THE ART OF THE SHORT STORY **Edward Friedman**

WEEK 3

Readings

Ana María Matute (Spain), "Sin of Omission"

Nella Larsen (United States), "Sanctuary"

Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), "The Ethnographer"

Rosario Ferré (Puerto Rico), "The Youngest Doll"

Ana María Matute, "Sin of Omission"

Ana María Matute (Spain, 1925-2014) was an award-winning novelist, essayist, and short story writer. She is recognized as a keen observer of children.

HIS MOTHER DIED when he was thirteen;
she was the last thing he had left in the world. He found himself alone. It had been at least three years since he had stopped going to school, because he had been forced to take on odd jobs here and there. His only relative was Emeterio Ruiz Heredia, a cousin of his father's. Emeterio was the mayor, and he owned a fine, two-storey house facing the town square, round and reddish under the August sun. Emeterio also had two hundred head of cattle grazing on the

slopes of Sagrado, and an unwed daughter who was close to twenty, dark, robust, cheerful, and a bit dumb. His wife, lean and hard as a black poplar, had quite a tongue and knew how to give orders. Emeterio Ruiz never did get along with his distant cousin, and he helped his widow to come up with some extra income only because it was the least that could be expected. Afterward, even though he did take in the orphaned boy, who lacked inheritance and skills for a trade, Emeterio ignored him, just as he did the rest of his household.

The first night that Lope spent in Emeterio's house, he bedded down under the granary. He was given dinner and a glass of wine. The next day, while Emeterio was tucking his shirt into his trousers, the sun rising with the crowing of the roosters, he called Lope through the stairwell, frightening the hens that slept there:

"Lope!"

Lope descended barefoot, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He was small for a thirteen-year-old, and he, had a large, shaved head.

"You're going up to Sagrado to work as a shepherd."

Lope found his boots and put them on. In the kitchen, Francisca, the daughter, had warmed some peppered potatoes. Lope swallowed them quickly, his aluminum spoon dripping with every bite.

"You know what to do. I believe you spent a spring up in the hills of Santa Aurea, with the goats of Aurelio Bernal."

"Yes, sir."

"You won't be alone. Roque el Mediano is up there, too, somewhere. You'll work together."

“Yes, sir.”

Francisca put a large loaf of bread into his leather pouch, an aluminum canteen, some goat grease, and dried beef.

“Get going," said Emeterio Ruiz Heredia.

Lope looked at him with his two big black eyes, round and bright.

“What are you staring at? Let's get a move on!"

Lope went out, with the pouch over his shoulder. On his way, he picked up the staff, thick and glossy from wear, which he kept leaning against the wall.

As he was climbing toward the slope of Sagrado, don Lorenzo, the schoolteacher, saw him. That afternoon at the tavern, don Lorenzo rolled a cigarette while he sat with Emeterio, who had stopped to have a glass of anisette.

“I saw Lope," he said. "He was on his way up to Sagrado, poor kid."
"Yep," said Emeterio, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "He's going up to work as a shepherd. You know, no free lunch these days. Life's tough. That pathetic Pericote didn't leave him a damn thing."
"The bad part is," said don Lorenzo, scratching his ear with a long yellow fingernail, "the kid's got potential. If he had the means, he could amount to something. He's smart, very smart. In school. . ."
Emeterio cut him short with a wave of his hand:
"Okay, okay. I'm not saying he couldn't. But he has to earn his keep. Life's tougher every day."
He ordered another anisette. The schoolteacher nodded his head in agreement.
Lope reached Sagrado and shouted out Roque el Mediano's name until he found him. Roque was slightly retarded, and he had been working up there for Emeterio for about fifteen years. He was close to fifty, and he hardly ever spoke. They shared the same mud hut, sleeping beneath the oak trees, embraced at night by the protruding roots. The hut was barely big enough for them to lie down in, and they had to enter on all fours, halfway between a crawl and dragging themselves. But it was cool in summer, and warm enough in winter.
Summer passed, and fall and winter. The shepherds didn't go II down to town, except on the day of the fiesta. Every two weeks a lad went up with their provisions: bread, jerky, goat grease, some garlic. Sometimes, a skin of wine. The peaks of Sagrado were beautiful—a deep blue colour, terrible, blind. The sun, high and round like an imperturbable eye, reigned supreme. Lope would wake up very early, with the mist of dawn, before the buzzing of the flies or any other sound, and the first thing he would see was the mud ceiling close to his face. He would lie still for a while, and feel the dumb bulk of Roque's body pressing against his side. Then he would crawl out to the corral. In the air, crisscrossing one another like fugitive stars, myriad noises came and went, loud and useless. God alone knew where they would end up, falling from the sky like stones. Like the years that went by: one year, two, five.
After five years had passed, Emeterio sent word that he wanted to see Lope. He had him examined by the doctor, and saw that he

had grown strong and healthy.
"Like an oak!" said the new doctor. Lope blushed, and did not know what to answer. Francisca had married, and she had three little ones, who were playing in the entrance to the square. A dog, its tongue hanging out, went up to Lope. Maybe it remembered him from somewhere. Then he saw Manuel Enríquez, an old school chum who had always been second to him in class. Manuel had on a grey suit, and he was wearing a tie. He passed by and waved at them.
Francisca commented: "A good future ahead of him, that one. His father is sending him to school, and he's studying to be a lawyer."
When he went to the fountain, Lope saw Manuel again. Suddenly, he felt an urge to call out his name. But the shout stuck in his throat like a ball.
"Eh!" he managed to say, or something like it.
Manuel turned to look, and he recognized him. Imagine that: he recognized him, and he was smiling.
"Lope! Lope, old buddy!"
Who could understand what he was saying? How strange the accent of men, how odd the words that come out of the dark holes of their mouths! A thick kind of blood began to fill his veins, as he listened to Manuel Enríquez.
Manuel opened a flat little case of polished silver, with the whitest and most perfect cigarettes he had ever seen. He offered him one, smiling.
Lope reached out his hand. Then he noticed how thick and rough it was, like a piece of dried beef. His fingers lacked dexterity, they couldn't perform the task. How strange the hand of Manuel: a fine hand, with fingers like large white worms, agile and flexible. What a hand, wax-coloured, and with shiny, polished fingernails. An amazing hand, the like of which even the women couldn't boast. Lope's fingers fumbled awkwardly. Finally, he took out a cigarette, white and delicate, so strange between his heavy, clumsy fingers: useless, absurd, in his fingers. The blood stopped between Lope's eyebrows. He could feel a clot forming there, quiet, fermenting. He crushed the cigarette with his fingers and turned away, unable to contain himself even before Manuel's surprise.
Manuel kept calling him: "Lope! Lope!"
Emeterio was sitting on the porch, in shirt sleeves, watching his grandchildren. He smiled, resting his eyes on the eldest, and

relaxing from the day's labour, the wine-skin within easy reach. Lope walked directly toward him, and saw his quizzical, grey eyes. "Let's get a move on, boy. Time to get back to Sagrado."
On the square was a reddish, rectangular stone. It was the size of a melon, like the stones kids find around crumbling walls. Slowly, Lope picked it up. Emeterio, settled comfortably on the porch, watched him with mild curiosity. His right hand was nestled between his belt and stomach. He did not have enough time even to take it out: the muffled blow, his own blood sprinkling across his chest, and death and surprise, like two sisters, rising to greet him. That was all.
When they led him away, handcuffed, Lope was in tears. And when the women, howling like wolves, tried to strike him, and followed him with their mantles raised above their heads, in a show of grief and indignation, "My God, the one who took him in. My God, the one who made him a man. My God, he would have starved to death. . . ," Lope could only weep and repeat:
“Yes, yes, yes . . .”

Translated by Michael Scott Doyle

1. How are Lope and Don Emeterio represented in the story?
2. To what extent is the reader’s response to the story affected by the presentation of the material by the narrator?
3. What are the primary themes and messages of the story?

Nella Larsen, “Sanctuary”

Nellallitea 'Nella' Larsen (April 13, 1891 – March 30, 1964) was an American novelist of the Harlem Renaissance who wrote two novels (*Quicksand*, *Passing*) and a few short stories. Though her literary output was scant, what she wrote was of extraordinary quality, earning her recognition by her contemporaries and by present-day critics.

I

On the Southern coast, between Merton and Shawboro,* there is a strip of desolation some half a mile wide and nearly ten miles long between the sea and old fields of ruined plantations. Skirting the edge of this narrow jungle is a partly grown-over road which still shows traces of furrows made by the wheels of wagons that have long since rotted away or been cut into firewood. This road is little used, now that the state has built its new highway a bit to the west and wagons are less numerous than automobiles.

In the forsaken road a man was walking swiftly. But in spite of his hurry, at every step he set down his feet with infinite care, for the night was windless and the heavy silence intensified each sound; even the breaking of a twig could be plainly heard and the man had need of caution as well as haste.

Before a lonely cottage that shrank timidly back from the road the man hesitated a moment, then struck out across the patch of green in front of it. Stepping behind a clump of bushes close to the house, he looked in through the lighted window at Annie Poole, standing at her kitchen table mixing the supper biscuits.

He was a big, black man with pale brown eyes in which there was an odd mixture of fear and amazement. The light showed streaks of gray soil on his heavy, sweating face and great hands, and on his torn clothes. In his woolly hair clung bits of dried leaves and dead grass.

He made a gesture as if to tap on the window, but turned away to the door instead. Without knocking he opened it and went in.

II

The woman's brown gaze was immediately on him, though she did not move. She said, "You ain't in no hurry, is you, Jim Hammer?" It wasn't, however, entirely a question.

"Ah's in trubble, Mis' Poole," the man explained, his voice shaking, his fingers twitching.

"W'at you done now?"

"Shot a man, Mis' Poole."

"Trufe?" The woman seemed calm. But the word was spat out.

"Yas'm. Shot 'im." In the man's tone was something of wonder, as if he himself could not quite believe that he had really done this thing which he affirmed.

"Daid?"

"Dunno, Mis' Poole. Dunno."

"White man o' niggah?"

"Cain't say, Mis' Poole. White man, Ah reckons."

Annie Poole looked at him with cold contempt. She was a tiny, withered woman--fifty perhaps--with a wrinkled face the color of old copper, framed by a crinkly mass of white hair. But about her small figure was some quality of hardness that belied her appearance of frailty. At last she spoke, boring her sharp little eyes into those of the anxious creature before her.

"An' w'at am you lookin' foh me to do 'bout et?"

"Jes' lemme stop till dey's gone by. Hide me till dey passes. Reckon dey ain't fur off now." His begging voice changed to a frightened whimper. "Foh de Lawd's sake, Mis' Poole, lemme stop."

And why, the woman inquired caustically, should she run the dangerous risk of hiding him?

"Obadiah, he'd lemme stop ef he was to home," the man whined.

Annie Poole sighed. "Yas," she admitted slowly, reluctantly, "Ah spec' he would. Obadiah, he's too good to you all no 'count trash." Her slight shoulders lifted in a hopeless shrug. "Yas, Ah reckon he'd do et. Emspecial' seein' how he allus set such a heap o' store by you. Cain't see w'at foh, mahse'f. Ah shuah don' see nuffin' in you but a heap o' dirt."

But a look of irony, of cunning, of complicity passed over her face. She went on, "Still, 'siderin' all an' all, how Obadiah's right fon' o'you, an' how white folks is white folks, Ah'm a-gwine hide you dis one time."

Crossing the kitchen, she opened a door leading into a small bedroom, saying, "Git yo'se'f in dat dere feather bald an'Ah'm a-gwine put de clo's on de top. Don' reckon dey'll fin' you ef dey does look foh you in mah house. An Ah don' spec' dey'll go foh to do cat. Not lessen you been keerless an' let 'em smell you out gittin' hyah." She turned on him a withering look. "But you allus been triflin'. Cain't do nuffin' propah. An' Ah'm a-tellin' you ef dey warn's white folks an'you a po'niggah, Ah shuah wouldn't be lettin' you mess up mah feather bald dis ebenin', 'cose Ah jes' plain con' went you hyah. Ah done kep'mahse'f outen bubble all mah life. So's Obadiah."

"Ah's powahful 'bliged to you, Mis' Poole. You shuah am one good 'omen. De Lawd'll mos' suttinly--"

Annie Poole cut him off. "Dis ain't no time foh all dat kin' o' fiddle-de-roll. Ah does mah duty as Ah sees et 'shout no thanks from you. Ef de Lawd had gib you a white face 'stead o' dat dere black one, Ah shuah would turn you out. Now hush yo' mouf an' git yo'se'f in. An' don' git movin' and scrunchin' undah dose covahs and git yo'se'f kotched in mah house."

Without further comment the man did as he was told. After he had laid his soiled body and grimy garments between her snowy sheets, Annie Poole carefully rearranged the covering and placed piles of freshly laundered linen on top. Then she gave a pat here and there, eyed the result, and, finding it satisfactory, went back to her cooking.

III

Jim Hammer settled down to the racking business of waiting until the approaching danger should have passed him by. Soon savory odors seeped in to him and he realized that he was hungry. He wished that Annie Poole would bring him

something to eat. Just one biscuit. But she wouldn't, he knew. Not she. She was a hard one, Obadiah's mother.

By and by he fell into a sleep from which he was dragged back by the rumbling sounds of wheels in the road outside. For a second fear clutched so tightly at him that he almost leaped from the suffocating shelter of the bed in order to make some active attempt to escape the horror that his capture meant. There was a spasm at his heart, a pain so sharp, so slashing, that he had to suppress an impulse to cry out. He felt himself falling. Down, down, down . . . Everything grew dim and very distant in his memory . . . Vanished . . . Came rushing back.

Outside there was silence. He strained his ears. Nothing. No footsteps. No voices. They had gone on then. Gone without even stopping to ask Annie Poole if she had seen him pass that way. A sigh of relief slipped from him. His thick lips curled in an ugly, cunning smile. It had been smart of him to think of coming to Obadiah's mother's to hide. She was an old demon, but he was safe in her house.

He lay a short while longer, listening intently, and, hearing nothing, started to get up. But immediately he stopped, his yellow eyes glowing like pale flames. He had heard the unmistakable sound of men coming toward the house. Swiftly he slid back into the heavy, hot stuffiness of the bed and lay listening fearfully.

The terrifying sounds drew nearer. Slowly. Heavily. Just for a moment he thought they were not coming in--they took so long. But there was a light knock and the noise of a door being opened. His whole body went taut. His feet felt frozen, his hands clammy, his tongue like a weighted, dying thing. His pounding heart made it hard for his straining ears to hear what they were saying out there.

"Evenin', Mistah Lowndes." Annie Poole's voice sounded as it always did, sharp and dry.

There was no answer. Or had he missed it? With slow care he shifted his position, bringing his head nearer the edge of the bed. Still he heard nothing. What were they waiting for? Why didn't they ask about him?

Annie Poole, it seemed, was of the same mind. "Ah don' reckon youall done traipsed way out hyah jes' foh yo' healf," she hinted.

"There's bad news for you, Annie, I'm 'fraid." The sheriff's voice was low and queer.

Jim Hammer visualized him standing out there--a tall, stooped man, his white tobacco-stained mustache drooping limply at the ends, his nose hooked and sharp, his eyes blue and cold. Bill Lowndes was a hard one too. And white.

"W'atall bad news, Mistah Lowndes?" The woman put the question quietly, directly.

"Obadiah--" the sheriff began--hesitated--began again. "Obadiah--ah--er--he's outside, Annie. I'm 'fraid--"

"Shucks! You done missed. Obadiah, he ain't done nuffin', Mistah Lowndes. Obadiah!" she called stridently, "Obadiah! git hyah an' splain yo'se'f."

But Obadiah didn't answer, didn't come in. Other men came in. Came in with steps that dragged and halted. No one spoke. Not even Annie Poole. Something was laid carefully upon the floor.

"Obadiah, chile," his mother said softly, "Obadiah, chile." Then, with sudden alarm, "He ain't daid, is he? Mistah Lowndes! Obadiah, he ain't daid?"

Jim Hammer didn't catch the answer to that pleading question. A new fear was stealing over him.

"There was a to-do, Annie," Bill Lowndes explained gently, "at the garage back o' the factory. Fellow tryin' to steal tires. Obadiah heerd a noise an' run out with two or three others. Scared the rascal all right. Fired off his gun an' run. We allow et to be Jim Hammer. Picked up his cap back there. Never was no 'count. Thievin' an' sly. But we'll git 'im, Annie. We'll git 'im."

The man huddled in the feather bed prayed silently. "Oh, Lawd! Ah didn't go to do et. Not Obadiah, Lawd. You knows dat. You knows et." And into his frenzied brain came the thought that it would be better for him to get up and go out to them before Annie Poole gave him away. For he was lost now. With all his great strength he tried to get himself out of the bed. But he couldn't.

"Oh, Lawd! " he moaned. "Oh, Lawd! " His thoughts were bitter and they ran through his mind like panic. He knew that it had come to pass as it said somewhere in the Bible about the wicked. The Lord had stretched out his hand and smitten him. He was paralyzed. He couldn't move hand or foot. He moaned again. It was all there was left for him to do. For in the terror of this new calamity that had come

upon him he had forgotten the waiting danger which was so near out there in the kitchen.

His hunters, however, didn't hear him. Bill Lowndes was saying, "We been a-lookin' for Jim out along the old road. Figured he'd make tracks for Shawboro. You ain't noticed anybody pass this evenin', Annie?"

The reply came promptly, unwaveringly. "No, Ah ain't sees nobody pass. Not yet."

IV

Jim Hammer caught his breath.
"Well," the sheriff concluded, "we'll be gittin' along. Obadiah was a mighty fine boy. Ef they was all like him--I'm sorry, Annie. Anything I c'n do, let me know."

"Thank you, Mistah Lowndes."

With the sound of the door closing on the departing men, power to move came back to the man in the bedroom. He pushed his dirt-caked feet out from the covers and rose up, but crouched down again. He wasn't cold now, but hot all over and burning. Almost he wished that Bill Lowndes and his men had taken him with them.

Annie Poole had come into the room.

It seemed a long time before Obadiah's mother spoke. When she did there were no tears, no reproaches; but there was a raging fury in her voice as she lashed out, "Git outer mah feather baid, Jim Hammer, an' outen mah house, an' don' nevah stop thankin' yo' Jesus he done gib you dat black face."

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*Fictional locations.

1. How is the story narrated?
2. How important is the dialogue here?
3. How can one explain the ending of the story?
4. What is the principal message of the story?

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Ethnographer"

Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899-1986) is arguably the most influential Latin American writer of the twentieth century. He wrote poetry, but his major innovations come in his short stories, which have tremendous importance in themselves and in the ways in which they inspired other writers, notably novelists.

I was told about the case in Texas, but it had happened in another state. It has a single protagonist (though in every story there are thousands of protagonists, visible and invisible, alive and dead). The man's name, I believe, was Fred Murdock. He was tall, as Americans are; his hair was neither blond nor dark, his features were sharp, and he spoke very little. There was nothing singular about him, not even that feigned singularity that young men affect. He was naturally respectful, and he distrusted neither books nor the men and women who write them. He was at that age when a man doesn't yet know who he is, and so is ready to throw himself into whatever chance puts in his way — Persian mysticism or the unknown origins of Hungarian, the hazards of war or algebra, Puritanism or orgy. At the university, an adviser had interested him in Amerindian languages. Certain esoteric rites still survived in certain tribes out West; one of his professors, an older man, suggested that he go live on a reservation, observe the rites, and discover the secret revealed by the medicine men to the initiates. When he came back, he would have his dissertation, and the university authorities would see that it was published. Murdock leaped at the suggestion. One of his ancestors had died in the frontier wars; that bygone conflict of his race was now a link. He must have foreseen the difficulties that lay ahead for him; he would have to convince the red men to accept him as one of their own. He set out upon the long adventure. He lived for more than two years on the prairie, sometimes sheltered by adobe walls and sometimes in the open. He rose before dawn, went to bed at sundown, and came to dream in a language that was not that of his fathers. He conditioned his palate to harsh flavors, he covered himself with strange clothing, he forgot his friends and the city, he came to think in a fashion that the logic of his mind rejected. During the first few months of his new education, he secretly took notes; later, he tore the notes up — perhaps to avoid drawing suspicion upon himself, perhaps because he no longer needed them. After a period of time (determined upon in advance by certain practices, both spiritual and physical), the priest instructed Murdock to start remembering his dreams, and to recount them to him at daybreak each morning. The young man found that on nights of the full moon he dreamed of buffalo. He reported these recurrent dreams to his teacher; the teacher at last revealed to him

the tribe's secret doctrine. One morning, without saying a word to anyone, Murdock left.

In the city, he was homesick for those first evenings on the prairie when, long ago, he had been homesick for the city. He made his way to his professor's office and told him that he knew the secret, but had resolved not to reveal it.

"Are you bound by your oath?" the professor asked.

"That's not the reason," Murdock replied. "I learned something out there that I can't express."

"The English language may not be able to communicate it," the professor suggested.

"That's not it, sir. Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it in a hundred different and even contradictory ways. I don't know how to tell you this, but the secret is beautiful, and science, our science, seems mere frivolity to me now."

After a pause he added: "And anyway, the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself."

The professor spoke coldly: "I will inform the committee of your decision. Are you planning to live among the Indians?"

"No," Murdock answered. "I may not even go back to the prairie. What the men of the prairie taught me is good anywhere and for any circumstances."

That was the essence of their conversation.

Fred married, divorced, and is now one of the librarians at Yale.

Translated by Andrew Hurley

1. How did the narrator come to hear of Fred Murdock?
2. How is Murdock portrayed?
3. What does the professor propose to Murdock?
4. How does Murdock live during his two years in the prairie?
5. What is Murdock’s important decision?
6. How can one interpret the gaps in the story?
7. What is the significance of the last sentence of the story?

Rosario Ferré, "The Youngest Doll"

Rosario Ferré (Puerto Rico, 1938-2016) was a widely published novelist, short story writer, and essayist. She was a social activist, and her writings have a strong feminist slant. In addition to her studies in Puerto Rico, she was a Ph.D. from the Univesity of Maryland.

Early in the morning the maiden aunt had taken her rocking chair out onto the porch facing the canefields, as she always did whenever she woke up with the urge to make a doll. As a young woman, she had often bathed in the river, but one day when the heavy rains had fed the dragontail current, she had a soft feeling of melting snow in the marrow of her bones. With her head nestled among the black rock's reverberations she could hear the slamming of salty foam on the beach mingled with the sound of the waves, and she suddenly thought that her hair had poured out to sea at last. At that very moment, she felt a sharp bite in her calf. Screaming, she was pulled out of the water, and, writhing in pain, was taken home in a stretcher.

The doctor who examined her assured her it was nothing, that she had probably been bitten by an angry river prawn. But the days passed and the scab would not heal. A month later, the doctor concluded that the prawn had worked its way into the soft flesh of her calf and had nestled there to grown. He prescribed a mustard plaster so that the heat would force it out. The aunt spent a whole week with her leg covered with mustard from thigh to ankle, but when the treatment was over, they found that the ulcer had grown even larger and that it was covered with a slimy, stonelike substance that couldn't be removed without endangering the whole leg. She then resigned herself to living with the prawn permanently curled up in her calf.

She had been very beautiful, but the prawn hidden under the long, gauzy folds of her skirt stripped her of all vanity. She locked herself up in her house, refusing to see any suitors. At first she devoted herself entirely to bringing up her sister's children, dragging her monstrous leg around the house quite numbly. In those days, the family was nearly ruined; they lived surrounded by a past that was breaking up around them with the same impassive musicality with which the crystal chandelier crumbled on the frayed embroidered linen cloth of the dining-room table. Her nieces adored her. She would comb their hair, bathe and feed them, and when she read them stories, they would sit around her and furtively lift the starched ruffle of her skirt so as to sniff the aroma of ripe sweetsop that oozed from her leg when it was at rest.

As the girls grew up, the aunt devoted herself to making doll for them to play with. At first they were just plain dolls, with cottony stuffing from the gourd tree in the garden and stray buttons sewn on for eyes. As time passed, though, she began to refine her craft more and more, thus earning the respect and admiration of the whole family. The birth of a new doll was always cause for a ritual celebration, which explains why it never occurred to the aunt to sell them for a profit, even when the girls had grown up and the family was beginning to fall into need. The aunt continued to increase the size of the dolls so that their height and other measurements conformed to those of each of the girls. There were nine of them, and the aunt would make one doll for each per year, so it became necessary to set aside a room for the dolls alone in the house. When the eldest girls turned eighteen, there were one hundred and twenty-six dolls of all ages in the room. Opening the door gave you the impression of entering a dovecote, or the ballroom in the czarina's palace, or a warehouse in which someone had spread out a row of tobacco leaves to dry. But the aunt didn't enter the room for any of these pleasures. Instead, she would unlatch the door and gently pick up each doll, murmuring a lullaby as she rocked it: "This is how you were when you were a year old, this is you at two, and like this at three," measuring out each year of their lives against the hollow they had left in her arms.

The day the eldest turned ten, the aunt sat down in her rocking chair facing the canefields and hardly ever got up again. She would rock away entire days on the porch, watching the patterns of rain shift like watercolor over the canefields, and coming out of her stupor only when the doctor would pay her a visit, or she awoke with the desire to make a doll. Then she would call out so that everyone in the house would come and help her. On that day, one could see the hired help making repeated trips to town like cheerful Inca messenger, bringing wax, porcelain clay, needles, spools of thread of every shade and color. While these preparations were taking place, the aunt would call the niece she had dreamt about the night before into her bedroom and take her measurements. Then she would make a wax mask of the child's face, covering it with plaster on both sides, like a living face sheathed in two dead ones. Then she would draw out an endless flaxen thread of melted wax through a pinpoint on her chin. The porcelain of the hands and face was always translucent; it had an ivory tint to it that formed a great contrast with the curdled whiteness of the bisque faces. For the body, the aunt would always send out to a garden for twenty glossy gourds. She would hold them in one hand and, with an expert twist of her knife, would slice them up and lean them against the railing of the balcony, so that the sun and wind would dry the cottony guano brains out. After a few days, she would scrape off the dried fluff with a teaspoon and, with infinite patience, feed in into the doll's mouth.

The only items the aunt would agree to use in the birth of a doll that were not made by her with whatever materials came to her from the land, were the glass eyeballs. They were mailed to her directly from Europe in all colors, but the aunt considered them useless until she had left them submerged at the bottom of the stream for a few days, so that they would learn to recognize the slightest stirring of the prawn's antennae. Only then would she carefully rinse them in ammonia water and place them, glossy as gems and nestled in a bed of cotton, at the bottom of one of her Dutch cookie tins. The dolls were always outfitted in the same way, even though the girls were growing up. She would dress the younger ones in Swiss embroidery and the older ones in silk guipure, and on each of their heads she would tie the same bow, wide and white and trembling like the breat of a dove.

The girls began to marry and leave home. On their wedding day, the aunt would give each of them their last doll, kissing them on the forehead and telling them with a smile, "Here is your Easter Sunday." She would reassure the grooms by explaining to them that the doll was merely a sentimental ornament, of the kind that people used to place on the lid of grand pianos in the old days. From the porch, the aunt would watch the girls walk down the fanlike staircase for the last time. They would carry a modest checkered cardboard suitcase in one hand, the other hand slipped around the waist of the exuberant doll made in their image and likeness, still wearing the same olf-fashioned kid slippers and gloves, and with Valenciennes bloomers barely showing under their snowy, embroidered skirts. But the hands and faces of these new dolls looked less transparent than those of the old: they had the consistency of skim milk. This difference concealed a more subtle one: the wedding doll was never stuffed with cotton but was filled with honey.

All the girls had married, and only the youngest niece was left at home when the doctor paid his monthly visit to the aunt, bringing his son along this time, who had just returned from studying medicine up north. The young man lifted the starched ruffle of the aunt's skirt and looked intently at the huge ulcer which oozed a perfumed sperm from the tip of its greenish scales. He pulled out his stethoscope and listened to it carefully. The aunt thought he was listening for the prawn's breathing, to see if it was still alive, and so she fondly lifted his hand and placed it on the spot where he could feel the constant movement of the creature's antennae. The young man released the ruffle and looked fixedly at his father. "You could have cured this from the start," he told him. "That's true," his father answered, "but I just wanted you to come and see the prawn that has been paying for your education these twenty years."

From then on it was the young doctor who visited the old aunt every month. His interest in the youngest niece was evident from the start, so that the aunt was able to begin her last doll in plenty of time. He would always show up for the visit wearing a pair of brightly polished shoes, a starched collar, and an ostentatious tiepin of extravagant poor taste. After examining the aunt he would sit in the parlor, leaning his paper silhouette against the oval frame of the chair, and each time would hand the youngest an identical bouquet of purple forget-me-nots. She would offer him ginger cookies and would hold the bouquet with the tip of her fingers, as if she were holding a purple sea urchin turned inside out. She made up her mind to marry him because she was intrigued by his drowsy profile, and also because she was deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like.

On her wedding day, as she was about to leave the house, the youngest was surprised to find that the doll the aunt had give her as a wedding present was warm. As she slipped her arm around her waist, she examined her attentively, but quickly forgot about it, so amazed was she at the excellence of the craft. The doll's face and hands were made of the most delicate Mikado porcelain, and in her half-open and slightly sad smile she recognized her full set of baby teeth. There was also another notable detail: the aunt had embedded her diamond eardrops in the doll's pupils.

The young doctor took off to live in town, in a square house that made one think of a cement block. Each day he made his wife sit out on the balcony, so that passersby would be sure to see that he had married into society. Motionless inside her cubicle of heat, the youngest began to suspect that it wasn't just her husband's silhouette that was made of paper, but his soul as well. Her suspicions were soon confirmed. One day he pried out the doll's eyes with the tip of his scalpel and pawned them for a fancy gold pocket watch with a long, embossed chain. From then on the doll remained seated as always on the lid of the grand piano, but with her gaze modestly lowered.

A few months later the doctor noticed the doll was missing from her usual place and asked the youngest what she'd done with it. A sisterhood of pious ladies had offered him a healthy sum for the porcelain hands and face, which they thought would be perfect for the image of the Veronica in the next Lenten procession. The youngest answered him that the ants had at last discovered the doll was filled with honey and, streaming over the piano, had devoured it in a single night. "Since the hands and face were made of Mikado porcelain and were as delicate as sugar," she said, "the ants have probably taken them to some underground burrow and at this very moment are probably wearing down their teeth, gnawing furiously at fingers

and eyelids to no avail." That night the doctor dug up all the ground around the house, but could not find the doll.

As the years passed the doctor became a millionaire. He had slowly acquired the whole town as his clientele, people who didn't mind paying exorbitant fees in order to see a genuine member of the extinct sugarcane aristocracy up close. The youngest went on sitting in her chair out on the balcony, motionless in her muslin and lace, and always with lowered eyelids. Whenever her husband's patients, draped in necklaces and feathers and carrying elaborate handbags and canes, would sit beside her, perhaps coughing or sneezing, or shaking their doleful rolls or flesh with a jingling of coins, they would notice a strange scent that would involuntarily make them think of a slowly oozing sweetsop. They would then feel an uncontrollable urge to rub their hands together as if they were paws.

There was only one thing missing from the doctor's otherwise-perfect happiness. He noticed that, although he was aging naturally, the youngest still kept the same firm, porcelained skin she had had, when he had called on her at the big house on the plantation. One night he decided to go into her bedroom, to watch her as she slept. He noticed that her chest wasn't moving. He gently placed his stethoscope over her heart and heard a distant swish of water. Then the doll lifted up her eyelids, and out of the empty sockets of her eyes came the frenzied antennae of all those prawns.

1. How is the “maiden aunt” portrayed in the story?
2. What is the symbolism of the dolls?
3. What happens at the end of the story?
4. What are the primary themes and messages of the story?