

STYLE, TONE, AND LANGUAGE

(Mary) Flannery O'Connor
A Images



Tim O'Brien
A Photo B vid Pickof



James Joyce
A Images



Style and Tone

5

5

6

B

U

One of the qualities that gives a work of literature its individuality is its **style**, the way in which a writer uses language, selecting and arranging words to say what he or she wants to say. Style encompasses elements such as word choice; syntax; sentence length and structure; and the presence, frequency, and prominence of imagery and figures of speech.

Closely related to style is **tone**, the attitude of the narrator or author of a work toward the subject matter, characters, or audience. Word choice and

sentence structure help to create a work's tone, which may be intimate or distant, bitter or affectionate, straightforward or cautious, supportive or critical, respectful or condescending. (Tone may also be **ironic**; see Chapter 10, "Point of View," for a discussion of irony.)



The Uses of Language

Language offers almost limitless possibilities to a writer. Creative use of language (such as unusual word choice, word order, or sentence structure) can enrich a story and add to its overall effect. Sometimes, in fact, a writer's use of language can expand a story's possibilities through its very inventiveness. For example, James Joyce's innovative **stream-of-consciousness** style mimics thought, allowing ideas to run into one another as random associations are made so that readers may follow and participate in the thought processes of the narrator. Here is a stream-of-consciousness passage from Joyce's experimental 1922 novel *Ulysses*:

frseeeeeeeefronnnng train somewhere whistling the strength those engines have in them like big giants and the water rolling all over and out of them all sides like the end of Loves old sweet sonnnng the poor men that have to be out all the night from their wives and families in those roasting engines stifling it was today. . . .

Skillfully used, language can enhance a story's other elements. It may, for example, help to create an atmosphere that is important to the story's plot or theme, as Kate Chopin's lush, rhythmic sentences help to create the sexually charged atmosphere of "The Storm" (p. 199)—an atmosphere that overpowers the characters and thus drives the plot. Language may also help to delineate character, perhaps by conveying a character's mental state to readers. For instance, the breathless, disjointed style of Edgar Allan Poe's 1843 short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" suggests the narrator's increasing emotional instability: "Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew!*—they were making a mockery of my horror!"

In his 1925 short story "Big Two-Hearted River," Ernest Hemingway uses short, unconnected sentences to create a flat, emotionless prose style that reveals his character's alienation and fragility as he struggles to maintain control: "Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him."

Language that places emphasis on the sounds and rhythm of words and sentences can also enrich a work of fiction. Consider the use of such language in the following sentence from James Joyce's "Araby" (p. 288):

The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing.

Here the narrator is describing his first conversation with a girl who fascinates him, and the lyrical, almost musical language reflects his enchantment. Note in particular the **alliteration** (*light/lamp; caught/curve; hair/hand*), the repetition (*lit up/lit up*), and the rhyme (*lit up her hair/that rested there*) and **near rhyme** (*falling/railing*); these poetic devices weave the words of the sentence into a smooth, rhythmic whole.

Another example of this emphasis on sound may be found in the measured **parallelism** of this sentence from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1843 story "The Birthmark":

He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleared his fine countenance from the furnace smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife.

The style of this sentence, conveying methodical precision and order, reflects the compulsive personality of the character being described.

The following passage from Alberto Alvaro Ríos's story "The Secret Lion" (p. 466) illustrates the power of language to enrich a story:

We had read the books, after all; we knew about bridges and castles and wildtreacherousraging alligatormouth rivers. We wanted them. So we were going to go out and get them. We went back that morning into that kitchen and we said, "We're going out there, we're going into the hills, we're going away for three days, don't worry." She said, "All right."

"You know," I said to Sergio, "if we're going to go away for three days, well, we ought to at least pack a lunch."

But we were two young boys with no patience for what we thought at the time was mom-stuff: making sa-and-wiches. My mother didn't offer. So we got out little kid knapsacks that my mother had sewn for us, and into them we put the jar of mustard. A loaf of bread. Knivesforksplates, bottles of Coke, a can opener. This was lunch for the two of us. And we were weighed down, humped over to be strong enough to carry this stuff. But we started walking anyway, into the hills. We were going to eat berries and stuff otherwise. "Goodbye." My mom said that.

Through language, the adult narrator of the preceding paragraphs recaptures the bravado of the boys in search of "wildtreacherousraging alligatormouth rivers" even as he suggests to readers that the boys are not going far. The story's use of language is original and inventive: words are blended together ("getridofit," "knivesforksplates"), linked to form new words ("mom-stuff"), and drawn out to mimic speech ("sa-and-wiches"). These experiments with language show the narrator's willingness to move back into a child's frame of reference while maintaining the advantage of distance. The adult narrator uses sentence fragments ("A loaf of bread."), colloquialisms ("kid," "mom," "stuff"), and contractions. He also includes conversational elements such as *you know* and *well* in the story's dialogue, accurately recreating the childhood scene even as he sees its folly and remains aware of the disillusionment that awaits him. Thus, the unique style permits the narrator to bring readers

with him into the child's world while he maintains his adult stance: "But we were two young boys with no patience for what we thought at the time was mom-stuff. . . ."

Although many stylistic options are available to writers, a story's language must be consistent with the writer's purpose and with the effect he or she hopes to create. Just as writers may experiment with point of view or manipulate events to create a complex plot, so they can adjust language to suit a particular narrator or character or to convey a particular theme. In addition to the creative uses of language described above, writers also frequently experiment with *formal and informal diction*, *imagery*, and *figures of speech*.



Formal and Informal Diction

The level of diction—how formal or informal a story's language is—can reveal a good deal about a story's narrator and characters.

Formal diction is characterized by elaborate, complex sentences; a learned vocabulary; and a serious, objective, detached tone. It does not generally include contractions, shortened word forms (like *phone*), regional expressions, or slang, and it may substitute *one* or *we* for *I*. At its most extreme, formal language is stiff and stilted, far removed from everyday speech.

When formal diction is used by a narrator or by a character, it may indicate erudition, a high educational level, a superior social or professional position, or emotional detachment. When one character's language is significantly more formal than others', he or she may seem old-fashioned or stuffy; when language is inappropriately elevated or complex, it may reveal the character to be pompous or ridiculous; when a narrator's language is noticeably more formal than that of the story's characters, the narrator may seem superior or even condescending. Thus, the choice of a particular level (or levels) of diction in a story can convey information about characters and about the narrator's attitude toward them.

The following passage from Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" illustrates formal style:

In the latter part of the last century there lived a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy, who not long before our story opens had made experience of a spiritual affinity more attractive than any chemical one. He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleared his fine countenance from the furnace smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife. In those days when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of Nature seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depth and absorbing energy. The higher

intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart might all find their congenial ailment in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed, would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself.

The long and complex sentences, learned vocabulary (“countenance,” “ailment,” “votaries”), and absence of colloquialisms suit Hawthorne’s purpose well, recreating the formal language of the earlier era in which his story is set. The narrator is aloof and controlled, and his diction makes this clear to readers.

Informal diction, consistent with everyday speech, is characterized by slang, contractions, colloquial expressions like *you know* and *I mean*, shortened word forms, incomplete sentences, and a casual, conversational tone. A first-person narrator may use an informal style, or characters may speak informally; in either case, informal style tends to narrow the distance between readers and text.

One kind of informal language is illustrated in Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (p. 453) by the casual, slangy style of the dialogue between the teenager Connie and her older stalker, Arnold Friend:

“I ain’t late, am I?” he said.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Connie said.

“Toldja I’d be out, didn’t I?”

“I don’t even know who you are.”

Here, the level of the characters’ diction is a key element of the story: because Arnold seems to speak Connie’s language, she lets down her guard and becomes vulnerable to his advances.

Another kind of informal language is seen in the regionalisms and dialect used in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (p. 295), where speech patterns and individual words (“aloose”; “you all”; “britches”) help to identify the region in which the characters live and their social class.

Informal diction may also include language readers find offensive. In such cases, a character’s use of obscenities may suggest anything from crudeness to adolescent bravado, and the use of racial or ethnic slurs indicates that a character is insensitive or bigoted.

The following passage from John Updike’s “A&P” (p. 160) illustrates informal style:

She had sort of oaky hair that the sun and salt had bleached, done up in a bun that was unravelling, and a kind of prim face. Walking into the A&P with your straps down, I suppose it’s the only kind of face you *can* have. She held her head so high her neck, coming out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn’t mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was.

Here, the first-person narrator, a nineteen-year-old supermarket checkout clerk, uses a conversational style, including colloquialisms (“sort of,” “I suppose,” “kind of”), contractions (“it’s,” “didn’t”), and the imprecise, informal *you* (“Walking into the A&P with *your* straps down. . .”). The narrator uses neither elaborate syntax nor a learned vocabulary.



Imagery

Imagery—words and phrases that describe what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched—can have a significant impact in a story. A writer may use a pattern of repeated imagery to convey a particular impression about a character or situation or to communicate or reinforce a story’s theme. For example, a character’s newly discovered sense of freedom or sexuality can be conveyed through repeated use of words and phrases suggesting blooming or ripening, as in the two stories in this text by Kate Chopin.

In T. Coraghessan Boyle’s “Greasy Lake” (p. 425), the narrator’s vivid description of Greasy Lake uses rich visual imagery to evoke a scene:

Through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and shopping malls, street lights giving way to the thin streaming illumination of the headlights, trees crowding the asphalt in a black unbroken wall: that was the way out to Greasy Lake. The Indians had called it Wakan, a reference to the clarity of its waters. Now it was fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a hundred yards from shore, so stripped of vegetation it looked as if the air force had strafed it. We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and crickets. This was nature.

By characterizing a bucolic natural setting with surprising words like “fetid,” “murky,” and “greasy” and unpleasant images such as the “glittering of broken glass,” the “ravaged island,” and the “charred remains of bonfires,” Boyle creates a picture that is completely at odds with the traditional view of nature. The incongruous images are nevertheless perfectly consistent with the sordid events that take place at Greasy Lake.



Figures of Speech

Figures of speech—such as *similes*, *metaphors*, and *personification*—can enrich a story, subtly revealing information about characters and themes.

By using **metaphors** and **similes**—figures of speech that compare two dissimilar items—writers can indicate a particular attitude toward characters

and events. Thus, Flannery O'Connor's many grotesque similes in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" help to dehumanize her characters; the children's mother, for instance, has a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage." In Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" (p. 217), an extended metaphor in which a mother compares her daughter to a dress waiting to be ironed expresses the mother's attitude toward her child, effectively suggesting the daughter's vulnerability. Similes and metaphors are used throughout in Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (p. 199). In a scene of sexual awakening, Calixta's skin is "like a creamy lily," her passion is "like a white flame," and her mouth is "a fountain of delight"; these figures of speech add a lushness and sensuality to the story.

Personification—a figure of speech, closely related to metaphor, that endows inanimate objects or abstract ideas with life or with human characteristics—is used in "Araby" (p. 288), where houses, "conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces." This use of figurative language expands readers' vision of the story's setting and gives a dreamlike quality to the passage. (Other figures of speech, such as **hyperbole** and **understatement**, can also enrich works of fiction. See Chapter 19, "Figures of Speech," for further information.)

Allusions—references to familiar historical, cultural, literary, or biblical texts, figures, or events—may also expand readers' understanding and appreciation of a work. An allusion widens a work's context by bringing it into the context of a related subject or idea. For instance, in Charles Baxter's short story "Gryphon" (p. 172), the narrator's allusions to *Pinocchio* and Betty Crocker enable readers who recognize the references to gain a deeper understanding of what certain characters are really like. (For information on the use of allusion in poetry, see Chapter 22.)

NOTE In analyzing the use of language in a work of fiction, you may occasionally encounter unfamiliar allusions (or foreign words and phrases or regional expressions), particularly in works treating cultures and historical periods other than your own. Frequently, such language will be clarified by the context or by explanatory notes in your text. If it is not, always look up the meaning.

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Style, Tone, and Language

- Does the writer make any unusual creative use of word choice, word order, or sentence structure?
- Is the story's tone intimate? distant? ironic? How does the tone advance the writer's purpose?

continued on next page

- Does the style emphasize the sound and rhythm of language? For example, does the writer use alliteration and assonance? repetition and parallelism? What do such techniques add to the story?
- Is the level of diction generally formal, informal, or somewhere in between?
- Is there a difference between the diction used by the narrator and the diction used in the characters' speech? If so, what is the effect of this difference?
- Do any of the story's characters use regionalisms, colloquial language, or nonstandard speech? If so, what effect does this language have?
- What do different characters' levels of diction reveal about them?
- What kind of imagery predominates? Where, and why, is imagery used?
- Does the story develop a pattern of imagery? How does this pattern of imagery help to convey the story's themes?
- Does the story use simile and metaphor? personification? What is the effect of these figures of speech?
- Do figures of speech reinforce the story's themes? reveal information about characters?
- Does the story make any historical, literary, or biblical allusions? What do these allusions contribute to the story?
- Are any unfamiliar, obscure, or foreign words, phrases, or images used in the story? What do these words or expressions contribute to the story?

5



Source: © AP Images

JAMES JOYCE (1882–1941) was born in Dublin but lived his entire adult life in self-imposed exile from his native Ireland. Though his parents sent him to schools that trained young men for the priesthood, Joyce saw himself as a religious and artistic rebel and fled to Paris soon after graduation in 1902. Recalled briefly to Dublin by his mother's fatal illness, Joyce returned to the Continent in 1904, taking with him an uneducated Irish country girl named Nora Barnacle, who became his wife in 1931. In dreary quarters in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris, Joyce struggled to support a growing family, sometimes teaching classes in Berlitz language schools.

10. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE In *Notes on the American Short Story Today*, Richard Kostelanetz discusses the **epiphany**, one of Joyce's most significant contributions to literature:

In Joyce's pervasively influential theory of the short story we remember, the fiction turned upon an epiphany, a moment of revelation in which, in [critic] Harry Levin's words, "amid the most encumbered circumstances it suddenly happens that the veil is lifted, the . . . mystery laid bare, and the ultimate secret of things made manifest." The epiphany, then, became a technique for jelling the narrative and locking the story's import into place. . . . What made this method revolutionary was the shifting of the focal point of the story from its end . . . to a spot within the body of the text, usually near (but not at) the end.

Where in "Araby" does the story's epiphany occur? Does it do all that Kostelanetz believes an epiphany should do? Do you think that—at least in the case of "Araby"—the epiphany may not be as significant a force as Kostelanetz suggests?

Related Works: "Snow" (p. 82), "A&P" (p. 160), "Gryphon" (p. 172), "The Girl with Bangs" (p. 187), "Doe Season" (p. 395), "The Secret Lion" (p. 466), "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (p. 575), "How Do I Love Thee?" (p. 719), *Beauty* (p. 831)



Source: © AP Images

(MARY) FLANNERY O'CONNOR (1925–1964) was born to a prosperous Catholic family in Savannah, Georgia, and spent most of her adult life on a farm near the town of Milledgeville. She left the South to study writing at the University of Iowa, moving to New York to work on her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952). On a train going south for Christmas, O'Connor became seriously ill; she was diagnosed as having lupus, the immune system disease that had killed her father and would cause O'Connor's death when she was only thirty-nine years old.

While her mother ran the farm, O'Connor spent mornings writing and afternoons wandering the fields with cane or crutches. Her short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and an excellent French translation of *Wise Blood* established her international reputation, which was solidified with the publication of a second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and a posthumously published book of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965).

O'Connor, said a friend, believed that an artist "should face all the truth down to the worst of it." Yet however dark, her stories are infused with grim humor and a fierce belief in the possibility of spiritual redemption, even for her most tortured characters. A line from her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" says much about what O'Connor perceived about both natural things and her characters: "The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them

sparkled.” In O’Connor’s work, the “meanest” things and people can sparkle, touched by a kind of holy madness and beauty.

Cultural Context Some readers consider O’Connor a Christian writer, and indeed the Christian concepts of free will, original sin, and the need for spiritual redemption appear throughout her work. According to Christian theology, humanity was created with free will—the freedom to choose to obey or to disobey God, the freedom to follow right or wrong. Human beings fell from their original state of innocence, however, and this fall allowed sin and corruption to enter the world. Thus, a “good man”—one who is perfectly upright—is not simply “hard to find” but *impossible* to find: *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, says the Bible (Romans 3.23). Because of that first disobedience (original sin), humanity stands in need of redemption—a reuniting with God—which, according to Christian theology, comes through Jesus Christ.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find (1955)

The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal*. “Now look here, Bailey,” she said, “see here, read this,” and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. “Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did.”

Bailey didn’t look up from his reading so she wheeled around then and faced the children’s mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green headkerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit’s ears. She was sitting on the sofa, feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar. “The children have been to Florida before,” the old lady said. “You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee.”

The children’s mother didn’t seem to hear her but the eight-year-old boy, John Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, “If you don’t want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?” He and the little girl, June Star, were reading the funny papers on the floor.

“She wouldn’t stay at home to be queen for a day,” June Star said without raising her yellow head.

5 “Yes and what would you do if this fellow, the Misfit, caught you?” the grandmother asked.

"I'd smack his face," John Wesley said.

"She wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks," June Star said. "Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go."

"All right, Miss," the grandmother said. "Just remember that the next time you want me to curl your hair."

June Star said her hair was naturally curly.

The next morning the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go. She had her big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus in one corner, and underneath it she was hiding a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it. She didn't intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself. Her son, Bailey, didn't like to arrive at a motel with a cat.

She sat in the middle of the back seat with John Wesley and June Star on either side of her. Bailey and the children's mother and the baby sat in front and they left Atlanta at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890. The grandmother wrote this down because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back. It took them twenty minutes to reach the outskirts of the city.

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.

She said she thought it was going to be a good day for driving, neither too hot nor too cold, and she cautioned Bailey that the speed limit was fifty-five miles an hour and that the patrolmen hid themselves behind billboards and small clumps of trees and sped out after you before you had a chance to slow down. She pointed out interesting details of the scenery: Stone Mountain; the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway; the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground. The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled. The children were reading comic magazines and their mother had gone back to sleep.

"Let's go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much," John Wesley said.

15 “If I were a little boy,” said the grandmother, “I wouldn’t talk about my native state that way. Tennessee has the mountains and Georgia has the hills.”

“Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground,” John Wesley said, “and Georgia is a lousy state too.”

“You said it,” June Star said.

“In my time,” said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, “children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. “Wouldn’t that make a picture, now?” she asked and they all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved.

“He didn’t have any britches on,” June Star said.

20 “He probably didn’t have any,” the grandmother explained. “Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do. If I could paint, I’d paint that picture,” she said.

The children exchanged comic books.

The grandmother offered to hold the baby and the children’s mother passed him over the front seat to her. She set him on her knee and bounced him and told him about the things they were passing. She rolled her eyes and screwed up her mouth and stuck her leathery thin face into his smooth bland one. Occasionally he gave her a faraway smile. They passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. “Look at the graveyard!” the grandmother said, pointing it out. “That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation.”

“Where’s the plantation?” John Wesley asked.

“Gone with the Wind,”¹ said the grandmother. “Ha. Ha.”

25 When the children finished all the comic books they had brought, they opened the lunch and ate it. The grandmother ate a peanut butter sandwich and an olive and would not let the children throw the box and the paper napkins out the window. When there was nothing else to do they played a game by choosing a cloud and making the other two guess what shape it suggested. John Wesley took one the shape of a cow and June Star guessed a cow and John Wesley said, no, an automobile, and June Star said he didn’t play fair, and they began to slap each other over the grandmother.

The grandmother said she would tell them a story if they would keep quiet. When she told a story, she rolled her eyes and waved her head and was very dramatic. She said once when she was a maiden lady she

¹ *Gone with the Wind: Gone with the Wind* is a 1936 novel by Margaret Mitchell about the Civil War.

had been courted by a Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden from Jasper, Georgia. She said he was a very good-looking man and a gentleman and that he brought her a watermelon every Saturday afternoon with his initials cut in it, E. A. T. Well, one Saturday, she said, Mr. Teagarden brought the watermelon and there was nobody at home and he left it on the front porch and returned in his buggy to Jasper, but she never got the watermelon, she said, because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials, E. A. T.! This story tickled John Wesley's funny bone and he giggled and giggled but June Star didn't think it was any good. She said she wouldn't marry a man that just brought her a watermelon on Saturday. The grandmother said she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out and that he died only a few years ago, a very wealthy man.

They stopped at The Tower for barbecued sandwiches. The Tower was a part stucco and part wood filling station and dance hall set in a clearing outside of Timothy. A fat man named Red Sammy Butts ran it and there were signs stuck here and there on the building and for miles up and down the highway saying, TRY RED SAMMY'S FAMOUS BARBECUE. NONE LIKE FAMOUS RED SAMMY'S! RED SAM! THE FAT BOY WITH THE HAPPY LAUGH. A VETERAN! RED SAMMY'S YOUR MAN!

Red Sammy was lying on the bare ground outside The Tower with his head under a truck while a gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree, chattered nearby. The monkey sprang back into the tree and got on the highest limb as soon as he saw the children jump out of the car and run toward him.

Inside, The Tower was a long dark room with a counter at one end and tables at the other and dancing space in the middle. They all sat down at a board table next to the nickelodeon and Red Sam's wife, a tall burnt-brown woman with hair and eyes lighter than her skin, came and took their order. The children's mother put a dime in the machine and played "The Tennessee Waltz," and the grandmother said that tune always made her want to dance. She asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her. He didn't have a naturally sweet disposition like she did and trips made him nervous. The grandmother's brown eyes were very bright. She swayed her head from side to side and pretended she was dancing in her chair. June Star said play something she could tap to so the children's mother put in another dime and played a fast number and June Star stepped out onto the dance floor and did her tap routine.

"Ain't she cute?" Red Sam's wife said, leaning over the counter. 30
"Would you like to come be my little girl?"

"No I certainly wouldn't," June Star said. "I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" and she ran back to the table.

“Ain’t she cute?” the woman repeated, stretching her mouth politely.

“Aren’t you ashamed?” hissed the grandmother.

Red Sam came in and told his wife to quit lounging on the counter and hurry up with these people’s order. His khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt. He came over and sat down at a table nearby and let out a combination sigh and yodel. “You can’t win,” he said. “You can’t win,” and he wiped his sweating red face off with a gray handkerchief. “These days you don’t know who to trust,” he said. “Ain’t that the truth?”

35 “People are certainly not nice like they used to be,” said the grandmother.

“Two fellers come in here last week,” Red Sammy said, “driving a Chrysler. It was a old beat-up car but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me. Said they worked at the mill and you know I let them fellers charge the gas they bought? Now why did I do that?”

“Because you’re a good man!” the grandmother said at once.

“Yes’m, I suppose so,” Red Sam said as if he were struck with this answer.

His wife brought the orders, carrying the five plates all at once without a tray, two in each hand and one balanced on her arm. “It isn’t a soul in this green world of God’s that you can trust,” she said. “And I don’t count nobody out of that, not nobody,” she repeated, looking at Red Sammy.

40 “Did you read about that criminal, The Misfit, that’s escaped?” asked the grandmother.

“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he didn’t attack this place right here,” said the woman. “If he hears about it being here, I wouldn’t be none surprised to see him. If he hears it’s two cent in the cash register, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he . . .”

“That’ll do,” Red Sam said. “Go bring these people their Co’-Colas,” and the woman went off to get the rest of the order.

“A good man is hard to find,” Red Sammy said. “Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more.”

He and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right. The children ran outside into the white sunlight and looked at the monkey in the lacy chinaberry tree. He was busy catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy.

45 They drove off again into the hot afternoon. The grandmother took cat naps and woke up every few minutes with her own snoring. Outside of Toombsboro she woke up and recalled an old plantation that she had

visited in this neighborhood once when she was a young lady. She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden. She recalled exactly which road to turn off to get to it. She knew that Bailey would not be willing to lose any time looking at an old house, but the more she talked about it, the more she wanted to see it once again and find out if the little twin arbors were still standing. "There was a secret panel in this house," she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, "and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found . . ."

"Hey!" John Wesley said. "Let's go see it! We'll find it! We'll poke all the woodwork and find it! Who lives there? Where do you turn off at? Hey Pop, can't we turn off there?"

"We never have seen a house with a secret panel!" June Star shrieked. "Let's go to the house with the secret panel! Hey Pop, can't we go see the house with the secret panel!"

"It's not far from here, I know," the grandmother said. "It wouldn't take over twenty minutes."

Bailey was looking straight ahead. His jaw was as rigid as a horseshoe. "No," he said.

The children began to yell and scream that they wanted to see the house with the secret panel. John Wesley kicked the back of the front seat and June Star hung over her mother's shoulder and whined desperately into her ear that they never had any fun even on their vacation, that they could never do what THEY wanted to do. The baby began to scream and John Wesley kicked the back of the seat so hard that his father could feel the blows in his kidney.

"All right!" he shouted and drew the car to a stop at the side of the road. "Will you all shut up? Will you all just shut up for one second? If you don't shut up, we won't go anywhere."

"It would be very educational for them," the grandmother murmured.

"All right," Bailey said, "but get this: this is the only time we're going to stop for anything like this. This is the one and only time."

"The dirt road that you have to turn down is about a mile back," the grandmother directed. "I marked it when we passed."

"A dirt road," Bailey groaned.

After they had turned around and were headed toward the dirt road, the grandmother recalled other points about the house, the beautiful glass over the front doorway and the candle-lamp in the hall. John Wesley said that the secret panel was probably in the fireplace.

"You can't go inside this house," Bailey said. "You don't know who lives there."

“While you all talk to the people in front, I’ll run around behind and get in a window,” John Wesley suggested.

“We’ll all stay in the car,” his mother said.

60 They turned onto the dirt road and the car raced roughly along in a swirl of pink dust. The grandmother recalled the times when there were no paved roads and thirty miles was a day’s journey. The dirt road was hilly and there were sudden washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments. All at once they would be on a hill, looking down over the blue tops of trees for miles around, then the next minute, they would be in a red depression with the dust-coated trees looking down on them.

“This place had better turn up in a minute,” Bailey said, “or I’m going to turn around.”

The road looked as if no one had traveled on it in months.

“It’s not much farther,” the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey’s shoulder.

The children were thrown to the floor and their mother, clutching the baby, was thrown out the door onto the ground; the old lady was thrown into the front seat. The car turned over once and landed right-side-up in a gulch off the side of the road. Bailey remained in the driver’s seat with the cat—gray-striped with a broad white face and an orange nose—clinging to his neck like a caterpillar.

65 As soon as the children saw they could move their arms and legs, they scrambled out of the car, shouting, “We’ve had an ACCIDENT!” The grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey’s wrath would not come down on her all at once. The horrible thought she had had before the accident was that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee.

Bailey removed the cat from his neck with both hands and flung it out the window against the side of a pine tree. Then he got out of the car and started looking for the children’s mother. She was sitting against the side of the red gutted ditch, holding the screaming baby, but she only had a cut down her face and a broken shoulder. “We’ve had an ACCIDENT!” the children screamed in a frenzy of delight.

“But nobody’s killed,” June Star said with disappointment as the grandmother limped out of the car, her hat still pinned to her head but the broken front brim standing up at a jaunty angle and the violet spray hanging off the side. They all sat down in the ditch, except the children, to recover from the shock. They were all shaking.

“Maybe a car will come along,” said the children’s mother hoarsely.

"I believe I have injured an organ," said the grandmother, pressing her side, but no one answered her. Bailey's teeth were clattering. He had on a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it and his face was as yellow as the shirt. The grandmother decided that she would not mention that the house was in Tennessee.

The road was about ten feet above and they could see only the tops 70 of the trees on the other side of it. Behind the ditch they were sitting in there were more woods, tall and dark and deep. In a few minutes they saw a car some distance away on top of a hill, coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them. The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention. The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile. There were three men in it.

It came to a stop just over them and for some minutes, the driver looked down with a steady expressionless gaze to where they were sitting, and didn't speak. Then he turned his head and muttered something to the other two and they got out. One was a fat boy in black trousers and a red sweat shirt with a silver stallion embossed on the front of it. He moved around on the right side of them and stood staring, his mouth partly open in a kind of loose grin. The other had on khaki pants and a blue striped coat and a gray hat pulled down very low, hiding most of his face. He came around slowly on the left side. Neither spoke.

The driver got out of the car and stood by the side of it, looking down at them. He was an older man than the other two. His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long creased face and didn't have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans that were too tight for him and was holding a black hat and a gun. The two boys also had guns.

"We've had an ACCIDENT!" the children screamed.

The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was. He moved away from the car and began to come down the embankment, placing his feet carefully so that he wouldn't slip. He had on tan and white shoes and no socks, and his ankles were red and thin. "Good afternoon," he said. "I see you all had you a little spill."

"We turned over twice!" said the grandmother. 75

"Oncet," he corrected. "We seen it happen. Try their car and see will it run, Hiram," he said quietly to the boy with the gray hat.

"What you got that gun for?" John Wesley asked. "Watcha gonna do with that gun?"

“Lady,” the man said to the children’s mother, “would you mind calling them children to sit down by you? Children make me nervous. I want all you all to sit down right together there where you’re at.”

“What are you telling US what to do for?” June Star asked.

80 Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth. “Come here,” said their mother.

“Look here now,” Bailey began suddenly, “we’re in a predicament! We’re in . . .”

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and stood staring. “You’re The Misfit!” she said. “I recognized you at once!”

“Yes’m,” the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, “but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of reckernized me.”

Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened.

85 “Lady,” he said, “don’t you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don’t mean. I don’t reckon he meant to talk to you thataway.”

“You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would you?” the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it.

The Misfit pointed the toe of his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again. “I would hate to have to,” he said.

“Listen,” the grandmother almost screamed, “I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!”

“Yes mam,” he said, “finest people in the world.” When he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth. “God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy’s heart was pure gold,” he said. The boy with the red sweat shirt had come around behind them and was standing with his gun at his hip. The Misfit squatted down on the ground. “Watch them children, Bobby Lee,” he said. “You know they make me nervous.” He looked at the six of them huddled together in front of him and he seemed to be embarrassed as if he couldn’t think of anything to say. “Ain’t a cloud in the sky,” he remarked, looking up at it. “Don’t see no sun but don’t see no cloud neither.”

90 “Yes, it’s a beautiful day,” said the grandmother. “Listen,” she said, “you shouldn’t call yourself The Misfit because I know you’re a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell.”

“Hush!” Bailey yelled. “Hush! Everybody shut up and let me handle this!” He was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn’t move.

“I pre-chate that, lady,” The Misfit said and drew a little circle in the ground with the butt of his gun.

"It'll take a half a hour to fix this here car," Hiram called, looking over the raised hood of it.

"Well, first you and Bobby Lee get him and that little boy to step over yonder with you," The Misfit said, pointing to Bailey and John Wesley. "The boys want to ast you something," he said to Bailey. "Would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?"

"Listen," Bailey began, "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody real- 95
izes what this is," and his voice cracked. His eyes were as blue and intense as the parrots in his shirt and he remained perfectly still.

The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground. Hiram pulled Bailey up by the arm as if he were assisting an old man. John Wesley caught hold of his father's hand and Bobby Lee followed. They went off toward the woods and just as they reached the dark edge, Bailey turned and supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted, "I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!"

"Come back this instant!" his mother shrilled but they all disappeared into the woods.

"Bailey Boy!" the grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!"

"Nome, I ain't a good man," The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, "but I ain't the worst in the world neither. My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything!'" He put on his black hat and looked up suddenly and then away deep into the woods as if he were embarrassed again. "I'm sorry I don't have on a shirt before you ladies," he said, hunching his shoulders slightly. "We buried our clothes that we had on when we escaped and we're just making do until we can get better. We borrowed these from some folks we met," he explained.

"That's perfectly all right," the grandmother said. "Maybe Bailey has 100
an extra shirt in his suitcase."

"I'll look and see terrectly," The Misfit said.

"Where are they taking him?" the children's mother screamed.

"Daddy was a card himself," The Misfit said. "You couldn't put anything over on him. He never got in trouble with the Authorities though. Just had the knack of handling them."

"You could be honest too if you'd only try," said the grandmother. "Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."

105 The Misfit kept scratching in the ground with the butt of his gun as if he were thinking about it. “Yes’m, somebody is always after you,” he murmured.

The grandmother noticed how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat because she was standing up looking down on him. “Do you ever pray?” she asked.

He shook his head. All she saw was the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades. “Nome,” he said.

There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old lady’s head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath. “Bailey Boy!” she called.

“I was a gospel singer for a while,” The Misfit said. “I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet,” and he looked up at the children’s mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; “I even seen a woman flogged,” he said.

110 “Pray, pray,” the grandmother began, “pray, pray...”

“I never was a bad boy that I remember of,” The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, “but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive,” and he looked up and held her attention to him by a steady stare.

“That’s when you should have started to pray,” she said. “What did you do to get sent to the penitentiary that first time?”

“Turn to the right, it was a wall,” The Misfit said, looking up again at the cloudless sky. “Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done, lady. I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain’t recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was coming to me, but it never come.”

“Maybe they put you in by mistake,” the old lady said vaguely.

115 “Nome,” he said. “It wasn’t no mistake. They had the papers on me.”

“You must have stolen something,” she said.

The Misfit sneered slightly. “Nobody had nothing I wanted,” he said. “It was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I known that for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it. He was buried in the Mount Hopewell Baptist churchyard and you can go there and see for yourself.”

“If you would pray,” the old lady said, “Jesus would help you.”

“That’s right,” The Misfit said.

"Well then, why don't you pray?" she asked trembling with delight 120 suddenly.

"I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself."

Bobby Lee and Hiram came ambling back from the woods. Bobby Lee was dragging a yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it.

"Thow me that shirt, Bobby Lee," The Misfit said. The shirt came flying at him and landed on his shoulder and he put it on. The grandmother couldn't name what the shirt reminded her of. "No, lady," The Misfit said while he was buttoning it up, "I found out the crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it."

The children's mother had begun to make heaving noises as if she couldn't get her breath. "Lady," he asked, "would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband?"

"Yes, thank you," the mother said faintly. Her left arm dangled help- 125 lessly and she was holding the baby, who had gone to sleep, in the other. "Hep that lady up, Hiram," The Misfit said as she struggled to climb out of the ditch, "and Bobby Lee, you hold onto that little girl's hand."

"I don't want to hold hands with him," June Star said. "He reminds me of a pig."

The fat boy blushed and laughed and caught her by the arm and pulled her off into the woods after Hiram and her mother.

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods. She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, "Jesus, Jesus," meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing.

"Yes'm," The Misfit said as if he agreed. "Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course," he said, "they never shown me my papers. That's why I sign myself now. I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you'll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't been treated right. I call myself The Misfit," he said, "because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a 130 pistol report. "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?"

“Jesus!” the old lady cried. “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!”

“Lady,” The Misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, “there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip.”

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, “Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!” as if her heart would break.

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice became almost a snarl.

135 “Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.

“I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t,” The Misfit said. “I wist I had of been there,” he said, hitting the ground with his fist. “It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen, lady,” he said in a high voice, “if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

Without his glasses, The Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking. “Take her off and thow her where you thown the others,” he said, picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg.

“She was a talker, wasn’t she?” Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch with a yodel.

140 “She would of been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

“Some fun!” Bobby Lee said.

“Shut up, Bobby Lee,” The Misfit said. “It’s no real pleasure in life.”

Reading and Reacting

1. How are the style and tone of the narrator’s voice different from those of the characters? What, if anything, is the significance of this difference?
2. The figures of speech used in this story sometimes create unflattering, even grotesque, pictures of the characters. Find several examples of such negative figures of speech. Why do you think O’Connor uses them?
3. What does the grandmother’s use of the words *pickaninny* and *nigger* reveal about her? How are readers expected to reconcile this language with her very proper appearance and her preoccupation with manners? How does her use of these words affect your reaction to her?
4. Explain the **irony** in this statement: “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (par. 12).
5. How does The Misfit’s dialect characterize him?
6. What does the **allusion** to *Gone with the Wind* (par. 24) contribute to the story?
7. How do the style and tone of the two-paragraph description of the three men in the car (pars. 71–72) help to prepare readers for the events that follow?
8. When The Misfit tells the grandmother about his life, his language takes on a measured, rhythmic quality: “Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet . . .” (par. 109). Find other examples of rhythmic repetition and parallelism in this character’s speech. How does this style help to develop The Misfit’s character?
9. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Why do you think the grandmother tells The Misfit that she recognizes him? Why does she fail to realize the danger of her remark?
10. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In his 2002 essay “Light and Shadow: Religious Grace in Two Stories by Flannery O’Connor,” David Allen Cook writes:

The literary works of Flannery O’Connor often contend that religious belief can only be consummated by direct confrontation with evil, and for those uncommitted and unprepared, tragedy seems inevitable. For O’Connor’s religious “pretenders,” a moment of religious grace—a revelation of Truth—often does come, but at a devastating price. In . . . “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” we are presented with main characters that experience a deep epiphany after being spiritually challenged by the darker side of human nature.

SYMBOL, ALLEGORY, AND MYTH

Alice Walker

Monica Morgan/Getty Images



Shirley Jackson

AP Images



Nathaniel Hawthorne

Mathew B. Brady/Bettmann/Corbis



Raymond Carver

Reg Innell/Getty Images



Symbol

A **symbol** is a person, object, action, place, or event that, in addition to its literal meaning, suggests a more complex meaning or range of meanings. **Universal** or **archetypal symbols**, such as the Old Man, the Mother, or the Grim Reaper, are so much a part of human experience that they suggest the same thing to most people. **Conventional symbols** are also likely to suggest the same thing to most people (a rose suggests love, a skull and crossbones

denotes poison), provided the people share cultural and social assumptions. For this reason, conventional symbols are often used as a kind of shorthand in films and advertising, where they elicit predictable responses.

A conventional symbol, such as the stars and stripes of the American flag, can evoke powerful feelings of pride and patriotism in a group of people who share certain cultural assumptions, just as the maple leaf and the Union Jack can. Symbols used in works of literature can function in much the same way, enabling writers to convey particular emotions or messages with a high degree of predictability. Thus, spring can be expected to suggest rebirth and promise; autumn, declining years and powers; summer, youth and beauty. Because a writer expects a dark forest to evoke fear, or a rainbow to communicate hope, he or she can be quite confident in using such images to convey a particular idea or mood (provided the audience shares the writer's frame of reference).

Many symbols, however, suggest different things to different people, and different cultures may react differently to the same symbols. (In the United States, for example, an owl suggests wisdom; in India it suggests the opposite.) Thus, symbols enhance meaning, expanding the possibilities for interpretation and for readers' interaction with the text. Because they are so potentially rich, symbols have the power to open up a work of literature.

Literary Symbols

Both universal and conventional symbols can function as **literary symbols**—symbols that take on additional meanings in particular works. For instance, a watch or clock denotes time; as a conventional symbol, it suggests the passing of time; as a literary symbol in a particular work, it might also convey anything from a character's inability to recapture the past to the idea of time running out—or it might suggest something else.

Considering an object's symbolic significance can suggest a variety of ways to interpret a text. For instance, William Faulkner focuses attention on an unseen watch in a pivotal scene in "A Rose for Emily" (p. 143). The narrator first describes Emily Grierson as "a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt." Several sentences later, the narrator notes that Emily's visitors "could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain." Like these visitors, readers are drawn to the unseen watch as it ticks away. Because Emily is portrayed as a woman living in the past, readers can assume that the watch is intended to reinforce the impression that she cannot see that time (the watch) has moved on. The vivid picture of the pale, plump woman in the musty room with the watch invisibly ticking does indeed suggest that she is frozen in time and remains unaware of the progress around her. Thus, the symbol of the watch enriches both the depiction of character and the story's theme.

In “Barn Burning” (p. 256), another Faulkner story, the clock is a more complex symbol. The itinerant Snopes family is without financial security and apparently without a future. The clock the mother carries from shack to shack—“The clock inlaid with mother-of-pearl, which would not run, stopped at some fourteen minutes past two o’clock of a dead and forgotten day and time, which had been [Sarty’s] mother’s dowry”—is their only possession of value. The fact that the clock no longer works seems at first to suggest that time has run out for the family. On another level, the clock stands in stark contrast to Major de Spain’s grand home, with its gold and glitter and Oriental rugs. Knowing that the clock was part of the mother’s dowry, and that a dowry suggests a promise, readers may decide that the broken clock symbolizes lost hope. The fact that the mother still clings to the clock, however, could suggest just the opposite: her refusal to give up.

As you read, you should not try to find one exact equivalent for each symbol; that kind of search is reductive and unrewarding. Instead, consider the different meanings a symbol might suggest. Then consider how these various interpretations enrich other elements of the story and the work as a whole.

Recognizing Symbols

When is a clock just a clock, and when is it also a symbol with a meaning (or meanings) beyond its literal significance? If a character waiting for a friend glances once at a watch to check the time, there is probably nothing symbolic about the watch or about the act of looking at it. If, however, the watch keeps appearing again and again in the story, at key moments; if the narrator devotes a good deal of time to describing it; if it is placed in a conspicuous physical location; if characters keep noticing it and commenting on its presence; if it is lost (or found) at a critical moment; if its function in some way parallels the development of plot or character (for instance, if it stops as a relationship ends or when a character dies); if the story’s opening or closing paragraph focuses on the timepiece; or if the story is called “The Watch”—the watch most likely has symbolic significance. In other words, considering how an image is used, how often it is used, and when it appears will help you to determine whether or not it functions as a symbol.

Symbols expand the possible meanings of a story, thereby heightening interest and actively involving readers in the text. In “The Lottery” (p. 335), for example, the mysterious black box has symbolic significance. It is mentioned prominently and repeatedly, and it plays a pivotal role in the story’s action. Of course, the black box is important on a purely literal level: it functions as a key component of the lottery. But the box has other associations as well, and it is these associations that suggest what its symbolic significance might be.

The black wooden box is very old, a relic of many past lotteries; the narrator observes that it represents tradition. It is also closed and closely guarded,

suggesting mystery and uncertainty. It is shabby, “splintered badly along one side . . . and in places faded or stained,” and this state of disrepair could suggest that the ritual it is part of has also deteriorated or that tradition itself has deteriorated. The box is also simple in construction and design, suggesting the primitive (and therefore perhaps outdated) nature of the ritual. Thus, this symbol encourages readers to probe the story for values and ideas, to consider and weigh the suitability of a variety of interpretations. It serves as a “hot spot” that invites questions, and the answers to these questions reinforce and enrich the story’s theme.



Allegory

An **allegory** communicates a doctrine, message, or moral principle by making it into a narrative in which the characters personify ideas, concepts, qualities, or other abstractions. Thus, an allegory is a story with two parallel and consistent levels of meaning—one literal and one figurative. The figurative level, which offers some moral or political lesson, is the story’s main concern.

Whereas a symbol has multiple symbolic associations as well as a literal meaning, an **allegorical figure**—a character, object, place, or event in the allegory—has just one meaning within an **allegorical framework**, the set of ideas that conveys the allegory’s message. (At the simplest level, for instance, one character can stand for good and another can stand for evil.) For this reason, allegorical figures do not open up a text to various interpretations the way symbols do. The allegorical figures are significant only because they represent something beyond their literal meaning in a fixed system. Because the purpose of allegory is to communicate a particular lesson, readers are not encouraged to speculate about the allegory’s possible meanings; each element has only one equivalent, which readers must discover if they are to make sense of the story.

Naturally, the better a reader understands the political, religious, and literary assumptions of a writer (as well as the context of the work itself), the easier it will be to recognize the allegorical significance of his or her work. John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, for example, is a famous seventeenth-century allegory based on the Christian doctrine of salvation. In order to appreciate the complexity of Bunyan’s work, readers would have to familiarize themselves with this doctrine.

One type of allegory, called a **beast fable**, is a short tale, usually including a moral, in which animals assume human characteristics. Aesop’s *Fables* are the best-known examples of beast fables. More recently, contemporary writers have used beast fables to satirize the political and social conditions of our time. In one such tale, “The Gentlemen of the Jungle” by the Kenyan writer Jomo Kenyatta, an elephant is allowed to put his trunk inside a man’s hut during a rainstorm. Not content with keeping his trunk dry, the

elephant pushes his entire body inside the hut, displacing the man. When the man protests, the elephant takes the matter to the lion, who appoints a Commission of Enquiry to settle the matter. Eventually, the man is forced not only to abandon his hut to the elephant but also to build new huts for all the animals on the Commission. Even so, the jealous animals occupy the man's new hut and begin fighting for space; while they are arguing, the man burns down the hut, animals and all. Like the tales told by Aesop, "The Gentlemen of the Jungle" has a moral: "Peace is costly," says the man as he walks away happily, "but it's worth the expense."

The following passage from Kenyatta's tale reveals how the allegorical figures work within the framework of the allegory:

The elephant, obeying the command of his master (the lion), got busy with the other ministers to appoint a Commission of Enquiry. The following elders of the jungle were appointed to sit in the Commission: (1) Mr. Rhinoceros; (2) Mr. Buffalo; (3) Mr. Alligator; (4) The Rt. Hon. Mr. Fox to act as chairman; and (5) Mr. Leopard to act as Secretary of the Commission. On seeing the personnel, the man protested and asked if it was not necessary to include in this Commission a member from his side. But he was told that it was impossible, since no one from his side was well enough educated to understand the intricacy of jungle law.

From this excerpt, we can see that each character represents a particular idea. For example, the members of the Commission stand for bureaucratic smugness and inequity, and the man stands for the citizens who are victimized by the government. In order to fully understand the allegorical significance of each figure in this story, of course, readers would have to know something about government bureaucracies, colonialism in Africa, and possibly a specific historical event in Kenya.

Some works contain both symbolic elements *and* allegorical elements, as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (p. 367) does. The names of the story's two main characters, "Goodman" and "Faith," suggest that they fit within an allegorical system of some sort: Young Goodman Brown represents a good person who, despite his best efforts, strays from the path of righteousness; his wife, Faith, represents the quality he must hold on to in order to avoid temptation. As characters, they have no significance outside of their allegorical functions. Other elements of the story, however, are not so clear-cut. The older man whom Young Goodman Brown meets in the woods carries a staff that has carved on it "the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought, that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent." This staff, carried by a Satanic figure who represents evil and temptation, suggests the snake in the Garden of Eden, an association that neatly fits into the allegorical framework of the story. Alternatively, however, the staff could suggest the "slippery," ever-changing nature of sin, the difficulty people have in perceiving sin, or even sexuality (which may

explain Young Goodman Brown's susceptibility to temptation). This range of possible meanings suggests that the staff functions as a symbol (not an allegorical figure) that enriches Hawthorne's story.

Other stories work entirely on a symbolic level and contain no allegorical figures. "The Lottery," despite its moral overtones, is not an allegory because its characters, events, and objects are not arranged to serve one rigid, didactic purpose. In fact, many different interpretations have been suggested for this story. When it was first published in June 1948 in the *New Yorker*, some readers believed it to be a story about an actual custom or ritual. As author Shirley Jackson reports in her essay "Biography of a Story," even those who recognized it as fiction speculated about its meaning, seeing it as (among other things) an attack on prejudice; a criticism of society's need for a scapegoat; or a treatise on witchcraft, Christian martyrdom, or village gossip. The fact is that an allegorical interpretation will not account for every major character, object, and event in the story.

Myth

Throughout history, human beings have been makers of myths. For the purpose of this discussion, a **myth** is a story that is central to a culture; it embodies the values on which a culture or society is built. Thus, myths are not synonymous with falsehoods or fairy tales. Rather, they are stories that contain ideas that inform a culture and that give that culture meaning. In this sense, then, both an ancient epic and a contemporary religious text can be considered myths.

Although many myths have to do with religion, myths are not limited to the theological. Myths explain everything from natural phenomena—such as the creation of the world—to the existence of human beings and the beginnings of agriculture. The importance of myths rests on their ability to embody a set of beliefs that unifies both individuals and the society in which they live. By examining myths, we can learn much about our own origins and about our most deeply held beliefs.

One of the most prevalent types of myth is the **creation myth**. Almost every culture has an explanation for how the earth, sun, and stars—not to mention people—came into being. According to the ancient Greeks, for example, the world began as an empty void from which Nyx, a bird with black wings, emerged. She laid a golden egg, and out of it arose Eros, the god of love. The two halves of the eggshell became the earth and the sky, who fell in love with each other and had many children and grandchildren. These offspring became the gods of the Greek pantheon, who eventually created human beings in their own likeness. Each of these gods had a role to play in the creation and maintenance of the world, and their actions—in

particular, their constant meddling in the lives of people—comprise the myths of ancient Greece.

In various cultures all over the world, creation myths take different forms. According to the ancient Japanese, for example, the world emerged from a single seed, which grew to form a god who, in turn, created other gods and eventually the islands of Japan and their inhabitants. Several Native American tribes share common beliefs about “sky ancestors,” who created the people on the planet.

In Western culture, the most recognizable creation myth appears in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. According to Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth as well as all living creatures—including Adam and Eve. Other stories are part of the oral tradition of Judaism and do not appear in Genesis. An example of such a story is the tale of Lilith, which emerged sometime between the eighth and eleventh centuries. According to this Hebrew myth, Lilith, who was created before Eve, was Adam’s first wife. However, she refused to be subservient to Adam, and so she left Eden, eventually to be replaced by Eve. Talmudic tradition holds that she later mated with demons and gave birth to a legion of demonic offspring who inhabit the dark places of the earth.

The influence of mythology on literature is profound, and our contemporary understanding of narrative fiction owes a great deal to mythology. In fact, many of the short stories in this anthology contain allusions to myth. Consider, for example, the role of myth in “The Lottery,” “Young Goodman Brown,” and Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” (p. 353). In each of these short stories, myth is central to the characters’ behavior, sensibility, and understanding of the world in which they live.

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Symbol, Allegory, and Myth

- Are any universal symbols used in the work? any conventional symbols? What is their function? 5
- Is any character, place, action, event, or object given unusual prominence or emphasis in the story? If so, does this element seem to have symbolic as well as literal significance? 5
- What possible meanings does each symbol suggest? 7
- How do symbols help to depict the story’s characters? 8
- How do symbols help to characterize the story’s setting? 8
- How do symbols help to advance the story’s plot? 8

hundreds of letters, which included (among others) the following interpretations of the story:

- The story is an attack on small-town America.
- The story is a parable about the perversion of democracy.
- The story is a criticism of prejudice, particularly anti-Semitism.
- The story has no point at all.

How plausible do you think each of these interpretations is? Which comes closest to your interpretation of the story? Why?

Related Works: “Young Goodman Brown” (p. 367), “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (p. 453), “Patterns” (p. 512), “Ballad of Birmingham” (p. 529), *Nine Ten* (p. 861)



Monica Morgan/Getty Images

ALICE WALKER (1944–) was the youngest of eight children born to Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, sharecroppers who raised cotton. She left the rural South to attend Spelman College in Atlanta (1961–1963) and Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York (1963–1965).

In 1967, Walker moved to Mississippi, where she was supported in the writing of her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), by a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Her short story “Everyday Use” was included in *Best American Short Stories 1973* and has been widely anthologized and studied.

Other novels and collections of short stories followed, including *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973), *Meridian* (1976), *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1993), *The Complete Stories* (1994), *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998), and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). Her latest books include the essay collection *The Cushion in the Road* (2013) and the poetry collection *The World Will Follow Joy* (2013). Her third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), won the American Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize and was made into an award-winning movie and a long-running Broadway play.

In the third year of her marriage, Walker took back her maiden name because she wanted to honor her great-great-great-grandmother who had walked, carrying her two children, from Virginia to Georgia. Walker’s renaming is consistent with one of her goals in writing, which is to further the process of reconnecting people to their ancestors. She has said that “it is fatal to see yourself as separate” and that if people can reaffirm the past, they can “make a different future.”

Cultural Context Quilting attained the status of art in Europe in the fourteenth century but reached its fullest development later in North America. By the end of the eighteenth century, the American quilt had taken on unique and distinctive features that separated it from quilts made in other parts of the world. For African Americans, quilting has particular significance. Some scholars think that during slavery, members of the Underground Railroad used quilts to send messages. One design, the Log Cabin, was hung outside to mark a house of refuge for fugitive slaves. Other quilts mapped escape routes out of a plantation or county, often by

marking the stars that would act as a guide to freedom for those escaping at night. After the emancipation of slaves, quilts retained their cultural and historical significance, as the quilt in this story does.

Everyday Use (1973)

For Your Grandmama

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that “no” is a word the world never learned to say to her.

You’ve no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has “made it” is confronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tottering in weakly from backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: What would they do if parent and child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other’s faces. Sometimes the mother and father weep, the child wraps them in her arms and leans across the table to tell how she would not have made it without their help. I have seen these programs.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a smiling, gray, sporty man like Johnny Carson who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred

pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.

But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up. Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature.

“How do I look, Mama?” Maggie says, showing just enough of her thin body enveloped in pink skirt and red blouse for me to know she’s there, almost hidden by the door.

“Come out into the yard,” I say.

Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground.

10 Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure. She’s a woman now, though sometimes I forget. How long ago was it that the other house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie’s arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them. And Dee. I see her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot brick chimney. Why don’t you do a dance around the ashes? I’d wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much.

I used to think she hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised the money, the church and me, to send her to Augusta to school. She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn’t necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she’d made from an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At sixteen she had a style of her own, and knew what style was.

I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down. Don't ask me why: in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now. Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good-naturedly but can't see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by. She will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I'll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself. Although I never was a good singer. Never could carry a tune. I was always better at a man's job. I used to love to milk till I was hooked in the side in '49. Cows are soothing and slow and don't bother you, unless you try to milk them the wrong way.

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs any more. There are no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down. She wrote me once that no matter where we "choose" to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends. Maggie and I thought about this and Maggie asked me, "Mama, when did Dee ever *have* any friends?"

She had a few. Furtive boys in pink shirts hanging about on washday 15 after school. Nervous girls who never laughed. Impressed with her they worshiped the well-turned phrase, the cute shape, the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye. She read to them.

When she was courting Jimmy T she didn't have much time to pay to us, but turned all her faultfinding power on him. He *flew* to marry a cheap city girl from a family of ignorant flashy people. She hardly had time to recompose herself.

When she comes I will meet—but there they are!

Maggie attempts to make a dash for the house, in her shuffling way, but I stay her with my hand. "Come back here," I say. And she stops and tries to dig a well in the sand with her toe.

It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee. Her feet were always neat-looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style. From the other side of the car comes a short, stocky man. Hair is all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like a kinky mule tail. I hear Maggie suck in her breath. "Uhhnnh," is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. "Uhhnnh."

Dee next. A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so 20 loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings gold, too, and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the

folds of the dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, I like it. I hear Maggie go “Uhhnnh” again. It is her sister’s hair. It stands straight up like the wool on a sheep. It is black as night and around the edges are two long pigtails that rope about like small lizards disappearing behind her ears.

“Wa-su-zo-Tean-o!”¹ she says, coming on in that gliding way the dress makes her move. The short stocky fellow with the hair to his navel is all grinning and he follows up with “Asalamalakim,² my mother and sister!” He moves to hug Maggie but she falls back, right up against the back of my chair. I feel her trembling there and when I look up I see the perspiration falling off her chin.

“Don’t get up,” says Dee. Since I am stout it takes something of a push. You can see me trying to move a second or two before I make it. She turns, showing white heels through her sandals, and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid.³ She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house. Then she puts the Polaroid in the back seat of the car, and comes up and kisses me on the forehead.

Meanwhile Asalamalakim is going through motions with Maggie’s hand. Maggie’s hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold, despite the sweat, and she keeps trying to pull it back. It looks like Asalamalakim wants to shake hands but wants to do it fancy. Or maybe he don’t know how people shake hands. Anyhow, he soon gives up on Maggie.

“Well,” I say. “Dee.”

25 “No, Mama,” she says. “Not ‘Dee,’ Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!”

“What happened to ‘Dee?’” I wanted to know.

“She’s dead,” Wangero said. “I couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me.”

“You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie,” I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her “Big Dee” after Dee was born.

“But who was *she* named after?” asked Wangero.

30 “I guess after Grandma Dee,” I said.

“And who was she named after?” asked Wangero.

“Her mother,” I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. “That’s about as far back as I can trace it,” I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

¹*Wa-su-zo-Tean-o*: A greeting in Swahili; Dee sounds it out one syllable at a time.

²*Asalamalakim*: A greeting in Arabic: “Peace be upon you.”

³*Polaroid*: A type of camera with self-developing film.

"Well," said Asalamalakim, "there you are."

"Uhhnnh," I heard Maggie say.

"There I was not," I said, "before 'Dicie' cropped up in our family, so 35 why should I try to trace it that far back?"

He just stood there grinning, looking down on me like somebody inspecting a Model A car. Every once in a while he and Wangero sent eye signals over my head.

"How do you pronounce this name?" I asked.

"You don't have to call me by it if you don't want to," said Wangero.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked. "If that's what you want us to call you, we'll call you."

"I know it might sound awkward at first," said Wangero. 40

"I'll get used to it," I said. "Ream it out again."

Well, soon we got the name out of the way. Asalamalakim had a name twice as long and three times as hard. After I tripped over it two or three times he told me to just call him Hakim-a-barber. I wanted to ask him was he a barber, but I didn't really think he was, so I didn't ask.

"You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road," I said. They said "Asalamalakim" when they met you, too, but they didn't shake hands. Always too busy: feeding the cattle, fixing the fences, putting up salt-lick shelters, throwing down hay. When the white folks poisoned some of the herd the men stayed up all night with rifles in their hands. I walked a mile and a half just to see the sight.

Hakim-a-barber said, "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style." (They didn't tell me, and I didn't ask, whether Wangero [Dee] had really gone and married him.)

We sat down to eat and right away he said he didn't eat collards and 45 pork was unclean. Wangero, though, went on through the chitlins and corn bread, the greens and everything else. She talked a blue streak over the sweet potatoes. Everything delighted her. Even the fact that we still used the benches her daddy made for the table when we couldn't afford to buy chairs.

"Oh, Mama!" she cried. Then turned to Hakim-a-barber. "I never knew how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rump prints," she said, running her hands underneath her and along the bench. Then she gave a sigh and her hand closed over Grandma Dee's butter dish. "That's it!" she said. "I knew there was something I wanted to ask you if I could have." She jumped up from the table and went over in the corner where the churn stood, the milk in it clabber by now. She looked at the churn and looked at it.

"This churn top is what I need," she said. "Didn't Uncle Buddy whittle it out of a tree you all used to have?"

"Yes," I said.

"Uh huh," she said happily. "And I want the dasher, too."

“Uncle Buddy whittle that, too?” asked the barber.

50 Dee (Wangero) looked up at me.

“Aunt Dee’s first husband whittled the dash,” said Maggie so low you almost couldn’t hear her. “His name was Henry, but they called him Stash.”

“Maggie’s brain is like an elephant’s,” Wangero said, laughing. “I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table,” she said, sliding a plate over the churn, “and I’ll think of something artistic to do with the dasher.”

When she finished wrapping the dasher the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn’t even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumb and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived.

55 After dinner Dee (Wangero) went to the trunk at the foot of my bed and started rifling through it. Maggie hung back in the kitchen over the dishpan. Out came Wangero with two quilts. They had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War.

“Mama,” Wangero said sweet as a bird. “Can I have these old quilts?”

I heard something fall in the kitchen, and a minute later the kitchen door slammed.

“Why don’t you take one or two of the others?” I asked. “These old things was just done by me and Big Dee from some tops your grandma pieced before she died.”

“No,” said Wangero. “I don’t want those. They are stitched around the borders by machine.”

60 “That’ll make them last better,” I said.

“That’s not the point,” said Wangero. “These are all pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear. She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine!” She held the quilts securely in her arms, stroking them.

“Some of the pieces, like those lavender ones, come from old clothes her mother handed down to her,” I said, moving up to touch the quilts. Dee (Wangero) moved back just enough so that I couldn’t reach the quilts. They already belonged to her.

"Imagine!" she breathed again, clutching them closely to her bosom.

"The truth is," I said, "I promised to give them quilts to Maggie, for when she marries John Thomas."

She gasped like a bee had stung her. "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" she said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use." 65

"I reckon she would," I said. "God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!" I didn't want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told me they were old-fashioned, out of style.

"But, they're *priceless!*" she was saying now, furiously; for she has a temper. "Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!"

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, *these* quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would *you* do with them?" 70

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.

Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound her feet made as they scraped over each other.

"She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts."

I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff and it gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open. 75

"Take one or two of the others," I said to Dee.

But she turned without a word and went out to Hakim-a-barber.

"You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

80 “Your heritage,” she said. And then she turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, “You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It’s really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you’d never know it.”

She put on some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin.

Maggie smiled; maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.

Reading and Reacting

1. In American culture, what does a patchwork quilt symbolize?
2. What is the literal meaning of the two quilts to Maggie and her mother? to Dee? What symbolic meaning, if any, do they have to Maggie and her mother? Do the quilts have any symbolic meaning to Dee?
3. How does the contrast between the two sisters’ appearances, personalities, lifestyles, and feelings about the quilts help to convey the story’s theme?
4. What does the name *Wangero* signify to Dee? to her mother and sister? Could the name be considered a symbol? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think Maggie gives the quilts to her sister?
6. What is Dee’s opinion of her mother and sister? Do you agree with her assessment?
7. What does the story’s title suggest to you? Is it ironic? What other titles would be effective?
8. Discuss the possible meanings, aside from their literal meanings, that each of the following suggest: the family’s yard, Maggie’s burn scars, the trunk in which the quilts are kept, Dee’s Polaroid camera. What symbolic functions, if any, do these items serve in the story?
9. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What objects have the kind of symbolic value to you that the quilts have to Maggie? What gives these objects this value?
10. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In her article “The Black Woman Artist as Wayward,” critic Barbara Christian characterizes “Everyday Use” as a story in which Alice Walker examines the “creative legacy” of ordinary African American women. According to Christian, the story “is about the use and misuse of the concept of heritage. The mother of two daughters, one selfish and stylish, the other scarred and caring, passes on to us its true definition.”

What definition of *heritage* does the mother attempt to pass on to her children? How is this definition like or unlike Dee’s definition?

THEME

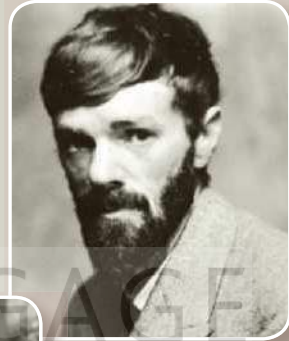
Eudora Welty

B t n ann b is



D(avid) H(erbert) Lawrence

B t n ann b is



David Michael Kaplan

Phot gaphy by Joyce W ner

The **theme** of a work of literature is its central or dominant idea. *Theme* is not the same as *plot* or *subject*, two terms with which it is sometimes confused. A summary of the **plot** of Tadeusz Borowski's "Silence," a story about survivors of the Holocaust, could be, "Prisoners are liberated from a concentration camp, and, despite the warnings of the American officer, they kill a captured German guard." The statement "'Silence' is about freed prisoners and a guard" could define the **subject** of the story. A statement of the theme

of “Silence,” however, has to do more than summarize its plot or define its subject; it has to convey the values and ideas expressed by the story.

Many effective stories are complex, expressing more than one theme, and “Silence” is no exception. You could say that “Silence” suggests that human beings have a need for vengeance. You could also say the story demonstrates that silence is sometimes the only response possible when people confront unspeakable horrors. Both these themes—and others—are expressed in the story, yet one theme seems to dominate: the idea that under extreme conditions, the oppressed can have the same capacity for evil as their oppressors.

When you write about theme, you need to do more than tell what happens in the story. The theme you identify should be a general idea that extends beyond the story and applies to the world outside fiction. Compare these two statements that a student wrote about Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” (p. 249):

Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” is about a man who has an obsessive desire for revenge.

Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” suggests that when the desire for revenge becomes obsessive, it can deprive individuals of all that makes them human.

The first statement merely tells what the story is about; the second statement identifies the story’s theme, a general observation about humanity.

Granted, some short works (fairy tales or fables, for example) have themes that can **only** be expressed as **clichés**—overused phrases or expressions—or as **morals**—lessons dramatized by the work. The fairy tale “Cinderella,” for example, expresses the clichéd theme that a virtuous girl who endures misfortune will eventually achieve her just reward; the fable “The Tortoise and the Hare” illustrates the moral “Slow and steady wins the race.” Like “The Cask of Amontillado,” however, the stories in this anthology have themes that are much more complex than clichés or morals.



Interpreting Themes

Contemporary critical theory holds that the theme of a work of fiction is as much a creation of readers as it is of the writer. Readers’ backgrounds, knowledge, values, and beliefs all play a part in determining the theme (or themes) they will identify in a work. Many readers, for example, will realize that David Michael Kaplan’s story “Doe Season” (p. 395)—in which the main character goes hunting, kills her first deer, and is forced to confront suffering and death—expresses a conventional **initiation theme**, revealing growing up to be a disillusioning and painful process. Still, different readers bring different perspectives to the story and, in some cases, see different themes.

During a classroom discussion of “Doe Season,” a student familiar with hunting saw more than his classmates did in the story’s conventional initiation theme. He knew that in many states there really is a doe season. Shorter than the ten-day buck season, it allows hunters to control the size of the deer herd by killing females. This knowledge enabled the student to conclude that by the end of the story the female child’s innocence is destroyed, just as the doe is.

Another student pointed out that the participation of Andy—a female who uses a male name—in hunting, a traditional male rite of passage, leads to her killing the deer and to her subsequent disillusionment. It also leads to her decision to abandon her nickname. By contrasting “Andrea” with “Andy,” the story reveals the conflict between her “female” nature (illustrated by her compassion) and her desire to emulate the men to whom killing is a sport. This interpretation led the student to conclude that the theme of “Doe Season” is that males and females must, by their natures, have very different outlooks on life.

Other students rejected the negative portrayal of the story’s male characters that the preceding interpretation implies. They pointed out that the father is a sympathetic figure who is extremely supportive; he encourages and defends his daughter. He takes her hunting because he loves her, not because he wants to initiate her into life or to hurt her. One student mentioned that Andy’s reaction (called *buck fever*) when she sees the doe is common in children who kill their first deer. In light of this information, several students concluded that far from being about irreconcilable male and female differences, “Doe Season” makes a statement about a young girl who is hunting for her own identity and who in the process discovers her mortality. Her father is therefore the agent who enables her to confront the inevitability of death, a fact she must accept if she is going to take her place in the adult world. In this sense, the theme of the story is the idea that in order to mature, a child must come to terms with the reality of death.

Different readers may see different themes in a story, but any interpretation of a theme must make sense in light of what is actually in the story. Evidence from the work, not just your own feelings or assumptions, must support your interpretation, and a single statement by a character is not usually enough in itself to reveal a story’s theme. Therefore, you must present a cross-section of examples from the text to support your interpretation of the story’s theme. If you say that the theme of James Joyce’s “Araby” (p. 288) is that an innocent idealist is inevitably doomed to disillusionment, you have to find examples from the text to support this statement. You could begin with the title, concluding that the word *Araby* suggests idealistic dreams of exotic beauty that the boy tries to find when he goes to a bazaar. You could reinforce your interpretation by pointing out that the unattainable woman is a symbol of all that the boy wants so desperately

to find. Finally, you could show how idealism is ultimately crushed by society: at the end of the story, the boy stands alone in the darkness and realizes that his dreams are childish fantasies. Although other readers may have different responses to “Araby,” they will find your interpretation reasonable if you support it with enough examples.



Identifying Themes

Every element of a story can shed light on its themes. As you analyze a short story, look for features that reveal and reinforce what you perceive to be the story’s most important ideas.

- *The title can often provide insight into the theme or themes of a story.* The title of an F. Scott Fitzgerald story, “Babylon Revisited,” emphasizes a major idea in the story—that Paris of the 1920s is like Babylon, the ancient city the Bible singles out as the epitome of evil and corruption. The story’s protagonist, Charlie Wales, comes to realize that no matter how much money he lost after the 1929 stock market crash, he lost more—his wife and his daughter—during the boom, when he was in Paris. Charlie’s search through his past—his return to “Babylon”—provides new meaning to his life and offers him at least a small bit of hope for the future.
- *Sometimes a narrator’s or character’s statement can reveal a theme.* For example, at the beginning of Alberto Alvaro Ríos’s “The Secret Lion” (p. 466), the first-person narrator says, “I was twelve and in junior high school and something happened that we didn’t have a name for, but it was there nonetheless like a lion, and roaring, roaring that way the biggest things do. Everything changed.” Although the narrator does not directly announce the story’s theme, he suggests that the story will convey the idea that the price children pay for growing up is realizing that everything changes, that nothing stays the way it is.
- *The arrangement of events can suggest a story’s theme,* as it does in an Ernest Hemingway story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” At the beginning of the story, the title character is a coward who is stuck in an unhappy marriage. As the story progresses, he gradually learns the nature of courage and, finally, finds it in himself. At the moment of his triumph, however, Francis is shot by his wife; his “happy life” is short indeed. The way the events of the story are presented, through foreshadowing and flashbacks, reveals the connection between Macomber’s marriage and his behavior as a hunter, and this connection in turn helps to reveal a possible theme: that sometimes courage can be more important than life itself.

- *A story's central conflict can offer clues to its theme.* For example, the main character in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (p. 434), a woman who has recently had a baby, is in conflict with the nineteenth-century society in which she lives. She is suffering from “temporary nervous depression,” what doctors today recognize as postpartum depression. Following the practice of the time, her physician has ordered complete bed rest and has instructed her husband to deprive her of all mental and physical stimulation. This harsh treatment leads the narrator to lose her grasp on reality; eventually, she begins to hallucinate. The main conflict of the story is clearly between the woman and her society, controlled by men. This conflict communicates the central theme: that in nineteenth-century America, women are controlled not just by their husbands and the male medical establishment, but also by the society men have created.
- *The point of view of a story can shed light on its theme.* For instance, a writer's use of an unreliable first-person narrator can help to communicate the theme of a story. Thus, Montresor's self-serving first-person account of his crime in “The Cask of Amontillado”—along with his attempts to justify these actions—enables readers to understand the dangers of irrational anger and misplaced ideas about honor. The voice of a third-person narrator can also help to convey a story's theme. For example, the detachment of the narrator in Stephen Crane's Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage* reinforces the theme of the novel: that bravery, cowardice, war, and even life itself are insignificant when set beside the indifference of the universe.
- *Quite often a story's symbols—names, places, and objects—can suggest its theme.* For example, the rocking horse in D. H. Lawrence's “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (p. 409) can be seen as a symbol of the boy's desperate desire to remain a child. Interpreted in this way, it reinforces the theme that innocence cannot survive when it confronts adult greed and selfishness. Similarly, Hawthorne's “Young Goodman Brown” (p. 367) uses symbols such as the walking stick, the woods, sunset and night, and the vague shadows to develop one of its central themes: that once a person strays from the path of faith, evil is everywhere.
- *Finally, changes in a character can shed light on the theme or themes of the story.* The main character in Charles Baxter's “Gryphon” (p. 172), for example, eventually comes to realize that the “lies” his substitute teacher tells may be closer to the truth than the “facts” his other teachers present, and his changing attitude toward her helps to communicate the story's central theme about the nature of truth.

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Theme

- What is the central theme of the story?
- What other themes can you identify?
- Does the title of the story suggest a theme?
- Does the narrator, or any character, make statements that express or imply a theme?
- In what way does the arrangement of events in the story suggest a theme?
- In what way does the central conflict of the story suggest a theme?
- How does the point of view shed light on the story's central theme?
- Do any symbols suggest a theme?
- Do any characters in the story change in any significant way? Do these changes convey a particular theme?



Bettmann/Corbis

EUDORA WELTY (1909–2001) was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. After attending the Mississippi College for Women, the University of Wisconsin, and Columbia University (where she studied advertising), she returned to Jackson to pursue her long career as a writer, beginning as a journalist. In 1936, she wrote the first of her many short stories, which are gathered in *Collected Stories* (1980). Welty also wrote several novels, including *Delta Wedding* (1946), *Losing Battles* (1970), and the Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972). Her volume of memoirs, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), was a best-seller.

One of America's most accomplished writers, Welty focused much of her fiction on life in southern towns and villages peopled with dreamers, eccentrics, and close-knit families. Her sharply observed characters are sometimes presented with great humor, sometimes with poignant lyricism, but always with clarity and sympathy. "Of course any writer is in part all of his characters," she observed. "How otherwise would they be known to him, occur to him, become what they are?" In "A Worn Path," Welty creates a particularly memorable character in the tenacious Phoenix Jackson, and through her she explores a theme that transcends race and region.

Cultural Context During the 1930s, the years of the Great Depression, poverty and unemployment were widespread but were especially severe in isolated rural areas of the South.

For the black population living in this poor and undeveloped region, difficult economic conditions were made worse by the system of segregation that prevented them from voting, receiving a good education, or enjoying the same rights and privileges as their white counterparts. Hoping to improve their situation, many African American families left the South and moved into northern and midwestern cities where there were better opportunities for education and employment. Others, like the protagonist of this story, remained in the South in an atmosphere of residual racism and oppression.

A Worn Path (1940)

It was December—a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson. She was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made a grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird.

She wore a dark striped dress reaching down to her shoe tops, and an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks, with a full pocket: all neat and tidy, but every time she took a step she might have fallen over her shoelaces, which dragged from her unlaced shoes. She looked straight ahead. Her eyes were blue with age. Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper.

Now and then there was a quivering in the thicket. Old Phoenix said, “Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals! . . . Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites. . . . Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don’t let none of those come running my direction. I got a long way.” Under her small black-freckled hand her cane, limber as a buggy whip, would switch at the brush as if to rouse up any hiding things.

On she went. The woods were deep and still. The sun made the pine needles almost too bright to look at, up where the wind rocked. The cones dropped as light as feathers. Down in the hollow was the mourning dove—it was not too late for him.

5 The path ran up a hill. “Seem like there is chains about my feet, time I get this far,” she said, in the voice of argument old people keep to use with themselves. “Something always take a hold of me on this hill—pleads I should stay.”

After she got to the top she turned and gave a full, severe look behind her where she had come. “Up through pines,” she said at length. “Now down through oaks.”

Her eyes opened their widest, and she started down gently. But before she got to the bottom of the hill a bush caught her dress.

Her fingers were busy and intent, but her skirts were full and long, so that before she could pull them free in one place they were caught in another. It was not possible to allow the dress to tear. “I in the thorny bush,” she said. “Thorns, you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes thought you was a pretty little *green* bush.”

Finally, trembling all over, she stood free, and after a moment dared to stoop for her cane.

10 “Sun so high!” she cried, leaning back and looking, while the thick tears went over her eyes. “The time getting all gone here.”

At the foot of this hill was a place where a log was laid across the creek.

“Now comes the trial,” said Phoenix.

Putting her right foot out, she mounted the log and shut her eyes. Lifting her skirt, leveling her cane fiercely before her, like a festival figure in some parade, she began to march across. Then she opened her eyes and she was safe on the other side.

“I wasn’t as old as I thought,” she said.

15 But she sat down to rest. She spread her skirts on the bank around her and folded her hands over her knees. Up above her was a tree in a pearly cloud of mistletoe. She did not dare to close her eyes, and when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble-cake on it she spoke to him. “That would be acceptable,” she said. But when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air.

So she left that tree, and had to go through a barbed-wire fence. There she had to creep and crawl, spreading her knees and stretching her fingers like a baby trying to climb the steps. But she talked loudly to herself: she could not let her dress be torn now, so late in the day, and she could not pay for having her arm or her leg sawed off if she got caught fast where she was.

At last she was safe through the fence and risen up out in the clearing. Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard.

“Who you watching?”

In the furrow she made her way along.

20 “Glad this not the season for bulls,” she said, looking sideways, “and the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep in the winter.

A pleasure I don't see no two-headed snake coming around that tree, where it come once. It took a while to get by him, back in the summer."

She passed through the old cotton and went into a field of dead corn. It whispered and shook and was taller than her head. "Through the maze now," she said, for there was no path.

Then there was something tall, black, and skinny there, moving before her.

At first she took it for a man. It could have been a man dancing in the field. But she stood still and listened, and it did not make a sound. It was as silent as a ghost.

"Ghost," she said sharply, "who be you the ghost of? For I have heard of nary death close by."

But there was no answer—only the ragged dancing in the wind.

25

She shut her eyes, reached out her hand, and touched a sleeve. She found a coat and inside that an emptiness, cold as ice.

"You scarecrow," she said. Her face lighted. "I ought to be shut up for good," she said with laughter. "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know. Dance, old scarecrow," she said, "while I dancing with you."

She kicked her foot over the furrow, and with mouth drawn down, shook her head once or twice in a little strutting way. Some husks blew down and whirled in streamers about her skirts.

Then she went on, parting her way from side to side with the cane, through the whispering field. At last she came to the end, to a wagon track where the silver grass blew between the red ruts. The quail were walking around like pullets, seeming all dainty and unseen.

"Walk pretty," she said. "This is the easy place. This the easy going."

30

She followed the track, swaying through the quiet bare fields, through the little strings of trees silver in their dead leaves, past cabins silver from weather, with the doors and windows boarded shut, all like old women under a spell sitting there. "I walking in their sleep," she said, nodding her head vigorously.

In a ravine she went where a spring was silently flowing through a hollow log. Old Phoenix bent and drank. "Sweet-gum makes the water sweet," she said, and drank more. "Nobody know who made this well, for it was here when I was born."

The track crossed a swampy part where the moss hung as white as lace from every limb. "Sleep on, alligators, and blow your bubbles." Then the track went into the road.

Deep, deep the road went down between the high green-colored banks. Overhead the live-oaks met, and it was as dark as a cave.

A black dog with a lolling tongue came up out of the weeds by the ditch. She was meditating, and not ready, and when he came at her she

35

only hit him a little with her cane. Over she went in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed.

Down there, her senses drifted away. A dream visited her, and she reached her hand up, but nothing reached down and gave her a pull. So she lay there and presently went to talking. “Old woman,” she said to herself, “that black dog come up out of the weeds to stall you off, and now there he sitting on his fine tail, smiling at you.”

A white man finally came along and found her—a hunter, a young man, with his dog on a chain.

“Well, Granny!” he laughed. “What are you doing there?”

“Lying on my back like a June-bug waiting to be turned over, mister,” she said, reaching up her hand.

40 He lifted her up, gave her a swing in the air, and set her down. “Anything broken, Granny?”

“No sir, them old dead weeds is springy enough,” said Phoenix, when she had got her breath. “I thank you for your trouble.”

“Where do you live, Granny?” he asked, while the two dogs were growling at each other.

“Away back yonder, sir, behind the ridge. You can’t even see it from here.”

“On your way home?”

45 “No sir, I going to town.”

“Why, that’s too far! That’s as far as I walk when I come out myself, and I get something for my trouble.” He patted the stuffed bag he carried, and there hung down a little closed claw. It was one of the bob-whites, with its beak hooked bitterly to show it was dead. “Now you go on home, Granny!”

“I bound to go to town, mister,” said Phoenix. “The time come around.”

He gave another laugh, filling the whole landscape. “I know you old colored people! Wouldn’t miss going to town to see Santa Claus!”

But something held old Phoenix very still. The deep lines in her face went into a fierce and different radiation. Without warning, she had seen with her own eyes a flashing nickel fall out of the man’s pocket onto the ground.

50 “How old are you, Granny?” he was saying.

“There is no telling, mister,” she said, “no telling.”

Then she gave a little cry and clapped her hands and said, “Git on away from here, dog! Look! Look at that dog!” She laughed as if in admiration. “He ain’t scared of nobody. He a big black dog.” She whispered, “Sic him!”

“Watch me get rid of that cur,” said the man. “Sic him, Pete! Sic him!”

Phoenix heard the dogs fighting, and heard the man running and throwing sticks. She even heard a gunshot. But she was slowly bending

forward by that time, further and further forward, the lid stretched down over her eyes, as if she were doing this in her sleep. Her chin was lowered almost to her knees. The yellow palm of her hand came out from the fold of her apron. Her fingers slid down and along the ground under the piece of money with the grace and care they would have in lifting an egg from under a setting hen. Then she slowly straightened up, she stood erect, and the nickel was in her apron pocket. A bird flew by. Her lips moved. "God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing."

The man came back, and his own dog panted about them. "Well, 55 I scared him off that time," he said, and then he laughed and lifted his gun and pointed it at Phoenix.

She stood straight and faced him.

"Doesn't the gun scare you?" he said, still pointing it.

"No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done," she said, holding utterly still.

He smiled, and shouldered the gun. "Well, Granny," he said, "you must be a hundred years old, and scared of nothing. I'd give you a dime if I had any money with me. But you take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you."

"I bound to go on my way, mister," said Phoenix. She inclined her 60 head in the red rag. Then they went in different directions, but she could hear the gun shooting again and again over the hill.

She walked on. The shadows hung from the oak trees to the road like curtains. Then she smelled wood-smoke, and smelled the river, and she saw a steeple and the cabins on their steep steps. Dozens of little black children whirled around her. There ahead was Natchez shining. Bells were ringing. She walked on.

In the paved city it was Christmas time. There were red and green electric lights strung and crisscrossed everywhere, and all turned on in the daytime. Old Phoenix would have been lost if she had not distrusted her eyesight and depended on her feet to know where to take her.

She paused quietly on the sidewalk where people were passing by. A lady came along in the crowd, carrying an armful of red-, green- and silver-wrapped presents; she gave off perfume like the red roses in hot summer, and Phoenix stopped her.

"Please, missy, will you lace up my shoe?" She held up her foot.

"What do you want, Grandma?"

"See my shoe," said Phoenix. "Do all right for out in the country, but 65 wouldn't look right to go in a big building."

"Stand still then, Grandma," said the lady. She put her packages down on the sidewalk beside her and laced and tied both shoes tightly.

"Can't lace 'em with a cane," said Phoenix. "Thank you, missy. I doesn't mind asking a nice lady to tie up my shoe, when I gets out on the street."

Moving slowly and from side to side, she went into the big building, and into a tower of steps, where she walked up and around and around until her feet knew to stop.

70 She entered a door, and there she saw nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head.

“Here I be,” she said. There was a fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body.

“A charity case, I suppose,” said an attendant who sat at the desk before her.

But Phoenix only looked above her head. There was sweat on her face, the wrinkles in her face shone like a bright net.

“Speak up, Grandma,” the woman said. “What’s your name? We must have your history, you know. Have you been here before? What seems to be the trouble with you?”

75 Old Phoenix only gave a twitch to her face as if a fly were bothering her.

“Are you deaf?” cried the attendant.

But then the nurse came in.

“Oh, that’s just old Aunt Phoenix,” she said. “She doesn’t come for herself—she has a little grandson. She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork. She lives away back off the Old Natchez Trace.” She bent down. “Well, Aunt Phoenix, why don’t you just take a seat? We won’t keep you standing after your long trip.” She pointed.

The old woman sat down, bolt upright in the chair.

80 “Now, how is the boy?” asked the nurse.

Old Phoenix did not speak.

“I said, how is the boy?”

But Phoenix only waited and stared straight ahead, her face very solemn and withdrawn into rigidity.

“Is his throat any better?” asked the nurse. “Aunt Phoenix, don’t you hear me? Is your grandson’s throat any better since the last time you came for the medicine?”

85 With her hands on her knees, the old woman waited, silent, erect and motionless, just as if she were in armor.

“You mustn’t take up our time this way, Aunt Phoenix,” the nurse said. “Tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over. He isn’t dead, is he?”

At last there came a flicker and then a flame of comprehension across her face, and she spoke.

“My grandson. It was my memory had left me. There I sat and forgot why I made my long trip.”

“Forgot?” The nurse frowned. “After you came so far?”

90 Then Phoenix was like an old woman begging a dignified forgiveness for waking up frightened in the night. “I never did go to school, I was too

old at the Surrender,”¹ she said in a soft voice. “I’m an old woman without an education. It was my memory fail me. My little grandson, he is just the same, and I forgot it in the coming.”

“Throat never heals, does it?” said the nurse, speaking in a loud, sure voice to old Phoenix. By now she had a card with something written on it, a little list. “Yes. Swallowed lye. When was it?—January—two-three years ago—”

Phoenix spoke unasked now. “No, missy, he not dead, he just the same. Every little while his throat begin to close up again, and he not able to swallow. He not get his breath. He not able to help himself. So the time come around, and I go on another trip for the soothing medicine.”

“All right. The doctor said as long as you came to get it, you could have it,” said the nurse. “But it’s an obstinate case.”

“My little grandson, he sit up there in the house all wrapped up, waiting by himself,” Phoenix went on. “We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don’t seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last. He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird. I remembers so plain now. I not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation.”

“All right.” The nurse was trying to hush her now. She brought her a 95 bottle of medicine. “Charity,” she said, making a check mark in a book.

Old Phoenix held the bottle close to her eyes, and then carefully put it into her pocket.

“I thank you,” she said.

“It’s Christmas time, Grandma,” said the attendant. “Could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?”

“Five pennies is a nickel,” said Phoenix stiffly.

“Here’s a nickel,” said the attendant. 100

Phoenix rose carefully and held out her hand. She received the nickel and then fished the other nickel out of her pocket and laid it beside the new one. She stared at her palm closely, with her head on one side.

Then she gave a tap with her cane on the floor.

“This is what come to me to do,” she said. “I going to the store and buy my child a little windmill they sells, made out of paper. He going to find it hard to believe there such a thing in the world. I’ll march myself back where he waiting, holding it straight up in this hand.”

She lifted her free hand, gave a little nod, turned around, and walked out of the doctor’s office. Then her slow step began on the stairs, going down.

¹*the Surrender*: The surrender of General Robert E. Lee to General Ulysses S. Grant at the end of the Civil War, April 9, 1865.

Reading and Reacting

1. How does the first paragraph set the scene for the rest of the story? How does it foreshadow the events that will take place later on?
2. Traditionally, a **quest** is a journey in which a knight overcomes a series of obstacles in order to perform a prescribed feat. In what way is Phoenix's journey a quest? What obstacles does she face? What feat must she perform?
3. Because Phoenix is old, she has trouble seeing. What things does she have difficulty seeing? How do her mistakes shed light on her character? How do they contribute to the impact of the story?
4. What is the major theme of this story? What other themes are expressed?
5. A **phoenix** is a mythical bird that would live for five hundred years, be consumed by fire, and then rise from its own ashes. In what way is the name of this creature appropriate for the main character of this story?
6. Phoenix is not intimidated by the man with the gun and has no difficulty asking a white woman to tie her shoe. In spite of her pride and her strength of character, however, Phoenix has no qualms about stealing a nickel or taking charity from the doctor. How do you account for this apparent contradiction?
7. How do the various people Phoenix encounters react to her? Do they treat her with respect? with disdain? Why do you think they react the way they do?
8. In paragraph 90, Phoenix says that she is an old woman without an education. Even so, what knowledge does she seem to have that the other characters lack?
9. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Could "A Worn Path" be seen as an **allegory**? If so, what might each of the characters represent?
10. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Writing about "A Worn Path," Eudora Welty said that the question she was asked most frequently by both students and teachers was whether Phoenix Jackson's grandson was actually dead. Here she attempts to answer this question:

I had not meant to mystify readers by withholding any fact; it is not a writer's business to tease. The story is told through Phoenix's mind and she undertakes her errand. As the author at one with the character as I tell it, I must assume that the boy is alive. As the reader, you are free to think as you like, of course; the story invites you to believe that no matter what happens, Phoenix for as long as she is able to walk and can hold to her purpose will make her journey.

Do you think Phoenix's grandson is alive or dead? Why?

Related Works: "Miss Brill" (p. 166), "Araby" (p. 288), "Everyday Use" (p. 344), "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (p. 769)



Photography by Joyce Wiener

DAVID MICHAEL KAPLAN (1946–) is one of a group of American writers who, along with South American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez of Columbia, are called “magic realists.” Magic realists work outside of the borders of traditional fantasy writing, seamlessly interweaving magical elements with detailed, realistically drawn “everyday” settings. These elements, says a reviewer of Kaplan’s work, are invoked “to illuminate and underscore heightened moments of reality.” The story “Doe Season,” which appeared in Kaplan’s debut collection, *Comfort* (1987), was included in *Best American Short Stories 1985*. Kaplan’s first novel, *Skating in the Dark*, was published in 1991, and his

writing text, *Revision: A Creative Approach to Writing and Re-writing Fiction*, was published in 1997. Kaplan teaches fiction writing at Loyola University Chicago.

Interestingly, the stories in *Comfort* break from classic “first-time author” tradition by side-stepping the autobiographical, young-man-comes-of-age theme. Instead, these stories are about young girls—or young women—coming to grips with parents (present or absent) and with loss and searching for ways to resolve their ambivalence about becoming women. In “Doe Season,” Andy’s surreal encounter with the doe may be a dream, but the beauty and horror of their meeting will affect the rest of her life.

Cultural Context When European settlers first came to America, deer roamed freely from coast to coast, and the settlers hunted them to put meat on the table. Today, deer are hunted in a regulated fashion in order to control their numbers and maintain a balance in their population. Deer hunting has long been viewed as a coming-of-age ritual for young men—and, more recently, for young women first entering adulthood, like the protagonist in this story. It used to be the tradition that a young hunter who missed his first deer had his shirttail cut off; if he succeeded, his face was smeared with the blood of his first kill. Now few hunters observe these initiation rites.

Doe Season (1985)

They were always the same woods, she thought sleepily as they drove through the early morning darkness—deep and immense, covered with yesterday’s snowfall, which had frozen overnight. They were the same woods that lay behind her house, *and they stretch all the way to here*, she thought, *for miles and miles, longer than I could walk in a day, or a week even, but they are still the same woods*. The thought made her feel good: it was like thinking of God; it was like thinking of the space between here and the moon; it was like thinking of all the foreign countries from her geography book where even now, Andy knew, people were going to bed, while they—she and her father and Charlie Spoon and Mac, Charlie’s

eleven-year-old son—were driving deeper into the Pennsylvania countryside, to go hunting.

They had risen long before dawn. Her mother, yawning and not trying to hide her sleepiness, cooked them eggs and French toast. Her father smoked a cigarette and flicked ashes into his saucer while Andy listened, wondering *Why doesn't he come?* and *Won't he ever come?* until at last a car pulled into the graveled drive and honked. "That will be Charlie Spoon," her father said; he always said "Charlie Spoon," even though his real name was Spreun, because Charlie was, in a sense, shaped like a spoon, with a large head and a narrow waist and chest.

Andy's mother kissed her and her father and said, "Well, have a good time" and "Be careful." Soon they were outside in the bitter dark, loading gear by the back-porch light, their breath steaming. The woods behind the house were then only a black streak against the wash of night.

Andy dozed in the car and woke to find that it was half light. Mac—also sleeping—had slid against her. She pushed him away and looked out the window. Her breath clouded the glass, and she was cold; the car's heater didn't work right. They were riding over gentle hills, the woods on both sides now—the same woods, she knew, because she had been watching the whole way, even while she slept. They had been in her dreams, and she had never lost sight of them.

5 Charlie Spoon was driving. "I don't understand why she's coming," he said to her father. "How old is she anyway—eight?"

"Nine," her father replied. "She's small for her age."

"So—nine. What's the difference? She'll just add to the noise and get tired besides."

"No, she won't," her father said. "She can walk me to death. And she'll bring good luck, you'll see. Animals—I don't know how she does it, but they come right up to her. We go walking in the woods, and we'll spot more raccoons and possums and such than I ever see when I'm alone."

Charlie grunted.

10 "Besides, she's not a bad little shot, even if she doesn't hunt yet. She shoots the .22 real good."

"Popgun," Charlie said, and snorted. "And target shooting ain't deer hunting."

"Well, she's not gonna be shooting anyway, Charlie," her father said. "Don't worry. She'll be no bother."

"I still don't know why she's coming," Charlie said.

"Because she wants to, and I want her to. Just like you and Mac. No difference."

15 Charlie turned onto a side road and after a mile or so slowed down. "That's it!" he cried. He stopped, backed up, and entered a narrow dirt road almost hidden by trees. Five hundred yards down, the road ran

parallel to a fenced-in field. Charlie parked in a cleared area deeply rutted by frozen tractor tracks. The gate was locked. *In the spring*, Andy thought, *there will be cows here, and a dog that chases them*, but now the field was unmarked and bare.

"This is it," Charlie Spoon declared. "Me and Mac was up here just two weeks ago, scouting it out, and there's deer. Mac saw the tracks."

"That's right," Mac said.

"Well, we'll just see about that," her father said, putting on his gloves. He turned to Andy. "How you doing, honeybun?"

"Just fine," she said.

Andy shivered and stamped as they unloaded: first the rifles, which they unsheathed and checked, sliding the bolts, sighting through scopes, adjusting the slings; then the gear, their food and tents and sleeping bags and stove stored in four backpacks—three big ones for Charlie Spoon and her father and Mac, and a day pack for her.

"That's about your size," Mac said, to tease her.

She reddened and said, "Mac, I can carry a pack big as yours any day." He laughed and pressed his knee against the back of hers, so that her leg buckled. "Cut it out," she said. She wanted to make an iceball and throw it at him, but she knew that her father and Charlie were anxious to get going, and she didn't want to displease them.

Mac slid under the gate, and they handed the packs over to him. Then they slid under and began walking across the field toward the same woods that ran all the way back to her home, where even now her mother was probably rising again to wash their breakfast dishes and make herself a fresh pot of coffee. *She is there, and we are here*: the thought satisfied Andy. There was no place else she would rather be.

Mac came up beside her. "Over there's Canada," he said, nodding toward the woods.

"Huh!" she said. "Not likely."

"I don't mean *right* over there. I mean farther up north. You think I'm dumb?"

Dumb as your father, she thought.

"Look at that," Mac said, pointing to a piece of cow dung lying on a spot scraped bare of snow. "A frozen meadow muffin." He picked it up and sailed it at her. "Catch!"

"Mac!" she yelled. His laugh was as gawky as he was. She walked faster. He seemed different today somehow, bundled in his yellow-and-black-checked coat, a rifle in hand, his silly floppy hat not quite covering his ears. They all seemed different as she watched them trudge through the snow—Mac and her father and Charlie Spoon—bigger, maybe, as if the cold landscape enlarged rather than diminished them, so that they, the only figures in that landscape, took on size and meaning just by

being there. If they weren't there, everything would be quieter, and the woods would be the same as before. *But they are here*, Andy thought, looking behind her at the boot prints in the snow, *and I am too, and so it's all different.*

30 “We’ll go down to the cut where we found those deer tracks,” Charlie said as they entered the woods. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and get a late one coming through.”

The woods descended into a gully. The snow was softer and deeper here, so that often Andy sank to her knees. Charlie and Mac worked the top of the gully while she and her father walked along the base some thirty yards behind them. “If they miss the first shot, we’ll get the second,” her father said, and she nodded as if she had known this all the time. She listened to the crunch of their boots, their breathing, and the drumming of a distant woodpecker. And the crackling. In winter the woods crackled as if everything were straining, ready to snap like dried chicken bones.

We are hunting, Andy thought. The cold air burned her nostrils.

They stopped to make lunch by a rock outcropping that protected them from the wind. Her father heated the bean soup her mother had made for them, and they ate it with bread already stiff from the cold. He and Charlie took a few pulls from a flask of Jim Beam while she scoured the plates with snow and repacked them. Then they all had coffee with sugar and powdered milk, and her father poured her a cup too. “We won’t tell your momma,” he said, and Mac laughed. Andy held the cup the way her father did, not by the handle but around the rim. The coffee tasted smoky. She felt a little queasy, but she drank it all.

Charlie Spoon picked his teeth with a fingernail. “Now, you might’ve noticed one thing,” he said.

35 “What’s that?” her father asked.

“You might’ve noticed you don’t hear no rifles. That’s because there ain’t no other hunters here. We’ve got the whole damn woods to ourselves. Now, I ask you—do I know how to find ‘em?”

“We haven’t seen deer yet, neither.”

“Oh, we will,” Charlie said, “but not for a while now.” He leaned back against the rock. “Deer’re sleeping, resting up for the evening feed.”

“I seen a deer behind our house once, and it was afternoon,” Andy said.

40 “Yeah, honey, but that was *before* deer season,” Charlie said, grinning. “They know something now. They’re smart that way.”

“That’s right,” Mac said.

Andy looked at her father—had she said something stupid?

“Well, Charlie,” he said, “if they know so much, how come so many get themselves shot?”

“Them’s the ones that don’t *believe* what they know,” Charlie replied. The men laughed. Andy hesitated, and then laughed with them.

They moved on, as much to keep warm as to find a deer. The wind 45 became even stronger. Blowing through the treetops, it sounded like the ocean, and once Andy thought she could smell salt air. But that was impossible; the ocean was *hundreds* of miles away, farther than Canada even. She and her parents had gone last summer to stay for a week at a motel on the New Jersey shore. That was the first time she'd seen the ocean, and it frightened her. It was huge and empty, yet always moving. Everything lay hidden. If you walked in it, you couldn't see how deep it was or what might be below; if you swam, something could pull you under and you'd never be seen again. Its musky, rank smell made her think of things dying. Her mother had floated beyond the breakers, calling to her to come in, but Andy wouldn't go farther than a few feet into the surf. Her mother swam and splashed with animal-like delight while her father, smiling shyly, held his white arms above the waist-deep water as if afraid to get them wet. Once a comber rolled over and sent them both tossing, and when her mother tried to stand up, the surf receding behind, Andy saw that her mother's swimsuit top had come off, so that her breasts swayed free, her nipples like two dark eyes. Embarrassed, Andy looked around: except for two women under a yellow umbrella farther up, the beach was empty. Her mother stood up unsteadily, regained her footing. Taking what seemed the longest time, she calmly refixed her top. Andy lay on the beach towel and closed her eyes. The sound of the surf made her head ache.

And now it was winter; the sky was already dimming, not just with the absence of light but with a mist that clung to the hunters' faces like cobwebs. They made camp early. Andy was chilled. When she stood still, she kept wiggling her toes to make sure they were there. Her father rubbed her arms and held her to him briefly, and that felt better. She unpacked the food while the others put up the tents.

"How about rounding us up some firewood, Mac?" Charlie asked.

"I'll do it," Andy said. Charlie looked at her thoughtfully and then handed her the canvas carrier.

There wasn't much wood on the ground, so it took her a while to get a good load. She was about a hundred yards from camp, near a cluster of high, lichen-covered boulders, when she saw through a crack in the rock a buck and two does walking gingerly, almost daintily, through the alder trees. She tried to hush her breathing as they passed not more than twenty yards away. There was nothing she could do. If she yelled, they'd be gone; by the time she got back to camp, they'd be gone. The buck stopped, nostrils quivering, tail up and alert. He looked directly at her. Still she didn't move, not one muscle. He was a beautiful buck, the color of late-turned maple leaves. Unafraid, he lowered his tail, and he and his does silently merged into the trees. Andy walked back to camp and dropped the firewood.

50 “I saw three deer,” she said. “A buck and two does.”

“Where?” Charlie Spoon cried, looking behind her as if they might have followed her into camp.

“In the woods yonder. They’re gone now.”

“Well, hell!” Charlie banged his coffee cup against his knee.

“Didn’t I say she could find animals?” her father said, grinning.

55 “Too late to go after them,” Charlie muttered. “It’ll be dark in a quarter hour. Damn!”

“Damn,” Mac echoed.

“They just walk right up to her,” her father said.

“Well, leastwise this proves there’s deer here.” Charlie began snapping long branches into shorter ones. “You know, I think I’ll stick with you,” he told Andy, “since you’re so good at finding deer and all. How’d that be?”

“Okay, I guess,” Andy murmured. She hoped he was kidding; no way did she want to hunt with Charlie Spoon. Still, she was pleased he had said it.

60 Her father and Charlie took one tent, she and Mac the other. When they were in their sleeping bags, Mac said in the darkness, “I bet you really didn’t see no deer, did you?”

She sighed. “I did, Mac. Why would I lie?”

“How big was the buck?”

“Four point. I counted.”

Mac snorted.

65 “You just believe what you want, Mac,” she said testily.

“Too bad it ain’t buck season,” he said. “Well, I got to go pee.”

“So pee.”

She heard him turn in his bag. “You ever see it?” he asked.

“It? What’s ‘it’?”

70 “It. A pecker.”

“Sure,” she lied.

“Whose? Your father’s?”

She was uncomfortable. “No,” she said.

“Well, whose then?”

75 “Oh I don’t know! Leave me be, why don’t you?”

“Didn’t see a deer, didn’t see a pecker,” Mac said teasingly.

She didn’t answer right away. Then she said, “My cousin Lewis. I saw his.”

“Well, how old’s he?”

“One and a half.”

80 “Ha! A baby! A baby’s is like a little worm. It ain’t a real one at all.”

If he says he’ll show me his, she thought, I’ll kick him. I’ll just get out of my bag and kick him.

"I went hunting with my daddy and Versh and Danny Simmons last year in buck season," Mac said, "and we got ourselves one. And we hog-dressed the thing. You know what that is, don't you?"

"No," she said. She was confused. What was he talking about now?

"That's when you cut him open and take out all his guts, so the meat don't spoil. Makes him lighter to pack out, too."

She tried to imagine what the deer's guts might look like, pulled from the gaping hole. "What do you do with them?" she said. "The guts?"

"Oh, just leave 'em for the bears."

She ran her finger like a knife blade along her belly.

"When we left them on the ground," Mac said, "they smoked. Like they were cooking."

"Huh," she said.

"They cut off the deer's pecker, too, you know."

Andy imagined Lewis's pecker and shuddered. "Mac, you're disgusting."

He laughed. "Well, I gotta go pee." She heard him rustle out of his bag. "Broo!" he cried, flapping his arms. "It's cold!"

He makes so much noise, she thought, just noise and more noise.

Her father woke them before first light. He warned them to talk softly and said that they were going to the place where Andy had seen the deer, to try to cut them off on their way back from their night feeding. Andy couldn't shake off her sleep. Stuffing her sleeping bag into its sack seemed to take an hour, and tying her boots was the strangest thing she'd ever done. Charlie Spoon made hot chocolate and oatmeal with raisins. Andy closed her eyes and, between beats of her heart, listened to the breathing of the forest. *When I open my eyes, it will be lighter*, she decided. But when she did, it was still just as dark, except for the swaths of their flashlights and the hissing blue flame of the stove. *There has to be just one moment when it all changes from dark to light*, Andy thought. She had missed it yesterday, in the car; today she would watch more closely.

But when she remembered again, it was already first light and they had moved to the rocks by the deer trail and had set up shooting positions—Mac and Charlie Spoon on the up-trail side, she and her father behind them, some six feet up on a ledge. The day became brighter, the sun piercing the tall pines, raking the hunters, yet providing little warmth. Andy now smelled alder and pine and the slightly rotten odor of rock lichen. She rubbed her hand over the stone and considered that it must be very old, had probably been here before the giant pines, *before anyone was in these woods at all*. A chipmunk sniffed on a nearby branch. She aimed an imaginary rifle and pressed the trigger. The chipmunk froze, then scurried away. Her legs were cramping on the narrow ledge. Her father seemed

to doze, one hand in his parka, the other cupped lightly around the rifle. She could smell his scent of old wool and leather. His cheeks were speckled with gray-black whiskers, and he worked his jaws slightly, as if chewing a small piece of gum.

Please let us get a deer, she prayed.

A branch snapped on the other side of the rock face. Her father's hand stiffened on the rifle, startling her—*He hasn't been sleeping at all,* she marveled—and then his jaw relaxed, as did the lines around his eyes, and she heard Charlie Spoon call, “Yo, don't shoot, it's us.” He and Mac appeared from around the rock. They stopped beneath the ledge. Charlie solemnly crossed his arms.

“I don't believe we're gonna get any deer here,” he said drily.

Andy's father lowered his rifle to Charlie and jumped down from the ledge. Then he reached up for Andy. She dropped into his arms and he set her gently on the ground.

100 Mac sidled up to her. “I knew you didn't see no deer,” he said.

“Just because they don't come when you want 'em to don't mean she didn't see them,” her father said.

Still, she felt bad. Her telling about the deer had caused them to spend the morning there, cold and expectant, with nothing to show for it.

They tramped through the woods for another two hours, not caring much about noise. Mac found some deer tracks, and they argued about how old they were. They split up for a while and then rejoined at an old logging road that deer might use, and followed it. The road crossed a stream, which had mostly frozen over but in a few spots still caught leaves and twigs in an icy swirl. They forded it by jumping from rock to rock. The road narrowed after that, and the woods thickened.

They stopped for lunch, heating up Charlie's wife's corn chowder. Andy's father cut squares of applesauce cake with his hunting knife and handed them to her and Mac, who ate his almost daintily. Andy could faintly taste knife oil on the cake. She was tired. She stretched her leg; the muscle that had cramped on the rock still ached.

105 “Might as well relax,” her father said, as if reading her thoughts. “We won't find deer till supertime.”

Charlie Spoon leaned back against his pack and folded his hands across his stomach. “Well, even if we don't get a deer,” he said expansively, “it's still great to be out here, breathe some fresh air, clomp around a bit. Get away from the house and the old lady.” He winked at Mac, who looked away.

“That's what the woods are all about, anyway,” Charlie said. “It's where the women don't want to go.” He bowed his head toward Andy. “With your exception, of course, little lady.” He helped himself to another piece of applesauce cake.

“She ain't a woman,” Mac said.

“Well, she damn well’s gonna be,” Charlie said. He grinned at her. “Or will you? You’re half a boy anyway. You go by a boy’s name. What’s your real name? Andrea, ain’t it?”

“That’s right,” she said. She hoped that if she didn’t look at him, 110 Charlie would stop.

“Well, which do you like? Andy or Andrea?”

“Don’t matter,” she mumbled. “Either.”

“She’s always been Andy to me,” her father said.

Charlie Spoon was still grinning. “So what are you gonna be, Andrea? A boy or a girl?”

“I’m a girl,” she said. 115

“But you want to go hunting and fishing and everything, huh?”

“She can do whatever she likes,” her father said.

“Hell, you might as well have just had a boy and be done with it!” Charlie exclaimed.

“That’s funny,” her father said, and chuckled. “That’s just what her momma tells me.”

They were looking at her, and she wanted to get away from them all, 120 even from her father, who chose to joke with them.

“I’m going to walk a bit,” she said.

She heard them laughing as she walked down the logging trail. She flapped her arms; she whistled. *I don’t care how much noise I make*, she thought. Two grouse flew from the underbrush, startling her. A little farther down, the trail ended in a clearing that enlarged into a frozen meadow; beyond it the woods began again. A few moldering posts were all that was left of a fence that had once enclosed the field. The low afternoon sunlight reflected brightly off the snow, so that Andy’s eyes hurt. She squinted hard. A gust of wind blew across the field, stinging her face. And then, as if it had been waiting for her, the doe emerged from the trees opposite and stepped cautiously into the field. Andy watched: it stopped and stood quietly for what seemed a long time and then ambled across. It stopped again about seventy yards away and began to browse in a patch of sugar grass uncovered by the wind. Carefully, slowly, never taking her eyes from the doe, Andy walked backward, trying to step into the boot prints she’d already made. When she was far enough back into the woods, she turned and walked faster, her heart racing. *Please let it stay*, she prayed.

“There’s doe in the field yonder,” she told them.

They got their rifles and hurried down the trail.

“No use,” her father said. “We’re making too much noise any way you 125 look at it.”

“At least we got us the wind in our favor,” Charlie Spoon said, breathing heavily.

But the doe was still there, grazing.

“Good Lord,” Charlie whispered. He looked at her father. “Well, whose shot?”

“Andy spotted it,” her father said in a low voice. “Let her shoot it.”

130 “What!” Charlie’s eyes widened.

Andy couldn’t believe what her father had just said. She’d only shot tin cans and targets; she’d never even fired her father’s .30-.30, and she’d never killed anything.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“That’s right, she can’t,” Charlie Spoon insisted. “She’s not old enough and she don’t have a license even if she was!”

“Well, who’s to tell?” her father said in a low voice. “Nobody’s going to know but us.” He looked at her. “Do you want to shoot it, punkin?”

135 *Why doesn’t it hear us?* she wondered. *Why doesn’t it run away?* “I don’t know,” she said.

“Well, I’m sure as hell gonna shoot it,” Charlie said. Her father grasped Charlie’s rifle barrel and held it. His voice was steady.

“Andy’s a good shot. It’s her deer. She found it, not you. You’d still be sitting on your ass back in camp.” He turned to her again. “Now—do you want to shoot it, Andy? Yes or no.”

He was looking at her; they were all looking at her. Suddenly she was angry at the deer, who refused to hear them, who wouldn’t run away even when it could. “I’ll shoot it,” she said. Charlie turned away in disgust.

She lay on the ground and pressed the rifle stock against her shoulder bone. The snow was cold through her parka; she smelled oil and wax and damp earth. She pulled off one glove with her teeth. “It sights just like the .22,” her father said gently. “Cartridge’s already chambered.” As she had done so many times before, she sighted down the scope; now the doe was in the reticle. She moved the barrel until the cross hairs lined up. Her father was breathing beside her.

140 “Aim where the chest and legs meet, or a little above, punkin,” he was saying calmly. “That’s the killing shot.”

But now, seeing it in the scope, Andy was hesitant. Her finger weakened on the trigger. Still, she nodded at what her father said and sighted again, the cross hairs lining up in exactly the same spot—the doe had hardly moved, its brownish-gray body outlined starkly against the blue-backed snow. *It doesn’t know*, Andy thought. *It just doesn’t know*. And as she looked, deer and snow and faraway trees flattened within the circular frame to become like a picture on a calendar, not real, and she felt calm, as if she had been dreaming everything—the day, the deer, the hunt itself. And she, finger on trigger, was only a part of that dream.

“Shoot!” Charlie hissed.

Through the scope she saw the deer look up, ears high and straining.

Charlie groaned, and just as he did, and just at the moment when Andy knew—*knew*—the doe would bound away, as if she could feel its haunches tensing and gathering power, she pulled the trigger. Later she would think, *I felt the recoil, I smelled the smoke, but I don't remember pulling the trigger.* Through the scope the deer seemed to shrink into itself, and then slowly knelt, hind legs first, head raised as if to cry out. It trembled, still straining to keep its head high, as if that alone would save it; failing, it collapsed, shuddered, and lay still.

"Whoee!" Mac cried.

145

"One shot! One shot!" her father yelled, clapping her on the back. Charlie Spoon was shaking his head and smiling dumbly.

"I told you she was a great little shot!" her father said. "I told you!" Mac danced and clapped his hands. She was dazed, not quite understanding what had happened. And then they were crossing the field toward the fallen doe, she walking dreamlike, the men laughing and joking, released now from the tension of silence and anticipation. Suddenly Mac pointed and cried out, "Look at that!"

The doe was rising, legs unsteady. They stared at it, unable to comprehend, and in that moment the doe regained its feet and looked at them, as if it too were trying to understand. Her father whistled softly. Charlie Spoon unslung his rifle and raised it to his shoulder, but the doe was already bounding away. His hurried shot missed, and the deer disappeared into the woods.

"Damn, damn, damn," he moaned.

"I don't believe it," her father said. "That deer was dead."

150

"Dead, hell!" Charlie yelled. "It was gutshot, that's all. Stunned and gutshot. Clean shot, my ass!"

What have I done? Andy thought.

Her father slung his rifle over his shoulder. "Well, let's go. It can't get too far."

"Hell, I've seen deer run ten miles gutshot," Charlie said. He waved his arms. "We may never find her!"

As they crossed the field, Mac came up to her and said in a low voice, 155
"Gutshoot a deer, you'll go to hell."

"Shut up, Mac," she said, her voice cracking. It was a terrible thing she had done, she knew. She couldn't bear to think of the doe in pain and frightened. *Please let it die,* she prayed.

But though they searched all the last hour of daylight, so that they had to recross the field and go up the logging trail in a twilight made even deeper by thick, smoky clouds, they didn't find the doe. They lost its trail almost immediately in the dense stands of alderberry and larch.

"I am cold, and I am tired," Charlie Spoon declared. "And if you ask me, that deer's in another county already."

“No one’s asking you, Charlie,” her father said.

160 They had a supper of hard salami and ham, bread, and the rest of the applesauce cake. It seemed a bother to heat the coffee, so they had cold chocolate instead. Everyone turned in early.

“We’ll find it in the morning, honeybun,” her father said, as she went to her tent.

“I don’t like to think of it suffering.” She was almost in tears.

“It’s dead already, punkin. Don’t even think about it.” He kissed her, his breath sour and his beard rough against her cheek.

Andy was sure she wouldn’t get to sleep; the image of the doe falling, falling, then rising again, repeated itself whenever she closed her eyes. Then she heard an owl hoot and realized that it had awakened her, so she must have been asleep after all. She hoped the owl would hush, but instead it hooted louder. She wished her father or Charlie Spoon would wake up and do something about it, but no one moved in the other tent, and suddenly she was afraid that they had all decamped, wanting nothing more to do with her. She whispered, “Mac, Mac,” to the sleeping bag where he should be, but no one answered. She tried to find the flashlight she always kept by her side, but couldn’t, and she cried in panic, “Mac, are you there?” He mumbled something, and immediately she felt foolish and hoped he wouldn’t reply.

165 When she awoke again, everything had changed. The owl was gone, the woods were still, and she sensed light, blue and pale, light where before there had been none. *The moon must have come out*, she thought. And it was warm, too, warmer than it should have been. She got out of her sleeping bag and took off her parka—it was that warm. Mac was asleep, wheezing like an old man. She unzipped the tent and stepped outside.

The woods were more beautiful than she had ever seen them. The moon made everything ice-rimmed glimmer with a crystallized, immanent light, while underneath that ice the branches of trees were as stark as skeletons. She heard a crunching in the snow, the one sound in all that silence, and there, walking down the logging trail into their camp, was the doe. Its body, like everything around her, was silvered with frost and moonlight. It walked past the tent where her father and Charlie Spoon were sleeping and stopped no more than six feet from her. Andy saw that she had shot it, yes, had shot it cleanly, just where she thought she had, the wound a jagged, bloody hole in the doe’s chest.

A heart shot, she thought.

The doe stepped closer, so that Andy, if she wished, could have reached out and touched it. It looked at her as if expecting her to do this, and so she did, running her hand, slowly at first, along the rough, matted fur, then down to the edge of the wound, where she stopped. The doe stood still. Hesitantly, Andy felt the edge of the wound. The torn flesh

was sticky and warm. The wound parted under her touch. And then, almost without her knowing it, her fingers were within, probing, yet still the doe didn't move. Andy pressed deeper, through flesh and muscle and sinew, until her whole hand and more was inside the wound and she had found the doe's heart, warm and beating. She cupped it gently in her hand. *Alive*, she marveled. *Alive*.

The heart quickened under her touch, becoming warmer and warmer until it was hot enough to burn. In pain, Andy tried to remove her hand, but the wound closed about it and held her fast. Her hand was burning. She cried out in agony, sure they would all hear and come help, but they didn't. And then her hand pulled free, followed by a steaming rush of blood, more blood than she ever could have imagined—it covered her hand and arm, and she saw to her horror that her hand was steaming. She moaned and fell to her knees and plunged her hand into the snow. The doe looked at her gently and then turned and walked back up the trail.

In the morning, when she woke, Andy could still smell the blood, but ¹⁷⁰ she felt no pain. She looked at her hand. Even though it appeared unscathed, it felt weak and withered. She couldn't move it freely and was afraid the others would notice. *I will hide it in my jacket pocket*, she decided, *so nobody can see*. She ate the oatmeal that her father cooked and stayed apart from them all. No one spoke to her, and that suited her. A light snow began to fall. It was the last day of their hunting trip. She wanted to be home.

Her father dumped the dregs of his coffee. "Well, let's go look for her," he said.

Again they crossed the field. Andy lagged behind. She averted her eyes from the spot where the doe had fallen, already filling up with snow. Mac and Charlie entered the woods first, followed by her father. Andy remained in the field and considered the smear of gray sky, the nearby flock of crows pecking at unyielding stubble. *I will stay here*, she thought, *and not move for a long while*. But now someone—Mac—was yelling. Her father appeared at the woods' edge and waved for her to come. She ran and pushed through a brake of alderberry and larch. The thick underbrush scratched her face. For a moment she felt lost and looked wildly about. Then, where the brush thinned, she saw them standing quietly in the falling snow. They were staring down at the dead doe. A film covered its upturned eye, and its body was lightly dusted with snow.

"I told you she wouldn't get too far," Andy's father said triumphantly. "We must've just missed her yesterday. Too blind to see."

"We're just damn lucky no animal got to her last night," Charlie muttered.

Her father lifted the doe's foreleg. The wound was blood-clotted, ¹⁷⁵ brown, and caked like frozen mud. "Clean shot," he said to Charlie. He grinned. "My little girl."

Then he pulled out his knife, the blade gray as the morning. Mac whispered to Andy, “Now watch this,” while Charlie Spoon lifted the doe from behind by its forelegs so that its head rested between his knees, its underside exposed. Her father’s knife sliced thickly from chest to belly to crotch, and Andy was running from them, back to the field and across, scattering the crows who cawed and circled angrily. And now they were all calling to her—Charlie Spoon and Mac and her father—crying *Andy*, *Andy* (but that wasn’t her name, she would no longer be called that); yet louder than any of them was the wind blowing through the treetops, like the ocean where her mother floated in green water, also calling *Come in, come in*, while all around her roared the mocking of the terrible, now inevitable, sea.

Reading and Reacting

1. The initiation of a child into adulthood is a common literary theme. In this story, hunting is presented as an initiation rite. In what way is hunting an appropriate coming-of-age ritual?
2. Which characters are in conflict in this story? Which ideas are in conflict? How do these conflicts help to communicate the story’s initiation theme?
3. In the story’s opening paragraph and elsewhere, Andy finds comfort and reassurance in the idea that the woods are “always the same”; later in the story, she remembers the ocean, “huge and empty, yet always moving. Everything lay hidden . . .” (par. 45). How does the contrast between the woods and the ocean suggest the transition she must make from childhood to adulthood?
4. How do the references to blood support the story’s initiation theme? Do they suggest other themes as well?
5. Throughout the story, references are made to Andy’s ability to inspire the trust of animals. As her father says, “Animals—I don’t know how she does it, but they come right up to her” (par. 8). How does his comment foreshadow later events?
6. Why does Andy pray that she and the others will get a deer? What makes her change her mind? How does the change in Andy’s character help to convey the story’s theme?
7. Andy’s mother is not an active participant in the story’s events. Still, she is important to the story. Why is her role important? How does paragraph 45 reveal the importance of the mother’s role?
8. What has Andy learned as a result of her experience? What else do you think she still has to learn?
9. **JOURNAL ENTRY** How would the story be different if Andy were a boy? What would be the same?