The Sphinx Without A Secret

Oscar Wilde

EFL CLASSICS

ENGLISH LITERATURE FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Created by Ian Sumter

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Introduction

Welcome to EFL Classics: a new and unique series of books designed for learners of the English language.

Here you can find a collection of some of the best writers in English: classic British authors like Dickens, Jerome K Jerome and Thomas Hardy: famous American authors including Mark Twain and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

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The idea behind the series is simple. Short stories are perfect for English learners looking to read widely in English.

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There are sixty books in total in this series. I very much enjoyed editing and working on them. Although I have read English books all my life, I have found something new and exciting here.

I hope you too can experience some of these pleasures of English literature, while you continue to learn and improve your English language.

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About EFL Classics

Every EFL Classics text contains three sections. The main story, a glossary of unfamiliar words found in the text, and a series of questions. These questions focus on detailed aspects of grammar, and also general understanding of the work. There are also more open-ended questions encouraging the student to think about some of the themes in the texts.

The books are suitable for intermediate students and above. For all levels of learning, it is recommended to use the book in combination with the audio material.

EFL teachers also have the possibility of using these texts in class. While it would be simple for students to be set the reading tasks for homework, other approaches might include:

- Ask the students to read through the vocabulary lists, and decide what the books might be about
- Divide the book between the class. Each group to read and summarise their part, while imagining what came before and after the events described. The whole class then puts the story together.

- Students can discuss the text as a literary piece - with discussions about character, language or theme.

These texts have been slightly adapted for easier reading by students. This has been done by simplifying some of the older or more complex grammar styles that are not used in modern English; and by finding some more common variants for extremely unusual words that are unlikely to be of much use to students in every day speech.

However, very little of the original style or design has been lost in this process, which can only improve the student's learning experience.

Audio-books

Audio-books are available for download free from www.eflclassics.com.
A password is required to access each audio-book. The password is only available once the ebook has been purchased.

The password for this book, *The Sphinx Without A Secret*, is **batallion19**.

The audio material is best listened to via high quality headphones and a modern audio application or player.

The Sphinx Without a Secret

Oscar Wilde

Two former classmates from Oxford meet by chance in Paris and discuss the mystery of a beautiful woman that one of them has known.

The story contains some unusual terms, for your reading convenience I will define them here . . .

1) *Giaconda in sables --> "The Mona Lisa in furs (she is wrapped in furs in the picture)"*
2) *brougham --> a carriage*
3) *ma belle inconnue -- my unknown beauty*

*An **etching***

One afternoon I was sitting outside the Cafe de la Paix, watching the splendour and **shabbiness** of Parisian life, and thinking over my drink at the strange panorama of pride and **poverty** that was passing before me, when I heard someone call my name. I turned round, and saw Lord Murchison. We had not met since we had been at college together, nearly ten years before, so I was delighted to come across him again, and we shook hands warmly.

At Oxford we had been great friends. I had liked him a great deal; he was so handsome, so high-spirited, and so honourable. We used to say of him that he would be the best of **fellows**, if he did not always speak the truth, but I think we really admired him all the more for his **frankness**.

I found him a good deal changed. He looked anxious and worried, and seemed to be in doubt about something. I felt it could not be modern scepticism, for Murchison was the strongest of **Tories**, and believed in the **Pentateuch** as firmly as he believed in the House of Lords; so I concluded that it was a woman, and asked him if he was married yet.

'I don't understand women well enough,' he answered.

'My dear Gerald,' I said, 'women are meant to be loved, not to be understood.'

'I cannot love where I cannot trust,' he replied.

'I believe you have a mystery in your life, Gerald,' I exclaimed; 'tell me about it.'

'Let us go for a drive,' he answered, 'it is too crowded here. No, not a yellow carriage, any other colour - there, that dark-green one will do;' and in a few moments we were **trotting** down the boulevard in the direction of the Madeleine.

'Where shall we go?' I said.

'Oh, anywhere you like!' he answered - 'to the restaurant in the

Bois; we will dine there, and you shall tell me all about yourself.'

'I want to hear about you first,' I said. 'Tell me your mystery.'

He took from his pocket a little silver morocco case, and handed it to me. I opened it. Inside there was the photograph of a woman. She was tall and **slight**, and strangely picturesque with her large **vague** eyes and loosened hair. She looked like a **clairvoyant**, and was wrapped in rich furs.

'What do you think of that face?' he said; 'is it truthful?'

I examined it carefully. It seemed to me the face of someone who had a secret, but whether that secret was good or evil I could not say. Its beauty was a beauty formed from many mysteries - the beauty, in face, which is psychological, not plastic - and the **faint** smile that just played across the lips was far too **subtle** to be really sweet.

'Well,' he cried impatiently, 'what do you say?'

'She is the Gioconda in sables,' I answered. 'Let me know all about her.'

'Not now,' he said; 'after dinner;' and began to talk of other things.

When the waiter brought us our coffee and cigarettes I reminded Gerald of his promise. He rose from his seat, walked two or three times up and down the room, and, **sinking** into an armchair, told me the following story: -

'One evening,' he said, 'I was walking down Bond Street about five o'clock. There was a terrific **crush** of carriages, and the traffic was almost stopped. Close to the **pavement** was standing a little yellow brougham, which, for some reason or other, attracted my attention. As I passed by, there looked out from it the face I showed you this afternoon. It fascinated me immediately.

'All that night I kept thinking of it, and all the next day. I **wandered** up and down that Row, **peering** into every carriage, and waiting for the yellow brougham; but I could not find *ma belle inconnue*, and at last I began to think she was merely a dream.

"About a week afterwards I was dining with Madame de Rastail. Dinner was for eight o'clock; but at half-past eight we were still waiting in the drawing-room. Finally the servant threw open the door, and announced Lady Alroy. It was the woman I had been looking for. She came in very slowly, looking like moonlight in grey **lace**, and, to my intense delight, I was asked to take her in to dinner.

After we had sat down I remarked quite innocently, "I think I caught sight of you in Bond Street some time ago, Lady Alroy." She grew very pale, and said to me in a low voice, "Pray do not talk so loud; you may be overheard."

'I felt miserable at having made such a bad beginning, and turned instead to the subject of French plays. She spoke very little,

always in the same low musical voice, and seemed as if she was afraid of someone listening. I fell passionately, stupidly in love, and the **indefinable** atmosphere of mystery that **surrounded** her excited my most burning **curiosity**.

When she was going away, which she did very soon after dinner, I asked her if I might call and see her. She **hesitated** for a moment, glanced round to see if anyone was near us, and then said, "Yes; tomorrow at a quarter to five."

I begged Madame de Rastail to tell me about her; but all that I could learn was that she was a **widow** with a beautiful house in Park Lane, and as some scientific **bore** began a dissertation of widows, as exemplifying the survival of the **matrimonially** fittest, I left and went home.

'The next day I arrived at Park Lane **punctual** to the moment, but was told by the **butler** that Lady Alroy had just gone out. I went down to the club quite unhappy and very much uncertain, and after much thought wrote her a letter, asking if I might be allowed to try my chance some other afternoon.

I had no answer for several days, but at last I got a little note saying she would be at home on Sunday at four, and with this extraordinary **postscript**: "Please do not write to me here again; I will explain when I see you."

On Sunday she received me, and was perfectly charming; but

when I was going away she **begged** of me, if I ever had occasion to write to her again, to address my letter to "Mrs. Knox, care of Whittaker's Library, Green Street." "There are reasons," she said," why I cannot receive letters in my own house."

'All through **the season** I saw a great deal of her, and the atmosphere of mystery never left her. Sometimes I thought that she was in the power of some man, but she looked so **unapproachable** that I could not believe it. It was really very difficult for me to come to any conclusions, for she was like one of those strange crystals that one sees in museums, which are at one moment clear, and at another clouded.

At last I determined to ask her to be my wife: I was sick and tired of the **incessant** secrecy that she imposed on all my visits, and on the few letters I sent her. I wrote to her at the library to ask her if she could see me the following Monday at six.

She answered yes, and I was in the seventh heaven of delight. I was **infatuated** with her: in spite of the mystery, I thought then – and so, I see now. No; it was the woman herself I loved. The mystery troubled me, maddened me. Why did chance put me in its path?'

'You discovered it, then?' I cried.

'I fear so,' he answered. 'You can decide for yourself.'

'When Monday came round I went to lunch with my uncle, and

about four o'clock found myself in the Marylebone Road. My uncle, you know, lives in Regent's Park. I wanted to get to Piccadilly, and took **a short cut** through a lot of **shabby** little streets. Suddenly I saw in front of me Lady Alroy, deeply **veiled** and walking very fast.

On coming to the last house in the street, she went up the steps, took out a key, and let herself in. "Here is the mystery," I said to myself; and I hurried on and examined the house. It seemed a sort of place for rented **lodgings**. On the doorstep lay her handkerchief, which she had dropped. I picked it up and put it in my pocket.

Then I began to consider what I should do. I came to the conclusion that I had no right to spy on her, and I drove down to the club. At six I called to see her. She was lying on a sofa, in a tea-gown of silver tissue supported by some strange moonstones that she always wore. She was looking quite lovely.

"I am so glad to see you," she said; "I have not been out all day."

I stared at her in amazement, and pulling the handkerchief out of my pocket, handed it to her.

"You dropped this in Cumnor Street this afternoon, Lady Alroy," I said very calmly. She looked at me in terror, but made no attempt to take the handkerchief.

"What were you doing there?" I asked.

"What right have you to question me?" she answered.

"The right of a man who loves you," I replied; "I came here to ask you to be my wife."

She hid her face in her hands, and burst into floods of tears.

"You must tell me," I continued.

She stood up, and, looking me straight in the face, said, "Lord Murchison, there is nothing to tell you."

"You went to meet someone," I cried; "this is your mystery."

She grew dreadfully white, and said, "I went to meet no one,"

"Can't you tell me the truth?" I exclaimed.

"I have told it," she replied.

I was mad, frantic; I don't know what I said, but I said terrible things to her. Finally I rushed out of the house. She wrote me a letter the next day; I sent it back unopened, and started for Norway with Alan Colville.

After a month I came back, and the first thing I saw in the Morning Post was the death of Lady Alroy. She had **caught a chill** at the Opera, and had died in five days from an infection of the **lungs**.

I shut myself up and saw no one. I had loved her so much, I had loved her so madly. Good god! how I had loved that woman!'

'You went to the street, to the house in it?' I said.

'Yes,' he answered.

'One day I went to Cumnor Street. I could not help it; I was tortured with doubt. I knocked at the door, and a respectable-looking woman opened it to me. I asked her if she had any rooms to let.

"Well, sir," she replied, "the drawing-rooms are supposed to be let; but I have not seen the lady for three months, and as the rent is owing on them, you can have them."

"Is this the lady?" I said, showing the photograph.

"That's her, sure enough," she exclaimed; "and when is she coming back, sir?"

"The lady is dead," I replied.

"Oh, sir, I hope not!" said the woman; "she was my best lodger. She paid me three guineas a week merely to sit in my drawing-rooms now and then."

"She met someone here?" I said; but the woman assured me that it was not so, that she always came alone, and saw no one.

"What on earth did she do here?" I cried.

"She simply sat in the drawing-room, sir, reading books, and sometimes had tea," the woman answered.

I did not know what to say, so I gave her a **sovereign** and went away. Now, what do you think it all meant? You don't believe the woman was telling the truth?'

'I do.'

'Then why did Lady Alroy go there?'

'My dear Gerald,' I answered, 'Lady Alroy was simply a woman with a mania for mystery. She took these rooms for the pleasure of going there with her veil down, and imagining she was a heroine. She had a passion for secrecy, but she herself was merely a Sphinx without a secret.'

'Do you really think so?'

'I am sure of it,' I replied.

He took out the morocco case, opened it, and looked at the photograph. 'I wonder?' he said at last.

Glossary

To beg – to ask strongly for something.

Bore – an uninteresting or boring person.

Butler – male servant in a house, responsible for serving drink.

To catch a chill – to become ill because of the cold.

Clairvoyant – a person who can see into the future.

Crush – a crowd of people.

Curiosity – interested in knowing many things.

Etching – a drawing or scene done with a pencil.

Faint – not clear.

Fellow – informal word for a man.

Frankness – honesty.

To hesitate – to stop or wait because of being uncertain.

Incessant – all the time.

Indefinable – not possible to describe.

Infatuated – to have some great extreme love for someone.

Lace – fine material made with a pattern of holes.

Lodgings – a place to live.

Lungs – organ in the body used for breathing.

Matrimonially – related to marriage.

Pavement – the place on the street where people walk.

To peer – to look at carefully.

Penteteuch – The first five books of the Bible (Old Testament).

Postscript – words written at the end of a letter (now simply P.S.).

Poverty – the state of being poor, having no money.

Punctual – to always arrive on time.

The season – regular social events held in high society.

Shabbiness – old and dirty.

Short cut – an unusual route shorter than the normal journey.

To sink – to drop downwards, often into deep water.

Slight – thin.

Sovereign – an old English coin.

Subtle – quiet and intelligent.

To surround – to cover on all sides.

Tories – political party in England. Traditionally wealthy owners of

land.

To trot – a horse walking.

Unapproachable – unfriendly, not easy to make friends with.

Vague – not very clear.

Veil – cloth worn to cover a woman's face.

To wander – to walk with no clear direction.

Widow – a woman whose husband has died.

Exercises

General Understanding Questions

1) What does the man in the café think about Lord Murchison? Does he like him or not?
2) What is his opinion of the woman in the picture?
3) How did Lord Murchison meet Lady Alroy? Why does he want to meet her again?
4) How does Lady Alroy behave when they next see each other? Why is this attractive to Lord Murchison?
5) How must Lord Murchison write to Lady Alroy in the future?
6) Why does Lord Murchison have doubts about marrying Lady Alroy?
7) Why is the handkerchief important in this story?
8) Why does Lord Murchison want to visit the house in Cumnor Street? What does he think happens there?
9) What does the woman who owns the house in Cumnor Street tell Lord Murchison?
10) What is Lady Alroy's secret? What does the narrator of the story think? What does Lord Murchison think?

Detailed Understanding Questions

1) How can you think “over your drink?”
2) How could beauty be described as “plastic”?
3) What does the phrase “sink into an armchair” suggest?
4) Why does Lord Murchison say “threw open the door” rather than “opened the door”?
5) Lord Murchison tells Lady Alroy that he “caught sight of her”? Did he see her? Did he see her for long?
6) What does the guest at the party mean by describing widows “as exemplifying the survival of the matrimonially fittest”? What phrase is he changing for humorous effect?
7) Lord Murchison says that he is “sick and tired” of waiting. Is he really sick? Is he really tired? How does he actually feel?
8) The woman in Cumnor Street says the rooms are “supposed to be let”. Are the rooms actually let? Is there some doubt or problem with the rooms?
9) Lord Murchison asks: “What on earth did she do?” How is the phrase “on earth” used here?
10) What is the meaning of the narrator’s observation that Lady Alroy is “a sphinx without a secret?”

Literary Questions

1) What do the following observations mean? Are they meant to be taken seriously? Is it good advice?
   a. “He would be the best of fellows, if he did not always speak the truth.”
   b. “Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood.”
2) What impression do you have of London and Paris life from the story?
3) How could you compare the characters of Lord Murchison and the narrator of the story?
4) To what extent does Lord Murchison really love Lady Alroy? Why is mystery so attractive?
5) Why would Lady Alroy try to maintain a sense of mystery?
6) A woman should always maintain some atmosphere of mystery. Do you agree?

General Understanding Answers

1) Lord Murchison is an old friend and they speak to each other on friendly terms. Lord Murchison is rather focused on his own problems, and the narrator regards his friend with some humour; so perhaps the relationship is not particularly strong or close.
2) The woman has some secret. The narrator does not know whether the woman has a good or bad character – but she is certainly elegant. He compares her with the most mysterious of women: the Mona Lisa.
3) He met Lady Alroy by chance while she was riding in a carriage. There is no special reason he found her attractive, just this sense of mystery.
4) Lady Alroy does not answer any questions directly and seems rather distant, though not exactly unfriendly. This convinces Lord Murchison that the woman is more mysterious than before.
5) Lady Alroy tells him to write to a different address.
6) Now Lord Murchison has become worried about theis woman's mystery and wants to know what it is.
7) Lady Alroy drops the handkerchief outside the house in Cumnor Street. Lord Murchison picks it up. When

Lady Alroy tells him she has been at home all day, Lord Murchison knows she is lying.

8) Lord Murchison wants to know about the house in Cumnor Street because he saw Lady Alroy enter and she will not explain why. He suspects that she is meeting another man there.

9) The woman in Cumnor Street explains that Lady Alroy only came to the house to sit by herself for a few hours. She never met any other people in the house.

10) The story does not reveal any secret. It is not explained why Lady Alroy sits alone in the house. The narrator of the story think there is no mystery at all, and that Lady Alroy just likes to make herself appear mysterious. Lord Murchison is not convinced. He thinks there is still something not fully explained.

Detailed Understanding Answers

1) This means you are thinking while you are drinking.

2) Plastic in this sense just means artificial or not natural.

3) Ships usually sink in the sea. Sinking into an armchair suggests that the chair is very soft and the person sitting down is rather heavy, so he goes down quite

deep into the furniture.

4) Throwing open the door is more theatrical than merely opening the door. It creates the impression of surprise and drama when Lady Alroy enters. Lord Murchison may also use the phrase to make his story sound more exciting.

5) When you catch sight of someone, you do see them, but not usually very long or very clearly.

6) The guest is making a joke, suggesting widows live longer than their husbands. The phrase “survival of the fittest” is from Darwin, talking about human evolution.

7) He is not really sick and he is not really tired. He uses the phrase to suggest he has had enough of a situation, is bored with it, and wants it to change or end.

8) The rooms are let to Lady Alroy. The problem is that she has not been there for three months and not paid any rent. The phrase “supposed to” can suggest a difference between what should be the case, and what is actually the case.

9) The phrase “on earth” makes an observation stronger. It is a polite idiom rather than using some swear word.

10) He means Lady Alroy is certainly mysterious, but there is really no mystery about her at all.