



## THE KNIFE THROWER & OTHER STORIES

STEVEN MILLHAUSER

Please read (authentically!) the following works and consider the attached reading questions over the summer. Be prepared to discuss the works and write about them both in journal form and on an in-class essay when you return for classes in the fall. Please note the reading questions are for your use and consideration, **not** as an assignment to be completed and turned in to the teacher.

### REQUIRED

*The Knife Thrower and Other Stories*, by Steven Millhauser, 1998

--reading questions at <http://bit.ly/knifeAP>

**CHOOSE 1:** \*Do not choose a work if you have read it previously. \*

1. *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, 1831 edition  
--reading questions at <http://bit.ly/frankensteinAP>
2. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald  
-- reading questions at <https://bit.ly/APgatsby>
3. *The Odyssey* by Homer, translated by Robert Fagles or translated by Emily Wilson  
-- reading questions at <https://bit.ly/APtheodyssey>

Have a great summer! We look forward to our future endeavors!

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Note: Words in **bold** are literary terms of enduring significance to interpretive work in AP Lit.

### “The Knife Thrower”

1. What is the meaning of the word “**ambivalence**,” and how does it apply to Hensch’s audience?
2. Discuss the significance of **point of view** in this story. What is unusual about it, and what significant effects are produced by the point of view?
3. What do you think Millhauser means for the knife throwing act to **symbolize**? In other words, with what other modern arts or entertainments are we to associate a knife throwing act?
4. Differentiate between Hensch’s audience and the author’s (Millhauser’s) **audience**. Where do the experiences of the audiences most significantly differ, and where do they most significantly coincide?

### “A Visit”

1. On what poetic tradition does this story offer an **ironic** twist? (Hint: it involves the **setting**.)
2. The “fact” of the frog wife exists in the tradition of **magic realism**, where impossible occurrences are accepted as matter of fact. Explain how this definition of magic realism becomes in a sense the main source of tension or **conflict** in this story.



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3. Explain how the narrator is **characterized** in the following passage:  
A big-bladed knife lay on the table and I began cutting the bread. “And if you’d cut just a little piece of cheese for Alice,” [said Albert]. I immediately cut a little piece of cheese for Alice. (26)
4. How does the **narrator** seem to **resolve** the **conflict** in the story?
5. Does Millhauser intend for the reader to reach the same **resolution** regarding the conflict as the narrator does? Give evidence from the story to support your assertion.
6. In one sense the narrator of this story is an **audience** like the narrator of “The Knife Thrower.” Explain the similarities in the two stories between the audience in the stories and Millhauser’s audience reading the stories. What effect does Millhauser gain by drawing attention to these separate audiences?

### “The Sisterhood of Night”

1. Define “**ambiguity**” and explain how it becomes the main source of tension or conflict in the story.
2. Explain how the concept of “night” operates **symbolically** in the story.
3. How do the section headings contribute to the frustration of reader expectations in this story? What might the author be doing by frustrating the reader?
4. In the society described in the story, what is the one thing that society really does NOT want?



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5. Explain how this story might be “the most interesting story ever written about nothing.” Discuss both sides of this equation (ie, “interesting story” and “about nothing”).
6. This story features several changes in **point of view**. Explain these changes and discuss their significance.

### “The Way Out

1. The story begins with Harter saying the affair had turned into a **farce**. By the conclusion of the story, do we think it is a farce, a **tragedy**, or a pure **comedy**?
2. Discuss the complications of **characterizing** Harter. How does the **point of view**, which is different than the point of view employed in the first three stories, affect our view of Harter as a character?
3. How does Harter view himself? How does the author seem to view Harter? How does the combination of the author plus Harter himself affect the reader’s view of Harter?
4. What is the significance of the dreams that Harter has, both in terms of **characterization** and in terms of **symbolism**?
5. Consider Harter’s habit of always finding a flaw in the women he pursues. What if we turned this idea of the flaw on Harter himself?
6. Which passages show a **detachment** or **distance** between the author and Harter? (Question for the whole class: how does this distance apply to the other stories in the collection?)



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### “Flying Carpets”

1. Discuss the ways in which the **first sentence** of the story, “In the long summers of my childhood, games flared up suddenly, burned to a brightness, and vanished forever,” acts as a thesis which the rest of the story develops. What insight can be gained from treating this sentence like a thesis?
2. What is the **narrator’s** relationship with his mother, and how does it help **characterize** the narrator?
3. There is a sentence of description about the wild tales of what goes on way up in the sky, “Even as you refused to believe them, you saw them” (84). This is a concise description of what happens in the storytelling tradition of **magic realism**. Apply that insight to this story. In which specific passages are you asked to see and sense those things that you ought not to believe?
4. Identify the **climactic** paragraph of the story, and defend it as such.
5. What is the **resolution of the conflict** in this story?
6. What is the effect of not naming the **narrator**?

### “The New Automaton Theater”

1. What is the point of view of this story, and to which other story or stories is the point of view most closely related?
2. The opening paragraph of the story clearly refers to the art of the automaton theater. What other arts or entertainments does the description bring to mind? What might be the commentary about contemporary arts and/or entertainments?



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3. What new territory is Millhauser exploring regarding art when his narrator says, “Young Heinrich confessed to having improved the musculature of the hand beyond a merely human capacity; for this he was lightly rebuked” (99)?
4. In what ways is the automaton theater like the art of the knife thrower from the title story?
5. What is the translation of the compound word Zaubertheater (from German to English)? What is the significance of this name for the theater?
6. In the paragraph on p. 107 that begins, “And Heinrich Graum returned,” how does Millhauser build **dramatic tension**?
7. What is the shocking development of the New Automaton Theater, and what does it suggest about the human need for art?

### “Clair de Lune”

1. Google the term “clair de lune.” What two prominent results turn up, and what effect do they have on your interpretation of the story?
2. Compare the unnamed **narrator** of this story to the unnamed narrator of “Flying Carpets.” What do you find?
3. When the narrator says, “The girl-boys excited and disturbed me, as if I’d stumbled into some secret rite” (117), there is a clear connection to the story, “The Sisterhood of Night.” What does this connection contribute to your understanding of this story? Of this collection?
4. The plot of this story involves an **epiphany ending** more than an **action ending**. What epiphany does the narrator make?



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5. How does Millhauser employ **magic realism** to illustrate the epiphany of the narrator?

### “The Dream of the Consortium”

1. What is a “consortium”? What does the **title** suggest about the story?
2. The narrator mentions “startling juxtapositions” on p. 129. Define **juxtaposition** and explain how the consortium uses the concept in its store. What point does Millhauser ultimately make through these juxtapositions?
3. The narrator also says on p. 129, “We who wanted nothing better than to lose our way plunged deeper into the wandering aisles.” What does this say about the **motivation** of the narrator and his fellow townspeople? What does the narrator later say is the “buyer’s secret desire”? What kind of social commentary is Millhauser making here?
4. Examine the litany on p. 140 that begins, “You could purchase quartz heaters . . . .” Explain what is going on in this **litany** from the point of view of the consortium, the narrator, Millhauser, and the audience.
5. What is the **climax** of the story (to know that, you have to identify a **conflict**)? How is the tension of the conflict **resolved**?
6. Make connections between this story and other stories in the collection.

### “Balloon Flight, 1870” + “Paradise Park”

*At some point students need to start asking and answering their own questions. Modeling the questions from the previous stories, what questions would you ask that would help you analyze these two stories?*



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### “Kaspar Hauser Speaks”

1. Google the term Kaspar Hauser. What do you find? What does it add to your appreciation of the story?
2. What is the **rhetorical situation** in this story (ie, **speaker, audience, and occasion**)? How does this rhetorical situation separate the story from others in the collection?
3. When Kaspar Hauser says, “I have been formed in your image,” what **allusions** is he making?
4. At the **climax** of the story, Kaspar Hauser says, “To be Kaspar Hauser is to . . . .” How does he finish this sentence? In other words, what does Kaspar Hauser want more than anything else in the world?
5. How does Millhauser turn Kaspar Hauser’s deepest desire into **satire**?
6. The final sentence of the story says, “If in the course of my remarks I have said anything to offend you, please forgive poor Kaspar Hauser, who would not harm the meanest insect that crawls in dung—far less you, ladies and gentleman.” Look up the meaning of the rhetorical term **preterition**. Explain how this final sentence is an example of preterition.

### “Beneath the Cellars of Our Town”

*Again, what questions would you ask to help you analyze this story?*



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- *Now that you have finished the collection, what could you say about Millhauser's methods in it? What does he do that reminds you of other authors? What does he do that seems unique to you?*