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STORIES OF OURSELVES:
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL
EXAMINATIONS ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES IN ENGLISH

NOTES FOR TEACHERS
on the short stories set for examination in June and November
Years 2013, 2014, 2015 *

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[* NOTE: There are separate documents about the different selections of stories set for examination in years **2007- 2009** and **2010-2012**.]

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Introduction

These notes are intended to give some background information on each author and/or story as an aid to further research and to stimulate discussion in the classroom.

They are intended only as a starting-point. They are no substitute for the student's own study and exploration of the texts.

University of Cambridge International Examinations is not responsible for the content of any of the websites mentioned in the suggestions for further online reading.

Thomas Hardy **1840-1928**

THE SON'S VETO (1894)

Hardy is the writer of a number of classic novels of the English Victorian era. He stopped writing novels altogether following the outcries that greeted *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895); both were judged in their day to be too explicit in their treatment of personal and social themes. Thereafter he concentrated on writing poetry.

In *The Son's Veto*, Sophy's character is presented to us by concentrating on a number of telling moments in her life. The story reveals detail gradually in order to allow us to build up an impression of her. The narrator begins writing from the perspective of a man viewing the woman's immaculate hair from behind. We hear the exchange of dialogue between son and mother in which the former rebukes the latter for her poor grammar 'with an impatient fastidiousness that was almost harsh'. The boy's sensitivity here will eventually lead to his veto over his mother's wish to re-marry. The vignette of the public-school cricket match illustrates perhaps best of all the class consciousness at the heart of the story.

How do students respond to Hardy's depiction of the boy who eventually becomes the 'young smooth-shaven priest' at the end of the story? Encourage them to consider how Hardy makes us feel sorry for the mother.

Wider reading

Encourage students to read other short stories by Thomas Hardy such as *The Withered Arm* and *Tony Kytes, the Arch-Deceiver*. They might also try novels popular at IGCSE/O Level including *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and poems such as *The Voice* and *The Darkling Thrush*.

Compare with

The Fly in the Ointment by V.S. Pritchett

The Village Saint by Bessie Head

On Her Knees by Tim Winton

Online

Biographical and critical texts on Hardy can be found at:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hardy/index.html>

Katherine Mansfield 1888-1923

HER FIRST BALL (1921)

Mansfield, brought up in New Zealand, was a notable writer of short stories.

Get students to explore the ways in which Mansfield presents Leila's thoughts and feelings before and during the ball. It would be useful to consider the way in which Leila is different from the other girls and how this affects their (and our) impressions of her. How do they think Mansfield captures the excitement of the ball? Students should pay particular attention to the contribution to the story of the two men who dance with Leila, the odious fat man and then the young man with curly hair. They should examine carefully the words Mansfield uses in the dialogue and description to guide readers' responses to the various characters.

Wider reading

Other short stories by Katherine Mansfield such as *The Daughters of the Late Colonel* and *The Garden Party*.

Students might enjoy the novel *The Getting of Wisdom* (by Henry Handel Richardson) about a twelve year old girl's experience at a boarding school in Melbourne (which has been popular as a past IGCSE set text).

Compare with

The Yellow Wall Paper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The Destructors by Graham Greene

The Taste of Watermelon by Borden Deal

To Da-duh, In Memoriam by Paule Marshall

V.S. Pritchett 1900-1997

THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT (1932)

V.S Pritchett's life spanned the twentieth century and he became one of its most prolific short story writers.

The Fly in the Ointment begins with a sketch of a November day in London with its overcast sky and the mention of unemployed and beggars 'dribbling slowly past the desert of public buildings'. This provides the social backdrop against which is played out the reunion of a son and his father, the latter recently made bankrupt after thirty years of being a factory boss. Their reunion brings to the surface the underlying frictions in their relationship. Students should be encouraged to consider how Pritchett gradually reveals this lack of mutual understanding. The narrator tells us straightforwardly that the father 'despised his son' and charts the alarming way in which the mood changes during their talk, with at one point the father's 'warm voice going dead and rancorous'. Students should note the hints given about the father's shady business dealings and consider possible reasons for his absurdly excessive disgust and fear at the fly. In this respect, the significance of the title should be explored. Finally, how do they think Pritchett encourages us to view son and father? They might make particular reference to the father at the story's conclusion.

Wider reading

Students might dip into the collection of stories *A Careless Widow and Other Stories* by V.S. Pritchett.

Compare with

The Son's Veto by Thomas Hardy

Sredni Vashtar by Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)

The Custody of the Pumpkin by P.G. Wodehouse

The Enemy by V.S. Naipaul

Journey by Patricia Grace

Online

An interesting 1990 interview with V.S. Pritchett by *The Paris Review* can be found at:

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2263/the-art-of-fiction-no-122-v-s-pritchett>

P.G. Wodehouse 1881-1975

THE CUSTODY OF THE PUMPKIN (1935)

Wodehouse was a prolific British writer of comic prose fiction. His stories are populated by aristocrats like the ninth Earl of Emsworth, and take place in upper class settings. This story was originally published in US and UK magazines in 1924.

The story begins with a loving description of the sunshine alighting on, among other things, the Castle, its ivied walls, its green lawns, wide terraces, noble trees and three characters: the Earl, his son Freddie and Beach, the butler. Readers will note how Lord Emsworth relies on his butler to put his hat on and to take the cap off his new telescope. Much of the story's humour derives from the dialogue, with even the butler given choice lines. By contrast, the head-gardener is given a comic Scottish accent ('She's paying' me twa poon' a week'). Students should be encouraged to note dialogue and descriptions they find particularly funny, and explain why.

The comic figure of Lord Emsworth is central to the story. Students should consider the way in which he responds to his son's courtship and eventual marriage to Aggie Donaldson, and what it reveals about snobbery and class. They might examine, too, how Wodehouse portrays Lord Emsworth's comic concern for the well-being of his prize pumpkin and also consider why the latter makes its first appearance about a third of the way through the story.

Wider reading

Students might enjoy reading more of Wodehouse's *Blandings Castle* stories or his most famous stories featuring Jeeves and Wooster (starting with *The Inimitable Jeeves*).

Compare with

The Son's Veto by Thomas Hardy

Sredni Vashtar by Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)

An Englishman's Home by Evelyn Waugh

The Stoat by John McGahern

Online

The following site aims at giving 'A Complete Guide to PG Wodehouse':

<http://www.pgwodehousebooks.com/>

Graham Greene 1904-1991

THE DESTRUCTORS (1954)

Graham was a popular novelist and writer of short stories in his own lifetime. His novels have in the past featured as examination set texts: for example, *Brighton Rock*, *Travels with My Aunt* and *The Human Factor*. *The Destructors* is a popular choice for anthologies of short stories.

The destruction in the story is masterminded and overseen by the new boy to the gang, Trevor. He is called 'T.' as Trevor sounds too middle-class a name. Students should explore how Greene presents the shifting power within the group as leadership passes from Blackie to T. They should explore their responses to the various characters, and in particular T. with his adult-like appreciation of architecture - 'It's a beautiful house,' he says, using a social register that invites scorn from Blackie.

The story is told chronologically by a third person narrator, and the references to Smarties, Woolworth's, bomb damage caused by the Blitz and wet Bank Holiday weekends supply a quintessentially English backdrop of the time.

What do students make of the paradox at the heart of the story, namely, that the act of destruction is a form of creation? Encourage students to explore the ways in which Greene builds suspense. How effective do they find the ending with the driver and his convulsive laughter?

Wider reading

Students might enjoy Greene's short story *I Spy*, or one of his novels, perhaps one of those mentioned above.

Compare with

Secrets by Bernard MacLaverty

Games at Twilight by Anita Desai

The Taste of Watermelon by Borden Deal

My Greatest Ambition by Morris Lurie

Online

The following website offers some background to Greene's works:

<http://greeneland.tripod.com/index.htm>

R.K. Narayan 1906-2001

A HORSE AND TWO GOATS (1970)

Narayan is one of India's most celebrated prose fiction authors writing in the English language. This story was written in 1960 and published in 1970.

The story begins with a description of Kritam, where Muni lives. The third person narrator captures the largely phlegmatic way in which Muni regards the significant decline of his fortunes. In more affluent times he had 'lorded over a flock of fleecy sheep' whereas now he has only two 'miserable gawky goats'. We see events through his eyes, and are made to see why he feels like the 'poorest fellow in our caste'. All of the detail thus provided about Muni makes the appearance of the red-faced New Yorker all the more incongruous. The dialogue between the affable New Yorker and the initially awkward Muni reveals a lot about them, though not to each other. Students should explore what makes their 'mutual mystification' so amusing, taking care to examine what these two characters' words and actions show about their respective cultures. What do the students feel about the way in which the story ends?

Wider reading

Narayan's 1945 novel *The English Teacher*.

Compare with

How It Happened by Arthur Canon Doyle

Journey by Patricia Grace

To Da-duh, in Memoriam by Paule Marshall

Sandpiper by Ahdaf Soueif

The Third and Final Continent by Jhumpa Lahiri

On Her Knees by Tim Winton

Ted Hughes 1930-1998

THE RAIN HORSE (1974)

Ted Hughes is more celebrated for his poetry than his prose, and was British Poet Laureate from 1984 until he died. In this story, the description of the blinding rain and the mysterious and powerful horse is richly poetic, appealing to all senses. The hills and fields described in the story are reminiscent of the countryside in the Calder Valley where he was born.

The story, recounted in chronological third-person narration, depicts an increasingly terrifying clash between the young man and the horse which watches him intently. The horse is initially described in terms of other animals: a cat, dog and leopard. Students should explore how Hughes gradually builds up a sense of menace as the horse stalks the man, and consider the effects on the man of the relentless rain. They should examine how the description of the horse biding its time and of its sudden charging contributes to the dramatic impact of the writing. How effective do they find the portrayal of the man at the end of the story?

Wider reading

Try reading some of Hughes poems such as *The Thought Fox* and *Pike*. (The latter is in the *Songs of Ourselves* Paper 1/Paper 4 poetry selection for 2013-2015.)

Also: dip into Hughes's verse translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Compare with

The Yellow Wall Paper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

There Will Come Soft Rains by Ray Bradbury

The Lemon Orchard by Alex La Guma

The Stoat by John MacGahern

Online

Background material about his poetry and the opportunity to hear Hughes reading some of his poems can be found at:

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7078>

Morris Lurie 1938 -

MY GREATEST AMBITION (1984)

Morris Lurie is an Australian writer of comic prose fiction and plays.

The greatest ambition of the narrator (surname Lurie) is spelled out at the start of the story: he wants to be a comic-strip artist. From his perspective, fellow pupils wanting to become farmers, chemists, doctors and so are dreamers and romantics. The narrator's mocking father ('a great scoffer') clearly sees his son as such a dreamer. Students might usefully explore the way in which the father-son relationship is depicted. The eventual trip to the offices of *Boy Magazine* is full of deft comic touches, from the shortness of the boy's trousers to his permanent smile and the awkwardness when the men in grey suits realise that the comic-strip artist is a mere schoolboy. Students should consider the effectiveness of the story's final paragraph and the narrator's observation: 'The only thing that was ever real to me I had 'grown out of'. I had become, like everyone else, a dreamer.'

Wider reading

Try reading his 1978 novel *Flying Home*.

Compare with

Sredni Vashtar by Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)

The Enemy by V.S. Naipaul

Secrets by Bernard MacLaverty

The Taste of Watermelon by Borden Deal

Ahdaf Soueif **1950 -**

SANDPIPER (1994)

Born in Cairo, Soueif was educated in Egypt and England.

The story movingly portrays the breaking down of the relationship between an English writer and her Egyptian husband. The story opens with a lyrical description of the narrator sitting on the beach where the water rolled in. Students should consider the significance of this opening description to the title and also to the story as a whole. The first summer holiday at the place described (which was new to the narrator though not her husband) was a time of joy when her husband was a 'colossus bestriding the waves'. During the second summer holiday she misses their earlier time together spent in London. Ask students to explore the evidence that, in spite of the passage of time, the wife finds it difficult to fit into a different culture and to consider what effect this has on her relationship with her husband. They might begin with this excerpt: 'My foreignness, which had been so charming, began to irritate him. My inability to remember names, to follow the minutiae of politics, my struggles with the language, my need to be protected from the sun, the mosquitoes, the salads, the drinking water.'

Wider reading

Read more of Soueif's stories in the collection *Sandpiper*.

Compare with

The Son's Veto by Thomas Hardy

The Yellow Wall Paper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The Lemon Orchard by Alex La Guma

The Bath by Janet Frame

The Third and Final Continent by Jhumpa Lahiri

Online

Ahdaf Soueif's official website can be found at:

<http://www.ahdafsoueif.com/index.htm>

Penelope Fitzgerald 1916-2000

AT HIRUHARAMA (2000)

The English writer Penelope Fitzgerald is perhaps remembered chiefly for her novels.

The opening of the story provides the social and historical context. Mr Tanner's grandparents had left for New Zealand, he as an apprentice and she as a governess – but both end up being little more than servants. They married and became farmers, settling in some poor and lonely countryside. Of their home, the narrator says forcefully: 'Don't picture a shack, though.' Students should consider the impact of the narrator with her explicit interventions such as this and 'But wait a minute, surely he couldn't read or write?' The story certainly has its dramatic moments: the wife's cry, the husband covered in blood and the twist towards the end of the story. How do students respond to the arrival of the character of Brinkman half way through the story, his dominance thereafter and his thoughts at the end of the story?

Wider reading

Try reading some of the stories in *The Means of Escape*, which was published posthumously.

Compare with

The Yellow Wall Paper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The Prison by Bernard Malamud

The Village Saint by Bessie Head

The Bath by Janet Frame

Sandpiper by Ahdaf Soueif