her to stay. Upon reflection, if it had not been winter when his mother died, Ethan is sure he would not have been so weak. Ethan had always wanted to live in a city and be an engineer, so now that he was free to leave that was his dream. What he discovered during the time he was trying unsuccessfully to sell the farm was that Zeena could not be moved. She could only be content in a town small enough for her to despise; she could not bear to be in a place that might despise her. Within a year of their marriage, Zeena became chronically sickly; it was then Ethan realized her nursing skills came from her own experience. He often wondered if his wife was turning queer like his mother, for she had a furtiveness about her that Ethan found disconcerting.

As he takes the lumber to town, his fears about Zeena subside; his only worry now is the matter of getting the money he claimed he would get. When he arrives at Andrew Hale’s place, he is greeted warmly. Ethan does eventually ask, rather shamefacedly, for an advance of fifty dollars, though it is against their usual arrangement of payment every three months. If he had pleaded some kind of urgency, perhaps he would have gotten the funds; however, Ethan has no desire for Hale or anyone else in town to think he is struggling more than he already is, so he does not press the issue and leaves with nothing.

On his way out of town, Ethan sees Ned Hale steal a kiss from Ruth Varnum, and he sees Dennis Eady heading out in his sleigh. Immediately Ethan jealously assumes Eady has found out that Zeena is gone and is going to court Mattie; he listens for the sound of sleigh bells all the way home. Again he ponders the family cemetery, thinking about how long living together for fifty years used to sound, “but now it seemed to him that they might pass in a flash.” As he walks into the kitchen he does not see the one he is looking for; as he moves into the house, he sees her in much the same position as he had seen Zeena the night before. But Mattie is not brown and old and worn; she is lustrous and alive. She has set the table carefully with a meal of doughnuts, blueberries, and pickles. The cat is drowsing by the glowing fire. Ethan is “suffocated with a sense of well-being.” After washing for dinner, Ethan asks Mattie if she has had any visitors since he left. When she answers yes, Ethan prepares himself for the worst. Jotham had come back after delivering Zeena at the station, and Ethan is relieved. As they sit down to eat, the cat jumps between them and settles on Zeena’s chair, and Ethan feels almost as if Zeena were watching them even in her absence. Ethan is having difficulty conversing but Mattie seems comfortable and confident. The cat gets up and walks across the table, headed for the milk jar. Both Ethan and Mattie reach for the jar and their hands touch. Ethan keeps his hand over hers just a moment longer than he needs to, and the cat takes the opportunity to retreat, knocking over the pickle dish while doing so.

Ethan good-naturedly stoops to clean up the pickles, but Mattie is in distress. She is afraid of what Zeena will say about this particular dish being broken. It was kept in the back of the cupboard, and Zeena never intended it to be used. Ethan tells her he will replace it tomorrow, but Mattie tells him it was a wedding gift from Philadelphia, which is why Zeena never used it. She begins to cry, and Ethan feels that their evening has crashed into pieces just like the dish. In an effort to regain control of the situation, Ethan picks up the pieces of glass and reconstructs the dish in the cupboard in such a way that the casual observer would never notice the breakage. He will glue it tomorrow and that will be the end of the matter. He has taken charge of this evening, and Mattie comes back to the table. Ethan feels powerful and in charge, like when he is steering a sled down the hill.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 5 Summary

After dinner, Ethan goes to care for the animals for the night while Mattie tidies the kitchen. When he returns, Ethan sees the picture he envisioned, Mattie sitting with her sewing by the light of a lamp. It is, to him, perfect contentment. He takes off his boots, picks up his pipe, and becomes part of the domestic scene. When he realizes he is unable to see Mattie from his position, he asks her to come sit nearer to him. Mattie does so, seating herself in Zeena’s nearby rocking chair. Looking at her there gives Ethan a start because he sees Zeena’s face superimposed over the younger woman’s face. Mattie, too, feels ill at ease and moves back to the light of the lamp. Ethan gets up to stoke the fire and uses the opportunity to move his chair so he can watch Mattie. He reminds her they were to have gone coasting tonight. Ethan insists that it is a dangerous ride and Mattie insists she would not be afraid, but both are content to stay where they are.

Ethan leans over, touches the end of her needlework, and asks her to guess who he saw getting kissed this afternoon. Mattie blushes and guesses correctly, and the conversation dies. Her blush sets up a “flaming guard” around her. They are in a setting too intimate for such things, which might easily have been spoken about in the open air of a moonlight walk. Ethan supposes the young lovers will get married soon and that Mattie will probably be next. Mattie has no such thoughts and wonders what prompts him to mention it. He tells her he is trying to prepare himself, but Mattie soon asks if Zeena is preparing to get rid of her. Mattie expresses her nervousness around Zeena lately but dismisses it when Ethan says he has heard nothing of the kind from his wife. Ethan moves his hand further up the end of Mattie’s needlework, and a current seems to flow between them.

Suddenly the cat darts from Zeena’s chair to chase a mouse, leaving the empty chair rocking. Ethan realizes Zeena will be back in that chair before long, and he tightly clenches the end of the needlework then bends to kiss it. As he does, the fabric moves and Mattie is gathering up her work for the evening. It is eleven o’clock, and they proceed to do the small tasks that must be done before bed. Mattie goes up the stairs, pauses to tell Ethan goodnight, and then closes her bedroom door behind her. Ethan realizes he had not even touched her hand that evening.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 6 Summary

At breakfast the next morning, Ethan acts proprietary and does not even offer to help Mattie with the dishes. He and Jotham make their plan for this rather muddy day; Jotham will be sent to retrieve Zeena while Ethan continues working on the farm. He goes back to the house one more time. He wants to say that these will be their last moments alone together; instead, he simply tells Mattie he will probably be home for dinner. One of his errands in town is to buy glue, but the miry roads cause one of his horses to get cut and he is running short of time. When he finally makes it to town, the regular clerks are not at Eady’s store and Ethan is forced to ask Dennis Eady for help. The inexperienced Dennis is unable to find glue anywhere, so Ethan goes to Ms. Homan’s store. She is slow and full of questions, but she finally locates a single bottle of glue. Ethan grabs it and hurries home. The weather has gotten worse, and Ethan is afraid Jotham and Zeena may overtake him on the road.

The barn is empty when he arrives, much to Ethan’s relief, and he hastily settles the animals so he can get to the house and glue the pickle dish. As he walks in, Mattie grabs his sleeve and tells him in a dramatic whisper Zeena is home. Jotham dropped her off and then headed straight to his own home with some packages. When Ethan asks how Zeena is, Mattie tells him she does not know; she came in and went straight to her room without saying a word. Ethan tells her he will mend the dish tonight when she is asleep. Just then, Jotham returns with the sleigh.
After trips such as this, Zeena is often miserable to be around, so Ethan invites Jotham to join them as a “neutralising presence.” But Jotham, never one to turn down a free meal, declines the offer—twice. Zeena generally attacks the first person she sees when things are not going well for her, so Ethan assumes Jotham was the recipient of her wrath earlier and has no interest in repeating the experience. When Ethan heads back into the house, the scene is much the same as it was the evening before except there is now an air of dread in the room.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 7 Summary

After hanging up his wet garments, Ethan calls upstairs to Zeena; when she does not answer, he makes his way to their bedroom. He finds her sitting rigidly by the window, still in her traveling clothes. This is the pattern after such a trip, and Ethan is not surprised when she says she does not think she can eat any dinner. This time, however, after making this statement she does not immediately make her way to the table. “I’m a great deal sicker than you think,” she tells her husband. With a great sigh, she announces she has “complications”—a dire pronouncement that leaves Ethan with mixed feelings. He makes a tactical error by questioning the wisdom of this new doctor, to which Zeena reacts sharply. She tells Ethan everyone can see she is getting worse and that everyone she knows who has seen this doctor is now well. With as much sympathy as he can muster, Ethan tells her he is glad she might feel better soon and that she must do whatever the doctor tells her to do. Her answer is that she must have a hired girl so she does not have to do even one thing around the house. Ethan is stunned into silence, and she continues with the news that her aunt has found one for her—and she promised an extra dollar to ensure the girl’s speedy arrival by noon tomorrow.

Ethan is angry that she made such plans without consulting him and is dismayed at the prospect of this new, continued drain on his scant resources. The argument escalates, and Zeena finally claims she lost her health while nursing his mother. Ethan is outraged at the thought and they continue the argument “like serpents shooting venom.” Eventually Ethan lights a candle and they speak more calmly; he explains they simply do not have the money for a hired girl. Zeena responds that she can no longer keep slaving away and he might as well send her to the poorhouse—where other Fromes have been before now, she supposes. Ethan ignores the thrust and tells her there is just no money. Quietly, Zeena asks about the fifty dollars he got from Andrew Hale. After Ethan stammers something about a misunderstanding, Zeena’s tone changes and he grows momentarily hopeful. Ethan assures her that he and Mattie will do more, but Zeena interrupts him to casually state that at least they will not have the expense of keeping Mattie, but he is only half listening and has already started for the kitchen when her words strike him. He asks what she means, and Zeena laughs (a foreign sound for her) and says now she knows why he was so worried. He obviously did not understand that Mattie would be leaving, that it is someone else’s turn to take the “pauper.” Just then Mattie calls them to dinner.

After a moment’s hesitation, Zeena calls out to say she will not be coming down to supper. When Mattie offers to bring something up to her, Ethan tells her not to worry about it and he will be down shortly. Ethan appeals to Zeena’s sense of right and wrong, saying she cannot send her cousin away with nowhere to go and no money to live; he asks what others would say if she did so. After a significant pause, Zeena says she knows what people are saying about her having kept Mattie in her house this long. This cuts Ethan and leaves him powerless to fight for his wife’s cousin without revealing his true feelings for Mattie—and Zeena knows it. Ethan never loved Zenobia, but now he loathes her. Until now he has managed to stay indifferent, but now he knows she is going to take away the one thing that matters most to him, and he can hardly believe it.
Downstairs in the kitchen, Mattie is innocently unaware of the plans that have been made and anticipates a pleasant dinner just like the one they shared the evening before. Ethan begins to eat but is unable to hide his disgust and dismay. Mattie runs to him, and he folds her in his arms and kisses her. When she pulls back, he tells her he will not let her go. She understands Zeena’s resolve on such matters and contemplates a future away from this place. Both are in despair. Ethan bravely vows to have his way on this matter, but they both know that Mattie’s fate has been sealed.

Zeena appears. She has changed clothes and claims she has to keep her strength up, according to the doctor. After the familiar adjusting of her teeth, Zeena helps herself to a great slab of the meat pie Mattie prepared and settles in to eat. The other two are unable to eat, but Zeena is in fine storytelling form and regales them with stories of her family and her journey. After she finishes her meal, Zeena criticizes Mattie’s cooking and claims she must take some stomach powders to offset the heartburn from the “heavy” pie. Mattie offers to get them, but Zeena tells her they are in a secret place and goes to get them. The remaining pair is miserable and slow to move. A devastated Zeena returns, holding the broken pickle dish in her hands.

When she asks who is responsible for the broken dish, neither Ethan nor Mattie answers. Zeena is near tears as she explains she only keeps things that matter very much to her far back in that cupboard. Even when she does spring cleaning, she is careful to lift it with both hands so it will not get broken. Zeena asks again who broke the dish, and Ethan finally answers. He tells her the cat broke it. Zeena is incredulous and wonders how a cat got into the cupboard and broke this one item. Mattie finally speaks, admitting she got it down to use for supper to make the table look pretty. Zeena calls Mattie “a bad girl,” accuses her of trying to steal something from her while she was away, and bursts again into tears. As she walks away with the broken glass in her hand, she taunts Mattie by saying this would not have happened if she had not kept her so long.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 8 Summary

After Zeena walks out of the room, Mattie begins to do the dishes and Ethan performs his usual night duties outside. When he returns, the kitchen is empty and Ethan goes to his small study behind the parlor. On a trip to the kitchen for his pipe and tobacco, Ethan finds a scrap of paper on which Mattie has written, “Don’t trouble, Ethan.” Back in his study, Ethan begins to fume and form thoughts of rebellion. He reflects that Zeena has become a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her.

His thoughts turn to a couple he knows, a man who left his wife and started a new life with a woman he loved. How easy it would be to just walk away with Mattie and leave Zeena nothing but a letter. He even starts writing the letter, but soon the reality of his situation settles over him like a dark, heavy mantle. The farm and the mill are heavily mortgaged, and though he might make a go of it on his own, Ethan has to ensure he can make a living for both Mattie and himself. And Zeena would have nothing; she would have to go back to her family. He scans the newspaper for ticket prices to the West and discovers he cannot even afford the trip. In despair, he realizes he is “a prisoner for life.”

He wakes up in the morning to the reality that this is his last day with Mattie. She walks up behind him and says she did not hear him come to bed last night. He feels a rush of tenderness for her and begins to start the fire in the kitchen stove. Suddenly things do not seem so dire to Ethan, and he tells Mattie to “take no notice” of Zeena when she comes downstairs. Ethan and Jotham begin to work, and Ethan dismisses all plans to take Mattie or her trunks to the train station. When they enter the kitchen, Zeena is discussing a missing towel and some damage to a piece of furniture for which she blames Mattie. Mattie’s leaving appears unstoppable.
Ethan heads to town in hopes of getting money from Andrew Hale after explaining his desperate need. Hale is home with lumbago, but his wife treats Ethan kindly. She seems to understand Ethan’s plight and says, “You’ve had an awful mean time, Ethan Frome.” This expression of sympathy deters him from his plan; he cannot take money from them under false pretenses. Suddenly he sees the tragic reality of his life, and he heads slowly back to the farm.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 9 Summary

When he arrives home, Zeena is reading a medical book and Mattie is upstairs sitting on her trunk in her bare room and crying. She stops when she sees Ethan and explains she thought he had left without saying good-bye. They share a short-lived moment of raw emotion and then work Mattie’s trunk around the corner and down the stairs. The trunk is sent to the station on another sleigh, and they sit down to one last meal. Clearly Zeena wants Jotham to take Mattie to the station, but Ethan insists. Zeena claims he must fix the furnace in the new girl’s room; Ethan declares that if it was good enough for Mattie it will certainly be good enough for the new girl. He leaves to go get the sleigh ready for this last ride.

When he returns he finds Mattie in his study. Zeena has gone to her room and does not intend to come back down to say good-bye. The two leave gleefully with time for a lovely ride before the train departs. Ethan takes them on a drive past places filled with memories of their time together, including a church picnic during which Mattie made Ethan feel more alive than he had ever felt before. Mattie tells him they must leave, but Ethan will not be rushed and finally asks her what she will do once she leaves. She says she may try to get a job in a store, but Ethan knows she is not strong enough for such work, despite her protests that she is stronger now than when she came. In dismay, Ethan wishes he could go with her. Mattie understands; she read the letter he started to write to Zeena. They talk tearfully about the future, and Ethan says she will probably get married. Mattie says she would rather be dead, and Ethan says he almost would prefer that. Soon they regain their senses and continue their drive.

They stop near the coasting hill, and they see and hear delighted children sledding. Ethan convinces Mattie to go for a ride with him. Though the light is growing dim, Ethan takes his place behind Mattie on a borrowed sled and steers them confidently down the hill. It is an exhilarating experience for both of them, and Ethan boasts again that he has always been able to “measure distances to a hair’s-breadth—always could.” As they pause in the sheltered spot in which Ethan caught Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum kissing, they share a last desperate moment together. Their situation is hopeless. Then Mattie has an idea. She wants them to sled down the hill again, only this time so “we’ll never come up any more.” At first Ethan protests, but the vision of his loveless and desperate life along with the trembling and sobbing woman in front of him help change his mind.

Mattie takes her seat in the front of the sled, but Ethan insists they trade places. Mattie does not realize that Ethan is trying to spare her the worst of the crash. At the last moment Ethan hesitates, but the alternative is too grim to consider. He hears the whinny of his nearby horse and then they begin their “delirious descent.” They are heading directly for the big elm at the bottom, Mattie clinging fiercely to Ethan. Suddenly he sees the image of Zeena’s face in front of him, and he swerves. Though he corrects their path, it is not enough to reach their goal.

After a time, Ethan finds himself sprawled in the snow. He hears a slight whimpering, like the sound of a wounded animal. He feels around, hoping to find the source and offer some comfort to the poor creature, only to find that the sound is coming from Mattie. She briefly opens her eyes and speaks his name. Ethan tells her he thought they had done it. The last thing he hears is the whinny of his horse.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 10 Summary

Ethan is about to open the door to his home for the engineer on this treacherous snowy night. Inside, there is a “querulous drone” that stops the moment the door opens. The narrator sees two women but cannot tell from which of them the sound originated. One of the women gets up from her chair when the men enter, not in greeting but in preparation for the evening meal. This woman is angular and sallow, and her clothes hang from her bony frame. The other woman has a slighter build and is sitting hunched near the stove. She turns her head when the men enter, though her body does not move at all. Her hair is gray and she, too, appears “bloodless and shriveled.”

The kitchen is as destitute as the rest of the farm is. It is meager and cold, and Ethan apologizes that the fire has gone out. The woman in the chair complains that Zeena fell asleep and let the fire go out. The engineer recognizes the whine and knows it was she whose voice he heard from behind the door. The older woman is just bringing a dish to the table, and Ethan takes the opportunity to introduce the engineer to the women. His wife, Zenobia, is the woman preparing their supper; the other, the one who is paralyzed, is Mattie Silver.

The next day, after the narrator arrives at Mrs. Ned Hale’s boarding house, he is greeted with alacrity. She and her mother had both been worried about him and are shocked to hear he had spent the night at the Fromes’. They are curious about his impressions of the Fromes, but he simply tells them he slept in a makeshift bed in a small study off the parlor. Ruth believes no one has visited the Fromes in the last twenty years, even old friends, except for the doctor and herself. She goes twice a year but tries to visit at a time when she knows Ethan is not there. It is depressing enough, she says, to see the two women; to see the despair on Ethan’s face is just too much for her to bear, especially because she can remember the time before Ethan’s mother died and the trouble began.

The narrator senses Ruth would like to talk with someone else who has seen what she sees, and he waits patiently for her to tell him more of the story. Ruth continues. They brought Mattie to Ruth’s house right after the accident because they were friends. She was given sedatives to help her sleep, but when she woke up in the morning she looked right at Ruth and said—but Ruth could not bring herself to tell that part of the story. The word around town was that Ethan was taking Mattie to the train station, but no one knew why they had been coasting. Nobody knows what Zeena thought at the time, and that has not changed. Zeena simply came to Ethan’s bedside and stayed with him until he was moved home. As soon as the doctors released Mattie, Zeena brought her to the farmhouse. She has been there ever since; there was nowhere else for her to go.

Zeena seems to have gained supernatural strength, overcoming her own varied ailments to nurse her crippled cousin for the past twenty years. Ruth explains that none of them are “easy people.” When the two women quarrel, says Ruth, it breaks her heart to see Ethan’s face. They are able to move Mattie outside during the nicer months, but the winters take their toll on this tragic household. Ruth leans forward and unburdens her heart to the narrator as she relates one last bit of information. There was a day, about a week after the accident, when no one expected Mattie to live. Ruth believes it was “a pity she did,” for no one else heard what Mattie had to say that first morning after the accident. Ruth believes that Ethan might have had a chance to live if Mattie had died. Instead, she does not see much difference between the Fromes in the house and the Fromes in the graveyard, except that “down there they’re all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.”

Themes

Ethan Frome takes place in Starkfield, a village in the Berkshires. The name of the village appropriately suggests the bleak, barren atmosphere of this novella. The three main characters find themselves controlled by the constraints of poverty, Puritanism, and the harsh physical realities of rural New England. In Ethan Frome
the season always seems to be winter.

Passion and repression are the main themes of *Ethan Frome*. The three main characters are passionate beings, their unexpressed feelings sharply contrasting with the austerity of their surroundings and the severity of their manners. In this atmosphere, the most unassuming remark is charged with significance and emotion.

Another important theme concerns the youthful desire for escape and freedom, and the adult acceptance of responsibility and care. As a young man, *Ethan Frome* had hoped to free himself from the burdens of a family property that could barely support him and his wife, but by the age of twenty-eight he finds himself saddled with a hypochondriacal wife, a mortgage, and an unprofitable business. When he dreams of running away with Mattie Silver, he recognizes that he lacks even the means to purchase the two railway tickets. Nor will he leave his sickly wife with an estate that can not provide a living for her. Like many other Wharton characters, he finds himself trapped in circumstances from which he sees no escape.

**Themes**

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

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

**Individual Responsibility**
Related to the theme of frustration is that of individual responsibility, insofar as it is Ethan's sense of duty that chains him to his circumstances. Critic Blake Nevius defined the "great question posed by Ethan Frome" as "What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of manners, conventions, taboos, apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty?" Responsibility interrupts Ethan's studies and brings him home to the farm to care for his parents, and self-sacrifice characterizes his marriage to Zeena, whose "one pleasure ... was to inflict pain on him." Toward the end of the novel, it is duty that prevents Ethan from asking the Hales for money so he can run away with Mattie. The reality, he tells himself, is that he is a poor man, "the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute." Critics have disputed whether Ethan's choices constitute moral decisions, that is, decisions that are guided by moral principles, as opposed to need or expediency. Lionel Trilling wrote, "Choice is incompatible with [Ethan's] idea of his existence; he can only elect to die," whereas according to K. R. Shrinivasa Iyengar, "It would be an oversimplification to say that the chief characters in Ethan Frome are only moved by blind
necessity." Marius Bewley saw Ethan's decision to die with Mattie as a clear moral decision that "entails tragic consequences because it is the wrong decision."

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

Characters: Characters Discussed

Ethan Frome
Ethan Frome, a farmer frustrated in his ambition to become an engineer or a chemist and in his marriage to a nagging, sour, sickly wife. He falls in love with his wife’s good and lovely cousin, Mattie Silver, who comes to live with them. When his wife finally drives the girl away, Ethan insists on taking her to the station. Ethan and Mattie decide to take a sleigh ride they have promised themselves and, in mutual despair over the impending separation, they resolve to kill themselves by running the sled against a tree. They are not killed, only permanently injured, and Ethan’s wife is to look after them for the rest of their lives.

Zenobia Pierce Frome (Zeena)
Zenobia Pierce Frome (Zeena), Ethan’s wife, a distant cousin who nursed his mother during a long illness. The marriage is loveless, and Zeena is sickly and nagging.

Mattie Silver
Mattie Silver, Zeena’s cousin, who comes to live with the Fromes. She returns Ethan’s love, and once when Zeena spends a night away from home, she and Ethan spend a happy evening together, not making love but sitting quietly before the fire, as Ethan imagines happily married couples do. Mattie feels that she would rather die than leave Ethan, but in the crash she suffers not death, but a permanent spine injury and must submit thereafter to being nursed by Zeena.

Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale
Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale, a young engaged couple whom Ethan observes stealing a kiss. On his night alone with Mattie, he tells her wistfully about it; it is as close as he comes to making advances.

Characters
The characterizations in Ethan Frome are simple and intense. The three main characters have been stripped of all extraneous gestures and ornamentation. What remain are the essential passions and frustrations of human existence. In her introduction to the novella, Wharton compares the characters to the "granite outcroppings" of
the New England landscape they inhabit: they are "but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate." Life had always presented itself "starkly and summarily" to these characters.

When readers first see Ethan Frome, twenty-four years after a catastrophic accident, he appears much older than his fifty-two years. Stiff and lame, he bears a red gash across his forehead. His physical appearance quite literally suggests the inner man: maimed by life, he is a shell of the kind, generous man that existed before the accident.

Mattie Silver and Zenobia Frome have also been reduced to essential characteristics. Before the accident, Mattie was not only beautiful and good-natured but also fragile and sickly, unable to survive in the harsh New England climate without a protector. Now that she has been crippled, these latter character traits have become dominant. Her one distinguishing characteristic is the "querulous drone" in her voice. In contrast, Zenobia Frome has found a purpose for her life because of the accident. In the early years of her marriage, her sole concern was her own physical welfare. She appeared indifferent, indeed hostile, to the needs of anyone else. But after the accident, her basic New England fortitude finds a lifetime mission as she resumes the "doctoring" of her youth.

**Character Analysis: Ethan Frome**

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

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

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

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

Character Analysis: Narrator

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

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

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

Character Analysis: Other Characters

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

Zeena Frome
See Zenobia Frome

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

Andrew Hale
Andrew is a builder, Ned Hale's father, and an old friend of Ethan's family. To avoid having to drive Zeena to the Flats, Ethan pleads that he has to collect cash for lumber from Hale. The lie forces him to go to see Hale and ask for an advance, which "the builder refused genially, as he did everything else." In a desperate attempt to procure money so he can run away with Mattie, Ethan considers approaching Hale a second time. But he cannot bring himself to deceive Hale and his wife, "two kindly people who had pitied him."

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

Jotham Powell
The Fromes's hired man.
Critical Essays: Analysis

Wharton’s main thrust in this much-disputed and problematical work is the presentation of a universe of moral ambiguity hemmed in by a physical universe that seems clear-cut in its starkness and finality. Images of death, frozen submission, imprisonment, and sterility imbue Ethan Frome with a sense of grim determinism. Yet it is not a deterministic work. Events seem ordained by both the nature and harshness of the characters’ lives, but Ethan is able to make, at least momentarily, a distinct decision as to what is right (not just “proper”) when he chooses not to lie to the Hales or to desert Zeena. His moment of truth comes with his sudden and melancholic realization of who he is and what he must do: . . . the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him.

It is Wharton’s mastery of her subject matter that enables her readers to see both the grim inevitability of Ethan’s life and, at the same time, the grandeur of his moral choice in this grimmest of worlds. Her work is more properly termed tragic irony because, although Ethan decides not to abandon and humiliate Zeena by running away with Mattie, he weakens and decides (with her tacit consent) to commit mutual suicide. The irony exists in that he opts, finally, for an end to life through death and instead receives, in the vast indifference of Wharton’s universe, a death-in-life. He, Mattie, and Zeena continue to exist in the same entrapped, triangular relationship as before but without hope, without the vitality of Ethan and Mattie’s love. Furthermore, not only are the roles reversed, but the sick (Zeena) has become well, and the healthy or vital (Mattie and Ethan) have become maimed, crippled, and scarred (there is a red gash in Ethan’s forehead).

In many ways, the novel unites content and form through stylistic and metaphoric comparisons of the cold and frozen landscape as part and parcel of the character’s moral framework. Isolated, “frozen” in their poverty, barren (the Fromes are childless), and unhealthy in outlook (Zeena is obsessed with her diseases and “complications”), the characters reflect the countryside itself. It is this very sense of isolation that causes Ethan to marry Zeena—he fears being left alone, with silence—after his mother dies. Silence and absence are also powerful metaphors. It is by silence that Zeena manipulates best, spreading unknown fears among Mattie and Ethan. Further, Zeena becomes more powerful in her absence: when the pickle dish is broken, when Mattie sits in Zeena’s rocking chair, and when the cat inadvertently starts the chair rocking and the specter of Zeena fills the room. Even in the final moments of his suicide attempt, the image of Zeena invades Ethan’s mind and almost subverts his actions.

Wharton also uses the technique of contrast to emphasize her irony. She contrasts the prosperous, unrestricted life of the engineer-narrator with Ethan, who once studied such things at the university. In reverberating scenes, the author first presents Zeena at the back door of the farmhouse with a lantern silhouetting her drawn and tight features; later she is contrasted with a similar scene of Mattie with lantern light highlighting her youthful and soft features. Finally, the most powerful contrast, presented in the main versus the frame story, is of Ethan himself as young, vital, loving, and capable of so many unexpressed possibilities with the final grim, warped “ruin of a man” that Ethan becomes—a sort of Sisyphus in the mythology of Wharton’s universe.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

Ethan Frome has enjoyed greater popularity than any other of Edith Wharton’s twenty-two novels and novellas. It is also better known than any of her short stories, nonfiction, or poetry. Appearing first as a three-part serial in Scribner’s magazine, the 1911 book got its start around 1907 when Wharton developed
aspects of the narrative as an exercise in writing French. The story appeared as a play in 1936. Moving away from depicting the manners of high society, Wharton treats, in Ethan Frome, poor, inarticulate people living in the countryside. Early critics complained that a New York sophisticate such as Wharton knew nothing about the lives of the kind of people depicted in Ethan Frome. The book’s popularity argues otherwise.

Wharton frames her story. Prior to chapter 1, an engineer observes Ethan Frome coming to town and inquires about his history. Later, caught in a snowstorm, the engineer spends a night at the Frome house, and the engineer intuits events of long ago. An omniscient narrator relates nine chapters that conclude with the accident. In the epilogue the engineer comments on Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie living in the lonely farm house for twenty-four years.

The novel employs few symbols. Beside the emblematic landscape, the cat implies the witchlike influence of Zeena on Mattie and Ethan, and the family graveyard suggests that Ethan will never escape Zeena or the farm. In her foreword to a 1922 edition, Wharton writes that Ethan Frome intends to convey a sense of the harsh and beautiful New England countryside. Thus, Wharton adopts an austere realism, a tone in keeping with the hard landscape and with the shocking outcome.

This harsh tone informs the theme of Ethan’s isolation. Wharton describes Ethan as like the landscape, mute and melancholic, as if he were one of the outcroppings of slate that push up through the snow. Ethan is “an incarnation of the land’s frozen woe with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface.” The central narrative occurs in winter, but flashbacks contrast happy summer occasions. Ethan recalls to Mattie a picnic the previous summer at Shadow Pond when he found her locket; then he points to a tree trunk recalling that there they sat together in the summer evening. At the time he speaks the winter snow has nearly buried that tree trunk.

Isolation pervades the novel. When Ethan comes to town from his farm, he speaks to no one. Four or five years prior to the main action, Ethan had had one year of study at a technological college in Worcester, and he had been to Florida. The encounter with the greater world contrasts with Ethan’s confinement to his rural farm. The isolation drives Ethan’s mother crazy. The road past the house has lost its traffic and the mother can no longer see passersby. Once a talker, the mother grows silent and seldom speaks. Ethan, desperate in the long winter evenings for the sound of a voice, asks why she does not say something; his mother, insane, answers that she is listening to the people talking out in the storm. Then Zeena—a distant relative—comes to nurse the mother. After his mother’s funeral, fearful of being left alone, Ethan too quickly proposes marriage.

Ethan is trapped on the farm. A villager notes early that most of the smart people got away from the area, but Ethan had to care first for his father, then his mother, then his wife, and then Mattie. Ethan made some attempts to get away. When his mother dies, Ethan hopes to move to a town, but Zeena prefers notoriety as a sickly person in Starkfield to anonymity in a city. Ethan considers running off with Mattie; he even writes a note to Zeena explaining his desertion. He recalls that a man in the area did run off to the West and that he found happiness.

Ethan, however, cannot bring himself to abandon Zeena. She cannot support herself on the farm. Then his eye fastens on a newspaper advertisement offering train trips to the West at reduced rates. He has no money with which to buy train fare for himself and Mattie. The facts of poverty and his marital obligation act like prison guards to chain him, “a prisoner for life.” The toboggan accident leaves him lame so that his every step seems checked by the jerk of a chain. Circumstances and his own conscience prohibit Ethan from ever leaving Starkfield.

Zeena counters her husband of seven years in all his desires. She speaks in a flat whine, keeps her hair tight with crimping pins, dresses always in dark calico, and complains constantly about imagined illness. She demands that the lovely Mattie be banished from the house and that a new girl come to wait on her. Zeena,
witchlike, dominates Ethan. After the crash, Zeena creates a living hell for Mattie and for Ethan.

**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

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

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

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

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

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

This claustrophobic novel centers on the triangle formed by Ethan, Zeena, his dour, hypochondriacal wife, whom he married to satisfy a sense of indebtedness to her for caring for his dying mother, and Mattie Silver, Zeena’s poor but vivacious and younger cousin. Ethan and Mattie fall in love and plan to flee the bleak, New England world only to be stopped by Ethan’s sense of obligation to his wife. In the end the couple attempt a double suicide which fails and leaves Ethan crippled and Mattie a hopeless invalid, ironically leaving Zeena to care for them both at the conclusion of the story.

Although atypical in setting for a Wharton novel, the tale recapitulates in condensed form one of her most obsessive themes, the question of freedom and entrapment within marriage. Each of the main characters exhibits strengths and weaknesses which contribute to the interlocking triangle to which they all belong. Mattie’s youth and vulnerability play on Ethan’s need to dream and to be protective; Zeena’s hypochondria and conventionality touch Ethan’s sense of duty and fear of change. Ethan in turn is bound to both women, two sides of the female nature, toward which he experiences both attraction and repulsion in equal parts enough to immobilize him.

The touching final scene of the three trapped, interdependent people in their secluded farm house is one of the grimmest in modern literature. It provides a fitting conclusion to Wharton’s sparsest and starkest piece of fiction, one which contains a distillation of her other work and has proved to be one of her most popular stories.

Bibliography:


Bloom, Harold, ed. Edith Wharton. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. A collection of critical essays on the body of Wharton’s work. Ethan Frome is addressed in the essay “Ethan Frome: This Vision of His Story,” by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, which includes an in-depth discussion of the role of the narrator. Wolff implies that the narrator as character is on an equal footing with the other main characters and that the narrator’s “vision” is a manipulation of reality and must be questioned.

Howe, Irving, ed. Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962. Two of the essays deal directly with Ethan Frome. Blake Nevius’ “On Ethan Frome” disputes previous positive interpretations and posits the idea that the work demonstrates a “despair arising from the contemplation of spiritual waste.” Lionel Trilling’s influential essay “The Morality of Inertia” takes the position that Ethan makes no moral decision, paralyzed by inaction, and that this type of “inertia” characterizes a large part of humanity. Both essays are valuable in terms of understanding the traditional critical perspectives on this work.


**Essays and Criticism: The narrative and moral ambiguity in Ethan Frome**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Read in this fashion, the narrator's vision becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of inaction and moral paralysis.

Recalling that Wharton was careful to label Ethan Frome a "tale" instead of a "novel," Elizabeth Ammons searches for meaning by comparing the work to the archetypes of fairy tales. What she finds is a "modern fairy story" that is "as moral as the classic fairy tale" and which functions as "realistic social criticism."

Specifically, she believes that a network of imagery in the novel "calls up the fairy tale Snow White," the frozen landscape, Mattie's physical appearance, her role as housekeeper, and her persecution by witchlike Zeena all have "obvious parallels in the traditional fairy tale about a little girl whose jealous step-mother tries to keep her from maturing into a healthy, marriageable young woman." The difference is that in Wharton's "inverted fairy tale," it is the witch who wins. This victory is then amplified by the failed suicide attempt that transforms Mattie into "a mirror image of Zeena." According to Ammons, in Wharton's modern fairy story, witches not only win, they multiply.

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

Ammons' reading of the novel suggests that witches are made, not born. In Zeena's case, the transition appears to have begun soon after her marriage to Ethan. Like her beloved but never-used pickle dish, Zeena's life was also put on a shelf the day she was married. The lack of communication between husband and wife, the absence of intimacy, and the isolation of life on a farm in a rural community make Zeena's a very lonely existence. To her husband, preoccupied by dreams of Mattie, Zeena has "faded into an insubstantial shade."

Blake Nevius draws attention to the scene in which Zeena, face streaming with tears, confronts Ethan and Mattie with the shattered remains of her pickle dish. In this scene, Nevius argues, "we get a terrible glimpse of the starved emotional life that has made her what she is." We also get a glimpse, a vision, of the life Mattie would have known had she replaced Zeena as Ethan's wife.

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

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

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

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

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

Essays and Criticism: "Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome and the Question of Meaning"

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

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

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

Specifically, a network of imagery and event in Ethan Frome calls up the fairy tale Snow White. The frozen landscape, the emphasis on sevens, the physical appearance of Mattie Silver (black hair, red cheeks, white skin), her persecution by witch-like Zeena (an older woman who takes the girl in when her mother dies and thus serves as a stepmother to her), Mattie's role as housekeeper: all have obvious parallels in the traditional fairy tale about a little girl whose jealous step-mother tries to keep her from maturing into a healthy, marriageable young woman. Although Wharton is not imitating this well-known fairy tale—rather, she draws on familiar elements of Snow White as touchstones for a new, original fairy tale—still, the implicit contrast between Zeena's victory in Ethan Frome and the step-mother's defeat in Snow White subtly contributes to the terror of Wharton's story. Customarily fairy tales reassure by teaching that witches lose in the end. Children and heroines ("Snow Whites") do not remain the victims of ogres. Someone saves them. Here is part of the horror of Ethan Frome: Wharton's modern fairy tale for adults, while true to traditional models in the way it teaches a moral about "real" life at the same time that it addresses elemental fears (e.g., the fear of death, the fear of being abandoned), does not conform to the genre's typical denouement. The lovers do not live happily ever after. The witch wins.

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

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

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

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

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

Wharton's moral, her social criticism, emerges logically from this fairy tale. Ethan Frome maintains that witches are real. There are women whose occupation in life consists of making other people unhappy. Ethan Frome includes three. Ethan's mother, housebound and isolated for years on a failing farm, lived out her life an insane, wizened creature peering out her window for passersby who never came and listening for voices that only she could hear. Her frightening silence oppressed Ethan until Zeena joined the household to care for her. But then Zeena too fell silent.... Zeena's hypochondria, her frigidity, her taciturnity broken only by querulous nagging, her drab appearance—these make her an unsympathetic character. They also make her a typically "queer" woman of the region, a twisted human being produced by poverty and isolation and deadening routine....

In reality, Mattie had no future to lose. Ethan asks for assurance that she does not want to leave the farm, and "he had to stoop his head to catch her stifled whisper: 'Where'd I go, if I did?'" There is nowhere for her to go. She has no immediate family and no saleable skills;... Ethan thinks of Mattie "setting out alone to renew the weary quest for work.... What chance had she, inexperienced and untrained, among the million breadseekers of the cities? There came back to him miserable tales he had heard at Worcester, and the faces of girls whose lives had begun as hopefully as Mattie's ... " (final ellipsis Wharton's). Mattie's prospects are grim. She can work in a factory and lose her health; she can become a prostitute and lose her dignity as well; she can marry a farmer and lose her mind. Or she can be crashed in a sledding accident and lose all three at once. It makes no difference. Poverty, premature old age, and shattered dreams comprise her inevitable reward no matter what she does. The fact that Wharton cripples Mattie, but does not let her die, reflects not the author's but the culture's cruelty.... Mattie Silver has been prepared for no economically independent life. The system is designed to keep her a parasite...

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

_Ethan Frome_ departs from traditional fairy tales by showing that life does not contain happy endings. Good girls do not grow up into happy wives, and good-hearted, worthy lovers do not ride off into the western sun with the maiden of their dreams. For, in Wharton's fairy tale, witches do not get vanquished and disappear. They multiply. First there is Ethan's mother, then Zeena, then Mattie; and they represent only three of the many women gone "queer" in this wintry American landscape. Wharton's moral emerges cold and grim as her Starkfield setting. _Ethan Frome_ mocks the fantasy that witches will disappear and romance with a woods-nymph will liberate man into a miraculous world of masterful love and erotic fulfillment. As long as women are kept isolated and dependent, _Ethan Frome_ implies, Mattie Silvers will become Zeena Fromes: frigid crippled wrecks of human beings whose pleasure in life derives from depriving others of theirs....

The narrator exists to unlock the deepest, the psycho/sexual, level of _Ethan Frome_. Empathically, he projects himself into young Ethan's situation and sees in it the realization of a specific male fear: the fear that Woman will turn into Witch. The fear that Mother will turn into Witch (love into hate, day into night, life into death) everyone has known.... Precisely this inversion occurs in _Ethan Frome_, and because the terror is man's it makes emotional and intellectual sense to have a man, and one temperamentally close to Ethan, visualize the sinister fairy tale in which man, in this case Ethan, can be caught.

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

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

**Source:** Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's _Ethan Frome_ and the Question of Meaning," in _Studies in American Fiction_, Vol. 7, No 2, 1979, pp. 127-40
Essays and Criticism: "Imagery and Symbolism in Ethan Frome"

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

For easy discussion, the imagery and symbolism may be divided into three parts: the compatibility of setting and character, the uses of light and dark, and the sexual symbolism. A survey of these three parts in the novel will, it is hoped, clarify the real story in Ethan Frome by adding a new dimension of meaning.

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

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

There is hardly a page throughout the book that does not have some reference to light and dark. Wharton uses all of them with effect. The supreme light image is Mattie Silver, as her name implies. She is in contrast to everything in Starkfield; her feelings bubble near the surface. Frome, on the other hand, is all dark. He lives in the dark, especially emotionally. At the beginning of the novel, when he has come to meet Mattie, she is dancing gaily in a church filled with "broad bands of yellow light." Frome keeps "out of the range of the revealing rays from within." "Hugging the shadow," he stands in the "frosty darkness" and looks in. Later he
catches up to her "in the black shade of the Varnum spruces," the spot from where they finally begin the attempted suicide that cripples them. He stands with her in "the gloom of the spruces," where it is "so dark ... he could barely see the shape of her head," or walks with her "in silence through the blackness of the hemlock-shaded lane." Blackness is his element. As they walk back to the farm he revels in their closeness. "It was during their night walks back to the farm that he felt most intensely the sweetness of this communion." Their love is a bloom of night. "He would have liked to stand there with her all night in the blackness." He does not see Mattie so much as sense her: ". . . he felt in the darkness, that her face was lifted quickly to his." "They strained their eyes to each other through the icy darkness." Frome's favorite spot is a secluded place in the woods called Shadow Pond. On their last visit there "the darkness descended with them, dropping down like a black veil from the heavy hemlock boughs." Frome cannot seem to get out of the dark. And often, as in quotations above, the dark is pregnant with suggestions of death and cold. Frome's kitchen, on their return from the village, has "the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of night." As Ethan settles in his tomblike house, Mattie's effect on him dies away. He lies in bed and watches the light from her candle, which sending its small ray across the landing, drew a scarcely perceptible line of light under his door. He kept his eyes fixed on the light till it vanished Then the room grew perfectly black, and not a sound was audible but Zeena's asthmatic breathing.

Without Mattie's "light" he is left with the ugly reality of his wife. In numerous small ways also Wharton makes the light and dark images work for her. When Mattie relieves Ethan's jealousy at one point, "The blackness lifted and light flooded Ethan's brain." When Mattie is told by Zeena she must go, and she repeats the words to Ethan, "The words went on sounding between them as though a torch of warning flew from hand to hand through a dark landscape." Before their suicide plunge, "The spruces swathed them in blackness and silence." A bitter argument between Ethan and Zeena is "as senseless and savage as a physical fight between two enemies in the darkness." After, Zeena's face "stood grimly out against the uncurtained pane, which had turned from grey to black." The cumulative effect of all these images is to tell us a great deal about Frome and his tortured psyche.

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

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

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

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

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

The red pickle dish is Zeena's most prized possession. She received it as a wedding gift. But she never uses it. Instead she keeps it on a shelf, hidden away. She takes it down only during spring cleaning, "and then I always lifted it with my own hands, so's 't shouldn't get broke." The dish has only ceremonial, not functional, use. The sexual connotations here are obvious. The fact that the wedding dish, which was meant to contain pickles, in fact never does, explains a lot of the heaviness of atmosphere, the chill, the frigidity. The most intense scenes of the book, the most revealing, center around this dish. For example, Zeena never does discover an affair in the making between Ethan and Mattie, nor does she ever say anything, except for one hint not followed up, that reveals such knowledge. Her only discovery (and it is the discovery of the book) is of her broken (and used) pickle dish. It is this which brings the only tears to her eyes in the entire book. When Zeena is gone for a day, Mattie, significantly, brings down and uses the pickle dish in serving Ethan supper. Only if the dish is properly understood can it be seen how her violation is a sacrilege, as Zeena's emotions amply testify. The dish is broken, and Ethan plans to glue it together. Of course the dish can never be the same. This kind of violation is irrevocable. Zeena does not discover that the dish is broken until she gets, again significantly, heartburn, the powders for which she keeps on the same private shelf as the pickle dish. The scene following is a symbolic recognition of the fact that Mattie has usurped her place, broken her marriage, and become one with Ethan, though in fact it was the cat (Zeena) who actually broke the dish. The fact that Zeena never truly filled her place however ceremonially, and she resents what has happened... The evening that Mattie and Ethan spend together, then, is not as innocent as it seems on the surface. That Mattie and Ethan's infidelity is so indirectly presented, whether because of Wharton's sense of propriety or her desire
to maintain a minimum of direct statement, does not at all lessen the reality of that fact. If the overt act of infidelity is not present, the emotional and symbolic act is. The passage is full of passion; the moment, for example, when Frome kisses the piece of material Mattie is holding has climatic intensity.

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

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

Thus Ethan Frome, when he plunges towards what he considers certain death, is a failure but not a mystery. His behavior is not unmotivated; the tragedy is not contrived. The very heart of the novel is Frome's weakness of character, his negation of life. Behind that is his true, unfulfilled, relationship with Zeena. Wharton's economy of language in the novel is superb. There is hardly a word unnecessary to the total effect. Her final economy is the very brevity of the book. It fits the scene and character. There were depths to plumb; her people were not simple. To overcome the deficiencies of their natural reticence (and perhaps her own), to retain the strength of the severe and rugged setting, particularly the "outcropping granite," she resorted to a brilliant pattern of interlocking imagery and symbolism, three facets of which have been outlined here, to create a memorable work.


Analysis: Form and Content

Ethan Frome is unique among Edith Wharton's works in that it tells the tale of an isolated drama, far from the urban and societal concerns of her longer novels. It is also distinctive in that it is a "framework story," that is, a story within a story. Wharton's "frame" takes the form of a narrator who introduces the end of the story (Ethan is seen in the present, at age fifty-two) and then provides a "vision" of prior events that becomes the story proper. Although some framework stories never return to the frame, such as Henry James's novel The Turn of the Screw (1898), Wharton's narrator concludes the book with a return to the present and a chilling denouement that apparently explains the enigma of Ethan Frome and the hidden story of his past.
The narrator’s story is simultaneously a flashback and a re-creation. The reader never knows the “truth”—that is, the story from a source that took part in it (Ethan, Zeena, or Mattie)—but instead receives data through the filter of the nameless narrator, who surmises the events and pieces together a tale from the comments of other minor characters and from his own imagination. Ostensibly, though, the story of Ethan Frome is a tragic and dramatic portrayal of irony, both as a literary technique and an authorial worldview.

The first version of Ethan Frome was in French, which Wharton abandoned and then rewrote in English during a period of personal turmoil. She did not consider it her best work, despite critical acclaim, but did view it as “the fruition of her long search for technical mastery and artistic maturity” according to critic Margaret B. McDowell. This particular work’s relation to women’s issues is problematical because it does not address them directly. Instead, it presents a total and enclosed universe of restrictive forces for both its female figures of Mattie and Zeena and its central male Ethan, who as a figure caught between these two extremes of vitality and sterility expresses the meaning of the story. Nevertheless, the female “role” as caretaker is a perception that is manipulated by Wharton in Ethan Frome to comment on female issues generally.

The narrator, an engineer, comes to Starkfield in the dead of winter on a work assignment that requires he lodge in Starkfield and commute daily to his work site. When a local epidemic sickens the town’s horses, he works out an agreement with the reticent and crippled Frome to drive him. On one of these occasions, they are caught in a snowstorm and must stop halfway on their return at the Fromes’ desolated farmhouse. As the narrator hears a “droning” and “querulous” voice at the threshold of the farm kitchen, he leaves the present and plunges the reader into the tale of Frome’s marriage to Zenobia, her subsequent transformation into a sort of “helpless” and immutably complaining dictator, and the natural attraction of Ethan to her younger, destitute cousin who comes to live with them as helpmate. Zeena, in her dictatorial manipulations, decides to send Mattie away. Ethan cannot justify keeping Mattie, who is Zeena’s cousin, not his; nor can he blithely throw away all the moral strictures that have heretofore regulated his life. Although Zeena is powerful through her helplessness, controlling and frustrating Ethan at every turn, he knows that abandoning her will destroy her. On the way to the train station, Mattie and Ethan take a detour to sled down a dangerous hill, both tacitly and subconsciously abandoning themselves to the moment and a possible (but not explicit) suicide. While speeding down the snow-covered hill, Ethan has a fleeting and “monstrous” vision of his wife’s face which seems to deter him from his goal. At the last moment, he tries to right the sled’s direction, but it crashes into a gigantic elm.

The tale now returns to the frame, to the present, and to the beginning of the story. The narrator steps over the threshold and finds not what he expects—a querulous Zeena and a crippled, even innocently maimed Mattie—but instead the reverse of their roles: Zeena acts as ministering angel and caretaker, while Mattie, with the eyes of a “witch” and a high whiny voice, has become the alter ego of Zeena. It is at this point that Mrs. Hale tells the narrator that it is Ethan who truly suffers the most—and then makes her chilling observation that there is little difference between the Fromes in the farmhouse and the Fromes in the graveyard.

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

**Starkfield**

Starkfield. Fictional village in the hills of western Massachusetts’s Berkshire County, where Wharton herself lived for many years. Small and rural, Starkfield lives up to its harsh name. Though connected by trolley to the larger town of Bettsbridge—which has libraries and theaters—Starkfield is isolated and lonely during the long New England winters. The village has a post office and a Congregational church. It also has one mansion, Lawyer Varnum’s house, in which the narrator boards during his enforced residency in the community. The narrator refers to the “deadness” of the community only two pages after describing Ethan
Frome as looking dead.

Ethan lives outside Starkfield on his own infertile farm, where he ekes out a meager living by the force of his labor in the fields and in the sawmill that he has inherited from his father. Ethan is the embodiment of the landscape, an “incarnation” of its frozen woes. Even as Wharton describes the loneliness and the accumulated cold of the hard, lean winters in the Berkshire Hills, she is also describing her protagonist. His life is as harsh as the climate, and his world as desolate as the village in winter.

**Frome farm**

Frome farm. Ethan’s farm outside Starkfield, with a lonely New England farmhouse that seems to make the landscape even lonelier. Its starving apple trees grow out of a hillside on which slate is more visible than cleared fields. The ugly house is made of thin wooden walls in need of paint. It is smaller than it was in Ethan’s father’s time because Ethan has removed the “L,” which the narrator describes as the center or “hearthstone” of the New England farm. This suggests to readers how Ethan’s life has narrowed, while the narrator sees in the “diminished dwelling” an image of Ethan’s “shrunken body.” The barren land reflects Ethan and his wife Zeena’s childless marriage, and his unsuccessful sawmill serves as a reminder of Ethan’s inability to get ahead.

The farmhouse is homelike only on the night that Zeena is absent. When Mattie decorates the table with Zeena’s treasured red glass pickle dish, a wedding gift that Zeena herself refuses to use even for guests, Mattie transforms the drab house with that single little bit of color. When she and Ethan share their evening meal free of the misery caused by the whining Zeena, they briefly experience warmth and conversation that contrasts tragically with their normally cold, silent meals.

Ethan’s property also includes a graveyard, which serves as a focal point for all the novel’s images of death. A dead cucumber-vine dangles from the porch like a crepe streamer tied to a door for mourning. Other farmhouses dot the landscape like gravestones; the graves of Ethan’s ancestors mock any momentary desire for happiness. Indeed, there is even one headstone with the name Ethan Frome—the ancestor for whom the protagonist was named—that serves as a silent reminder of the death in life that pervades the novel.

**School House Hill**

School House Hill. Hill overlooking Starkfield that is the location of the climactic scene of the novel. The hill is also the site of sledding parties and moonlight kisses, but its hint of happiness and romance is always tempered by a dangerous curve at its base, where one mistake can mean serious injury or death. Here in the black and silent shadow of tall spruce trees that give Ethan and Mattie the feeling of being in “coffins underground,” the two make the suicide pact that leads to the bleak and bitter ending in which there is little difference between the Fromes on the farm and the Fromes in the graveyard.

**Bettsbridge**

Bettsbridge. Sounding like a combination of the names “Berkshire,” “Pittsfield,” and “Stockbridge”—all actual names from the western Massachusetts region, Bettsbridge is the fictional city that Zeena goes to when she feels the need to see another medical specialist. She also refers to visiting Springfield, a real city in central Massachusetts, where she consults doctors whose recommendations invariably require expenditures that further stretch the Fromes’ insufficient income.

*Worcester*
Worcester (WEE-ster). City in the east-central portion of Massachusetts where Ethan attends college (perhaps Worcester Polytechnic Institute) and studies engineering. This site represents Ethan’s lost opportunity. Now only a reminder of what Ethan wants out of life—intellectual stimulation and freedom to see the world—the memory of his life in the city provides a bitter contrast to his impoverished existence on the hardscrabble farm.

Analysis: Context

Although Ethan Frome does not directly posit an opinion on women’s issues, it implicitly describes the terrible restrictions and limitations of the world of its female characters. Unlike some of Wharton’s other female heroines who operate in highly complex social structures—for example, Lily Bart in The House of Mirth (1905) or Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence (1920)—Mattie and Zeena attempt to function in a closed, black-and-white, bleak microcosm. Mattie would never blatantly rebel against Zeena and functions, if at all, through her inarticulateness. It is in the gaps of her silences that Ethan projects all his romantic longings and envisionings. Zeena, on the other hand, too insecure to operate in a big city, probably manufactures her illnesses out of sheer boredom. It is her way of providing diversion, and ultimately a means of controlling the household. Thus, the women in this work must sabotage both themselves and Ethan in order to gain power, feel secure, and function in such a restrictive framework. They live in an inflexible society that seems as ossified as the granite outcroppings of the landscape. It is also a society in which their deemed roles seem limited as one kind of a caretaker or another: Mattie as servant and helpmate, Zeena as nurse after the accident.

Edith Wharton, on the other hand, was personally breaking out of women’s supposed models and roles by ending her marriage in an age when divorce was not yet quite acceptable and by becoming an expatriate woman writer. McDowell terms Wharton “probably the most distinguished woman writer of fiction America produced before World War II.” Wharton was not only a prolific writer but also the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale University and the first woman to be awarded the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She won a Pulitzer Price in 1920 for The Age of Innocence. Therefore, through her active role as model and her depiction of women in either stratified and depersonalized or stifling and limited roles, Wharton expanded the awareness of the diversity and possibilities in the modern woman’s lifestyle. Wharton is one of the preeminent models for women writers who wish to examine the defining restrictions and ironies of being one half of a male-female dichotomy. She has left a body of work that ruthlessly examines the limiting effect of convention on the development and fulfillment of the individual.

Analysis: Historical Context

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

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

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

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

The First World War (1914-1918)
America's attempts at neutrality became irrelevant as the efforts of American manufacturers to capture world markets drew the United States into the affairs of other nations. U.S. economic interests were particularly strong in Latin America and the Caribbean, exemplified by Bethlehem Steel's purchase of Chile's Tofo Iron Mines in 1911, and the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914. The policies of interventionist presidents like Roosevelt and Taft contrasted with those of Woodrow Wilson. But Wilson was not blind to international realities and the need of U.S. industries for open markets. American economic ties were behind U.S. intervention in the Mexican Revolution of 1911 and the landing of U.S. Marines in Honduras, Cuba, and Nicaragua the same year. They were also what ultimately drew the United States into the First World War.

The war created tensions among a nation of immigrants, who in 1911 constituted a quarter of the U.S. population in every area of the country except the south. But the war also spelled opportunities for American bankers and businessmen. In addition, the commitment of millions of men called into service opened the doors to jobs for women and African Americans. Four hundred thousand blacks left the south for jobs in the north, beginning the "Great Migration" that was to affect not only African American life but American culture as a whole. In a move that would also have profound economic repercussions, close to a million American women joined the labor force for the first time. The government became an increasing presence in the lives of Americans, most notably in matters related to economic policy, production decisions, and labor disputes. Government-fostered xenophobia, backed by the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918, resulted in the abusive treatment of German Americans and of anarchists, communists, and socialists, particularly following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in November 1917.
The conclusion of the war brought not the long hoped for serenity but widespread disorder. President Wilson's design for the League of Nations foundered. Workers and employers were at loggerheads. The Red Scare resulted in the deportation of alien radicals and the expulsion of radical labor organizers from the New York State legislature. Conflicts between returning African American soldiers and other migrant southern workers, and their white counterparts in the North, led to race riots in several major northern cities.

**Analysis: Literary Style**

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

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

Mattie is also associated with images of birds. Wharton makes repeated references to voices. At first, in comparison to his mother's silence, Zeena's gregarious nature was music in Ethan's ears. But her voice has become a "flat whine," unlike Mattie's "sweet treble," though at the end of the novel Mattie's voice, too, becomes a querulous drone. Even the kitchen reflects the contrasts between the two women. It is a "poor place, not 'spruce' and shining as his mother had kept it in his boyhood; but it was surprising what a homelike look the mere fact of Zeena's absence gave it." Images of death are evident in the "black wraith of a deciduous creeper flagged on the porch," the missing "L" in Ethan's farmhouse, and a "dead cucumber-vine" dangling from the porch.

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

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

**Setting**

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

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

**Irony**

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

Wharton employs a first-person narrator in this work, an outsider who has taken up residence at Starkfield and who pieced together the story of Ethan Frome. The narrator hardly functions as a character at all, but as an educated outsider he possesses the skills needed to tell this story. According to Wharton, "only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger categories."

Analysis: Ideas for Group Discussions

In *Ethan Frome*, Wharton has stripped away from her story all extraneous details. What remains is a dramatic exposition of three characters locked into a nightmarish situation. There is a timeless quality about this novella since Wharton seems to have exposed the hellish quality of the lives of all people who find themselves trapped by circumstances in situations that are not fulfilling. One avenue for group discussion is whether Wharton's story holds the universality that its admirers claim for it. Some may not find anything transcendent about this grim story, seeing Ethan, Zenobia, and Mattie as tied to a particular time and place. Discussions may focus on the root causes of this tragedy — economics, Puritanical values, and climate.

1. Which serves as more of a constraint on the lives of Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie — poverty or moral principle?

2. Is Zeena Frome's illness before the accident imaginary or real? How can we tell?

3. Is the device of the narrator useful? How does Wharton use it to shape her material?

4. In what way do place and weather dictate what happens? Could this story have occurred in a warmer climate?

5. How do the physical characteristics of the three leading characters suggest the roles they play in *Ethan Frome*?

6. Is Wharton's portrayal of passion in such a sparse and uninviting atmosphere effective?

7. Comment on the uses Wharton makes of the cat and the pickle dish. Given the role they play in the story, is it significant that they belong to Zeena?

8. Consider the options open to both Zeena and Mattie in this novella. Can they be considered victims of an economic system inhospitable to women as well as of a harsh physical environment?

9. Is Ethan Frome a fully realized character, or is he the imaginative construct of the narrator who is telling the story?

10. Ethan Frome has been described as presenting a view of a nightmarish situation that is lived on a daily basis over a long period. Do you agree that *nightmare* is the appropriate name for the twenty-four years of communal living shared by Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie?

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1880s: People in New England farming communities led a difficult, culturally void existence.
1911: Innovations in transportation made communication easier between the villages and gave residents access to recreational activities in the bigger towns.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Today: Since its launch from the shuttle Atlantis in 1990, the Hubble Space Telescope has provided a flood of new images of the universe. For example, it shows star clusters 2.2 million light years away, springtime dust storms at the Martian north pole, and (for the first time) the surface of Pluto.

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

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

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

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

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

In her introduction to *Ethan Frome*, Wharton acknowledges her indebtedness to Balzac's "La Grande Breteche" and Robert Browning's The *Ring and the Book* (1869) for the structure of her novella. Balzac in particular uses a similar situation (a curious stranger in a provincial setting) for the frame of his story.

Some critics also find elements of Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence in this work. Elizabeth Ammons, for example, finds a kinship between *Ethan Frome* and Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand" and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) pointing to the names of characters (Ethan and Zenobia), the bleak New England setting, and the theme of the "male fear of woman."

Analysis: Related Titles

In 1917, Wharton published *Summer*. In this companion piece to *Ethan Frome*, Wharton uses a similar Berkshire setting, only the season is now summer and the tale itself is grimmer and more melodramatic.

Analysis: Adaptations

In 1993 *Ethan Frome* was made into a film written by Richard Nelson, directed by James Madden, and starring Liam Neeson as Ethan, Patricia Arquette as Mattie, and Joan Allen as Zeena. The movie successfully conveys the icy atmosphere and the grim poverty of the Fromes, and it leaves one with the overwhelming feeling of lives that have been lost or used up by cruel circumstances. It is not a literal rendering of Wharton's novella. Many changes have been made in the adaptation. The stranger from another place is no longer a visiting engineer who is spending a winter in Starkfield but is now a young minister who has come to serve at the local Congregational Church and who is attempting to put down roots in Starkfield. The story of *Ethan Frome* is not presented as the vision of an outsider who has pieced the story together from what he could find out from various sources but as a kind of confession made by Ruth Hale to the minister. Ruth is about the same age as Mattie Silver and has known the Frome family all her life. The story Ruth tells differs from the engineer's version in many details. Some of these are relatively minor, e.g., Ethan asks Andrew Hale for a thirty-dollar rather than a fifty-dollar advance on his lumber transaction in the film. Others are new details that may have been deemed more cinematic or dramatic than the original. For example, in the novella, Ethan sees young Denis Eady out in his cutter on the day that Zeena has gone to Bettsbridge, and he jealously imagines that the young man has gone to visit Mattie; in the film, Ethan stops at Eady's shop to buy sweets for Mattie and Denis asks him to take a pink ribbon to Mattie as a present. There are also significant changes in the relationship between Ethan and Mattie. In the film, the two become lovers and make love on two occasions. In the novella, these two opportunities for sex are very explicitly not part of the narrator's vision. In the film, Zeena is sleeping in the room across the hall from the lovers. The next morning, she attributes the sounds she heard during the night to the dying moans of a fox that Ethan had been attempting to poison throughout the film for preying on chickens in the barn. Later that morning, Mattie attempts to kill herself in the barn with the poison for the fox. There are no fox and no suicide attempt in the novella. In short, the film makes the relationship between Ethan and Mattie much more physical and outwardly emotional. The characters as portrayed by Wharton are so severe and restrained in their display of emotion, that the deep-rooted feelings that are central to their story would have most likely been missed in a literal rendering of the novella. The film is fortunate in its cast, particularly Joan Allen as Zeena.

*Ethan Frome* also was successfully adapted for the stage in 1936 by Owen and Donald Davis. It starred Raymond Massey as Ethan, Pauline Lord as Zeena, and Ruth Gordon as Mattie. Wharton read this version and praised it for its faithfulness to the original novella. As in the movie, a number of changes were made to realize dramatically what is essentially an internal drama. In particular, the relationship between Zeena and
Ethan is developed more fully and dramatically in the play. A detailed analysis of the differences between the play and the novella may be found in Marlene Springer's *Ethan Frome: A Nightmare of Need* (1993).

**Analysis: Media Adaptations**

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

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

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

An unabridged audio recording read by C. M. Herbert is available from Blackstone Audio-books.

**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

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

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

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

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

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

**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**Sources**


**Further Reading**


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


An investigation into Wharton's work and personal relationships from a feminist perspective, drawing on many previously unavailable sources.


Blackall discusses Wharton's use of the ellipsis, showing how they may represent (among other things) the inexpressible or that which a character is unwilling to express. They might also be used to entice the reader into imaginative collaboration with the writer.
A review of three of Wharton's works, including *Ethan Frome*, which novelist and critic Burgess calls too pessimistic to be true.

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

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

Murad explores the biographical ties between Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome.

An excerpt from Nevius's *Edith Wharton* in which he discusses, among other things, Ethan's heroic possibilities and Wharton's handling of point of view.

A book-length chronicle of Wharton's wartime relief and chanty activities and her wartime writings.

A book-length study of Ethan Frome that includes discussions on the literary and historical context of the novel, characterization, style and symbolism.

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

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

**Bibliography**


narrator as character is on an equal footing with the other main characters and that the narrator’s “vision” is a manipulation of reality and must be questioned.

Howe, Irving, ed. *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962. Two of the essays deal directly with *Ethan Frome*. Blake Nevius’ “On *Ethan Frome*” disputes previous positive interpretations and posits the idea that the work demonstrates a “despair arising from the contemplation of spiritual waste.” Lionel Trilling’s influential essay “The Morality of Inertia” takes the position that Ethan makes no moral decision, paralyzed by inaction, and that this type of “inertia” characterizes a large part of humanity. Both essays are valuable in terms of understanding the traditional critical perspectives on this work.


