
POST-TEST IN THE HUMANITIES

NOTE: This test is to be administered only under the direction of your instructor.

The following short story is from a humanities textbook.¹ Read it the way you have learned to read this type of material. You will then be asked questions about what you read.

THIEF by Robley Wilson, Jr.

He is waiting at the airline ticket counter when he first notices the young woman. She has glossy black hair pulled tightly into a knot at the back of her head—the man imagines it loosed and cascading to the small of her back—and carries over the shoulder of her leather coat a heavy black purse. She wears black boots of soft leather. He struggles to see her face—she is ahead of him in line—but it is not until she has bought her ticket and turns to walk away that he realizes her beauty, which is pale and dark-eyed and full-mouthed, and which quickens his heartbeat. She seems aware that he is staring at her and lowers her gaze abruptly.

The airline clerk interrupts. The man gives up looking at the woman—he thinks she may be about twenty-five—and buys a round-trip, coach class ticket to an eastern city.

His flight leaves in an hour. To kill time, the man steps into one of the airport cocktail bars and orders a scotch and water. While he sips it he watches the flow of travelers through the terminal—including a remarkable number, he thinks, of unattached pretty women dressed in fashion magazine clothes—until he catches sight of the black-haired girl in the leather coat. She is standing near a Travelers Aid counter, deep in conversation with a second girl, a blonde in a cloth coat trimmed with gray fur. He wants somehow to attract the brunette's attention, to invite her to have a drink with him before her own flight leaves for wherever she is traveling, but even though he believes for a moment she is looking his way he cannot catch her eye from out of the shadows of the bar. In another instant the two women separate; neither of their directions is toward him. He orders a second scotch and water.

When next he sees her, he is buying a magazine to read during the flight and becomes aware that someone is jostling him. At first he is startled that anyone would be so close as to touch him, but when he sees who it is he musters a smile.

"Busy place," he says.

She looks up at him—is she blushing?—and an odd grimace crosses her mouth and vanishes. She moves away from him and joins the crowds in the terminal.

The man is at the counter with his magazine, but when he reaches into his back pocket for his wallet the pocket is empty. *Where could I have lost*

1. Source: Reprinted from *Dancing for Men*, U of Pittsburgh P, 1983.

it? he thinks. His mind begins enumerating the credit cards, the currency, the membership and identification cards; his stomach churns with something very like fear. *The girl who was so near to me*, he thinks—and all at once he understands that she has picked his pocket.

What is he to do? He still has his ticket, safely tucked inside his suitcoat—he reaches into the jacket to feel the envelope, to make sure. He can take the flight, call someone to pick him up at his destination—since he cannot even afford bus fare—conduct his business and fly home. But in the meantime he will have to do something about the lost credit cards—call home, have his wife get the numbers out of the top desk drawer, phone the card companies—so difficult a process, the whole thing suffocating. What shall he do?

First: Find a policeman, tell what has happened, describe the young woman; damn her, he thinks, for seeming to be attentive to him, to let herself stand so close to him, to blush prettily when he spoke—and all the time she wanted only to steal from him. And her blush was not shyness but the anxiety of being caught; that was most disturbing of all. *Damned deceitful creatures*. He will spare the policeman the details—just tell what she has done, what is in the wallet. He grits his teeth. He will probably never see his wallet again.

He is trying to decide if he should save time by talking to a guard near the x-ray machines when he is appalled—and elated—to see the black-haired girl. (*Ebony-Tressed Thief*, the newspapers will say.) She is seated against a front window of the terminal, taxis and private cars moving sluggishly beyond her in the gathering darkness; she seems engrossed in a book. A seat beside her is empty, and the man occupies it.

"I've been looking for you," he says.

She glances at him with no sort of recognition. "I don't know you," she says.

"Sure you do."

She sighs and puts the book aside. "Is this all you characters think about—picking up girls like we were stray animals? What do you think I am?"

"You lifted my wallet," he says. He is pleased to have said "lifted," thinking it sounds more worldly than *stole* or *took* or even *ripped off*.

"I beg your pardon?" the girl says.

"I know you did—at the magazine counter. If you'll just give it back, we can forget the whole thing. If you don't, then I'll hand you over to the police."

She studies him, her face serious. "All right," she says. She pulls the black bag onto her lap, reaches into it and draws out a wallet.

He takes it from her. "Wait a minute," he says. "This isn't mine."

The girl runs; he bolts after her. It is like a scene in a movie—bystanders scattering, the girl zig-zagging to avoid collisions, the sound of his own breathing reminding him how old he is—until he hears a woman's voice behind him:

"Stop, thief! Stop that man!"

Ahead of him the brunette disappears around a corner and in the same moment a young man in a marine uniform puts out a foot to trip him up. He falls hard, banging knee and elbow on the tile floor of the terminal, but manages to hang on to the wallet which is not his.

The wallet is a woman's, fat with money and credit cards from places like Sak's and Peck & Peck and Lord & Taylor, and it belongs to the blonde in the fur-trimmed coat—the blonde he has earlier seen in conversation with the criminal brunette. She, too, is breathless, as is the policeman with her.

"That's him," the blonde girl says. "He lifted my billfold."

It occurs to the man that he cannot even prove his own identity to the policeman.

Two weeks later—the embarrassment and rage have diminished, the family lawyer has been paid, the confusion in his household has receded—the wallet turns up without explanation in one morning's mail. It is intact, no money is missing, all the cards are in place. Though he is relieved, the man thinks that for the rest of his life he will feel guilty around policemen, and ashamed in the presence of women.

Now answer the following sets of questions.

I. Comprehension

Directions: Circle the letter of the best answer, or fill in the blank, as appropriate.

1. Through whose *point of view* is the story mostly told?
 - a. the man
 - b. the young brunette woman
 - c. the blonde woman
 - d. none of the above

2. Based on the way the story is told, where *is* the *setting*?
 - a. an airport in a western or midwestern city
 - b. the country
 - c. an eastern city
 - d. can't tell

3. How would you describe the *dialogue* used?
 - a. formal
 - b. imagistic
 - c. colloquial
 - d. sarcastic

4. How would you describe the overall *tone* of the story?
 - a. serious
 - b. comical
 - c. ironic
 - d. tender

5. What is the *plot* of the story?

6. What *theme* or *themes* do you think the story conveys?

7. Does the story seem real to you? Explain.

8. Why does the man in the story feel he will be “ashamed in the presence of women” for the rest of his life?

9. How well does the title fit the story? Explain.

10. Explain why you liked or didn't like the story.

II. Vocabulary

Directions: Explain what each of the following statements or phrases means or implies.

1. "the man imagines it [her hair] loosed and cascading to the small of her back."

2. "buys a round-trip, coach class ticket to an eastern city"

3. "to kill time"

4. "someone is jostling him."

5. "he musters a smile."

6. "he is appalled—and elated ."

7. *"Ebony-Tressed Thief"*

8. "he bolts after her."

9. "credit cards from places like Sak's and Peck & Peck and Lord & Taylor"

10. Explain the difference between a simile and a metaphor.
