

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Ethan Frome

by Edith Wharton

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Ethan Frome

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the symbolic use of color
2. explain the significance of imagery in the novel
3. analyze the creation and use of irony
4. analyze the impact of setting on character and plot
5. analyze the point of view, the narrative voice, and the narrative techniques used by the author

Ethan Frome

Introductory Lecture

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones to the wealthy New York family that is often credited as being *the* Jones family in the phrase, “keeping up with the Joneses.” She received a marriage proposal at a young age, but the wedding was called off by her fiancé’s parents, who were upset by what they perceived as the Jones family’s unsurpassed snobbery. In 1885, at the age of twenty-three, she married Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton, twelve years her senior. Wharton was from a well-established Boston family. He was a sportsman and a gentleman, and the Joneses approved of him as being of their social class. Edith and her husband shared a love of travel. Eventually, however, Edith concluded that they had little in common intellectually. He eventually began conducting a series of dalliances with younger women, which took its toll on Wharton’s mental health. Her doctor suggested that she write as a means of relieving some of her tension. *Ethan Frome*, the story of a sensitive and intelligent man trapped in a loveless marriage with a manipulative and self-absorbed hypochondriac is the result.

Edith and Edward divorced in 1913, after he suffered a nervous breakdown and was confined to a hospital. She never relinquished his family name.

Besides her writing, Wharton was a well-respected landscape architect and interior designer. She wrote several influential books, including *The Decoration of Houses*, her first published work, and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.

In 1921, Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for her highly esteemed novel *The Age of Innocence*, making her the first woman to win the award. Edith Wharton died in 1937 in her villa near Paris at the age of seventy-five.

Ethan Frome was released in 1911 and has been viewed negatively by some critics as morally or ethically insignificant. The novel, however, seems more autobiographical than moralistic in intent. Ethan is analogous to Edith, Zeena to Edward, and Mattie to Edith’s one-time lover, journalist Morton Fullerton. It is one of the few pieces of Wharton’s fiction that does not take place in an urban, upper-class environment. Her normally lush and luxurious settings are replaced by the stark and foreboding descriptions of rural working-class New England, which is especially unusual given the fact that Wharton herself was a woman of leisure, living in the luxury of a French villa. Wharton claimed to have based the story of *Ethan Frome* on an accident that had occurred to an acquaintance in Lenox, Massachusetts—an area with which she was familiar.

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"?

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?

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?

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?
