

# Before You Read

## *Ethan Frome* Chapters III–V

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Recall an instance when you were tempted to do something that you might later have regretted. What prevented you from doing it? How did you feel afterwards?

#### Journal

In your journal, write a paragraph about an instance in which your self-control prevented you from doing something you might have regretted. What was the situation, and how difficult was the challenge? If you had it to do over, would you respond in the same way? Why or why not?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what happens when Ethan and Mattie find themselves alone for the first time.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

The American elm that plays a central role in the climax of *Ethan Frome* was once the tree of choice for urban landscapers across the United States. With its graceful fan-shaped crown, the elm attained heights of one hundred feet or more, providing an abundance of shade along city streets. In addition, it tolerated air pollution, poor soil, and de-icing salt during the winter. Its range across the eastern half of the United States was extensive until Dutch elm disease struck in the 1930s. The scourge wiped out an estimated 90 percent of these beautiful trees. Efforts at developing a hybrid have been successful, but the beauty and grace that the American elm contributed to the nation's urban landscape is lost forever.

#### Foreshadowing

**Foreshadowing** is an author's use of hints or clues to prepare readers for an event that will occur later in the story. For example, in *Ethan Frome*, the big elm is referred to at least twice before it appears in the last chapter of the novella: on page 18, when Mattie says that Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum came near running into it at the bottom of the hill, and on page 37, when Ethan says he'd be scared to sled down Corbury road because of the "ugly corner" where the big elms stands. As you read, look for other instances of foreshadowing that hint of what is to come.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**constraint** [kən strānt'] *n.* holding back of natural feelings; forced or unnatural manner (p. 36)

**discomfiture** [dis kum'fi chər] *n.* confusion; embarrassment (p. 31)

**eloquence** [el'ə kwəns] *n.* forceful or persuasive speech (p. 33)

**indenture** [in den'chər] *v.* to bind (a person) by contract to serve another person for a stated period of time (p. 24)

**inevitable** [i nev'ə tə bəl] *adj.* unable to be avoided (p. 29)

**obliterate** [ə blit'ə rāt'] *v.* to remove all traces of; to blot out (p. 36)

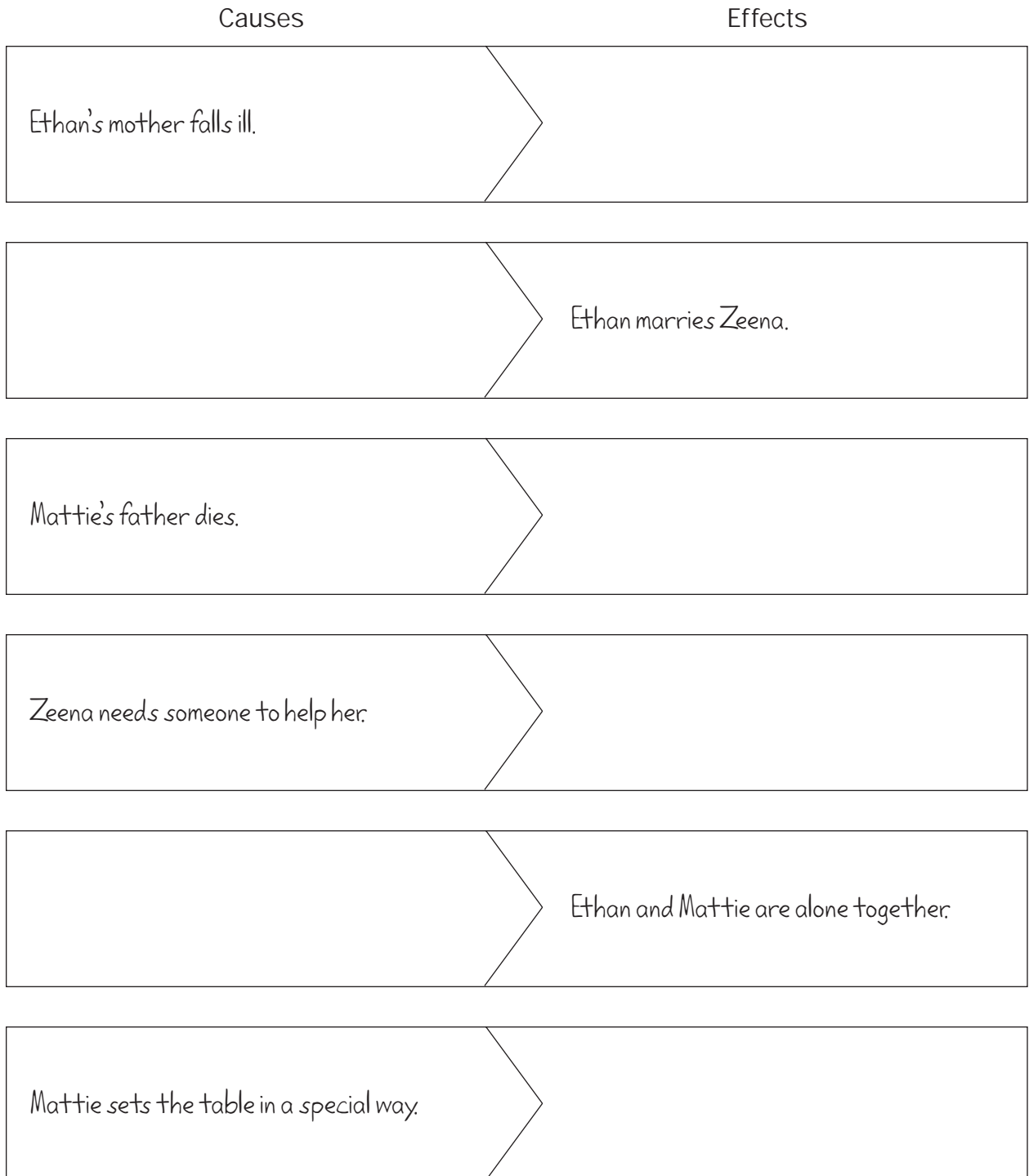
**scintillating** [sint'əl ā' tɪŋ] *adj.* brilliant; sparkling (p. 23)

**spectral** [spek'trəl] *adj.* ghostly (p. 39)

# Active Reading

## *Ethan Frome* Chapters III-V

In novels, events happen for a reason. They have causes. They also have effects that move the plot forward. As you read these chapters, think about causes and effects. Fill in the diagram below as you read.



# Responding

## *Ethan Frome* Chapters III-V

### Personal Response

Were you surprised that Zeena left Ethan and Mattie at home alone? Why or why not?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. What was Zeena like when Ethan first met her? Why did Ethan ask her to stay? What difference might it have made if his mother had died in spring?

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2. In what way did Zeena change after marriage? What effect did Zeena's behavior have on Ethan's future plans?

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3. What does Ethan want from Mr. Hale and why? What effect does Mr. Hale's statement that he is fixing up a house for Ned and Ruth have on Ethan? Why?

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4. What two sights does Ethan notice on his way home, and what is his response to each?

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5. How does Mattie set the dinner table? What gets broken, and what might it symbolize?

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# Responding

## Ethan Frome Chapters III–V

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

6. Think about your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 20. Why do you think Ethan did not express his feelings for Mattie when the two were alone?

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7. What function does the following passage serve in relation to the plot? “[B]ut since the previous night a vague dread had hung on his [Ethan’s] sky-line. It was formed of Zeena’s obstinate silence, Mattie’s sudden look of warning, of the memory of just such fleeting imperceptible signs as those which told him, on certain stainless mornings, that before night there would be rain (page 24).”

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### Literature and Writing

#### Analyzing Character

Zeena’s cold, quarrelsome, complaining character might be associated with the wintry Starkfield landscape. Using Mattie Silver as Zeena’s foil, write a paragraph describing the season that you would associate with Mattie’s personality. Use examples from these chapters to support your point of view.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

Is Ethan Frome to blame for his plight—that of being trapped in a loveless marriage and having to give up his aspiration to study engineering, or is he a victim of circumstance, bound by family tradition? Does Mattie Silver represent his last chance to attain happiness, or does his liaison with her represent another instance of poor judgment on his part? Debate these issues in your groups.

##### Performing

With a partner, prepare to enact of one of the following scenes:

- *The scene just before and during dinner.* The person who plays Ethan should reveal Ethan’s jealousy about a possible visitor and what happens after Zeena’s name is mentioned.
- *The scene just after the pickle-dish breaks.* The person who plays Mattie should show her fear, and the one who plays Ethan should show his sudden determination to take charge.



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