

Charlie

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a black cat's face. The cat's eyes are a striking, glowing green color, looking directly at the viewer. The fur is dark and textured, with some highlights catching the light. The overall mood is mysterious and intense.

**a short story lesson plan for English
reading, speaking & vocabulary**

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Introduction

Do you have a pet?

How much do you love this pet?

Some people love their pets more than their own family —
what do you think about this?

Are pets part of our family?

Or just pets?

Charlie

"He's been dead for ten years," said the little old lady, looking at me with concern.

I stared back into her silvery-blue eyes and nodded my head slowly.

I didn't know what else to do.

She had this passive look on her face and I felt expected to say something. So I cleared my throat, desperately trying to think of something to say.

"Your husband?"

A look of mild disgust crossed the woman's face.

"My husband?" she said. "No. He's been dead for over fifteen years. No, not him. Charlie. My dear Charlie."

Who was Charlie?

"Charlie?" I said.

She looked at me like I was an idiot.

"Yes, Charlie. He was the love of my life. He was my one and only true love."

So. This old lady. Who I didn't know. She just sat next to me at

the bus stop and starts telling me about her secret lover Charlie.

"Oh, I see." There was a very awkward pause. "Well, I'm sorry for your loss."

She smiled, but I could see a look in her eye that said she was not convinced.

I turned my head to see if the bus was coming. But just an empty road.

"I always keep him near me," she said. "He's always with me."

"Charlie?" I said.

"Yes, Charlie. He's always close to my heart."

"Well, that's good," I said. "It's good to have some spiritual connection to our loved ones."

I surprised myself at how well I could keep the conversation going. But as soon as the bus arrived, I would go upstairs. No more chatting to old ladies about their long-lost lovers.

"No, I don't mean that," she snapped. "I don't believe in any of that spiritual mumbo-jumbo."

She tapped her chest. She wore a thick coat and a scarf. It looked like it was made of fur. She clutched at the scarf and held it against her throat.

I wrapped my arms around myself as an icy breeze blew around

us.

"Charlie is always with me. And I mean really with me."

"That's great," I said.

I couldn't talk to this old lady anymore. I just wanted the bus to arrive and then I could get home and have a hot bath. I didn't want to engage in conversations with this mad old woman and her Charlie, whoever he was.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

I turned to face her.

"Yes. I believe you."

"Have you ever had someone that you have loved so dearly and who loves you back so dearly that you would do anything to make them stay with you?"

I stumbled for something to say.

The old lady shook her head. "You haven't, have you? Too caught up in your own life and all the things you think about. You haven't had time to think of anyone else. That's the trouble with young people today. Too inconsiderate."

She was right about that. She had hit the nail right on the head there.

I had been single for... well, forever. I had a girlfriend at college

but as soon as we graduated we parted company. Since then.
Nothing.

I lived alone in a tiny flat. I had one friend who I referred to as my best friend when in fact he was my only friend. And my visits back home to see my mum and dad were becoming more and more infrequent.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I loved Charlie. And he loved me. We told each other this every single day."

Then she started to cry. And not just a little weepy, but full-on sobbing.

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a handkerchief. I hadn't seen one in years.

"Please," I said. "Don't upset yourself. Tell me about Charlie."

She wiped the tears away from her eyes and then blew her nose.

"I don't know where to begin."

"Well, you said Charlie is always with you. Tell me about that."

"He is always with me," she said, and her hand went to her heart again. "He's right here. Right here with me."

"Charlie must have been a very special man," I said.

The old woman leaned back and gave me a glare.

"Man? I never said he was a man."

I cursed myself for upsetting her again.

"But... I'm sorry... I thought..."

"Yes, you thought," she said. "And where does thinking get you?"

She patted the furry scarf against her neck.

"No, Charlie was not a man. He was not a human being."

She smiled back at me. Her teeth all brilliant white.

"So, what was he then?" I asked.

"He was a cat."

"Oh," I said.

All this time and the only thing we were talking about was a silly cat.

"Yes, Charlie was my pride and joy," she said. She tilted her head down. "Isn't that right, Charlie?"

I looked up the road again and saw the bus trundling down towards us.

"Well, he must have been a very special cat," I said, pulling some loose change from my coat pocket.

"He was," she said. "Would you like to see him?"

The bus got nearer.

"A picture, you mean?"

"No," she said. "Charlie. See him. In the flesh."

I just stared back at the old lady, unable to think of anything to say.

"Take a look," she said, and she unbuttoned her coat.

Around her neck, the scarf. Now clearly visible.

It was all fur. And four thin legs with little paws at the end.

A tail. And the other end a head. The ears moth-eaten and worn away and in place of its eyes two glass beads.

And the mouth. A gaping jaw with blackened teeth.

"This is Charlie," she said. "He is with me all the time. He never leaves me."

Reading Comprehension Questions

Which characters are introduced at the beginning of the story?

What colour are the old lady's eyes?

Who is the old lady talking about?

Is Charlie alive or dead?

How long has the old lady's husband been dead?

Where does the story take place?

Is there any traffic on the road?

What is the narrator's initial reaction to the old lady?

How does the old lady describe her relationship with Charlie?

What does the narrator of the story plan to do when the bus arrives?

Why does he plan to do that?

What is the old lady wearing?

Is the weather cold in the story?

Is the old lady a spiritual person?

How does the old lady describe her connection with Charlie's presence?

What does the narrator plan to do when he gets home?

Does the old lady think the narrator believes what she is saying to him?

Does the narrator like talking to the old lady?

According to the old lady, what is the trouble with young people today?

How does the narrator describe their own personal life and relationships?

Does he have a girlfriend?

When was his last girlfriend?

Who does he live with?

How many friends does he have?

Does he visit his parents very often?

Why does the old lady become emotional and start crying?

Is the old lady crying just a little? Or a lot?

What does the old lady do to wipe away her tears?

What part of her body does the old lady touch when she talks about Charlie?

What detail about Charlie is revealed that surprises the narrator?

What is she wearing around her neck?

What is Charlie?

At this part of the story, is there any traffic on the road?

What does the narrator take from his pocket?

What word does the narrator use to describe Charlie the cat?

What offer does the old lady make to the narrator?

What does the narrator assume the old lady wants to show him?

What does the old lady do with her coat?

Describe Charlie's appearance as revealed by the old lady.

How does the old lady claim that Charlie is always with her?

What is Charlie?

Where is Charlie right now?

How does the story conclude, and what is the narrator's reaction to Charlie's true identity?

Charlie – story and reading comprehension questions

"He's been dead for ten years," said the little old lady, looking at me with concern.

I stared back into her silvery-blue eyes and nodded my head slowly.

I didn't know what else to do.

She had this passive look on her face and I felt expected to say something. So I cleared my throat, desperately trying to think of something to say.

"Your husband?"

A look of mild disgust crossed the woman's face.

"My husband?" she said. "No. He's been dead for over fifteen years. No, not him. Charlie. My dear Charlie."

Who was Charlie?

"Charlie?" I said.

She looked at me like I was an idiot.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Which characters are introduced at the beginning of the story?

What colour are the old lady's eyes?

Who is the old lady talking about?

Is Charlie alive or dead?

How long has the old lady's husband been dead?

"Yes, Charlie. He was the love of my life. He was my one and only true love."

So. This old lady. Who I didn't know. She just sat next to me at the bus stop and starts telling me about her secret lover Charlie.

"Oh, I see." There was a very awkward pause. "Well, I'm sorry for your loss."

She smiled, but I could see a look in her eye that said she was not convinced.

I turned my head to see if the bus was coming. But just an empty road.

"I always keep him near me," she said. "He's always with me."

"Charlie?" I said.

"Yes, Charlie. He's always close to my heart."

Reading Comprehension Questions

Where does the story take place?

Is there any traffic on the road?

What is the narrator's initial reaction to the old lady?

How does the old lady describe her relationship with Charlie?

"Well, that's good," I said. "It's good to have some spiritual connection to our loved ones."

I surprised myself at how well I could keep the conversation going. But as soon as the bus arrived, I would go upstairs. No more chatting to old ladies about their long-lost lovers.

"No, I don't mean that," she snapped. "I don't believe in any of that spiritual mumbo-jumbo."

She tapped her chest. She wore a thick coat and a scarf. It looked like it was made of fur. She clutched at the scarf and held it against her throat.

I wrapped my arms around myself as an icy breeze blew around us.

Reading Comprehension Questions

What does the narrator of the story plan to do when the bus arrives?

Why does he plan to do that?

What is the old lady wearing?

Is the weather cold in the story?

Is the old lady a spiritual person?

"Charlie is always with me. And I mean really with me."

"That's great," I said.

I couldn't talk to this old lady anymore. I just wanted the bus to arrive and then I could get home and have a hot bath. I didn't want to engage in conversations with this mad old woman and her Charlie, whoever he was.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

I turned to face her.

"Yes. I believe you."

"Have you ever had someone that you have loved so dearly and who loves you back so dearly that you would do anything to make them stay with you?"

Reading Comprehension Questions

How does the old lady describe her connection with Charlie's presence?

What does the narrator plan to do when he gets home?

Does the old lady think the narrator believes what she is saying to him?

Does the narrator like talking to the old lady?

I stumbled for something to say.

The old lady shook her head. "You haven't, have you? Too caught up in your own life and all the things you think about. You haven't had time to think of anyone else. That's the trouble with young people today. Too inconsiderate."

She was right about that. She had hit the nail right on the head there.

I had been single for... well, forever. I had a girlfriend at college but as soon as we graduated we parted company. Since then. Nothing.

I lived alone in a tiny flat. I had one friend who I referred to as my best friend when in fact he was my only friend. And my visits back home to see my mum and dad were becoming more and more infrequent.

Reading Comprehension Questions

According to the old lady, what is the trouble with young people today?

How does the narrator describe their own personal life and relationships?

Does he have a girlfriend?

When was his last girlfriend?

Who does he live with?

How many friends does he have?

Does he visit his parents very often?

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I loved Charlie. And he loved me. We told each other this every single day."

Then she started to cry. And not just a little weepy, but full-on sobbing.

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a handkerchief. I hadn't seen one in years.

"Please," I said. "Don't upset yourself. Tell me about Charlie."

She wiped the tears away from her eyes and then blew her nose.

"I don't know where to begin."

Reading Comprehension Questions

Why does the old lady become emotional and start crying?

Is the old lady crying just a little? Or a lot?

What does the old lady do to wipe away her tears?

"Well, you said Charlie is always with you. Tell me about that."

"He is always with me," she said, and her hand went to her heart again. "He's right here. Right here with me."

"Charlie must have been a very special man," I said.

The old woman leaned back and gave me a glare.

"Man? I never said he was a man."

I cursed myself for upsetting her again.

"But... I'm sorry... I thought..."

"Yes, you thought," she said. "And where does thinking get you?"

She patted the furry scarf against her neck.

"No, Charlie was not a man. He was not a human being."

She smiled back at me. Her teeth all brilliant white.

Reading Comprehension Questions

What part of her body does the old lady touch when she talks about Charlie?

What detail about Charlie is revealed that surprises the narrator?

What is she wearing around her neck?

"So, what was he then?" I asked.

"He was a cat."

"Oh," I said.

All this time and the only thing we were talking about was a silly cat.

"Yes, Charlie was my pride and joy," she said. She tilted her head down. "Isn't that right, Charlie?"

I looked up the road again and saw the bus trundling down towards us.

"Well, he must have been a very special cat," I said, pulling some loose change from my coat pocket.

"He was," she said. "Would you like to see him?"

Reading Comprehension Questions

What is Charlie?

At this part of the story, is there any traffic on the road?

What does the narrator take from his pocket?

What word does the narrator use to describe Charlie the cat?

What offer does the old lady make to the narrator?

The bus got nearer.

"A picture, you mean?"

"No," she said. "Charlie. See him. In the flesh."

I just stared back at the old lady, unable to think of anything to say.

"Take a look," she said, and she unbuttoned her coat.

Around her neck, the scarf. Now clearly visible.

It was all fur. And four thin legs with little paws at the end.

A tail. And the other end a head. The ears moth-eaten and worn away and in place of its eyes two glass beads.

And the mouth. A gaping jaw with blackened teeth.

"This is Charlie," she said. "He is with me all the time. He never leaves me."

Reading Comprehension Questions

What does the narrator assume the old lady wants to show

him?

What does the old lady do with her coat?

Describe Charlie's appearance as revealed by the old lady.

How does the old lady claim that Charlie is always with her?

What is Charlie?

Where is Charlie right now?

How does the story conclude, and what is the narrator's reaction to Charlie's true identity?

Essential Vocabulary

concern	silvery-blue	passive
expected	cleared my throat	desperately
mild disgust	idiot	secret lover
awkward pause	loss	convinced
spiritual	connection	loved ones
chatting	long-lost	snapped
mumbo-jumbo	tapped	scarf
fur	clutched	wrapped
icy breeze	engage	dearly
stumbled	inconsiderate	hit the nail on the head
single	graduated	parted
tiny flat	referred to	infrequent
upset	weepy	full-on
sobbing	handkerchief	wiped
glare	cursed	furry
human being	brilliant white	silly
my pride and joy	tilted	trundling
loose change	in the flesh	unbuttoned
visible	paws	moth-eaten
beads	gaping	jaw
blackened		

Exercise

Write down all the words and phrases in your vocabulary notebook. Look in your dictionary and find the meaning of each word. Write the definition next to each word.

Then make up your own sentences using each word or phrase.

For example:

Concern — *a feeling of being worried or nervous about something.*

Silvery-blue — *a light shade of blue, that has a hint of silver in it.*

Then write a sentence of your own that uses the new word or phrase correctly.

Next-door neighbour's dog causes me some concern.

The bird's wings looked silvery-blue in the sunlight.

Do this with all the vocabulary and, over time, this will help improve all your English skills — reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Discussion Questions

What does the old lady wear around her neck?

Why would she wear such a thing?

Do you think she is crazy? Or does she really love Charlie and miss him?

What does the little old lady mean when she says, "He's always with me"?

Why does the old lady believe that Charlie is with her? Is her Charlie literally with her in body and soul? Or just his body? Or what?

In your opinion, what does the young man talking to her think about the old lady?

How does the narrator's attitude towards the old lady change throughout the story?

Describe the old lady's emotional connection to Charlie.

Why does the old lady believe that young people are "too inconsiderate"?

Is this true today, do you think?

Do you think more of yourself than others?

What do you think of the narrator's own life?

Do you think he is happy?

Does he have enough other people in his life?

Why do you think the old lady carries Charlie with her all the time?

How does the old lady's attachment to Charlie compare to other forms of companionship?

Discuss the theme of love and companionship in the story.

How does the story make you reflect on your own relationships and attachments?

Do you have enough friends in your life?

Do you have a good relationship with your family and friends?

Why does the old lady hold on to Charlie all the time?

Why can't she just let him go?

Do you believe in the possibility of a deep, emotional connection with an object or pet? Why or why not?

Can people become so attached to a pet cat or dog?

Do you know anyone who loves their pet cat or dog very dearly?

Who or what do you love unconditionally? Talk about this person or thing. Why do you love this person or thing so much?

Do you have a pet? How much love is there between you and your pet?

When your pet dies, what will you do? How will you remember this pet?

Some people have their pets stuffed and keep them in their house. What do you think about this?

Some people have special gravestones made for their pets when they die. What do you think about this?

Is it crazy to be so attached to an animal?

Do pets have as much love for their owners?

The Perfect Pet

This is a presentation exercise.

Get into groups of four students. Then choose one of the animals below.

Cat

Dog

Bird

Spider

Fish

Turtle

Elephant

Tiger

Snake

Rat

No group can choose the same animal!

You should now make a presentation about this animal, and why it would make the perfect pet.

Think of all the advantages of having this animal as a pet and try to convince the rest of the class why they should have this animal as a pet.

For example; maybe you have a horse as a pet.

The advantages could be:

- You can ride the horse to school
- The horse is not dangerous and likes people to stroke his nose and feed him
- The horse lives outside so it is a very healthy pet to look after — lots of fresh air and being outside
- The horse eats healthy food so this could encourage you to eat healthy too

When your group has finished making your presentation, the rest of the class should ask you questions about keeping your animal as a pet.

In your groups, take some time to think of all the advantages of keeping your chosen animal as a pet.

Then present to the class.

Writing

This is a creative writing exercise.

Write a poem about an animal.

Your poem can be in any style you like.

It might be a good idea to make the poem rhyme. This will help you with the sound of English words and how they work together.

When you have finished your poem, read it out in front of your class.

Reading Comprehension Questions — Answers

Section 1

Which characters are introduced at the beginning of the story?

The narrator and the little old lady.

What colour are the old lady's eyes?

Silvery-blue.

Who is the old lady talking about?

Charlie.

Is Charlie alive or dead?

Dead.

How long has the old lady's husband been dead?

Over fifteen years.

Section 2

Where does the story take place?

At a bus stop.

Is there any traffic on the road?

No, just an empty road.

What is the narrator's initial reaction to the old lady?

Awkward and unsure how to respond.

How does the old lady describe her relationship with Charlie?

Charlie was the love of her life, her one and only true love.

Section 3

What does the narrator of the story plan to do when the bus arrives?

Go upstairs on the bus to avoid talking to the old lady.

Why does he plan to do that?

He wants to avoid more uncomfortable conversation.

What is the old lady wearing?

A thick coat and a scarf that looks like it's made of fur.

Is the weather cold in the story?

Yes, there's an icy breeze.

Is the old lady a spiritual person?

No, she says she doesn't believe in "spiritual mumbo-jumbo."

Section 4

How does the old lady describe her connection with Charlie's presence?

She says he is really with her, not in a spiritual way.

What does the narrator plan to do when he gets home?

Have a hot bath.

Does the old lady think the narrator believes what she is saying to him?

No, she says, "You don't believe me, do you?"

Does the narrator like talking to the old lady?

No, he finds it uncomfortable and wants the conversation to end.

Section 5

According to the old lady, what is the trouble with young people today?

They're too caught up in their own lives and inconsiderate.

How does the narrator describe their own personal life and relationships?

Lonely and isolated. He lives alone, rarely sees his parents, and has only one friend.

Does he have a girlfriend?

No.

When was his last girlfriend?

Back in college.

Who does he live with?

He lives alone.

How many friends does he have?

One.

Does he visit his parents very often?

No, his visits are becoming more infrequent.

Section 6

Why does the old lady become emotional and start crying?

She is overwhelmed with grief and love for Charlie.

Is the old lady crying just a little? Or a lot?

A lot – she is sobbing.

What does the old lady do to wipe away her tears?

She uses a handkerchief from her handbag.

Section 7

What part of her body does the old lady touch when she talks about Charlie?

Her heart/chest area.

What detail about Charlie is revealed that surprises the narrator?

Charlie was not a man or a human being.

What is she wearing around her neck?

A furry scarf.

Section 8

What is Charlie?

A cat.

At this part of the story, is there any traffic on the road?

Yes, the bus is coming down the road.

What does the narrator take from his pocket?

Loose change.

What word does the narrator use to describe Charlie the cat?

He calls him "a very special cat."

What offer does the old lady make to the narrator?

To show him Charlie.

Section 9

What does the narrator assume the old lady wants to show him?

A picture of Charlie.

What does the old lady do with her coat?

She unbuttons it to reveal Charlie.

Describe Charlie's appearance as revealed by the old lady.

Charlie is a taxidermied cat worn as a scarf: fur, four legs with paws, a tail, a head with moth-eaten ears, glass bead eyes, and a gaping jaw with blackened teeth.

How does the old lady claim that Charlie is always with her?

By wearing him around her neck all the time.

What is Charlie?

A dead, taxidermied cat.

Where is Charlie right now?

Around the old lady's neck.

How does the story conclude, and what is the narrator's reaction to Charlie's true identity?

The story ends with the old lady revealing the taxidermied cat as Charlie. The narrator is shocked and speechless.

Credits

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