The Monkey's Paw Study Guide

The Monkey's Paw by W. W. Jacobs

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Introduction

"The Monkey's Paw" is W.W. Jacobs' most famous story and is considered to be a classic of horror fiction. It first appeared in *Harper's Monthly* magazine in 1902, and was reprinted in his third collection of short stories*, The Lady of the Barge*, also published in 1902. The story has since been published in many anthologies, adapted for the stage, and made into films. "The Monkey's Paw" was well received when Jacobs first published it; the story garnered rave reviews from some of the most important critics writing at the turn of the century. The story was also very popular with readers.

Like O. Henry, Jacobs was famous during his lifetime for writing a particular type of story rather than for any particular work. Similar to O. Henry's stories, Jacobs' tales are tightly constructed, humorous stories that usually revolve around simple surprise-ending plots Many of his stories are set on the waterfronts and docks of London, which Jacobs knew from his own childhood.

In addition to humor, Jacobs explored the macabre in several of his tales. "The Monkey's Paw" is probably the best example of this. The story opens with the White family spending a cozy evening together around the hearth. An old friend of Mr. White's comes to visit them. Sergeant-Major Morris, home after more than twenty years in India, entertains his hosts with exotic stories of life abroad. He also sells to Mr. White a mummified monkey's paw, said to have had a spell put on it by a holy man that will grant its owner three wishes. Morris warns the Whites not to wish on it at all—but of course they do, with horrible consequences.

Jacobs uses foreshadowing, imagery and symbolism in this story to explore the consequences of tempting fate. His careful, economical creation of setting and atmosphere add suspense to the tale, while his use of dialogue and slang (another Jacobs trademark) help readers to feel that the characters are genuine.

Author Biography

W. W. Jacobs was one of the most popular humorists of the early 1900s, although his most famous story, "The Monkey's Paw," is considered a horror classic. William Wymark Jacobs, born September 8, 1863, was the son of a wharf manager and his wife. He grew up in Wapping, a seaport section of London. The docks and wharves of seaport towns later provided the setting for many of his stories.

Jacobs attended private schools and entered the civil service as a clerk in 1879, a job that he hated. When he was about twenty years old, he began writing stories and articles for fun, and by 1885 he began to publish them in magazines. His first collection of stories, *Many Cargoes*, was published in 1896, and the following year, he published two novellas in a single volume—*The Skipper's Wooing/The Brown Man's Servant*. However, Jacobs was a cautious man, and he did not quit his civil service job to devote himself to writing until his third book—another volume of stories, entitled Sea Urchins —was published in 1899,

Jacobs married soon after that. His wife, a militant suffragette and socialist, was very different from the conservative Jacobs, and their marriage was not a happy one. This fact may have contributed to the negative depiction of women that runs through most of his fiction.

The writer was very prolific during the early years of his career, producing a book nearly every year until 1911. At that time, the rate at which he wrote new material slowed dramatically, and he wrote very little during the last seventeen years of his life. However, it was in these years that Jacobs enjoyed great popularity with readers and some fame. Many of his early works were reissued, and he wrote some adaptations of his stories for the stage. He died in 1943.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Mr. White and his son Herbert playing a game of chess. Mrs. White is knitting by the fire. Mr. White loses the game and becomes agitated and exasperated. Soon, there is a knock at the door and the Sergeant-Major enters. They share a few drinks and the Sergeant-Major tells them some tales about his trips to India, where he obtained a monkey's paw. The paw is magical, allowing three men three wishes each. One man has died and the Sergeant-Major has used up his three wishes. He tosses the paw into the fire, but Mr. White snatches it out and keeps it for himself. The Sergeant-Major tells them that a fakir has put a spell on the paw "to show that fate ruled people's lives," Those who tamper with fate "did so to their sorrow." But Herbert coaxes his father to wish for something modest, like 200 pounds. His father does so, while Herbert plays dramatic chords on the piano in accompaniment. They all go to bed for the night.

In the morning, Herbert leaves for work and tells his parents not to break into the money before he comes home that evening. Mr. and Mrs. White make light-hearted comments about Herbert's return and his reactions to an arrival of the money.

Later, a stranger comes to the door and, after coining into the house, tells the parents that Herbert has been killed at work that morning when he was caught in some machinery. The stranger then gives them compensation from the company: 200 pounds.

Herbert is buried in a nearby cemetery. About a week later, Mr. White is awakened by the sounds of Mrs. White weeping over their son. Suddenly, she remembers the paw and the two wishes that remain. She pleads for Mr. White to get it and to make a wish that Herbert would be alive again. He tries to tell her that since he was mangled in the machinery and had been buried for a week, it would not be a wise wish. But she insists. Despite misgivings about invoking the magic of the paw again, Mr. White wishes for Herbert to be alive again.

They wait. They watch out the window, but nothing happens and no one arrives. They start to bed again when suddenly a slight knock is heard at the door.

Mrs. White then remembers that the cemetery is two miles away and that it would have taken Herbert a while to walk home. The knocking increases, ending in a series of rapid hangings on the door. Mr. White tries to stop her from opening the door. She persists and climbs up on a chair to open the top-most bolt.

Just as she opens the door, Mr. White asks his third wish. The door opens; the street is still and empty. Only a dim streetlight flickers on the roadway.

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

It is night; it is cold; it is damp. In Lakesnam Villa, the blinds are closed to the outdoors while a family sits before a burning fire. Mr. White and his son, Herbert, play chess, and Mrs. Herbert knits by the fire.

Mr. Herbert tries to distract his son after he makes an erroneous move, sure to end the game in his son's favor. The father makes reference to an expected guest, a diversionary tactic, but Herbert sees his father's strategic mistake. Mr. Herbert bemoans the miserable pathways to their home in misplaced anger. Seeing right through this, Mrs. Herbert assures her husband he will win next time.

The banging of the gate heralds the arrival of their guest, Sergeant-Major Morris, a big man, with beady eyes and red face. Mr. Herbert offers his guest several drinks, and after the third, Morris speaks of his experiences around the world. For twenty-one years the Sergeant-Major traveled, much to the envy of Mr. Herbert, who longed to see India. The host then asks his guest about a monkey's paw to which he had heard his guest make reference on another occasion.

The sergeant-major blows off this inquiry as "a bit of magic," but the family wants more. The retired serviceman pulls a mummified paw out of his pocket. Mrs. White will not touch it, but Herbert studies it. Father and son are very curious and inquire as to its "magic." The sergeant-major says that a fakir, a holy man, put a spell on it. The purpose in doing that was "to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it do so to their sorrow." Morris also tells them that three wishes were granted each of three owners, and the family listens earnestly.

Realizing the impact of the sergeant-major's words, Herbert questions the guest about why he did not have three wishes. Morris informs them that he had, and the original owner received his as well, making his third wish death. That is how Morris assumed ownership. The guest speaks gravely, causing a dead silence from his listeners.

Then Herbert asks Morris why he still carries the paw, and their visitor explains that he thought of selling it, but since it had caused so much trouble already, he doubted anyone would want to buy it, at least not without trying it first.

It is time for Herbert's father to react to all this information, and he asks if Morris could have three wishes again, would he use it. Morris is momentarily unsure of his answer, but with a high degree of assurance, he then throws the paw into the fire.

Mr. White expresses his desire for the object of ill meaning, according to Morris, but Morris refuses to give it to him. The sergeant-major tells his host that if he wants the paw, Mr. White is never to blame the guest for any resultant mishap. The host pulls it from the fire and keeps it, inquiring of his guest how to use it.

The instructions are simple: the owner is to hold up his right hand and make his wish audibly. Mrs. White leaves to start her dinner preparation and offhandedly suggests to her husband that he might ask for more hands for her household responsibilities. Looking at the paw, the family laughs, only to have Morris gaze intently at them while he grabs his host's arm. He tells his host that if he *has* to wish, he should "wish for something sensible."

Forgetting the talisman through dinner and the storytelling that followed, the family finally says goodbye to their guest. When asked if he remunerated the sergeant-major for the monkey's paw, the father tells his son that he in fact had, but the guest refused it. Mr. White insisted and the guest again warned his host against using the talisman. Herbert does not take Morris seriously and jokes light heatedly about the wealth that awaits them and how it will stop any henpecking. Mrs. White, however, playfully chases her witty son around the table with an antimacassar, the protective linens on backs and arms of furniture.

Now Mr. White has time to consider his first wish. Mr. White feels he has everything he could possibly want, but his son suggests he ask for two hundred pounds to pay off his house. With sweet interplay among the family members, the father smiles at the audacity of thinking this possible, and his son winks to his mother. Herbert even plays a theatrical introduction for the great act of wishing before his father asks for the money.

Mr. White makes his wish, shrieks and throws the object to the floor, claiming it moved in his hand "like a snake." Since no money is seen, the wife thinks it is surely her husband's imagination that caused him to throw the talisman. The family continues with their delightful evening, sitting by the fire. The wind, however, picks up, and the father is a bit skittish when a door bangs upstairs. A melancholic and eerie silence falls upon the family. Herbert rises to go to bed, he teases his parents about the money being on their bed and adds that there will be "something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains."

Section 1 Analysis

The setting is immediately established in the first sentence, demonstrating W.W. Jacobs's excellent ability to consolidate literary elements for a short story. The weather and time of day also help establish tone, and the chess game introduces the element of the unexpected, even in a well calculated game, a game of planning and strategy.

The fact that father, son, and mother are all together and enjoying each other's company attests to the family structure. The non-verbal communication between mother and son convey understanding between generations, and the wife's humorous encouragement to her husband shows the health of their relationship.

Into this pleasant household enters the father's friend, Morris. Morris shares tales of his military travels with the family. This would have been very common, since at the time of

this story's publication, 1902, the British Empire had holdings all over the world, and the military career was a respected way of life that impacted almost all families.

Their guest shares the background of a talisman he carries, telling the family that it is said to possess magical qualities, and that it was hexed by a holy man who wanted to show the impact on those who tamper with fate. While he tells the Whites the charm was created "to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it do so to their sorrow." This establishes the story's theme at this early point in the structure of the story.

Morris tells the family that its first owner wished death for his third wish, but they ignore this warning that foreshadows the story. After answering the family's further inquiries regarding the talisman, Morris throws the paw into the fire, rather than entertain the thought of using it again. It is the fire in the house that symbolizes first the welcoming hearth when the guest arrives and then a source of destruction and evil when the talisman is thrown into it. It is symbolic of the fires of eternity that swallow evil.

When Mr. White retrieves the paw from the fire, their guest is visibly shaken and tries to dissuade his host from using the talisman. Morris tries to warn them of the consequences, and Mrs. White compares it to the Arabian Nights. In creating this simile, the author foreshadows a degree of uncertainty and danger connected with the monkey's paw. In the tales mentioned, a wife is kept alive only because of the stories she tells each night, saving each story's climax until the next night.

Mr. White eventually makes his first wish and, after he does, he throws the talisman across the room, saying if felt "like a snake" in his hand. This simile conveys a sense of evil since, in most cultures in the Northern Hemisphere, a snake symbolizes wickedness. When nothing results from the father's wish, the son teases his parents about some wretched demon watching them while they put away their "ill-gotten gains." The tone continues to be established through this phrase, and the possibility of some type of retribution is introduced.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

Morning brings the White family a bright sun, dispelling all their apprehensions and foolishness about the previous night. Mr. White reminds the family that the sergeant-major told them that when a wish is granted, things seem to unfold naturally, as though it were all part of some grand scheme. Herbert even jokes with his parents regarding their imagined newfound wealth. Mrs. White sees the possibility of anyone's desires being granted as ludicrous, yet a knock sends her rushing to the door, only to accept a bill.

After Herbert leaves for work, another visitor comes to the White household, a man tentatively hanging around their gate. The man is well-dressed and seems uncomfortable in their home. The visitor is from Maw and Meggins, the company where their son works. The man tells the parents that their son is '"Badly hurt,' he said, quietly, 'but he is not in any pain.'" Then it occurs to the mother what the man is saying. Their son is indeed in no more pain because he is dead. It takes longer for the father to understand the impact of the man's words.

In a loving move, Mr. White goes to comfort Mrs. White tenderly like he did in their dating days, some forty years earlier. The man from Maw and Meggins informs them that the company is not responsible, but due to Morris's service, they want to compensate the family - two hundred pounds. The wife screams and the old man, after smiling, falls to the floor.

Section 2 Analysis

In a very short scene in this story, a great deal is learned about the characterization of Mrs. White. Mrs. White dispels the magical qualities in the paw, yet continues to hope in its validity. Mrs. White is the one to run to the door, and she is the one to notice the next visitor to their house.

This visitor brings the news of their son's death. According to the stranger, '"He was caught in the machinery."' This can be taken literally and figuratively. Their son was indeed killed in a machine accident, but the family itself is also caught in the machinery of the talisman's power, the power to alter destiny. This hints at the story's theme: to interfere with fate is to interfere with one's well being.

When told there would be some settlement from the company, the father is said to have "a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action." This simile implies somewhat of an idea of war but a reluctance to accept the true reality. Such is the case with Mr. White for, as slow as he was in understanding the man's original purpose for the visit, he was quick to perceive the true meaning of the two hundred-pound settlement.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary

The couple buries their son and waits for something to happen that might alter "a house steeped in shadow and silence." Nothing comes and time wears on them heavily. The couple rarely speak, and one night Mr. White finds himself alone in bed, his wife crying at the window. Mr. White warmly calls her back to his warmth, but she tells him that where he is, their son is colder. Mrs. White cries more, and as much as he wants to console her, he is lulled back to sleep by the bed's warmth. Suddenly, however, he is awakened by an outburst from his wife. Mrs. White demands the monkey's paw. Mr. White tells her it is in the parlor, at which she laughs, cries, and then kisses his cheek.

It just occurred to her that there are two remaining wishes, and she will wish their boy back. Mr. White orders her back in bed with a deal of trepidation, calling the outcome of the first wish "a coincidence." This does not stop her; she orders him to get it.

Mr. White goes downstairs and gets the talisman. Mr. White becomes fearfully aware that his maimed son might appear at this request. When he returns to his wife, she is white and has an abnormal look to her face. Mrs. White orders him to wish; he calls it "foolish and wicked," but she insists. Mr. White does as she orders. The paw again drops to the floor and the old man shakily falls into a chair. His wife approaches the window and looks for her son with "burning eyes."

Mr. White sits in the chair until he is cold, and then goes back to bed. Mr. White is relieved the paw appears not to work, and his wife later joins him when she is likewise convinced. Unable to sleep, Mr. White goes down the stairs with a match in his hand. When he gets to the base of the stairs, his match goes out, and a light knock is heard at the door. The old man drops the matches and listens to another knock. Mr. White runs upstairs and closes his door. Another knock is heard.

Mrs. White immediately inquires of her husband what that sound was, and he dismisses it as a rat. After another knock, one quite loud, she yells out her son's name. Mrs. White runs to the door, but her husband grabs and holds her. Mr. White questions what she is about to do and she tells him it is Herbert. Since their son is two miles away, of course it would take him a while to get to their home.

The husband does not want his wife to let their guest in, and she accuses him of being afraid of their own son. The knocks keep coming, and Mrs. White pulls away from her husband. Mrs. White makes it to the door and calls after her husband to free the bolt. Mr. White, however, is trying frantically to reach the paw. Mr. White calls his son "it" and "the thing," knowing full well what semblance of a man might walk in that door.

Mr. White hears his wife drag a chair to reach the door bolt, and when he hears it unlatch, he grabs the paw and makes his third wish. The bolt is pulled back and he

hears the door open. Wind and a desperate cry from his wife sweep up the stairs. The husband runs to his wife, and then outside where nothing is found.

Section 3 Analysis

Like the other scenes, this excels in the advancement of plot through dialogue. Through the exchange of husband and wife, the reader learns of their plans and the possible outcome of their wish. Word choices such as "horrible," "escape," "seized," and "unwholesome" contribute to the tone clearly established from the beginning of the story and continued throughout.

After Mr. White makes his second wish, a description of the candle burning down, casting ghostly images on the ceiling, continues to set the tone and foreshadows the possible haunting force about to enter their lives. Again, word choice enhances the story's tone and meaning when the husband refers to his son as "it" and "thing," conveying something other than human. The fact that Mrs. White is described as having "burning eyes" also conveys the evil power working within her.

The author's real talent, however, is his building of suspense at the story's conclusion. The author has the knock on their door occur in complete darkness, just when the match extinguishes. Also, he draws out the ending with details of the wife's struggle to admit their mutilated son. Step by step, she struggles with the bolt while her husband frantically gropes to find the paw. Jacobs masterfully has the bolt "come slowly back" at the same moment the husband finds the paw.

The reader awaits the outcome only a brief moment because we are told of the mother's grief-laden cry that no one is at the door. The wise and ever-comforting husband then joins his wife to investigate the absence of their son. The solitary image of a "street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road," is much like the couple in the doorway.

Another important element in this story is the unknown, the elements of surprise and uncertainty. Mr. White only surmises that his son will return in his mutilated form, but the reader is never to know what or who is really at the door. When trying to control fate, the unknown is sure to result.

Characters

Father

See Mr. White

Morris

See Sergeant-Major Morris

Sergeant-Major Morris

Sergeant-Major Morris is the catalyst for the story: he brings the monkey's paw to the Whites' home. He is "a tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage," whose eyes get brighter after his third glass of whiskey at the Whites' hearth. Morris is both familiar and exotic. Morris and Mr. White began their lives in approximately the same way; Mr. White remembers his friend as "a slip of a youth in the warehouse," But in his twenty-one years of travel and soldiering, Morris has seen the world and has brought back tales of "wild scenes and doughty deeds; of wars and plagues and strange peoples." Morris also carries with him the monkey's paw, which changes all the Whites' lives forever.

Mother

See Mrs. White

The Other

See The Stranger

The Stranger

The last character to appear in "The Monkey's Paw" has no name. He is the messenger of death— the company representative sent to tell Herbert's parents about the death of their son in a terrible accident at work. On one level, Jacobs paints a realistic portrait of this man; Mrs. White notes that he is well dressed, and that he seems very nervous, hesitating at their gate, and picking lint from his clothes before he delivers his horrible news. However, on another level, the writer keeps this character anonymous: the man never gives his name, and his face is not described except as "perverted." In this way, the character works as a symbol of death or fate.

The Visitor

See The Stranger

Herbert White

Herbert White lives with his elderly parents and gets along with them quite well. He works at a local company called Maw and Meggins. Like his father, he is good-natured and reliable.

Despite this steadiness of character, Herbert is also a little bit silly. He is the first to ask Morris whether the old soldier used three wishes himself, and Morris looks at him "in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth." He teases his parents about wishing on the monkey's paw, goading his mother into chasing him around the table, and his father into making the first wish. He remains skeptical and flippant about the paw's powers: "'Well, I don't see the money," said his son as he picked [the paw] up and placed it on the table, 'and I bet I never shall.'" A bit later in the story, Herbert jokes, "I expect you'll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed."

Like his father's failings, Herbert White's irreverence is perfectly understandable. This quality even contibutes to why Herbert is so likeable. However, when Herbert dies a horrible death, "caught in the machinery" at Maw and Meggins, it is suggested that his death is related to his refusal to take the powers of the monkey's paw more seriously.

Mr. White

Mr. White is a conservative, satisfied man who enjoys his quiet domestic life. Jacobs shows this in the very first scene in the story, which opens with father and son playing chess in their cozy cottage on a rainy night, while Mrs. White, knitting by the fire, comments on their game. Clearly, the Whites live a contented, if somewhat contained, life. Later in the story, the grandest thing Mr. White can think of to wish for is to clear the mortgage on their little house.

White does have reckless tendencies, though. In the first paragraph of the story, in the chess game with his son, he puts his king "into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment" from his normally docile wife. This recklessness leads him to tempt fate with the monkey's paw, endangering his family as a result.

Mr. White is a kind of "everyman." Happily retired, content with his life and his family, he is nevertheless intrigued by the tales of the exotic that his friend, Sergeant-Major Morris, brings home. His curiosity and his greed (a very minor greed, really) prove to be the undoing of his entire family—but these characteristics are what make him so human.

Although he is influenced by all the other characters, Mr. White is the principal force in the story—the one who makes things happen. Morris brings the monkey's paw, but Mr.

White rescues it from the fire and later purchases it from the sergeant-major. Herbert, Mr. White's son, teases him into making the first wish; and it is his wife who forces him to make the second. He makes the third wish by himself, without even a witness to the wish-making. However, as the new owner of the paw, Mr. White is the person who makes all three wishes. He is the person who truly sets the story in motion, and it can be argued that he is the character who pays the most awful price for wishing on the monkey's paw. For although Herbert loses his life, and Mrs. White loses her central reason for living, Mr. White in effect loses his whole family, and must live with the knowledge that these losses are his own fault.

Mrs. White

Mrs. White is a calm, reserved woman. In the story's first scene, Jacobs notes that Mr. White's chess moves are so "radical" that they "even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire"—as if drastic events must take place in order for her to even speak.

Mrs. White enjoys a good relationship with both her husband and her son, Herbert. She jokes with them, and humors them; when Mr. White insists that the monkey's paw moved in his hand when he made the first wish, she replies, soothingly, "You thought it did." She fits the stereotype of the good housewife, common in the time when Jacobs was writing: she keeps the house and sets the supper; her husband and son are the center of her world.

In fact, it is the strength of her maternal instinct that empowers her at the end of the story, after Herbert has died. Overcome by the loss of her beloved son, she forces Mr. White to make the second wish on the monkey's paw: to bring Herbert back. Tragically, neither Mrs. nor Mr. White remembers to request that he come back whole from the grave, and in the moments before the door swings open, Mr. White wishes him gone again, so diat his wife need not see the mangled, partly decayed body that both characters believe will be there. Thus, Mrs. White loses her son not once, but twice.

Themes

Fate and Chance

In "The Monkey's Paw," Sergeant-Major Morris, an old family friend of the Whites, returns from India with tales of his exotic life and with a strange souvenir—a monkey's paw. This paw has had a spell put on it by a fakir (a holy man), he tells the Whites. Morris goes on to say that the fakir wanted to show that "fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it."

As the story unfolds, author Jacobs provides many hints that, indeed, the monkey's paw does possess strange powers, and that tempting fate by making the three wishes is a grave mistake. First, the son, Herbert, asks Morris if he has made his three wishes, since he is in possession of the monkey's paw. "'I have,' he said, quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

"'And did you really have the three wishes granted?' asked Mrs. White.

"'I did,' said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth."

The sergeant major will say nothing else of his own misfortunes, but he does tell the Whites that although he does not know what the first owner of the paw asked for in his first two wishes, "the third was for death. That's how I got the paw."

Later that evening, Morris throws the paw on the fire, but Mr. White rescues it. Despite his friend's grave warnings, Mr. White makes a rather modest wish for 200 pounds, so that he may pay off the mortgage on his family's little house. And so, in spite of the original warning of the fakir, the story of the first owner of the monkey's paw, who wished for death at the end, and the warnings of their friend Morris, the Whites attempt to interfere with fate, with terrible consequences.

Morris has also told them that "the things happened so naturally that you might if you so wished attribute [events] to coincidence." This is, in fact, what happens in the story. A strange man appears at the Whites' door the very next morning. He tells them that their son Herbert has been killed in an accident at work, and while the company admits no liability, they would like to settle on the Whites a sum of 200 pounds, as compensation for Herbert's death.

Ten days after the funeral, Mrs. White, almost crazy with grief, forces her husband to make the second wish on the monkey's paw: to bring Herbert back to them. Nothing happens for several hours, but then there is a knock at the door, "If s my boy! It's Herbert!" the old lady cries. "I forgot it was two miles to the cemetery!"

Mr. White imagines his mangled son, risen after ten days in a grave, whose face was barely recognizable after the accident, standing at their door. To spare his wife this horrible sight, he makes the third and final wish on the paw: that Herbert go away.

By tempting fate, and wishing for money, the Whites lose something even more precious: their son, and their happy life as a family.

Human Condition

It is human nature to want what one cannot have, and to undervalue what one does possess. Another common truth about the human condition is that people's best qualities often turn out to be their worst: the characteristics that can save them on the one hand can be their undoing on the other. The downfall of the White family comes from tendencies within each of the Whites that are only natural.

For example, Mr. White, in his life a reasonable man, is reckless in small ways like in the chess game he plays with his son. He is skeptical about the power of the monkey's paw; he feels foolish wishing on it and discounts the many warnings he hears and sees about the dangers of using it. He does, however, make his wishes. In the end, his "sensible" wish for the mortgage money is his undoing. The fact that he has wished at all is enough to bring on the fakir's curse.

Mrs. White also carries the seed of her destruction in her own character. She is the picture of the ideal housewife at the time the story was written: a good housekeeper, devoted to her husband and son, happy to let the men in the household make the important decisions. In her great love for Herbert, her son—for which she can hardly be faulted—she seizes upon the idea of wishing him back from the dead. Normally quiet and demure, she exhorts Mr. White to wish Herbert back with such force that he cannot deny her, even against his better instincts.

Herbert himself is a good-natured young man, who teases his parents about the power of the monkey's paw. He, too, is skeptical His joking is not mean; under the circumstances, it seems normal. However, we wonder whether he would have lost his life if he had been more respectful of these mysterious powers.

Style

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a technique in which the writer hints at the events to come. Sometimes, authors depict events early in a story that are really microcosms of the plot that is soon to unfold; other times, writers create this effect by developing an atmosphere that projects the tone of what is about to happen. For instance, a rather cliched example would be a stormy night on the eve of a murder. Jacobs uses both types of foreshadowing techniques in"The Monkey's Paw."

The Whites' chess game at the opening of the story, when Mr. White puts his king into "sharp and unnecessary perils"—and soon sees "a fatal mistake after it was too late"—is a kind of mini-drama, one that tells us what is about to happen in the story.

The Whites (and readers) are given plenty of clues that the monkey's paw is dangerous and powerful. When Herbert asks if Morris has had his three wishes, he only replies, "I have," and taps his glass against his teeth. We get the feeling that what happened to him is so terrible that he will not talk about it. Morns also tells the Whites that while he does not know what the first owner of paw wanted in his first two wishes, the man's third wish was for death. Mr. White, despite these warnings, wishes anyway, and feels the monkey's paw move in his hand when he does so.

The atmosphere in the White's little house grows tense and ominous after Mr. White has wished on the paw. The wind rises outside, and "a silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three." Finally, after his parents have gone to bed, Herbert sits alone in the darkness, watching faces in the fire.

"The last face was so horrible and so simian [monkey-like] that he gazed at it in amazement." The face becomes so vivid that Herbert reaches for a glass of water on the table to throw onto the fire; instead of the water glass, his hand finds the monkey's paw.

These elements of the story, plus the appearance and strange behavior of the "mysterious man" who appears the next morning, prepare readers for the story's first horrible event: Herbert's death.

Imagery and Symbolism

Two other techniques that Jacobs uses with great skill and subtlety are imagery (the picture created by the story's language) and symbolism (the meaning of an image beyond its literal description). Often, when an image is repeated, it then becomes symbolic. One such image in "The Monkey's Paw" is fire.

At the beginning of the story, fire is a wanning, comforting element: with a storm raging outside, the family is grouped around the hearth, with father and son playing chess while mother knits contentedly. After the sergeant-major has arrived and had supper with the Whites, the men again sit in front of the fire, smoking their pipes.

A little later, when Morris tosses the paw onto the flames, the function of the fire changes: its intended role is to consume and purify the evil and destructive force that Morris believes exists in the monkey's paw. At the end of the evening, the same fire becomes ominous (or perhaps, delivers a warning) to Herbert, who sees a horrible, monkey-like face in the flames—one that so disturbs him that he tries to put it out.

In the final scenes of the story, fire fulfills a different purpose-—to illuminate, both literally and figuratively. After Mr. White makes the second wish, the candle in the White's room goes out, symbolizing that even more darkness will come into their lives. The father lights a match to show his way to the door, but the match goes out too; frantic, he drops the box of matches in his attempt to light another match. Mr. and Mrs. White are in the dark. Symbolically, this loss of light means that they have lost their direction; that they have lost hope.

The final, sad image in the story is the view the Whites have when they have flung open their front door, where we suppose the dead and mangled Herbert, called forth from the grave, was standing just a moment before. All they see is a quiet and deserted road, illuminated by a flickering street light (street lights, when this story was wntten, were not powered by electricity and light bulbs, but rather by a gas flame). The Whites' life, without their son, will now be desolate and empty.

Historical Context

The British Empire

When Jacobs wrote "The Monkey's Paw" a popular saying was "the sun never sets on the British empire." By the early 1900s, England had conquered and colonized countries all over the world. The saying meant that somewhere in the world it was always daylight, and there a British colony could be found. Sergeant-Major Morris returns from India, a British colony, in "The Monkey's Paw." In colonies like India, Hong Kong, Australia, and South Africa, British military men, explorers, archaeologists, and scientists were learning about ancient cultures and traditions little known in the West. Returning from distant colonies to England, they were firsthand sources of information about other peoples and countries for their countrymen curious about exotic far-off lands. The retired colonel just back from India was a staple character in British popular fiction for many years.

The Victorian Era

The last decades of the 19th century, and the first decade or so of the 20th century was, culturally, a very structured time, particularly in England. Jacobs grew up and wrote in an era when people lived by rigid, if unspoken, rules. Religious beliefs were strong, the growing middle class honored hard work and social stability. Men were the wage-earners; women were the housekeepers and in charge of raising the children.

Everyday Life

Over six million people lived in London by 1900. Because of the crowded conditions, several generations of the same family normally lived together in the same house. Housing was too expensive and scarce for most individuals or married couples to live alone. Grandparents, parents, and children often shared the same living quarters. There was no electricity, so all light came from candles or gas lamps. Young people looking for work sometimes turned to colonial service because it paid well and provided some relief from the conditions in England. Those who stayed home often worked in the many industrial factories.

Critical Overview

Popular with readers and critics alike (P.G. Wodehouse hailed him as a master writer), Jacobs was a prolific writer who published 19 volumes between 1896 and 1926. He wrote short stories, novels, and plays, although critics agree that he was most accomplished at the short story form. Despite the fact that most of his stories were humorous tales of life on the English waterfront at the turn of the century, his most famous story is "The Monkey's Paw," which James Harding in *The Reference Guide to Short Fiction* called "a little masterpiece of horror by an unusually gifted writer."

Jacobs is known for his deft, economical scene-setting and his neat, logical plots, two characteristics which are easily visible in "The Monkey's Paw." His stories show a gradation in humor. Many of them could be considered comedies, but Jacobs also began to experiment with what later became known as "black humor." This vein of writing led him to deal in the macabre, crafting pieces like "The Interruption" (Sea Whisper), about a man who murders his wife for her money and is then blackmailed by his housekeeper. He plans to poison the housekeeper but his plans go awry, and he dies instead. Another macabre story, "Jerry Bundler" *(Light Freights),* is a ghost story in which no ghost actually appears—similar to the last scene in "The Monkey's Paw," in which we believe that the mangled, ghost- or zombie-like Herbert is at the door—but never see him.

Jacobs published his first collection of short-stories, *Many Cargoes*, in 1896. The book was well received by both readers and critics. G.K. Chesterton, who was regarded as one of England's premier men of letters during the first half of the twentieth century, gave the book a glowing review, favoring Jacobs over Rudyard Kipling: "Mr. Jacobs is in a real sense a classic.. .compared with Mr. Kipling, Mr. Jacobs is like the Parthenon."

Similar to O. Henry, Jacobs became famous more for the *type* of story that he wrote, rather than any particular work. The action in his stories usually revolves around neat, surprise-ending plots, which were very popular in his day. Sometimes his characters are motivated by money; often they are motivated by the desire to either be married or to avoid marriage. Nearly all his plots contain trickery or deception.

Jacobs' output slowed considerably, beginning around 1911. However, in the last twenty years or so of his life, his popularity escalated, and many of his earlier works were reissued. In these later years, Jacobs did not produce much new work, but he did write some adaptations of his better-known stories for the stage.

After he died, Jacobs' works fell into obscurity. In the late 1960s, however, interest in his writing was revived, and a number of his works have since been reissued.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Carl Mowery has a doctorate in rhetoric and composition and has taught at Southern Illinois University and Murray State University. In the following essay, he provides an overview of "The Monkey's Paw" and examines fire imagery in the story.

The English author W. W. Jacobs did most of his writing in a fifteen-year period around the turn of the twentieth century. Many of his stories were lighthearted tales about life on the English waterfront. But' "The Monkey's Paw," first published in 1902 in a collection called *The Lady of the Barge* deals with the ghastly and macabre. According to G. K. Chesterton, it rates very highly "among our modern tales of terror in the fact that [it is] dignified and noble." Chesterton says that Jacobs' "horror is wild, but it is a sane horror." This is in contrast to Edgar Allan Poe's tales of "insane horror."

Even though "The Monkey's Paw" is a short story and does not contain the royal characters or political intrigues of Greek drama, it does contain some elements of Greek tragedy. It begins in happiness and hope, and it closes in grief and despair. Mr. White's desire for easy money (greed) leads him to challenge fate. That violation brings the whole family to grief.

In ancient Greece, there were two types of drama: Comedy and Tragedy. In a Comedy, the action is usually lighthearted and often humorous. The ending is a happy one. In a Tragedy, the action begins with the hero on a high social and/or political level. He or she then descends to a position that is significantly lower in status than where the story began. The hero in a tragedy has a character weakness—the tragic flaw—that causes him or her to make a serious mistake, which causes his fall from the high position. Fate is a major concern in these plays. If the hero interferes with the inevitable, because of his tragic flaw, serious consequences occur. The ending is often intensely dramatic and the hero may die or be killed at the end.

As our tragic little story opens, we are struck by the images of the happy family sitting in the living room, father and son playing chess and mother kmtting by the fireplace. This is a typical English family from about the year 1900 and, as such, we know that their lives were highly structured. They lived by a set of strict but unwritten rules. Fathers were the wage earners, and the decision makers in the household. Mothers were homemakers and the family members most responsible for rearing the children. Sons were expected to follow in their father's footsteps, or to go out and earn a living as soon as they were old enough. Daughters were expected to learn how to keep the house and then to marry and rear children.

But even in the most tightly organized situation, events occurred that disturbed the equilibrium. Equilibrium, in a story, is a state of balance among the characters. It is the disruption of equilibirum that creates interest in a story. Mr. and Mrs. White and their son, Herbert, are visited by the Sergeant-Major and things begin to go awry. He comes into the house and entertains the family with stories of his visits to India (a colony in the British Empire at this time). During one trip he has obtained a monkey's paw that has

had a magic spell put on it by a fakir (a holy man) "to show that fate ruled people's lives, and those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow." As he describes the paw, "His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group." These powers, he explains, should be taken very seriously and should never be trifled with. After the Whites take possession of the paw, the Sergeant-Major tries to convince them not to indulge in its magic, warning them of dire consquences.

Despite the warning of the Sergeant-Major, the family is intent on testing the paw. Mr. White and Herbert are intrigued with the possibilities of gaining wealth by making a single wish. So, heeding the Seargeant-Major's advice "to wish for something sensible," Mr. White makes a wish for just 200 pounds. In one innocent act of greed, Mr. White has set into motion a series of events that are fated to end unhappily. After Herbert is killed in an accident at work, the company sends 200 pounds compensation to Mr. and Mrs. White. The wish seems to have come true!

If we accept these events at face value, several questions arise. Did Herbert die because they trifled with fate as the fakir warned? Or is Herbert's death only a happenstance, as suggested by the Sergeant-Major's remark that "things happened so naturally that you might if you wished attribute it to coincidence."

No matter which possibility we choose, Mr. and Mrs. White continue to rely on the paw for assistance, which contributes to their continued descent into despair. Mr. White's flaw, greed, has blinded him to his violation of fate. And after Herbert's death, he succumbs to a deeper greed: to wish his son back from the dead. His failure to learn from his first interference with fate leads him deeper into the magical world.

But his tragic flaw has caused him to fall into a great despair. He ignores the warnings of the Sergeant-Major at the beginning and he ignores his own instincts at the end when, at his wife's urgings, he makes the second wish. His third wish is made, restoring a desolate calm, and this little tragedy has come to an end.

There are two techniques that illuminate the tragedy of the White family. These are imagery (the picture created by the language) and symbolism (the meaning of an image beyond its literal description).

A powerful symbol occurs in the opening scene with father and son playing chess. Here the game is more than just a chess match. It is symbolic of a set of rules, a strict order. As long as the players follow the rules of the game, everything is in order. But if one or the other player violates the rules then chaos will follow. The White family's lives have been governed by a strict set of rules and when we first see them, they are still living within them. But then these rules are violated, and chaos indeed ensues.

Herbert moves from playing chess to playing childish games, taunting his father into making the first wish and then teasing him after the wish is made. Even Mrs. White joins in by chasing Herbert around the table. These childlike games have no rules and are ultimately more dangerous, because they indicate "a carelessness which betokened no great belief in [the paw's] virtues."

Another important image is the fire and flame. Fire is often seen as a source of comfort and warmth. It is also seen as a purifying or a destroying element. As a single flame of a candle or a match, it provides illumination. At first, fire is a part of a warming, comfortable image—mother sitting near the hearth, knitting. Later the two men sit comfortably before the fire and smoke their pipes before going to bed. But this image contains a double meaning. The fire and pipe smoking are both comforting, but they are also destroying something in the process. In both instances there is a reduction of substance, tobacco or fire wood, resulting in darkness, foreshadowing and symbolizing the dying happiness in the life of the family. During the evening, the fire takes on another meaning, when the Sergeant-Major, who is convinced that the paw is evil, tosses it into the fire. Here, fire is a destroying and/or purifying element.

Another important flame image occurs in the final scenes of the story. After Mr, White makes the second wish, the candle in their room goes out before any results come from the wish. Then father lights a match to show his way to the door. But it, too, goes out and he cannot see down the hallway. He drops the box of matches in his frantic attempts to light another match. The symbolism of lost direction and lost hope is seen in the candle and the match going out. The Whites are in the dark, both literally and figuratively. Their passion for the dark power of the paw has clouded their ability to see. But, perhaps, the most poignant fire image in the whole tale is the last, the flickering street light illuminating "a quiet and deserted road." In this final scene, the realization of the loss of their son is all the Whites have.

Source: Carl Mowery, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Stefan Dziemianowicz is the editor of many anthologies of horror and supernatural fiction. In the following essay, he examines the narrative structure of "The Monkey's Paw," which he judges to be "flawlessly crafted."

W. W. Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw" is one of the most reprinted tales of horror in the English language. Yet any study of the story's merits as such must take into account that its author was not a horror writer. Although several of his short stories feature macabre elements, Jacobs was best known in his day as a writer of humorous tales, often concerned with the sea and sailors.' "The Monkey's Paw" was first published in the general literary magazine *Harper's Monthly* in 1902, and collected that same year in *The Lady of the Barge*, a mixed bag of stories on various themes that differed little in content from Jacobs' previous volumes of short fiction.

"The Monkey's Paw" is a superior work of horror fiction because, first and foremost, it is a flawlessly crafted short story, A deceptively simple tale, it reveals on close inspection Jacobs' meticulous attention to narrative structure and careful handling of foreshadowing, symbolism, and other narrative elements that contribute to its eerie effect.

The story is divided into three parts, a number that Jacobs treats with significance: the monkey's paw grants three wishes, the White family is the third party to benefit from its magic power, and there are three members of the family. As a symbol, the number three can be interpreted to mean many things, including progression and imbalance. In Jacobs' tale, the universe tolerates neither. The monkey's paw has a spell put on it by a fakir who "wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow." Jacobs orchestrates the story's events to show how trying to change one's fate upsets the existing balance and invites a counter-reaction. The futility his characters experience trying to improve their lot with the monkey's paw is mirrored in the structure of the three parts of the story. Each is built around the same central event, a visit to the White household by an outsider. The repetition of this event and the consequences that follow reinforces the tale's lesson concerning the immutability of fate.

The first part of the story lays the foundation on which the other two parts build. Jacobs begins by contrasting the internal and external worlds of his tale: "Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small corner of Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly." The world that the Whites know is presented as cozy and bright, and the world beyond their door as inhospitable and dark. Jacobs is setting his scene here, but he is also building the framework for a tale of supernatural horror, which traditionally involves the eruption of dark and hostile forces into the comfortably ordered world of its characters. Indeed, it does not take long for him to evoke this possibility. Although the Whites are at ease with themselves and their surroundings, the "sudden and unlooked-for violence" with which Mr. White responds to losing a chess game suggests that the stability of the household is tenuous and fragile. The first test of its

vulnerability is the visiting Sergeant-Major Morris, recently returned from twenty-one years of military duty in India. Morns is a taciturn man whose dourness clashes with the conviviality of the Whites and is clearly related to his experiences abroad. When Mr. White wistfully wishes that he might visit India himself, Morris remarks, "Better where you are," a comment that sounds particularly ominous in light of Mr. White's earlier outburst that "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this [the family homestead] is the worst." The monkey's paw and the wishes it grants appear to be the root cause of Morris's sullenness. He informs the Whites that he has availed himself of its magic, but is cryptically evasive when asked what he wished for. He does note that its previous owner's third wish was for death, leaving the reader to infer the enormity of what he has suffered from his use of the talisman. This is the first of several instances in which Jacobs evokes horrors indirectly, foreshadowing the final horror which is so terrible that it is enough to suggest it without showing it.

In the first part of the story the monkey's paw is a symbol of the world beyond Laburnam Villa, a souvenir of a distant land but also an embodiment of the dark and foreboding forces that encroach outside the White's happy home. Morris begs the family to wish only for "something sensible," but knows that any wish made with it, no matter how sensible, will exact a devastating price. Mr. White believes "I've got all I want," but is easily goaded by his wife and son Herbert to wish for two hundred pounds. From the moment it is introduced into White's home, the monkey's paw begins disordering its harmony.

The story's second part follows the pattern of the first. When it appears that Mr. White's wish has not come true, everyone makes light of his credulousness. A spirit of "prosaic wholesomeness" prevails in White household until the arrival of the second visitor, this time the representative of Herbert's employer, who informs the mother and father that their son has been killed in a work accident. Jacobs carefully chooses the words that describe Herbert's accident: "He was caught in the machinery" —literally the tools of his trade, but also the mechanism of fate which grinds down diose who attempt to resist it.

"The Monkey's Paw" abounds with allusions to a inflexibly ordered universe that is merciless towards those who deviate from its prescribed paths. The first part of the story opens with Mr. White and Herbert playing chess, a game with fixed rules. Mr. White is characterized as someone who "possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes," a trait that puts his king into "sharp and unnecessary perils." By contrast, the man dispatched by Herbert's employers to deliver the news of his death remarks, "I am only their servant and am merely obeying orders." Much of the story's horror derives from its depiction of fate as a mechanism indifferent to human whims and ambitions. In the story's first part, Herbert jokes that his father will find the money he has wished for sitting on his bed, "and something horrible squatting on top of the wardrobe as you pocket your ill-gotten gains." This image, which captures the spirit of much supernatural horror fiction written in Jacobs' time, suggests a world in which good is rewarded, evil is punished, and the moral concerns that govern human behavior matter. "The Monkey's Paw" shows the foolishness of such a world view. When the representative of Herbert's employers informs the family that they "disclaim all responsibility" for his death, he echoes Sergeant-Major Morris's warning "don't blame me for what happens" when Mr.

White rescues the paw from the fireplace. There is no arbiter of good and evil working responsibly behind the scenes of Jacobs' story, only a clockwork universe in which the two-hundred pound indemnity paid the Whites amounts to an equal exchange for Herbert's life.

In the third section of the story the stasis one might expect in a universe so rigidly ordered becomes manifest. The Whites have buried their son and though they feel "a state of expectation as though something else was to happen," they are mired in "the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, apathy." A brief boost of hope revives Mrs. White when she realizes that the monkey's paw can still grant two wishes. Once again Mr. White is pressed to make a wish, this time for the return of their son. Thus begins the third and final visit to the White household, a recapitulation of events from the first two parts which the reader knows by now can only lead to despair. When the knocking begins on the downstairs door some time later it appears that Herbert has returned and fate has been contravened. Belatedly, though, Mr. White realizes that in wishing his son back he has neglected to take into account the boy' s mutilation and time spent in the grave. A resurrected Herbert would be an abomination, as intolerable to look upon as impossible to exist in the fate-driven universe of the story. In a twist on the events of the first two parts, where outsiders bring misery into the White's home, a family member must now be kept out to prevent even greater misery from occurring. The irony of this turn of events raises the impending sense of horror to an excruciating level at the climax. With his third and final wish, Mr. White cancels out his second, wishing the knocker away. The magic of the monkey's paw is exhausted, and the Whites have gained nothing by it. Jacobs draws the reader's attention to this methodical working out of fate in his final sentence, where Mr. White looks out upon the "deserted road," as empty as it was at the story's beginning.

"The Monkey's Paw" is a model of story telling economy, whose 'individual parts reflect and contribute to a tightly integrated whole. Jacobs works out the story's simple premise —the inability to change one's fate—through its plot, but also uses it to organize his narrative. This expertly calculated matching of form to content explains the extraordinary power of Jacobs' tale, and possibly why its numerous imitators have never surpassed its effectiveness as a tale of horror.

Source: Stefan Dziemianowicz, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following brief essay, Harkey explains some instances of foreshadowing in Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw."

In the early lines of W. W. Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw," an altogether chilling story, is embedded the germ of the entire story. Mr. White and his son Herbert were playing chess, the father,

(/) who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, (2) putting his king Into .. sharp and unnecessary perils... "Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, (5) having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, (4) was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

Contained in this passage are four elements that foreshadow the action of the story, although Jacobs is never heavy-handed in working out the tale as a projection of its opening paragraphs. The obvious parallel to the game of chess, is, of course, the game of life. While Mr. White's choosing a small sum (two hundred pounds) when he made his first wish on the monkey's paw might make him seem less than radical, we must remember that he snatched the paw from the fire when the old soldier tossed it there. Had White been one merely to accept life, he would have taken the soldier's advice and let the paw burn.

The second element, that of putting his king into "sharp and unnecessary peril," comes with the first wish. White had no way of knowing that he was endangering Herbert's life in requesting the £200, but the soldier's demeanor when he told of the magical powers of the paw should have warned a less radical man to let the paw burn. As it turned out, the £200 wished for came as an indemnity for Herbert, who was killed when he fell into some working machinery. While the Gothic tone of the story is not such that one would expect a pun on the ! 'sharp" peril, certainly the peril was ***unnecessary***. White planned to use the £200 requested to pay off the mortgage, but there was no urgent need for it to be paid off immediately.

White's seeing a fatal mistake after it was too late was the third element. The fatal mistake here is not the death of his son, however, but something even more terrible—the resurrection of his son with his face still mangled from the machinery. When Mrs. White insisted that White make a second wish—to bring Herbert back—White feared that the wish might bring the son back mutilated. Nevertheless, his fear of his wife caused him to make the second wish. It was only much later, when they heard a noise at the door, that White sensed it was his mutilated son and frantically sought the paw to make a third wish.

This wish—that Herbert be dead again—was an acting out of the fourth element. But it is not the son he is preventing from seeing the fatal mistake this time. It is his wife, who is not aware that the second wish did not include the request that Herbert be restored

whole. The third wish prevented the heartstruck mother from seeing the hideous creature outside the door.

Thus in the opening two paragraphs, Jacobs has given us a micro-story which contains all the elements of the macro-story, if one may use those terms. Still, his symbolic foreshadowing is not heavy-handed. The use of the words "amiably desirous" to describe White's efforts to prevent his son from seeing his mistake, for instance, would seem incongruous were they to describe his effort to prevent his wife from seeing their son. Indeed, despite the symbolic relationship of the chess game to the story proper, Jacobs handled it in such a sophisticated manner that the effect of the game on the reader is suggestive, hinting of the dangers implicit in Mr. White's radical ideas about the game—of life, while at the same time giving us with a few bold strokes a preliminary sketch of the central character in the story.

Source: Joseph H Harkey, "Foreshadowing in 'The Monkey's Paw'," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol VI, no. 5, Fall, 1969, pp 653-54

Adaptations

In 1933, *The Monkey's Paw* was made into a 58-minute, black and white film directed by Wesley Ruggles, produced by RKO, and starring C. Aubrey Smith, Ivan Simpson, Bramwell Fletcher, and Louise Carter.

A British version of *The Monkey's Paw*, produced in 1948, was directed by Norman Lee and produced by Ernest G. Roy. The film is 64 minutes long, black and white, and the cast included Milton Rosmer, Megs Jenkins, Joan Seton and Norman Shelley.

In 1972 the anthology movie *Tales from the Crypt*, containing five dramatized stories, adapted "The Monkey's Paw" under the title "Wish You Were Here." The film was directed by Freddie Francis and produced by Cinerama. The cast included Sir Ralph Richardson, Joan Collins and Martin Boddey.

In 1979, the story was adapted as a 19-minute film produced by Martha Moran and now available on video from Phoenix/BFA Films and Video.

Stillife-Gryphon Films produced a 27-minute version of' "The Monkey's Paw" in 1983, available on video from Modern Curriculum Press.

Topics for Further Study

Research England's occupation and colonization of India. When did it begin? How long did it last? How was England's culture influenced by the information that was brought back from India to the British Isles?

Research the Industrial Revolution, and locate Jacobs' work within it. How did the Industrial Revolution change life in England? Life in the United States? How did it affect families like the Whites in Jacobs's story?

What writers and artists were contemporaries of Jacobs? Did they have similar concerns? Did other writers of his day use the literary devices that Jacobs often employed? Were painters and sculptors operating under the same cultural constraints and assumptions, and how did this affect their work?

Compare and Contrast

Early 1900s: England rules over an empire with colonies throughout the world, some of the most important being India and portions of South Africa.

Today: On July 1,1997, Hong Kong, England's last important colony, is returned to Chinese rule.

Early 1900s: Rickets, a bone disease caused by malnutrition, was common among poor children in England.

Today: Rickets is now a rare disease in England. Other once-common childhood illnesses, such as smallpox and polio, have also been eradicated through advances in medicine.

1902: Popular superstitions, like the curse of Egypt's mummies or the powers of India's shamans, arise from Britain's contact with non-Western cultures.

Today: The popularity of alternative medicine and natural healing remedies stems from society's disenchantment with Western medicine, which is based solely on science.

What Do I Read Next?

Selected Short Stories, reprinted in 1975, contains some of Jacobs' best stones.

The ghost stories of M. R. James are among the finest of the twentieth century. *Ghost Stones of an Antiquary* (1905) is his best known collection.

An earlier writer of surpernatural tales is Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, whose *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851) is highly regarded by critics in the genre.

Further Study

Adcock, A.St. John. "WilliamWymarkJacobs," in his *TTie Glory That Was Grub Street: Impressions of Contemporary Authors*, Musson Book Company, 1928, pp. 147-57
Adcock discusses Jacobs's use of humor, horror and sentiment, and praises his stylistic control

Donaldson, Norman "W W Jacobs," in *Supernatural Fiction Writers*, Vol. 1, edited by E F Bleiler, Scnbner, 1985, pp. 383-87.

Donaldson writes a brief description of Jacobs's supernatural tales, including "The Monkey's Paw," which he calls Jacobs's best.

Harding, James. "The Monkey's Paw," in *The Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, edited by Noelle Watson, St James, 1994, p. 806.

A short essay on story; book also includes entry on W.W Jacobs and a bibliography.

Priestley, J. B. "Mr. W. W. Jacobs," in his *Figures in Modern Literature, Books for Libraries Press*, 1970, pp 103-23.

Priestley argues that, in his humorous stories, Jacobs created a miniature world of his own where his comedic skills could be best displayed.

Pritchett, V S "*W W Jacobs,*" in his Books in General,Chatto & Windus, 1953, pp. 235

Pritchett provides an appreciative overview of Jacobs's work as a writer, calling him "one of the supreme craftsmen of the short story."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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