British and American Short Stories

by D H Lawrence and Others

**SUMMARY**

his fascinating collection of short stories gives the reader glimpses into many different times, places and social classes of people. However, there is one overall theme that concerns all the stories—they are all about people coping in different ways with the world around them. The stories focus on a wide range of people, from Armenians living in California, to a typist in New York, to a gravedigger in the English countryside.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

All the writers in this book were of British or American nationality, and came from a range of very different backgrounds.

*Herbert Ernest Bates* (1905–74) was a British writer. He set many of his novels and short stories in the rural Midlands of England. He invented an idyllic way of life and drew happy portraits of country characters and their simple ways. He also wrote about his wartime experiences in the air force.

*William Somerset Maugham* (1874–1965) was born at the British Embassy in Paris. He studied philosophy at Heidelberg in Germany and medicine in London, and then settled in Paris in 1898 to begin his career as a writer. His first novel was about life in the slums, which he had researched at first hand. Some of his short stories are considered among the finest in the English language. He is praised for his narrative skill and sharp unromantic observation.

*William Saroyan* (1908–81), an Armenian born in California, was a self-taught writer with a gift for creating atmosphere in his stories. He wrote about the tragedy and comedy of everyday life in the Armenian community, emphasizing the individuality of ordinary folk.

*David Herbert Lawrence* (1885–1930) was the first British writer from a genuinely working class background. His father was a coal-miner and his mother a teacher. He had an intense and painful relationship with his mother. Despite ill-health, he travelled widely and wrote continuously during his short life. He wrote with a direct and fresh style about human relationships, and was often in trouble with the law for his clear descriptions of sex.

*O Henry*, pen name of W S Porter, (1862–1910) was born in North Carolina in America and did not begin writing until he found himself in prison for fraud at the age of 35. After three years in prison absorbing stories from the other prisoners, he settled in New York and became a full-time writer. He is particularly known for his sharp openings and fast narrative style.

*Hector Hugh Munro*, also known as Saki (1870–1916) was born in Burma but brought up in Devon by two unmarried aunts. This was not a happy childhood and often features in his stories. He wrote apparently light-hearted stories with a darker side. He particularly enjoyed ending his stories with an unexpected twist. He was killed fighting in the First World War.

*Mark Twain* (1835–1910) was a river-boat pilot on the Mississippi and then a reporter in San Francisco before becoming a writer. His humour and sharp observation make him just as popular today as he was in his own time. He is particularly famous for writing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

*Francis Marion Crawford* (1854–1909) was an American born into a very wealthy family in Italy. He enjoyed a glamorous lifestyle and visited exotic locations in many lands, about which he wrote. For a time he was America’s most successful novelist.

*Stephen Leacock* (1869–1944) was a Canadian humorist. He was a full-time political economist and a part-time writer. His stories belong to the American humorist tradition of Mark Twain.

**BACKGROUND AND THEMES**

Short stories are often impressions rather than full narrative accounts. In some ways, reading a short story is very like reading a poem or looking at a painting.

The modern short story emerged as a literary form in the middle of the 19th century. It was at one time thought of as a short novel, written by someone who didn’t have enough ideas or talent to make a long story. Today, however, the short story is celebrated as an important medium in its own right.

The short story as a genre first became popular in America. Writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James and Mark Twain made clever use of the form to create frightening, penetrating or humorous tales. In England in the middle of the 19th century, people enjoyed reading long novels by, for example, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thackeray. Short story writing was not paid much attention until later in the century when writers like D H Lawrence, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson began to make such good use of it. Perhaps the fleeting moment which short story writers catc’
so well was more appropriate to the fast-moving, dynamic world of America, than the more traditional world of Victorian England.

Often short stories were written for magazines and had to be an exact number of words to fit in a page. When a writer has only 2,000 words with which to tell a story, every word has to count. Length is often the only thing short stories have in common. A short story might be a portrait of an interesting character, a mood, a joke, or a mystery. It might be an exploration of a shared human experience. It will very often have an unexpected twist at the end.

Reading a short story is a very different experience from reading a novel. To begin with, we usually read it in one sitting. We can hold in our minds what happens at the beginning all the way through to the end. If the events of the story all take place in one location, we can accumulate all the details into one big mental picture. The opening sentence is often the key to the success or failure of the story – the writer has little time to create the mood of the piece and catch our attention.

The stories in this collection are set in many different places and deal with many different themes. It might be interesting to ask students what they can learn about the social background in each story. In ‘The Rocking-Horse’, for example, we see the strain of a family pretending to the outside world that they are richer and have a higher social status than is really true.

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the book, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1. Talk to the class about short stories. Use some of the ideas in the Background and themes section above. Include some of these questions: How is a short story different from a novel? What do you expect when you start reading a short story? What makes a good short story?

2. Put students into pairs or groups. Read aloud the first sentence from each story. Which sentence do students think is best/worst? Do they think it tells them anything about the rest of the story? If they choose the O Henry opening sentence as the worst, go on to read them the first paragraph.

ACTIVITIES WHILE READING THE BOOK

‘Mabel’

Put students into pairs. George explains to Mabel at the end of the story why he has been travelling at top speed across Asia. Each pair works out an excuse that he can give her. Pairs read out their excuses and the class decides which is the best.

‘The Open Window’

Students work in groups of five or six. Tell them to imagine that Framton Nuttel does not run out of the house. He stays in the room with Vera, Mrs Sappleton, Mr Sappleton and one or two of the brothers. He says, ‘Vera told me that you were dead.’ Students take parts and continue the conversation.

‘The Upper Berth’

Put students into groups. Each group prepares a short ghost story, four or five sentences long. They choose three important words in their story. Each group reads aloud their story to the class, but they leave out three important words. The class have to fill in the gaps.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

1. Put students into small groups to discuss this question.

Which story did you enjoy most and which did you enjoy least? Why?

2. Get students to write an opening sentence for a short story. Everyone reads aloud their sentence. Whose is the most frightening, the funniest, the strangest?

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

‘Silas the Good’

gravedigger (n) somebody whose job is to dig graves

holy (adj) connected with God or religion

‘Mabel’

cart (n) a vehicle with two or four wheels that is pulled

consul (n) an official who lives in a foreign city and whose job is to help citizens of their country who are there

relief (n) the feeling you have when you are no longer worried about something

telegram (n) a message sent by electrical signals

‘The Barber’s Uncle’

barber (n) a man who cuts men’s hair and shaves them

‘The Rocking-Horse Winner’

rocking-horse (n) a toy horse for children to ride on

shilling (n) a piece of money used in Britain in the past

‘Springtime on the Menu’

dandelion (n) a small sea animal that has a shell and produces a jewel—a pearl

‘The Open Window’

bog (n) an area of soft wet muddy ground

‘The Income-Tax Man’

assessor (n) somebody who examines something and makes a decision about it

‘The Upper Berth’

berth (n) a place to sleep on a boat

damp (n) slightly wet

steward (n) a man who serves food and drink to people on a ship

‘My Bank Account’

accountant (n) somebody whose job is to keep or check financial records

Published and distributed by Pearson Education

© Pearson Education 2000

Factsheet written by Mary Tomalin

Factsheet series developed by Louise James
**British and American Short Stories**

**Student's activities**

**Photocopiable**

These activities can be done alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

### Activities before reading the book

1. Read the Introduction in the book. Which of these writers do you already know? Which story are you most looking forward to reading? Talk to another student.

2. Answer these questions.
   - Whose story do you think will be (a) funny?
   - (b) about a relationship between a mother and son?
   - (c) about Armenian people?
   - (d) a portrait of a country man?
   - (e) clever?
   - (f) set near the Mississippi?
   - (g) optimistic?
   - (h) exciting from the first sentence?
   - (i) about ghosts?

### Activities while reading the book

**‘Silas the Good’**

1. H E Bates often sets his stories in the countryside. What phrases in the opening paragraphs give us a feeling of a perfect, late spring day?

2. Answer these questions.
   - (a) What is the difference to Silas between a woman and a female?
   - (b) Why is the woman so angry with him?
   - (c) How does Silas win her good opinion?
   - (d) Why does she believe all the lies he tells her about his life?
   - (e) Do you think this is the first time the woman has drunk alcohol? How will she feel the next day?

3. Talk to another student.
   - This story is about a meeting between two people with different ideas about the world. Will this meeting change Silas or the woman? Will it do either of them any good?

**‘Mabel’**

1. As Mabel’s ship first approached Rangoon, (a) how did George feel?

2. Where (a) was Mabel when George arrived at Singapore?
   - (b) did George jump on a train?
   - (c) did George receive a telegram that said ‘Love. Mabel.’?

3. Answer these questions.
   - (a) Does Aram make much money as a barber?
   - (b) What kind of life does he want?
   - (c) The boy ‘laughed in Armenian’. What does the writer mean?
   - (d) Why was Uncle Misak alone in a city full of people?
   - (e) Why did Uncle Misak agree to put his head in the tiger’s mouth twice a day?

4. Talk to another student.
   - (a) How do you think Mabel feels while she is following George?
   - (b) Do Mabel and George have a happy marriage? How do we know?
   - (c) What picture of Asia does the writer give us? Remember that he wrote this story in the first half of the 20th century.

**‘The Barber’s Uncle’**

1. On the first page of the story, who ...
   - (a) used to have to walk in from out of town to admire the speaker’s hair?
   - (b) wants the writer to get a haircut?
   - (c) thinks the writer’s hair is a good place to lay eggs?

2. Answer these questions.
   - (a) Did Uncle Misak agree to put his head in the tiger’s mouth twice a day?

3. Talk to another student.
   - (a) How do you think Mabel feels while she is following George?
   - (b) Do Mabel and George have a happy marriage? How do we know?
   - (c) What picture of Asia does the writer give us? Remember that he wrote this story in the first half of the 20th century.

**‘The Rocking-Horse Winner’**

1. Answer these questions.
   - (a) Why is Paul’s mother so bitter?
   - (b) Why do you think Paul’s mother might be angry or unhappy if she knew where the £5000 came from?

2. Discuss with one or more other students.
   - (a) Do you believe that people are born lucky or unlucky?
(b) The writer often mentions Paul’s eyes in this story. Why? Find some of the different ways that he describes them.
(c) Paul would not have died if his relationship with his mother had been different. Do you agree?

‘Springtime on the Menu’
1 In this story the writer talks directly to the reader. What advice does he give us about
(a) the opening paragraph?
(b) going backwards in the story?
How does it affect the way we read the story?
2 Find a phrase on page 35 that shows how the writer thinks of our lives.
3 Work with another student. The writer prefers country life to city life. What advantages does he suggest? Think of ways in which city life is better than country life. Make a list.

‘The Open Window’
1 Correct these statements.
(a) Mr Nuttel and the young woman are waiting for his sister to join them.
(b) Mr Nuttel knows Mrs Sappleton very well.
(c) The window is kept open all night.
(d) Mrs Sappleton does not expect her husband to come back alive.
(e) Vera tells her aunt and uncle a true story about an experience Mr Nuttel had in a graveyard in India.
2 Talk to another student. At what point in the story did you realize that Vera had made up the story about the open window?
3 Imagine Framton is back in his sister’s house. Work with another student. One of you is Framton. The other is his sister. Framton tells his sister what happened when he visited Mrs Sappleton. His sister knows that her husband and brothers are not dead. Have their conversation.

‘The Income-Tax Man’
1 Answer these questions.
(a) If the speaker had known what an assessor was, how would his conversation have been different?
(b) What happens when he tries to trap the assessor?
(c) What three different types of income does the speaker mention?
(d) Why is the assessor so happy that he wants to throw his arms round the speaker?
2 Discuss with another student. What reason does the very rich man give for not paying any tax?

(b) Why does the writer accept the rich man’s suggestion not to pay any tax?
(c) How do we know that he really believes he is acting wrongly?

‘The Upper Berth’
Page 49 to middle of page 57
Answer these questions.
(a) What is unusual about the steward’s behaviour when Brisbane comes on board the Kamtschatka?
(b) Brisbane wakes up three times on the first night. What is unusual each time?
(c) Why do you think Brisbane chooses to stay in Room 105 rather than move?

Page 57 to end of story
1 Look at these words and phrases. What do they describe in the story?
hooked back; smooth, wet and icy cold; badly frightened; perfectly dry; cheerful; loosened; pale to the lips; dead white; shiny; hardly conscious
2 Discuss with another student. (a) What reason does the very rich man give for not paying any tax?
(b) Banks make the character in this story nervous. What places make you nervous?
(c) Can you think of a comic actor who would play this character well? Compare your choice with the rest of the class.

Activities after reading the book
1 Talk to another student. Would you like to read more work by any writers in this collection who are new to you? Which writers in particular? Make a note.
2 Work with a group of students. One student makes up the first sentence of a story. The other students add a sentence to the story. Go round the group until the story comes to an end.