



We know
books

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TEN WOMEN TEN STORIES

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the analysis of short stories

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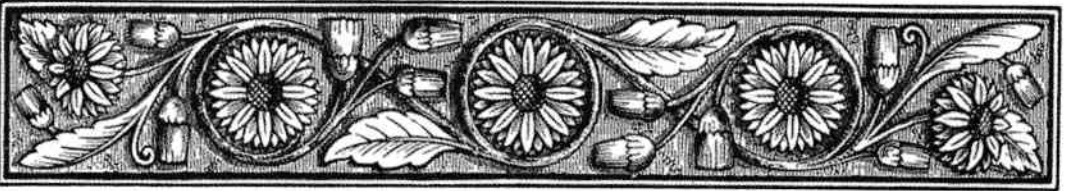
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HANNAH

by MALACHI WHITAKER



MALACHI WHITAKER (Margaret Olive Taylor) was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, in 1895, as the eighth of eleven children. Although as a child her curiosity led her to devour all the books she found in her father's book-binding workshop, she was not a brilliant pupil and left school early to go and work for her father. After marrying Leonard Whitaker in 1917, she moved to France and then back to Yorkshire, where she started to write short stories. Her first collection of stories, *Frost in April*, was published in 1929, thanks to the support of the influential literary critic John Middleton Murray, who had immediately recognised her talent. For her pseudonym she chose the Biblical name, Malachi. She soon gained a reputation for her masterly story-telling and published three more collections: *No Luggage?* (1930); *Five for Silver* (1932) and *Honeymoon* (1934). In 1939, after completing her autobiography, *And so did I*, she announced to family and friends that she "had written herself out". And indeed when she died in 1975 she left only a few unpublished stories and some autobiographical notes. The famous actress Joan Hart, editor of Mrs Whitaker's books, once pointed out that the tone of her short stories "sad, salted with a sometimes violent humour - seems to reflect her native Yorkshire landscape: bleak, open, lit with pale sunshine".

Before reading

- 1 Do you usually have a party to celebrate your birthday? Do you like organizing them?
- 2 Think of a birthday party you have been to recently. What kind of games/entertainments were there? What did you have to eat and drink?
- 3 Young people have always enjoyed organizing and giving parties – especially before they started going to discos. However, habits have changed over the last 30/50 years. What do you know about the kind of parties your parents used to go to? Did they prepare a lot of things to eat?
- 4 Below you will find a list of food and drink: underline those which are typical of present-day parties and circle the ones you think were likely to be served 30/50 years ago (check your monolingual dictionary if you need help!):
 - cakes
 - pastries
 - coke / soft drinks
 - fruit juice
 - sandwiches
 - cooked sausages
 - peanuts
 - stewed fruit
 - scones and jam
 - pudding
 - cream
 - fresh fruit
 - alcoholic drinks
 - tea
 - crumb-browned ham
 - rolls
 - roast-beef
 - buttered toast
 - apple pie
 - chips

- 5 Do young people dress up for parties or do they wear casual clothes? Did your parents wear "special" clothes for parties? Which of the three drawings below best portrays the typical dress and hairstyle a 17-year-old girl would have worn to her birthday party fifty years ago?



- 6 Now read the first part of the story. While reading, fill in the grid on page 7 about Hannah's birthday party.

THE girl Hannah was seventeen, and she had made almost all that array¹ of cakes and pastries on the kitchen dresser. She stood looking at them, her healthy pink face glowing with pride. She wore a blue dress and a white apron,² and her hair waved down her back to her waist in a golden-brown shower.

The party should be a lovely one. All the girls from her Sunday-school class were coming, and four of the best-behaved boys as well. Then there was to be the young man, Thomas Henry Smithson, the one that all the girls secretly laughed at. Really, he was too conscientious, too lumberingly³ polite for anything. His hats seemed always small, his trousers tight, his boots big. But her mother liked him. He helped to make things go, sang a few songs in a voice he called baritone, and never lost his temper.⁴

Hannah felt that she could put up with anything so long as Ralph Wellings turned up.⁵ He was nineteen. A strange boy for the little, fat, jolly parson to have as his son! Hannah had heard that he was wild, but he had never seemed wild to her. Sometimes they had met in the twilight, and he had walked along by her side through Pennyfoot woods to Hoyle's farm and carried the dozen eggs that she had gone to fetch⁶ back with him in a sugar-bag.

Of course, you were supposed to be still a child at seventeen, but Hannah didn't feel exactly like a child. She could talk to Ralph Wellings about the things she knew – the proper way to make candied toffee, the books she had recently found in the attic, old books in which all the letter esses were effs, the nicest hymn tunes. He never laughed at her, and she found this refreshing.

She loved him very much, admiring his forehead, for some reason, most of all. It was high and white. His blue-black hair, parted at the side, waved as beautifully as did hers. 'If we get married and have some children, they're sure to have curly hair' she thought. She liked, too, his flecked hazel⁷

1 **array** [ə'reɪ]: display.

2 **apron** [ˈeɪprən]: article of clothing usually worn over one's clothes to keep them clean.

3 **lumberingly** [ˈlʌmbərɪŋli]: in an annoying, irritating way.

4 **lost his temper**: got angry.

5 **turned up** [tɜːnd 'ʌp]: came.

6 **fetch** [fetʃ]: go and get.

7 **flecked hazel** [flekt 'heɪzl]: brown with lighter and darker shades.

eyes and his long fingers with their triangular nails. He called her ‘nice child’, and always seemed glad to see her.

She took her entranced gaze from the cakes and went into the dairy.⁸ The house had once been a farm, and the cool, stone-shelved room was still called the dairy. One side of it was laden with food. There was a whole, crumb-browned ham on a dish by the side of the meat-plate on which stood a perfectly cooked sirloin of beef. Another dish held four or five pounds of plump, cooked sausages. The trifles⁹ were ready, so were the stewed fruits for those who liked plainer sweets, and there was more cream, Hannah felt, than could possibly be used.

She ran out of the room, smiling with delight, to look for her mother.

‘Are you getting ready, mother?’ she called.

‘Yes.’

Her mother stood, bare-armed, in front of the oval mirror, a worried look in her eyes, her mouth filled with steel hairpins. She had her skirt on, but her black satin bodice was flung over the curved bedrail.

‘Aren’t you washed, child?’ She seemed to speak harshly because of the hairpins. ‘The company’ll be here before we know where we are. We sh’ll have a rush, you’ll see.’

‘Never mind, mother, everything looks lovely. I wish the party was beginning just now.’

She ran out of the room and changed her dress in a perfect fury of speed. Her face was clean enough, her hands white. What was the use of washing over and over and over again? Now she was in the summer pink dress that made her look older than ever before. The skirt was flounced,¹⁰ and she jumped round ballooning it, running a comb through her hair at the same time.

‘He’ll like me, he’ll like me, he will,’ she chanted. And she ran across to her mother’s room and flung herself panting on the great bed.

‘Hannah, Hannah, be a lady!’ cried her mother, rebukingly.¹¹

8 **dairy** [ˈdeəri] : special room on a farm where milk products are kept or stored.

9 **trifles** [ˈtraɪflz]: trifle is a traditional English dessert consisting of cake, fruit and custard.

10 **flounced** [ˈflaʊnst]: decorated with bands of cloth gathered in and sewn into small folds.

11 **rebukingly** [rɪˈbjuːkɪŋli] : severely.

Place:

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People invited:

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Food, drink, entertainment:.....

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- 7 In fiction a new character is usually introduced in one of three ways:
- a* by a narrator
 - b* by another character talking and thinking about him/her
 - c* appearing suddenly in the story allowing readers to form their own opinion of him/her.

A character usually develops when he/she interacts with other **personae** of the **fictional** world. Focus on the characters you have met so far.

Complete the table below with information about them.
(As far as presentation is concerned, consider that characters can be presented through dialogue, another character's words or thoughts, narrator's considerations/description, etc.)

	Physical Traits	Psychological Traits	Presentation	Impression
Hannah				
Thomas H. Smithson				
Ralph Wellings				
Mother				

Which character/s is/are most positively described? Why?

- 8 Underline all the expressions in the text which convey Hannah's joy. Why is she so happy?
- 9 Discuss with a partner how you think the story ends. Which elements in the text did you take into consideration when deciding about how the story develops?
- 10 Finish reading the story. Does the conclusion surprise you? Give reasons for your answer.