

The Monkey's Paw

W.W. Jacobs

Activate Prior Knowledge

You probably have heard the expression "Be careful what you wish for." Explain what the sentence means. Why should someone be careful about wishing?

Literary Analysis

The **exposition** of a story gives background information. What important background information about the characters and their home is given in the bracketed paragraph?

Reading Check

Where has the sergeant major been for twenty-one years? Underline the sentence that tells you.

On a cold, windy night, the White family is gathered in their parlor. Mr. White is playing chess with his son, Herbert, and losing. Mrs. White is knitting by the fire. The family is waiting for a visitor, an old friend of Mr. White's. At last the visitor, Sergeant Major Morris, arrives. The sergeant major has spent twenty-one years in India. He entertains the White family with stories of his adventures. Mr. White asks his guest about a monkey's paw. The sergeant major does not want to talk about the paw. The White family wants to know more. At last, the sergeant major begins to tell them about the dried-up paw.

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His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

"To look at," said the sergeant major, fumbling in his pocket, "it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy."

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

"And what is there special about it?" inquired Mr. White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

"It had a spell put on it by an old fakir," said the sergeant major, "a very holy man." "He 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."

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

“Well, why don’t you have three, sir?” said Herbert White, cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. “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.

“And has anybody else wished?” persisted the old lady.

“The first man had his three wishes, yes,” was the reply; “I don’t know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That’s how I got the paw.”

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.



Mr. White asks why the sergeant major keeps the paw, since his three wishes are used up. The soldier answers that he has thought about selling it, but he is afraid of the mischief that the paw might cause. He suddenly throws the paw into the fire. Mr. White quickly snatches the paw from the fire. Mr. White asks his friend to give him the paw. The sergeant major refuses, and tells Mr. White to burn the paw. Mr. White asks how to make a wish. The soldier tells Mr. White to hold the paw in the right hand and wish aloud. Mrs. White jokes about wishing for four hands. Very worried, the soldier tells them to wish for something

Reading Skill 

What **prediction**, or guess, can you make about the monkey’s paw and the White family? Circle details from the story that help you make your prediction.

Literary Analysis 

The events in a story make up its **plot**. A plot has exposition, rising action, a climax, falling action, and a resolution. The sergeant major tells the Whites the history of the monkey’s paw. What part of the **plot** is this?

Stop to Reflect 

Think about what you would do if you were in Mr. White’s position. Would you make the three wishes? Why or why not?

Vocabulary Development

jarred (jahrd) *v.* shocked because of an unpleasant noise
presumptuous (pri ZUMP choo uhs) *adj.* overly confident

TAKE NOTES

Reading Check

What is the first wish Mr. White makes? Underline the sentence in the text that tells you.

Reading Skill

Predict the results of Mr. White's wish.

Read Fluently

Read the underlined sentence. Circle any unfamiliar words. Use information from the sentence to guess the meanings of these words. Then, rewrite the sentence in your own words.

sensible. After supper, the Whites listen to more of the sergeant major's stories.

After he leaves, Mr. White tells his family that he paid his friend for the paw. The sergeant again had asked him to throw the paw away. Herbert jokes with his parents about being rich, famous, and happy.



Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. "I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact," he said, slowly. "It seems to me I've got all I want."

"If you only cleared the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?" said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. "Well, wish for two hundred pounds,¹ then; that'll just do it."

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

"I wish for two hundred pounds," said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved," he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. "As I wished it twisted in my hand like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the money," said his son as he picked it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."



Mrs. White tries to reassure her upset husband. The three sit silently by the fire for a while. As his father and mother get up,

Vocabulary Development

dubiously (DOO bee us lee) *adv.* having doubts about whether something is true

1. **pounds** *n.* units of English currency, roughly comparable to dollars.

Herbert jokes that they might find a bag of cash sitting on their bed, with “something horrible” watching them. Before Herbert goes to bed, he thinks he sees a monkey-face in the fire. He shivers when he accidentally touches the paw.

In the bright sun of next morning, Herbert laughs at his fears. Mrs. White complains about the old soldier’s tall tales. Herbert jokingly asks his parents not to spend the money before he returns. Then, he leaves for work. No money arrives in the mail. Nothing has happened as Mr. and Mrs. White sit down to breakfast. Mr. White repeats that he is sure that the paw moved in his hand as he made his wish. Mrs. White notices a well-dressed stranger pacing at their gate. At last the stranger comes to their door. He acts and speaks awkwardly and finally tells the Whites that there has been a terrible accident at Herbert’s place of work. Herbert has fallen into the machinery and been killed. Mr. and Mrs. White are shocked. The visitor tells them that he represents Herbert’s employers and expresses their sympathy.



There was no reply; the old woman’s face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband’s face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

“I was to say that Maw and Meggins disclaim all responsibility,” continued the other. “They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son’s services they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation.”

Mr. White dropped his wife’s hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his

Literary Analysis

Read the underlined passage. What part of the **plot** is this underlined passage?

Reading Skill

Use your prior knowledge and think about other stories you have read. How do family members cope with the loss of a loved one? Make a **prediction** about what the Whites will do now.

Reading Check

What information does the stranger give to Mr. and Mrs. White? Underline the sentence that tells you.

Vocabulary Development

inaudible (in AWD uh buhl) *adj.* too quiet to be heard

TAKE NOTES

Reading Check

What is the second wish?
Underline the sentence that tells what Mr. White wishes for.

Stop to Reflect

If you could give the Whites advice, what would you tell them?

What might you warn them about?

Literary Analysis

In what way does the second wish increase the tension of the story?

visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, “How much?”

“Two hundred pounds,” was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife’s shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.



Mr. and Mrs. White try to cope with their sudden loss. A week after Herbert’s funeral, Mr. White wakes in the night to find his wife looking for the monkey’s paw. Mrs. White realizes that they have two wishes left. They can wish for Herbert to be alive again. Mr. White is horrified. They argue. Mr. White tells his wife that Herbert was badly mangled and has been dead for ten days. Mrs. White doesn’t care. She drags her husband toward the door. Mr. White goes down to the parlor and takes up the paw. Sweating and afraid, he makes his way back to his wife.



Even his wife’s face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

“*Wish!*” she cried, in a strong voice.

“It is foolish and wicked,” he faltered.

“*Wish!*” repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. “I wish my son alive again.”

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it fearfully. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.



Mr. White sits in his chair. Mrs. White peers out the window. The candle burns out. Nothing happens. The Whites return to bed. They lie awake in the darkness, listening to the clock, a stair-creak, a mouse. Finally, Mr. White gets up to light a candle. He strikes

a match to light his way downstairs. As he pauses to light a new match at the bottom of the stairs, he hears a soft knock at the door. Mr. White drops all his matches and freezes. He hears a second knock. Mr. White runs back to the bedroom and closes the door. He hears a third knock. Mrs. White asks about the sound. Another knock occurs. Mrs. White screams that it is Herbert and runs for the door. Mr. White catches her, begging her not to let it in. They hear another knock. Mrs. White breaks free and races down the stairs, telling Herbert that she is coming. Mrs. White cannot reach the top bolt of the door. She calls for her husband to help her.



But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade² of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

Literary Analysis 

The **climax** is the high point of the story. How does the difference between what Mr. and Mrs. White are trying to do bring events to a climax?

Stop to Reflect 

Who do you think is outside the Whites' door? Explain.

Reading Skill 

What **predictions** that you made were correct? What helped you make these correct predictions?

Vocabulary Development

reverberated (ri VER buh rayt id) *v.* resounded, reechoed

2. **fusillade** (FYOO Asuh lahd) *n.* rapid firing, as of gunshots.