Ethan Frome

_Ethan Frome_ is narrated by an engineer who has taken a job in the small New England town of Starkfield early in the 20th century. While there, he becomes fascinated with a taciturn villager named Ethan Frome, who walks with difficulty and whose gruffness makes him an intriguing figure. The engineer discovers that Ethan, who is now in his 50s, suffered a severe accident many years earlier, and as the engineer befriends Ethan and asks local citizens about Ethan's life, he becomes more and more fascinated by what he discovers.

When he was a young man, Ethan had hoped to leave Starkfield to pursue a career in engineering. However, the death of his father followed by the sickness of his mother led him to return home, where his mother was cared for by a distant cousin named Zenobia (Zeena) Pierce, who was seven years Ethan's senior. Eventually she and Ethan married, but Zenobia soon became plagued by both real and imagined sickness, and Ethan found himself trapped in an essentially loveless, joyless marriage. After a number of years, Zeena's doctor advised that she get some assistance with the housework, so a young and attractive cousin named Mattie Silver came to live in the Frome household. Ethan found himself increasingly drawn to this vivacious young woman, and she was equally attracted to Ethan. Ethan enjoyed spending time with Mattie, who contrasted so strongly with his wife both in her physical appearance and in her general moods and attitudes.

While Zeena was away from home on a trip out of town, Mattie and Ethan enjoyed a pleasant supper together until Zeena's cat jumped onto the table and knocked a red pickle dish—one of Zeena's prize possessions, which she never used—onto the floor, breaking it to pieces. Mattie was distraught, but Ethan promised to glue the dish back together. Later in the evening, Ethan was tempted to kiss Mattie but refrained from doing so. When Zeena returned from her trip, she announced that she had hired a new helper to replace Mattie, who would now be sent away. Ethan, alone with Mattie, finally did kiss her, but he also realized that he was powerless to prevent Zeena from having her sent away. When Zeena discovered the broken pickle dish, she was even more determined to have Mattie out of the house.

Ethan tried to think of ways to spend the rest of his life with Mattie, but no practical plan presented itself. As he drove Mattie in mid-winter to the train station, they paused to enjoy a sled ride down a hill. Desperate at the thought of losing Ethan, Mattie suggested that they sled down the hill again and deliberately kill themselves by smashing the sled into a huge tree. As Ethan awoke after the crash, he could hear that Mattie, too, was still alive. As the novel closes, the narrator and Ethan enter the latter's home, where the narrator meets the elderly Zeena and the paralyzed Mattie, who now resembles Zeena both in her sickness and in her gloomy view of life. Ethan has been trapped in a frustrating and unhappy relationship with both women for many of the last two dozen years.

First Glimpse of Ethan Frome

Context

In the following passage, which is the very beginning of the novel's untitled preface, the narrator explains his initial introduction not only to Ethan Frome but also to the events of Frome's life.

I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story. If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade: and you must have asked who he was.

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

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

Analysis

The book opens, significantly enough, with the word I, thereby emphasizing a point that is often underemphasized in commentary on the novel: The entire story of Ethan Frome, at least as we possess it in this text, is shaped and reconstructed by the first-person narrator, who cannot possibly know all of the intimate events, thoughts, and feelings he subsequently recounts. His perspective is necessarily limited, and thus, his telling of Frome's tale is necessarily, to a great degree, an imaginative re-creation rather than a totally reliable, entirely objective, and completely omniscient account. A case can even be made that the novel inevitably tells us more about the mind, emotions, and values of the narrator than it does about any of the central personalities. Those personalities, after all, are largely characters in what is necessarily a piece of fiction of the narrator's making.

The narrator instantly creates interest and suspense by alluding to a "story" he obviously intends to share and obviously assumes will be worth our hearing. He claims to have gotten the story "bit by bit," just as we as readers will now get it from him, and he also claims to have gotten it "from various people." This claim lends credibility to his account, because it shows that he has been open to the testimony of people familiar with the story, but it also emphasizes the importance of individual perspectives—perspectives that the narrator will inevitably blend, shape, and color. By directly addressing his readers as "you," the narrator creates an intimate relationship with his audience; he implies that he and the reader have much in common and share similar experiences and values.

The fact that the story is set in a town named "Starkville" is, of course, symbolically significant. The name of the town already suggests the bleak, barren nature both of the physical environment and of Frome's eventual story. Meanwhile, the fact that Frome drives a "hollow-backed bay" already suggests that he is too poor to afford a better horse, while the fact that he is handicapped already foreshadows the various ways (physically, emotionally, socially) in which he has become a crippled being. The narrator's first glimpse of Frome is said to have "pulled [him] up sharp"—a detail that creates a sense of suspense and mystery, implying something startling about Frome's physical appearance. This air of suspense is enhanced when Frome is described as being "but the ruin of a man," since our natural instinct is to wonder why and how he was ruined and how he is coping with his ruined condition. The fact that Frome has a "careless powerful look" despite his "lameness" already suggests his complexity: He is physically weakened but still possesses an inner strength, and the combination makes him automatically intriguing. Ironically, it is precisely the "bleak and unapproachable" features of Frome's face that make the narrator (and his readers) want to know more about Frome: If Frome were immediately friendly and sociable, he might seem less fascinating. It is his distance and reserve that make him an object of both the narrator's and the reader's curiosity.

As we discover later, Frome's forbidding present physical appearance masks a sensitive inner nature, and it is this combination of outer toughness and reserve with inner tenderness and feeling that helps make him such a tragic figure. Frome walks with a lameness that checks "each step like the jerk of a chain" (phrasing that will soon come to symbolize all the various ways in which all human beings are limited and circumscribed by external circumstances), but in some ways, we will soon discover, Frome is hurting far more on the inside than he is hurting physically. His crippled leg will soon come to symbolize his largely crippled life. During our first glimpse of him he is alone, and a fundamental feeling of loneliness, in fact, will soon be revealed as the central affliction of his existence. At the same time, the repeated emphasis on Frome's physical handicap in this opening passage helps foreshadow the hugely important role that physical sickness will play in the novel as a whole. Such sickness helps lead to—and is also a major result of—the "smash-up" to which Harman Gow mysteriously and intriguingly alludes, and the cryptic reference to this event creates a further sense of suspense and prompts us to want to read further. What kind of "smash-up" does Gow have in mind? How did it happen? The fact that Gow, the one-time stage driver, knows "the chronicle of all the families on his line" not only gives his testimony added credibility but also helps emphasize the fact that there are few secrets (and no anonymity) in a small, provincial town. The opening passage emphasizes and foreshadows Frome's loneliness, but it also continually reminds us that he is inevitably part of a small, insular, remote, and rather inbred New England community.

Zeena Greets Ethan and Mattie

Context
In the following passage, which occurs near the end of chapter 2, Ethan has returned home at night with Mattie and tries to enter his darkened farmhouse. As he kneels on the porch, attempting to find the hidden key to the kitchen door, he is eventually greeted by his wife.

He was still kneeling when his eyes, on a level with the lower panel of the door, caught a faint ray beneath it. Who could be stirring in that silent house? He heard a step on the stairs, and again for an instant the thought of tramps tore through him. Then the door opened and he saw his wife.

Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, 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. To Ethan, still in the rosy haze of his hour with Mattie, the sight came with the intense precision of the last dream before waking. He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like.

She drew aside without speaking, and Mattie and Ethan passed into the kitchen, which had the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night.

"Guess you forgot about us, Zeena," Ethan joked, stamping the snow from his boots.

"No. I just felt so mean I couldn't sleep."

Mattie came forward, unwinding her wraps, the colour of the cherry scarf in her fresh lips and cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Zeena! Isn't there anything I can do?"

"No; there's nothing." Zeena turned away from her. "You might 'a' shook off that snow outside," she said to her husband.

Analysis

Whereas many of Ethan's most important and meaningful encounters with Mattie take place outdoors, his dealings with Zeena almost always occur inside their small house, which is often described (as it is here) as being dark and gloomy. The fact that Ethan glimpses merely a "faint ray" of light within the house seems symbolic of the dim and dismal nature of his life there and especially of his relationship with his wife. This emphasis on the dreary nature of the house is reinforced by the reference to its silence; a woman with a different kind of personality and disposition than Zeena might have been waiting up, with all the lights blazing, eagerly awaiting the return of her beloved husband. Instead, the house seems dark and almost dead, and indeed, for a moment Ethan even contemplates the possibility that "tramps" may have broken into the place—a prospect that adds at least the possibility of some excitement, of something unusual, having happened in his otherwise monotonous life. Is he even hoping, perhaps, that tramps may have entered and done some harm to Zeena? A few sentences before the beginning of this segment, he had even seemed to wish for Zeena's death, so when the narrator reports that "the thought of the tramps tore through" Ethan, we cannot be sure whether Ethan is feeling fear, hope, or some strange combination of both.

In any case, Zeena soon appears, and she seems no more delighted to see her husband than he seems to see her. They exchange no embrace, nor even any greeting. Zeena is described simply as "his wife": She is defined by her role rather than being regarded as a distinct individual. She stands, appropriately enough, against a "dark background," although it also seems ironic that the kitchen—the symbolic center of nourishment and vitality in any house—seems so dark and gloomy. She is "tall" (an adjective that might have made her seem attractive), but instantly she is also described as "angular" (an adjective that immediately cancels the attractive potential of the first). She covers herself with a "quilted counterpane" (bedspread), a fact that symbolizes both the literal and the symbolic coldness of the scene. Her gesture here implies her general tendency to withdraw, to shelter herself, to put distance between herself and her husband. Instead of seeking warmth in an embrace from Ethan, she shields her body from any kind of human contact. Her breast (traditionally a powerful symbol of female sexuality) is described as "flat," implying her inability to nurture and her lack of erotic appeal. Likewise, her "puckered throat" makes her seem prematurely old and wrinkled, while her general thinness almost gives her the appearance of a corpse, especially thanks to the reference to "the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face." Meanwhile, the "ring of crimping-pins" make her hair—another traditional symbol of feminine sexuality—seem anything but loose, free-flowing, or inviting. Instead, the metallic pins make her seem artificial and constrained. Ethan's probing vision of Zeena is described as a "dream," but it more nearly resembles a nightmare.

The narrator reports that Zeena "drew aside without speaking," and both the action and the silence seem utterly typical of her. She resists human contact or communication, and her behavior here implies her self-protectiveness, her distance, her lack of engagement, and her general lack of warmth. It seems entirely fitting, then, that her encounter with Ethan and Mattie (whom she
never acknowledges) occurs in a room that has "the deadly chill of a vault." Ethan tries to joke with her, perhaps merely to "break the ice" but perhaps also because of guilt or nervousness about his growing affection for Mattie. When he suggests that Zeena may have forgotten about them, she responds by reporting that, on the contrary, she "just felt so mean" that she "couldn't sleep." The word mean here obviously denotes "poorly" or "sickly," but just as obviously the word's other associations come into play. Zeena will prove to be "mean" in more ways than one, and she will inflict some of her own meanness and suffering on both Ethan and Mattie. If Zeena were a more generous, thoughtful person, her sickness and suffering would make her seem sympathetic and pitiful; instead, she has allowed her physical sickliness to corrupt her spirit and her attitudes toward others.

Mattie, symbolically, "comes forward," the sort of movement Zeena rarely makes. Mattie, just as symbolically, is described as "unwinding her wraps": In other words, she undresses while Zeena bundles up. She opens herself to others as Zeena never does. Mattie is full of all the vitality and attractiveness Zeena lacks—a fact that is emphasized by the reference to "the colour of the cherry scarf in her fresh lips and cheeks." Mattie is described in erotic, sensual terms, whereas Zeena almost seems spectral. Mattie shows a kind of compassion and concern for Zeena that Zeena rarely shows to others, and when Zeena remarks that "there's nothing" Mattie can do for her, her words seem symbolic of her whole negative outlook on life. She literally and figuratively turns away from offered help. She neither seeks nor welcomes bonds with others, and her last act in this segment is to criticize Ethan for shaking off his snowy boots inside the house. She not only chastises her husband but does so in front of another woman—an act that is doubly emasculating.

**Mattie Greets Ethan**

**Context**

In the following passage, from near the end of chapter 4, Ethan returns to the farmhouse while Zeena is away on a trip, and Mattie is home alone. He is surprised at first to discover that the door is locked.

Startled at finding it locked he rattled the handle violently; then he reflected that Mattie was alone and that it was natural she should barricade herself at nightfall. He stood in the darkness expecting to hear her step. It did not come, and after vainly straining his ears he called out in a voice that shook with joy: "Hello, Matt!"

Silence answered; but in a minute or two he caught a sound on the stairs and saw a line of light about the doorframe, as he had seen it the night before. So strange was the precision with which the incidents of the previous evening were repeating themselves that he half expected, when he heard the key turn, to see his wife before him on the threshold; but the door opened, and Mattie faced him.

She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. Then, striking upward, it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows.

She wore her usual dress of darkish stuff, and there was no bow at her neck; but through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon. This tribute to the unusual transformed and glorified her. She seemed to Ethan taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion. She stood aside, smiling silently, while he entered, and then moved away from him with something soft and flowing in her gait. She set the lamp on the table, and he saw that it was carefully laid for supper, with fresh doughnuts, stewed blueberries and his favourite pickles in a dish of gay red glass. A bright fire glowed in the stove and the cat lay stretched before it, watching the table with a drowsy eye.

**Analysis**

This episode obviously echoes the earlier one from chapter 2 in which Ethan found Zeena at home alone. In both cases Ethan comes back to the farmhouse only to discover that the door is locked. The superficial similarities between the two segments, however, only help highlight the crucial differences between the two women in Ethan's life and the contrasts between Ethan's responses to them. It already seems significant, for instance, that Ethan immediately associates Mattie with "natural" behavior, whereas he tends to think of Zeena in terms of her artificiality, such as her metal hairpins. His basic emotion when he stood on the steps earlier was one of apprehension, and perhaps even hope, that something unfortunate might have happened to Zeena; now, however, he is filled with "joy" at the thought of encountering Mattie, whom he addresses by an affectionate nickname ("Matt"). It is difficult to imagine him ever referring to Zeena so warmly.
The fact that Mattie possesses a "slim young throat" not only reinforces the contrast with the way Zeena was described in the earlier segment but also implies her vitality and her erotic attractiveness. Meanwhile, the fact that her wrist is "brown" implies that she (unlike Zeena, the housebound invalid) spends a good deal of time in the nurturing, tanning sun, while the fact that her wrist is "no bigger than a child's" makes her seem once more the opposite of Zeena, who seems prematurely aged. When Zeena, in the earlier scene, held a lamp, it had only highlighted her physical unattractiveness, but the lamp now has precisely the opposite effect when held by Mattie's hand: The light, "striking upward, … threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows." Nearly every word in this sentence suggests some kind of sensual appeal, involving especially the senses of sight, touch, and even (metaphorically) taste. Zeena had been associated with harsh and uninviting angles, but everything about Mattie instead seems linked to curves and softness.

The fact that Mattie is described as wearing "her usual dress of darkish stuff" implies (especially in that final noun) Ethan's basic ignorance of feminine fashion, but the phrasing also suggests that there is nothing special or extravagant about the way Mattie dresses. She does not need to wear costly apparel to seem appealing, and of course, she could not afford such apparel in any case. Ironically, the very plainness of her clothing highlights her own personal beauty, whereas the drabness of Zeena's clothing only accentuates Zeena's personal plainness. It might have seemed extravagant and unsubtle if Mattie had indeed worn a "bow at her neck"; instead, the way she decorates herself is more understated: "through her hair she had run a streak of crimson ribbon." Once more, then, she is associated with a bright, vital color (the color red is almost her signature hue in this novel), and the beauty of her hair, which is apparently loose-flowing as the ribbon, contrasts in every way with Zeena's cramped, crimped hair and its metallic hairpins. Ethan considers the ribbon a "tribute to the unusual" by which Mattie is "transformed and glorified." Such phrasing suggests that Ethan's life is so boring, so monotonous and predictable, that any hint of anything unusual is capable of exciting and stimulating him, even if it is a mere ribbon in a woman's hair. In a book otherwise so much concerned with mutability, mortality, and negative change, the idea that a human being can seem "transformed and glorified" by a mere strip of colored cloth sounds almost transcendental and even religious.

Zeena had seemed tall but angular; Mattie, in contrast, appears not only tall but also "fuller, [and] more womanly in shape and motion." The mere fact that she moves is itself symbolically significant, for Zeena was (and is) an essentially static figure, whose movements often involve withdrawal. Mattie, too, moves away in this scene, but it is "with something soft and flowing in her gait." Meanwhile, the fact that Mattie is described as "smiling silently" suggests that she enjoys a different, more subtle, more intimate kind of communication with Ethan than he has with Zeena. Silence in this novel is often cold and forbidding, but in the present instance it is warm and inviting. Ethan and Zeena do talk, but there is no real bond or communion between them. All Mattie has to do, however, is simply smile in silence, and she thereby reignites the connection Ethan feels toward her. The fact that she has provided him with abundant physical nourishment not only indicates her thoughtfulness but also associates her symbolically with sensual pleasure and satisfaction. Finally, her provision of the varied meal also suggests her domestic skills and implies that she would make a good wife, if marriage to her were only possible.

**Ethan's Anger at Zeena**

**Context**

In the following episode, from the middle of chapter 7, Ethan reacts to Zeena's plan to send Mattie away and hire a new caretaker.

Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. It was the sense of his helplessness that sharpened his antipathy. There had never been anything in her that one could appeal to; but as long as he could ignore and command he had remained indifferent. Now she had mastered him and he abhorred her. Mattie was her relation, not his: there were no means by which he could compel her to keep the girl under her roof. All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way. She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others. For a moment such a flame of hate rose in him that it ran down his arm and clenched his fist against her. He took a wild step forward and then stopped.

"You're—you're not coming down?" he said in a bewildered voice.

"No. I guess I'll lay down on the bed a little while," she answered mildly; and he turned and walked out of the room.
In the kitchen Mattie was sitting by the stove, the cat curled up on her knees. She sprang to her feet as Ethan entered and carried the covered dish of meat-pie to the table.
"I hope Zeena isn't sick?" she asked.
"No."
She shone at him across the table. "Well, sit right down then. You must be starving." She uncovered the pie and pushed it over to him. So they were to have one more evening together, her happy eyes seemed to say!

Analysis

The fact that this scene occurs in the bedroom of Ethan and Zeena seems significant. Rather than the bedroom functioning as a site of love and marital harmony, it functions instead as a site of tension, hostility, hatred, and even of near-violence, at least on Ethan's part. It is typical of the lack of clear communication and the absence of common understanding between Ethan and Zeena that the latter has no idea just how upset and even enraged her husband feels. Ethan is characteristically reticent and keeps his emotions boxed up inside of himself, and Zeena is too unperceptive and unintuitive to recognize or even imagine how he feels. The fact that Ethan feels "loathing" for his wife implies not merely hatred but also disgust, abhorrence, contempt, and even a sense of frustrated superiority, while the fact that Ethan is capable of such strong feeling (even if he does not openly show it) contrasts with his normally passive, placid external demeanor. His loathing for Zeena is a reflection, ironically, of the depth of his love for Mattie.

The description of Zeena as formerly a "listless creature" makes her seem somehow less than fully human and even less than fully alive. To be listless is to lack any sense of relish or strong inclination; etymologically, the word is related to lustless and thus suggests her general lack of vitality. At the same time, the description of her as a "mysterious alien presence" full of an "evil energy" makes her seem powerful almost in spite of herself, almost as if she were a kind of dangerous, supernatural being. Both characters, then, are presented here in complex ways: Ethan is full of a "helplessness that sharpened his antipathy," while Zeena is normally "listless" and "sullen" but now seems strangely potent. Both characters emerge from such descriptions as more fully rounded, more fully complicated personalities than they might otherwise seem.

Ethan's past power over Zeena was rooted partly in traditional male privilege: As long as he had the power to "command," he could also "ignore" her and thus remain "indifferent." Now, however, because Mattie is Zeena's relative, it is Zeena who has a kind of power (control of a household) traditionally reserved for males. As a result, Ethan feels that he has been "mastered"—a significantly gendered verb that implies that Zeena, in this instance, now wears the metaphorical pants in the family. It is partly because of her power that Ethan is now said to have "abhored" her, a verb that implies both hatred and fear. Etymologically, the word means "to shrink back in dread; to stand with one's hair on end; to stand aghast; to shudder with fright," etc. (Oxford English Dictionary). It is a word that suggests horror, extreme repugnance, disgust, utter hate, loathing, and abomination. It is, therefore, a word that implies Ethan's dread of Zeena's enhanced authority and mastery: Even the house is now spoken of as if it belongs to her ("there were no means by which he could compel her to keep the girl under her roof"). For Ethan, the present conflict with Zeena is simply the latest in (and thus a symbol of) what he considers a long history of "failure, hardship, and vain effort," and he regards Zeena as the very embodiment of, indeed as the literal source of, all his frustrations. He sees her as "the woman who at every turn had barred his way" and who "had taken everything ... from him." Yet, perhaps such phrasing should make us somewhat suspicious of Ethan's assessment of his plight; perhaps it should make us wonder about his own personal responsibility for his predicament. Perhaps we are not meant to see Ethan—as Ethan seems to see himself—entirely as a victim of a completely malevolent woman, especially since it was Ethan, after all, who chose to marry her in the first place. And, Zeena surely is not responsible for all the "failure, hardship, and vain effort" of Ethan's "youth." Very subtly, then, the phrasing here suggests the possibility of a different, more nuanced view of Ethan's plight than the view Ethan himself adopts. The very vehemence of his tendency to blame Zeena suggests that perhaps we should not take his assessment entirely at face value. Surely Ethan bears at least some personal responsibility for the situation in which he finds himself.

As the scene ends, Zeena is left in an utterly typical and symbolic position: lying in bed, alone and presumably feeling somewhat ill, and literally and figuratively above and distanced from the two other occupants of her house. Just as typically, Mattie is concerned that Zeena may be "sick," and although Ethan answers that she is not, his reply seems ambiguous. Zeena seems ill in all sorts of ways, and so does Ethan. As the episode concludes, however, Mattie is associated, as usual, with light, with life, with warmth, and with the provision of literal and symbolic nourishment.

Ethan Reminisces with Mattie
He looked up and down the little pebbly beach till his eye lit on a fallen tree-trunk half submerged in snow. "There's where we sat at the picnic," he reminded her.

The entertainment of which he spoke was one of the few that they had taken part in together: a "church picnic" which, on a long afternoon of the preceding summer, had filled the retired place with merrymaking. Mattie had begged him to go with her but he had refused. Then, toward sunset, coming down from the mountain where he had been felling timber, he had been caught by some strayed revellers and drawn into the group by the lake, where Mattie, encircled by facetious youths, and bright as a blackberry under her spreading hat, was brewing coffee over a gipsy fire. He remembered the shyness he had felt at approaching her in his uncouth clothes, and then the lighting up of her face, and the way she had broken through the group to come to him with a cup in her hand. They had sat for a few minutes on the fallen log by the pond, and she had missed her gold locket, and set the young men searching for it; and it was Ethan who had spied it in the moss. ... That was all; but all their intercourse had been made up of just such inarticulate flashes, when they seemed to come suddenly upon happiness as if they had surprised a butterfly in the winter woods ... "It was right there I found your locket," he said, pushing his foot into a dense tuft of blueberry bushes. "I never saw anybody with such sharp eyes!" she answered.

She sat down on the tree-trunk in the sun and he sat down beside her.

Analysis

Here, as so often elsewhere in the novel, Ethan and Mattie are associated with the beautiful outdoors, whereas Zeena is almost always depicted as confined to a particular room within her house. In the present case, however, the reference to "a fallen tree-trunk half submerged in snow" will seem a grim example of foreshadowing to anyone who has read the novel more than once, since a sled crash into a tree will be the event that will later ruin forever the happiness of Ethan and Mattie, which is so charmingly depicted here. Meanwhile, the fact that Ethan recalls one of his first intimate encounters with Mattie as occurring at a "church picnic" implies, by definition, a mood of relaxation, fellowship, and mutual enjoyment, as well as a break from everyday routine—precisely the sort of activities in which Ethan engages all too infrequently. Significantly, the outing is a church picnic (suggesting the importance of even smaller communities within the already-small community of Starkfield), and just as significantly, Ethan initially refuses to participate, even though Mattie has "begged" him to take part. Ethan is generally isolated, not only from his wife, but from the community at large, and part of the positive effect Mattie has on his life is to help him reestablish connections with a wider sort of existence. In the meantime, the fact that Mattie "begged" and that Ethan initially "refused" epitomizes the fundamental differences in their personalities: Hers is passionate, while his is reserved and aloof.

Just as typical of Ethan, however, are his capacity and penchant for hard work. While the others have been partying, he has been "felling timber" (an ironic activity in light of his eventual fate). His devotion to labor enhances our sense of his seriousness, especially in contrast with the carefree, "facetious youths" by whom Mattie is "encircled." The attention the young men pay her implies her sexual attractiveness, while the fact that they are described as "facetious" suggests not only that they are joking and amusing but perhaps also that they are not to be taken entirely seriously. She, in any case, seems more attracted by the older, more mature, more taciturn, and thus perhaps more masculine Ethan. The facetiousness of the young men who swarm around her makes Ethan seem more manly and more adult by contrast.

Mattie, as usual, is described in ways that associate her with nature and with nourishment. In a particularly striking and unusual simile, she is depicted as being "bright as a blackberry," paradoxical phrasing that conveys the beauty of something that is usually overlooked or merely taken for granted. As she sits, "brewing coffee over a gipsy fire," we are reminded of all her earlier associations with domestic skills and with savory provisions. Mattie is often shown making or presenting food, usually for and to Ethan, while the reference to the "gipsy fire" implies her simple needs and also her capacity to adapt to almost any circumstance. (It is hard to imagine Zeena ever cooking anywhere outside her own kitchen.) Here, as before, Mattie is associated with literal and figurative warmth, with light, with both physical and symbolic movement toward Ethan, and with a tendency to offer him both physical and emotional sustenance.
Part of the reason that Ethan is so strongly attracted to Mattie is that she is so obviously attracted to him. She, indeed, is the one who seems in pursuit here, and inevitably Ethan finds her active interest in him flattering. The fact that they sit together on the "fallen log" is, of course, tinged with a slight touch of irony in view of their later encounter on the sled with the fateful tree, but mainly this detail puts them both literally and figuratively in contact with nature even as it isolates them from the rest of the group (especially from the "facetious youths," who would no doubt like to count themselves as Ethan's competition). While these youths search in vain for Mattie's lost locket, it is Ethan, of course, who eventually spots it—a detail that may suggest a greater perceptiveness born of greater maturity and experience. As Mattie helped him by offering him fresh-brewed coffee, so he is able to return the favor by finding her locket. Their interactions are typified by this kind of shared concern and mutual assistance. And, of course, their interactions are also often associated with imagery of light (such as the reference to "inarticulate flashes"), natural beauty ("as if they had surprised a butterfly in the winter woods"), and natural sustenance ("pushing his foot into a dense tuft of blueberry bushes"). Mattie praises him, sincerely, for gifts he actually possesses ("I never saw anybody with such sharp eyes!"), and as the segment closes, they are shown once again in a posture of peace, comfort, and mutual relaxation—precisely some of the traits missing from Ethan's relationship with his wife.