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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



Great American
Short Stories
(Ed.) Paul Negri

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ISBN 978-1-93546-680-2

Item No. 308053

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Pre-Reading

1. Several thousand short stories have been published in the United States between 1835 and 1927, but this anthology contains only nineteen, which the editor determined were “Great American Short Stories.” What do you think makes a story “great”—its characters, plot, symbols, themes, or a combination of different things? Write a handout for your classmates, in which you explain what makes a “great” short story.
2. In the Note at the beginning of the anthology, the editor writes that the short story genre “has served both as a vehicle for the imaginative flights of the author and as a reflection of the realities of life in the United States.” Considering the period in which these stories were written (e.g., 1835 – 1927) what “realities,” in the form of historical events, prevalent ideas, and cultural movements, do you think may have inspired these stories? For an amount of time determined by your teacher, freewrite your ideas about this question.
3. The editor states that the stories in this collection will help the reader “understand the American character.” What values, beliefs, and ideas do you think define an American? Write a list of these characteristics with a brief explanation for each of why you chose it.

Great American Short Stories

6. In “Young Goodman Brown,” the woods represent all that is wild, untamed, and evil in the world. The setting contrasts Salem village, which represents order, law, and society. In creating the symbolism of the woods, Hawthorne is reflecting the views of the New England Puritans. The Puritans believed that, in town and under the influence of the church, men and women felt obligated to follow strict moral codes. However, in the woods, the people experienced ultimate freedom, and they allowed their sinful emotions and instincts to control them.

The short story, however, was written over a hundred years after the time of the Puritans and, by the 1820s, views on wildlife and nature had changed. Just a few years after this story was written, Henry David Thoreau wrote an opposite view of nature. While Hawthorne found chaos and immorality in the woods, Thoreau found order and spirituality there.

What do you think about nature? Do you agree with Young Goodman Brown that nature represents everything that is untamed and evil, or do you believe, like Thoreau, that there is spiritual benefit in experiencing the outdoors? Write a letter to a friend in which you attempt to convince him or her that nature is either wild and chaotic or pure and inspiring.

7. Alone in the woods, Young Goodman Brown hears murmuring voices all around him. He can't distinguish what they're saying, but he recognizes the voices as belonging to his friends and acquaintances in Salem Village. One of the voices Brown identifies is the voice of his own wife, Faith. At first, Young Goodman Brown hears Faith talking, but later, she begins to scream. The sound of her voice, combined with the fact that he finds her hair ribbon in a bush, leads him to think that Faith has succumbed to the Devil's temptation.

Write an instant message to Young Goodman Brown, comforting him and offering some rational explanation of what happened to Faith.

“The Tell-Tale Heart”

11. The narrator of this story begins by denying that he is mad. How, he reasons, could a madman have the stealth and knowledge to spy on an old man every single night, as the narrator does?

It is true that the narrator spies on an old man every night and this, understandably, makes the old man scared. Hearing someone enter his room, the old man wakes with a start. He is frightened by the sound of the floor creaking and the door opening, yet, in the pitch dark, he cannot see anyone entering the room. He wonders if anyone is there.

If the old man had a security system, even a lock on the door, he would probably be able to sleep more soundly, not being disturbed by intruders. As a salesperson for a company that sells security systems, write a sales pitch to the old man, trying to convince him to buy an alarm system for his room.

12. The narrator has a very strange motive for killing his guest; he says that he loves the old man and has never been wronged by him, but the old man’s eye makes his “blood [run] cold.” The narrator does not want to kill the man as much as he wants to “rid [him]self of the eye forever.” Even when he sneaks into the old man’s room at night with the intent to kill him, the narrator does not attack him until the lantern falls upon the open pale blue eye.

On occasion, we encounter people who we admire and love, but who have particular traits or characteristics that bother us. For instance, you might have a friend who has an annoying laugh or a sibling who always cracks his or her knuckles. Write an email to the person in which you address the characteristic or trait that troubles you.

Great American Short Stories

18. Bartleby does his work and is always the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave at night. In some senses, Bartleby is a model employee; however, the one drawback of his work performance is that he continually refuses to do anything but copy documents. Whenever his boss asks him to do an examination or to run errands, Bartleby responds, “I would prefer not to.”

Bartleby’s boss rationalizes that Bartleby is generally a good worker; however, his reluctance to do anything other than writing annoys the narrator. Bartleby’s co-workers, especially Turkey and Nippers, are likewise annoyed by his refusal to do any extra work. Why, they reason, should they have to take on Bartleby’s extra duties just because Bartleby “prefers” not to do them?

Write a dialogue between the workers in the scrivener’s office and a human resources officer, in which the human resources person attempts to soothe the bad feelings among all of the workers.

19. In reading this short story, it becomes clear that Bartleby’s catchphrase—a phrase that exemplifies his personality—is “I would prefer not to.” Not only is this his response to being asked to perform certain duties at work, it is also his remark when asked to talk about his history and his personal life.

What is a phrase that sums up your own personality, hopes, and desires? Write a journal entry in which you come up with your own catchphrase, and explain how it reflects your life or your outlook.

20. The boss’s feelings about Bartleby vacillate. At first, Bartleby’s stubbornness annoys the narrator. Then, when he finds that Bartleby is apparently homeless, the narrator feels pity toward him. He also becomes fearful when he thinks about what could happen if he confronts Bartleby in the secluded office.

Bartleby must be a very complex person if he can evoke such a wide range of emotions from just one person. Moreover, his refusal to answer any questions about his private life makes him a mysterious character. From where did Bartleby come? Does he have a family? What makes him refuse to do anything other than writing, no matter if his boss tells him to do it?