

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Ethan Frome

by Edith Wharton

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Item No. 201707

Introduction

1. Edith Wharton, the author of *Ethan Frome*, has written that she set this novel in New England after having spent years in that section of our country. After researching New England, copy down and complete the following sentences:
 - A. There are ____ New England states; their names and abbreviations are:_____.
 - B. The New England states are located geographically in the _____ part of the United States.
 - C. The coastline which runs along many of the New England states overlooks the _____ Ocean.
2. What does the author say are the only two things of any value to readers an author can explain? To answer this question, copy down the exact words the author uses. Be sure to put her words in quotation marks.

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3. When this novel opens, it is written in the first person. A narrator tells us that he is learning what happened to Ethan Frome twenty-four years ago. The narrator becomes interested in Ethan because of the strangeness of his appearance. We often judge people negatively by their appearance and sometimes find out later that we were wrong in our judgement. Suppose you are walking around the Mall with your best friend and see a person with stringy hair, big, dark glasses, torn jeans, and a new-looking black leather jacket. Complete the following conversation you would have with your friend about your judgement of that person:

You: Did you see that?

Friend: He reminds me of...

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4. When Harmon Gow tells the narrator that he thinks Ethan Frome will live to be a hundred, the narrator says, “He looks as if he is dead and in hell now.” Make a list of all of the physical characteristics of Ethan Frome which are described on pages 1 and 2. Then, thinking of a man in your own town you do not know but see fairly often, write a similar description of him. Write your description in complete sentences.
5. New England winters can very cold, ice and snow laden, and bring, as we read about in the case of Starkfield, a “deadness of the community.” Think about last year’s months of January and February in your own community. Imagine that spring, to your great relief, finally has arrived. Write a six-line poem describing your feelings about the two months of winter which have just passed. It does not have to rhyme. The following is an example of a first line:

Gun grey clouds hovering over frozen streets,

6. The narrator describes Ruth Varnum as “always as nervous as a rat.” A phrase which compare things which do not resemble each other using the word “like” or “as” is known as a simile, which is what Ruth Varnum’s phrase is. Complete the words below with a simile. Then, use the new phrase in a complete sentence.

1. as strong as...
2. as weak as...
3. as happy as...
4. as dumb as...
5. as smart as...

6. as crazy as...
7. as mean as...
8. as sweet as...
9. as pretty as...
10. as ugly as...

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7. Harmon Gow's New England dialect is quite apparent in his conversation with the narrator. Find the paragraph with the dialect that begins, "Well, matters ain't gone any too well with him," Harmon said." Rewrite the entire paragraph using standard English.

8. Descriptions of snowfalls can be among the most beautiful in literature. The sentence, "The height of the white waves massed against the garden fence and along the wall of the church showed that the storm must have been going all night..." is one of these. One of the most famous of all sentences about snow falling is written by the Irish author, James Joyce, in a short story titled, "The Dead." There he wrote, "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." Write two sentences you can think of about snow and/or snow falling.

9. The author writes a vivid description of Ethan Frome's house. All of us live in a building of one sort or another, whether in a house standing alone or an apartment in a building. Write a detailed description of your home or the building in which your home is located. Things to include, among others are: the material it is made of, how many floors it is, whether it has a basement or fireplace, what kind of windows and doors it has, etc. Be sure to use complete sentences in your description.

Chapter I

10. This chapter takes the story of Ethan Frome back to when he is a young man, before the accident which has left him physically damaged. You will notice that the previous narrator is no longer telling the story. The novel and its story now is being told in third-person. It is a clear, cold midnight with snow on the ground as Ethan arrives at the church basement to pick up his wife's young cousin, Mattie Silver, who lives with them, from a dance there. Ethan is looking through the church window. The book says, "Frome's heart is beating fast." Make a prediction from this sentence about some things you think could possibly happen in the novel concerning Ethan, Mattie, and her sister. Your prediction possibilities should be written as a paragraph and in complete sentences. Your first sentence might begin:

I think it's possible that Ethan...

11. The author, Willa Cather, does not paint a pretty picture of Ethan's wife, Zeena. Make a list of six things the author has written about Zeena in this chapter, which point up that she is not a very likeable character. Be sure to use quotation marks for the sentences or phrases you use that are taken directly from the pages.
12. Imagine that you are Zeena and that you are not happy about having your cousin Mattie living with you. Write a letter which Zeena would have written to a friend who had moved away from Starkfield two years ago, before Mattie arrived. In the letter, tell that friend of your feelings about the situation with Zeena and her physical health.

Chapter II

13. There were no cars at the time this novel is set; sleighs were used for transportation in winter. Young people in Starkfield also had sleds with which to coast down icy, snowy inclines for dangerous thrills. Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum's brush with death happens on a night run when they nearly crash into an elm tree. Suppose that you are the Mayor of Starkfield. Because you feel that it is too dangerous to go sledding after dark, you get the City Council to pass a law forbidding it. Write the announcement you would put in the daily paper informing the townspeople of the new law and why you feel it is needed.

14. When Ethan and Mattie arrive home after the dance, the key to the back door is missing. Zeena usually leaves it under the mat when she has gone to sleep. When Zeena opens the door to them, she explains that she did not leave the key because she could not sleep. Assuming this was not the truth, what reason do you think Zeena has for locking out Mattie and Ethan?

Chapter III

15. Mattie's family background is an unhappy one. It is the early 1900's. When her parents died, young Mattie was left homeless and penniless, and her relations would not help her. Her health breaks under the strain of trying to earn a living. The only thing left for her to do is take work as a hired girl with Zeena and Ethan. Think about what would happen to an uneducated girl today in the same circumstances. Make a list of four options that a girl in the present day would have in order not to have to work as a maid for a relative. Be sure that each option is written in complete sentences. Then write which of the four options you would feel would be the best one for a girl like Mattie and why.