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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Ethan Frome

by Edith Wharton

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Item No: 300331

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

provocation – arousal, stimulation
queer – strange, weird
querulously – constantly whining or complaining
rejoined – repeated sharply
reserve – restraint with words or actions
retarding – slowing
reticent – uncommunicative in speech; reluctant to talk
runners – blades on a sled or sleigh
sardonically – mockingly scornful or cynical
sentient – aware; perceptive of feelings
shock – a thick, heavy mass
spume – froth, foam
taciturnity – habitual silence or reserve
torrents – floods or outpourings
touch – to reach
wan – feeble, weak
wistful – sad, melancholy
woe – sadness
wraith – a ghost; specter; shadow

1. We meet the main character right away. What is it that sets him apart from the other “natives”?

2. For how long and why, according to Harmon Gow, has Ethan Frome looked as he looks now?

3. Considering that Ethan has no urgent need to get mail, why do you suppose he bothers to go every day?

3. Contrast the imagery used to describe the setting outside and the description of the inside of the church during the dance in Chapter I.

4. What is Ethan’s reaction when he sees Denis Eady dancing with Mattie?

5. Why has Mattie come to live with Ethan and his wife Zeena?

6. At this point, Mattie has been living with them for one year. How does Ethan feel about having to walk her back from the church socials?

7. When Ethan first sees Mattie at the train station, he observes “She don’t look much on housework.” Quickly, however, he feels her presence in the house is “like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth.” What does this comment suggest about Ethan and Zeena’s marriage?

8. In that same paragraph, what appears to be another reason Ethan likes Mattie’s company?

Chapter IV

Vocabulary

cessation – a stop or pause
contagion – the spreading of an attitude or emotion
convivial – relating to good times; having friendly and light-hearted fun
cupolo – [*cupola*] a vaulted ceiling or roof
discomfiture – embarrassment
disconsolately – gloomily, sadly; unable to be consoled
epitaph – the inscription on a tombstone
feigned – pretended
forebodings – bad predictions or omens
genial – gracious and friendly
implored – begged
inarticulate – incapable of expressing oneself through speech
inevitable – unavoidable
insatiable – impossible to satisfy
marrow – the core
opulence – wealth; prosperity
pathological – caused by disease
roan – a reddish colored horse
scrupulously – meticulously
subdued – hushed, quieted
unbidden – uninvited; not wished or asked for
unfounded – groundless; lacking evidence
volubility – talkativeness

1. As this chapter opens, to what is Ethan happily looking forward?

2. In what way does the house seem different to Ethan when Zeena is away?
