

Here and Beyond: 12 Stories
A Study Companion
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HERE AND BEYOND:

12 Stories

A STUDY COMPANION
by Ian Tan

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INTRODUCTION: READING THE SHORT STORY

Consider the following “short story”, often described to be the world’s shortest story:
For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

Although six words long, the text invites us to consider certain questions: Why are the baby shoes never worn? Why are they for sale now? Who is putting them up for sale? Why have they done so? Keeping these questions in mind, the imaginative reader will construct an entire narrative surrounding this text, and create characters that fit into the narrative, complete with human thoughts, feelings and motivations.

The short story is literally a *short* story – it is a narrative that uses fewer words than a novel. It uses less time to set up a narrative and introduce characters to us, and brings us to the climax and conclusion of the story more rapidly. Because it uses fewer words to convey the story, its themes and messages, the short story invites us to use our imaginations to fill in the blanks and to infer possible meanings and interpretations which lie in the story. The short story is a demanding form for a writer, as he has to be more careful about the words he uses to tell the story and to create the desired impact on the reader.

It is useful to think of the short story as a narrative that sets up a **problem** for the characters to solve or struggle with. In other words, at the heart of every short story is a dilemma that presents itself to the characters. In dealing with the dilemma, the characters make certain choices or express certain feelings which reveal their personality and morality. In “The Shoes of My Sensei”, the narrator struggles with whether he should go and visit his Japanese teacher in prison. Internal conflict is also present in “Visitors” where Hidayah debates about whether she should agree to her parents visiting her in New York. Sometimes the problem is resolved by the end of the story, sometimes it is not, and the reader is left to speculate about the resolution of the problem in the unwritten future.

In studying the short story, it is useful to think about five key elements of narrative: plot, character, theme, setting and narrative technique. What follows is a brief discussion about each of these elements and how the stories in *Here and Beyond* use these elements to create effective stories.

Plot

Plot is the most important element in a story, as it is the way in which the narrative is told. A classic example of the structure of a plot starts with the **introduction** or exposition of the setting, characters and situation of the story. Next, a **complication** is added to

the story (this is the problem or dilemma). As characters respond to the problem and interact with one another, the plot builds up to a **climax**, or the point of highest interest in the story. The story then proceeds to the **conclusion** where we find out whether the problem has been resolved.

Stories may be told in a straightforward **chronological** fashion where they start off at the introduction and move towards the conclusion in a linear manner. In “The Tiger”, Fatima’s encounter with the tiger and with the villagers is told chronologically. This is effective as the reader is compelled to follow Fatima’s reactions to her situation closely and notice the change in her attitude towards the tiger. Certain surprising facts about the tiger are also slowly revealed to the reader. On the other hand, in “My Cousin Tim”, the narrative constantly switches between the narrator’s experiences at his uncle’s funeral and flashbacks involving his cousin Tim. The reader understands that the story is told in this way in order to dramatise the intimate memories that the narrator has shared with his cousin in the past and to emphasise how much the narrator misses Tim presently.

The conclusion of a narrative can also be significant to the entire story. Conclusions can either be closed or open. A closed ending is an ending where all significant problems in the narrative have been resolved by the characters. In “Visitors”, Hidayah has resolved the inner conflict within herself about the significance of her parents’ visit and her identity as a Singaporean Malay. Her gesture of welcome to her parents at the airport serves as a fitting conclusion to the story. An open ending, on the other hand, leaves the fate of the characters unknown and does not provide a complete resolution to the issues raised in the story. In “Gloria”, the ultimate fate of the Filipino maid is left unclear, and this is done so that the reader can speculate on how she will end up. Open endings can leave the reader unsettled; this is the feeling we are left with after reading “The Shooting Ranch”, as we do not know whether Nancy and her children will be able to overcome the odds.

Character

Characters are crucial in sustaining the reader’s interest in the narrative, as they give the story a human element. Characters display traits that can be analysed using evidence from the story. The **protagonist** is usually the main character of the story. The **antagonist** enters into conflict with the protagonist, and this struggle is one of the key factors that drives the story along.

Characters may be classified into **flat** and **round** characters. Flat characters do not develop much in the story. They have few character traits, and may be considered as simplistic representations of certain character types. In “The Tiger”, the villager Mamood has few character traits and does not develop much during the course of the story. Likewise, the narrator’s father in “City in C Minor” is a straightforwardly good and caring father. On the other hand, round characters are complex characters who display multiple character traits, sometimes in contradiction with one another. They can change and develop in the story. The protagonist in “The Judge” is an example of a complex character who displays both positive and negative character traits. Throughout the course of the story, we see the change in his personality as demonstrated by the change in his views towards Wong Yee Oh and his mother.

When writing an answer about your impression of a character, you should be able to analyse the character's traits using the following guide:

Speech: what do a character's spoken words reveal about his character?

Thoughts: what does a character's thinking (about himself and others) reveal about his character?

Emotions: what do a character's feelings (towards himself and other people) reveal about his character?

Actions: what does a character's behaviour reveal about his character?

Language: what does the use of language by the narrator/writer/other characters reveal about their character?

Theme

A theme is the central idea or topic in a story. It can be considered to be part of the writer's message that he wants to convey to his readers. A theme is usually a universal human concern, i.e. love, death, family, compassion, loneliness. The themes in a story are emphasised through all the elements of the story, i.e. the character's actions/thoughts, plot, setting and narrative style.

When studying theme, it is important to consider the following questions:

- i) How is the theme conveyed through the story? For example, how is the theme of human evil conveyed in the stories "The Tiger" and "The Shooting Ranch"?
- ii) What is the writer saying about a particular theme? For example, what is the writer of "Grasshoppers" implying about life through his story?

As you will be asked to compare different stories in your examinations, it will be useful to think about how a particular theme is conveyed in two or more stories in your anthology. For example, the theme of death is explored in a wide range of stories such as "The Tiger", "My Cousin Tim", "The Shooting Ranch", "The Judge", "Campfire" and "True Singapore Ghost Story". However, the treatment of the theme of death is different in each story: the theme of death in "The Judge" functions as a way for the writer to question the death penalty, while death in "Campfire" reminds us of the fragility of life and worldly happiness. You should be precise and specific in your essays when explaining how each story explores its themes in different ways.

Setting

Setting refers to the time and place in which the story takes place in. A story may employ a setting that is familiar to readers; this can be seen in the stories "Gloria", "Grasshoppers" and "True Singapore Ghost Story", which are all set in modern Singapore. For "Gloria" and "True Singapore Ghost Story", the use of Singapore as a setting is significant because the writers are concerned with highlighting certain social issues and problems with Singaporean society that readers can identify with. On the other hand, the stories "The Tiger" and "The Shoes of My Sensei" use an unfamiliar setting to portray different facets of society – the jungle setting in the former story has an otherworldly quality, and the setting of the latter story portrays a Singapore undergoing turbulence and uncertainty – each aptly mirrors the feelings that the narrator experiences.

Certain stories in this anthology **juxtapose** different settings to convey different messages. "The Shooting Ranch" juxtaposes Nancy's rural home with the narrator's modern home to bring out the differences between both families. "Gloria" constantly switches between life in Singapore and life in the Philippines to emphasise the contrast between affluence and poverty. Lastly, the differences between America and Singapore in the stories "City in C Minor" and "Visitors" highlight the differences between the East and West.

Narrative Technique

This term refers to the way in which the narrative is being told. It is important not to confuse the narrator with the writer. The narrator is not the writer, as he or she is a character in the story. Sometimes, the views of the writer may be completely different from the narrator's, especially if the writer intends to criticise the narrator or if the narrator is unreliable.

Broadly speaking, we can classify narrative voice into first person narration, second person narration and third person narration. First person narration occurs when the narrative is told from a character's point of view. Readers can get a better insight into the character's thoughts and feelings, leading to identification and sympathy with him. The stories "The Shoes of My Sensei", "Grasshoppers" and "Campfire" all use first person narration to allow us greater access into the emotions of the protagonists, enabling us to sympathise with them at various points of the story.

Third person narration occurs when the story is told from the perspective of someone who is not a character in the story. The story may employ an **omniscient** third person narrator who can enter into the thoughts of multiple characters in the story. For example, the narrator in "City in C Minor" enters into the thoughts of both Emma and the famous cellist, to explore the differences in their characters, balancing their perspectives throughout the story. However, the third person narrator can also identify very closely with a particular character by telling the story from a perspective sympathetic to this character. The third person narrators in "Here Comes The Sun" and "Gloria" identify very closely with the protagonists of the stories. Mdm Goh and Gloria's perspectives dominate each story, and the reader views events from their points-of-view. However, the writers' use of the third person mode also brings some degree of objectivity into the stories. In other words, they encourage readers to evaluate the actions of Mdm Goh and Gloria objectively and come to their own conclusions about them.

The Study Companion

This study companion provides you with detailed analyses of all the stories in this anthology, paying close attention to the themes and issues that the stories convey. While trying to be as comprehensive as possible, these chapters only offer suggested ways of interpreting these stories. It is important to develop your own opinions and interpretations of these stories, and to express your own personal voice when writing essays.

Along with the detailed analyses that form the main bulk of each chapter, there are important sections that I have inserted in each chapter to help you engage with each story:

i) Let's Discuss!

These sections contain stimulating discussion questions that you can use during group work, class discussions or even as part of your own reflection. These questions are open ended – there are no specific answers, as the emphasis is on your own interpretation of the issues raised by the text.

ii) Let's Compare!

These sections contain useful ways in which you can compare different stories in the anthology with one another. An important skill in the “O” level examinations is the ability to develop responses towards the characters and themes of two or more stories. Use these sections to sharpen your awareness of the similarities and differences between these twelve stories.

iii) Research Ideas

These sections contain some directions for further research on the themes and issues of particular stories. Such research will allow you to better appreciate the link between the fictional world of the stories and the real world.

iv) Further Activities

Located at the end of each chapter, these sections contain suggested activities that can be carried out in your groups or as a class to consolidate your learning and appreciation of the stories. These activities range from essay-writing practices to comparisons with poems and films. Use these sections to engage with the stories in creative ways!

Throughout this study companion, you will find words in **bold script**. These words are specific to the study of literature, and you are encouraged to look up what they mean to deepen your appreciation of literary study. I hope this study companion will prove valuable as you read and enjoy these twelve stories!

GLORIA BY SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM

An Outsider in Singapore

We are first introduced to the main character, Gloria, who is described to be “holding” a child “between her knees, hugging him close against her breast”. Gloria’s motherly instincts are emphasised, as she gives Timmy comfort and attention in a way that Timmy’s own mother, Gloria’s Singaporean employer, does not. However, the irony is that Gloria’s own children are far away from her in the Philippines, and she cannot reach out to them like a normal mother can. She will spend the rest of the story thinking about and agonising over them. Her own downfall at the end of the story also comes about as a result of her wanting to provide for them.

Gloria’s attention is not consistently focused on her employer’s family. It is drifting towards Manila City and her hometown where her children are. The writer consistently **juxtaposes** Manila and Singapore, to suggest the abject poverty that Gloria faces back home. The buildings in Singapore are “brightly-lit”, whereas there is “garbage” floating on the river in her hometown. The wealth and affluence of her employer is also contrasted to her family’s desperation and pennilessness.

In contrast to the other stories in *Here and Beyond* that focus on the experiences of Singaporeans living in foreign countries, “Gloria” provides us with a portrayal of an outsider living and working in Singapore. Due to her status and class, the family isolates her. She sits apart from them, and it is considered “presumptuous” if she sits with them. However, the writer also subtly suggests the artificiality of such divisions – the “dark sky” outside the house is the same dark sky “that arcs over Manila city”, and the moon is the same in Singapore as in the Philippines. These images suggest that people are connected and share a common humanity. Gloria’s own family resembles her employer’s family in some ways, and Gloria and her employer are also connected as they are both mothers who worry about their children. Indeed, Gloria constantly worries about her children: she thinks about the talcum powder that she wants to buy for Migoy and Amy, and imagines that she is rocking her little Migoy as she rocks Timmy in her arms.

Gloria’s Background

Gloria next recalls her time in the clinic where she has to undergo a pregnancy test before she can be employed. We understand that her employer has changed maids before. Pay attention to the cold and emotionless way in which her employer talks about Gloria with Alice: domestic helpers can be changed with ease, and there is no financial cost except at the third change. Maids can be bought and transferred easily, with little or no emotional attachment.

The writer emphasises Gloria’s unease in the clinic, where she feels like “one of those tiny white mice” about to be bought in a pet shop, a stranger who is being “scrutinised” by everybody. Not only that, she is made to feel ashamed of her “shabby blouse and faded black pants”. Through Gloria, the writer criticises our attitudes towards our domestic helpers. Although Singapore is a “clean and green city” compared to Manila that is mired in poverty, we are unfeeling and soulless towards people whom we have paid to work for us.

What her employer does not know about Gloria is her background and family circumstances back in Manila. She is being unfairly pressurised by her husband Alex to have more children even though she already has ten mouths to feed back home. She is torn between providing for her family amidst crushing poverty and pleasing her husband. The priest also exerts pressure upon her by telling her that it is her duty to obey her husband and not allow him to look for other women because she does not give him what he desires. It is thus a combination of factors that has pushed Gloria into desperation and into finding work as a maid in Singapore. Because of these pressures back home, Gloria constantly thinks about “money” and how she has to work to pay back everybody she has borrowed money from. She even has to pay lawyer fees incurred by her husband, who is now in prison.

LET’S DISCUSS!

Why does the writer go into so much detail about Gloria’s family background at this point of the story?

The Pressures of Working in Singapore

The first days of Gloria’s employment provide her with some challenges. The first is associated with her level of education – she cannot read the cookbooks that her employer shows her because she has “only been to school up to grade four”. The employer also lays out stringent expectations for her – the kitchen floor must be “clean and spotless” and she has to keep a close watch on household supplies that have run out.

When her employer tells her that she has left 50 dollars for her to buy the children food, the money starts to become a source of temptation for Gloria. She calculates that 50 Singaporean dollars is equivalent to 2000 pesos, and that is a lot of money to her. Given what you know of Gloria’s situation back home, is it understandable that she should think in this way?

The temptation that the money presents to Gloria is next highlighted in an incident involving the children. When Gloria tries to cook pork adobo, a Filipino delicacy, for the children, they refuse and demand fish fingers. The children are insensitive towards Gloria’s culture, rejecting the food that she cooks for them. Because they are living in affluence, they do not think twice about wasting food because they do not like the taste. This attitude is juxtaposed against Gloria’s own children who would have “rushed” for the food because they do not have enough to eat. The indulgent and wasteful attitudes of the children are condoned by Gloria’s employer, who reprimands her for thinking twice about buying an extra packet of fish fingers just to satisfy the children’s demands. Think

about the irony behind the mother’s words that “there’s not enough food” for her children – her over-permissive style of parenting has resulted in her children’s unreasonable requests for more fish fingers even though there is plenty of food to eat.

Gloria’s Temptation

As Gloria heads to the supermarket to buy fish fingers, she thinks about the money in her hand. The 50 dollar note can buy for her “so many sacks of rice, so many kilos of fish”. We understand that she constantly worries about the lack of money back home, and that the money she handles on behalf of her employer could go a long way towards improving her family situation. Could her thoughts about using the money here **foreshadow** her actions at the end of the story?

The writer constantly uses **juxtaposition** to highlight the differences between Singapore and Manila. The ordinary neighbourhood supermarket in Singapore is the kind of place frequented by “rich people” in Quezon City. Walking down the aisles in the supermarket, she notices products “she’d never seen or eaten before”. The narrative, told from Gloria’s point of view, makes the items on sale look extremely appealing. She is not used to being surrounded by luxury and an abundance of food. Holding the 50 dollars, Gloria suddenly feels very rich and that, for the first time in her life, she has the “power” to purchase things.

LET’S DISCUSS!

Have you ever felt the same way as Gloria when you visit the supermarket? Why is it significant that the writer narrates the story here from Gloria’s point of view?

The Differences between Gloria’s Family and her Employer’s Family

Gloria thinks about how she would buy leftover pork from the meat stall back home for her own children. In contrast to how her employer liberally provides money to buy food, there are days when she cannot even afford food for her children. The writer also contrasts the meagre portions of “rice and salted fish” that her children have for dinner, with the “chunks of half-eaten pork, rice and vegetables” that her employer’s family throws away and wastes at the dinner table. The writer portrays the wasteful attitude of the family towards food in a negative light, especially when compared to how Gloria’s family suffers with no food to eat.

By juxtaposing Gloria’s family against her employer’s family, the writer highlights **social inequality** and the income gap. Both Gloria and her employer have children to look after; however, Gloria’s children are “always hungry and scrawny” because of their poverty and lack of resources. As Singapore has a much higher standard of living, Gloria’s employer’s family is able to live in considerable comfort. However, the writer also suggests that living this way has made the family unappreciative of comforts and insensitive towards people like Gloria who are not as fortunate as them.

Gloria’s Plan

Thinking about the abundance of food in Singapore, Gloria hatches a plan to buy extra food and sell it for cash. She realises she can do this as her employer “does not care how much food she buys”. Compared to how much they earn and their extravagant lifestyles of buying cars and going on holidays, Gloria is correct to note that they “won’t even miss” the money she siphons off.

LET’S DISCUSS!

As a class, debate this motion:

“Is Gloria justified in her actions?”

Come up with reasons to support your stand. Be prepared to defend your stand against groups who have a different opinion.

Gloria’s Children

Gloria next receives sad news that Suzie, her daughter, has left home and abandoned her siblings. Devastated by the news, Gloria is visibly shaken. Her employers, worried that she has contracted some illness, send her to take a blood and urine test. Gloria realises that her employers are not really concerned about her emotional well-being, as their only thoughts are about how she might affect their well-being with her illness. Their first instinct is to “be sure of everything” and protect themselves against whatever inconvenience Gloria might cause them. She, on the other hand, cannot be sure of what the future brings for her and how she can protect her children. Encased in their privileged lifestyles, Gloria’s employers do not sympathise with her.

Gloria understands that Suzie has run off because she cannot stand the life of poverty and desperation that she has been plunged into. The miserable state of Gloria’s existence in the Philippines is strikingly conveyed through the description of them “sleeping, eating and shitting in the hovels under the bridges of Pasig and Quezon City”. Their lack of money becomes more pressing for Gloria, who breaks down due to her helplessness (“What do you do? Where can you find her? O God!”) in providing for her children and keeping the family together.

The final blow for Gloria comes when Suzie sends her photographs of herself and a note saying that she is working in a hotel in Tokyo. Initially ecstatic over news of her daughter, Gloria is cut to the heart when she imagines the truth behind her daughter’s “bright red negligee”, which she is wearing in the photograph: due to crushing poverty, Suzie may have gone into prostitution. Gloria believes that her daughter has strayed into a life of self-destruction, and once again feels her helplessness to protect her family.

Having described the circumstances of Gloria’s family, the writer invites us to sympathise with Suzie, and the path she takes. Through Suzie, the writer implies that the choices people make are sometimes influenced by their social environment. The point will be made clearer later on in the story, when Gloria is caught having stolen goods from the departmental store. Although stealing is wrong, we can see that Gloria has been edged into doing this due to various factors.

Gloria's Last Night

The story here skips forward to Gloria's last night in Singapore. Why do you think the writer has chosen to focus on this incident, and not to narrate events that happened after Gloria learns about Suzie?

Due to Gloria's maternal care, Timmy says that he will miss her. However, John reminds him that they will "get a new maid soon", so it is silly to miss her. John's attitude towards Gloria is similar to his attitude towards food – both commodities are purchasable and disposable, and it is absurd to have any feelings towards them. Gloria is treated like something that can be thrown away, as maids "always leave" and can be replaced with ease. As much as the writer criticises John's callous attitude towards Gloria, she also criticises Linda's failure to correct her step-son – Linda is just pleased that he finally calls her "Mum".

Linda's Insecurities

In fact, Linda is insecure over how Gloria displays more motherly affection towards her children than she herself does. She stops Gloria from hugging and kissing her children because she feels that she can do that herself. She is jealous that her role as a mother and caregiver to her children is being supplanted by the maid. However, the reader understands that Gloria tries to connect with her own children *through* hugging and kissing her employer's children. By stopping Gloria from doing so, Linda deprives Gloria from connecting with her maternal instincts.

Linda is also worried about John not being able to fit into the family, as he is her step-son. She uses the word "outsider" in reference to John. The irony is of course that Gloria is the true outsider in the family, and Linda has never made any efforts to help her fit in and be a part of the family.

Gloria's Crime

The story shockingly ends with Linda and George fetching Gloria back from the police station. They are furious that Gloria has been caught stealing on the eve of her departure. However, we realise that the real reason behind their fury is that they will lose their deposit with the Ministry of Manpower. It is ultimately because of a selfish reason that they are angry with her. They view the maid ultimately in monetary terms: her crime means that they will lose money because of her.

Linda also questions why Gloria has to steal, when she already has enough money. Although her employers do not understand how it could even be possible for her to want to steal, we as readers understand the state of Gloria's poverty and how her life and family back in Manila have already crumbled. We are thus more inclined to sympathise with her and relate to her possible motives for stealing. Take note that the narrative in this section is filtered through Linda's point of view, and thus Gloria is described as a "stupid woman" and a "brazen liar". The narrative comes across to us as being heavily ironic, as we understand that in reality, Gloria does not deserve to be labelled as such.

The final image of the story is undoubtedly striking: Gloria is described as a "cow waiting for the butcher's knife". Earlier on, her appearance is described as "bovine". After offering her services to her employers like an animal to its master, she is no longer

useful to them and is about to be "slaughtered" or suffer a terrible fate. Her employers have washed their hands off her – they will not bail her out and she will have to pay for her own flight back after a possible term in prison. Given what little money she is taking back with her, she will probably end up as penniless as before she came to Singapore. She is ultimately used and destroyed by a society that does not care about her existence or her life.

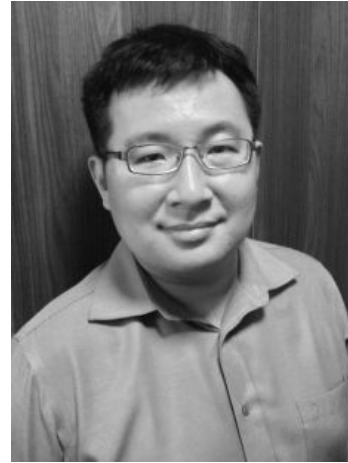
LET'S COMPARE!

In this story, Gloria faces punishment from the law for her crime of stealing. How is the same theme of crime and punishment represented in "The Judge"?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you are the defence lawyer representing Gloria at her trial. How would you defend her? In your group, write a speech that will be presented in court, defending Gloria and her actions of stealing from the shopping centre.
2. How does the writer build and maintain our sympathy for Gloria? Support your answers with evidence from the text and suitable elaboration.
3. Imagine you are Gloria and you have been sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment. Write a letter from prison to your family back in Manila, making sure to describe your experiences in Singapore and your feelings towards them.
4. Watch the film *Ilo Ilo* (2013) directed by Anthony Chen, and discuss the similarities between the film and this short story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ian Tan holds a first class honours in English Literature from the National University of Singapore. He currently teaches English Literature at Raffles Institution (Year 5–6). He has previously taught English Literature and English Language in CHIJ St. Nicholas Girls' School (Secondary), and has conducted numerous workshops, book clubs and poetry circles for secondary school English Literature teachers. He has published a study guide on John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* which was widely used by students and teachers from secondary schools.