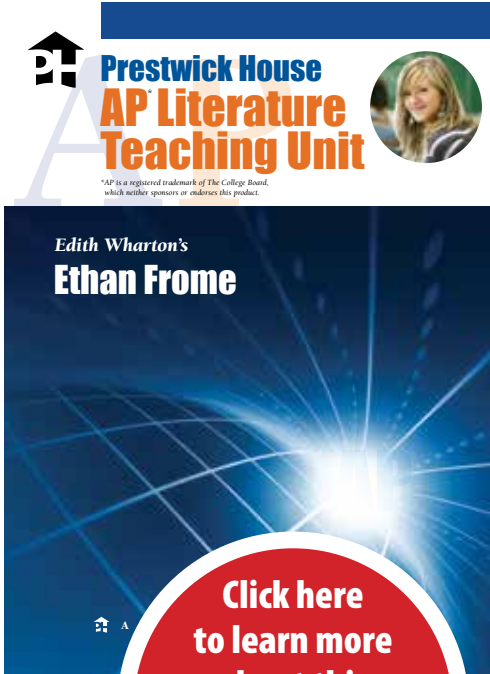




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Teaching Unit

Ethan Frome

by Edith Wharton

Written by Rebecca Grudzina



Prestwick House

Item No. 302795

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

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 a utobiographical 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.

THE PROBLEM OF NARRATIVE RELIABILITY

Critics have hailed *Ethan Frome* as the most carefully constructed of Wharton’s novels, and one cannot discuss the novel without examining the frame story with which it begins and ends. Wharton admitted she got the idea for the frame narrative and the long flashback from Honore de Balzac’s *La Grande Bretche*.

Ethan Frome

Prologue

1. What does the beginning of the novel suggest about the reliability of the information presented in the story?

2. How does the narrator's imagery establish the reader's first impression of Ethan?

3. What is our first clue to the key event of the story?

4. What clues do the contents of Ethan's typical mail delivery suggest?

5. What key words establish the image of the broken and crippled Ethan?

6. To what does Harmon attribute Ethan's problem? What does the comment suggest about the relationship between setting and character?

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 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 VIII

1. How do Ethan’s reflections about Mattie develop one of the key motifs Wharton has established for her?

2. What does the moon emerging from the mist make Ethan remember?

3. How do we know that the woman who finds Ethan in his study is Mattie and not Zeena?

4. How does Wharton establish the tortuously slow pace of the morning of Mattie’s departure? Compare it to the earlier scene in which Ethan was trying to buy the glue to repair Zeena’s pickle dish.

5. Ultimately, why does Ethan decide that it is impossible for Mattie and him to escape Starkfield and go west?

Epilogue

1. How does the beginning of the Epilogue return us to the place where the flashback began? Who do we think is the speaking woman?

2. How are the two women similar? How are they different?

3. Who turns out to be the paralyzed, complaining woman?

4. What is ironic about Zeena's ability to care for the injured Mattie and Ethan?

5. Why does the narrator conclude that Mrs. Hale has chosen him as the person to whom she will break her silence?
