

Ethan Frome

Prologue

*Study Guide
(Optional)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11. What does the narrator mean when he says, "[N]o one gave me an explanation of the look in his face which, as I persisted in thinking, neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there?"

12. What metaphoric motif does the narrator strengthen when he says, "He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface"?

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

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

15. On what suspenseful note does the Prologue end?

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

Chapter I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter III

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter V

1. What is strange about the cat's behavior?

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

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

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

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

Chapter VI

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

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

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

4. What theme does the sleet storm emphasize?

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

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

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

Chapter VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter VIII

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter IX

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

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

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

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

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

Epilogue

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

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

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

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

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