

THE GLENCOE LITERATURE LIBRARY

Study Guide

for

Ethan Frome

by **Edith Wharton**



New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Edith Wharton



From a childhood and youth of complete intellectual isolation . . . I passed, in my early thirties, into an atmosphere of the rarest understanding, the richest and most varied mental comradeship.

—Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*

Edith Newbold Jones, the daughter of a wealthy New York family, was born into society on January 24, 1862. She grew up New York and Europe. She was educated by private tutors and by excursions into her father’s library. A shy redheaded girl, Wharton received little support from her parents when she began writing at a young age.

“Incurably Ugly” At twenty-three, Wharton married a friend of the family, Edward “Teddy” Wharton. Like her, he had enjoyed a life of wealth and leisure. However, his main interests, unlike hers, were sports and outdoor activities. The Whartons spent summers in Newport, Rhode Island, where they owned a house called Land’s End. Wharton once called it “incurably ugly,” and hired an interior decorator, Ogden Codman Jr., to help her improve it. Later, the two of them wrote a book, *The Decoration of Houses*—Wharton’s first published book.

This was the start of a distinguished publishing career. Wharton next produced a short-story

collection and a novella and then turned her attention to a nonwriting project—a house called the Mount, built in Lenox, Massachusetts. The Mount was her refuge, her window onto New England society, and her home in the United States for more than a decade.

Her Literary Life Wharton’s first major successful novel, *The House of Mirth*, focused on wealthy New York society. It brought her swift recognition as a major literary figure. Two years later, Wharton moved to France, where she continued writing and developed her friendships with other writers, including the celebrated American expatriate Henry James. As her literary life began to flower, her personal life grew troubled. Her husband suffered from mental illness, and he and Wharton divorced.

She eventually sold her beloved home in Lenox and decided to remain in France. While there, she wrote some of her best-known works, including *Ethan Frome*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Buccaneers*. Though it may seem odd that *Ethan Frome*, a novel so closely associated with New England, should have been written in France, Wharton explained it this way:

For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose colored spectacles of my predecessors.

Later Life and Awards Wharton was living in France during World War I and became an avid supporter of the Allies. In 1916, a grateful France awarded her the cross of the Légion d’honneur. Seven years later, she was named the first female grand officer of the Legion. She won other awards as well. In 1921, she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction; and two years later, Yale University conferred upon her an honorary degree. She later received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. When she died in 1937, Wharton had received more honors than any other American woman writer.

Introducing the Novel

Few books can have so surprised an author's public as did Ethan Frome in 1911. For more than a decade Mrs. Wharton's fiction had dealt exclusively with metropolitan and cosmopolitan society, with a world whose pivots were money and luxury and art and beauty; . . . yet in Ethan Frome she accomplished something as bleak and simple as a sketch of Sarah Orne Jewett.

—E. K. Brown,
"Edith Wharton: The Art of the Novel"

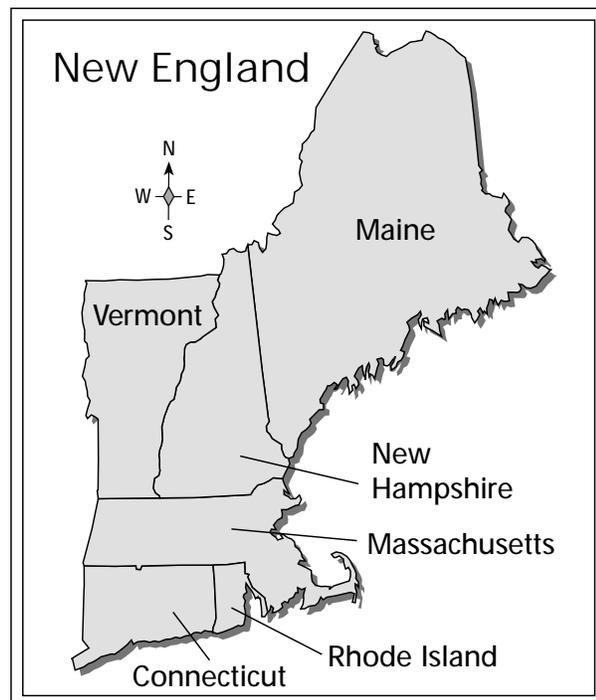
BACKGROUND

Although it is often called an American classic, *Ethan Frome* was originally written in French. Wharton had hired a tutor to help her improve her command of the language. Too polite to correct her speech, the tutor suggested that she produce written exercises. The result was the first version of the story, written in a small black notebook. Not only was the original French version much shorter than the final English one but the main character was named Hart, not Ethan, and the ending was completely different. With the French version, however, Wharton had established the framework for the novella.

This work probably surprised Wharton's readers. After all, she was a wealthy woman who frequently wrote about characters who belonged to her privileged social class. Nevertheless, she had spent a decade living in Massachusetts, where she had certainly passed through many small and isolated villages similar to Starkfield, where *Ethan Frome* is set. She saw the conditions in these places and imagined what it might be like to live in them.

THE TIME AND PLACE

As Wharton suggests in *Ethan Frome*, village populations in New England were declining at the end of the 1800s. Several reasons accounted for this decline. First, in New England, farming has always been difficult. The landscape is hilly and rocky, the soil is infertile, and the growing season is short. Many people who wanted to farm began to move west, where conditions were more favorable. Second, factories were springing up all over New England, and especially in Massachusetts. By the end of the century, approximately one-third of the nation's woolen goods and one half of its shoes were produced in that state. The geography lent itself to industrialization, since Massachusetts had many rivers whose energy could be harnessed to power factories. The map below shows the six states that make up the New England region.



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Did You Know?

A typical nineteenth-century New England farm had to serve many purposes. It had to have land on which to grow crops, shelter for the family and the animals, and storage facilities for food and tools.

A New England farmstead often included many connected buildings: a main house, where the family lived; a barn or two; an icehouse, built to store ice that was cut from frozen ponds; a stable or carriage shed or both, to

hold horses, wagons, and buggies; a chicken shed, a sheep barn, or a pigsty; an apple barn to store apples or a sap house to make maple syrup; and a silo or corncrib to store fodder for the animals. The construction and maintenance of these buildings added to the farmer's work. Families who could not perform this work were not likely to thrive, so they were often happy to take in distant relatives or other live-in helpers.

CRITIC'S CORNER

In its spare, chilling re-creation of rural isolation, hardscrabble poverty, and wintry landscape . . . Ethan Frome overwhelms the reader as a drama of irresistible necessity.

—Alfred Kazin

Before You Read

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Consider the adage, “Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear.” What do you think it means? Do you follow that piece of advice? Why or why not?

Share Ideas

With a partner, share an instance in which the reputation of a person whom you knew was based on hearsay that turned out to be untrue. What were the circumstances? What lesson did you learn? What do you think makes people embellish the truth?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what the townspeople say about Ethan Frome and why he captures the narrator’s attention.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In writing *Ethan Frome*, Wharton relied on two tried and true literary devices: the frame story and the flashback. A **frame story** is a story within a story. The “frame” is an outer story that precedes and follows a more important inner story. In *Ethan Frome*, the outer story is the narration by a visitor to Starkfield. He tells how he put together the facts about Ethan Frome’s accident. The inner story that relates the events leading up to the climactic accident is told in flashbacks. A **flashback** is an interruption of chronological sequence by the interjection of events that occurred earlier. Writers use flashbacks to explain what happened previously, giving readers information that may help explain the main events of the story. Sometimes a writer will signal a flashback with a transitional word or phrase, but at other times readers must depend on clues. Wharton uses flashback frequently in *Ethan Frome*.

Whose Story Is This?

Every work of fiction has a narrator, a “voice” that tells the story. In *Ethan Frome*, the narrator of the frame tale is an engineer who is visiting Starkfield on a job assignment. In the Beginning he tells the story from the **first-person point of view**, referring to himself as *I*. The reader knows only what he knows. However, when Chapter I begins, the point of view shifts to the **third-person limited**, and the thoughts and feelings of one character exclusively—Ethan, referred to as *he*, because the reader is seeing the events through his eyes.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

aggrieved [ə grēvd’] *adj.* troubled (p. 6)

conspicuously [kən spik’ ū əs lē] *adv.* noticeably or strikingly (p. 1)

degenerate [di jen’ər it] *adj.* inferior (p. 2)

detachment [di tach’mənt] *n.* a standing apart; aloofness (p. 3)

obstinately [ob’stə nit lē] *adv.* stubbornly; inflexibly (p. 15)

perceptible [pər sep’tə bəl] *adj.* noticeable (p. 2)

plaintive [plān’tiv] *adj.* mournful; sad (p. 14)

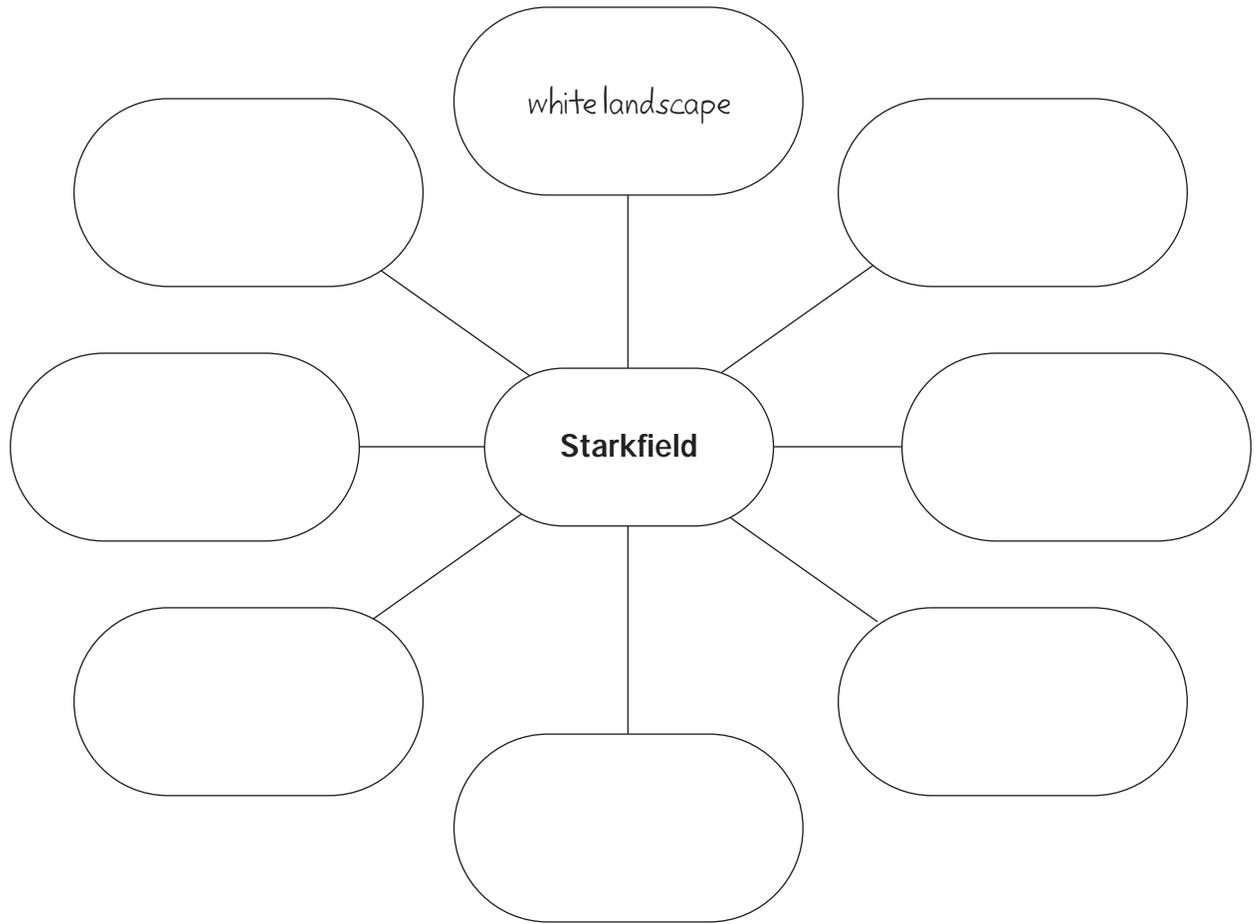
reticent [ret’ə sənt] *adj.* restrained or reserved, especially in speech (p. 4)

taciturnity [tas’ə tur’nə tē] *n.* silence or extreme reserve; unwillingness to speak (p. 2)

Active Reading

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

The setting of *Ethan Frome* is as important as the characters. In fact, some critics have said that the setting of the novella is a character. The very name of the village, “Starkfield,” suggests barrenness and harshness. As you read the opening chapters, pay attention to the author’s descriptions of the setting. What atmosphere does Wharton create? Using the organizer below, record words and phrases that describe the setting.



Responding

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

Personal Response

What are your initial feelings about Ethan Frome, the protagonist? What details from this section of the novella helped shape your feelings?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does the narrator learn about Frome from other characters? What effect does this knowledge have on the narrator?

2. What is Ethan's house like? What part is missing, and why does this strike the narrator as important?

3. Who is Mattie Silver and why is her presence so important to Ethan Frome?

4. Why is Zeena dissatisfied with Mattie? How does this dissatisfaction affect Zeena's behavior toward her?

5. What does Zeena fail to do when Ethan brings Mattie home from the dance? What might have been her motive for doing it?

Responding

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. At the story's beginning, the narrator says that each person's story about Ethan Frome was different. Later he describes the reluctance of the townspeople to discuss the story. What does this behavior imply about New Englanders' attitudes toward outsiders? Are they protecting Zeena or Ethan Frome, do you think?

7. Think about your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 16. Based on Ethan Frome's own words and behavior in the novella so far, what image of him is emerging in your mind? Explain your response.

Literature and Writing

Descriptive Writing

Review your **Active Reading** web on page 17. Then write a paragraph describing Starkfield, Massachusetts as you visualize it. Pretend that you are describing the place to someone who has not been there. Feel free to use the descriptive words from the activity as well as others that may occur to you.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Throughout this section, the words and phrases that Wharton uses to describe the bleak but beautiful New England landscape mirror the emotional state of Ethan Frome. In your group, analyze the imagery and descriptive words used to create the setting to determine how they reflect Ethan Frome's emotional state at this point in the novella. Decide whether the setting described in this part of the novel actually functions as a character as many critics contend.

Music Connection

Work with a group to put together a sound track for Chapter II. First, make a list of the most important scenes in the chapter. Then discuss what songs or instrumental music you would select for the various scenes. Try to choose selections that capture the mood of the scenes.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Ethan Frome Chapters III–V

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall an instance when you were tempted to do something that you might later have regretted. What prevented you from doing it? How did you feel afterwards?

Journal

In your journal, write a paragraph about an instance in which your self-control prevented you from doing something you might have regretted. What was the situation, and how difficult was the challenge? If you had it to do over, would you respond in the same way? Why or why not?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what happens when Ethan and Mattie find themselves alone for the first time.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

The American elm that plays a central role in the climax of *Ethan Frome* was once the tree of choice for urban landscapers across the United States. With its graceful fan-shaped crown, the elm attained heights of one hundred feet or more, providing an abundance of shade along city streets. In addition, it tolerated air pollution, poor soil, and de-icing salt during the winter. Its range across the eastern half of the United States was extensive until Dutch elm disease struck in the 1930s. The scourge wiped out an estimated 90 percent of these beautiful trees. Efforts at developing a hybrid have been successful, but the beauty and grace that the American elm contributed to the nation's urban landscape is lost forever.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is an author's use of hints or clues to prepare readers for an event that will occur later in the story. For example, in *Ethan Frome*, the big elm is referred to at least twice before it appears in the last chapter of the novella: on page 18, when Mattie says that Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum came near running into it at the bottom of the hill, and on page 37, when Ethan says he'd be scared to sled down Corbury road because of the "ugly corner" where the big elms stands. As you read, look for other instances of foreshadowing that hint of what is to come.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

constraint [kən strānt'] *n.* holding back of natural feelings; forced or unnatural manner (p. 36)

discomfiture [dis kum'fi chər] *n.* confusion; embarrassment (p. 31)

eloquence [el'ə kwəns] *n.* forceful or persuasive speech (p. 33)

indenture [in den'chər] *v.* to bind (a person) by contract to serve another person for a stated period of time (p. 24)

inevitable [i nev'ə tə bəl] *adj.* unable to be avoided (p. 29)

obliterate [ə blit'ə rāt'] *v.* to remove all traces of; to blot out (p. 36)

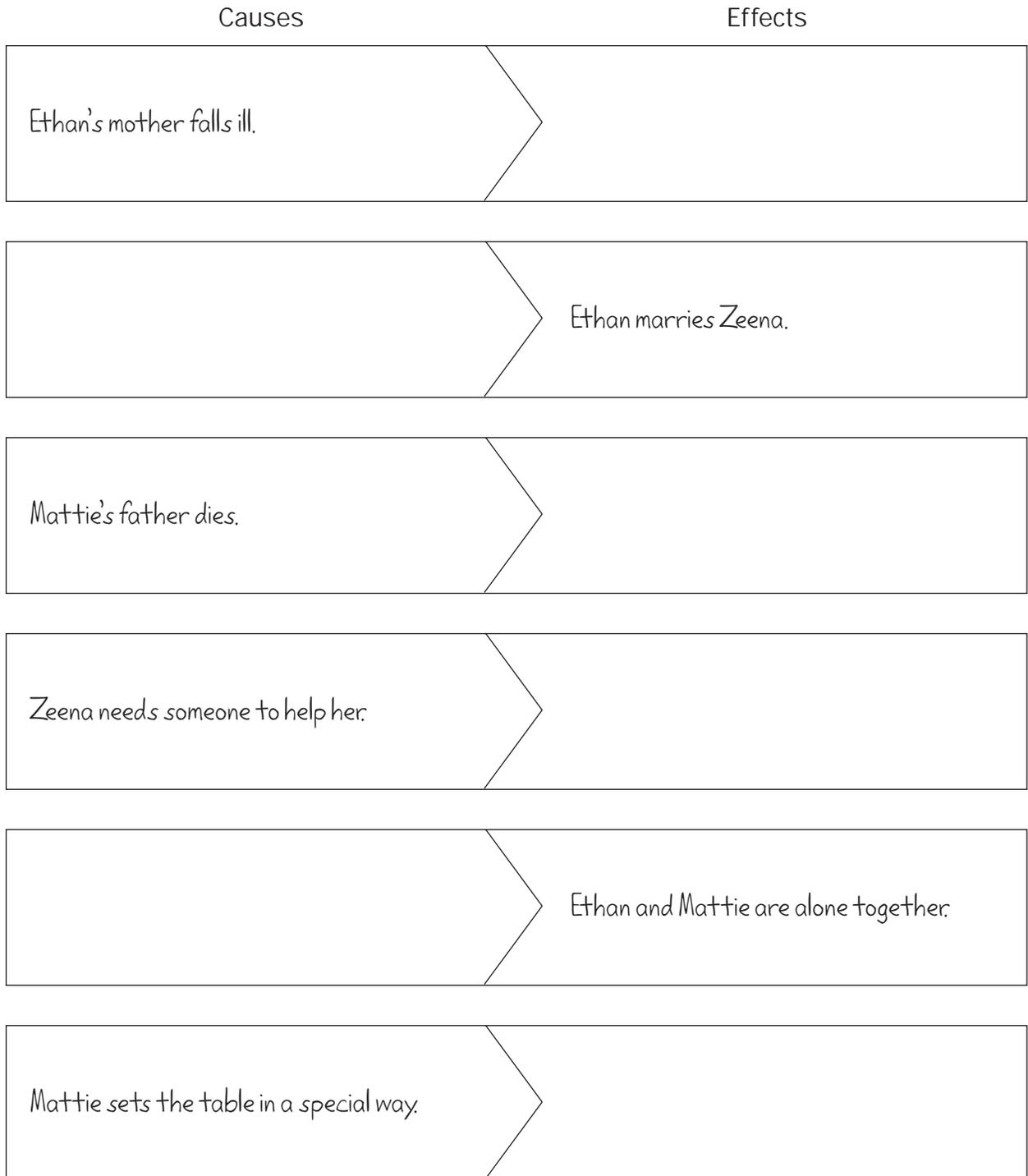
scintillating [sint'əl ā' tɪŋ] *adj.* brilliant; sparkling (p. 23)

spectral [spek'trəl] *adj.* ghostly (p. 39)

Active Reading

Ethan Frome Chapters III–V

In novels, events happen for a reason. They have causes. They also have effects that move the plot forward. As you read these chapters, think about causes and effects. Fill in the diagram below as you read.



Responding

Ethan Frome Chapters III-V

Personal Response

Were you surprised that Zeena left Ethan and Mattie at home alone? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What was Zeena like when Ethan first met her? Why did Ethan ask her to stay? What difference might it have made if his mother had died in spring?

2. In what way did Zeena change after marriage? What effect did Zeena's behavior have on Ethan's future plans?

3. What does Ethan want from Mr. Hale and why? What effect does Mr. Hale's statement that he is fixing up a house for Ned and Ruth have on Ethan? Why?

4. What two sights does Ethan notice on his way home, and what is his response to each?

5. How does Mattie set the dinner table? What gets broken, and what might it symbolize?

Responding

Ethan Frome Chapters III–V

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. Think about your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 20. Why do you think Ethan did not express his feelings for Mattie when the two were alone?

7. What function does the following passage serve in relation to the plot? “[B]ut since the previous night a vague dread had hung on his [Ethan’s] sky-line. It was formed of Zeena’s obstinate silence, Mattie’s sudden look of warning, of the memory of just such fleeting imperceptible signs as those which told him, on certain stainless mornings, that before night there would be rain (page 24).”

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Character

Zeena’s cold, quarrelsome, complaining character might be associated with the wintry Starkfield landscape. Using Mattie Silver as Zeena’s foil, write a paragraph describing the season that you would associate with Mattie’s personality. Use examples from these chapters to support your point of view.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Is Ethan Frome to blame for his plight—that of being trapped in a loveless marriage and having to give up his aspiration to study engineering, or is he a victim of circumstance, bound by family tradition? Does Mattie Silver represent his last chance to attain happiness, or does his liaison with her represent another instance of poor judgment on his part? Debate these issues in your groups.

Performing

With a partner, prepare to enact of one of the following scenes:

- *The scene just before and during dinner.* The person who plays Ethan should reveal Ethan’s jealousy about a possible visitor and what happens after Zeena’s name is mentioned.
- *The scene just after the pickle-dish breaks.* The person who plays Mattie should show her fear, and the one who plays Ethan should show his sudden determination to take charge.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Ethan Frome Chapters VI–VIII

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Have you ever had to make a difficult decision and felt pulled in opposite directions? What helped you to arrive at the decision?

Quickwrite

Jot down the strategies you use that help you make difficult decisions.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover what motivates Ethan Frome to make a very difficult decision.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In the mid-nineteenth century, medicine was extremely primitive by today's standards, especially for women. Many doctors had little or no formal training, and women's complaints were considered either to be related to childbearing or of psychological origin. Out of modesty, many women would not discuss issues openly with their physicians; nor did they submit to thorough examinations. Worse yet, prescribed medicines often contained little besides alcohol or addictive painkillers. People could order medications by mail, which they might take for years, convinced of their effectiveness. In many instances, however, the patients were getting worse rather than better.

Plot Structure

In most stories, the plot follows a predictable pattern. It begins with the **exposition**, or the introduction of the characters, setting, and conflict. Then it proceeds to the **rising action**, or the events that result from the conflict. These events build up to a final **climax**, or turning point, before the climax ends in **resolution**. As you read this section of the book, try to identify the stages of the plot as they unfold.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

almshouse [ä'mz' hous'] *n.* publicly supported home for the poor; poorhouse (p. 47)

destitute [des' tə tōōt'] *adj.* lacking the necessities of life; in absolute want (p. 59)

incessant [in ses' ənt] *adj.* continuing without interruption; unceasing (p. 55)

inexorable [i nek' sər ə bəl] *adj.* unchangeable; unyielding (p. 56)

pauper [pô' pər] *n.* a very poor person (p. 48)

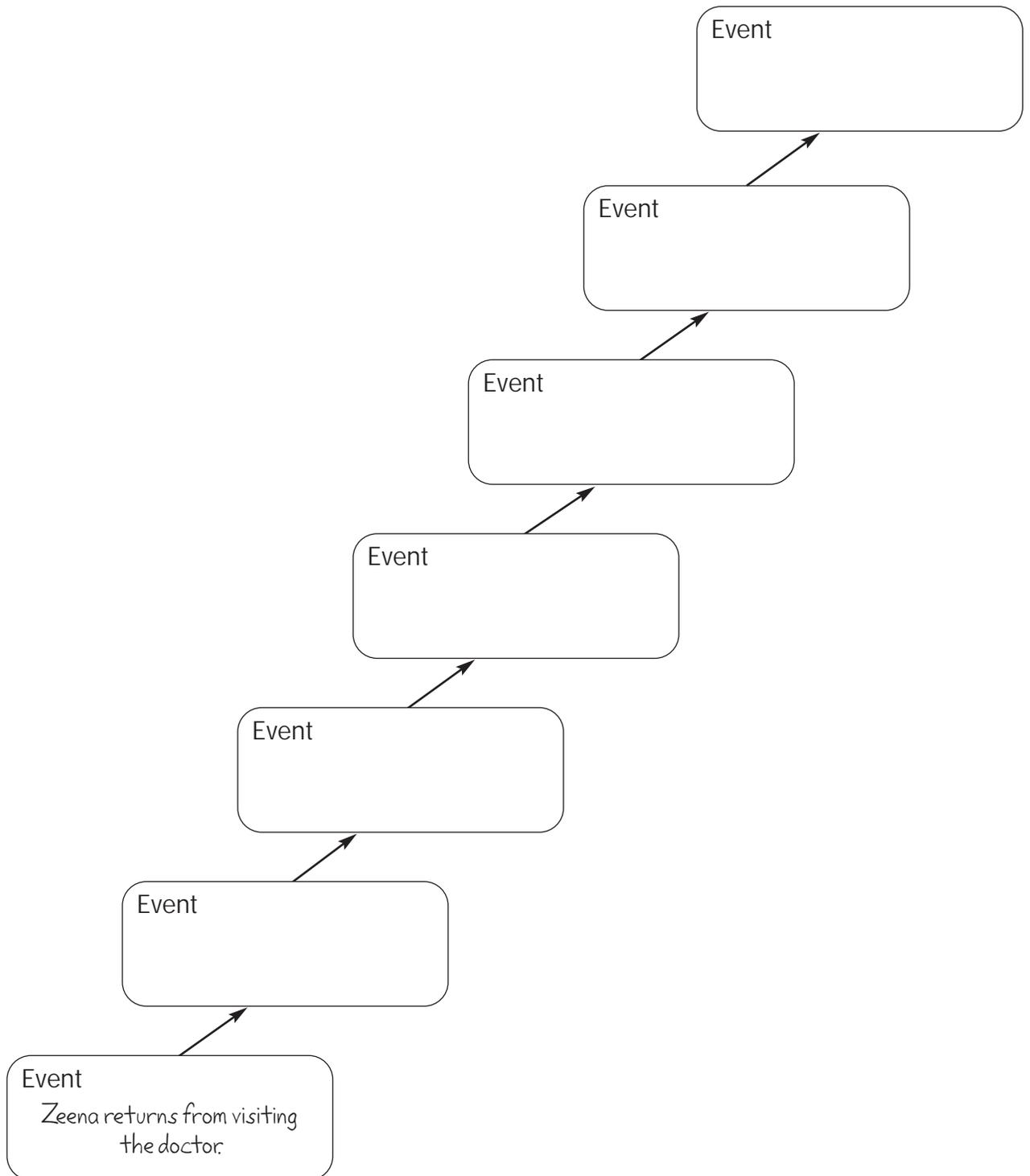
squalid [skwol' id] *adj.* having a gloomy, wretched, poverty-stricken appearance (p. 43)

stoicism [stō' ə siz' əm] *n.* indifference to pleasure or pain; impassivity (p. 44)

Active Reading

Ethan Frome Chapters VI–VIII

In this section of the novella, the rising action continues to build toward the climax. Use the boxes below to keep track of the events as they occur.



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Responding

Ethan Frome Chapters VI–VIII

Personal Response

For which character do you have the most sympathy? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How did Ethan feel the morning after spending the evening with Mattie, and what contributed to this feeling? Do you think the feeling will last? Why or why not?

2. What plan does Zeena have when she returns? How does Ethan react at first? What do you think is Zeena's true motive for dismissing Mattie?

3. What discovery does Zeena make? What does this suggest that she will do?

4. What two courses of action can Ethan take? What forces make the decision difficult?

5. Why does Ethan decide to visit Mr. Hale? What does Ethan's change of heart reveal about him?

Responding

Ethan Frome Chapters VI–VIII

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. Review your answer to the **Focus Activity** on page 24. Which of the two emotions prompted Ethan Frome to choose not to take advantage of the Hales' sympathy?

7. What does the author suggest by Mrs. Hale's statement that she didn't know what Zeena would have done if she hadn't had Ethan to look after her? Is Mrs. Hale aware of Ethan Frome's predicament at the time?

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Values

In this section of the novella, both Ethan and Zeena make separate references to things or ideals that they value most. Write a paragraph that compares and contrasts these things. What does this indicate about the characters and their relationship to each other?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Reread the parts of Chapter VIII in which Ethan decides whether to leave Zeena and go with Mattie. In your group, discuss his arguments with himself and his decision-making process. What factors might he be overlooking?

Health Science Connection

Some illnesses that afflict human beings are psychological in nature and are not necessarily caused by physical ailments. Do you think that Zeena's ailments are caused by her state of mind? Using the Internet and other sources, research the topic of psychosomatic illnesses. Based on the character profile of Zeena, determine whether she might be a victim of these illnesses. Present a brief report to the class, setting forth your position.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Ethan Frome Chapter IX

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Is there such a thing as an “impossible situation?” Why might one believe that there is no such thing as an impossible situation?

Journal

In your journal, describe a situation that could be considered impossible or unbearable. Then try identify some strategies for coping with that situation.

Setting a Purpose

Read to learn how Ethan and Mattie arrive at a shocking solution to their problem.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

The spinal cord is the bundle of nerves that extends from the base of the brain to the waist and relays messages from the brain to the rest of the body. When the spinal cord is damaged, messages can't be relayed properly, and full or partial paralysis results. This condition is called Spinal Cord Injury, or SCI, and it can be caused either by an accident or a disease. Although people who have SCI may experience some improvement within the first year and a half of the injury, the vast majority of those who suffer from the condition do not heal significantly after that time.

Tragedy

A tragedy is a drama in which the main character suffers a downfall as a result of a fatal character flaw, error in judgment, or force beyond human control, such as fate. Traditionally, the tragic hero is a person of high rank, who, out of an exaggerated sense of power or pride, violates a human, natural, or divine law. By breaking the law, the hero poses a threat to society and causes suffering to family members, friends, and associates.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

exaltation [eg' zôl tã' shən] *n.* feeling of great rapture or well-being (p. 68)

imploring [im plôr' ing] *adj.* asking earnestly (p. 62)

inarticulate [in' är tik' yə lit] *adj.* not clearly expressed (p. 64)

lineaments [lin' ē mənt] *n.* features (p. 70)

querulous [kwər' ə ləs] *adj.* whining or complaining (p. 71)

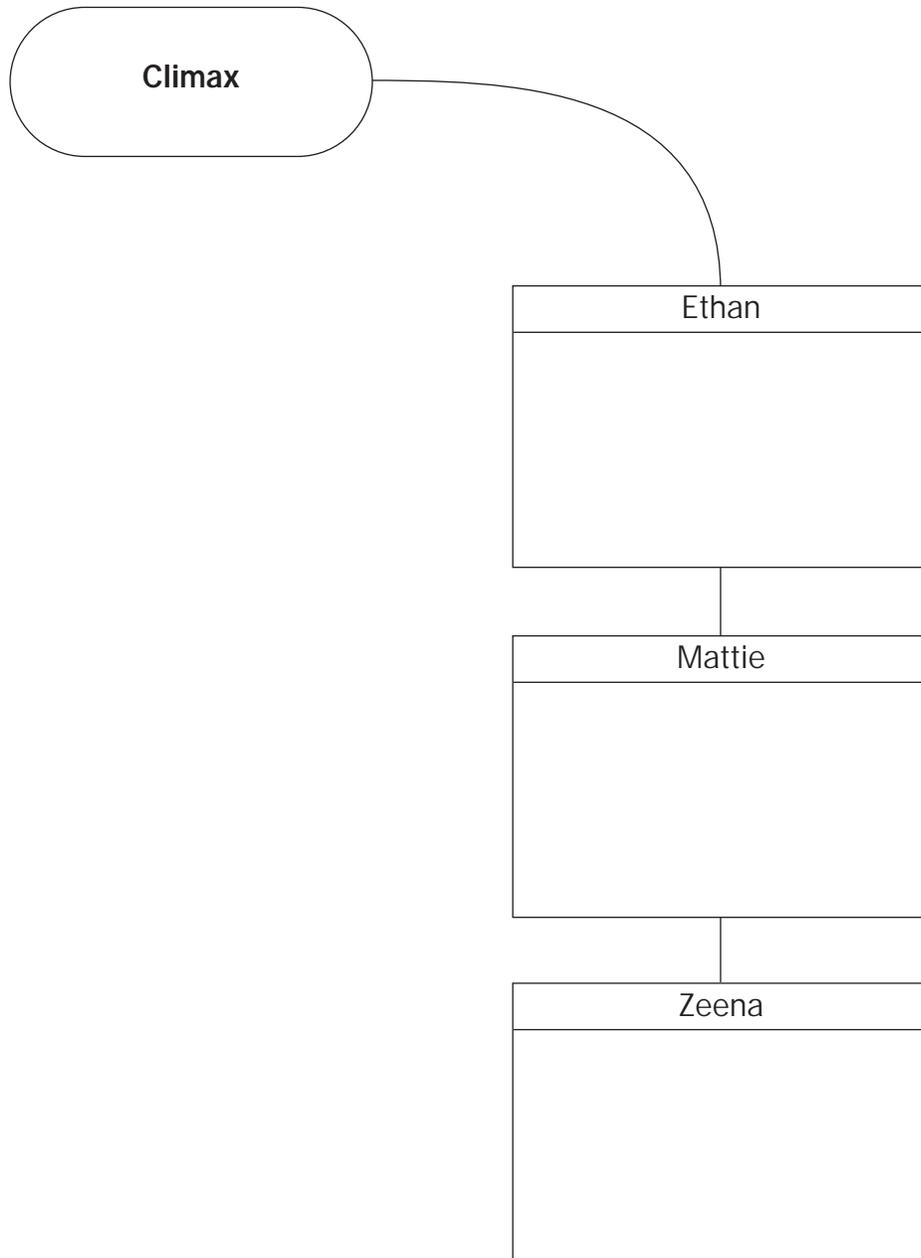
slatternly [slat' ərn lē] *adj.* neglected and dirty (p. 71)

uncouth [un kōōth'] *adj.* odd or clumsy (p. 64)

Active Reading

Ethan Frome Chapter IX

The climax of the novella occurs in this chapter. Use the organizer below to describe the climax and to note how each of the main characters contributes to it.



Responding

Ethan Frome Chapter IX

Personal Response

Describe the emotions that ran through your mind as you read the final five pages. Were you surprised, or did you expect this ending?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Where do Ethan and Mattie first stop on their ride, and how do they act toward each other?

2. What is Ethan's motive for stopping at the crest of the Corbury Road? What is their first ride down together like?

3. What idea does Mattie suggest and why?

4. What does Ethan mean when he says, "I know we can fetch it"? What image does he suddenly see, and how does he react?

5. How does Mrs. Hale describe Ethan Frome's life after the accident? Why does she make this assessment of him?

Responding

Ethan Frome Chapter IX

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. In the beginning of the novella, Ethan opens the door to his house for the narrator, but the narrator does not describe what he sees until the final chapter. How does this technique affect the reader?

7. The last lines in the book suggest that the Fromes in the graveyard might actually be luckier than the ones in the house. Do you agree or not, and why?

Literature and Writing

Whom Do You Blame?

Who or what is responsible for the outcome of this novella? Write a few paragraphs explaining who or what caused the conditions that the narrator observes in Ethan Frome's house.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Review the list of actions that you generated in the **Focus Activity** on page 28. Within your small group, debate whether the main characters in *Ethan Frome* found themselves in an impossible situation. Consider what alternatives might have been open to them. Do you agree with the words of Mrs. Hale that “[I]f she’d ha’ died, Ethan might ha’ lived.” Why or why not?

Internet Connection

Use the Internet to find out more about Edith Wharton and *Ethan Frome*. Try to find critics’ comments about the novella, Wharton’s comments about the book, and readers’ responses to the work.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Robert Frost

The Hill Wife and An Old Man's Winter Night

Before You Read

Focus Question

What are some of the fears that a woman living in the country might have?

Background

Robert Frost (1874–1963) received four Pulitzer Prizes and was invited to read at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. In these two poems, he explores the emotions associated with the New England countryside.

Responding to the Reading

1. What are some of the feelings that the wife has about where she lives, and what causes those feelings?

2. What does the wife do finally, and what is the husband's reaction?

3. Why might the poem be titled "The Hill Wife" instead of being named after a particular person? What conclusions can you draw from this?

4. What is the old man like? Describe some of the things that he does, as well as what he can't do.

5. **Making Connections** Of which characters from *Ethan Frome* do the characters in these poems remind you? What are the similarities between the characters in the novella and in the poems?

Performing

Acting as a character in either poem, create a brief skit about a telephone call that the character either receives or makes. The call should discuss some aspect of rural life that was addressed or touched on in the poems. Although the audience can hear only the character's side, they should still be able to follow the entire conversation.

Sherwood
Anderson

Stolen Day

Before You Read

Focus Question

Recall a time when you used sickness as an excuse for not doing something.

Background

Writing between World War I and World War II, Sherwood Anderson drew on his own childhood to create believable stories about small town people. Many of these stories included are in his famous work of fiction *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Responding to the Reading

1. Whom does the narrator know who has inflammatory rheumatism, and what does that person do?

2. What does the narrator tell his mother when he arrives home, and what does he not tell her? What is her reaction?

3. What does the narrator mean when he says, "I was having a grand time, having died"? What real incident provided him with specific details?

4. How does the narrator get attention from his family towards the end of the story? Why does he tell them he has inflammatory rheumatism? How do they react to this news?

5. **Making Connections** Contrast the way this character's illness affects his family with the way Zeena's illness affected her family. What might be the reason for the difference?

Learning for Life

The narrator of this story does not quite know how to look and act sick. Help out other young students like him by writing rules of conduct for elementary-school-age children who want to look sick. Your rules should be humorous in tone and should close by implying that in the end, it is always better to go to school than to pretend to be sick.

from *The
Berkshire
Evening Eagle*

Fatal Coasting Accident

Before You Read

Focus Question

What real-life incident have you heard or read about that might make a good novel or film?

Background

This newspaper article from *The Berkshire Evening Eagle* of 12 March 1904, tells of the 1904 sledding accident that happened in Lenox, Massachusetts. Edith Wharton lived in Lenox at the time of the accident and knew one of the riders. This accident probably served as inspiration for the one in *Ethan Frome*.

Responding to the Reading

1. Who was steering the sled when the accident happened, and who kept claiming responsibility for it?

2. How might an accident like this have affected those who saw it or heard about it? Give your reasons.

3. The writer of this article says that the road “was never in finer condition” and “neither the post nor the sled was wrecked.” What is ironic about these two statements?

4. In your opinion, could this accident have been predicted and thus prevented, or not? Give reasons for your answer.

5. **Making Connections** What details about the accident are described in this newspaper account that were not described in *Ethan Frome*? What information about the accident is found in *Ethan Frome* but not in the newspaper account?

Creative Writing

Using your own imagination and the information from this article, write a report of the accident as if you had been eyewitness. Describe what you saw and heard and how you felt.

Naomi Shihab
Nye

Snow

Before You Read

Focus Question

What makes certain events memorable, while others fade?

Background

Palestinian American writer, editor, and poet Naomi Shihab Nye has lived in many places. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri, went to school in Jerusalem and Jordan and currently lives in San Antonio, Texas. The everyday people she has met in her different homes inspire her work.

Responding to the Reading

1. What is happening at home while the brother and sister are out sledding? Why is the sister's metaphor particularly appropriate?

2. How is the sled trip described in the poem different from other sled trips the speaker and his brother have taken? Why are they going sledding today, do you think?

3. How are the children's actions different from their feelings?

4. Is the snowstorm a symbol for something else, do you think? Give reasons for your answer, using evidence from the poem.

5. **Making Connections** In what ways is this poem similar to *Ethan Frome*? Consider the setting, the mood, and the way the characters behave.

Literature Groups

What is the change in the weather that the speaker mentions in the last line? In your group, discuss the meaning of these lines in relation to the rest of the poem. What does it suggest about the situation at home?

Sybil Marshall
Clementina
Black

A Farmer's Maid and The Dislike to Domestic Service

Before You Read

Focus Question

What kind of conditions do you think domestic workers face? Why might they perform this type of work?

Background

These first-hand accounts detail the work done by domestic servants at the turn of the last century. They offer a look at the type of work that Mattie Silver might have done.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to Marshall, what were the benefits of "good service"? Why might parents send a child to work in a "properly run big house"?

2. Describe some of the problems that domestic servants faced. What seemed to be the employers' attitudes towards these workers? Give reasons for your response.

3. How might the job of a domestic worker, such as a housecleaner or a nanny, be different today than it was during Marshall's and Black's time? What similarities still exist, do you think?

4. What conclusions can you draw about society's attitudes towards children and young teens at the turn of the century? In your opinion, what are some ways that those attitudes have changed?

5. **Making Connections** Which of the problems described in these accounts are similar to ones faced by Mattie Silver? Which ones are different?

Internet Connection

Use the Internet to learn more about present and past child labor practices in the United States. What sort of work is considered appropriate and proper for children? What sort of work is discouraged or condemned?