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## **The British Thriller: An Introduction to the British Novel**

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What influences have shaped modern British fiction? The British colonized America, yet Englishmen fought for freedom from British rule. What bonds and differences exist between the cultures today and how are these influences reflected in British literature? These are some of the questions “The British Thriller” will address.

Literature courses in our high schools today focus principally upon American literature. Often the only foreign readings studied are the Greek and Roman myths and the plays of Shakespeare. When questioned, many of my students viewed American literature as the only literature of any importance. I was surprised to discover that most students in a recent course thought Agatha Christie was American because they “liked” her stories. Literature from other lands is viewed then as something not enjoyable or perhaps nonexistent. I believe that familiarity with the literature of other countries enables the individual to put one’s own thinking in perspective. It helps one view the world more realistically and leads to greater understanding of other points of view. Additionally students may discover great literatures and find the reading satisfying.

This course is designed as an eight week IA block class in British literature with the following objectives:

- (1) To expose students to British writings and relate those writings to the history of their times;
- (2) To help students better understand the structure of a novel;
- (3) To enable students to enjoy reading a greater variety of works;
- (4) To help students experience attitudes and outlooks which differ from our own;
- (5) To help students discover some of the events which foster differences in outlook between our two countries.

### **Historical Background**

In order to understand some of the attitudes and happenings in English stories some historical background must be introduced. The writings in this unit begin with the early twentieth century, therefore an

understanding of the Victorian period would be helpful. This could be introduced in the form of a film or with short readings of the period augmented with visits to the British Art Center to see representations of the people who lived during that time. What follows is a brief summary of the Victorian period. Teachers who wish more detail are referred to the bibliography for sources.

Queen Victoria's reign was the longest of any British monarch. It was also a time when England led the way as an industrial nation giving rise to a more powerful middle class and expanding education to more people. It signaled the beginning of the private ballot and the beginning of the end of widespread, acceptable, bought political office. It contained the seeds from which developed the growth of real political power for the common working man. In what way did these events shape the twentieth century Englishman?

The Englishman was educated and taught that it was his Godgiven duty to civilize the world. This belief encouraged the acquisition of foreign territory including lands on the African and Asian continents. This attitude created a new kind of independent Englishman, often a religious, military, or opportunistic individual who made his home as well as his living on foreign soil, who returned to England to strengthen ties, educate his children, or spend his money, and who felt that his heritage alone protected him.

Unfortunately this belief in Britain's industrial and military superiority remained at a time when it was no longer true. J.B. Priestly in *The English* states that he was taught that "England easily led the way in the industrial revolution) becoming so rich and powerful, because it possessed the natural resources for mechanization . . ." Priestly, however, points out that although this belief was fiction, it and fictions like it shaped the beliefs and actions of several generations of Englishmen. Thus when we begin to study the first novel, *The Thirty-nine Steps*, we meet as hero a self-reliant, self-made Englishman from the South African outback who thrives on putting his independence to the test.

At the turn of the century, Joseph Chamberlain, then Prime Minister and some of his supporters involved England in what became the Boer War, a struggle for supremacy in South Africa, a war now considered by many historians to have been unnecessary. England prevailed, but with heavy losses in men, material, and national and world support. Loss of the charisma of victory resulted in far reaching changes. The 1902 Education Act eventually brought education to all classes. The vote was extended to a few more Englishmen and eventually to all. The average man having endured severe hardships became more organized and more demanding thus forcing the government to become more responsive to the working man, and positions of leadership in politics became possible for the common man. As a result of this conflict, Britain also realized the need for a complete overhaul of the military and of some industries. However, Britain was not the only one to discover her weaknesses. They were also recognized by the other imperialistic nations, notably Germany. Britain would no longer remain an unchallenged power.

From this historical brief, some differences between our American experience and the British experience appear. We do not have royalty, that is established, legal, hereditary, leadership, and most of us have never felt that it was all right to be poor, starving, and out of work, because that was our lot. Americans aspire to be the best, and most Americans feel that they are as worthy as anyone else. The attitude of a nation of people destined by birth to be underlings, and placidly accepting of it, is foreign to us—on the whole. Although unintentioned by our founders, the common man, because of our expanding frontier, participated in politics both as voter and leader for a long time, excepting women, blacks, and Indians who have largely gained their rights during this century. A comparison of the British struggle for equal rights with the current struggle for equal rights for women may help students see how sometimes the oppressed as well as the oppressor can contribute to his own bondage. Although we have in this century become known as "ugly Americans," we have

for most of our history, adjacent territories excepted, been more isolationist in policy. A comparison of our policy of foreign aid with England's imperialistic policies may aid students in understanding somewhat how the Englishman thought.

In this century the two major sources of revolution have been The Great War and World War II. Some historians credit Britain's vulnerability during the Boer War as an indirect cause of World War I. Britain was not prepared for war. The United States had never imagined there could be a major European war. Neither country had experienced such carnage before. The English, because of their close proximity to the field of battle were perhaps more conscious of the calamity of this war, although both countries lost large percentages of their young men. Economically, Britain survived the war better than her allies. We, Americans seem to have been the more naive in this war.

The after effects of the war were far reaching. For Britain equality of the vote was a result as well as more job protection and more housing for the working class. The common man became a permanent fixture in politics. On the other hand, the depressions of 1929-30 were also a result though less felt in England than the United States. Additionally, the origins of World War II can be traced to World War I and the unfortunate peace settlements at Versailles. The standing mistrust of the English for Germany is evident in many twentieth century British novels, perhaps with good cause.

In World War II Britain became like the rest of Europe, a battleground. Again Germany was the dominant enemy. English civilians like the French before now had to cope with incessant bombings and the horror of war. A former acquaintance, an English woman, spoke frequently about the war. She was the young wife of an officer at the time. She lived, usually alone, with her baby, in a third floor flat. One time she spoke of the fear. "They were like silver fish," she said. "you would hear a high whistle. When the whistle stopped, you knew the bomb would explode somewhere nearby." She once told how one afternoon she begged the guards at a local armory to let her and her baby spend the night. When they refused, she ran terrified to the nearest underground where she spent the night. The next morning she discovered that the armory had been blown to dust. These stories have remained vividly with me. Survivors who have spent time in war zones make arresting guests whose stories are not easily forgotten. Much British fiction after World War II gives accurate, sometimes terrifying, accounts of life in a war zone.

A Polish refugee of World War II spoke to one of my classes last year. At first, students had difficulty believing that human beings could have been treated that cruelly. When she finished answering questions, the entire class was silent. Veterans may be a resource in order to help students understand in some way the British experience during War II.

### **Launching the Unit**

To stir interest in some of the concepts to be developed—comparison of attitudes between Americans and the British, application of some concepts in literature to life—I plan to introduce some of the following activities:

(I) Explore differences between subjective and objective thinking. Most of us think that our point of view is the "right" one and that people who think differently are "wrong" or "crazy." I would like to present some of the following exercises to sharpen students' awareness of our ever-present subjectivity.

a. Circle picture—Students are each given a sheet of paper and asked to think of a theme they wish to convey in picture form, such as "A Sunny Day," or "Man in Space." They are then

given approximately thirty seconds to start their drawing. No words are to be spoken or written on the drawing. The teacher emphasizes the goal of the exercise, which is to determine what theme the originator of the drawing wished to convey and to continue that theme. It is important also to point out that the originator must select those clues which are essential in establishing his point of view. The pictures are then passed clockwise at approximately ten second intervals at a signal from the teacher. When the drawings have come full circle (It helps to place an identifying mark in the upper right hand corner of each paper), the originator then finishes it and gives it a title. Students then display the drawings, tell what theme they intended and if their picture returned with that theme intact. Students then discuss the processes involved in communicating their ideas.

b. Circle story—The procedure is the same as circle picture, but students write a story instead of drawing a picture. This exercise can become quite involved, but it also offers the opportunity to introduce the elements of a story using students' own examples.

c. "Why Man Creates"—The instructor shows this film, available through ACES or Winchester School, and class discussion follows. The film contains many opportunities to discuss differing points of view. There is a sixty second history of the world, the parable of an extraordinarily high-jumping ping pong ball who one day jumps so high he never returns, with three points of view about his destiny offered; the process that an artist undergoes in creating his work and then in having critical opinion unleashed upon it (a process with which students who have participated in circle story will identify readily), and there is the problem of real people, scientists and inventors, who may spend years developing an idea, only to discover that they have traveled the wrong path.

d. The Secret Life of Walter Mitty by James Thurber—Students read this short story and follow with a class discussion. How does the dream differ from reality? What purpose does the dream serve? Does the dream influence our actions or the way we are viewed by others?

Writing suggestions: Write about a time when your point of view differed from someone else's, a parent, a friend or loved one. How did you act? What reasons did you have for behaving the way that you did? What effects did your actions have on yourself and others?

Write a daydream that persists in the mind of an imaginary character. How might it affect his life or the lives of those around him?

(2) Explore the roadblocks to clear thinking and careful actions engendered by culture, tradition, or environment. Often our prejudices cause us to behave in ways a more objective viewpoint might consider unwise or erratic. The following exercises are designed to make students more aware of the biases we take with us everywhere.

a. "England to America" by Margaret Prescott Montague. "Lord, but the English are funny." <sup>1</sup> What preconceived ideas hamper judgment?

b. *Old Mali and the Boy* by D.R. Sherman—Read selections from the story. This is the story of a privileged young boy living in India during the time of British rule and his relationship to his personal servant, Old Mali. What were the boy's preconceived ideas? How did they change? How does he differ at the end of the story? Do you think this change will endure? Although this is an easily read story, it is not included in entirety because it is no longer published in paperback form. I have found several copies in public libraries, however.

c. "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street" by Rod Serling—This is a short play in which the "Monsters" are the prejudices which cause us to behave often in irrational ways, and which can be used by others to manipulate us. What incidents caused the panic? How did preconceived ideas affect the actions of the people on Maple Street?

d. “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson—This is a memorable story involving a New England location and an old tradition. How are our beliefs formed? Have you beliefs formed by tradition or the beliefs of others? What responsibility do we have to examine questionable beliefs and practices? Do our responsibilities extend to taking action? At what risk? How might our viewpoints change if we ourselves are threatened? This is a particularly weighty story which might lead to several other discussions and writing assignments.

Writing Suggestions: Investigate a value that you think helps guide your behavior. What made you think this value important? Write about one time when a belief you hold helped or failed to help guide your actions. Describe your feelings as you tried to resolve the situation. How did you feel about the results of your actions?

## Story Structure

This unit begins with short plays and fiction with highly unusual or exciting plots. This is because arousing student interest is the most important aspect of engaging students in the reading process. Students just beginning to read more complex literature are usually most interested in plot, and it helps if one begins with swiftly moving stories. This is also the time to introduce or review the structural elements of traditional stories:

- a. plot—The story skelton.
- b. character—Actors in a story or play.
- c. setting—Time, place, and environment or atmosphere.
- d. Conflict—A problem, physical or mental, that a character must cope with. Students tend to think of conflict as a physical fight. I try to stress that a physical struggle may not be involved, but that conflict must be present in order to have a story.

Conflict itself is often separated into three categories:

1. Character verses character—Characters opposing one another physically, emotionally, or mentally.
2. Character verses setting—Men struggling with some aspect of their environment.
3. Character verses himself—The dilemma is endemic to most thrillers and to the best literature.

e. theme—The message or messages the author wishes to convey. I have placed this last because it is the most difficult concept for students to grasp, and I usually introduce this idea only after the story has been read.

In discussions after reading a particular piece, I try to show how various elements interrelate. At various times different elements become more important. For example, in most thrillers, setting plays a most important role, and is sometimes as important as the characters themselves. *The Thirty-nine Steps* is an example where the country-side itself almost seems to take on human form. It is impossible, of course, to understand any of these elements apart from a story, and I try not to over-analyze a story. Nevertheless, sometimes pulling the elements out helps students see that good short stories and novels don't just fall together. They must be carefully constructed. More importantly, it emphasizes the fact that fiction, no matter how life-like it seems, is *not* reality.

The classic thriller contains certain common elements. It usually begins with an appealing amateur as hero with great common sense and an ability to survive. The hero then has a problem to solve within a given time limit. The protagonist usually must confront two sets of enemies, the established authorities on one hand and the true villains on the other. There is a chase across beautiful or arresting terrain. Finally, the hero confronts his enemy and, hopefully, emerges the winner.

There are variations and additions to this formula, but one can usually find some, if not all, of these elements in thrillers. *The Thirty-nine Steps* is perhaps the classic example. The story takes place in the uneasy calm before World War I. Richard Hannay, a bored young man, back in England after making his fortune in South Africa, befriends his frightened neighbor, Mr. Scudder. Hannay offers Scudder the hospitality of his home, and Scudder tells him stories of impending war, spies and espionage. Hannay listens half-heartedly, but one day he returns home to find that Scudder has been murdered. Hannay finds Scudder's code book and sets off to complete the dead man's unfinished duties. The chase begins. The police think Hannay a murderer, the murderers are after the code book. Hannay sets off across Scotland, even stumbling into the enemy's lair, but escapes victoriously. Hannay, finally cleared of murder, captures the villain, and helps the authorities round up the German spies.

My approach to the study of a novel develops in three stages. First I try to place students concretely in the story by offering necessary background and by concentrating on the concrete aspects of the story. Who are the characters? What is the setting? What is the problem?

Secondly, I try to get students to ask why. Why is the main character in this place? Why does he behave as he does? Why is this clue or conversation significant?

Finally, after the story has been read I try to have students compare characters or events, relate content to the structure, or generalize to real life situations.

In this paper, I have only sketched the briefest analysis of literature. Teachers who wish more information about story structure will find sources listed in the bibliography. The sample study which follows is for a novel *Call for the Dead* by John LeCarre. I chose to examine this novel rather than Buchan's because guides to it are not as readily available. Within the system are class copies of *The Thirty-nine Steps* complete with questions. I hope this guide may help those looking for a supplementary novel. *Call for the Dead* is a good complement to *The Thirty-nine Steps*. Both novels are spy stories. *Call for the Dead* takes place in London approximately thirty-five years later than *Thirty-nine Steps* during the cold war and with flashbacks to World War II. Thus students will be able to trace the history of the period from World War II through the aftermath. *Call for the Dead* is a more complex novel than Buchan's but it contains the same elements. George Smiley is an aging hero described as a "toad," but he is appealing none the less. He is a professional spy but an amateur detective. He chases and is chased by the murderer across a city landscape rather than a country one, but it is a landscape equally as perilous as Hannay's Scotland and just as arresting. He is not only sought after by murderers, but he can't appeal to his own department because he has resigned and is working without authorization. He must catch the killers before they get him, and finally he does confront the murderer and lives to be reinstated and to tell the tale. This story, like Buchan's, introduces a series character. Students who like either work have sequels to fire their interest. I have a liking for this novel because Smiley is not the perfect spy. He is depicted as sentimental and somewhat vulnerable, sides of his nature not so apparent in the sequels. Additionally, LeCarre's insights into the hearts of men are as devastating as they are engrossing.

## Study Guide— *Call for the Dead*

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### Summary

*Call for the Dead* introduces George Smiley, an active WWII intelligence agent now quietly doing counterespionage work at home and longing for his former active life and his wandering ex-wife, Lady Ann Sercomb. Smiley is called to task by his superior, Maston, for having bullied Arthur Fennan, a man Smitty had investigated because of an anonymous letter alleging party membership. Fennan has committed suicide. Smiley is surprised because he had not only cleared Fennan of suspicion, but had formed an affection and regard for him. Smiley is sent to Fennan's widow Elsa, a former concentration camp inmate, to find out why Fennan killed himself. While there, he discovers that Fennan had left a wake-up call for that morning, an action a man contemplating suicide would not do.

Smiley's friend, a C.I.D. superintendent, Inspector Mendel, confirms Smiley's suspicions about the wake-up call. However, when Smiley presents his suspicions to Maston, he discovers that Maston intends to throw him to the wolves. Enraged, Smiley resigns, and narrowly escaping an attempt on his life, begins, with Inspector Mendel's help, to track the murderer. The trail takes Smiley not only across London but across time, back to WWII. In a harrowing climax, Smiley confronts the murderer, a former member of Smiley's spy network, and conquers. Smiley is reinstated, and the novel ends as Smiley travels to Zurich in search of his ex-wife.

### Chapters 1-6

#### Vocabulary



enigmatic                      irreconcilable authorized  
incongruity    mercenary                      uncompromising  
evasive                      amoral                      cul-de-sac  
promiscuous rudimentary                      denunciation

1. Where and when does this story take place?
2. Describe George Smiley physically and mentally.
3. Why was Smiley's marriage to Lady Ann Sercomb described as incongruous?
4. What was Smiley's job in the past? What does he do now?
5. What is Smiley's nickname? Why does it fit him?
6. Who is Maston? What is his relationship to Smiley?
7. How does Smiley feel about Maston? Give examples from the story to support your point of view.
8. Why doesn't Smiley want to see Elsa Fennan?
9. What is Smiley's impression of Elsa?
10. How does Smiley learn that Elsa Fennan lied to him? How does he confirm his suspicions?
11. Describe Inspector Mendel. Why do you think he helped Smiley?
12. What happened when Smiley revealed his suspicions to Maston?
13. Why did Smiley resign?
14. What did Smiley find when he returned home? Why did he go to Mendel for help?
15. Who is Scarr? What information does Smiley obtain?
16. Describe what happened to Smiley when he returned to his car.

## **Chapters 7-11**

### *Vocabulary*



resignation articulate

academic rendezvous

revulsion conceivable

flamboyance apprehensive

1. Briefly summarize the information Mendel obtained from Adam Scarr after Smiley went to the hospital?
2. How did Smiley feel about being in bed? Why?
3. Who is Peter Guillam? Why does Smiley want his help?
4. What does Smiley mean when he reflects about Samuel Fennan, "The new world and the old world met in him."
5. Why does Smiley think the murderer wants to kill him quickly?
6. What information does he obtain from Peter?
7. What surprising news does Mendel bring about Adam Scarr?
8. What does Mendel observe about Smiley? Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. Who is "The Virgin?" What information does Mendel obtain?
10. What is the Steel Mission? Why is Dieter Frey important?
11. Who is Mundt?
12. Why does Smiley want to see Elsa Fennan again?

## **Chapters 12-17**

### *Vocabulary*

concessive recompense detachment

coherent immaterial incipient

1. According to Elsa, Why was Samuel Fennan killed?
2. Of what importance is it that Fennan had Dieter's full name and number written in his address book?
3. What kinds of files was Fennan taking home? Why?
4. What did Smiley remember about Dresden?
5. Why does Smiley have a message sent to Elsa? What is the result?

6. What happens to Elsa at the theatre?
7. Why does Smiley lose control when he confronts Dieter? Describe what happened.
8. What does Smiley mean when he says at the end of chapter sixteen, "Oh God, who was then the gentleman . . . ?"
9. Why does Maston visit Smiley?
10. What was the truth about Elsa Fennan? What had Sam Fennan intended to do the day he took off?
11. Why does Smiley turn down the promotion?
12. Why is he on the plane to Zurich? Is the young man right?

Select any two of the following questions, and write a composition for each. Be sure to support your ideas with examples from the story.

1. Where, how, and with whom does *Call for the Dead* begin? End? How much time does it cover in the lives of the main characters?
2. What influence did the setting have on the events and characters? Could an almost identical story have occurred in another time and place and still be believable?
3. Who are the main characters? What are their relationships? Do they seem real? How would Smiley act if he were a teacher at this school? Mendel? Elsa?
4. Select two of Smiley's personality traits and show how they are revealed. Does the author tell you? -Can you tell by Smiley's words, actions, or thoughts? How do the other characters feel about him? How do you feel about him? Why?
5. From what point of view is this story told? Does the point of view ever change? Why? What is accomplished? Select one scene and show how the point of view or change in the point of view increased your understanding or enjoyment of this book.
6. Are flashbacks used in this story? Why? How would this novel have been changed if everything had been told in chronological order?
7. How did Smiley's and Mendel's relationship change during the novel? Were they different in any way at the end than they were at the beginning?
8. What is the theme of this story? What values do you think emerge at the end of the story? Did you learn anything you could apply to your life?

9. Has this novel helped you understand how complex a person's response could be in any given situation? Give examples.
10. Select something about the novel you liked best and write about it. Lesson Plans

### **Day 1—Time 3 hours**

#### ***Objective***

- To introduce the unit.
- To foster cooperation among students.
- To help students recognize their subjectivity.
- To obtain initial samples of student writing.
- To introduce plot and character.

#### ***Materials Magic Markers, drawing paper, composition paper, pens***

#### ***Procedure***

1. Have students sit in a circle, and tell why they entered class and what they wish to accomplish.
2. Explain what I hope to accomplish, and the classroom rules.
3. Move to tables. Sit in a circle and explain the rules of Circle Picture. (see the rules under "Launching the Unit")
4. Play game and discuss results. If a high degree of cooperation already exists go on to next activity. If not, discuss the reasons why and try again.
5. Put pictures on display, have students return to seats and play circle story. Have students read stories aloud when finished and vote on which ones they think did the best job. Discuss why these stories were more interesting than the others and make a list. Review plot and character. Take break.

6. After break, students are to write a composition about a time when their point of view differed from someone else's which really mattered to them. (see "Launching the Unit") Length is to be approximately one page. Collect compositions when finished.

**Homework Assignment Read "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" by James Thurber**

**Day Two—Time three hours**

**Objectives**

- To establish rules for compositions.
- To help students recognize differing points of view.
- To introduce setting and conflict.

**Materials Paper, pens, play "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street"**

**Procedure**

1. Sit in circle. Return yesterday's compositions. Discuss what was good, what needs improvement. Compile list of errors too easy to make, such as, periods at end of each sentence, using capitals correctly, etc. The list will depend upon the level of students. Don't make the list too long. Stick to the most basic things. Each student understands that his paper will be returned if a list error is discovered.
2. Discuss "Walter Mitty." (see "Launching Unit")
3. Composition assignment to be begun in class finished for homework. Write a story about someone who made his dream come true. The story can be real or fictional.
4. After break, assign parts and begin reading play, "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street".

**Homework Assignment Finish composition.**

## **Day Three—Time three hours**

### **Objectives**

- To introduce novel— *The Thirty-nine Steps*.
- To help students recognize differing points of view.
- To reinforce plot, character, setting, conflict.

### **Materials Folders, pens, paper, novel, film on WWI**

### **Procedure**

1. Collect homework compositions. Pass out folders. Students are to collect future work in folders.
2. Pass out “Monsters.” Finish play. Discussion. If you could be any one of these characters and change their destiny, who would you be? How would you change things?
3. Present film. Discussion. Compare attitudes and beliefs to today’s. Break.
4. Distribute novel, questions. Review things to look for in characters and setting. Begin story in class aloud. Finish first chapter silently.

### **Homework Finish first four chapters. Answer questions.**

## **Notes**

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1. Loban, Ryan, Squire, *Teaching Language and Literature* , New York, Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961, p. 590.

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