

Name: _____ Class: _____

Sleeping

By Katharine Weber

Katharine Weber (b. 1955) is a contemporary American nonfiction writer and novelist whose writing has been published in over twelve different countries. As you read "Sleeping," pay close attention to the details as the story develops.



She would not have to change a diaper, they said. In fact, she would not have to do anything at all. Mrs. Winter said that Charles would not wake while she and Mr. Winter were out at the movies. He was a very sound sleeper, she said. No need to have a bottle for him or anything. Before the Winters left they said absolutely please not to look in on the sleeping baby because the door squeaked too loudly.

Harriet had never held a baby, except for one brief moment, when she was about six, when Mrs. Antler next door had surprisingly bestowed on her the tight little bundle that was their new baby, Andrea. Harriet had sat very still and her arms had begun to ache from the tension by the time Mrs. Antler took back her baby. Andy was now a plump seven-year-old, older than Harriet had been when she held her that day.

After two hours of reading all of the boring mail piled neatly on a desk in the bedroom and looking through a depressing wedding album filled with photographs of dressed-up people in desperate need of orthodonture (Harriet had just ended two years in braces and was very conscious of malocclusion issues) while flipping channels on their television, Harriet turned the knob on the baby's door very tentatively, but it seemed locked. She didn't dare turn the knob with more pressure because what if she made a noise and woke him and he started to cry?

She stood outside the door and tried to hear the sound of a baby breathing but she couldn't hear anything through the door but the sound of the occasional car that passed by on the street outside. She wondered what Charles looked like. She wasn't even sure how old he was. Why had she agreed to baby-sit when Mr. Winter approached her at the swim club? She had never seen him before, and it was flattering that he took her for being capable, as if just being a girl her age automatically qualified her as a baby-sitter.

By the time the Winters came home, Harriet had eaten most of the M & M's in the glass bowl on their coffee table: first all the blue ones, then the red ones, then all the green ones, and so on, leaving, in the end, only the yellow.

They gave her too much money and didn't ask her about anything. Mrs. Winter seemed to be waiting for her to leave before checking on the baby. Mr. Winter drove her home in silence. When they reached her house he said, My wife. He hesitated, then he said, You understand, don't you? and Harriet answered Yes without looking at him or being sure what they were talking about although she did really know what he was telling her and then she got out of his car and watched him drive away.

© 2003 Katharine Weber. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Text-Based Questions:

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Is the baby real? How do you know? List all of the clues.

2. When Mr. Winters says, “you understand, don’t you?” he is most likely referring to which of the following?

- a. Mr. and Mrs. Winter do not trust Harriet to take care of Charles.
- b. Mr. and Mrs. Winters’ baby Charles died and they are struggling to accept reality.
- c. Mrs. Winters is hiding the truth about Charles from her husband.

3. Why is it significant that the parents are named Mr. and Mrs. Winters? (Hint: think about what winter represents.)

4. Based on the information in paragraph two, how old is Harriet?

5. Why do you think Mr. Winter chose Harriet to babysit Charles?

6. Reread paragraph three. Choose three details that help reveal the truth about Charles. Explain how each detail supports your conclusion.

7. Reread the last sentence. What does Harriet understand? What does Harriet not understand? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

8. This story mostly about:

- a. Guilt
- b. Death
- c. Growing up

9. Which of the following literary device is most important to the development of the story? Explain your answer.

- a. Detail/imagery
- b. Dialogue
- c. Symbolism/metaphor
- d. Irony

For Teachers

Suggested Text Pairings:

“Charles” by Shirley Jackson

In this 1949 short story, Jackson’s use of detail and dialogue help the reader uncover the truth about Charles. Pair “Sleeping” with “Charles” and ask students to compare the author’s craft in each. Find the full short story here: http://www.loa.org/images/pdf/Jackson_Charles.pdf

More Teaching Resources Related to “Sleeping” by Katharine Weber:

- A high school student-made silent film interpretation of “Sleeping”
<http://margaretnoble.net/educator/silent-film-performances/>
- A short film interpretation of the story by Group-Six Films
<http://www.group-six.com/sleeping>