

Before You Read

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Consider the adage, “Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear.” What do you think it means? Do you follow that piece of advice? Why or why not?

Share Ideas

With a partner, share an instance in which the reputation of a person whom you knew was based on hearsay that turned out to be untrue. What were the circumstances? What lesson did you learn? What do you think makes people embellish the truth?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what the townspeople say about Ethan Frome and why he captures the narrator’s attention.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In writing *Ethan Frome*, Wharton relied on two tried and true literary devices: the frame story and the flashback. A **frame story** is a story within a story. The “frame” is an outer story that precedes and follows a more important inner story. In *Ethan Frome*, the outer story is the narration by a visitor to Starkfield. He tells how he put together the facts about Ethan Frome’s accident. The inner story that relates the events leading up to the climactic accident is told in flashbacks. A **flashback** is an interruption of chronological sequence by the interjection of events that occurred earlier. Writers use flashbacks to explain what happened previously, giving readers information that may help explain the main events of the story. Sometimes a writer will signal a flashback with a transitional word or phrase, but at other times readers must depend on clues. Wharton uses flashback frequently in *Ethan Frome*.

Whose Story Is This?

Every work of fiction has a narrator, a “voice” that tells the story. In *Ethan Frome*, the narrator of the frame tale is an engineer who is visiting Starkfield on a job assignment. In the Beginning he tells the story from the **first-person point of view**, referring to himself as *I*. The reader knows only what he knows. However, when Chapter I begins, the point of view shifts to the **third-person limited**, and the thoughts and feelings of one character exclusively—Ethan, referred to as *he*, because the reader is seeing the events through his eyes.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

aggrieved [ə grēvd’] *adj.* troubled (p. 6)

conspicuously [kən spik’ ū əs lē] *adv.* noticeably or strikingly (p. 1)

degenerate [di jen’ər it] *adj.* inferior (p. 2)

detachment [di tach’mənt] *n.* a standing apart; aloofness (p. 3)

obstinately [ob’stə nit lē] *adv.* stubbornly; inflexibly (p. 15)

perceptible [pər sep’tə bəl] *adj.* noticeable (p. 2)

plaintive [plān’tiv] *adj.* mournful; sad (p. 14)

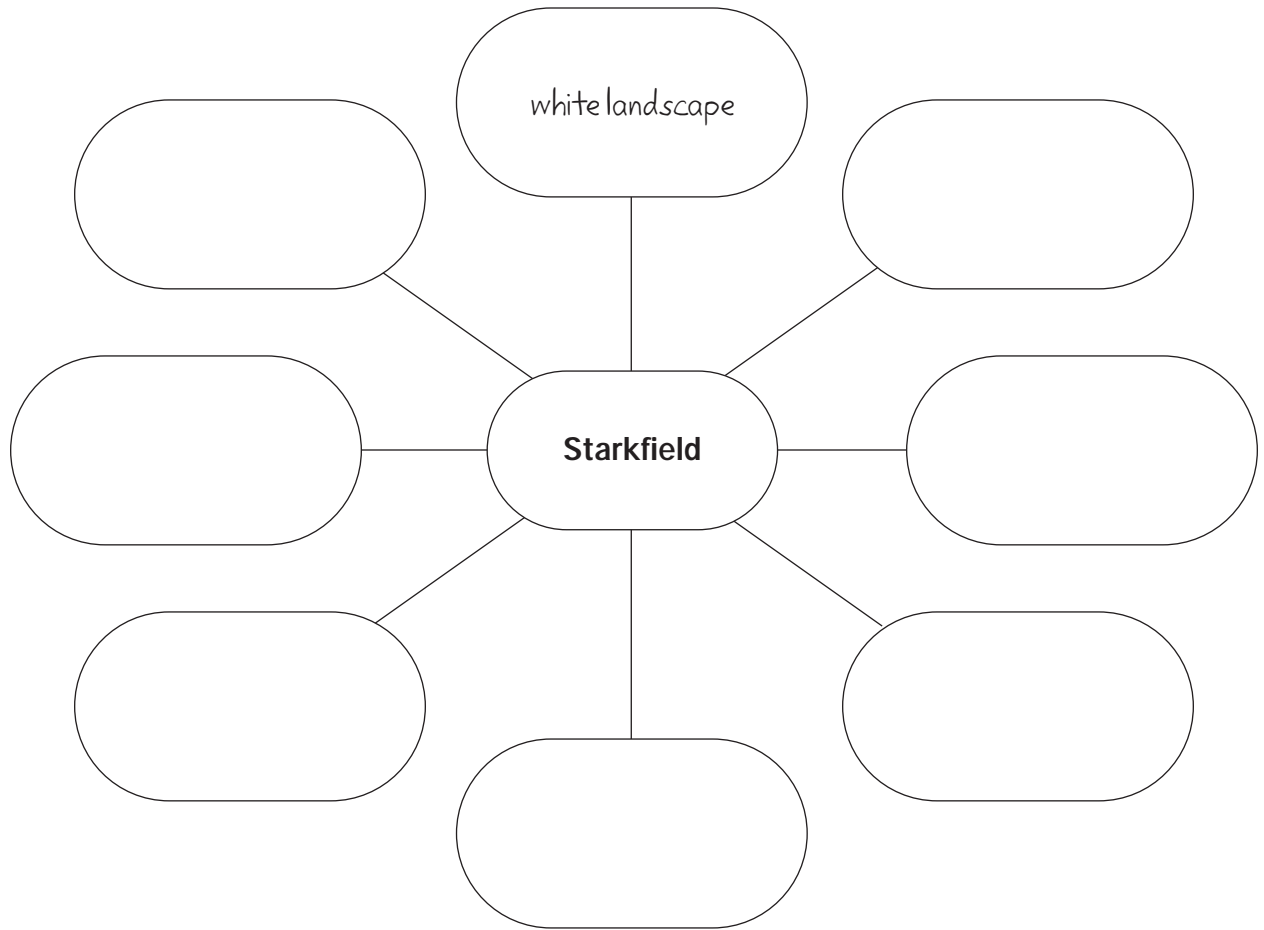
reticent [ret’ə sənt] *adj.* restrained or reserved, especially in speech (p. 4)

taciturnity [tas’ə tur’nə tē] *n.* silence or extreme reserve; unwillingness to speak (p. 2)

Active Reading

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

The setting of *Ethan Frome* is as important as the characters. In fact, some critics have said that the setting of the novella is a character. The very name of the village, “Starkfield,” suggests barrenness and harshness. As you read the opening chapters, pay attention to the author’s descriptions of the setting. What atmosphere does Wharton create? Using the organizer below, record words and phrases that describe the setting.



Responding

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

Personal Response

What are your initial feelings about Ethan Frome, the protagonist? What details from this section of the novella helped shape your feelings?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does the narrator learn about Frome from other characters? What effect does this knowledge have on the narrator?

2. What is Ethan's house like? What part is missing, and why does this strike the narrator as important?

3. Who is Mattie Silver and why is her presence so important to Ethan Frome?

4. Why is Zeena dissatisfied with Mattie? How does this dissatisfaction affect Zeena's behavior toward her?

5. What does Zeena fail to do when Ethan brings Mattie home from the dance? What might have been her motive for doing it?

Responding

Ethan Frome Beginning—Chapter II

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. At the story's beginning, the narrator says that each person's story about Ethan Frome was different. Later he describes the reluctance of the townspeople to discuss the story. What does this behavior imply about New Englanders' attitudes toward outsiders? Are they protecting Zeena or Ethan Frome, do you think?

7. Think about your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 16. Based on Ethan Frome's own words and behavior in the novella so far, what image of him is emerging in your mind? Explain your response.

Literature and Writing

Descriptive Writing

Review your **Active Reading** web on page 17. Then write a paragraph describing Starkfield, Massachusetts as you visualize it. Pretend that you are describing the place to someone who has not been there. Feel free to use the descriptive words from the activity as well as others that may occur to you.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Throughout this section, the words and phrases that Wharton uses to describe the bleak but beautiful New England landscape mirror the emotional state of Ethan Frome. In your group, analyze the imagery and descriptive words used to create the setting to determine how they reflect Ethan Frome's emotional state at this point in the novella. Decide whether the setting described in this part of the novel actually functions as a character as many critics contend.

Music Connection

Work with a group to put together a sound track for Chapter II. First, make a list of the most important scenes in the chapter. Then discuss what songs or instrumental music you would select for the various scenes. Try to choose selections that capture the mood of the scenes.



Save your work for your portfolio.