



Grade 11 English(College)

Ethan Frome

By Edith Wharton

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I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story.

If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade: and you must have asked who he was.

It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two. I had this from Harmon Gow, who had driven the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days and knew the chronicle of all the families on his line.

"He's looked that way ever since he had his smash-up; and that's twenty-four years ago come next February," Harmon threw out between reminiscent pauses.

The "smash-up" it was—I gathered from the same informant—which, besides drawing the red gash across Ethan Frome's forehead, had so shortened and warped his right side that it cost him a visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post-office window. He used to drive in from his farm every day at about noon, and as that was my own hour for fetching my mail I often passed him in the porch or stood beside him while we waited on the motions of the distributing hand behind the grating. I noticed that, though he came so punctually, he seldom received anything but a copy of the Bettsbridge Eagle, which he put without a glance into his sagging pocket. At intervals, however, the post-master would hand him an envelope addressed to Mrs. Zenobia—or Mrs.

Zeena-Frome, and usually bearing conspicuously in the upper left-hand corner the address of some manufacturer of patent medicine and the name of his specific. These documents my neighbour would also pocket without a glance, as if too much used to them to wonder at their number and variety, and would then turn away with a silent nod to the post-master.

Every one in Starkfield knew him and gave him a greeting tempered to his own grave mien; but his taciturnity was respected and it was only on rare occasions that one of the older men of the place detained him for a word. When this happened he would listen quietly, his blue eyes on the

speaker's face, and answer in so low a tone that his words never reached me; then he would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand and drive slowly away in the direction of his farm.

"It was a pretty bad smash-up?" I questioned Harmon, looking after Frome's retreating figure, and thinking how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape.

"Wust kind," my informant assented. "More'n enough to kill most men. But the Fromes are tough. Ethan'll likely touch a hundred." "Good God!" I exclaimed. At the moment Ethan Frome, after climbing to his seat, had leaned over to assure himself of the security of a wooden box—also with a druggist's label on it—which he had placed in the back of the buggy, and I saw his face as it probably looked when he thought himself alone. "That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!"

Harmon drew a slab of tobacco from his pocket, cut off a wedge and pressed it into the leather pouch of his cheek. "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

"Why didn't he?"

"Somebody had to stay and care for the folks. There warn't ever anybody but Ethan. Fust his father—then his mother—then his wife."

"And then the smash-up?"

Harmon chuckled sardonically. "That's so. He had to stay then." "I see. And since then they've had to care for him?"

Harmon thoughtfully passed his tobacco to the other cheek. "Oh, as to that: I guess it's always Ethan done the caring."

Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps.

But one phrase stuck in my memory and served as the nucleus about which I grouped my subsequent inferences: "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters."

1. The details of the 'smash-up' are given to the narrator by Harmon Gow. Gow knew this story because he:

- A) was a distant relative of Ethan Frome.
- B) was the postmaster and had met most of the locals at the post office.
- C) was a curious, nosy person who made it his business to learn about the local gossip.
- D) had driven the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield and knew much about those who lived along the route.

2. Refer to the information in question 1.

Ethan Frome is greeted gravely by all who meet him and they respect his quietness, but once in awhile one of the older men would speak to him. Ethan's response, at these times, would be:

- A) an angry curse.
- B) a nod of his head.
- C) a quiet answer while he watched intently.
- D) no visible indication that he had heard anything from anyone.

3. Refer to the information in question 1.

Because of Ethan Frome's stiff and grizzled appearance and his lameness, the narrator is surprised to hear that Ethan Frome:

- A) has been in a smash-up.
- B) is not more than fifty-two.
- C) is a most striking figure.
- D) is the owner of a hollow-backed bay.

4. Refer to the information in question 1.

When Ethan Frome climbs to his seat in the buggy, he leans over to make sure that a wooden box is secure. The box probably contains:

- A) groceries.
- B) feed.
- C) buggy parts.
- D) medicine.

5. Refer to the information in question 1.

At the post office, Ethan Frome sometimes receives an envelope from:

- A) Mrs. Zeena-Frome.
- B) the Bettsbridge Eagle editor.
- C) the Bettsbridge Eagle.
- D) a medicine manufacturer.

6. Refer to the information in question 1.

The mood of this selection can best be described as:

- A) cautious and fearful.
- B) dark and mysterious.
- C) angry and vengeful.
- D) humourous and light hearted.

7. Refer to the information in question 1.

The line below which most clearly describes Ethan Frome's physical limitations is:

- A) ‘.. it was the careless powerful look he had."
- B) "...there was something bleak and unapproachable in his face."
- C) "...a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain."
- D) "...had so shortened and warped his right side that it cost him a visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post-office window."

8. Refer to the information in question 1.

The reason that Ethan had stayed in Starkfield for too many winters when many of the others had left was that he felt obligated to:

- A) continue running the family farm.
- B) stay because of his poor health.
- C) repay the costs of the smash-up.
- D) care for his father, mother and his wife.

9. Refer to the information in question 1.

The term "natives" in the third paragraph refers to:

- A) a local Aboriginal group.
- B) a person who moved to the area from a local reservation.
- C) a migrant agricultural worker.
- D) any of the local inhabitants who was born in the area.

10. Refer to the information in question 1.

The characteristic which the narrator notices sets Ethan Frome apart from the others in Starkfield is best expressed by which of the following statements?

- A) "was but the ruin of a man"
- B) "great height marked him"
- C) "was the careless, powerful look he had"
- D) "was the most striking character in Starkfield"

