

Short Takes

15 Contemporary Stories



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Two Fathers

ADVICE TO TEACHER: It might be interesting to point out to students that the heart of a short story sometimes lies in action, sometimes in observation, and sometimes in dialogue. This story rides a gentle arc over all three of these elements. The story opens with Norman's observations, progresses through his father's spoken words, and ends with a set of actions (Norman's building and hanging a sign) that define the main character. A story does not always have all three of these elements. Students might discuss why this story benefits from all three. How would the story change if there were no dialogue? How would it change if it described the *act* of Norman's arrival home without his observations about his family?

1. We know that Norman is scared ("still trembling"); he was unhappy and unliked at military school ("wept amidst soaked sheets and catcalls"); that his father is powerful and intimidating ("A head taller . . . rich-bellied . . . great gesture . . . triumphantly . . ."); that he lives in the South in comfortable circumstances ("sunny Southern lawn . . . the sun porch . . ."). These are all "telling" details: small details that say more about a character or situation than an entire paragraph of explanation could accomplish.
2. He's a bit of a blowhard who is fond of making pronouncements (" . . . some incantation for which [Norman] should be grateful"). He's also a bit of a racist (" . . . good honest work for a white boy").
3. Norman did not "shine" at school, and the father is clearly disappointed at this evidence of Norman's limitations.
4. Norman doesn't understand what his father wants or expects. Norman appears to be a boy in need of love and understanding, and his father has a history of being stern and unsupportive: "You smash yo' finguh, I ain't takin' you to no hospital."

5. He doesn't understand them, he doesn't know how to talk to them, and he's both impatient with them and scared of them.
6. He recognizes that his son needs to be good at something. In spite of what he sees as Norman's limitations, he believes Norman might have a chance at being a good carpenter.
7. Norman may believe that by literally locking himself away from his family, he can discover for himself what he is able to do and make himself feel worthy.
8. Norman has been waiting for a chance to be alone with his own decisions, in a place where he doesn't have to try to understand what everybody means and figure out what everybody wants of him. This is his moment: he is claiming his territory—both physical and emotional—by making a sign that says KEEP OUT.
9. Answers will vary. Norman may withdraw even more deeply into himself, putting a further rift between himself and his uncomprehending family. On the other hand, Norman may respond to his father's gift by recognizing his father's kindness, and by finding out that he does indeed have a talent with tools and wood. In this way Norman's life would change by the improvement in his self-image and his relationship with his father.
10. This is how Norman sees it: he takes in every detail of the first thing that is truly his, that represents possibilities for him. It also tells us something about Norman's father: how deliberately—perhaps even lovingly—he picked everything out for his son.