

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Ethan Frome

by Edith Wharton

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Ethan Frome

Background Notes

Edith Wharton grew up in New York City in a wealthy, fashionable family. At the age of twenty-three, she met and married a friend of her brother. The two were quite dissimilar, and it was clear very early that the marriage was a mistake. Because of the society in which they lived, however, a divorce was out of the question, and it was not until thirty years later that she obtained a divorce.

Significantly perhaps, the author's husband, who was fourteen years older than she was, began to have health problems. In her autobiography, she comments that he complained a great deal and verbally abused her when he was ill. In *Ethan Frome*, the parallels between Wharton's life and Ethan's are unmistakable.

All references come from the Prestwick House Touchstone Classic edition of *Ethan Frome*, published 2005.

Ethan Frome

Objectives

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

1. explain how the setting of the story relates to Ethan Frome's character.
2. write a character sketch of at least one of the three main characters, including personality traits, motivations in the story, and an opinion of the character.
3. define irony and discuss three examples in this story.
4. discuss the symbolic use of warm and cool colors.
5. explain why the ending of this story is memorable for most readers.
6. explain why the actions of the characters were appropriate for the time in which the story took place, despite seeming odd today.
7. provide details to prove that each of the following is a major motif/theme of this novel:
 - how loneliness and isolation affects an individual
 - situations without hope
 - marriage as a form of enslavement
 - the tyranny of illness inhibits individual growth
8. identify and analyze two major symbols in the novel.
9. identify the point of view of the story and explain why the author chose to use a visitor to the area as the narrator, rather than using one of the characters involved in the action.
10. explain how the setting of the story influences the plot.
11. define the terms hero, tragic hero, and anti-hero, and apply them to Ethan Frome.
12. identify at least three instances of foreshadowing in the novel.
13. identify and explain significant imagery in the novel.

Ethan Frome

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does Ethan's poor financial status affect the actions of the plot?
2. Although not explicitly stated, there are suggestions that, try as he might, Ethan could not escape his fate. Argue for or against that theory.
3. Explain how the setting for this story—Starkfield, Massachusetts—influences this novel.
4. Point out how images of warmth and light contrast with images of cold and darkness in this story.
5. How appropriate is the ending of this story?
6. Discuss the role that ill health plays in Ethan's life.
7. Consider these terms: hero, tragic hero, and anti-hero. Which of these terms, if any, is appropriate for Ethan?
8. Write a character analysis of Ethan, Zeena, or Mattie. Be sure to include personality traits, motivations in the story, and your own opinion of each character.
9. In your opinion, how successful is the narrative format that the author uses in this story? Can the story be told as well in real time, rather than flashback?
10. Define irony, and point out three examples of it in this novel.
11. In what sense is the action of this novel locked into the novel's setting, New England in the late 1800s?
12. Provide the necessary details for each of these ideas and prove that each is a major theme in the story (or choose one):
 - how loneliness and isolation affects an individual
 - situations without hope
 - marriage as a form of enslavement
 - the tyranny of illness inhibits individual growth

Ethan Frome

Prologue

Vocabulary

affected – pretended
aggrieved – troubled
allusion – a reference to something else, usually something famous
anecdote – a short story of an interesting, amusing, or biographical subject
assented – agreed
bay – a reddish-brown horse
beleaguered – worn out; exhausted
capitulating – surrendering
chafed – felt irritated or discontented
chronicle – a narrative or fictional account
colloquially – informally
consolatory – comforting
conspicuously – obviously
deciduous – shedding, not lasting
ebb – a decline
exanimate – spiritless; lifeless
faculty – ability, power
fast – firmly; tightly
floundered – stumbled
forlorn – sad; depressed
gale – a very strong wind
garrison – troops stationed at a military post
habitable – capable of being lived in
incarnation – a version
inference – reaching conclusions from factual knowledge or evidence
inflection – tone of voice
innocuous – harmless
insurmountable – incapable of being overcome
intercourse – contact; communication
melancholy – sad, depressed, dejected
mien – manner
obscurity – darkness
oracle – a person who gives wise or authoritative opinions; sage
patent medicine – a drug protected by a trademark
perceptible – obvious
poignant – affecting the feelings or emotions
portico – a doorway
pretence – a claim or insincere attempt

Chapter III

Vocabulary

draughts – [*drafts*] cold gusts of wind
exacting – making severe demands
flux – a state of change; a continuous flow
imperceptible – unable to be sensed
imprudence – lacking discretion or judgment
indentured – contracted one person to work for another
laden – burdened, loaded
merino – soft wool
plaintively – woefully, sadly
preclude – to rule out
pretext – an act to hide one's real intentions
scintillating – sparkling, dazzling
sedentary – usually sitting, idle
sorrel – a reddish-brown animal
tangible – able to be felt or touched; real
thrice – three times
valise – a suitcase; bag

1. In the third paragraph of this chapter, how is Mattie associated with images of light and warmth?

2. Ethan thinks to himself how much Mattie has changed since her arrival in Starkfield. How has she changed?

4. Why is Mattie anxious about Zeena?

5. We are told that Ethan’s “return to reality was...painful.” What does that mean in the context of the story?

6. This chapter is full of color. Find at least three significant uses of color imagery in the text, and explain the importance of each.
