

The Short Story

If you think that reading a short story will take you less time than a novel, you're right. Short stories are shorter. Even so, you should put just as much thought into the act of reading a short story as you would a longer piece of fiction. A short story can be just as complicated, as dense, and as powerful as any novel. Because it is a distilled form of fiction, every image and symbol becomes correspondingly more important and significant. If you don't believe me, try reading any Flannery O'Connor or Charlotte Perkins Gilman story. Theme-marking, summarizing, and figuring out one of those stories can take a *long* time. And hopefully, the story will be exciting and interesting to you because the hidden elements all add to the dynamic, creative storytelling.

Some people really dislike short stories; they see them as unsatisfying, incomplete, and confusing. Some people also hate chocolate—there's no accounting for taste. Be open-minded when it comes to short stories. Take each story on its own merits. You're going to like some more than others. It's just important that you give them a chance.

Reading Zone 10

Read the following passage as if you were reading it just for leisure. Do not time yourself; the point of this exercise is to see how much of the passage you retain. Then answer the questions that follow and check your answers on page 246.

Sheppard sat on a stool at the bar that divided the kitchen in half, eating his cereal out of the individual pasteboard box it came in. He ate mechanically, his eyes on the child, who was wandering from cabinet to cabinet in the paneled kitchen, collecting the ingredients for his breakfast. He was a stocky blond boy of ten. Sheppard kept his intense blue eyes fixed on him. The boy's future was written in his face. He would be a banker. No, worse. He would operate a small loan company. All he wanted for the child was

that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely. Sheppard was a young man whose hair was already white. It stood up like a narrow brush halo over his pink sensitive face.

The boy approached the bar with a jar of peanut butter under his arm, a plate with a quarter of a small chocolate cake on it in one hand and the ketchup bottle in the other. He did not appear to notice his father. He climbed up on the stool and began to spread peanut butter on the cake. He had very round large ears that leaned away from his head and seemed to pull his eyes slightly too far apart. His shirt was green but so faded that the cowboy across the front of it was only a shadow.

“Norton,” Sheppard said, “I saw Rufus Johnson yesterday. Do you know what he was doing?”

The child looked at him with a kind of half attention, his eyes half forward but not yet engaged. They were a paler blue than his father’s as if they might have faded like the shirt; one of them listed, almost imperceptibly, toward the outer rim.

“He was in an alley,” Sheppard said, “and he had his hand in a garbage can. He was trying to get something to eat out of it.” He paused to let this soak in. “He was hungry,” he finished, and tried to pierce the child’s conscience with his gaze.

The boy picked up the piece of chocolate cake and began to gnaw it from one corner. “Norton,” Sheppard said, “do you have any idea of what it means to share?” A flicker of attention. “Some of it’s yours,” Norton said. “Some of it’s his,” Sheppard said heavily. It was hopeless. Almost any fault would have been preferable to selfishness—a violent temper, even a tendency to lie.

The child turned the bottle of ketchup upside-down and began thumping ketchup onto the cake. Sheppard’s look of pain increased. “You are ten and Rufus Johnson is fourteen,” he said. “Yet I’m sure your shirts would fit Rufus.” Rufus Johnson was a boy he had been trying to help at the reformatory for the past year. He had been released two months ago. “When he was in the reformatory, he looked pretty good, but when I saw him yesterday, he was skin and bones. He hadn’t been eating cake with peanut butter on it for breakfast.”

“It’s stale,” he said. “That’s why I have to put stuff on it.”

Sheppard turned his face to the window at the end of the bar. The side lawn, green and even, sloped fifty feet or so down to a small suburban wood. When his wife was living, they had often eaten outside, even breakfast, on the grass. He had never noticed then that the child was selfish. “Listen to me,” he said, turning back to him, “look at me and listen.” The boy looked at him. At least his eyes were forward. “I gave Rufus a key to this house when he left the reformatory—to show my confidence in him and so he would have a place he could come to and feel welcome any time. He didn’t use it, but I think he’ll use it now because he’s seen me and he’s hungry. And if he doesn’t use it I’m going out and find him and bring him here. I can’t see a child eating out of garbage cans.” The boy frowned. It was dawning on him that something of his was threatened. Sheppard’s mouth stretched in disgust. “Rufus’s father died before he was born,” he said. “His mother is in the state penitentiary. He was raised by his grandfather in a shack without water or electricity and the old man beat him every day. How would you like to belong to a family like that?” “I don’t know,” the child said lamely. “Well, you might think about it sometime,” Sheppard said.

Sheppard was City Recreational Director. On Saturdays he worked at the reformatory as a counselor, receiving nothing for it but the satisfaction of knowing he was helping boys no one else cared about. Johnson was the most intelligent boy he had worked with and the most deprived. Norton turned the rest of the cake over as if he no longer wanted it. “You started that, now finish it,” Sheppard said. “Maybe he won’t come,” the child said and his eyes brightened slightly. “Think of everything you have that he doesn’t!” Sheppard said. “Suppose you had to root in garbage cans for food? Suppose you had a huge swollen foot and one side of you dropped lower than the other when you walked?” The boy looked blank, obviously unable to imagine such a thing. “You have a healthy body,” Sheppard said, “a good home. You’ve never been taught anything but the truth. Your daddy gives you anything you need or

want. You don't have a grandfather who beats you. And your mother is not in the state penitentiary." The child pushed his plate away. Sheppard groaned aloud.

A knot of flesh appeared below the boy's suddenly distorted mouth. His face became a mass of lumps with slits for eyes. "If she was in the penitentiary," he began in a kind of racking bellow, "I could go to seeeeee her." Tears rolled down his face and the ketchup dribbled on his chin. He looked as if he had been hit in the mouth. He abandoned himself and howled. Sheppard sat helpless and miserable, like a man lashed by some elemental force of nature. This was not a normal grief. It was all part of his selfishness. She had been dead for over a year and a child's grief should not last so long. "You're going on eleven years old," he said reproachfully. The child began an agonizing high-pitched heaving noise. "If you stop thinking about yourself and think what you can do for somebody else," Sheppard said, "then you'll stop missing your mother." The boy was silent but his shoulders continued to shake. Then his face collapsed and he began to howl again. "Don't you think I'm lonely without her too?" Sheppard said. "Don't you think I miss her at all? I do, but I'm not sitting around moping. I'm busy helping other people. When do you see me just sitting around thinking about my troubles?" The boy slumped as if he were exhausted but fresh tears streaked his face.

"What are you going to do today?" Sheppard asked, to get his mind on something else. The child ran his arm across his eyes. "Sell seeds," he mumbled. Always selling something. He had four quart jars full of nickels and dimes he had saved and he took them out of his closet every few days and counted them. "What are you selling seeds for?"

"To win a prize."

"What's the prize?"

"A thousand dollars."

"And what would you do if you had a thousand dollars?"

"Keep it," the child said and wiped his nose on his shoulder.

"I feel sure you would," Sheppard said. "Listen," he said and lowered his voice to an almost pleading tone,

“suppose by some chance you did win a thousand dollars. Wouldn’t you like to spend it on children less fortunate than yourself? Wouldn’t you like to give some swings and trapezes to the orphanage? Wouldn’t you like to buy poor Rufus Johnson a new shoe?”

The boy began to back away from the bar. Then suddenly he leaped forward and hung with his mouth open over his plate. Sheppard groaned again. Everything came up, the cake, the peanut butter, the ketchup—a limp sweet batter. He hung over it gagging, more came, and he waited with his mouth open over the plate as if he expected his heart to come up next.

1. The relationship between Norton and Sheppard can best be described as
 - (A) loving and open
 - (B) aggressive and violent
 - (C) uncommunicative and disjointed
 - (D) sickening and unnatural
 - (E) friendly and supportive
2. According to Sheppard, operating a small loan company would be
 - (A) a sign of self-involvement
 - (B) a lucrative career move
 - (C) a fate similar to losing one’s soul
 - (D) an unlikelihood for Norton
 - (E) a good job for Norton
3. How does the author intend the reader to interpret Sheppard’s name?
 - (A) Ironically
 - (B) Symbolically
 - (C) Humorously
 - (D) Incorrectly
 - (E) No interpretation

4. Why does the author keep referring to the character as “the child” instead of “Norton”?
- (A) To make the reader dislike him
 - (B) Because Sheppard dislikes him
 - (C) To establish distance between the two characters
 - (D) To establish distance between Norton and the reader
 - (E) To distinguish between Rufus and Norton
5. According to Sheppard, what’s the least desirable fault someone can have?
- (A) A violent temper
 - (B) Selfishness
 - (C) A tendency to lie
 - (D) Putting ketchup on cake
 - (E) Operating a loan company

Reflection

For any question you got wrong, go back and leave notes next to each answer choice indicating why it is correct or incorrect. It’s important that you not only practice, but also reflect on your performance! This way, you’ll see what issues give you trouble and gain a better understanding of how to improve.