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Enhancing Language and Intercultural Competence through Reading Literary Texts



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UNIT I

Narrative Structures of Meaning

I.1. Lines of Plot

Plot is a literary term that designates the sequences of events that make up a story, but especially the main part of a story. These events are related to one another and are grouped in accordance with certain patterns that reveal a predictable configuration. Characters are built around the plot and settings are also depending on plot. Plot is a means of organizing and structuring information and events in a coherent way. However, plot should not overshadow other components of a piece of literature, such as style, characterization, etc.

Forster distinguished in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) between a *plot* and a *story*, stating that a plot is similar to a story, being “a narrative of events”. The only difference is that “the emphasis falls on *causality*”. And he gives his famous example: “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. But ‘the king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it.” (84)

To make things even clearer, E. M. Forster goes on with the distinction, referring to the novel, yet, implicitly, to any kind of fiction writing:

“Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story, we say ‘and then?’. If it is in a plot we ask ‘why?’ That is the fundamental differences between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cavemen or a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. they can only be kept awake by ‘and then and then’ – They can only supply curiosity. but a plot demands intelligence and memory also.” (id.)

As E. M. Forster suggests, a story “can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next.” As for the plot, the reader gets involved in it emotionally and intellectually. It is the plot that offers the reader a sense of completion when he has completed his reading the story and has reached a conclusion. It is the plot that becomes part of

the readers' memories, allowing them to think about the book as if it were part of their actual personal experience.

The basic elements of plot are the following:

- **Exposition or Introduction:** the beginning of the story, where characters and setting are established. The conflict or main problem is introduced as well.

- **Rising Action:** the conflict is built gradually, characters are designated as major (protagonists) or minor and events begin to get complicated. Readers begin to get something of the tension between characters and they are led to the *crisis*.

- **Climax:** a turning point of the story, which increases reader's curiosity and excitement, making him eager to find out what is going to happen next. Excitement is often fueled by surprise, revelation, and coincidence.

As David Lodge remarks, "most narratives contain an element of surprise. If we can predict every twist in a plot, we are unlikely to be gripped by it. But the twists must be convincing as well as unexpected. Aristotle called this effect *peripeteia*, or reversal, the sudden shift from one state of affairs to its opposite, often combined with "discovery", the transformation of a character's ignorance into knowledge. Aristotle's example was the scene in *Oedipus Rex* when the messenger who has come to reassure the hero about his origins in fact reveals to him that he has killed his father and married his mother." (1994, 69)

- **Falling Action:** the winding up of the story, occurring when actions and difficulties begin to resolve. The reader tracks simultaneously all lines of plot having in view the promise of both disclosure and closure.

- **Resolution:** is the end of a story, which may occur with either a happy or a tragic ending. Postmodernist writers prefer open endings or no endings at all.

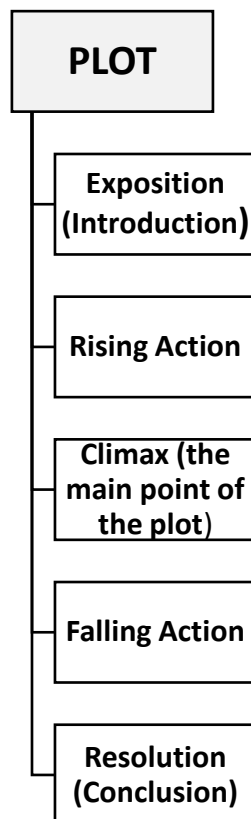
1.2. Titles and Beginnings

The beginning proper of any piece of writing is the title and we should always pay attention to titles as these are rarely chosen at random by writers. In fact, most of the writers confess that choosing titles is extremely challenging. "The title of a novel is part of the text - the first part of it, in fact, that we encounter - and therefore has considerable power to attract and condition the reader's attention. (...) For the novelist, choosing a title may be an important part of the creative process, bringing into sharper focus what the novel is supposed to be about. (...)

Novels have always been commodities as well as works of art, and commercial considerations can affect titles, or cause them to be changed.” (Lodge, 1994, 193-4)

Some titles manage to fulfill their task, that of anticipating something of the nature of the writing, whereas some others fail to do it. The Bookseller/Diagram Prize for Oddest Title of the Year, awarded at the Frankfurt Book Fair, is a humorous literary award that is given annually to a book with an unusual title. For instance, in 2014 the prize was won by *Strangers Have the Best Candy* by Margaret Meps Schulte. Titles may quench or boost the readers’ interest in the text that is but an object in his hands.

As for the opening of a narrative, this is also of extreme importance. “However one defines it, the beginning of a novel is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should therefore, as the phrase goes, “draw us in.” (Lodge, 1994, 4)



There are beginnings that make readers “leap” abruptly into the flow of events, others are equivocal, creating a sense of

anticipation and confusion, while others create a certain specific atmosphere meant to help the reader get acclimatized to the

setting. Some openings are original; some others are not. One of the most parodied openings in English literature belongs to Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The phrase he used to open his novel *Paul Clifford* (1830), “It was a dark and stormy night”, is often-mocked as it is considered to represent the typical specimen of a flowery, sensational style of fiction writing. What is worse is that it is not even original. The “purple-prose” phrase was borrowed from Washington Irving who used it to begin his 1809 “A History of New York”:

“It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents — except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.”

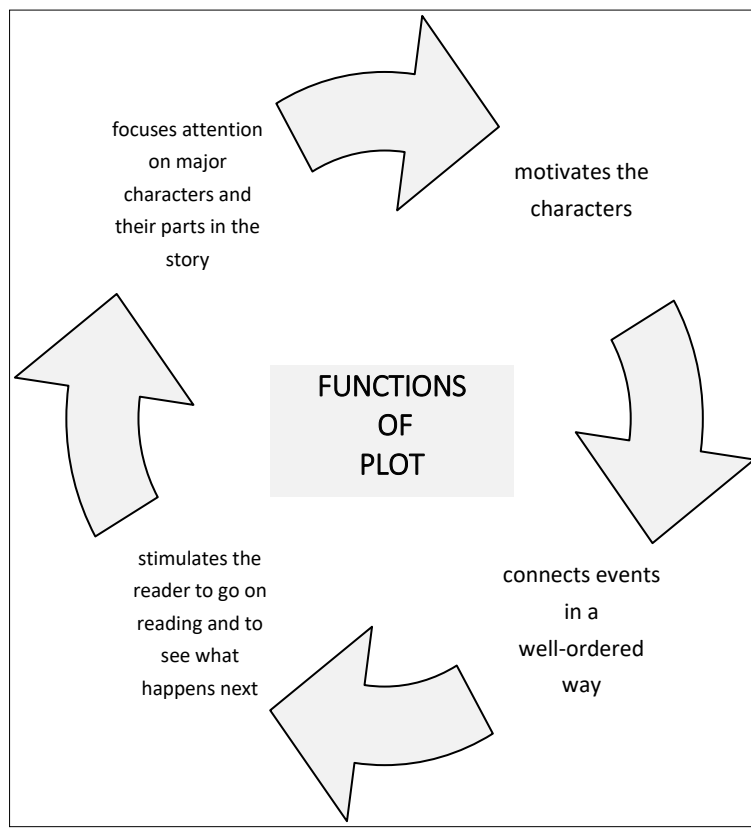
The catchphrase for bad writing became a successful motto for a tongue-in-cheek contest, organized annually by the English Department of San Jose State University in California. Participants in this competition are asked “to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels” – that is, intentionally bad. As advertised on the site, sentences that are notable but not quite bad enough to merit the Grand Prize or a category prize are awarded Dishonorable Mentions (<http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>).

I.3. Endings

Endings are also difficult to write and sometimes hard to understand for the readers. Some others are also hard to accept and that is why many readers turn into writers themselves and start writing sequels to novels or stories whose endings they have found unacceptable. As George Eliot remarked “conclusions are the weak points of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation.” (in Kermode, 2000, 74)

Henry James sarcastically described the ending as “a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks.” It is extremely difficult for a writer to conceal the fact that the story is reaching its termination because, as Jane Austen pointed out in a metafictional digression of *Northanger Abbey*,

the number of pages that the reader still has to read is visible. One possible way out of this dilemma and of maintaining the suspense beyond the finish line of the story is that provided by John Fowles in the form of a mock-Victorian conclusion to his novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. His innovation consists in offering the reader two endings. When the reader reaches the conclusion of the story he is confused as he can see that there is more to be read. The alternative endings cannot conceal the fact that even in the absence of a resolution, or closure, the reader will eventually reach the last page, the point where the discourse reaches a halt.



In the case of short stories, the importance of endings is even greater as they are “end-oriented”, engaging the reader in a similar experience that is aimed at reaching a conclusion as soon as possible. Short stories are supposed to be “devoured”

in a single sitting, “drawn along by the magnetic power of its anticipated conclusion.” (Lodge, 1994. 225) Yet, at times the reader’s anticipated conclusion is not the end of the short story.

Do you know that by means of a special software anyone can create a tailor-made tale? You may choose a title, a type of ending, a certain style and specific characters and the “customized” story is ready! See, for instance, [**https://www.plot-generator.org.uk/story/**](https://www.plot-generator.org.uk/story/)



I.4. Reading to Comprehend: “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin

Objectives:

- Read and understand text
- Discuss information with several different partners
- Use language effectively for different tasks

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

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

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

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

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

¹Kate Chopin's story was originally published in 1894.

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

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

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

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery,

count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

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

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

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

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

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



"The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth."

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



Read the excerpts with a partner and answer the questions:

	1. "Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death." 2. "It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her." 3."He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message." 4. "She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow." 5. "There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul."
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6. "She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves."

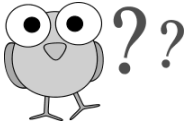
7. "There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window."

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

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

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

11. "When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went

	from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.” 12. “She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.” 13. “Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one.” 14. “He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen himself from the view of his wife.” 15. “But Richards was too late. When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease – of joy that kills.”
	1. What is the theme of “The Story of an Hour?” 2. How does Mrs. Mallard respond to her husband's death at the beginning of the story? 3. How do Mrs. Mallard's feelings change while she is in her room? 4. What does the phrase “Free! Body and soul free!” indicate? 5. What does the story say about the nature of marriage? 6. How does Chopin illustrate the role of women in nineteenth century western civilization?



1. Give some examples of imagery and symbolism in “The Story of an Hour”
2. The story ends with a misinterpretation. Has the author prepared us to understand it?



Dramatic irony is the type of irony in which the audience or readers know more about the events in the story than the characters themselves.

Situational irony occurs in a story when the outcome of an event is the opposite of what one expects.

Verbal irony is when a character says something but means something else.

Identify instances of these types of irony in Chopin’s short story.

UNIT II

The “Educated Reader”

II.1. Readers and the Reading Process

There are at least two types of readers: the ones who try to impose meaning on the text they read and those who try to find meaning through collaboration and interaction with the text.

Students are expected to become more proficient readers and their readings to address a number of current topics from multiple perspectives. That is why we emphasize the importance of reading analytically and interacting critically with written information. One way to enhance reading comprehension is by engaging in communication about your readings through small group discussion, in-class exercises, and written assignments. The aim of high education is to create “educated readers”, that is readers who understand what they read, who are also able to find further information on the same topic, to assess their readings objectively and to comment on them critically.

On the other hand, one should allow himself to be amazed and taken by surprise by works of fiction and avoid reading them through the eyes of previous readers. It is advisable to read stories with an innocent eye, untainted by critical opinions accessible on the internet or in other books. Paradoxically, the more trained in reading, the more unquestioning and docile a reading public. As C. S. Lewis wrote, the educated reader may get easily immersed in a good story, while the unimaginative one may be obstinate and uncompromising when faced with unreality:

“Why you fool, it's the educated reader who can be gulled. All our difficulty comes with the others. When did you meet a workman who believes the papers? He takes it for granted that they're all propaganda and skips the leading articles. He buys his paper for the football results and the little paragraphs about girls falling out of windows and corpses found in Mayfair flats. He is our problem. We have to recondition him. But the educated public, the people who read the high-brow weeklies,

don't need reconditioning. They're all right already. They'll believe anything." (Lewis, 1945)

This does not mean that you are supposed to stay naïve. After reading yourself the story, after making notes and taking efforts at comprehending it, you may visit other readings and employ other points of view.

II.2 Dominant, Alternative, and Resistant Readings

As already shown, readers may choose the trodden path of reading and accept a ready-made solution.

Widely accepted interpretations of a text are known as 'dominant' readings, which are the conventional responses to texts of the majority of readers. Such readings are also named 'invited readings' as they depend on cultural stereotypes and author's intentionality.

Alternative readings are less desirable than dominant readings as the readers may miss the whole point. This usually happens when the reader is not well-equipped to match the text or, on the contrary, the reader's hermeneutics surpasses the potential of the story. Such readings are unique, flamboyant, far-fetched, seldom related to the text itself.

Perhaps the best solution is that of employing a resistant reading, which is related to alternative reading, yet aware of the dominant reading. Usually, such a reading challenges dominant readings, examining the text from a different perspective (such as, a feminist or post-colonial angle, that have not been common in previous readings). To conclude, a resistant reader reads a text as it was not intended to be read. What should be definitely avoided is an absolutist approach which assumes that there is one true or 'right' interpretation.

II.3. Reading to Comprehend: “Signs and Symbols” by Vladimir Nabokov²

Objectives:

- Read and understand text
- Discuss information with several different partners
- Use language effectively for different tasks

For the fourth time in as many years they were confronted with the problem of what birthday present to bring a young man who was incurably deranged in his mind. He had no desires. Man-made objects were to him either hives of evil, vibrant with a malignant activity that he alone could perceive, or gross comforts for which no use could be found in his abstract world. After eliminating a number of articles that might offend him or frighten him (anything in the gadget line for instance was taboo), his parents chose a dainty and innocent trifle: a basket with ten different fruit jellies in ten little jars.

At the time of his birth they had been married already for a long time; a score of years had elapsed, and now they were quite old. Her drab gray hair was done anyhow. She wore cheap black dresses. Unlike other women of her age (such as Mrs. Sol, their next-door neighbor, whose face was all pink and mauve with paint and whose hat was a cluster of brookside flowers), she presented a naked white countenance to the fault-finding light of spring days.

Her husband, who in the old country had been a fairly successful businessman, was now wholly dependent on his brother Isaac, a real almost forty years standing. They seldom saw him and had nicknamed him “the Prince.” That Friday everything went wrong. The underground train lost its life current between two stations, and for a quarter of an hour one could hear nothing but the dutiful beating of one's heart and the rustling of newspapers. The bus they had to take next kept

²“Signs and Symbols” was first published in the May 15, 1948, issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. Before publishing the story, the editors of the magazine changed the title to “Symbols and Signs.” After the story appeared, Nabokov changed the title back to its original wording.

them waiting for ages; and when it did come, it was crammed with garrulous high school children. It was raining hard as they walked up the brown path leading to the sanatorium.

There they waited again; and instead of their boy shuffling into the room as he usually did (his poor face botched with acne, ill-shaven, sullen, and confused), a nurse they knew, and did not care for, appeared at last and brightly explained that he had again attempted to take his life. He was all right, she said, but a visit might disturb him. The place was so miserably understaffed, and things got mislaid or mixed up so easily, that they decided not to leave their present in the office but to bring it to him next time they came. She waited for her husband to open his umbrella and then took his arm. He kept clearing his throat in a special resonant way he had when he was upset.

They reached the bus-stop shelter on the other side of the street and he closed his umbrella. A few feet away, under a swaying and dripping tree, a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle. During the long ride to the subway station, she and her husband did not exchange a word; and every time she glanced at his old hands (swollen veins, brown-spotted skin), clasped and twitching upon the handle of his umbrella, she felt the mounting pressure of tears.

As she looked around trying to hook her mind onto something, it gave her a kind of soft shock, a mixture of compassion and wonder, to notice that one of the passengers, a girl with dark hair and grubby red toenails, was weeping on the shoulder of an older woman. Whom did that woman resemble? She resembled Rebecca Borisovna, whose daughter had married one of the Soloveichiks in Minsk, years ago. The last time he had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded, had not an envious fellow patient thought he was learning to fly and stopped him. What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape. The system of his delusions had been the subject of an elaborate paper in a scientific monthly, but long before that she and her husband had puzzled it out for themselves. "Referential mania," Herman Brink had called it. In these very rare cases the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature

shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.

Some of the spies are detached observers, such as glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others again (running water, storms) are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him, and grotesquely misinterpret his actions. He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things.

The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. If only the interest he provokes were limited to his immediate surroundings but alas it is not! With distance the torrents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility. The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a million times, flit over vast plains; and still farther, great mountains of unbearable solidity and height sum up in terms of granite and groaning firs the ultimate truth of his being.

2

When they emerged from the thunder and foul air of the subway, the last dregs of the day were mixed with the streetlights. She wanted to buy some fish for supper, so she handed him the basket of jelly jars, telling him to go home. He walked up to the third landing and then remembered he had given her his keys earlier in the day. In silence he sat down on the steps and in silence rose when some ten minutes later she came, heavily trudging upstairs, wanly smiling, shaking her head in deprecation of her silliness. They entered their two-room flat and he at once went to the mirror. Straining the corners of his mouth apart by means of his thumbs, with a horrible masklike grimace, he removed his new hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate and severed the long tusks of saliva connecting him to it. He read his Russian-language newspaper while she laid the table. Still reading, he ate the pale victuals that needed no teeth. She knew his moods and was also silent.

When he had gone to bed, she remained in the living room with her pack of soiled cards and her old albums. Across the narrow yard where the rain tinkled in the dark against some battered ash cans, windows were blandly alight and in one of them a black-trousered man with his bare elbows raised could be seen lying supine on an untidy bed. She pulled the blind down and examined the photographs. As a baby he looked more surprised than most babies. From a fold in the album, a German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiancé fell out. Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig, a slanting housefront badly out of focus. Four years old, in a park: moodily, shyly, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any other stranger. Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about. Age six that was when he drew wonderful birds with human hands and feet, and suffered from insomnia like a grown-up man. His cousin, now a famous chess player. He again, aged about eight, already difficult to understand, afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe. The shame, the pity, the humiliating difficulties, the ugly, vicious, backward children he was with in that special school.

And then came a time in his life, coinciding with a long convalescence after pneumonia, when those little phobias of his which his parents had stubbornly regarded as the eccentricities of a prodigiously gifted child hardened as it were into a dense tangle of logically interacting illusions, making him totally inaccessible to normal minds. This, and much more, she accepted for after all living did mean accepting the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case mere possibilities of improvement. She thought of the endless waves of pain that for some reason or other she and her husband had to endure; of the invisible giants hurting her boy in some unimaginable fashion; of the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world; of the fate of this tenderness, which is either crushed, or wasted, or transformed into madness; of neglected children humming to themselves in unswept corners; of beautiful weeds that cannot hide from the farmer and

helplessly have to watch the shadow of his simian stoop leave mangled flowers in its wake, as the monstrous darkness approaches.

3

It was past midnight when from the living room she heard her husband moan; and presently he staggered in, wearing over his nightgown the old overcoat with astrakhan collar which he much preferred to the nice blue bathrobe he had. "I can't sleep," he cried.

"Why," she asked, "why can't you sleep? You were so tired." "I can't sleep because I am dying," he said and lay down on the couch. "Is it your stomach? Do you want me to call Dr. Solov?" "No doctors, no doctors," he moaned. "To the devil with doctors! We must get him out of there quick. Otherwise we'll be responsible. Responsible!" he repeated and hurled himself into a sitting position, both feet on the floor, thumping his forehead with his clenched fist.

"All right," she said quietly, "we shall bring him home tomorrow morning." "I would like some tea," said her husband, and retired to the bathroom. Bending with difficulty, she retrieved some playing cards and a photograph or two that had slipped from the couch to the floor: knave of hearts, nine of spades, ace of spades, Elsa and her bestial beau. He returned in high spirits, saying in a loud voice: "I have it all figured out. We will give him the bedroom. Each of us will spend part of the night near him and the other part on this couch. By turns. We will have the doctor see him at least twice a week. It does not matter what the Prince says. He won't have to say much anyway because it will come out cheaper."

The telephone rang. It was an unusual hour for their telephone to ring. His left slipper had come off and he groped for it with his heel and toe as he stood in the middle of the room, and childishly, toothlessly, gaped at his wife. Having more English than he did, it was she who attended to calls.

"Can I speak to Charlie," said a girl's dull little voice. "What number you want? No. That is not the right number." The receiver was gently cradled. Her hand went to her old tired heart.

"It frightened me," she said. He smiled a quick smile and immediately resumed his excited monologue. They would fetch him as soon as it was day. Knives would have to be kept in a locked drawer. Even at his worst he presented no danger to

other people. The telephone rang a second time. The same toneless anxious young voice asked for Charlie.

"You have the incorrect number. I will tell you what you are doing: you are turning the letter O instead of the zero."

They sat down to their unexpected festive midnight tea. The birthday present stood on the table. He sipped noisily; his face was flushed; every now and then he imparted a circular motion to his raised glass so as to make the sugar dissolve more thoroughly. The vein on the side of his bald head where there was a large birthmark stood out conspicuously and, although he had shaved that morning, a silvery bristle showed on his chin. While she poured him another glass of tea, he put on his spectacles and reexamined with pleasure the luminous yellow, green, red little jars. His clumsy moist lips spelled out their eloquent labels: apricot, grape, beech plum, quince. He had got to crab apple, when the telephone rang again.



"Most of the stories I am contemplating (... one about the old Jewish couple and their sick boy) will be composed on these lines, according to this system wherein a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent one."

Nabokov in a letter to his editor, Katherine White



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



Read the excerpts with a partner and answer the questions:



1

“One should be careful with symbols generally.”

(From Nabokov’s short story, “The Christmas Story”)

1. What are symbols? Give a short definition.

Symbols are _____.

2. Name several symbols in the short story.

3. Does the title create a sense of obligation in you to identify symbols and try to decode them?

4. Explain the warning the writer gives in the above quotation.

5. Who is being warned in this way?



knowledgeowl

“Roughly speaking, anything that “stands for” something else is a symbol, but the process operates in many different ways. A cross may symbolize Christianity in one context, by association with the Crucifixion, and a road intersection in another, by diagrammatic resemblance. Literary symbolism is less easily decoded than these examples, because it tries to be original and tends towards a rich plurality, even ambiguity, of

meaning (all qualities that would be undesirable in traffic signs and religious icons, especially the former)." (Lodge, 1993, 139)

 2	For the fourth time in as many years they were confronted with the problem of what birthday present to bring a young man who was incurably deranged in his mind. He had no desires.
1. Whose birthday is this? _____. 2. What does he suffer from? He suffers from _____. 3. Why do you think he has no desires? He has no desires because _____. 4. What is his name? _____.	

 3	After eliminating a number of articles that might offend him or frighten him (anything in the gadget line for instance was taboo), his parents chose a dainty and innocent trifle: a basket with ten different fruit jellies in ten little jars.
1. Is this gift symbolic? What does it stand for? It stands for _____. 2. In the end of the story the present is described once again. Why? _____.	

 4	The last time he had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded, had not an envious fellow patient thought he was learning to fly and stopped him. What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape.
--	--

1. What did he try to do?

_____.

2. How did he try to do it?

_____.

3. How did he describe his suicidal act?

He associated death with _____.



5

The system of his delusions had been the subject of an elaborate paper in a scientific monthly, but long before that she and her husband had puzzled it out for themselves. "Referential mania," Herman Brink had called it. In these very rare cases the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. (...) Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.

1. What is the scientific name of the son's illness?

_____.

2. If the son "reads" reality in the manner described above what kind of a reader is he?

_____.



6

Some of the spies are detached observers, such as glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others again (running water, storms) are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him, and grotesquely misinterpret his actions.

He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away.

1. How does he perceive his observers? How many types are there?

2. Who watches whom? Who interprets whom/what?



Guiding Questions, Topics for Discussion and Essay Writing

1. What is your interpretation of the ending of the story?
2. How does modern medicine treat severely paranoid patients like the son?
3. If you ask ten artists to paint the same landscape, each will interpret and depict it differently. In your opinion, does each person in the world have a different perception of reality than other persons?
If your answer is yes, explain why one person's perception of reality is considered normal and another's—like the son's—abnormal.
4. The writer identifies several persons by name, such as Aunt Rosa, Dr. Solov, and Rebecca Borisovna? Why doesn't he identify by name the elderly couple and their son?



Write an essay on either of the two topics below:

1. Imagine the fate the elderly couple might have had in Germany during the rise of Adolf Hitler.
2. The significance of the son's silence.

UNIT III

Writing about Your Readings

III.1. Reading strategies

Read (or at any rate skim) the entire text you are expected to write about. Pay attention to such details as the cover, the title, the subtitle, and all such parts as afterword or preface, introduction, epilogue, footnotes and biographical notes that can add to your understanding of both text and author.

Consider the author and gather major facts about this person. Choose your sources of information with care. The reading process must be organized realistically and in accordance with a timetable that you set for yourself. Reading a short story would not take a lot and it is preferable to read it quickly but also effectively. This means that while you are reading you also have to record some of your reactions and questions.

Obviously, the first difficulties you may encounter are those related to language. Write down unknown words and phrases so that you can check them up later. As for the questions they could represent a starting point for class discussions or essays.

I plead for re-reading as a means of comprehending the literary text. Yet rereading is to be completed only after you have solved all lexical problems (you have looked up in the dictionary for words that you are not familiar with) and after you have a clear image of the plot, of characters and their positions and relationship in the story. Now it's time to go back to the text and look at each and every detail in such a way as to find out things that are not so obvious at first reading.

III.2. Writing strategies

As already suggested, there are several stages of reading. Similarly, there are stages of writing. The first stage is that when you record your questions and reactions simultaneously with your reading. This stage results in all kinds of informal signs on the margin of the text (question and exclamation marks, the Latin "hic!" for "here, in this place" or "sic!" for a

word that appears odd or erroneous, etc.) though it is advisable to keep a notepad close by and avoid writing on the book.

Some people draw all kinds of diagrams to better understand the time sequences or the relationships between characters. You may do the same. After all, it is your own personal reading experience and you may do whatever you like if it helps better understand the text.

After re-reading

When your re-reading is over, take a short break. I do not want to imply that after you complete your re-reading, your job is done. You simply need several minutes or hours to clear your mind. After this, try to put down on paper the ideas and thoughts that the text has created in your mind. Write down your hypotheses and follow your train of thoughts. Do not underestimate your brains and rush to the internet to find out somebody else's ideas about the text! You will be surprised to learn that sometimes your ideas are superior!

Writing about your Readings

Now read the writing assignment. Plan your research carefully and select your quotes from the text. Citation rules should be observed. Be sure to place others' thoughts in between quotation marks.

Write a draft first. Visit the library and dig for useful information, making sure that you are able to identify and understand the role of figures of speech, sources of inspiration, intertextuality, etc.

Well-planned and revised writings get higher grades than those written a night before your homework is due. You may find it useful to get feedback from one of your colleagues who may also be asked to proofread your paper. In this way you avoid misspellings and grammar mistakes but you may also benefit from your friends' encouragement and appreciation.

III.3. Reading to Comprehend: “The Open Window” by Saki³

Objectives:

- Read and understand the text
- Discuss information with several different partners
- Use language effectively for different tasks

“My aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel,” said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; “in the meantime you must try and put up with me.”

Framton Nuttel endeavoured to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

“I know how it will be,” his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat; “you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice.”

Framton wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton, the lady to whom he was presenting one of the letters of introduction, came into the nice division.

“Do you know many of the people round here?” asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silent communion.

“Hardly a soul,” said Framton. “My sister was staying here, at the rectory, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here.”

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

“Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?” pursued the self-possessed young lady.

“Only her name and address,” admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or

³Saki is the pen name of the British writer Hector Hugh Munro, also known as H. H. Munro (1870 - 1916). This short story was first published in the collection *Beasts and Super-Beasts* in 1914.

widowed state. An undefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

"Her great tragedy happened just three years ago," said the child; "that would be since your sister's time."

"Her tragedy?" asked Framton; somehow in this restful country spot tragedies seemed out of place.

"You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn.

"It is quite warm for the time of the year," said Framton; "but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy?"

"Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favourite snipeshooting ground they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog. It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it." Here the child's voice lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human. "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back some day, they and the little brown spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing 'Bertie, why do you bound?' as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window - "

She broke off with a little shudder. It was a relief to Framton when the aunt bustled into the room with a whirl of apologies for being late in making her appearance.

"I hope Vera has been amusing you?" she said.

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

"I hope you don't mind the open window," said Mrs. Sappleton briskly; "my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes to-day, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you men-folk, isn't it?"

She rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter. To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic; he was conscious that his hostess was giving him only a fragment of her attention, and her eyes were constantly straying past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was certainly an unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary.

"The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise," announced Framton, who laboured under the tolerably wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure. "On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

"No?" said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into alert attention - but not to what Framton was saying.

"Here they are at last!" she cried. "Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes!"

Framton shivered slightly and turned towards the niece with a look intended to convey sympathetic comprehension. The child was staring out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window; they all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk: "I said, Bertie, why do you bound?"

Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat; the hall-door, the gravel-drive, and the front gate were dimly-noted stages in his headlong retreat. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid an imminent collision.

"Here we are, my dear," said the bearer of the white mackintosh, coming in through the window; "fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who bolted out as we came up?"

"A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel," said Mrs. Sappleton; "could only talk about his illnesses, and dashed off

without a word of good-bye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost."

"I expect it was the spaniel," said the niece calmly; "he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone their nerve."

Romance at short notice was her speciality.



"I hate posterity - it's so fond of having the last word."

Saki, Reginald in Russia and Other Sketches



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



Read the excerpts with a partner and answer the questions:

 1	“Comedy in fiction would appear to have two primary sources, though they are intimately connected: situation (which entails character - a situation that is comic for one character wouldn't necessarily be so for another) and style. Both depend crucially upon timing, that is to say, the order in which the words, and the information they carry, are arranged.” (Lodge, 1993, 110)
	1. Is this piece of fiction comic? Give a short definition of comedy, rephrasing David Lodge's description. _____. 2. Name a comic situation in the short story. _____. 3. Does the title create the expectations for a comedy? What does it suggest? _____.



2

“Framton Nuttel endeavoured to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.”

1. Is the name of the character suggestive? Is it illustrative of his condition?
_____.

2. What does he expect from his visits to his neighbours?
_____.



3

“Do you know many of the people round here?” asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silent communion.

“Hardly a soul,” said Framton. “My sister was staying here, at the rectory, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here.”

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

“Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?” pursued the self-possessed young lady.”

1. What is the purpose of these questions?
_____.

2. Identify some matters of social conventions and etiquette in the dialogue above.
_____.



4

“Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favourite snipeshooting ground they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog. It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it.”

1. What kind of story is this?

_____.

2. Identify elements of style that might help us describe the story as belonging to a certain genre or another.

_____.



5

““I expect it was the spaniel,” said the niece calmly; “he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone their nerve.”

Romance at short notice was her speciality.”

1. Is the teenager mischievous? Does she intend to wreak havoc on the nerves of her unsuspecting guest?

_____.

2. If your answer to the first question is affirmative how can you explain the humorous effect of the ending?

_____.

UNIT IV

Suggested Readings

“The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe

“Genesis and Catastrophe: A True Story” by Roald Dahl

“A Resumed Identity” by Ambrose Bierce

“The Story of a Panic” by E. M. Forster

“Cat in the Rain” by Ernest Hemingway

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. Le Guin

“A Haunted House” by Virginia Woolf

OWL YOU NEED IS
SOME MORE
READING



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