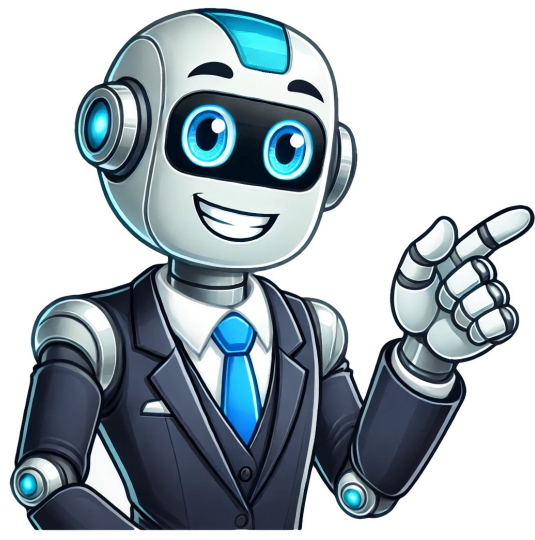


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Talk about a no-win situation: Frank Stockton's The Lady, or the Tiger? (1882) is a fairy tale and fascinating allegory. We hope our study guide is particularly useful for teachers and students to fully appreciate the story's quandary and its themes. It's a great persuasive writing prompt.

Read the story: The Lady, or the Tiger?, Character Analysis & Summary, Genre & Themes, Literary Devices, Quotes, Discussion Questions, Paired Readings, Useful Links, and Notes/Teacher Comments

The King - The semi-barbaric ruler, who enjoys administering justice by chance, in which the person on trial must blindly choose their fate, whether to die or live with a determined outcome.

The Princess - The King's daughter falls in love with a young man, who, once her father learns of their affair, subjects him to a perilous fate in which he must choose one of two doors. Behind one holds a tiger, who will eat him; the other hides a young maiden whom he must marry. The Princess, who is semi-barbaric as is her father, knows which door hides each creature, and signals the young man to pick the door on the right. Will she show her barbaric side (being impetuous and jealous), or her humane side (allow her lover to live, but be with another). The reader is left to guess her decision.

The Young Man - The handsome and brave courtier loves the Princess, but when his intentions are discovered by the King, he is subject to the worst punishment of all, a public demonstration of his fate in which he faces either certain death, or is forced to marry a maiden, rather than his beloved Princess.

The Lady - The lovely young maiden who waits behind one of the doors and would be the Young Man's bride if he chooses her door, is hated by the Princess.

Plot Summary: The story is set in a kingdom ruled by a semi-barbaric king, who rules calmly and wisely for certain things, but relishes public trials of chance to administer justice for things he cares about, primarily for his own pleasure.

The Lady Genre: The Lady, or the Tiger? is in the genre of fairy tale, rather than a short story, with the sub-genre of allegory. It has two levels of meaning: the first is the story itself, the second is its symbolic meaning and lessons it offers the reader.

Themes: Determinism versus Free Will (alternatively, Fate versus Choice) Since the King presents an out-of-their control, no-win "choice" for the Young Man (determinism), he and the Princess cannot pursue their love for each other (free will). Ironically, the Princess can exercise free will deciding the fate of her lover, since she knows the secret of what's behind each door and can choose his fate.

Barbarism versus Progressiveness - Stockton emphatically described the King as "semi-barbaric" in his self-serving desires and "exuberant fancy" for public spectacles of cruelty (barbarism). Yet he has a "civilized" side in his commitment to administer justice in an impartial and incorruptible manner by chance, and "develop the mental energies of the people."

Trust versus Betrayal - Though the Princess seems to be deeply in love with the young man, and he trusts her with his life, she is faced with two opposing emotions: jealousy and hatred for the young man if he lives, or mortal anguish should he be devoured by a Tiger. We learn she has deliberated long and hard over both choices. The reader is given more clues that show her leaning towards the Tiger door option (her barbaric half). Love vs. set it free/Covet versus True Love - If the reader is pulling for her civilized half, she might opt for the sentimental (butterfly) option: "If you love something, set it free." Wait, would this mean he's "free" to love the maiden? Clearly, it's an unsolvable problem for the Princess, consuming all her energy. Either result is a tragic loss for her. Ironically, the courtier has absolute trust in her decision, whichever it may be.

The Tiger Literary Devices: Suppressed ending: Stockton uses the literary device of suppressing the ending to create suspense for the reader, which creates more questions than answers. Just as the Princess deliberates on the "right" choice to guide her lover to his fate, the reader is left guessing, and wrestling with terrible outcomes (particularly for the Princess). The problem described in his tale has become a literary expression meaning an unsolvable or impossible problem to solve. "Which will it be, the lady or the tiger?" Symbols: Stockton writes an allegory, two levels of meaning, in which the deeper level is represented by symbols. The doors represent fate, the tiger represents death and punishment, the lady symbolizes innocence and reward (it's not her fault she's lovely and the Princess is jealous). "Doleful iron bells" represent mourning, while "gay brass bells" represent celebration and life. Stockton's symbols help readers broaden their appreciation for the deeper level of the story's meaning, and perhaps relate it to their own life lessons.

Interesting Vocabulary: Semi-barbaric: Half savage or uncivilized, brutal and cruel, the other half civilized or "not quite" barbaric. It's a confusing juxtaposition, which makes it a perfect adjective to describe the King and the Princess.

Barleycorn: While literally a grain of barley or unit of measurement based on the length of the grain, Stockton's description: "...every barleycorn a king, knew no tradition to which he owed more allegiance than pleased his fancy" may also be a reference to an ancient British folksong personifying the ill-fated: John Bar-Ley-Corn.

Chorists: A member of a choir, or someone leading singing, used in the story to describe a "good" outcome: "Another door opened beneath the king, and a priest, followed by a band of chorists, and dancing maidens blowing flutes and golden horns and (reading an measure, 'Memento!'"

Memento: (another reference to semi-barbaric). "He did not seem for the mood of barbarism; her nature, it is probable that she would not have been such, if she had possessed herself of the secret of the doors." "Fraser Stockton Explain what the following quotes mean and how they relate to the story." He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts. He was greatly given to self-communing; and, when he and himself agreed upon anything, the thing was done."

"The arena of the king was built, not to give the people an opportunity of hearing the rhapsodies of dying gladiators, nor to enable them to view the inevitable conclusion of a conflict between religious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheatre, with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime was punished. Or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance."

"The moment that the case of the criminal was thus decided, doleful iron bells were clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience, with bowed heads and downcast hearts, wended slowly their homeward way, mourning greatly that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate."

"The decisions of this tribunal were not only fair, they were positively determinate: the accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty; and, if innocent, he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments or the king's arena."

"Among his courtiers was a young man of that fineness of blood and lowliness of station common to the conventional heroes of romance who love royal maidens. This royal maiden was well satisfied with her lover, for he was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom; and she loved him with an ardor that had enough of barbarism in it to make it exceedingly warm and strong."

"He had loved the Princess, and neither he, she, nor any one else thought of denying the fact; but the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of his tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction."

"Possessed of more power, influence, and force of character than any one who had ever before been interested in such a case, she had done what no other person had done—she had possessed herself of the secret of the doors."

"It was one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court who had been selected as the reward of the accused youth, should he be proved innocent of the crime of aspiring to one so far above him, and the Princess hated her."

"She raised her hand, and made a slight, quick movement toward the right. No one but her lover saw her."

"Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semi-barbaric Princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?"

First edition cover, 1884 1. Explain the meaning of "semi-barbaric" and why it's a perfect adjective to describe both the King and the Princess. How can someone be half cruel, brutal and uncivilized, and half not? 2. Stockton begs the question: "Which came out of the opened door,—the lady, or the tiger?" Write a persuasive argument for which choice the Princess ended up making, and why. 3. Explain why this situation poses an unsolvable problem. 4. Determinism versus Free Will is one of the story's themes. Explain both concepts as revealed in this tale. 5. Think of this tale from the young man's point of view, if he could choose. If he was a Romantic, might he die rather than lose his true love? Or, is he a Realist, settling for survival with a fair maiden? Sure beats being dead. 6. Using the literary device of allegory, the story has two layers of meaning. Explain each layer and what the symbols represent. 7. Relate the concept of "fate" to a situation in your own life where a "choice" wasn't really up to you. Have you ever had to make a "lady or the tiger?" decision? 8. Read the sequel to this story, The Discourager of Hesitancy, and compare the King's "choice" offered to a visiting prince requesting a wife, with the young man's in this story. 9. Think of a story, book, or movie in which the ending was withheld, leaving the reader or audience to determine the ending, or guessing what happens next. (Can't think of one? Try the Harry Potter series). Discuss why this is an appealing technique to keep readers back for more? The Discourager of Hesitancy Compare The Lady, or the Tiger? themes The Discourager of Hesitancy, the story's sequel, in which the reader eagerly hopes to discover which fate the Princess chooses for her lover in the first story. The Monkey's Paw by W.W. Jacobs, which shares the literary device of a dramatically suppressed ending, leaving the reader to figure it out. Marjorie Daw by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, offers a dramatic surprise ending. The Most Dangerous Game by Richard Connell, another story with an impossible "choice"—both of deadly consequence. The Travelling Companion by Hans Christian Andersen, compare the Princesses' character, motives, and "evilness." The Cunning Little Tailor by The Brothers Grimm, compare the riddling Princess, and whether both stories share aspects of the fairy tale genre. Choose one of these Morality Tales and compare its lesson to this story. Barbarian or Civilized? A Teacher's Work Is Never Done We need to hear from you! Please share your lesson plans, discussion questions, or pitfalls to avoid while teaching this story, in pursuing our common interests of helping more students enjoy reading classic literature! 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No additional restrictions You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation. No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Important: This sample is for inspiration and reference only Ambiguity as a Literary Device Author's Intent: Invoking Imagination Reader's Choice and Engagement Moral and Philosophical Reflection The Enduring Allure of Uncertainty Conclusion: Embracing the Unanswered Question References Frank R. Stockton's short story "The Lady or the Tiger" has captivated readers for decades with its enigmatic ending that leaves the resolution of the narrative up to interpretation. This essay delves into the significance of the story's open ending, the author's intent, and the impact of leaving readers with a choice between the lady and the tiger. By analyzing different perspectives, we gain insights into the storytelling techniques that make this ending enduringly thought-provoking. Ambiguity as a Literary Device The ending of "The Lady or the Tiger" showcases the power of ambiguity in literature. Stockton deliberately withholds the resolution of the story, inviting readers to engage with the narrative on a deeper level. This open-endedness encourages readers to consider multiple possibilities, thereby allowing them to become active participants in constructing the story's conclusion. The ambiguity also mirrors the uncertainty and unpredictability of life, creating a connection between the fictional world and reality. No time to compare samples? Hire a Writer Full confidentiality No hidden charges No plagiarism Author's Intent: Invoking Imagination Stockton's choice to conclude his story ambiguously was likely intentional. By not providing a definitive ending, he encourages readers to use their imagination and creativity to envision their own outcomes. This reflects Stockton's desire to engage his audience on a personal level, making the story's impact more lasting and meaningful. The lack of closure challenges readers to explore their own beliefs and values, leading to varied interpretations that resonate uniquely with each individual. Reader's Choice and Engagement The open ending of "The Lady or the Tiger" places readers in the position of the semi-barbaric king, forcing them to make a decision that reflects their own perspectives and emotions. This interactive aspect of the narrative draws readers into the story, making it more than just a passive reading experience. Readers are compelled to consider the motivations of the characters, the implications of their choices, and the broader ethical questions posed by the story. This engagement deepens the reader's connection with the narrative and sparks introspection. Moral and Philosophical Reflection Stockton's ending prompts readers to confront complex moral and philosophical dilemmas. The choice between the lady and the tiger is symbolic of the broader choices individuals face in life, where outcomes are uncertain and consequences unknown. Readers must grapple with questions of love, jealousy, justice, and sacrifice. The lack of a clear answer challenges readers to contemplate the nature of choices, the unpredictability of fate, and the inherent complexity of human desires and motivations. The Enduring Allure of Uncertainty Decades after its publication, "The Lady or the Tiger" continues to captivate readers precisely because of its ambiguous ending. The unresolved tension lingers in readers' minds, inviting them to revisit the story and explore new interpretations. This quality of enduring intrigue sets the story apart and contributes to its timeless appeal. It also serves as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling that sparks discussion, introspection, and the exploration of the human condition. Conclusion: Embracing the Unanswered Question The ambiguous ending of "The Lady or the Tiger" stands as a literary masterpiece that showcases the art of storytelling. Stockton's decision to leave readers with a choice between the lady and the tiger elevates the narrative beyond a simple tale and transforms it into a canvas for readers' own imaginations and reflections. The unresolved question at the heart of the story underscores the richness of human experiences and the complexity of the choices we face. Ultimately, it is this very ambiguity that allows the story to resonate across generations and invites us to engage with literature in a deeply personal and profound way. References Stockton, F. R. (1882). The Lady or the Tiger? The Century Magazine, 23(1), 92-96. Cohen, M. (2003). Ambiguity and the Ending of The Lady or the Tiger?. The English Journal, 92(1), 31-35. Peck, A. (2010). The Lady, or the Tiger?: How Can We Choose? Teachers & Writers Magazine, 42(5), 31-34. Miller, L. (2016). Minding the Gaps: The Lady or the Tiger? and the Teaching of Reading. Language Arts, 93(1), 27-34. Hughes, T. L. (2001). Why I Can't Teach The Lady or the Tiger?. The English Journal, 91(1), 93-95. You can receive your plagiarism free paper on any topic in 3 hours! *minimum deadline To export a reference to this article please select a referencing style below Copy to Clipboard The Lady or the Tiger Ending: Exploring Ambiguity and Readers Choice. (2023, August 29). WritingBros. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from The Lady or the Tiger Ending: Exploring Ambiguity and Readers Choice. WritingBros, 29 Aug, 2023, writingbros.com/essay-examples/the-lady-or-the-tiger-ending-exploring-ambiguity-and-readers-choice/ The Lady or the Tiger Ending: Exploring Ambiguity and Readers Choice. [online]. Available at: < [Accessed 28 May 2025]. The Lady or the Tiger Ending: Exploring Ambiguity and Readers Choice [Internet]. WritingBros. 2023 Aug 29 [cited 2025 May 28]. Available from: Copy to Clipboard By Dr Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University) The Lady, or the Tiger? is a widely studied short story by the American writer Frank R. Stockton (1834-1902). This classic short story, which was first published in The Century magazine in 1882, began life as a story Stockton told at a party; he published it when it received a strong response from his friends. In The Lady, or the Tiger?, we are presented with an ancient system of justice whereby a suspected criminal has to choose one of two doors. Behind one is a lady, whom he will marry; behind the other is a tiger, which will devour him. Plot summary Some time in the past, a semi-barbaric king has an arena built, in which justice is administered. Any man arrested on suspicion of committing a crime has to choose one of two doors in the amphitheatre, without knowing what is concealed behind the two doors. All he knows is that behind one door is a lady, and behind the other door is a tiger. Behind one door is a lady, who has been handpicked from the population as a suitable bride for the man. If he chooses this door, he will be married to the lady immediately in a wedding ceremony performed in front of the crowd. Even if he already has a wife, he must marry this new bride and be with her. The alternative is far worse. For behind the other door is a tiger, which he has chosen to live with and devour him in front of the audience. This is the king's way of serving justice in his realm; effectively, he places responsibility for their fate into the criminals own hands, although of course it is purely a matter of chance as to which prize they get. One day, the king learns that his daughter, the princess, has fallen in love with a young courtier. He is horrified that a princess could have been led astray by a commoner like this, and he has the young man arrested. It is announced that he will face his justice before the whole kingdom, in the arena, and men are immediately dispatched to find a suitable potential bride for him. Meanwhile, the fiercest tiger in the whole land is sought out. The princess, who loves the young man, is at the arena on the day of her lovers sentencing. When the young man sees the princess, he can tell that she has done as he expected her to do: that she has used money and her powerful status at court to discover which door hides the lady and which the tiger. When he makes eye contact with her, he asks her, Which?, and she gestures to her right. So she has signalled which door he should choose. But at this point, the third-person narrator of the story tells us that he cannot tell us whether the princess directed her lover to choose the lady door or the tiger door. He tells us, though, that she knows the identity of the lady concealed behind one of the doors, and its a beautiful lady at court who is clearly attracted to the young man; what more, the princess has suspected for a while that her lover likes this lady, too. So, did she help him to escape the fate of the tigers jaws, and effectively give the man she loves to another woman, with whom he will probably be perfectly happy? Or did her jealousy get the better of her, and she gestured to the door behind which the tiger waits to devour him? The narrator leaves this question unanswered, instead encouraging us to think for ourselves about which decision the princess would have made. Analysis in many ways. The Lady, or the Tiger? resembles a fable or fairy tale, and indeed the stories author, Frank R. Stockton, wrote a number of fairy tales for children. The story, like a fable or fairy tale, has a simple plot, and the ending is left open, or even analysed, in a short story. This is what makes the story without providing us with the final denouement. We are left wondering what the princess decided to do. But in withholding this information, Stockton created, in The Lady, or the Tiger?, a forum for many twentieth-century modernist stories which would be similarly open-ended and ambiguous. Perhaps even without fully realising it himself, Stockton topped the author from his godlike pedestal and made us, the readers of his story, the final authors of the story's conclusion. In this, too, he anticipates Barthes, whose 1960s essay The Death of the Author would argue that the godlike authority of the author must be resisted in favour of the birth of the reader. Subscribe to get the latest posts sent to your email. The Lady or the Tiger? by Frank R. Stockton first appeared in The Century Magazine in 1882. This captivating story presents a unique form of justice. The Lady or the Tiger? by Frank R. Stockton first appeared in The Century Magazine in 1882. This captivating story presents a unique form of justice: a young man accused of a crime must choose between two doors. 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The king, unwavering in his ideals, casts the lover into prison and sets a date for his trial in the arena. The princess, consumed by love and jealousy, refuses to be a passive observer. Using her power and resources, she discovers the secret of the doors. She learns which door conceals the tiger and which holds a beautiful maiden, a rival for her lovers affection (in this story, or even analysing, a short story). This is what makes the story without providing us with the final denouement. We are left wondering what the princess decided to do. But in withholding this information, Stockton created, in The Lady, or the Tiger?, a forum for many twentieth-century modernist stories which would be similarly open-ended and ambiguous. Perhaps even without fully realising it himself, Stockton topped the author from his godlike pedestal and made us, the readers of his story, the final authors of the story's conclusion. 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