

ETHAN FROME

by Edith Wharton



THE AUTHOR

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was born into an upper-class family in New York City. Her parents were very class-conscious and were determined that their daughter marry well. Their attitude thwarted her first love, and at the age of 23 she married Edward Wharton, an older man of whom her family approved, but whom she did not love. They remained married until 1913, though their marriage was never a happy one. This bad marriage is generally thought to have stimulated her writing career, and one should not be surprised to see the theme of illicit passion running through most of her stories. In fact, her affair with a newspaperman brought about her divorce from her husband in 1913.

Wharton's early writing career was undistinguished, but she produced her first successful novel in 1905 when she published *The House of Mirth*. Near the end of her marriage she moved to Paris, where she lived for the rest of her life, publishing many other works, including *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. One of her closest associates in Paris was another American expatriate, Henry James, whose writing shares similar themes with those of Wharton's novels. Her writings raised moral questions about the relationship of the individual to society, though her perspective did not remain constant; in her early days she was considered a dangerous radical, and later was excoriated as a crotchety conservative. No matter the viewpoint, Wharton's writing shows great insights into human psychology and emotion.

Ethan Frome, though certainly among the most popular of Wharton's works, is a bit of an anomaly. Most of her stories and novels reflect her upper-class background and experience, whether describing the lives of wealthy New Yorkers or talking about the trials and tribulations of American expatriates. *Ethan Frome*, however, is a story of rural New England, and reflects a life of which Wharton had very little experience. Many critics have derided the novel for lack of authenticity, claiming that rural New England life is nothing like the way Wharton described it, but the authenticity of the novel lies in its insights into the human heart and human emotions, especially the struggles associated with loveless marriages and hopeless infatuations. The plot was taken from an actual incident about which Wharton heard while traveling through New England. She met one of the people involved in the sledding accident, and saw in it the potential for a novel.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, an engineer who has recently moved to the town of Starkfield, Massachusetts, begins to tell the story of Ethan Frome, a reclusive fifty-two year old lifelong resident of the town who walks with a limp. The narrator begins to ask questions, trying to find out about this mysterious man who hardly ever speaks to anyone. He gains little information from Harmon Gow, the stagecoach driver, learning little more than that Frome was crippled in a smash-up twenty-four years before and that the family had sunk into poverty because of a long series of reverses. Later he talks to Mrs. Ned Hale, who is better-educated and more refined than the rest of the townsfolk, but finds her unwilling to discuss the subject. At the time of a heavy snowstorm that makes travel nigh impossible, the narrator asks Ethan to give him a ride to the train station, which he willingly does when offered a dollar for doing so. The arrangement continues for over a week, until one day the snow is particularly heavy and the journey cannot be completed. Ethan invites the narrator to stay overnight at his farm, and at this point the narrator discovers Ethan's secret. He then begins to tell Ethan's tragic story.

When Ethan was young, he went to college to study engineering, but was forced to come home when his father fell ill. He later married, and his wife Zeena quickly became an ill-tempered shut-in, though much of her illness seemed to be psychosomatic. A year before the narrator begins his tale, Zeena's cousin Mattie Silver comes to live with the couple in order to keep house and care for Zeena. She is an indifferent housekeeper, but Ethan soon finds in her a kindred spirit - one who loves the natural world and appreciates Ethan's knowledge of it. She is also lively, unlike Zeena, and Ethan quietly grows to love her, though her liveliness is bestowed on all around her. She often goes to town at night when any simple amusement is available, and Ethan walks her there and back; these evenings soon become the highlights of the silent farmer's life. In time Zeena begins to notice little things about Ethan's behavior and starts to talk about finding a replacement for Mattie.

One evening Ethan picks up Mattie after a dance. Denis Eady tries to talk her into letting him give her a ride home, but she refuses. During the walk home, Ethan feels increasingly close to Mattie, reading every change of expression and gesture in the context of his unexpressed love for her, and inwardly reacting with jubilation or despair. She assures him that she has no plans to go elsewhere, and he comes very close to kissing her on the doorstep before they go into the house. He begins to imagine what might be if Zeena were to die. We also learnt that Mattie is the daughter of Zeena's cousin, a man whose ambitious business venture had failed, leading to his premature death and that of his wife soon thereafter. Mattie has few skills, and thus had trouble finding employment until relatives put her forward as a possible companion for Zeena.

One day Zeena announces that she is going to visit a doctor in a nearby town and that she will be gone overnight. Ethan's reaction is mixed, knowing that such trips in the past have been very expensive because of all the medicine she brings home and often never uses, but dreaming of what might happen if he is alone with Mattie for even a single night. As Ethan looks forward to his evening with Mattie, he remembers the circumstances under which he had married Zeena. His father had died and his mother was failing fast when his cousin Zenobia Pierce had come to help around the house. She had been very efficient, and after his mother died Ethan did not want to be left alone, so he married her. Within a year she became sickly and demanding, and Ethan's hope of moving to the city and taking up engineering again was lost, leaving him feeling trapped on the farm. Zeena is a mere shell of the woman he married seven years before. She is now a

very old 35, while Ethan is 28 and Mattie is 22. During the day Ethan tries to get immediate payment for the lumber he delivers to the local builder, knowing that Zeena will spend far too much money on drugs while she is gone. When he gets home, Mattie has dinner ready and they spend a quiet evening together. He enjoys sitting and watching her sew, and they have pleasant conversation, but when they go to bed he sadly realizes that he did not once so much as touch her. The only notable incident is when the cat knocks over a pickle dish that Zeena had gotten for a wedding present. Mattie is horrified because she had used the dish, which Zeena never brought out, without permission, and is convinced that Zeena will be furious. Ethan tries to reassure her, and fits the fragments together and returns them to the top shelf from which the dish had come, promising to glue them together later and insisting that Zeena won't even look at the thing for many months.

The next morning, Ethan sends Jotham Powell, his farmhand, to bring Zeena back home again while he goes to town to buy glue to fix the broken pickle dish. He hurries home, hoping to get the job taken care of and spend some time alone with Mattie, but finds that Zeena has gotten a ride from a local farmer and is already home. Zeena immediately begins complaining about her physical problems and tells Ethan that the doctor said she could not do anything at all around the house and needed to hire a housekeeper. She clearly intends to send Mattie away, and tells Ethan that the new girl will arrive the next day. Ethan is stricken, but has no idea how to resist her wishes, since Mattie is her cousin, not his. He also knows they cannot afford to hire a permanent housekeeper. Zeena refuses to come down to dinner, and Ethan shares the news with Mattie. She comes to his arms and he kisses her, then assures her that he will not allow Zeena to send her away. Zeena then unexpectedly enters the room and joins them for dinner. After eating, Zeena decides she needs her special stomach powders, which she has hidden in the china closet. When she goes to get them, she discovers the broken pickle dish and throws a fit, especially when she finds Mattie had the temerity to use it without permission. That night Ethan goes down to his makeshift study. He begins to write a note to Zeena telling her that he is running away with Mattie and that she can have the farm and everything on it. He can't go through with it because he knows Zeena could never handle the farm, or even get enough money from it to live on if she sold it, and that if he ran away he would have nothing with which to support Mattie. He wakes at dawn and sees Mattie looking at him. They reassure and comfort one another, but neither one's heart is in it. After breakfast, Ethan goes into town to try to borrow fifty dollars from Mr. Hale, the lawyer. Mrs. Hale is very sympathetic, but Ethan's conscience won't let him ask for the loan because he would have to deceive his friends and betray his wife.

When he gets back home, he finds Mattie packed and the sleigh at the door to transport her things. He goes upstairs to fetch her trunk and the two again kiss. After the trunk is sent to the train station on the sleigh, Ethan insists that he, not Jotham, will take Mattie to meet the train and then pick up the new girl. Zeena tries to stop them by making up jobs for Ethan to do, but he is determined to see Mattie off. On the way, the two stop to sled down the steep hill near the schoolhouse. They remember the first time they had felt close to one another - at a church picnic at the same site. They have a delightful ride, Ethan skillfully steering the sled away from the huge elm tree at the bottom of the hill. Before they return to the wagon, Mattie asks to go down the hill one more time, and this time asks Ethan to aim for the elm so that the two will be together forever. He complies, but the resulting crash does not kill either of them; it merely leaves Ethan with a permanent limp and Mattie totally paralyzed. Both are eventually taken back to the Frome cottage, where the suddenly reinvigorated Zeena cares for both of them for twenty-four years.

She is still the same bitter, silent woman, and Mattie, too, becomes embittered as the years pass. The scene discovered by the narrator is the two crabbed women inside Ethan's poorly-furnished home, where they have been, never coming out, for more than two decades.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Narrator - An anonymous man who has recently moved to Starkfield; he becomes curious about Ethan Frome and begins to ask questions about him. Finally, he discovers his secret when he is snowed in one night at the remote Frome farmhouse.
- Ethan Frome - The central character in the story, he tires of his sickly and unpleasant wife and falls in love with her cousin. Ethan's wife sends Mattie away and Ethan takes her sledding on the way to the train station; they have a sledding accident that cripples both of them.
- Zenobia (Zeena) Frome - Ethan's wife, she is gifted in caring for the sick, but she herself is a shut-in, a bitter hypochondriac who makes Ethan's life miserable.
- Mattie Silver - Zeena's cousin, she and Ethan's fall in love. The two are badly hurt in a sledding accident when Ethan takes her to the railway station, and she winds up living with the Fromes and being nursed by Zeena.
- Denis Eady - The son of a prosperous shopkeeper; he has his eye on Mattie, but she spurns him.
- Harmon Gow - A stagecoach driver who tells the narrator that Frome was hurt in a smash-up twenty-four years earlier.
- Mrs. Ned Hale (nee Ruth Varnum) - A longtime resident of Starkfield who knows Ethan's secret, but is reluctant to say much about him.
- Jotham Powell - Ethan's hired hand, he often transports Zeena when she needs to go somewhere.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!" (Narrator, Prologue, p.6)

"Ethan Frome drove in silence, the reins loosely held in his left hand, his brown seamed profile, under the helmet-like peak of the cap, relieved against the banks of snow like the bronze image of a hero." (Narrator, Prologue, p.14)

"Perhaps this connection of ideas, which had often occurred to me in my rambles about Starkfield, caused me to hear a wistful note in Frome's words, and to see in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body." (Narrator, Prologue, p.21)

“Even a few minutes earlier, when they had stood alone outside the house, he would not have dared to think of kissing her. But since he had seen her lips in the lamplight he felt that they were his.” (Narrator, ch.3, p.57)

“Completely reassured, she shone on him through tear-hung lashes, and his soul swelled with pride as he saw how his tone subdued her. She did not even ask what he had done. Except when he was steering a big log down the mountain to his mill he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery.” (Narrator, ch.4, p.87)

“With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, 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.” (Narrator, ch.8, p.143)

“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.” (Narrator, ch.9, p.154)

“Right into the big elm. You said you could. So ‘t we’d never have to leave each other any more.” (Mattie, ch.9, p.165)

“The spruces swathed them in blackness and silence. They might have been in their coffins underground.” (Narrator, ch.9, p.167)

“And I say, if she’d ha’ died, Ethan might ha’ lived; and the way they are now, I don’t see’s 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.” (Mrs. Ned Hale, Epilogue, p.181)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Would you describe the protagonist of Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* as being a weak or a strong man? Why and in what ways? Support your conclusions with specific incidents and quotations from the novel.
2. Edith Wharton often wrote stories about people who were trapped by the moral strictures of society and were thus unhappy; she herself spent more than twenty years in a loveless marriage in which she had become involved in order to please her parents. How does *Ethan Frome* reflect this favorite theme of the author? How and in what ways would you describe the protagonist as being trapped by the society in which he lived?

3. Analyze the author's perspective on the sad situation described in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Does she believe Ethan should have run away with Mattie, or does she see his flirtation with Mattie as the main cause of their downfall? Is she championing society's standards of sexual morality or criticizing them? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
4. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, the protagonist's trouble really begins when he marries for the wrong reasons. According to the author, what are right and wrong reasons for entering into a marriage? Do you agree with her? Support your conclusions from the novel and from Scripture.
5. In popular science fiction, zombies are the "living dead." Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* often compares the condition of the protagonist with that of the dead. For instance, near the end of the novel, Mrs. Hale says, "I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard." Would you agree with her assessment? Did the existence of the inhabitants of the Frome farm have to be that way? How could they have made their lives more tolerable?
6. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, during one of the narrator's early encounters with the protagonist, he says, "Ethan Frome drove in silence, the reins loosely held in his left hand, his brown seamed profile, under the helmet-like peak of the cap, relieved against the banks of snow like the bronze image of a hero." Was this a misperception on the part of the narrator, or did the author also see Ethan in this way? Do you see him as a tragic hero? Why or why not?
7. In the tragedy of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, some have seen the protagonist as a tragic hero. If he is, would you consider passivity to be his tragic flaw? In what ways does Ethan's passivity contribute to his eventual downfall? If he is not a tragic hero, why would you deny him that distinction?
8. To what extent do you consider the protagonist of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* to be a good man? What are his outstanding moral strengths and moral weaknesses? Which of these ultimately dominate his character? Support your conclusions with details from the novel.
9. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, why does Ethan love Mattie? Are his reasons good ones? Why or why not? Be sure to answer the question by using both the details of the novel and the teachings of Scripture.

10. Near the end of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, the protagonist suddenly sees his situation clearly for the first time. The narrator says, "With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, 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." Was this perception accurate? Is the author here tearing apart the romantic fictions people so often use to justify sexual immorality, or does she have some other purpose?
11. Discuss the role of Zeena's hypochondria in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. In what ways does she demonstrate the power of weakness in manipulating others? In what other ways does her desire for power in the relationship show up in the course of the story? Be sure to consider the Epilogue as well as the body of the novel.
12. In his famous poem, Langston Hughes asks the questions, "What happens to a dream deferred?" How is that question answered in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*? Does the author agree with any of Hughes' answers to the question? Discuss the consequences of frustrated dreams in the life of the protagonist, along with his response to those frustrations. Could better responses on his part have led to different consequences?
13. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, the protagonist nourishes two frustrated dreams - one to leave Starkfield and become an engineer in a big city, and the other to marry Mattie. To what extent are these dreams related? Is one the real cause of the other? Which dream really predominates in Ethan's desires? Why do you think so?
14. Given that most of the story is told from his point of view, to what extent is the protagonist of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* a reliable storyteller? Discuss in particular his assessments of the other characters in the story and the way this impacts the impressions of the reader.
15. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, to what extent are the two women in the protagonist's life intended to be foils for one another? Discuss how the characteristics of Zeena and Mattie are brought out in greater relief by the personality traits of the other.
16. Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* describes the tragic love story of Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver. Do you consider Mattie to be a worthy object of Ethan's love? Why or why not? Be sure to distinguish between the Mattie we see through Ethan's eyes and the Mattie we see through her own words and actions.
17. Two of the leading symbols found in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* are the New England weather and the Frome farmhouse. Choose one of these major symbols and discuss its significance, both to the plot and the themes of the story.

18. Discuss the relationship between physical illness and disfigurement and the condition of the heart and mind in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Choose three characters for whom sickness or a handicap is significant and trace any connections between their outer and inner lives, their bodies and their souls.
19. Compare the roles played by the physical environment in which the characters live in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. How do the wintry New England landscape and the blasted heath of Bronte's novel reflect the conditions of the souls of those who live in those places? Use specifics from both novels to support your conclusions.
20. Compare and contrast the functions of the color red in the clothing of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Mattie Silver in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. In what ways do the red adornments symbolize the same things? How do the authors use those symbols differently?
21. Compare and contrast the pictures and consequences of Puritan morality presented in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Though the settings in time are radically different, the same moral sensibilities pervade both stories. What do the respective authors consider to be the essence of the moral ideas that have shaped New England? What is their evaluation of these moral standards? Use quotations and incidents from both novels to support your evaluation.
22. Discuss the use of foreshadowing in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Choose three important examples of the technique in the novel and explain how they point toward significant incidents later in the story and contribute to the author's thematic emphases.
23. Discuss the symbolism of the broken pickle dish in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. For what is it intended to stand? What is the significance of the circumstances under which it is broken? of Ethan's response to the accident? of Zeena's reaction?
24. Discuss the symbolism of Zeena's cat in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Pay special attention to the evening Ethan and Mattie have alone and its aftermath. What is the cat intended to represent? How do its actions in the critical scene indicate the meaning the author intended it to have, and how do they support the thematic elements of the story?
25. Throughout the course of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, Ethan uses a number of reasons to justify his unwillingness to run away with Mattie. At various times, the narrator suggests that public moral standards, Ethan's own moral sense, and even financial considerations stand in his way. Evaluate these three reasons for Ethan's failure to act on his love for Mattie. Which are true and which are mere rationalizations? Support your conclusions with details from the novel.
26. Discuss the significance of the family graveyard in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Be sure to consider each instance in the story where the graveyard appears or is mentioned. How does Wharton use it to convey important themes in the novel?

27. Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* are both short novels centering on illicit loves. Though the two were written only a little more than a decade apart, one could hardly imagine two perspectives more different. Discuss the similarities and, mostly, the differences between the two stories, considering the authors' perspectives, the personalities of the characters, and thematic elements.
28. In most novels that place the action inside of a frame narrative, the purpose is to support the credibility of the incidents being described, e.g., *Frankenstein*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Time Machine*. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, however, the author has quite a different purpose in mind. Discuss the role of the narrator in Wharton's novel. Be sure to include his contribution to the story's thematic elements.
29. Discuss the use of irony in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Consider especially the language used prior to the climactic sledding accident, and indicate the double meanings found in much of the conversation between Ethan and Mattie. How does this irony employed by Wharton emphasize the themes of the novel?
30. Discuss the concept of alienation as it appears in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Consider each of the three main characters and the nature of their alienation from one another and from the world. How does their loneliness contribute to the themes of the novel? Does the author provide any solution for human alienation? If so, what is it? If not, why not?
31. To what extent is it fair to describe the protagonist of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* as a failure? Do his failures in life reveal or shape his character? Support your analysis with specifics from the novel.
32. Discuss the symbolic use of names, both for people and places, in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Be sure to develop your analysis and relate the names to major themes in the novel.
33. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, the story is not told in chronological order, but rather jumps around constantly, starting near the end and moving back throughout the narrative to fill in details from the past. Why do you think Wharton chose to do this? In what ways does it contribute to the effectiveness of the tale?
34. Discuss the role of suffering in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. Which of the three main characters suffers the most? Why do you think so? In supporting your conclusion, be sure to indicate why the two characters you have not chosen fail to rate the distinction of being the most pitiable victims.
35. Choose one of the two women central to Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and discuss the extent to which they are full-orbed personalities. Is Mattie or Zeena a real person, or simply an extreme character as seen through the perceptions of the protagonist? Does the author give any hints as to ways in which Mattie may not be as admirable as Ethan thinks, or ways in which Zeena may not be the witch Ethan perceives her to be? Be sure to use specifics to support your conclusions.

36. Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* is a story told largely through the eyes of the protagonist, despite the frame story in which it is embedded. Suppose the author had chosen a different character to provide the prevailing point of view? How would the story have been different had it been told through the eyes of Zeena or Mattie? Choose one and indicate how a different point of view would have altered the story. Be sure to use specifics to support your conclusions.
37. In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, to what extent is Ethan responsible for the events of his life? Does the book present human life as something for which people must take responsibility, or as something governed by fate and beyond anyone's control? Support your conclusions with details from the story.
38. Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* was considered an immoral book at the time of its publication. Do you agree? Why or why not? Discuss the moral universe of the novel and evaluate that picture of morality on the basis of Scripture.