

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Ethan Frome (Unabridged)

by
Edith Wharton

Book Information

Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome (Unabridged)

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Interest Level: UG

This tragic love story, with its setting in remote New England, has become one of the classics of twentieth-century American literature.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Love; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Ethan Frome a taciturn New England farmer who is trapped in a loveless marriage and falls in love with his wife's young cousin

Mattie Silver Zenobia's young and charming relative who brings happiness to Ethan's life

Ruth Varnum Hale a friend of Mattie and Ethan who witnesses the aftermath of their horrific accident and recounts the details to the narrator

the Narrator a traveling engineer who gets to know Ethan and discovers the details of his tragic life

Zenobia (Zeena) Frome Ethan's cold, overbearing, and hypochondriacal wife

Vocabulary

"L" a series of rooms connecting a New England farm house to the barn

almshouse poorhouse, or public place for the needy

counterpane a coverlet or bedspread

pine-boles the trunks of pine trees

sledge a horse-drawn vehicle on runners used over ice or snow

sorrel a light-brown colored horse

Synopsis

As the story opens, the narrator, an engineer on temporary assignment near the quiet town of

Starkfield, becomes intrigued with one of the local residents, Ethan Frome. He finds there is a tragic story behind the man's defeated air, and he determines to put the pieces of Frome's story together through tentative inquiries of Frome's Starkfield neighbors. After the engineer hires Frome for daily transportation by sleigh to the railroad station, he hopes to learn more from the man himself. At this point the action moves to the Starkfield of twenty years prior.

Ethan was a subsistence farmer whose sickly parents had both died after extended illnesses. Ethan had married his wife, Zeena, after she had come to the farm to nurse his mother. Shortly after their wedding, she herself became a self-absorbed hypochondriac, and their spare existence was bleak and unhappy.

Mattie Silver, a relative of Zeena, came to live with the Fromes after her father's death left her destitute. From the beginning, Ethan viewed Mattie's presence as the one source of vibrancy and vitality in his life. He looked forward to walking her back to the farm on those nights when she attended a social function in town, and he was overjoyed to learn, on one special night, that he was to have a chance to be alone with her. Zeena was to be out of town overnight to see a new doctor.

That night Mattie prepared a special meal for herself and Ethan, and used the prized pickle dish that Zeena never took out, not even for company. Unfortunately the pickle dish was broken. Even so, the evening was filled with joy for Ethan and it deepened the regard he and Mattie felt for each other. Upon Zeena's return, Ethan was crushed to learn that she wanted a hired girl to take Mattie's place. Worse still, Zeena discovered her broken pickle dish and ordered Mattie out of the house the next day.

Ethan became desperate at the thought of losing Mattie, but felt he had no alternative but to stay with his sickly, domineering wife. Then, on the way to the railroad station where they would part forever, Ethan and Mattie finally expressed their feelings for each

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other. Each felt utterly trapped and ultimately decided on a desperate measure whereby they could be together forever - they would coast headlong into a large elm tree at the bottom of the hill.

The ride was heady and ecstatic, but the result was not as the two lovers had planned: after several days in which her life hung in the balance, it became evident that Mattie would survive but be maimed for life.

After the accident, Mattie returned to the Frome farm, and Zeena miraculously "recovered" to care for both her and Ethan. For years, the three lived a hopeless existence, the women contentious and Ethan defeated. It was in this state that the engineer observed them, twenty years later, on an evening when snow prevented Ethan's sleigh from reaching Starkfield. As a Starkfield neighbor, Ruth Hale, tells him, "I don't see there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why do you think Zeena had an incredible "recovery" after the coasting accident, and she uncharacteristically dedicated herself to nursing Ethan and Mattie for over twenty years?

The author gives many clues that Zeena's illnesses are largely self-imposed and almost enjoyed by her. After the accident, it is likely that Zeena accept the inevitability of her lot - with three invalids, the only alternative may have been the "almshouse" to which she alluded earlier. It is also possible that she felt remorse for her treatment of her husband and her thoroughly decent young cousin.

Literary Analysis

The stark New England winter provides an appropriate backdrop for this bleak tale of desperation and entrapment. What setting details does the author use to create the mood of the story? How do the details relate to the characters themselves?

In the beginning of the story, the narrator uses an extended metaphor to liken the Starkfield winter to a six-month siege, from which the residents emerged "like a starved garrison." Throughout the story, the dark and cold seem to underscore the nature of Ethan's marriage to Zeena and the "frozen" condition of his heart.

Inferential Comprehension

After Ruth Hale, the narrator's landlady, hears that he has spent the night at the Frome farm, she reveals to him all the agony of the accident and its aftermath. Mrs. Hale stops herself before telling the narrator what Mattie said when she finally awoke. Reread her account from the last few pages of the book. What do you think Mattie might have told her?

Replies will vary. Given that Ruth was a close friend of Mattie, it is possible that she revealed their purpose in coasting down the hill that night. On the other hand, Mrs. Hale's loyalty to both of them and her sense of propriety might have prevented her from sharing this level of detail with the narrator.

Constructing Meaning

In the first chapter of the book, the narrator is struck by Ethan's limping gait, writing that "the lameness checked each step like the yank of a chain." Besides providing a powerful visual image of Frome's lameness, what other meaning might the author have intended to convey through use of this metaphor?

The chain that checked Ethan's gait might be an allusion to the trapped and imprisoned condition in which the narrator first found Ethan some twenty years after the "smash-up."

Teachable Skills

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Recognizing Setting Early in the book, when the narrator is invited to spend the night at the Frome farm, Frome mentions that he had to take down the "L" a while back. The narrator explains that the "L," a series of rooms connecting the house with the barn, was often the "hearthstone" of the New England farm, offering a link between the farmer's home and his work. To learn more about the setting in which this novel takes place, assign students to research and write a one-page paper on the subject of the New England "L." Ask them to include the design and function of the "L" as well as its emotional significance to the farmer and his family. How is the taking down of the "L" symbolic of the characters' relationships?

Understanding Characterization Imagine the scene that takes place when Zeena is told of the coasting accident involving Ethan and Mattie. Assign students to write an additional chapter for the book, this time narrated from the first-person point of view by Zeena. Provide dialogue that demonstrates Zeena's transformation from imperious hypochondriac to resigned caretaker.

Extending Meaning Initiate a classroom discussion in which students are asked how they feel about the decisions Ethan made with respect to Mattie. Was his initial decision to let her go a noble act of self-sacrifice or a sign of weakness? Should he have gone along with Mattie's suggestion to end their dilemma at the elm tree at the bottom of the Corbury Road?

Responding to Literature The story of Ethan Frome's life is all the more tragic because of those few chances he did have to escape Starkfield - chances that were snatched away. He was called back from engineering school to tend the farm and his sick father. Later, his one chance for happiness with Mattie ends with both of them maimed for life. Was the opportunity missed of their volition or was it taken away by circumstances beyond their control? Ask students to think of a missed chance or lost opportunity that occurred in their own lives. Reflect through individual journal entries.