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Ethan Frome

Edith Wharton · *1911 · original English text*

A visitor to Starkfield, Massachusetts, pieces together Ethan Frome's story from various people, each time a different story, and then from Ethan himself. The brief novel moves from a hard farm and a hard marriage to a night of flight that does not free anyone.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a long winter, a sick marriage, and one hope of escape do to a man—and is the graveyard quieter only because the women there must hold their tongues?

"I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard;"
The close, a neighbor's judgment

The frame is a winter visitor who has the story bit by bit. The inner tale is Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie Silver, a sled, and a smash that is not a release. Wharton's English in this hosted text (PG #4517) keeps the New England speech: "don't see's," "'cept." The last contrast between the farm and the graveyard is the book's hard mercy. Short enough for a wide band of older readers, and bleak enough to be taught with care. It is not a simple love story.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ethan Frome
The farmer, caught between duty, poverty, and a late tenderness.

Zeena Frome
His wife, ill and exacting, whose will outlasts the crash.

Mattie Silver
The poor cousin whose presence is the house's one ease, and then its wreck.

the visitor
The frame narrator, who must gather a story the town already half knows.

THE FARM AND THE GRAVEYARD

> *"I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard;"*
> The close

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Starkfield, in Pieces
THE FRAME

The narrator has the story, bit by bit, from various people, and each time it is a different story. The post-office, the winter, and Ethan's ruined body are the first facts.

- The opening is exact: 'I had the story, bit by bit, from various people.'
- The frame matters; this is a tale assembled, not a straight confession.
- Starkfield's weather is already a moral climate.

> *"I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story."*
> The opening of the frame

02
A Farm, and a Marriage
THE INNER TALE BEGINS

Ethan works a poor farm. Zeena is ill, sharp, and not to be lied to easily. Mattie Silver, a poor cousin, has become the household's one warmth.

- Do not flatten Zeena into a mere shrew; her illness and her power are both real.
- Ethan's decency and his hunger live in the same rooms.
- Money, medicine, and a hired girl's place are the book's hard facts.

03
A Walk, and a Hope
THE MIDDLE

An evening, a church social, a walk, a moment when another life seems possible. Zeena's return of attention will close it.

- The tenderness is real; so is the trap.
- A pickle-dish, a cat, a silence: small things carry the fate.
- Mattie has few roads, and Ethan has not opened one.

04
The Elm, and the Sled
THE NIGHT OF THE SMASH

They take the sled down toward the big elm. What they intend, and what the village later knows, should be taught with gravity, not as a thrill.

- This is the book's crisis, not an adventure scene.
- The smash does not free them.
- Older students can bear it if it is not sensationalized.

05
The Farm and the Graveyard
THE FRAME AGAIN

The visitor sees what is left. A neighbor does not see much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard, except that down there the women have got to hold their tongues.

- Quote this text's speech exactly: "don't see's," "'cept."
- The last irony is not a joke; it is the book's judgment.
- A short novel, and a bleak one: a marriage, a hopeless love, a living wound. Teach it as such.

Winter and Poverty · A Hard Marriage · A Late Tenderness · A Failed Escape · Silence

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is Edith Wharton's original English (Project Gutenberg #4517). Quote the New England speech as printed: "I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard;" and "'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues."
2. The book is short and bleak: a cramped marriage, a hopeless love, a sled wreck that does not release anyone. Teach the smash with gravity, not as a thrill. Suitable for older students.
3. The opening frame ("I had the story, bit by bit, from various people") is part of the design; do not treat the book as only the inner tale.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #4517, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/ethan-frome/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.