

Ethan Frome



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH WHARTON

Born Edith Newbold Jones to socially prominent middle-class parents (the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" refers to two of her great-aunts), Edith Wharton's literary ambitions surprised and slightly embarrassed her merchant-class family. Married off at 23 to Teddy Wharton, a wealthy Bostonian, Wharton did not begin to write full-time and publish novels until she was in her 40s, when she was living in Lenox, MA. She achieved literary celebrity with [The House of Mirth](#) (1905), followed by *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), and [The Age of Innocence](#) (1920), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, becoming the first woman to achieve that distinction. Over that same period, however, her marriage unraveled, and ended in divorce in 1913. Wharton was a prolific writer, writing in total 22 novels and novellas, 87 short stories, nine volumes of nonfiction, and two volumes of poetry. In 1910 Wharton moved permanently to France, where in 1916 she was named an officer of the Legion of Honor for her wartime work on behalf of refugees.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The climactic scene in *Ethan Frome* was inspired by a sledding accident in Lenox in 1904 that killed one young woman and gravely injured four of her companions (Wharton knew one of the victims). The fatal paralysis of Wharton's neighbor Ethel Cram after a pony-cart accident in 1905 also played a role in shaping the narrative. The novel also provides accurate social commentary on life in urban and rural areas in turn-of-the-century New England, including transactions between farmers and builders, the effects of the new railway system, the inadequate education of girls, the status of doctors, attitudes toward debt, and levels of unemployment.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In writing *Ethan Frome*, Wharton was greatly influenced by Emily Brontë's [Wuthering Heights](#), Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Balzac's short story "La Grande Bretèche," from which she drew her narrative method, Nathaniel Hawthorne's [The Blithedale Romance](#), from which Zeena's name is taken (Ethan's name was based on another Hawthorne character, Ethan Brand), and John Keats' poem "The Eve Of St. Agnes." Wharton's 1920 novel [The Age of Innocence](#) features a male hero, Newland Archer, who like the character Ethan Frome allows circumstances to determine the outcome of his love affair with a beautiful woman who is not his wife.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Ethan Frome*
- **When Written:** 1910-11; French exercise begun in 1907
- **Where Written:** Rue de Varenne, Paris, France
- **When Published:** September 1911
- **Literary Period:** Edwardian Period
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** The fictitious town of Starkfield, Massachusetts
- **Climax:** The sledding accident
- **Antagonist:** Zenobia (Zeena) Frome
- **Point of View:** First-person observer (frame story); third-person omniscient (main narrative)

EXTRA CREDIT

Views on Marriage: Wharton frequently wrote about unhappy marriages, and herself divorced a mentally-ill husband at a time when divorce was a hot topic (divorce figures doubled between 1880 and 1900, and doubled again by 1920, owing to new laws and changing social mores). Wharton was particularly critical of American marriages in which the husband looked down on the wife because she took no interest in his business affairs, and the wife retaliated by spending enormous amounts of money. Although *Ethan Frome* is sometimes seen as anomalous among Wharton's novels because it is not about upper-class New York society, it is typical in its concern with how traditional institutions and values perpetuate an imbalance of power between men and women that often destroys their relationships with one another.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Narrator, an engineer assigned to a job at a power plant near the town of Starkfield, MA, is intrigued by a tall crippled man he sees at the local post office. He learns that the man, Ethan Frome, was injured in a sledding accident 24 years earlier, but can get little more from the secretive locals. Circumstances lead the narrator to hire Ethan to drive him to and from his work. One night a violent winter storm forces Ethan to invite the Narrator to stay overnight at the Frome farm, where what he sees inspires him to reconstruct the tragedy.

The Narrator's vision begins with 28-year-old Ethan Frome peering through a church window at 21-year-old Mattie Silver, Ethan's wife's cousin. Mattie works at the Frome farm, where she provides domestic help to Zeena, Ethan's ailing wife, in return for room and board. As Ethan watches, Mattie dances

with the arrogant Denis Eady, son of the town's wealthy grocer. Jealous, Ethan eavesdrops as Mattie refuses Denis's offer of a ride home and begins the two-mile walk back to the farm alone. Ethan hurries after her and they continue past a dangerous sledding hill, where Mattie's friend Ruth Varnum and Ruth's fiancé Ned Hale have recently avoided a serious accident. The attraction between Mattie and Ethan is palpable, but unspoken. When they reach the farm, they are surprised to find the door locked. Zeena greets them at the door, complaining that she is feeling "too mean to sleep." Ethan goes to bed with an uneasy feeling that Zeena guesses his feelings for Mattie, though she gives no outward sign.

The next day, Ethan postpones hauling a delivery of lumber to Andrew Hale, a local builder. Stopping at the farmhouse, Zeena, dressed in traveling clothes, informs him that she is making an overnight trip to Bettsbridge to consult a promising new doctor about her "shooting pains." Ethan quickly agrees to the plan, realizing that it will allow him to be alone at the farm with Mattie. He lies to Zeena that he can't take her to the station because he must collect payment from Andrew Hale.

Although he knows Hale never pays in advance, Ethan goes to him for the money in order to avoid being exposed as a liar. But Hale politely declines his request, and Ethan does not press him. Returning empty-handed to the farm, he finds Mattie presiding over a carefully-laid supper table. The blissful scene is shattered, however, when Zeena's **red pickle-dish**, a favorite wedding present, is knocked to the floor by the cat. Anticipating Zeena's anger, Mattie is terrified, but Ethan assures her that he will glue the fragments together before Zeena returns. The two go upstairs to bed without declaring their passion for one another or so much as touching.

The next day, farm work and bad weather conditions delay his errand to buy glue to mend the pickle-dish. When he returns home, he learns from Mattie that Zeena has already arrived and gone straight up to their room. Collecting himself, Ethan goes up to greet her, only to learn that the doctor has told her she will die unless she hires more efficient domestic help. She tells him a new hired girl will arrive the following day, and that Mattie must go immediately.

Mattie, waiting at the supper table, learns of her dismissal from Ethan, who kisses her passionately, no longer able to hide his feelings. Zeena approaches and interrupts them. She joins them at the dinner table, although previously she had claimed to be too ill to eat. Complaining of heartburn, Zeena leaves the table in search of stomach powders, but returns carrying the broken **pickle-dish**. Mattie confesses, which only fuels Zeena's determination to replace Mattie.

That night, Ethan starts to write a letter informing Zeena he has decided to elope with Mattie and go out West. Considering the plan further, though, Ethan realizes that he has no way of getting even the bit of money needed to travel West. He's also afraid of what will become of Zeena if she can't sell the farm. He

falls asleep, leaving the letter unfinished.

Ethan decides to approach Hale and lie in order to get the money he needs. But at Hale's house he meets Hale's wife, who praises his dedication to Zeena. Her compassion makes Ethan ashamed of his plan to lie, and he gives it up. He returns to the farm to find Mattie's departure already underway. He tells Zeena that he, not the farmhand Jotham Powell, will drive Mattie to the train.

Instead of driving directly to the train station, Ethan and Mattie first go to Shadow Pond, the site where they had first fallen in love. Afterwards, they stop at the sledding hill and Ethan proposes that they go for the ride they've often considered taking. The first ride is accomplished without incident, but then Mattie suggests that they go down again, but steer into a big elm tree at the bottom of the hill rather than face parting from one another. Ethan complies—but just before they strike the tree Ethan sees a vision of Zeena's face, and momentarily swerves. Neither of the two are killed by the collision, but both are crippled for life.

The frame story resumes 24 years later, as the Narrator follows Ethan into the farmhouse kitchen. There he encounters two gray-haired women, one tall and thin, the other huddled in a chair. The tall one is Zeena, and the paralyzed woman, whose voice whines just like Zeena's, is Mattie Silver.

The following day, the Narrator tells his landlady, Mrs. Ned Hale, about his night at the Frome farm. The Narrator and Mrs. Hale talk sympathetically about Ethan. They describe him as imprisoned on the poverty-stricken farm with two discontented hags, doomed to contemplate the ruin of his hopes and to blame himself for his role in their destruction.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ethan Frome – The protagonist of the novel and its tragic hero, Ethan is 28 years old in the main narrative and 52 years old in the frame story. According to the Narrator, he is a tall striking figure, despite being "a ruin of a man," an allusion both to the crippling injury and the disappointments he has suffered. Circumstances are partly responsible for Ethan's troubles, but his failure to act decisively in his own interest contributes to the unhappy condition of all three of the major characters by the end of the novel. Sensitive to natural beauty and intellectually curious, Ethan finds in Mattie a companion who appreciates his learning and respects his authority.

Zenobia (Zeena) Frome – Ethan's wife, who is 35 at the time of the main narrative, is described as "already an old woman," with false teeth, wrinkles, a skeletal physique, and a sallow complexion. Ethan was dazzled by her efficiency when she came to nurse his mother, and marries her in order to avoid being left alone after his mother died. He realizes his mistake

When Zeena is afflicted by illness and pain that thwart his hopes of moving to a bigger town. Though Ethan suspects that Zeena's illnesses are faked, his sense of duty forces him to take care of Zeena, and she uses her illness to manipulate and control Ethan. The behavior of Zeena's cat implies that Zeena has certain witch-like powers, though this is probably the Narrator's attempt to convey the power she has gained over Ethan and Mattie.

Mattie Silver – Zeena's vivacious 21-year-old cousin, who comes to live with the Fromes when her parents die and leave her penniless. With no education or job skills, Mattie is forced to rely on the charity of her relatives, performing menial work in return for room and board. Her only hope of escape lies in attracting a suitor who will marry her and remove her from the Frome household, so her infatuation with Ethan is reckless, endangering her employment and her future. Mattie's **red scarf** and **red ribbon** symbolize her passionate nature.

The Narrator An engineer who is temporarily residing in Starkfield while assigned to work at a nearby power plant, and who is sympathetic to Ethan's troubles. Wharton's use of a narrator who is an outsider in the community contributes to the suspense of the tale, as the narrator tries to reconstruct the tragedy from a few direct observations and details provided by Mrs. Ned Hale and Harmon Gow. Wharton also intended the narrator to serve as a bridge between her "simple" characters and the sophisticated readers who were the audience for her novels.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Ned Hale (Ruth Varnum) – As a young woman, a close friend of Mattie's. In the frame story, she is the Narrator's landlady. Initially reluctant to reveal what she knows about the tragedy, she is nonetheless the source of many important details, and confirms the Narrator's story.

Harmon Gow – A former stagecoach driver. He's the first to provide information about Ethan to the Narrator, and it is he who suggests that the narrator hire Ethan as a driver.

Denis Eady – An arrogant young man, the son of Michael Eady, a wealthy Starkfield grocer. Until Ethan learns the true nature of Mattie's feelings, he feels inferior to Denis and threatened by Denis's romantic pursuit of Mattie.

Jotham Powell – A hired man at the Frome farm. A quiet fellow who follows Zeena's orders to get rid of Mattie.

Andrew Hale – A Starkfield builder who buys lumber from Ethan. He has a reputation for never paying until three months after delivery.

Mrs. Andrew Hale – Andrew Hale's wife and Ned Hale's mother. A kindly, sympathetic woman.

Ned Hale – Ruth Varnum's fiancé and later her husband, and son of Andrew and Mrs. Andrew Hale. He has died by the time

the Narrator comes to Starkfield.

Aunt Martha Pierce – Zeena's relative, whom she goes to stay with in Bettsbridge.

Old Mrs. Varnum – Ruth's mother and the wife of Lawyer Varnum. She appears only in the frame story.

Michael Eady – A rich Starkfield grocer. Denis Eady's father.

Mrs. Homan – Owner of a grocery store, where Ethan buys glue to fix the broken **pickle-dish**.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DETERMINISM AND FREE WILL

In *Ethan Frome*, Wharton explores the concept of determinism—the idea that human lives are determined by outside forces, including social customs, heredity, environment, history, and laws of nature. For instance, Ethan's life is "determined" in a variety of ways: his desire to become an engineer is thwarted by the moral necessity of returning to Starkfield to care for his dying parents; his plans to leave Starkfield after his marriage are thwarted by the infertility of his farm, which no one wants to buy, and his wife Zeena's "sickliness;" and Ethan's desire to abandon Zeena in favor of Mattie is blocked by the feeling, imbued in him by his New England culture with its Puritan roots, that such an action would be immoral. As a result, Ethan has the sense that he is helpless to affect his own life and, rather than acting, he indulges in his naïve wish that Mattie will always live at the farm without him having to do anything decisive at all.

Despite all these factors, Ethan *could* act decisively. Other characters in the novel do: Ruth Varnum and Ned Hale kiss secretly even though they aren't yet married; Mr. Hale turns down Ethan's request for an advance because he can't afford it at the time; and Zeena summarily acts to replace Mattie with a new girl. Yet every time Ethan seems on the verge of action, he finds himself facing some obstacle and instead of facing it gives in, all the while blaming the external forces that are thwarting him without ever recognizing his own lack of courage.



DUTY AND MORALITY VS. DESIRE

Ethan struggles against the customs and rules of society, fighting an inner battle between what he feels he needs in order to be happy and what he feels he must do to appease his family and society. Most

prominently, this theme plays out in Ethan's struggle between his desire for Mattie and his sense of duty toward Zeena, his wife. Wharton portrays Zeena as horribly shrewish, devoid of any redeeming attributes, while Mattie is kind, gentle, radiant, and a perfect match for Ethan. Ethan's desire to leave Zeena for Mattie is therefore completely understandable. Yet, because Ethan knows that society would severely judge a man who abandoned his wife, and because he knows that without him Zeena would suffer in poverty, he can't bring himself to leave her. Similarly, Ethan avoids entering into an affair with Mattie because he knows that an affair would ruin Mattie's reputation. He therefore continually thinks of their relationship in terms of marriage, takes great pleasure in their domesticity, and displays an intense physical shyness, avoiding even touching Mattie when they are alone together in the house.

Ethan's sense of duty and morality conflict with his desires in a variety of other ways. His desire to leave Starkfield to pursue a career in engineering conflicts with his obligation to provide for his wife and continue running the family farm. His strict code of ethics won't allow him to lie to the Hales to get the money to run away with Mattie. Even in his great act of defiance, when Ethan and Mattie decide to commit suicide to try to escape the constraints placed on them by the world, Ethan can't stop thinking about his duties. As the sled speeds downhill, he remembers that he must feed his horse and thinks of Zeena—these distractions make him lose control of the sled and botch the suicide attempt, crippling instead of killing himself and Mattie, and condemning them both to a kind of living death.



GENDER ROLES AND MARRIAGE

As in many of Wharton's novels, *Ethan Frome* makes the case that traditional gender roles limit the potential of men and women, and destroy male-

female relationships. Through Mattie, the novel critiques gender expectations that resulted in young women being raised to become nothing more than domestic servants and companions for men. Mattie is an example of a middle-class girl who was educated only to trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite poetry, and play the piano, accomplishments that would have helped her to attract a husband but were of little practical use when it came to earning a living. The novel also shows how the traditional division of labor in marriage resulted in women staying at home much of the time, occupied with dull household chores, while men were out working. In the novel, the isolation women suffer is literally maddening: Ethan's mother goes insane from loneliness. Through the passive aggressive "sickliness" that Zeena uses to control Ethan, and Ethan's own feelings of inferiority and revulsion for Zeena that result from his lack of control, the novel shows how traditional marriage sets up a destructive power struggle between man and wife. In fact, Ethan's attraction to Mattie depends in part on her

submissiveness to him. Though the novel never explicitly mentions divorce, the obviously flawed match of Ethan and Zeena, and the toll the marriage takes on both of them, makes it clear that Wharton felt that the social taboo against divorce and, in particular divorced women, were harsh and destructive.



WORK, INDUSTRY AND PROGRESS

Technology, symbolized in *Ethan Frome* by the railroad, was developing rapidly at the turn of the century. Cities were growing, their populations swelled by the arrival of immigrants and people from the countryside, lured by jobs in factories and mills. Young women in particular often suffered serious health problems owing to the harsh working conditions that existed before protective labor laws were passed. In rural communities, technology provided new connections to the outside world, but also caused upset and change, as shown by the arrival of the railroad, which eliminates traffic on the road to the Frome farm.



HOSTILE OR INDIFFERENT NATURE

In the rural Berkshires where *Ethan Frome* is set, the characters are at the mercy of nature. The short New England growing season and thin mountain soils discouraged large-scale agriculture, ensuring that most farms, like the Frome farm, allowed for only "subsistence" farming that prevented farm owners from overcoming poverty. In addition, as Harmon Gow's comment that Ethan has "been in Starkfield too many winters" suggests, the prolonged and brutal winters of the region had a profound effect on the personalities of the inhabitants of rural villages, resulting in reserved social behavior, a tendency toward pathological illness (especially in women), and a sense of disconnectedness from the larger world.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



MATTIE'S RED SCARF AND RIBBON

The red scarf and red ribbon Mattie wears at the dance and later at the farmhouse represent her passionate nature and the passion that Ethan feels for her. The color red also makes her stand out from the crowd, confirming Ethan's belief that she is exceptional.



THE RED GLASS PICKLE-DISH

The pickle-dish, Zeena's favorite wedding present, is a symbol of Ethan and Zeena's marriage. For this

reason, its destruction is particularly devastating to Zeena. The red color of the dish can be interpreted as symbolizing the passion that the couple no longer share.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Ethan Frome* published in 2005.

Prologue Quotes

☝☝ "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

Related Characters: Harmon Gow (speaker), Ethan Frome

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator arrives in Starkfield, he observes Ethan Frome at the post office and is instantly intrigued by his quietness and despondency. The stagecoach driver and town gossip Harmon Gow comments on Ethan's grim melancholy by pointing out the relationship of the harsh New England environment (and especially its winter months) to the people who live there. Gow observes that the Starkfield climate (and perhaps its judgmental small-town atmosphere as well) weighs heavily on its inhabitants, such as Ethan, creating a kind of prison that traps those who are not sufficiently determined to leave it. Ethan falls under this category, and when Gow comments that "the smart ones get away," he is suggesting that Ethan's failure to leave stems from a lack of will or determination to take hold of his life and change his circumstances.

☝☝ When I had been there a little longer, and had seen this phase of crystal clearness followed by long stretches of sunless cold; when the storms of February had pitched their white tents about the devoted village and the wild cavalry of March winds had charged down to their support; I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator here observes for himself the conditions of Starkfield winters that last for six months before the town's inhabitants are finally given the relief of spring. He compares the winter's relentless force to a siege in wartime that slowly starves the defending soldiers (the town's inhabitants). In a way, this kind of condition is worse than a single, ruthless attack -- rather than quick death (or the possibility of glorious victory), a siege is bigger than any one individual's attempt to face it down, and it drains the energy from all those facing it.

Ethan's life in Starkfield thus becomes associated with a never-ending war against the elements. In addition, with the metaphor of a garrison "capitulating," the theme of defeat and despondency returns. While the war of winter may end every year, it is not triumphant or victorious, because the inhabitants know it will return in a matter of months, wearing them down over long periods of time, and starving them of life-force and energy, year after year.

☝☝ "Sickness and trouble: that's what Ethan's had his plate full up with, ever since the very first helping."

Related Characters: Harmon Gow (speaker), Ethan Frome

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In listening to Ethan's neighbor's account of him, the narrator comes to understand Ethan's life initially from the perspective of an outsider who only sees the surface of Ethan's problems. "Sickness" alludes to Ethan's parents and his wife, Zeena, and "trouble" alludes to the larger struggles that these illnesses have caused in his life, such as poverty, dependency, and a lack of energy or will to change his lot in life. However, the narrator is able to sense that there are other issues underlying the surface, and over time it becomes clear to the reader that Ethan's problems, while stemming from "sickness and trouble," have grown past this simplistic account of them.

The fact that Ethan's troubles have plagued him for his entire life indicate that, beyond mere bad luck, Ethan's own inability or lack of will to effect change in his life for the better have greatly contributed to his terrible situation.

Ethan accepts decisions and choices that other people make for him, rather than making them for himself, just as a child might accept whatever his mother puts before him at mealtime.

☝ He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence. I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it, as Harmon Gow had hinted, the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ethan Frome, Harmon Gow

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

During the narrator's daily drives with Ethan, he isn't able to learn much about his past due to Ethan's reserved nature. As they travel outside through the melancholy landscape, the narrator observes Ethan's similarities to this environment: they are both apparently barren and desolate, but the narrator suspects that a hidden warmth and spark lie deep underneath Ethan's cold exterior, just as fertile grass lies in wait under snow. The result of Ethan's having lived for his whole life in such a landscape enacts an unbreakable connection between the two, such that Ethan's apparently unchangeable fate is fundamentally shaped by his environment of relentless stability and harshness. Ethan's personality alone doesn't determine his shyness with the narrator, but rather his "personal plight" leading to his personality has been a product of a life lived in an unrelenting environment.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom. "We never got away—how should you?" seemed to be written on every headstone; and whenever he went in or out of his gate he thought with a shiver: "I shall just go on living here till I join them." But now all desire for change had vanished, and the sight of the little enclosure gave him a warm sense of continuance and stability.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

When walking home with Mattie after the dance, Ethan observes his family's headstones in the cemetery. Usually, this provokes sadness in him because it reminds him that he will never be able to move away from the land that claimed his family, and thus, will never be able to move beyond his ancestors' own aspirations, establishing a pattern of routine and regression in the Frome family. However, when he is in Mattie's company, he begins to think about ways of tolerating the path that had previously been so stifling for him. Instead of seeming narrow or threatening, the quality of sameness that Ethan observes in the Frome family plot becomes comforting. In such a way, Mattie begins to fill a marital role, subsuming the memory of Zeena that tortures Ethan, by becoming part of the traditional continuance and stability that has defined the Frome family. Thus he is only able to gain fulfillment and comfort from his assumed future by changing out key points to make it more tolerable.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ But when Zenobia's doctor recommended her looking about for some one to help her with the house-work the clan instantly saw the chance of exacting a compensation from Mattie.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

After Mattie's father's business goes up in smoke, her family members who had invested in the venture lose their money as well. The family therefore harbors resentment towards Mattie as a representative of her father's failures, and they seek mild revenge by sending her to perform housework for Zeena. As an educated young girl, Mattie would not have experience doing housework, and her previous attempts to work retail jobs led to a collapse of her health. In such a way, the family's attempt to "exact a compensation" from Mattie is somewhat insidious, and speaks of larger resentments that individual members of the "clan" have for others.

Instead of revealing a communal, kind-hearted nature, Zeena's employment of Mattie speaks to the deeply individualistic and cutthroat nature of this family. Competitive and resentful, the family does not care for her in material terms, and deliberately drafts her into a job that will surely destroy her faltering health.

☛ She sat opposite the window, and the pale light reflected from the banks of snow made her face look more than usually drawn and bloodless, sharpened the three parallel creases between ear and cheek, and drew querulous lines from her thin nose to the corners of her mouth. Though she was but seven years her husband's senior, and he was only twenty-eight, she was already an old woman.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

When Ethan looks at Zeena, he can't help but observe her physical imperfections and the evidence of her age, even though she is only thirty-five years old. By sitting at the window, Zeena appears in comparison with the landscape outside, and with the snow's light's reflection on her face, Zeena's appearance blends with the barrenness outside. Like Ethan's quietness and lack of will that stem from Starkfield's relentless winters, Zeena's appearance has been affected by the harsh environment to such an extent that it takes a physical toll on her, creating wrinkles and sapping her skin of healthy color. Comparing the relationship that Ethan and Zeena share to the environment suggests that while male characters like Ethan can develop complex interiorities as a result of their environment, women instead take on the effects of the landscape physically. Thus, the beauty of women is compared to the mental acuity and strength of men, emphasizing a disparity in social attitudes towards men and women under stress.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ After the mortal silence of his long imprisonment Zeena's volubility was like music in his ears. He felt that he might have "gone like his mother" if the sound of a new voice had not come to steady him.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome, Ethan Frome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After Ethan's mother falls ill, she stops speaking and claims that she is "listening" instead to the various voices around her. As such, Ethan's loneliness begins to consume him, just as the Starkfield weather consumes him and subsumes his desire for progress or advancement. With Zeena's arrival, Ethan's loneliness seems to be turning around, and he welcomes the friendliness offered by another human. Instead of offering something like routine, Zeena is "voluble" (talkative) and therefore adds a sense of difference to Ethan's life. He grasps on to this feeling—unusual for Starkfield—and decides to marry her, even though Ethan only sees in her what he would see in any person: "a new voice" that can "steady him." Ethan believes that Zeena saves him from illness and possibly insanity by arriving to nurse his mother and as such, there is a sense of indebtedness that he bears to her.

☛ He recalled his mother's growing taciturnity, and wondered if Zeena were also turning "queer." Women did, he knew. Zeena, who had at her fingers' ends the pathological chart of the whole region, had cited many cases of the kind while she was nursing his mother; and he himself knew of certain lonely farm-houses in the neighborhood where stricken creatures pined, and of others where sudden tragedy had come of their presence. At times, looking at Zeena's shut face, he felt the chill of such forebodings. At other times her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome, Ethan Frome

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In Starkfield, women did not have much power for individual mobility, and so Zeena was largely restricted to her home with Ethan after her marriage. As such, her access to the outside world came in the form of gossip, and Zeena collected stories of other people's illnesses as a way of

vicariously escaping her own gendered lot. However, the prevailing gossip of illness inevitably contributed towards Zeena's own sense of ill-being and pain. Like Ethan's mother, women internalized the harsh environment and their own confinement, turning inwardly and becoming taciturn about their mental sufferings. To compensate, Zeena complained frequently about her external and physical sufferings, only vocalizing when she could complain about her failing body. Ethan suspects that Zeena has a complex interiority beneath her taciturnity, and yet he fears her resentments, which he understands only insofar as he has his own resentments towards her. Both serve as the other's prison, and enact distinct forms of loneliness and despair that the other cannot relieve, and in fact only exacerbates.

☝ She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's. Then, striking upward, it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

When Mattie opens the door of the farmhouse to Ethan, he is struck initially by the similarity of her pose to Zeena's the previous evening. However, Ethan immediately recognizes the clear physical differences between Mattie and Zeena. While Zeena is wrinkled and tired—similar to the barren landscape around them—Ethan notices Mattie's youth in her smooth skin and warm coloring. Yet with her mimicry of Zeena's pose, Ethan is able to think of Mattie in the position of his wife, despite the women's differences in appearance. Ethan's blending of the two women speaks to his marital fantasies of having a youthful, warm wife who is the polar opposite to Zeena. However, the echoed pose also suggests that Ethan would find the same dissatisfaction and marital unhappiness with any woman (including Mattie) as with Zeena. The pose suggests a dependence upon the status of being married, rather than upon individual consciousness. As such, the women become interchangeable in Ethan's mind when he begins to think of them as wives or potential wives.

☝ Completely reassured, she shone on him through tear-hung lashes, and his soul swelled with pride as he saw how his tone had subdued her. She did not even ask what he had done. Except when he was steering a big log down the mountain to his mill he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

When Mattie breaks the red pickle dish, symbolizing their mutual and forbidden love for each other (as the pickle dish was Zeena's favorite wedding present), it represents the danger of acting on their passion. However, when Ethan cleans it up and puts it back together—as though it never happened—the two believe that they have solved their problem, even though it is merely a temporary solution. In this passage, both Ethan and Mattie are willing to put their faith in Ethan with his masculine authority that declares that the problem has been solved, even though he has merely swept it under the rug (almost literally). Mattie cedes to Ethan, and he views her as “subdued,” speaking to the subservient position of women in marital relations. Ethan's sense of control over Mattie is further emphasized by his invigorating memory of steering a log down the mountain—and image that will recur with disastrous results later in the text.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

When Ethan asks Mattie to sit in Zeena's chair, he hopes to be able to fool himself into envisioning Mattie as his wife. However, his guilt and uneasiness with his potential adultery makes itself clear when he superimposes Zeena's face over Mattie's. The unsettling image of a gaunt face

attached to a youthful figure shocks Ethan, and even Mattie feels discomfort with the violation she has enacted by trying to take Zeena's place by the fire. Mattie thus becomes "the intruder" who has attempted to replace the woman who actually belongs there, and it becomes clear that Ethan and Mattie can never have the kind of relationship each desires under the circumstances of their current lives—they are too restricted by duty and conscience.

Now, in the warm lamp-lit room, with all its ancient implications of conformity and order, she seemed infinitely farther away from him and more unapproachable.

Related Characters: Mattie Silver, Ethan Frome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

After picking up Mattie at the dance, Ethan feels free outside under the stars, in contrast to his feeling within the home. Even though he and Mattie seem to resemble an old married couple, Ethan is uncomfortably aware of the moment's artifice. Mattie's distance from him in the house is particularly pointed because of the relationship of the home to the traditional conception of marriage that adultery would violate. The potentially adulterous relationship between the two threatens the "ancient implications of conformity and order" that the home would otherwise suggest, which is underscored by the shattering of the red pickle dish (a symbol of their passion, but also of domesticity and Ethan's marriage to Zeena) and the superimposition of Zeena's face over Mattie's. Although Ethan and Mattie should feel more comfortable at home than out in the open, exposed to the harsh elements, instead the house becomes a source of discomfort and disillusionment because of how it manages to separate the two by convention, rather than bringing them together.

Chapter 7 Quotes

She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. It was the sense of his helplessness that sharpened his antipathy. There had never been anything in her that one could appeal to; but as long as he could ignore and command he had remained indifferent. Now she had mastered him and he abhorred her. . . . All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way. She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others.

Related Characters: Zenobia (Zeena) Frome, Ethan Frome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

Ethan can usually ignore Zeena, since she stays at home and only speaks when she complains. However, with her attempting to control her household by dismissing Mattie, Zeena attempts to strip masculine authority from Ethan by asserting her control over his actions. This reversal of traditional gender roles leaves Ethan resentful and furious, because not just his happiness has been overstepped, but also what he regards as his essential role as a man. In his "helplessness," Ethan is not just made powerless, but he is feminized by his wife. To be a woman in Starkfield at this time is to be relatively helpless in the face of fate, and to be unable to assert authority in relationships between men and women. Because Mattie offers the one possible escape route from his misery, Ethan's perceived subjugation by Zeena is not just the escape from his present unhappiness, but the insurance that he will be as unhappy as Zeena and Mattie forever.

"If I'd 'a' listened to folks, you'd 'a' gone before now, and this wouldn't 'a' happened," she said; and gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body . . .

Related Characters: Mattie Silver (speaker), Mattie Silver

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

When Zeena sees the broken pickle dish, she understands that Ethan and Mattie have been adulterous, even though they never physically consummated their betrayal of her. She interprets the broken pickle dish as a violation of Ethan's wedding vows with her because the dish was a wedding gift, and a memory of what love they once had for each other. Further, it symbolizes the passion that Ethan and Mattie now share, and which Zeena sees as irretrievably beyond her control because it has taken a material toll on her life and her possessions. The red pickle dish's symbolic resonance with "a dead body" underscores the way that Ethan and Mattie's betrayal is a crime of passion that has effectively killed any potential of reconciliation between the three.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome, Zenobia (Zeena) Frome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Within Ethan's anger at Zeena is his fear that he did not sufficiently take hold of his fate to change his circumstances when he was unhappy. With "possibilities sacrificed" to Zeena's will, Ethan saw his own will and authority subsumed, but wasn't aware of it until Mattie came to stay with them. Zeena's unhappiness, further, has grown just as Ethan's has over time; the two become more and more unhappy with the other every day, and are able to feel happiness only when they hurt the other. Even though Ethan feels guilty over his potential adultery with Mattie, still he derives a thrill from it that stems, in part, from his desire to exert authority over his own life even at the risk of causing Zeena unhappiness.

☝☝ The inexorable facts closed in on him like a prison-warder handcuffing a convict. There was no way out—none. He was a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

The "inexorable facts" that halt Ethan in his tracks are not abstract feeling of doubt or guilt, but rather his knowledge that tangible, concrete things are holding him back: namely, a lack of money with which to travel West with Mattie and support them both. He is close to being moved to action in writing a letter to Zeena revealing his plan, but the absence of money plagues Ethan just as it plagues everyone in Starkfield, whether or not they are trying to uproot their lives, which is why Ethan is unable to borrow money from his neighbors.

The image of a prisoner works in two ways; on the one hand, Ethan has been imprisoned by his lack of money. On the other, someone who steals money would face the same fate of imprisonment. In such a way, it is clear to Ethan that he has to accept his lot in life because even attempting to change it would end in the same grim way. What had once been a "ray of light"—his escape with Mattie—proves just as unreasonable and capable of turning out poorly, underscoring the way that Ethan feels like a "prisoner for life," trapped by his internal and external circumstances.

☝☝ The early mist had vanished and the fields lay like a silver shield under the sun. It was one of the days when the glitter of winter shines through a pale haze of spring. Every yard of the road was alive with Mattie's presence, and there was hardly a branch against the sky or a tangle of brambles on the bank in which some bright shred of memory was not caught. Once, in the stillness, the call of a bird in a mountain ash was so like her laughter that his heart tightened and then grew large; and all these things made him see that something must be done at once.

Related Characters: Mattie Silver, Ethan Frome

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 76-77

Explanation and Analysis

As Ethan prepares for Mattie's departure, he finds the surrounding landscape to contain memories of and similarities to Mattie, instead of finding it bleak, harsh, and barren of fond memories. Like bits of string from her red scarf catching on tree branches, Mattie's time at Starkfield remains inscribed on the surrounding environment for Ethan, such that the birds resonate with Mattie's laughter when the two stood outside after the dance. Ironically, in accepting, rather than rejecting, the landscape around him, Ethan is able to make manifest his desire for change and act on his desire for something different and comforting. However, because Ethan projects his desire for change onto an existing, stable, and harsh landscape, any action he and Mattie undertake to escape their life must necessarily be tinged with disaster, as with all things during Starkfield's winters.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ "You won't need me, you mean? I suppose you'll marry!"

"Oh, Ethan!" she cried.

"I don't know how it is you make me feel, Matt. I'd a'most rather have you dead than that!"

"Oh, I wish I was, I wish I was!" she sobbed.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver (speaker), Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In this society, marriage for women is at once a livelihood and a death knell. They must marry to guarantee a home and an income (even though both would belong in name to their husbands) due to the lack of opportunities for women to work outside of the home. However, in marrying, women also lose the autonomy and freedom of unmarried women because they are beholden to their husbands' desires and expectations, and their previous lives are effectively rendered null, or dead. In considering Mattie married to someone else, Ethan realizes the way that this would effectively render her "dead" in respect to him. Unlike Ethan, who might recover in society from an adulterous relationship, Mattie never could. As such, when he considers Mattie marrying, he considers the total

conclusion of any relationship they might have had. For Ethan, it is not so extreme to consider Mattie "dead" to him when he considers her loving, or at least living with, anyone else. (Although of course it's also incredibly selfish of him to prefer her dead altogether, rather than just dead to *him*.)

Mattie similarly realizes that Ethan would be forever lost to her if she married. However, in saying, "Oh, I wish I was [dead]," she takes death onto herself. Rather than condemning her beloved Ethan to a metaphorical death, as he does to her, she metaphorically takes her own life to save Ethan's. This kind of suicidal sacrifice speaks again to the insidiousness of gender relations that leaves the woman with a much harsher end of the social and marital bargain.

☛ He laughed contemptuously: "I could go down this coast with my eyes tied!" and she laughed with him, as if she liked his audacity. Nevertheless he sat still a moment, straining his eyes down the long hill, for it was the most confusing hour of the evening, the hour when the last clearness from the upper sky is merged with the rising night in a blur that disguises landmarks and falsifies distances.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Although Ethan boasts to Mattie about his superior vision and ability to protect her, when the crucial moment comes to sled down the hill, he is momentarily gripped by doubt as he looks down the darkened hill. The danger of the situation is emphasized with the "blur that disguises landmarks and falsifies distances," which leads the reader to distrust Ethan, even though Mattie does not fear for her life because of his swaggering "audacity." Ethan's superior vision recurs as a motif particularly in his interactions with Mattie; yet while he can see small objects and obstacles, his emotional vision is much dimmer and less sure. In squinting at the landscape before him, Ethan tries to overcome this dimmed vision emotionally and physically. While it does not harm them on the first try, Mattie realizes the latent danger and potential harm they could do to one another, inspiring their disastrous second ride down.

Her sombre violence constrained him: she seemed the embodied instrument of fate. He pulled the sled out, blinking like a night-bird as he passed from the shade of the spruces into the transparent dusk of the open. The slope below them was deserted. All Starkfield was at supper, and not a figure crossed the open space before the church. The sky, swollen with the clouds that announce a thaw, hung as low as before a summer storm. He strained his eyes through the dimness, and they seemed less keen, less capable than usual.

Related Characters: Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As “the embodied instrument of fate,” Mattie is no longer merely a pawn in the game of her own circumstances; instead, she attempts to gain control of her life as it is spinning out of her grasp. However, to Ethan, she is just one more instrument acting out someone else’s desires over him, even though they overlap in this moment. Mattie ultimately makes the decision to go down the hill to try to kill themselves; Ethan merely follows her lead, thus making the metaphorical path they are about to take that much dimmer and unclear. His eyes fail him in this instance where he is not in control of his body or his future; instead, Mattie exerts unusual control over his actions. (Although, of course, it’s not unusual for Ethan to assume that “fate” or outside influence of some kind is really determining his life, rather than his own free will—it’s just unusual for Mattie to be the one so powerful and determined.)

With the shift to Starkfield’s population at supper, there is a characteristic jump of Wharton to the everyday and the mundane that permeates more symbolically-rich moments in the novel. As when Ethan is halted in his decision to travel West by the thought of money, here Ethan might be stopped by the thought of the society in which he lives, which passes day by day in the same routine. He and Mattie

ultimately attempt to break with such a society in attempting suicide; however, their attempt does not rupture society’s rules or conventions. Instead, it merely ruptures their individual futures.

Epilogue Quotes

“And I say, if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Andrew Hale (speaker), Ethan Frome, Mattie Silver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

After the “smash up,” Ethan is resigned to live a life of misery with two similarly miserable women: Mattie and Zeena, who now cares for Mattie in a reversal of fortunes. In this way, his life is more like a living death, and was directly a result of his inability to make a decision at the crucial moment in regards to Mattie. By living out their days in such misery, each member of the family is akin to the dead Frome family members buried in the church. In continuing to talk, the living Frome members (primarily Mattie) perpetuate their misery by vocalizing it, while the dead members suffer in silence. The final rebellion of women in the novel is speech, so in some ways, Mattie’s ability to continue talking and complaining after the accident gives her a small sense of agency, while Ethan buries further and further into his dejected taciturnity—that which the narrator experiences when Ethan drives him around town at the beginning of the story.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

An unnamed Narrator, an engineer assigned to a job at a power plant in Corbury Junction, Massachusetts, describes his first impressions of Ethan Frome. Frome is a badly crippled but still striking older man whom the Narrator has seen at the post office in Starkfield, the town where he is staying. Harmon Gow, a former stagecoach driver who knows the histories of all the Starkfield families, responds to the Narrator's questions about Frome by telling him that Frome was disfigured in a "smash-up," an accident that occurred 24 years ago. But Gow provides few details.

A strike at the power plant extends the Narrator's stay in Starkfield through the winter. The Narrator observes the effect of the harsh climate on the psychology of the town's inhabitants, and compares their situation to that of an army under siege. He thinks about Gow's comment that Ethan has "been in Starkfield too many winters."

The Narrator hopes to learn more about Ethan's story from his landlady, Mrs. Ned Hale (formerly Ruth Varnum), but she is strangely reluctant to speak of the accident. Gow relates that the accident happened in front of her childhood home, and that she had been a close friend of the victims.

When the local livery stable owner Denis Eady's horses fall ill from an epidemic, Gow suggests that the Narrator hire Ethan to drive him to the train station and back every day. Gow explains that the Fromes are desperately poor, and that their farm has poor soil and an obsolete mill. In addition, Ethan has been plagued with "sickness and trouble"—his father was kicked in the head by a horse, resulting in disability, insanity, and death; his mother also went insane; and Ethan's wife Zenobia (also called Zeena) suffers from frequent real or imagined illnesses.

Although Ethan says little as he drives the Narrator to the station, the Narrator learns that Ethan is interested in engineering, and lends him a book on popular science. To the Narrator, Ethan seems a tragic hero, "frozen" in silence, who's inner need for knowledge and learning contrasts with his outwardly simple life. The Narrator realizes that he and Ethan have more in common than he expected.

The "frame story," told in the first-person by the Narrator builds suspense around Ethan Frome and the events leading to the "smash-up" that disfigured him. By telling the story through the device of the "frame," so that the Narrator is trying to learn a story that has already happened, Wharton gives Ethan's story a sense of inevitability.



The long, cold New England winters have a negative effect on the mental health of the inhabitants of the area. Gow's comment implies that in addition to the winters, Ethan's fate was largely determined by his failure to leave Starkfield.



Mrs. Hale's distressed reaction to the Narrator's inquiries adds to the suspense about what happened to Ethan.



Rather than explaining what Ethan did to end up in his current situation, Gow describes Ethan in terms of the external forces that have plagued him: a family history of infirmity and insanity, poverty, poor soil, and obsolete technology.



The Narrator's discovery of Ethan's interest in engineering and science indicates that Ethan had ambitions that for some reason he never fulfilled. That Ethan has been "frozen" into silence links his condition to the brutal winters of the region.



One day, a severe winter storm blocks the railroad. Ethan drives the Narrator the full ten miles to the power station, along a road that passes by the Frome farm. Ethan tells the Narrator that the coming of the railroad resulted in less traffic along the road to the farm, and relates that Ethan's mother died of loneliness and insanity as a consequence of the Fromes' isolation.

On the way home the storm worsens and Ethan and the Narrator are forced to take shelter at the Frome farm. As they enter the house, the Narrator hears a woman's complaining voice, but cannot make out her words. The narrator says that he then discovered the "clue" to Ethan Frome that allowed him to "put together this vision of his story."

Even the railroad bends to the whims of nature in this region. Technological progress has not improved life for the Fromes, instead causing them to become even more isolated. The Frome women, who do domestic work at home, are forced into even deeper isolation than the men.



The narrator does not reveal the "clue" until the end of the novel, injecting even more suspense into the novel. At this point, the reader is left to assume that the whining voice belongs to Ethan's sickly wife, Zeena.



CHAPTER 1

The Narrator's "vision" of Ethan Frome's story, told in the third person, begins. It is winter in Starkfield. Young Ethan Frome walks through the deep snow to the church where a dance is being held. As he walks, Ethan is reminded of a physics course he took four or five years earlier at a technological college in Worcester, before his father's accidental death forced him to drop out of school and return to Starkfield to take over the Frome farm.

Hiding outside the church, Ethan peeps through a window and sees Mattie Silver, his wife's younger cousin, dancing with Denis Eady, the son of Michael Eady, a wealthy shopkeeper. Mattie, wearing a **cherry-colored scarf** called a "fascinator," appears happy and exhilarated. Ethan is dismayed that Mattie doesn't see what an arrogant, offensive fellow Denis is. Since Ethan is only happy when he is with Mattie, he's confused by Mattie's high spirits, and worries that she may be in love with Denis.

Mattie lives with the Fromes because her own parents lost their money and died a year earlier. She now helps Ethan's sickly wife Zeena with household chores in exchange for room and board. To make the transition from city life easier, Zeena has encouraged Mattie to attend social events in Starkfield occasionally. Ethan enjoys walking Mattie the two miles back to the farm after these events. Ethan and Mattie share a love of nature, and during the walk he likes to point out the constellations to her and impress her with his knowledge.

Ethan's educational ambitions were thwarted by events outside of his control—a horse kick to his father's head—and by his own sense of duty to return and take over the farm.



Ethan standing out in the snow while the dance goes on inside shows his isolation from society. Ethan's jealousy of Denis Eady's wealth shows his sense of inferiority as well as his tendency to blame external forces, like his poverty, for his situation in life. The red scarf sets Mattie apart from the crowd, and is the first of several images that associate her with warmth and light.



19th-century America offered few employment opportunities for uneducated single women. As an orphan with no inheritance, Mattie is dependent on her relatives for support. Ethan is attracted to Mattie partly because she listens respectfully to what he tells her and admires his learning. Unlike Zeena, who questions his authority, Mattie makes Ethan feel masterful.



Recently, however, Zeena pointed out to Ethan how inefficiently Mattie does the housework. Ethan tried to cover up for Mattie by secretly helping her with the chores. Zeena noticed his efforts, however, and suggested that they look for a new hired girl, adding that Mattie will soon be leaving them when she marries Denis Eady. Although Mattie has given no indication that she is interested in Denis, the sight of them dancing together arouses Ethan's fears, as he realizes that he can no longer live without her.

Zeena has the exclusive right to Ethan's love and loyalty. To protect her marriage and ensure her security, Zeena reminds Ethan that it is in Mattie's best interest to marry a promising young bachelor like Denis Eady. Despite his love and concern for Mattie, Ethan cannot bear to lose her to a younger and more successful rival.



CHAPTER 2

As Mattie leaves the church after the dance, Denis approaches and talks with her. Ethan, shyly hiding in the shadows, eavesdrops on their conversation. Denis brags that he has his father's "cutter," a light sled, with him, and offers to drive Mattie home. To Ethan's relief and delight, she refuses the ride.

Mattie rebuffs Denis, and his fast high-end sled, in favor of walking with the married Ethan. For a woman in her position, who can gain security only through marriage, this action is reckless.



After Denis leaves, Ethan joins Mattie and they begin the walk back to the farm. They pause near the top of a hill on the road home, and Mattie tells Ethan that Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum narrowly escaped sledding into a big elm tree at the bottom of the icy slope. Ethan promises Mattie that the two of them can return to "coast" when there is a moon, boasting that with him steering there will be no danger of striking the tree. Mattie claims that she is not the kind of person who would be afraid of a possible sledding accident.

The love Ethan and Mattie share is palpable, in their boastful, flirting language, but they never actually get up the courage to admit their feelings. The tale of another young couple's narrow escape foreshadows Ethan and Mattie's sledding accident. Ethan's boast that he can guide the sled to safety indicates his desire to prove his masculinity to Mattie.



Wanting to find out for sure whether Mattie has feelings for Denis, Ethan mentions that other people have been saying that Mattie will be leaving the Frome household. Mattie, however, thinks that Ethan is referring to Zeena's dissatisfaction with the way she does the housework. Mattie is clearly distressed at the prospect of having to leave, and this reassures Ethan.

Though Mattie's feelings for Ethan are obvious, Ethan can't quite believe it. Meanwhile, the mention of Zeena's dissatisfaction with Mattie already makes clear that if they want to stay together they will have to act in some way. Instead, they do nothing.



As Ethan and Mattie walk through the snowy landscape to the farm, they pass under hemlock trees and the graveyard where Ethan's ancestors are buried. Normally Ethan feels that the gravestones are mocking his inability to get away from Starkfield, but this night he wants things to stay as they are forever, with Mattie at his side.

Ethan's feelings that the gravestones mock him show his frustrated ambitions. But his delusional belief that things will just stay as they are hints that his ambitions were thwarted at least in part by his own failure to take action.



As they approach the darkened farmhouse, Ethan puts his arms around Mattie. She does not resist. A dead cucumber vine dangling from the porch reminds Ethan that if Zeena were to die, he and Mattie would be free to marry.

The dead vine's appearance at this intimate moment between Ethan and Mattie is foreboding. Ethan's hope that Zeena will die is another example of Ethan's passive daydreaming.



The key that Zeena normally leaves under the doormat isn't there, and the guilty lovers experience a moment of panic. A moment later, Zeena opens the door, looking bony and unattractive. Standing in the "vault"-like kitchen, Zeena says she felt "too mean to sleep," meaning that she feels ill. Not wanting Mattie to see him follow Zeena upstairs, Ethan claims that he wants to stay up and go over the mill accounts. Mattie warns him with her eyes not to resist, and he follows Zeena to bed.

The word "vault" is used to describe a tomb. Using that word to describe a kitchen, a room that is usually a source of warmth, emphasizes how Zeena has trapped Ethan and made his life like a living death.



CHAPTER 3

The next morning Ethan wonders why he didn't kiss Mattie the night before when he had the chance. The red sunrise reminds him of the rosy color of Mattie's cheeks. In contrast to Zeena's constant discontent, Mattie's positive attitude seems remarkable to him, considering how difficult her life has been. Penniless and orphaned after the failure of her father's business and her parents' death, Mattie worked for a while in a department store, but her health broke down. She was forced to seek help from relatives, who had lost their own savings when Mattie's father's business collapsed. In revenge, these relatives sent Mattie to work for Zeena without pay.

The contrast between the vibrant Mattie and sour Zeena couldn't be more strong. Mattie is what, in Ethan's traditionalist estimation, a woman should be. Unlike Ethan, Mattie's father escaped rural Massachusetts by moving to the city of Stamford, but did not succeed there despite his ambitious nature. Like many daughters of middle-class families, Mattie has no education, so she is reduced to working menial jobs for a living.



The next morning, Zeena informs Ethan that she is going to Bettsbridge to consult a new doctor and stay overnight with her Aunt Martha Pierce. Despite his fear that Zeena will spend what little money the Fromes have on expensive medicines, he looks forward to being alone with Mattie. Zeena appears old and wrinkled even though she is only 35, eight years older than Ethan.

Zeena's ugliness and the fact that she is eight years older than Ethan further emphasizes what a bad match they are. Ethan's concerns about money, which he feels he can do nothing about, make it apparent that Zeena's "illness" allows her to control Ethan.



At the last minute, in order to buy more time with Mattie, Ethan lies to Zeena—he says he needs to collect payment for the delivery of lumber from his mill to Andrew Hale, a builder in Starkfield, and that therefore Jotham Powell, the hired man, will have to take Zeena to the train.

Ethan finally takes action—he lies, compromising his ethics, in order to spend more time alone with Mattie.



CHAPTER 4

Ethan looks forward to an evening alone with Mattie, and recalls how warm and inviting the kitchen was in the days when his mother was alive. He remembers that his mother had been a "talker," until her illness, when she fell silent and began to hear voices. When Zenobia Pierce, his cousin, came to help nurse his mother, Ethan was grateful for the company and conversation, and when his mother died, rather than being alone again he asked Zeena to marry him.

Ethan married Zeena because he was afraid of silence, just as his mother was. The Fromes appear to suffer from a fear of loneliness, which causes them to make poor decisions. Ethan associates Mattie with his mother, who unlike Zeena makes the farmhouse kitchen a warm and inviting place.



When they married, Zeena and Ethan agreed that they would sell the farm and saw-mill and move to a larger town, where Ethan would become an engineer. But no one wanted to buy the farm, and as they waited for a year Zeena developed her "sickliness," making any move to a larger town impossible, though Ethan suspects Zeena's illness may be imagined or faked.

After a while, Zeena had stopped talking almost entirely, except to complain. Ethan wonders if Zeena is going crazy like his mother (and many other women who lived on isolated farms). But at other times he wonders if maybe she is deliberately holding her tongue and plotting revenge.

Not wanting to be caught in the lie he has told to Zeena, Ethan goes to Andrew Hale with his load of lumber and asks for an advance payment, even though he knows Hale never pays sooner than three months after delivery. Hale refuses politely, explaining he needs the money for his son's upcoming wedding to Ruth Varnum. Ethan's pride keeps him from pursuing the matter, and he leaves without the money.

In the village Ethan is passed by Denis Eady in his father's cutter (a fancy sled for the time). Ethan's heart sinks as he imagines that Denis is on his way to the farm to meet Mattie. Retrieving his horses from Andrew Hale's stable, he surprises Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum secretly kissing at the top of the hill where he and Mattie paused the night before—the couple, startled, quickly part.

On the way home, Ethan passes the Frome graveyard again and sees the headstone of his namesake, another Ethan Frome, and his wife, named Endurance. The inscription on their headstone reads: "Dwelled Together in Peace for Fifty Years." He wonders if his own headstone with Zeena will bear the same words.

The farmhouse door is locked—then Mattie opens the door, silhouetted in lamplight as Zeena had been the night before. She has run a **crimson ribbon** through her hair. The table is carefully laid for supper, with Ethan's favorite pickles in a **red glass pickle-dish**. The room is warm and bright, and Zeena's cat lies contentedly by the fire. Ethan jealously asks if Mattie has had any visitors. She teases him by describing how she entertained Jotham Powell over a cup of coffee.

Ethan's passivity causes him to accept setbacks too easily. Though he suspects Zeena of faking her illness, he uses it as an excuse to do nothing. Wharton implies that Zeena got "ill" because she couldn't bear moving to a larger town where Ethan would be out of her control.



The isolation of New England farms was particularly hard on women, who were confined to their houses with domestic chores, whereas the men had more opportunities to socialize when they conducted business.



Ethan's typical New England simplicity and rigid code of ethics prevent him from looking after his own interests. Just as he does nothing in the face of the illness he suspects that Zeena is faking, now he doesn't protest or insist on payment from Hale.



The sight of Ned and Ruth quickly parting when Ethan appears is a reminder of New England society's strict rules regarding male-female relations. But it is also a reminder that Ned and Ruth were willing to break those rules for love.



The name "Endurance" suggests the only course of action open to husbands and wives in an unhappy marriage, in a time when divorce was rare and against most people's religious principles. "Dwelling in peace" is not the same as sharing love.



The contrast between Zeena and Mattie is emphasized by the parallel between Mattie's appearance at the door and Zeena's in chapter 2. The extra effort Mattie has made to make the kitchen inviting confirms Ethan's belief that she'll be a good wife to someone. The red ribbon and pickle-dish symbolize the couple's passion and their sin against Zeena.



As Ethan and Mattie sit down at the table, Zeena's cat jumps between them onto Zeena's chair. Conversation is strained as they feel that somehow Zeena is in the room with them. The cat goes after the milk and as Ethan and Mattie's hands meet on the handle of the milk-jug the cat knocks over the **pickle-dish**, shattering it.

Mattie is distraught. The **pickle-dish** was one of Zeena's most prized wedding gifts. In fact, Zeena prizes it so highly that she never ever uses it. Ethan consoles Mattie by replacing the broken fragments on the top shelf of the china-closet, saying that if he cannot replace it he will glue it together the next day. Mattie is reassured, and they return to supper.

The cat can be interpreted as an almost supernatural extension of Zeena, or as a manifestation of Ethan and Mattie's guilt about their illicit love.



Now it's clear that the pickle-dish symbolized Ethan and Zeena's marriage. The breaking of the dish represents their failed marriage in contrast to Mattie and Ethan's love. Yet Ethan's response is not to acknowledge his love affair with Mattie, but to try to hide it by fixing the dish and pretending nothing happened.



CHAPTER 5

After supper, Mattie sews while Ethan smokes his pipe and sits by the fire. Ethan wishes this scene of domestic bliss would go on forever. But he can't see Mattie where she is sitting so he tells her to sit in Zeena's rocking-chair. When she does, Ethan is unsettled to see Zeena's face superimposed on Mattie's. Mattie also feels uncomfortable and slips back to her usual chair. Zeena's cat jumps onto the rocking-chair and watches them.

Gradually, Ethan and Mattie find it easier to talk, and the illusion that they are husband and wife and will always be together grows. Ethan mentions that this was the night they were to have gone sledding, and suggests that they go the following night. They discuss the dangerous elm tree, and Ethan feels sure of his ability to protect Mattie from danger.

Ethan touches the end of the fabric Mattie is sewing, then tells her that he surprised Ned and Ruth kissing by the Varnums' gate. Mattie blushes. He feels that he has crossed a line: inside the house he shares with Zeena, Mattie seems unapproachable. The two talk about Ruth and Ned's upcoming marriage and Ethan, thinking of Denis Eady, says darkly that it will be Mattie's turn to marry next. Mattie asks whether Ethan is saying that because Zeena has said something against her. Ethan replies that nobody can tell what Zeena is thinking.

Ethan and Mattie finally get a night alone together, and they spend it in domestic, rather than physical, bliss. Ethan, with his strict morals, doesn't want to have an affair with Mattie. He wants to be married to her. But marriage is impossible because he's already married to Zeena, as the superimposed faces show. Faced with this dilemma, Ethan does nothing. He just wishes his time with Mattie would last forever.



In Zeena's absence, the love between Ethan and Mattie flourishes. Their love affair is traditional—Ethan, the competent powerful male protector guards his love from dangerous outside forces, as symbolized by the tree in this scene.



Ethan's shyness, in addition to his sensitivity to traditional morals, prevents him from acting on his feelings physically. He can do nothing more than touch the end of the piece of fabric Mattie is sewing. For her part, Mattie, playing the traditional woman's role, is unable to make the first move.



Realizing that time is running out, Ethan touches the fabric a second time. This time Mattie notices, and it seems as if something might happen between them... But just then, the cat darts at a mouse and Zeena's rocking-chair begins to rock, reminding them that Zeena will be back the following day. As they return to reality Ethan impulsively kisses the end of the fabric. Mattie silently rises, puts away the fabric, and moves the pots of geraniums Ethan has planted for her away from the window. They part without touching, going upstairs to their separate rooms.

Ethan and Mattie are helpless to act on their love, kept apart by the thought of Zeena and by their own moral hang-ups. The scene ends on an unresolved note: Mattie's ambivalent reaction to Ethan's kiss may communicate her discomfort or her longing for Ethan to act more decisively. Ethan's unwillingness to act is typical of the passivity that prevents him from achieving happiness.



CHAPTER 6

The following day at breakfast Ethan thinks happily of the evening he shared with Mattie. He imagines that Mattie knew why he didn't press her for signs of affection and tells himself he is glad that nothing between them has changed.

Ethan justifies his cowardly inaction on the grounds that he doesn't want to change anything for the worse. It's clear that Ethan's lack of success is in large part his own fault.



Ethan tells Mattie he will be back from the mill in time for dinner. The weather has gotten warmer and a wet snow has fallen and made the roads icy. Ethan plans to drive another load of logs to town and buy some glue to fix the **pickle-dish** while sending Jotham to fetch Zeena at the train station. However, one of the horses slips on the ice and cuts its knee, and the sleety rain makes loading the logs difficult. Ethan is unable to make it to the village and is late for dinner.

Outside forces do also seem to conspire against Ethan. While the thaw, which occurs simultaneously with Zeena's absence, at first seems to signal an improvement over the frigid cold of previous chapters, the sleet interferes with Ethan's search for glue.



After dinner, Ethan hurries to the village with the logs, then to Michael Eady's store for the glue. Denis Eady is unable to locate any glue, so Ethan goes to Mrs. Homan's store, where after some delay a bottle of glue is found. Ethan drives home in the rain, hoping to beat Zeena and Jotham back to the farm. When he sees that the sorrel horse is not in the barn he believes he and Mattie are alone.

More obstacles hinder Ethan's efforts to prevent Zeena from finding out about him and Mattie. Mattie, for her part, is unable to leave the house and must rely on Ethan to save her from Zeena's wrath.



However, when Ethan bursts into the kitchen Mattie tells him Zeena has returned and has gone upstairs without saying a word. Ethan tells Mattie he will fix the **pickle-dish** later than night after Zeena has gone to bed.

Zeena's silence is ominous. It makes Ethan's optimism that he'll get a chance to fix the pickle-dish seem naive, and his efforts to protect Mattie seem doomed to failure.



When Jotham drives up with the sorrel horse, which he has borrowed to carry some goods home to his wife, Ethan tries to persuade him to stay for supper, knowing Zeena will be less likely to make a scene if Jotham is present. Jotham, who normally would not turn down a free meal, refuses politely, and Ethan wonders what passed between him and Zeena on the drive home. When he re-enters the kitchen Mattie has set the table and it looks as welcoming as the night before.

Jotham's refusal to stay for dinner is a final indication that something is terribly wrong. Ethan and Mattie's guilt is noticeable as they wait for Zeena to come down to dinner. Yet rather than act, they continue to pretend that nothing has happened, as if they have no choice but to wait for the storm that is brewing, and that will erupt in the next chapter.



CHAPTER 7

Ethan calls Zeena's name, but when she does not answer he goes up to their room. Zeena, sitting bolt upright by the window in her traveling clothes, reveals that the doctor has told her she has "complications." Ethan is torn between wishing she would die and feeling compassion for her. Zeena implies that she has kidney trouble and that she ought to have an operation, but that she will settle for a hired girl on doctor's orders. Before Ethan can reply she declares that Aunt Martha has already found her one, and that the girl will arrive the following afternoon.

When Ethan objects angrily to the cost, Zeena shouts back at him that she would have been ashamed to tell the doctor that Ethan refused her the money when the fact was she had lost her health nursing Ethan's mother. She says her relatives all told her that Ethan couldn't do less than marry her after that.

Struggling with rage and disgust, Ethan tells Zeena that he lacks the money to pay for a hired girl and that he will do the housework himself. Zeena reminds him that he is neglecting the farm already and taunts him with the suggestion that he send her to the almshouse (poorhouse). She asks him about the fifty dollars he was supposed to have gotten from Andrew Hale and without thinking he confesses that he doesn't have it, since Hale always takes at least three months to pay. This is the first time Ethan has been caught in a lie.

Ethan humbly apologizes to Zeena for being a poor man and says he will do the best he can for her. She replies that they will manage since they won't have to pay for Mattie's board any longer. Ethan is confused, but Zeena shrilly insists that Mattie is a burden and that now it's someone else's turn to take her in.

Mattie's voice sounds from the landing, calling Ethan and Zeena to supper. Zeena says she's not coming down and Ethan calls out that he will be there in a minute. Ethan tries to shame Zeena into agreeing to keep Mattie on, but Zeena replies that people are gossiping about him and Mattie, and that she should have let Mattie go long before.

Realizing that he has been "mastered" by Zeena, Ethan looks at his wife with loathing. His helplessness makes him hate her, and he feels that she is the cause of all of his failures. For a moment he clenches his fist, then retreats to the kitchen.

Zeena continues to use her "illness" to exploit Ethan's guilt in order to get what she wants. In this case, that means removing Mattie from the house because Mattie directly threatens her control over Ethan. Rather than act aggressively to keep Mattie in the house, Ethan is indecisive and finds himself unable to respond to the actions Zeena has taken..



Zeena's response to Ethan's objections is to hurl accusations intended to deepen Ethan's guilt and, consequently, further her control over him. Ethan does not argue with her or defend himself.



Ethan's offer to do women's work would be seen as inappropriate and demeaning. His inability to make the farm profitable is another slight to his sense of masculinity, and Zeena is not above taunting him. By exposing Ethan's lie about the money he said he would get for the lumber, she makes him look and feel even weaker.



Here Zeena springs her trap, using Ethan's complaints about money against him. Zeena's decisive actions shatter Ethan's delusion that he can keep things as they are by doing nothing.



Zeena puts the final nail in the coffin when she insinuates that the villagers are talking about Mattie and Ethan. Ethan can't bear the thought of being considered immoral by his community.



Ethan hates Zeena for stripping him of the husbandly authority he feels he deserves. Instead of standing up for himself and Mattie, he again does nothing.



At the supper table Mattie looks at Ethan happily, oblivious to what has just occurred. Ethan is so upset that he can't eat and Mattie realizes something is wrong. He takes her in his arms and they kiss passionately. He says he can't and won't let her go. Mattie is bewildered, and Ethan is forced to tell her that the doctor has ordered Zeena to get a hired girl, which Mattie realizes would force her to leave.

Mattie's naïveté is striking in contrast to Zeena's conniving strategies. Mattie's helplessness also highlights Ethan's lack of authority. He too is helpless in his desire to help her. Their kiss comes at the moment when hope seems lost, heightening its poignancy.



Mattie tries to console Ethan but she knows her prospects of getting work are poor. Ethan remembers stories he has heard about girls like Mattie who look for work in cities like Worcester and Stamford.

Workrooms in mills and factories were poorly ventilated, labor laws were nonexistent, and wages were often extremely low.



Ethan says he won't let her leave, and that he will stand up to Zeena. At that moment Zeena comes down from the bedroom and sits at the table. Zeena says she is feeling better and starts eating, while Ethan sits speechless and Mattie tries to act as if everything is normal. After eating, though, Zeena complains of heartburn and goes to get some stomach powder.

At this moment of crisis, it seems that Ethan has finally decided to act. Yet Ethan is speechless when Zeena appears. Zeena's cheerfulness seem particularly cruel, and implies that Zeena takes pleasure in hurting Ethan.



When Zeena returns, she is furious and carrying the broken **pickle-dish**. Ethan tells her the cat knocked it over, to which Zeena replies that a cat couldn't set the pieces neatly back on the shelf. Mattie then confesses that she took down the pickle-dish to make the dinner table pretty. Zeena accuses Mattie of taking from her the thing she cared for most of all. She says she always knew Mattie was a bad girl, and adds that she should have thrown Mattie out long ago.

Though Zeena seems just as miserable in her marriage as Ethan does, her anger over the broken pickle-dish (a symbol of her marriage), shows her deep desire to save her marriage. This makes sense in the novel's social context: Ethan (a man) has prospects beyond marriage, but for Zeena (a woman), marriage is the only option. So it's not surprising that Zeena takes whatever steps she feels are necessary to preserve her marriage.



CHAPTER 8

After the scene in the kitchen, Ethan goes on his nightly inspection of the farm. He returns to find the kitchen empty, with his pipe laid out for him, and a note from Mattie telling him not to worry. In the kitchen he finds a note from Mattie that reads, "Don't trouble, Ethan." He enters his cold unused study and thinks about how he has sacrificed his life for Zeena, and recalls a married man he knew who deserted his own wife and went west with the girl he loved.

The study symbolizes Ethan's lost dreams of getting an education. Yet Ethan's willingness to blame Zeena and fate for his failures shows how he refuses to accept that, above all, his own passivity and cowardice have created his predicament.



He begins writing a letter to Zeena, telling her he is leaving her to go west with Mattie, and will leave Zeena the farm.

Once again, Ethan is pushed to the verge of action...



As he writes, Ethan is besieged with doubts about whether Zeena will be able to sell the farm, and how she will keep it going until she finds a buyer. He also worries how he will be able to support Mattie, considering he has no money and he knows no one who will lend to him.

...only to come up with reason after reason why his plans will fail. Ethan is trapped by societal expectations, but only because he is unwilling to them and face the consequences.



As Ethan lies hopelessly on the sofa, he sees the moon through the window-pane and remembers that he had promised to take Mattie sledding. The beauty of the snowy landscape seems to mock his wretchedness, and he falls asleep.

The tranquility of the landscape contrasts with the turmoil in Ethan's heart, as if nature itself is indifferent to human suffering.



At dawn, Mattie appears in the doorway wearing her **red scarf**. She is pale and says she has been awake all night, listening for him to come upstairs. As daylight comes and the stove warms the kitchen, Ethan feels more hopeful. He tells Mattie he thinks things will "straighten out" and not to take any notice of what Zeena says.

The red sun and the warmth of the stove, symbols of the passionate love Ethan feels for Mattie, contrast with the cold and darkness associated with Zeena and Starkfield in general.



Ethan goes out to the barn, where he meets Jotham Powell. Jotham tells Ethan that Daniel Byrne is willing to take Mattie's trunk to Corbury Flats, so that the sleigh will be lighter when he takes Mattie to the station to catch the six o'clock train and to pick up the new hired girl. Ethan says it hasn't been decided yet that Mattie is definitely leaving.

Though Jotham works for Ethan, he carries out Zeena's orders, undermining Ethan's authority. Zeena's provisions for Mattie's departure take Ethan by surprise, and the plot seems to race along as he hesitates.



At breakfast, Zeena is unusually alert and active. While Ethan looks on, she criticizes Mattie for neglecting the geraniums, accuses her of stealing a number of items, and discusses the logistics of Mattie's departure with Jotham Powell.

Zeena's determination contrasts with Ethan's inertia. Ethan's failure to defend Mattie from Zeena's slanderous accusations shows her power over him.



Ethan is ashamed at what Mattie must think of him and confused about what to do, though he has resolved to do something. He tells Jotham he is going to Starkfield and that he won't be back for dinner. As he walks to the village the landscape reminds him of Mattie and he realizes he must act at once. He decides to ask Andrew Hale for an advance on the lumber, using the lie that he needs the money to pay the hired girl.

Once again, Ethan decides to act, reminded of Mattie's importance by everything he sees. His humiliation at seeing Mattie banished causes him to swallow his pride and seek assistance from Hale. His love for Mattie makes him blind to the fact that in doing so he will have to compromise his morals.



At the Hale's house, Mrs. Andrew Hale greets Ethan and expresses sympathy for Zeena's poor health and for Ethan's troubles. Ethan is grateful for her sympathy, and continues on his mission, feeling sure that the Hales' compassion will make it easy for him to get the money he needs from them.

Mrs. Hale's compassion for Ethan's suffering and his devoted care for Zeena seems kind. In fact, it is kind—Mrs. Hale really does feel for Ethan's plight.



Ethan quickens his pace, but his conscience overwhelms him as he realizes the immorality of his plan to abandon his wife or to deceive two people who are kind enough to pity him. He turns back to the farm.

However, Mrs. Hale's kindness also reinforces the social expectations that trap Ethan. He can't bear to act in a way that he's been raised to believe is immoral, even if his morality costs him his happiness.



CHAPTER 9

Back at the farm, Ethan finds Daniel Byrne waiting in his sleigh outside the kitchen door. Ethan is shocked to learn that Mattie is getting her trunk down from her room alone, since Jotham is at the wood-lot and Daniel Byrne doesn't want to leave his horse. Ethan goes up to help, and finds Mattie sobbing in her empty room. They cling to each other and Mattie tells him she thought she would never see him again.

Without Ethan to look out for her, Mattie is forced to fend for herself. Believing Ethan has abandoned her, Mattie accepts her fate passively.



Zeena calls to them to hurry and Ethan and Mattie maneuver the trunk down the stairs together. Zeena does not move from her chair or even look up. Before they go back into the house, Ethan tells Mattie that, despite Zeena's orders, he—not Jotham—will drive her to the train station.

Ethan again resolves to take a stand. But Zeena seems certain of her power and unconcerned that Ethan will actually do anything to upset her plans.



At dinner, Ethan cannot bring himself to eat. Zeena eats hungrily and offers Jotham seconds, though ordinarily she ignores him. She also accuses Mattie of stealing various items. After dinner, Mattie washes the dishes.

Zeena's kindness to Jotham makes her rudeness to Mattie even more vicious. Even when she's on the verge of leaving, Mattie does her chores.



Ethan tells Jotham not to come for Mattie as he will be driving her to the train station himself. Zeena protests but Ethan is firm. Zeena tries a second time, demanding that Ethan stay to fix the stove for the hired girl. Ethan replies that the stove was good enough for Mattie, so it ought to be good enough for the new girl. He tells Mattie to be ready at three o'clock, saying he has business in Corbury.

At last Ethan asserts his authority. He stands up to Zeena when she objects to his driving Mattie to the station, and resists her attempts to manipulate him. To buy more time with Mattie, he lies a second time—he doesn't really have business in Corbury.



As Ethan readies the horse for the trip, he notes the spring-like weather and remembers picking up Mattie at the station a little more than a year before, in similar weather. Zeena goes upstairs without saying goodbye, complaining of shooting pains in her legs. With a feeling of unreality, Ethan helps Mattie into the sleigh and they drive away.

The beautiful weather seems arbitrary to Ethan, since it's the same whether Mattie is arriving for the first time or leaving forever. Zeena's complaining returns as she again feels anxious about her power over Ethan, and tries to control him.



Instead of going in the direction of Starkfield, Ethan turns the sleigh toward Bettsbridge. They drive to a beautiful spot in the woods called Shadow Pond, where at a church picnic the summer before Mattie and Ethan sat on a fallen log by the pond. As they sat, Mattie noticed she was missing her gold locket. All the young men began looking for it, but it was Ethan who found it in the moss. Now, sitting again on the fallen log, Ethan reminds her of how he found the locket, and Mattie says she never saw anybody with such sharp eyes.

Ethan longs to reach out and touch Mattie, to tell her how he feels, but just then Mattie says, "We mustn't stay here any longer." After a moment in which they stare into one another's eyes, they drive away as the sun sinks behind the hill.

As the sleigh winds through the fields back to the Starkfield road, Ethan asks Mattie what she plans to do when she gets to Stamford. When Mattie replies that she will try to get a job in a store, Ethan reminds her that it made her ill before, and asks if any of her father's friends can help her. Mattie says she wouldn't ask them, and Ethan says there isn't anything he wouldn't do for her if he could. At that moment Mattie pulls out the letter Ethan began writing to Zeena the night before. He asks Mattie if she would have gone west with him, but she says the question is pointless and tears the letter into pieces.

Ethan persists, and Mattie tells him she has been fantasizing about going away with him since the day at Shadow Pond. Ethan sadly tells her that he is "tied hand and foot," and that there isn't anything he can do. Mattie asks him to write to her and Ethan replies that writing is no good, when what he wants to do is be with her, and take care of her when she's sick or lonely. Mattie tries to reassure him, and Ethan says he supposes she'll marry someone else, and that he'd almost rather have her dead than let that happen. Mattie begins to sob, and says she wishes she were dead. Ethan feels ashamed of himself and tells her not to talk like that, and Mattie says Ethan is the only person who has ever been good to her.

The moment at the pond sums up Ethan and Mattie's relationship: their shared love of nature, Mattie's status as a beautiful young woman desired by many young men, and Ethan's ability to help and protect her better than any of those other men. Ethan's sharp eyes symbolize both his strength and competence, and Mattie's trust in him.



Ethan is on the verge of taking action, but once again he moves too slowly and the moment passes him by, as symbolized by the sun sinking behind the hill.



Mattie's future seems bleak, and it's questionable whether her feeble efforts will improve her situation. Her refusal to consider asking her father's friends for help shows the shame she feels, but it's also another instance of her resignation to the terrible fate she believes awaits her. She tears up the letter because she realizes it's just another empty gesture toward action by Ethan that will never go anywhere.



Ethan behaves and speaks romantically in this scene, but his claims that he can do nothing sound hollow. When he says he would rather she were dead than married to someone else, it's hard not to despise him for his selfishness. Mattie's response introduces the idea that death might be the solution to their problems. Though she believes that Ethan has been good to her, her final statement is ironic because Ethan more than anyone has been the source of her troubles.



When they reach Starkfield they see some boys with sleds leaving the sledding-grounds, and at the top of the hill Ethan asks Mattie if she'd like to coast down with him one time before they drive to the station. Mattie says there isn't time, but Ethan helps her onto a sled that's lying under the trees and climbs on behind her. Mattie asks him if he can see, and Ethan says he could steer them down with his eyes closed. He peers through the dusk and they fly down the hill, passing safely by the elm. Ethan asks Mattie if she was scared, and she replies that she is never scared when she's with him. Ethan boasts that he is a good judge of distances, but that one swerve would have sent them into the elm, and they'd "never ha' come up again."

As they climb back up the hill, Ethan thinks to himself that it's the last time they'll ever walk together. Ethan says he thinks the sled is Ned Hale's, and Mattie asks him if this is the place where he saw Ned and Ruth kissing. She kisses him, crying "Good-bye!" Ethan cries that he can't let her go, and Mattie, sobbing, says she can't bear to go either. They cling to each other as the church clock strikes five.

Suddenly, Mattie asks Ethan to sled down with her again, "So't we'll never come up any more." Ethan asks her what she means, and she says she wants him to steer them into the big elm. He says she's crazy, but Mattie responds that she will be if she has to leave him. Ethan thinks of going back to his intolerable life with Zeena, and kisses Mattie again, stroking her hair.

The train whistles in the distance. Ethan wonders if he will feel anything after he dies. His horse whinnies, and he thinks that the horse is probably wondering why it hasn't gotten its supper. As Ethan gazes down at the empty slope his eyes feel less sharp than usual.

Ethan climbs onto the sled and Mattie gets on in front of him. He orders her to get on behind him, because he wants to feel her holding him. The horse whinnies as they start down the slope, and they feel like they're flying up into the cloudy sky. Ethan repeats to himself, "I know we can fetch it," and imagines that the tree knows what they are planning and is waiting for them. Just before they strike the tree, a vision of Zeena's face appears before him, and as he tries to brush it aside the sled swerves, but he guides it back toward the tree.

The topic of Ethan's excellent vision comes up again, and the couple revel in the traditional roles they assume. Ethan feels strong and competent; Mattie feels protected and cared for. Ethan's boast that his judgment saved them from a collision makes Mattie realize that they could easily kill themselves by steering into the tree.



Mattie's impulse to kiss Ethan on the spot where another couple have kissed indicates her wish that their relationship, like Ruth and Ned's, were legitimate in the eyes of the community. The couple's passion causes them to act recklessly.



Mattie realizes that death offers them an escape of last resort. Society won't let them be together in life, but society can't touch them in death. For his part, Ethan decides that real death is preferable to the living death he shares with Zeena.



The horse's whinny distracts Ethan, reminding him of the duties in life and at the farm that he has neglected because of his desire for Mattie.



The sled ride is a perfect metaphor for Ethan's life. He wants Mattie to cling to him like a traditional wife as he steers them through life. But in the end, Ethan can't maintain focus and gets distracted by outside forces, knocking him off course. The act of sledding can also be seen as a metaphor for Ethan's failure to take control over his life, just as the sled goes wherever the snowy course takes it.



Lying in the snow after the crash, Ethan sees a star and wonders vaguely if it is the star Sirius. He feels very tired and hears a frightened twittering, like a small animal in pain, nearby under the snow. He wants to help it, and feels around with his hand, which finds something soft—Mattie's hair. He realizes that his hand is on her face, and then he sees her eyes open and she says his name. Just then the horse whinnies, and he thinks, "I ought to be getting him his feed..."

Stars symbolized the ideas that fate and human lives are predetermined, since stars move in prescribed arcs across the sky. The opposing view holds that human beings are responsible for the course their lives take, and can influence their fate by choosing to act—much as Ethan sought to control the path of the sled. Ethan found himself caught between these two views, trying to control his life even though it always felt beyond his control. The result is catastrophic. Just as Ethan failed to achieve any of his other goals, he fails to commit suicide and ends up crippled for life.



EPILOGUE

The frame story resumes in the first-person voice of the Narrator. As he and Ethan enter the dark sparsely-furnished farmhouse kitchen, the whining voice grows silent. Two women are in the room: one tall, grey, and bony, who sets about preparing supper, the other smaller and huddled in an armchair, with a witch-like stare.

Ethan's life has gotten worse. Before he had one shrewish wife, but now he seems somehow to have two. The identity of the second woman is a mystery to the reader, for the moment.



Ethan comments that the fire seems almost out. The tall woman ignores him, but the woman in the chair complains in a high, thin voice that Zeena fell asleep and let the fire go out, and that while it was out she thought she would freeze to death. The Narrator realizes that it was she who was speaking when he entered the room. Ethan introduces the tall woman as his wife, and the complaining woman as "Miss Mattie Silver."

Until it is revealed that the second woman is Mattie, and that she, not Zeena, is the owner of the whiny, demanding voice. As Mrs. Hale explains later, suffering has changed her from a sweet girl into a bitter hag. Mattie has gone from Zeena's opposite to her mirror image.



Back in Starkfield the next morning the Narrator reveals to Mrs. Ned Hale and old Mrs. Varnum that he has spent the night at the Frome farm. Mrs. Hale is greatly surprised, and says she believes he is the only stranger who has set foot in that house in over twenty years. Though after the accident she went to the Frome's quite often, Mrs. Hale says that she now only goes there twice a year, because she can't stand to see the look on Ethan's face when the two women "get going at each other." She is about to tell the Narrator what Mattie said to her when she was carried up to the Varnum house after the accident, but she starts crying and cannot finish her sentence. No one knows what Zeena was thinking, she says, but as soon as Mattie could be moved, Zeena took her back to the farm. Mrs. Hale says it is a miracle that someone as sick as Zeena was able to care for two cripples for 20 years, when before the accident she couldn't even care for herself.

The novel never explains why Zeena takes in Mattie. One possible explanation is that Zeena saw an opportunity to torment both Ethan and Mattie by taking in Mattie. But it's also possible that Zeena felt social pressure to take in Mattie because Mattie was a relative who had suffered so horribly. In other words, just as Zeena's "illness" gave her power over Ethan, Mattie's more profound and real suffering seems to have given her power over Zeena, as shown when Mattie complains about Zeena letting the fire go out. At any rate, they are now all trapped by misery, poverty, and disability in their lonely, decaying farmhouse.



The Narrator comments that life must be horrible for them all. Mrs. Hale agrees, but says she thinks Ethan has it the worst. She confides to the Narrator that she thinks it's a pity that Mattie survived the accident, because if she had died, "Ethan might ha' lived." She adds that the way it is now, there's not much difference between the Fromes in the graveyard and the Fromes up at the farm, except that the women in the graveyard "have got to hold their tongues."

Mrs. Hale describes Ethan's life as a kind of living death. Ethan sought to keep things just as they were by doing nothing. But by never making a choice, either to break the rules of society and go off with Mattie or to give up what he desired and follow society's rules, he managed to destroy everything.





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