

“Tracks”

Reading Comprehension—Short Stories

Directions: Read the story. Then answer the questions below.

Lida sat outside her great aunt’s hotel watching the steam engines go by and listening to the clop-clop of horses as they pulled wagons down the cobbled road. She was taking a short break from her chores at the inn: mopping the ballroom, fixing cornbread for the guests, and tending the fire in the wood-burning stove. She enjoyed working there and was happy to help her illustrious aunt bolster her growing business and notoriety around the city.



Lida had always had an **assiduous** nature and applied herself to almost any task unremittingly. Today, however, she took this quick **respite** to daydream about the dance she would be attending that evening.

At 17, it would be her first. Her friends had all purchased brightly colored, ornate dresses to wear. Lida, as a reflection of her **demure** personality, had chosen a modest, yet elegant dress in a charcoal gray.

“Are you ready, Miss Lida?” Hattie asked as she burst through the parlor doors and into the kitchen. Mary and Florence were in step right behind her.

“Hattie, I done told you never to come in that way. You disturb the guests having cocktails in the parlor!”

“Oh, hush, Lida. You worry too much. Let’s go.”

“I need to put a few more logs in the stove so Auntie can boil water for the dishes,” Lida said. “Then we can go.”

Hattie gave a sigh, but did not bother to argue. She knew that when Lida had something to do, she didn’t rest until it was done.

“Let’s take the tracks,” Hattie said when they finally headed out to the party. Daylight was turning into dusk.

“Naw, Hattie,” Lida said. “You know that’s too dangerous in the night.”

“Look, Lida,” Hattie said impatiently. “We’re runnin’ late ‘cause of you. The tracks will take 15 minutes off our walk.” Mary and Florence both mumbled in agreement. “We can take the carriage back.”

Against her better judgment, Lida agreed to take the train tracks. After all, it was her first real dance ever. Why adulterate it with acrimony?

The girls clumsily navigated the moonlit tracks and talked excitedly about the dance: who would be there, who was the best-looking, who was the smartest, and if anyone had remembered money for a carriage ride home. Then Lida heard a whistle in the distance. It seemed to get louder as it persisted and then cut out in a shock of tender silence. “We’ve gotta get off the tracks. Train’s coming,” said Lida.

The girls scurried to the side but found the decline too precipitous. They made their way forward along the tracks and finally found a suitable place to descend. Lida tiptoed nimbly from the precipice. Finding herself safely below, she heard a sudden thud. She gasped and turned about.

“Help!” she heard a voice cry, “Help...down here!” Hattie had fallen in the ash pit, an 8 foot trench between the rails, about 20 feet long, where trains stopped to empty ashes from the engine’s fire box when they pulled through town.

Hattie screamed and tried frantically to climb out, but the pit was too deep. Lida scrambled to the edge, grabbing for her hand, the train getting closer, the whistle growing evermore piercing.

Not wanting to appear scared herself, Lida’s calm voice **belied** the panic-stricken beating of her heart.

“Just give me your hand, Hattie, and I’ll pull ya right out.”

They fumbled for each other’s hands in the dark. Lida lay down on the rails and hooked her feet under the track to give herself more leverage. She had Hattie in her fingertips. Then she lost her. Then she had her again. Lida pulled and she could feel the joints in Hattie’s hands popping. In this instant, Hattie found better purchase—on what, no one could be sure—and her hands came into view. Wearing a mask of anguish, her teeth clenched and reflecting the pale moonlight, Lida pulled and pulled. Hattie’s amorphous form appeared from below the surface like some stygian phantom. Mary and Florence’s screams could be heard intermittently in the night, watching helplessly as the train lights grew brighter.

Hattie’s torso finally eclipsed the edge of the pit and there she lay, catching her breath. The girls hoisted her to her feet and hobbled away from the tracks like a collection of frenzied grave robbers, their treasure in tow. It was there that they stood, caked in ash, watching as the train screeched to a stop and dropped its load of glowing cinders.

Questions:

1) Using the story as a guide, it can be inferred that

- A. Lida lives in a hotel
- B. Lida and her family are poor
- C. Hattie and Lida are best friends
- D. one of the story’s central themes is slavery
- E. the story is not set in contemporary times

- 2) As used in the beginning of the story, which is the best definition for **assiduous**?
- A. cautious
 - B. efficient
 - C. energetic
 - D. diligent
 - E. passionate
- 3) As used in the beginning of the story, which is the best synonym for **respite**?
- A. continuation
 - B. stop
 - C. pause
 - D. shelter
 - E. pardon

- 4) Using the story as a guide, how do Hattie and Lida differ?
- A. Hattie is good-natured; Lida is stoic.
 - B. Hattie is trusting; Lida is circumspect.
 - C. Hattie is carefree; Lida is responsible.
 - D. Hattie is respectful; Lida is judgmental.
 - E. Hattie is excited about the party; Lida is ambivalent about it.

- 5) What type of characters are Mary and Florence?
- A. round, characterized by being well-developed in the story
 - B. foils, characterized by eliciting each other's traits through contrast
 - C. confidantes, characterized by being people whom the main character confides in
 - D. flat, characterized as doing very little to advance plot
 - E. dynamic, characterized by changing over time

- 6) As used in the beginning of the story, which is the best antonym for **demure**?
- A. reckless
 - B. aggressive
 - C. harmful
 - D. outgoing
 - E. reserved

- 7) As used at the end of the story, which is the best definition for **belied**?
- A. revealed
 - B. disguised
 - C. protected
 - D. calmed
 - E. relieved

- 8) Which literary device is used in the following sentence from the final paragraph: "The girls hoisted her to her feet and hobbled away from the tracks like a collection of frenzied grave robbers, their treasure in tow"?
- A. personification, characterized by the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects or abstract notions
 - B. flash forward, characterized by an interjected scene that temporarily jumps the narrative forward in time
 - C. irony, characterized by a discrepancy between expectation and reality
 - D. simile, characterized by the use of a comparison using "like" or "as"
 - E. symbolism, characterized by the use of iconic representations that carry particular conventional meanings

Answers and Explanations

1) **E**

In the story, there are a variety of references to things that are not common in contemporary times. In paragraph 1, for example, Lida watches “steam engines” and listens “to the clop-clop of horses as they pulled wagons down the cobbled road.” Using this information, the reader can infer that the story is not set in contemporary times. Therefore **(E)** is correct.

In paragraph 1, Lida “sat outside her great Aunt’s hotel.” Lida “enjoyed working there.” The reader can infer from these statements that Lida works in her great aunt’s hotel, but that does not imply that Lida lives at the hotel. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. Other than Lida’s great aunt, who owns a hotel, the story does not discuss Lida’s family. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. Hattie is a key character in the story. She talks with Lida a lot and Lida saves Hattie at the end of the story. However, there is nothing in the story to suggest that Lida and Hattie were best friends. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. There is nothing in the story to support answer choice **(D)**, so it is incorrect.

2) **D**

assiduous (*adjective*): hard working; persevering.

Near the beginning of the story, we learn that “Lida had always had an **assiduous** nature and applied herself to almost any task unremittingly.” Since Lida’s assiduous nature made her work persistently, the reader can infer that *assiduous* means *diligent*. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

Cautious means attentive to potential dangers. One can be persistent without being cautious. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Efficient* is working effectively with minimal wasted time. One can work diligently without being efficient. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Energetic* means having a lot of force or energy. An energetic nature does not necessarily lead to persistent, unremitting work. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. A *passionate* person is dominated by intense emotions. This does not necessarily lead to persistent, diligent work. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

3) **C**

respite (*noun*): a short period of rest or relief; pause.

At the beginning, we learn that “Lida always had an assiduous nature and applied herself to almost any task unremittingly. Today, however, she took this quick **respite** to daydream about the dance she would be attending that evening.” Since Lida was a persistent, diligent worker, we can understand that her “**respite** to daydream” was a *pause* in her work. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

A *continuation* is a restarting of an earlier undertaking. Since Lida is taking a **respite** to daydream, she is not taking that time to continue her work. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. A stop is the cessation of something. Here, Lida

does not cease to work entirely, she just pauses briefly to think of something else. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. A shelter is a form of protection. Lida does not use protection from work to think about the dance. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect. A *pardon* is a release from punishment or penalty. Lida's work is not a punishment. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

4) **C**

At the beginning of the story, we learn that Lida is a persistent hard worker. We also learn that "when Lida had something to do, she didn't rest until it was done." The reader can infer from this that Lida is *responsible*. Hattie, in contrast, walks into the hotel through the parlor doors, even though she had been told not to. When scolded, Hattie tells Lida, "You worry too much." The reader can infer from this that Hattie does not worry as much as Lida. Later, Hattie is determined to take the train tracks to save time, while Lida worries that this way is too dangerous. The reader can infer from this that Hattie is *carefree*—even careless. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

Someone who is *stoic* is so reserved as to be cold. While Lida is a hard worker, the story also shows that Lida is caring and brave. These traits are not cold. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Circumspect* means prudent or aware of potential consequences. Lida demonstrates that she is circumspect when she tells the girls that it isn't a good idea to take the tracks. However, the story does not give any information that leads the reader to believe that Hattie is *trusting*. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. Hattie is not *respectful*—Hattie deliberately walks through the parlor doors even though she knows it will disturb the guests. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect. Lida is not *ambivalent* about the party. She daydreams about the dance early in the story. Later, when her friends want to take the tracks, Lida goes along with them so as not to cause problems. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

5) **D**

Mary and Florence figure into the story very little. They go along with Hattie and Lida to the dance, but they do not even speak, other than to mumble in agreement with Hattie when Hattie wants to take the tracks. Mary and Florence do little to advance the plot. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

The story does not provide information to support answer choices **(A)**, **(B)**, **(C)**, and **(E)**. Therefore they are incorrect.

6) **D**

demure (*adjective*): modest and reserved.

Near the beginning of the story, it says, "Her friends had all purchased brightly colored, ornate dresses to wear. Lida, as a reflection of her **demure** personality, had chosen a modest, yet elegant dress in a charcoal gray." Lida differs from her friends by wearing something that does not call attention to herself. The reader can infer from this that demure means shy or reserved. An antonym for *demure*, then, is *outgoing*. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

Being *reckless* means acting with disregard for possible harm. The opposite of shy is not acting with a disregard for harm. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. Someone who is *aggressive* is physically or socially forceful. Someone who is shy is probably not aggressive, but aggressive is not the opposite of shy. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Harmful* means causing harm, which is not the opposite of shy or reserved. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. *Reserved* is a synonym for demure. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

7) **B**

belie (*verb*): to misrepresent or give a false representation.

Near the end of the story, Lida wants to pull Hattie out of the ash pit. Lida calls out to Hattie, urging Hattie to give Lida her hand so Lida can pull her out. “Not wanting to appear scared herself, Lida’s calm voice **belied** the panic-stricken beating of her heart.” The reader can understand from this that Lida was terrified, but did not want Hattie to know it. Lida spoke to Hattie with a calm voice in order to hide the fear that Lida felt. Lida’s voice *disguised* her fear. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

Something *revealed* is shown or disclosed. The calm of Lida’s voice hid her panic, instead of revealing it. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. To *protect* is to preserve something from harm. Lida’s calm voice did not preserve the panicked beating of Lida’s heart. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. Lida’s calm voice hid her panic, but Lida was still terrified, not *calm*. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect. Her calm voice also did not *relieve* her panic. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

8) **D**

The author uses the word *like* here to compare the girls, as they picked Hattie up and helped her away from the tracks, to “frenzied grave robbers.” This gives the reader a vivid picture of the action—we can at once imagine Hattie, limp and helpless, as the girls struggle to hoist her up and get her off the tracks. The use of the word *like* to compare two things is a simile. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

Since the author is comparing people (the girls) to people (the grave robbers), the author is not giving human attributes to objects or notions. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. The narrative does not jump forward in time. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. There is no contrast between expectation and reality. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. The author does not use iconic representations, or symbols, to convey meaning. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.