

This Book is Lit:

An Introduction to Literary Analysis



Marsh's Library Bookstacks by J.Jason Long, personal photo

By J. Jason Long

FIRST EDITION

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By J. Jason Long

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*To My Mom,
for teaching me to love
stories and books*

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Introduction:

Note to Teachers: The purpose of this book is to provide teachers with an open educational resource for use in a college-level “Introduction to Literature” course. While published texts offer huge anthologies with loads of additional readings, which is why some hit 2000 pages, this book sticks to covering the essentials. For example, there is just a single short story paired up with each Element of Fiction and three poems attached to each chapter in the Elements of Poetry section. Students will have enough to get started, and there are also some shorter “anthologies” with additional stories and poems here, but there is room for ancillary readings to be added in addition to those that are provided. The goal is to give a teacher everything that *needs* to be in the textbook without trying to include everything that *could* be in the textbook. The overall organization of the book is based on the order that these subjects are covered in my own community college course, but again all of it can be adjusted as desired. Lastly, as this resource is open and free for anyone to use, it can also be changed and the content can be adjusted for a variety of educational levels and uses.

Note to Students: The purpose of this book is to provide you with a straightforward and approachable text for use in college-level “Introduction to Literature” courses. The book is a relatively no-frills endeavor, and while published (and oftentimes expensive) textbooks include additional anthologies of a hundred short stories and a thousand poems, this zero cost textbook stays focused on delivering just what *needs* to be in here, not necessarily everything that *could* be in here. That said, many of the chapters feature some informational content followed by a single short story, a few poems, or a play that allows for some hands-on practice looking deeper into the chapter’s content. In the end, this should be more than enough to get you started down the path to understanding these literary concepts.

Note on Text Selection and Diversity: In order for this textbook to be free for students, all of the included readings have been taken from the public domain - that means they were published before 1930 or their authors passed away before 1956. This creates some challenges for finding stories, poems, and plays that represent the full spectrum of literary voices we enjoy reading today. That said, you will find many readings in this book from some of the most well-known and widely anthologized authors from the past - many of whom were white men from Western Europe or the United States - because these writers have significantly

influenced literary history. However, you will also find many works by women, authors of color, and writers from diverse cultural backgrounds from these same time periods, even though they faced barriers to recognition and publication. Regardless of the authors' backgrounds, the hope is that the skills you learn in this textbook will help you to dig deeper as you enjoy the wide range of works by the vast array of literary voices available to us today.

How the Book is Organized: This book is divided into five main sections, as follows:

Part 1 gets things rolling by covering why we might want to read fiction in the first place. There are also some tips for being an active reader that can help make the most of your reading time and get off on the right foot.

Part 2 focuses on the "Elements of Fiction" - the building blocks of any fictional story, including plot, character, setting, and more. Understanding these elements will allow you to go much deeper in your analysis. We'll begin by reading one short story together that we'll refer back to throughout this section, so don't skip it! Then each chapter will cover a single element followed by another short story and a response question. This gives you hands-on practice with each of these important elements.

Part 3 of the book will be on the "Elements of Poetry." Much like fiction, poetry has its own set of building blocks. Some of the essentials are things like word choices, imagery, and the rhythm of the words. Again, we will begin by reading one poem together and using it as a sample throughout that poetry section. In Part 3, every chapter will cover a single element followed by a poem that helps you get some experience digging into these things a bit more closely.

Part 4 of the book will be a relatively brief look at drama. No, not the kind between you and your friends in junior high, but specifically scripts for plays and theater performances. Drama is very similar to fiction, and so there is a lot of overlap with the "Elements of Fiction" here; however, there are some differences as well, and the chapter will culminate in the reading of a script instead of a short story.

In **Part 5**, things get a little more challenging as we explore "Critical Strategies" for deeper literary analysis. Considering plot, character, and setting is one critical lens known as Formalist

Criticism, but there are many others. For example, we can focus on the experiences of women in a patriarchal society (Feminist Criticism), or we can examine how money and power impact the characters' outcomes (Marxist Criticism). We can even explore how the author's life experiences shaped the story (Biographical Criticism). Each lens reveals the story in a new and deeper way. As with the previous sections on fiction and poetry, Part 5 begins with a shared reading that we can then examine through different critical lenses.

Now that you know what's coming, without further ado, let's jump into Part 1.

Part 1: Why Read Literature?

Chapter 1: The Value of Reading Literature

What is literature? First of all, when we talk about literature, we are focusing mostly on fictional stories that are artistic and imaginative in nature. This can include short stories, novels, plays, movie scripts, flash fiction, and more. On the other hand, nonfiction writing (like biographies, self-help guides, and history or science books) is considered informational text and is not typically covered in literature courses. It should be noted that some forms of nonfiction can definitely blur the lines between these two - think true crime or travel writing - but this book stays tightly focused on the more traditional aspects of imaginative literature for all the sample readings. Finally, while poetry may be fictional or personal in nature, it is always considered literature because of its highly artistic and expressive nature.

Why bother reading literature? Sometimes people ask why somebody would want to sit around reading fictional works when they could spend their time reading “real stuff” instead, but there are many reasons why somebody might want to choose fiction over its less creative counterpart. Some of the most significant are explained here.

For Pure Enjoyment: The first and foremost is simple enjoyment. Humans love stories. We crave them. Even small children are constantly asking grownups to “tell me a story.” Yuval Noah Harari, a historian, philosopher, and best selling author, focuses on the importance of storytelling to humans in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. In an interview on his popular book, he explained “We are storytelling animals. We think not in facts, not in statistics, not in equations. We think in stories” (Harari). In other words, our love of stories is one of the things that makes each of us uniquely human. And, best of all, no matter what genre a person might like the most - mystery, suspense, science fiction, fantasy or romance - there are an almost infinite number of stories to choose from. Regardless of what books we choose to read, deep down somewhere in all of us, we just really *love* a good story.

For Mental Escape: Stories can also take us out of our regular lives to places we could never have imagined on our own. Instead of packing that same old tired lunch in a brown paper bag and waiting for the bus to bring you to school for that dreaded statistics class, have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a knight riding into a massive wave of goblins in order to

defend the kingdom? Or what it would be like to discover that you are the long-lost daughter of a royal family in some tiny European country? Or maybe even what it would be like to wake up one morning to find that you've been invited to study at a school of witchcraft and wizardry? From being sucked up by a tornado to falling down a rabbit hole, there is no limit to the completely new and unfamiliar worlds a reader may encounter when they get lost in a book, and these creative experiences impact our brains in positive ways.

For Creativity: There is a lot of recent research that has shown how people who read more fiction actually end up being more creative themselves. For example, in one study Emory University ran daily fMRI scans of 21 students' brains for a 19-day period as they read through a fictional novel and found that the scans of their brains showed heightened activity in multiple key locations connected to creativity. Better yet, these changes lasted for days after they had stopped reading the book. Considering the findings, lead researcher Gregory Berns noted that "the neural changes that we found associated with physical sensation and movement systems suggest that reading a novel can transport you into the body of the protagonist" (Clark). This means that the readers actually felt as though they were going along for the ride with the characters in the story, and this ties in closely with the second significant benefit of reading fiction.

For Empathy and Understanding: Along with gaining creativity, there has been a raft of research completed to show that people who read fiction have a higher capacity for empathy and show more compassion for others. One reason for this can be found in a study completed at Washington University in St. Louis where they hooked participants up to an fMRI as they read works of fiction, and they found that our brains fire right in line with the events in the book. The lead researcher Jeffrey Zacks concluded, "When we read a story and really understand it, we create a mental simulation of the events described by the story" (Everding). In other words, when the character in the book is jumping out of that moving car, the part of our brains that controls jumping is firing right along with them.

For Flow and Well-Being: Finally, getting into a good story is one the most common ways the average person can get into what is known as a flow state, and these states have been found to be very important for human happiness. Now, you might not know much about flow, but essentially it is that feeling when we are completely absorbed in something that we enjoy doing to the point where we can lose track of time. According to renowned psychologist and

researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*, this type of engagement in a fulfilling activity is essential for deep, lasting happiness (Csikszentmihalyi). There are lots of ways to get into flow - playing an instrument, painting, writing, or going on a jog, just to name a few - but for many people, reading is one of the easiest and most accessible activities to achieve this important mental state. All you need is a good story and a quiet location to really get there. So when you find yourself getting lost in a story for this class, you're not just completing an assignment, you're experiencing something deeply human and beneficial.

Chapter 2: Becoming an Active Reader

What does it mean to read actively? When we think of the interaction between a reader and a writer, it sometimes feels like a very imbalanced relationship. We can imagine a writer hunched over their desks, dedicating themselves to their craft, and toiling away for months or even years to complete their masterpiece. On the other hand, we can imagine the reader of this masterpiece distractedly flipping through the pages stretched out on a love seat in their parent's living room, Netflix on in the background and a phone doomsscrolling on TikTok in their other hand. Yes, the commitment to this very same story seems pretty uneven, but that is exactly where active reading comes in.

Reading actively essentially means to take your job as a reader much more seriously. It means that, as readers, we need to remember that we are half of the equation. I'm sure you've heard somebody ask the question, "If a tree falls in the woods and nobody is there to hear it, does it really make any sound?" Similarly, we could also ask, "If a story is written and nobody on Earth ever reads it, does it really even exist?" In other words, stories are written to be read. And, when we pick up a book, while we aren't committing to it for three years like the author did, we should at least be willing to dig into it deeply and give it our full attention. Reading, like virtually everything else you will ever do in your life, follows a very simple principle: the more you put into it, the more you get out of it. With that in mind, besides just trying to make ourselves stay focused, there are a few easy techniques we can use to push ourselves towards being more mentally active, aware, and alive while we are reading.

Using Annotation: One of the quickest and easiest techniques that helps a person to become a more active reader is simply taking out a pen or a pencil and interacting with what you are reading by writing on it. This form of writing directly on the work itself is called annotation. If nothing else, this helps to at least begin to even the effort gap between the reader and writer, basically saying "Yeah, you wrote the book, but now I'm writing in it too." There are classes that try to teach specific annotation methods - mark these things, look up these words, highlight in this color - but those rules are a bit silly. When you have a pen in your hand, *you* are now the writer, and nobody should be telling you exactly what to write or where. If you're interested in trying annotation, you'll see a sample page in Part 2 to help you get going, though remember: annotations are as unique and individual as readers themselves.

Questioning, Connecting, and Predicting: Once you get in the habit of annotating and digging into the text in this much more active way, you will begin to think about what to write while you are engaged with the reading, and that is a very good thing. Being mentally active in this way increases what we call “metacognition,” which is simply thinking about our own thinking. Being self-aware as a reader is essential, so you don’t end up reading six pages and then realize that you were distracted the whole time. Instead, having that pen in hand while reading will help to keep you locked in. And what kinds of things should you be writing? Anything you want, really. You have a question? Jot it down. Do you have a prediction? Scribble it right there in the margin. Are you confused? Do you not know what a word means? Are you bored out of your mind and almost falling asleep? In every case, write it down directly on the pages that you are reading. There really are no rules, but asking questions of the author, the characters, or the text is a great place to start. *Why on Earth did you go into the cemetery at midnight?* Making connections to your life or other things you’ve read is also perfect. *This reminds me of something I went through last summer.* Making predictions is also a fun way to stay engaged in what you’re reading, and nobody wants to miss the chance to write, *I think the butler did it!* in the margins of a good mystery novel. Lastly, just writing down any other comments can help you to be a more active participant in the reading process - *Yes, No way, Awesome, Important Point, Gimme a Break*, or even ZZZZZ in a really boring part of the book are all great ways to leave your footprints in the margins.

Doesn’t annotation damage my book? Now, some students really don’t like the idea of annotating. They say things like “I don’t want to mess up my book” and argue that it damages the pristine pages when we write on them. This just isn’t the case, though. Try this thought experiment: you are an author and have spent years of your life struggling to complete your masterpiece. After loads of effort, the book finally gets published. A few years later, you come across your book on the shelf in the public library and start thumbing through it. Would you prefer to find the book in like-new condition, with clean, crisp pages as though it may have never been read before? Or would you prefer to find the book worn down and the pages a bit dog-eared with lots of annotations in different colors of ink, and some pencil too, showing you that the book must have been read - and actively so - a hundred different times? Honestly, it isn’t even close. Anyone would love to see that their book was read in an active way, and the author might even enjoy reading all the comments and thoughts littered throughout the pages. In the end, when you think of it that way, annotation doesn’t damage a book or take away from it, but actually adds another dimension to it.

Reading More Than Once: Beyond annotation, reading something multiple times is also a powerful tool to help you dig deeper. I am sure you've watched a favorite show or movie more than once, but when you watch something for a second (or third or fourth) time, you watch it very differently. You aren't wondering what is going to happen next, since you already know. Instead you can look at different things going on in the film, and perhaps you even notice lots of little details you missed the first time you watched it. This is the very same with rereading something - lots of little details you may have initially missed will jump out at you. Now, nobody has time to read everything twice, but this is a very good technique for something like a short story or a poem that you may have to write an essay about. Giving it a couple of active reads will really go a long way to understanding it on a deeper level.

Keeping a Reading Journal: The final suggestion here is to begin keeping a journal on what you read. This journal piggybacks well on top of annotation. When we annotate, it helps us to stay engaged, but we only have limited space for quick thoughts that occur to us as we read. However, when we then journal about what we've read afterwards, we have a lot more space to share our deeper thoughts. This can be done regularly throughout the reading process, leaving us with a diary of our thoughts as we went through the book. In the end, keeping reading journals has shown to increase memory, deepen understanding, and improve critical thinking. Yes, it takes a little extra time to do this, but the payoff makes it well worth the effort.

In his poem on annotation called "Marginalia," poet Billy Collins writes:

We have all seized the white perimeter as our own
and reached for a pen if only to show
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;
we pressed a thought into the wayside,
planted an impression along the verge.

Hopefully the techniques covered here - annotation, rereading, and journaling - will transform you from the kind of passive reader that Billy Collins would call a lazy page-turner, into an active participant, really digging in and getting the most out of the things you read. And that's when reading gets really good.

The following is a sample of what an annotated page can look like using one of our upcoming readings, "The Lottery Ticket" by Anton Chekhov :

"The Lottery Ticket" by Anton Chekhov

Ivan Dmitritch, a middle-class man who lived with his family on an income of twelve hundred a year and was very well satisfied with his lot, sat down on the sofa after supper and began reading the newspaper.

"I forgot to look at the newspaper today," his wife said to him as she cleared the table. "Look and see whether the list of drawings is there."

"Yes, it is," said Ivan Dmitritch; "but hasn't your ticket lapsed?"

"No; I took the interest on Tuesday."

"What is the number?"

"Series 9,499, number 26."

"All right . . . we will look . . . 9,499 and 26."

Ivan Dmitritch had no faith in lottery luck and would not, as a rule, have consented to look at the lists of winning numbers, but now, as he had nothing else to do and as the newspaper was before his eyes, he passed his finger downwards along the column of numbers. And immediately, as though in mockery of his scepticism, no further than the second line from the top, his eye was caught by the figure 9,499! Unable to believe his eyes, he hurriedly dropped the paper on his knees without looking to see the number of the ticket, and, just as though some one had given him a douche of cold water, he felt an agreeable chill in the pit of the stomach; tingling and terrible and sweet!

"Masha, 9,499 is there!" he said in a hollow voice.

His wife looked at his astonished and panicstricken face, and realized that he was not joking.

"9,499?" she asked, turning pale and dropping the folded tablecloth on the table.

"Yes, yes . . . it really is there!"

"And the number of the ticket?"

"Oh yes! There's the number of the ticket too. But stay . . . wait! No, I say! Anyway, the number of our series is there! Anyway, you understand...."

Looking at his wife, Ivan Dmitritch gave a broad, senseless smile, like a baby when a bright object is shown it. His wife smiled too, it was as pleasant to her as to him that he only mentioned the series, and did not try to find out the number of the winning ticket. To torment and tantalize oneself with hopes of possible fortune is so sweet, so thrilling!

Great image

They both are enjoying the possibilities.

- TRUE!
Isn't this why most people play the lottery?

He's happy for now, but what will the lottery ticket do?

about 65,000 in today's dollars

So, the wife bought the ticket?

Need both to win!

me neither!

BAD idea!! Need to check both numbers.

Why is she reacting this way? You'd think she'd be excited.

Sample annotation of Anton Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket" by J. Jason Long.

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Long, J. Jason. *Marsh's Library Bookstacks*. June 2023, Dublin, Ireland. Photograph.

Part 2: Elements of Fiction

Creating a work of fiction is a lot like baking a cake. First, you have to put in your most essential ingredients, like flour, eggs, and sugar, without which you don't really have a cake at all. On top of these, you will likely add some other ingredients, depending on the type of cake you are making. Maybe some vanilla, chocolate chips, or even rainbow sprinkles to liven things up. It's much the same with writing creative stories, but the ingredients are called the Elements of Fiction, and in the coming chapters we are going to focus on some of the most significant ones. We'll begin with the big three - plot, character, and setting - that are absolutely essential to every story. Then we'll continue to add depth to our understanding of fiction by looking at Point of View, Symbols and the Style and Tone the author uses. Finally, we'll wrap up Part 2 of the book by taking a step back and considering the bigger picture, determining the deeper meaning of a story through our discussion of Theme.

First, though, let's start with a shared reading that we can use as an example for all the Elements of Fiction to come. In the following pages, you'll have an opportunity to read a famous short story called "The Lottery Ticket" by Russian author Anton Chekhov. The piece takes place in just a few minutes of real time as a man and his wife realize they may have just won the lottery - worth approximately \$4,000,000 in modern U.S. dollars. The work is a fairly quick read, full of unexpected twists, and has a nice example of a big, drop-the-mic ending common to many of the best short stories. Because we will be referring back to this story repeatedly throughout Part 2 of this book, it is highly recommended that you take the time to read the story actively. If possible, you can print it out and annotate directly on the pages. Also, consider reading the story twice and spending a few quiet moments reflecting on what happens in it and what it all means. The extra effort will pay off as we dig deeper into this story in the coming chapters.



Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian writer and doctor who somehow managed to become one of the greatest short story writers of all time while also working as a physician. Born in a small coastal town in Russia, Chekhov had a pretty rough childhood—his father was strict and often abusive, and the family went bankrupt when Anton was a teenager. Despite all this, he made it to medical school in Moscow and started writing humorous sketches and short stories on the side to pay the bills.

What began as a way to make extra money turned into a legendary literary career. Chekhov had a gift for writing stories about regular people dealing with everyday disappointments, dreams, and frustrations. Chekhov kept things real. His characters are doctors, clerks, peasants, and unhappy spouses—people you might actually know. And instead of tying everything up neatly with a bow at the end, his stories often just... stop, leaving readers to figure out what it all means.

He's probably most famous for his plays like *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull*, but his short stories are where he really shines. Chekhov died young at 44 from tuberculosis, but in his short life, he wrote hundreds of stories that changed the way people think about fiction.

“The Lottery Ticket” by Anton Chekhov

Ivan Dmitritch, a middle-class man who lived with his family on an income of twelve hundred a year and was very well satisfied with his lot, sat down on the sofa after supper and began reading the newspaper.

"I forgot to look at the newspaper today," his wife said to him as she cleared the table.
"Look and see whether the list of drawings is there."

"Yes, it is," said Ivan Dmitritch; "but hasn't your ticket lapsed?"

"No; I took the interest on Tuesday."

"What is the number?"

"Series 9,499, number 26."

"All right . . . we will look . . . 9,499 and 26."

Ivan Dmitritch had no faith in lottery luck, and would not, as a rule, have consented to look at the lists of winning numbers, but now, as he had nothing else to do and as the newspaper was before his eyes, he passed his finger downwards along the column of numbers. And immediately, as though in mockery of his scepticism, no further than the second line from the top, his eye was caught by the figure 9,499! Unable to believe his eyes, he hurriedly dropped the paper on his knees without looking to see the number of the ticket, and, just as though some one had given him a douche of cold water, he felt an agreeable chill in the pit of the stomach; tingling and terrible and sweet!

"Masha, 9,499 is there!" he said in a hollow voice.

His wife looked at his astonished and panicstricken face, and realized that he was not joking.

"9,499?" she asked, turning pale and dropping the folded tablecloth on the table.

"Yes, yes . . . it really is there!"

"And the number of the ticket?"

"Oh yes! There's the number of the ticket too. But stay . . . wait! No, I say! Anyway, the number of our series is there! Anyway, you understand...."

Looking at his wife, Ivan Dmitritch gave a broad, senseless smile, like a baby when a bright object is shown it. His wife smiled too; it was as pleasant to her as to him that he only mentioned the series, and did not try to find out the number of the winning ticket. To torment and tantalize oneself with hopes of possible fortune is so sweet, so thrilling!

"It is our series," said Ivan Dmitritch, after a long silence. "So there is a probability that we have won. It's only a probability, but there it is!"

"Well, now look!"

"Wait a little. We have plenty of time to be disappointed. It's on the second line from the top, so the prize is seventy-five thousand. That's not money, but power, capital! And in a minute I shall look at the list, and there--26! Eh? I say, what if we really have won?"

The husband and wife began laughing and staring at one another in silence. The possibility of winning bewildered them; they could not have said, could not have dreamed, what they both needed that seventy-five thousand for, what they would buy, where they would go. They thought only of the figures 9,499 and 75,000 and pictured them in their imagination, while somehow they could not think of the happiness itself which was so possible.

Ivan Dmitritch, holding the paper in his hand, walked several times from corner to corner, and only when he had recovered from the first impression began dreaming a little.

"And if we have won," he said--"why, it will be a new life, it will be a transformation! The ticket is yours, but if it were mine I should, first of all, of course, spend twenty-five thousand on real property in the shape of an estate; ten thousand on immediate expenses, new furnishing . . . travelling . . . paying debts, and so on. . . . The other forty thousand I would put in the bank and get interest on it."

"Yes, an estate, that would be nice," said his wife, sitting down and dropping her hands in her lap.

"Somewhere in the Tula or Oryol provinces. . . . In the first place we shouldn't need a summer villa, and besides, it would always bring in an income."

And pictures came crowding on his imagination, each more gracious and poetical than the last. And in all these pictures he saw himself well-fed, serene, healthy, felt warm, even hot! Here, after eating a summer soup, cold as ice, he lay on his back on the burning sand close to a stream or in the garden under a lime-tree. . . . It is hot. . . . His little boy and girl are crawling about near him, digging in the sand or catching ladybirds in the grass. He dozes sweetly, thinking of nothing, and feeling all over that he need not go to the office today, tomorrow, or the day after. Or, tired of lying still, he goes to the hayfield, or to the forest for mushrooms, or watches the peasants catching fish with a net. When the sun sets he takes a towel and soap and saunters to the bathing shed, where he undresses at his leisure, slowly rubs his bare chest with his hands, and goes into the water. And in the water, near the opaque soapy circles, little fish flit to and fro and green water-weeds nod their heads. After bathing there is tea with cream and milk rolls. . . . In the evening a walk or vint with the neighbors.

"Yes, it would be nice to buy an estate," said his wife, also dreaming, and from her face it was evident that she was enchanted by her thoughts.

Ivan Dmitritch pictured to himself autumn with its rains, its cold evenings, and its St. Martin's summer. At that season he would have to take longer walks about the garden and beside the river, so as to get thoroughly chilled, and then drink a big glass of vodka and eat a salted mushroom or a soused cucumber, and then--drink another. . . . The children would come running from the kitchen-garden, bringing a carrot and a radish smelling of fresh earth. . . . And then, he would lie stretched full length on the sofa, and in leisurely fashion turn over the pages of some illustrated magazine, or, covering his face with it and unbuttoning his waistcoat, give himself up to slumber.

The St. Martin's summer is followed by cloudy, gloomy weather. It rains day and night, the bare trees weep, the wind is damp and cold. The dogs, the horses, the fowls--all are wet,

depressed, downcast. There is nowhere to walk; one can't go out for days together; one has to pace up and down the room, looking despondently at the grey window. It is dreary!

Ivan Dmitritch stopped and looked at his wife. "I should go abroad, you know, Masha," he said. And he began thinking how nice it would be in late autumn to go abroad somewhere to the South of France ... to Italy ... to India!

"I should certainly go abroad too," his wife said. "But look at the number of the ticket!"

"Wait, wait! ..."

He walked about the room and went on thinking. It occurred to him: what if his wife really did go abroad? It is pleasant to travel alone, or in the society of light, careless women who live in the present, and not such as think and talk all the journey about nothing but their children, sigh, and tremble with dismay over every farthing. Ivan Dmitritch imagined his wife in the train with a multitude of parcels, baskets, and bags; she would be sighing over something, complaining that the train made her head ache, that she had spent so much money.... At the stations he would continually be having to run for boiling water, bread and butter. ...She wouldn't have dinner because of its being too dear....

"She would begrudge me every farthing," he thought, with a glance at his wife. "The lottery ticket is hers, not mine! Besides, what is the use of her going abroad? What does she want there? She would shut herself up in the hotel, and not let me out of her sight.... I know!"

And for the first time in his life his mind dwelt on the fact that his wife had grown elderly and plain, and that she was saturated through and through with the smell of cooking, while he was still young, fresh, and healthy, and might well have got married again.

"Of course, all that is silly nonsense," he thought; "but...why should she go abroad? What would she make of it? And yet she would go, of course.... I can fancy.... In reality it is all one to her, whether it is Naples or Klin. She would only be in my way. I should be dependent upon her. I can fancy how, like a regular woman, she will lock the money up as soon as she gets it.... She will look after her relations and grudge me every farthing."

Ivan Dmitritch thought of her relations. All those wretched brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles would come crawling about as soon as they heard of the winning ticket, would begin whining like beggars, and fawning upon them with oily, hypocritical smiles. Wretched, detestable people! If they were given anything, they would ask for more; while if they were refused, they would swear at them, slander them, and wish them every kind of misfortune.

Ivan Dmitritch remembered his own relations, and their faces, at which he had looked impartially in the past, struck him now as repulsive and hateful. "They are such reptiles!" he thought.

And his wife's face, too, struck him as repulsive and hateful. Anger surged up in his heart against her, and he thought malignantly:

"She knows nothing about money, and so she is stingy. If she won it she would give me a hundred roubles, and put the rest away under lock and key."

And he looked at his wife, not with a smile now, but with hatred. She glanced at him too, and also with hatred and anger. She had her own daydreams, her own plans, her own reflections; she understood perfectly well what her husband's dreams were. She knew who would be the first to try to grab her winnings.

"It's very nice making daydreams at other people's expense!" is what her eyes expressed. "No, don't you dare!"

Her husband understood her look; hatred began stirring again in his breast, and in order to annoy his wife he glanced quickly, to spite her at the fourth page on the newspaper and read out triumphantly: "Series 9,499, number 46! Not 26!"

Hatred and hope both disappeared at once, and it began immediately to seem to Ivan Dmitritch and his wife that their rooms were dark and small and low-pitched, that the supper they had been eating was not doing them good, but lying heavy on their stomachs, that the evenings were long and wearisome. . . .

"What the devil's the meaning of it?" said Ivan Dmitritch, beginning to be ill-humored. 'Wherever one steps there are bits of paper under one's feet, crumbs, husks. The rooms are never swept! One is simply forced to go out. Damnation take my soul entirely! I shall go and hang myself on the first aspen-tree!"

Discussion Questions:

1. At the beginning of the story, how would you describe Ivan and Masha's marriage? What specific details from the text support your answer?
2. Chekhov describes Ivan and Masha's home with minimal description, yet he describes Ivan's daydreams in vivid detail - we can almost see and feel all of his imaginings. Why do you think Chekhov makes these fantasies so concrete and appealing before pulling them away?
3. Chekhov named the story "The Lottery Ticket" for a reason, but why do you think the ticket is so important to the couple? Is it only about the money they could win, or are there other factors involved? What does the ticket symbolize for Ivan and Masha?

4. Ivan's first thoughts about the lottery money seem relatively innocent - travel, a new estate. At what point do his thoughts turn darker? What triggers this shift?
 5. By the end of the story, nothing in Ivan and Masha's actual circumstances has changed - they're exactly where they started financially. So what HAS changed?
 6. Do you think Ivan and Masha are unusually greedy people, or is Chekhov suggesting that most people would react similarly in their situation?
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Chapter 3: Plot

The term plot refers to the sequence of events that take place in a work of fiction. Every story needs a plot because if there's going to be a story at all, *something* has to happen. Otherwise, we'd get a story like, "They sat in a room and stared at the walls. The end."

Understanding the Basics of Plot: The arrangement of events in a story can be presented in many different ways, the most common being **chronological order**. This means that the author tells the sequence of events in the story in the same order they would have actually happened. For example, the *Harry Potter* series of books follows a very strict chronological order, going from year one through year seven. In addition, each individual book follows chronological order, typically starting near the beginning of a school year and running through the end of it.

On the other hand, some stories begin right in the middle of the action, for which we use the fancy Latin term *in medias res* (which simply means "in the middle of things"). There are many epic examples of this in film, especially in war movies like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Dunkirk* (2017) where the opening battle scenes will leave you gripping your seat - if not diving under it!

Another common technique is to begin stories by telling the ending, and then jumping back in time using a technique called a **flashback**. This is just as it sounds, where the story goes back in time to fill in missing information. An excellent example of this "give away the ending first" technique is the opening of William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" which we'll be reading later in this chapter):

WHEN Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant — a combined gardener and cook — had seen in at least ten years.

Right in the opening line of the story we already know that Emily has died and that it seems she'd mostly been on her own, as nobody in town (aside from her servant) had seen the inside of her home in over 10 years. It may seem that giving away the ending first could ruin things, almost as if the author should have given a "spoiler warning." But, giving away the ending

actually creates a lot more tension in the story as we flash back to earlier times to see how things ended up this way.

Regardless of how a story begins - with the beginning, middle, or end - there are several other essential ingredients to the plot of a fictional work. The driver of all stories is called the **conflict** which is a problem that has to be resolved by the plot. This could be a conflict between a person and themselves (internal conflict), between multiple characters, or between a character and something external like nature, technology, or society. It's also important to know that stories can have multiple layers of conflict going on at once—a character facing off against an enemy while riddled with self-doubts would be an example of both external and internal conflict playing out simultaneously. Whatever the conflict, trying to resolve it is essential to the plot.

Oftentimes we refer to the character who drives the plot forward as the **protagonist**, while their opposing force is called the **antagonist**. The antagonist usually refers to the main character's rival, like Darth Vader to Luke Skywalker in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, but the term can more generally apply to more abstract opposition. Forces like nature, society, or even the protagonist's own personal flaws could be antagonists if that is what the protagonist is trying to overcome.

Beyond the opening of a story and the conflict and characters that drive it, there are several other key ingredients that most works of fiction include to various degrees. One is the **exposition**, which is where the author gives the reader the background information they need to get going. This example is covered in greater depth later in this chapter, but a quick look at the opening lines of "The Lottery Ticket" reveals quite a lot of important information to help us feel grounded in the everyday life of Ivan Dmitritch. Another important part of the plot is the **inciting incident** where the conflict begins to reveal itself, and this often impacts the life that our protagonist was living at the outset of the story. Both exposition and the inciting incident are often included early on in a story, though nothing is ever set in stone in creative works.

Once the inciting incident gets things rolling, the plot gains steam through **rising action**, which is the sequence of events that continue to add more complications and increase the stakes. These events make up many of the great plot twists and unexpected turns in a story. Along with these developments, an author can also tease us by **foreshadowing** things that are yet to come in a story, similar to the way that dark clouds and distant rumbling let you know that a

storm is likely on the way. One key purpose behind the choices an author makes when structuring and building a plot sequence in a given way - either chronologically or through flashbacks - is to build **suspense**, which is the tension that turns a good story into an absolute page-turner.

Eventually, all this pent up tension reaches a peak moment in the **climax** of the story, which is where something happens that will determine the outcome of the conflict - for better or worse. Once this moment has passed, a story can fairly quickly come to the **resolution** of the conflict and usually the ending of the story itself. If there is any additional tying up of loose ends in the tale, the French term **denouement** is often used, which literally means “to untie.” A good movie example of a *denouement* is after the end of the main plotline in the final Harry Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*, we get a quick glimpse of the characters far in the future, as an older Ron, Hermione, Harry and Ginny are sending their own children off to Hogwarts.

Writing a Plot Analysis: A lot of times when a student is asked to do an analysis of the plot of a story they quickly jump into summarizing what happened. This makes sense, as the sequence of events in a story *are* the plot. In our shared reading of “The Lottery Ticket,” this would sound something like, “Well, it starts with a man reading the paper, and his wife asks him to check the lottery numbers. He is pretty skeptical of lotteries, but he checks anyways. As he skims down, he realizes that the first number is actually a match. Before checking the second number, he stops and...” and so it would go until Ivan feels like he wants to run off and hang himself on the nearest tree.

The problem is that this isn’t actually a plot analysis; it is a plot summary. And, these are two very different activities. To *summarize* is to simply restate something in your own words, but to *analyze* is to look deeper into something by checking out all of its parts and structure. So, while a summary would tell us that Ivan delayed looking at the final winning number, the analysis would explain how that delay was used by Chekhov as rising action in order to allow for tension to build between the two main characters. Writing an analysis can be tricky, but now that you’ve gotten all that key terminology down, all you need to do is work through a story and try to find and then look more closely at each of these parts.

Important Note on Literary Present and Writing About Fiction: Before getting into the upcoming sample plot analysis of “The Lottery Ticket,” it is important to understand one of the grammatical conventions that we use whenever we write about fiction: the **literary present**. Simply put, literary present is a writing style choice where we use present tense verbs whenever we talk about works of art - and this counts for fiction, nonfiction, songs, paintings, poems, and movies. We do this for a few reasons, but the main one is that it makes works of art seem alive in the present moment. And, of course, in a sense they are. To say “Peter Pan *flew* to Neverland” in the past tense isn’t quite right because every time anyone picks up the book *Peter and Wendy*, there Peter is, flying to Neverland all over again. In fact, he will always be flying to Neverland as long as people are reading that book, and so it is common to use present tense verbs when we write about Peter Pan and all forms of art. So even though these works of art were made long ago, when we discuss them we still say Vincent van Gogh *uses* bright colors, Billy Collins’ poetry *creates* vivid images, Luke Skywalker *draws* his lightsaber, and Ivan Dmitritch *reads* the newspaper. The only usual exception is if we are talking about something that happened before a scene in a story or prior to the beginning of the story altogether, then we would use past tense.

“The Lottery Ticket” Sample Plot Analysis: Now, let’s go back to our shared reading for Part 2 of the book, “The Lottery Ticket” by Anton Chekhov, and work our way through a basic plot analysis. Structurally, the story seems to be told in **chronological order**, with Chekhov telling us what happens next going in regular time order. The story begins with some **exposition** where we learn some essential information - Ivan and Masha are a middle-class couple living a rather ordinary life. They seem content with their lives, as we’re told directly that Ivan, at least, “was well satisfied with his lot” (Chekhov). It is into this quiet, contented life that Masha casually asks Ivan to check the lottery ticket numbers.

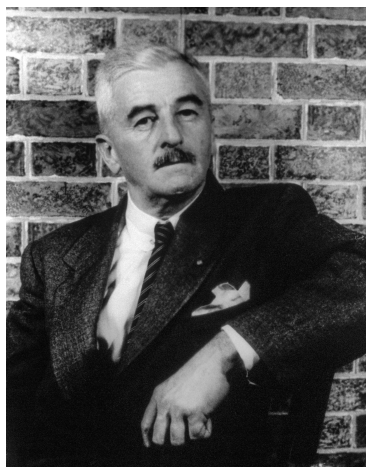
Things start to change quickly in the story once Ivan skims down the paper to see that series number 9,499 was part of the winning number, but decides not to check if the second number is also a match. This highly unexpected turn of events is what we could consider the **inciting incident** that triggers everything that happens for the rest of the story, and both Ivan and Masha feel like it is more exciting to “torment and tantalize” themselves before finding out the real results (Chekhov).

From that moment onward, we start getting **rising action**. What makes this story particularly interesting is that most of this action takes place in the characters' imaginations, while very little actually happens aside from a little conversation. First, Ivan begins having positive dreams about how the 75,000 rubles (which would be close to \$4,000,000 today) will change their lives. He pictures things like estates, long walks, warm weather, and relaxing with a book. The story tells us that Ivan "saw himself well-fed, serene, healthy, felt warm, even hot! Here, after eating a summer soup, cold as ice, he lay on his back on the burning sand close to a stream or in the garden under a lime-tree" (Chekhov). However, Ivan's daydreams quickly turn dark. He realizes that the lottery ticket was purchased by Masha and that she will be the one who determines how the money gets spent. Ivan believes that "She would begrudge me every farthing," or in other words, she'll resent every single penny he spends of *her* money.

Quickly his imagination turns cruel, feeling that Masha is no longer attractive and that he wants to travel abroad on his own and meet other women. He also worries about their greedy relatives all descending on them for money and never being satisfied. To this point in the short story we are only getting Ivan's daydreams, but when he looks at Masha we're told that "She glanced at him too, and also with hatred and anger" (Chekhov). She seems to know exactly what he is thinking, but that he shouldn't be daydreaming about what he is going to do with her money. With both characters' consumed by greed and hatred for each other, the stakes are at their height, and the story has brought the tension to its peak, so Chekhov needs to resolve the situation.

Finally, Ivan looks back into the paper and checks the second number and realizes that they did not, in fact, win anything. Knowing that Masha would have been the actual winner of the lottery, he shares the losing results "triumphantly" (Chekhov). This moment is the **climax** of the story and quickly resolves the conflict that had been driving the plot. The **resolution** is very quick in this story, as "hatred and hope disappeared at once," and Ivan is left feeling like his home and his once-contented life are both shabby and poor (Chekhov). The **denouement** is also brief, with Ivan feeling unable to stay in his home any longer and wanting to hang himself on the nearest tree. While this isn't likely meant literally, it is darkly comic and shows his feelings of despair by the end. The reality is that while they didn't really lose any money, as they hadn't ever won in the first place, they ended up losing feelings of contentment in their lives together, which might be even worse.

Now It's Your Turn: With the sample plot analysis of "The Lottery Ticket" fresh in your mind, read the following story and complete the practice activity at the end in order to get some hands-on experience doing a plot analysis of your own.



William Faulkner (1897-1962) was born in New Albany, Mississippi, in 1897, but grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, a small town that would later inspire the fictional Yoknapatawpha County that appears throughout much of his work. Faulkner came from a once-prominent Southern family that had fallen on harder times after the Civil War—a theme that would echo throughout his writing.

Faulkner never finished college, dropping out of the University of Mississippi after just three semesters. Before becoming a full-time writer, he worked various jobs including postmaster at the university, a position from which he was eventually fired for reading on the job instead of actually working.

Faulkner's writing career took off in the 1920s and 30s with novels like *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). His writing was known for its experimental techniques—he loved to play with chronology, use stream-of-consciousness narration, and write incredibly long, winding sentences. "A Rose for Emily," published in 1930, is one of his most famous short stories and a classic example of Southern Gothic literature—a genre that combines Southern settings with elements of horror, decay, and the grotesque.

Most of Faulkner's fiction deals with themes like the decline of the old Southern aristocracy, racial tensions, family dysfunction, and the weight of history. In 1949, Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He continued writing until his death in 1962 and is today considered one of the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century.

A Note on Language: "A Rose for Emily" was published in 1930 and is set in the post-Civil War South. The story contains racial slurs and reflects the racist attitudes of that time and place, particularly in its depiction of Emily's Black servant, who remains nameless and is treated as

invisible by the white townspeople. This language and these attitudes are offensive and unacceptable, but they are also historically accurate to the world Faulkner is portraying.

"A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner

WHEN Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant — a combined gardener and cook — had seen in at least ten years.

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor — he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. Not that Miss Emily would have accepted charity. Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.

When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction. On the first of the year they mailed her a tax notice. February came, and there was no reply. They wrote her a formal letter, asking her to call at the sheriff's office at her convenience. A week later the mayor wrote her himself, offering to call or to send his car for her, and received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to

the effect that she no longer went out at all. The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment.

They called a special meeting of the Board of Aldermen. A deputation waited upon her, knocked at the door through which no visitor had passed since she ceased giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier. They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse — a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father.

They rose when she entered — a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.

She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt. Then they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain.

Her voice was dry and cold. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

"But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff... I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see We must go by the —"

"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But, Miss Emily —"

“See Colonel Sartoris.” (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) “I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobel!” The Negro appeared. “Show these gentlemen out.”

II

SO she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell.

That was two years after her father’s death and a short time after her sweetheart — the one we believed would marry her — had deserted her. After her father’s death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. A few of the ladies had the temerity to call, but were not received, and the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man — a young man then — going in and out with a market basket.

“Just as if a man — any man — could keep a kitchen properly,” the ladies said; so they were not surprised when the smell developed. It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons.

A neighbor, a woman, complained to the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old.

“But what will you have me do about it, madam?” he said.

“Why, send her word to stop it,” the woman said. “Isn’t there a law?”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Judge Stevens said. “It’s probably just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard. I’ll speak to him about it.”

The next day he received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. “We really must do something about it, Judge. I’d be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we’ve got to do something.” That night the Board of Aldermen met — three graybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.

“It’s simple enough,” he said. “Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don’t...”

“Dammit, sir,” Judge Stevens said, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?”

So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily’s lawn and slunk about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular sowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had

been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away.

That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her. People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such. We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized.

When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized. Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less.

The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly.

We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.

III

SHE was sick for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows — sort of tragic and serene.

The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father's death they began the work. The construction company came with niggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee — a

big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face. The little boys would follow in groups to hear him cuss the niggers, and the niggers singing in time to the rise and fall of picks. Pretty soon he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group. Presently we began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable.

At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest, because the ladies all said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer." But there were still others, older people, who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige — without calling it noblesse oblige. They just said, "Poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her." She had some kin in Alabama; but years ago her father had fallen out with them over the estate of old lady Wyatt, the crazy woman, and there was no communication between the two families. They had not even been represented at the funeral.

And as soon as the old people said, "Poor Emily," the whispering began. "Do you suppose it's really so?" they said to one another. "Of course it is. What else could..." This behind their hands; rustling of craned silk and satin behind jalousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon as the thin, swift clop-clop-clop of the matched team passed: "Poor Emily."

She carried her head high enough — even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness. Like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic. That was over a year after they had begun to say "Poor Emily," and while the two female cousins were visiting her.

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eyesockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look. "I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd recom —"

"I want the best you have. I don't care what kind."

The druggist named several. "They'll kill anything up to an elephant. But what you want is —"

"Arsenic," Miss Emily said. "Is that a good one?"

"Is . . . arsenic? Yes, ma'am. But what you want —"

"I want arsenic."

The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. "Why, of course," the druggist said. "If that's what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."

Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn't come back. When she opened the package at home there was written on the box, under the skull and bones: "For rats."

IV

SO the next day we all said, "She will kill herself"; and we said it would be the best thing. When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, "She will marry him." Then we said, "She will persuade him yet," because Homer himself had remarked — he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club — that he was not a marrying man. Later we said, "Poor Emily" behind the jealousies as they passed on Sunday afternoon in the glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove.

Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister — Miss Emily's people were Episcopal — to call upon her. He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again. The next Sunday they again drove about the streets, and the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama.

So she had blood-kin under her roof again and we sat back to watch developments. At first nothing happened. Then we were sure that they were to be married. We learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece. Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt, and we said, "They are married." We were really glad. We were glad because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been.

So we were not surprised when Homer Barron — the streets had been finished

some time since — was gone. We were a little disappointed that there was not a public blowing-off, but we believed that he had gone on to prepare for Miss Emily's coming, or to give her a chance to get rid of the cousins. (By that time it was a cabal, and we were all Miss Emily's allies to help circumvent the cousins.) Sure enough, after another week they departed. And, as we had expected all along, within three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening.

And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time. The Negro man went in and out with the market basket, but the front door remained closed. Now and then we would see her at a window for a moment, as the men did that night when they sprinkled the lime, but for almost six months she did not appear on the streets. Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die.

When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning. Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man.

From that time on her front door remained closed, save for a period of six or seven years, when she was about forty, during which she gave lessons in china painting. She fitted up a studio in one of the downstairs rooms, where the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries were sent to her with the same regularity and in the same spirit that they were sent to church on Sundays with a twenty-five-cent piece for the collection plate. Meanwhile her taxes had been remitted.

Then the newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies' magazines. The front door closed upon the last one and remained closed for good. When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it. She would not listen to them.

Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket. Each December we sent her a tax notice, which would be returned by the post office a week later, unclaimed. Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows — she had evidently shut up the top

floor of the house — like the carved torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which. Thus she passed from generation to generation — dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse.

And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows, with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her. We did not even know she was sick; we had long since given up trying to get any information from the Negro.

He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse.

She died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight.

V

THE negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.

The two female cousins came at once. They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men — some in their brushed Confederate uniforms — on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years.

Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.

The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just

been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks. The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair.

Discussion Questions:

1. As with many great short stories, "A Rose for Emily" has a shocking and abrupt finish. The story ends with the discovery of Homer Barron's corpse and a "long strand of iron-grey hair" on the pillow beside him. What does this detail suggest, and why do you think this ending often leads the story to be classified as Southern Gothic literature, which is part of the horror genre?
2. The events in "A Rose for Emily" are not told in chronological order, but rather Faulkner chose to start with Emily's death and jump through time using a variety of flashbacks. How would the ending change, from the reader's perspective, if Faulkner had followed a strict chronological order? What would be lost?
3. How would you describe Emily Grierson's character in the story? Select a few key personality traits and then find evidence (quotes, actions, descriptions) in the story that supports them.
4. How does Emily react to her father's death in the story, and in what way does this foreshadow how she responds to the possibility of losing Homer?
5. How does the setting - a small Southern town in the post-Civil War era - impact the events that take place in the story?
6. "A Rose for Emily" has a unique narrator who uses "we" throughout the story. Who do you think this "we" is referring to? How would the story be changed if it were told from Emily's perspective? What about Homer's?

Chapter Writing Activity: Now that you've completed an active reading of "A Rose for Emily," practice doing a careful analysis of the plot similar to the sample featured earlier in this chapter using Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket." It is important to note that while the story jumps around in time - beginning with the end and using lots of flashbacks - the essential ingredients of a plot still occur in a more traditional order. Your job is to figure out where these plot elements - exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, and resolution - are located in the story and to then take a closer look at each one. Be sure to include quotations and specific details to support your ideas.

Chapter 4: Character

In order for there to be a plot in a story, then there has to be something or someone pushing it forward, and we call these figures **characters**. If we look back at “The Lottery Ticket” for example, if it wasn’t for Ivan Dmitritch and his wife - the two characters in the story - then there wouldn’t be any tension at all. There would be nobody to buy the lottery ticket, nobody to look at the winning numbers, and of course, nobody to have daydreams about how their lives would be transformed by winning all that money. When we talk about the idea that every story has one or more conflicts that need to be resolved, then there has to be someone or something wanting to resolve it.

Understanding the Basics of Character: In most cases, the main characters in stories are humans, but they can also be virtually anything else from aliens like E.T. in the 1982 film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, to animals, like the dog named Buck in Jack London’s famous novel *The Call of the Wild*, to robots like Wall-E from the Pixar film *Wall-E*. Even inanimate objects can become the protagonist like the tree that takes center stage in Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*. In the end, what can constitute the characters of a fictional work are only limited by the imaginations of the writer.

Even though the characters in works of fiction don’t exist in the real world, and can take many forms, we still relate and connect to them in meaningful ways. This can happen as we get to know them better through a combination of **showing** and **telling**. When a writer tells us about a character, they can simply lay out the essential information for us. This could sound like, “Maria was a kind and generous person, always putting others first.” This technique is quick and effective, but we have to take the narrator’s word for it, since we haven’t seen these traits for ourselves.

On the other hand, story-telling is usually more engaging when we are shown a character’s traits instead. When characters are shown to us, we have to figure out their personalities for ourselves, just as we do with other people in the real world, by watching the way they behave in the story. Essentially, we get this information by evaluating the **thoughts, dialogue, actions** and descriptions of a character. Getting back to our Maria example, instead of telling, the author could have written, “Maria noticed an elderly woman struggling to load groceries into her car. Without hesitating, she abandoned her own cart and ran over to help.” When we see

Maria's actions, we come to our own conclusion that she is a kind person without necessarily being told.

When we learn more about characters, we can begin to evaluate them. First, we can consider their **motivation** for making various decisions, and come to some conclusions about the justification for their behaviors. Yes, they might have made decisions we don't agree with, but understanding why they did can significantly impact our feelings about a character. We can also evaluate how much a character changes throughout the story. If a character is much the same at the ending of the story as they were in the beginning, then we consider them **static**. A good example is Sherlock Holmes from the mysteries of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as he is the same brilliant detective at the beginning of the stories as he is at the end. On the other hand, if a character's personality undergoes changes during a story, we call them **dynamic**. We'll get more into "The Lottery Ticket" later, but Ivan Dmitritch is an example of a dynamic character who seems very different by the end of the story than the "very well satisfied" man in the beginning.

Another way we can evaluate characters in a story is how much of their personalities are revealed to us. Characters that we learn very little about are considered to be **flat**. An example could be a villain in a story who is simply violent and greedy, and we get very little else about them. Additionally, some flat characters are what we consider to be **stock** characters. A stock character is a generic or stereotypical character that serves a purpose in a story, but developing them in much depth isn't necessary. Two examples are Draco Malfoy's sidekicks in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Draco is one of the villains in the series, but he is often found with two large, relatively dim-witted henchmen named Goyle and Crabbe. In the earlier novels we get to know very little about them, which would make them flat. But, they are also stock characters, in that they provide the strong henchmen that surround villains in many stories. On the other hand, when a character is more fully fleshed out, we consider them to be **round**. An example of a round character would be Harry Potter himself, as we learn about his hopes, fears, relationships, and struggles throughout the series.

Typically, protagonists - which we also call **heroes** in stories, particularly when they demonstrate positive attributes - tend to be both round and dynamic. This makes sense, as we usually get some depth of coverage on our central character, and they are often changed by the events in the story. But, like most everything else in fiction, this is not always the case. We can have heroes in stories who are either flat or static. We also have the possibility of a protagonist in a

story that doesn't have many heroic qualities at all - they may be a coward, a criminal, or unnecessarily violent. When this is the case, we often refer to the protagonist as an **antihero**. A great modern example of an antihero is Deadpool, featured in both Marvel Comics and films. He is the protagonist in these stories, but he is far from heroic - he kills people for money, makes crude jokes, and acts primarily out of self-interest. Compare him to traditional Marvel heroes like Spider-Man or Captain America, who are noble and self-sacrificing, and the difference becomes clear, yet Deadpool is still the protagonist of many comic books and films.

Writing a Character Analysis: When students are asked to do an analysis of the characters in a piece of fiction, the result is often a list of all the characters and some basic information about each one. This is sort of the right idea for a Character Analysis, or at least it is headed in the right direction, but much like our plot analysis from last chapter, really doing the job properly requires one to go much deeper than this.

First, since you are going to spend more time on each character, the analysis should focus on the most important characters in the work, and then evaluate each one more carefully using appropriate terminology. That means figuring out the essentials, like who are the protagonist and the antagonist of the work, and if the various characters being evaluated are dynamic or static and flat or round. Along with this, we consider both what an author shows us and tells us about a character to arrive at a description of them in much the same way we might describe the people around us in the real world. We can also consider their motivations in our evaluation as well.

“The Lottery Ticket” Sample Character Analysis: With all that in mind, now let's jump back to our shared reading for this unit, “The Lottery Ticket” and do a proper character analysis. First, the short story by Chekhov features two main characters - Ivan Dmitritch and his wife Masha. Other relatives are briefly mentioned, but they do not play significant roles. It seems clear that Ivan is the **protagonist**, and though Masha doesn't seem to do anything overtly antagonistic - as much of the story takes place in Ivan's imagination - she appears to take on the role of **antagonist** by the end, standing in the way of Ivan getting all the lottery winnings.

Ivan is a **round** character, as we get great insight into his thought processes, hopes, and dreams through the story, including his eventual fears, frustration, and misery by the end. He is also a **dynamic** character, making a massive shift from being “very well satisfied with his lot” in

the opening of the story to yelling “Damnation take my soul entirely!” and wishing he could hang himself by the end (Chekhov).

On the personality front, Ivan is tricky to pin down. In the opening, the narrator tells us he is quietly content, but the possibility of sudden wealth reveals he isn't satisfied after all, and he can be both greedy and cruel. We see his dissatisfaction when he responds to the possibility of winning with “a broad, senseless smile, like a baby when a bright object is shown it” (Chekhov). Someone truly content wouldn't feel instantly drunk with the possibility of new money. Though he acknowledges the ticket belongs to his wife, he immediately starts planning how to spend the winnings - dreaming of estates and luxurious vacations in Italy, France, and India.

Ivan is pulled from his daydreams when he again realizes the money is technically Masha's, and his thoughts turn greedy and cruel. He imagines she'll be stingy and that “she would only be in my way” on his travels. His thoughts grow even darker: Masha “had grown elderly and plain, and that she was saturated through and through with the smell of cooking” (Chekhov). By the end, he looks at her with “hatred” and reads the final number - revealing they didn't win - with triumphant spite. In the end, Ivan is the protagonist but not a **hero** - nor quite an **antihero**. He's an ordinary man caught between two conflicts: his contentment in life versus his desires for more, and his love for his wife versus his resentment of her.

Masha is the secondary character in the story who gets significantly less coverage. She falls between **flat** and round - not simplified down to one or two traits, but lacking the depth we get with Ivan. Chekhov hints at her complexity: “She glanced at him too, and also with hatred and anger. She had her own daydreams, her own plans, her own reflections” (Chekhov). So there's clearly a lot going on under the surface, even if we aren't privy to it. Masha is also dynamic. The woman casually asking about lottery numbers while clearing the dinner table in the beginning of the story isn't the same as the Masha at the end who glares at Ivan with a look that says, “It's very nice making daydreams at other people's expense! No, don't you dare” (Chekhov)!

Much of what we learn about Masha is shown by her looks and glances, as interpreted by Ivan. However, the narrator also tells us important information, like Masha “understood perfectly well what her husband's dreams were. She knew who would be the first to try to grab her winnings” (Chekhov). She seems sharp and very perceptive, but also set on protecting all the winnings for herself. Though we aren't told Masha is initially content like Ivan, by the end she too seems to

wish for something more. Her main function is as Ivan's antagonist, standing between him and his dreams - though ironically, she never does anything antagonistic aside from a few glances across the room.

Now It's Your Turn: Considering the sample character analysis of "The Lottery Ticket," read the following story and complete the practice activity at the end in order to get some hands-on experience writing a character analysis of your own.



Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was born Katherine O'Flaherty in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1850 to a well-off family. Her father died when she was young, and she was raised primarily by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother - all strong, independent women who likely influenced her feminist perspectives. She received a good education and was known for being intelligent and unconventional as a young woman.

In 1870, she married Oscar Chopin, a Louisiana cotton trader, and they moved to New Orleans. The couple had six children in nine years, and Kate seemed content with domestic life. However, when Oscar died suddenly in 1882, leaving her with significant debts, Chopin moved back to St. Louis and began supporting herself and her children with her writing.

Chopin wrote short stories and novels that often featured strong female characters dealing with issues of marriage, independence, and desire—topics that were pretty radical for the 1890s. Her short story "The Story of an Hour" (1894) is still widely read today for its frank portrayal of a woman's complex feelings about marriage and freedom. Her novel *The Awakening* (1899) caused a scandal when it was published because it depicted a married woman pursuing her own desires and ultimately rejecting the constraints of wife and motherhood. This essentially ended Chopin's writing career. She published very little after that and died of a brain hemorrhage in 1904 at age 54. Today, she's recognized as a pioneering feminist writer who was simply ahead of her time.

“The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will — as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body. She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome. There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him — sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg, open the door — you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window. Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far

from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease — of the joy that kills.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the key plot points in "The Story of an Hour": Where is the inciting incident? What is the main conflict driving the plot along? What is the climax, and how does the resolution work? Lastly, how is the ending foreshadowed by the opening of the story?
2. In this story, we learn very little about Brently Mallard, Mrs. Mallard's husband. Why do you think Chopin gives us so little information about him? What effect does this have on the story and the message she is trying to convey about the situation women were in back in the 1890's?
3. Setting goes beyond just the physical surroundings in a story, and so how does the story being set in the late 1800s shape what eventually happens? How does the historical context - particularly expectations about marriage and women's roles - shape the story's meaning?
4. The doctors say Mrs. Mallard died of "heart disease - of joy that kills." This is dramatically ironic and can be understood in different ways by different people. How do you think Brentley Mallard interpreted this statement, and then what do *you* think actually killed her, and why?
5. Spring imagery appears throughout the story, such as "delicious breath of rain" and "tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life." What does spring typically symbolize, and why does Chopin weave references to it into this story?
6. How does Mrs. Mallard compare to Emily Grierson from "A Rose for Emily"? They both struggle against the defined social expectation placed on women in that time period, yet they both respond in very different ways. Explore their similarities and differences.

Chapter Writing Activity: Now that you've completed an active reading of "The Story of an Hour," practice writing a careful character analysis similar to the sample featured earlier in this chapter that used Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket." It is important that you first decide which characters in Chopin's story warrant a closer look - some may only need a passing mention -

and then dig deeper in each of them using the appropriate terminology we learned for writing a character analysis. Be sure to include quotations and specific details to support your ideas.

Chapter 5: Setting

Once a story has a plot, in other words some sort of conflict to be resolved, and we have characters who are pursuing this aim, then we can turn our attention to the third essential pillar of fiction - the setting.

Understanding the Basics of Setting: Simply put, the setting of a story is the time and place in which the events unfold. Authors often put some specific details into their stories to give us a sense of where things are happening - descriptions of buildings or rooms or even a beautiful rug on the floor - but understanding the setting can go far beyond those kinds of physical descriptions.

The setting of a story also encompasses the historical period, social context, and culture that surround a story. This background can have a significant impact on the events that transpire, and so it is important to understand it. If you consider both Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," both of the female protagonists' lives and choices were significantly impacted - and limited - by the time in which they lived. These stories focus on two different, fictional women trapped in the inflexible patriarchal society of the United States in the 1890s and how they responded to extremely challenging circumstances. One responded to the threat of being abandoned by murdering her lover and keeping his body nearby; the other responded to the possible death of her husband - who she said had only ever shown her love - by secretly feeling an overwhelming sense of joy about the possibility of tasting freedom. Neither of these storylines would feel the same if the stories took place in the United States today. We would wonder why Emily couldn't just find another man if Homer left or simply live a great life on her own terms, and we might also wonder why Louise Mallard wouldn't just file for divorce if she felt so confined by her marriage. In both cases, society has given these women very limited options, and so the stories make the most sense only when these cultural aspects of the setting are considered.

In addition, setting can include the impact of nature on a story like the weather. Characters being trapped in a cabin that is snowed in or on a ship that is being tossed around in a storm can heighten many aspects of a story. And, how many times have you noticed rain pouring down in a movie at just the right moment? This is a commonly used technique for tv and film, but if it hasn't jumped out at you, check out Andy Dufresne's escape from prison in the film *The*

Shawshank Redemption for a sense of the impact of rain on a story, and keep a lookout for rain pouring from the skies during the climax of many romantic comedy movies.

Finally, the mood or feeling surrounding a story can significantly impact the events. As we all know, walking into a room where two people just had an argument feels a lot different than walking into a room where everyone is laughing. Much the same can be said for the characters in a story, and so being aware of the mood that surrounds the events as they unfold can be very important to fully understanding a piece of fiction.

Writing a Setting Analysis: When asked to do an analysis of the setting of a given work, the first job is to try and consider the larger context in which a story takes place. Having a basic sense of the social and cultural expectations that surround the characters during a given historical period is critical. Again, in order to really understand both "A Rose for Emily" and "The Story of an Hour," a reader needs to have a basic understanding of the situation women faced in the United States in the 1890s. Without that, there is a key ingredient missing from both short stories.

Beyond that, the next step is jumping into the story, being an active reader, and playing detective. There are often details in the story that either give us setting descriptions directly or more subtly and indirectly. A good example of very direct coverage of the setting can be seen in the ending of "A Rose for Emily" when the townsfolk break through the locked door at the top of the stairs. The gruesome final scene takes place in a room that is described in this way:

The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks. The man himself lay in the bed (Faulkner).

This section is a detailed description of the setting in order to set the mood for the big reveal that Emily used to sleep in this room alongside Homer's decaying corpse for many, many years.

This included the years when her house was filled with children taking art lessons in one of the downstairs rooms. Again, the ending is terrible on its own, but the setting of the room really adds to the horror aspects of the story.

Beyond those more concrete kinds of details, we can get much more subtle information about the setting that may need some interpretation. For example, in "The Story of an Hour," after Louise Mallard has been told that her husband had been killed in a train accident, she weeps uncontrollably and locks herself in her room. Before her mood shifts to eventually feeling a sense of joyous freedom, she looks out the window and we get the following details, "She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air... and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds" (Chopin). These setting details seem to foreshadow something very different than her sadness. The fact that the season is changing from Winter to Spring - the trees are "aquiver" with new life and countless sparrows are chirping away - sets the stage for something hopeful. That fact that a cleansing rain is in the air - keep a lookout for all the rain in stories! - and there are blue skies breaking through adds to the feeling that something positive is coming, and that is indeed the case as the story moves along.

After finding these larger historical, cultural, and societal aspects of setting and the more specific details - both direct and indirect aspects of setting - you can then examine them more closely for their impact on the plot, characters, or even the deeper meanings of the entire work itself. Taking this final step is the all-important difference between simply listing setting details you found and writing a meaningful analysis where you try to understand the significance and impact of the setting on a given work of fiction.

Important Note: Unlike plot and character, setting doesn't have as much specialized terminology to learn (like climax, protagonist, and dynamic characters). Instead, it is important that you take the time to consider all the various aspects of the setting that were covered here - both the larger historical and cultural aspects along with the concrete details given in the text. Only then can you fully assess the impact the setting has on the plot, characters, and the overall meaning of the work of fiction.

“The Lottery Ticket” Sample Setting Analysis: With all these aspects of the setting in mind, it’s time to look back at our shared reading, “The Lottery Ticket” by Anton Chekhov, and do a careful analysis of the backdrop for this story.

First of all, “The Lottery Ticket” was written in 1886 and takes place in a similar time period to the other two stories we’ve been discussing in our previous two short stories; however, Chekhov’s work takes place in Russia instead of in the United States. It seems that many aspects of the two cultures are similar; aside from the mentions of the money being “rubles,” this story could easily take place in the United States during that same time period. The Russian society in that period - much like the US - was undergoing a lot of social changes as the economy was rapidly industrializing, populations were becoming more urbanized, and traditional social structures - including the patriarchy - were beginning to be challenged. However, the rigid class structure of the late-19th century was still in place, so there was typically very little opportunity for working class Russians to move up in status. A basic understanding of this social background is essential, as it plays a critical role in the way the story unfolds and how we understand these events.

Following that look at the wider context, a close, active reading of “The Lottery Ticket” reveals some specific detail about the setting, though not nearly as much as one might expect. The various elements of fiction play out to a greater or lesser extent depending on the particulars of a given story, and one of the challenging aspects of “The Lottery Ticket” is that Chekhov gives very little in the way of concrete details to describe where the story takes place. Initially, we just get that Ivan is sitting on the sofa reading the newspaper, while Masha is clearing the table after supper. The mood of the couple feels content and generally satisfied with their lives. We can imagine the surroundings are relatively modest, as we are told directly that they are “middle-class” in the opening line and that they get by on 1200 rubles a year - about 65,000 dollars today. At the end of the story, after the dream of becoming wealthy has collapsed, the mood the couple were feeling in the beginning is replaced by hatred, dissatisfaction and misery. The descriptions of the setting reflect this mood change, as Ivan described the home as feeling “dark and small” with “low-pitched” ceilings (Chekhov). He says it feels like the floors are “never swept” and covered in bits of paper and crumbs.

One of the reasons there may be so little in the way of details about the physical setting is that much of the plot actually takes place in Ivan's imagination. As previously mentioned, since Ivan and Masha are middle class and living in a strictly hierarchical society, they have very little opportunity to climb socially unless something miraculous were to happen, like winning the lottery and getting 75,000 rubles or about four million dollars. Just considering that possibility makes their imaginations go wild, and when it comes to Ivan's dreams about what he'd do with the money, Chekhov gives us loads of vivid descriptions like laying on lush green grass in a beautiful garden under a lime tree, while his little children are crawling around looking for ladybugs, or lying out on the hot sand by a cool stream and feeling the warmth on his back. These specific details seem to intentionally be given in stark contrast to the limited information we get about their actual home, which seems to show us that what Ivan and Masha are imagining is much more important than how they are actually living.

As mentioned earlier, they are married and living in a patriarchal society - they both seem to follow traditional roles as Ivan is relaxing on the couch with the newspaper while Masha is cleaning the table after supper and folding the tablecloth in the background. However, Russia has laws governing private ownership, and both Ivan and Masha are fully aware that Masha was the one who bought the ticket, and so she is also the only one of them who would technically control all the winnings. Yes, they are married, and so Ivan is expecting that some of the spoils will come his way, but his role as the primary financial decision-maker would be challenged, if not completely undercut if she controls all that money. This may be one of the major reasons why he sours on the idea of them winning and seems triumphant when he eventually announces that they lost. In the end, both these larger societal considerations and the few important details we get from Chekhov help us shed a lot more light on the events that take place in "The Lottery Ticket."

Now It's Your Turn: Considering the sample setting analysis of "The Lottery Ticket," read the following story and complete the chapter writing activity at the end in order to get some hands-on experience writing a setting analysis of your own.



Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was born in Notasulga, Alabama, in 1891, but grew up in Eatonville, Florida—one of the first all-Black incorporated towns in the United States. Growing up in this self-governing Black community profoundly shaped her worldview and her writing, as she saw Black life that wasn't defined primarily by white oppression or racism, but by its own rich culture and traditions.

After her mother died when Zora was thirteen, her life became unstable. She worked various jobs, including as a maid for a traveling theater company, before eventually making her way to Baltimore and then to Washington, D.C., where she finished high school in her twenties. She went on to attend Howard University and then Barnard College, where she was the only Black student and studied anthropology under the famous Franz Boas.

Hurston became a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, writing short stories, novels, and plays while also conducting anthropological research on African American and Caribbean folklore. Her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is now considered a masterpiece, though it received mixed reviews when first published. Hurston's work celebrated Black culture, dialect, and folklore at a time when some critics wanted more overtly political protest literature.

Despite her talent and productivity, Hurston died in poverty in 1960 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Florida. Writer Alice Walker later found and marked her grave in 1973, helping to revive interest in Hurston's work. Today, she's recognized as one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century.

“Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston

It was eleven o'clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a wash-woman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things

to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.

She squatted in the kitchen floor beside the great pile of clothes, sorting them into small heaps according to color, and humming a song in a mournful key, but wondering through it all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her horse and buckboard.

Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her. A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move. Then she saw that it was the big bull whip her husband liked to carry when he drove.

She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright. She screamed at him.

"Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes."

"Course Ah knowed it! That's how come Ah done it." He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. "If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don't keer how bad Ah skeer you."

"You aint got no business doing it. Gawd knows it's a sin. Some day Ah'm goin' tuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness. 'Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin' wid no bull whip."

"You sho is one aggravatin' n----- woman!" he declared and stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house."

He picked up the whip and glared down at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and set it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, praying, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things.

"Next time, Ah'm gointer kick 'em outdoors," he threatened as he struck a match along the leg of his corduroy breeches.

Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further.

"Ah aint for no fuss t'night Sykes. Ah just come from taking sacrament at the church house."

He snorted scornfully. "Yeah, you just come from de church house on a Sunday night, but heah you is gone to work on them clothes. You ain't nothing but a hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout, then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath."

He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

"Sykes, you quit grindin' dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat'day if Ah don't start on Sunday?"

"Ah don't keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other men, Ah aint gointer have it in mah house. Don't gimme no lip neither, else Ah'll throw 'em out and put mah fist up side yo' head to boot."

Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her.

"Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' for fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

"What's that got to do with me?" he asked brutally.

"What's it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it."

She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did.

"Naw you won't," she panted, "that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin' with aint comin' heah to pile up on mah sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin' on this place, and Ah'm gointer stay right heah till Ah'm toted out foot foremost."

"Well, you better quit gittin' me riled up, else they'll be totin' you out sooner than you expect. Ah'm so tired of you Ah don't know whut to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!"

A little awed by this new Delia, he sidled out of the door and slammed the back gate after him. He did not say where he had gone, but she knew too well. She knew very well that he

would not return until nearly daybreak also. Her work over, she went on to bed but not to sleep at once. Things had come to a pretty pass!

She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed. She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands, and drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed. Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else. This case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. Too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely.

Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. Amen. She went to sleep and slept until he announced his presence in bed by kicking her feet and rudely snatching the covers away.

"Gimme some kivah heah, an' git yo' damn foots over on yo' own side! Ah oughter mash you in yo' mouf fuh drawing dat skillet on me."

Delia went clear to the rail without answering him. A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did.

The week was as full of work for Delia as all other weeks, and Saturday found her behind her little pony, collecting and delivering clothes.

It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke's porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane-knots as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat.

"Heah come Delia Jones," Jim Merchant said, as the shaggy pony came 'round the bend of the road toward them. The rusty buckboard was heaped with baskets of crisp, clean laundry.

"Yep," Joe Lindsay agreed. "Hot or col', rain or shine, jes ez reg'lar ez de weeks roll roun' Delia carries 'em an' fetches 'em on Sat'day."

"She better if she want'er eat," said Moss. "Syke Jones aint wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em. Not to huh he aint. "

"He sho' aint," Walter Thomas chimed in. "It's too bad, too, cause she wuz a right pritty lil trick when he got huh. Ah'd uh mah'ied huh mahseff if he hadnter beat me to it."

Delia nodded briefly at the men as she drove past.

"Too much knockin' will ruin any 'oman. He done beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks," said Elijah Moseley. "How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he's layin' roun wid, gits me. Ah swear dat eight-rock couldn't kiss a sardine can Ah done throwed out de back do' 'way las' yeah."

"Aw, she's fat, thass how come. He's allus been crazy 'bout fat women," put in Merchant. "He'd a' been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a' found one tuh have him. Did Ah tell yuh 'bout him come sidlin' roun' mah wife—bringin' her a basket uh pecans outa his yard fuh a present? Yessir, mah wife! She tol' him tuh take 'em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat washtub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an' soapsuds. Ah jus' wisht Ah'd a' caught 'im 'dere! Ah'd a' made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road."

"Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees 'im grinnin' at every 'oman dat passes," Walter Thomas said. "But even so, he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil 'oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh losin' huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind."

"There oughter be a law about him," said Lindsay. "He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear."

Clarke spoke for the first time. "Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in 'im. There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin' after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way."

"We oughter take Syke an' dat stray 'oman uh his'n down in Lake Howell swamp an' lay on de rawhide till they cain't say Lawd a' mussy.' He allus wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since

dat white 'oman from up north done teacht 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live—an' we oughter kill 'im," Old Man Anderson advised.

A grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue, and Elijah Moseley began to bait Joe Clarke.

"Come on, Joe, git a melon outa dere an' slice it up for yo' customers. We'se all sufferin' wid de heat. De bear's done got me!"

"Thass right, Joe, a watermelon is jes' whut Ah needs tuh cure de eppizudicks," Walter Thomas joined forces with Moseley. "Come on dere, Joe. We all is steady customers an' you aint set us up in a long time. Ah chooses dat long, bowlegged Floridy favorite."

"A god, an' be dough. You all gimme twenty cents and slice way," Clarke retorted. "Ah needs a col' slice m'self. Heah, everybody chip in. Ah'll lend y'll mah meat knife."

The money was quickly subscribed and the huge melon brought forth. At that moment, Sykes and Bertha arrived. A determined silence fell on the porch and the melon was put away again.

Merchant snapped down the blade of his jackknife and moved toward the store door.

"Come on in, Joe, an' gimme a slab uh sow belly an' uh pound uh coffee—almost fuhgot 'twas Sat'day. Got to git on home." Most of the men left also.

Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

"Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two bottles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an' a block uh chewin' gum."

With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

The men returned soon after they left, and held their watermelon feast.

"Where did Syke Jones git da 'oman from nohow?" Lindsay asked.

"Ovah Apopka. Guess dey musta been cleanin' out de town when she lef'. She don't look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it."

"Well, she sho' kin squall," Dave Carter contributed. "When she gits ready tuh laff, she jes' opens huh mouf an' latches it back tuh de las' notch. No ole grandpa alligator down in Lake Bell ain't got nothin' on huh."

Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room rent at Della Lewis'—the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to “stomps.” He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state.

“Sho’ you kin have dat lil’ ole house soon’s Ah kin git dat ‘oman outa dere. Everything b’longs tuh me an’ you sho’ kin have it. Ah sho’ ‘bominates uh skinny ‘oman. Lawdy, you sho’ is got one portly shape on you! You kin git anything you wants. Dis is mah town an’ you sho’ kin have it.”

Delia’s work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia’s house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.

The sun had burned July to August. The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly.

“Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin’!”

She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

“Syke! Syke, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake ‘way from heah! You gottuh. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!”

“Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin’ uh de kin’—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin’ but die. Taint no use uh you puttin’ on airs makin’ out lak you skeered uh dat snake—he’s gointer stay right heah tell he die. He wouldn’t bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle ‘im. Nohow he wouldn’t risk breakin’ out his fangs ‘gin yo’ skinny laigs.”

"Naw, now Syke, don't keep dat thing 'roun' heah tuh skeer me tuh death. You knows Ah'm even feared uh earth worms. Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see. Kill 'im Syke, please."

"Doan ast me tuh do nothin' fuh yuh. Goin' roun' trying' tuh be so damn asterperious. Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo' uh him dan you! Dat's a nice snake an' anybody doan lak 'im kin jes' hit de grit."

The village soon heard that Sykes had the snake, and came to see and ask questions.

"How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Syke?" Thomas asked.

"He's full uh frogs so he caint hardly move, thass how. Ah eased up on 'm. But Ah'm a snake charmer an' knows how tuh handle 'em. Shux, dat aint nothin'. Ah could ketch one eve'y day if Ah so wanted tuh."

"Whut he needs is a heavy hick'ry club leaned real heavy on his head. Dat's de bes 'way tuh charm a rattlesnake."

"Naw, Walt, y'll jes' don't understand dese diamon' backs lak Ah do," said Sykes in a superior tone of voice.

The village agreed with Walter, but the snake stayed on. His box remained by the kitchen door with its screen wire covering. Two or three days later it had digested its meal of frogs and literally came to life. It rattled at every movement in the kitchen or the yard. One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment.

That night she broached the subject as soon as Sykes sat down to the table.

"Syke, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake 'way fum heah. You done starved me an' Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin' dat varmint heah."

Sykes poured out a saucer full of coffee and drank it deliberately before he answered her.

"A whole lot Ah keer 'bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin' no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh 'im tuh go. So fur as beatin' is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay 'roun' me."

Delia pushed back her plate and got up from the table. "Ah hates you, Sykes," she said calmly. "Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an' took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck. Dat's de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an' moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge—so Ah don't haf tuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don't wantuh see yuh 'roun' me atall. Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog."

Sykes almost let the huge wad of corn bread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.

"Well, Ah'm glad you does hate me. Ah'm sho' tiahed uh you hangin' ontuh me. Ah don't want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo' rawbony laigs an' arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes' lak de devvul's doll-baby tuh me. You cain't hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin' you fuh years."

"Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings. Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout you, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah." Delia said this with no signs of fear and Sykes departed from the house, threatening her, but made not the slightest move to carry out any of them.

That night he did not return at all, and the next day being Sunday, Delia was glad she did not have to quarrel before she hitched up her pony and drove the four miles to Woodbridge.

She stayed to the night service—"love feast"—which was very warm and full of spirit. In the emotional winds her domestic trials were borne far and wide so that she sang as she drove homeward.

"Jurden water, black an' col'

Chills de body, not de soul

An' Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time."

She came from the barn to the kitchen door and stopped.

"Whut's de mattah, ol' satan, you aint kickin' up yo' racket?" She addressed the snake's box. Complete silence. She went on into the house with a new hope in its birth struggles.

Perhaps her threat to go to the white folks had frightened Sykes! Perhaps he was sorry! Fifteen

years of misery and suppression had brought Delia to the place where she would hope anything that looked towards a way over or through her wall of inhibitions.

She felt in the match safe behind the stove at once for a match. There was only one there.

“Dat niggah wouldn’t fetch nothin’ heah tuh save his rotten neck, but he kin run thew whut Ah brings quick enough. Now he done toted off nigh on tuh haff uh box uh matches. He done had dat ‘oman heah in mah house, too.”

Nobody but a woman could tell how she knew this even before she struck the match. But she did and it put her into a new fury.

Presently she brought in the tubs to put the white things to soak. This time she decided she need not bring the hamper out of the bedroom; she would go in there and do the sorting. She picked up the pot-bellied lamp and went in. The room was small and the hamper stood hard by the foot of the white iron bed. She could sit and reach through the bedposts—resting as she worked.

“Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time,” she was singing again. The mood of the “love feast” had returned. She threw back the lid of the basket almost gaily. Then, moved by both horror and terror, she sprang back toward the door. There lay the snake in the basket! He moved sluggishly at first, but even as she turned round and round, jumped up and down in an insanity of fear, he began to stir vigorously. She saw him pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed, then she seized the lamp and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. The wind from the open door blew out the light and the darkness added to her terror. She sped to the darkness of the yard, slamming the door after her before she thought to set down the lamp. She did not feel safe even on the ground, so she climbed up in the hay barn.

There for an hour or more she lay sprawled upon the hay a gibbering wreck.

Finally, she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm.

“Well, Ah done de bes’ Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault.”

She went to sleep—a twitch sleep—and woke up to a faint gray sky. There was a loud hollow sound below. She peered out. Sykes was at the wood-pile, demolishing a wire-covered box.

He hurried to the kitchen door, but hung outside there some minutes before he entered, and stood some minutes more inside before he closed it after him.

The gray in the sky was spreading. Delia descended without fear now, and crouched beneath the low bedroom window. The drawn shade shut out the dawn, shut in the night. But the thin walls held back no sound.

“Dat ol’ scratch is woke up now!” She mused at the tremendous whirr inside, which every woodsman knows, is one of the sound illusions. The rattler is a ventriloquist. His whirr sounds to the right, to the left, straight ahead, behind, close under foot—everywhere but where it is. Woe to him who guesses wrong unless he is prepared to hold up his end of the argument! Sometimes he strikes without rattling at all.

Inside, Sykes heard nothing until he knocked a pot lid off the stove while trying to reach the match safe in the dark. He had emptied his pockets at Bertha’s.

The snake seemed to wake up under the stove and Sykes made a quick leap into the bedroom. In spite of the gin he had had, his head was clearing now.

“‘Mah Gawd!’ he chattered, ‘ef Ah could on’y strack uh light!’”

The rattling ceased for a moment as he stood paralyzed. He waited. It seemed that the snake waited also.

“Oh, fuh de light! Ah thought he’d be too sick”—Sykes was muttering to himself when the whirr began again, closer, right underfoot this time. Long before this, Sykes’ ability to think had been flattened down to primitive instinct and he leaped—onto the bed.

Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound.

A tremendous stir inside there, another series of animal screams, the intermittent whirr of the reptile. The shade torn violently down from the window, letting in the red dawn, a huge brown hand seizing the window stick, great dull blows upon the wooden floor punctuating the gibberish of sound long after the rattle of the snake had abruptly subsided. All this Delia could see and hear from her place beneath the window, and it made her ill. She crept over to the four-o’clocks and stretched herself on the cool earth to recover.

She lay there. “Delia. Delia!” She could hear Sykes calling in a most despairing tone as one who expected no answer. The sun crept on up, and he called. Delia could not move—her legs were gone flabby. She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising.

“Mah Gawd!” She heard him moan, “Mah Gawd fum Heben!” She heard him stumbling about and got up from her flower-bed. The sun was growing warm. As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, “Delia, is dat you Ah heah?”

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her—all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the central conflict in "Sweat"? Is it primarily external (person vs. person) or internal (person vs. self)? Are there multiple layers of conflict at work in this story?
2. Identify the key plot elements in "Sweat": Where is the inciting incident? What constitutes the rising action? Where is the climax? How does the resolution work, and what makes it satisfying or unsatisfying?
3. How would you characterize Delia? Is she round or flat? Static or dynamic (does she change through the story)? Select a few prominent personality traits and specific evidence from the story to support your analysis.
4. The story is set in an all-Black Florida town in the 1920s. How does this social and historical setting shape the story? What options does Delia have (or not have) based on when and where she lives?
5. The title "Sweat" is significant and symbolizes much more than the literal sweat in the Florida heat. What does sweat represent in this story? Consider both literal sweat (from Delia's labor) and metaphorical meanings.
6. How does the story explore the theme of justice or karma? Is the ending an example of divine justice, poetic justice, natural consequences, or something else?

Chapter Writing Activity: Now that you've completed an active reading of "Sweat," practice writing a careful setting analysis similar to the sample featured earlier in this chapter that used Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket." Make sure to consider the larger societal aspects of the story - it took place in an all-Black Florida town in the 1920s that featured a religious, patriarchal society - and then the specific details Hurston provides about the physical setting. Don't forget that the weather is an important part of the setting, and make sure to go beyond listing details. You should analyze how the setting impacts the plot, characters, and overall meaning of the story. Be sure to include quotations and specific details to support your ideas.

Chapter 6: Point of View

Now that we have learned about the three most essential building blocks for fiction - plot, character, and setting - we can move beyond looking at what is in a story and focus our attention on the storyteller.

Understanding the Basics of Point of View: Essentially, the point of view of a story is the perspective from which it is told. This perspective becomes our eyes and ears as a reader, similar to the person who is holding the camera when we're watching a movie or a tv show. This perspective has a serious impact on the information we do (or don't) get, and so it can color the way we get to know characters, control the details we "see" in the setting, and even impact how the plot unfolds.

In our daily lives, we understand the importance of knowing where our information comes from. When a person tells you a hard-to-believe story about something that happened at school, you need to know if you are being told by somebody who was actually involved, somebody who heard about it fairly directly, or somebody who just heard a rumor around campus. Each one of these perspectives seems a bit more unreliable than the last, and so the quality of the source impacts your confidence in the story itself. The point of view in a piece of fiction works in the same way.

When we read, we refer to the storyteller as the **narrator**, and we always have to be aware of their trustworthiness, their access to various perspectives, and their limitations. Consider the mysterious actions of Emily Grierson in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." The story is told by a collective "we" which seems to be the townsfolk, and so our access to information is very limited in some ways. For example, the narrator believes that Homer Barron left Emily, and that she purchased arsenic to commit suicide, but in the end both of these assumptions were incorrect. The truth of what seemingly happened - though we'll never quite know for sure - is only revealed in the very end of the story when the folks in the town break into the upstairs room. Faulkner's choice of using the townsfolk as the narrator is a unique one, but we wouldn't have much of a surprise ending if we had access to Emily's own perspective throughout the tale. We'd know she went to buy arsenic in order to kill Homer, and we'd lay down next to his body each night right along with her.

In the end, there are countless ways to tell a story and lots of different perspectives an author can choose. The majority of these fall into two main categories, third-person narration and first-person narration. Before diving into the particulars, it should also be noted that on some rare occasions authors also can write in the second person, like the Choose Your Own Adventure series of books where “you” are the star of the story, but this kind of writing is extremely rare in literature on the whole.

The first of our two main categories is **third-person narration**, which is the most common. Using this perspective means that the narrator is not one of the characters in the story itself, but is a nonparticipant who is telling us the story. Sometimes the third-person narrator seems to have access to everything going on in the story, as if the camera has access to every character and all their thoughts through the story. If this were the case with “A Rose for Emily,” the narrator could have jumped from the townsfolk’s perspective to Emily’s thoughts, then to Homer’s hopes and dreams, then back to the townsfolk again. This kind of all-knowing or God-like perspective is called an **omniscient narrator**, though in general this perspective is pretty rare as well.

A slightly more restricted form of narration - which is a lot more commonly used - is called a **limited omniscient narrator**. Using this perspective allows the readers to have access to a limited number of characters. This is the perspective used in “Sweat,” as we mostly follow along with Delia’s thoughts and actions, but then we are briefly pulled out to see conversations by the “village men on Joe Clarke’s porch.” These conversations happen when Delia is not around, and so we know the story is coming from a completely new perspective. However, the number of perspectives are limited, and so we never know what Sykes or Bertha or many of the other characters are thinking.

A final form of third-person narration is when authors don’t allow the readers to have access to the thoughts of any of the characters. This **objective point of view** places the focus on the dialogue and actions of the characters in a story, and then leaves it up to the reader to determine why various characters acted in the ways that they did. An example is Ernest Hemingway’s short story “Hills Like White Elephants” - which is featured later in the book - where we only get action and dialogue and are left to determine the thoughts of the characters all on our own. Most television shows and movies also use this type of objective point of view

as well, since we don't usually get to know the thoughts of various characters directly aside from the rare voiceover or when they turn to talk directly to the audience.

The second category of narrative styles, which is also less common, is called **first-person narration**. This is when the story is told from the perspective of a single character using the pronoun "I" throughout. This character can either be a major character in the story or a minor one. A great example of a major character telling a first-person story is Holden Caulfield from J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. From the opening line, Holden speaks directly to the reader saying, "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like..." (Salinger 1). This sets up a situation where the entire book comes from inside the mind of this single, central figure.

There are also many examples of a minor character telling a story about somebody else. Perhaps two of the more well-known are Dr. Watson recounting all the adventures of the great detective Sherlock Holmes and F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* being told from the perspective of Nick Carraway instead of Gatsby himself. There can be big advantages to using a minor character as the narrator, including leaving the thoughts of the main characters as somewhat mysterious. This works particularly well in the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, as he is a mastermind who is always a step ahead, and so getting Dr. Watson's perspective protects us from knowing the outcome too early.

Regardless of whether it is a major or minor one, placing the role of narrator inside a single character has a huge impact on a work of fiction, limiting us to just one perspective. While the first-person voice may make the story seem more engaging in one way, we may also rightly wonder if that one perspective is wholly reliable to recount the events fairly. This is often the case, like Dr. Watson who seems to be a very reliable narrator of Sherlock Holmes' cases, even if he is a massive Sherlock fan-boy. However, other times we may not be so sure. When we think that the character may be misrepresenting events, we can consider them to be an **unreliable narrator**. Holden Caulfield is a clear example of this, as he freely admits to being a great liar while regularly contradicting himself. He is also telling his story from a psychiatric facility after having a mental breakdown, and in his depressed state he consistently calls almost everyone else "phonies," but the reader has to wonder if this is really the case.

Additionally, some first-person narrators are simply limited in their perspective and may be unintentionally unreliable, which is called a **naive narrator**. A well known example is Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain's 1885 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck is young, uneducated, and raised in a racist society, and so when he helps his friend Jim - who is an enslaved man - escape to freedom, Huck thinks that he is committing a terrible sin and will probably go to hell for it. As readers, we understand that Huck is doing the right thing, and freeing Jim is an act of great courage, even though Huck himself is not able to understand it.

Writing a Point of View Analysis: In order to write a solid analysis of the point of view of a story, you have to work through a few key steps. The first thing is to go back through the story carefully, as an active reader, to identify the point of view as being first-person or third-person. Once you know which larger category you are in, you'll have some different possibilities to consider.

If the story is told from a third-person perspective, you'll want to evaluate the kind of access you are getting to various characters' thoughts in order to decide between omniscient, limited-omniscient, or an objective narrator. On the other hand, if the story is coming from a first-person narrator, you'll want to figure out who this character is - are they central to the story or a minor bystander - and if they seem to be reliable. If they are not, you'll want to be able to explain exactly why not. In either case - first or third person - you can also consider what limitations the narrator has and the kinds of information you may not be getting.

Once you've got the basics of the point of view identified, next comes the important part - the actual analysis of *why* this point of view matters and *what* it accomplishes in the story. First, consider questions like why did the author select the point of view they eventually used for the story? What information is withheld from us and why? How would the story be different if it were told from another perspective? How does the point of view create suspense and add to the story? For example, as explained above, making Sherlock Holmes the narrator would ruin all of the mysteries because he often has the crimes solved halfway through the book, so Watson's outside perspective is much better. Using Watson keeps us away from Holmes' brilliant mind and problem-solving skills, creating more suspense as the reader never really knows the outcome of the story until the case is solved in the very end. Also, Watson is also often confused by the outcomes of these cases, and this allows Holmes to explain everything to him (and us) in great detail once a mystery has been solved.

Additionally, consider how the point of view impacts all the other elements of fiction and the overall meaning of the story. Take, for example, the limited omniscient point of view in "Sweat." Because we spend most of our time following along with Delia, we have an intimate connection to her as a character, and we have sympathy for her suffering and regular abuse at the hands of Sykes. The setting is also impacted by this point of view, as we see Delia's home through her perspective, a beautiful place that is 15 years in the making. This makes Sykes' violation of that space by bringing in the snake seem all the worse. The point of view also impacts the plot, as our Delia-centered perspective helps build up suspense. We know the snake has gotten loose in the house as soon as she does, and then the climax has maximum emotional impact as we feel like the final turn of events is justified as we sit outside with Delia waiting for Sykes to die.

In the end, regardless of who is telling the story, it is important as a reader to be aware of how much that perspective impacts all of the other elements of fiction along with the meaning of the story overall.

"The Lottery Ticket" Sample Point of View Analysis: Anton Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket" uses a **limited-omniscient, third-person** narrator that mostly follows protagonist Ivan Dmitritch's perspective. There are also some brief glimpses into his wife Masha's thoughts as well, but these are kept fairly minimal, as most of the perspective we get on her is filtered through Ivan.

This choice for the point of view is important to the story because it connects us much more closely with Ivan and limits our understanding of Masha's thought processes. Getting unfiltered access to Ivan's thoughts lets us take a deep dive right along with him into a sort of fantasyland lifestyle of the insanely rich. We also follow along as his dreams of owning a large estate and travelling the world morph into selfishness and pettiness, eventually turning him against his wife and relatives. Being restricted from Masha's perspective creates additional tension in the story as well. We do get a sense that she is likely undergoing some emotional twists and turns similar to Ivan's, but we don't really know for sure. Also, having a limited-omniscient perspective means we are unaware of the final numbers in the newspaper until Ivan reads them. Having an omniscient narrator could potentially spill the beans early, thus changing the climax of the story, or it could give us access to both character's thoughts which would likely impact the suspense in the story.

This point of view impacts our sense of both characters. First, Ivan comes across as being fairly unlikeable, as we see his initial excitement quickly turn from wild fantasies into dark visions of greed and selfishness. We also see how he deceives himself and plays mental gymnastics to try and justify how he, and not Masha, really deserves all the money. In the end, we see all his personal flaws through our unfiltered access to his thought processes. Masha is more insulated from our judgements. Aside from some brief mentions of her thoughts, such as “she had her own daydreams, her own plans, her own reflections,” the narrator gives us very little (Chekhov). The impact of this is that the more cruel Ivan’s thoughts, like thinking of her as “repulsive,” “stingy,” “elderly,” and “plain,” then the more likely we are to feel sympathy for her situation (Chekhov).

Additionally, the limited-omniscient perspective of the story has significant setting and plot implications. For the setting, we are given descriptions through Ivan’s eyes alone, and so when he feels content in the beginning, we get very little detail aside from him sitting on a couch reading the newspaper. However, after his vividly described dreams have been crushed, we see that the home is “dark and small” with “low-pitched” ceilings (Chekhov). We have to wonder, though, if this perception is accurate or just a reaction to his frustration at that moment. As for the plot, if we consider the revelation of the final lottery number as the climax, then this only works because we are kept from that information by the limited-omniscient perspective. Basically, we don’t know the numbers don’t match until Ivan and Masha do. This helps to build up suspense as well, and that tension is heightened further as we don’t really know for sure what Masha is thinking. So we’ve got both tension between poverty and wealth building along the tension between the two characters.

The point of view in “The Lottery Ticket” also helps us understand the larger themes of human nature and our deep-seated greed that are at play in the story. Taking what is supposedly a happily married couple at the outset, and then having money - even fictional money that they haven’t won - completely destroy their relationship in seconds makes a significant commentary on human nature. Having a point of view that allows us direct access into the mind of a person who is spiraling into selfishness increases our understanding of how we all may be susceptible to playing some mental gymnastics in order to get the things we want and to justify our own worst behaviors. If we weren’t given this access, and instead had a more objective point of

view, we would simply have to guess what the two characters were thinking, then the story wouldn't have nearly the same effect and power. In the end, the use of a third-person limited omniscient narrator that mostly follows the thoughts of Ivan Dmitritch effectively impacts the plot, character, and setting in ways that help develop the theme or overarching point of the story.

Now It's Your Turn: After having read a sample point of view analysis of "The Lottery Ticket," read the following story actively and complete the practice activity at the end in order to get some hands-on experience doing a point of view analysis of your own.



Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton, 1875-1954) was born in Montreal to a Chinese mother and English father, making her one of the first writers of Asian descent to publish fiction in North America. At a time when anti-Chinese prejudice was rampant in the United States, Eaton made a bold choice - she adopted the Japanese-sounding pen name "Onoto Watanna" and wrote popular romance novels with Japanese settings and characters.

This wasn't just about survival - it was a savvy career move. Eaton became a bestselling author, publishing her first novel *Miss Numè of Japan* in 1899, followed by hits like *A Japanese Nightingale* (which was adapted into a Broadway play and later a film). Her work appeared in major magazines like *Harper's Monthly*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. She was a literary celebrity who hobnobbed with New York's elite and later she was among the earliest women to work as a screenwriter in Hollywood.

Her decision to "pass" as Japanese has made her a complicated figure in Asian American literary history. Today, scholars recognize that Winnifred Eaton was a skilled writer who created strong female characters and explored themes of mixed-race identity, cultural conflict, and women's independence. "Eyes that Saw Not" was published in *Harper's Monthly* in 1902, co-written with her husband Bertrand Babcock, during the height of her literary fame.

“Eyes That Saw Not” by Onoto Watanna and Bertrand W. Babcock

Graytown had put out its lights and retired for the night, with the well-bred decorum of small-town respectability, when John Swinnerton came home smitten with blindness. Only the station porter saw the little party that met him almost at the door of the Pullman. John's mother was the first to greet him.

“John,” she said, as he stepped off the train—“John, it will be all right. Mrs. Thomas knows a specialist in New York who—” The rest of the sentence was lost in the hubbub of arrival.

His father standing by heard and smiled in pity. “John, old man!” was all he said. There was some little delay while Jerry clumsily drove his cab up to the board platform, and Elizabeth, who had also come down to the station, found herself alone with John for a moment. “I'm so sorry, John,” she said.

Her chagrin at the trite inadequacy of her words received instant compensation when John replied melodramatically, just as she feared he would:

“It is nothing. Say no more. The light without has gone to feed the flame within.”

Then she guided him into the cab, and the others silently clambered after and took their places. Jerry's fumbling at the door-catch and the sharp bang of the door's closing awoke in each the same memory. Certainly there had been happier home-comings than this of John Swinnerton to Graytown.

There was no conversation during the long ride to the Swinnertons' home, the residence of Graytown's leading family. To Elizabeth's relief, John's mother had insisted upon sitting by him, and as John sat idly holding his mother's hand, Elizabeth was shocked to surprise herself smiling at the idea of John's fancying it to be her hand.

Once home, the party broke up immediately. The hour was late, and John, the bereft sense of his affliction fresh upon him, craved the solitude of his old room. He could feel the way even now. His mother attempted, in the overflowing tenderness of her heart, to follow him. “No, mother, not to-night,” he remonstrated, kissing her, and gently pushing her from the room. He heard her crying in his father's room as he undressed. Then he lay down, and, utterly fatigued and worn out, fell asleep almost instantly.

Graytown, after the manner of most inland towns, followed with close interest the careers of its young men, even after they had fled, as is their wont, to the great cities, which drew them forth into the vortex of human activity and strife. Nor was this interest less tenacious for the fact that they left behind them scores of young unmarried women, who watched their struggles for

riches and honor, and while waiting found encouragement in sundry notes and epistles confided to envelopes bearing the postmark of one or another far-away metropolis. So was John's career the cynosure of Graytown in general and of Elizabeth in particular.

Graytown's solicitude for the welfare of the native was none the less genuine because an inquisitive sympathy was its accompaniment. Thus, on the morning following the sad reunion at the railroad station, John's arrival and misfortune were known to the whole town.

Early-morning neighbors on their way to office and shop stared cautiously at the red curtains that shut out the light from John's room. The newsboy when he brought the morning paper asked the cook how John was. When John's mother opened the library door on the veranda to receive from the postman the day's mail, his inquiry brought tears to her eyes.

Behind those red curtains, insensible to the thrill of curiosity he was causing his neighbors, John himself lay wide-awake. He had been stirred to consciousness as the machinists, who lived on the street's new extension, hurried past the house with rattling dinner-buckets to the shop before the five-minute whistle blew. He lay quite still for a long time, listening to their heavy, shuffling tread. Then a rooster crowed. John knew him well. He was a descendant of that old black Spaniard he had tried to kill with a Flobert rifle on one of his college vacations. From far below the bluff on which the house stood came the rattle of the morning train, loaded with fishermen going "up the river" for the day. It was all just as he had known it before he left home for the first time three years ago, yet it came to him now with a note of pathos and isolation. These people were going on without him. It was nothing to them that his career, as it seemed, had been suddenly cut short on the very threshold.

Then he drifted into another train of thought. He began to review his three years' work on the New York morning newspaper on which, as he put it, he had served his literary apprenticeship. All the incidents sedulously chronicled in his diary were recalled: the nights spent in the morgue—waiting for the identification of the mysteriously found body, and watching the reporters, who were always turning up with some false clew; the scenes in the Tenderloin, rich in color for the book he meant one day to write; the women's clubs he had attended, with orders from the city editor to "write up a funny story about them." Then there was his sudden resolution to give up the newspaper business for a serious attempt at real literary work, and his subsequent transfer to a copy desk, with the new idea of saving a little money before making the plunge. And then this catastrophe—his total blindness.

Yet, strange to say, this catastrophe failed to daunt John's hopes and ambitions, as it might have done with a young man of less buoyancy and self-confidence. His overweening

vanity, the very strand in his character which showed weakest, was the strongest now to save him from utter collapse.

As the scenes of his reporter days recurred to him his imagination grew warm; a woman's face thrusting itself into the tangled mass of color and incident fixed his resolution.

"I'll do it, by all the gods!" he cried aloud.

His mother, waiting outside in the hall, heard him. Emboldened, she brought in the breakfast-tray.

"John dear," she said, "I didn't know you were awake. I've been standing out here with the breakfast things, listening, and I'm afraid the oatmeal's all cold."

John pushed the tray aside impatiently.

"Mother, I'm going to make you very happy," he said, brusquely.

John's mother set the tray on the floor near the bedstead's head. Then she sat down on the bed near him.

"There is really nothing to worry about, John," she began. "Mrs. Thomas said—"

"No, it's not that," John broke in. "I have given up all hope of ever being able to see again. You know I had a long talk with old Doctor Vermile just before I left. The old man's been my friend ever since—well, never mind. You know what he said. Now let's put that aside."

"My brave boy!" John's mother interjected.

"It's just this, mother," John went on. "I have had three years of living where life most abounds. I have studied human nature thoroughly. I have plenty of incident and plenty of color. My inability to see is a physical misfortune. It doesn't impair my ability to write, nor destroy my knowledge of life. Mother, I intend to devote my life to literary work."

"And Elizabeth and I will be your secretaries!" exclaimed John's mother, enthusiastically—"that is," she added, "until you are able to see again."

That early-morning conversation with his mother marked the beginning of a new period in John's life. He devoted himself assiduously to what he called literary work. But he came to it by degrees. First of all he went over the notes he had laid up as treasure for his after-literary life: all the bits of genre description; all the quick impressions formed by seeing people, as the reporter alone sees them, at the great climaxes in their lives. His mother, to begin with, read his notes and scrap-books to him, but later it fell to Elizabeth to be his sole co-worker and amanuensis.

As a reporter, John Swinnerton had nursed the ultimate ambition of the literary aspirant. His scrap-books, containing under date and head-line all the printed results of his assignments,

all his “stories,” were a source of boundless pleasure to him, and of unfailing inspiration to Elizabeth.

She would read him some story of how the excursion steamer Oligarchy, coming up the bay in the fog, had met the Havana liner Orizaba; how both boats were steaming at each other with such speed that great disaster and loss of life seemed inevitable until, by a quick twist of the Oligarchy’s steam steering-gear to port, in spite of the other boat’s contradictory whistles, the excursionists had been saved, as the two boats cleared by about six inches.

The story in itself was interesting to Elizabeth, but the story of the story, as told by the reporter, who had fallen into the bay after it, she thought the most wonderful thing she had ever heard. Her eyes sparkled. She caught up a pen.

“John,” she cried, “write that just as you have told it to me, under the title, ‘The Story of a Story.’ Now, then, begin!”

John dictated.

His narrative to Elizabeth had been instinct with the charm of a personal experience told in simple, direct, graphic language, and his assumption of the first person had led her to identify herself with the actor in the scene, as her imagination, warming at his words, had reproduced the experience to the smallest detail. But his dictation lacked every grace; all the strength and picturesque beauty of his narration were wanting. While he had been talking he was himself, natural, spontaneous; now he was somebody else, an author dictating a story. Like the mere ecclesiastic who enters the pulpit in cleric robes, but lacks the message of the living word, so John left out just those elements that were the very soul of his story.

As the time-chipped phrases of the daily newspaper fell from his lips, Elizabeth wondered that the fortunate possessor of such rich experiences, possessed by one, too, who was capable of forming such vivid impressions, could so miserably fail in their ultimate expression.

The story he dictated spoke of a “heroic young reporter,” of a “gruff sea-captain”; told how “the young hero” “boldly plunged into the dark depths” that “funereal-like enveloped him,” and so on ad nauseam.

With other stories which followed, it was the same or worse. Experiences that would have delighted a literary artist became mere collections of literary mosaics, arranged with little more than a newspaper idea of journalistic effect.

Elizabeth’s life now became a series of exhilarations followed by greater depressions. When he told her, in that vivid conversational way of his, how for three days he had searched for the mother of a girl who had brought death to three others and finally to herself, how at last he

found her destitute—her daughter having taken the savings of years—and how she had only said, with that queer look of tenement-house pathos, “Well, I suppose the only thing to be done now is for all of us to pitch in and give her a first-class funeral,” Elizabeth thought that now perhaps John would rise to his opportunity. But no; as each grotesque experience was related to her she would thrill with the awakened instinct of creative power, but when John’s blundering, bald-phrased dictation began she shuddered, and her artistic perceptions underwent crucifixion.

Just three years ago, John, encouraged by Elizabeth’s girlish admiration for what they had both regarded as his undoubted marks of literary talent, had announced his intention of leaving Graytown and going out into the larger world to win something more than her loving approval and applause. Elizabeth remembered, and how, inwardly, she had been passionately jealous of his work. In the months that followed, her resentment against the ambition which threatened to come between them and push her aside had steadily grown, and in time her bitterness had begun to open her eyes to the true extent and value of his presumptive ability. She had slowly acquired a contempt and cynicism for it which was pitiful in the extreme. For it must be remembered that Elizabeth had loved John ever since as a young girl of fifteen, recently orphaned, she had come to live with his mother, and John, then a bright-faced college boy home on a vacation, had teasingly asked her whether he was to address her as “Sis” or “Sweetheart.”

Now that John, helpless and almost at her mercy, was forced to abandon the very work that had taken him from her, she gradually relapsed into the old habit of encouraging him to pursue a work which she now realized could only reap a harvest of bitter disappointments and failure for him in the end. How different from the days when she and John used to go out into the woods together, and his wild imaginings would conjure up the most vivid and fanciful impressions! Elizabeth now saw, with all the quickened sensitiveness of latent power that was in herself, that John could never realize his literary hopes.

Still, she cheered and comforted him, but as the days drifted into weeks and the weeks into months, despair and hopelessness seized on her heart, and John’s all-absorbing vanity grew more formidable.

As the number of completed stories increased, the difficulty of placing them had to be faced. One after another they came back, looking at first as if they had been examined, but by-and-by Elizabeth knew that the leaves of manuscript had not been disturbed. Then she had to summon every resource of her woman’s nature to reassure John.

The path of fame was none so easy, she would tell him. He must have patience and keep steadily at work. His reward would come some day.

But she could not sustain him on this philosophical ground much longer. In the beginning she had encouraged him in his pathetic hopes, because her belief in his ability had been actual. Moreover, now, when he was stricken and helpless, the light flame of their boy and girl love had deepened into a lasting and immeasurable tenderness for him.

For some days she had lacked courage to tell him of the return of a certain manuscript in which he had a special faith. The long delay in hearing from the magazine to which they had sent it at first depressed and then cheered him.

"Beth," he would say, pathetically, "really, you know, they would not hold the thing so long as if they were not uncertain about its value."

Elizabeth could not bear it any longer. She went on a personal mission to the city. She told him she would call at the office of the magazine while there.

When she came back to Graytown she brought news that gave new life to John. His story had been accepted. The first rung on the ladder had been mounted.

After this desperate invention Elizabeth took the story to her room and read it over and over again, hoping against hope that she might be able to discover in it something that would make it sufficiently attractive. And as she read, the plot of the story grew into her consciousness, awakening in her all the power of the literary artist. She could almost hear John's rich voice, with its ringing enthusiasm, as he had glowingly told her the story.

A sudden excitement fired her. With a quick nervous pencil and an old pad of John's, she sat down by her window and began to write feverishly.

A few days later she made her second trip to the city, and just three months after she put the magazine, with the story printed over his name, into John's hands. All that day long there was joy and peace in the Swinnerton household. And if Elizabeth, in her little white room upstairs, smothered her sobs at night in her pillow, she smiled by day.

The effect of the publication of his first story upon John was instantaneous. Plans and ambitions wilder and more futile than ever occupied his mind. And Elizabeth had to bear the brunt of them. Hour after hour she took his dictation. She thought of those prisoners condemned to work forever at machines that merely registered their efforts—a round of endless labor with nothing but a dial face to show what might have been accomplished.

But when she went to work on John's dictation, the passion of the writer possessed her, and she forgot that she had been walking the treadmill of letters. The instant acceptance and publication of most of the stories—were they not John's as much as hers?—whetted confidence in her ability and acted as a spur to her pen. Gradually all the stories bearing the name of John Swinnerton found acceptance wherever sent.

Then the critics found him out. Articles, well written, which could not but appeal to his peculiar vanities, appeared in the press. He became popularly known as “the well-known short-story writer, who unites the observation of the reporter with the grace of the artist.” He was now a full-fledged author, and a successful one.

Meanwhile Elizabeth kept an almost jealous guard over him. No one, not even his mother, must read his precious work to him but her who had shared his labours. And John’s fond little mother, with tears in her eyes, kissed the girl’s wistful white face and promised.

To John, Elizabeth said:

“John, you are now a very important man. You must live a secluded life. It will not do for you to be disturbed by the vulgar outside world—not yet, at least.”

“You are all I want,” said John.

Elizabeth’s lip quivered.

“Then, too,” she continued, her voice shaking, “you must keep very quiet. You must not be excited or disturbed. Your work demands it.”

John’s mother said to him:

“Dear, you must do all Elizabeth says. She knows best.”

“She is a wonder!” said John, softly, and John’s mother startled at the little sob that involuntarily escaped Elizabeth.

John began upon a novel. The plot he had planned out long ago, and Elizabeth had thrilled and glowed over it with all the sympathy of the natural-born writer.

It was done at last. Wooden characters strode through melodramatic situations with the commonplaces of newspaper phraseology upon their lips.

Nevertheless, the day came when Elizabeth put the book into John’s hand.

“Your novel, John,” she said, hurrying from the room to her own chamber, and locking herself in.

An hour later she found him still alone with the book. He was rubbing it gently over his cheek, handling it as if it were a thing of life, to be touched reverently. He opened it, fingering with delicate affection the bold lines of print.

“My book, Beth!” he said, almost in a whisper.

“Your book, John!”

“Beth, you don’t know what this day is to me. A little while ago I was alone in the darkness, vainly groping toward the light. Now I have found it. Then I was only a blind man, without the right to hope. Now I am an author whom the world recognizes.”

He paused.

"Beth, when I was blind and obscure, I did not dare hope for that which you must know has been my heart's desire ever since I have known you."

Even in his emotion John's words did not escape a certain affectation of manner.

"I resolved to struggle to the light for your sake only, Beth. You were the prize which was to crown my efforts. Dear, you must know that glorious and intoxicating as is the beckoning hand which leads me on to where the star of fame is poised, dizzy and alluring, yet the star of love shines above it, supreme, and without it the star of fame is blurred and dim, a dazzling light without warmth and life. My struggles you have witnessed—and shared. The result you see. It is no martyrdom now I ask you to take up with me, but the love of a strong, successful man, an author blind, but with insight into the human heart. Beth, will you—can you—"

He stopped. The novel he held out between them. All of a sudden she struck it to the floor jealously, and put her hand in his in place of the book.

"John," she said, in a voice barely above a whisper, "you love me—better—than—"

"My work?" he laughed, joyously. "Yes, yes," he said. "It is only a record of my brain. You, you dearest and sweetest of women, you are my heart, my soul! You will be my wife, Beth?" With a smile that seemed the most pitiful thing in life, she raised her own misty eyes to the wondering, groping, sightless ones.

"Yes, John," she said, simply.

It was spring-time, three years since the night John Swinnerton returned to Graytown. In two months he was to be married.

He sat impatiently by an open window, restlessly turning his eyes toward the little path that led up to the house, just as if they were endowed with sight. Suddenly they dilated with excitement, as he felt, rather than heard, some one enter the little gate.

A few moments later a big burly professional-looking man was closeted alone with him. Outside the door, her hands trembling as though afflicted with ague, her ear straining at the key-hole, knelt, or rather crouched, his mother.

Scarce an hour later John's mother was sobbing in his arms.

"Oh, John, John, John!" she was crying. "I knew it. Mrs. Thomas said . . . and oh, thank God!"

John's face was aglow. "Mother dear," he said, "we must keep this from Beth a little longer. Let us surprise her when she comes back from the city."

When John Swinnerton first saw the light again, it awoke in him a sudden shock, almost repulsion. His eyes, which had been trembling in the dark so long, pained him excessively after the operation. By a strange revulsion of the delight with which he had looked forward to this

event, a feeling of inexplicable depression and melancholia assailed him, a premonition of disaster amounting almost to superstition. It may have been due to the fact that Elizabeth was absent in the city with an aunt, who was in John's confidence, buying her trousseau. However it was, when they told John of the success of the operation, and he saw for the first time in three years a peep of light warming his eyeballs, he marvelled at the depression that weighed down his spirits.

But he was up and about and quite strong and hearty when Elizabeth returned home. He had watched for her all morning—watched the little path with eyes that behind their darkened glasses saw clearly.

His mother, who met Elizabeth at the door, acted in what seemed to her an extraordinary fashion, laughing and kissing her hysterically, and then pushing her toward John's door. When she stepped into the room, John, instead of coming to meet her, stood back from her sombrely, pale to the lips with tense emotion, his two hands, quivering and trembling, outstretched to her.

"Here I am, dear—" she began; "and your mother—" She stopped short, for her eyes had travelled upward to his face, and with a sudden shock she saw the glasses, and all in a moment she understood.

She caught at the edge of the table dizzily, trying to gather her scattered senses. And then John, unable to restrain himself longer, strode across to her with an exclamation of the most immeasurable love, and folded her in his arms.

When the first hysterical inrush of her emotion was past, and John was holding her at arm's-length so that his greedy eyes might feed once more on her delightful beauty, a horror of the events of the past three years swept over her and took full possession of her. What had she done? What would John do when he knew the truth? John, who despised dishonesty in every shape and form; John, who had been given new life from the very success which was now his own; John, who was so greedy and proud of his attainments, whose whole life had been one upward struggle and straining after the unattainable prize, which she by a trick had placed in his hands? She could not go on deceiving him. He knew nothing as yet; otherwise he would not have taken her to his heart. Ah, she knew John so well! And as all the horrible questions came up in her mind one by one, like a long thread of dismal phantoms in a nightmare, she almost lost consciousness as she stood there before him, vainly trying to put them from her mind and feign understanding of what he was saying, to listen to his whispered and broken words of love. Ah, could she do without them now? They had become her life! John meant them. He had said he loved her for herself alone; then she had not won his love by her

trick. Oh, no, no; not that! But would he spurn and hate her when he knew the truth? She had long studied his complex character. She had been cynical in her grand disdain of the vanity which was so dominant in him. He had called it “self-confidence.” Was it stronger than his love for her? Ah, that was the question!

Gradually she drew away from him.

“You—you—you” Words failed her, and she began to sob.

“Why, my darling!” He knelt beside her. Out in the hall they could hear his mother weeping also. She had not resisted the tempting pleasure of listening to them at the door. “They are so sweet!” she apologized to herself; and still crying softly, she passed down the hall.

“Let me think—I must think—” cried Elizabeth. “No, John, don’t touch me. Let me alone a moment.”

“But, dearest one—”

“John, do you remember what I once asked you—whether you loved best me or your work?”

“And I said you, of course,” he replied, quickly.

“John, answer me that when—when you—John dear—when you have read over—some—of your stories, John.”

Still mystified, but greatly moved by her apparent distress, he replied, “But, dearest, I know them already, almost by heart.”

“No, no!” She was losing herself in her passionate distraction. She caught up his book and thrust it into his hands. “Can you see well enough to read? There—do—just a few chapters—” Her breath almost left her.

His eyes strained as he turned the title-pages, and slowly, painfully, he began to read.

The silence in the room was horrible. It would not have been broken but that the book dropped from his nerveless hands. He staggered back, his hand to his head, like one who has suddenly lost reason, memory, understanding; and as she approached him with wide bright eyes full of piteous supplication, he stepped backward away from her.

“John,” she said, “for the love of Heaven, speak to me.”

Her voice recalled him. “You!” he turned on her with savage fierceness. “What have you done? What horrible deceit is this you have practised on me? My God!”

“John, I—”

“Whose work is this?”

“Yours, dear—all yours!”

“Mine!” He laughed mockingly.

"Yours—and mine, John. You were my inspiration. You gave the life, the spark. I could not have written a line but for you. Your soul, which could not find expression through your medium, dear, entered into mine, and I—"

"Ah-h!" he said, "I understand. It is all clear to me now. You—you stole—you took—my—work. You are guilty of the most despicable, the meanest of thefts."

He sank down in a chair, burying his face in his hands, and groaning in the agony of sudden disillusion.

"John," she cried, her two little hands stretched toward him appealingly. "I can't bear it. John, love, it was for you!"

He looked up at her. "For God's sake leave me," he cried. "Your jest has come to its end."

She was gone. He rose and stumbled about the room, more helpless than when he was totally blind. He began feverishly gathering the scrap-books in which the printed stories which had been cut from the magazines were pasted. Then he groped his way across the room to a chest of drawers. He drew out the original manuscripts—"the copies," she had called them. These at least were his own. He carried them over to the table, and spread them out side by side in order, opposite to the stories in the scrap-books bearing the same titles.

He was shaking pitifully. His hands trembled violently as he turned page after page, and as he read, a great light, a light that was startling in its poignant clearness, dawned upon him. The crudities of his own work, the set, stupid, inane phraseology, the long, tedious duologues! And then, opposite, the delicate wit, the intangible art, the philosophy, the pathos!

His shoulders heaved, his heart suffocated him with its tumultuous beating, and his brain was swimming with vertigo. His thoughts would not tarry with him. They wandered inconstantly without any abiding-place in his mind. One great feeling welled up and took full possession of him, a longing that was almost madness for the presence, the touch, the sympathy of her he had spurned.

He sprang to his feet and strode to the door, throwing it open violently.

"Beth!" he called, and the startled cry of fear and longing rang up through the deserted halls.

In her room she heard it, and was glad.

Discussion Questions:

1. The central conflict of “Eyes That Saw Not” isn’t revealed until later in the story. At what point did you realize Elizabeth was rewriting John’s stories? How does the delayed revelation affect your experience of the story?
2. Elizabeth is dynamic and seems to undergo the most significant character development in the story. Trace her journey from admiring supporter to cynical observer to secret collaborator. What motivates each shift?
3. Whose point of view does the story seem to follow? What kind of information does that give us access to, and what kind of information are we missing? How would the story change if it were told from a different perspective? What could we gain or lose?
4. John’s blindness is the most obvious symbol in the story, and it is also referenced in the title of the work. What does it represent beyond just the physical condition?
5. Is Elizabeth’s deception justified? Did she steal John’s work, or did she give life to something he couldn’t express on his own?
6. What does the story suggest about collaboration and authorship? Consider that this story itself was co-written by Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton) and her husband Bertrand Babcock.

Chapter Writing Activity: Now that you’ve completed a careful and active reading of “Eyes That Saw Not,” practice writing a careful point of view analysis similar to the sample featured earlier in this chapter that used Chekhov’s “The Lottery Ticket.” First, be sure to figure out from which perspective the story is being told, and then work to go deeper in your analysis by considering why the author made that choice and how the story might change if it were told from a different point of view. You should also analyze how the point of view impacts the plot, characters, setting, and overall meaning of the story. Be sure to include quotations and specific details to support your ideas.

Chapter 7: Symbolism

As we continue building our understanding of the elements of fiction, we can now turn our attention to symbolism - one of the ways writers create deeper layers of meaning in their stories.

Understanding the Basics of Symbolism: A **literary symbol** is an object, person, place, or action that stands for or suggests something deeper inside of a story than its literal meaning. These symbols can be subtly woven into the text and tricky to find sometimes, and it is important to know that not all stories include them. It is best to allow the symbols in a story - if there are any at all - to come to you naturally through your careful, active reading. There's no need to force the issue or be dead set on finding symbols in what you are reading because, as the saying goes, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

There are a couple of main categories of literary symbols that can be found in stories, and we'll start with the ones you already recognize without even thinking about it. They are called **cultural symbols**. These kinds of symbols mean something more to an entire society or culture and are widely understood both inside and outside of a given story. Some examples are a cross, an American flag, or even a Nike Swoosh. These things are not very complex in the literal sense - two pieces of wood placed perpendicular to each other, a colorful piece of fabric, and a corporate logo - and yet these symbols still seem to conjure up many complex and abstract ideas, like faith, patriotism, and an athletic "Just Do It" mentality.

Cultural symbols extend beyond objects to actions like raising the middle finger to tell somebody "Nice driving!" or sliding our pointer finger across our throats as a threat. Again, the important thing here is that these are understood culturally, and so when a character in a story puts his thumbs up in response to a question, we understand (at least in Western cultures) that they are saying "OK" to something. One example of this type of symbol we've seen in our stories is the mention of Springtime in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," when Louise Mallard looks out her window. Springtime is pretty widely understood to symbolize rebirth, renewal, and a fresh start, and so it initially seems like an odd fit when she just found out that her husband died unexpectedly. A few moments later we can see what Chopin was doing by placing that conventional symbol into the story at that moment. Another example is the snake in Hurston's "Sweat." The snake has a long and storied history of symbolizing evil, temptation, and death in the Western world. Placing this threatening creature - and a deadly rattler, no less - into the otherwise safe space of Delia's home is one of the lowest points for Sykes in the story, and

becomes the instrument of his own death, which seems a fitting end for him. In general, these kinds of symbols are the easiest to find.

The other type of literary symbols that are found in stories are **contextual symbols**. Students often find this type of symbol much trickier to locate because unlike cultural symbols, contextual symbols gain their deeper meaning only within the specific story where they appear - the author creates the symbolic significance rather than drawing on shared cultural understanding. Some examples are Louise Mallard's repetitions of the words, "Free, free, free" in "The Story of an Hour." The word free can mean many things, including giving something away for nothing. But in the context of this story, it takes on a much deeper meaning symbolically. Louise is feeling free from her marriage, free from responsibilities, and free to do what she wants for all of her future days. The return of Brently Mallard is also symbolic in the story, despite it literally just being him walking in the front door. His return symbolizes the death of the future freedom and possibilities Louise had just imagined, and she literally passes away the moment she sees him.

Another example of a literary symbol is the basket of white sheets that Delia is trying to wash in "Sweat." White is often understood as a cultural symbol for purity, like in a wedding dress, but in terms of the story it also symbolizes Delia's hard work and dignity. When Sykes steps on and kicks away the load of laundry she is trying to clean, he isn't just getting some sheets dirty, he is disrespecting her effort and trying to degrade her worth. Again, the word "free" and a basket of laundry don't mean these same things to everyone everywhere - they aren't widely understood cultural symbols - but in the context of these two stories, these symbols pack a very powerful punch.

Lastly, sometimes symbolism is confused with what is known as **allegory**, but these are not the same things. An allegory is when an entire story is written with a hidden purpose, attempting to make a particular point - often religious or political in nature. When a story is an allegory, then yes, many of the objects, people, places, and actions inside the story are symbolic of other things, but they all fit nicely into the larger point being made. A famous example of an allegory is C.S. Lewis's 1950 novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* from his Chronicles of Narnia series. In the story, one character (Aslan) seemingly represents Christ, another (Edmund) represents humanity's sin, and a third (the White Witch) represents Satan. The plot eventually plays out similar to Christ's sacrifice to redeem humanity in the Bible. The main difference between these symbols in an allegory and contextual symbols like Delia's laundry in "Sweat" is

that the symbols in an allegory are all relatively fixed in meaning by the larger purpose, whereas contextual symbols are much more nuanced and open to interpretation. With both cultural and contextual symbols in mind, you're ready to begin looking for them in your own reading.

Writing a Symbolism Analysis: As stated earlier, not every work of fiction relies heavily on symbolism in order to get the story across; however, more often than not there is something in the story that suggests a deeper meaning. Even so, it is better to find little in the way of symbolism in a given work than to try and force deeper meanings on lots of things that are simply used literally in the piece.

That said, it is best to begin with an active and careful reading with a lookout first for widely recognizable cultural symbols that are easy to spot. When you find some, ask yourself why they were put in the story, and how their cultural significance impacts the meaning of the work. This first step will get you going down the path to evaluating symbolism in a given piece of fiction. Next, look again for objects, people, places, or actions that seem to suggest more than their simple literal meanings. Sometimes these will jump out at you in a second reading rather than a first. You can also look for objects, people, places, or actions that are repeated in a story, like all the references to Delia's laundry in Zora Neale Hurston's story. The more it gets mentioned, the more impactful it might be as a symbol.

Another great suggestion is to consider the titles, particularly of short stories, as many offer a clue to the reader of an important symbol in the work. An example of this is the aforementioned "Sweat." We've discussed the snake and the laundry, but what about the word in the title? The term "Sweat" appears throughout the piece and seems to mean a lot more than simple perspiration - which is what sweat *literally* is. Instead, it can be seen as a reference to Florida's brutal heat and humidity on one hand, but even deeper than that, it suggests Delia's hard work, determination, and suffering. Sykes, on the other hand never works, and so never "sweats," yet he tries to claim ownership over the fruits of Delia's labor, even as he mocks her efforts. The term "sweat," when viewed as a symbol, helps us to see a lot more of what is going on in the story.

One of the trickiest things when writing about symbols, though, is that we have to be able to provide evidence for why we think something has a particular meaning. In other words, while

there really isn't any one *right* answer to what things mean in most stories, if you can't find any textual support for an idea you have, then it is likely incorrect. For example, one could say, "when I think of large white sheets of fabric, I think of sails on a ship and travelling, and so I think that the basket of white laundry that Delia is washing is a symbol that she wants to get away from everything." This idea isn't inherently incorrect, but the problem is that when we make assertions such as this one, we need to provide evidence either directly from the story itself - by quoting or paraphrasing - or from other context surrounding the text (historical evidence, culture, the author's intended purpose) that supports that our assertion is legitimate. As for the "boat sails" idea, well, there is very little evidence to support it. In fact, the story explains pretty clearly on multiple occasions that Delia has worked hard for her home and takes great pride in it, and she is also closely connected to her church and her community. So, it would be best to go back to the drawing board and try to find another possibility that is easier to support with the text.

In the end, whether we are looking at conventional symbols or contextual symbols that we support with evidence from the text, we can significantly deepen our understanding and enjoyment of reading by considering this rich element of fiction.

"The Lottery Ticket" Sample Symbol Analysis: When we look for symbols in Anton Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket," it is best to begin by looking for the easier to find **cultural symbols**. Considering the title of the story, the first and most obvious choice is the lottery ticket itself. In most cultures, lottery tickets symbolize hope, possibility, and the dream of gaining sudden wealth and changing your life. This is exactly how the lottery ticket functions inside of the story, as a symbol of the possibility that Ivan and Masha may escape from their ordinary, middle-class lives. And it isn't just about the money itself, but the freedom and the chance to have a relaxing, leisurely existence that becomes so exciting.

Another cultural symbol in the story is the idea of an estate, which is referenced multiple times in the fantasies of both Ivan and Masha. Culturally, our homes have a lot of symbolic value attached - including strong connections to our senses of safety, belonging, and identity. To upgrade from their middle class dwellings that Ivan eventually describes as "dark and small and low-pitched" to an impressive estate would give the family safety, far more space, and privacy.

In addition, centering their dreams around living in an estate right from the outset reveals their class anxieties and aspirations to climb in social status.

Beyond cultural symbols, the text also features several **contextual symbols**. First is the series number 9,499. This number is repeated early and often through the story, and beyond what a lottery ticket can do in a generic sense, the fact that they matched this number means, as Ivan says, “there is a probability that [they] have won” (Chekhov). This number then, symbolically, is referring to the possibility that they have won. The door has been opened, and as long as 9,499 is a match and they don’t look in the newspaper to check the next number, then that glimmer of hope persists. Chekhov uses the symbol brilliantly here, as each time the number is mentioned, it is a potent reminder that Ivan and Masha’s dream of great freedom and wealth is still alive.

Another symbol that is referenced multiple times in the story is the train. A train can mean many things to many people, including part of a boring morning commute to work for people who live in cities, but in this story, the train is symbolic of travelling to new places and living an entirely new lifestyle. When Ivan mentions travelling on the train, he is thinking of going abroad to locations like Southern France, Naples, Italy and India. He imagines travelling alone, so he can spend time with “light, careless women who live in the present” (Chekhov) instead of his wife. The first time he turns on Masha in the story is when he tries to picture her going along on the train trip with him. He imagines her weighed down with loads of luggage and thinks “she would be sighing over something, complaining that the train made her head ache, that she had spent so much money” (Chekhov).

Chekhov’s “The Lottery Ticket” doesn’t rely on the use of symbolism as much as many other stories, and yet, with these symbols in mind, we can see how potent and impactful they can be in a story. Chekhov uses the lottery ticket as more than just a plot device but as a trigger for fantasies that eventually expose the fault lines in Ivan and Masha’s marriage. They both share dreams of living in an estate - which includes a massive climb in social status - but the more the possibilities of series 9,499 are dangled in front of them, the more their relationship collapses. Their deep-seated hatred for each other is finally revealed once Ivan begins dreaming of travelling the world by train all alone.

Now It's Your Turn: After having read a sample symbolism analysis of "The Lottery Ticket," read the following story actively and complete the practice chapter writing activity at the end in order to get some hands-on experience doing a symbolism analysis of your own.



Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was an American writer, lecturer, and social reformer who became one of the leading feminist voices of her era. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, she had a difficult childhood marked by her father's abandonment of the family, leaving her mother to raise Charlotte and her brother in poverty.

Gilman struggled with severe depression after the birth of her daughter in 1885, and her physician prescribed the infamous "rest cure" - complete bed rest with no mental stimulation. This experience directly inspired her most famous work, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). The story has become a classic of feminist literature and is still widely read today for its powerful critique of how women's mental and physical health was treated in the nineteenth century.

Beyond her fiction, Gilman was a prolific writer of nonfiction, publishing works like *Women and Economics* (1898), which argued for women's financial independence. She lectured extensively across the United States and founded her own magazine, *The Forerunner*, which she wrote and published single-handedly from 1909 to 1916.

Gilman's personal life was unconventional for her time. She divorced her first husband and encouraged him to marry her best friend, then later remarried. Diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer, she chose to end her life in 1935, leaving behind a note that read, "I have preferred chloroform to cancer."

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—*perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see, he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.

So I will let it alone and talk about the house.

The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.

There is a *delicious* garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid; but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it.

I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a *draught*, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself,—before him, at least,—and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery, at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playground and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate, and provoke study, and when you follow the lame, uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions.

The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word.

We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength.

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!

I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!

Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able—to dress and entertain, and order things.

It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby!

And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous.

I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wallpaper!

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.

He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

"You know the place is doing you good," he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months' rental."

"Then do let us go downstairs," I said, "there are such pretty rooms there."

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain.

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things.

It is as airy and comfortable a room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fire-works in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside-down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place

where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store.

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious, however, for we had to bring it all from downstairs. I suppose when this was used as a playroom they had to take the nursery things out, and no wonder! I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

The wallpaper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed, which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.

But I don't mind it a bit—only the paper.

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.

She is a perfect, and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows.

There is one that commands the road, a lovely, shaded, winding road, and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded, and where the sun is just so, I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

There's sister on the stairs!

Well, the Fourth of July is over! The people are gone and I am tired out. John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so we just had mother and Nellie and the children down for a week.

Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now.

But it tired me all the same.

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!

Besides, it is such an undertaking to go so far.

I don't feel as if it was worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous.

I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time.

Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to.

So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper.

It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of “debased Romanesque” with *delirium tremens*—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the cross-lights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all,—the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap, I guess.

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod-liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness, I suppose.

And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head.

He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper.

If we had not used it that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all. I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

Of course I never mention it to them any more,—I am too wise,—but I keep watch of it all the same.

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here!

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around, just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper *did* move, and when I came back John was awake.

"What is it, little girl?" he said. "Don't go walking about like that—you'll get cold."

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before."

"The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better. I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening, when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away."

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug; "she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

"And you won't go away?" I asked gloomily.

"Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really, dear, you are better!"

"Better in body perhaps"—I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.

"My darling," said he, "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't,—I lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well under way in following, it turns a back somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions,—why, that is something like it.

That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window—I always watch for that first long, straight ray—it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

By moonlight—the moon shines in all night when there is a moon—I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind,—that dim sub-pattern,—but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed, he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit, I am convinced, for, you see, I don't sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake,—oh, no!

The fact is, I am getting a little afraid of John.

He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times *looking at the paper!* And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wallpaper—he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.

I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime.

In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing.

There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.

It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.

But there is something else about that paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair.

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad—at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful. I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell.

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over.

I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!

I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside-down, and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her on that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!

I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

And John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once.

But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at one time.

And though I always see her she *may* be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.

I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes.

And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime.

John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.

As if I couldn't see through him!

Still, I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months.

It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.

Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John is to stay in town over night, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight, and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me I declared I would finish it to-day!

We go away to-morrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me—not *alive*!

She tried to get me out of the room—it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner—I would call when I woke.

So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

We shall sleep downstairs to-night, and take the boat home to-morrow.

I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here!

This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.

I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

This bed will *not* move!

I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.

Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to *look* out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get *me* out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Why, there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!"

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said—very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!"

"I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!"

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it, of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!

Discussion Questions:

1. Identify the story's inciting incident, key moments of rising action, and climax. What makes these moments significant in terms of the narrator's psychological journey?
2. How would you characterize the narrator at the beginning of the story and then again at the end? What specific details from the text show us her transformation?
3. We get to know John mostly from his actions and his dialogue. What kind of husband does he seem to be? Does he love his wife?
4. How does the setting of the story - consider the colonial mansion and the room the narrator is staying in - contribute to the narrator's mental state?
5. Why do you think Gilman structures the story through the use of the narrator's diary entries? How does this intimate, first-person perspective affect our understanding of her mental state and our trust in what she tells us? What would be different if told through a more objective third-person narrator?
6. Gilman's story is widely thought to be a commentary on the poor state of the physical and mental healthcare treatment of women in the late 1800s. What are some pieces of evidence in the text that help to support this idea? Consider the narrator's treatment and her ability to make decisions for herself.

Chapter Writing Activity: After a careful and active reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," practice writing an analysis of the symbols in the story similar to the sample featured earlier in this chapter on Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket." Make sure to consider both the cultural symbols in the story along with the contextual ones. Also, this story matches up perfectly with the "pay attention to the title" suggestion earlier in the chapter, so be sure to account for the yellow wallpaper itself and what it could symbolize. Lastly, remember when you suggest that a person, place, object, or action has a symbolic meaning in the story, be sure to provide textual evidence to support your assertion.

Chapter 8: Style and Tone

In this chapter, we dig into the line-by-line writing of a short story with a narrower focus than before, considering the language and writing style used. However, we'll also take a step back and look at the overall tone of the work as well. These two activities may seem somewhat different, but style and tone are tightly connected, as we'll learn in this section.

Understanding the Basics of Style: Style is the manner in which we go about doing something, and it is a concept that we are all familiar with in many different facets of our lives. Styles are also unique to the individual, and so while one person might love hip-hop music, dress in boho chic outfits, and be fascinated by modernist abstract painting, another person might not like a single one of those things. As the saying goes, “there is no accounting for taste,” and each of us has our own characteristic style.

Much the same can be said for literature, as each author and each story has its own style that emerges through a close and careful reading. The various facets that feed into the style of a given piece of fiction are many, but we are going to focus on three of the most significant here. The first two go hand in hand and are the **diction** and **syntax** of the writing. Diction is basically just a fancier way of looking at the word choices an author makes throughout their story, while syntax looks at the structures of the sentences. So, we need to consider both the word choices and the sentence structures that an author uses in order to help us determine their writing style.

If we once again look at Hurston’s “Sweat” as a great example, the way that she chose to have her characters speak in the authentic dialect for African Americans in Florida during that time period was a powerful stylistic choice, and while maybe it isn’t the easiest to read, it changes the way we imagine what is going on. For example, in order to describe Delia’s work ethic and reliability with her laundry business, one of the folks in town says, “Hot or col’, rain or shine, jes ez reg’lar ez de weeks roll roun’ Delia carries ’em an’ fetches ’em on Sat’d’ay” (Hurston). Hurston could have written in standard English, but she made the stylistic choice to include this much more authentic and musical voice to celebrate and preserve this aspect of African American culture and make the story feel profoundly real.

The powerful impact of syntax can be seen throughout Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” We see how the narrator is locked in a mental battle for her own ability to make decisions for herself, and even in the journal style point of view, we find moments where her own thoughts

seem interrupted by these controlling influences. An example is where the narrator says, “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house” (Gilman). Here you can see that just before the narrator finishes her thought about wanting more agency and social interaction, the sentence is literally cut in half by a dash and interrupted by what John thinks is best. John is not even there at the moment, but even her own thoughts are split here between what they both think is the best course of action, and so Gilman has made the stylistic decision to cut the sentence right in the middle as well.

A third part of style is the **imagery** that an author creates through their stories. The way we picture what is happening in a story - plot, character, setting and more - is through the details we’re given, and the images they conjure up in our mind. The way Faulkner describes Emily’s home in the opening of “A Rose for Emily” - which is really the end of the story, just after Emily has died - is as follows:

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily’s house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores (Faulkner).

The powerful image begins in the past when the home was beautiful and on the best street in town, and quickly describes how things have deteriorated. We see how all the “garages and cotton gins” and industrial machinery have encroached, along with “cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps” that now surround her house. He describes the home as both “stubborn” and in a state of “coquettish decay” as well. All these vivid images help us picture the scene in our minds, and because of this powerful imagery, the stage is set for where the story eventually will end - with a rotting corpse of a man upstairs in the rotting corpse of a home that’s stuck in the industrial part of town, or as Faulkner says, “an eyesore among eyesores.”

Understanding the Basics of Tone: The tone of a given piece of fiction is the author’s or narrator’s attitude and feelings towards the subject, characters, or audience in the work. When

a person speaks to us in conversation, they usually have a particular tone in their voice and mannerisms which allow them to say something like, “Nice job!” and mean it as a genuine compliment or an insult. Most of us are able to fairly easily determine the difference between these two meanings, but it can be a bit trickier when reading fiction. Since we don’t have that voice or body language to go on, we need to really look carefully at the words, sentences, and images used to help us determine the tone.

For example, if we consider the tone in Watanna and Babcock’s “Eyes That Saw Not,” we get a sense of heart-felt sincerity that comes through in much of the story. The narrator isn’t joking about the content of this story, and they aren’t mocking either. Instead, we just get very serious and straight-forward writing with lines like, “For it must be remembered that Elizabeth had loved John ever since as a young girl of fifteen, recently orphaned, she had come to live with his mother” (Watanna and Babcock). This sincerity can also be seen in the scenes where John and Beth profess their love for each other, like when John says, “You, you dearest and sweetest of women, you are my heart, my soul! You will be my wife, Beth?” It’s so heart-felt, it can almost border on being a little cheesy here.

However, there is more going on in the tone in the story, as the narrator also seems to have some complicated feelings towards John, including that he has a sense of “overweening vanity” - meaning he is extremely self-important - and that his writing “lacked every grace; all the strength and picturesque beauty of his narration were wanting. While he had been talking he was himself, natural, spontaneous; now he was somebody else, an author dictating a story” (Watanna and Babcock). The narrator’s critical perspective on John softens us up for our eventual agreement that Beth likely did the right thing by improving his stories and deceiving him, but again, the tone here is very important to that. Adding further complexity, the story was co-written between Onoto Watanna and her husband Bertrand Babcock, and so we have to wonder how that relationship fed into this story and the narrative tone as well.

As far as the types of tone that can be found in a story, it is once again as varied and wide-ranging as there are authors and stories. A narrator or author’s tone can run anywhere from admiring, compassionate, amused and joyful to aggressive, angry, depressing, and defiant. However, one of the more common and complex tones that students will find in literature is when a narrator is being **ironic**. Essentially, this is when the words in the story don’t really

match the situation of what is actually happening, and when the readers catch on to this discrepancy, then this ironic tone really works.

A good example of an ironic tone in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is when Louise runs up to her room and locks the door after getting the news about Brentley. Her sister comes upstairs and as the narrator describes, "Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. 'Louise, open the door! I beg, open the door — you will make yourself ill'" (Chopin). We, of course, have access to the other side of the door and understand that Louise is actually feeling a massive sense of relief and excitement, which is the opposite of what one might expect. Further, this tone is developed even more by the shocking ending, where Brentley comes home unexpectedly, and Louise has a heart attack on the stairway upon seeing him. The doctor tells Brentley that "she had died of heart disease — of the joy that kills" (Chopin). This is what is known as **situational irony** because we know what the doctor means and what Brentley thinks it means - she died from the joy of seeing her husband was alive - but we also know that it is exactly the opposite. She *did* die of a joy that kills, but it was the joy of imagining her future without Brentley, and once that ended, so did her life.

There are three main kinds of irony used in literature. The first is **verbal irony**, when characters say the opposite of what they mean, kind of like coming in from a downpour and saying, "Such a beautiful day out there!" The second is **situational irony**, where the outcome is the opposite of what is expected, like a police station getting robbed. The third is **dramatic irony**, where the audience knows things that the characters in a story do not, and this creates suspense. We could say that "The Story of an Hour" has an ironic tone overall because these types of ironic situations are spread throughout the text. Louise feeling excited at Brentley's death is situational irony - we would assume she'd be devastated. The final line is both verbal irony and dramatic irony. The doctor's reference to the source of Louise's "joy" is the exact opposite of the truth, and only the readers know it. Many of our other stories have a variety of these types of irony as well. For some examples, we can see dramatic irony in "Sweat" when we know the snake is loose and there are no matches left, but Sykes does not. There is situational irony in that story too, when Sykes brought in the snake in the first place to threaten Delia, and he ended up killed by his own foolishness.

Understanding how style - through diction, syntax, and imagery - feeds into a story's tone helps us develop a deeper sense of the narrator's or author's perspective beyond just a point of view analysis alone. When we pay attention to these stylistic choices, we can also recognize when stories employ an ironic tone and identify the specific types of irony at work. In the following reading, you'll have the chance to practice analyzing style, tone, and irony together in a single story."

Writing a Style and Tone Analysis: When you sit down to write an analysis of the style and tone of a work of fiction, you are basically trying to put together all the observations you've made through your close and careful reading. The purpose here isn't to prove that you read the story - it's about showing how the author's choices in language and the tone of the author or narrator towards the story itself impacts our understanding of the work and our experience as a reader.

Start by identifying the stylistic features that jump out in the reading. Consider **diction** - are the word choices formal and elevated or casual and down-to-earth? Next, consider the **syntax** - are there long sprawling sentences or short choppy ones? When are these various types of lines used? Perhaps you'll notice that some characters have one kind of voice while others speak differently. Finally, consider the kinds of **imagery** that is present. Does the author use vivid descriptions for some aspect of the story and more neutral or bland images for others? Of course, you can't obsess over every single style choice - as every word in a story is chosen intentionally - but look for patterns that may have an impact on how the story works.

Once you've got some ideas of these stylistic elements, try to connect them to the tone they create. A story with lots of short, simple sentences and direct and straight-forward language might feel like it has a blunt or matter-of-fact tone. On the other hand, if the sentences are extremely long and weighted down with elaborate wording, you might find the tone nostalgic or overly-formal. Remember it is about making that connection between the style choices (*how* the story is told) and the tone of the author or narrator (*why* it is told that way). For example, we could say that "Gilman's use of interrupted syntax - sentences that cut off the narrator's thoughts mid-stream with dashes - creates a tone of fragmentation and psychological distress, which matches up with the way that the narrator has lost control over her life."

If you notice irony at work, or find that a story has a particularly **ironic tone**, don't just label it as "ironic" and move on. Try and point out the gap between expectation and reality (**situational irony**), between what's said and what's meant (**verbal irony**), or between what the characters know and what the readers know (**dramatic irony**). As we've talked about before, simply saying that "The Story of an Hour" includes irony does very little for your analysis, whereas analyzing the specific ironies reveals much more about the story and the how the tone of the story is both tragic and darkly critical of the marriage constraints placed on women in the late 1800s.

As always, be sure to support your claims with specific quotes from the text that back up your ideas. Don't just say Hurston has her characters talking in a particular dialect without giving the reader a sample of it. The same principle applies to imagery. If you believe Faulkner wanted to highlight the horror of the ending of "A Rose for Emily" with his creepy description of that upstairs bedroom, then be sure to provide some of that detail in your work as well.

Finally, connect analysis of the style and tone to the story's larger meaning. How do the stylistic choices you found and the tone you've arrived at help convey the deeper messages and meaning of the story on the whole? How does it shape your understanding of the other elements of fiction, like plot and character? Does the narrator having a seemingly critical perspective on John in "Eyes That Saw Not" impact your own feelings towards the character? Does that help you to side with Beth during the climactic moment when her deception is revealed? In the end, a good analysis doesn't just tell a reader what is there, but it explains why it matters. And remember, there is no single "right" interpretation of style and tone. Different readers may emphasize different elements that they want to focus on, but what matters most is that whatever you choose, you are able to provide specific textual evidence to explain how the author's choices created the effects you are identifying and how they help build up the tone and eventually the meaning of a given work of fiction.

"The Lottery Ticket" Sample Style and Tone Analysis: In Anton Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket," the author uses deceptively simple style choices to make a shift from a playful story about a happy couple dreaming about what life might be like if they were to win the lottery into a cynical warning about how corrosive greed can destroy human relationships. In the end, Chekhov's story functions on multiple levels of irony, where the readers can see what is going on even as the characters themselves cannot, all while making a powerful commentary on how quickly fantasies of wealth and status can poison reality.

First, the **diction** in the story opens with a very casual and conversational style as we are dropped into a quiet family conversation. We don't get much in the way of vivid imagery in the wording here, but more basic descriptions that tell us Ivan is "a middle-class man" who was "very well satisfied" with his life. We get bits of light amusement, as Masha realizes she "forgot to look at the newspaper" and casually asks Ivan to check the winning lottery numbers. For Ivan's part, we're told he has "no faith" in lotteries at all and wouldn't even bother to check the numbers usually, but since he's got "nothing else to do" he skims through the paper to find them (Chekhov).

Everything changes once the series 9,499 is a match, however. Right away the word choices become more vivid, with Ivan feeling an "agreeable chill in the pit of the stomach; tingling and terrible and sweet" while Masha looks at "his astonished and panicstricken face" (Chekhov). The language choices quickly escalate from there, as the couple both spiral off into fantasies about the money. Suddenly the word choices are dynamic with Ivan imagining himself laying "on his back on the burning sand close to a stream or in the garden under a lime-tree" while his children are "digging in the sand or catching ladybirds in the grass" (Chekhov). The colorful descriptions continue as Ivan falls further into the fantasy, and then come crashing down at the end as the bubble has burst, and the couple realizes that they didn't win anything at all.

The **syntax** in Chekhov's story is similar. The opening uses straightforward sentence structures to describe what is going on. The couple's dialogue comes in particularly short and choppy sentences. For example, a portion of their initial conversation is as follows:

"Yes, it is," said Ivan Dmitritch; "but hasn't your ticket lapsed?"

"No; I took the interest on Tuesday."

"What is the number?"

"Series 9,499, number 26" (Chekhov).

Again though, the sentence structures change completely once Ivan is spiraling off into his fantasies of wealth and status. In fact, at times there aren't clear beginnings and endings to the sentences at all, as Chekhov uses ellipses to string together loads of jumbled thoughts, like in the following single sentence that stretches on and on:

"At that season he would have to take longer walks about the garden and beside the

river, so as to get thoroughly chilled, and then drink a big glass of vodka and eat a salted mushroom or a soused cucumber, and then--drink another. . . . The children would come running from the kitchen-garden, bringing a carrot and a radish smelling of fresh earth. . . . And then, he would lie stretched full length on the sofa, and in leisurely fashion turn over the pages of some illustrated magazine, or, covering his face with it and unbuttoning his waistcoat, give himself up to slumber" (Chekhov).

When the dreams of wealth and status have collapsed, however, the sentences revert back to being short, choppy, and straight-forward, as the final lines are Ivan saying "The rooms are never swept! One is simply forced to go out. Damnation take my soul entirely! I shall go and hang myself on the first aspen-tree" (Chekhov)! In the end, through the clever use of syntax, Chekhov shows us how Ivan and Masha's orderly and contented life before the dreams of winning the lottery became chaotic and turned upside-down.

Chekhov's use of **imagery** follows a very similar trajectory, as we begin in a little described simple living room on a "sofa" that receives no further detail but before long find ourselves in a fantasy world full of vivid imagery. From hot sand and cool streams to icy cold sips of vodka and pulling delicious "carrot and a radish smelling of fresh earth" from their own kitchen-garden to make for dinner, the dreams include loads of detailed descriptions that we can imagine seeing, tasting, touching, and feeling. The difference is stark here, and when the dreams finally come crashing down, these beautiful mental pictures are replaced by a deep disappointment - and a lack of vivid imagery - that speaks volumes.

These style choices help us to determine the tone of the work, which seems to be darkly comic and ironic on many levels. The first is that the entire story operates on **situational irony**, as we would expect that a middle-class couple muddling through life would be made much happier at the prospect of winning a fortune and living a wealthy, care-free future. Instead, the exact opposite happens and this possibility reveals Ivan's selfishness and greed and destroys their peace of mind and relationship. The story also includes various examples of **dramatic irony** as the readers can see both the difference between the wild dreams that are playing out in Ivan's head - and seemingly Masha's too - and the little verbal exchanges going on in a mostly silent room. Ivan simply says they should get an estate and Masha agrees. Later, Ivan says he'd like to go abroad, and Masha agrees again, but the extent of the fantasies and eventual hatred for

each other happening internally is something we know, but they themselves don't fully grasp in the moment.

There is also a larger dramatic irony at play, as we can see that the couple is allowing something real - their relationship - to be destroyed by something imaginary - lottery winnings they don't have. By the time the story wraps up, they have torn everything apart over nothing at all. In the end, by considering the style choices and arriving at a sense of the tone of the story, Chekhov seems to want us to both laugh at this comical situation and the absurdity of it all, while also understanding this is a tragedy that reveals something important about the darker side of human nature.

Now It's Your Turn: After having read a sample analysis of the style and tone in "The Lottery Ticket," read the following story actively and complete the practice chapter writing activity at the end in order to get some first-hand experience doing a style and tone analysis of your own.



Liam O'Flaherty (1896-1984) was an Irish novelist and short story writer born on Inishmore, one of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. Growing up in a Gaelic-speaking community, O'Flaherty was deeply connected to Irish culture, though he would later write primarily in English. He studied for the priesthood but left and joined the Irish Guards during World War I, where he was seriously wounded at the Battle of Langemarck in 1917.

After the war, O'Flaherty returned to Ireland during the tumultuous period of the Irish War of Independence and the subsequent Irish Civil War (1922-1923). He briefly joined the Irish Republican Army and was involved in radical politics, even participating in the occupation of the Rotunda in Dublin in 1922. However, he became disillusioned with the violence and political divisions tearing Ireland apart—experiences that would deeply influence his writing, particularly "The Sniper."

O'Flaherty is known for his stark, realistic prose and his ability to capture both the beauty and brutality of Irish life. "The Sniper," published in 1923, remains his most famous short story and

is a powerful commentary on the Irish Civil War's senseless violence and its devastating impact on families and communities. O'Flaherty also wrote numerous novels, including *The Informer* (1925), which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and was later adapted into an Academy Award-winning film by John Ford. O'Flaherty continued to write until his death in 1984, and his legacy remains significant in Irish literature.

A Note of Context: "The Sniper" was written about the Irish Civil War that took place from 1922-1923. After hundreds of years under British Rule, Irish negotiators had agreed on a treaty that would allow for partial self-governance. Some of the Irish supported the final agreement, while others refused to accept it. This led to a brutal Irish civil war between the pro-treaty Free Staters and the anti-treaty Republicans. To be clear, the term Republican here is not related to the American Political party.

"The Sniper" by Liam O'Flaherty

The long June twilight faded into night. Dublin lay enveloped in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light as of approaching dawn over the streets and the dark waters of the Liffey. Around the beleaguered Four Courts the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.

On a rooftop near O'Connell Bridge, a Republican sniper lay watching. Beside him lay his rifle and over his shoulders was slung a pair of field glasses. His face was the face of a student, thin and ascetic, but his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic. They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to looking at death.

He was eating a sandwich hungrily. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had been too excited to eat. He finished the sandwich, and, taking a flask of whiskey from his pocket, he took a short drought. Then he returned the flask to his pocket. He paused for a moment, considering whether he should risk a smoke. It was dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there were enemies watching. He decided to take the risk.

Placing a cigarette between his lips, he struck a match, inhaled the smoke hurriedly and put out the light. Almost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof. The sniper took another whiff and put out the cigarette. Then he swore softly and crawled away to the left.

Cautiously he raised himself and peered over the parapet. There was a flash and a bullet whizzed over his head. He dropped immediately. He had seen the flash. It came from the opposite side of the street.

He rolled over the roof to a chimney stack in the rear, and slowly drew himself up behind it, until his eyes were level with the top of the parapet. There was nothing to be seen--just the dim outline of the opposite housetop against the blue sky. His enemy was under cover. Just then an armored car came across the bridge and advanced slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street, fifty yards ahead. The sniper could hear the dull panting of the motor. His heart beat faster. It was an enemy car. He wanted to fire, but he knew it was useless. His bullets would never pierce the steel that covered the gray monster. Then round the corner of a side street came an old woman, her head covered by a tattered shawl. She began to talk to the man in the turret of the car. She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.

The turret opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared, looking toward the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and fired. The head fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman darted toward the side street. The sniper fired again. The woman whirled round and fell with a shriek into the gutter.

Suddenly from the opposite roof a shot rang out and the sniper dropped his rifle with a curse. The rifle clattered to the roof. The sniper thought the noise would wake the dead. He stooped to pick the rifle up. He couldn't lift it. His forearm was dead. "I'm hit," he muttered. Dropping flat onto the roof, he crawled back to the parapet. With his left hand he felt the injured right forearm. The blood was oozing through the sleeve of his coat. There was no pain--just a deadened sensation, as if the arm had been cut off.

Quickly he drew his knife from his pocket, opened it on the breastwork of the parapet, and ripped open the sleeve. There was a small hole where the bullet had entered. On the other side there was no hole. The bullet had lodged in the bone. It must have fractured it. He bent the arm below the wound. the arm bent back easily. He ground his teeth to overcome the pain. Then taking out his field dressing, he ripped open the packet with his knife. He broke the neck of the iodine bottle and let the bitter fluid drip into the wound. A paroxysm of pain swept through him. He placed the cotton wadding over the wound and wrapped the dressing over it. He tied the ends with his teeth.

Then he lay still against the parapet, and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to overcome the pain.

In the street beneath all was still. The armored car had retired speedily over the bridge, with the machine gunner's head hanging lifeless over the turret. The woman's corpse lay still in the gutter.

The sniper lay still for a long time nursing his wounded arm and planning escape. Morning must not find him wounded on the roof. The enemy on the opposite roof covered his escape. He must kill that enemy and he could not use his rifle. He had only a revolver to do it. Then he thought of a plan.

Taking off his cap, he placed it over the muzzle of his rifle. Then he pushed the rifle slowly upward over the parapet, until the cap was visible from the opposite side of the street. Almost immediately there was a report, and a bullet pierced the center of the cap. The sniper slanted the rifle forward. The cap clipped down into the street. Then catching the rifle in the middle, the sniper dropped his left hand over the roof and let it hang, lifelessly. After a few moments he let the rifle drop to the street. Then he sank to the roof, dragging his hand with him. Crawling quickly to his feet, he peered up at the corner of the roof. His ruse had succeeded. The other sniper, seeing the cap and rifle fall, thought that he had killed his man. He was now standing before a row of chimney pots, looking across, with his head clearly silhouetted against the western sky.

The Republican sniper smiled and lifted his revolver above the edge of the parapet. The distance was about fifty yards--a hard shot in the dim light, and his right arm was paining him like a thousand devils. He took a steady aim. His hand trembled with eagerness. Pressing his lips together, he took a deep breath through his nostrils and fired. He was almost deafened with the report and his arm shook with the recoil.

Then when the smoke cleared, he peered across and uttered a cry of joy. His enemy had been hit. He was reeling over the parapet in his death agony. He struggled to keep his feet, but he was slowly falling forward as if in a dream. The rifle fell from his grasp, hit the parapet, fell over, bounded off the pole of a barber's shop beneath and then clattered on the pavement. Then the dying man on the roof crumpled up and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.

He looked at the smoking revolver in his hand, and with an oath he hurled it to the roof at his feet. The revolver went off with a concussion and the bullet whizzed past the sniper's head. He was frightened back to his senses by the shock. His nerves steadied. The cloud of fear scattered from his mind and he laughed.

Taking the whiskey flask from his pocket, he emptied it a drought. He felt reckless under the influence of the spirit. He decided to leave the roof now and look for his company commander, to report. Everywhere around was quiet. There was not much danger in going through the streets. He picked up his revolver and put it in his pocket. Then he crawled down through the skylight to the house underneath.

When the sniper reached the laneway on the street level, he felt a sudden curiosity as to the identity of the enemy sniper whom he had killed. He decided that he was a good shot, whoever he was. He wondered did he know him. Perhaps he had been in his own company before the split in the army. He decided to risk going over to have a look at him. He peered around the corner into O'Connell Street. In the upper part of the street there was heavy firing, but around here all was quiet.

The sniper darted across the street. A machine gun tore up the ground around him with a hail of bullets, but he escaped. He threw himself face downward beside the corpse. The machine gun stopped.

Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face.

Discussion Questions:

1. The story begins *in medias res* (in the middle of action) rather than with background or setup. How does this affect your experience as a reader? What does starting in the middle of the conflict accomplish?
2. How does O'Flaherty structure the rest of the plot to create maximum suspense? Consider where he places the revelation about the enemy sniper's identity and why that timing matters.
3. How does the sniper's character change over the course of the story? Compare his mental state when he lights the cigarette to his state after killing the enemy sniper.
4. How does the urban warfare setting of Dublin at night contribute to the story's atmosphere and tension? What specific details of setting stand out?

5. What is the point of view that O'Flaherty uses in this story? How does this perspective contribute to the story's surprise ending? What information is deliberately withheld from both the sniper and the reader, and how might the story feel different if we knew who the other shooter was earlier?
6. How does the story explore the theme of the dehumanizing effects of war? Point to specific moments where the sniper treats killing as mechanical or routine.

Chapter Writing Activity: After a close and careful reading of "The Sniper," practice writing an analysis of the style and tone O'Flaherty uses in the story, similar to the sample featured earlier in this chapter on Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket." First, make sure to consider the three key aspects of style - diction, syntax, and imagery - in order to arrive at the tone that O'Flaherty creates in the story. Also, be sure to consider the irony here, especially in the shocking and unexpected ending. Remember a good analysis goes deeper, and so take some time to reflect on how this style and tone impact your understanding of the other elements - plot, character, setting, etc. Lastly, whatever assertions you make about both the style and tone, you should support them with solid textual evidence coming directly from the story.

Chapter 9: Theme

We have finally come to the last of the elements of fiction, one that requires us to fit all the other elements together like puzzle pieces in order to see the bigger picture. Or better yet, consider the other elements as clues we can use to unravel a mystery. We use these clues to build our case and come to a conclusion about the larger meaning of a work of fiction. But, what exactly are we looking for when we search for a theme?

Understanding the Basics of Theme: Essentially, the theme of a work of fiction is the underlying main point it makes about human experience, society, or the human condition at large. Much like symbolism and other elements we've already explored, there isn't just one correct choice for the theme of a story. Instead, the theme of a given work is always open for interpretation. The important part is that, like finding symbols in a story, we must arrive at a theme for a work by giving a careful assessment to all the other elements of fiction first. We don't want to pick one ourselves and force it upon a story when the theme isn't supported by what is there on the page. We also don't want to confuse a topic for the theme because a topic like "war" in O'Flaherty's "The Sniper" isn't really explaining anything about the deeper meaning or the message of the work.

Sometimes a theme is clearly stated in a work of fiction. A funny example is in the 1994 Kevin Smith cult-classic comedy *Clerks*, where the last lines of the movie are given by a character named Silent Bob, who hasn't said a single word. He gives advice to his friend Dante and says, "You know, there's a million fine women in the world, dude. But they don't all bring you lasagna at work." This line comes after Dante has been complaining about his girlfriend Veronica throughout the movie, and it perfectly captures one of the main themes of the film - we should be grateful for what we have instead of always wanting something more. Another last line that helps us arrive at a much darker theme is the closing of the aforementioned "The Sniper," where our protagonist turns over the body of the man he killed and discovers it is his own brother. That shocking ending can help clue us in to the deeper point behind the story about the horrors and nonsensical nature of a civil war where brothers are literally killing brothers.

More often, though, themes aren't handed to us in a single line - we have to detect them through our own careful analysis. One example is "Eyes That Saw Not" by Watanna and Babcock. At the very end, when John calls out to Beth, seemingly in acknowledgement that her revisions had improved his stories, it is still hard to know the exact purpose behind the story. What is the

underlying message here? Perhaps the story is showing us that there are many different kinds of blindness, including John's literal blindness early on, and then his metaphorical blindness - John's inability to see Beth's contributions - until the end of the story. It could also be a social commentary on the hidden contributions of women that often go unacknowledged, or even a statement about love and sacrifice, as Beth's love for John leads her to give him full credit for writing that includes a lot of her own work. Regardless of which direction we go in - and there are many other options too - we would need to carefully consider the other elements to ensure our proposed theme is well supported by the text.

The key is to look at the totality of a story - considering all the various aspects to the best of our abilities - before deciding on a theme because many similar stories have very different main ideas underlying them. We can see this by comparing Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" to Hurston's "Sweat." In both stories we have female protagonists who are fierce, courageous, and in stubborn opposition to the male-dominated societies around them. They also both have male counterparts who end up being killed by unnatural causes. However, the themes of these stories are night and day. In "Sweat," Delia basically allows Sykes to be killed by his own rattlesnake, and the story suggests themes of karma or poetic justice - basically that Sykes deserves what he gets - or the triumph of hard-work, resilience, and endurance over her partner's abuse and laziness. In the other story, nobody would suggest that it was "triumphant" when Emily poisoned Homer Baron and used him as a human body-pillow for years afterwards. Instead, the themes in "A Rose for Emily" seem more focused on the tragic effects of loneliness and isolation, or maybe on the resistance and even refusal to change in a world that keeps moving forward. Either way, the themes in Emily's story seem more focused on the negative and giving us some type of warning versus the positive rewards for hard-work, faith, and endurance woven into Delia's story.

On the other hand, some of the stories we have already read have very different storylines, and yet still suggest very similar themes. For example, in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," Louise Mallard dies suddenly at the end after finding out that her husband *did not* die in a train accident, while in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," our female protagonist appears suicidal before finally descending into madness in the final scene. These two stories are very different from each other, and yet both show us the devastating results of the oppression of married women in the late 1890s. They also touch on the loss of a sense of self in marriage and the pressures of female gender roles during that period of time. Again, there is a lot of similarity in

the themes, even though the plot, characters, symbols, and writing styles are quite different from each other.

Writing a Theme Analysis: As we consider how to do a careful analysis of the theme of a story, it is important to acknowledge that it is a bit harder to figure out than some of our other elements. This is because it requires a synthesis of information - or the bringing together of a lot of different ideas in order to arrive at one central point. As always, the first step is a close, careful, and hopefully active reading of the work. Focus on the various elements of fiction we've learned about - like plot, character, setting and point of view - and use this information like clues in a mystery. Once you've gathered all these clues, ask yourself: what is this story trying to tell us about our lives, our society, or the human condition? Be sure to avoid the topic trap, and if you arrive at a one-word idea like "war" or "love" then go a step further, asking yourself what deeper message the story is saying about that topic. So, using these examples, you could try and consider what meaningful insight the story is offering us about "war" or "love."

A great place to start is in the end. Consider how the story ends and the eventual resolution of the plot. Endings often reveal a lot of information that has been held back throughout a story. This is especially true in short stories where authors often finish with a "drop the mic" moment. Consider "The Sniper" when we realize the brother was killed, or "The Story of an Hour" when Louise dies suddenly, or "A Rose for Emily" when we find Homer's skeleton and discover that Emily slept next to it for many years. These endings, these moments of resolution to the conflicts in our plot, don't come from nowhere - they are the culmination of all the plot steps that happened along the way, and they often help to show us the deeper message that the story is trying to convey. The important thing is to move beyond thinking about *what* happened in the story, and start to ask yourself *why* that happened. However, even if we do a great job evaluating the ending, one part of a story is not enough to fully understand the theme.

The next step is to consider all the various elements and look for patterns that we can trace. If we take "Sweat" as an example, our main conflict is between Delia, a hard-working woman of great faith, and her husband Sykes, who is lazy, mean-spirited, and faithless. Delia respects her home and her community, and she wants to continue living in the beautiful home she bought with her own hard work and dedication, while Sykes abuses her at every turn, cheats on her openly with another woman, and even brings a rattlesnake into the house to threaten and

intimidate her. There are many symbols in the short story, particularly the sweat from all the effort Delia puts into making a living, the laundry that she is constantly washing, and then the rattlesnake, which is typically considered a sign of evil and danger. The point of view follows Delia, for the most part, and this, along with the sympathetic tone of the story, makes us give Delia our full support without ever questioning if Sykes has any reason for why he treats her so terribly. The events of the plot eventually lead us to a situation where Sykes is bitten and killed by his own poisonous snake, and we - the reader - feel like it was most deserved. Notice how all these elements—the symbols, the character contrasts, the tone, the plot resolution—all point in the same general direction, reinforcing each other. When we use all these elements to try and arrive at a larger point, we might get something about justice prevailing in the end or perhaps that hard-work and endurance will eventually win out. We have to be careful not to cherry-pick one idea and fixate on it though, like saying “Sykes was unfaithful as a husband, so the message here is that cheaters pay the price in the end.” This type of reading ignores loads of other aspects of the story, including Delia, her work ethic, the laundry and much more. So remember, don’t force anything here. If it is challenging to support your theme, then the text is probably trying to point you in a different direction.

Next, you’ll want to create a strong, clear statement of the theme. Let’s say you’ve read a story and decided on something like “the theme is revenge.” First, remember that “revenge” isn’t a theme on its own - it is just a topic. But, what does the story say about revenge? A much better option might be something like “the story’s theme is that revenge eventually destroys the person who is seeking it,” or taking it even further, “the cycle of violence can eventually destroy everyone who gets wrapped up in it.” You should, however, try to avoid anything vague and overly universal, so something like “violence is always wrong” or on the other side of things, “love conquers all” would best be avoided. The main goal is to discover what’s specific and unique to *this* story - what insight does *this particular* work offer? You’re not trying to land on earth-shattering universal truths that apply to every story ever written. Also remember that this theme is the story’s message, not your message. And so make sure to avoid pushing your own beliefs onto what you are reading, even if the theme you end up writing about isn’t something with which you fully agree.

Finally, once you’ve arrived at a clear theme, it is time to write up your analysis, which consists mainly of explaining the theme and providing all the textual support - from the various elements

of fiction - that helped you to arrive at it. Remember that this isn't *the* theme of the story, as though there is only one correct answer, and you found it. Instead, this is just your interpretation of a possible theme for the story, and you are providing textual evidence to the reader in order to help explain your reasoning. For instance, as we discussed earlier in this section, if you argue that "Sweat" explores how endurance and faith triumph over cruelty, you'd need to point to specific pieces of evidence - Delia's refusal to leave her home, the symbolism of her work and sweat, Sykes bringing the snake into the house and his final fate - to show readers how you arrived at that interpretation.

"The Lottery Ticket" Sample Theme Analysis: First, before jumping into an analysis of the theme of Anton Chekhov's short story, it should be noted that there are many different possibilities to choose from. The story is on the shorter end and seems simple, but it is actually very deep and leaves us with several different messages about life, including how greed can corrupt our relationships, how money reveals our true character, the fragility of human contentment, class consciousness and resentment, and even the dangers of "what if" thinking and imagining a life better than our own. With these possibilities, and surely more, to consider, this analysis will go with the first option: how greed can corrupt our relationships.

A careful reading of Anton Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket" reveals many different life lessons woven into the story, but one of the most significant themes is that greed can corrupt and destroy our personal relationships. There are many different elements of fiction that support this interpretation, but it is best to begin by looking at the very end of the story. The climactic finish is when Ivan finally looks up the last lottery numbers in the newspaper, and he and Masha realize they haven't actually won anything. This discovery isn't very surprising - at least most readers probably figure the couple are getting worked up over nothing - but the real revelation at the end is that Ivan and Masha's relationship seems to have been completely ruined by the feelings of greed that have overtaken them. As the story goes along and the desire to keep all the money for themselves amps up, they go from being "satisfied" with their life together to staring across the room at each other with hatred in their eyes. This core relationship isn't the only one that gets destroyed by greed either. When Ivan considers how their relatives will want to share in some of the money, he calls Masha's extended family "wretched, detestable people" and his own "repulsive and hateful" (Chekhov). The narrator even tells us that Ivan felt "impartially"

about them in the past, and so it is clear that selfishness and greed are leading to this sudden change of heart.

To look a bit more closely at the plot, the story begins in a nice, middle class home with a contented couple chatting after supper. The inciting incident, which is realizing they matched the series number 9,499 in the paper, is really what sets things in motion. From then on, most of the rising action happens in the imaginations of the couple, though the point of view of the story predominantly gives us access only to Ivan's thoughts. These begin as exciting fantasies about estates, travel, and living a luxurious life without the need for going to work each day. However, these dreams quickly turn dark as soon as Ivan realizes that Masha actually purchased the ticket and would be the one who decides how they could use the money. He starts imagining that on their travels, she would be upset "that she had spent so much money" and "she wouldn't have dinner because of its being too dear." This negative and self-centered turn happens quickly, and shortly thereafter, Ivan becomes cruel. A particularly significant moment comes when the narrator tells us that "for the first time in his life his mind dwelt on the fact that his wife had grown elderly and plain" (Chekhov). This line is important because we can see that at this moment - dreaming of a once-in-a-lifetime chance at becoming wealthy - is the first time in their entire relationship that he is unsatisfied with Masha. Literally, greed has ruined his relationship with Masha, and the narrator tells us she is undergoing the exact same transformation. By the climactic moment, they are both filled with hatred for the other.

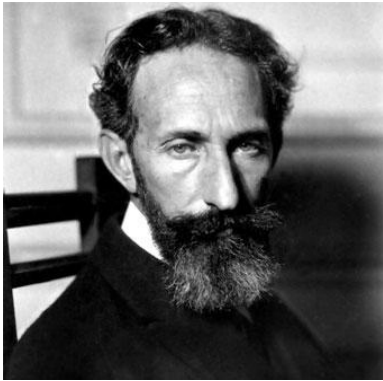
If we consider the use of symbols in the story, the most significant is the lottery ticket itself. When most of us think of a lottery ticket, or more specifically the possibility of winning a lottery, the dreams really come down to how transformative it would be to get loads and loads of money overnight. This kind of windfall buys luxury, social status, freedom from work and other responsibilities, and more. Dangling this hope of a new life in front of our middle-class couple is the perfect way to see exactly how they respond, and Chekhov uses the lottery ticket as mirror to reflect their true characters. The collapse of their reason begins when Ivan "gave a broad, senseless smile, like a baby when a bright object is shown it." Essentially, he's been knocked senseless, drunk with possibility. The lottery ticket, which should have brought them excitement and joy, ends up triggering dreams that eventually grow darker, as he and Masha turn against each other. The fact that this is just a lottery - not something they earned - makes the selfishness and greed seem all the worse, as we might be more understanding of somebody

being overly protective of wealth they earned through years of hard work. Thus, the lottery ticket is both symbolic of a better life and a sort of test of character that, unfortunately, both Ivan and Masha fail in very short order.

Chekhov's tone in the work is detached - with a very matter-of-fact style - but also darkly ironic. He reserves any comment on Ivan's dreams but just shares the images one by one. He also tells us directly that Masha's mind is going down a similar path. All this information is coming in a fairly neutral, news-like feel, and this detached tone allows us to feel as if these two characters could be anyone - including ourselves. Sadly, while the two are letting their fantasies run wild, the reader can see what is *really* going on - and this is where all the irony comes in. We see the folly in not checking the final number right away, as most readers have a good sense that they likely didn't win anything. Secondly, with a first-hand view of Ivan's mean-spirited thoughts and a sense that Masha is feeling something similar, we also understand that their relationship is collapsing, even as the two characters are simply sitting in a room staring at each other in silence. Lastly, we see that they both start the story happily and end it in misery, yet nothing in their lives had externally actually changed. They didn't win money or lose any money; what ruined them was a greed-filled fever dream of "what-if." This leaves the tone deeply ironic on a variety of levels.

In the end, the theme of this story is that greed can reveal our true nature and destroy our relationships with our loved ones, extended family, and beyond. Sadly, this can even be the case when there is nothing to be greedy about, aside from a daydream of what it might be like to win the lottery. In the resolution of Anton Chekhov's "The Lottery Ticket," with Ivan feeling trapped in a "dark and small" middle-class home with his "elderly and plain" wife, both of which he was satisfied with only moments ago, we come to the realization that human contentment is a fragile thing that can easily be undone by the mere thought of having more. This interpretation of the theme can be gathered from a close look at the ending, character development, symbolism, and tone of the story, and then following where the text-based evidence leads.

Now It's Your Turn: With this sample theme analysis of "The Lottery Ticket" in mind, read the following story closely and carefully, and complete the practice activity at the end in order to get some hands-on experience doing a theme analysis of your own.



Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937) was a Uruguayan short story writer often called the "Edgar Allan Poe of Latin America" for his masterful tales of horror, psychological terror, and human struggle against nature. Born in Salto, Uruguay, Quiroga's life was marked by tragedy from an early age. His father died in a hunting accident when Quiroga was an infant, and his stepfather later committed suicide. These early traumas would profoundly influence his dark, fatalistic writing style.

Quiroga spent much of his adult life in the jungle region of Misiones, Argentina, where he worked as a cotton farmer and wrote prolifically. The harsh tropical environment became central to many of his stories, which often depict humans locked in brutal conflict with the unforgiving natural world. His experiences living in isolation among dangerous wildlife and primitive conditions gave his jungle tales an authenticity that captivated readers throughout Latin America.

His personal life continued to be plagued by tragedy—his first wife committed suicide, and he accidentally killed one of his closest friends in a shooting incident. These experiences deepened the themes of death, fate, and psychological suffering that dominate his work. Quiroga was a master of the short story, and his writing is known for its precise, economical style and shocking, often violent endings. In 1937, suffering from terminal cancer, Quiroga took his own life in Buenos Aires. Despite his troubled existence, he left behind a remarkable body of work that remains essential to Latin American literature.

“The Dead Man” by Horacio Quiroga

The man and his machete had just finished clearing the fifth row of the banana grove. They still had two rows to go; but since these were thick with *chirca* shrubs and wild mallows, the task ahead was a trivial matter. The man, consequently, cast a satisfied look at the cleared bushes and crossed the wire fence to lie down for a while in the grass. But as he lowered the barbed wire and moved his body through, his left foot slipped on a piece of rotten wood detached from the post, at the same moment the machete slipped from his hand. As he fell, the man had the distant impression of not seeing the machete lying flat on the ground.

He was already stretched out on the grass, lying on his right side, just as he wanted. His mouth, which had opened to its full extent, had just closed. He was as he would have wished to be: knees bent and left hand over his chest. Except that behind his forearm, and immediately below his belt, the hilt and half of the machete blade protruded from his shirt; the rest could not be seen.

The man tried to move his head in vain. He glanced sideways at the hilt of the machete, still damp with the sweat of his hand. He mentally gauged the length and trajectory of the machete inside his belly, and acquired - cold, mathematical, and inexorable - the certainty that he had just reached the end of his existence. Death. Throughout the course of life, one often thinks that one day, after years, months, weeks, and preparatory days, we will arrive at our turn at the threshold of death. It is the fatal law, accepted and foreseen; so much so, that we often allow ourselves to be whimsically carried by the imagination to that moment, supreme among all, in which we draw our last breath. But between the current moment and that final expiration, what dreams, disturbances, hopes, and dramas do we assume for our lives! What does this existence, full of vigor, still hold for us before its removal from the human stage! This is the consolation, the pleasure, and the reason for our musings on the end of our lives: Death is so far away, and what we have yet to live is so unforeseen! Yet...?

Not even two seconds have passed: the sun is at the exact same height; the shadows have not advanced a millimeter. Suddenly, for the prone man, his long-term wanderings have reached their resolution: he is dying. Dead. He can consider himself dead in his comfortable posture. But the man opens his eyes and looks. How much time has passed? What cataclysm has the world survived? What upheaval of nature exudes this horrible event?

He is going to die. Coldly, terribly, and unavoidably, he is going to die.

The man resists—that horror is so unforeseen!—and thinks: it is a nightmare; that's it! What has changed? Nothing. And he looks: is that not the banana grove? Does he not come every morning to clear it? Who knows it as well as he does? He sees the banana grove perfectly, all thinned out, and the wide leaves bared to the sun. There they are, very close, frayed by the wind. But now they do not move... It is the midday calm; it must be twelve o'clock. Through the banana trees, up there, the man sees from the hard ground the red roof of his house. To the left, he glimpses the woods and the grove of cinnamon trees. He cannot see more, but he knows very well that behind his back is the road to the new port; and that in the

direction of his head, far below, the Paraná river lies at the bottom of the valley, as still as a lake. Everything, everything is exactly as it has always been; the fiery sun, the vibrating and lonely air, the motionless banana trees, the fence of very thick, high posts that he will soon have to replace...

Dead! But is it possible? Is this not one of the many days he has left his house at dawn with his machete in hand? Is his horse, his *malacara*, not right there, four meters away, frugally sniffing the barbed wire? But yes! Someone is whistling. He cannot see, because his back is to the road; but he feels the horse's footsteps echoing on the small bridge... It is the boy who passes every morning toward the new port at eleven-thirty. And always whistling... From the rotting post that he almost touches with his boots, to the living hedge of the woods that separates the banana grove from the road, there are fifteen long meters. He knows it perfectly well, because he himself, when putting up the fence, measured the distance.

What is happening, then? Is this or is it not a natural midday among so many in Misiones, in his woods, in his pasture, in the thin banana grove? Without a doubt! Short grass, ant hills, silence, leaden sun... Nothing, nothing has changed. Only he is different. For two minutes now, his person, his living personality, has had nothing to do with the pasture—which he cleared himself with a hoe for five consecutive months—nor with the banana grove, the work of his hands alone. Nor with his family. He has been uprooted abruptly, naturally, by the work of a slippery piece of rotten wood and a machete in his belly. Two minutes ago: he is dying.

The man, very fatigued and stretched out on the grass on his right side, still refuses to admit a phenomenon of such significance, given the normal and monotonous appearance of everything he sees. He knows the time well: eleven-thirty... The boy from every day has just crossed the bridge.

But it isn't possible that he slipped...! The handle of his machete (he must soon change it for another; it has little use left) was perfectly gripped between his left hand and the barbed wire. After ten years in the forest, he knows very well how to handle a brush machete. He is only very tired from that morning's work, and he is resting for a while as usual. The proof...? Why, that very grass entering the corner of his mouth now, he planted it himself in sods of earth placed a meter apart! That is his banana grove; and that is his *malacara*, snorting cautiously at the barbs of the wire! He sees him perfectly; he knows the horse does not dare turn the corner of the fence because he is lying almost at the foot of the post. He distinguishes it clearly; and he

sees the dark threads of sweat starting from the withers and the haunch. The sun falls like lead, and the calm is immense, for not even a fringe of the banana leaves moves. Every day, just like this one, he has seen these same things.

...Very tired, but he is only resting. Several minutes must have passed by now... And at a quarter to twelve, from up there, from the red-roofed house, his wife and his two children will set out toward the banana grove to find him for lunch. He always hears, before the others, the voice of his younger boy who wants to pull away from his mother's hand: *Papá! Papá!*

Is that not it...? Of course, he hears it! It is time. He actually hears his son's voice... What a nightmare...! But it is one of those many days, trivial like all of them, clearly! Excessive light, yellowish shadows, the silent heat of an oven upon the flesh, which makes his horse sweat, standing motionless before the forbidden banana grove.

...Very tired, very tired, but nothing more. How many times, at midday like now, has he crossed that pasture returning home - a pasture that was overgrown scrub when he arrived, and before that had been a virgin forest! He was returning then, also very fatigued, with his machete hanging from his left hand, with slow steps. He can still move away in his mind, if he wishes; he can, if he wishes, abandon his body for an instant and see from the pond he built the same mundane landscape as always: the volcanic gravel with rigid grasses; the banana grove and its red sand; the fence shrinking on the slope, angling toward the road. And further away still, see the pasture, the work of his hands alone. And at the foot of a rotting post, lying on his right side and his legs pulled up, exactly like every day, he can see himself, like a small sun-drenched bundle on the grass - resting, because he is very tired.

But the horse, streaked with sweat and motionless with caution before the corner of the fence, also sees the man on the ground and does not dare skirt the banana grove as he would like. At the voices that are now near - *Papá!* - he turns his motionless ears toward the bundle for a long, long time; and reassured at last, he decides to pass between the post and the prone man who is finally at rest.

Discussion Questions:

1. The story's timeline is unusual—we know the man is dead from the title and opening, yet the narrative shows his thoughts after the accident. How does this structure affect your

reading experience? Why might Quiroga have chosen to reveal the ending at the beginning?

2. The story contains very little external action—a man falls on his machete and dies. Yet it feels dramatic and suspenseful. What creates the tension in a story where we already know the outcome?
3. We never learn the protagonist's name, and we know very little about his past or personality. Why might Quiroga have kept the character so anonymous? How does this affect the story's impact?
4. Quiroga lived in the jungle region of Misiones, Argentina, for many years. How does his intimate knowledge of this environment come through in the story? What vivid details feel particularly authentic in his description of the setting?
5. We experience the man's growing confusion and denial through his own thoughts. How does this perspective make his death more powerful or disturbing than if we watched it from the outside?
6. Quiroga's prose is famously minimalist - he includes only essential details and uses simple, direct language. How does this sparse style affect the story's emotional impact?

Chapter Writing Activity: After a close and careful reading of "The Dead Man," practice writing an analysis of the theme of Quiroga's story. It would be helpful to read both the step by step instructions for how to write a theme analysis along with "The Lottery Ticket" example before completing this activity. There are many possible main points you could consider, but after carefully considering the other elements of fiction, try to select the most significant theme that you think the story is trying to convey. Lastly, whatever theme you eventually select, make sure to support it with solid textual evidence coming directly from text, considering the other elements of fiction.

Chapter 10: A Brief Anthology of Fiction

The following is a short anthology containing a few additional short stories for additional discussions and writing activities.



Sui Sin Far (1865-1914), born Edith Maude Eaton, was one of the first writers of Asian descent to publish fiction in North America. Born in England to a British father and Chinese mother, she was the second of fourteen children in a mixed-race family that faced financial hardship and prejudice. The family moved to Montreal when Edith was a child, and she left school early to help support her siblings, working as a typesetter, stenographer, and journalist.

At a time when anti-Chinese sentiment was intense—the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese immigration from 1882 to 1943—Eaton made the bold choice to publicly identify as Chinese and adopt the pen name "Sui Sin Far," which means "narcissus" in Cantonese. She could have passed as white, but she refused, dedicating her writing career to depicting the lives and struggles of Chinese immigrants with sympathy and realism.

Eaton moved frequently throughout her adult life, living in Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston while working as a legal secretary and freelance journalist. She published over two hundred stories and articles in newspapers and magazines, though she struggled with poor health, suffering from rheumatic fever and heart problems.

In 1912, she published her only book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, a groundbreaking collection of short stories about Chinese families navigating life in America. Her stories exposed the cruelty of immigration laws and explored tensions between tradition and assimilation. She died in Montreal in 1914 at age 49. The local Chinese community honored her grave with a headstone inscribed "The righteous one does not forget China."

“In the Land of the Free” by Sui Sin Far

I

“See, Little One—the hills in the morning sun. There is thy home for years to come. It is very beautiful and thou wilt be very happy there.”

The Little One looked up into his mother’s face in perfect faith. He was engaged in the pleasant occupation of sucking a sweetmeat; but that did not prevent him from gurgling responsively.

“Yes, my olive bud; there is where thy father is making a fortune for thee. Thy father! Oh, wilt thou not be glad to behold his dear face. ’Twas for thee I left him.”

The Little One ducked his chin sympathetically against his mother’s knee. She lifted him on to her lap. He was two years old, a round, dimple-cheeked boy with bright brown eyes and a sturdy little frame.

“Ah! Ah! Ah! Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!” puffed he, mocking a tugboat steaming by.

San Francisco’s waterfront was lined with ships and steamers, while other craft, large and small, including a couple of white transports from the Philippines, lay at anchor here and there off shore. It was some time before the Eastern Queen could get docked, and even after that was accomplished, a lone Chinaman who had been waiting on the wharf for an hour was detained that much longer by men with the initials U. S. C. on their caps, before he could board the steamer and welcome his wife and child.

“This is thy son,” announced the happy Lae Choo.

Hom Hing lifted the child, felt of his little body and limbs, gazed into his face with proud and joyous eyes; then turned inquiringly to a customs officer at his elbow.

“That’s a fine boy you have there,” said the man. “Where was he born?”

“In China,” answered Hom Hing, swinging the Little One on his right shoulder, preparatory to leading his wife off the steamer.

“Ever been to America before?”

“No, not he,” answered the father with a happy laugh.

The customs officer beckoned to another.

“This little fellow,” said he, “is visiting America for the first time.”

The other customs officer stroked his chin reflectively.

"Good day," said Hom Hing.

"Wait!" commanded one of the officers. "You cannot go just yet."

"What more now?" asked Hom Hing.

"I'm afraid," said the first customs officer, "that we cannot allow the boy to go ashore. There is nothing in the papers that you have shown us—your wife's papers and your own—having any bearing upon the child."

"There was no child when the papers were made out," returned Hom Hing. He spoke calmly; but there was apprehension in his eyes and in his tightening grip on his son.

"What is it? What is it?" quavered Lae Choo, who understood a little English.

The second customs officer regarded her pityingly.

"I don't like this part of the business," he muttered.

The first officer turned to Hom Hing and in an official tone of voice, said: "Seeing that the boy has no certificate entitling him to admission to this country you will have to leave him with us."

"Leave my boy!" exclaimed Hom Hing.

"Yes; he will be well taken care of, and just as soon as we can hear from Washington he will be handed over to you."

"But," protested Hom Hing, "he is my son."

"We have no proof," answered the man with a shrug of his shoulders; "and even if so we cannot let him pass without orders from the Government."

"He is my son," reiterated Hom Hing, slowly and solemnly. "I am a Chinese merchant and have been in business in San Francisco for many years. When my wife told to me one morning that she dreamed of a green tree with spreading branches and one beautiful red flower growing thereon, I answered her that I wished my son to be born in our country, and for her to prepare to go to China. My wife complied with my wish. After my son was born my mother fell sick and my wife nursed and cared for her; then my father, too, fell sick, and my wife also nursed and cared for him. For twenty moons my wife care for and nurse the old people, and when they die they bless her and my son, and I send for her to return to me. I had no fear of trouble. I was a Chinese merchant and my son was my son."

"Very good, Hom Hing," replied the first officer. "Nevertheless, we take your son."

"No, you not take him; he my son too."

It was Lae Choo. Snatching the child from his father's arms she held and covered him with her own.

The officers conferred together for a few moments; then one drew Hom Hing aside and spoke in his ear.

Resignedly Hom Hing bowed his head, then approached his wife. "'Tis the law," said he, speaking in Chinese, "and 'twill be but for a little while—until tomorrow's sun arises."

"You, too," reproached Lae Choo in a voice eloquent with pain. But accustomed to obedience she yielded the boy to her husband, who in turn delivered him to the first officer. The Little One protested lustily against the transfer; but his mother covered her face with her sleeve and his father silently led her away. Thus was the law of the land complied with.

II

Day was breaking. Lae Choo, who had been awake all night, dressed herself, then awoke her husband.

"'Tis the morn," she cried. "Go, bring our son."

The man rubbed his eyes and arose upon his elbow so that he could see out of the window. A pale star was visible in the sky. The petals of a lily in a bowl on the window-sill were unfurled.

"'Tis not yet time," said he, laying his head down again.

"Not yet time. Ah, all the time that I lived before yesterday is not so much as the time that has been since my little one was taken from me."

The mother threw herself down beside the bed and covered her face.

Hom Hing turned on the light, and touching his wife's bowed head with a sympathetic hand inquired if she had slept.

"Slept!" she echoed, weeping. "Ah, how could I close my eyes with my arms empty of the little body that has filled them every night for more than twenty moons! You do not know—man—what it is to miss the feel of the little fingers and the little toes and the soft round limbs of your little one. Even in the darkness his darling eyes used to shine up to mine, and often have I fallen into slumber with his pretty babble at my ear. And now, I see him not; I touch him not; I hear him not. My baby, my little fat one!"

"Now! Now! Now!" consoled Hom Hing, patting his wife's shoulder reassuringly; "there is no need to grieve so; he will soon gladden you again. There cannot be any law that would keep a child from its mother!"

Lae Choo dried her tears.

"You are right, my husband," she meekly murmured. She arose and stepped about the apartment, setting things to rights. The box of presents she had brought for her California friends had been opened the evening before; and silks, embroideries, carved ivories, ornamental lacquer-ware, brasses, camphorwood boxes, fans, and chinaware were scattered around in confused heaps. In the midst of unpacking the thought of her child in the hands of strangers had overpowered her, and she had left everything to crawl into bed and weep.

Having arranged her gifts in order she stepped out on to the deep balcony.

The star had faded from view and there were bright streaks in the western sky. Lae Choo looked down the street and around. Beneath the flat occupied by her and her husband were quarters for a number of bachelor Chinamen, and she could hear them from where she stood, taking their early morning breakfast. Below their dining-room was her husband's grocery store. Across the way was a large restaurant. Last night it had been resplendent with gay colored lanterns and the sound of music. The rejoicings over "the completion of the moon," by Quong Sum's firstborn, had been long and loud, and had caused her to tie a handkerchief over her ears. She, a bereaved mother, had it not in her heart to rejoice with other parents. This morning the place was more in accord with her mood. It was still and quiet. The revellers had dispersed or were asleep.

A roly-poly woman in black sateen, with long pendant earrings in her ears, looked up from the street below and waved her a smiling greeting. It was her old neighbor, Kuie Hoe, the wife of the gold embosser, Mark Sing. With her was a little boy in yellow jacket and lavender pantaloons. Lae Choo remembered him as a baby. She used to like to play with him in those days when she had no child of her own. What a long time ago that seemed! She caught her breath in a sigh, and laughed instead.

"Why are you so merry?" called her husband from within.

"Because my Little One is coming home," answered Lae Choo. "I am a happy mother—a happy mother."

She pattered into the room with a smile on her face.

The noon hour had arrived. The rice was steaming in the bowls and a fragrant dish of chicken and bamboo shoots was awaiting Hom Hing. Not for one moment had Lae Choo paused to rest during the morning hours; her activity had been ceaseless. Every now and again, however, she had raised her eyes to the gilded clock on the curiously carved mantelpiece. Once, she had exclaimed:

“Why so long, oh! why so long?” Then apostrophizing herself: “Lae Choo, be happy. The Little One is coming! The Little One is coming!” Several times she burst into tears and several times she laughed aloud.

Hom Hing entered the room; his arms hung down by his side.

“The Little One!” shrieked Lae Choo.

“They bid me call tomorrow.”

With a moan the mother sank to the floor.

The noon hour passed. The dinner remained on the table.

III

The winter rains were over: the spring had come to California, flushing the hills with green and causing an ever-changing pageant of flowers to pass over them. But there was no spring in Lae Choo’s heart, for the Little One remained away from her arms. He was being kept in a mission. White women were caring for him, and though for one full moon he had pined for his mother and refused to be comforted he was now apparently happy and contented. Five moons or five months had gone by since the day he had passed with Lae Choo through the Golden Gate; but the great Government at Washington still delayed sending the answer which would return him to his parents.

Hom Hing was disconsolately rolling up and down the balls in his abacus box when a keen-faced young man stepped into his store.

“What news?” asked the Chinese merchant.

“This!” The young man brought forth a typewritten letter. Hom Hing read the words:

“Re Chinese child, alleged to be the son of Hom Hing, Chinese merchant, doing business at 425 Clay street, San Francisco.

“Same will have attention as soon as possible.”

Hom Hing returned the letter, and without a word continued his manipulation of the counting machine.

"Have you anything to say?" asked the young man.

"Nothing. They have sent the same letter fifteen times before. Have you not yourself showed it to me?"

"True!" The young man eyed the Chinese merchant furtively. He had a proposition to make and he was pondering whether or not the time was opportune.

"How is your wife?" he inquired solicitously—and diplomatically.

Hom Hing shook his head mournfully.

"She seems less every day," he replied. "Her food she takes only when I bid her and her tears fall continually. She finds no pleasure in dress or flowers and cares not to see her friends. Her eyes stare all night. I think before another moon she will pass into the land of spirits."

"No!" exclaimed the young man, genuinely startled.

"If the boy not come home I lose my wife sure," continued Hom Hing with bitter sadness.

"It's not right," cried the young man indignantly. Then he made his proposition.

The Chinese father's eyes brightened exceedingly.

"Will I like you to go to Washington and make them give you the paper to restore my son?" cried he. "How can you ask when you know my heart's desire?"

"Then," said the young fellow, "I will start next week. I am anxious to see this thing through if only for the sake of your wife's peace of mind."

"I will call her. To hear what you think to do will make her glad," said Hom Hing.

He called a message to Lae Choo upstairs through a tube in the wall.

In a few moments she appeared, listless, wan, and hollow-eyed; but when her husband told her the young lawyer's suggestion she became as one electrified; her form straightened, her eyes glistened; the color flushed to her cheeks.

"Oh," she cried, turning to James Clancy, "You are a hundred man good!"

The young man felt somewhat embarrassed; his eyes shifted a little under the intense gaze of the Chinese mother.

"Well, we must get your boy for you," he responded. "Of course"—turning to Hom Hing—"it will cost a little money. You can't get fellows to hurry the Government for you without gold in your pocket."

Hom Hing stared blankly for a moment. Then: "How much do you want, Mr. Clancy?" he asked quietly.

"Well, I will need at least five hundred to start with."

Hom Hing cleared his throat.

"I think I told to you the time I last paid you for writing letters for me and seeing the Custom boss here that nearly all I had was gone!"

"Oh, well then we won't talk about it, old fellow. It won't harm the boy to stay where he is, and your wife may get over it all right."

"What that you say?" quavered Lae Choo.

James Clancy looked out of the window.

"He says," explained Hom Hing in English, "that to get our boy we have to have much money."

"Money! Oh, yes."

Lae Choo nodded her head.

"I have not got the money to give him."

For a moment Lae Choo gazed wonderingly from one face to the other; then, comprehension dawning upon her, with swift anger, pointing to the lawyer, she cried: "You not one hundred man good; you just common white man."

"Yes, ma'am," returned James Clancy, bowing and smiling ironically.

Hom Hing pushed his wife behind him and addressed the lawyer again: "I might try," said he, "to raise something; but five hundred—it is not possible."

"What about four?"

"I tell you I have next to nothing left and my friends are not rich."

"Very well!"

The lawyer moved leisurely toward the door, pausing on its threshold to light a cigarette.

"Stop, white man; white man, stop!"

Lae Choo, panting and terrified, had started forward and now stood beside him, clutching his sleeve excitedly.

"You say you can go to get paper to bring my Little One to me if Hom Hing give you five hundred dollars?"

The lawyer nodded carelessly; his eyes were intent upon the cigarette which would not take the fire from the match.

"Then you go get paper. If Hom Hing not can give you five hundred dollars—I give you perhaps what more that much."

She slipped a heavy gold bracelet from her wrist and held it out to the man. Mechanically he took it.

"I go get more!"

She scurried away, disappearing behind the door through which she had come.

"Oh, look here, I can't accept this," said James Clancy, walking back to Hom Hing and laying down the bracelet before him.

"It's all right," said Hom Hing, seriously, "pure China gold. My wife's parent give it to her when we married."

"But I can't take it anyway," protested the young man.

"It is all same as money. And you want money to go to Washington," replied Hom Hing in a matter of fact manner.

"See, my jade earrings—my gold buttons—my hairpins—my comb of pearl and my rings—one, two, three, four, five rings; very good—very good—all same much money. I give them all to you. You take and bring me paper for my Little One."

Lae Choo piled up her jewels before the lawyer.

Hom Hing laid a restraining hand upon her shoulder. "Not all, my wife," he said in Chinese. He selected a ring—his gift to Lae Choo when she dreamed of the tree with the red flower. The rest of the jewels he pushed toward the white man.

"Take them and sell them," said he. "They will pay your fare to Washington and bring you back with the paper."

For one moment James Clancy hesitated. He was not a sentimental man; but something within him arose against accepting such payment for his services.

"They are good, good," pleadingly asserted Lae Choo, seeing his hesitation.

Whereupon he seized the jewels, thrust them into his coat pocket, and walked rapidly away from the store.

IV

Lae Choo followed after the missionary woman through the mission nursery school. Her heart was beating so high with happiness that she could scarcely breathe. The paper had come at last—the precious paper which gave Hom Hing and his wife the right to the possession of their own child. It was ten months now since he had been taken from them—ten months since the sun had ceased to shine for Lae Choo.

The room was filled with children—most of them wee tots, but none so wee as her own. The mission woman talked as she walked. She told Lae Choo that little Kim, as he had been named by the school, was the pet of the place, and that his little tricks and ways amused and delighted every one. He had been rather difficult to manage at first and had cried much for his mother; “but children so soon forget, and after a month he seemed quite at home and played around as bright and happy as a bird.”

“Yes,” responded Lae Choo. “Oh, yes, yes!”

But she did not hear what was said to her. She was walking in a maze of anticipatory joy.

“Wait here, please,” said the mission woman, placing Lae Choo in a chair. “The very youngest ones are having their breakfast.”

She withdrew for a moment—it seemed like an hour to the mother—then she reappeared leading by the hand a little boy dressed in blue cotton overalls and white-soled shoes. The little boy’s face was round and dimpled and his eyes were very bright.

“Little One, ah, my Little One!” cried Lae Choo.

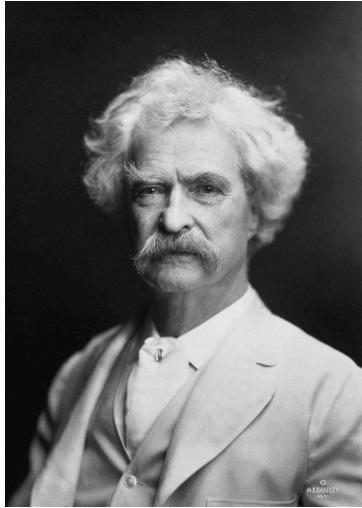
She fell on her knees and stretched her hungry arms toward her son.

But the Little One shrunk from her and tried to hide himself in the folds of the white woman’s skirt.

“Go’way, go’way!” he bade his mother.

Discussion Questions:

1. The story's conflict centers on Little One being detained by immigration authorities. How does Sui Sin Far structure the rising action through the parents' repeated attempts to get their son back? What is the effect of stretching this conflict over ten months?
 2. The climax comes when Lae Choo is finally reunited with her son. Why is this moment both a resolution and a tragedy? How does the ending complicate our expectations for a "happy ending"?
 3. Lae Choo is characterized primarily through her emotional reactions to her son's detention. What do her responses throughout the story reveal about her character? How does she change (or not change) by the end?
 4. The story takes place in San Francisco during the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act. How does this historical and geographical setting create the conditions for the story's conflict?
 5. The story is told from a third-person limited point of view, primarily following Lae Choo's perspective with some access to Hom Hing's thoughts. How would the story be different if told from Little One's perspective? Or from the perspective of the customs officials?
 6. What is the overall tone of the story? Is the narrator sympathetic, angry, detached, or something else? Point to specific passages that create this tone.
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Mark Twain (1835-1910), born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Missouri, is often called the father of American literature. He grew up in Hannibal, a small town on the Mississippi River that would later inspire the settings of his most famous novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. After his father's death when Samuel was eleven, he left school to work as a printer's apprentice, beginning a lifelong relationship with the written word.

Before becoming a writer, Clemens worked as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River—an experience that gave him his pen name. "Mark twain" was a riverboat term meaning the water was two fathoms deep, just barely safe for navigation. When the Civil War ended steamboat traffic, he headed west to Nevada and California, working as a miner and journalist. It was in California that he wrote "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," the humorous story that launched his literary career in 1865.

Twain became famous for his humor, his mastery of American dialect, and his sharp social criticism. His writing captured the spirit of 19th-century America—its optimism, its contradictions, and its injustices. He wrote extensively about racism, imperialism, and hypocrisy, often hiding serious social commentary beneath humor and satire.

Twain's personal life was marked by both success and tragedy. He married Olivia Langdon and had four children, but financial troubles and the deaths of three of his children left him increasingly bitter in his later years. He died in 1910, leaving behind a body of work that continues to shape American literature.

“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” by Mark Twain

In compliance with the request of a friend of mine, who wrote me from the East, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. I have a lurking suspicion that Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that, if I asked old Wheeler about him, it would remind him of his infamous Jim

Smiley, and he would go to work and bore me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design, it certainly succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the bar-room stove of the old, dilapidated tavern in the ancient mining camp of Angel's, and I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up and gave me good-day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood named Leonidas W. Smiley -- Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, a young minister of the Gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of Angel's Camp. I added that, if Mr. Wheeler could tell me any thing about this Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, I would feel under many obligations to him.

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat me down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned the initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was any thing ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse. To me, the spectacle of a man drifting serenely along through such a queer yarn without ever smiling, was exquisitely absurd. As I said before, I asked him to tell me what he knew of Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, and he replied as follows. I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once:

There was a feller here once by the name of Jim Smiley, in the winter of '49 or may be it was the spring of '50 I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume wasn't finished when he first came to the camp; but any way, he was the curiosest man about always betting on any thing that turned up you ever see, if he could get any body to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't, he'd change sides. Any way that suited the other man would suit him any way just so's he got a bet, he was satisfied. But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solittry thing mentioned but that feller'd offer to bet on it, and -take any side you please, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse-race, you'd find him flush, or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight,

he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken-fight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first; or if there was a camp-meeting, he would be there reg'lar, to bet on Parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exhorter about here, and so he was, too, and a good man. If he even seen a straddle-bug start to go anywheres, he would bet you how long it would take him to get wherever he was going to, and if you took him up, he would foller that straddle-bug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smiley, and can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to him he would bet on any thing the dangdest feller. Parson Walker's wife laid very sick once, for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn's going to save her; but one morning he come in, and Smiley asked how she was, and he said she was considerable better thank the Lord for his infnrit mercy and coming on so smart that, with the blessing of Providence, she'd get well yet; and Smiley, before he thought, says, "Well, I'll risk two- and-a-half that she don't, any way."

Thish-yer Smiley had a mare the boys called her the fifteen- minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because, of course, she was faster than that and he used to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind. They used to give her two or three hundred yards start, and then pass her under way; but always at the fag-end of the race she'd get excited and desperate- like, and come cavorting and straddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust, and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down.

And he had a little small bull pup, that to look at him you'd think he wan's worth a cent, but to set around and look ornery, and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was up on him, he was a different dog; his underjaw'd begin to stick out like the fo'castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover, and shine savage like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him, and bully- rag him, and bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson which was the name of the pup Andrew Jackson would never let on but what he was satisfied, and hadn't expected nothing else and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up; and then all of a sudden he would grab that other dog jest by the j'int of his hind leg and freeze on it not chew, you understand, but only jest grip and hang on till they thronged up the sponge, if it was a year.

Smiley always come out winner on that pup, till he harnessed a dog once that didn't have no hind legs, because they'd been sawed off by a circular saw, and when the thing had gone along far enough, and the money was all up, and he come to make a snatch for his pet bolt, he saw in a minute how he'd been imposed on, and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he 'peered surprised, and then he looked sorter discouraged-like, and didn't try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He give Smiley a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take bolt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for hisself if he'd lived, for the stuff was in him, and he had genius I know it, because he hadn't had no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances, if he hadn't no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'n, and the way it turned out.

Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat-tarriers, and chicken cocks, and tom-cats, and all of them kind of things, till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketched a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal'klated to edercate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet you he did learn him, too. He'd give him a little punch behind, and the next minute you'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut see him turn one summerset, or may be a couple, if he got a good start, and come down flat-footed and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of catching flies, and kept him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as far as he could see him. Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do most any thing and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog and sing out, "Flies, Dan'l, flies!" and quicker'n you could wink, he'd spring straight up, and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor again as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straightforward as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair and square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand; and when it come to that, Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had traveled and been everywhere, all said he laid over any frog that ever they see.

Well, Smiley kept the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him down town sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller a stranger in the camp, he was come across him with his box, and says:

"What might it be that you've got in the box?"

And Smiley says, sorter indifferent like, "It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, may be, but it an't it's only just a frog."

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, "H'm so 'tis. Well, what's he good for?"

"Well," Smiley says, easy and careless, "He's good enough for one thing, I should judge he can outjump any frog in Calaveras county."

The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley, and says, very deliberate, "Well, I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog."

"May be you don't," Smiley says. "May be you understand frogs, and may be you don't understand 'em; may be you've had experience, and may be you an't only a amature, as it were. Anyways, I've got my opinion, and I'll risk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras county."

And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad like, "Well, I'm only a stranger here, and I an't got no frog; but if I had a frog, I'd bet you."

And then Smiley says, "That's all right that's all right if you'll hold my box a minute, I'll go and get you a frog." And so the feller took the box, and put up his forty dollars along with Smiley's, and set down to wait.

So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to hisself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a tea- spoon and filled him full of quail shot filled him pretty near up to his chin and set him on the floor. Smiley he went to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog, and fetched him in, and give him to this feller, and says:

"Now, if you're ready, set him alongside of Dan'l, with his fore- paws just even with Dan'l, and I'll give the word." Then he says, "One two three jump!" and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off, but Dan'l give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders so like a Frenchman, but it wan's no use he couldn't budge; he was planted as solid as an anvil, and he couldn't no more stir than if he was anchored out. Smiley was a good deal surprised, and he was disgusted too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course.

The feller took the money and started away; and when he was going out at the door, he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulders this way at Dan'l, and says again, very deliberate, "Well, I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog."

Smiley he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, "I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw'd off for I wonder if there an't something the matter with him he 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow." And he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and lifted him up and says, "Why, blame my cats, if he don't weigh five pound!" and turned him upside down, and he belched out a double handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketchd him. And-

[Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front yard, and got up to see what was wanted.] And turning to me as he moved away, he said: "Just set where you are, stranger, and rest easy I an't going to be gone a second."

But, by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond Jim Smiley would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, and so I started away.

At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he button- holed me and recommenced:

"Well, thish-yer Smiley had a yellor one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only jest a short stump like a bannanner, and "

"Oh! hang Smiley and his afflicted cow!" I muttered, good-naturedly, and bidding the old gentleman good-day, I departed.

Discussion Questions:

1. The story uses a framing technique, and the outer frame (the narrator looking for Leonidas W. Smiley) and the inner story (Jim Smiley and his frog) seem unrelated. What is the effect of this mismatch? Is the narrator ever given the information he actually wanted?
 2. The climax occurs when the stranger's frog wins the jumping contest. What makes this moment both surprising and inevitable? How does Twain build toward this outcome?
 3. Jim Smiley is characterized as someone who "would bet on anything." What does this compulsive gambling reveal about his character? Is he presented sympathetically, critically, or neutrally?
 4. The story begins in a "dilapidated tavern" where Wheeler is "dozing comfortably by the barroom stove" in Angels Camp, a California mining town during the Gold Rush era. How does this frontier setting contribute to the story's humor and meaning?
 5. The story uses first-person point of view, but we actually get two first-person narrators: the educated narrator in the frame, and Simon Wheeler telling his story. How does this double narration affect our reading experience?
 6. The story is fundamentally about someone being tricked or conned. What is Twain saying about gullibility, trust, and deception? Is there a moral lesson here, or is it just a funny story?
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Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) was an American writer who helped revolutionize the modern short story with his groundbreaking collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Born in Camden, Ohio, he grew up in the small town of Clyde, where he witnessed firsthand the lives of ordinary people struggling with loneliness and unfulfilled dreams—experiences that would later shape his most famous work.

Anderson's path to literary success was anything but conventional. He left school at fourteen to help support his family, working various jobs including as a laborer, soldier in the Spanish-American War, and advertising copywriter. In 1912, while managing a paint factory in Elyria, Ohio, he famously suffered a nervous breakdown. He reportedly walked out of his office mid-sentence, mumbling something to his secretary about his feet getting wet, and disappeared for several days. This mental crisis became a turning point, leading him to abandon business and pursue writing full-time.

Moving to Chicago, Anderson joined the city's vibrant literary scene and befriended writers like Carl Sandburg and Theodore Dreiser. *Winesburg, Ohio* emerged from this period - a collection of interconnected stories about the "grotesques" of small-town America. These weren't monsters, but ordinary people twisted by isolation and unexpressed desires. The book's innovative structure and psychological depth influenced a generation of writers, including Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, who both acknowledged their debt to Anderson's pioneering style.

Anderson wrote in a deceptively simple, almost conversational prose that captured the loneliness lurking beneath the surface of American life. He spent his later years in Virginia, where he owned and edited two newspapers. He died in 1941 from peritonitis while on a goodwill trip to South America. His legacy endures as the writer who taught American literature to look inward, finding profound meaning in ordinary lives.

“Paper Pills” by Sherwood Anderson

HE WAS AN old man with a white beard and huge nose and hands. Long before the time during which we will know him, he was a doctor and drove a jaded white horse from house to house through the streets of Winesburg. Later he married a girl who had money. She had been left a large fertile farm when her father died. The girl was quiet, tall, and dark, and to many people she seemed very beautiful. Everyone in Winesburg wondered why she married the doctor. Within a year after the marriage she died.

The knuckles of the doctor's hands were extraordinarily large. When the hands were closed they looked like clusters of unpainted wooden balls as large as walnuts fastened together by steel rods. He smoked a cob pipe and after his wife's death sat all day in his empty office close by a window that was covered with cobwebs. He never opened the window. Once on a hot day in August he tried but found it stuck fast and after that he forgot all about it.

Winesburg had forgotten the old man, but in Doctor Reefy there were the seeds of something very fine. Alone in his musty office in the Heffner Block above the Paris Dry Goods Company's store, he worked ceaselessly, building up something that he himself destroyed. Little pyramids of truth he erected and after erecting knocked them down again that he might have the truths to erect other pyramids.

Doctor Reefy was a tall man who had worn one suit of clothes for ten years. It was frayed at the sleeves and little holes had appeared at the knees and elbows. In the office he wore also a linen duster with huge pockets into which he continually stuffed scraps of paper. After some weeks the scraps of paper became little hard round balls, and when the pockets were filled he dumped them out upon the floor. For ten years he had but one friend, another old man named John Spaniard who owned a tree nursery. Sometimes, in a playful mood, old Doctor Reefy took from his pockets a handful of the paper balls and threw them at the nursery man. "That is to confound you, you blathering old sentimentalist," he cried, shaking with laughter.

The story of Doctor Reefy and his courtship of the tall dark girl who became his wife and left her money to him is a very curious story. It is delicious, like the twisted little apples that grow in the orchards of Winesburg. In the fall one walks in the orchards and the ground is hard with frost underfoot. The apples have been taken from the trees by the pickers. They have been put in barrels and shipped to the cities where they will be eaten in apartments that are filled with books, magazines, furniture, and people. On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands. One nibbles at them

and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness. One runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples.

The girl and Doctor Reefy began their courtship on a summer afternoon. He was forty-five then and already he had begun the practice of filling his pockets with the scraps of paper that became hard balls and were thrown away. The habit had been formed as he sat in his buggy behind the jaded white horse and went slowly along country roads. On the papers were written thoughts, ends of thoughts, beginnings of thoughts.

One by one the mind of Doctor Reefy had made the thoughts. Out of many of them he formed a truth that arose gigantic in his mind. The truth clouded the world. It became terrible and then faded away and the little thoughts began again.

The tall dark girl came to see Doctor Reefy because she was in the family way and had become frightened. She was in that condition because of a series of circumstances also curious.

The death of her father and mother and the rich acres of land that had come down to her had set a train of suitors on her heels. For two years she saw suitors almost every evening. Except two they were all alike. They talked to her of passion and there was a strained eager quality in their voices and in their eyes when they looked at her. The two who were different were much unlike each other. One of them, a slender young man with white hands, the son of a jeweler in Winesburg, talked continually of virginity. When he was with her he was never off the subject. The other, a black-haired boy with large ears, said nothing at all but always managed to get her into the darkness, where he began to kiss her.

For a time the tall dark girl thought she would marry the jeweler's son. For hours she sat in silence listening as he talked to her and then she began to be afraid of something. Beneath his talk of virginity she began to think there was a lust greater than in all the others. At times it seemed to her that as he talked he was holding her body in his hands. She imagined him turning it slowly about in the white hands and staring at it. At night she dreamed that he had bitten into her body and that his jaws were dripping. She had the dream three times, then she became in the family way to the one who said nothing at all but who in the moment of his passion actually did bite her shoulder so that for days the marks of his teeth showed.

After the tall dark girl came to know Doctor Reefy it seemed to her that she never wanted to leave him again. She went into his office one morning and without her saying anything he seemed to know what had happened to her.

In the office of the doctor there was a woman, the wife of the man who kept the bookstore in Winesburg. Like all old-fashioned country practitioners, Doctor Reefy pulled teeth, and the woman who waited held a handkerchief to her teeth and groaned. Her husband was with her and when the tooth was taken out they both screamed and blood ran down on the woman's white dress. The tall dark girl did not pay any attention. When the woman and the man had gone the doctor smiled. "I will take you driving into the country with me," he said.

For several weeks the tall dark girl and the doctor were together almost every day. The condition that had brought her to him passed in an illness, but she was like one who has discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples, she could not get her mind fixed again upon the round perfect fruit that is eaten in the city apartments. In the fall after the beginning of her acquaintanceship with him she married Doctor Reefy and in the following spring she died. During the winter he read to her all of the odds and ends of thoughts he had scribbled on the bits of paper. After he had read them he laughed and stuffed them away in his pockets to become round hard balls.

Discussion Questions:

1. "Paper Pills" doesn't follow a traditional plot structure with rising action, climax, and resolution. Instead, it begins with a paragraph that seems to tell the whole story, while the rest seems to be more of a character sketch or meditation. How does this episodic, non-linear structure affect your reading experience? Does the lack of conventional plot make the story more or less effective?
2. Doctor Reefy is described with very specific physical details: his white beard, huge nose and hands, and knuckles "like clusters of unpainted wooden balls." Why does Anderson focus so intensely on these physical characteristics? What do they reveal about Reefy's character?
3. The girl has two unusual suitors: one who talks constantly about virginity, and one who says nothing but tries to kiss her in the darkness. What do these contrasting characters

reveal about the girl's search for genuine connection? Why does she ultimately choose neither of them?

4. The story's third-person narrator gives us access to the girl's thoughts and feelings during her courtship, but very little access to Doctor Reefy's inner life. Why might Anderson have made this choice? What effect does it create?
 5. There are two significant symbols in this story - the "twisted little apples" left in the orchard after harvest and the "paper pills" mentioned in the title. What do these two symbols represent? What support can you pull from the text to support these ideas?
 6. Like the plot, the style of Anderson's short story is also unique. At times, his writing is very direct and matter-of-fact, yet other passages in the story are often described as being more "lyrical"—musical and flowing. Find examples of both types of sentences, and consider the effect this shifting style has on the story.
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Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) was a pioneering African American poet, journalist, short story writer, and civil rights activist who played a significant role in the Harlem Renaissance. Born Alice Ruth Moore in New Orleans to a formerly enslaved mother and a white father, she grew up in the city's vibrant Creole community, which deeply influenced her literary work.

At a time when fewer than one percent of Americans attended college, Dunbar-Nelson graduated from Straight University (later part of Dillard University) in 1892 at age seventeen and began teaching in New Orleans public schools. In 1895, she published her first collection, *Violets and Other Tales*, a groundbreaking mix of poetry and short stories that explored Creole life and the experiences of women of color. Despite harsh criticism from some quarters, she persisted in her literary career.

In 1898, she married the celebrated poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, though their marriage was troubled by his alcoholism and abuse. After their separation, she continued writing and became increasingly involved in activism. She remarried twice, finally to Robert J. Nelson, a fellow poet and activist, and adopted the hyphenated name by which she's best known.

Dunbar-Nelson was a fierce advocate for women's suffrage and African American civil rights. She co-founded the Wilmington Equal Suffrage Study Club in 1914 and served as a field organizer for the women's suffrage movement. Her later work included journalism, essays, and political commentary that addressed lynching, racism, and women's rights. Her best-known short story collection, *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* (1899), showcased her intimate knowledge of New Orleans Creole culture and her skillful depiction of women's lives, desires, and struggles.

“The Goodness of Saint Rocque” by Alice Dunbar-Nelson

Manuela was tall and slender and graceful, and once you knew her the lithe form could never be mistaken. She walked with the easy spring that comes from a perfectly arched foot. To-day she swept swiftly down Marais Street, casting a quick glance here and there from under her heavy veil as if she feared she was being followed. If you had peered under the veil, you would have seen that Manuela's dark eyes were swollen and discoloured about the lids, as though they had known a sleepless, tearful night. There had been a picnic the day before, and as merry a crowd of giddy, chattering Creole girls and boys as ever you could see boarded the ramshackle dummy-train that puffed its way wheezily out wide Elysian Fields Street, around the lily-covered bayous, to Milneburg-on-the-Lake. Now, a picnic at Milneburg is a thing to be remembered for ever. One charts a rickety-looking, weather-beaten dancing-pavilion, built over the water, and after storing the children--for your true Creole never leaves the small folks at home--and the baskets and mothers downstairs, the young folks go up-stairs and dance to the tune of the best band you ever heard. For what can equal the music of a violin, a guitar, a cornet, and a bass viol to trip the quadrille to at a picnic?

Then one can fish in the lake and go bathing under the prim bath-houses, so severely separated sexually, and go rowing on the lake in a trim boat, followed by the shrill warnings of anxious mamans. And in the evening one comes home, hat crowned with cool gray Spanish moss, hands burdened with fantastic latanier baskets woven by the brown bayou boys, hand in hand with your dearest one, tired but happy.

At this particular picnic, however, there had been bitterness of spirit. Theophile was Manuela's own especial property, and Theophile had proven false. He had not danced a single waltz or quadrille with Manuela, but had deserted her for Claralie, blonde and petite. It was Claralie

whom Theophile had rowed out on the lake; it was Claralie whom Theophile had gallantly led to dinner; it was Claralie's hat that he wreathed with Spanish moss, and Claralie whom he escorted home after the jolly singing ride in town on the little dummy-train.

Not that Manuela lacked partners or admirers. Dear no! she was too graceful and beautiful for that. There had been more than enough for her. But Manuela loved Theophile, you see, and no one could take his place. Still, she had tossed her head and let her silvery laughter ring out in the dance, as though she were the happiest of mortals, and had tripped home with Henri, leaning on his arm, and looking up into his eyes as though she adored him.

This morning she showed the traces of a sleepless night and an aching heart as she walked down Marais Street. Across wide St. Rocque Avenue she hastened. "Two blocks to the river and one below--" she repeated to herself breathlessly. Then she stood on the corner gazing about her, until with a final summoning of a desperate courage she dived through a small wicket gate into a garden of weed-choked flowers.

There was a hoarse, rusty little bell on the gate that gave querulous tongue as she pushed it open. The house that sat back in the yard was little and old and weather-beaten. Its one-story frame had once been painted, but that was a memory remote and traditional. A straggling morning-glory strove to conceal its time-ravaged face. The little walk of broken bits of brick was reddened carefully, and the one little step was scrupulously yellow-washed, which denoted that the occupants were cleanly as well as religious.

Manuela's timid knock was answered by a harsh "Entrez."

It was a small sombre room within, with a bare yellow-washed floor and ragged curtains at the little window. In a corner was a diminutive altar draped with threadbare lace. The red glow of the taper lighted a cheap print of St. Joseph and a brazen crucifix. The human element in the room was furnished by a little, wizened yellow woman, who, black-robed, turbaned, and stern, sat before an uncertain table whereon were greasy cards.

Manuela paused, her eyes blinking at the semi-obscurity within. The Wizened One called in croaking tones:

"An' fo' w'y you come here? Assiez-la, ma'amzelle."

Timidly Manuela sat at the table facing the owner of the voice.

"I want," she began faintly; but the Mistress of the Cards understood: she had had much experience. The cards were shuffled in her long grimy talons and stacked before Manuela.

"Now you cut dem in t'ree part, so--un, deux, trois, bien! You mek' you' weesh wid all you' heart, bien! Yaas, I see, I see!"

Breathlessly did Manuela learn that her lover was true, but "dat light gal, yaas, she mek' nouvena in St. Rocque fo' hees love."

"I give you one lil' charm, yaas," said the Wizen'd One when the seance was over, and Manuela, all white and nervous, leaned back in the rickety chair. "I give you one lil' charm fo' to ween him back, yaas. You wear h'it 'roun' you' wais', an' he come back. Den you mek prayer at St. Rocque an' burn can'le. Den you come back an' tell me, yaas. Cinquante sous, ma'amzelle. Merci. Good luck go wid you."

Readjusting her veil, Manuela passed out the little wicket gate, treading on air. Again the sun shone, and the breath of the swamps came as healthful sea-breeze unto her nostrils. She fairly flew in the direction of St. Rocque.

There were quite a number of persons entering the white gates of the cemetery, for this was Friday, when all those who wish good luck pray to the saint, and wash their steps promptly at twelve o'clock with a wondrous mixture to guard the house. Manuela bought a candle from the keeper of the little lodge at the entrance, and pausing one instant by the great sun-dial to see if the heavens and the hour were propitious, glided into the tiny chapel, dim and stifling with heavy air from myriad wish-candles blazing on the wide table before the altar-rail. She said her prayer and lighting her candle placed it with the others.

Mon Dieu! how brightly the sun seemed to shine now, she thought, pausing at the door on her way out. Her small finger-tips, still bedewed with holy water, rested caressingly on a gamin's head. The ivy which enfolds the quaint chapel never seemed so green; the shrines which serve as the Way of the Cross never seemed so artistic; the baby graves, even, seemed cheerful.

Theophile called Sunday. Manuela's heart leaped. He had been spending his Sundays with Claralie. His stay was short and he was plainly bored. But Manuela knelt to thank the good St. Rocque that night, and fondled the charm about her slim waist. There came a box of bonbons during the week, with a decorative card all roses and fringe, from Theophile; but being a Creole, and therefore superstitiously careful, and having been reared by a wise and experienced

maman to mistrust the gifts of a recreant lover, Manuela quietly thrust bonbons, box, and card into the kitchen fire, and the Friday following placed the second candle of her nouvena in St. Rocque.

Those of Manuela's friends who had watched with indignation Theophile gallantly leading Claralie home from High Mass on Sundays, gasped with astonishment when the next Sunday, with his usual bow, the young man offered Manuela his arm as the worshippers filed out in step to the organ's march. Claralie tossed her head as she crossed herself with holy water, and the pink in her cheeks was brighter than usual.

Manuela smiled a bright good-morning when she met Claralie in St. Rocque the next Friday. The little blonde blushed furiously, and Manuela rushed post-haste to the Wizenred One to confer upon this new issue.

"H'tit ees good," said the dame, shaking her turbaned head. "She ees 'fraid, she will work, mais you' charm, h'tit weel beat her."

And Manuela departed with radiant eyes.

Theophile was not at Mass Sunday morning, and murderous glances flashed from Claralie to Manuela before the tinkling of the Host-Bell. Nor did Theophile call at either house. Two hearts beat furiously at the sound of every passing footstep, and two minds wondered if the other were enjoying the beloved one's smiles. Two pair of eyes, however, blue and black, smiled on others, and their owners laughed and seemed none the less happy. For your Creole girls are proud, and would die rather than let the world see their sorrows.

Monday evening Theophile, the missing, showed his rather sheepish countenance in Manuela's parlour, and explained that he, with some chosen spirits, had gone for a trip--"over the Lake."

"I did not ask you where you were yesterday," replied the girl, saucily.

Theophile shrugged his shoulders and changed the conversation.

The next week there was a birthday fete in honour of Louise, Theophile's young sister. Everyone was bidden, and no one thought of refusing, for Louise was young, and this would be her first party. So, though the night was hot, the dancing went on as merrily as light young feet could make it go. Claralie fluffed her dainty white skirts, and cast mischievous sparkles in the direction

of Theophile, who with the maman and Louise was bravely trying not to look self-conscious. Manuela, tall and calm and proud-looking, in a cool, pale yellow gown was apparently enjoying herself without paying the slightest attention to her young host.

"Have I the pleasure of this dance?" he asked her finally, in a lull of the music.

She bowed assent, and as if moved by a common impulse they strolled out of the dancing-room into the cool, quaint garden, where jessamines gave out an overpowering perfume, and a caged mocking-bird complained melodiously to the full moon in the sky.

It must have been an engrossing tete-a-tete, for the call to supper had sounded twice before they heard and hurried into the house. The march had formed with Louise radiantly leading on the arm of papa. Claralie tripped by with Leon. Of course, nothing remained for Theophile and Manuela to do but to bring up the rear, for which they received much good-natured chaffing.

But when the party reached the dining-room, Theophile proudly led his partner to the head of the table, at the right hand of maman, and smiled benignly about at the delighted assemblage. Now you know, when a Creole young man places a girl at his mother's right hand at his own table, there is but one conclusion to be deduced therefrom.

If you had asked Manuela, after the wedding was over, how it happened, she would have said nothing, but looked wise.

If you had asked Claralie, she would have laughed and said she always preferred Leon.

If you had asked Theophile, he would have wondered that you thought he had ever meant more than to tease Manuela.

If you had asked the Wizenred One, she would have offered you a charm.

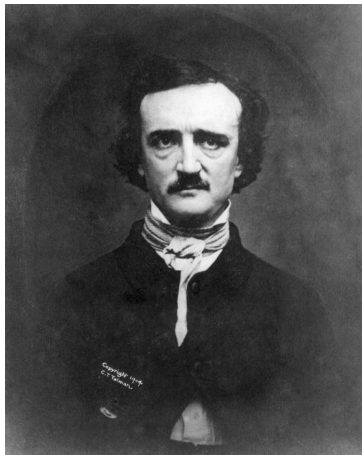
But St. Rocque knows, for he is a good saint, and if you believe in him and are true and good, and make your nouvenas with a clean heart, he will grant your wish.

Discussion Questions:

1. At the beginning of the story, Manuela is described as walking "with the easy spring that comes from a perfectly arched foot," yet her eyes are "swollen and discoloured" from crying. Later, we learn she "tossed her head and let her silvery laughter ring out" at the

picnic even while heartbroken. What does this contrast between her inner pain and outer performance tell us about her character and the social expectations she faces?

2. The story is set in the Creole community of New Orleans, with rich sensory details: Spanish moss, latanier baskets, jessamines, the mocking-bird, "the breath of the swamps." How does this specific cultural and geographic setting shape the story? Could this story happen anywhere else, or is it essentially a New Orleans Creole story?
3. The narrator occasionally addresses the reader directly ("Now you know, when a Creole young man places a girl at his mother's right hand...") and seems to be an insider explaining Creole customs to outsiders. How does this insider/outsider dynamic affect your reading of the story? Does it make you feel included or excluded from this world?
4. The "charm" that Manuela wears around her waist and the candles she lights at St. Rocque are the story's central symbols. What might they represent beyond their literal function in the plot? Consider: what gives them power—the objects themselves, Manuela's belief in them, or something else?
5. Both Manuela and Claralie use indirect means to pursue Theophile—superstition, performance, social maneuvering. Neither confronts him directly or expresses their feelings openly. What does this suggest about gender roles and women's agency in this world? Is Dunbar-Nelson critiquing these limitations or simply observing them?
6. The story ends with a conventionally "happy" romantic resolution—marriage—unlike many of the stories you've read this semester. Does the happy ending make it less serious or literary than stories with tragic or ambiguous endings? What might a happy ending allow an author to explore that a tragic ending doesn't?



Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an American writer, poet, editor, and literary critic who pioneered the modern short story and is considered the master of Gothic horror and the detective genre. Born in Boston to itinerant actors, Poe was orphaned by age three when his mother died and his father abandoned the family. He was taken in (though never formally adopted) by John and Frances Allan of Richmond, Virginia, a wealthy tobacco merchant and his wife.

Poe's life was marked by tragedy and instability. He attended the University of Virginia but left after one year due to gambling debts and lack of financial support from John Allan. He briefly attended West Point but was dismissed for neglect of duty. In 1836, he married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm; her death from tuberculosis in 1847 devastated him and deepened the melancholy that pervaded his work.

Despite personal struggles, Poe was a brilliant and prolific writer. He worked as a literary critic and editor for various magazines while producing his dark, psychologically complex tales and hauntingly beautiful poetry. Stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Tell-Tale Heart" explored guilt, madness, death, and the darker corners of the human psyche. His poem "The Raven" (1845) brought him fame, though not financial security. He invented the detective story with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), creating the template for countless mystery writers to follow.

Poe died mysteriously in Baltimore in 1849 at age forty under circumstances that remain unclear. Found delirious on the streets, he died four days later, never becoming coherent enough to explain what had happened. His influence on American and world literature remains immeasurable.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe

TRUE!—NERVOUS—VERY, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this, And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out—"Who's there?"

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—“It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor,” or “It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.” Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?—now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the

dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart,—for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled,—for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct:—It continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness—until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew very pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!”

Discussion Questions:

1. The narrator insists repeatedly that he is not mad: "TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" Why does he protest so much? What does his need to prove his sanity reveal about his actual mental state? Can we trust anything he tells us?
2. The story is told entirely from the murderer's first-person point of view, with no other perspectives offered. How does this limited viewpoint affect our understanding of events? What would we gain or lose if we could hear from the old man or the police officers?

3. The narrator claims he loved the old man and had no rational motive for the murder: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man." If this is true, what does it tell us about the nature of his madness? Is a motiveless crime more or less disturbing than one with a clear reason?
 4. The "vulture eye" of the old man becomes the central symbol of the story - the narrator says it was "the eye! yes, it was this!" that drove him to murder. What might the eye symbolize? Why would an eye—the organ of sight and perception—be so threatening to the narrator?
 5. The beating heart that the narrator hears growing louder is physically impossible—the old man is dead and dismembered. What does the sound really represent? Is it guilt, paranoia, psychological breakdown, or something else? What does this auditory hallucination reveal about the narrator's psychology?
 6. The story was published in 1843 but remains deeply disturbing and relevant today. What makes it timeless? What does it reveal about human psychology, guilt, or madness that still resonates more than 180 years later? How does Poe's exploration of a disturbed mind compare to more modern psychological fiction you've encountered?
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Part 3: Poetry

We are now leaving fiction behind for a bit, turning our attention to poetry. In a way, poetry takes all the emotional impact of a short story or an even longer work of prose and boils it down to a much more concentrated, compact form. It's a bit like buying a small bottle of concentrated detergent instead of a huge plastic jug of dish soap. Both will get your dishes clean, but they are quite different from each other. In the coming chapters, we'll focus on how to be an active reader of poetry, the ways poetry is different from prose, and some of the unique aspects to consider when doing an analysis of a poem.

Chapter 11: Understanding Poetry

Understanding the Differences Between Poetry and Prose: To begin with, compared to traditional storytelling, poetry can be much more free and loose in a variety of ways. Poets can throw out some of the elements of fiction entirely - like plot, character, and setting - and even ignore lots of conventions of traditional prose too, like writing in complete sentences or following standard punctuation rules. Poets also don't have to worry about following strict forms - like writing in paragraphs or starting all the lines on the left of the page. Instead, poets turn all their attention towards getting right into the heart of the matter without necessarily worrying about building up suspense into some sort of climactic moment. In poetry - because it is so pared down - every choice the poet makes is given increased importance, and every word counts to an even higher degree than in regular prose writing. So, with that in mind, we usually read poems more slowly and carefully, focusing on every single detail.

In the end, reading poetry is a bit like carefully savoring each of the unique flavors in a fancy box of chocolate truffles, while reading short stories might be a bit more like knocking down a delicious bag of potato chips. They are both enjoyable things to do, but end up being very different experiences.

The Basics of Reading Poetry: Reading poetry still comes down to the same basic steps as reading anything else - seeing what's on the page and trying to make sense of it all. But there is artistry in poetry too, unlike a lot of other things we read, and so we have to approach it a bit differently. For one thing, reading poetry can feel a bit intimidating, especially compared to

reading something like a short story. This is likely because we just don't read poetry nearly as often, and it looks quite different on the page, all split up into little pieces. Also, the idea that every word and every image is important can kind of feel a bit stressful to figure out, similar to trying to uncover the meaning of an important symbol in a work of fiction.

Instead of worrying about all this stuff, it is best to approach poems in a simpler way - just jump in there and start reading. And if you can, read it actively, with a pen in hand (if you are using a paper copy, of course). Don't worry about analyzing everything, digging into every symbol, or examining all the imagery for some deeper meaning. Just read it and see what bubbles up. You might start to notice patterns or rhymes or images that repeat, or you may see some deeper message about life hidden in the poet's words - or not. Either way is perfectly okay.

Also, when you read poetry, remember to follow a few basic tips to make your experience a bit better. First, is *an important one* to help with that annoying "choppy" feel that poems can have sometimes. Whatever you do, do not stop at each line of a poem, but only when there is a punctuation mark - like a comma or a period. If you stop... at every line... sometimes poetry... can drive you crazy! Instead, you should read slowly and thoughtfully, ignoring the line breaks unless you hit a punctuation mark that tells you otherwise. Once you do this, poems will open up to you and you'll get a much better sense of the feel and flow of things.

Secondly, it is highly recommended that you read and experience poems out loud. In classrooms, students often read poems individually and in absolute silence. The place sounds like a funeral service, but without the crying... usually. However, when you watch a video of the same poem being read out loud in front of a crowd, the audience is laughing, or cheering, or clapping, or usually doing *something* at least. Poetry is kind of like a hybrid creature with one foot in writing and the other in music, and so even though it is on paper in black and white, it is really meant to be heard. Even if you are alone, it is really always best to read a poem out loud to hear it roll off the tongue and to experience what the author intended. Essentially, reading a poem in silence is like checking out the newest single from your favorite band by reading the sheet music and saying, "Damn, that's a banger!" In the end, getting into the habit of following the lead of the punctuation marks and reading poetry out loud will help you get the very most out of the time you are spending. You've got this, and honestly, poetry isn't as scary as it seems.

But before plunging into the Elements of Poetry, we are going to read a shared poem that we can use as a sample in each of the upcoming chapters. You can consider this your very first chance to practice the reading techniques you just learned. Also, this will be similar to the way “The Lottery Ticket” by Anton Chekhov was used throughout the “Elements of Fiction” chapters, so it is best not to just skim through it. Instead, give the poem a few active and thoughtful readings following those tips - slowly, pen in hand (if you have a paper copy), and out loud so you can really *listen* to the words.



Langston Hughes (1902–1967) is one of the most influential voices in American literature, and he helped define the Harlem Renaissance - a cultural explosion of Black art, music, and writing in 1920s New York. Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes had a complicated childhood. His parents separated when he was young, and he was raised largely by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. It was his grandmother who first introduced him to stories of resilience and pride in Black history, planting seeds that would grow into his life's work.

Hughes started writing poetry in high school, and by the time he was nineteen, he'd published "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in *The Crisis* magazine. The poem became an instant classic. He went on to write poetry, novels, plays, essays, and children's books, but he's best known for his poetry that captured the rhythms of jazz and blues, the struggles of working-class Black Americans, and the beauty of everyday life in Harlem.

What made Hughes special was his accessibility. He didn't write for academics in ivory towers - he wrote for regular people. His poems showed up in Black newspapers. He read his work in churches, schools, and community centers. He believed poetry should reflect real life, real speech, and real emotion, and he spent his career proving that literature could be both artful and democratic. Hughes faced criticism from some who thought his work was too focused on the struggles of poor Black Americans, but he never apologized for telling their stories, and he spent his life making sure their voices were heard.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

- (1) I've known rivers:
- (2) I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human
blood in human veins.
- (3) My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
- (4) I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
- (5) I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
- (6) I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
- (7) I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've
seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
- (8) I've known rivers:
- (9) Ancient, dusky rivers.
- (10) My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is this poem about on a literal level? What is the speaker describing? Try to put the main idea into your own words without worrying about deeper meaning yet.
2. Who do you think is speaking in this poem? Is it just Langston Hughes talking about his own life, or could the "I" represent something larger? What makes you think so?

3. Hughes repeats certain lines in this poem. Which lines repeat, and why do you think he chose to repeat them? What effect does that repetition have on you as a reader?
 4. The poem begins and ends with similar ideas. How does that circular structure affect the way you understand the poem's message?
 5. Why do you think Hughes chose *rivers* specifically? What do rivers do? How do they behave? What might rivers represent beyond just bodies of water?
 6. What feeling or mood does this poem create for you? Is it sad, proud, peaceful, angry, something else? Point to specific words or lines that create that feeling.
-

Chapter 12: Speaker, Tone and Mood

Once we start getting the hang of reading poetry effectively, it's time to go deeper. After all, we're not just learning to be casual readers of poetry, but the kind of thinkers who dig into the meaning of things with some careful analysis of the speaker, tone, and mood of the work.

Considering the Speaker: In the same way that every work of fiction has a narrator, every poem has a **speaker**. Essentially, this is the person who is talking in the poem, and it is important to remember that this speaker may not be the poet themselves. Now, it is true that a lot of poetry is personal, but we can't just assume the speaker is the poet, especially as a man can write a poem from the perspective of a grieving mother, a woman can write a poem from the perspective of a cat, and Dr. Seuss can write a poem from the perspective of "The Lorax," even though he isn't one himself... probably.

Understanding the speaker is important because when we ask "What is this poem saying?," what we're really asking is "What is the *speaker* saying in this poem?" Taking time to try to understand the speaker helps us to better lock in on the meaning of things overall, and it also opens us up to a host of really important questions, including "Who is this speaker? What do we know about them?" To answer this, we first have to decide if the author and the speaker are one and the same. We can first see if the speaker describes experiences and perspectives that couldn't be the author's - like the poet who writes from the perspective of their cat. We can see if the poem uses "I" or "we" in a way that seems to represent more than just the one individual who wrote it. Finally, we can see if the speaker has beliefs, attitudes, or knowledge that might be different from the poet's. And remember, even if none of these are the case, and the speaker and poet might be one and the same, it is still better to refer to the voice in a poem as the speaker.

One of the reasons it is better to maintain some distance between the poet and the speaker is that it helps to remind us to keep our attention on what is happening inside the poem and to not jump to any conclusions about the poet's life. It also opens up discussions about whether or not the speaker is reliable, or if they might be biased, confused, or lying. We likely wouldn't ask these questions of the poet themselves, but when we think in terms of the speaker, then it seems easier to wonder about them. Differentiating between the two roles - of author and speaker - also allows us to question why the poet chose *this* particular speaker to deliver *this* specific message.

Understanding The Basics of Tone: One additional question we can ask about the speaker in a poem is “What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject?” The answer to this brings us back to the concept of **tone**, which we covered in the “Elements of Fiction” portion of the book. Similar to how we used the term before, the tone of a poem is the speaker or author's attitude towards their subject, and it works just like tone in real life. Think of the number of ways a person could say the word, “Oh, great.” This can be said with excitement (you just got an “A” on a paper), with sarcasm (your car won't start) or even with exhaustion (you have to work the night-shift). That said, we can work to determine this tone by considering the word choices (diction), imagery, sounds, and the relationship between the speaker and the subject. For now, let's keep it simple: if a poem uses words like “dark,” “cold,” and “empty,” the tone is probably somber or depressing. If a poem uses words like “bright,” “laughter,” and “warm,” the tone is probably joyful or hopeful. Pay attention to the feeling behind the words, and you'll start to sense the speaker's attitude come through. If that sounds like *a lot*, don't worry - we'll explore these ideas in much greater detail in the upcoming chapters, and you'll get to see an example of exactly how to do this using Langston Hughes' poem.

Understanding the Basics of Mood: Once we've read the poem carefully, figured out a bit about the speaker, and used some textual cues to help us discern the tone - which is how the speaker feels - it is time to do a little introspection and think about how the poem makes *us* feel. The **mood** of a poem is essentially the emotional atmosphere the work creates for us. When we watch movies, for example, we're used to talking about the mood - or the way the movie made us feel. And in the very same way, we can say a poem was scary, funny, depressing or intense, depending on how we perceive the mood of the work. To get a sense of the mood, we actually use the very same clues that we use to understand the tone - word choices, imagery, and sounds - but, interestingly enough, they don't always match up which can create some dramatic tension.

For example, if you consider music, there are many songs that have really upbeat music, and yet, if you look at the lyrics, you'll realize they are actually pretty depressing. Some examples are “Pumped Up Kicks” by Foster the People - about a disturbed kid chasing people down with a gun, “Manchild” by Sabrina Carpenter - about the frustrations of dating immature men, and “Blinding Lights” by The Weeknd - about loneliness and lost love. These songs intentionally create tension between potentially depressing lyrics and the upbeat music behind them. The same can be said for a mismatch in the tone and mood of a poem, where you might find the speaker's tone trying to stay fairly light and cheerful, and then suddenly feel like something is off

when you realize that the imagery is actually dark or possibly even violent. Done intentionally, this can create a lot of drama, in the same way you want to jump out of your seat during a horror movie when a character is walking through a cemetery at midnight cracking jokes. To be clear, though, the tone and mood of many poems do match up - in the same way that the music and lyrics of songs usually fit together - but it is important to be aware that this isn't always the case.

One final quick note on mood - when we talk about the mood of a given poem, there are really two ways to do it. One is to talk about the mood in terms of the poem itself, like "the poem had a joyful mood" or "the poem creates an atmosphere of dread." The other way is to talk about it in terms of the way we feel, like "the poem made me feel anxious" or "after reading this, I felt hopeful." Both are perfectly fine, but being that the first way keeps the focus more on the text and not just on our own moods at any given time, it is best to talk about the mood in terms of the poem itself when writing for academic settings.

Writing a Speaker, Tone, and Mood Analysis: As always, it is best to begin with multiple careful readings of the poem, actively, with a pen in hand (if you're reading a paper copy). Read the poem slowly and out loud - ignoring line breaks and only following punctuation marks. After a few passes, and hopefully getting some basic sense of what the poem is about, turn your attention to figuring out a bit about the speaker in the poem. Ask yourself, "What do we know about the speaker? Do they use 'I' or 'we' in the poem in a way that makes them seem different from the author? Does the speaker have beliefs, attitudes or knowledge that seem different from the poet?" After considering those questions, it is still best to refer to the voice in the poem as the speaker and ask "Why did the poet choose this speaker for this poem?"

Once you've explained a bit about the speaker, look at their attitude towards the subject-matter in the poem - which is known as the tone. You can work to uncover this by looking closely at the words, images, and sounds in the poem - you can especially get a sense of the sounds by reading out loud. Additionally, consider the content. It's hard to have a funny or silly attitude in a poem about a funeral - though it *can* happen, of course. Just remember that a poet can use all the same types of tone that a person can use in conversation, so they could be silly, serious, sarcastic, frustrated, exhausted, or excited about their subject-matter. Whatever you end up choosing, be sure to provide textual evidence to explain your choice.

The last step in completing this type of analysis is to look inwards. Using all the same pieces of textual evidence - words, images, sounds, and subject - consider how the poem makes you feel.

That emotional atmosphere is the mood of the poem, and similar to things like songs and movies, poems can have an emotional impact that leaves us feeling a certain kind of way. When we explain the mood of the poem, even though we are thinking of the way it made us feel, we still explain the mood in terms of the poem. Writing something like “the poem creates a somber mood” is the best way to phrase it. Again, the key to doing a good job on an analysis is to always ground your observations in the text itself - cite specific words, images, lines, or sounds that support your interpretation.

Sample Speaker, Tone, and Mood Analysis: Langston Hughes wrote his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” when he was only 19 years old during the Harlem Renaissance, which was a vibrant social, cultural, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York from the 1910s to the 1930s. The poem explores the connection between modern Black people around the world and their rich and ancient ancestry that goes all the way back to the dawn of civilization, and a closer look at the speaker, tone, and mood of the poem helps to support this central point.

First, in the title “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” - which uses terminology that was common and respectful in 1920s - Hughes is using a singular “I,” but he isn’t actually speaking just about one man or an individual’s experience. He is speaking of an entire race or group of people, in this case Black people across history and geography. We get this sense when we look at all the things that the speaker - who refers to themselves as “I” throughout the poem - has done. They have done things like bathe in the Euphrates at the beginning of time, were in the Nile and built the pyramids, and were in “the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans” (line 7). Obviously, no one person could have done all this, and so it’s clear that Hughes is referring to all Black people throughout time. Choosing this speaker is a powerful move, and as the poem goes along, it feels like this collective “I” is capturing the dignity and timelessness of all Black history itself.

The tone in the poem seems to be dignified and reflective - thinking about the past - but also with a quiet sense of pride at the rich history and many accomplishments of Black culture. There are words like “ancient,” “dusky,” and “deep” which feel weighty and serious, again, giving the poem that connection to the dawn of humanity. Hughes also repeats the words “I’ve known rivers” in lines 1, 2 and 8 to powerful effect, and the language isn’t bragging nor argumentative, simply stating the facts and thinking back over the long arc of history for his people. The speaker finishes, again, with a calmly stated, but powerful claim that “My soul has grown deep

like the rivers” (line 10). This gives the poem a powerful, spiritual finish, showing that the speaker is dignified and self-assured.

The mood of the poem is a good match for the tone, as it gives off a sort of reverent and timeless vibe. This can be seen in the repeated imagery of the ancient rivers - the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi - that all predate the “flow of human blood in human veins” (line 3). The building of the pyramids also gives the reader a sense of awe. Additionally, the poem creates a sort of circular, meditative feel by beginning and ending with very similar lines and images - that the speaker has known ancient rivers and has grown similarly deep. This bookends the poem in a way that makes the work itself feel timeless like the flow of the ancient rivers.

In conclusion, the speaker, tone, and mood all work together to help Langston Hughes’s poem make a powerful point about the impressive contributions Black culture has made to humanity. Capturing the collective voice of all Black people through history, the speaker of the poem gives “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” a mythical, larger-than-life quality. The tone seems to be dignified, but also shows the reader a sense of pride in these impressive cultural accomplishments. Finally, the poem’s mood creates a sense of awe and leaves the reader with a timeless feeling that this rich history hasn’t ended, but will continue on like an ancient river that keeps flowing.

Now It's Your Turn: With the sample Speaker, Tone, and Mood Analysis using Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” still in your mind, it is time to turn your attention towards trying your own analysis. Read each of the following poems first, and choose the one that speaks to you the most for your analysis. Once you pick, you should probably give your poem a few more active readings before jumping into the writing assignment.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was one of the first African American poets to gain national recognition. Born in Dayton, Ohio, to parents who had been enslaved, Dunbar worked as an elevator operator while writing poetry and selling his work to passengers. His breakthrough came in 1896 with *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, which made him nationally famous. Dunbar wrote in both standard English and African American dialect, though his poems in standard English - like “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy” - powerfully captured the pain of Black life in America. He died of tuberculosis at just 33, but his work paved the way for the Harlem Renaissance.

“We Wear the Mask” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

Discussion Questions:

1. Who is the "we" in this poem? What group of people do you think the speaker is representing, and what evidence from the poem supports your interpretation?
 2. The poem says "We wear the mask that grins and lies." What is the mask lying about? Who is being lied to, and why might this deception be necessary?
 3. Look at the contrast between what the mask shows ("grins") and what's underneath ("torn and bleeding hearts"). How does this contrast help you understand the speaker's experience?
 4. The speaker asks, "Why should the world be over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?" What does this question reveal about the speaker's attitude toward the outside world?
 5. Notice the repetition of "We wear the mask" throughout the poem. What effect does this repetition have? Does it make the act of wearing the mask seem habitual, defensive, defiant, or something else?
 6. Have you ever felt like you had to "wear a mask" and hide your true feelings in a particular situation? How does your personal experience help you understand this poem, or does the poem reveal something new about that experience?
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Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is often called the father of American poetry. Born on Long Island, he left school at eleven and worked as a printer and journalist before revolutionizing poetry with *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Whitman broke traditional rules by writing in free verse and celebrating everyday Americans - mechanics, farmers, mothers - as worthy subjects for poetry. He believed in democracy as a way of seeing the world, where every person had dignity and value. During the Civil War, he volunteered as a nurse, caring for wounded soldiers. Though commercial success was limited during his lifetime, and his work was often considered controversial, Whitman's influence on American poetry is immeasurable.

“I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,

The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,

The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,

The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,

The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,

The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,

The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,

The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,

Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Discussion Questions:

1. The speaker describes hearing various people "singing" while they work—mechanics, carpenters, masons, boatmen, shoemakers, and others. What do you think Whitman means by "singing"? Are these people literally singing, or does "singing" represent something else?
2. Look at the types of workers Whitman includes in this poem. What do they have in common? Are there any types of workers or people notably absent from this list?
3. Each worker sings "what belongs to him or her and to none else." What might this line suggest about individuality, ownership, or personal identity?

4. The poem ends with "the delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing." Why do you think Whitman saved the women for the end? Does their placement change how you read the poem?
 5. The title is "I Hear America Singing," suggesting that these workers' songs collectively represent America. What vision of America is Whitman presenting? Is it inclusive, idealistic, realistic, or something else?
 6. Langston Hughes wrote a response poem called "I, Too" that begins "I, too, sing America" (featured in Chapter 15 of this book) and addresses the exclusion of Black Americans. Knowing this, how might we read Whitman's poem differently - as incomplete, as aspirational, as problematic, or as something else? Note: you can read Hughes's poem in "Chapter 16: A Brief Poetry Anthology" later on in this book.
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Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) is best known for her novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), but she began her literary career as a poet. Born in Yorkshire, England, Charlotte and her siblings - Emily, Anne, and Branwell - grew up in relative isolation, creating elaborate imaginary worlds and writing stories together. In 1846, the three sisters published a poetry collection under male pseudonyms (Charlotte used "Currer Bell") because female authors faced significant prejudice. The book sold only two copies, but it gave Charlotte the confidence to pursue novel-writing. Though she died young at 38 from complications during pregnancy, her novels revolutionized literature by centering complex, passionate, independent female protagonists who refused to accept their assigned social roles.

"Life" by Charlotte Brontë

Life, believe, is not a dream
 So dark as sages say;
 Oft a little morning rain
 Foretells a pleasant day.
 Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,
 But these are transient all;

If the shower will make the roses bloom,
 O why lament its fall?
 Rapidly, merrily,
 Life's sunny hours flit by,
 Gratefully, cheerily
 Enjoy them as they fly!
 What though Death at times steps in,
 And calls our Best away?
 What though sorrow seems to win,
 O'er hope, a heavy sway?
 Yet Hope again elastic springs,
 Unconquered, though she fell;
 Still buoyant are her golden wings,
 Still strong to bear us well.
 Manfully, fearlessly,
 The day of trial bear,
 For gloriously, victoriously,
 Can courage quell despair!

Discussion Questions:

1. The speaker tells us that "Life, believe, is not a dream / So dark as sages say." Who are these "sages," and why might the speaker be pushing back against their pessimistic view of life?
2. The poem uses weather as a metaphor: "a little morning rain / Foretells a pleasant day." What does this metaphor suggest about hardship and difficulty? How does rain leading to roses extend this idea?
3. Look at the question the speaker asks: "If the shower will make the roses bloom, / O why lament its fall?" What attitude toward difficulty is the speaker promoting? Do you agree with this perspective?
4. The speaker describes clouds of gloom as "transient," meaning temporary, and also instructs us to enjoy life's happy moments "Gratefully, cheerily" as they fly by. What does this suggest about the speaker's awareness that good and bad times are temporary?

5. Consider the poem's overall tone. Is the speaker unrealistically optimistic, realistically hopeful, or something else? What evidence supports your interpretation?
6. Charlotte Brontë lived a difficult life—her mother died when she was five, she lost several siblings to illness, and she faced significant barriers as a female writer. Does knowing this biographical context change how you read this poem about finding hope despite hardship?

Chapter Writing Activity: After a close and careful reading of whichever of the three poems you choose, practice writing an analysis of the speaker, tone, and mood. Be sure to review both the "Writing a Speaker, Tone, and Mood Analysis" section along with the sample analysis using Langston Hughes's poem before completing this activity. Remember that whatever assertions you choose to make in your analysis, make sure to support them with solid textual evidence coming directly from the poem.

Chapter 13: Imagery, Figurative Language, and Symbolism

In the last chapter we learned that tone and mood tell us about the feeling of a poem, but imagery and figurative language are *how* that feeling is created. When poets want to send a message to us, like “try and stay positive” or “I’m feeling sad today,” they don’t simply write that on the page. If they did, then poems would have very little emotional impact. Instead, poets use vivid images - things we can see, touch, and smell - and sharp comparisons - through metaphor and simile - in order to make these more abstract points. In doing this, they allow us to see, hear, and even feel what they mean, and this is where poetry gets its true power. A vivid image or a well-chosen comparison can create more meaning in just a few words than many long paragraphs of prose writing could ever express.

Understanding the Basics of Imagery: Poets are often considered to be sharp observers of both the human condition and the world in general. These keen observations eventually find themselves coming out in their poetry through the use of **imagery**. Simply put, imagery is language that appeals to our senses - sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell. Poets weave this into their work using vivid, descriptive language in order to create mental pictures and sensory experiences for the reader. Oftentimes this is done as a potent way to take larger, more abstract ideas and make them more concrete and tangible, impacting the reader on a more emotional level.

There are lots of examples of imagery from the poems we read in the previous chapter. For example, Walt Whitman uses auditory imagery when he begins his poem with “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear” (line 1) and lists the many songs he hears from the everyday, working class people of the country like carpenters, mechanics, shoemakers, and boatmen. He wraps up the poem by coming back to this auditory image, hearing them all “Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs” (line 11). Poets also can use more tactile - or touch-based - imagery to express physical sensations. This can be seen particularly in Dunbar’s poem where he is trying to describe the emotional pain that African Americans feel, saying they have “torn and bleeding hearts” (line 4). He adds that “the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile;” (lines 12-13) to express their misery and exhaustion. Finally, and more commonly, poets focus on visual imagery. Bronte, for example, uses many vivid references to nature, like “a little morning rain” (line 3), “clouds of gloom” (line 5), “roses bloom” (line 7), and “Life’s sunny hours” (line 10). All of these conjure up images we can all easily hear, feel, and see, and they add emotional impact to our reading of these works.

Understanding the Basics of Figurative Language: Beyond the use of vivid imagery in the work, another way poets can pack a lot of emotional power into such a small package is with the use of **figurative language**, or language that means something beyond its literal meaning. This is done by creating comparisons or connections between unlike things - such as saying an eyeball is like a camera lens. One of the reasons this is so effective is that it allows a poet to express complex ideas in terms of something more familiar. There are a variety of types of figurative language, but in the following sections we'll learn a bit more about three of the most common.

The first of these types is called a **simile**, which is comparing two things using the words "like" or "as." In other words, the format is simply "A is like B." The second type is called **metaphor**, and it is the same as a simile but without the use of "like" or "as." In other words, we simply state that one thing *is* another thing, so "A is B." Finally, there is **personification**, where we take an inanimate object and give it human-like qualities, like "my old Jeep coughed and sputtered, eventually springing to life." Personification is also a great way to take an abstract concept and make it seem alive and relatable for the reader, like "my depression followed me everywhere, knocking on my door every morning and refusing to leave." The key here is that these three forms of figurative language aren't just creative window dressing - they are very short and effective ways for poets to take a significant amount of meaning and compress it into a tiny package.

There are many examples of figurative language in the poems from the previous chapter, including a metaphor in Walt Whitman's poem "I hear America Singing" where he takes the concept of Americans working and has changed it into a song. Essentially he is saying: working *is* a song. He is also doing a form of personification as well, saying that America - an inanimate object - is singing a song that varies from one singer to the next. In Charlotte Brontë's poem "Life," there is also an extended metaphor - which makes a comparison between two things that runs through many different lines - comparing the weather to the ups and downs we face in life. She suggests that the rains, clouds, and showers are all the challenges we face in life, whereas the good times are represented by sunshine and roses blooming. There aren't clear examples of similes in the three poems from the last chapter, but similes are very common in poetry, for instance Scottish poet and lyricist Robert Burns famously wrote, "O my Luve's like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June" (lines 1-2) which is featured later in this book, and English Romantic era poet William Wordsworth wrote that "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills" (lines 1-2) which is featured later in this chapter.

Understanding the Basics of Symbolism: Another technique that allows poets to create the most impact possible in just a few words is through the use of **symbols** - which is where poets use concrete objects, actions, or images to represent abstract principles, emotions, and even themes that go beyond their literal meaning. Taking something and turning it into a symbol allows an author to convey a wide range of feelings that the reader will unpack every time the symbol is mentioned. Again, this helps to make poetry deeply meaningful without the need for the poet to take time to lay everything out and fully explain things. A great example of this - and this ties back into the suggestion in our elements of fiction chapter on symbols - is right in the title of Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask." In the poem, the mask is a symbol that represents all the complex aspects of putting up a false front - not letting the world know about your unhappiness or the challenges you go through. He says that the mask "grins and lies" (line 1), essentially covering up our true feelings with a fake smile. The poem has two more stanzas, both explaining why it is better to not allow others to know how we really feel, and again each finish with a reference to the same, central symbol - "We wear the mask" (9, 15). The use of this repeated symbol becomes a potent reminder of Dunbar's main point in the poem, and in much the same way as simile, metaphor, and personification, using symbolism is one of the most powerful tools in the poet's tool belt.

Writing an Imagery, Figurative Language, and Symbolism Analysis: Similar to Chapter 12, it is important to begin any analysis of a poem with several careful readings. If you have a paper copy, you should do this actively with a pen in hand, and regardless of the format, you should also be reading the poem out loud to hear its sounds and rhythms. Once you've got a good sense of the general meaning of the poem, then it's time to start your analysis and look for the specific techniques the poem uses.

A good first step is to consider the imagery in the poem. Skim the poem searching for words that you can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. Again, if you have a paper copy, mark these words in the margins. Also, try to figure out which sense the poet uses most and if there is any repetition in these various images that seem to create patterns. You can even go deeper here, and ask yourself how the images being conjured up in your mind impact the mood of the poem. You can also look for places where this imagery makes abstract ideas feel more concrete.

Next, read through the poem searching for figurative language. You can literally skim through the poem hunting for the words "like" or "as" to find the similes. If you notice other, more direct comparisons, then these are metaphors, and you'll definitely want to note them as well. Our

third type of figurative language is personification, and you can see if the poet is giving human traits to any inanimate objects in the poem. Lastly, pay special attention to extended metaphors - comparisons that run through multiple lines - like Charlotte Brontë's many comparisons of nature to the good and bad times of our lives that run through much of her poem "Life."

The next step is to look through the work and identify any objects, actions, or images that seem to mean something more than their literal meaning. These symbols often represent larger abstract ideas - things like love, hope, oppression, or freedom - but there are no strict rules here. As we learned before, a great place to start is with the title - is there a symbol in there that runs through the poem? Also, consider the repetition of any symbols you find, like Dunbar's use of the mask in "We Wear the Mask" and try to determine what this repeated symbol represents. Just remember that you don't *have* to find symbols in a poem - there is no need to force things - just see what jumps out to you and trust that if a poet returns to an image repeatedly in their poem, it is most likely symbolic.

The final steps in the process are to consider how all these different images, uses of figurative language, and symbols all work together to impact the poem's tone or mood. Think about how they all contribute to the deeper meaning, or the theme, of the poem as well. What overall effect do these images and comparisons create, and how might the poem be different if some or all of these were not in it? Once you've arrived at the main points for your analysis, it is time to write this out. You might want to just write in similar order to the steps featured in this section - imagery first, then figurative language, and finally symbols - focusing on how these things impact the tone, mood, and the poem's overall meaning. Remember if the poem has a lot to choose from - and many do - stick to the most important ones and focus on how they work together to create the poem's overall effect.

A Sample Imagery, Figurative Language, and Symbolism Analysis:

Langston Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" during the Harlem Renaissance in 1921, when he was only nineteen years old. By making a connection between Black culture and the way these ancient rivers have spread across continents and endured through millennia, Hughes shows how Black history is central to the history of all human civilization. By using vivid imagery, figurative language, and key symbols, Hughes writes a deeply moving poem that presents the depth and continuity of the Black experience through time.

The imagery in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is mostly visual and historical. In the poem, Hughes names four specific rivers: "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. / I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. / I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it" (lines 4-6). A few lines later, he adds the "Mississippi" (line 7) to that list as well. Each river conjures up a completely different civilization - ancient Mesopotamia, Africa, and Egypt, along with the more recent deep South of the United States. Other visual images of our ancient ancestors bathing, building huts, and raising the pyramids make it clear that Black culture played a key role in human history. The poem also includes imagery that emphasizes a cultural connection going back to the dawn of time, as the rivers are "ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins" (line 2). The imagery of the rivers ends up taking us so far back, it's even before the beginning of humanity. Hughes closes with a beautiful description of sights and sounds: "I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset" (line 7). This allows us to both imagine these cultural songs and see the muddy river as it turns into a spectacular golden sunset.

Langston Hughes also uses figurative language and powerful symbols in his poem to deepen its meaning. One comparison he draws is found in the repeated line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (3, 10). This is a simile because of the use of the word "like," but it essentially functions as a metaphor saying the speaker's soul *is* deep like the river. Making this comparison suggests the speaker is old, wise, and enduring - again, all qualities associated with these important rivers. This comparison extends through the poem too, basically drawing a connection between modern Black people and their ancient heritage that reaches back to the very dawn of civilization.

Hughes also uses the rivers as an important symbol throughout the work. There are a few clues this is the case, including the title of the poem and the repetition, as the word "river" is included in the short poem 6 different times, not counting all the times he discusses various rivers by name. In a literal sense, a river is just a large stream of water, and yet symbolically they are powerful. They symbolize continuity - flowing endlessly through time - as well as life and civilization, as many of the great civilizations of the world have been built around rivers, depending on them for survival. Each of the rivers the speaker uses by name also evoke an important civilization or historical moment, with Euphrates being the cradle of early civilization, the Congo representing African culture, the Nile representing the great Egyptian civilizations and their massive achievements, and finally the Mississippi representing the African American

experience and eventual freedom. The repetition of the line "I've known rivers" at the beginning and near the end of the poem (1, 8) reinforces the symbolic importance of rivers as markers of identity and heritage. By returning to this symbol repeatedly, Hughes makes it clear that rivers aren't just geographic features - they represent the endurance, depth, and dignity of Black people across history.

In the end, these poetic elements combine to create a powerful overall effect. The vivid imagery, the connection between a soul and the river, and the use of the river itself as a repeated symbol all combine to reinforce the central message of the poem - that Black people and their culture have been here since the dawn of time and have contributed to some of humanity's greatest accomplishments throughout history. These elements also contribute to the tone, which is dignified and quietly proud of this heritage. It also helps to show the mood of the piece, both showing awe at this impressive endurance and great achievements and giving the poem a sort of timeless feel.

Now It's Your Turn: After having read the Sample Imagery and Figurative Language Analysis using Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," it is time to turn your attention towards trying your own analysis. Read each of the following poems first, and choose the one that speaks to you the most for your analysis. Once you pick, you should probably give your poem a few more active readings before jumping into the writing assignment. Don't forget to read your poem out loud to really "hear" what it is all about!

William Blake (1757–1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker who spent most of his life in London creating visionary art that combined words and images. Blake had limited formal education and was largely self-taught as a writer and artist, working as an engraver to support himself while creating his illuminated books - poetry collections he wrote, illustrated, and printed by hand. His contemporaries often thought he was eccentric or even mad because he claimed to see visions and angels, but today he's recognized as one of the greatest figures of the Romantic era. His poetry explores profound questions about innocence, experience, creation, spirituality, and the nature of good and evil.

“The Tyger” by William Blake

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night;

What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.

Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,

Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

And when thy heart began to beat.

What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,

In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp.

Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,

In the forests of the night:

What immortal hand or eye,

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Discussion Questions:

1. The poem opens with the famous lines "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright / In the forests of the night." What does the image of something "burning bright" in darkness suggest? What might the "forests of the night" represent?
2. Blake uses questions throughout the entire poem—in fact, almost every stanza is a question. Why do you think Blake chose to structure the poem this way rather than making statements? What effect does this create?
3. The speaker asks, "What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" What does "fearful symmetry" mean? How can the tiger be both fearful and symmetrical (balanced, orderly)?
4. In the fourth stanza, Blake describes the creation of the tiger using imagery of metalworking: "What the hammer? what the chain, / In what furnace was thy brain?" What does this comparison between creating the tiger and forging metal suggest about the act of creation?
5. The speaker asks, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" This refers to another Blake poem called "The Lamb" about innocence and gentleness. What is Blake suggesting by asking if the same creator made both the gentle lamb and the fierce tiger?

6. Look at the imagery Blake uses to describe the tiger: "fire," "burning," "furnace," "deadly terrors." What do these images have in common? What qualities of the tiger is Blake emphasizing through this word choice?
-

Countee Cullen (1903-1946) was one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Raised in Harlem by Reverend Frederick Cullen, he showed extraordinary talent early, winning poetry contests while still in high school. His first collection, *Color* (1925), was published when he was just 22 and received critical acclaim. Unlike some Harlem Renaissance peers who embraced jazz rhythms and vernacular language, Cullen preferred traditional poetic forms like sonnets and ballads. He later taught French in Harlem public schools while continuing to write. His poem "Incident" remains a devastating exploration of childhood racism, proving that restrained, precise language can deliver powerful emotional truths.

"Incident" by Countee Cullen

Once riding in old Baltimore,

Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,

I saw a Baltimorean

Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,

And he was no whit bigger,

And so I smiled, but he poked out

His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore

From May until December;

Of all the things that happened there

That's all that I remember.

Discussion Questions:

1. The speaker describes being "heart-filled, head-filled with glee" at the beginning of the poem. What creates this joyful mood, and how does the poem's tone shift after the first stanza?
2. Why do you think the speaker mentions that both children were eight years old and very small? What effect does noting their similarity have on the impact of what happens next?
3. The racist slur appears in the poem without dramatic buildup or emotional commentary - it's just stated matter-of-factly. Why do you think Cullen chose to present it this way rather than with more anger or sadness in the language?
4. The speaker says, "Of all the things that happened there / That's all that I remember." What does this final statement reveal about the lasting impact of this single incident? Why would this one moment overshadow an entire six months in Baltimore?
5. The other child is described simply as "a Baltimorean" who "was no whit bigger." Why do you think Cullen doesn't provide more details about this child? What effect does this choice have?
6. Have you experienced or witnessed a moment that, like this one, seems small on the surface but has a lasting impact? How does this poem capture the way single incidents can shape our understanding of the world?

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) was one of the founders of English Romantic poetry and spent most of his life in England's Lake District, where the natural landscape deeply influenced

his work. Born in the north of England, Wordsworth lost his mother at eight and his father by age thirteen, so he was raised by relatives. He traveled through Europe as a young man, witnessing the French Revolution firsthand, which shaped his early radical politics. Wordsworth believed poetry should use everyday language to capture powerful emotions and the beauty of nature. His collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge on *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) helped launch the Romantic movement. He eventually became England's Poet Laureate in 1843.

“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” by William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they

Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:

A poet could not but be gay,

In such a jocund company:

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought

What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie

In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils.

Discussion Questions:

1. The poem opens with a simile: "I wandered lonely as a cloud." What does this comparison suggest about the speaker's state of mind at the beginning of the poem? What qualities of a cloud might apply to how the speaker feels?
2. Wordsworth uses extensive visual imagery to describe the daffodils: "golden," "fluttering and dancing in the breeze," "Continuous as the stars that shine." What overall impression do these images create? How do they make you visualize the scene?
3. In the second stanza, the speaker compares the daffodils to stars: "Continuous as the stars that shine / And twinkle on the milky way." Why might Wordsworth compare flowers to stars? What does this comparison suggest about the number of daffodils or their significance?

4. The third stanza describes the waves on a nearby lake, but the speaker says "the daffodils out-did the sparkling waves in glee." What does it mean for flowers to "out-do" waves in happiness? What is Wordsworth suggesting about the power of natural beauty?
5. The final stanza shifts from past tense to present tense. The speaker is no longer in the field of daffodils but lying on his couch "in vacant or in pensive mood." What happens when he remembers the daffodils? Why is this memory important?
6. This poem is often read as an example of Romantic poetry's celebration of nature. But it's also about the power of memory and imagination. Which do you think is more important in the poem—the actual encounter with the daffodils, or the speaker's ability to recall and relive that moment later?

Chapter Writing Activity: After a few active readings of whichever of the three poems you have chosen, practice writing an analysis of the imagery and figurative language. Be sure to review both the "Writing an Imagery and Figurative Language Analysis" section along with the sample analysis using Langston Hughes's poem before completing this writing assignment. Also, be sure to look for any symbols that may be used in your selected poem, and be sure to question the deeper meaning of things versus just pointing out what you find. Lastly, remember that whatever assertions you choose to make in your analysis, make sure to support them with solid textual evidence coming directly from the poem.

Chapter 14: Sound and Form

We've already considered the speaker, tone and mood of a poem, and then learned more about the importance of the imagery and figurative language that a poet uses, but we still have two essential elements of poetry left to discuss: **sound** and **form**. As we've discussed, poems are really meant to be read aloud, and historically were chanted or even played to music, and so that makes the sounds of the words - the musical way the words roll off the tongue - an essential part of this art form. A well-read poem makes the most of what the author intended because it captures the sounds of the words as much as it does the meanings of those words. Secondly, comes the physical shape of the poem - the form it takes on the page and the types of patterns the poem follows. These can be more traditional fixed forms or free and open forms depending on the author and the intent.

Both the sounds and the form can have significant impacts on the overall meaning of a poem. Essentially, the sound and form of poetry can be compared to the music and structure of a song. When we listen to a song, we understand the words and can see the imagery created by the vocalist's lyrics, but the actual music that is playing underneath is also extremely important. You couldn't create an effective lullaby, for example, if the singer was crooning gently about falling asleep while their band was thrashing around playing death metal. The same thing can be said for the form. In music, bands have to make decisions about the forms of their songs - what goes where, how often, and for how long. These kinds of forms are essential for fitting into genres. So for example, while it is okay for the Grateful Dead's guitarist to have a 15-minute guitar solo in the middle of a psychedelic rock song (in fact, it is exactly what the fans expect), a pop band would never do such a thing because most pop hits are 3-4 minutes in total with very tight, repetitive patterns.

In the coming sections we will learn more about how to recognize these two elements of poetry and many of the specific details to consider when looking into both sound and form. However, as active readers who are digging deeper into the poems we are reading, we don't just want to be able to recognize sounds and forms, we always want to take those next steps, asking ourselves why the author may have made these decisions and what they could possibly mean. When we do, we'll be able to get even more out of the poems we read, and we'll realize that, just like the example above using music, the sound and forms of poetry have a significant impact on the overall meaning and emotional impact of a poem. One last warning here - this section has a LOT of information. Just know that you don't have to memorize all this stuff or

become an expert in sound devices or poetic forms. Instead, this book gives you an introductory overview of a lot of different topics, and it's hopefully just enough for you to know if you are really into poetry or not. If it isn't your thing, no problem, but if you find that you do want to learn more, there is some more information on the forms of poetry later in this book in "Chapter 16: A Brief Anthology of Poetry" - including some examples - and about a million other books entirely focused on doing deeper analyses of poetry.

Understanding the Basics of Sound: One of the most common and noticeable aspects of the sound of a poem is **rhyme**. Essentially, a rhyme is when a writer places two words with the same sounds in them in such a way that they echo each other. Usually this matching sound is at the end of the lines, like Wordsworth rhyming "cloud" and "crowd" in his poem "I wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1, 3). However, there can also be rhymes using internal words, where the words that rhyme are placed in the middle of a line instead of the end. A great example of this is in the opening lines to the Beatles' song "Hey Jude" - and song lyrics *are* poetry too - which say, "Hey Jude, don't make it bad / Take a sad song and make it better" (1-2). You can see that word ending the first line - "bad" - rhymes perfectly with "sad" in the middle of the next line. This forms a unique rhyming pattern as the song goes along. Finally, there can be rhymes in poems that aren't exactly a perfect match, but are close enough to do the job. These are called slant rhymes or half rhymes, like rhyming "warm" and "worm," "hill" and "full," or when Blake rhymes "symmetry" and "eye" in "The Tyger" (lines 4, 6).

It is important to know that not all poems rhyme - this isn't some kind of *rule* for poetry, but a *choice* that poets get to make. When a poet does choose to rhyme in a certain pattern, ask yourself what are they doing with it? What does the rhyme accomplish? Poets might rhyme to create a sense of satisfaction - people love patterns, connect ideas together, make their poem memorable, create a sense of humor, or many other possibilities. Also remember that rhyming doesn't always work, sometimes it can feel really forced or even cheesy - think of a high school teacher trying to rap a history lesson to their class as an example of this! Again, as the one doing the analysis, you can figure out the rhymes, decide if they work well, and try and determine what they might mean for the reader.

Besides rhyming, **alliteration** is another common sound device in poetry. Basically, alliteration is the repetition of the first sound of words. This creates emphasis and can make the words more memorable. Many stories feature characters that use this device, such as Clark Kent (Superman), Peter Parker (Spiderman), and Lois Lane in comics. In every case, these names

jump out at us and become much easier to remember. Of course, this device is also used in poetry, like the repeated -s sounds in Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" when he writes about the "shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench" (line 6), and alliteration needn't always come right at the beginning of words, but can also be found in the middle of words too. A good example of this is another repeated -s sound in Whitman's poem, when he hears "delicious singing" (line 8). And remember that the sounds themselves matter; these -s sounds create a smooth, musical feel, while a repetition of harsh -k sounds or soft -m sounds can create completely different moods.

In addition, there are many other sound devices that authors frequently use in their work. The first is **assonance**, which is the repetition of vowel sounds inside of words and is much more subtle - and a little trickier to find - than both rhyming and alliteration. For example, read aloud the famous opening lines of Blake's "The Tyger" where he writes "Tyger Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night" (lines 1-2), which features four repetitions of the long "i" sound in "Tyger" (twice), "bright," and "night." This can create a feeling of internal musicality in the words and can even speed up or slow down the feel of lines with repeated long or short vowels. In a similar way, **consonance** is a sound device where there are repeated consonant sounds in the words of various lines in a poem. This can be seen when reading aloud the opening of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," when he writes "We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes," and has woven multiple hissing -s sounds throughout the lines. Consonance plays a similar role to assonance and creates a kind of music in the lines and may even create an echoing effect which can connect different ideas without having to use regular rhyming throughout the poem.

Next, there is **onomatopoeia**, which is the use of words that sound like what they mean. Onomatopoeia brings the action right into the poetry, and can create vivid sensory experiences. It can be as obvious as describing the "purr" or "hiss" of a cat or more subtle like the "whisper" of the wind through the leaves. Think of a comic book with an action scene, and the artist includes the words "BOOM!" or "ZAP!" These are all great examples of words that are meant to sound like what they represent. On the poetry front, Wordsworth's description of the daffodils as "fluttering" (line 6) in his poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" is another good example. The stuttering sound of the word "fluttering" mirrors the action. In a sense, this is the most direct way that sounds impact meaning, as the word *is* the thing it's describing. Finally, we come to **repetition**, which is pretty straightforward as it refers to words, phrases, or even structures that are repeated through a poem. This can have a few impacts, but saying something repeatedly

creates a sense of emphasis or importance, builds a certain rhythm, and creates a sense of unity through a poem - returning to the same idea time and again. Again, in Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" we can see this in use by his regular return to the imagery of the mask (lines 1,9,15). Taken together, all these sound devices - rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and repetition - are the tools poets use to make their work musical. As you get more comfortable reading poetry, you can note their use and think of the ways they impact the overall meaning of the work.

Understanding the Basics of Rhythm and Meter: Every word has stressed and unstressed syllables, and you can see this when you compare the words poet and poetic. Even though the words are similar, the stressed syllable is different in each, and you can see it by visualizing them this way: PO-et and po-ET-ic. With this basic idea in mind, when we string together words we are always forming patterns in the syllables which we call the **rhythm**, and this affects the pace and feel of the work. Lots of short and unstressed syllables make for a fast paced poem which creates a feeling of excitement and energy. Lots of long vowels and stressed syllables makes for a slower rhythm, creating a weighty and serious feeling. It is also important to know that there is no requirement here - some poems have regular patterns of rhythm and some don't. When poets create rhythms that are consistent throughout a poem it makes the poem feel predictable and orderly. On the other hand, a poet who creates an irregular pattern - or seemingly no pattern at all - can create a feeling of surprise, tension or maybe even chaos. Again, the key isn't just pointing out the rhythm but taking that next step to think about what it all means for the reader.

When you notice a poem that seems to have a regular rhythm, we call the pattern that is formed the **meter** of the poem, and each little repetition of that pattern are the **feet**. This stuff is a little confusing, so just hang in there and try to get the general sense of things before your eyes glaze over. It might be easiest to think again of music. If you listen to a rock or pop song, you will usually hear a certain drum beat running through it. We can consider that specific beat the rhythm of the song. Most drum beats are made by repeating a certain pattern (let's say bass drum, snare, bass drum, snare) repeated over and over again throughout the song. All the little repetitions of this pattern are like the feet in a poem. Before you throw your laptop across the room, just know that there are some fancy names for these various patterns that you should learn a bit about. First, there are four main types of feet - iamb (da-DUM), trochee (DUM-da), anapest (da-da-DUM), dactyl (DUM-da-da) - and when these feet are repeated, they form the meter of the poem.

In English, the first type, da-DUM, is the most common. When we put several of these iambic feet together, we can say the poem has an iambic meter. An example of an **iambic** meter is in the opening lines of Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" poem where he writes "we WEAR the MASK that GRINS and LIES" (line 1). If you read it out loud and emphasize the capitalized words, you can hear the iambic da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. Again, if you can go beyond just recognizing the patterns (which is a pretty awesome accomplishment in its own right), then you can start to consider how this iambic meter makes the poem feel. In the case of Dunbar's work, it gives the poem a steady, plodding, predictable feel that matches the mask, but seems to contrast with the emotional pain under the surface. Another pattern is when the trochee, DUM-da, is repeated, and we call it a **trochaic** pattern. This is exactly what Blake uses in the opening line of "The Tyger" to add some additional intensity, "'TY-ger TY-ger BUR-ning BRIGHT" (line 1). Again that DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM pattern has a very different and much more tense feel than Dunbar's poem, like a tiger stalking its prey, and so these choices are all intentional.

Let's look at one more example to make sure this is all clear. Read the opening line of Wordsworth's "I Wander Lonely as a Cloud" and see if you can sound out the pattern. Remember that reading this out loud is preferable here, especially focusing on the stressed and unstressed syllables. "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills," (lines 1-2). Take a moment to see if you can figure out the pattern before reading on, but... these lines, like Dunbar's, are also iambic. Here it is with emphasis, "i WAN-dered LONE-ly AS a CLOUD / That FLOATS on HIGH o'er VALES and HILLS," (1-2). Again, there is a clear da-DUM repeated over and over again throughout the poem - four times per line, giving it that relaxed, musical sort of "peacefully hiking out in nature" vibe that Wordsworth is after. Like so many of these elements of poetry, though, these things are optional, and just as there are poems where we can uncover the rhythm and meter, there are others that don't follow any of these patterns at all, including Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," which we call **free verse** which uses stressed and unstressed syllables without any distinct patterns. This, too, is intentional, giving the poem a more open and expressive feel which matches well with the individual Americans singing as they work in the poem.

Understanding the Basics of Form: One more important consideration when analyzing a poem is to consider the **form**, or the structure of the piece. Like all of the elements of poetry, authors have many choices of form, and some have more rigid rules while others have no rules at all. In the end, though it is important to remember that every form a poem can take - either

following a strict pattern or being completely free from the rules - is a choice made by the author for a reason, and so we can spend time analyzing the choice and decide what we think it means for the poem on the whole.

The first of the main forms of poetry is one we already touched on in our previous section, **free verse**. Last time we used the term in reference to poems that lack a clear pattern of rhythm or a consistent meter; however, the same term applies to poems that do not follow any clear structural rules. Once again, we can look at Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" to see how - beyond the lack of a clear rhythm - the lines also vary significantly in length. This doesn't mean the poem is "formless," but instead it gives the utmost amount of freedom and flexibility for Whitman to describe these scenes in the way he wants. He doesn't have to worry about finding a word that rhymes with "orange" or making sure each line has a set number of feet in the meter. The end result is a poem that breaks with tradition and sounds more casual and conversational, and these choices fit in perfectly with a piece that is giving a voice to the average working-class American.

In addition to the more modern free verse poems, there are also many styles of **fixed forms** - more than there is time to cover in this book - and so in the coming sections we will focus on some of the most essential points to understand. First is that poems are made up of **lines** often organized into sections (kind of like paragraphs in prose writing) called **stanzas**. Oftentimes these stanzas follow consistent patterns that are repeated throughout a poem, but of course, there are also many poems that vary the stanzas as well. Even though we talked about not stopping at every line break when reading a poem - only when there is a punctuation mark - it is still important to understand that the places where the poet decides to break the lines are important, and we can look at the last words of every line in a stanza to help determine if there is a set **rhyme scheme**. This is simply a pattern formed in the rhyming of last words, where maybe every two lines rhyme together, like aabb, or perhaps they take turns, like abab. A simple poem with an aabb pattern is the traditional "Humpty Dumpty" nursery rhyme. It goes as follows:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, (a)

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; (a)

All the king's horses and all the king's men (b)

Couldn't put Humpty together again. (b) (Anonymous lines 1-4)

You can see how the first two lines rhyme with wall and fall, and then the second two lines rhyme with men and again. This is why we would say this stanza uses the aabb pattern. If the nursery rhyme continued, we might expect that pattern to repeat, but of course there is no rule as such. For comparison, a nursery rhyme with the abab rhyme scheme is “Mary Had a Little Lamb” by Sarah Josepha Hale. It goes as follows:

Mary had a little lamb, (a)

Its fleece was white as snow; (b)

And everywhere that Mary went (a)

The lamb was sure to go. (b) (lines 1-4)

Again, if we look at the last words of each line, we see that there is a clear pattern of abab rhyming. This poem continues as well, and all of the stanzas follow this exact same pattern, but with different rhyming words, and so we'd map the poem's rhyme scheme out as abab cdcd efef and so on. There are two other important concepts on display in these nursery rhymes. First is that when we have two lines in a row that have both the same meter and typically rhyme at the end, we call them a **couplet**. So, while “Humpty Dumpty” here is made of two couplets, “Mary Had a Little Lamb” doesn't use them, as it alternates rhymes. Secondly, you also might notice that both of these samples are using four line stanzas, and this is fitting because four line stanzas are the most common form of poetry in the English language. We call them a **quatrain**, and while you will definitely see many other patterns both longer and shorter than four lines, you will also find a significant number of poems that rely on the use of traditional quatrains to develop their poems, building a longer poem out of these shorter, manageable chunks of content.

Beyond these essential building blocks of the structure of poetry, there are many other fixed forms of poetry that determine the length, meter, and rhyme scheme of the entire work. One popular example is the **sonnet**. A sonnet is a 14-line poem with a set rhyme scheme. They have been popular since the 1500s, and while they are traditionally about love, they can really be about anything. There are also many other traditional poetry forms that can be used, including the 19-line **villanelle**, the 39-line **sestina**, the **elegy** written in honor of somebody who has passed, and the very short and witty **epigram**. There are also specific forms connected to

particular cultures like the **Limerick**, **Haiku**, and **Rondeau**. There are countless others as well, but if you are interested in learning more, each of the types listed here has some brief coverage and samples featured in “Chapter 16: A Brief Anthology of Poetry” later in this book.

There is certainly a lot to be considered when looking at the form of a poem, and it can feel overwhelming, but there are certain key considerations to keep in mind. First, the place where a poet decides to end the lines matters, and these words become more emphasized - even if we don't stop at each line when we read. We can look at all the end words together and determine the rhyme scheme of a poem, if there is one. Secondly, we can tackle a poem stanza by stanza, understanding that each one typically develops one main idea or image that contributes to the whole. We can also see when a poet doesn't use stanzas and consider why they made that less structured choice. Finally, when we look at the overall form of the whole poem, and decide if it is a free verse or following a more traditional set pattern. We should take that next step as well, asking ourselves why the poet either used free verse and what that accomplishes or why the poet used a fixed form and how that more rigid, constrained form adds meaning to the whole. Remember that these more fixed forms also connect the work with the craftsmanship and tradition of older poetry, while ignoring all those traditions makes for a more modern and spontaneous final poem.

Writing a Sound and Form Analysis: So, there really is a lot of information in this chapter, but just know that the goal of doing an analysis of the sound and form of a poem isn't to find *everything* going on in every poem. Instead, the goal is to notice patterns in the sound and form and to think about the effects of these patterns and how they impact the meaning of the poem. That said, here is a practical step by step approach to making the most of this type of analysis.

This first step is to complete multiple, active readings of the poem. Reading out loud is particularly important - if not absolutely essential - for doing an analysis of the sound of a poem. On the first reading just try to get the overall feel, but with the subsequent reading, try to notice patterns in the sounds, like where words are rhyming or particular sounds that repeat through the work. You might even consider having another person read the poem to you or even finding an audio version of the poem online. Basically, the more times you can hear it, the better.

The next step is to listen for the particular sound devices we've learned about in this chapter. Listen to the poem and focus on the rhyming scheme, then listen again and focus on repetitions of words. Finally, think about some of the harder to find aspects, like alliteration, assonance,

and consonance. If none of these things jump out at you, you can even just listen more generally for the types of sounds you are hearing - lots of harsh (k, t, p) sounds, or lots of smoother (m, l, w, s) sounds. Ask yourself how these sounds make you *feel* when listening to the poem. How does this feeling work with the content of the poem? Remember, there is no pressure here to map out every sound or locate every instant of the sound devices we've learned about.

The third step is to analyze the rhythm and think about the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. You might find there really is no pattern at all - which is free verse - or you might find a very clear pattern of iambic da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM or something a bit different. In a more general sense, does the poem seem fast or slow? Does the poem's rhythm seem to speed up or slow down? If so, where does this happen? You might also just get a more global feel of whether or not the poem feels more orderly or more loose and possibly chaotic. Again, in all cases, once you've figured out something, make sure to think about how this impacts the meaning of the poem in the bigger picture.

The next step is to widen the focus a bit and look at the overall form of the poem. Look at the lines and how they are placed together in stanzas. Is this poem composed of quatrains - four line stanzas - or something else? If you did notice some rhyming words in your analysis of the sounds, try to map out the pattern. Is it aabb or abab or maybe something a bit different. Does the form of the poem feel tightly controlled and perhaps traditional, or is it more open and modern? Once you arrive at a bit of an "ah-ha" moment, don't forget to tie your new understanding of the form back into what it all means for the poem, why the poet made these choices, and how it impacts your feelings as a reader of the work.

The last step is to tie it all together. In your conclusion, consider how the sounds, patterns of rhythm, and form of the poem work together with the content in order to deepen the meaning of the work. Most of the time these elements all work in concert, like a rock band with a singer belting their guts out, but you may also find contrasts too. Perhaps there is a gut-wrenching poem about the unpredictability of life, and yet the poem itself follows a very rigid, traditional pattern. What could this all mean? Remember too that all of these things are optional choices, and a poet that doesn't rhyme, doesn't have a distinct rhythm, and doesn't write their work with any recognizable pattern in the form isn't just throwing words on the page - they are making these choices intentionally, and so it becomes our job to look at all their choices and decide

what it all means. And, as always, whatever we decide, we have to provide textual proof and support for our assertions.

Sample Analysis of Sound and Form:

Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a powerful tribute to the Black community, highlighting their important contributions and accomplishments throughout the long history of humanity. The poem has a deep, slow, and meditative feeling to it, and when read aloud, with a focus on sound and form, certain patterns emerge that shed even more light on the deeper meanings of the poem.

First, the sound device that jumps out most of all is the regular use of **repetition** through the poem. The work includes the words "I've known rivers" (lines 1, 2, 8) repeated in three different locations, including back to back in the two opening lines. The poem also has the line "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (3, 10) repeated near the beginning and at the very end, seemingly to surround the majority of the poem with this central message. As the speaker is making a connection between themselves and the rivers by the use of "I" and "my" in these lines, the frequent repetition emphasizes this important connection even further. This repetition also gives the poem a sort of religious, prayer-like or meditative feel, in the same way people say many Hail Mary's or repeat a mantra during a meditation. Again, this repetition creates a strong connection between the speaker and the rivers and a spiritual mood.

Another sound device that Hughes uses in the poem is **assonance**, which is the repetition of vowel sounds, and in this case a repeated "o" sound that slows the poem down and gives it a weighty feeling. Consider all the vowel "o" sounds in the following line: "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins" (2). We can hear the repeated "o" sounds in "known," "older," and "flow," here, along with a similar sound in "human." This repetition slows down the poem and creates an emphasis on the line. This "o" sound also creates a flowing feeling when read out loud. While Hughes doesn't use a traditional **rhyme scheme**, his careful attention to repeated vowel sounds shows he's still crafting the music of the poem deliberately. By avoiding traditional patterns of rhyme schemes like aabb or abab, Hughes creates a poem that seems much more modern and is free from following the conventions primarily set down by European poets. .

Along those lines, the poem is written in a **free verse**, which means that it has neither a regular **rhythm** to it - no da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables - nor

does it follow any traditional **forms** - sonnet, villanelle, etc . The poem is made up of five **stanzas**, though there are no standard number of lines. Some have just one, while others have two or four. The lines themselves also are not consistent. There are long lines, like “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset” (7) followed immediately by very short lines, like “I’ve known rivers:” (8). This sort of varying length of the lines can create a lot of power in the same way that a short sentence after some longer ones in prose writing is an attention-grabbing writing technique. Considering the free verse, though, Hughes is writing a powerful social commentary here, and he is doing so intentionally in a way that challenges all the traditional rules of poetry, which seems only fitting. Lastly, free from worrying about fitting into rigid patterns or rhyme schemes, Hughes can focus on the message and create an impactful poem that flows in a slow, meditative way.

In the end, the repetition of the lines about rivers, the repeated assonance involving the “o” sounds, and use of free verse instead of traditional rhymes, rhythms, and forms allows the poem to take on a spiritual and meditative mood. The poem beginning and ending with similar messages about the rivers also allows us to feel that the rivers will go on forever, tapping into a sort of timeless feeling, and allowing us to imagine ourselves back at the very beginning of human history and project ourselves forward into the future as well. The goal of this analysis wasn’t to find every single possible sound device or consider every single line independently, breaking the entire poem into pieces, but instead was to search the piece for patterns that would help us to gain a deeper understanding of the poem on the whole.

Now It's Your Turn: After having read the Sample Analysis of the Sound and Form of Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” it is time to get some experience writing your own analysis. Read each of the following poems first, and choose the one that jumps out to you the most for your analysis. Once you pick, you should probably give your poem a few more active readings before beginning the writing assignment. Don’t forget to read your poem out loud to really “hear” what it is all about - especially for doing the analysis of all the sounds!

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was one of Victorian England's greatest poets, though she lived a quiet, deeply religious life in London. Born into an artistic Italian-English family (her

brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a famous painter and poet), Christina began writing poetry as a child. She twice turned down marriage proposals because her suitors didn't share her devout Anglican faith, choosing instead to dedicate herself to her writing and charitable work. Rossetti wrote primarily about love, death, faith, and renunciation, often exploring themes of loss and longing with remarkable emotional restraint. Her poetry combines traditional forms like sonnets with deeply personal feelings. Though she published several collections during her lifetime, including *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), she never achieved the fame of male contemporaries like Tennyson - something modern readers are working to correct.

“Remember” by Christina Rossetti

Remember me when I am gone away,

Gone far away into the silent land;

When you can no more hold me by the hand,

Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

Remember me when no more day by day

You tell me of our future that you plann'd:

Only remember me; you understand

It will be late to counsel then or pray.

Yet if you should forget me for a while

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:

For if the darkness and corruption leave

A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,

Better by far you should forget and smile

Than that you should remember and be sad.

Discussion Questions:

1. The speaker of this poem is addressing someone directly using "you," speaking from beyond the grave. Who do you think the speaker is, and what is their relationship to the person being addressed? What is the tone of the speaker toward this person?
 2. The opening line - "Remember me when I am gone away" - creates a somber mood immediately. Look at the imagery throughout the first eight lines: "gone away," "silent land," "darkness and corruption." How do these images shape the emotional atmosphere of the poem?
 3. Rossetti uses euphemisms and metaphors for death: "gone far away into the silent land" and "the darkness and corruption leave." Why might she avoid saying "death" directly? What effect do these figurative descriptions create?
 4. The poem shifts tone halfway through. The first eight lines ask to be remembered, but then the speaker says "Better by far you should forget and smile / Than that you should remember and be sad." Why does the speaker change their mind? What does this reveal about love and selflessness?
 5. Look at the rhyme scheme of this sonnet, noting how the first 8 lines have a different pattern than the final 6 lines. How does the shift in rhyme pattern mirror the shift in the speaker's message? Does the form of the poem support its meaning?
 6. Notice the repetition of "remember" and "forget" throughout the poem. How does this repetition emphasize the central tension between remembering and moving on? What sound effect does the repetition create? Which do you think is the speaker's true wish - having their lover remember them or move on?
-

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) was the pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, an Oxford mathematics professor who became one of the most beloved children's authors in history. Born in England, he spent most of his life teaching logic and mathematics while pursuing photography as a hobby. His most famous work, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), began as a story he told to Alice Liddell and her sisters during a boat trip. Carroll loved wordplay, puzzles, and nonsense, which shows throughout his writing. "Jabberwocky," from *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), showcases his genius for creating new words that somehow

still make perfect sense. Despite writing whimsical children's literature, Carroll was a serious scholar who published mathematical treatises and pioneered early portrait photography.

“Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand;

Long time the manxome foe he sought—

So rested he by the Tumtum tree

And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,

And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through

The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

He left it dead, and with its head

He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?

Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”

He chortled in his joy.

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

Discussion Questions:

1. Even though Carroll invented words like "brillig," "slithy," and "mimsy," we can still understand the basic story of the poem. How does the poem's structure (stanzas, rhyme scheme, grammar) help us follow what's happening even when we don't know what the words mean?

2. Look at the rhyme scheme of the poem. How does this regular, predictable pattern help make the nonsense words feel more familiar and less chaotic? What effect does the consistent rhythm have on the mood of the poem?
 3. Consider the imagery in lines like "Beware the Jabberwock, my son! / The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!" Even though we've never seen a Jabberwock, what mental image do these words create? How do "bite" and "catch" help us visualize this creature?
 4. Carroll uses real words for the structure of sentences but invented words for important nouns and adjectives. What does this choice tell us about how grammar and sound create meaning separate from vocabulary?
 5. Consider the sound of the invented words. "Jabberwock" sounds harsh and threatening with its hard consonants, while "whiffling" sounds light and airy. Can you find other examples where the sound of a nonsense word suggests what it might mean? How does alliteration (like "gyre and gimble") add to the musical quality?
 6. Think about the tone of the poem. Is the speaker warning the son seriously, or is there something playful about lines like "O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"? How does the made-up vocabulary affect the overall tone?
-

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived most of her life in her family's home in Amherst, Massachusetts, rarely leaving and eventually becoming almost entirely reclusive. She wrote nearly 1,800 poems during her lifetime but published fewer than a dozen - most were discovered in her bedroom after her death, sewn into small hand-bound books. Dickinson wrote about death, nature, love, and immortality in short, compressed poems that broke all the rules of traditional poetry: she used unconventional punctuation (especially dashes), slant rhymes, and fragmented syntax. Her contemporaries would have found her style strange and unpolished, but today she's recognized as one of America's most original and influential poets. She dressed only in white in her later years and communicated with visitors from behind doors or by lowering baskets of treats to neighborhood children from her window - eccentric behaviors that have made her a legendary figure in American literature.

"A Bird, came down the walk-" by Emily Dickinson

A Bird, came down the Walk -

He did not know I saw -

He bit an Angle Worm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew

From a convenient Grass -

And then hopped sidewise to the Wall

To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,

That hurried all abroad -

They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,

He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,

I offered him a Crumb,

And he unrolled his feathers,

And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,

Too silver for a seam,
 Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
 Leap, plashless as they swim.

Discussion Questions:

1. The poem describes a very simple, everyday moment: watching a bird. What is the speaker's tone toward the bird? Is it scientific observation, gentle amusement, wonder, or something else?
2. Notice the vivid imagery in the opening stanza where the bird "bit an Angle Worm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw." The poem also features beautiful natural imagery, like the ocean and butterflies in the fifth stanza. Considering both, what does Dickinson seem to be saying about how we should see nature - as violent and survival-driven, or as beautiful and graceful?
3. Dickinson writes that the bird "drank a Dew / From a convenient Grass." Look at the visual imagery here - what does "convenient" suggest about the bird's perspective? How does this word choice create a slightly humorous tone?
4. The bird's eye is described as "rapid" and "like frightened Beads." This is a simile comparing the bird's eye to beads. What does this comparison suggest about how the bird sees the world? What mood does "frightened" create?
5. Look at the rhyme scheme, including the slant rhymes in the poem. How does this looser, imperfect rhyme scheme match the casual, observational tone of the poem? Would perfect rhymes feel too formal?
6. The speaker offers the bird a crumb, but the bird flies away instead. What might this symbolize about the relationship between humans and nature? Is there a divide that can't be crossed between humans and wild animals?

Chapter Writing Activity: After a few active readings of whichever of the three poems you have chosen, practice writing an analysis of the sound and form. Be sure to review both the "Writing a Sound and Form Analysis" section along with the sample analysis using Langston Hughes's poem before completing this writing assignment. There is a lot of content to consider, but remember to read your poem out loud several times and listen for larger patterns where you

can focus most of your attention. Lastly, remember that whatever points you choose to make in your analysis, make sure to connect them back to the meaning of the work and support them with solid textual evidence coming directly from the poem.

Chapter 15: Theme

We are now coming to the end of the “Elements of Poetry,” and it is time to consider how everything we have learned so far feeds into the theme of a given poem. Essentially, what we have learned to do so far is to work our way through a poem gathering evidence like a detective, and now it is finally time to put it all together and reach a conclusion.

Understanding the Basics of Theme: Much like the theme of a short story, the **theme** of a poem is the deeper meaning about life or human nature that the work is trying to tell us. Remember that a topic is not a theme - we don’t want to read a poem and say the theme is “love” or “loss” or “nature.” These are all fine topics, but they aren’t themes. A theme requires that next step, considering the questions, “What is this poem saying about that topic? What is the central point this poem is trying to convey?” We can see this difference if we consider “Incident” by Countee Cullen. The poem is about an act of racism, but if we simply say the theme is “racism” we are missing the deeper message here. As we’ve learned before, there isn’t just one theme for a work of literature, but in Cullen’s case, we might say the central point is that one act of racial hatred seemed to outweigh months of other experiences in the speaker’s life. Or perhaps we can take a wider view and say that racism destroys childhood innocence.

Another consideration for the theme is that it should be universal. The central point of a poem should reach beyond just the specifics of that one piece of writing. If we were to consider the theme of Cullen’s poem again and say that the central point is “racist acts against eight-year-olds in Baltimore can have effects that last a lifetime,” we are getting too narrow in our focus. This theme doesn’t reach beyond the specific confines of Cullen’s work. We also don’t want the theme to be some sort of moral lesson like “people should be kinder to each other,” as this isn’t an insight or a deeper truth about human nature. We also don’t want a theme that is an unanswered question, like “why are people such jerks?” or “why are kids so cruel to each other?” These questions might be interesting topics for conversation, but they aren’t sharing an observation or insight about the deeper meaning of the poem. Again, when we are looking for a theme in a poem, we want to try and find a deeper message that applies to all of us, that says something important about life or human nature.

It is also important to remember that a poem - or any work of fiction - doesn’t have one, single theme that we are trying to find like detectives. Instead, these works are often complex and can make many different points at once. If we return to Cullen’s “Incident” one last time here, we

can see that there are many possibilities that we could choose for the theme. Previously we covered how the theme could be “one act of racial hatred seemed to outweigh months of other experiences in the speaker’s life” or the idea that “racism can destroy the innocence of childhood,” but there are still many more options. We could say that the poem is about how “bad memories from our childhood stick with us for life,” “traumatic experiences can shape our memories and sense of self,” “children learn prejudice from society and perpetuate cycles of hatred,” or “a single word can carry such hatred to permanently hurt another person.” Even this list is not exhaustive, and another reader could come up with many more. In the end, though, the really important thing to remember is that whatever theme you end up choosing, it needs to come from the text - instead of being forced onto the text - and you can show this is the case by bringing in lots of textual evidence that supports your choice.

Writing a Theme Analysis: As is always the case with literature, you shouldn’t lead the way when it comes to uncovering a theme. Instead, you should begin with multiple, slow, measured readings in order to let the work speak to you and reveal its own theme. As we learned back in Chapter 11, reading poetry out loud is particularly important, so you can hear what the author intended. If you have a paper copy of the text, be sure to have a pen in hand and annotate as you go. The next step is to consider all the elements of poetry that we have learned. Obviously, it would be pretty difficult to think of all these things simultaneously, and so it might be best to work your way through the following questions one at a time:

What can you learn about the speaker in the poem? (Ch 12)

What is the tone and mood of the work? (Ch 12)

What imagery, figurative language, and symbols jump out to you? (Ch 13)

What did you notice about sound and form? (Ch 14)

Each one of these questions can be like opening a large can of worms, as they say, but remember you don’t need to think about every single thing - you are just looking for patterns that reveal themselves to you.

The next step is to try and decide on the basic topic that you would say the whole poem is about - this can be a simple statement like “death,” “happiness,” “love,” or “nature” or perhaps a bit more detailed than that, like “the beauty of nature” or “dealing with the loss of a loved one.” Once you figure out the main topic of the poem, and then ask yourself: what does the poem say

about that topic? What is the universal message here? You can use all the evidence you gathered in your analysis of the elements of poetry as your guide, and try to write out the theme as a complete thought that contains a universal truth about the world or our lives. Remember to avoid being too narrow, giving a moral to the story - a *should* statement, or asking a question. If you're unsure whether your theme statement works, review the suggestions earlier in this chapter about what makes a strong theme.

Finally, it is time to write your theme analysis out, and you develop your support - and prove that the theme came from the story itself - by bringing in lots of textual evidence directly from the poem. These pieces of evidence should come from your analysis of the elements of poetry that led you to this theme in the first place, and so all the parts should fit together like a puzzle.

Sample Theme Analysis: Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published during the Harlem Renaissance during a time of heightened racial tensions in the United States. America was a segregated country, and racism and racial violence against Black Americans was common. The poem counters this racism with a positive message about Black history, African heritage, and cultural identity. Considering all the elements of poetry, the **theme** of the poem is that Black history and culture are ancient and deep, reaching all the way back to the very beginning of human civilization.

First of all, the **speaker** of the poem frequently refers to themselves in the first person, using "I," "me," and "my" statements throughout. Being that no individual person could have been building huts with the earliest humans, then engineered the pyramids in Egypt, and then come to the Mississippi, it is clear that this is a collective "I" referring to all Black people throughout history. The **tone** and the **mood** of the poem have a timeless, meditative feeling that also gives off a sense of awe. For the tone, Hughes includes words like "ancient" and "dusky," and he uses the connections to the various rivers and their associated historical civilizations to show how Black culture reaches back to times even before the beginning of humanity.

The imagery in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is mostly visual and, again, historical. In the poem, Hughes names four specific rivers: "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. / I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. / I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it" (lines 4-6). A few lines later, he adds the "Mississippi" (line 7), conjuring up these mental images of Black people leading the way in a variety of the most important civilizations in human history. Hughes also effectively uses a connection to these four rivers as

a **symbol** to drive the depth of Black history back even further. This works because rivers typically symbolize endlessness, life, and civilization.

The **sound** and **form** of the poem also support this theme. The poem effectively uses the sound device of **repetition** with the references to the rivers, with lines like “I’ve known rivers” (1,2,8), and surrounds most of the poem with the repeated lines that “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” (3,10). Hughes also chose to ignore many of the traditional European conventions of poetry, including **rhyme schemes**, **rhythm**, and **standard forms**, instead choosing to focus on the feeling and content here by using **free verse**. He is also intentionally circular, again opening the poem and finishing it with almost identical sentiments. This makes the poem feel like it will continue to flow on forever, just as the rivers will.

In conclusion, Langston Hughes’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” leaves us with a powerful message about cultural heritage. With the collective speaker, the symbol of the river, and the free verse form, the poem presents a clear theme that the history of Black people is ancient and impressive, with significant cultural achievements that reach all the way back to the earliest days of human civilization.

Now It’s Your Turn: After having read the “Sample Theme Analysis” using Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” it is time to get some experience writing your own analysis of the theme of a poem. Read each of the following three poems first, and then pick the one that speaks to you the most for your assignment. Once you choose, you should probably give your poem a few more active readings before beginning the writing assignment. Don’t forget to read your poem out loud to really “hear” what it is all about!

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935) grew up in Gardiner, Maine, which became the model for “Tilbury Town,” the fictional setting for many of his poems. Despite early struggles with poverty and alcoholism, Robinson became one of America’s most celebrated poets, winning the Pulitzer Prize three times. He spent most of his adult life in New York City, writing poems that explored loneliness, failure, and quiet desperation in small-town American life. Robinson specialized in character portraits of ordinary people facing disappointment and loss, often with subtle irony and psychological depth. His work influenced later poets like Robert Frost, and he’s known for making traditional forms relevant to modern American subjects and sensibilities.

“Mr. Flood’s Party” by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night
Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home, paused warily.
The road was his with not a native near;
And Eben, having leisure, said aloud,
For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird." He raised up to the light
The jug that he had gone so far to fill,
And answered huskily: "Well, Mr. Flood,
Since you propose it, I believe I will."

Alone, as if enduring to the end

A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn,

He stood there in the middle of the road

Like Roland's ghost winding a silent horn.

Below him, in the town among the trees,

Where friends of other days had honored him,

A phantom salutation of the dead

Rang thinly till old Eben's eyes were dim.

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child

Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,

He set the jug down slowly at his feet

With trembling care, knowing that most things break;

And only when assured that on firm earth

It stood, as the uncertain lives of men

Assuredly did not, he paced away,

And with his hand extended paused again:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this

In a long time; and many a change has come

To both of us, I fear, since last it was

We had a drop together. Welcome home!"

Convivially returning with himself,

Again he raised the jug up to the light;

And with an acquiescent quaver said:

"Well, Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.

"Only a very little, Mr. Flood—

For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do."

So, for the time, apparently it did,

And Eben evidently thought so too;

For soon amid the silver loneliness

Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,

Secure, with only two moons listening,

Until the whole harmonious landscape rang—

"For auld lang syne." The weary throat gave out,

The last word wavered; and the song being done,

He raised again the jug regretfully

And shook his head, and was again alone.

There was not much that was ahead of him,

And there was nothing in the town below—

Where strangers would have shut the many doors

That many friends had opened long ago.

Discussion Questions:

1. The speaker describes Eben Flood setting down his jug "as a mother lays her sleeping child / Down tenderly, fearing it may awake." What does this simile reveal about Flood's relationship with the jug? What does it suggest about loneliness and what we treasure?
2. Flood speaks to himself using his own formal name, "Mr. Flood," and even says "Welcome home!" as if greeting an old friend. What does this self-conversation reveal about his isolation and his attempt to maintain dignity?
3. The poem mentions "only two moons listening" when Flood sings. What causes him to see two moons? How does this detail affect your understanding of his state of mind and the poem's tone?
4. Consider the title: "Mr. Flood's Party." A party typically involves multiple people celebrating together, yet Flood is completely alone. What is ironic or tragic about calling this solitary drinking a "party"?
5. The poem uses traditional rhyming couplets and a formal, elevated style to describe a lonely old man drinking by himself on a hilltop. How does this dignified form affect how we view Flood? Does it grant him dignity or emphasize his tragedy?
6. The final lines state: "There was not much that was ahead of him, / And there was nothing in the town below— / Where strangers would have shut the many doors / That many friends had opened long ago." What has happened to the community Flood once belonged to? Who bears responsibility for his isolation - Flood, the changing town, time itself?

Langston Hughes - biography featured in Chapter 11 of this textbook

“I, Too” by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Discussion Questions:

1. The poem opens with "I, too, sing America." This is a direct response to Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" (which is featured in Chapter 12 of this textbook). What does Hughes accomplish by echoing Whitman's title and opening? What does "too" imply?
 2. The speaker describes being sent "to eat in the kitchen / When company comes." What does the kitchen symbolize? Who is the "company," and what does this reveal about the speaker's position in American society?
 3. The speaker says, "But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong." What do these actions suggest about resistance, survival, and preparation for change? Why is growing strong important?
 4. Look at the shift to future tense: "Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table." What does "tomorrow" represent? Is this literal or symbolic?
 5. The poem is very short (18 lines) and uses simple, direct language. How does this simplicity contribute to the power of the message? What would be lost with more elaborate language?
 6. The final line returns to the opening: "I, too, am America." How has the meaning of this statement changed from the first line to the last? What has the poem accomplished in between?
-

Emily Dickinson - biography featured in Chapter 14 of this textbook

“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” by Emily Dickinson

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -

And sore must be the storm -

That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chilliest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

Discussion Questions:

1. The extended metaphor compares hope to a bird. What specific characteristics of birds (perching, singing, flying in storms, needing no food) does Dickinson use, and what does each characteristic reveal about the nature of hope?
2. The bird "perches in the soul" and "sings the tune without the words." Why is it significant that hope's song has no words? What does this suggest about how hope works?

3. Dickinson writes that hope "never stops - at all -" and sings "sweetest - in the Gale."
What does it mean that hope is strongest during storms and hardship? Does this match your experience?
 4. The speaker says that even 'in Extremity' (in the most extreme circumstances), hope never 'asked a crumb - of me.' What does this tell us about hope? Is hope demanding or generous? What does it mean that hope gives everything but asks for nothing in return?
 5. Look at Dickinson's use of dashes throughout the poem. How do these pauses affect the rhythm and the meaning? Do they create hesitation, emphasis, or something else?
 6. The final stanza mentions "the chilliest land - / And on the strangest Sea." What do these settings represent? Where has hope accompanied the speaker?
-

Robert Frost (1874-1963) is one of America's most beloved poets, known for poems like "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Born in San Francisco, he moved to New England as a child and spent most of his life in rural Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. Frost worked as a farmer, teacher, and mill worker before gaining recognition as a poet in his late thirties. He won four Pulitzer Prizes and became a cultural icon, reading at John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration in 1961. Though his poetry uses accessible language and rural New England settings, his work explores complex philosophical questions about choice, isolation, nature, and human limitations. Frost's deceptively simple style often masks darker, more ambiguous meanings beneath the surface.

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Questions:

1. The speaker says both roads "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." If both roads are actually equally worn and equally leaf-covered, what does this reveal about the speaker's later claim that he took "the one less traveled by"?
2. The speaker admits, "I kept the first for another day! / Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back." What does this suggest about the finality of choices? Can we ever really go back and choose differently?
3. Look at the tone in the final stanza: "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence." Is this sigh one of satisfaction, regret, wistfulness, or something else? How does the tone affect the meaning?
4. The poem is often read as celebrating individualism and choosing the unconventional path. But if the roads were actually "really about the same," is the speaker being honest or creating a mythology about the importance of his own choices?
5. The poem uses a regular ABAAB rhyme scheme and iambic meter. How does this orderly, almost sing-song structure contrast with the supposedly momentous choice being described?
6. The speaker says his choice "has made all the difference." Do you think he believes this, or is he constructing a narrative to give meaning to a random choice? What does the poem suggest about how we tell stories about our own lives?

Chapter Writing Activity: After a few active readings of whichever of the four poems you have chosen, practice writing an analysis of the theme. Be sure to review both the "Writing a Theme Analysis" section along with the sample analysis using Langston Hughes's poem before completing this writing assignment. There is a lot of content to consider as you work through all the elements of poetry, but remember to read your poem out loud several times and listen for larger patterns where you can focus most of your attention. Be sure to use the set of guiding questions in this chapter as you move your way through each of these elements, and then decide on a topic before asking "what larger message does this poem say about that topic?" Lastly, remember that whatever points you choose to make in your analysis and whatever theme you end up choosing, make sure to support them with solid textual evidence coming directly from the poem.

Chapter 16: A Brief Poetry Anthology

The following is a short anthology containing a selection of poems, beginning with some brief descriptions and examples of common poetic forms. This anthology may be useful for additional discussions and writing activities.

Sonnet:

A sonnet is a 14-line poem with a specific rhyme scheme, and it's been one of the most popular poetic forms since the 1500s. Sonnets typically explore a single idea, question, or emotion, and they often feature a "turn" or shift in thought - usually around line 9 - where the poem changes direction or offers a resolution. While sonnets were traditionally about love, modern poets use the form to write about everything from politics to nature to everyday observations.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's preeminent dramatist. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, he wrote approximately 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and several long narrative poems. His works - including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - have been translated into every major language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. Shakespeare's sonnets, written in the 1590s and published in 1609, explore themes of love, beauty, mortality, and time with unmatched linguistic brilliance. His influence on literature, language, and culture remains immeasurable; countless phrases we use daily ("break the ice," "wild goose chase") originated in his writing.

“Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” by William Shakespear

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer’s lease hath all too short a date;
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Wordsworth - biography featured in Chapter 13 of this book

“The World is Too Much With Us” by William Wordsworth

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Claude McKay (1889-1948) was a Jamaican-American writer and a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Jamaica, McKay came to the United States in 1912 to study agriculture

but soon turned to writing, becoming one of the first African American writers to achieve mainstream literary success. His militant sonnet "If We Must Die" (1919), written in response to racial violence during the Red Summer, became an anthem of resistance that Winston Churchill even quoted during World War II. McKay's work combined traditional poetic forms with radical political content, exploring themes of racial pride, resistance to oppression, and the African diaspora experience.

"If We Must Die" by Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
 Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,
 So that our precious blood may not be shed
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
 And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
 What though before us lies the open grave?
 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was one of the most celebrated poets of the Victorian era and a strong voice for social reform. Born into a wealthy family, she educated herself voraciously despite chronic illness that kept her largely housebound. Her secret courtship and elopement with poet Robert Browning at age forty became one of literature's great love stories. *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which includes "How Do I Love Thee?," were love poems to Robert that became among the most famous in English literature. Barrett Browning also wrote passionately about social issues including child labor, slavery, and women's rights.

“How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of being and ideal grace.

I love thee to the level of every day's

Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

I love thee freely, as men strive for right.

I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of the major English Romantic poets and a radical political thinker who championed revolution, atheism, and free love. Born into aristocratic privilege, Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing an atheist pamphlet and spent much of his life in exile in Italy, where he produced his greatest works. His poetry combines lyrical beauty with passionate calls for social justice and political reform. Shelley drowned in a sailing accident in Italy at age twenty-nine, cutting short one of the most brilliant poetic careers in English literature. His second wife, Mary Shelley, wrote *Frankenstein*.

“Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Emma Lazarus (1849-1887) was an American poet and advocate for Jewish immigrants whose sonnet "The New Colossus" is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. Born into a wealthy Sephardic Jewish family in New York, Lazarus was privately educated and published her first book of poetry at seventeen. Initially writing on conventional literary themes, she became passionately committed to Jewish causes after witnessing the persecution of Russian Jews in the 1880s. "The New Colossus," written in 1883 to help raise funds for the statue's pedestal,

transformed the statue's meaning from a symbol of liberty to a beacon welcoming immigrants, giving America some of its most famous lines.

“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1649-1695) was a Mexican nun, scholar, and poet considered one of the greatest writers of the Spanish Golden Age and the first great Latin American poet. Born illegitimate in colonial Mexico, Juana was a child prodigy who taught herself Latin, philosophy, and science by reading in her grandfather's library. Unable to attend university as a woman, she

entered a convent where she could pursue intellectual life. Sor Juana wrote poetry, plays, and prose defending women's right to education until Church authorities pressured her to stop writing. Her intellectual brilliance and proto-feminist arguments make her a pioneering figure in both Latin American literature and women's history.

“To Her Portrait” by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, translation by Thomas Walsh

This that you see, the false presentment planned

With finest art and all the colored shows

And reasoning of shade, doth but disclose

The poor deceits by earthly senses fanned!

Here where in constant flattery expand

Excuses for the stains that old age knows,

Pretexts again the years' advancing snows,

The footprints of old seasons to withstand;

'Tis but vain artifact of scheming minds;

'Tis but a flower fading on the winds;

'Tis but a useless protest against Fate;

'Tis but stupidity without a thought,

A lifeless shadow, if we meditate;

'Tis dead, 'tis dust, 'tis shadow, yea, 'tis nought.

John Keats (1795-1821) was one of the greatest English Romantic poets despite dying of tuberculosis at age twenty-five. Born in London to working-class parents, Keats trained as a

surgeon before dedicating himself to poetry. In just four years of serious writing, he produced masterworks including "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn." His poetry explores beauty, mortality, and the imagination with rich sensory imagery and emotional intensity. Though his work was harshly criticized during his lifetime, Keats is now recognized as a master of the English language whose influence on poetry has been profound and lasting.

"When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" by John Keats

When I have fears that I may cease to be

Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,

Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,

Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;

When I behold, upon the night's starred face,

Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,

And think that I may never live to trace

Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;

And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,

That I shall never look upon thee more,

Never have relish in the faery power

Of unreflecting love—then on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think

Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Villanelle:

A Villanelle is a 19-line poem with a highly structured pattern of repetition that creates an almost hypnotic, obsessive effect. It consists of five tercets (three-line stanzas) followed by a quatrain (four-line stanza), and uses only two rhymes throughout the entire poem. The real trick is that the first and third lines of the opening stanza alternate as refrains, repeating at the end of each subsequent stanza and then appearing together at the poem's conclusion. This circular, repeating structure makes villanelles perfect for exploring obsession, loss, or ideas that loop back on themselves - like Dylan Thomas's famous "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

Edwin Arlington Robinson - biography featured in Chapter 15 of this book

“The House on the Hill” by Edwin Arlington Robinson

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:

There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.

Epigram:

An epigram is a very short, witty poem - usually just two to four lines - that makes a clever observation or delivers a sharp punchline. Think of it as the poetic equivalent of a great one-liner or a perfectly crafted tweet. Epigrams often use humor, irony, or satire to make their point, and the best ones are memorable precisely because they pack so much punch into so few words. The ancient Romans loved epigrams, and the form has stayed popular for centuries because it rewards cleverness and wit over length and complexity.

Paul Laurence Dunbar - biography featured in Chapter 12 of this book

“Theology” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

There is a heaven, for ever, day by day,
The upward longing of my soul doth tell me so.
There is a hell, I'm quite as sure; for pray
If there were not, where would my neighbours go?

Hilaire Belloc (1872-1953) was a British-French writer known for his witty light verse, children's books, and prolific output across multiple genres. Born in France to a French father and English mother, Belloc became a British citizen and served in Parliament while maintaining a successful literary career. He wrote over 150 books including essays, history, biography, and political commentary, but his cautionary tales for children - *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*, *Cautionary*

Tales for Children - remain his most enduring work. Belloc's epigrams are known for their clever wit and memorable phrasing, combining humor with sharp observation.

“On his book” by Hilaire Belloc

When I am dead, I hope it may be said:

"His sins were scarlet, but his books were read."

Limerick:

A limerick is a five-line comic poem with a distinctive bouncy rhythm and an AABBA rhyme scheme. The form originated in Ireland and became wildly popular in the 1800s, especially through Edward Lear's nonsense verse. Limericks typically begin with "There was a..." and then introduce an absurd character or situation, building to a punchline or twist in the final line. The rhythm is anapestic (da-da-DUM), which gives limericks their playful, almost musical gallop - think of them as the joke form of poetry, meant to be funny, silly, and often-times racy or cleverly absurd rather than serious or profound.

Edward Lear (1812-1888) was an English artist and writer who popularized the limerick form and wrote some of the best-loved nonsense verse in English. Born into a large family, Lear supported himself from age fifteen as an illustrator, eventually becoming one of Queen Victoria's drawing teachers. His *A Book of Nonsense* (1846), featuring illustrated limericks, made him famous and essentially created the modern limerick form. Lear wrote to entertain children but his nonsense poetry appeals to all ages with its playful language, absurd situations, and underlying melancholy. He lived much of his later life traveling through Europe and the Mediterranean, working as a landscape painter.

“There was an Old Man with a Beard” by Edward Lear

There was an Old Man with a beard,

Who said, "It is just as I feared!—
 Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren,
 Have all built their nests in my beard."

Arthur Henry Reginald (1874-1944) Buller was a British-Canadian mycologist and plant pathologist who made significant contributions to the study of fungi. Despite his primary career as a scientist, Buller is best remembered for his clever limerick "Relativity," which wittily captures Einstein's theory of relativity in five lines. The poem, published in *Punch* magazine in 1923, demonstrates that scientific concepts can inspire playful art. Buller spent most of his career at the University of Manitoba, where he researched wheat rust and other plant diseases while occasionally producing light verse that combined scientific knowledge with humor.

"Relativity" by A. H. Reginald Buller

There was a young lady named Bright
 Whose speed was far faster than light;
 She set out one day
 In a relative way
 And returned on the previous night.

Haiku:

A haiku is a short Japanese poem traditionally consisting of three lines with a 5-7-5 syllable pattern, focusing on nature and capturing a single moment in time. When American poets like Amy Lowell discovered haiku in the early 1900s, they adapted the form more loosely - keeping the brevity and vivid imagery while taking liberties with syllable counts and subject matter. These Western versions capture haiku's spirit of compression and directness without always following the strict traditional rules.

Arakida Moritake (1473-1549) was a Japanese poet and Shinto priest who served at the Ise Grand Shrine, one of Japan's most sacred sites. Though he wrote in several poetic forms popular during the late medieval period, including renga (linked verse), Moritake is particularly remembered for pioneering haiku's development. His poem about fallen flowers transforming into butterflies demonstrates the compression and natural imagery that would become central to haiku. Living during a transitional period in Japanese poetry, Moritake helped establish principles that later masters like Bashō would perfect. His work connects medieval Japanese poetic traditions with the haiku form that would emerge in subsequent centuries.

“Thought I, the fallen flowers” by Arakida Morikado, translated by A.G. Aston

Thought I, the fallen flowers
Are returning to their branch;
But lo! they were butterflies.

Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) is considered the greatest master of haiku and one of the most important figures in Japanese literature. Born into a samurai family, Bashō eventually rejected that life to become a wandering poet, traveling throughout Japan and writing poems that captured fleeting moments in nature with profound simplicity. He elevated haiku from light wordplay to serious art, infusing the form with Zen Buddhist philosophy and deep spiritual observation. Bashō's most famous haiku - about a frog jumping into an ancient pond - demonstrates his ability to find profundity in ordinary moments. His travel journals, combining prose and poetry, influenced Japanese literature for centuries.

“An Ancient Pond” by Matsuo Bashō

An ancient pond!
With a sound from the water
Of the frog as it plunges in.

Amy Lowell (1874-1925) was an American poet who became a leader of the Imagist movement, which emphasized clear, precise language and sharp visual images. Born into the wealthy and prominent Lowell family of Massachusetts, she had the financial freedom to dedicate herself fully to poetry. Lowell was known for her flamboyant personality - she smoked cigars, kept unusual hours, and traveled with a companion in a custom maroon car. Her interest in Japanese poetry, particularly haiku, influenced her work and helped introduce Eastern poetic forms to American audiences. Lowell won the Pulitzer Prize posthumously for her collection *What's O'Clock* (1925).

"Autumn" by Amy Lowell

All day I have watched the purple vine leaves
Fall into the water.
And now in the moonlight they still fall,
But each leaf is fringed with silver.

Lewis Grandison (1900-1945) Alexander was an African American poet, playwright, and actor associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Washington, D.C., Alexander was an active member of the vibrant Black literary community in the capital, contributing poems to important African American publications including *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. He was particularly interested in Japanese poetic forms and wrote several haiku and tanka influenced by traditional Japanese poetry. Alexander also acted in and wrote plays, including work with the Negro Repertory Theatre. Though less famous than some Harlem Renaissance figures, Alexander's work represents the movement's interest in diverse poetic forms and international influences.

Excerpt from "Japanese Hokku" by Lewis Grandison Alexander

Why sit like the sphinx,
Watching the caravan pass?
Join in the parade.

Elegy:

An elegy is a poem of mourning and reflection written in honor of someone who has died. While early elegies followed specific formal patterns, modern elegies can take any form - what makes them elegies is their contemplative, sorrowful tone and their focus on loss, grief, and memory. Elegies often move beyond personal grief to explore larger themes about mortality, the meaning of life, and how we preserve the memory of those we've lost. Some elegies meditate on death more generally rather than mourning a specific person, but most elegies celebrate an individual life while grappling with the pain of its ending.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was one of the greatest men of letters in the history of the English language - a towering figure who shaped eighteenth-century literature as poet, essayist, novelist, critic, biographer, and lexicographer. Born in Lichfield, England, Johnson overcame poverty, illness, and depression to produce monumental works including *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), which he completed by himself over an eight year period, writing more than 42,000 definitions and citing over 114,000 literary examples mostly from memory. His work standardized English spelling and usage for generations. He also wrote *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-1781), which established the foundations of literary criticism. His brilliant conversation, moral wisdom, and penetrating intellect made him the center of London's literary world. Johnson's friend James Boswell immortalized him in what many consider the greatest biography ever written, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

“On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet” by Samuel Johnson

Condemned to Hope's delusive mine,
As on we toil from day to day,
By sudden blasts, or slow decline,
Our social comforts drop away.

Well tried through many a varying year,

See Levet to the grave descend;
 Officious, innocent, sincere,
 Of every friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills Affection's eye,
 Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;
 Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny
 Thy praise to merit unrefined.

When fainting Nature called for aid,
 And hovering Death prepared the blow,
 His vigorous remedy displayed
 The power of art without the show.

In Misery's darkest cavern known,
 His useful care was ever nigh,
 Where hopeless Anguish poured his groan,
 And lonely Want retired to die.

No summons mocked by chill delay,
 No petty gain disdained by pride,
 The modest wants of every day
 The toil of every day supplied.

His virtues walked their narrow round,
 Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
 And sure the Eternal Master found
 The single talent well employed.

The busy day, the peaceful night,
 Unfelt, uncounted, glided by;
 His frame was firm, his powers were bright,
 Though now his eightieth year was nigh.

Then with no throbbing fiery pain,
 No cold gradations of decay,
 Death broke at once the vital chain,
 And freed his soul the nearest way.

Rondeau:

A rondeau is a French poetic form consisting of 13 or 15 lines built around two rhymes and a repeating refrain. The opening phrase appears as a short refrain (called a *rentrement*) at the middle and end of the poem, creating a circular, musical effect. The pattern typically follows AABBA AABR AABBAR, where "R" represents the refrain. Rondeaux were popular in medieval French poetry and experienced a revival in English during the Victorian era. The form's repeating refrain can create effects ranging from obsessive longing to playful wit, depending on how the poet uses it - think of it as a verbal echo that gains new meaning each time it returns.

Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) was an English poet, critic, and essayist who played a crucial role in the Romantic literary movement by promoting the work of younger poets like Keats and Shelley. Born in London, Hunt was imprisoned for two years for criticizing the Prince Regent in his political journal *The Examiner*. Despite financial struggles throughout his life, Hunt maintained a generous spirit and literary salon that became a center of London's intellectual life. His brief poem "Jenny Kiss'd Me" captures a moment of pure joy and has remained popular for its simplicity and charm. Charles Dickens based the character Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House* partly on Hunt.

"Jenny Kiss'd Me" by Leigh Hunt

Jenny kissed me when we met,
 Jumping from the chair she sat in;
 Time, you thief, who love to get
 Sweets into your list, put that in:
 Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
 Say that health and wealth have missed me,

Say I'm growing old, but add,
 Jenny kissed me.

Note: **“We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar** is also another great example of the Rondeau poetic form, but it is already featured in Chapter 12 of this textbook.

Narrative poem:

A narrative is a poem that tells a story. Like short stories or novels, narrative poems have characters, plot, setting, and often dialogue, but they use poetic techniques like rhythm, imagery, and sometimes rhyme to tell the tale. Famous examples include epic poems like Homer's *The Odyssey*, long ballads about heroes or tragic events, and shorter story-poems like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven."

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) - biography featured in Chapter 10 of this textbook

“The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
 Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
 While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
 As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
 “Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
 Only this and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;
 And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
 Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
 From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
 For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—

Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
“’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—
This it is and nothing more.”

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
“Sir,” said I, “or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you”—here I opened wide the door;—
Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore?”
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, “Lenore!”—
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
“Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—
’Tis the wind and nothing more!”

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—

Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
 Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
 By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
 “Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven,
 Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
 Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
 Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
 For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
 Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—
 Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
 With such name as “Nevermore.”

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
 That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
 Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
 Till I scarcely more than muttered “Other friends have flown before—
 On the morrow he will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.”
 Then the bird said “Nevermore.”

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
 “Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store
 Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
 Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
 Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
 Of ‘Never—nevermore’.”

But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,
 Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
 Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking

Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
 What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
 Meant in croaking “Nevermore.”

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
 To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;
 This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
 On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o’er,
 But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o’er,
 She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
 Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
 “Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
 Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
 Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
 Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
 On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
 Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
 By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—
 “Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!

Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
 And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!

Additional Poems By Topic:

Poems About Love and Devotion:

Lord Byron (1788-1824) was one of the leading figures of English Romanticism and one of the most famous poets in European history. Born with a club foot into an aristocratic but troubled family, Byron became a celebrity after publishing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), which made him, in his own words, famous overnight. His scandalous personal life - including affairs, debts, and rumors of incest - forced him into exile from England. Byron's poetry combines sardonic wit, passionate emotion, and rebellious individualism. He died in Greece while fighting for Greek independence from Ottoman rule, cementing his reputation as a Romantic hero both in life and art.

“She Walks in Beauty” by Lord Byron

She walks in beauty, like the night
 Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
 And all that’s best of dark and bright
 Meet in her aspect and her eyes;

Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) was the first published poet in the American colonies and one of the first significant women writers in English. Born in England, she immigrated to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 with her husband and father, both prominent Puritan leaders. Despite the hardships of colonial life and bearing eight children, Bradstreet wrote poetry that explored faith, love, mortality, and domestic life. Her brother-in-law published her first collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650), without her knowledge, making her famous in both

America and England. Her personal poems about marriage and family are considered her finest work.

“To My Dear and Loving Husband” by Anne Bradstreet

If ever two were one, then surely we.

If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.

If ever wife was happy in a man,

Compare with me, ye women, if you can.

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,

Or all the riches that the East doth hold.

My love is such that rivers cannot quench,

Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.

Thy love is such I can no way repay;

The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.

Then while we live, in love let's so persevere,

That when we live no more, we may live ever.

Robert Herrick (1591-1674) was an English lyric poet and Anglican clergyman best known for his celebration of English country life and his carpe diem poems urging readers to seize the day. Born in London, Herrick spent most of his career as a country minister in Devon, where he wrote over 2,500 poems, most published in *Hesperides* (1648). His work combines classical influences with English folk traditions, creating poems that are both elegant and accessible. "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," with its famous opening "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may," remains one of English literature's most enduring carpe diem poems.

“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” by Robert Herrick

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
 The higher he's a-getting,
 The sooner will his race be run,
 And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,
 When youth and blood are warmer;
 But being spent, the worse, and worst
 Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
 And while ye may, go marry;
 For having lost but once your prime,
 You may forever tarry.

Poems About Death and Solitude:

Christina Rossetti - biography featured in Chapter 14 of this book

“When I Am Dead, My Dearest” by Christina Rossetti

When I am dead, my dearest,

Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

Emily Dickinson - biography featured in Chapter 14 of this book

“Because I Could Not Stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop for Death –

He kindly stopped for me –

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –

And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste

And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,

For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess – in the Ring –

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –

We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –

The Dews drew quivering and Chill –

For only Gossamer, my Gown –

My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground –

The Roof was scarcely visible –

The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity –

Li Bai (701-762), also known as Li Po, is considered one of the two greatest poets in Chinese history (along with Du Fu) and a central figure of the Tang Dynasty's golden age of poetry. Born in Central Asia and raised in Sichuan, Li Bai spent much of his life wandering through China, writing poems that celebrated friendship, nature, wine, and the joy of living in the moment. Legend says he drowned while drunkenly trying to embrace the moon's reflection in a river - a fitting end for a poet who wrote so beautifully about drinking, moonlight, and the transience of life. His poems combine Taoist philosophy with vivid natural imagery and have influenced Chinese literature for over a thousand years.

“The Solitude of Night” by Li Bai

It was at a wine party—

I lay in a drowse, knowing it not.

The blown flowers fell and filled my lap.

When I arose, still drunken,

The birds had all gone to their nests,

And there remained but few of my comrades.

I went along the river—alone in the moonlight.

Walt Whitman - biography featured in Chapter 12 of this book

“When I heard the Learn’d Astronomer” by Walt Whitman

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

Poems about Hope and Perseverance:

Langston Hughes - biography featured in Chapter 11 of this book

“Dreams” by Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.

William Ernest Henley (1849-1903) was an English poet, critic, and editor who overcame tremendous physical adversity to become an influential literary figure in late Victorian England. Born in Gloucester, Henley suffered from tubercular arthritis that required the amputation of one leg and nearly cost him the other. He wrote "Invictus" while hospitalized, creating one of literature's most powerful expressions of resilience and determination. The poem's famous closing lines - "I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul" - have inspired countless people facing adversity. Henley also edited several literary magazines and mentored younger writers including Rudyard Kipling.

"Invictus" by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,

Black as the pit from pole to pole,

I thank whatever gods may be

For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor cried aloud.

Under the bludgeonings of chance

My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears

Looms but the Horror of the shade,

And yet the menace of the years

Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,

How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate,

I am the captain of my soul.

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Part 4: Drama

After having learned a bit more about fiction and then poetry, it is now time to move into a completely different form of literature: drama. Even though fiction can spark our imagination and poetry is meant to be read out loud, drama is still unique in that it is *meant to be performed*, not read. That said, since we are just as likely to encounter plays as readers instead of sitting in the live audience at a playhouse, reading drama creates some unique challenges compared to the other forms of literature we've discussed.

You've probably never dreamed of becoming a director someday, but in a sense, that is exactly what you need to imagine when you pick up a play or a movie script. You have to picture the actors on the stage, where and how they move, the sets they are moving through, and even how they say the various lines. Doing this is perhaps more challenging than just reading a short story, but it can also be very rewarding. The joy of "imagining the play taking place in front of you" is why people can still read plays written hundreds of years ago and feel like they're living works, being acted out once again right at this moment.

In Chapter 17, we are going to consider the unique experience of reading this type of literature, including a shared reading of a one-act play. Then, in Chapter 18 we will once again consider all the elements of fiction we have learned - plot, character, setting, etc - and look at how they work specifically inside of this medium. With that in mind, the stage has been set (pun intended), so let's dive into drama!

Chapter 17: Reading Drama

Unlike fiction, where the writer describes the action and can give the reader glimpses inside characters' heads, drama tells a story exclusively through dialogue and action. And, unlike poetry, where the focus is on imagery and the power of the words themselves, drama focuses on a central conflict and moves the plot along briskly, creating a blueprint for an entertaining live performance. But, what does this all mean for you as the reader?

Understanding the Basics of Reading Drama: One of the most important things to be aware of when reading drama is that more is required of you. Yes, being an active reader is important

for all types of literature, but reading a drama script requires even more of you. You wear many different hats at the same time: you are the director, stage manager, set designer, and casting agent simultaneously. But the end result is a highly imaginative 'theater' experience playing out in your mind, all from the comfort of your own living room.

Another really unique aspect of reading drama is the **stage directions**. These instructions are outside of the actual dialogue of the play, but they are where the playwright gives specific instructions that they hope will help guide eventual performances of the play. These can be things like telling actors where to move or how to speak. They can also give details about what the set should look like and information about the psychological state of a given character. It is important not to skip this information! Sometimes it can reveal a lot about what is happening, beyond what the words convey. It could say a character "jumps back in surprise," but if you just skip it and read the next line of dialogue, you're really not "seeing" what would be happening on stage at all.

Additionally, it is really helpful to visualize the action of a play. You can picture the actors moving on stage or through a set. You can imagine who you would cast for a given role and what their costumes would look like. How would they say their lines? What would their facial expressions and physical gestures look like? You can also spend a little time imagining what exactly the set would look like if you were putting this play on at a local theater, for example. The more vividly you can imagine the play, the more impactful reading drama will become for you.

Finally, one last difference between reading drama and other types of literature is the form. First, a script looks very different on the page, with stage directions intermingled with the scripted lines of the various characters. A play is also structured into larger parts called **acts**, and these are made up of smaller **scenes**. The end of an act is often marked by the closing of the main curtain and a break called an **intermission**, often running between 10 and 20 minutes. A change in a scene is often marked by characters coming and going on stage, the dimming of lights, the changing of the sets, or potentially the closing of the curtains. With this in mind, it is especially important for readers of drama to notice when a character arrives or heads off stage, as it can change the dynamics of what is happening on stage instantly.

Now that we've got a better sense of how to get the most out of reading a play, we are going to follow a similar pattern to the previous parts of the book and complete a shared reading. The

following play is much shorter than most plays, and is considered a one-act play, with an approximate stage running time of 30 minutes. As we've covered here, follow the stage directions, set everything up in your mind, picture the characters as moving in a given space, and try to imagine how they are saying these lines including facial expressions. Stay active while reading, and if you have a paper copy, a pen in hand doesn't hurt!



Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) was an American playwright, novelist, and journalist who co-founded the Provincetown Players, one of the most important theater companies in American history. Before becoming a playwright, she worked as a court reporter in Iowa, where she covered a sensational murder trial involving a farmer's wife accused of killing her husband. This real-life case would later inspire *Trifles* (1916), her most famous and frequently performed work. Glaspell was known for writing strong, complex female characters and exploring themes of gender, justice, and the constraints placed on women in early 20th-century America. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931 for her play *Alison's House*, which was based on the life of poet Emily Dickinson. Her

work helped shape modern American theater and gave voice to women's experiences at a time when few playwrights did, making her a pioneer of feminist drama.

***Trifles* by Susan Glaspell**

First performed by the Provincetown Players at the Wharf Theatre, Provincetown, Mass., August 8, 1916.

GEORGE HENDERSON (County Attorney)

HENRY PETERS (Sheriff)

LEWIS HALE, A neighboring farmer

MRS PETERS

MRS HALE

SCENE: *The kitchen is the now abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleted work. At the rear the outer door opens and the SHERIFF comes in followed by the COUNTY ATTORNEY and HALE. The SHERIFF and HALE are men in middle life, the COUNTY ATTORNEY is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the SHERIFF's wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. MRS HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door.*

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(rubbing his hands)* This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies.

MRS PETERS: *(after taking a step forward)* I'm not—cold.

SHERIFF: *(unbuttoning his overcoat and stepping away from the stove as if to mark the beginning of official business)* Now, Mr Hale, before we move things about, you explain to Mr Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: By the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?

SHERIFF: *(looking about)* It's just the same. When it dropped below zero last night I thought I'd better send Frank out this morning to make a fire for us—no use getting pneumonia with a big case on, but I told him not to touch anything except the stove—and you know Frank.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Somebody should have been left here yesterday.

SHERIFF: Oh—yesterday. When I had to send Frank to Morris Center for that man who went crazy—I want you to know I had my hands full yesterday. I knew you could get back from Omaha by today and as long as I went over everything here myself—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, Mr Hale, tell just what happened when you came here yesterday morning.

HALE: Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes. We came along the road from my place and as I got here I said, I'm going to see if I can't get John Wright to go in with me on a party telephone.' I spoke to Wright about it once before and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet—I guess you know about how much he talked himself; but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Let's talk about that later, Mr Hale. I do want to talk about that, but tell now just what happened when you got to the house.

HALE: I didn't hear or see anything; I knocked at the door, and still it was all quiet inside. I knew they must be up, it was past eight o'clock. So I knocked again, and I thought I heard somebody say, 'Come in.' I wasn't sure, I'm not sure yet, but I opened the door—this door (*indicating the door by which the two women are still standing*) and there in that rocker—(*pointing to it*) sat Mrs Wright.

(*They all look at the rocker.*)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: What—was she doing?

HALE: She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of—pleating it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And how did she—look?

HALE: Well, she looked queer.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How do you mean—queer?

HALE: Well, as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How did she seem to feel about your coming?

HALE: Why, I don't think she minded—one way or other. She didn't pay much attention. I said, 'How do, Mrs Wright it's cold, ain't it?' And she said, 'Is it?'—and went on kind of pleating at her apron. Well, I was surprised; she didn't ask me to come up to the stove, or to set down, but just sat there, not even looking at me, so I said, 'I want to see John.' And then she—laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh. I thought of Harry and the team outside, so I said a little sharp: 'Can't I see John?' 'No', she says, kind o' dull like. 'Ain't he home?' says I. 'Yes', says she, 'he's home'. 'Then why can't I see him?' I asked her, out of patience. 'Cause he's dead', says she. 'Dead?' says I. She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin' back and forth. 'Why—where is he?' says I, not knowing what to say. She just pointed upstairs—like that (*himself pointing to the room above*) I got up, with the idea of going up there. I walked from there to here—then I says, 'Why, what did he die of?' 'He died of a rope round his neck', says she, and just went on pleatin' at her apron. Well, I went out and called Harry. I thought I might—need help. We went upstairs and there he was lyin'—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I think I'd rather have you go into that upstairs, where you can point it all out. Just go on now with the rest of the story.

HALE: Well, my first thought was to get that rope off. It looked ... (*stops, his face twitches*) ... but Harry, he went up to him, and he said, 'No, he's dead all right, and we'd better not touch anything.' So we went back down stairs. She was still sitting that same way. 'Has anybody been notified?' I asked. 'No', says she unconcerned. 'Who did this, Mrs Wright?' said Harry. He said it business-like—and she stopped pleatin' of her apron. 'I don't know', she says. 'You don't *know*?' says Harry. 'No', says she. 'Weren't you sleepin' in the bed with him?' says Harry. 'Yes', says she, 'but I was on the inside'. 'Somebody slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him and you didn't wake up?' says Harry. 'I didn't wake up', she said after him. We must 'a looked as if we didn't see how that could be, for after a minute she said, 'I sleep sound'. Harry was going to ask her more questions but I said maybe we ought to let her tell her story first to the coroner, or the sheriff, so Harry went fast as he could to Rivers' place, where there's a telephone.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And what did Mrs Wright do when she knew that you had gone for the coroner?

HALE: She moved from that chair to this one over here (*pointing to a small chair in the corner*) and just sat there with her hands held together and looking down. I got a feeling that I ought to make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John wanted to put in a telephone,

and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked at me—scared, (*the COUNTY ATTORNEY, who has had his notebook out, makes a note*) I dunno, maybe it wasn't scared. I wouldn't like to say it was. Soon Harry got back, and then Dr Lloyd came, and you, Mr Peters, and so I guess that's all I know that you don't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*looking around*) I guess we'll go upstairs first—and then out to the barn and around there, (*to the SHERIFF*) You're convinced that there was nothing important here—nothing that would point to any motive.

SHERIFF: Nothing here but kitchen things.

(*The COUNTY ATTORNEY, after again looking around the kitchen, opens the door of a cupboard closet. He gets up on a chair and looks on a shelf. Pulls his hand away, sticky.*)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Here's a nice mess.

(*The women draw nearer.*)

MRS PETERS: (*to the other woman*) Oh, her fruit; it did freeze, (*to the LAWYER*) She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

(*The two women move a little closer together.*)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*with the gallantry of a young politician*) And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies? (*the women do not unbend. He goes to the sink, takes a dipperful of water from the pail and pouring it into a basin, washes his hands. Starts to wipe them on the roller-towel, turns it for a cleaner place*) Dirty towels! (*kicks his foot against the pans under the sink*) Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?

MRS HALE: (*stiffly*) There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: To be sure. And yet (*with a little bow to her*) I know there are some Dickson county farmhouses which do not have such roller towels. (*He gives it a pull to expose its length again.*)

MRS HALE: Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. But you and Mrs Wright were neighbors. I suppose you were friends, too.

MRS HALE: (*shaking her head*) I've not seen much of her of late years. I've not been in this house—it's more than a year.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And why was that? You didn't like her?

MRS HALE: I liked her all well enough. Farmers' wives have their hands full, Mr Henderson. And then—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes—?

MRS HALE: (*looking about*) It never seemed a very cheerful place.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No—it's not cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't know as Wright had, either.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: You mean that they didn't get on very well?

MRS HALE: No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'd like to talk more of that a little later. I want to get the lay of things upstairs now. (*He goes to the left, where three steps lead to a stair door.*)

SHERIFF: I suppose anything Mrs Peters does'll be all right. She was to take in some clothes for her, you know, and a few little things. We left in such a hurry yesterday.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes, but I would like to see what you take, Mrs Peters, and keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us.

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mr Henderson.

(The women listen to the men's steps on the stairs, then look about the kitchen.)

MRS HALE: I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticising.

(She arranges the pans under sink which the LAWYER had shoved out of place.)

MRS PETERS: Of course it's no more than their duty.

MRS HALE: Duty's all right, but I guess that deputy sheriff that came out to make the fire might have got a little of this on. *(gives the roller towel a pull)* Wish I'd thought of that sooner. Seems mean to talk about her for not having things slicked up when she had to come away in such a hurry.

MRS PETERS: *(who has gone to a small table in the left rear corner of the room, and lifted one end of a towel that covers a pan)* She had bread set. *(Stands still.)*

MRS HALE: *(eyes fixed on a loaf of bread beside the bread-box, which is on a low shelf at the other side of the room. Moves slowly toward it)* She was going to put this in there, *(picks up loaf, then abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar things)* It's a shame about her fruit. I wonder if it's all gone. *(gets up on the chair and looks)* I think there's some here that's all right, Mrs Peters. Yes—here; *(holding it toward the window)* this is cherries, too. *(looking again)* I declare I believe that's the only one. *(gets down, bottle in her hand. Goes to the sink and wipes it off on the outside)* She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.

(She puts the bottle on the big kitchen table, center of the room. With a sigh, is about to sit down in the rocking-chair. Before she is seated realizes what chair it is; with a slow look at it, steps back. The chair which she has touched rocks back and forth.)

MRS PETERS: Well, I must get those things from the front room closet, *(she goes to the door at the right, but after looking into the other room, steps back)* You coming with me, Mrs Hale? You could help me carry them.

(They go in the other room; reappear, MRS PETERS carrying a dress and skirt, MRS HALE following with a pair of shoes.)

MRS PETERS: My, it's cold in there.

(She puts the clothes on the big table, and hurries to the stove.)

MRS HALE: *(examining the skirt)* Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was thirty years ago. This all you was to take in?

MRS PETERS: She said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want, for there isn't much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. She said they was in the top drawer in this cupboard. Yes, here. And then her little shawl that always hung behind the door. *(opens stair door and looks)* Yes, here it is.

(Quickly shuts door leading upstairs.)

MRS HALE: *(abruptly moving toward her)* Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Do you think she did it?

MRS PETERS: *(in a frightened voice)* Oh, I don't know.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit.

MRS PETERS: *(starts to speak, glances up, where footsteps are heard in the room above. In a low voice)* Mr Peters says it looks bad for her. Mr Henderson is awful sarcastic in a speech and he'll make fun of her sayin' she didn't wake up.

MRS HALE: Well, I guess John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck.

MRS PETERS: No, it's strange. It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a—funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.

MRS HALE: That's just what Mr Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand.

MRS PETERS: Mr Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling.

MRS HALE: *(who is standing by the table)* Well, I don't see any signs of anger around here, *(she puts her hand on the dish towel which lies on the table, stands looking down at table, one half of which is clean, the other half messy)* It's wiped to here, *(makes a move as if to finish work, then turns and looks at loaf of bread outside the breadbox. Drops towel. In that voice of coming back to familiar things.)* Wonder how they are finding things upstairs. I hope she had it a little more red-up up there. You know, it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!

MRS PETERS: But Mrs Hale, the law is the law.

MRS HALE: I s'pose 'tis, *(unbuttoning her coat)* Better loosen up your things, Mrs Peters. You won't feel them when you go out.

(MRS PETERS takes off her fur tippet, goes to hang it on hook at back of room, stands looking at the under part of the small corner table.)

MRS PETERS: She was piecing a quilt. *(She brings the large sewing basket and they look at the bright pieces.)*

MRS HALE: It's log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it? I wonder if she was goin' to quilt it or just knot it?

(Footsteps have been heard coming down the stairs. The SHERIFF enters followed by HALE and the COUNTY ATTORNEY.)

SHERIFF: They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it! *(The men laugh, the women look abashed.)*

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(rubbing his hands over the stove)* Frank's fire didn't do much up there, did it? Well, let's go out to the barn and get that cleared up. *(The men go outside.)*

MRS HALE: (*resentfully*) I don't know as there's anything so strange, our takin' up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence. (*she sits down at the big table smoothing out a block with decision*) I don't see as it's anything to laugh about.

MRS PETERS: (*apologetically*) Of course they've got awful important things on their minds.

(*Pulls up a chair and joins MRS HALE at the table.*)

MRS HALE: (*examining another block*) Mrs Peters, look at this one. Here, this is the one she was working on, and look at the sewing! All the rest of it has been so nice and even. And look at this! It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!

(*After she has said this they look at each other, then start to glance back at the door. After an instant MRS HALE has pulled at a knot and ripped the sewing.*)

MRS PETERS: Oh, what are you doing, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: (*mildly*) Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good. (*threading a needle*) Bad sewing always made me fidgety.

MRS PETERS: (*nervously*) I don't think we ought to touch things.

MRS HALE: I'll just finish up this end. (*suddenly stopping and leaning forward*) Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: What do you suppose she was so nervous about?

MRS PETERS: Oh—I don't know. I don't know as she was nervous. I sometimes sew awful queer when I'm just tired. (*MRS HALE starts to say something, looks at MRS PETERS, then goes on sewing*) Well I must get these things wrapped up. They may be through sooner than we think, (*putting apron and other things together*) I wonder where I can find a piece of paper, and string.

MRS HALE: In that cupboard, maybe.

MRS PETERS: (*looking in cupboard*) Why, here's a bird-cage, (*holds it up*) Did she have a bird, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Why, I don't know whether she did or not—I've not been here for so long. There was a man around last year selling canaries cheap, but I don't know as she took one; maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself.

MRS PETERS: (*glancing around*) Seems funny to think of a bird here. But she must have had one, or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.

MRS HALE: I s'pose maybe the cat got it.

MRS PETERS: No, she didn't have a cat. She's got that feeling some people have about cats—being afraid of them. My cat got in her room and she was real upset and asked me to take it out.

MRS HALE: My sister Bessie was like that. Queer, ain't it?

MRS PETERS: (*examining the cage*) Why, look at this door. It's broke. One hinge is pulled apart.

MRS HALE: (*looking too*) Looks as if someone must have been rough with it.

MRS PETERS: Why, yes.

(*She brings the cage forward and puts it on the table.*)

MRS HALE: I wish if they're going to find any evidence they'd be about it. I don't like this place.

MRS PETERS: But I'm awful glad you came with me, Mrs Hale. It would be lonesome for me sitting here alone.

MRS HALE: It would, wouldn't it? (*dropping her sewing*) But I tell you what I do wish, Mrs Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes when *she* was here. I—(*looking around the room*)—wish I had.

MRS PETERS: But of course you were awful busy, Mrs Hale—your house and your children.

MRS HALE: I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful—and that's why I ought to have come. I—I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now—(*shakes her head*)

MRS PETERS: Well, you mustn't reproach yourself, Mrs Hale. Somehow we just don't see how it is with other folks until—something comes up.

MRS HALE: Not having children makes less work—but it makes a quiet house, and Wright out to work all day, and no company when he did come in. Did you know John Wright, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not to know him; I've seen him in town. They say he was a good man.

MRS HALE: Yes—good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—(*shivers*) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone, (*pauses, her eye falling on the cage*) I should think she would 'a wanted a bird. But what do you suppose went with it?

MRS PETERS: I don't know, unless it got sick and died.

(*She reaches over and swings the broken door, swings it again, both women watch it.*)

MRS HALE: You weren't raised round here, were you? (*MRS PETERS shakes her head*) You didn't know—her?

MRS PETERS: Not till they brought her yesterday.

MRS HALE: She—come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery. How—she—did—change. (*silence; then as if struck by a happy thought and relieved to get back to everyday things*) Tell you what, Mrs Peters, why don't you take the quilt in with you? It might take up her mind.

MRS PETERS: Why, I think that's a real nice idea, Mrs Hale. There couldn't possibly be any objection to it, could there? Now, just what would I take? I wonder if her patches are in here—and her things.

(*They look in the sewing basket.*)

MRS HALE: Here's some red. I expect this has got sewing things in it. (*brings out a fancy box*) What a pretty box. Looks like something somebody would give you. Maybe her scissors are in here. (*Opens box. Suddenly puts her hand to her nose*) Why—(*MRS PETERS bends nearer, then turns her face away*) There's something wrapped up in this piece of silk.

MRS PETERS: Why, this isn't her scissors.

MRS HALE: (*lifting the silk*) Oh, Mrs Peters—it's—

(MRS PETERS *bends closer.*)

MRS PETERS: It's the bird.

MRS HALE: (*jumping up*) But, Mrs Peters—look at it! It's neck! Look at its neck!

It's all—other side *to*.

MRS PETERS: Somebody—wrung—its—neck.

(*Their eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension, of horror. Steps are heard outside. MRS HALE slips box under quilt pieces, and sinks into her chair. Enter SHERIFF and COUNTY ATTORNEY. MRS PETERS rises.*)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*as one turning from serious things to little pleasantries*) Well ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it?

MRS PETERS: We think she was going to—knot it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, that's interesting, I'm sure. (*seeing the birdcage*) Has the bird flown?

MRS HALE: (*putting more quilt pieces over the box*) We think the—cat got it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*preoccupied*) Is there a cat?

(MRS HALE *glances in a quick covert way at MRS PETERS.*)

MRS PETERS: Well, not now. They're superstitious, you know. They leave.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*to SHERIFF PETERS, continuing an interrupted conversation*) No sign at all of anyone having come from the outside. Their own rope. Now let's go up again and go over it piece by piece. (*they start upstairs*) It would have to have been someone who knew just the—

(MRS PETERS *sits down. The two women sit there not looking at one another, but as if peering into something and at the same time holding back. When they talk now it is in the manner of feeling their way over strange ground, as if afraid of what they are saying, but as if they can not help saying it.*)

MRS HALE: She liked the bird. She was going to bury it in that pretty box.

MRS PETERS: (*in a whisper*) When I was a girl—my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—(*covers her face an instant*) If they hadn't held me back I would have—(*catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly*)—hurt him.

MRS HALE: (*with a slow look around her*) I wonder how it would seem never to have had any children around, (*pause*) No, Wright wouldn't like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too.

MRS PETERS: (*moving uneasily*) We don't know who killed the bird.

MRS HALE: I knew John Wright.

MRS PETERS: It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him.

MRS HALE: His neck. Choked the life out of him.

(*Her hand goes out and rests on the bird-cage.*)

MRS PETERS: (*with rising voice*) We don't know who killed him. We don't *know*.

MRS HALE: (*her own feeling not interrupted*) If there'd been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still, after the bird was still.

MRS PETERS: (*something within her speaking*) I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then—

MRS HALE: (*moving*) How soon do you suppose they'll be through, looking for the evidence?

MRS PETERS: I know what stillness is. (*pulling herself back*) The law has got to punish crime, Mrs Hale.

MRS HALE: (*not as if answering that*) I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang. (*a look around the room*) Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?

MRS PETERS: (*looking upstairs*) We mustn't—take on.

MRS HALE: I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it's queer, Mrs Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing, (*brushes her eyes, noticing the bottle of fruit, reaches out for it*) If I was you, I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone. Tell her it *ain't*. Tell her it's all right. Take this in to prove it to her. She—she may never know whether it was broke or not.

MRS PETERS: (*takes the bottle, looks about for something to wrap it in; takes petticoat from the clothes brought from the other room, very nervously begins winding this around the bottle. In a false voice*) My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a—dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with—with—wouldn't they *laugh*!

(*The men are heard coming down stairs.*)

MRS HALE: (*under her breath*) Maybe they would—maybe they wouldn't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No, Peters, it's all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show—something to make a story about—a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it—

(*The women's eyes meet for an instant. Enter HALE from outer door.*)

HALE: Well, I've got the team around. Pretty cold out there.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'm going to stay here a while by myself, *(to the SHERIFF)* You can send Frank out for me, can't you? I want to go over everything. I'm not satisfied that we can't do better.

SHERIFF: Do you want to see what Mrs Peters is going to take in?

(The LAWYER goes to the table, picks up the apron, laughs.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. *(Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back)* No, Mrs Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not—just that way.

SHERIFF: *(chuckling)* Married to the law. *(moves toward the other room)* I just want you to come in here a minute, George. We ought to take a look at these windows.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(scoffingly)* Oh, windows!

SHERIFF: We'll be right out, Mr Hale.

(HALE goes outside. The SHERIFF follows the COUNTY ATTORNEY into the other room. Then MRS HALE rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at MRS PETERS, whose eyes make a slow turn, finally meeting MRS HALE's. A moment MRS HALE holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly MRS PETERS throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens box, starts to take bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room. MRS HALE snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. Enter COUNTY ATTORNEY and SHERIFF.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(facetiously)* Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS HALE: *(her hand against her pocket)* We call it—knot it, Mr Henderson.

(CURTAIN)

Discussion Questions:

1. The opening stage directions describe Mrs. Peters as "a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face" and Mrs. Hale as "larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now." How do these physical descriptions and the direction that the women "stand close together near the door" help us understand their emotional states and relationship before any dialogue begins?
2. Glaspell describes the kitchen in detail: "unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleting work." If you were directing this play, how would you design this kitchen to make sure the audience immediately understands something is wrong? What specific details would you emphasize?
3. When the County Attorney says, "And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?" and the stage directions note "the women do not unbend," what is really being communicated? What does the County Attorney think he's saying, and what are the women hearing?
4. The men go upstairs to investigate the crime scene while the women remain in the kitchen. How does this physical separation on stage create meaning? What does it tell us about how the characters view men's work versus women's work?
5. The birdcage and the dead canary are crucial props in this play. What do these objects reveal that dialogue alone couldn't communicate? Why is it significant that we see these items rather than just hearing characters describe them?
6. Notice how the tension changes each time the men leave the kitchen or return. Choose one moment when characters enter or exit and explain how it shifts the mood or allows certain conversations to happen.
7. Near the end of the play, the stage directions read: "MRS HALE rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at MRS PETERS, whose eyes make a slow turn, finally meeting MRS HALE's. A moment MRS HALE holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed." Why does Glaspell choreograph this moment so carefully without any dialogue? What is happening between these two women?
8. The men repeatedly dismiss the women's observations as "trifles"—insignificant details. How does the audience's understanding of what's important differ from the men's understanding? What makes this an example of dramatic irony?

Applying What We've Learned Using *Trifles*: After having read Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, it is a good time to go back and consider some of the specific and unique aspects of reading drama, as they relate specifically to this play. First, the script doesn't have a narrator to give us access to thoughts and background information like we usually have in fiction, so there is nobody there to say, "Mrs. Wright killed her husband because he broke her spirit." Instead, Glaspell uses other ways to provide us with the evidence we need to understand what happened. For example, she provides physical evidence through the dead canary prop, and the women telling the audience that its neck was broken. We also get Mrs. Hale remembering aloud that Minnie Foster used to sing in the choir when she was young. Instead of having a narrator tell us about Mr. Wright, we get Mrs. Hale saying, "he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him - (shivers) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone" (Glaspell). In this way, props and dialogue replace a lot of what a narrator might directly tell a reader in a narrative story.

Specifically considering the stage direction in *Trifles*, we get a lot of important information that helps the audience - or in our case, the reader - understand what has happened. Details like the messy and cold kitchen show us that there was chaos and disorder in the home before the murder took place. The women seem to understand this, while the men don't seem to make the connection. The physical positions of the characters during the play is also of critical importance. The women often stand together, while the men move about the house, coming and going from the stage. When the men are away, the women seem to figure out exactly what happened, but when the men return, they behave completely differently.

We also have a complex relationship between the two women, at least initially, as Mrs. Peters is the Sheriff's wife, and so Mrs. Hale is not sure she can trust her. This is made clear by the stage direction, ""(MRS HALE starts to say something, looks at MRS PETERS, then goes on sewing)" (Glaspell). This line is a great way to show us the internal conflict. Eventually, the two women are on the same side - trying to protect Mrs. Wright, and this is made clear in the climax when, once again, the stage directions tell us that the moment the men leave the room, both women are quickly trying to hide the dead canary - a critical piece of evidence - from the police. This begins with "A moment MRS HALE holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly MRS PETERS throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing" (Glaspell). In the end, carefully reading and thinking about the stage direction in drama is really essential.

Another key aspect to getting the most out of reading drama is to pay close attention to the dialogue, consider what is and what is not said. For example, when the men notice the messy state of the kitchen, instead of realizing it is evidence, there is the following exchange:

“COUNTY ATTORNEY: Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies? MRS HALE: (stiffly) There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm” (Glaspell). We can see that Mrs. Hale doesn't agree with him, but she also doesn't clearly say, “don't judge her since you don't know what her life was like.” We do get the direction “(stiffly)” to make her disagreement with him clear though.

Another significant moment that shows the importance of deeper meanings that can be found in the dialogue is the following: “COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it? MRS PETERS: We think she was going to—knot it” (Glaspell). This has a double meaning, as they men think the women are talking about the quilt - or a meaningless “trifle” - and yet, when Mrs. Hale repeats this phrase at the end of the play, she is really talking about the knot in the rope around Mr. Wright's neck. Saying that Minnie decided to “knot it” is basically admitting that after suffering abuse from her husband, she finally decided to kill him. The women have solved the murder, the audience knows this, but the Sheriff and Attorney are in the dark. And again, the women could shed light on this, but they choose not to say anything.

Visualizing the staging and the action in *Trifles* is also extremely important, in order to get the most out of our reading. For the staging, we get key details like “*a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleting work.*” This helps us to set the stage inside the home physically, but it has symbolic value too - telling us the situation had gotten very bad inside the relationship prior to the murder. We also get the two-stage split with the men upstairs looking at the crime scene, while the women stay down below actually solving the crime. For the action, we also get important details, like the set description of the scene where Mr. Hale tries to explain what he found when he came into the house and says “and there in that rocker—*(pointing to it)* sat Mrs Wright” (Glaspell). This is followed with the stage direction “*(They all look at the rocker)*” (Glaspell). If you imagine this scene on stage, maybe even with a light pointing down at this empty chair while all the other characters stare at it, it becomes a really powerful image. The empty chair reminds us that Mrs. Wright is gone, and later when Mrs. Hale almost sits in the chair but decides not to, we can imagine that the chair is haunted in

some way. We also have to imagine other key scenes, like Mrs. Hale jamming the bird's box into her coat just as the men return downstairs, holding her hand against the hidden evidence as the final curtain closes. If we, as readers or drama, skim over these important visual moments, or don't take the time to really "see" them in our minds, we miss so much of what makes plays an impactful art form. Instead, taking this extra time allows drama to come alive, and transforms reading drama from a passive to an active experience.

Finally, we have to consider the structure of the play - the acts, scenes, and comings and goings of characters. First, the play is a one-act play that happens mostly in real time, taking about 30 minutes from start to finish. There is no intermission and no scene breaks, so we can't look away and neither can the characters. From the moment the curtain opens, the play has nonstop forward momentum. The men come and go throughout the play, which has a significant impact on the behavior of the two women. Every time the men are away - out at the barn or upstairs - the women can talk more freely as they work out what happened. An example of this is their careful examination of the broken door on the birdcage, that seemed like somebody had gotten rough with it, and their discovery of the canary with the broken neck. When the men return, the women become much more reserved and even use deception to make sure the men don't solve the crime, like saying that the cat probably got the bird. In the end, this relentless one act structure with the men always nearby - coming and going - creates an intense and claustrophobic tension in the work.

Looking back at Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, it's clear that understanding the differences in how you need to approach reading a play versus reading a story or a poem is very important. Reading the dialogue and stage direction carefully, knowing there isn't a narrator to lead us along, and then visualizing both the staging and the action is essential. And trying to picture the structure and how the play would actually be performed on a stage will help make it come alive for us. Doing all these things can help us to get the very most out of the time we spend reading drama, and now that you've seen how it works in *Trifles*, you are ready to tackle any play that comes your way.

Chapter 18: Elements of Drama

Now that we've learned how to make the most of our reading of a script, it is time to once again dig deeper by considering our old friends from Part 2 of this book, the Elements of Fiction. In this chapter we will briefly review each element and then spend the majority of our time focusing on how they play out a bit differently in drama than they did back when we were using them to analyze short stories. This is especially the case because a drama's reliance on dialogue, action, and stage direction changes how plot, character, setting, and the other elements function. Please note that in order to give examples throughout this chapter, we will once again refer to *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell from Chapter 17, and so if you haven't read that play yet, it is highly recommended that you check it out before continuing.

Understanding the Elements of Drama: As you may remember from Chapter 3, most stories move through a basic series of plot points or steps, including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Drama can generally follow this same pattern as well, but with some key differences. First, drama is not able to include the same type of exposition that the narrator can include to set up the background of a narrative. In a play, there are usually no lines like "Nothing exciting had happened in the sleepy seaside town for the previous 20 years, until..." Instead, drama often begins *in medias res* - or right in the middle of the story - and the essential background can be revealed through dialogue and action. For example, in *Trifles*, Glaspell covers the essential background information - that a murder happened - through the dialogue from Mr. Hale. Without his account, the audience would be confused about what happened. The rising action in the play is similar to what you might find in a work of fiction, in that there are clues that the characters and audience discover along the way, like the messy kitchen, the erratic stitching, and the broken bird cage. These discoveries ratchet up the tension step by step, pulling the audience into the mystery.

Next, the climactic moment in a play is often an action or a crucial decision that is visibly made on stage. Again, in the case of *Trifles*, the exciting moment when the two women choose to hide the dead canary moments before the men open the door to return serves as a powerful and intense climax. The falling action and resolution happen quickly afterwards, as the men return and the women protect Mrs. Wright by lying about the bird. The "knot it" line serves as a final resolution to the play, though we don't actually know the outcome for Mrs. Wright (Glaspell). One final important difference to notice is that the plot in a drama moves quickly and can be tightly compressed, as plays are significantly limited on time compared to other fictional

stories. This being the case, the conflict that is always at the heart of any story is much more central and present in a play because there simply isn't time for the plot to wander away from it.

The next element to consider is character, and once again, we have some important differences here. In fiction, we can be shown a character or told about that character. But in plays - without that narrative voice - we mostly are shown characters through dialogue, action, and stage direction. Aside from that major difference, plays still have round and flat characters as well as static and dynamic characters, just as we learned back in Chapter 4, but we can only determine this by carefully watching what a character says - and doesn't say - and how they move on stage and interact with others.

If we consider the various characters in *Trifles*, we see that Mrs. Hale seems to be round, as her dialogue reveals genuine depth, like when she defends Mrs. Wright in front of the men or explains how she feels guilty for not being there for Mrs. Wright. Her actions also reveal depth, in that she fixes the erratic stitching she finds and eventually hides the bird. Mrs. Peters is also a round character, revealed through dialogue where she reflects back on her own childhood trauma - concerning her cat - and how that trauma informs her decision to eventually protect Mrs. Wright. The stage direction showing how she tried to hide the evidence also shows the audience the depth to her character. These two characters are also dynamic, as they begin the play seemingly hesitant and conflicted, but by the end of the play, both women are complicit in the cover-up to protect Mrs. Wright and deceive the men investigating the case.

The men in the play - the attorney, sheriff, and Mr. Hale - all seem to be both flat and static. Their flatness comes from the fact that very little is revealed about their personalities during the play. They are men of authority, but nothing personal is revealed about them, aside from their failure to see what is right in front of their faces. The fact that they are static, or unchanging, is revealed in their dialogue, as they are dismissive and condescending towards the women and their "trifles" throughout the play, from the beginning to the end.

The final character to consider is Mrs. Wright. Even though she never appears in the play, we get a lot of information about her character throughout. We learn about her childhood from Mrs. Hale's memories, and we learn about her more recent emotional state through the messy kitchen and erratic quilt stitching. We also learn about her suffering through Mrs. Hale's recollections of what Mr. Wright was like, and then the discovery of the broken bird cage and

dead canary. All of this adds up to Mrs. Wright being a fully realized character who never appears on stage but is symbolized by the empty rocking chair.

The setting is another important element to consider, which is the time, place, and atmosphere in which a story takes place. Unlike in a narrative story, where the setting can change with just a few words, the staging of a play creates an actual physical space in which the audience can see the action unfold. This means that every detail, like the props, furniture, walls, and lighting all carry meaning, and unlike written fiction, the stage is set throughout a play, though there may be some clever set changes at various times. This space - often based on the stage direction notes written in the script - has a significant impact on the mood of the work. These physical elements can also have symbolic power in the story as well. An example is the kitchen setting in *Trifles*. The kitchen - particularly considering the more traditional gender roles back in 1916 when this play was written - symbolizes a woman's domestic work, which the men in the play seem to dismiss. The mess in the freezing cold kitchen shows that the Wrights' domestic life had completely collapsed before the murder, but again, the men seem to miss these important clues completely. Other clues come in the form of important props, like the empty rocking chair, the quilt, the broken bird cage, and the dead canary, all of these items also symbolize various aspects of the collapse of the Wrights' relationship leading up to the murder.

Next comes the theme which, as we have learned in our sections on fiction and poetry, is the deeper meaning of a given work and still applies to drama in much the same way. Even though the end result is the same, it is important to remember that when looking at a drama, we don't have that narrator or their point of view to consider as we weigh things out. Instead, our focus falls on the plot, character, setting, and symbols to determine the central underlying meaning of a given play. If we once again look at *Trifles*, we can see there are many different significant points that are made. One connects to gender perceptions, as the men and women in the play are often apart from each other and tackle the investigation in very different ways. The men are looking for more traditional "clues" for a murder, while the women can see what really happened by looking at the domestic evidence that was left behind. Even the title of the play, "trifles" is a reference to the men dismissing what women traditionally spent their lives working on, and yet these very trifles were crucial to solving the crime. We can also see this gender difference as the two women in the play decide to protect Mrs. Wright and hide evidence.

Another theme worth looking at is isolation and oppression. By the end, it is clear that Mrs. Wright lived a very lonely and isolated life. This is reinforced by Mrs. Hale's guilty admission

that she could no longer visit the home because spending time around Mr. Wright was so difficult. As the women put the clues together, it seems that Mrs. Wright finally got a little bit of joy from having a canary in the home - as she loved to sing when she was young - but her husband violently broke the cage door open and strangled the bird. The combination of isolation and oppression drove Mrs. Wright to seek retribution and strangle her husband to death with a piece of rope. An additional theme possibility is to consider the difference between justice and the law, but we will look into that theme in greater depth later in this chapter. And remember, these three ideas are just some of the many different possibilities for the theme, however, and each could be fully developed using support directly from the text.

There are a couple of other considerations when analyzing the elements of drama. One is to be aware of dramatic irony, again, which was covered back in Part 2 of this book. Essentially, this is a situation where the audience knows things that the characters on stage do not know, and this is commonly used in drama in order to create loads of tension. This often happens in plays when characters act on incomplete information, while the audience knows the truth. Some examples in *Trifles* are when the women suggest that the cat must have eaten the bird, when the audience knows this is not the case, and the dead bird is actually in Mrs. Hale's coat pocket. Another great example is the final line when Mrs. Hale says "knot it," the audience knows she is talking about the knot on the rope Mrs. Wright used to kill her husband, but the men think she is talking about knotting the strings on a quilt (Glaspell).

Lastly, readers of classical dramas should be aware that many of those plays fall into one of two categories - tragedies and comedies - and this is particularly the case for plays from the Greek or Shakespearean traditions. A tragedy involves the downfall of the protagonist, often due to a character flaw or the hand of fate. A comedy, on the other hand, is lighter and usually involves misunderstandings that eventually result in happy endings. There can also be a tragicomedy that blends elements of both of these together in various ways, covering serious themes with moments of absurdity mixed in. It is important to note that there are many other, nontraditional forms of drama as well, and *Trifles* - being a relatively modern play - is an example that isn't really a perfect fit for any of these genres. It does have tragic elements though, giving the play a dark and somber mood, though the person who suffers the downfall - Mrs. Wright - is never featured in the play. It also has somewhat darkly comic moments, as the oblivious men make condescending jokes about the "trifles" that would have actually solved the case, but these aren't really the types of comic twists that would make anyone in the audience laugh or bring about a light-hearted mood.

Writing a Theme Analysis of Drama: An analysis of the theme of a play requires you to select one of the many possible themes for a given work, fully explain it in depth, and then support it with the dramatic elements and evidence pulled right from the text. You want to show how the playwright uses them - plot, character, setting, symbols, etc. - to develop a play with a deeper meaning, and how they communicate this central point to the audience. Being able to do this activity is an important step, as you move from thinking about what happened in a play into what it all means, and so let's briefly look at the steps that will lead you from a careful reading all the way to a focused essay on the theme.

So, what does this process look like? First, remember what we learned about the theme before. You want to consider the topic of a work, and then ask yourself what the author is saying about that topic. Is there some larger point about humanity or life or the world that we should be getting from all this? Once you have selected one of these - don't do more than one! - you want to start looking at the dramatic elements and see how they help reveal this message. Does the stage setting or props symbolize it? Do some characters embody aspects of it? Do key aspects of the plot or some dramatic irony work to create tension around this idea? Once some of these puzzle pieces start fitting together, and you feel like you have some supporting evidence for your theme, then it's time to get working on your draft. Note: if you really can't find much support for an idea you have for the theme, don't stress too hard, just be flexible and consider a different theme that the elements seem to support a bit more clearly. The great thing about all types of literature is that there are always many different ways of interpreting it!

Once you sit down to write, in the final paper you'll begin by introducing all the essential information the reader will need - the playwright, the title of the play, a brief summary, and maybe a bit of context too. You can follow this up with body paragraphs that each focus on an element or some specific aspect of how the theme is developed in the work. For example, if you want to talk about the way the characters in the play help support your understanding of the theme, you could go through a few different characters and explain how each embodies some aspect of the theme. These points can be supported with quotes pulled directly from the play - either quotes from their dialogue or maybe important stage directions - but be sure to cite these properly using the playwright's last name, like (Glaspell). This careful analysis will be wrapped up with a solid conclusion that ties your argument together. Remember to explain why this theme matters and what it reveals about the play's message or the human experience for the people in the audience. And lastly, while this recommended structure works really well, don't

forget that none of this is set in stone. You are still the author of your own paper, and so you get to do your own version of this type of analysis in your own way.

***Trifles* Sample Theme Analysis:**

Trifles is a one act play, written by Susan Glaspell in 1916, that covers the investigation of a murder that takes place in an isolated farmhouse in rural Iowa. Essentially, a man named Mr. Wright was strangled to death in bed by a piece of rope, though his wife says she slept through it. The play consists of only five main characters - three men and two women. The men are Mr. Peters - the Sheriff, Mr. Hale - a neighbor of the deceased, and the County Attorney. The women are two of their spouses, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. Through contrasting the perspectives of the male investigators with their much more observant wives, Glaspell shows us that there can be a big difference between following the law and providing justice. Considering the play in its entirety, the dramatic elements work together to show that sometimes the only way to pursue moral justice is to break the laws, especially when those laws ignore the experiences of the oppressed.

On the character front, the men clearly represent the law - as they include both the Sheriff and County Attorney among them - and are scouring the crime scene seeking evidence that will enforce their assumption that Mrs. Wright murdered her husband. In other words, they have already reached their conclusion. Now they just need to find proof to show that Mrs. Wright is guilty. According to Mrs. Peters, the Attorney suggests that "what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling" (Glaspell). The men focus on the more "official" crime scene upstairs and completely miss all the evidence in the domestic areas of the home, like the messy kitchen which showed that the Wrights' domestic life had fallen into disarray, or the poor quality stitching on the quilt to show Mrs. Wright has been acting erratically. Instead, the men are dismissive when looking around the kitchen and saying "Nothing here but kitchen things" and even condescending when considering the other more domestic clues by saying "women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell). These male characters are portrayed as flat with very little depth to their personalities, and they are also static and unchanging throughout the play, making the same rude and mocking comments about women in the end as they did in the beginning. This shows how the law can be unbending, even when some flexibility is needed.

The women, on the other hand, feel sympathy and even some guilt for Mrs. Wright's situation. Mrs. Hale admits that she should have visited more often, but she couldn't spend time around Mr. Wright, who she says is a "hard man... Like a raw wind that gets to the bone" (Glaspell). The two women also piece together the whole scenario behind the murder - Mrs. Wright's years of oppression at the hands of her husband topped off by his pulling her canary out of its cage and breaking its neck. This becomes clear through a mixture of dialogue - verbally explaining the evidence they are finding out loud - and important props on set, like the dead canary and the broken bird cage. Eventually, with growing feelings of solidarity between the women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters both believe that Mrs. Wright was likely justified in killing her abusive husband. This seems to go directly against the purpose of the men who intend on following the law inflexibly and without any comprehension of the domestic situation that led to the murder in the first place. In order to seek justice over and above simply following the law, the women decide to hide critical evidence in the form of the dead bird, lie to the men by saying "We think the—cat got it," and disrupt the investigation (Glaspell). The playwright seems to approve of this decision, as the two women receive a more round portrayal with childhood memories and aspects of their personalities woven into the play, and they are also both dynamic, initially supporting the men until they are persuaded by the evidence to believe that Mrs. Wright was justified.

In conclusion, while Glaspell doesn't explicitly state her message, the dramatic elements reveal a clear theme in *Trifles* - that there can be a significant difference between simply following the law and doing what is just. Looking at the portrayal of the five main characters, including their portrayal (flat vs round, static vs dynamic), their dialogue and treatment of each other, and some critically important stage props, everything adds up to the two lead female characters deciding to pursue justice even if it means ignoring the laws. Additionally, with the clever use of dramatic irony - where only the audience knows everything the women know - the viewers are most likely siding with them and believing that they are, in fact, doing the right thing when they decide to hide the evidence. Still, the play leaves things open for interpretation, and the audience never finds out what happens to Mrs. Wright in the end, but it is clear what the women would like to have happen, and that is the point around which the theme is centered.

Now It's Your Turn: Now that you've learned about the elements of drama and read a "Writing a Theme Analysis of Drama" section on how to use these elements to arrive at your own

interpretation of the theme, it is time to get some practice using these skills on your own. What follows is another short one-act play, similar in length to Glaspell's *Trifles*, though this one is by Anton Chekhov, who you might recall as the author of "The Lottery Ticket" from back in Part 2 of this textbook. The following play is called *The Proposal*, and you'll find it has a dramatically different tone and feel from Chekhov's short story we read previously. As you read it, don't forget to try to imagine who you would cast for the three main characters. Also, make a mental image of the stage and picture these scenes as they happen in as much vivid detail as possible. Try to transform the act of *reading* a play into the act of *watching* one. And once you are ready to begin writing, don't forget that this chapter also includes a sample essay on Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* to show you exactly how this works.

Anton Chekhov - biography featured in Chapter 2 of this book

The Proposal by Anton Chekhov

CHARACTERS

STEPAN STEPANOVITCH CHUBUKOV, a landowner

NATALYA STEPANOVNA, his daughter, twenty-five years old

IVAN VASSILEVITCH LOMOV, a neighbour of Chubukov, a large and hearty, but very suspicious landowner

The scene is laid at CHUBUKOV's country-house

A drawing-room in CHUBUKOV'S house.

[LOMOV enters, wearing a dress-jacket and white gloves. CHUBUKOV rises to meet him.]

CHUBUKOV. My dear fellow, whom do I see! Ivan Vassilevitch! I am extremely glad! [Squeezes his hand] Now this is a surprise, my darling... How are you?

LOMOV. Thank you. And how may you be getting on?

CHUBUKOV. We just get along somehow, my angel, to your prayers, and so on. Sit down, please do.... Now, you know, you shouldn't forget all about your neighbours, my darling. My dear fellow, why are you so formal in your get-up? Evening dress, gloves, and so on. Can you be going anywhere, my treasure?

LOMOV. No, I've come only to see you, honoured Stepan Stepanovitch.

CHUBUKOV. Then why are you in evening dress, my precious? As if you're paying a New Year's Eve visit!

LOMOV. Well, you see, it's like this. [Takes his arm] I've come to you, honoured Stepan Stepanovitch, to trouble you with a request. Not once or twice have I already had the privilege of applying to you for help, and you have always, so to speak... I must ask your pardon, I am getting excited. I shall drink some water, honoured Stepan Stepanovitch. [Drinks.]

CHUBUKOV. [Aside] He's come to borrow money! Shan't give him any! [Aloud] What is it, my beauty?

LOMOV. You see, Honour Stepanitch... I beg pardon, Stepan Honouritch... I mean, I'm awfully excited, as you will please notice.... In short, you alone can help me, though I don't deserve it, of course... and haven't any right to count on your assistance....

CHUBUKOV. Oh, don't go round and round it, darling! Spit it out! Well?

LOMOV. One moment... this very minute. The fact is, I've come to ask the hand of your daughter, Natalya Stepanovna, in marriage.

CHUBUKOV. [Joyfully] By Jove! Ivan Vassilevitch! Say it again—I didn't hear it all!

LOMOV. I have the honour to ask...

CHUBUKOV. [Interrupting] My dear fellow... I'm so glad, and so on.... Yes, indeed, and all that sort of thing. [Embraces and kisses LOMOV] I've been hoping for it for a long time. It's been my continual desire. [Sheds a tear] And I've always loved you, my angel, as if you were my own

son. May God give you both His help and His love and so on, and I did so much hope... What am I behaving in this idiotic way for? I'm off my balance with joy, absolutely off my balance! Oh, with all my soul... I'll go and call Natasha, and all that.

LOMOV. [Greatly moved] Honoured Stepan Stepanovitch, do you think I may count on her consent?

CHUBUKOV. Why, of course, my darling, and... as if she won't consent! She's in love; egad, she's like a love-sick cat, and so on.... Shan't be long! [Exit.]

LOMOV. It's cold... I'm trembling all over, just as if I'd got an examination before me. The great thing is, I must have my mind made up. If I give myself time to think, to hesitate, to talk a lot, to look for an ideal, or for real love, then I'll never get married.... Brr!... It's cold! Natalya Stepanovna is an excellent housekeeper, not bad-looking, well-educated.... What more do I want? But I'm getting a noise in my ears from excitement. [Drinks] And it's impossible for me not to marry.... In the first place, I'm already 35—a critical age, so to speak. In the second place, I ought to lead a quiet and regular life.... I suffer from palpitations, I'm excitable and always getting awfully upset.... At this very moment my lips are trembling, and there's a twitch in my right eyebrow.... But the very worst of all is the way I sleep. I no sooner get into bed and begin to go off when suddenly something in my left side—gives a pull, and I can feel it in my shoulder and head.... I jump up like a lunatic, walk about a bit, and lie down again, but as soon as I begin to get off to sleep there's another pull! And this may happen twenty times....

[NATALYA STEPANOVNA comes in.]

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Well, there! It's you, and papa said, "Go; there's a merchant come for his goods." How do you do, Ivan Vassilevitch!

LOMOV. How do you do, honoured Natalya Stepanovna?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. You must excuse my apron and negligé... we're shelling peas for drying. Why haven't you been here for such a long time? Sit down. [They seat themselves] Won't you have some lunch?

LOMOV. No, thank you, I've had some already.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Then smoke.... Here are the matches.... The weather is splendid now, but yesterday it was so wet that the workmen didn't do anything all day. How much hay have you stacked? Just think, I felt greedy and had a whole field cut, and now I'm not at all pleased about it because I'm afraid my hay may rot. I ought to have waited a bit. But what's this? Why, you're in evening dress! Well, I never! Are you going to a ball, or what?—though I must say you look better. Tell me, why are you got up like that?

LOMOV. [Excited] You see, honoured Natalya Stepanovna... the fact is, I've made up my mind to ask you to hear me out.... Of course you'll be surprised and perhaps even angry, but a...
[Aside] It's awfully cold!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What's the matter? [Pause] Well?

LOMOV. I shall try to be brief. You must know, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, that I have long, since my childhood, in fact, had the privilege of knowing your family. My late aunt and her husband, from whom, as you know, I inherited my land, always had the greatest respect for your father and your late mother. The Lomovs and the Chubukovs have always had the most friendly, and I might almost say the most affectionate, regard for each other. And, as you know, my land is a near neighbour of yours. You will remember that my Oxen Meadows touch your birchwoods.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Excuse my interrupting you. You say, "my Oxen Meadows...." But are they yours?

LOMOV. Yes, mine.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What are you talking about? Oxen Meadows are ours, not yours!

LOMOV. No, mine, honoured Natalya Stepanovna.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Well, I never knew that before. How do you make that out?

LOMOV. How? I'm speaking of those Oxen Meadows which are wedged in between your birchwoods and the Burnt Marsh.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Yes, yes.... They're ours.

LOMOV. No, you're mistaken, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, they're mine.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Just think, Ivan Vassilevitch! How long have they been yours?

LOMOV. How long? As long as I can remember.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Really, you won't get me to believe that!

LOMOV. But you can see from the documents, honoured Natalya Stepanovna. Oxen Meadows, it's true, were once the subject of dispute, but now everybody knows that they are mine. There's nothing to argue about. You see, my aunt's grandmother gave the free use of these Meadows in perpetuity to the peasants of your father's grandfather, in return for which they were to make bricks for her. The peasants belonging to your father's grandfather had the free use of the Meadows for forty years, and had got into the habit of regarding them as their own, when it happened that...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. No, it isn't at all like that! Both my grandfather and great-grandfather reckoned that their land extended to Burnt Marsh—which means that Oxen Meadows were ours. I don't see what there is to argue about. It's simply silly!

LOMOV. I'll show you the documents, Natalya Stepanovna!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. No, you're simply joking, or making fun of me.... What a surprise! We've had the land for nearly three hundred years, and then we're suddenly told that it isn't ours! Ivan Vassilevitch, I can hardly believe my own ears.... These Meadows aren't worth much to me. They only come to five dessiatins [Note: 13.5 acres], and are worth perhaps 300 roubles [Note: £30.], but I can't stand unfairness. Say what you will, but I can't stand unfairness.

LOMOV. Hear me out, I implore you! The peasants of your father's grandfather, as I have already had the honour of explaining to you, used to bake bricks for my aunt's grandmother. Now my aunt's grandmother, wishing to make them a pleasant...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I can't make head or tail of all this about aunts and grandfathers and grandmothers! The Meadows are ours, and that's all.

LOMOV. Mine.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Ours! You can go on proving it for two days on end, you can go and put on fifteen dress-jackets, but I tell you they're ours, ours, ours! I don't want anything of yours and I don't want to give up anything of mine. So there!

LOMOV. Natalya Ivanovna, I don't want the Meadows, but I am acting on principle. If you like, I'll make you a present of them.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I can make you a present of them myself, because they're mine! Your behaviour, Ivan Vassilevitch, is strange, to say the least! Up to this we have always thought of you as a good neighbour, a friend: last year we lent you our threshing-machine, although on that account we had to put off our own threshing till November, but you behave to us as if we were gipsies. Giving me my own land, indeed! No, really, that's not at all neighbourly! In my opinion, it's even impudent, if you want to know....

LOMOV. Then you make out that I'm a land-grabber? Madam, never in my life have I grabbed anybody else's land, and I shan't allow anybody to accuse me of having done so.... [Quickly steps to the carafe and drinks more water] Oxen Meadows are mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true, they're ours!

LOMOV. Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true! I'll prove it! I'll send my mowers out to the Meadows this very day!

LOMOV. What?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. My mowers will be there this very day!

LOMOV. I'll give it to them in the neck!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. You dare!

LOMOV. [Clutches at his heart] Oxen Meadows are mine! You understand? Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Please don't shout! You can shout yourself hoarse in your own house, but here I must ask you to restrain yourself!

LOMOV. If it wasn't, madam, for this awful, excruciating palpitation, if my whole inside wasn't upset, I'd talk to you in a different way! [Yells] Oxen Meadows are mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Ours!

LOMOV. Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Ours!

LOMOV. Mine!

[Enter CHUBUKOV.]

CHUBUKOV. What's the matter? What are you shouting at?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa, please tell to this gentleman who owns Oxen Meadows, we or he?

CHUBUKOV. [To LOMOV] Darling, the Meadows are ours!

LOMOV. But, please, Stepan Stepanitch, how can they be yours? Do be a reasonable man! My aunt's grandmother gave the Meadows for the temporary and free use of your grandfather's peasants. The peasants used the land for forty years and got as accustomed to it as if it was their own, when it happened that...

CHUBUKOV. Excuse me, my precious.... You forget just this, that the peasants didn't pay your grandmother and all that, because the Meadows were in dispute, and so on. And now everybody knows that they're ours. It means that you haven't seen the plan.

LOMOV. I'll prove to you that they're mine!

CHUBUKOV. You won't prove it, my darling.

LOMOV. I shall!

CHUBUKOV. Dear one, why yell like that? You won't prove anything just by yelling. I don't want anything of yours, and don't intend to give up what I have. Why should I? And you know, my beloved, that if you propose to go on arguing about it, I'd much sooner give up the meadows to the peasants than to you. There!

LOMOV. I don't understand! How have you the right to give away somebody else's property?

CHUBUKOV. You may take it that I know whether I have the right or not. Because, young man, I'm not used to being spoken to in that tone of voice, and so on: I, young man, am twice your age, and ask you to speak to me without agitating yourself, and all that.

LOMOV. No, you just think I'm a fool and want to have me on! You call my land yours, and then you want me to talk to you calmly and politely! Good neighbours don't behave like that, Stepan Stepanitch! You're not a neighbour, you're a grabber!

CHUBUKOV. What's that? What did you say?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa, send the mowers out to the Meadows at once!

CHUBUKOV. What did you say, sir?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Oxen Meadows are ours, and I shan't give them up, shan't give them up, shan't give them up!

LOMOV. We'll see! I'll have the matter taken to court, and then I'll show you!

CHUBUKOV. To court? You can take it to court, and all that! You can! I know you; you're just on the look-out for a chance to go to court, and all that.... You pettifogger! All your people were like that! All of them!

LOMOV. Never mind about my people! The Lomovs have all been honourable people, and not one has ever been tried for embezzlement, like your grandfather!

CHUBUKOV. You Lomovs have had lunacy in your family, all of you!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. All, all, all!

CHUBUKOV. Your grandfather was a drunkard, and your younger aunt, Nastasya Mihailovna, ran away with an architect, and so on.

LOMOV. And your mother was hump-backed. [Clutches at his heart] Something pulling in my side.... My head.... Help! Water!

CHUBUKOV. Your father was a guzzling gambler!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. And there haven't been many backbiters to equal your aunt!

LOMOV. My left foot has gone to sleep.... You're an intriguer.... Oh, my heart!... And it's an open secret that before the last elections you bri... I can see stars.... Where's my hat?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's low! It's dishonest! It's mean!

CHUBUKOV. And you're just a malicious, double-faced intriguer! Yes!

LOMOV. Here's my hat.... My heart!... Which way? Where's the door? Oh!... I think I'm dying....
My foot's quite numb.... [Goes to the door.]

CHUBUKOV. [Following him] And don't set foot in my house again!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Take it to court! We'll see!

[LOMOV staggers out.]

CHUBUKOV. Devil take him! [Walks about in excitement.]

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What a rascal! What trust can one have in one's neighbours after that!

CHUBUKOV. The villain! The scarecrow!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. The monster! First he takes our land and then he has the impudence to abuse us.

CHUBUKOV. And that blind hen, yes, that turnip-ghost has the confounded cheek to make a proposal, and so on! What? A proposal!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What proposal?

CHUBUKOV. Why, he came here so as to propose to you.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. To propose? To me? Why didn't you tell me so before?

CHUBUKOV. So he dresses up in evening clothes. The stuffed sausage! The wizen-faced frump!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. To propose to me? Ah! [Falls into an easy-chair and wails] Bring him back! Back! Ah! Bring him here.

CHUBUKOV. Bring whom here?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Quick, quick! I'm ill! Fetch him! [Hysterics.]

CHUBUKOV. What's that? What's the matter with you? [Clutches at his head] Oh, unhappy man that I am! I'll shoot myself! I'll hang myself! We've done for her!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I'm dying! Fetch him!

CHUBUKOV. Tfoo! At once. Don't yell!

[Runs out. A pause. NATALYA STEPANOVNA wails.]

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What have they done to me! Fetch him back! Fetch him! [A pause.]

[CHUBUKOV runs in.]

CHUBUKOV. He's coming, and so on, devil take him! Ouf! Talk to him yourself; I don't want to....

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Wails] Fetch him!

CHUBUKOV. [Yells] He's coming, I tell you. Oh, what a burden, Lord, to be the father of a grown-up daughter! I'll cut my throat! I will, indeed! We cursed him, abused him, drove him out, and it's all you... you!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. No, it was you!

CHUBUKOV. I tell you it's not my fault. [LOMOV appears at the door] Now you talk to him yourself [Exit.]

[LOMOV enters, exhausted.]

LOMOV. My heart's palpitating awfully.... My foot's gone to sleep.... There's something keeps pulling in my side.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Forgive us, Ivan Vassilevitch, we were all a little heated.... I remember now: Oxen Meadows really are yours.

LOMOV. My heart's beating awfully.... My Meadows.... My eyebrows are both twitching....

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. The Meadows are yours, yes, yours.... Do sit down.... [They sit] We were wrong....

LOMOV. I did it on principle.... My land is worth little to me, but the principle...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Yes, the principle, just so.... Now let's talk of something else.

LOMOV. The more so as I have evidence. My aunt's grandmother gave the land to your father's grandfather's peasants...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Yes, yes, let that pass.... [Aside] I wish I knew how to get him started.... [Aloud] Are you going to start shooting soon?

LOMOV. I'm thinking of having a go at the blackcock, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, after the harvest. Oh, have you heard? Just think, what a misfortune I've had! My dog Guess, whom you know, has gone lame.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What a pity! Why?

LOMOV. I don't know.... Must have got twisted, or bitten by some other dog.... [Sighs] My very best dog, to say nothing of the expense. I gave Mironov 125 roubles for him.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It was too much, Ivan Vassilevitch.

LOMOV. I think it was very cheap. He's a first-rate dog.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa gave 85 roubles for his Squeezer, and Squeezer is heaps better than Guess!

LOMOV. Squeezer better than. Guess? What an idea! [Laughs] Squeezer better than Guess!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Of course he's better! Of course, Squeezer is young, he may develop a bit, but on points and pedigree he's better than anything that even Volchanetsky has got.

LOMOV. Excuse me, Natalya Stepanovna, but you forget that he is overshot, and an overshot always means the dog is a bad hunter!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Overshot, is he? The first time I hear it!

LOMOV. I assure you that his lower jaw is shorter than the upper.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Have you measured?

LOMOV. Yes. He's all right at following, of course, but if you want him to get hold of anything...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. In the first place, our Squeezer is a thoroughbred animal, the son of Harness and Chisels, while there's no getting at the pedigree of your dog at all.... He's old and as ugly as a worn-out cab-horse.

LOMOV. He is old, but I wouldn't take five Squeezers for him.... Why, how can you?... Guess is a dog; as for Squeezer, well, it's too funny to argue.... Anybody you like has a dog as good as Squeezer... you may find them under every bush almost. Twenty-five roubles would be a handsome price to pay for him.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. There's some demon of contradiction in you to-day, Ivan Vassilevitch. First you pretend that the Meadows are yours; now, that Guess is better than Squeezer. I don't like people who don't say what they mean, because you know perfectly well that Squeezer is a hundred times better than your silly Guess. Why do you want to say it isn't?

LOMOV. I see, Natalya Stepanovna, that you consider me either blind or a fool. You must realize that Squeezer is overshot!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true.

LOMOV. He is!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true!

LOMOV. Why shout, madam?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Why talk rot? It's awful! It's time your Guess was shot, and you compare him with Squeezer!

LOMOV. Excuse me; I cannot continue this discussion: my heart is palpitating.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I've noticed that those hunters argue most who know least.

LOMOV. Madam, please be silent.... My heart is going to pieces.... [Shouts] Shut up!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I shan't shut up until you acknowledge that Squeezer is a hundred times better than your Guess!

LOMOV. A hundred times worse! Be hanged to your Squeezer! His head... eyes... shoulder...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. There's no need to hang your silly Guess; he's half-dead already!

LOMOV. [Weeps] Shut up! My heart's bursting!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I shan't shut up.

[Enter CHUBUKOV.]

CHUBUKOV. What's the matter now?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa, tell us truly, which is the better dog, our Squeezer or his Guess.

LOMOV. Stepan Stepanovitch, I implore you to tell me just one thing: is your Squeezer overshot or not? Yes or no?

CHUBUKOV. And suppose he is? What does it matter? He's the best dog in the district for all that, and so on.

LOMOV. But isn't my Guess better? Really, now?

CHUBUKOV. Don't excite yourself, my precious one.... Allow me.... Your Guess certainly has his good points.... He's pure-bred, firm on his feet, has well-sprung ribs, and all that. But, my dear man, if you want to know the truth, that dog has two defects: he's old and he's short in the muzzle.

LOMOV. Excuse me, my heart.... Let's take the facts.... You will remember that on the Marusinsky hunt my Guess ran neck-and-neck with the Count's dog, while your Squeezer was left a whole verst behind.

CHUBUKOV. He got left behind because the Count's whipper-in hit him with his whip.

LOMOV. And with good reason. The dogs are running after a fox, when Squeezer goes and starts worrying a sheep!

CHUBUKOV. It's not true!... My dear fellow, I'm very liable to lose my temper, and so, just because of that, let's stop arguing. You started because everybody is always jealous of everybody else's dogs. Yes, we're all like that! You too, sir, aren't blameless! You no sooner notice that some dog is better than your Guess than you begin with this, that... and the other... and all that.... I remember everything!

LOMOV. I remember too!

CHUBUKOV. [Teasing him] I remember, too.... What do you remember?

LOMOV. My heart... my foot's gone to sleep.... I can't...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Teasing] My heart.... What sort of a hunter are you? You ought to go and lie on the kitchen oven and catch blackbeetles, not go after foxes! My heart!

CHUBUKOV. Yes really, what sort of a hunter are you, anyway? You ought to sit at home with your palpitations, and not go tracking animals. You could go hunting, but you only go to argue with people and interfere with their dogs and so on. Let's change the subject in case I lose my temper. You're not a hunter at all, anyway!

LOMOV. And are you a hunter? You only go hunting to get in with the Count and to intrigue.... Oh, my heart!... You're an intriguer!

CHUBUKOV. What? I an intriguer? [Shouts] Shut up!

LOMOV. Intriguer!

CHUBUKOV. Boy! Pup!

LOMOV. Old rat! Jesuit!

CHUBUKOV. Shut up or I'll shoot you like a partridge! You fool!

LOMOV. Everybody knows that—oh my heart!—your late wife used to beat you.... My feet... temples... sparks.... I fall, I fall!

CHUBUKOV. And you're under the slipper of your housekeeper!

LOMOV. There, there, there... my heart's burst! My shoulder's come off.... Where is my shoulder? I die. [Falls into an armchair] A doctor! [Faints.]

CHUBUKOV. Boy! Milksop! Fool! I'm sick! [Drinks water] Sick!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What sort of a hunter are you? You can't even sit on a horse! [To her father] Papa, what's the matter with him? Papa! Look, papa! [Screams] Ivan Vassilevitch! He's dead!

CHUBUKOV. I'm sick!... I can't breathe!... Air!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. He's dead. [Pulls LOMOV'S sleeve] Ivan Vassilevitch! Ivan Vassilevitch! What have you done to me? He's dead. [Falls into an armchair] A doctor, a doctor! [Hysterics.]

CHUBUKOV. Oh!... What is it? What's the matter?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Wails] He's dead... dead!

CHUBUKOV. Who's dead? [Looks at LOMOV] So he is! My word! Water! A doctor! [Lifts a tumbler to LOMOV'S mouth] Drink this!... No, he doesn't drink.... It means he's dead, and all that.... I'm the most unhappy of men! Why don't I put a bullet into my brain? Why haven't I cut my throat yet? What am I waiting for? Give me a knife! Give me a pistol! [LOMOV moves] He seems to be coming round.... Drink some water! That's right....

LOMOV. I see stars... mist.... Where am I?

CHUBUKOV. Hurry up and get married and—well, to the devil with you! She's willing! [He puts LOMOV'S hand into his daughter's] She's willing and all that. I give you my blessing and so on. Only leave me in peace!

LOMOV. [Getting up] Eh? What? To whom?

CHUBUKOV. She's willing! Well? Kiss and be damned to you!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Wails] He's alive... Yes, yes, I'm willing....

CHUBUKOV. Kiss each other!

LOMOV. Eh? Kiss whom? [They kiss] Very nice, too. Excuse me, what's it all about? Oh, now I understand... my heart... stars... I'm happy. Natalya Stepanovna.... [Kisses her hand] My foot's gone to sleep....

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I... I'm happy too....

CHUBUKOV. What a weight off my shoulders.... Ouf!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. But... still you will admit now that Guess is worse than Squeezer.

LOMOV. Better!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Worse!

CHUBUKOV. Well, that's a way to start your family bliss! Have some champagne!

LOMOV. He's better!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Worse! worse! worse!

CHUBUKOV. [Trying to shout her down] Champagne! Champagne!

Curtain.

Discussion Questions:

1. The play includes numerous stage directions describing Lomov's physical ailments (clutching his heart, his foot going to sleep, fainting). How do these stage directions contribute to the comedy? If you were directing this play, how would you stage Lomov's various "attacks" to maximize the humor without making him seem truly ill?
2. Are the three characters in this play round or flat? What do we learn (or not learn) about their inner lives and personalities? Also, are they dynamic or static - does anyone

change by the end of the play? How does Chekhov's approach to character differ from Glaspell's in *Trifles*?

3. The play has two major arguments that follow a similar pattern: they start calmly, escalate to shouting, and end with someone leaving or fainting. Choose one of these arguments (Oxen Meadows or the dogs) and describe how you would stage it. Where would the characters be positioned? How would their physical proximity change as the argument intensifies?
4. Notice how the arguments include repeated lines like "Mine!" / "Ours!" and "Better!" / "Worse!" What effect does this repetition create? How does it contribute to the comedy and reveal something about the characters?
5. The play is set in Chubukov's drawing room in rural Russia. What details from the dialogue tell us about the characters' social class and lifestyle? How does the setting (a formal drawing room where Lomov arrives in evening dress) contrast with the childish behavior of the characters?
6. Lomov comes to propose marriage, but he never actually proposes to Natalya directly. How does Chekhov use dramatic irony here? What does the audience know that Natalya doesn't know for most of the play, and how does this create humor?
7. This play is essentially one long conflict with brief pauses. Identify the different types of conflict at work: character vs. character (who is arguing with whom?), internal conflict (what does Lomov struggle with internally?), and even the conflict between what characters want and what they actually do.
8. Unlike *Trifles*, which has a dark, serious tone, *The Proposal* is clearly a comedy. What makes it funny? Consider: physical comedy, absurd arguments, exaggerated characters, misunderstandings, and the ending. How does comedy work differently than tragedy as a dramatic form?

Chapter Writing Activity: After a close and careful reading of *The Proposal*, practice writing an analysis of the theme of Chekhov's play. It would be helpful to read both the step by step instructions for how to write a theme analysis along with the *Trifles* example before completing this activity. There are many possible central points you could consider, but after carefully considering the other dramatic elements (including dramatic irony), try to select the most significant theme that you think the story is trying to convey. Lastly, whatever theme you eventually select, make sure to support it with solid textual evidence coming directly from text, considering the other elements of drama.

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Part 5: Literary Criticism

Now that we have taken time to learn more about the elements of fiction, poetry, and drama, we are going to head to our final destination - **literary criticism**. The word *criticism* might make you think that the final step must be to point out the faults with everything we read - “predictable,” “boring,” “repetitive,” and so on - but literary criticism is something quite different from that. Working through this textbook, you’ve already learned that you can take a single short story, for example, and then analyze it in a variety of ways. Choosing a different element to focus on - plot, character, setting or symbolism - will result in a completely different analysis of the same work of fiction. In a sense, these elements have become a set of lenses through which you can see a story in a brand new way, by focusing more on some aspects and less on others. In the same way, literary criticism provides us with another set of unique lenses through which we can analyze any poem, play, or story that is put in front of us.

The good news is that you’ve already learned about one of them - a formalist critique. This type of literary criticism is where you focus on the form of the work as it sits on the page, and so all of the elements we’ve learned thus far fit perfectly into this type of analysis. In the following two chapters we will discuss formalism in greater depth along with several other significant types of literary criticism. We’ll explore the key principles of each of these unique perspectives followed by examples that are pulled directly from the short stories featured back in Part 2 of this textbook. Hopefully, getting to see stories you are familiar with in a brand new light will help show you the value of each of these perspectives. Plus, having more options is a good thing because some lenses are a better fit than others for a given story, and they will help reveal layers we might have otherwise missed. Essentially, when we have more tools to choose from, we can pick the one that does the job best, and by the end of Part 5, your toolbelt will have many more options.

Chapter 19: Text-Focused and Context-Focused Approaches

Formalist and New Criticism: Formalist criticism - sometimes called New Criticism, though it is hardly “new” anymore - focuses on the elements of a piece of literature, and how they come together to support a central theme or a deeper meaning of the work. Formalists believe that a piece of literature is, in and of itself, a singular object with meaning, and the best way to

understand that meaning is to do close readings, carefully looking at what is on the page. Formalists are not concerned with the historical context surrounding a piece of literature, information about the author's life, or the author's possible intentions for writing a given piece of literature. This makes sense for a formalist critic because if there is a poem that leaves everyone who reads it bawling their eyes out, it doesn't matter a whole lot that the author may have *intended* it to be uplifting. All that really matters is what is written on the pages in black and white.

This means that when doing a formalist critique, the elements we've learned before - things like plot, character, and setting for fiction, or word choice, imagery, and structure for poetry - take center stage. Essentially, we can use these elements as a lens through which we can learn about the deeper meaning of a given work. For those in the New Criticism school of thought, on top of the traditional building blocks of literature, they pay particular attention to tension, paradox, ambiguity, and irony in the text, as they believe that these are places where a text reveals its deepest meaning. In either case, this type of criticism is what we have spent the majority of this textbook learning to do with stories, poems, and plays, and so the process should be quite familiar. As we've learned, it begins with several close readings, looking for patterns that jump out as being significant - things like images, symbols, characters, tension, irony and so much more - and then using them to help derive the deeper meaning of the text.

Sample Formalist Critique: Consider Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" from Part 2 of our text. If we look at the structure of this story, we can see that it is very tightly compressed - the title itself announces that we've only got one hour to work with. The plot moves quickly with a tiny bit of exposition in the opening just to catch us up to speed, and then boom, we're into the inciting incident - Mrs. Mallard's husband has died. This is quickly followed by rising action in Mrs. Mallard's bedroom as she embraces her freedom, a climax when Brently Mallard walks in the front door, and a resolution as Mrs. Mallard collapses on the stairs. Beyond the plot, what really jumps out is the repeated patterns throughout the work, like the bookended mentions of her heart troubles. In the opening lines we're told about them, and then at the end of the story the doctor says "she had died of the heart disease" (Chopin). We also have another significant repetition, as Mrs. Mallard is filled with a "monstrous joy" in her bedroom when imagining a future of freedom, and this image comes back again when the doctor says she died of "joy that kills" (Chopin) in the final line. A formalist realizes that this kind of repetition is not accidental and leads us towards key questions, like what kind of heart troubles? What really killed her?

The imagery in the story also helps to drive the meaning. When Mrs. Mallard is alone in her room and - at a time when we might expect dark and gloomy imagery to match her devastation - the vivid description of everything outside the open windows is about springtime and rebirth. She hears birds chirping and sees treetops blooming as blue skies break through the clouds. This surprising twist builds significant tension in the work between what we expect to happen and what we see is actually happening. It also leads to the ironic finish, when we are told that she was killed by joy. We understand that the doctor and Brently likely believe this to be her joy at seeing her husband alive and well, but we know otherwise and are left to wonder if she was killed by her own “monstrous joy” or the apparent loss of the future she’d just imagined (Chopin). This irony and intentional ambiguity of the final line is what New Criticism finds particularly valuable for getting to the heart of a work of literature. In the case of “The Story of an Hour,” this focus really pays off, as it seems that this ambiguity is itself the main point of the story. A formalist analysis reveals that the story is showing the incompatibility of freedom and marriage, particularly for women, and this is driven home by the stark contrast between what we see outside the open windows and what we eventually find behind locked doors. While “The Story of an Hour” doesn’t come out and say this directly, Chopin’s work makes the point about marriage in a clear and powerful way. In the end, you don’t need to look beyond the text itself in order to dig into the deeper layers and central meaning of a piece of literature.

Key Questions for a Formalist Critique:

- What patterns repeat throughout the text? (images, symbols, words, or situations)
 - How does the structure or form of the work contribute to its meaning?
 - What contrasts and oppositions exist in the text? (light/dark, open/closed, freedom/confinement, etc.)
 - Where do you notice irony - moments where what's said differs from what's meant, or where the outcome differs from expectations?
 - Are there moments of ambiguity where meaning is intentionally unclear or could be interpreted multiple ways?
 - How do the literary elements (plot, character, setting, imagery, symbolism, etc.) work together to create meaning?
 - How do all the parts work together as a unified whole?
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Reader-Response Criticism: You may remember way back in the beginning of this textbook, when we were just getting started, there was a section on the importance of being an active reader. The point of it was that in every interaction between a writer and a reader, both roles are extremely important. Yes, the writer is the one who locked themselves away from the world, grinding day after day to bring a masterpiece into existence, but the reader is the one who brings the words to life with his or her imagination every time they read it. Unlike formalism which focuses entirely on the text, **reader-response criticism** acknowledges that real meaning comes from the transaction between the words on the page and the person reading them, and the reader is going to bring their own experiences, values, and cultural background along for the ride as they interpret the meaning of a text. So different readers can arrive at vastly different - yet equally valid - interpretations. It's kind of like the way that parents and their kids can watch the same movie and understand it on two very different levels. Even the same person can reread something they had read years before and have a completely different interpretation of it the second time around, since they've gained lots of new life experiences in the meantime. The important thing to understand is that the text never changed - not a single word is different - but the reader has, and that is why reader-response criticism is a valuable way to consider how important that side of the interaction can be.

In order to accomplish an effective reader-response critique, you have to look inward as you carefully read a text, evaluating your thoughts and emotions as you go. It's best if you can decide on this approach before reading a text for the first time, so you can note when you're genuinely surprised, confused, angry, or sympathetic. Of course, you can still do a reader-response on stories you've read before too. If you have particularly strong responses to certain characters or events, reflect on how your own background has shaped those feelings, and consider how different readers - different ages, genders, cultures - might respond differently to the same moment. Pay attention to gaps and ambiguities the text leaves open, similar to the ambiguous ending in "The Story of an Hour," where readers must decide what the "joy that kills" really means.

Sample Reader-Response Critique: In order to get a sense of a reader-response critique in action, let's look back to William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" in Part 2 of the textbook. The story begins with a surprising twist - its namesake character, Emily Grierson, has already died. This isn't what one might expect reading a story about a person, and there's also a sense of

sympathy for the character here, as nobody had been into her home in over 10 years, and we're told that some people only went to the funeral out of "curiosity" to see inside the place. The sympathetic tone continues, explaining that her house was old and rotting, sitting on the industrial side of town, an "eyesore among eyesores" (Faulkner). Ouch! By the third paragraph, the story begins to flashback, and so it's apparent that she is going to be alive in the story. This means that the events in the story are going to be told out of order which can make things a little tough and disorienting for a reader to follow, especially compared to one told in simple chronological order. To add to the early confusion, the narrator's perspective isn't quite clear early on - we get a lot of "she" references to Emily, "they" to the townsfolk of earlier generations, and then there is a surprising "we" and references to "people in our town" (Faulkner). So, it seems that the whole tale is told from the perspective of the current townsfolk - the ones going to the funeral - almost as if this is sort of gossip that we're hearing instead of being told by a truly omniscient narrator.

As the story moves through Emily's life, reader sympathies shift dramatically. Her refusal to pay taxes, her lies about her father's death, her mysterious purchase of arsenic, Homer's disappearance - each revelation makes Emily more unsettling. Yet we also see her as a victim of her controlling father and the town's nosiness. The reader is pulled back and forth between sympathy and revulsion, never quite sure where to land. Regardless, Emily seemingly murdered Homer and kept his dead body in her upstairs bed for decades. On top of that, the story finishes with a second head indentation on the pillow next to Homer and a strand of iron-gray hair lying there. This line is like a hand grenade for the reader - pull the pin, count to three, and boom! Essentially, by putting all the time jumping together into a clear timeline like a detective, it is clear that Emily actually slept next to Homer's body for decades, even when her home was open for art classes to all the younger ladies in town. Whatever we thought Emily might have been up to - and things certainly felt suspicious - it is hard to imagine such a gruesome finish. No wonder this story is considered Southern Gothic - a part of the horror genre.

Still "A Rose for Emily" can be read in different ways by different readers. Many readers who aren't into deciphering the clues of a mystery might not interpret the more horrifying meaning of the final details, and they will likely figure that Emily just killed Homer and left him up there - which is dark enough, of course. There are also generational differences in the reading of this story. For example, many older readers interpreted Homer as a hard-working and hard-drinking manual laborer who said himself that "he was not a marrying man" (Faulkner). However, more

recent generations have interpreted that Homer Barron is gay, as Faulkner writes “he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks’ Club” (Faulkner). The reality is that it could be understood either way, and this interpretation changes the story quite a bit too - one version showing that Emily thought she could convince this avowed bachelor to finally settle down, while the other is much more sad and desperate as Emily is trying to convince a homosexual man to marry her.

In the end, Homer’s sexuality is just one of many ambiguities - when did Emily kill him? How long had she planned it? How long did she sleep next to him? And, what was her mental state leading to the murder (madness, grief, control, or even a corrupted sort of love)? One of the most enjoyable aspects of reading literature is that we get to interpret things in our own way - as long as there is evidence for it - and much of where we eventually arrive depends on each of us. Different readers will see the story in their own unique ways, and even a second reading will be different than the first. For example, we may notice that there was a lot more foreshadowing of the grisly ending, like Emily holding on to her father’s corpse for days, her buying arsenic and refusing to say why, and Homer’s sudden disappearance. Yes, the author is the one who made the puzzle, but as the reader we get the fun of trying to put all those pieces together.

Key Questions for a Reader-Response Critique:

- What was your immediate emotional reaction to the text?
 - How did your feelings or understanding change as you read?
 - Were there moments that surprised, confused, or disturbed you?
 - What personal experiences or beliefs influenced your interpretation?
 - Where did you agree or disagree with characters' choices?
 - How might readers different from you respond differently?
 - What gaps or ambiguities did you fill in with your own assumptions?
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Historical and Biographical Criticism: Our third critical lens in this chapter is really a combination of two approaches that complement each other. The first is **historical criticism** where we focus on what was going on in the world in the historical period when a piece of literature was written, while the second is **biographical criticism** where we focus on the details

of the author's life and how these experiences may have influenced the work. Historical and biographical criticism brings our attention to the fact that all texts are products of their times, and learning about this context helps us to add some deeper layers to our interpretations. Knowing about the time period can also help us to understand references, assumptions and concerns that might not be readily visible to modern readers. For example, looking at "The Story of an Hour," a modern reader might think, "Why doesn't Mrs. Mallard just file for divorce if she's not happy?" without understanding the fact that in the 1890s, women were dependent on their husbands legally, socially, and economically. Understanding this situation helps us sympathize with Mrs. Mallard's short-lived dreams of freedom. In a more general sense, having historical and biographical knowledge helps us to read a piece of literature closer to the way the audience would have read it back when it was written, and teaches us how the work interacts with and ultimately reflects the cultural moment when it was created.

Doing this type of critique begins with a couple of pretty straight-forward steps - research a bit about the time period and read up on the author's biography. You can use the internet and get some essentials of the historical era, but you should focus your searches on specific details from the text itself. For example, if you are doing a historical and biographical critique of "The Story of an Hour," instead of just looking at general history of that period, you could dig into the specific situation that married women found themselves in during the late 1800s when it was written. Once you have a sense of the essential history, you can turn your attention to the author. Again, you only need the basics, so there's no need to run out and read an entire biography, like the massive 1,300 page *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Just get to know the essentials about the author. With this historical and biographical information, you can read the text again and start looking for connections between what you've learned and what you are seeing on the page. If there are moments you now understand differently, those are great places to explore in your critique. If you realize the author's experiences or beliefs have also found their way into the text, again, these are great places to focus on. Drawing these connections will also help you to see where the author makes references to historical events or makes assumptions that reflect social values of their era. You might also find times that they challenge the prevailing views as well, and all of this can help you to position the work in the bigger picture to show how it fits into the historical moment of its writing.

Sample Historical and Biographical Research: The short story "Eyes That Saw Not" was co-written by Onoto Watanna and her husband Bertrand Babcock and published in 1902. Considering the story is about the complex relationship between a couple - John and Beth -

that is both romantic and centered around writing, it seems like examining the relationship between the married couple who authored the piece, along with the historical time period in which the story was written, would be an interesting place to look in order to understand the work on a deeper level. What follows is a look at the biographies of the two authors, some information about the early 1900s that may be significant, and a critique of how this information impacts our understanding of the story.

First, Winnifred Eaton was a Chinese-British-Canadian who chose to use a Japanese pen name, Onoto Watanna, instead of a Chinese one. This is an interesting choice, as she wasn't Japanese at all. However, in the early 1900s, in both the US and Canada there was a fascination with everything Japanese - the culture was considered exotic and refined - while Chinese immigrants faced severe discrimination. There were even laws like the "Chinese Exclusion Act," which basically banned Chinese immigration to the United States for over sixty years. Essentially, Onoto Watanna took on a false ethnic identity in order to be more publishable and marketable as a writer, and this choice paid off with a successful career writing Japanese romance novels and movie scripts. For comparison, her sister Edith Eaton chose a Chinese pen name - Sin Sin Far - and died in relative obscurity (her biography and her story "In the Land of the Free" is in "Chapter 10: A Brief Anthology of Fiction").

Watanna's husband, Bertrand Babcock, was a white American during a time when white men dominated the publishing world, and so women often needed male support in order to be widely published. This would especially be the case for Watanna, as American society also operated with a strict racial hierarchy in place, and so publishing opportunities for a non-white, female author would be extremely limited without male support. Understanding this situation calls into question how the power dynamics worked in their relationship and if these tensions worked their way into the storyline in "Eyes That Saw Not." For example, did Watanna do the majority of the writing, but then Babcock still got half the credit? We don't know for certain, but if so, this would seem eerily similar to the relationship between John and Beth, where he comes up with the general ideas, but she is actually the gifted writer of the two. In any case, our understanding of the story becomes richer when we realize it could include a bit of a social commentary on the conditions of its own creation.

Sample Historical and Biographical Critique: If we take the information gathered during our research and apply it back to the story, we start to see some interesting moments in "Eyes That Saw Not". For example, we see that early in the story Beth is much more concerned with her

relationship with John than she is with her own writing career - essentially, being with John is her goal. But as things move along, and John begins dictating his stories to her, something changes. She realizes he has good ideas, but the narrator makes it clear multiple times that he is a terrible writer. We're told that in his stories, "Wooden characters strode through melodramatic situations with the commonplaces of newspaper phraseology upon their lips" (Watanna and Babcock). This is basically a crushing review of his work. We also get a scene where Beth is reading John's notes and "hoping against hope that she might be able to discover in it something that would make it sufficiently attractive," and it is this very activity that awakens "in her all the power of the literary artist" (Watanna and Babcock). So, it is clear he has some interesting life experiences, but she is the writer, and yet at the end she doesn't complain in any way that John is getting all the credit for her efforts. She even tells him the book is all his, and she only improved it out of love. For a modern reader, this might seem deeply unfair, as it seems pretty clear that Beth should be getting most, if not all, the credit. However, knowing what we know about the era when this was written, it seems to fit into the expectations of that time period that Beth would give all the credit to her husband and only admit to improving the book out of love for him.

It is interesting that Beth doesn't seem to resent giving her writing credit to John, and so perhaps Watanna could have felt similarly. With a better understanding of that time period in hand, even if Watanna felt like the situation in the story was unjust, if she was interested in continuing with her successful writing career - and writing under a false Japanese identity suggests she may have been - then it would make sense to write stories that did not challenge the prevailing cultural norms in a strictly patriarchal society. With this in mind, having the lead female character in "Eyes That Saw Not" deferring to her male partner in a story that was published in 1902 is not surprising at all, even if we would likely see a very different story - and a very different Beth - if this were written today. For a reader in 1902, this story would be an enjoyable read with a surprising twist at the end, though one that doesn't challenge any cultural norms. Again, for comparison, Watanna's sister, not only went by the Chinese pen name Sin Sin Far but also wrote stories that called out and challenged America's racist policies against Chinese immigrants, and ended up being neither widely read nor published.

In the end, understanding the historical period and the authors' biographies reveals many more layers in "Eyes That Saw Not." First, we learn about Watanna's choice of using a Japanese pen name and the reason she needed to have her husband listed as the co-author in order to be published. We also can see that while the story seems to be a romance between John and

Beth as they learn to collaborate as writers, we actually see some deeper social commentary happening as well, as some aspects of the authors' lives play out in these pages. It is true that the story doesn't seem to challenge the norms of its day very much, but not all authors are willing to do that. Essentially, this piece of literature is a fitting product of its time, and while modern readers might not feel comfortable with Beth's situation in the story, a historical and biographical critique shows us that the readers back in 1902 would have been perfectly comfortable watching her defer to her partner in the end. Even though the final takeaway will be different every time, adding greater context around a story is consistently an effective way to add some depth to our understanding of a piece of literature.

Key Questions for a Historical and Biographical Critique:

- When and where was this written? What was happening historically?
 - What in the author's life might have influenced this work?
 - What cultural assumptions or values does the text reflect or challenge?
 - How would original audiences have understood this differently than modern readers?
 - What historical events, movements, or debates does the text engage with?
 - How does knowing the author's biography change your interpretation?
 - What references or allusions would have been clear to contemporary readers but need explanation now?
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Chapter 20: Political and Ideological Approaches

Feminist and Gender Criticism: As we move on from text-focused and context-focused criticism, we will start looking into approaches that are centered around specific political and ideological critiques. We will begin by looking at **feminist and gender criticism**, which looks at the way texts represent, reinforce, or challenge gender roles and power dynamics. Historically, literature has been dominated by male voices and male perspectives, and so a feminist critique works to expose patriarchal assumptions and structures in order to validate women's voices and experiences. In our society, gender is a system of power - not just some biological difference - and we can read texts specifically looking at how this system of power is portrayed. More specifically, this system may be reinforced, like in "Eyes That Saw Not," or challenged, like in "The Story of an Hour." In any case, we have to remember that literature doesn't just reflect our understanding of gender roles, but the stories we read also help shape our understanding of societal expectations, so in the past when children read a hundred stories about helpless princesses being saved by courageous knights, they were learning something about the roles that they would be expected to play as they grew up.

To be clear, feminist and gender criticism doesn't work to praise female characters while hating on male characters or male authors. Instead, it keeps the focus more generally on examining how power operates through gender in a given piece of literature. This critique also isn't limited to focusing solely on women, but it can also look at the portrayal of masculinity or more generally the way that gender expectations have the potential to limit and harm everyone in society. Feminist and gender criticism also intersects with many other forms of literary analysis that look at the power dynamics and representations of particular groups in a text, including race (aka Critical Race Theory) and LGBTQ+ (aka Queer Theory) criticism.

In order to do a solid feminist and gender critique of a given work, it is important to begin with a careful reading with this specific lens in mind. You want to pay special attention to male and female characters, looking at how they behave and the expectations for each of them. Do some conform while others go against societal expectations? If characters do go outside of the norms for their historical time period, what happens to them? Think of Mrs. Mallard in "The Story of an Hour" who dared to embrace her freedom only to die moments later - seemingly paying the ultimate price for wanting independence. You should also focus on relationships between characters and consider who has the power in them, how it is maintained, and what specific type it is - economic, physical, or social power. It's also important to notice who speaks and who

doesn't, and if you're doing a feminist critique specifically, look for ways that female characters gain or lose their voices throughout the text.

You should also consider the gender of the author in your assessment of a given work of literature. If the author is male, how do they represent female characters? Do they objectify them through the "male gaze" or describe them with some legitimate complexity? If the author is female, how does she challenge or conform to the patriarchal literary traditions in her treatment of various gendered characters? It is also important in a feminist critique to consider the representation of marriage, motherhood, sexuality, work, and domestic life in general. Are the women in a story dependent on their partners or independent? Is there a threat of violence against women in the text, like what Delia faces in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat?" All of these pieces of information eventually come together to reveal how a given literary work represents gender overall, and as we dig deeper into the text we can determine in what ways the piece works to reinforce or challenge traditional patriarchal values.

Sample Feminist and Gender Critique: A short story that is a perfect fit for a feminist and gender critique is "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a feminist writer and activist. The story is based on Gilman's own experience with what was known as the "rest cure" for postpartum depression back in the late 1800s, which was right at the height of the male-dominated, Victorian gender ideology. A close look at the various characters and how their gender roles play out in the text reveals loads of deeper layers than simply reading the story on a more surface level. First, it is clear that the narrator - who is seemingly not even named - has absolutely no agency throughout the text. John, who is her husband *and* doctor, is in complete control of her treatment, her allowed activities, and even her thoughts. We can see this on many occasions as her mind wanders into territory where she is critical of her treatment, but she quickly realizes John wouldn't like it and cuts herself off. He also infantilizes her by calling her "little girl," ignores all her wishes, and treats her concerns as "fancies" (Gilman).

As the story progresses, it is clear that the narrator is locked in a marriage (and a society) that is similar to the prison cell she finds herself in - with barred windows, a nailed-down bed, and a locked door in the old colonial mansion. Her domestic and social life has been effectively cut off, and John has also completely undercut her voice, literally laughing off all of her suggestions. As the narrator says, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman). The only real voice she has left is her ability to write, but John decides that also goes against the "rest cure" regimen and tries to stop that as well. However, she fights against his control in

various ways, most importantly by secretly writing when nobody is around - this is one of her main feminist acts of resistance, and eventually her journal becomes the story that we are reading. She also moves about the room - "creeping" as she calls it - and tearing off the wallpaper when she has been repeatedly told not to do so.

In the end, a feminist and gender critique shows us that "The Yellow Wallpaper" isn't just a story about one woman struggling with mental illness. It is a larger critique of the power men exerted over women in the Victorian era, specifically centered on medicine, marriage, and domestic life. Gilman wrote the work as a feminist protest of the power structures present during her lifetime, and perhaps more specifically as a warning about the dangers of the "rest cure" that she had suffered through herself. Essentially, by having the narrator fight John's control and break out of his grip by the end, when she says "I've got out at last," Gilman is showing us a woman who is fighting against not just John but the entire patriarchy (Gilman). Yes, it is true that the narrator might be losing her mind in the last lines of the story, but this is also a way that Gilman shows the limited avenues a woman had for taking back some agency and control of her own life during that time period. In the big picture, looking at "The Yellow Wallpaper" through a feminist and gender lens reveals many deeper layers to understanding what is really going on in the silent struggle the narrator undergoes as she fights for her freedom.

Key Questions for a Feminist and Gender Critique:

- How are women and men portrayed? What gender roles are assumed or challenged?
- Who has power in relationships, and how is that power maintained?
- How does the text represent female sexuality, agency, and voice?
- If the author is male, how does that shape the portrayal of women?
- If the author is female, how does she navigate or challenge patriarchal literary traditions?
- What is absent or silenced in the text? Whose voices are missing?
- Does the text reinforce or critique patriarchal values?

Marxist Criticism: Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German economist and philosopher who argued that human history has been driven by a class struggle between owners and workers. He believed that wealthy capitalists made their profits by exploiting workers and taking

advantage of their labor. His work has been extremely influential, and we still refer to his ideas - and his name! - when we do **Marxist criticism**. Essentially, a Marxist critique is when we focus our attention on how a piece of literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges the dominant economic system and class structure. We do this by evaluating the wealth, property ownership, labor, and economic inequality in a given work. We look for class struggle between the owners and workers (or more simply between rich and poor characters), and we try to see how economic power and economic insecurity and exploitation reveal themselves in a text. Economic systems shape much of our lives, and it can reveal many different layers to a story when we look at the ways in which it reinforces or challenges these power structures.

When trying to get to the bottom of a news story, people often say “follow the money,” and in order to do an effective Marxist critique, that is exactly what we do. As always, begin with a slow and careful reading of the text with a Marxist lens in mind. Consider the economic situation of each character, including who owns property or has accumulated wealth. You can note which characters work and which ones are dependent on others for economic survival. Do you see places where some characters exploit others? Beyond the individual characters, you can look at larger class conflicts and the ways that money (or lack of it) creates tension and drives the plot. You can also look at the ways labor is portrayed - is hard work dignified or degrading to the characters that do it? You can also consider the ways that rich and poor characters are described and if the text glorifies wealth or critiques it in a larger sense. Lastly, decide if there is financial instability represented in the work, where characters are trapped by their economic circumstances or find that the lack of resources impact their relationships and limit their choices. Yes, there is a lot to consider here, but in the end the goal is to look at the way money, labor, and economic power impacts the characters and the work as a whole, and you can also decide if the piece of literature is supporting the economic status quo or challenging it.

Sample Marxist Critique: The title in Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “Sweat” is literally referring to the sweat coming off Delia, the protagonist, as she does backbreaking work for a living. This makes the story a great fit for a Marxist critique, as much of it is centered around hard work, economic survival, and exploitation. The main driver of the plot is the tension between Delia and her husband Sykes. The story presents Delia as an extremely hard working woman who does challenging physical labor, and as she says herself, “Ah been takin’ in washin’ for fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat” (Hurston). She is clearly an exploited worker on several different fronts too. First, her husband Sykes is a leech who lives off her

labor, even as he belittles her for it. She also is working seven days a week - the story mentions she even does laundry on Sundays - in order to provide local white families with clean laundry. This brings aspects of both racial and financial exploitation into the story. And the work is taking a serious toll on her body as well, as the story says that Delia “thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands” (Hurstons).

Sykes, on the other hand, seems to be quite the opposite - he contributes nothing but still lives off Delia’s labor. When he complains about her working so much, she points out that her work has put food into his belly for many years. Also, to add to the insult, Sykes spends her money and spends it on another woman with whom he is having an affair. In the story, Sykes’s economic abuse and exploitation of Delia is coupled with violence, and he claims - as the man of the house - to have ownership of their home, though it is clear that Delia’s labor has paid for it. She says herself that “Mah sweat is done paid for this house” (Hurstons). The house is an even bigger issue than just a place to live, as it’s where Delia does all the washing. Without it, she wouldn’t have any location to continue her business, and as a Black working-class woman in rural Florida, she has few alternatives. Also, with a deadbeat partner, she is trapped by the financial necessity of providing for herself.

There are a lot of different ways to view the ending of “Sweat,” but from a Marxist perspective, when Delia allows Sykes to die, she is reclaiming both her labor and her property. She takes back the means of production - her home - and no longer is allowing herself to be exploited by her parasitic husband. This new understanding of the ending reveals that it isn’t just personal revenge or karma at play, but the final scene provides her with economic justice. Considering a wider perspective, the story seems to critique the capitalist system by pointing out the injustice of Black workers having to do grueling manual labor seven days a week for wealthy white families in order to just survive. It also points out the injustice of men owning all the property in a relationship, whether they earned it or not. However, considering the title and narrator’s sympathy for Delia in the story, it seems that the story also promotes the more status quo notion that hard-work is admirable and should be rewarded. Again, all these new angles and perspectives on this story show how effective a Marxist critique can be for evaluating the class systems that underpin many of the works of literature we read.

Key Questions for a Marxist Critique:

- What is the economic situation of the characters? Who owns property/wealth?

- What class conflicts or tensions exist in the text?
 - How does the text portray work, labor, and economic survival?
 - Who has economic power, and how do they maintain it?
 - Does the text reinforce or critique capitalist values (competition, consumption, profit)?
 - How are workers or the poor represented?
 - What happens when economic needs conflict with human needs?
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Postcolonial Criticism: Throughout history, many indigenous peoples and countries have been conquered and colonized by other more powerful nations, known as imperial powers. Some of the most common imperial powers in modern history were the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Portugal. Colonization by these countries is the reason why most people living in North and South American nations speak one of these four languages instead of the native languages that existed on these continents hundreds of years ago. However, these countries have left much longer and deeper legacies, going far beyond just the languages people speak. **Postcolonial criticism** focuses on how literature represents colonialism, imperialism, and these lasting effects. This form of critique looks at the power dynamics between the colonizer (the imperial power) and the people they have colonized and attempts to recover and validate the voices of those colonized people who may have been silenced or marginalized. Colonizing powers impose their language and cultural values on subjugated peoples, and this doesn't just end as soon as they leave. With that in mind, postcolonial criticism looks at what happens during the occupation and after these powers have left - including the lasting trauma, divided identities, and internalized violence. This form of critique focuses on how this system of power is represented, either by reinforcing the colonial stereotypes or exposing and examining colonial violence.

In order to do an effective postcolonial critique, you need to begin with a close and careful reading while focusing on the power dynamics between the various groups being represented. You can consider who has power in the text and what groups or individuals are marginalized or treated as "other." You should pay special attention to the relationships between characters of different cultures, nations, ethnicities, or races and how their differences are represented. You can see if colonized people are treated as "primitive" or "savages," while the imperial powers are

shown to be “civilized.” You can consider from which perspective the story is being told - including which language the story is written in - and how these factors impact the work. In the end, key questions in postcolonial criticism include evaluating how characters navigate their cultural identities during or after colonization, how they might have internalized violence (often by turning against each other), and if there are lasting psychological, social, or political effects from their colonial occupation. In the end, this information helps us to determine if a piece of literature - in general - is working to challenge or reinforce the systems of colonization and imperial power.

Sample Postcolonial Critique: Liam O’Flaherty was an Irish author who joined the IRA (Irish Republican Army) in order to push for Irish independence from the British after hundreds of years of occupation. The Irish War of Independence ended in 1921 with a compromise deal - as the British offered only partial independence rather than full sovereignty. This split Irish society between those willing to accept the compromise (Free Staters) and those demanding complete freedom (Republicans), leading to civil war breaking out in 1922. This Irish Civil War lasted just under a year, but cost the lives of over 1,000 soldiers and hundreds of innocent civilians. O’Flaherty was himself a soldier for the Republican side, and the war serves as the backdrop for his short story “The Sniper,” where one Irish soldier unknowingly kills his own brother during an intense duel between the two rooftop gunmen. Essentially, the story shows us what can happen to a country and to a people shortly after a colonizing power leaves.

The story takes place during a battle between two groups, the Free State and the Republicans, but it is important to understand that both of these military groups are made up of Irish soldiers. There are no British characters featured in this work, yet it is still a clear example of postcolonial literature because it takes place in the deadly aftermath of colonization, as the British occupation left behind a fractured Irish society. In the piece, O’Flaherty uses the literal symbol of one brother killing another to show how brutal and senseless this internalized violence ended up becoming. Basically, the colonial violence perpetrated on the Irish over hundreds of years has twisted them into seeing each other as their enemies now that the British have finally left. Essentially, this personal tragedy (brother killing brother) is a symbol of the larger national tragedy (Irish killing Irish). It is interesting to note, too, that the style of the narration is very matter-of-fact and mechanical, simply describing what is happening without any preference for either side of the battle. You’d think that since O’Flaherty fought in this war himself, he’d show a clear bias towards one group over the other, but he never does. Staying neutral shows us that

the real focus isn't on which Irish group is "right," but the story is really all about the brutality we don't get to see - the brutality that the British unleashed on the Irish people for generations.

In conclusion, this isn't just a story about a horrific tragedy wrapped inside of a civil war. Instead, a postcolonial critique of "The Sniper" reveals that the deeper meaning of the story is to show how imperialism's negative effects outlast the occupation by the empire itself. The long years of abuse at the hands of the British essentially fractured Irish society, leaving behind soldiers who were taught to kill efficiently while dehumanizing their enemies, even if they were other Irish soldiers. The final scene becomes all the more shocking when we read that "the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face" (O'Flaherty). This tragic turn of events ends up showing us colonialism's ultimate victory: making the colonized people destroy themselves.

Key Questions for a Postcolonial Critique:

- How are colonized or marginalized cultures represented?
 - Who has the power to tell stories? Whose voices are silenced?
 - How does the text represent cultural difference? (Exotic? Threatening? Inferior?)
 - What assumptions about "civilized" vs. "savage" cultures appear?
 - How do characters navigate cultural identity and belonging?
 - Does the text reinforce or challenge colonial/imperial ideologies?
 - What are the ongoing effects of colonialism in the text?
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Psychological Criticism: All of us have played an armchair psychologist at one point or another in our lives, and doing **psychological criticism** allows us to get some additional practice as we analyze characters' mental states, behaviors, and motivations. Characters can be "evaluated" for depression, anxiety, trauma, grief, and mental illness. We can consider their emotional responses to events in the stories we read. There are also many different branches of psychology that can be considered, starting with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, which is focused on the unconscious mind and the use of defensive mechanisms like repression (pushing ideas down), denial (refusing to accept reality), and projection (attributing one's own ideas to others). There is also behavioral therapy which looks at how characters respond to

stimuli, learned behaviors, and conditioning. Another option is cognitive therapy that focuses on how characters think, perceive reality, and process information. Finally, a psychological critique can consider more general mental health concerns, like depression, anxiety, PTSD and other psychological disorders. Remember that characters are psychological beings with inner lives, and their emotional states drive their behaviors. Even if a work is pure fiction, it can still reveal authentic human emotions and behaviors, and so understanding a bit about psychology and reading a work through that lens can be a really effective way to understand additional layers of a text. And, you are welcome to just use concepts you are already familiar with, like depression and anxiety, or go even deeper if you have a more detailed knowledge of the psychological field.

In order to complete a psychological critique, you should begin with a close and careful reading of the text. Consider the psychological condition or state of the characters. What kind of experiences are they having, and how are they responding emotionally? Ask yourself why the character responds in this way. As you read, you may notice patterns, like denial or aggression, or where characters display emotions like depression, fear, grief, or obsession. When a character seems to be feeling a certain way, carefully read to see how the text represents that mental state - is it represented physically, through the use of symbols, or expressed through their thoughts? When they face difficult circumstances, look for natural human coping mechanisms as well, like denial, projection or rationalization. You can consider their specific symptoms and even aspects of a character that may be unconscious - things they don't even know about themselves. You can also decide if the emotional portrayals of various characters seem to be realistic and authentic. The ultimate goal is to use this information to look back at the story and understand it on a deeper level, considering what it reveals about the human mind and our emotional experiences.

Sample Psychological Critique: Horacio Quiroga was an Uruguayan writer known for psychological realism and dark themes. His short story "The Dead Man" brings us into a man's consciousness as he slowly dies from a machete wound, and so it is a perfect choice for a psychological critique. The story begins with the man working in the fields, and casually deciding to climb over a fence to lay down in the grass for a short break. It is here the tragedy takes place, and he is mortally wounded. He realizes "He is going to die. Coldly, terribly, and unavoidably, he is going to die" (Quiroga). Yet within seconds, his mind shifts to denial, as we're told "The man resists," and "it is a nightmare; that's it" (Quiroga)! His mind is clearly attempting to protect itself, but this is not a sign of weakness - it is a natural emotional response to avoid being completely overwhelmed. From this point onwards, his mind is in a battle between the

knowledge that he is dying and the sense that this can't be possible. Quiroga writes that since everything around the man seems so normal, he "still refuses to admit a phenomenon of such significance" (Quiroga).

An additional technique the man uses to deny his situation is to try to continue making future plans. For example, he looks at the worn handle of the machete - sticking out of his side, no less - and thinks "he must soon change it for another; it has little use left" (Quiroga). He also looks at the fence that he slipped on and tells himself it is a "fence of very thick, high posts that he will soon have to replace" (Quiroga). These plans might seem like madness, but they effectively help the man to remain very calm during these final moments of his life instead of panicking. Additionally, he seems to have convinced himself that as he is slowly getting closer to death, he is really just feeling tired. This is a repeated pattern through the text, as he tells himself things like he is only laying down because he is "Very tired, but he is only resting" and again that he is "very tired, but nothing more" (Quiroga).

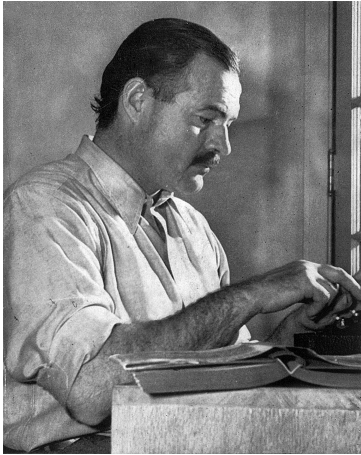
In the end, Quiroga offers up a very authentic portrayal of a man dealing with a horrific, unexpected trauma and his own impending death. As his mind can't seem to comprehend the reality of the situation, he quickly denies what has happened and just keeps telling himself that he is only tired. This kind of cognitive distortion - making excuses for why he is laying down and why he can't move - is a very natural response to overwhelming situations, and keeping his mind occupied helps him maintain a strange sense of calm as he begins to fade. As death approaches, the man's perception of time begins to distort, and while his body can't continue moving around, he realizes his mind can wander. We're told that "he can, if he wishes, abandon his body for an instant and see from the pond he built the same mundane landscape as always" (Quiroga). This also seems like he is experiencing the sort of out of body experience that many dying people have described, and shortly thereafter, he is gone. In the end, a psychological critique of Quiroga's "The Dead Man" reveals ways in which denial can be a powerful coping mechanism when people are faced with a dire situation. It shows us in an authentic way how the mind can construct its own reality even as the body is dying, and we're faced with incontrovertible evidence - like the machete stuck in the man's side. This form of critique also reveals an even deeper, universal psychological truth, that we cannot comprehend our own non-existence.

Key Questions for a Psychological Critique:

- What mental or emotional state is the character experiencing?
- Why does the character behave this way? What psychological motivations drive them?
- Does the text portray mental states realistically or stereotypically?
- What defense mechanisms or coping strategies does the character use?
- How does the character respond to psychological stress or trauma?
- What does the text reveal about human psychology more broadly?
- Are there patterns of behavior that suggest specific psychological conditions?

A Final Thought on Literary Criticism: The great thing about having all these new types of literary criticism to choose from is that you now have a lot of flexibility to match the right lens with any piece of literature you are trying to analyze. Different stories call for different approaches, and while “The Yellow Wallpaper” would be a perfect fit for a feminist lens, it would be pretty tough to uncover a whole lot of new layers in “The Sniper” using that same option. Your job going forward is to pick the approach that you think best illuminates what you want to explore in a text. You should know that while the seven approaches covered in this chapter are foundations of literary criticism, there are many more options out there that you can explore if you are interested. They include lenses like Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Ecocriticism, Mythological and Archetypal Criticism, Narrative Theory, Deconstruction (whew - this is a tough one) and many more. As you continue in your journey with literature, you’ll find that each lens opens up interesting new ways of seeing a story, and you even have the option of combining lenses too. There is really no limit to what you can do, and the critical skills you’ve developed here will serve you well no matter which approach you choose.

Now It’s Your Turn: Now that you’ve read about seven different critical approaches to literature, it’s time to get your hands dirty and give this a try. What follows is a widely anthologized story by Ernest Hemingway that is unique in several ways, including that it is heavily dialogue driven and neither character ever directly states what they are talking about the whole time. Read it carefully, pen in hand (if you’re using a paper copy), and then select the critical approach that you think would best help you to reveal some deeper layers of the story.



Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century, known for his spare, understated prose style that changed the way authors write. Born in Oak Park, Illinois, Hemingway rejected his conservative middle-class upbringing to pursue adventure and art. After high school, he worked as a journalist and drove an ambulance during World War I in Italy, where he was seriously wounded. These early experiences with violence, war, and death would haunt his fiction for the rest of his life.

After the war, Hemingway joined the community of American expatriates living in Paris during the 1920s, where he befriended writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein. It was Stein who encouraged his signature minimalist style - cutting away everything unnecessary until only the essential remains. His theory of writing, which he called the "iceberg principle," held that the deeper meaning of a story should not be evident on the surface but should shine through implicitly.

Hemingway's life was almost as dramatic as his fiction. He was married four times, survived two plane crashes, worked as a war correspondent, loved bullfighting and big-game hunting, and won both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. His major works include *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

Hemingway struggled with depression, alcoholism, and numerous physical injuries throughout his life. In 1961, he died by suicide at his home in Idaho. Despite his troubled life, Hemingway remains one of the most widely read American authors, celebrated for his honest exploration of courage, loss, and dignity.

“Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express

from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer."

"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.

"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Two big ones."

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"

"Anis del Toro. It's a drink."

"Could we try it?"

The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

"Four reales."

"We want two Anis del Toro."

"With water?"

"Do you want it with water?"

"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it good with water?"

"It's all right."

"You want them with water?" asked the woman.

"Yes, with water."

"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything."

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so."

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."

"Should we have another drink?"

"All right."

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.

"It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it."

"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?"

"I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry."

"If I do it you won't ever worry?"

"I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple."

"Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't care about me."

"Well, I care about you."

"Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine."

"I don't want you to do it if you feel that way."

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything."

"We can have everything."

"No, we can't."

"We can have the whole world."

"No, we can't."

"We can go everywhere."

"No, we can't. It isn't ours any more."

"It's ours."

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

"But they haven't taken it away."

"We'll wait and see."

"Come on back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't feel that way."

"I don't feel any way," the girl said. "I just know things."

"I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do——"

"Nor that isn't good for me," she said. "I know. Could we have another beer?"

"All right. But you've got to realize——"

"I realize," the girl said. "Can't we maybe stop talking?"

They sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table.

"You've got to realize," he said, "that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you."

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."

"Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else. And I know it's perfectly simple."

"Yes, you know it's perfectly simple."

"It's all right for you to say that, but I do know it."

"Would you do something for me now?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.

"But I don't want you to," he said, "I don't care anything about it."

"I'll scream," the girl said.

The woman came out through the curtains with two glasses of beer and put them down on the damp felt pads. "The train comes in five minutes," she said.

"What did she say?" asked the girl.

"That the train is coming in five minutes."

The girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her.

"I'd better take the bags over to the other side of the station," the man said. She smiled at him.

"All right. Then come back and we'll finish the beer."

He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

Discussion Questions:

1. The story contains very little external action—most of it is just dialogue between two people waiting for a train. Why does Hemingway structure the story this way? How does the lack of traditional plot action affect your reading experience?
2. The central conflict of the story is never explicitly stated. What is the actual conflict between the American man and Jig? At what point in the story did you realize what they're really discussing?
3. What can we infer about the relationship between the American and Jig based on their dialogue? How would you describe these two characters? How long do you think they've been together?
4. Hemingway describes two distinct landscapes visible from the station: the barren, brown hills on one side and the fertile fields with trees along the Ebro River on the other. What might these contrasting landscapes symbolize?
5. The story is told from a unique, third-person objective (or dramatic) point of view - we only see and hear what an outside observer would see and hear, with no access to the characters' inner thoughts. How would the story be different if we could read Jig's thoughts? Or the man's thoughts?
6. Hemingway is famous for his "iceberg theory" - the idea that the deeper meaning of a story should be beneath the surface, implied rather than stated. Where in "Hills Like White Elephants" do you see this approach at work? What is below the surface that Hemingway never states directly?

Chapter Writing Activity: Now that you've actively and carefully read Hemingway's short story, select the critical approach that you think would best help you to reveal some deeper layers of its meaning. Once you make your choice, it's highly recommended to go and review the section on that critical lens again - what exactly does that particular critical approach focus on? What are the recommended steps to accomplishing it? What are the key questions you should be focusing on? You should also take the time to reread the sample of that form of critique before beginning, and then work to create something very similar using Hemingway's story.

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About the Author:

J. Jason Long is a Professor of English at Merced College's Los Baños Campus in California's Central Valley, where he has taught composition, literature, and Humanities courses for over twenty years. As a lover of all the Humanities, he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy followed by a Master's in English Literature from California State University, East Bay, focusing on 18th-century British and Multicultural American Literatures. He lives with his family near Santa Cruz and is an avid reader across genres, though he'll readily acknowledge that nothing beats a well-written mystery.