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“Everything for the English Classroom!”

Free Lesson of the Month October 2010

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Please feel free to share this lesson with all your colleagues. We hope that they find these classroom-proven lessons to be as useful as you do.

This month’s Free Lesson comes from the [*Great Stories of Horror and Suspense Teaching Unit*](#) and features H.H. Munroe’s short story “The Open Window.”

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Prestwick House
PO Box 658
Clayton, DE 19938
1-800-932-4593
www.prestwickhouse.com

The Open Window

Vocabulary

duly – accordingly, properly
engulfed – swallowed up
falteringly – hesitatingly, unsteadily
ghastly – horrible, frightening
headlong – reckless, hurried
imminent – pending; about to happen
infirmities – injuries or illnesses
mackintosh – a type of raincoat
moor – a boggy piece of land usually covered with moss and low shrubs
pariah – an outcast or stray
pretentious – overly self-satisfied, smug
rectory – a dwelling for a clergyman
scarcity – shortage, lack
snipe – a wading bird found in marshes
undefinable – incapable of being described or defined

1. Why has Framton Nuttel come to this town? Why has he come to this particular house?

Framton is on a rural retreat which is supposed to help him with “the nerve cure” he is undergoing. It seems that Framton is high-strung and neurotic, and a retreat in the country has been prescribed to help his nervous condition. Framton has come to this particular house because it is one of the households for which his sister, who previously visited the town, has given him letters of introduction. During the time in which the story is set, it was customary to use such letters as a kind of social calling card. When a person traveled to an unknown city, a letter of introduction from a mutual acquaintance helped to integrate that person into polite society.

2. Describe Framton Nuttel. Is he a likable character?

Framton is nervous, anxiety-ridden, snobby, and pretentious, agonizing over the “correct” thing to say and already disliking the social call which he has made. He seems quite shallow and peevish. Answers will vary. Example: Framton is not exactly likable, nor is he detestable. He is not necessarily a bad guy—just cranky, pretentious and silly.

3. What is the “tragedy” which the girl describes to Framton?

Three years ago, the husband and two young brothers of the girl’s aunt went out bird-shooting and never returned. They had apparently drowned in “a treacherous piece of bog” and their bodies were never found.

4. According to the girl, why is the window kept open every night until dusk?

Ever since they disappeared, the girl's aunt has been awaiting their return: "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back someday...and walk in that window just as they used to do."

5. What is Mrs. Sappleton's demeanor when she enters the room? Does she act like a person who is pining away for her lost husband and brothers? What does Framton think of her demeanor?

Mrs. Sappleton hurries in, making apologies of her lateness. She talks briskly and cheerfully, and announces that her husband and brothers will be home from shooting soon. Answers will vary. Example: Mrs. Sappleton does not seem to be distressed or upset, as we might imagine, given the tragedy which occurred. However, she might be acting cheerful and brisk precisely because of the tragedy. In other words, she may have gone mad due to the tragedy, and this is why she irrationally keeps awaiting the threesome, even after three years. Her eyes do keep straying from Framton and toward the open window. Framton Nuttel thinks Mrs. Sappleton is pathetic, and probably crazy: "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."

6. What might we infer, from the following line, about the author's attitude toward people like Framton Nuttel?

"Framton...labored under the tolerably widespread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure."

Answers will vary. Example: Munro's attitude toward his character, Framton Nuttel, seems to be one of amused distaste. He seems to be poking fun at pretentious, high-strung people like Framton. In this story and many of his others, Munro tends to mock the customs and mores of upper middle-class society. Framton Nuttel appears to exemplify this type of upper middle-class gentleman.

7. What do the three (Mrs. Sappleton, her niece, and Framton Nuttel) witness as they look out the window? Describe the expression and behavior of each one as they look out the window.

They see three men and a dog, and every detail about the group matches the description which the girl recently gave in her story of the tragedy: "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." Mrs. Sappleton brightens and exclaims, "Here they are at last!" The girl stares out the window with a look of horror. Framton Nuttel, terrified, grabs his cane and hat and rushes headlong out the door.

8. What is ironic about the ending of the story?

The story ends with at least two layers of irony. First, we find out that the actual outcome (the fact that the girl made up the entire story) does not fit with what we expected. Additionally, while the reader finally becomes aware of the girl's trickery, Framton Nuttel never does. Ironically, he had come out to the country in order to cure his "nervous condition" but his condition is now far worse than it was when he arrived.

9. What is the mood of the story?

While considered a ghost story, the mood is not dark and brooding like many other ghost stories in this collection. Instead, the mood is light, humorous, and fast-paced. The story is mainly a social satire, meant to poke fun at people like Framton Nuttel.

10. Munro has been accused of having a mean streak in some of his writings, creating characters that are a little too cruel. Was the girl too cruel to Framton? Do we sympathize with Framton, or do we, like the girl, laugh at how foolish he is?

Answers will vary.

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