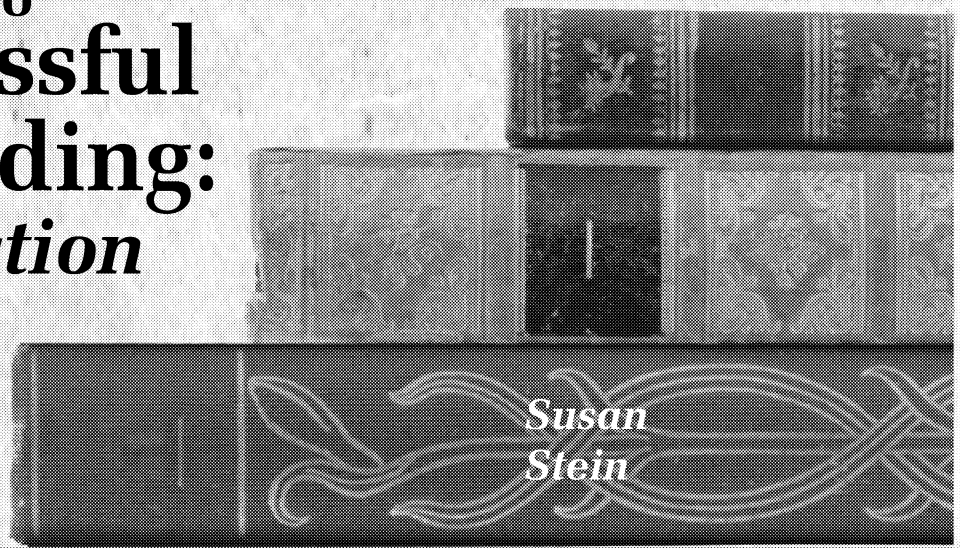


Steps to
**Successful
Reading:**
Fiction



J. WESTON
WALCH
PUBLISHER
Portland, Maine

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SHORT STORY

2

FROM “A HANDFUL OF DATES”

by Tayeb Salih, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

Learning Strategy: Visualizing Through Imagery

Reading Skill: Analyzing Setting

Test-Taking Strategy: True/False

Setting the Scene

Tayeb Salih was born in 1929 in the northern province of Sudan, which is mostly inhabited by Muslims. “A Handful of Dates” contains some elements of Salih’s own childhood; he grew up in a farming town similar to the one in the story. As a young man, he left his village and studied in Khartoum, Sudan, and London, England. While in England, he worked for the British Broadcasting Company’s Arabic Service. Later he worked for the Sudan Broadcasting Service, UNESCO in Paris, and the Information Services in Qatar. His novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) is set in the same village as the story in this lesson.

Your students may not know much about Islam and life in Islamic countries. Try to explain some of the Islamic elements referred to in the story. It will be important for students to know about the Koran, mosques, and prayer in the life of a Muslim. You will want to explain that the Koran is the holy book of the Muslim faith. In many countries, only priests and men are permitted to read the Koran. A mosque is a special building of worship. In some countries, men and women have separate mosques. Mosques have a distinctive onion-shaped dome. Muslims are expected

to say prayers five times a day. At the appointed hour, they kneel on a prayer rug, face east toward their holy city, Mecca, and repeat prayers. In some Islamic countries, women are expected to wear a special body-covering garment. In other countries, women are only required to cover their hair, not their entire body. You may want to visit some of the web sites and books listed in Finding Out More to learn more about the Five Pillars of Islam and the roles of men and women in Islamic cultures.

Introducing the Skill

Since the setting of this story may be unfamiliar, “A Handful of Dates” draws attention to this aspect of literature. Help heighten your students’ ability to visualize what is happening on the pages before them to increase comprehension. To practice visualizing and to focus students on setting, you may want to read a descriptive paragraph about setting (perhaps from a book students have already read) and ask students to draw the scene. As students read the excerpt of the lesson, encourage them to highlight or underline words that help them form mental pictures.

It is important to point out to your students that setting can be a crucial element in a story. You may want to discuss

Teacher Guide

two of the functions setting can perform in a story: affecting the characters and manipulating the reader's feelings to set a mood. For instance, "A Handful of Dates" could not have taken place in the United States. Not only is the geography different, but there are cultural aspects of this story that ground it in Africa. Before reading, you may want to ask students to brainstorm aloud places *they* might set a short story about a boy and his grandfather. Depending on where students live and their family background, settings will vary, but they will probably reflect students' experiences. To emphasize the role of setting in a story, ask questions after reading, such as How might a story about a boy and his grandfather be told in the United States? What would be the same as in "A Handful of Dates"? What would be different?

Especially for English Language Learners

Sharing Culture Here's a place where you can let your Islamic students shine. If you have any students in your class from Muslim countries, give them the opportunity to discuss cultural influences they understand or assume from this story that you may miss. Similarly, if you have any Sudanese students, give them the chance to talk about life in their country. Be careful not to showcase these students in such a way that they feel judged or defensive of their countries.

Sharing Language Be sure students review the footnoted words from the story before reading it. Similarly, review the religious references early on to be sure that everyone understands and can form mental pictures from Salih's rich descriptions. You may want to invite students to find out what a date palm looks like, or what the climate in Sudan is like.

Ask your ELL students to share words about agriculture from their native language. Ask them about connotations surrounding words for *water* and *desert*, and how these connotations affect how they visualize settings described in such words.

Assessing Understanding

Carefully review students' responses in **Step 3: Check Your Strategy** to find out how well they are able to use visualizing as a strategy.

Although answering true/false questions sounds easy, the **Test-Taking Strategy** described in the students' **Step 3: Assess It** warns about pitfalls to be avoided and offers clues to use to advantage with such assessments.

Finding Out More

Other books by Tayeb Salih:

Season of Migration to the North (1969)
The Wedding of Zein (1968)

Other books on the subject:

Al-Hardallo, Ibrahim. "Sudanese Literature." *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. New York: Ungar, 1984. 365-67.

"Salih, Tayeb." *African Authors: A Companion to Black African Writing*. Ed. Donald Herdeck. Washington, DC: Black Orpheus, 1973. 381.

Smith, Huston. "Islam." *The World's Religions*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. 221-70.

Web sites on Sudan:

www.sudan.net/
www.arab.net/sudan/sudan_contents.html

Web sites on Islam:

<http://islam.org/>



STEP 5: RELATE IT

1. Draw a scene from this story and present it to the class. You may use watercolor, markers, or any other medium you are comfortable with. Be prepared to explain how the words from the story and your imagination helped you with your final product. (Visual) 
2. Research farming techniques in Africa, particularly Sudan. Explain the economic realities of making a living in agriculture there. An adult education center in your area may know of recent immigrants from that area willing to talk with you about their country. (Logical/mathematical) 
3. Interview a friend about his or her favorite place. Ask your subject to close his or her eyes and visualize the place. Then ask your subject to describe the place, giving sensory details—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch sensations. Draw the place from these descriptions. (Intrapersonal, visual)  
4. Research Sudan on the Internet. Choose a topic you read about. Focus your research, and present your findings to the class. (Technological) 
5. Choose a setting—both place and time—familiar to you, such as a childhood classroom, your current bedroom, your neighborhood in winter. Write a paragraph that describes that setting for someone who has never experienced it. (Writing) 



FOLKTALE

3

“THE OLD GRANDFATHER AND HIS LITTLE GRANDSON”
by Leo Tolstoy

Learning Strategy: Self-Questioning
Reading Skill: Making Inferences
Test-Taking Strategy: Essay



STEP 1: LINK IT

Before You Read

Folktales are old, old stories that show a moral or lesson. Storytellers would often pass down important cultural beliefs from one generation to the next using this oral tradition. Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) is one of Russia’s best-known writers. In this folktale, he asks his readers to think about how they treat their elders.

In the chart below, list some words you think of when you hear *senior citizen*, *elderly person*, and *grandparent*.

senior citizen	elderly person	grandparent



What connotations do these words have? That is, what feelings are linked to those words? Are the connotations mostly positive or negative? Are the words in all three columns the same, or are there differences? Compare your list with those of classmates. Discuss similarities and differences.

Then think about where your listed words come from. Have you had experiences with older people? Are you very close to—or distant from—a grandparent? Do you think your attitudes have been affected by those of your parents? Your friends? Things you have read or seen on television? Discuss your ideas with classmates.

Set a Purpose

Think about your relationships with people. How well do you know a grandparent or other family member? How do you get to know people? Is it by the things they do? Is it what they say to you? Is it how they talk or how they treat others that reveals who they are? Or is it how they look? Chances are, it's a combination of all these things. Even in a story as short as this one, you can get to know the characters. Tolstoy has developed each character so carefully that you understand why they act the way they do and why they change their behavior.

As you read, pay attention to how Tolstoy shows you what each character is like. You are reading this story to observe how good writers develop character.

Set a Strategy

This folktale contains only five paragraphs, yet there is enough evidence to understand what the four characters are like.

As you read the story, ask yourself questions about why the characters act as they do. You may want to underline or draw an arrow to words that lead you to ask a question. Becoming aware of your thoughts as you read can help you understand what you are reading and remember a story after you have read it.

Check Your Purpose

Did you recognize the mystery elements in “A Furnished Room”? Answer the questions below.

1. What is the central problem—the mystery—of the story? _____

2. What words, phrases, or actions added to the suspense? _____

3. What surprise was revealed at the end? _____

Check Your Strategy

Go back to the story map on page 46 and fill in any empty lines.

Test-Taking Strategy

Some tests check to make sure you understand the plot of what you read. These are questions about reading comprehension. A common reading comprehension test format is the **multiple-choice test**. You have been using this format in some of the **Check Your Understanding** sections.

On a multiple-choice test, these steps can help you succeed:

- First, read the question carefully. You will want to read it more than once to be sure you understand exactly what the question is asking.
- Next, read all the choices.
- If you do not know the answer immediately, go back to the point in the reading where you think you will find the answer.
- If you still don't know the answer, start the process of elimination. If you are sure that a certain answer is wrong, discard it.
- When you have narrowed down your choices, make your best guess. For some tests, the directions will tell you directly that you will lose more



points for a wrong answer than for a blank answer. In that case, if you cannot make a strong guess, do not answer at all.

Now use the strategy to answer these multiple-choice questions. Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

1. Where does “The Furnished Room” take place?
 - a. on a farm
 - b. in a homeless shelter
 - c. in a rooming house
 - d. at the main character’s home
2. Whom is the main character looking for?
 - a. his mother
 - b. his sister
 - c. his girlfriend
 - d. his assistant
3. What is the main character’s problem?
 - a. He has a secret he must tell his sweetheart.
 - b. He has money to give his sweetheart.
 - c. He is angry with his sweetheart and wants to tell her so.
 - d. He is in love and desperate to find the woman he loves.
4. How does the main character try to solve his problem? (Circle two answers.)
 - a. He travels from rooming house to rooming house looking for his sweetheart.
 - b. He hires a private detective to help him find her.
 - c. He places an ad in the newspaper.
 - d. He travels to all of the theaters looking for his sweetheart.
5. Why does the housekeeper not tell him about the woman who last stayed in the room?
 - a. She doesn’t want to help him find her.
 - b. She does not want him to be afraid to rent the room because there had been a suicide there.
 - c. Her friend advised against it.
 - d. She is hoping that the man will fall in love with her and forget about his girlfriend.
6. What does the man do after he asks the housekeeper a second time about previous guests?
 - a. He packs up to go looking at another boarding house.
 - b. He finally gives up looking and kills himself.
 - c. He calls the police.
 - d. He decides to stop looking and get on with his life.





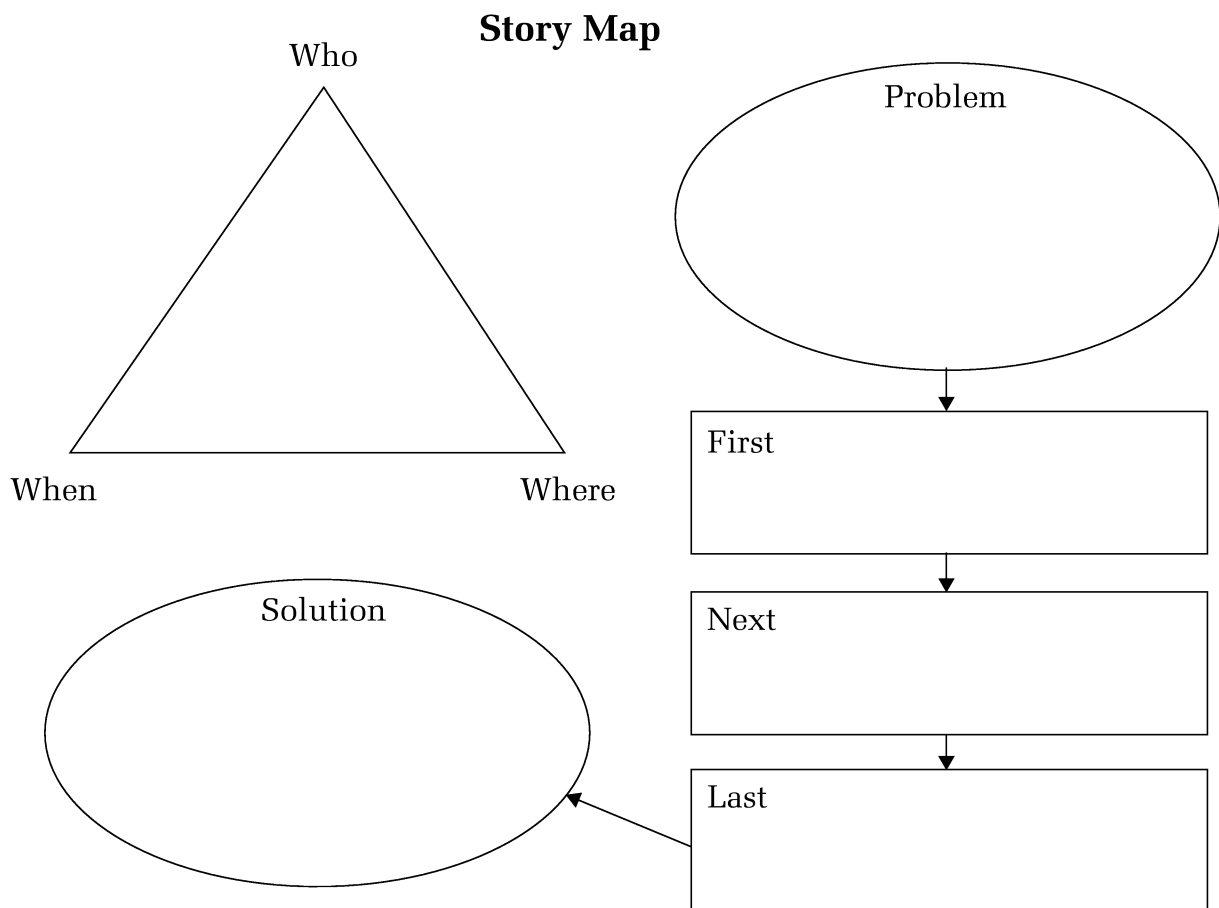
STEP 4: THINK ABOUT IT

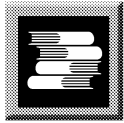
Plot is one of the main aspects of fiction. The characters experience the plot as they move through the setting. It is hard to understand the main idea of a story if you do not have a clear idea of what happened and when. Graphic organizers can help you keep track of the plot.

When you fill in a story map or other graphic organizer, you look at what you are working on in a new way. Some people learn better when they can see things. A story map helps you see the story.

A skill used in filling in the story map is summarizing. Since you are boiling down the story to its most important points, you make decisions about what is important and what is less important.

The story map below is even more condensed than the one you filled in earlier. The events in this map are reduced to the three most important. Review your earlier story map. Then summarize the story further and fill in this map.



**STEP 2: READ IT**

Kate Chopin was married to a wealthy cotton broker, had children, and lived in a nice home in Louisiana. To an outsider, it might have looked as if she had a perfect life. Yet, this story, "The Story of an Hour," like many others she wrote, examines the unspoken, inner life of women and their desire for more choices in their lives. This suggests that one definition of the perfect life did not apply to everyone.

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near
5 her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

10 She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this
15 she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song
20 which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite
25 motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who had cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.



She was young, with a fair, calm face whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years: she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.



Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

65 "Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

70 She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard 75 who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his gripsack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

80 When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

