

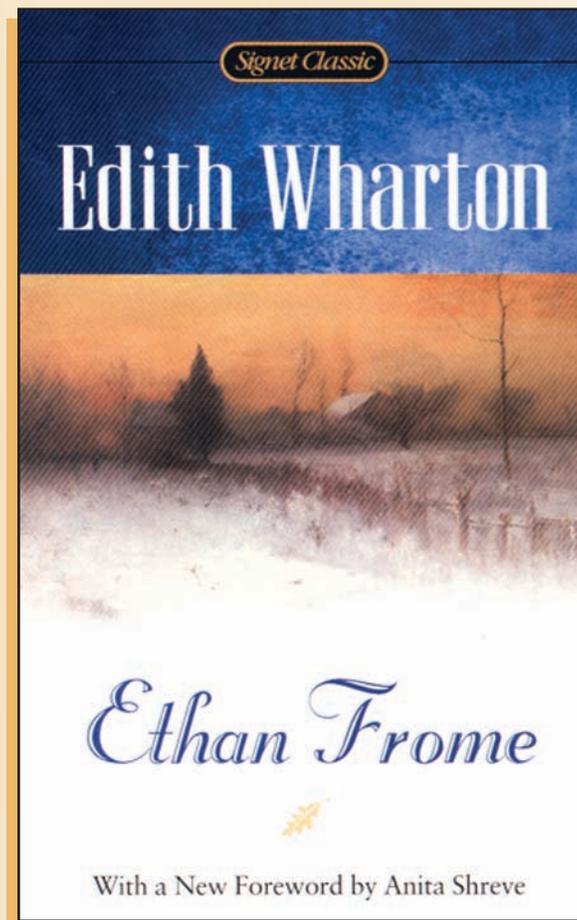
Signet Classic

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSIC EDITION OF

EDITH WHARTON'S

ETHAN FROME

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S E R I E S E D I T O R S :

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INTRODUCTION

Ethan Frome has much to offer senior high school students. Because it is short and easy to read, young people should be able to concentrate on its themes. All young people can relate to Ethan's conflict between doing what he thinks will make him happy and what he believes to be morally right. Fortunately, most teenagers do not have to choose between an understanding girl (boy) friend or a nagging wife (husband); still, they know how it feels to be pulled in different directions by the pressures of personal, family, and social responsibilities.

Today's teenager understands the importance of making choices. As Ethan and Mattie weigh the options, students can apply the steps in the decision-making process to their own lives. How much of who we are depends on our circumstances? How greatly does our own attitude towards these circumstances affect our choices? Is it possible to follow one's own inclinations as well as fulfill family or group responsibilities? These are issues that matter to young people, regardless of academic ability.

An important theme of *Ethan Frome* is the failure of suicide to resolve the problems. As more and more teens react to pressure by taking their own lives, alternatives must be offered and discussed. Mattie and Ethan's solution, so tragically aborted, provides a topic for discussion to which teenagers can relate.

Much of the tragedy of this short novel is caused by an inability to communicate freely and honestly. Young people tend to perceive authority figures (parents, teachers, employers) as rigid and close-minded as Ethan views his wife, Zeena. Hence, they will be able to understand Ethan's attraction to Mattie who shares his love of natural beauty and who can respond to it as he does. They will also realize that happiness and fulfillment depend on finding someone who listens and understands.

More sophisticated students will find analyzing Wharton's "framed story" technique a challenge. How much of what the Narrator tells us is "true?" Since his information is pieced together from fragments gleaned from two other narrators, whose "vision" of Ethan's story is the real one? In trying to solve this puzzle, students may discover a relationship between a definition of truth or reality and the point of view of its interpreter. Although they may not arrive at a satisfying conclusion, the process itself should be stimulating.

This teacher's guide contains an overview (synopsis of each chapter), followed by teaching suggestions for before, during, and after reading the novel. There are activities, discussion questions, and topics for writing assignments. All suggestions are applicable to students of average academic ability. Those recommended for the advanced student are denoted with an asterisk (*).

AN OVERVIEW

PROLOGUE (PP. 3-19)

Ethan Frome is introduced from an omniscient Narrator's point of view. We never learn his name; rather he is an engineer sent to work on a job and temporarily detained in Starkfield, Massachusetts. Intrigued by Ethan Frome's bleak, stiffened appearance, imagining how he must have looked before the "smash up" that has twisted his body on one side, the Narrator wants to learn details of the accident, but his landlady, Mrs. Hale, and the "village oracle," Herman Gow, the stagecoach driver, are reluctant to supply them.

Gow comments that "the smart ones get away" from Starkfield, yet Ethan has remained. Mrs. Hale allows that she "knew them both...it was awful"—information that serves to pique the Narrator's curiosity but not enough to satisfy. Gow has volunteered the bare facts of Frome's background, and, from these bits, the Narrator infers that the real Ethan Frome, whoever he may be, has been frozen by his "tragic" past as well as the "accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters" into the mute lonely cripple who has become a fixture in the town.

When Frome agrees to transport the Narrator to his job, their brief snatches of conversation make the Narrator feel that he is finally getting to know Ethan, the man. A fierce snowstorm forces Frome and his passenger to put up at Frome's poor farm, and as the Narrator steps across the threshold to hear a "droning querulous voice," he says that he has found the clue to Ethan Frome and is able to put together a "vision of his story." He does not enter the narrative again until the Epilogue.

CHAPTER I (PP. 20-29)

Ethan, through the Narrator's vision, is introduced as a young man. We learn that he had taken a year's course at a technical college, dabbling in physics, but had to stop when his father's death and subsequent financial losses called him home. Ethan is on his way to pick up his wife's cousin, Mattie Silver, who is attending a church dance. The night is cold; the village buried under two feet of snow. He stops for a moment to look over the long hill behind the church, a favorite place for coasters—a scene that foreshadows the tragedy of Chapter IX.

We also learn that Mattie, an orphan, has come to live with the Fromes to help Ethan's wife Zeena (Zenobia), a chronic invalid. Mattie is described as very pretty and possessing a sensitivity to natural beauty that is like Ethan's own. They share a communion that is precious to both, but which causes Zeena to be jealous. Mattie has no natural bent for housework, and when Ethan helps her, Zeena makes vague threats about replacing her with someone stronger. Peeking through the church window, Ethan watches Mattie dance with many partners, and also feels jealous. He recalls Zeena's threats, and he feels uneasy.

CHAPTER II (PP. 31-41)

As Ethan and Mattie walk home, they pass the big elm at the bottom of the hill, and Mattie mentions that her engaged friends, Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum, had almost run into it while coasting (more foreshadowing). When Ethan suggests Mattie might want to get married and leave them, she assures him that she doesn't. Walking past the family graveyard, he has a vision of living forever with Mattie and after they are dead, also having her beside him. This reverie is interrupted at the door by Zeena, who has failed to leave the house key in its accustomed place. Her glance seems to accuse them of improper behavior, and seeing her ugliness contrasted to Mattie's beauty makes Ethan even more aware of his unhappiness.

CHAPTER III (PP. 42-49)

Ethan recalls how sickly-looking Mattie had been when she arrived in Starkfield and how healthy and strong she has become. We learn that Mattie's father's death left her family bankrupt, and at twenty, Mattie has few skills that will enable her to support herself. Zeena decides to seek the advice of a new doctor in Bettsbridge, advice Ethan dreads because he knows it will be costly. In order to avoid enduring her company on the long drive to the station, he lies about having to collect some cash for some lumber he has delivered, a lie he will regret later.

CHAPTER IV (PP. 50-64)

Ethan and Mattie are left alone, and Ethan feels excitement at the prospect of enjoying his house without Zeena. We learn more about his past. Although quiet, he had a sociable streak and enjoyed his college studies. After his forced return to Starkfield, he assumed both the burdens of the farm and his mother. In her early years his mother had been a "talker," but had become quiet and withdrawn after her illness.

The silence of his life was so oppressive that when his cousin Zeena came to nurse his mother, her chatter and efficiency made him feel he couldn't bear being alone. After the funeral, Ethan proposed to Zeena, with the intention of moving away from Starkfield to try their luck in a new and larger town. Although Zeena didn't like Starkfield, she was unwilling to be transplanted to a place where she would be unknown. Within a year of their marriage she had retreated to the security of self-imposed hypochondria and silence.

CHAPTER V (PP. 64-72)

Ethan is able to savor his evening with Mattie, although Zeena's absence causes some constraint. Mattie has served the pickles in one of Zeena's best cut-glass dishes, and when the cat accidentally breaks it, both she and Ethan are terrified. He tells Mattie not to cry, and this command gives him a feeling of mastery he hasn't felt in a long time.

The evening passes quietly in small talk about Ned and Ruth's engagement. Ethan wonders aloud if Mattie will be "next." She questions Zeena's hostilities toward her. Neither wishes to discuss the implication of the topic, and the interlude in front of the fire passes for both in a rosy haze of unspoken and unfulfilled desire.

CHAPTER VI (PP. 73-79)

The next morning Ethan hopes to continue to dream of what “life at her side might be like,” but the day is filled with little snags that portend disaster. When he finally finds glue to mend the pickle dish, it is too late; Zeena is already home and has gone to her room. When Jonathan Powell, the hired man who has driven her back from the station, refuses a meal, Ethan perceives this as “ominous.”

CHAPTER VII (PP. 80-94)

Zeena's medical report from the doctor is “complications” that warrant the services of another girl, already hired to begin the next day. Horrified both at the expense and by the fear of losing Mattie, Ethan lashes out at his wife who retaliates by blaming her poor health on having to nurse his mother. When Zeena makes it clear that Mattie must leave in order to make room for the girl, Ethan's former resignation to his sad situation turns to loathing for his wife.

Joining Mattie at the supper table, he breaks the news to her, and, in a desperate gesture, kisses her, swearing to never let her go. The scene is interrupted by Zeena who takes a perverse pleasure in talking about her ailments as she watches Mattie. The chapter ends with a confrontation over who broke the pickle dish, which Zeena uses as proof that her cousin is incompetent as well as dishonest.

CHAPTER VIII (PP. 95-105)

Ethan retires to his icy study to think over what has happened and to formulate a plan. Acting on his impulse to head West with Mattie, he begins a letter to Zeena, stating his intentions to leave her the mill and farm, only to realize moments later that even if he were to leave, he has no money to do so. He falls asleep and awakens at dawn with false hopes quickly dashed when Jonathan Powell informs him that Zeena has given orders for Mattie to take the six o'clock train.

Desperate, Ethan sets off with the hope of borrowing money from Andrew Hale. On the way he meets Mrs. Hale, whose sympathetic comment, “You've had an awful time, Ethan Frome,” brings the realization that he had planned to take advantage of their kindness, and he feels this would be wrong. His sense of responsibility to his wife outweighs his love for Mattie, and he returns to the farm.

CHAPTER IX (PP. 106-126)

Defying Zeena's instructions to stay home, Ethan insists on driving Mattie to the station. Taking a detour around Shadow Pond, he and Mattie reminisce about the fleeting moments of happiness they have shared and pledge the love that might have been theirs if only circumstances had permitted it. Desperate, they plan a final sled ride down the hill that will join them forever in death. However, something goes wrong and instead of finding oblivion, both are left alive but terribly injured. It is here that the first person narrative ends.

EPILOGUE

Crossing the threshold behind Ethan Frome, the Narrator finds two slatternly women huddled together in the cold, poorly furnished room, and is introduced by Ethan to “my wife, Mis' Frome, and Miss Mattie Silver.”

Returning to Mrs. Hale's house, he learns that after the accident, Zeena changed her mind, accepted Mattie back into the household, and has been caring for her and Ethan for over twenty years. The novel ends with Mrs. Hale's opinion that if Mattie had died, Ethan might have had a chance to escape his harsh existence. Caught between two quarrelsome women, he is defenseless. She likens their home life to that in the Frome graveyard, “cept there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.”

TEACHING ETHAN FROME: BEFORE READING THE NOVEL**NOVEL STRUCTURE**

It may be helpful to review the basics of novel structure—exposition, conflict, climax, denouement, resolution—as well as the story elements—plot, setting, character, theme, point of view, tone—that comprise any literary work, but any consideration given to those topics at this time should be brief.

THEMES

It is especially helpful for students to consider questions or to engage in activities that relate to themes in the novel before reading it. The following suggestion may be implemented with students working alone, in small groups (or with partners), or as a class.

THEME #1: CONFLICTS EXISTING BETWEEN PERSONAL INCLINATIONS AND GROUP OBLIGATIONS.

1. Have Students read a short story or view a film dealing with the theme of sacrificing individual wishes for the benefit of someone else. Examples: “From Mother With Love” by Zoa Sherburne, “Shaving” by Leslie Norris, or *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. Respond to these questions:
 - a. What dilemma does the protagonist face?
 - b. Who is asking him or her to make the choice?
 - c. Does this person have that right?
 - d. What, ultimately, influences the protagonist’s decision?
 - e. Was the decision the “right” one for him/her as well as the other person involved?
2. Working in small groups (3-4), have students make two lists: (a) family responsibilities parents remind them of; (b) individual desires that seem to be in conflict with these obligations. Discuss what forms these conflicts take (defiance, arguments, excuses, etc.), how they are usually resolved, and how they might be handled better. One conflict from each group might be presented to the class for discussion and suggestions for resolution.
3. As a follow-up or alternative to the previous question, create a role-play involving personal wishes versus group responsibilities. The whole class can first brainstorm for suggested conflicts. Only the conflict itself should be presented in the role-play; let the class discuss/provide the resolution.

THEME #2: HOW MUCH CONTROL DO WE HAVE OVER THE CHOICES WE MAKE?

Crystal Ball Exercise: Assign groups of 3 or 4 students the following lines (one per group) from the novel. Ask them to predict (1) What will this person probably be like? (2) How will this attitude affect the way he/she deals with difficulties in life?

- a. “The doctor don’t want I should be left without anybody to do for me.” (Zeena, p. 28, helpless, complainer)
- b. “I know I ain’t anything like as smart as I ought to be...but if she’d only let me I’d try.” (Mattie, p. 37, honest)
- c. “She needn’t know anything about it if you keep quiet. I’ll get another just like it tomorrow.” (Ethan, p. 63, avoids confrontations)
- d. “Oh, no—don’t let’s think about it...” (Ethan, p. 69, prefers to pretend all is fine)
- e. “I’m the one to blame for its getting broken.” (Mattie, p. 94, open, truthful)
- f. “Yes, and my folks told me at the time you couldn’t do less than marry me after...” (Zeena, p. 83, manipulative, makes people feel guilty)

THEME #3 IS SUICIDE A SOLUTION OR A “COP OUT”?

Many articles and TV programs (see bibliography) have dealt with this topic. Students might be introduced to it via a video presentation or a visit from a guidance counselor. A follow-up might take the form of a panel discussion with both sides represented. Students will have their own personal stories to share.

THEME #4: PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE

Create a role-play situation in which a communication gap exists between a young person and an authority figure. Examples: (1) A student is trying to tell a parent about a success (or problem) but the adult is too busy or preoccupied to listen. (2) A teen is trying to break up with his/her steady, but the other refuses to admit anything is wrong. Discuss: How does this make you feel? How do you handle the feelings?

THEME #5: HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT IS TRUE OR REAL?

Brainstorm definitions of truth and reality, jotting responses on the chalkboard. About five minutes into the exercise engage in an “Eyewitness Report” exercise you have prearranged with a colleague. Example: Someone enters the classroom. He/she walks up to a student, asks to be accompanied out into the hall, hinting that the student has done something wrong. When you intervene on the student’s behalf, you are brusquely told to stay out of it. The student and colleague leave. You then ask the rest of the class to write up what they saw in case the administration needs to be notified.

Compare student reports of “exactly what happened.” They will realize that definitions of truth and reality depend on the point of view of the interpreter.

AS THE NOVEL IS READ

The author’s technique (“framed story”: Ethan’s story within Wharton’s novel; the use of an omniscient Narrator) as well as its brevity (nine chapters plus prologue and epilogue) make it feasible to maintain a running analysis and synthesis of each third of the novel as it is read and discussed. Emphasis should be placed on the close relationship among structure, content, and language. The questions that follow are intended for discussion although many are also suitable for writing assignment topics. Suggestions are also included for activities highlighting various literary techniques. These will be listed at the end of each section of the novel. Teachers may want to look over the selections in the “After Reading” section of this study guide since some of these can be incorporated as the novel is being read.

QUESTIONS: PROLOGUE–CHAPTER III

PROLOGUE

1. What does the name Starkfield suggest about the setting? (bleak, empty, contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community) How does Herman Gow corroborate this later? (“Most of the good ones get away.” p. 5)
 2. What is the stereotype of an engineer? (factual, rational) How is the Narrator/engineer atypical? (romantic, sees Frome as gallant and a hero) Can the reader therefore trust what he tells us? Why did Wharton have the Narrator say that he “...began to piece together this vision” (rather than “version”) of Frome’s story? (Perhaps the reader should pay close attention to details. Maybe there are other points of view as well.)
 3. What is significant about the missing “L”-structure on the farm? (Narrator perceives it as a symbol for Ethan Frome, himself. p. 16)
 4. What places do Herman Gow and Mrs. Ned Hale occupy in the story? (They are the sources of information about Ethan for the Narrator, allowing him to infer/tell the story.)
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CHAPTER I

1. Since we know from the Prologue that the novel involves a tragedy, what foreshadowing devices has the author used? (Ethan's uneasiness about Zeena's suspicions; his inability to exist without Mattie.) How is the setting itself a foreshadowing? (Winter is a conventional symbol for death.)

CHAPTER II

1. How does Ethan reveal that he feels ambivalent? He loves Mattie yet he knows he hasn't the "right" to acknowledge it. (He watches her through the window of the church as she prepares to leave the party; he uses her popularity as a portent that "you'll be leaving us soon;" he can possess her only in death [sees her name and his on the headstones in the family graveyard].)
2. What foreshadowing is used in this chapter? (Another reference to the danger of the old elm for coasters; Mattie comments that her friends' happiness would be destroyed if they hit the tree; Ethan sees the dead cucumber vine against the house as a funeral crape streamer "for Zeena;" his romantic vision of himself and Mattie lying side by side in the family graveyard.)
3. How is Ethan's conflict between his feelings for Mattie and those for Zeena voiced? (The gravestones seem to mock his desire for "change and freedom," yet he doesn't want to leave Mattie behind. Death appears to be the only logical way to have her. "We'll always go on living here together and someday she'll lie there beside me." p. 38)
4. Why is the missing door key significant? (It shows that Zeena won't be honest about her jealousy; she prefers to play games with Ethan and Mattie. It also shows the power she holds over the situation. She commands Ethan to go upstairs to bed with her and he obeys.)
5. How are Mattie and Zeena contrasted, physically? (Mattie wears bright colors; she has "fresh color in her cheeks and lips." Zeena's throat is puckered; her breast is flat; her hair is in crimping pins; the lines on her face are "fretful.")

CHAPTER III

1. How are the two women contrasted psychologically? (Mattie has a positive attitude. Despite her lack of money, family, and skills, she is making the best of her life with the Fromes. She is usually cheerful and uncomplaining. Zeena, on the other hand, is absorbed solely in her health. A chronic complainer, she is a silent fault-finder with Mattie's few domestic talents, preferring to hint at her disapproval rather than express it openly.)
2. How is Ethan's conflict intensified in this chapter? (Zeena's overnight trip will leave him and Mattie alone to act/not act on their feelings. He also lies to Andrew Hale about the load of lumber. Basically honest, lying makes him feel guilty.)

SYNTHESIS: PROLOGUE-CHAPTER III

1. Explain how each of the following quotations is significant to this section of the novel. What does each reveal about the characters, conflict, or theme?
 - a. "He's looked that way ever since he had his smash-up; and that's twenty-four years ago come next February." (p. 4) (First reference to an accident. Piques the reader's curiosity about Ethan. Explains his crippled appearance. Establishes Herman Gow as an indirect narrator.)
 - b. "I merely felt in her an insurmountable reluctance to speak of him and his affairs...." (p. 8) (Establishes Mrs. Hale as another indirect narrator, also establishes the direct Narrator's position between the two, Gow and Mrs. Hale. He wants to learn Ethan Frome's story.)
 - c. When Mattie says, referring to a group of clouds overhead, "It looks just as if it was painted,' it seemed to Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul...." (p. 26) (Refers to Ethan's feeling that he and Mattie share a communion about natural beauty and wonders. His innate sensitivity and brief education set him apart from his wife and neighbors, and this isolation intensifies his loneliness. Wharton is underscoring the theme that in order to be happy, people need to be able to communicate with kindred spirits.)
 - d. "I guess you're always late, now you shave every morning." (p. 29) (Zeena has noticed Ethan's interest in her cousin and indirectly hints at her displeasure. This makes her husband, in turn, become uncomfortable around both women. The theme that will be developed later is that problems arise when people cannot communicate honestly and directly with each other.)
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- e. "His glance crossed Mattie's and he fancied that a fugitive warning gleamed through her lashes." (p. 41) (Zeena has deliberately locked them out. Her suspicions seem to be deepening, and Ethan's guilt and worry are increasing. He and Mattie are now in league against Zeena, yet both are unwilling to confront her. Communication between them is indirect.)
- f. "Though she was but seven years her husband's senior, and he was only twenty-eight, she was already an old woman." (p. 48) (This description of Zeena arouses the reader's curiosity even more. Why did Ethan marry her in the first place? Will he leave her? We want to keep reading to see how the conflict will be resolved.)

At this point in the novel, most readers will probably believe that the Narrator's story is true. Burdened with a sickly wife, Ethan Frome is naturally drawn to someone who shares his interests. The reader feels sympathy for Ethan and Mattie and wants them to be happy. Although Zeena is to be pitied, she isn't a likable character. In this first section of the novel, Wharton has introduced setting, characters, rising conflict, and a narrative point of view (which may/may not be her own. Advanced students may wish to explore the "framed story" technique as the narrative develops), and has begun to develop themes.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES: PROLOGUE–CHAPTER III

1. Individually or as partners, students might make a collage of Starkfield that shows the contrast between vitality and inertia, mentioned by the Narrator in the Prologue. (Setting)
 2. Choose a character—Zeena, Mattie, or Ethan. Brainstorm for clues to this character's personality, using adjectives found in the texts as well as inferences. Introduce the character to the class in a variety of ways. Explain your choice:
 - a. An outfit that character would choose (dress in it, draw/collage it).
 - b. A book the character might read; a film or TV program preference.
 - c. Music the character might listen to.
 - d. A favorite food.
 - e. A representation of what the character might look like, using photos, magazine cut outs, fabric pieces. (Character)
 3. Illustrate Ethan's conflict between his feelings for Mattie and his sense of duty in one of the following ways:
 - a. Write a stream of consciousness-type dialogue he might have with his conscience.
 - b. Create a visual representation of his ambivalence.
 - c. With a partner act out the ambivalence—one portraying Ethan, the other his conscience.
 - d. Voice Ethan's feelings while appropriate music, representing his inner emotions, is played in the background. (Conflict)
 4. Creative drama and/or reader's theater-type interpretation of conflict, for example:
 - a. Mattie and Ethan approaching the house after the dance, discovering that the key is missing, confronting Zeena on the doorstep. (This could include a fourth person as Ethan's inner self, seeing death as a way to claim Mattie.)
 - b. Zeena's news that she will be away consulting the new doctor. Ethan's lie about the lumber. (Again, an additional person representing Ethan's inner self would highlight the conflict.) (Conflict)
 5. To emphasize the fact that Ethan Frome suggests varying points of view, students can conduct a man-on-the-street interview with Mr. Gow, Mrs. Hale, or Denis Eady. One student can portray a reporter who has heard about a tragedy in Starkfield and is there to learn some behind-the-scenes information. (Point of View)
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QUESTIONS: CHAPTERS IV-VI**CHAPTER IV**

1. What traits in Ethan's character are emphasized? (His pride and his prudence. When he asks Andrew Hale for the "unprecedented" advance of \$50.00, he doesn't want to admit he needs it to cover his lie to Zeena, yet he realizes he needs the money to do just that.)
2. Comment on Wharton's use of descriptive language in this chapter, particularly to adjectives referring to color. Why are they significant? (Mattie's appearance is noted in detail: her "slim young throat," the crimson ribbon in her hair, something "soft and flowing in her movements." Also, the pickle dish is described as "gay red glass." The bareness of Ethan's marital life is contrasted with the potentially rich and happy one that Mattie offers.)

CHAPTER V

- 1.* What basic difference between Ethan and Mattie is highlighted in this chapter? (Mattie is open about Zeena's disfavor. "Nobody can tell with Zeena" [p. 69], whereas Ethan prefers to push the truth away. "Oh no, don't let's think about it, Matt." [p. 70])

CHAPTER VI

1. How has the evening without Zeena altered Ethan's perception of his daily routine? (He sees what life with Mattie might be like.)

SYNTHESIS: CHAPTERS IV-VI

1. What do these statements reveal about the characters?
 - a. "...He had secretly gloried in being clapped on the back and hailed as 'Old Ethe' or 'Old Stiff'..." (p. 51). (Reveals how important sociability is to Ethan. His brief sojourn in Worcester had put him within a group of other students, and although his nature is "grave and inarticulate," he needs human contact and companionship. Hence, his attraction to Mattie. Another variation on the theme is that people need people in order to feel fulfilled.)
 - b. "...He had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery" (p. 64). (After deciding how to handle the broken pickle dish incident, Ethan feels like a man. He is happy because he feels in control of what's happening.)
 - c. "Now, in the warm lamplit room, with all its ancient implications of conformity and order, she seemed...more approachable" (p. 68). (Ethan's conflict is intensified. His inner feelings are battling with his outer habits of doing what he believes to be the socially correct thing, namely honoring his marriage vows.)
 - d. "I don't know. She went right up to her room" (p. 77). (Mattie's uncertainty increases Ethan's uneasiness about their relationship. He dreads his wife's discovery of the broken dish, itself a symbol of their shattered marriage, yet he is reluctant to bring the situation into the open. His earlier feelings of being in control are weakening, showing how easily he can be swayed.)

At this point in the novel, the salient theme, Ethan's struggle between passion and duty, is highlighted. His feelings are clear, but his habits of responsibility and conformity are ingrained. He enjoys his newly-awakened masculinity as he brags that he can guide himself and Mattie past the old elm as safely and as surely as he can mend the dish before Zeena discovers the damage. Will this heady feeling be strong enough to withstand the decision to sever the marriage bonds? At this point, the reader still feels sympathy for the lovers' plight and believes what the Narrator tells is true, namely that Ethan is the victim of an unsatisfying marriage.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR CHAPTERS IV-VI

1. Read Chapter IV aloud to students. Ask them to write down as many facts about the Frome marriage (including previous occupations; how they met) as possible. After the reading, rank the facts as to which the students consider the greatest cause of unhappiness. Use these rankings as the basis for small or large group discussion. (Plot)
2. Conduct a Reader's Theater or creative drama conversation between Ethan and Zeena with appropriate music played in the background to represent their unspoken feelings. (Conflict)
3. To help students understand the relationship between setting and descriptive language, have them create a visual representation of the scene in the kitchen when (a) Ethan and Mattie are enjoying the evening without Zeena, and (b) after Zeena arrives at home. Students should use colors and images that illustrate Wharton's words (e.g. crimson, bright heath, shining comfort, a dream). (Setting; conflict)

QUESTIONS: CHAPTER VII-EPILOGUE

CHAPTER VII

1. How does Zeena's news about hiring Mattie's replacement affect Ethan? (He confronts her directly, accusing her of turning her back on kin. This is the first time we have seen Ethan behave assertively with his wife.)
2. Why can this chapter be considered the climax of the novel? (It fulfills the criteria of the high point of excitement [Zeena and Ethan's confrontation] as well as the turning point [Ethan is resolved to buck Zeena; to assert himself and insist that Mattie remain].)

CHAPTER VIII

1. In this chapter, Ethan weighs his options. How is his decision to maintain the status quo in keeping with his personality? (He has always been inherently honest. He can't lie to the Hales in order to finance his escape. He has always been conventional and responsible. He came home to care for his parents; he realizes that deserting Zeena would leave her "destitute." He refers to his plan to leave as "madness." He follows his feelings rather than thinking things through. He fell in love with Mattie but couldn't see the consequences of his love, simply assuming all three would remain together until death. Now that he is forced to resolve his dilemma, falling back into the habit is natural to him.)
2. Why does he not consider his obligation to Mattie? What will his decision to remain with Zeena do to Mattie? Is this fair?
- 3.* How do Wharton's descriptions mirror Ethan's state of mind and foreshadow the end? (Looking out into the woods he sees "silver-edged darkness;" trees and hills evoke "some bright shred of memory" that is "alive with Mattie's presence." That night "was to have been their night for coasting down the hill.")

CHAPTER IX

1. How is Zeena's reaction to Mattie's departure a contrast to Ethan's? (She is cheerful, smiling, her appetite is good.) What are the implications of her behavior? (Her hypochondria is false; she uses it to manipulate people.)
2. Comment on the irony of Ethan's defiance of her command to stay home and let Jotham drive Mattie to the station. (It's a little late. He can pay lip service to his desire to protect Mattie, but he feels powerless to alter the situation.)
3. Why does suicide seem logical? (Ethan insists he's tied hand and foot;" Mattie can't manage alone. Since they can't express their love in life, perhaps they can finally join together in death.) Is this decision a solution or a "cop out?"

EPILOGUE

1. How is the reader surprised? (The "querulous droning" belongs to Mattie. She and Zeena are now almost identical in looks and habits. This is the ultimate irony: Ethan's chains are now doubly locked.)
 2. How does the Narrator deal with the story now? (He steps aside to let Mrs. Hale fill in the facts after the accident. He lets her interpret the tragedy.)
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- 3.* What is ironic about Mrs. Hale's interpretation? (She thinks that had Mattie dies, Ethan would have stood a chance of living. To her, the problem is that he is caught between two nagging women. She doesn't mention the possibility of Ethan's pre-accident life with Mattie as another option. As Mattie's friend, she must have known about their feelings for each other. Leaving Zeena was an option Ethan didn't choose.)

SYNTHESIS: CHAPTER VII-EPILOGUE

1. What do these quotes from the novel reveal?
 - a. "It was as senseless and savage as a physical fight between two enemies in the darkness" (p. 83). (Refers to Ethan's and Zeena's directly-stated conflict over Mattie. Even though they are at last being honest, it is too late. Had they communicated earlier, would it have made a difference?)
 - b. "I'm going to try my luck West" (p. 97). (Ethan's letter to Zeena written on impulse before the facts close in. Reveals Ethan's tendency to act on impulse rather than resign himself to habit.)
 - c. "He turned and walked slowly back to the farm" (p. 119). (He is returning to Zeena, to his habits of responsibility and conformity. These qualities are the essence of the man. Did he ever have a choice?)
 - d.* "I could go down this hill with my eyes tied!" (p. 119). (Ethan's eyesight isn't keen enough to handle the twilight that disguises landmarks and "falsifies distances," hence the aborted smash-up. This statement is ironic. Ethan's vision was never wide-reaching enough to have enabled him to follow his dreams. Seeing only what was close at hand, he reinforced his prison walls.)

This final section is the denouement and resolution of the novel. The ending, foreshadowed in Chapter I, has inevitably come to pass. Although Ethan and Mattie wanted and deserved happiness, neither was able to secure it. The reader is disappointed, but not surprised because all the clues dropped throughout the novel have led inexorably to this tragic end. However, when Mrs. Hale relates that Zeena took care of Mattie, one wonders if she couldn't have roused herself sooner. Seeing the patent medicine catalogs, perhaps the Narrator assumed Ethan was burdened with a hypochondriac: yet Ethan's tendency to do the "right thing" might have kept him as chained to Starkfield as did Zeena's ailments. He uses his "values" as an excuse to chain himself there. Perhaps he is the one who doesn't want to leave.

Because most of the information and interpretation of it are guided for us by an omniscient Narrator, we can only speculate as to how much of Ethan Frome's story is "true." This is not the point, however. What matters is that in this novel, Edith Wharton has encouraged readers to ask questions and to examine issues that are as relevant today as in 1911 when *Ethan Frome* was written. Satisfyingly provocative, it continues to merit its place as a "classic" in American literature.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR CHAPTER VII-EPILOGUE

1. Reader's Theater or creative drama interpretation that can be used after reading Chapter VII:
 - a. Interchange between Ethan and Zeena (pp. 80-87).
 - b. Interchange between Ethan and Mattie (pp. 87-91).
 - c. Interchange amongst all three (pp. 91-94). (Conflict)
2. Rewrite Chapter VII from Zeena's point of view. (Point of View)
3. Rewrite Chapter IX from Mattie's point of view. This could also be a diary entry. (Point of View)
4. Have students enact a dramatic interpretation of Ethan and Mattie reminiscing about their last year together. What tone is suggested by the imagery of the comparison to a butterfly in the snow? (p. 113). (Tone)

AFTER READING THE NOVEL

The following suggestions relate to the themes introduced in the “before reading” section. Many also lend themselves to being incorporated as the novel is being read.

1. Compare and contrast *Ethan Frome* with *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams:
 - a. How is Zeena like Amanda?
 - b. How is Tom like Ethan?
 - c. What does each work tell us about dreams unfulfilled?
 2. Write an essay or conduct a small group discussion on the following:
 - a. Ethan Frome is right to honor his marital responsibilities.
 - b. Ethan has the right to his own happiness.
 - c. Ethan's greatest hindrance to happiness is himself.
 - d. Suicide is the only solution for Ethan and Mattie.
 3. Go back to the “Crystal Ball” exercise. Respond to the same lines in view of your earlier predictions. How accurate were your predictions?
 4. Role-play the following scenarios based on the theme: *Ethan Frome* teaches us that unhappiness is caused by an inability to communicate with people close to us. Play each scene twice: (A) straight, according to clues in the story; (B) create a dialogue that suggests communication/compromise. Discuss how this might have made a difference in the outcome of the novel.
 - a. Ethan and Zeena after their marriage. Ethan wants to leave Starkfield; Zeena doesn't. (They compromise.)
 - b. Zeena's latest ailment. Ethan's observation of something he has seen that day doing chores. (They should talk to each other.)
 - c. Mattie and Zeena in the kitchen. Mattie is having trouble with some household task. (Should stress an alternative to silent criticism).
 - d. Zeena, Ethan and Mattie at the door the night the lovers are locked out. (Ethan and Mattie should express their feelings honestly rather than remain silent.)
 - e. Ethan finishes his letter to Zeena and takes it to her. (Zeena might offer a way to give Ethan his freedom or improve their marriage.)
 5. Pretend you are a reporter sent to cover the “smash-up.” Give a factual account as well as some comments from rescuers and witnesses.
 6. Rewrite Chapter X, disregarding the Epilogue if you wish. If you don't like the ending in Chapter IX, create your own, but make it consistent with the rest of the novel.
 7. Develop a diary kept by any character, with entries covering episodes from each section of the novel.
 8. Write a letter to “Dear Ann” or “Dear Abby” from any one of the characters asking for advice. Include the reply.
 9. Describe how you would have solved the problem differently from the way Ethan did.
 10. Make a visual representation of the novel's structure that is also a timeline of significant events; note story elements.
 11. Words relating to sight, especially the word, “vision,” play an important role in *Ethan Frome*. Divide the class into small groups. Assign each group a passage in which a word pertaining to sight occurs, asking for a response that will reflect (A) how the word is significant to that part of the novel; (B) how it relates to the whole novel.
 - a. “It was that night I found the clue to Ethan Frome and it began to put together this vision of his story” (p. 19). (We learn Ethan's tragedy; narrative point of view is established.)
 - b. “He let the vision possess him as they climbed the hill to the house” (p. 38). (Ethan plans to live with Mattie until death; his romantic nature prevents the making of practical plans.)
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- c. "Their evening together had given him a vision of what life at her side might be like" (p. 73). (Zeena is away; deepens his resolve to escape.)
 - d. "He gazed blankly about the kitchen which looked cold and squalid in the rainy winter twilight" (p. 77). (The morning after their evening alone; he sees what life will be like if no changes take place.)
 - e. "...he cried out, as if he saw her drowning in a dream..." (p. 89). (Ethan has written his letter; foreshadows the tragedy.)
 - f. "I always say you have the surest eye ..." (p. 120). (Mattie trusts Ethan to take care of her; he misjudges distance and the would-be fatal crash occurs, but is not successful in killing them.)
 - g. "The sweetness of Mattie's avowal...made the other vision more abhorrent..." (p. 122). (Heading for the tree; the thoughts of Zeena strengthen his resolve to go through with the suicide pact.)
 - h. "Mrs. Hale paused for a moment, and I remained silent, plunged in the vision of what her words evoked" (p. 132). (Mrs. Hale is filling in the facts; the Narrator is interpreting them from his own, romantic perspective.)
12. Other words, for example those relating to cold, are also used frequently. Find passages in which words related to cold occur and explain their significance.
13. Wharton often uses figurative language to heighten our perception of various story elements. Listed below are several metaphors and similes from the novel. Explain the significance of each.
- a. "Starkfield emerged from its six month's siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter" (p. 7). (Setting)
 - b. "He seemed a part of the mute, melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe" (p. 11). (Character)
 - c. "...the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth" (p. 25). (Conflict)
 - d. "The moon would push over the ridge behind the farm, burn a gold edged rent in the clouds, and then be swallowed by them" (p. 58). (Style)
 - e. "It was as senseless and savage as a physical fight between two enemies in the darkness" (p. 83). (Conflict)
 - f. "...a mysterious, alien presence, an evil energy..." (p. 87). (Character)
 - g. "The inexorable facts closed in on him like a prison-wardens cuffing of a conflict" (p. 99). (Conflict)
 - h. "...they seemed to come suddenly upon happiness as if they had surprised a butterfly in the winter woods..." (p. 113). (Tone)
 - i. "...her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that the disease of the spine sometimes gives" (p. 128). (Plot)
14. Reenact *Ethan Frome* as a current soap opera.
- 15.* Discuss the novel as a tragedy in the classical sense in which a flaw in the hero's character contributes to his downfall (What is Ethan's tragic flaw?) and in a more modern sense (In your opinion, what is tragic about the situation?).
16. Create a visual representation of these "framed stories," indicating the various artists who paint their word pictures. For example, *Ethan Frome*, the large canvas by Wharton, frames the smaller pictures by Herman Gow, Mrs. Hale and the Narrator.
17. Compare and contrast *Ethan Frome* with *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. In what ways are these "framed stories" alike? In each story, which narrator seems the most trustworthy?
- 18.* Read the author's own introduction to the novel. Write an essay discussing the value of an omniscient Narrator. Consider the following questions as part of your response:
- a. Why does she use the unnamed engineer rather than any of the characters themselves?
 - b. What does he bring to the novel that they would not?
 - c. She says she "instinctively" felt she made the right choice. Did she?
- 19.* Compare or contrast Edith Wharton's novella *Summer*, described as a "hot *Ethan Frome*," with the novel *Ethan Frome*.
- 20.* Using Cynthia Griffin Wolff's excellent introduction in the Signet Classic edition of *Ethan Frome*, as well as Edith

Wharton's own introduction, prepare a brief research report on the ways in which *Ethan Frome* is autobiographical. Focus particularly on Wharton's feelings about her own entrapment and implications as to how to gain freedom.

21. Conduct a guided large group discussion on the topic "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail." Divide the class into two groups. One group (half the class) researches the status of marriage in the early 1900s (e.g. few divorces, marital duty above personal happiness, honored reputation of invalid-type females, role of women in marriage, alternatives to unhappy marriages, ways couples dealt with marital problems, etc.). This group should show how *Ethan Frome* is a reflection of this time.

The second group (half the class) researches marriages in the late 20 th century, focusing on such questions as: What values are promoted in modern marriages? What are the divorce statistics, and what do they show about modern marriages? What roles are played by women in modern marriages? How do modern married couples deal with marital problems?

After presenting the facts, discuss as a class how old-fashioned or contemporary *Ethan Frome* really is. Answer the questions: Do marriages like Ethan's exist today? How are they similar? How are they different? What alternatives do modern couples have that Ethan did not have? What ways do modern couples have to deal with marital problems that were unavailable to Ethan? How is the role of women in modern marriages different from the role of women in marriages of the early 20 th century?

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The outstanding introduction by Cynthia Griffin Wolff which appears in the Signet Classic edition of *Ethan Frome* is of particular interest in providing clues to the personality of Edith Wharton herself. Advanced students will find it invaluable when exploring ways in which *Ethan Frome* is autobiographical.

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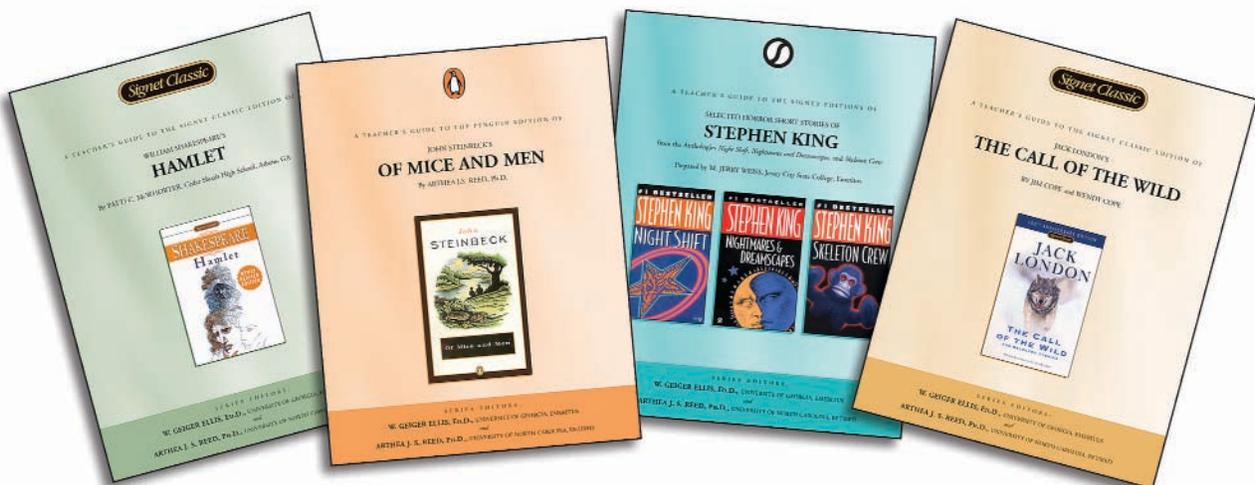
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