
GRADE 10 ENGLISH STUDY GUIDE
***GREAT MODERN EUROPEAN SHORT STORIES* Edited by Angus & Angus**

“The Kiss” by Anton Chekhov

Background:

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) is often referred to as a master of the short story due to his “slice of life” approach to writing. The characters and their dilemmas in both his plays and short stories often lift off of the page and into our lives as we relate to them with awe and intrigue. Rather than discuss ideas that pertain to particular time periods, Chekhov chose universal feelings and themes for his stories. Born in Taganrog, Ukraine, Chekhov supported himself by tutoring at the age of sixteen when his father’s business went bankrupt because he wanted to continue his schooling. After grammar school he attended the University Medical School in Moscow and eventually became a doctor. His experiences as a doctor greatly influenced his writing, especially the way that his characters show apathy for those involved in traumatic events. He rejected Christianity and metaphysical thinking and was often classified as a Western realist. His stories pose moral questions and often have ambiguous endings, leaving the reader to decide the fate of the characters and the fate of themselves as well.

Symbols and themes:

- The contrast between the soldiers and the guests at Von Rabbeck’s home—how the soldiers impact the mood/atmosphere while in the home
- The time of year—May—with its fragrant flowers and how it impacts the mood
- The wide open windows in the room that Ryabovich enters
- The contrast between Lobytko and Ryabovich
- light and dark imagery
- lilac, peppermint, and oil (Ryabovich felt he was anointed with oil)
- The garden after he leaves Mestechki and when he returns
- Illusion versus reality
- Life is an “unintelligible, aimless jest”
- The spiritual and psychological metamorphosis of the individual

Questions to consider:

1. When the soldiers begin to dance with the ladies, how does Ryabovich respond?
2. What happens when he goes in the billiard room with the men?
3. What is Ryabovich’s opinion of himself? How can the reader relate to him?
4. What two profound experiences does Ryabovich encounter? Why are these necessary for his emotional and psychological development?
5. Compare/Contrast how Ryabovich acts before and after his encounter.
6. Why does Ryabovich choose not to go back to Von Rabbeck’s home?
7. Is the ending positive or negative?

Helpful definitions:

Cossack—a member of the Russian army, known for his horsemanship skills

lynx—short tailed wildcat

artillery—soldiers who specialize in using large powerful firearms

cavalry—soldiers on horseback

infantry—foot soldiers; a unit or branch in an army

mazurka—lively Polish dance

Mestechki—the name of village the brigade visits

“Araby” by James Joyce

Background:

“Araby” is part of a collection of short stories written by James Joyce called *Dubliners*. The stories in *Dubliners* are structured according to stages of human development, from innocence to awareness. Joyce said, “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country, and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity, and public life. The stories are arranged in this order.” The story of “Araby” is clearly in the “adolescence” section, and the main character, an unnamed boy, experiences the pain of growing older when he is forced to realize that his fantasies will never come true the way he has imagined them. James Joyce was born in 1882, and he published *Dubliners* in 1914.

Symbols and Themes:

Mangan’s sister is the primary focus of the narrator’s attention in the story. He is growing up, and he has become interested in her. She performs an important function in the story because she is a familiar figure to the narrator, but she also represents the mystery and allure of how the familiar will change with age. Ultimately, this story is about the trauma we experience in the maturation process: Mangan’s sister is at the center of the narrator’s painful change. Also, pay attention to the function of the bazaar – it symbolizes the romanticized image of Arabia the narrator has created in his head. The reality of the bazaar, of course, is far removed from this fantasy. The central theme of the story concerns the frustration we all experience when we realize that grim reality is not at all consistent or even compatible with our hopes and expectations. The narrator’s change of attitude at the end of the story is quite depressing: he simply gives up, realizing there is no way to make good on his promise. As the bazaar fades into darkness, it is symbolic of the boy’s knowledge that his ideas about life and love have been seriously misguided.

Questions to Consider:

1. What aspects of the setting help create the tone? Why has this tone been established?
2. Why would a dead priest be mentioned?
3. What is the point of view of the narrator? Is this important?
4. What is the effect of the last sentence in the story? In what way does it summarize the theme?

“The Infant Prodigy” by Thomas Mann

Background:

Like many of Thomas Mann’s stories and novels, “The Infant Prodigy” addresses the conflict between a perspective formed by an upper class lifestyle and an artistic temperament which criticizes sensibilities associated with wealth. This characteristic of Mann derives from his background. He was born in Lubek, Germany to wealthy merchant class people. Three significant figures heavily influenced Mann’s writing. Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer conveyed a vision of the artist’s suffering and development. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche provided a portrait of the diseased artist overcoming chaos and decay to produce, through discipline and will, artworks that justify excellence. Composer Richard Wagner embodied the complete artist who controlled all aspects of his work. Mann’s work also takes a definitive stance on art, modern society, and the human condition as well as explores the cultural and spiritual crises occurring in Europe at the turn of the century. This corresponds to “The Infant Prodigy’s” publication in 1903. “The Infant Prodigy” describes a child prodigy’s piano recital in an unknown city. His performance generates varying reactions from the audience and, in the process, illustrates many of Mann’s characteristic themes.

Symbols and Themes:

The child prodigy’s performance provides the central action of the story. The commentary from the onlookers, the prodigy’s opinions, as well as Mann’s tone, generates the social criticism. Many of the listeners, especially the critic, seem hypocritical. One on hand, they attempt to find fault in the performance. On the other hand, they all wish to be that celebrated and revered. The child prodigy seems to despise the audience, and this evokes the hypocritical nature of art and artists. This concept concludes the story, where the reader’s assumptions about art have been replaced by a very confusing scene and message.

Questions to consider:

1. What is the significance of the child prodigy’s long name?
2. Why does Mann emphasize ‘average’ and ‘regular’ throughout the story?
3. If this story can be interpreted as a satire, how is it satirizing the notions of celebrity and greatness?
4. Which one character does the child prodigy relate to? Why is that significant?

Helpful words to know:

1. Satire: noun. A literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn
2. Impresario: noun. The promoter, manager, or conductor of an opera or concert company
3. Score: verb. To write or arrange music
4. Arpeggios: noun. Production of the tones of a chord in succession and not simultaneously

Works Cited:

Angus, Douglas and Sylvia. *Great Modern European Short Stories*, Fawcett Books, New York, 1967, p. 58.
Feuerlicht, Ignace. *Thomas Mann*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1968, p. 135.
Norton Anthology of World Literature, Seventh Edition, Volume 2, p. 1511.

“The Colonel’s Lady” by Somerset Maugham**Background:**

Though noted for his plays and novels, Somerset Maugham was also a master of the English short story. One of the most popular and successful British writers during the 1920s, Maugham’s works are characterized by plain prose and use of the ironic statement. “The Colonel’s Lady,” one of a collection of four short stories published in 1949 in a volume entitled *Creatures of Circumstance*, relates the story of a country gentleman whose wife publishes a best-selling book about her passionate love affair with a younger man. The husband, George Peregrine, realizes that his conception of Evie, his wife of many years, as “the sort of woman you simply didn’t notice,” (81) has not been altogether accurate.

Symbols and Themes:

George’s sense of betrayal culminates in a meeting to discuss the possibility of divorce for his wife’s alleged affair. His conversation with his solicitor, who is also a revered friend, provides the climactic moment when George faces the truth. His statement, “I don’t know what I’d do without Evie,” (93) reveals man’s need to overcome the sorrow and disappointment of love. Evie’s book, the object of so much public attention, becomes a powerful symbol of female intellectualism and imagination. Though Evie can not produce an heir to pass on the respected family name, she does create a different kind of legacy—her voice in print. This presents one of the social issues relevant during the 20s---the place of women writers. Maugham is at his best in the final ironic statement of the story; George’s simple sentence points out the arrogance and vanity of man.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of the character of Daphne?
2. What is the significance of Evie being compared to Sappho?
3. What do George’s pastimes and reading material reveal about him?

Works Cited:

Angus, Douglas and Sylvia. *Great Modern European Short Stories*, Fawcett Books, New York, 1967.

“Gimpel the Fool” by Isaac Bashevis Singer

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991) came from the world of eastern European Jewish life depicted in “Gimpel the Fool.” He was raised in a poor Jewish village (or *shtetl*) near Warsaw, Poland, and as the son of a Hasidic rabbi, he was steeped in traditional stories and sacred studies. He chose to become a journalist, not a rabbi, and wrote the stories of ordinary people in newspapers and in fiction. In order to flee fascism, he moved to New York in 1935.

“Gimpel the Fool” comes from a long tradition of literary fools. On the surface, he is the archetypal *Schlemell*, or idiot, featured in slapstick Yiddish folk tales. Going deeper, he could also be the Wise Fool, the spiritual innocent protected by God. However, Singer complicates Gimpel’s character with each episode, as he increases the cruelty inflicted upon him.

Along these lines, consider the following questions when you read:

1. Does Gimpel know he’s being fooled?
2. If so, why does he choose to believe what he’s told, and act on it as if it were fact?
3. Does he believe in order to show good faith, to simply get along, or to punish himself for his gullibility?
4. As his awareness grows, why doesn’t he stand by what he knows to be fact?
5. Given the answers to these questions, what is most important to Gimpel? What gives his life meaning?

Gimpel's community also changes relative to him.

6. What does the matchmaker's choice of a bride, and the location of the wedding say about Gimpel's status in the village?
7. How has the village come to depend on Gimpel by the beginning of part four?
8. Who is the only character who seems to take Gimpel's divorce petition seriously?
9. What does that character say about those who deceive their neighbor?
10. How does the death and vision of Elka confirm his words? Who is deceiving whom?

When Gimpel gains the upper hand, his good faith undergoes its ultimate test, and gives into temptation.

11. Who is the tempter, and what is the temptation?
12. What does the tempter tell Gimpel that convinces him there will be no consequences?

But Gimpel's response to his own actions points out his essential priorities.

13. Why doesn't Gimpel follow through with his revenge, and instead give up his family, his fortune, and his community?
14. Is he once again punishing himself on behalf of the village, or is he somehow saving himself from the village's brand of corruption?

By the end, Gimpel's lifelong struggle to distinguish truth from lies, and reality from dreams transcends such distinctions. As a wandering holy man, he gains the wisdom available only to the fool. He realizes that all stories are the same story, that dreams and lies really happen, and that everything is possible. Finally, he understands that the ultimate reality lies in our mortality. Anyone who says otherwise is deceiving himself.

Historical Context and Theme

Written 1945, "Gimpel" was published when the true horror and scope of the Holocaust was coming to light. Singer himself has come under fire for anti-Semitism in his portrayal of the shtetl's vicious behavior and Gimpel's unfulfilled revenge. Gimpel's good faith and credulity has been interpreted as signifying the placidity of many Jews shipped to concentration camps, and his unquestioning belief in God as a delusion that permits evil to have its way.

After the fact of the Holocaust, though, Singer is asking a bigger question: *How can, or why should we believe the unbelievable?* The Holocaust itself was so vast that it defied belief, and the disbelief of the Holocaust, to a great extent, allowed it to happen. Because Gimpel takes the spirit of evil seriously, he is able to reject it and remove himself from a cycle of retribution which would destroy his essential integrity. In the end, he alone among the villagers refuses to fool himself.

"War" by Luigi Pirandello

"War," by Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), is a much more straightforward look at self-deception in the face of loss. Taking place in a train during an unspecified European war, the passengers argue over whose suffering is greater, even though they all face losing their sons. Follow the rationales and rhetoric of their arguments closely, and locate each passenger's core belief.

1. What is the newly arrived couple's claim to the greatest sorrow? (The small man and his wife dressed in mourning.)
2. How do two other passengers raise the bar? What are their potential losses?
3. When the fat man speaks, how does he challenge the traditional notion of the parent/child relationship?
4. According to the fat man, to whom does a son belong? Himself? His parents? His country?
5. What does the fat man believe is the highest cause, the cause that is worth dying for?
6. Does he think it is better to die young, or to die old? Why?
7. Why is it important for the fat man to believe that his son died for a good cause?
8. Why do the fat man's words help the mourning woman?
9. What is the mourning woman's question?
10. What essential truth has the fat man not really faced? What rationalization has he used to avoid it?

What's curious about this story is that all of the characters fail to acknowledge that every loss is an inherently valid cause for grief. Even more interesting is that nobody seems to question whether war itself is necessary, or whether Country is worth the sacrifice of children. By blinding themselves in myopic grief, or by deceiving themselves with patriotic sentiments, they fail to ask, *"Is war right? Is Country good if it kills our sons?"*

“Journey Through the Night” by Jakov Lind

First published in Germany, Lind’s “Journey Through the Night” is one tale in a collection of short stories “that bring to life the agony of central Europe and indeed of modern man everywhere.” Like the other stories in the collection, “Journey Through the Night” is both horrifying and humorous; it narrates a conversation between two men in a train compartment, one a traveling man, *en route* to Paris and one a cannibal, waiting for the other to fall asleep. As the two men talk, Lind “alternates scenes of pure savagery and hilarity” and in doing so, raises questions regarding the value of living and of life in an irrational and ambivalent world (front and back flaps).

Literary symbols and themes:

Lind’s story is a conversation between a creator, the narrator, and a destroyer, the cannibal. The tension between the two men drives the story forward—in a sense, the conversation is the train, and the destination can end in one of two places.

Each man has his own stop in mind; how does he try to achieve his goal? What role does language play? At what point does the conversation take a turn? What makes the narrator have his final reaction? What makes the cannibal have his final reaction? Pay careful attention to the discussion. Lind uses graphic description not only to shock and to amuse but also to focus our vision. By showing us the bits and pieces, Lind guides us to think about the whole.

Through first person narrative, Lind connects language and cannibalism. That is, the cannibal’s words are also the narrators, and vice versa. Lind points to this doubling from the start: the narrator calls the cannibal, “the fellow-passenger” (206). To be sure, we hear the cannibal through the mouth of the narrator—why would Lind write the story this way? What is Lind trying to say through his choice of first person point of view?

Train ride: Like sailing in a boat (*The Odyssey*), riding in a train is a traditional journey motif. Look at description of train’s destination(s).

Cannibal: A traditional mythological/symbolic character. Think of Chronos or of Cyclops, for example. The cannibal can suggest a number of ideas, from the unfaithful (eats physical body rather than spiritual body); to a social corruption that fragments and devours its inhabitants; to a xenophobic fear of the Other (comes from Columbus’ naming the Other he saw as the Caribs). What does the cannibal suggest in this story? Why does he say he will eat only after the traveler falls asleep?

Narrator: A creator

Traveler: Everyman. Modern society. Life itself.

Questions:

The front flap of *Soul of Wood*, the collection containing “Journey Through the Night,” states “Lind deals masterfully with a world of horror through fantasy, paradox, and sardonic distortion.” Look up the three terms: **fantasy**, **paradox**, and **distortion**. Look up **sardonic**. Find examples in the story of each literary device.

1. How do Lind’s words create fantasy? Look at the description of the cannibal. How does the description enhance or tone down the horror? Explain.
2. How does Lind convey distortion? Look at the traveler’s questions and the questioning. Why is the traveler asking so many questions?
3. How does Lind convey paradox; in particular, how does Lind convey humor and horror at the same time? Look at the description of the cannibal’s tools and the discussion of the cannibal’s method.
4. Why does the cannibal say “I bet you’d rather be salted alive than eaten dead.”
5. Explain the last line/metaphor of the story.

Lind, Jakov. “Journey Through the Night.” *Soul of Wood and Other Stories*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. NY: Grove. 1964. 99-105.