

# Ethan Frome Chapter Questions

## Directions

MAKE A COPY IN GOOGLE DOCS (under File).

THEN TYPE RESPONSES IN A DIFFERENT COLORED FONT.

Keep in your docs. You will share with your teacher when school starts.

## Questions

### Prologue

1. What does the name Starkfield suggest about the setting? How does Harmon Gow corroborate this later?
2. What is the stereotype of an engineer? How is the Narrator/engineer atypical? Can the reader therefore trust what he tells us? Why did Wharton have the Narrator say that he "...began to piece together this vision" (rather than "version") of Frome's story?
3. What is significant about the missing L-structure on the farm? What places do Harmon Gow and Mrs. Ned Hale occupy in the story?
4. Setting: "Guess he's [Ethan] been in Starkfield too many winters." Harmon Gow says this to the narrator?. What does this suggest about the cause of Ethan's situation?
5. What else do we find out about the narrator in this prologue and are there any similarities with Ethan?
6. Look at the description of Ethan's home: "... in all its plaintive ugliness. The black wraith of a deciduous creeper flapped from the porch, and the thin wooden walls, under their worn coat of paint, seemed to shiver in the wind that had risen with the ceasing of the snow." What impression do we get of the house?
7. Why do you think Edith Wharton uses three lines of dots (an ellipsis) at the end of the prologue?

### Chapter I

1. Since we know from the Prologue that the novel involves a tragedy, what foreshadowing devices has the author used? How is the setting itself a foreshadowing?
2. Look out for elements of Wharton's writing style – comment on the devices below:

Quote	Technique	Comment
“In a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires.”	Metaphor – sky of iron Simile – hung like icicles	
As Ethan looks through the window of the church hall: “from the pure and frosty darkness in which he stood, it seemed to be seething in a mist of heat.”	Symbolism – use of thresholds and light / dark and cold / heat	
Mattie: “a cherry-coloured fascinator about her head”	Symbolism - red color	
Mattie’s arrival at Starkfield is described as “like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth.”	Simile	
“the cold red of sunset”; “slopes of golden stubble” and “intensely blue shadows”	Colors - symbolism	

- Note in this section the use of flashbacks. What role do flashbacks play in this story?
- Explain Ethan’s feelings about Denis Eady. Pick out key quotes.
- What image do we get of Zeena in this chapter?

## Chapter II

- How does Ethan reveal that he feels ambivalent? He loves Mattie yet he knows he hasn't the "right" to acknowledge it.
- What foreshadowing is used in this chapter?
- Why is the missing door key significant?
- How are Mattie and Zeena contrasted, physically?
- Why does Ethan not want to go to bed immediately?
- Comment on the literary techniques used by Wharton:**

Quotation	Technique	Comment
“Her wonder and his laughter ran together like spring rills in a thaw.”	Simile	

“Its icy slope, scored by innumerable runners, looked like a mirror scratched by travellers at an inn.”	Simile	
“The cry was balm to his raw wound.”	Metaphor	
“Here and there a farmhouse stood far back among the fields, mute and cold as a gravestone.”	Simile	
“they heard the frozen snow crackle under their feet.”	Onomatopoeia	
“The crash of a loaded branch falling far off in the woods reverberated like a musket-shot.”	Onomatopoeia and Simile	
“They walked on as if they were floating on a summer stream.”	Simile	
Reference to “coasting”  The Frome grave-stones  Thresholds: church hall / outside; outside the cottage and inside the cottage; the threshold of their room.	Symbolism	

## Chapter III

1. How are the two women contrasted psychologically?
2. How is Ethan's conflict intensified in this chapter?
3. Re-read the flashback of the night before in Ethan and Zeena's bedroom. What does it reveal about their marriage? Does it help to explain why they do not have any children?
4. What do we learn about Mattie's family background? Why has she come to live with the Fromes? What does this tell us about the position of women at this time?

## Chapter IV

1. What traits in Ethan's character are emphasized?
2. Comment on Wharton's use of descriptive language in this chapter, particularly to adjectives referring to color. Why are they significant?
3. At the beginning of the chapter, Wharton describes the kitchen. Pick out elements to show how the kitchen seems to be different now that Zeena has gone.
4. Read carefully, what vision does Ethan have of married life?
5. A flashback reveals details about Ethan's life – what do we learn about his past and why did he marry Zeena?
6. We also learn of the couple's plans and dreams when they got married – what were they?
7. Read the final pages of the chapter and comment on the following elements of this scene:

Elements of the passage	Comments
On his way home Ethan looks at the graves on the knoll: "Sacred to the memory of Ethan Frome and Endurance his wife, who dwelled together in peace for fifty years."	
The parallel between Mattie opening the door to him and the scene the previous evening when Zeena had opened the door to him.	
"The cat jumped between them into Zeena's empty chair".	
The pickle dish "It seemed to him as if the shattered fragments of their evening lay there."	

## Chapter V

1. What basic difference between Ethan and Mattie is highlighted in this chapter?
2. What elements disturb Mattie and Ethan's evening together?
3. Look at the description of Mattie in this chapter. Comment on the following quotes:

Quote	Technique	Comment
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“He kept his eyes on her, marvelling at the way her face changed with each turn of their talk, like a wheat-field under a summer breeze.”		
“She pronounced the married as if her voice caressed it. It seemed a rustling covert leading to enchanted glades.”		
The movement of her hands as she sews is described as if “he had seen a pair of birds make short perpendicular flights over a nest they were building.”		
“the light that she carried before her making her dark hair look like a drift of mist on the moon.”		

4. How does Ethan try to reveal his feelings to Mattie in this chapter?

## Chapter VI

1. How has the evening without Zeena altered Ethan's perception of his daily routine?
2. Find the quotation to describe the kitchen now that Zeena has come back.
3. What signs are there of foreboding?

## Chapter VII

1. How does Zeena's news about hiring Mattie's replacement affect Ethan?
2. Why can this chapter be considered the climax of the novel?
3. Why do you think Zeena is so determined to get rid of her cousin Mattie?
4. Contrast Zeena's reaction to the broken pickle dish and her decision to throw out her cousin Mattie.
5. Look at the following images and comment on them:

Quote	Technique	Comment
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“Through the obscurity which hid their faces their thoughts seemed to dart at each other like serpents shooting venom.”		
“His wife’s retort was like a knife-cut across the sinews and he felt suddenly weak and powerless.”		
“a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding.”		
“felt her lashes beat his cheek like netted butterflies”		
“She stood silent a moment, drooping before him like a broken branch.”		

## Chapter VIII

1. In this chapter, Ethan weighs his options. How is his decision to maintain the status quo in keeping with his personality?
2. In this chapter, Ethan thinks about the example of a young man who left his wife “by going West with a girl he cared for.” What does this example show about Ethan’s personality?
3. Why does he not consider his obligation to Mattie? What will his decision to remain with Zeena do to Mattie? Is this fair?
4. \* How do Wharton's descriptions mirror Ethan's state of mind and foreshadow the end? Look closely at the images that link Mattie and nature.
5. How does this chapter and the novel as a whole undermine the idea of the American Dream?
6. Look at how Ethan views his marriage to Zeena: “The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders hand-cuffing 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.”

## Chapter IX

1. How is Zeena's reaction to Mattie's departure a contrast to Ethan's? What are the implications of her behavior?
2. Comment on the irony of Ethan's defiance of her command to stay home and let Jotham drive Mattie to the station.
3. What options are open to Mattie? What does this show us about the position of women at this time?
4. Why does suicide seem logical? Is this decision a solution or a "cop-out?"

## Epilogue

1. How is the reader surprised? How is the ending ironic?
2. How does the Narrator deal with the story now?
3. What is ironic about Mrs. Hale's interpretation?
4. The use of ellipsis – Re-read Mrs. Hale's comments about her conversation with Mattie after the accident: "When she came to I went up to her and stayed all night. They gave her things to quiet her, and she didn't know much till to'rd morning, and then all of a sudden she woke up just like herself, and looked straight at me out of her big eyes, and said ..." Mrs. Hale does not finish her sentence – what do you think Mattie told her?