

## Before You Read

Have you ever attended an elementary school in which you had the same teacher for every subject? If you did, you know that you were with that one person a long time—approximately fourteen hundred hours a year. A teacher, especially one who is with a student for so long, can have a great deal of influence. Think of the best teacher you've ever had. What qualities and actions made this teacher special? As you read, ask yourself whether your favorite teacher was anything like the teachers in "Miss Awful."

# Miss Awful

Arthur Cavanaugh

The whole episode of Miss Awful began for the Clarks at their dinner table one Sunday afternoon. Young Roger Clark was explaining why he could go to Central Park with his father instead of staying home to finish his homework—Miss Wilson, his teacher, wouldn't be at school tomorrow, so who'd know the difference? "She has to take care of a crisis," Roger explained. "It's in Omaha." ❶

"What is?" his older sister, Elizabeth, inquired. "For a kid in third grade, Roger, you talk dopey. You fail to make sense."

Roger ignored the insult. His sister was a condition of life he had learned to live with, like lions. Or snakes. Poisonous ones. Teetering,<sup>1</sup> as always, on the tilted-back chair, feet wrapped around the legs, he continued, "Till Miss Wilson gets back we're having some other teacher. She flew to Omaha yesterday." He pushed some peas around on his plate and was silent a moment. "I hope her plane don't crash," he said.

Roger's mother patted his hand. A lively, outgoing youngster, as noisy and rambunctious<sup>2</sup> as any eight-year-old, he had another side to him, tender and soft, which worried about people. Let the blind man who sold pencils outside the five-and-ten on Broadway be absent from his post, and Roger worried that catastrophe had overtaken him. When Mrs. Loomis, a neighbor of the Clarks in the

1. **teetering** *v. used as adj.*: wobbling, as if about to fall.  
2. **rambunctious** *adj.*: noisy and lively.

## IDENTIFY

❶ Why does Roger decide he does not have to do his homework?



*Tribute to the American Working People* (detail of five-part painting) by Honoré Desmond Sharrer.

National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, NY.

### IDENTIFY

2 What does the narrator tell you directly about Roger's character?

Greenwich Village brownstone, had entered the hospital, Roger's anxious queries had not ceased until she was discharged.<sup>3</sup> And recently there was the cat which had nested in the downstairs doorway at night. Roger had carried down saucers of milk, clucking with concern. "Is the cat run away? Don't it have a home?"<sup>2</sup>

Virginia Clark assured her son, "You'll have Miss Wilson safely back before you know it. It's nice that you care so."

Roger beamed with relief. "Well, I like Miss Wilson, she's fun. Last week, for instance, when Tommy Miller got tired of staying in his seat and lay down on the floor—"

"He did what?" Roger's father was roused from his post-dinner torpor.<sup>4</sup>

"Sure. Pretty soon the whole class was lying down. Know what

3. discharged *v.*: released: here, from the hospital.

4. torpor (*tôr'pər*) *n.*: sluggishness.

Miss Wilson did?”

“If you’ll notice, Mother,” Elizabeth interjected, “he hasn’t touched a single pea.”

“*She* lay down on the floor, too,” Roger went on ecstatically. “She said we’d *all* have a rest, it was perfectly normal in the middle of the day. That’s what I love about St. Geoff’s. It’s fun.”

“Fun,” snorted his sister. “School isn’t supposed to be a fun fest. It’s supposed to be filling that empty noodle of yours.” ❸

“Miss Wilson got down on the floor?” Mr. Clark repeated. He had met Roger’s teacher on occasion; she had struck him as capable but excessively whimsical.<sup>5</sup> She was a large woman to be getting down on floors, Mr. Clark thought. “What did the class do next?” he asked.

“Oh, we lay there a while, then got up and did a Mexican hat dance,” Roger answered. “It was swell.”

“I’m sure not every day is as frolicsome,” Mrs. Clark countered, slightly anxious. She brought in dessert, a chocolate mousse. Roger’s story sounded typical of St. Geoffrey’s. Not that she was unhappy with his school. A small private institution, while it might be called overly permissive, it projected a warm, homey atmosphere which Mrs. Clark found appealing. It was church-affiliated, which she approved of, and heaven knows its location a few blocks away from the brownstone was convenient. True, Roger’s scholastic progress wasn’t notable—his spelling, for example, remained atrocious. Friendly as St. Geoffrey’s was, Mrs. Clark sometimes *did* wish . . . ❹

Roger attacked dessert with a lot more zest than he had shown the peas. “So can I go to the park with you, Dad? I’ve only got spelling left, and who cares about that?” Before his mother could comment, he was up from the table and racing toward the coat closet. “Okay, Dad?”

“I didn’t say you could go. I didn’t even say I’d take you,” Mr. Clark objected. He happened, at that moment, to glance at his waistline and reflect that a brisk hike might do him some good. He pushed back his chair. “All right, but the minute we return, it’s straight to your room to finish your spelling.”

“Ah, thanks, Dad. Can we go to the boat pond first?”

“We will not,” cried Elizabeth, elbowing into the closet. “We’ll go to the Sheep Meadow first.”

5. **whimsical** (hwim'zi:kəl) *adj.*: full of silly, fanciful ideas.

## Comparing Literature

### COMPARE AND CONTRAST

❸ What does Roger think school is good for? What does his sister think?

### IDENTIFY

❹ What does Roger’s mother like about his school? What does she find troublesome?

**PREDICT**

5 Sometimes a writer drops a hint that foreshadows events to come. What do you think is going to happen next?

**INFER**

6 What does the fact that Roger packs so many toys in his schoolbag tell you about him? about his school?

Roger was too happy to argue. Pulling on his jacket, he remarked, "Gee, I wonder what the new teacher will be like. Ready for your coat, Dad?" 5

It was just as well that he gave the matter no more thought. In view of events to come, Roger was entitled to a few carefree hours. Monday morning at school started off with perfect normalcy. It began exactly like any other school morning. Elizabeth had long since departed for the girls' school she attended uptown when Mrs. Clark set out with Roger for the short walk to St. Geoff's. She didn't trust him with the Fifth Avenue traffic yet. They reached the school corner and Roger skipped away eagerly from her. The sidewalk in front of school already boasted a large, jostling throng of children, and his legs couldn't hurry Roger fast enough to join them. Indeed, it was his reason for getting to school promptly: to have time to play before the 8:45 bell. Roger's schoolbag was well equipped for play. As usual, he'd packed a supply of baseball cards for trading opportunities; a spool of string, in case anybody brought a kite; a water pistol for possible use in the lavatory; and a police whistle for sheer noise value. Down the Greenwich Village sidewalk he galloped, shouting the names of his third grade friends as he picked out faces from the throng. "Hiya, Tommy. Hey, hiya, Bruce. Hi, Steve, you bring your trading cards?" 6

By the time the 8:45 bell rang—St. Geoff's used a cowbell, one of the homey touches—Roger had finished a game of tag, traded several baseball cards, and was launched in an exciting jump-the-hydrant contest. Miss Gillis, the school secretary, was in charge of the bell, and she had to clang it extensively before the student body took notice. Clomping up the front steps, they spilled into the downstairs hall, headed in various directions. Roger's class swarmed up the stairs in rollicking spirits, Tommy Miller, Bruce Reeves, Joey Lambert, the girls forming an untidy rear flank behind them, shrill with laughter.

It wasn't until the front ranks reached the third-grade classroom that the first ominous note was struck.

"Hey, what's going on?" Jimmy Moore demanded, first to observe the changed appearance of the room. The other children crowded behind him in the doorway. Instead of a cozy semicircle—"As though we're seated round a glowing hearth," Miss Wilson had described it—the desks and chairs had been rearranged in stiff, rigid rows. "Gee, look, the desks are in rows," commented Midge Fuller, a

**“Gee, I wonder what the new teacher will be like. Ready for your coat, Dad?”**

plump little girl who stood blocking Roger’s view. Midge was a child given to unnecessary statements. “It’s raining today,” she would volunteer to her classmates, all of them in slickers. Or, “There’s the lunch bell, gang.” The point to Roger wasn’t that the desks had been rearranged. The point was, *why*? As if in answer, he heard

two hands clap behind him, as loud and menacing as thunder. 7

“What’s this, what’s this?” barked a stern, raspish voice. “You are not cattle milling in a pen. Enough foolish gaping! Come, come, form into lines.”

Heads turned in unison, mouths fell agape. The children of St. Geoffrey’s third grade had never formed into lines of any sort, but this was not the cause of their shocked inertia.<sup>6</sup> Each was staring, with a sensation similar to that of drowning, at the owner of the raspish voice. She was tall and straight as a ruler, and was garbed in an ancient tweed suit whose skirt dipped nearly to the ankles. She bore a potted plant in one arm and Miss Wilson’s roll book in the other. Rimless spectacles glinted on her bony nose. Her hair was gray, like a witch’s, skewered in a bun, and there was no question that she had witch’s eyes. Roger had seen those same eyes leering from the pages of *Hansel and Gretel*—identical, they were. He gulped at the terrible presence.

“Form lines, I said. Girls in one, boys in the other.” Poking, prodding, patrolling back and forth, the new teacher kneaded the third grade into position and ruefully inspected the result. “Sloppiest group I’ve ever beheld. *March!*” She clapped time with her hands and the stunned ranks trooped into the classroom. “*One*, two, three, *one*, two—girls on the window side, boys on the wall. Stand at your desks. Remove your outer garments. You, little Miss, with the vacant stare. What’s your name?”

“Ja-Ja—” a voice squeaked.

“Speak up. I won’t have mumblers.”

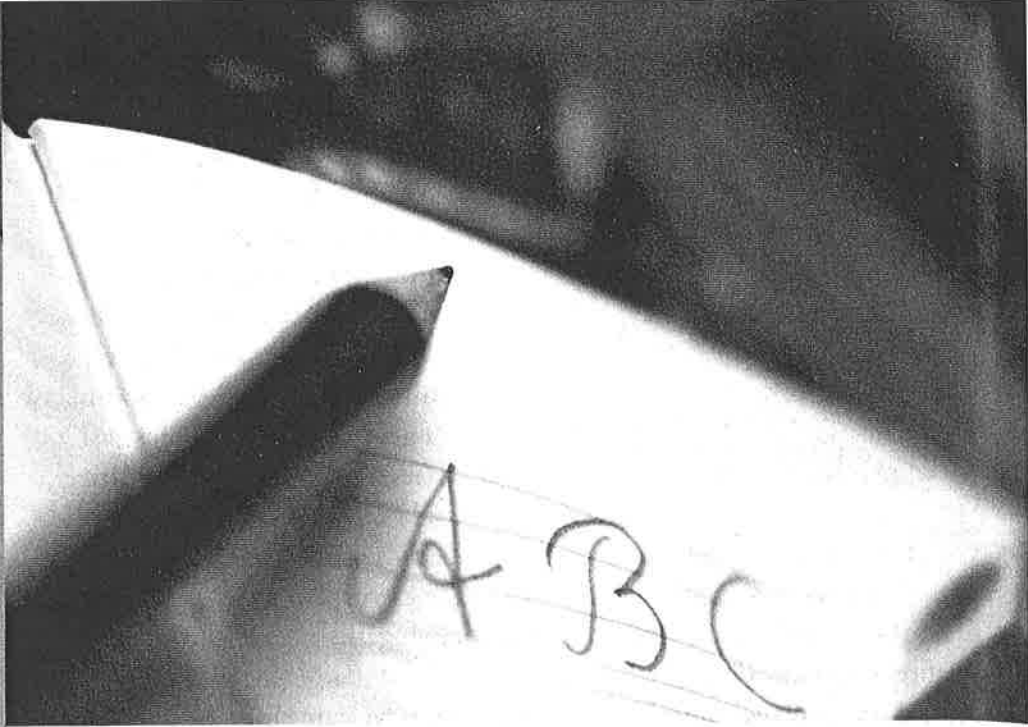
“Jane Douglas.”

6. *inertia* (in·ər’shə) *n.*: here, an inability or reluctance to move.

Comparing  
Literature

COMPARE AND  
CONTRAST

7 How is the classroom different from what it was like when Miss Wilson was there? What does the arrangement suggest about the new teacher?



“Well, Jane Douglas, you will be coat monitor. Collect the garments a row at a time and hang them neatly in the cloakroom. Did you hear me, child? Stop staring.” Normally slow-moving, Jane Douglas became a whirl of activity, charging up and down the aisles, piling coats in her arms. The new teacher tugged at her tweed jacket. “Class be seated, hands folded on desks,” she barked, and there was immediate compliance. She next paraded to the windows and installed the potted plant on the sill. Her witch’s hands fussed with the green leaves, straightening, pruning. “Plants and children belong in classrooms,” she declared, spectacles sweeping over the rows. “Can someone suggest why?”

There was total silence, punctured by a deranged giggle, quickly suppressed.

“Very well, I will tell you. Plants and children are living organisms. Both will grow with proper care. Repeat, *proper*. Not indulgent fawning, or giving in to whims—scrupulosity!”<sup>7</sup> With another tug at the jacket, she strode, ruler straight, to the desk in the front of the room. “I am Miss Orville. *O-r-v-i-l-l-e*,” she spelled. “You are to use my name in replying to all questions.”<sup>8</sup>

In the back of the room, Jimmy Moore whispered frantically to Roger. “What did she say her name is?”

### INFER

**8** According to Miss Orville, how are plants and children alike? What does this comparison tell you about Miss Orville’s feelings toward children?

7. **scrupulosity** (skrōō'pyə-lās'ə-tē) *n.*: extreme carefulness and correctness.

Miss Orville rapped her desk. "Attention, please, no muttering in the back." She cleared her voice and resumed. "Prior to my retirement I taught boys and girls for forty-six years," she warned. "I am beyond trickery, so I advise you to try none. You are to be in my charge until the return of Miss Wilson, however long that may be." She clasped her hands in front of her and trained her full scrutiny on the rows. "Since I have no knowledge of your individual abilities, perhaps a look at the weekend homework will shed some light. Miss Wilson left me a copy of the assignment. You have all completed it, I trust? Take out your notebooks, please. At once, at once, I say."

Roger's head spun dizzily around. He gaped at the monstrous tweed figure in dismay. Book bags were being clicked open, notebooks drawn out—what was he to do? He had gone to his room after the outing in the park yesterday, but, alas, it had not been to complete his assignment. He watched, horrified, as the tweed figure proceeded among the aisles and inspected notebooks. What had she said her name was? Awful—was that it? Miss Awful! Biting his lip, he listened to her scathing comments.

"You call this chicken scrawl penmanship?" R-r-rip! A page was torn out and thrust at its owner. "Redo it at once, it assaults the intelligence." Then, moving on, "What is this maze of ill-spelled words? Not a composition, I trust."

Ill-spelled words! He was in for it for sure. The tweed figure was heading down his aisle. She was three desks away, no escaping it. Roger opened his book bag. It slid from his grasp and, with a crash, fell to the floor. Books, pencil case spilled out. Baseball cards scattered, the water pistol, the police whistle, the spool of string . . .

"Ah," crowed Miss Awful, instantly at his desk, scooping up the offending objects. "We have come to play, have we?"

And she fixed her witch's gaze on him.

Long before the week's end, it was apparent to Virginia Clark that something was drastically wrong with her son's behavior. The happy-go-lucky youngster had disappeared, as if down a well. Another creature had replaced him, nervous, harried, continuously glancing over his shoulder, in the manner of one being followed. Mrs. Clark's first inkling of change occurred that same Monday. She had been chatting with the other mothers who congregated outside St. Geoffrey's at three every afternoon to pick up their offspring. A casual assembly, the mothers were as relaxed and informal as the

**COMPARE AND  
CONTRAST**

9 The children's behavior has changed. How did they behave in the past? How do they behave now?

**COMPARE AND  
CONTRAST**

10 Think back to the beginning of the story. How has Roger's attitude about homework changed?

school itself, lounging against the picket fence, exchanging small talk and anecdotes.

"That darling cowbell," laughed one of the group at the familiar clang. "Did I tell you Anne's class is having a taffy pull on Friday? Where else, in the frantic city of New York . . ."

The third grade was the last class to exit from the building on Monday. Not only that, but Mrs. Clark noted that the children appeared strangely subdued. Some of them were actually reeling, all but dazed. As for Roger, eyes taut and pleading, he quickly pulled his mother down the block, signaling for silence. When enough distance had been gained, words erupted from him. 9

"No, we don't have a new teacher," he flared wildly. "We got a *witch* for a new teacher. It's the truth. She's from *Hansel and Gretel*, the same horrible eyes—and she steals toys. *Yes*," he repeated in mixed outrage and hurt. "By accident, you happen to put some toys in your book bag, and she *steals* 'em. I'll fool her! I won't *bring* any more toys to school," he howled.

"Know what children are to her? Plants! She did, she called us plants. Miss Awful, that's her name."

Such was Roger's distress that his mother offered to stop at the Schrafft's on Thirteenth Street and treat him to a

soda. "Who's got time for sodas?" he bleated. "I have homework to do. Punishment homework. Ten words, ten times each. On account of the witch's spelling test."

"Ten words, ten times each?" Mrs. Clark repeated. "How many words were on the test?"

"Ten," moaned Roger. "Every one wrong. Come on, I've got to hurry home. I don't have time to waste." Refusing to be consoled, he headed for the brownstone and the desk in his room. 10

On Tuesday, together with the other mothers, Mrs. Clark was astonished to see the third grade march down the steps of St. Geoffrey's in military precision. Clop, clop, the children marched,

**"I have homework to do. Punishment homework. Ten words, ten times each."**



looking neither to the left nor right, while behind them came a stiff-backed, iron-haired woman in a pepper-and-salt suit. “One, two, three, *one*, two, three,” she counted, then clapped her hands in dismissal. Turning, she surveyed the assemblage of goggle-eyed mothers. “May I inquire if the mother of Joseph Lambert is among you?” she asked.

“I’m Mrs. Lambert,” replied a voice meekly, whereupon Miss Orville paraded directly up to her. The rest of the mothers looked on, speechless.

“Mrs. Lambert, your son threatens to grow into a useless member of society,” stated Miss Orville in ringing tones that echoed down the street. “That is, unless you term watching television useful. Joseph has confessed that he views three hours per evening.” 11

“Only after his homework’s finished,” Margery Lambert allowed.

“Madame, he does not finish his homework. He idles through it, scattering mistakes higgledy-piggledy. I suggest you give him closer supervision. Good day.” With a brief nod, Miss Orville proceeded down the street, and it was a full minute before the mothers had recovered enough to comment. Some voted in favor of immediate protest to Dr. Jameson, St. Geoffrey’s headmaster, on the hiring of such a woman, even on a temporary basis. But since it was temporary, the mothers concluded it would have to be tolerated.

Nancy Reeves, Bruce’s mother, kept staring at the retreating figure of Miss Orville, by now far down the block. “I know her from somewhere, I’m sure of it,” she insisted, shaking her head.

The next morning, Roger refused to leave for school. “My shoes aren’t shined,” he wailed. “Not what Miss Awful calls shined. Where’s the polish? I can’t leave till I do ’em over.”

“Roger, if only you’d thought of it last night,” sighed Mrs. Clark.

“You sound like her,” he cried. “That’s what *she’d* say,” and it gave his mother something to puzzle over for the rest of the day. She was still thinking about it when she joined the group of mothers outside St. Geoffrey’s at three. She had to admit it was sort of impressive, the smart, martial<sup>8</sup> air exhibited by the third grade as they trooped down the steps. There was to be additional ceremony today. The ranks waited on the sidewalk until Miss Orville passed back and forth in inspection. Stationing herself at the head of the columns, she boomed, “Good afternoon, boys and girls. Let us return with perfect papers tomorrow.”

8. **martial** (mär’shəl) *adj.*: military.

**INFER**

11 Why do you think Miss Orville disapproves of Joseph’s watching television?

**INFER**

12 Why do you think Miss Orville believes that household chores are “lessons in self-reliance for the future”?

**INFER**

13 Do you think Miss Orville is a cruel person, or does she have a good reason for treating Roger harshly?

“Good aaaafternoon, Miss Orville,” the class sang back in unison, after which the ranks broke. Taking little Amy Lewis in tow, Miss Orville once more nodded at the mothers. “Which is she?” she asked Amy.

Miss Orville approached the trapped Mrs. Lewis. She cleared her throat, thrust back her shoulders. “Amy tells me she is fortunate enough to enjoy the services of a full-time domestic<sup>9</sup> at home,” said Miss Orville. “May I question whether she is fortunate—or deprived? I needn’t lecture you, I’m sure, Mrs. Lewis, about the wisdom of assigning a child tasks to perform at home. Setting the table, tidying up one’s room, are lessons in self-reliance for the future. Surely you agree.” There was a nod from Mrs. Lewis. “Excellent,” smiled Miss Orville. “Amy will inform me in the morning the tasks you have assigned her. Make them plentiful, I urge you.” 12

The lecturing, however, was not ended. Turning from Mrs. Lewis, Miss Orville cast her gaze around and inquired, “Is Roger Clark’s mother present?”

“Yes?” spoke Virginia Clark, reaching for Roger’s hand. “What is it?”

Miss Orville studied Roger silently for a long moment. “A scallywag, if ever I met one,” she pronounced. The rimless spectacles lifted to the scallywag’s mother. “You know, of course, that Roger is a prodigy,”<sup>10</sup> said Miss Orville. “A prodigy of misspelling. Roger, spell *flower* for us,” she ordered. “Come, come, speak up.”

Roger kept his head lowered. “F,” he spelled. “*F-l-o-r.*”

“Spell castle.”

“K,” spelled Roger. “*K-a-z-l.*”

Miss Orville’s lips parted grimly. “Those are the results, mind you, of an hour’s solid work with your son, Mrs. Clark. He does not apply himself. He wishes to remain a child at play, absorbed in his toys. Is that what you want for him?” 13

“I—I—” Virginia Clark would have been grateful if the sidewalk had opened up to receive her.

As she reported to her husband that evening, she had never in her life been as mortified.<sup>11</sup> “Spoke to me in front of all the other mothers, in loud, clarion tones,” she described the scene. “Do I want Roger to remain a child at play. Imagine.”

“By the way, where is Roge?” Mr. Clark asked, who had come

9. **domestic** *n.*: housecleaner.

10. **prodigy** (prəd’ə-jē) *n.*: child genius.

11. **mortified** (môrt’ə-fid) *v.* used as *adj.*: ashamed and hurt.