

ENGLISH
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For Today

Book Six: LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

The National Council of Teachers of English

Second Edition

Second Edition

English for Today

Book Six: Literature in English

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Production: Renee Guilmette

Cover: Laurence Alexander

Illustrations: Ben F. Stahl

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

National Council of Teachers of English.

English for today.

"Student text."

CONTENTS: book 1. At home and at school.—book

2. The world we live in—book 3. The way we live. [etc.]

1. English language—Text-books for foreigners.

I. Slager, William R. II. Title

PE1128 N3 1972 428'.2'4 72-5105

ISBN 0-07-045819-7

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Book Six: Literature in English

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Section One

Fiction

Joseph Conrad, a famous English novelist, said that his goal as a writer was “to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything.” A good short story tries to give the reader a sense of the actual experience. Often it leaves a single sharp impression to be turned over and over in the mind. After finishing the story, the reader should have something to think about: the pathos or humor of life, its ironies, or the unpredictability of human behavior.

In order to read a short story with full understanding, the reader must approach the content on two levels. The first and most obvious level is conveyed through the plot. *Plot* refers to the sequence of events, to the actions of the characters and the situations in which they are involved. To explain the plot, then, is to tell what happened in the story and to whom. In some short stories, plot is the dominating element. “The Open Window,” the first of the selections that follow, is a good example of a short story in which plot dominates. The impact on the

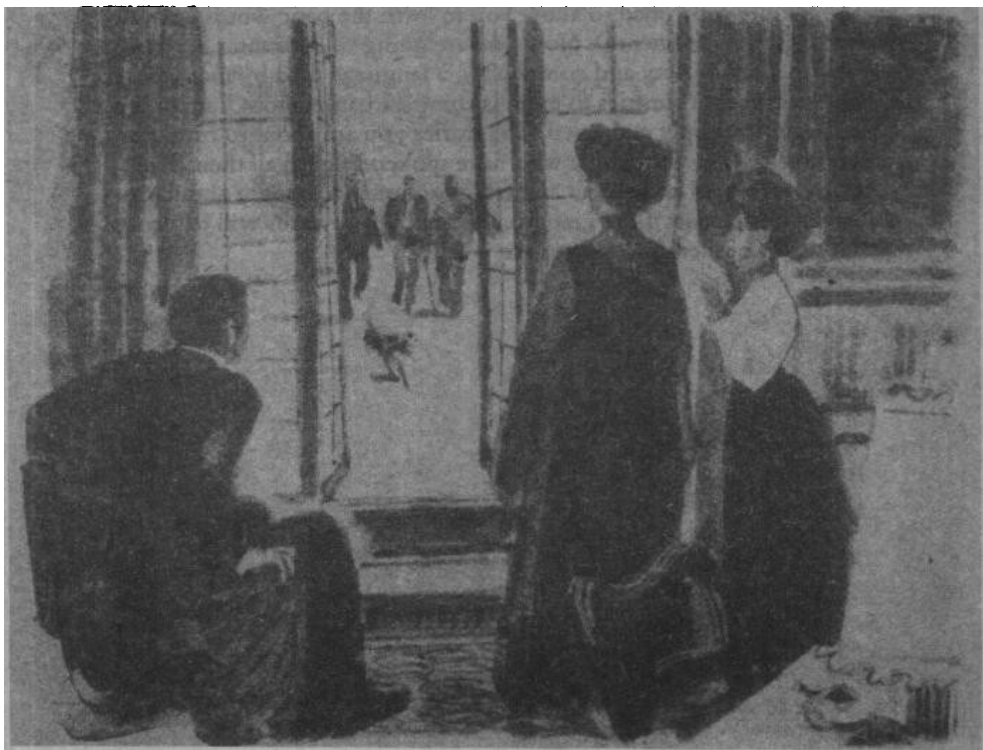
reader comes from the sudden and unexpected revelation of Vera's speciality of providing "romance at short notice." In other short stories, plot plays a very minor role. In "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," for example, all that "happens" is that an old man sits drinking in a café while the two waiters talk about him and about themselves. When the old man leaves, we follow the older of the two waiters to an all-night bar where he thinks about the restless night he will spend in a lonely room and an empty bed.

In Hemingway's story, then, we must approach the content on another level. The impact of the story comes from the insight it gives us into the needs and desires of youth and old age. To understand and appreciate the story, the reader must be able to identify its general topic or *theme* (youth versus old age). The next step is to identify the device by which the author comments on this theme—in this case, through the dialogue of the younger and older waiters. Finally, the reader should be able to articulate the insights which the author has given into the theme—that is, to explain the meaning of the story. In complex stories such as this one, careful readers may not always agree in their interpretations. One possible interpretation might be stated in this way: "Hemingway suggests that both youth and old age can be sad and lonely. But there is a difference. Old age has fewer expectations; it can be contented with less, sometimes with little more than a quiet drink in a clean, well-lighted place."

Readers cannot appreciate a short story fully—they cannot hear and see and feel it—unless they react not only to *what* has been said but also to *how* it has been said. They must look for style and structure, as well as for content. *Style* grows out of the writer's own personality and can be seen in the choice of words and phrases, the arrangement of sentences, the rhythm and tone. *Structure* refers to the architecture of the story—the ways in which the details are selected and arranged to produce the desired effect.

As you read the stories that are presented here, you should be prepared to encounter several kinds of English. The characters in the stories are from many different backgrounds and social levels, and they will often use words and phrases that do not appear in the standard writing of newspapers and magazines and books. They may use specialized terms and slang. The stories also have wide geographical range—from Willa Cather's small town, Sand City, in the Middle West to Frank O'Connor's Ireland. Irish English and Sand City English are very different. In addition, because literature uses language in a special way to achieve part of its artistic effect, some of these stories will contain words and phrases used figuratively—that is, they may have a symbolic meaning as well as the literal meaning found in the dictionary. The footnotes will attempt to give you some help in these matters: non-standard English, dialectal forms, and figurative language.

When you began to study English, the vocabulary and structure were carefully controlled to allow you to learn the basic words and sentence patterns efficiently. Now you are going to encounter a language used with all its variety and complexity, a language used by many people in many different countries to express complex truths about human life that cannot be simply expressed. The stories you are about to read are often difficult even for people who have spoken English all their lives. They must be read and reread and talked about and thought about. So you need not despair if the going is difficult. The rewards will be great. The rewards of literature always are.



The Open Window

by Saki (H. H. Munro)

In this story a very imaginative young lady of fifteen plays an amusing trick on a chance visitor to her aunt's house. As you read, watch closely how smoothly she conducts herself. The story is told with a charm and grace that is characteristic of this English author (1870–1916), who commonly wrote under the pen name of Saki.

“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.”¹