

BLOODSTAIN



*oward, coward, coward!" he cried
over and over. "You're afraid to tell!"*

by Christopher W. Rowan

THE BOY with the gun was fourteen, and he was consciously walking pigeon-toed, like an Indian, as he picked his way along a corridor-like path through the willows. Carrying the shotgun at trail, he fixed his whole attention on the underbrush ahead.

Back in the deep brush, away from the river and the footbridge, he began to walk more boldly. No one would know he had taken the gun. His parents were away for the afternoon, and he had met no one as he slipped out.

Fred chuckled as a nesting jay flew before his face, then clattered angrily in a cottonwood. With elaborate care the boy cocked both barrels, raised the gun, aimed, and pretended to snap the triggers.

"If I was as mad as you," he said, "you'd be a dead jay."

His whole body was vibrant, drunken with the smells and sounds and sights his senses brought him. Wild roses and dogwood were in bloom, and every sunny spot was heavy with their scent. Beyond the willows the spring hills, striped with the brighter green of aspen coulees, rolled up to a china sky. His ears were filled with the vanishing diminuendo of woodnymph, and he raised his head to sniff as a puff of wind brought him the spicy tang of choke-cherry blossoms.

Around a bend in the path ahead stepped a white-haired man with a book under his arm. The boy stopped

short, pressing the gun close to his body.

"Well!" the man said. "Big game hunter, eh?"

"I . . . uh . . . uh-huh. . . . Huntin' rabbits."

Under his eyebrows Fred studied the man. Mr. Haskell knew all about the gun, he could tell. No use to play that he didn't steal it for the afternoon. But Mr. Haskell was a swell guy. Maybe he wouldn't tell on him. His eyes were twinkling now, and Fred started to grin, but the twinkle changed abruptly to something hard and severe, and the gun was picked out of the boy's hands.

Dumbly, red with shame, Fred saw the old man uncock both hammers.

"You ought to know better than that."

"I do," the boy mumbled. "Forgot, I guess."

"I tanned Jerry for that just once," said Mr. Haskell. "Maybe I ought to tan you, for a lesson."

The twinkle had returned, and he handed the gun back with a playful cuff on the ear. Fred grinned openly now. It was all right. Mr. Haskell was a swell fellow.

"Folks know you got that blunder-buss out?"

"No sir."

Mr. Haskell cuffed him again, tucked his book under his arm, and started on.

"Just be careful. If I hear of you shooting anybody's cow I will give you that tanning."

"Yes sir," Fred said. "Thanks, Mr. Haskell."

Gratefully he watched the old man disappear behind the screen of willows, and then he was back at his stalking, pigeon-toeing carefully in the half-crouch he had been told frontiersmen used. This time his gun was uncocked, and the safety on.

For an hour he slipped quietly through the willow breaks, up into the fringe of heavier timber at the edge of the bench hills, and back in a wide circle along the inside of the horseshoe bend. In all that time he had not started a single rabbit, and his vigilance had flagged, so that when a snowshoe broke and vanished under his very nose he didn't even get the gun to his shoulder.

With cautious haste he followed until he found himself facing a tangled thicket. On his left the willows thinned, and Fred was circling through the clearing when something moved behind a clump of dogwood.

By careful creeping he flanked the clump so that something white showed. Raising the gun with trembling hands, he aimed a long time and pressed the right-hand trigger. The recoil hit his shoulder like a club, and the white object disappeared. Breathless with excitement, he circled the flowering bush.

His shout of triumph died to a sound, half-scream, half-whimper, that trailed out of his lips and left his mouth open. Behind the bush lay Mr. Haskell, one hand still clinging to the book, his white head spattered with red. A trickle of blood, shining like oil, started from the wound and dripped in a quickening patter on the ground.

Stupidly the boy stared. A drop of blood glistening on a leaf, a ladybug crawling on the dead man's wrist Every particular was seared into his brain, yet none of these things pene-

trated his consciousness. For minutes he stood still, until the erratic wind rustled the pages of the book and released him from paralysis.

A shrill scream split his throat as he whirled and ran back the way he had come, still grasping the gun by the barrels. The sun slipped under a cloud, and a wave of shadow crossed the quiet glade behind him, moving with incredible swiftness. Gasping, the boy fled blindly through the brush, and shrieked aloud when the shadow, swooping on swift wings, caught and engulfed him.

On and on he ran, tearing through matted clumps, lunging frantically when grasping branches held him back, mouth open, heart pounding, brain one black convulsion. At last he gave out, and after a hard fall could not rise, but lay completely spent. A nerve in his cheek twitched violently, pulling his mouth into a one-sided grin. With gritted teeth he buried his face in his hands and dug flesh with fingers, but still, under the tense hands, he felt the spasmodic jerk of the nerves.

The twitching was actually a relief, for he could concentrate on controlling it, and shut out the picture in the woods behind. After a half hour the nerve quieted. Now the first blank horror was gone, and in its place came fear, and guilt, and the thought of escape.

Rising stiffly, still sobbing a little, he saw the gun, and snatched it from the ground in a frenzy of fear. Getting his bearings from the sun and hills, he picked up the east-west trail. At the river bank he looked carefully up and down stream before crossing on the line of wet stones below the rapids. On the opposite bank he covered the gun with leaves and brush, then walked swiftly homeward.

His parents were not yet home, and the big house was unnaturally still. The stairs creaked under his feet, and he walked on tiptoe. In his room, after he had carefully locked the door, he stood miserably wondering why he had come home. Looking around, he saw the glass-topped box that contained his prized collection of rocks and minerals, the stuffed pike on its board between the windows, the bookcase with its battered books: *Treasure Island*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *A History of the World War*, *The Autobiography of Davy Crockett of Tennessee*. Dully his eyes saw the titles, saw the comfortable cluttered boy's room, but the charm was gone. The air was like the air of a prison.

Reaching out, he pulled the *Davy Crockett* from its shelf, opened it to the thumb-printed page where Davy grinned the coons out of the tree, but his mind, veering back to the tragedy, swung to the book in Mr. Haskell's dead hand, the red blotted stains, and the dry dead look of it, as if it had died with its owner.

He put *Davy Crockett* back again, and for the first time saw the mark on his index finger, an irregular spatter of blood half covering the nail. How it had come there he could not even guess.

Feverishly he poured a basin of water and scrubbed his hands until they hurt, but in the one finger was a feeling as of a deep burn that throbbled with every pound of his pulse. Even then, still stunned with the pain of what he had done, he realized that the stain of blood goes deeper than the skin.

Before the mirror he stared into his own eyes, wild and dark and swollen with crying. With the same keen, impersonal regard he noticed that the hair

of the boy in the glass was ruffled and untidy, with twigs and bits of leaves in it, and that the eyes were red and inflamed. Automatically he combed his hair, washed his face in cool water, and went to the window. Through the half-drawn curtains he saw a group of boys playing baseball in the vacant lot next door.

Jerry Haskell was at bat.

Fred slipped down on his knees beside the window, hands clenched in the curtain's starched folds. Out of his misery he fashioned an incoherent, fumbling prayer.

"Oh, God, don't let Jerry find out! Don't, make my best friend hate me! Help me, God, I pray. . . . Our Father which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. . . ."

He loosed his hold on the curtain and bent his head to the hard sill. From the lot next door came the shouts of boys playing.

All afternoon the boy lay face downward on the bed, the suffering growing keener as the numb shock wore off. Thoughts raced in agitated circles. . . .

Confession, flight, denial, silence. . . . and back again to bitter sorrow. For one shattered instant suicide hung over him like a black bird, but he chased the thing away.

What could he do? If he ran away, they would catch him and bring him back. He could see them. . . . parents, friends. . . . a ring of faces staring, shuddering, turning away. And if he stayed, said nothing, went about as usual? There might be a chance that he would not be suspected. He centered on the hope, seized it. Let it go again as he thought of Jerry, how he would have to face him, act as if he knew nothing, sympathize. . . .

Fred got up and took a long drink, avoiding the mirror. His mind still whirled in a chaos of doubt and fear. His head dropped on the pillow, and his clenched teeth met through the edge of the slip.

"Coward, coward, coward!" he cried over and over. "You're afraid to tell!"

Late in the afternoon, when his parents returned, he sat up on the bed in sudden fright. The shotgun! Obsessed with grief, he had forgotten all about it.

A splash of cool water to hide the tear stains, and he slipped downstairs. His mother was in the kitchen. Stealthily he crossed the hall. The front door closed behind him. He was just going out the gate when Jerry came around the corner of the house.

With no strength in his legs, his throat and tongue frozen rigid, Fred held tightly to the gate post and waited.

"Seen anything of Dad?"

Fred's head swung sideways.

"He ain't come back from his walk, and Mom's getting worried."

Somehow, in ten seconds, Fred fought his mind calm.

"Think he might've got lost?"

Jerry snorted. "He knows the woods like a book. Let's go up by the dam and look for him. He probably got reading and forgot what time it was."

The terror was upon Fred again. Not go with Jerry, hunting! He hung on the gate.

"Got to. . . go get the cows."

"Oh, come on! The cows'll come home alone."

Fred hesitated, thinking of the pile of brush and leaves under which the gun was hidden, of the empty pegs in the cellarway where it should hang.

"Well. . . ."

He started, stopped.

"Wait a minute."

Running up the front steps, he opened the door and shouted to his mother.

"Ma!"

"Yes?"

"I won't be home for supper. I'm going out with Jerry to look for Mr. Haskell. They think he's lost. Be back quick as I can."

He slammed the door and rejoined Jerry. He saw Jerry looking at him queerly.

"What's the matter with you? You look like you've been hawling."

"I know. Something's the matter with my eyes. Been sore all day. Maybe I'm getting pinkeye."

The lie had come smoothly. All paroxysms of grief had disappeared magically there at the gate, where his problem had been taken out of his hands. The death of Mr. Haskell now was a furtive secret, something to hide, not something to agonize about. His concern now was all for himself.

Up along the river cliffs Jerry raised echoes with his shrill call. Fred tried to shout too, but his throat was tight, and he gave up after a few halloos.

In an hour they had turned back through the fattening shadows. At the Haskell gate Fred waited while Jerry went in to see if his father had returned; waited miserably, fearful of the gathering dark, haunted by the thought of the missing shotgun. In a few minutes Jerry came back and without a word started off toward town. Fred followed.

At the frame building that served as City Hall and jail, Jerry told his story to the constable, who asked a few questions, put on his hat, and led the way to the hotel.

Six men were having an after-dinner poker game in the lobby, while the proprietor and two loungers looked on.

The constable nodded to the proprietor, casually important. "Lo, Frank. Say, Pop Haskell's lost. Want to get up a searching party?"

The proprietor was all alacrity. "Why sure! I'll get some lanterns. Come on, you guys. Pop Haskell's lost."

He dove into a back room and emerged with four lanterns.

"Where d'you suppose he's likely to be?"

"Out along the river somewhere. We'll split. You take three men and go up along the cliffs, and I'll take the other bunch into the timber. If you find him, send somebody with a lantern to let us know. We'll do the same."

Crowded out by the importance of the searchers, Fred inched away through the veranda door. Once free, he ran toward the spot where he had hidden the gun. Fear gathered behind him; with the fend at his back he cleared the irrigation ditch in a single leap, and he was in a gibbering panic when he found the spot, pulled away the brush, and groped around in the dark.

With the weapon in his hands his terror passed. He ejected the empty shell and threw it far into the river. The thin splash was instantly swallowed in the dark, but long after the sound had died the boy found himself poised with strained ears, listening.

Throwing the unused shell after the first, he cleaned the barrels with a willow stick and his handkerchief, wrapped the handkerchief around a stone and dropped it in the water. Then he crept out into the open. The bobbing lan-

terns of one search party were just crossing the footbridge.

Behind a tree near his house he stopped. There was no light in the kitchen, but a lamp was lighted in the front room, and shadows moved between it and the window. He hurried to the door and tiptoed in. There were voices in the other room, discussing the disappearance of Mr. Haskell.

"Perhaps some accident," his father was saying. "Maybe hurt. If that's it, they'll find him before morning."

Soundlessly Fred stole across the room, hung the gun on its pegs in the cellarway, and sneaked out, too wretched to feel relieved.

The spectre of discovery was off his mind for the moment, but in its place came other phantoms, the picture of death in the bright woods, the blood-spattered book, the ghastly wound in the white head. And other pictures of Mr. Haskell: on hands and knees showing him and Jerry how to build a bridge with the Erector set; floating comfortably on his back in the river with a tiny child perched on his chest clutching his bathing suit; playing ball with them only the other day, bare-headed as usual, showing them how to throw a drop. . . .

There would be dew on the old hair, now, and on the pages of the book, and the dead man's face would be pale and cold. And there had been a ladybug crawling on the dead wrist, a bug the color of blood, and the streams of blood that ran on the ground had been quick and bright. They would be clotted now, and dark, and cold. . . .

He wandered over by Jerry's house, lurking behind the hedge, peering into the windows, gnawed by conscience, fear-ridden, miserable. Shadows fright-

ened him; every tree was an accuser, every pool of blackness a menace.

Toward morning they brought the body in. From where he crouched by the hedge Fred saw dark figures carrying the shadow that had been Jerry's father, and Jerry walking beside the body. The men were silent, except for the tramp of their feet on the board sidewalk.

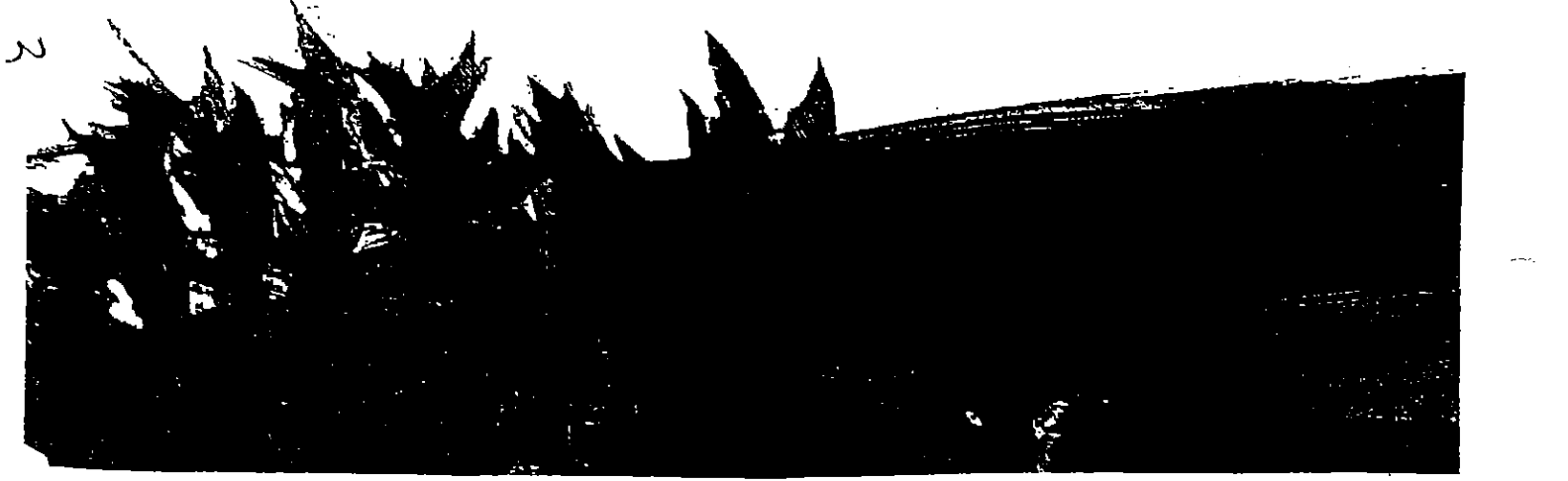
They turned in at the gate, and the porch sounded hollowly under their steps. The door opened; a woman cried out, a single, sharp cry, and the men went inside. The door shut with a dull note of finality, like a clod thudding on a coffin. The big house remained lighted, glaring into the night with yellow eyes, until someone inside pulled down the blinds, one by one.

It was hard to face Jerry the next day, but he had to go, had to go outside with him and stand while Jerry talked. He had to watch the tears rise suddenly, out of Jerry's control, and his own tears blinded him so that he fled.

Away from Jerry, back in his room, he felt curiously relieved. If he could only avoid his friend from now on, never have to speak to him. . . . If they could move to another town and never write. . . . Without realizing why, he felt their friendship as something vanished and impossible and repugnant.

Fred did not go to the funeral. He would have to walk past the coffin, look at the body. Everyone would be there, would be crying, and Jerry would try to get him to sit with the mourners. . . . He would be sure to give himself away.

In poignant contrast he saw the boy who had sneaked along the willow trail, playing Indian, and the furtive hunted animal who had crouched by the hedge to watch the searchers bring in the body



of the man he had killed. All the torturing doubts came back. Once more he was whirled through a maelstrom of indecision and fear. He prayed, and remembered the prayer he had made in his room that day, before anybody knew. It occurred to him as strange that he had not prayed since.

But the second prayer was bitter, too. It gave him no relief, only a hard, mean feeling of loneliness. He didn't want even God to know. All he wanted was to be left alone in his furtive waiting for what would happen.

That night the subject of Mr. Haskell came up again.

"Funny," said Fred's father. "They haven't found a trace of the murderer, except for the kicked-up leaves and the mark where he fell down as he was running away."

"The whole town was at his funeral," his wife said. "Mrs. Haskell was terribly broken up, poor thing. What she'll do now, Heaven knows. Alone with those two poor boys, and not a cent of insurance, I hear."

Fred ate stolidly without looking up, his food like rubber in his mouth.

"Where were you this afternoon?" his mother asked. "I didn't see you at the funeral."

"No . . . I didn't go, Mom. It's . . . Oh, I don't know! It's too sad!"

"Yes," said his father, "and the saddest thing is that the man who shot him will probably never be caught and get what he deserves."

The boy sat caged and sullen, waiting to be excused from table, unconsciously feeling the end of his right index finger, testing it against his thumb and the table edge. The burning sensation was there still. Whenever he had thought about it since that first day he

had felt it begin to swell and throb. Inside him a voice kept saying, "You'll have to tell! You'll have to tell! It'll burn forever if you don't tell."

He jerked his hand down to his lap as he saw his mother's eyes on him.

"What's the matter with your finger? You've been doing that for two or three days."

"Nothing. It ain't sore. Just a habit, I guess."

"I'll never tell," he told himself. "They'll never even suspect me."

And after dinner, when he went in to help his mother with the dishes, he found that the fear and agony had left him. His mind was full of a strange and sorrowful peace, and the finger no longer throbbled.

He was safe, he assured himself secretly, intensely. He would never tell.

THE END

Talking it over

1. a. How does Fred feel about the Haskell's? How do his feelings toward them make the accident seem even more horrible to him?

b. What kind of person is Fred? Give evidence from the story. What effect would these qualities have on the way he feels?

2. a. Why does Fred's home seem like a prison to him after the accident?

b. As Fred agonizes about what to do next, what possible solutions occur to him? Why does he reject each of them except one?

c. Why does the author keep our

attention focused on Fred, rather than taking us along with the search party when it discovers the body?

3. At a certain point, Fred stops worrying about what he should do. He feels that "his problem had been taken out of his hands" (363b, 10) and that from now on he can act only in a certain way. In what way have Fred's feelings changed?

4. a. Why does Fred feel a burning in his index finger? What does it mean to him?

b. What is meant by the statement, ". . . he realized that the stain of blood goes deeper than the skin" (361a, 4)?

c. Discuss whether "Bloodstain" is a good title for this story. If you think it is not, suggest a better one.

5. The author of "Bloodstain" again and again uses comparison and contrast to emphasize certain ideas. For example, when he says, "[Fred's] shout of triumph died to a sound half-scream, half-whimper, that trailed out of his lips and left his mouth open" he is contrasting sounds to make you feel Fred's shock and horror.

Reread the passages indicated below. In each one, what is being compared or contrasted? What point is the author making?

a. The description beginning "His whole body was vibrant . . ." (359a, 5) and the description in the paragraph beginning "A shrill scream split his throat . . ." (360b, 1)

b. The section beginning with the sentence "Through the half-drawn curtains he saw a group of boys playing baseball in the vacant lot next door" (end of paragraph at top of 361b) and continuing through the next four paragraphs.

c. The descriptions of Mr. Haskell in the paragraph beginning "The spectre of discovery . . ." (364b, 4) and the paragraph following.

6. a. At the end of the story, Fred no longer feels fear and agony and his finger no longer throbs. Does this mean that he no longer feels guilty? Explain your answer.

b. Reread the last sentence in the story. Do you think he really will be able to go through life without ever confessing? Explain.

Words in action

People who take up certain sports, hobbies, and occupations often find that words they already know have taken on new and special meanings. Hunting is one sport that has its own special vocabulary.

The following sentences are from "Bloodstain." In each one, the word or words in bold type have a special meaning when used by a hunter. Try to figure out this special meaning from the context, then explain it in your own words. Use a dictionary if you need help.

1. Carrying the shotgun at trail, he fixed his whole attention on the underbrush ahead.

2. In all that time he had not started a single rabbit, and his vigilance had flagged, so that when a snowshoe broke and vanished under his very nose he didn't even get the gun to his shoulder.

3. With elaborate care the boy cocked both barrels, raised the gun, aimed, and pretended to snap the triggers.

4. This time his gun was uncocked, and the safety on.

Elements of Fiction

This list includes many terms used to describe the elements or parts of literature. The information will enable you to discuss and write about the novels, poetry, essays, and other literary works you read.

Action: Everything that happens in a story.

Antagonist: The person or force that works against the hero of the story. (See *protagonist*.)

Character: One of the people (or animals) in a story.

Characterization: The ways in which a writer develops a character, making him or her seem believable. Here are three methods:

- ⊗ Sharing the character's thoughts, actions, and dialogue.
- ⊗ Describing his or her appearance.
- ⊗ Revealing what others in the story think of this character.

Conflict: A problem or struggle between two opposing forces in a story. Here are the five basic conflicts:

- ⊗ Person Against Person A problem between characters.
- ⊗ Person Against Self A problem within a character's own mind.
- ⊗ Person Against Society A problem between a character and society, school, the law, or some tradition.
- ⊗ Person Against Nature A problem between a character and some element of nature—a blizzard, a hurricane, a mountain climb, etc.
- ⊗ Person Against Fate (God) A problem or struggle that appears to be well beyond a character's control.

Dialogue: The conversations that characters have with one another.

Foils: A character who serves as a contrast or challenge to the main character.

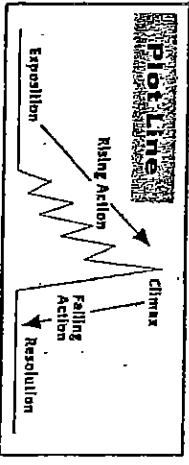
Mood: The feeling a piece of literature creates in a reader.

Moral: The lesson a story teaches.

Narrator: The person or character who actually tells the story, filling in the background information and bridging the gaps between dialogue. (See *point of view*.)

Plot: The action that makes up the story, following a plan called the plot line.

Plot Line: The planned action or series of events in a story. There are five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.



Exposition: The part of the story, usually near the beginning, in which the characters are introduced, the background is explained, and the setting is described.

Rising Action: The central part of the story during which various problems arise.

Climax: The high point or climax in the action of a story.

Falling Action: The action and dialogue following the climax that lead the reader into the story's end.

Resolution: The part of the story in which the problems are solved and the action comes to a satisfying end.

Point of View: The angle from which a story is told. The angle depends upon the narrator, or person telling the story.

First-Person Point of View: This means that one of the characters is telling the story: "Linda is my older sister, beautiful and popular, and so I've given up on being noticed at all."

Third-Person Point of View: In this case, someone from the outside of the story is telling it: "Linda is her older sister, beautiful and popular, and so she's given up on being noticed at all." There are three third-person points of view: *omniscient*, *limited*, and *camera view*. (See illustration.)

Protagonist: The main character in a story, often a good or heroic type.

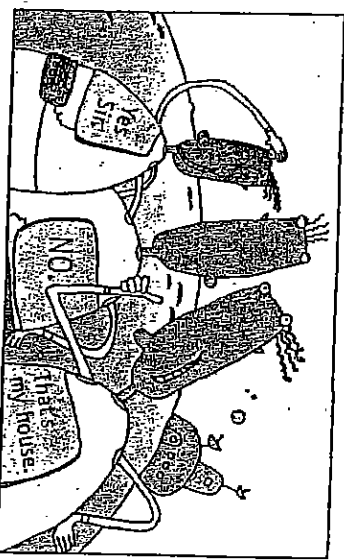
Setting: The place and the time frame in which a story takes place.

Theme: The message about life or human nature that is "hidden" in the story that the writer tells.

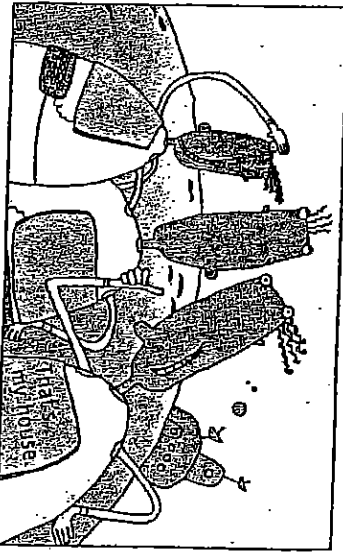
Tone: The attitude or feeling that comes across in a piece of literature, revealed by the characters, the word choice, and the general writing style. The tone can be serious, funny, satiric, etc.

Total Effect: The total impact or influence that a story has on a reader.

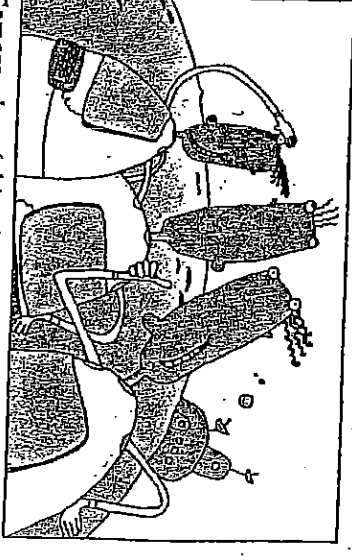
Third-Person Points of View



Omniscient point of view allows the narrator to share the thoughts and feelings of all the characters.



Limited omniscient point of view allows the narrator to share the thoughts and feelings of only one character.



Camera view (objective view) allows the storyteller to record the action from his or her own point of view, being unaware of "any of the characters' thoughts or feelings."