



Outstanding Short Stories

Edgar Allan Poe and Others



About the authors

H. G. Wells (1866–1946) started his working life as a schoolmaster but turned to writing in 1893. He is mainly known for his science fiction and fantastical stories but he also wrote novels of character and humour.

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), born in Ireland, was a colourful character with an eccentric lifestyle. He was sent to prison in 1895 accused of homosexual corruption. Before this he had written many comedy plays, poems and works of fiction.

P. G. Wodehouse (1881–1975) was a humourous novelist. His many novels showing entertaining characters in absurd situations became internationally popular. Born in England, he became an American citizen in 1955.

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) was born in New Zealand, and went to London in 1903. She wrote several collections of short stories and is considered one of the great masters of this form of fiction.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49), an American writer, had a difficult life, beset by personal tragedy and alcohol problems. He was one of the earliest writers to use the short story form and wrote many chilling horror stories in the romantic tradition. He is also recognized to be the inventor of the detective story.

Anthony Trollope (1815–82) was a popular English writer in his time, writing mainly about professional and middle-class life. His first, important series of novels was about church men in provincial England.

W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was a traveller, socialite and one of the most successful writers of short stories of the twentieth century, known for his simple narrative style. He started to study medicine but gave it

up for a literary career, writing mainly plays to begin with but turning to short stories after a trip to the Far East.

Summary

This excellent collection contains stories by seven of the very best authors of fiction in English between 1850 and 1940. Some of the stories are funny, some are sad, but all are outstanding in some way.

The Man Who Could Work Miracles by H. G. Wells

Fotheringay is an ordinary man. One evening, during a discussion at an inn about the feasibility of miracles, he finds that he can perform them himself. Later, while exercising his new powers, he accidentally has a policeman sent to San Francisco and, feeling contrite, decides to speak with the local minister, Mr Maydig, who is amazed and wants Fotheringay to use his powers to improve the world. But a problem with the wording Fotheringay uses to order the earth to stop turning, produces a chain of natural catastrophes which only Fotheringay survives. In his simplicity and shock, his last miracle is to have his powers withdrawn from him and everything forgotten, and the story closes with the same scene with which it opened.

The Model Millionaire by Oscar Wilde

Hughie is a charming, good looking young man with an income of £200 a year and a beautiful fiancée, Laura. They love each other but Laura's father won't hear of marriage unless Hughie has £10,000 of his own money.

Trevor is one of Hughie's friends, a painter who does well with his art. One afternoon Hughie pays a visit to Trevor at his studio and finds a beggar modelling for him. Moved, Hughie gives him the only pound he has in his pocket. But the beggar is no beggar; he is one of the richest men in London, and rewards Hughie with a £10,000 cheque.

Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend by P. G. Wodehouse

This is a very funny account of a mutually advantageous meeting between an elderly upper-class gentleman and a sharp-witted young girl. The gentleman, Lord Emsworth, is a weak, unhappy man, unable to oppose both his sister, Constance, who presses him into the formalities of the 'Blandings Annual School Treat', and his head gardener, McAllister, who rules over Lord Emsworth's gardens.



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During the fête (fair), Lord Emsworth meets Gladys, the sharp-witted young girl, who rescues him from her dog and innocently tells him how she, while stealing flowers from his garden, has faced up to McAllister. Later, when escaping from the tea-tent, Lord Emsworth meets Gladys again in a hut. She has been punished by Constance for taking food for her brother.

Amazed at the sight of a girl who can do what he can't, Lord Emsworth invites her for tea and lets her pick flowers from his gardens. When an infuriated McAllister approaches to defend his flowers, Lord Emsworth, encouraged by Gladys's hand taking his, stands up to both the gardener and his sister.

The Doll's House by Katherine Mansfield

The Burnell girls receive a wonderful doll's house as a present. They are fascinated and can't wait to show it off at school. Kezia, the youngest, particularly likes the lamp. The doll's house and its lamp becomes the topic of conversation at school. All the girls are invited to see it except the Kelveys, daughters of a washerwoman and an absent father who is said to be in prison. The Kelveys are not only isolated but also bullied, and silently endure their circumstances. Despite her parents' explicit banning of the Kelveys, Kezia invites them to see the doll's house. They are soon told to leave by the Burnell girls' aunt, but they have finally seen the house and the lamp.

X-ing a Paragraph by Edgar Allan Poe

In this satirical story, a stubborn Mr Touch-and-Go Bullet-head comes from the East, land of wise men, and settles down in Alexander-the-great-o-nopolis, in the West, where he opens the *Nopolis Teapot*, a newspaper. In his first article, he attacks John Smith, the editor of the local *Daily News*, and is answered with heavy criticism on his overuse of letter *O*. Upset by the attack on his style, he decides to show John Smith and the town how skilful he is and purposely overuses *O*s again. But when about to print the article, Bob, the printer's boy, finds that there are no *O*s in the boxes. He is instructed by his master to somehow print the article anyway and, following the printers' tradition, replaces all *O*s with *X*s. The article comes out unreadable, which leads the population to believe that there is something devilish in it. In anger, crowds try to find Mr Bullet-head, who has vanished. The story closes with a funny account of people's reactions X-pressed with the use of *X*.

The Courtship of Susan Bell by Anthony Trollope

After the death of her husband, Mrs Bell moves to Saratoga Springs with her daughters, where she rents rooms and they all live a dull life. Aaron Dunn, a young engineer from New York rents a room. After several evenings together in the sitting room, Aaron decides to open a conversation with Susan, the younger daughter.

Susan and Aaron fall in love, but Aaron is called back to New York. He declares his love to Susan and leaves. While he is away, Hetta becomes engaged to Mr Beckard, a minister whom Mrs Bell trusts. When Aaron is back, Beckard, asked by Mrs Bell for advice, disallows the relationship because Aaron's job isn't stable. Hetta agrees, Susan is grief-stricken and Aaron has to leave. Time passes with no news from Aaron and Susan's health declines. After some months, Aaron, now with a permanent post on a railway line, comes for Susan.

Lord Mountdrago by W. Somerset Maugham

Mr Mountdrago is the Foreign Minister, and a conceited man. He sees Dr Audlin, a reputable psychiatrist, because he is having difficulty in sleeping. He systematically dreams about situations in which he is humiliated and there is always the same witness: Griffiths, a member of the House of Commons. The problem is that every morning following a dream, Griffiths makes a comment that seems to suggest that he has been in the dream. Mountdrago thinks that what happens in the dreams has an effect on reality and, in his desperation, thinks of either killing himself or killing Griffiths in a dream.

As the psychiatrist manages to make him speak more openly, Mountdrago admits that he has politically destroyed Griffiths' political career by humiliating him in Parliament. One evening Audlin reads in the newspaper that the Foreign Minister has fallen under an underground train and died. On another page, he reads that Griffiths has also died.

Background and themes

These stories are all very different from each other in both style and content, but each one is a first-rate example of the short story format. The writers are able in just a few words to create unforgettable characters, important themes and powerful narratives.



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In *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (1898), H. G. Wells constructs a fantasy in which miracles really happen. It is also a clever example of a 'never-ending' story in which the end leads back to the beginning and the story could start all over again.

In *The Model Millionaire* (1907), Oscar Wilde paints a gently ironic picture of the way in which money drives society. 'It is better to have a permanent income than to be interesting', Wilde says at the start of the story. Through his character, Hughie, however, he shows us that charm and generosity can also pay large dividends. At the same time, the irony is that money does, after all, buy happiness.

Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend (1926) is very funny but its humour disguises its deeper themes. The aristocratic Lord Emsworth lives a rich, sheltered life on his country estate, completely ignorant of how other people live. His problem is that he feels powerless against his sister and his gardener. Then he meets a person who is his exact opposite in every way – a young working class girl from London – and, after a series of highly entertaining episodes, learns to assert his authority. Thus we see how, when people from different worlds interact, they can learn much from each other.

In *The Doll's House* (1922) Katherine Mansfield explores the relationships between adults and children, and between children themselves when adult ideas about social class are imposed on them. Mansfield's writing is typically poetic and delicate with strong visual images, while at the same time showing a profound understanding of human relationships and emotions. At the end of 'The Doll's House', we are left with a sense of disappointment at the way in which people behave towards each other.

Although Edgar Allan Poe is known for his tales of horror and mystery, *X-ing a Paragraph* (1850) is a sharp satire on newspapers, their editors and the gullibility of their readers. The focus of Poe's criticism seems to be the self-importance of editors.

The Courtship of Susan Bell (1860) traces the development of a relationship between a young woman and a young man. It shows how the narrow social rules and restrictions of American middle class society in the mid-nineteenth century nearly suffocate the relationship. The story also shows the vulnerability of women at this period: without the father, the family of women lives a poor, sheltered life.

The story of *Lord Mountdrago* (1940) is about psychiatry, the analysis of dreams and paranormal phenomena. The apparent suicide of a powerful politician and the death of his enemy are told from the point of view of a psychiatrist. The story poses interesting questions: is there another world of the spirit beyond the material world? And do we have access to this world through our dreams?

Discussion activities

The Man Who Could Work Miracles

Before reading

- Group work:** Tell students: *If you could work miracles, what miracle would you work? Think of one, and then think of all the consequences it would have. Make a list of them. Do you still want to work miracles?*

After reading

- Role play:** Tell students: *Imagine Fotheringay doesn't try to stop the earth and Winch comes back from San Francisco. Role play their conversation when they meet.*
- Pair work:** Remind students that Fotheringay used his powers to increase his property (page 4). Tell them: *Imagine that before Fotheringay made Winch disappear, Winch asked him about all the things he had 'purchased'. What could he have answered?* Pairs share their answers and vote for the most 'believable'.
- Debate:** Divide the class into two groups. Each takes one of these positions and they have a debate:
Group A: *It is possible to know reality. Science can describe and possibly explain it, so we know that miracles don't exist.* Group B: *It isn't possible to know reality because our knowledge is always filtered by our senses and the structure of our brain. Perhaps miracles exist but we can't see or explain them.*
- Write:** Students write a short review of the story. They choose one of the following openings: 'A person given the powers of a god will only make mistakes' or 'In this story, Wells takes us from our world to another and then back to ours.'
- Research and discuss:** Students search the Internet for the myth of King Midas, and discuss similarities and differences between the myth and this story.

The Model Millionaire

Before reading

- Discuss:** Tell students: *Some people believe that individuals always get what they deserve. Others believe that life isn't so fair. What do you think?*

After reading

- Read carefully and discuss:** Students read the first two lines on page 15, the first eight lines on page 16 and the fourth paragraph on page 17 and discuss:
 - Wilde's and their own ideas about the difference between a painter and an artist



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- b how the money produced by a painting should be distributed among model, artist and frame maker
- c what the artist's business is.
- 9 **Debate and research:** Divide the students into two groups and have them debate the following: *People who do not meet the standards of beauty of their societies are discriminated against, so 'beautiful' people have more opportunities.* After the debate, students search the Internet for information about discrimination against people who don't fit in with beauty standards in different societies.
- 10 **Role play:** Students role play first the conversation in which Mr Merton refuses to let Hughie marry Laura and then the conversation in which he accepts the marriage.
- 11 **Pair work:** Ask students: *Is the ending of the story predictable or does Wilde succeed in surprising the reader? If you were surprised, what made you think that the baron might not reward Hughie's kind action?*

Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend

Before reading

- 12 **Discuss:** Ask students: *Can people who are completely different from one another become friends? Or do friends have to be similar to one another? Do you have any friend who is completely different from you?*

After reading

- 13 **Group work:** Remind students that Lord Emsworth thought that a family like Gladys's didn't exist. Then, in groups, students discuss the following question: *Do children's attitudes and games vary with social class? If so, how? Why?*
- 14 **Pair work:** Tell students to discuss the following: *Every August Bank Holiday, some 'forces' didn't allow Lord Emsworth to wander around his gardens in an old coat. The same forces made him give a speech on a platform (page 20). What are these forces? What makes you think so? Can you think of similar forces in your life? What kinds of things do they make you do or not do?* Pairs share their conclusions.
- 15 **Role play:** Students role play a conversation between Gladys and Lady Constance on a second visit Gladys pays to Blandings Castle.
- 16 **Debate:** Divide the students into two groups and have them debate the following: Group A: *Gladys changes Lord Emsworth by doing what he doesn't dare do.* Group B: *Gladys changes Lord Emsworth by sliding her small, hot hand into his, and thus showing she trusted him.*
- 17 **Artwork:** Tell students: *Imagine an editorial wants to launch an illustrated version of this story for children. They want the following pictures: McAllister's drunken-potato-like face, Ern biting Lady Constance's leg, Lord Emsworth's top hat being hit by a nut. They also want a picture of your choice.* Students make the pictures and vote for the best.

The Doll's House

Before reading

- 18 **Discuss:** Ask students: *How do parents teach their children what is right and what is wrong? Why do children sometimes disobey their parents? Is it always wrong to disobey them? Make a list of cases in which it might not be wrong to disobey parents.*

After reading

- 19 **Game:** In groups, students re-read the description of the house (pages 39–40) and try to memorize as many details as possible. Then they shut the book and make a list of questions about it. They can't write information about the house, only questions. When ready, groups ask their questions to one another. The group that can answer the most questions correctly wins.
- 20 **Pair work:** Students imagine Kezia telling this story to her own children many years later. Ask them: *What does she tell them? Why did she decide to show the house to the Kelvey girls? Was it because she pitied them? Was it because she hadn't had a chance to show it off herself? Or was it for any other reason?*
- 21 **Role play:** Students take the roles of Mr and Mrs Burnell. They role play the conversation they had when they decided that the girls could invite their friends to the courtyard and who couldn't be invited.
- 22 **Group work and discuss:** Divide the class into two groups. They look up the words *bully* and *boast* in their dictionaries. Groups explain to each other how the words relate to the story. The *bully* group writes rhyming chants that the girls could have used to bully the Kelveys; the *boast* group writes comments that the Burnell girls could have used to boast about their new doll's house. The class then discusses why children tend to adopt these kinds of attitudes at school.
- 23 **Research and artwork:** Students search the Internet for any interactive game in which doll's houses can be decorated. They decorate a house as similar to the Burnell's house as possible. They share their houses and vote for the one that the class thinks is closest to the Burnell's.
- 24 **Discuss:** Remind students of their conclusions in Activity 21 and have them discuss whether what Kezia did was wrong.
- 25 **Write:** Students write a happy ending for the story.

X-ing a Paragraph

Before reading

- 26 **Discuss:** Write the following sentence and words on the blackboard and ask students what is peculiar about them. Tell them to look at the letters in them.
- The five boxing wizards jumped quickly.
 - favourite
 - rhythms
- Tell students to look at the title of the story and guess what X-ing may mean.



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After reading

27 Read carefully:

- Students look up the word 'syllogism' in their dictionaries. In groups, they analyze Poe's demonstration of Mr Bullet-head's wisdom to see if it's a syllogism; then they explain why the whole reasoning is wrong.
- Groups look up in their dictionaries the following words: pun, exaggerate, to ridicule, ironic and sarcastic.

Then they look for examples of each in the story and share their answers with other groups.

- Discuss:** Ask students: *Do the Daily News and the Teapot seem to shape public opinion? How powerful is the press in shaping public opinion? Do the media set the agenda for ordinary people's everyday conversation? Why are the media called the Fourth Estate? Do they have a similar name in your language?*
- Debate:** Ask students: *What are the two editors competing for?* Divide the class into two groups and have them debate the question. Groups try to defend the following positions: Group A: *They want to sell more newspapers.* Group B: *They want to demonstrate who has better style and writing skills.*
- Write:** Students write the one-paragraph article that John Smith would have published in response to the X-ed paragraph if Mr Bullet-head hadn't disappeared. They decide if it is addressed to Mr Bullet-head or the public.

The Courtship of Susan Bell

Before reading

- Discuss:** Tell students: *These are some of the writer's and characters' thoughts in this story. Do you agree with them?*
 - 'Things become important when they are delayed.'
 - 'There are many nice things that seem to be wrong only because they are nice.'
 - 'No harm ever comes from the truth.'

After reading

- Pair work:** Ask students: *What problems are faced by each of these people in the story? Who do you sympathize with the most? Why?*
 - Mrs Bell
 - Hetta
 - Susan
 - Aaron
- Write:** Divide the class into groups of four. Tell them: *Imagine that when a decision has to be made about Aaron and Susan's relationship, Aaron, Hetta, Susan and Mrs Bell write letters to a magazine asking for advice.* Each student chooses one of the four characters and writes the letter. Students then exchange the letters and write suitable replies.

- Role play:** Tell students: *Read the first paragraph on page 65. Imagine that Susan decides to stand up to Hetta and speak her mind. Role play their conversation.*
- Group work:** Ask students: *Although it is possible to try to keep up appearances, body language usually says more than we wish it did. Try to find in the story examples of the body saying what words don't, and of characters that are aware of this and try to read the language of the body.*
- Debate:** Divide the class into two groups and have them debate: whether Hetta was jealous of or worried about Aaron's love for Susan; whether we are always aware of our own real feelings or whether they sometimes deceive us.

Lord Mountdrago

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask the students if they think that some human beings have paranormal powers. Ask if they have had a paranormal experience or if they know anybody who has had one.

After reading

- Role play:** Students work in pairs. They take the roles of Dr Audlin and Lord Mountdrago. The Mountdragos tell the psychoanalyst one more dream and the Audlins give the patient an interpretation of the dream. Remind the Audlins that Lord Mountdrago has publicly made fun of Griffiths, which he knows is the worst thing to do to a politician in the House of Commons.
- Read carefully and role play:** Students read the description of Dr Audlin's voice and the way he spoke at the bottom of page 79 and role play a scene of their choice trying to speak as Audlin did.
- Artwork:** In groups, students make a wordless cartoon showing how Mountdrago and Griffiths died. Groups exchange cartoons and 'read' the stories that other students drew.
- Read carefully and write:** Students read the first paragraph of section 2, on page 96. Tell them that Dr Audlin decides to write the letter to the Foreign Office.
 - Students write the letter.
 - Students re-write the second section of the story; they narrate Lord Mountdrago's reaction and the new ending to which Dr Audlin's intervention leads.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.