

Ethan Frome



By: Edith Wharton

PLOT

Finding himself laid up in the small New England town of Starkfield for the winter, the narrator sets out to learn about the life of a mysterious local named Ethan Frome, who had a tragic accident some twenty years earlier. After questioning various locals with little result, the narrator finally comes to learn the details of Ethan's "smash-up" (as the locals call it) when a violent snowstorm forces the narrator into an overnight stay at the Frome household. Going back to that tragic year, we find Ethan walking through snowy Starkfield at midnight. He arrives at the village church, where lights in the basement reveal a dance. Ethan loiters by the window, transfixed by the sight of a young girl in a cherry-colored scarf. He has come to the church to fetch his wife's cousin, Mattie Silver, who has been living with the Fromes for over a year, helping around the house. Eventually, we learn that Mattie is the girl in the red scarf—and the object of Ethan's affection. When the dance lets out, Ethan hangs back to keep his presence unknown. Mattie refuses the offer of a ride from another young man named Denis Eady and begins the walk home alone. Ethan catches up with her. As they continue on their way together, Ethan experiences a sense of thrill in Mattie's presence, and the tension between the two becomes apparent. However, the tension dissipates when they arrive home and Zeena, Ethan's sickly, shrewish wife, who has kept a late-night vigil in anticipation of their return, greets them. She regards the dynamic between her husband and her cousin with obvious suspicion, and Ethan goes to bed in a state of unease, without a word to Zeena and with thoughts only of Mattie.

PLOT CONTINUED

The next day Ethan spends the morning cutting wood and returns home to find his wife prepared for a journey. She has decided to seek treatment for her illness in a neighboring town, where she will spend the night with some distant relatives. Excited by the prospect of an evening alone with Mattie, Ethan quickly assents to his wife's plan. He goes into town to make a lumber sale, but he hurries so as to return to Mattie in time for supper. That evening, tensions run high between Ethan and Mattie. Although the two never consummate or even verbalize their passions, their mutual feelings hang palpably between them, unspoiled by the house's many reminders of the absent Zeena. Catastrophe threatens when the cat shatters Zeena's favorite pickle dish, which Mattie had taken out to celebrate their dinner together, but Ethan quickly pieces the shards together and tucks the broken dish back in its place. After supper, with Mattie busy at her sewing work, Ethan contemplates an outright demonstration of his affections, but he stops short of full disclosure. Just after eleven, the two turn in for the night without so much as touching. The next morning, Ethan remains eager to reveal his feelings to Mattie, but the presence of his hired man, Jotham Powell, coupled with his own inhibitions, prevent him from making a move. Ethan makes a run into town to pick up some glue for the pickle dish. When he arrives back at the farm, expecting to find Mattie alone, she informs him that Zeena has returned. Quickly collecting himself, Ethan visits the bedroom to greet his wife. Zeena, however, is in no mood for kindnesses and bitterly informs Ethan that her health is failing rapidly. In light of this fact, Zeena announces, she plans to replace Mattie with a more efficient hired girl. Ethan privately resents Zeena's decision but keeps the bulk of his anger to himself.

PLOT CONTINUED

Going down to the kitchen, Ethan's passions spill over, and he kisses Mattie zealously. He tells Mattie of Zeena's plan to dismiss her, but their moment together is interrupted by Zeena herself, who had originally declined to come down to dinner but has changed her mind. After the meal, Zeena discovers the broken pickle dish while in search of some medicines and, in her rage, grows all the more determined to chase Mattie out. That evening, Ethan retreats to his makeshift study, where he contemplates the decision that lies before him. Unable to tolerate Mattie's dismissal, but effectively unable to prevent it, Ethan briefly considers eloping with Mattie, and even begins to draft a letter of farewell to Zeena. However, in a sober evaluation of his financial situation, Ethan comes to realize the impossibility of running away and falls asleep in a state of hopelessness. At breakfast the next morning, Zeena announces the day's plans for Mattie's departure and the arrival of the new hired girl. At mid-morning, having finished his tasks on the farm, Ethan steals into town on a desperate errand. His plan, hatched on the fly, is to make a second attempt to collect an advance from Andrew Hale on a recently delivered lumber load, in hopes of financing his elopement with Mattie after all. On his way down the hill Ethan encounters the Hale sleigh, and, in passing, Hale's wife praises him greatly for his patience in caring for the ailing Zeena. Her kind words serve to check his plan, and he returns to the farm with a guilty conscience. Against Zeena's wishes, Ethan decides to bring Mattie to the station himself. In a fit of nostalgia, he takes her by a roundabout route, and they eventually end up stopping at the crest of a village hill in order to take a sledding adventure they had once proposed but had never undertaken. A successful first run prompts Mattie to suggest a second, but with a different purpose in mind. She asks Ethan to run the sled into the elm tree at the foot of the hill, allowing them to spend their last moments together. Ethan initially rejects her proposal but is slowly won over, and they take their positions on the sled, locking themselves in a final embrace. In the wake of the collision, Ethan comes to consciousness dazedly, reaching out to feel the face of the softly moaning Mattie, who opens her eyes and weakly utters his name. Jumping forward twenty years, we find ourselves back in the company of the narrator as he enters the Frome household. Inside, he meets the gaze of two frail and aging women, and takes stock of the house's squalid conditions. Frome apologizes for the lack of heat in the house and introduces the narrator to the woman preparing their supper—his wife, Zeena—and to the seated, crippled woman in the chair by the fire—Miss Mattie Silver. The next day, the narrator returns to town, where he lodges with Mrs. Ned Hale and her mother, Mrs. Vernom. Sensing their curiosity, he gives a brief account of his evening in the Frome household, and after supper he settles down to a more intimate discussion with Mrs. Hale. Together, they mourn the tragic plight of the silent, cursed man and the two women fated to keep him company during the long New England winter nights.

Characters

- **Ethan Frome** - The protagonist of the story, Ethan is a farmer whose family has lived and died on the same Massachusetts farm for generations. A sensitive figure, Ethan has a deep, almost mystical appreciation of nature, and he feels a strong connection to the youth, beauty, and vital spirit of Mattie Silver, his wife's cousin. However, he ultimately lacks the inner strength necessary to escape the oppressive forces of convention, climate, and his sickly wife.
- **Zenobia Frome** - Ethan's sickly wife, more commonly known as “Zeena.” She comes across as prematurely aged, caustic in temperament, prone to alternating fits of silence and rage, and utterly unattractive, making her the novel's least sympathetic figure. She is acutely interested in the treatment of her own illness, displaying a degree of hypochondria (imagined illness or minor symptoms secretly relished and exaggerated by the patient). Despite Zeena's apparent physical weakness, she, not Ethan, holds the dominant position in their household.
- **Mattie Silver** - Zeena's cousin, who comes to assist the Fromes with their domestic tasks. Attractive, young, and energetic, Mattie becomes the object of Ethan's affection, and reciprocates his infatuation. Because the reader sees Mattie only through Ethan's own lovesick eyes, Mattie never truly emerges as a well-rounded character. She often seems more a focus for Ethan's rebellion against Zeena and Starkfield than an actual flesh-and-blood person with both strengths and weaknesses.
- **The Narrator** - Although he recounts the story's events, the narrator (an engineer by profession) plays no part in the story itself. That he remains nameless highlights the thinness of his character. As a stranger to Starkfield, he views Ethan Frome's story with fresh eyes and operates as a conduit between the closely guarded story of Frome's tragedy and the reader in the world outside the novel.
- **Denis Eady** - The son of Starkfield's rich Irish grocer, Michael Eady, and sometime-suitor of Mattie Silver. Denis is the focus of Ethan's jealousy in the novel's early chapters, before Ethan learns of Mattie's true feelings.

Characters Continued

- **Mrs. Ned Hale** - Widow of Ned Hale and landlady to the unnamed narrator. The narrator describes Mrs. Hale as more refined and educated than most of her neighbors. Although she was once intimate with the Fromes, she hesitates to discuss their plight with her inquisitive lodger.
- **Ned Hale** - Ruth Varnum's fiancé and later her husband. Ned and Ruth's romance contrasts with the fruitless love of Ethan and Mattie. Ned has died by the time the narrator comes to Starkfield.
- **Andrew Hale** - Ned's father, Andrew Hale is an amiable builder involved in regular business dealings with the young Ethan. When Ethan requests that Hale extend him an advance on a lumber load, Hale is forced to politely refuse, citing his own financial constraints. Nevertheless, Ethan (mistakenly) continues to regard him as a possible source of a loan.
- **Mrs. Andrew Hale** - Ned's mother and Andrew's wife, Mrs. Hale extends an unexpected degree of warmth to Ethan after encountering him by chance one winter afternoon. Her kindness and praise for his dedication to Zeena lead Ethan to reevaluate his decision to borrow money from Andrew Hale to elope with Mattie.
- **Jotham Powell** - The hired man on the Frome farm. Powell's main duty is to assist Ethan in the cutting, loading, and hauling of lumber. Markedly reticent, Powell is sensitive to the tensions between the Fromes but loath to involve himself in them.
- **Harmon Gow** - A former stage-driver and town gossip. Gow provides the narrator with a scattering of details about Ethan Frome's life and later suggests that the narrator hire Ethan as a driver, paving the way for the relationship through which the narrator learns Ethan's story

Character Analysis

- **Ethan Frome** Although the novel's introductory and concluding passages are told from the narrator's point of view, the bulk of the novel unfolds from Ethan Frome's perspective and centers on his actions. Whereas the other characters in the narrative remain opaque, we are allowed access to all of Ethan's thoughts as his life approaches a crisis. He can be seen as the protagonist of the story. In spite of the fact that Ethan contemplates an adulterous affair, Wharton renders him a generally sympathetic character by making extreme efforts to depict his wife, Zeena, as an appallingly unsympathetic figure. Even if we don't condone Ethan's desire for another woman, we understand his motivations. We never doubt his fundamental goodness. Ethan's illicit passion for Mattie Silver coexists with a moral sense strong enough to keep him from going beyond a few embraces and kisses. Though sympathetic, Ethan remains a frustrating main character. Wharton's novel emphasizes two themes: the conflict between passion and social convention, and the constricting effects that a harsh winter climate can have on the human spirit. These themes almost seem to conspire to make Ethan a passive, unhappy victim of circumstance, weighed down by his duty to his wife, his bitter existence as a poor farmer, and the strain that Starkfield's frozen landscape places on his soul. "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters," an old local tells the narrator. This assessment seems to be Wharton's epitaph for her protagonist, who is forced—like the original Ethan Frome and his wife, Endurance, in the graveyard—to endure rather than to act. His entire life becomes a series of dreams destroyed by circumstance. Zeena's illness and his poverty crush his desire for wider horizons, which we see in his hope to leave Starkfield and in his interest in chemistry and engineering. His desire for Mattie is likewise crushed by his inability either to break free of Zeena or to muster the courage to defy convention and risk ruin. Ethan is a sensitive man, a lover of nature, and a basically decent person, but he lacks emotional strength and so is mastered by circumstances. It is appropriate, then, that his only bold decision in the entire novel is to commit suicide—a decision that Mattie pushes on him and thus, in fact, contains little courage. Rather, his final, mad sled ride to disaster constitutes the ultimate expression of passivity: unable to face the consequences of any decision, he elects to attempt to escape all decisions forever.

Character Analysis

- **Zenobia (Zeena) Frome** Though Zeena is not as rounded a character as her husband, the negative aspects of her personality emerge quite clearly, making her seem like the novel's villain. While she is technically the victim of Ethan's plans to commit adultery, the reader comes to sympathize much more with Ethan, because he feels imprisoned in his marriage to the sickly and shrewish Zeena. Wharton's physical descriptions make Zeena seem old and unfeminine. Furthermore, Zeena speaks only in a complaining whine, and all her actions seem calculated to be as vindictive as possible. Her illness might make some of this crotchety behavior forgivable, but she so relishes her role as a sufferer that the reader suspects her of hypochondria, or at least of exaggeration. Her only talent is caring for the sick, and the only time she displays any vitality or sense of purpose is when administering to Ethan and Mattie at the end of the novel. One imagines her taking a perverse delight in Ethan and Mattie's suffering, since she knows that they attempted to kill themselves to escape her. It is important to note, however, that all of Zeena's faults are relayed from Ethan's point of view, which, given his passion for Mattie, is far from impartial.
- **Mattie Silver** Mattie's character constitutes the hinge on which the plot of Ethan Frome turns. All of the story's events are set in motion by her presence in the Frome household. Yet we glimpse Mattie, as we glimpse Zeena, only through Ethan's eyes, and his perception of her is skewed by his passion. With her grace, beauty, and vitality, she obviously embodies everything that he feels Zeena has denied him, and so becomes the focus of his aborted rebellion against his unhappy life. Mattie is distinguished by little other than the red decoration she wears, which symbolizes both passion and transgression. Until the very end, we cannot even be certain that Mattie reciprocates Ethan's feelings for her. When, at the climax of the novel, Mattie's true self does shine through, we see her as an impulsive, melodramatic young woman, more adolescent than adult. Her most active deed of self-definition is persuading Ethan to attempt suicide, which reveals her as rather immature, ready to give in to whatever passionate (and foolish) thoughts enter her head. Yet, because the text has so strongly established Mattie as the horrid Zeena's polar opposite, we forgive her childish delight in melodrama. Even in her recklessness, Mattie seems preferable to the shrewish, complaining, curmudgeonly Zeena: it is better that Ethan die a quick death with Mattie, we feel, than a slow one with Zeena. Nevertheless, one cannot help but suspect that Mattie may not be quite worth the passion that Ethan directs her way, and that the rebellion and escape she represents are more important than the pretty, flighty, and slightly absentminded girl she actually is.

Themes

- **Society and Morality as Obstacles to the Fulfillment of Desire**
- The constraint social and moral concerns place on individual desire is perhaps the novel's most prominent theme, since Ethan Frome's plot is concerned with Ethan's desire for a woman who is not his wife. By denying Zeena a single positive attribute while presenting Mattie as the epitome of glowing, youthful attractiveness, Wharton renders Ethan's desire to cheat on his wife perfectly understandable. The conflict does not stem from within Ethan's own heart—his feelings for Mattie never waver. Instead, the conflict occurs between his passions and the constraints placed on him by society, which control his conscience and impede his fulfillment of his passions. Again and again, Wharton displays the hold that social convention has on Ethan's desires. Although he has one night alone with Mattie, he cannot help but be reminded of his domestic duties as he sits in his kitchen. He plans to elope and run away to the West, but he cannot bring himself to lie to his neighbors in order to procure the necessary money—and so on. In the end, Ethan opts out of the battle between his desires and social and moral orders. Lacking the courage and strength of will to face down their force, he chooses to abandon life's burdens by abandoning life itself.
- **Winter as a Stifling Force**
- Ethan Frome, the novel's protagonist, is described by an old man as having “been in Starkfield too many winters.” As the story progresses, the reader, and the narrator, begin to understand more deeply the meaning of this statement. Although a wintry mood grips Ethan Frome from the beginning—even the name Starkfield conjures images of northern winters—the narrator appreciates the winter's spare loveliness at first. However, he eventually realizes that Starkfield and its inhabitants spend much of each year in what amounts to a state of siege by the elements. The novel suggests that sensitive souls like Ethan become buried emotionally beneath the winter—their resolve and very sense of self sapped by the oppressive power of the six-month-long cold season. Ethan yearns to escape Starkfield; when he was younger, we learn, he hoped to leave his family farm and work as an engineer in a larger town. Though Zeena and poverty are both forces that keep Ethan from fulfilling his dream, the novel again and again positions the climate as a major impediment to both Ethan and his fellow townsfolk. Physical environment is characterized as destiny, and the wintry air of the place seems to have seeped into the Starkfield residents' very bones.

Motifs and Symbols

- **Illness and Disability** Ethan and those individuals close to him, including (by the end of the novel) Mattie, suffer from sickness or disability. Caring for the sick and the lame defines Ethan's life. He spends the years before the novel begins tending to his ailing mother, and then he has to care for his hypochondriacal wife, Zeena. Finally, after his and Mattie's attempted suicides, Ethan is forced to spend the rest of his days as a cripple, living with a sick wife and the handicapped Mattie. Outward physical signs reflect inner realities in Ethan Frome, and the predominance of illness in the characters' physical states indicates that, inwardly, they are all in states of destitution and decline.
- **Snow and Cold** The imagery of Ethan Frome is built around cold, ice and snow, and hues of white. The characters constantly complain about the cold, and the climactic scene hinges on the use of a winter sport—sledding—as a means of suicide. These motifs work to emphasize the novel's larger theme of winter as a physically and psychologically stifling force. Like the narrator, we initially find beauty in the drifts, flakes, and icicles. Eventually, however, the unremittingly wintry imagery becomes overwhelming and oppressive, as the overall tone and outlook of the book become increasingly bleak. The cumulative effect is to make the reader feel by the end of the novel that, like Ethan himself, we have “been in Starkfield too many winters.”
- **Mattie's Red Scarf and Red Ribbon** In the two key scenes when Mattie and Ethan are alone together—outside the church after the dance and in the Frome house on the evening of Zeena's absence—Wharton emphasizes that Mattie wears red. At the dance she wears a red scarf, and for the evening alone she puts a red ribbon in her hair. Red is the color of blood, ruddiness, good health, and vitality, all of which Mattie has in abundance, and all of which Zeena lacks. In the oppressive white landscape of Starkfield, red stands out, just as Mattie stands out in the oppressive landscape of Ethan's life. Red is also the color of transgression and sin—the trademark color of the devil—especially in New England, where in Puritan times adulterers were forced to wear red A's on their clothes (a punishment immortalized in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*). Thus, Mattie's scarlet adornments also symbolize her role as Ethan's temptress toward moral transgression.
- **The Cat and the Pickle Dish** During their meal alone, and the evening that follows, Ethan and Mattie share the house with the cat, which first breaks Zeena's pickle dish and then seats itself in Zeena's rocking chair. The animal serves as a symbol of Zeena's tacit invisible presence in the house, as a force that comes between Mattie and Ethan, and reminds them of the wife's existence. Meanwhile, the breaking of the dish, Zeena's favorite wedding present, symbolizes the disintegration of the Frome marriage. Zeena's anguish over the broken dish manifests her deeper anguish over her fractured relationship.
- **The Final Sled Run** Normally, a sled rider forfeits a considerable amount of control and submits to the forces of gravity and friction but still maintains an ability to steer the sled; Ethan, however, forfeits this ability as well on the final sled run. His decision to coast in his final sled run symbolizes his inability to escape his dilemma through action of any kind. The decision parallels Ethan's agreement to Mattie's death wish, his conduct in his marriage, and his attitude toward life in general: unable to face the consequences of any decision, he lets external circumstances—other individuals, society, convention, financial constraints—make his decisions for him. Mattie's death wish appears especially appealing to Ethan in that it entirely eliminates all consequences for both of them, forever. Just as the rider of a sled relinquishes control, so Ethan surrenders his destiny to the whims of Mattie and of fate.