

# Before You Read

This selection also  
appears in *Elements  
of Literature*.

## The Scarlet Ibis by James Hurst

Sometimes we act in ways we later regret. Imagine that you could go back in time and change the way you treated someone you love. What would you change—and how? The narrator of “The Scarlet Ibis” remembers a time he was cruel and selfish. He thought he was doing the right thing, but pride clouded his judgment. As you read the story, decide how you would have acted in the narrator’s place.

### LITERARY FOCUS: SYMBOLS

A **symbol** is a person, a place, a thing, or an event that stands both for itself and for something beyond itself. For example, you may find that a writer mentions a mirror many times in a story. A mirror is an actual object, but the writer may be using it to stand for vanity or for an unreal world. Writers invent symbols to deepen the meaning of their stories. As you read “The Scarlet Ibis,” you’ll notice that the writer keeps drawing similarities and connections between one character and the scarlet ibis. The ibis is a rare water bird with long legs; a long, slender, curved bill; and brilliant orange-red feathers.

- As you read, look for clues that suggest that the ibis stands for something more than itself.

### READING SKILLS: MAKING INFERENCES

An **inference** is an intelligent guess you make about the meaning of something. You form inferences by putting together several related details and then generalizing about what they might mean. In making inferences about characters, you also draw on your own experiences. For example, if you observe a character who speaks harshly to her dog, slams the door, and won’t speak to her classmates, you can make an inference that this character is upset about something. You make that inference based on story details and on your own experience with people.

To make inferences about the meaning of a symbol, follow these steps:

- Pay careful attention to details. Does the writer repeat something, such as a color, an animal, or an object, throughout the story?
- Think about what the color, animal, or object represents to *you*. If the object is a ring, for example, it may represent love or faithfulness.
- Then, combine your own experience and the evidence in the story to make an inference about what this object or animal or color might signify.
- Be prepared to revise your inferences about symbols. You might have to re-read the story to be sure your inference holds up.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

##### Literary Skills

Understand  
symbolism.

##### Reading Skills

Make inferences  
from details.

##### Vocabulary Skills

Understand  
similes.



## VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

### PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

The following words appear in the story you're about to read. You may want to become familiar with them before you begin reading.

**sullenly** (sul'an-lē) *adv.*: resentfully; gloomily.

*Sullenly, the narrator took Doodle with him, all the while resenting the task.*

**imminent** (im'ə-nənt) *adj.*: near; about to happen.

*When thunder boomed and the sky darkened, they could tell the storm was **imminent**.*

**iridescent** (ir'i-des'ənt) *adj.*: rainbowlike; displaying a shifting range of colors.

*The bird's wings glowed with **iridescent** color.*

**serene** (sə-rēn') *adj.*: peaceful; calm.

*The **serene** lake was as smooth and calm as a mirror.*

**infallibility** (in-fal'ə-bil'ə-tē) *n.*: inability to make a mistake.

*Because of his belief in his **infallibility**, the narrator never doubted the success of his project.*

**blighted** (blīt'id) *v.* used as *adj.*: suffering from conditions that destroy or prevent growth.

*The **blighted** fields would never produce any corn or cotton.*

**doggedness** (dōg'id-nis) *n.*: stubbornness; persistence.

*Because of his **doggedness**, Doodle did learn to walk.*

**reiterated** (rē-it'ə-rāt'id) *v.*: repeated.

*Several times, the narrator **reiterated** his desire to teach Doodle to swim.*

**precariouly** (pri-ker'ē-əs-lē) *adv.*: unsteadily; insecurely.

*Doodle balanced **precariouly** on his thin legs.*

**mar** (mār) *v.*: damage; spoil.

*The storm could **mar** the cotton and other crops, causing the loss of acres of profits.*

### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

**Figurative language** helps you see familiar things in new ways. The simplest type of figurative language, the **simile**, uses comparisons to create fresh, new meaning. A simile is a comparison between two dissimilar things linked by a word such as *like*, *as*, or *resembles*. For example:

The storm was as fierce as an angry lion.

In this simile, a storm is compared to a lion. Comparing a fierce storm to an angry lion helps readers see how violent and dangerous the storm was.

As you read "The Scarlet Ibis," look for other similes. Figure out what is being compared. Ask yourself: "What does this simile help me see? How does it help me understand the story more fully?"



# The Scarlet Ibis

James Hurst



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## CLARIFY

A *clove* (klōv) is a division or split of some kind. During what time of year does this story take place?

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## IDENTIFY

Re-read the narrator's description of the garden (lines 1–9). Underline the words and phrases that bring to mind death or dying.

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It was in the *clove* of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree. The flower garden was stained with rotting brown magnolia petals, and ironweeds grew *rank*<sup>1</sup> amid the purple phlox. The five o'clocks by the chimney still marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm was untenanted and rocked back and forth like an empty cradle. The last graveyard flowers were blooming, and their smell drifted across the cotton field and through every room of our house, speaking softly the names of our dead.

10 It's strange that all this is still so clear to me, now that that summer has long since fled and time has had its way. A grindstone stands where the bleeding tree stood, just outside the kitchen door, and now if an oriole sings in the elm, its song seems to die up in the leaves, a silvery dust. The flower garden is prim, the house a gleaming white, and the pale fence across the yard stands straight and spruce. But sometimes (like right now), as I sit in the cool, green-draped parlor, the grindstone begins to turn, and time with all its changes is ground away—and I remember Doodle.

1. **rank** (rʌŋk) *adj.*: thick and wild. *Rank* also means "smelly."

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### INFER

Why is it so important to the narrator that his brother is “all there” (lines 54–55)?

### INTERPRET

What does the description in lines 59–61 tell you about Doodle?

### IDENTIFY

Pause at line 79. Why doesn't Aunt Nicey like Doodle's nickname?

However, one afternoon as I watched him, my head poked between the iron posts of the foot of the bed, he looked straight at me and grinned. I skipped through the rooms, down the echoing halls, shouting, “Mama, he smiled. He’s all there! He’s all there!” and he was.

When he was two, if you laid him on his stomach, he began to try to move himself, straining terribly. The doctor said that with his weak heart this strain would probably kill him, but it didn't. Trembling, he'd push himself up, turning first red, then a soft purple, and finally collapse back onto the bed like an old worn-out doll. I can still see Mama watching him, her hand pressed tight across her mouth, her eyes wide and unblinking. But he learned to crawl (it was his third winter), and we brought him out of the front bedroom, putting him on the rug before the fireplace. For the first time he became one of us.

As long as he lay all the time in bed, we called him William Armstrong, even though it was formal and sounded as if we were referring to one of our ancestors, but with his creeping around on the deerskin rug and beginning to talk, something had to be done about his name. It was I who renamed him. When he crawled, he crawled backward, as if he were in reverse and couldn't change gears. If you called him, he'd turn around as if he were going in the other direction, then he'd back right up to you to be picked up. Crawling backward made him look like a doodlebug<sup>5</sup> so I began to call him Doodle, and in time even Mama and Daddy thought it was a better name than William Armstrong. Only Aunt Nicey disagreed. She said caul babies should be treated with special respect since they might turn out to be saints. Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

5. **doodlebug** (dōōd'1-bug') *n.*: larva of a type of insect that moves backward.







### CLARIFY

Re-read the long sentence in lines 122–125. What is the narrator saying about the relationship between love and cruelty?

### VOCABULARY

**sullenly** (sul'ən-lē) *adv.*: resentfully; gloomily.

### INFER

Pause at line 144. Why do you think the narrator shows Doodle the coffin? What might this event **foreshadow**?

honeysuckle, yellow jasmine, snakeflowers, and waterlilies, and with wire grass we'd weave them into necklaces and crowns. We'd bedeck ourselves with our handiwork and loll about thus beautified, beyond the touch of the everyday world. Then when the slanted rays of the sun burned orange in the tops of the pines, we'd drop our jewels into the stream and watch them float away toward the sea.

There is within me (and with sadness I have watched it in others) a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love, much as our blood sometimes bears the seed of our destruction, and at times I was mean to Doodle. One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket, telling him how we all had believed he would die. It was covered with a film of Paris green<sup>7</sup> sprinkled to kill the rats, and screech owls had built a nest inside it.

Doodle studied the mahogany box for a long time, then said, "It's not mine."

"It is," I said. "And before I'll help you down from the loft, you're going to have to touch it."

"I won't touch it," he said **sullenly**.

"Then I'll leave you here by yourself," I threatened, and made as if I were going down.

Doodle was frightened of being left. "Don't go leave me, Brother," he cried, and he leaned toward the coffin. His hand, trembling, reached out, and when he touched the casket, he screamed. A screech owl flapped out of the box into our faces, scaring us and covering us with Paris green. Doodle was paralyzed, so I put him on my shoulder and carried him down the ladder, and even when we were outside in the bright sunshine, he clung to me, crying, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

When Doodle was five years old, I was embarrassed at having a brother of that age who couldn't walk, so I set out to teach him.

7. **Paris green** *n.*: poisonous green powder used to kill insects.





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We were down in Old Woman Swamp and it was spring and the sick-sweet smell of bay flowers hung everywhere like a mournful song. “I’m going to teach you to walk, Doodle,” I said.

150 He was sitting comfortably on the soft grass, leaning back against the pine. “Why?” he asked.

I hadn’t expected such an answer. “So I won’t have to haul you around all the time.”

“I can’t walk, Brother,” he said.

“Who says so?” I demanded.

“Mama, the doctor—everybody.”

“Oh, you can walk,” I said, and I took him by the arms and stood him up. He collapsed onto the grass like a half-empty flour sack. It was as if he had no bones in his little legs.

160 “Don’t hurt me, Brother,” he warned.

“Shut up. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m going to teach you to walk.” I heaved him up again, and again he collapsed.

## Notes

### WORD STUDY

Re-read lines 147–149.

Underline the **simile**, and explain what two things are being compared.



### INTERPRET

Pause at line 171. Underline the two statements the narrator makes about pride. Put his statements in your own words.

### WORD STUDY

Underline the **simile** in lines 184–186. What do you think the narrator means?

### VOCABULARY

**imminent** (im'ə-nənt) *adj.*: near; about to happen.

This time he did not lift his face up out of the rubber grass. “I just can’t do it. Let’s make honeysuckle wreaths.”

“Oh yes you can, Doodle,” I said. “All you got to do is try. Now come on,” and I hauled him up once more.

It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it’s a miracle I didn’t give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I did not know  
170 then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death. Every day that summer we went to the pine beside the stream of Old Woman Swamp, and I put him on his feet at least a hundred times each afternoon. Occasionally I too became discouraged because it didn’t seem as if he was trying, and I would say, “Doodle, don’t you *want* to learn to walk?”

He’d nod his head, and I’d say, “Well, if you don’t keep trying, you’ll never learn.” Then I’d paint for him a picture of us as old men, white-haired, him with a long white beard and me still pulling him around in the go-cart. This never failed to make  
180 him try again.

Finally, one day, after many weeks of practicing, he stood alone for a few seconds. When he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter peeling through the swamp like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done. Hope no longer hid in the dark palmetto thicket but perched like a cardinal in the lacy toothbrush tree, brilliantly visible. “Yes, yes,” I cried, and he cried it too, and the grass beneath us was soft and the smell of the swamp was sweet.

With success so **imminent**, we decided not to tell anyone  
190 until he could actually walk. Each day, barring rain, we sneaked into Old Woman Swamp, and by cotton-picking time Doodle was ready to show what he could do. He still wasn’t able to walk far, but we could wait no longer. Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do, like holding your breath. We chose to reveal all on October eighth, Doodle’s sixth birthday, and for weeks ahead we mooned around the house, promising everybody a most



spectacular surprise. Aunt Nicey said that, after so much talk, if we produced anything less tremendous than the Resurrection,<sup>8</sup> she was going to be disappointed.

200 At breakfast on our chosen day, when Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Nicey were in the dining room, I brought Doodle to the door in the go-cart just as usual and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hope to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he was standing alone I let them look. There wasn't a sound as Doodle walked slowly across the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry and ran over to him, hugging him and kissing him. Daddy hugged him too, so I went to Aunt Nicey, who was thanks-praying in the doorway, and began to waltz her around. We danced  
210 together quite well until she came down on my big toe with her brogans,<sup>9</sup> hurting me so badly I thought I was crippled for life.

Doodle told them it was I who had taught him to walk, so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry.

"What are you crying for?" asked Daddy, but I couldn't answer. They did not know that I did it for myself; that pride, whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices; and that Doodle walked only because I was ashamed of having a crippled brother.

220 Within a few months Doodle had learned to walk well and his go-cart was put up in the barn loft (it's still there) beside his little mahogany coffin. Now, when we roamed off together, resting often, we never turned back until our destination had been reached, and to help pass the time, we took up lying. From the beginning Doodle was a terrible liar, and he got me in the habit. Had anyone stopped to listen to us, we would have been sent off to Dix Hill.

My lies were scary, involved, and usually pointless, but Doodle's were twice as crazy. People in his stories all had wings and flew wherever they wanted to go. His favorite lie was about a

### INTERPRET

Re-read lines 215–218. Is the narrator describing pride that brings something wonderful or something terrible?

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### CLARIFY

Re-read lines 225–226. Dix Hill is a state mental hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina. What does the narrator mean by this statement?

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8. **Resurrection:** reference to the Christian belief in the rising of Jesus from the dead after his burial.

9. **brogans** (brō'gənz) *n.*: heavy, ankle-high shoes.



### VISUALIZE

Re-read lines 231–236. Underline the details that help you visualize Doodle's lie. Why is the peacock important in his lie?

### VOCABULARY

**iridescent** (ir'i-des'ənt) *adj.*: rainbowlike; displaying a shifting range of colors.

**serene** (sə-rēn') *adj.*: peaceful; calm.

**infallibility** (in-fal'ə-bil'ə-tē) *n.*: inability to make a mistake.

### EVALUATE

Pause at line 260. Do you think the narrator's "development program" is a good idea? Briefly explain.

230 boy named Peter who had a pet peacock with a ten-foot tail. Peter wore a golden robe that glittered so brightly that when he walked through the sunflowers they turned away from the sun to face him. When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread his magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the gloriously **iridescent**, rustling vortex.<sup>10</sup> Yes, I must admit it. Doodle could beat me lying.

Doodle and I spent lots of time thinking about our future. We decided that when we were grown, we'd live in Old Woman Swamp and pick dog's-tongue<sup>11</sup> for a living. Beside the stream, he planned, we'd build us a house of whispering leaves and the swamp birds would be our chickens. All day long (when we weren't gathering dog's-tongue) we'd swing through the cypresses on the rope vines, and if it rained we'd huddle beneath an umbrella tree and play stickfrog. Mama and Daddy could come and live with us if they wanted to. He even came up with the idea that he could marry Mama and I could marry Daddy. Of course, I was old enough to know this wouldn't work out, but the picture he painted was so beautiful and **serene** that all I  
250 could do was whisper yes, yes.

Once I had succeeded in teaching Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own **infallibility** and I prepared a terrific development program for him, unknown to Mama and Daddy, of course. I would teach him to run, to swim, to climb trees, and to fight. He, too, now believed in my infallibility, so we set the deadline for these accomplishments less than a year away, when, it had been decided, Doodle could start to school.

That winter we didn't make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But  
260 when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again. Success lay at the end of summer like a pot of gold, and our

10. **vortex** (vôr'teks') *n.*: something resembling a whirlpool.

11. **dog's-tongue** *n.*: wild vanilla.



campaign got off to a good start. On hot days, Doodle and I went down to Horsehead Landing, and I gave him swimming lessons or showed him how to row a boat. Sometimes we descended into the cool greenness of Old Woman Swamp and climbed the rope vines or boxed scientifically beneath the pine where he had learned to walk. Promise hung about us like leaves, and wherever we looked, ferns unfurled and birds broke into song.

270 That summer, the summer of 1918, was **blighted**. In May and June there was no rain and the crops withered, curled up, then died under the thirsty sun. One morning in July a hurricane came out of the east, tipping over the oaks in the yard and splitting the limbs of the elm trees. That afternoon it roared back out of the west, blew the fallen oaks around, snapping their roots and tearing them out of the earth like a hawk at the entrails<sup>12</sup> of a chicken. Cotton bolls were wrenched from the stalks and lay like green walnuts in the valleys between the rows, while the cornfield leaned over uniformly so that the tassels  
280 touched the ground. Doodle and I followed Daddy out into the cotton field, where he stood, shoulders sagging, surveying the ruin. When his chin sank down onto his chest, we were frightened, and Doodle slipped his hand into mine. Suddenly Daddy straightened his shoulders, raised a giant knuckly fist, and with a voice that seemed to rumble out of the earth itself began cursing heaven, hell, the weather, and the Republican party.<sup>13</sup> Doodle and I, prodding each other and giggling, went back to the house, knowing that everything would be all right.

290 And during that summer, strange names were heard through the house: Château-Thierry, Amiens, Soissons, and in her blessing at the supper table, Mama once said, "And bless the Pearsons, whose boy Joe was lost in Belleau Wood."<sup>14</sup>

12. **entrails** (en'trālz) *n.*: inner organs; guts.

13. **Republican party**: At this time most southern farmers were loyal Democrats.

14. **Château-Thierry** (sha'tō' tē-er'ē), **Amiens** (ā-myan'), **Soissons** (swā-sôn'), **Belleau Wood**: World War I battle sites in France.

## VOCABULARY

**blighted** (blīt'id) *v.* used as *adj.*: suffering from conditions that destroy or prevent growth.

## INTERPRET

Re-read lines 274–277.

Underline the **simile** the narrator uses to describe the destruction of the oak trees. Why do you think the writer chose this comparison?

## SYMBOLISM

Pause at line 288. If the "blighted" summer, including the violent hurricane, is a **symbol** of what is to come, what might lie in Doodle's future?





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### PREDICT

Underline the details in lines 309–313 that suggest Doodle is becoming increasingly ill and weak. Based on these details, what do you predict will happen to Doodle?

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So we came to that clove of seasons. School was only a few weeks away, and Doodle was far behind schedule. He could barely clear the ground when climbing up the rope vines, and his swimming was certainly not passable. We decided to double our efforts, to make that last drive and reach our pot of gold. I made him swim until he turned blue and row until he couldn't lift an oar. Wherever we went, I purposely walked fast, and  
300 although he kept up, his face turned red and his eyes became glazed. Once, he could go no further, so he collapsed on the ground and began to cry.

"Aw, come on, Doodle," I urged. "You can do it. Do you want to be different from everybody else when you start school?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"It certainly does," I said. "Now, come on," and I helped him up.

As we slipped through the dog days,<sup>15</sup> Doodle began to  
310 look feverish, and Mama felt his forehead, asking him if he felt

15. **dog days** *n.*: hot days in July and August, named after the Dog Star (Sirius), which rises and sets with the sun during this period.



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320       Daddy, Mama, Doodle, and I were seated at the dining-room table having lunch. It was a hot day, with all the windows and doors open in case a breeze should come. In the kitchen Aunt Nicey was humming softly. After a long silence, Daddy spoke. "It's so calm, I wouldn't be surprised if we had a storm this afternoon."

"I did," declared Doodle. "Down in the swamp."

330            “You did, eh?” said Daddy, ignoring my denial.

Suddenly, from out in the yard came a strange croaking noise. Doodle stopped eating, with a piece of bread poised ready for his mouth, his eyes popped round like two blue buttons. “What’s that?” he whispered.

340 By the time I had done this, Doodle had excused himself  
and had slipped out into the yard. He was looking up into the  
bleeding tree. "It's a great big red bird!" he called.

## VOCABULARY

**reiterated** (rē-it'ə-rāt'id) v.: repeated.

### INTERPRET



## VOCABULARY

**precariouly** (pri-ker'ē-əs-lē)  
*adv.*: unsteadily; insecurely.

**mar** (mār) *v.*: damage; spoil.

## SYMBOLISM

Re-read lines 346–351. In what ways does the bird remind you of Doodle?

## INTERPRET

Pause at line 364. Like Doodle, the scarlet ibis is described as being uncoordinated, delicate, and unique. How might the death of the ibis **foreshadow** the story's ending?

On the topmost branch a bird the size of a chicken, with scarlet feathers and long legs, was perched **precariouly**. Its wings hung down loosely, and as we watched, a feather dropped away and floated slowly down through the green leaves.

350 “It’s not even frightened of us,” Mama said.

“It looks tired,” Daddy added. “Or maybe sick.”

Doodle’s hands were clasped at his throat, and I had never seen him stand still so long. “What is it?” he asked.

Daddy shook his head. “I don’t know, maybe it’s—”

At that moment the bird began to flutter, but the wings were uncoordinated, and amid much flapping and a spray of flying feathers, it tumbled down, bumping through the limbs of the bleeding tree and landing at our feet with a thud. Its long, graceful neck jerked twice into an S, then straightened out, and the bird was still. A white veil came over the eyes, and the long white beak unhinged. Its legs were crossed and its clawlike feet were delicately curved at rest. Even death did not **mar** its grace, for it lay on the earth like a broken vase of red flowers, and we stood around it, awed by its exotic beauty.

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“It’s dead,” Mama said.

“What is it?” Doodle repeated.

“Go bring me the bird book,” said Daddy.

I ran into the house and brought back the bird book. As we watched, Daddy thumbed through its pages. “It’s a scarlet ibis,” he said, pointing to a picture. “It lives in the tropics—South America to Florida. A storm must have brought it here.”

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Sadly, we all looked back at the bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in *our* yard, beneath the bleeding tree.

“Let’s finish lunch,” Mama said, nudging us back toward the dining room.

“I’m not hungry,” said Doodle, and he knelt down beside the ibis.

“We’ve got peach cobbler for dessert,” Mama tempted from the doorway.

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Doodle remained kneeling. "I'm going to bury him."

"Don't you dare touch him," Mama warned. "There's no telling what disease he might have had."

"All right," said Doodle. "I won't."

Daddy, Mama, and I went back to the dining-room table, but we watched Doodle through the open door. He took out a piece of string from his pocket and, without touching the ibis, looped one end around its neck. Slowly, while singing softly "Shall We Gather at the River," he carried the bird around to the front yard and dug a hole in the flower garden, next to the petunia bed. Now we were watching him through the front window, but he didn't know it. His awkwardness at digging the hole with a shovel whose handle was twice as long as he was made us laugh, and we covered our mouths with our hands so he wouldn't hear.

When Doodle came into the dining room, he found us seriously eating our cobbler. He was pale and lingered just inside the screen door. "Did you get the scarlet ibis buried?" asked Daddy.

Doodle didn't speak but nodded his head.

"Go wash your hands, and then you can have some peach cobbler," said Mama.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"Dead birds is bad luck," said Aunt Nicey, poking her head from the kitchen door. "Specially *red* dead birds!"

As soon as I had finished eating, Doodle and I hurried off to Horsehead Landing. Time was short, and Doodle still had a long way to go if he was going to keep up with the other boys when he started school. The sun, gilded with the yellow cast of autumn, still burned fiercely, but the dark green woods through which we passed were shady and cool. When we reached the landing, Doodle said he was too tired to swim, so we got into a skiff and floated down the creek with the tide. Far off in the marsh a rail was scolding, and over on the beach locusts were singing in the myrtle trees. Doodle did not speak and kept his head turned away, letting one hand trail limply in the water.

### INFER

Pause at line 395. Why is Doodle so fascinated by the scarlet ibis? Why does he take such pains to bury it?

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### FLUENCY

The description of Doodle's burial of the scarlet ibis in lines 385–399 is a very moving passage. Read the boxed passage aloud twice. Focus on conveying meaning the first time you read. The second time you read, try to convey the passage's emotional overtones.

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### INTERPRET

Re-read lines 416–425. Circle the details describing the approaching storm. What do you think the storm **foreshadows**?

### INTERPRET

Underline line 441. Then, underline the parts of the story where you have heard this before—Doodle’s begging his brother not to leave him or not to hurt him. What could these words **foreshadow**?

### INFER

Pause at line 447. Why does the narrator leave Doodle behind?

After we had drifted a long way, I put the oars in place and made Doodle row back against the tide. Black clouds began to gather in the southwest, and he kept watching them, trying to pull the oars a little faster. When we reached Horsehead  
420 Landing, lightning was playing across half the sky and thunder roared out, hiding even the sound of the sea. The sun disappeared and darkness descended, almost like night. Flocks of marsh crows flew by, heading inland to their roosting trees, and two egrets, squawking, arose from the oyster-rock shallows and careened away.

Doodle was both tired and frightened, and when he stepped from the skiff he collapsed onto the mud, sending an armada<sup>16</sup> of fiddler crabs rustling off into the marsh grass. I helped him up, and as he wiped the mud off his trousers, he  
430 smiled at me ashamedly. He had failed and we both knew it, so we started back home, racing the storm. We never spoke (what are the words that can solder<sup>17</sup> cracked pride?), but I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy. The lightning was near now, and from fear he walked so close behind me he kept stepping on my heels. The faster I walked, the faster he walked, so I began to run. The rain was coming, roaring through the pines, and then, like a bursting Roman candle, a gum tree ahead of us was shattered by a bolt of lightning. When the deafening peal of thunder had died, and in the moment before the  
440 rain arrived, I heard Doodle, who had fallen behind, cry out, “Brother, Brother, don’t leave me! Don’t leave me!”

The knowledge that Doodle’s and my plans had come to naught was bitter, and that streak of cruelty within me awakened. I ran as fast as I could, leaving him far behind with a wall of rain dividing us. The drops stung my face like nettles, and the wind flared the wet, glistening leaves of the bordering trees. Soon I could hear his voice no more.

16. **armada** (är·mä’də) *n.*: group. *Armada* is generally used to mean “fleet, or group, of warships.”

17. **solder** (säd’ər) *v.*: patch or repair. Solder is a mixture of metals melted and used to repair metal parts.



I hadn't run too far before I became tired, and the flood of childish spite evanesced<sup>18</sup> as well. I stopped and waited for  
 450 Doodle. The sound of rain was everywhere, but the wind had died and it fell straight down in parallel paths like ropes hanging from the sky. As I waited, I peered through the downpour, but no one came. Finally I went back and found him huddled beneath a red nightshade bush beside the road. He was sitting on the ground, his face buried in his arms, which were resting on his drawn-up knees. "Let's go, Doodle," I said.

He didn't answer, so I placed my hand on his forehead and lifted his head. Limply, he fell backward onto the earth. He had been bleeding from the mouth, and his neck and the front of his  
 460 shirt were stained a brilliant red.

"Doodle! Doodle!" I cried, shaking him, but there was no answer but the ropy rain. He lay very awkwardly, with his head thrown far back, making his vermilion<sup>19</sup> neck appear unusually long and slim. His little legs, bent sharply at the knees, had never before seemed so fragile, so thin.

I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked very familiar. "Doodle!" I screamed above the pounding storm, and threw my body to the earth above his. For a long, long time, it seemed forever, I lay there crying, sheltering my  
 470 fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy<sup>20</sup> of rain.

18. **evanesced** (ev'ə-nest') *v.*: faded away; disappeared.

19. **vermilion** (vər-mil'yən) *adj.*: bright red.

20. **heresy** (her'ə-sē) *n.*: here, mockery. *Heresy* generally means "denial of what is commonly believed to be true" or "rejection of a church's teaching."



Corel.

### SYMBOLISM

What do the details in the description of Doodle in the last two paragraphs remind you of? Why do you think the writer makes this association?

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### SYMBOLISM

In lines 468–470, what does the narrator call his dead brother?

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# The Scarlet Ibis

**Symbol Chart** In “The Scarlet Ibis,” some of the people, places, things, and events stand both for themselves and for something beyond themselves. Fill out the symbol chart below to see how symbols convey meaning in the story. In the first column are passages from the story. Locate a symbol from each passage, and write it in the second column. Then, write the meaning of the symbol in the third column. The first row is done for you. Fill in the bottom row with a symbolic story passage that you find on your own.

Story Passage	Symbol	Meaning
That winter we didn’t make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again (lines 258–260).	spring	new start; rebirth
When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread his magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the gloriously iridescent, rustling vortex (lines 233–236).		
Sadly, we all looked back at the bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in <i>our</i> yard, beneath the bleeding tree (lines 372–374).		



### Test Practice

## The Scarlet Ibis

Complete the sample test item below. Then, read the explanation at the right.

Sample Test Question	Explanation of the Correct Answer
<p>Which of the following are recurring <b>symbols</b> in “The Scarlet Ibis”?</p> <p><b>A</b> birds</p> <p><b>B</b> flowers</p> <p><b>C</b> bees</p> <p><b>D</b> tombstones</p>	<p>The correct answer is <i>A</i>; the writer uses birds as symbols all through the story. <i>B</i> and <i>D</i> are not correct because they are used only once. <i>C</i> is not correct because bees aren’t mentioned in the story.</p>

**DIRECTIONS:** Circle the letter of each correct answer.

- The description of Doodle’s last summer as “blighted” **foreshadows** —
  - Doodle’s birth
  - Doodle’s coming death
  - the scarlet ibis
  - life in the South
- The scarlet ibis **symbolizes** Doodle in that both the child and bird are —
  - able to move very quickly
  - trying to learn to fly
  - rare, beautiful, and fragile
  - very fond of being outside
- The **setting** of the story as presented in the opening paragraph could best be described as—
  - sad and suggestive of death
  - cheerful and suggestive of life
  - peaceful and suggestive of heaven
  - haunted and suggestive of danger
- Which of these details is *not* an example of **foreshadowing** in the story?
  - “‘Don’t hurt me, Brother,’ he warned.”
  - “The oriole nest . . . rocked back and forth like an empty cradle.”
  - “One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket. . . .”
  - “Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do. . . .”

**SKILLS  
FOCUS**

**Literary Skills**  
Analyze  
symbolism.



### Test Practice

## The Scarlet Ibis

### Similes

**DIRECTIONS:** Circle the letter of the correct response.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

#### Vocabulary Skills

Identify and interpret similes. Use words in context.

- What does this **simile** indicate?  
*They named him William Armstrong, which was like tying a big tail on a small kite.*
  - The baby's abilities are amazing.
  - Babies do not need decoration.
  - The baby's name is too grand.
  - Coming up with names is tricky.
- Which of the following sentences contains a **simile**?
  - The flower garden was brown.
  - A grindstone stands where the bleeding tree stood.
  - The oriole nest rocked back and forth like an empty cradle.
  - The pale fence across the yard stands straight.
- Which of the following sentences contains a **simile**?
  - For the first time he became one of us.
  - He was a burden in many ways.
  - Finally, I could see I was licked.

### Vocabulary in Context

**DIRECTIONS:** Complete the paragraph below by writing words from the box in the correct blanks. Not all words from the box will be used.

#### Word Box

sullenly  
imminent  
iridescent  
serene  
infallibility  
blighted  
doggedness  
reiterated  
precariously  
mar

Tony stared (1) \_\_\_\_\_ out the window. He was unhappy about the weather. The vacation brochure had showed a (2) \_\_\_\_\_ lake, calm and blue. Another photograph featured a waterfall that sparkled, (3) \_\_\_\_\_ and colorful. Here, however, Tony saw nothing but a (4) \_\_\_\_\_ landscape, brown, bare, and damp. He said to the empty room, "Nothing is going to (5) \_\_\_\_\_ my vacation! I'm going to enjoy myself, rain or shine."



## Before You Read

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

### The Scarlet Ibis by James Hurst

Sometimes we act in ways we later regret. Imagine that you could go back in time and change the way you treated someone you love. What would you change—and how? The narrator of “The Scarlet Ibis” remembers a time he was cruel and selfish. He thought he was doing the right thing, but pride clouded his judgment. As you read the story, decide how you would have acted in the narrator’s place.

#### LITERARY FOCUS: SYMBOLS

A **symbol** is a person, a place, a thing, or an event that stands both for itself and for something beyond itself. For example, you may find that a writer mentions a mirror many times in a story. A mirror is an actual object, but the writer may be using it to stand for vanity or for an unreal world. Writers invent symbols to deepen the meaning of their stories. As you read “The Scarlet Ibis,” you’ll notice that the writer keeps drawing similarities and connections between one character and the scarlet ibis. The ibis is a rare water bird with long legs; a long, slender, curved bill; and brilliant orange-red feathers.

- As you read, look for clues that suggest that the ibis stands for something more than itself.

#### READING SKILLS: MAKING INFERENCES

An **inference** is an intelligent guess you make about the meaning of something. You form inferences by putting together several related details and then generalizing about what they might mean. In making inferences about characters, you also draw on your own experiences. For example, if you observe a character who speaks harshly to her dog, slams the door, and won’t speak to her classmates, you can make an inference that this character is upset about something. You make that inference based on story details and on your own experience with people.

To make inferences about the meaning of a symbol, follow these steps:

- Pay careful attention to details. Does the writer repeat something, such as a color, an animal, or an object, throughout the story?
- Think about what the color, animal, or object represents to you. If the object is a ring, for example, it may represent love or faithfulness.
- Then, combine your own experience and the evidence in the story to make an inference about what this object or animal or color might signify.
- Be prepared to revise your inferences about symbols. You might have to re-read the story to be sure your inference holds up.



**Literary Skills**  
Understand symbols.  
**Reading Skills**  
Make inferences from details.  
**Vocabulary Skills**  
Understand similes.

## SHORT STORY

### VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

#### PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

The following words appear in the story you’re about to read. You may want to become familiar with them before you begin reading.

**sullenly** (sul’ən-lee) *adv.*: resentfully; gloomily  
*Sullenly, the narrator took Doodle with him, all the while resenting the task.*

**blighted** (blīt’id) *v.* used as *adj.*: suffering from conditions that destroy or prevent growth.  
*The blighted fields would never produce any corn or cotton.*

**imminent** (im’ə-nənt) *adj.*: near; about to happen.  
*When thunder boomed and the sky darkened, they could tell the storm was imminent.*

**iridescent** (ir’i-des’ənt) *adj.*: rainbowlike; displaying a shifting range of colors.  
*The bird’s wings glowed with iridescent color.*

**serene** (sə-rēn) *adj.*: peaceful; calm.  
*The serene lake was as smooth and calm as a mirror.*

**infallibility** (in-fal’ə-bil’ē-tē) *n.*: inability to make a mistake.  
*Because of his belief in his infallibility, the narrator never doubted the success of his project.*

**doggedness** (dōg’id-nis) *n.*: stubbornness; persistence.  
*Because of his doggedness, Doodle did learn to walk.*

**reiterated** (rē-it’ə-rāt’id) *v.*: repeated.  
*Several times, the narrator reiterated his desire to teach Doodle to swim.*

**precariouly** (pri-ker’ē-əs-lee) *adv.*: unsteadily; insecurely.  
*Doodle balanced precariouly on his thin legs.*

**mar** (mār) *v.*: damage; spoil.  
*The storm could mar the cotton and other crops, causing the loss of acres of profits.*

#### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

**Figurative language** helps you see familiar things in new ways. The simplest type of figurative language, the **simile**, uses comparisons to create fresh, new meaning. A simile is a comparison between two dissimilar things linked by a word such as *like*, *as*, or *resembles*. For example:

The storm was as fierce as an angry lion.

In this simile, a storm is compared to a lion. Comparing a fierce storm to an angry lion helps readers see how violent and dangerous the storm was.


As you read “The Scarlet Ibis,” look for other similes. Figure out what is being compared. Ask yourself: “What does this simile help me see? How does it help me understand the story more fully?”

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# The Scarlet Ibis

James Hurst



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It was in the clove of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree. The flower garden was stained with rotting brown magnolia petals, and ironweeds grew rank<sup>1</sup> amid the purple phlox. The five o'clocks by the chimney still marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm was untenanted and rocked back and forth like an empty cradle. The last graveyard flowers were blooming, and their small drifted across the cotton field and through every room of our house, speaking softly the names of our dead.

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It's strange that all this is still so clear to me, now that that summer has long since fled and time has had its way. A grindstone stands where the bleeding tree stood, just outside the kitchen door, and now if an oriole sings in the elm, its song seems to die up in the leaves, a silvery dust. The flower garden is prim, the house a gleaming white, and the pale fence across the yard stands straight and spruce. But sometimes (like right now), as I sit in the cool, green-draped parlor, the grindstone begins to turn, and time with all its changes is ground away—and I remember Doodle.

**CLARIFY**

A clove (klov) is a division or split of some kind. During what time of year does this story take place?

**It takes place during the time when summer turns into autumn.**

**IDENTIFY**

Re-read the narrator's description of the garden (lines 1–9). Underline the words and phrases that bring to mind death or dying.

Notes

**IDENTIFY**

Re-read lines 20–23. Underline the detail that tells you that the story takes place in the past.

**INTERPRET**

In lines 32–33, the narrator compares his brother's given name to a "big tail on a small kite." What does this simile tell you about the narrator's opinion of his brother's name?

**The simile suggests that the narrator thinks the name "William Armstrong" is too weighty and important-sounding for a child as physically weak as his brother.**

**IDENTIFY**

Re-read lines 35–41. What does the narrator want? Underline what you find out.

**IDENTIFY**

Re-read lines 20–23. Underline the detail that tells you that the story takes place in the past.

**INTERPRET**

In lines 32–33, the narrator compares his brother's given name to a "big tail on a small kite." What does this simile tell you about the narrator's opinion of his brother's name?

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**IDENTIFY**

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Doodle was just about the craziest brother a boy ever had. Of course, he wasn't a crazy crazy like old Miss Leedie, who was in love with President Wilson and wrote him a letter every day, but was a nice crazy, like someone you meet in your dreams. He was born when I was six and was, from the outset, a disappointment. He seemed all head, with a tiny body which was red and shriveled like an old man's. Everybody thought he was going to die—everybody except Aunt Nicey, who had delivered him. She said he would live because he was born in a caul<sup>2</sup> and cauls were made from Jesus' nightgown. Daddy had Mr. Heath, the carpenter, build a little mahogany coffin for him. But he didn't die, and when he was three months old, Mama and Daddy decided they might as well name him. They named him William Armstrong, which was like tying a big tail on a small kite. Such a name sounds good only on a tombstone.

I thought myself pretty smart at many things, like holding my breath, running, jumping, or climbing the vines in Old Woman Swamp, and I wanted more than anything else someone to race to Horsehead Landing, someone to box with, and someone to perch with in the top fork of the great pine behind the barn, where across the fields and swamps you could see the sea. I wanted a brother. But Mama, crying, told me that even if William Armstrong lived, he would never do these things with me. He might not, she sobbed, even be "all there." He might, as long as he lived, lie on the rubber sheet in the center of the bed in the front bedroom where the white marquise<sup>3</sup> curtains billowed out in the afternoon sea breeze, rustling like palmetto fronds.<sup>4</sup>

It was bad enough having an invalid brother, but having one who possibly was not all there was unbearable, so I began to make plans to kill him by smothering him with a pillow.

**IDENTIFY**

Re-read lines 35–41. What does the narrator want? Underline what you find out.

**IDENTIFY**

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**IDENTIFY**

Re-read lines 35–41. What does the narrator want? Underline what you find out.



However, one afternoon as I watched him, my head poked between the iron posts of the foot of the bed, he looked straight at me and grinned. I skipped through the rooms, down the echoing halls, shouting, "Mama, he smiled. He's all there! He's all there!" and he was.

When he was two, if you laid him on his stomach, he began to try to move himself, straining terribly. The doctor said that with his weak heart this strain would probably kill him, but it didn't. Trembling, he'd push himself up, turning first red, then a soft purple, and finally collapse back onto the bed like an old worn-out doll. I can still see Mama watching him, her hand pressed tight across her mouth, her eyes wide and unblinking. But he learned to crawl (it was his third winter), and we brought him out of the front bedroom, putting him on the rug before the fireplace. For the first time he became one of us.

As long as he lay all the time in bed, we called him William Armstrong, even though it was formal and sounded as if we were referring to one of our ancestors, but with his creeping around on the deerskin rug and beginning to talk, something had to be done about his name. It was I who renamed him.

When he crawled, he crawled backward, as if he were in reverse and couldn't change gears. If you called him, he'd turn around as if he were going in the other direction, then he'd back right up to you to be picked up. Crawling backward made him look like a doodlebug\* so I began to call him Doodle, and in time even Mama and Daddy thought it was a better name than William Armstrong. Only Aunt Niece disagreed. She said caul babies should be treated with special respect since they might turn out to be saints. Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

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**INFER**

Why is it so important to the narrator that his brother is "all there" (lines 54–59)?

**Possible response: The narrator wants Doodle to develop normally physically so they can play together.**

**INTERPRET**

What does the description in lines 59–61 tell you about Doodle?

**Doodle is not physically strong.**

**IDENTIFY**

Pause at line 79. Why doesn't Aunt Niece like Doodle's nickname?

**She says that the name does not show enough respect for babies like Doodle, who are often blessed or gifted in some way.**

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Part 1

Collection 6: Symbolism and Allegory

Although Doodle learned to crawl, he showed no signs of walking, but he wasn't idle. He talked so much that we all quit listening to what he said. It was about this time that Daddy built him a go-cart, and I had to pull him around. At first I just paraded him up and down the piazza,<sup>6</sup> but then he started crying to be taken out into the yard and it ended up by my having to lug him wherever I went. If I so much as picked up my cap, he'd start crying to go with me, and Mama would call from wherever she was, "Take Doodle with you."

He was a burden in many ways. The doctor had said that he mustn't get too excited, too hot, too cold, or too tired and that he must always be treated gently. A long list of don'ts went with him, all of which I ignored once we got out of the house. To discourage his coming with me, I'd run with him across the ends of the cotton rows and careen him around corners on two wheels. Sometimes I accidentally turned him over, but he never told Mama. His skin was very sensitive, and he had to wear a big straw hat whenever he went out. When the going got rough and he had to cling to the sides of the go-cart, the hat slipped all the way down over his ears. He was a sight. Finally, I could see I was licked. Doodle was my brother, and he was going to cling to me forever, no matter what I did, so I dragged him across the burning cotton field to share with him the only beauty I knew, Old Woman Swamp. I pulled the go-cart through the sawtooth fern, down into the green dimness where the palmetto fronds whispered by the stream. I lifted him out and set him down in the soft rubber grass beside a tall pine. His eyes were round with wonder as he gazed about him, and his little hands began to stroke the rubber grass. Then he began to cry.

"For heaven's sake, what's the matter?" I asked, annoyed. "It's so pretty," he said. "So pretty, pretty, pretty."

After that day Doodle and I often went down into Old Woman Swamp. I would gather wildflowers, wild violets,

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**IDENTIFY**

What does the narrator transport Doodle in (lines 82–90)? Underline the sentence where you find out.

**Possible response: The narrator is a normal-sized boy, but Doodle is tiny, even for his age. The narrator is pulling Doodle behind him in a homemade cart. He is going very fast, and Doodle is grasping the sides of the cart. Doodle is wearing a big hat that has slipped down over his ears.**

**INFER**

Re-read lines 108–112, and circle the details that help you infer Doodle's character traits. What are they?

**He is emotional and responsive to beauty.**

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The Scarlet Ibis



CLARIFY

Re-read the long sentence in lines 122–125. What is the narrator saying about the relationship between love and cruelty?

**The narrator is saying that cruelty can spring from love.**

VOCABULARY

**sullenly** (sul'an (ə) adv): resentfully; gloomily.

INFER

Pause at line 144. Why do you think the narrator shows Doodle the coffin? What might this event foreshadow?

**Possible answer: The narrator is being mean to Doodle. Perhaps he is trying to scare Doodle so that Doodle will do what the narrator wants him to do. At some point in the story, the narrator or Doodle will die.**

honey suckle, yellow jasmine, snakeflowers, and waterlilies, and with wire grass we'd weave them into necklaces and crowns. We'd bedeck ourselves with our handiwork and loll about thus beautified, beyond the touch of the everyday world. Then when the slanted rays of the sun burned orange in the tops of the pines, we'd drop our jewels into the stream and watch them float away toward the sea.

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There is within me (and with sadness I have watched it in others) a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love, much as our blood sometimes bears the seed of our destruction, and at times I was mean to Doodle. One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket, telling him how we all had believed he would die. It was covered with a film of Paris green? sprinkled to kill the rats, and screech owls had built a nest inside it.

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Doodle studied the mahogany box for a long time, then said, "It's not mine."

"It is," I said. "And before I'll help you down from the loft, you're going to have to touch it."

"I won't touch it," he said **sullenly**.

"Then I'll leave you here by yourself," I threatened, and made as if I were going down.

Doodle was frightened of being left. "Don't go leave me, Brother," he cried, and he leaned toward the coffin. His hand, trembling, reached out, and when he touched the casket, he screamed. A screech owl flapped out of the box into our faces, scaring us and covering us with Paris green. Doodle was paralyzed, so I put him on my shoulder and carried him down the ladder, and even when we were outside in the bright sunshine, he clung to me, crying, "**Don't leave me. Don't leave me.**"

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When Doodle was five years old, I was embarrassed at having a brother of that age who couldn't walk, so I set out to teach him.

7. Paris green n.: poisonous green powder used to kill insects.

Collection 6: Symbolism and Allegory

Part 1

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Notes

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WORD STUDY

Re-read lines 147–149. Underline the **simile**, and explain what two things are being compared.

**Possible response: The scent of the flowers is compared to a "mournful song." The simile suggests the hymns sung at funerals.**

We were down in Old Woman Swamp and it was spring and the sick-sweet smell of bay flowers hung everywhere like a mournful song. "I'm going to teach you to walk, Doodle," I said.

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He was sitting comfortably on the soft grass, leaning back against the pine. "Why?" he asked.

I hadn't expected such an answer. "So I won't have to haul you around all the time."

"I can't walk, Brother," he said.

"Who says so?" I demanded.

"Mama, the doctor—everybody."

"Oh, you can walk," I said, and I took him by the arms and stood him up. He collapsed onto the grass like a half-empty flour sack. It was as if he had no bones in his little legs.

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"Don't hurt me, Brother," he warned.

"Shut up. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to teach you to walk." I heaved him up again, and again he collapsed.

The Scarlet Ibis

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**INTERPRET**

Pause at line 171. Underline the two statements the narrator makes about pride. Put his statements in your own words.

**He says that everyone wants to be proud of something or someone. He also says that pride brings both good things and bad things.**

**WORD STUDY**

Underline the simile in lines 184–186. What do you think the narrator means?

**The simile is comparing hope to a cardinal whose brilliant red color suggests a powerful life force.**

**VOCABULARY**

**imminent** (im'ə-nənt) *adj.*: near, about to happen.

This time he did not lift his face up out of the rubber grass. "I just can't do it. Let's make honeysuckle wreaths."

"Oh yes you can, Doodle," I said. "All you got to do is try. Now come on," and I hauled him up once more.

It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it's a miracle I didn't give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death. Every day that summer we went to the pine beside the stream of Old Woman Swamp, and I put him on his feet at least a hundred times each afternoon. Occasionally I too became discouraged because it didn't seem as if he was trying, and I would say, "Doodle, don't you want to learn to walk?"

He'd nod his head, and I'd say, "Well, if you don't keep trying, you'll never learn." Then I'd point for him a picture of us as old men, white-haired, him with a long white beard and me still pulling him around in the go-cart. This never failed to make him try again.

Finally, one day, after many weeks of practicing, he stood alone for a few seconds. When he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter peeling through the swamp like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done. Hope no longer hid in the dark palmetto thicket but perched like a cardinal in the lacy toothbrush tree, brilliantly visible. "Yes, yes," I cried, and he cried it too, and the grass beneath us was soft and the smell of the swamp was sweet.

With success so **imminent**, we decided not to tell anyone until he could actually walk. Each day, barring rain, we sneaked into Old Woman Swamp, and by cotton-picking time Doodle was ready to show what he could do. He still wasn't able to walk far, but we could wait no longer. Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do, like holding your breath. We chose to reveal all on October eighth, Doodle's sixth birthday, and for weeks ahead we mooned around the house, promising everybody a most

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Part 1

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**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 215–218. Is the narrator describing pride that brings something wonderful or something terrible?

**Possible answer: It has brought both, as the narrator predicted. The narrator taught Doodle to walk, but for a selfish reason. The narrator calls himself a "slave" to his pride, which suggests there may be unhappy consequences.**

**CLARIFY**

Re-read lines 225–226. Dix Hill is a state mental hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina. What does the narrator mean by this statement?

**He means that people who heard them would have thought they were insane.**

spectacular surprise, Aunt Nicey said that, after so much talk, if we produced anything less tremendous than the Resurrection,<sup>8</sup> she was going to be disappointed.

At breakfast on our chosen day, when Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Nicey were in the dining room, I brought Doodle to the door in the go-cart just as usual and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hope to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he was standing alone I let them look. There wasn't a sound as Doodle walked slowly across the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry and ran over to him, hugging him and kissing him. Daddy hugged him too, so I went to Aunt Nicey, who was thanks-praying in the doorway, and began to waltz her around. We danced together quite well until she came down on my big toe with her brogans,<sup>9</sup> hurting me so badly I thought I was crippled for life.

Doodle told them it was I who had taught him to walk, so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry.

"What are you crying for?" asked Daddy, but I couldn't answer. They did not know that I did it for myself; that pride, whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices; and that Doodle walked only because I was ashamed of having a crippled brother.

Within a few months Doodle had learned to walk well and his go-cart was put up in the barn loft (it's still there) beside his little mahogany coffin. Now, when we roumed off together, resting often, we never turned back until our destination had been reached, and to help pass the time, we took up lying. From the beginning Doodle was a terrible liar, and he got me in the habit. Had anyone stopped to listen to us, we would have been sent off to Dix Hill.

My lies were scary, involved, and usually pointless, but Doodle's were twice as crazy. People in his stories all had wings and flew wherever they wanted to go. His favorite lie was about a

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230 boy named Peter who had a pet peacock with a ten-foot tail. Peter wore a golden robe that glittered so brightly that when he walked through the sunflowers they turned away from the sun to face him. When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread his magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the gloriously iridescent, rustling vortex.<sup>10</sup> Yes, I must admit it, Doodle could beat me lying.

240 Doodle and I spent lots of time thinking about our future. We decided that when we were grown, we'd live in Old Woman Swamp and pick dog's-tongue<sup>11</sup> for a living. Beside the stream, he planned, we'd build us a house of whispering leaves and the swamp birds would be our chickens. All day long (when we weren't gathering dog's-tongue) we'd swing through the cy- presses on the rope vines, and if it rained we'd huddle beneath an umbrella tree and play stickfrog. Mama and Daddy could come and live with us if they wanted to. He even came up with the idea that he could marry Mama and I could marry Daddy. Of course, I was old enough to know this wouldn't work out, but the picture he painted was so beautiful and serene that all I could do was whisper yes, yes.

250 Once I had succeeded in teaching Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own infallibility and I prepared a terrific development program for him, unknown to Mama and Daddy, of course. I would teach him to run, to swim, to climb trees, and to fight. He, too, now believed in my infallibility, so we set the deadline for these accomplishments less than a year away; when, it had been decided, Doodle could start to school.

260 That winter we didn't make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again. Success lay at the end of summer like a pot of gold, and our

**VISUALIZE**  
Re-read lines 231–236. Underline the details that help you visualize Doodle's lie. Why is the peacock important in his lie?  
**Possible response: The peacock is important because it protects him. Perhaps he is thinking of being with someone who is kinder than his brother.**

**VOCABULARY**  
**iridescent** (i-rī-de'ənt) *adj.*: rainbowlike; displaying a shifting range of colors.  
**serene** (sə-rēn) *adj.*: peaceful, calm.  
**infallibility** (in-fal'ə-bil'ə-tē) *n.*: inability to make a mistake.

**EVALUATE**  
Pause at line 260. Do you think the narrator's "development program" is a good idea? Briefly explain.  
**Possible response: The narrator's "development program" is too difficult for Doodle. Doodle's colds suggest that he is weaker than the narrator realizes.**

10. vortex (vórtēks) *n.*: something resembling a whirlpool.  
11. dog's-tongue *n.*: wild vanilla.

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campaign got off to a good start. On hot days, Doodle and I went down to Horsehead Landing, and I gave him swimming lessons or showed him how to row a boat. Sometimes we descended into the cool greenness of Old Woman Swamp and climbed the rope vines or boxed scientifically beneath the pine where he had learned to walk. Promise hung about us like leaves, and wherever we looked, ferns unfurled and birds broke into song.

270 That summer, the summer of 1918, was blighted. In May and June there was no rain and the crops withered, curled up, then died under the thirsty sun. One morning in July a hurricane came out of the east, tipping over the oaks in the yard and splitting the limbs of the elm trees. That afternoon it roared back out of the west, blew the fallen oaks around, snapping their roots and tearing them out of the earth like a hawk at the entails<sup>12</sup> of a chicken. Cotton bolls were wrenched from the stalks and lay like green walnuts in the valleys between the rows, while the cornfield leaned over uniformly so that the tassels touched the ground. Doodle and I followed Daddy out into the cotton field, where he stood, shoulders sagging, surveying the ruin. When his chin sank down onto his chest, we were frightened, and Doodle slipped his hand into mine. Suddenly Daddy straightened his shoulders, raised a giant knuckly fist, and with a voice that seemed to rumble out of the earth itself began cursing heaven, hell, the weather, and the Republican party.<sup>13</sup> Doodle and I, prodding each other and giggling, went back to the house, knowing that everything would be all right.

280 And during that summer, strange names were heard through the house: Château-Thierry, Amiens, Soissons, and in her blessing at the supper table, Mama once said, "And bless the Parsons, whose boy Joe was lost in Belleau Wood."<sup>14</sup>

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**VOCABULARY**  
**blighted** (blīt'əd) *v.* used as *adj.*: suffering from conditions that destroy or prevent growth.

**INTERPRET**  
Re-read lines 274–277. Underline the simile the narrator uses to describe the destruction of the oak trees. Why do you think the writer chose this comparison?  
**The writer is using a bird in the simile as he has used birds to represent other things in the story.**

**SYMBOLISM**  
Pause at line 288. If the "blighted" summer, including the violent hurricane, is a symbol of what is to come, what might lie in Doodle's future?  
**If the weather is symbolic, then Doodle is in for a very bad time, and may even die.**

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12. entails (en'talz) *n.*: inner organs; guts.  
13. Republican party: At this time most southern farmers were loyal Democrats.  
14. Château-Thierry (shə'tō-'te-er-ē), Amiens (ā-myān'), Soissons (swā'sōn'), Belleau (be-lō') Wood: World War I battle sites in France.





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So we came to that clove of seasons. School was only a few weeks away, and Doodle was far behind schedule. He could barely clear the ground when climbing up the rope vines, and his swimming was certainly not passable. We decided to double our efforts, to make that last drive and reach our pot of gold. I made him swim until he turned blue and row until he couldn't lift an oar. Wherever we went, I purposely walked fast, and although he kept up, his face turned red and his eyes became glazed. Once, he could go no further, so he collapsed on the ground and began to cry.

"Aw, come on, Doodle," I urged. "You can do it. Do you want to be different from everybody else when you start school?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"It certainly does," I said. "Now, come on," and I helped him up.

As we slipped through the dog days,<sup>15</sup> Doodle began to look feverish, and Mama felt his forehead, asking him if he felt

15. **dog days** *n.*: hot days in July and August, named after the Dog Star (Sirius), which rises and sets with the sun during this period.

#### PREDICT

Underline the details in lines 309–313 that suggest Doodle is becoming increasingly ill and weak. Based on these details, what do you predict will happen to Doodle?

**Doodle is failing and might collapse—or perhaps even die—soon.**

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ill. At night he didn't sleep well, and sometimes he had nightmares, crying out until I touched him and said, "Wake up, Doodle. Wake up."

It was Saturday noon, just a few days before school was to start. I should have already admitted defeat, but my pride wouldn't let me. The excitement of our program had now been gone for weeks, but still we kept on with a tired **doggedness**. It was too late to turn back, for we had both wandered too far into a net of expectations and had left no crumbs behind.

Daddy, Mama, Doodle, and I were seated at the dining-room table having lunch. It was a hot day, with all the windows and doors open in case a breeze should come. In the kitchen Aunt Niecey was humming softly. After a long silence, Daddy spoke. "It's so calm. I wouldn't be surprised if we had a storm this afternoon."

"I haven't heard a rain frog," said Mama, who believed in signs, as she served the bread around the table.

"I did," declared Doodle. "Down in the swamp."

"He didn't," I said contrarily.

"You did, eh?" said Daddy, ignoring my denial. "He certainly did," Doodle **reiterated**, scowling at me over the top of his iced-tea glass, and we were quiet again.

Suddenly, from out in the yard came a strange croaking noise. Doodle stopped eating, with a piece of bread poised ready for his mouth, his eyes popped round like two blue buttons. "What's that?" he whispered.

I jumped up, knocking over my chair, and had reached the door when Mama called, "Pick up the chair, sit down again, and say excuse me."

By the time I had done this, Doodle had excused himself and had slipped out into the yard. He was looking up into the bleeding tree. "It's a great big red bird!" he called.

The bird croaked loudly again, and Mama and Daddy came out into the yard. We shaded our eyes with our hands against the hazy glare of the sun and peered up through the still leaves,

#### VOCABULARY

**doggedness** (dɒɡ'di:nɪs) *n.*: stubbornness; persistence.  
**reiterated** (ri-'i-tə-rāt'id) *v.*: repeated.

#### INTERPRET

In your own words, explain what the narrator means in lines 316–319.

**Their desire to get**

**Doodle to succeed**

**physically is blinding**

**them to the danger to**

**Doodle's health. "Left**

**no crumbs behind"**

**means that they left**

**no path behind**

**them—no way out of**

**their predicament.**



**VOCABULARY**

Pause at line 346. Like Doodle, the scarlet ibis is described as being uncoordinated, delicate, and unique. How might the death of the ibis foreshadow the story's ending?

**Both are tired and sick.**

On the topmost branch a bird the size of a chicken, with scarlet feathers and long legs, was perched **precariously**. Its wings hung down loosely, and as we watched, a feather dropped away and floated slowly down through the green leaves.

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"It's not even frightened of us," Mama said.

"It looks tired," Daddy added. "Or maybe sick."

Doodle's hands were clasped at his throat, and I had never seen him stand still so long. "What is it?" he asked.

Daddy shook his head. "I don't know, maybe it's—"

At that moment the bird began to flutter, but the wings were uncoordinated, and amid much flapping and a spray of flying feathers, it tumbled down, bumping through the limbs of the bleeding tree and landing at our feet with a thud. Its long, graceful neck jerked twice into an S, then straightened out, and the bird was still. A white veil came over the eyes, and the long white beak unhinged. Its legs were crossed and its clawlike feet were delicately curved at rest. Even death did not **mar** its grace, for it lay on the earth like a broken vase of red flowers, and we stood around it, awed by its exotic beauty.

360

"It's dead," Mama said.

"What is it?" Doodle repeated.

"Go bring me the bird book," said Daddy.

I ran into the house and brought back the bird book. As we watched, Daddy thumbed through its pages. "It's a scarlet ibis," he said, pointing to a picture. "It lives in the tropics—South America to Florida. A storm must have brought it here."

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Sadly, we all looked back at the bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in *our* yard, beneath the bleeding tree.

"Let's finish lunch," Mama said, nudging us back toward the dining room.

"I'm not hungry," said Doodle, and he knelt down beside the ibis.

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"We've got peach cobbler for dessert," Mama tempted from the doorway.

**INTERPRET**

Pause at line 364. Like Doodle, the scarlet ibis is described as being uncoordinated, delicate, and unique. How might the death of the ibis foreshadow the story's ending?

**The death of the scarlet ibis may foreshadow the failure of the narrator's plan, and perhaps an even greater tragedy, such as Doodle's death.**

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**INFER**

Pause at line 395. Why is Doodle so fascinated by the scarlet ibis? Why does he take such pains to bury it?

**Doodle is fascinated because the ibis is strange and beautiful—unlike any bird that Doodle has ever seen. He takes pains to bury it because he feels kinship with the bird.**

Doodle remained kneeling. "I'm going to bury him."

"Don't you dare touch him," Mama warned. "There's no telling what disease he might have had."

"All right," said Doodle. "I won't."

Daddy, Mama, and I went back to the dining-room table, but we watched Doodle through the open door. He took out a piece of string from his pocket and, without touching the ibis, looped one end around its neck. Slowly, while singing softly "Shall We Gather at the River," he carried the bird around to the front yard and dug a hole in the flower garden, next to the petunia bed. Now we were watching him through the front window, but he didn't know it. His awkwardness at digging the hole with a shovel whose handle was twice as long as he was made us laugh, and we covered our mouths with our hands so he wouldn't hear.

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When Doodle came into the dining room, he found us seriously eating our cobbler. He was pale and lingered just inside the screen door. "Did you get the scarlet ibis buried?" asked Daddy. Doodle didn't speak but nodded his head.

400

"Go wash your hands, and then you can have some peach cobbler," said Mama.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"Dead birds is bad luck," said Aunt Nicey, poking her head from the kitchen door. "Specially red dead birds!"

As soon as I had finished eating, Doodle and I hurried off to Horsehead Landing. Time was short, and Doodle still had a long way to go if he was going to keep up with the other boys when he started school. The sun, gilded with the yellow cast of autumn, still burned fiercely, but the dark green woods through which we passed were shady and cool. When we reached the landing, Doodle said he was too tired to swim, so we got into a skiff and floated down the creek with the tide. Far off in the marsh a rail was scolding, and over on the beach locusts were singing in the myrtle trees. Doodle did not speak and kept his head turned away, letting one hand trail limply in the water.

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**FLUENCY**

The description of Doodle's burial of the scarlet ibis in lines 385–399 is a very moving passage. Read the boxed passage aloud twice. Focus on conveying meaning the first time you read. The second time you read, try to convey the passage's emotional overtones.

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After we had drifted a long way, I put the oars in place and made Doodle row back against the tide. **Black** clouds began to gather in the southwest, and he kept watching them, trying to pull the oars a little faster. When we reached Horsehead Landing, lightning was playing across half the sky and thunder roared out, hiding even the sound of the sea. The sun disappeared and darkness descended, almost like night. Flocks of marsh crows flew by, heading inland to their roosting trees, and two egrets, squawking, arose from the oyster-rock shallows and careened away.

Doodle was both tired and frightened, and when he stepped from the skiff he collapsed onto the mud, sending an armada<sup>16</sup> of fiddler crabs rustling off into the marsh grass. I helped him up, and as he wiped the mud off his trousers, he smiled at me as ashamedly. He had failed and we both knew it, so we started back home, racing the storm. We never spoke (what are the words that can soldier<sup>17</sup> cracked pride?), but I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy. The lightning was near now, and from fear he walked so close behind me he kept stepping on my heels. The faster I walked, the faster he walked, so I began to run. The rain was coming, roaring through the pines, and then, like a bursting Roman candle, a gum tree ahead of us was shattered by a bolt of lightning. When the deafening peal of thunder had died, and in the moment before the rain arrived, I heard Doodle, who had fallen behind, cry out, "Brother, Brother, don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

The knowledge that Doodle's and my plans had come to naught was bitter, and that streak of cruelty within me awakened. I ran as fast as I could, leaving him far behind with a wall of rain dividing us. The drops stung my face like nettles, and the wind flared the wet, glistening leaves of the bordering trees. Soon I could hear his voice no more.

16. **armada** (är-mä'dä) n.; group. Armada is generally used to mean "fleet, or group, of warships."

17. **soldier** (sä'dr) v.; patch or repair. Soldier is a mixture of metals melted and used to repair metal parts.

**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 416–425. Circle the details describing the approaching storm. What do you think the storm foreshadows?

**Most students will say**

**the storm foreshadows danger.**

**INTERPRET**

Underline line 441. Then, underline the parts of the story where you have heard this before—Doodle's begging his brother not to leave him or not to hurt him. What could these words foreshadow?

**See pages 172 and 173. The words could foreshadow a time when the brother does leave Doodle.**

**INFER**

Pause at line 447. Why does the narrator leave Doodle behind?

**He is angry because he feels Doodle has failed him.**

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I hadn't run too far before I became tired, and the flood of childish spite evanesced<sup>18</sup> as well. I stopped and waited for Doodle. The sound of rain was everywhere, but the wind had died and it fell straight down in parallel paths like ropes hanging from the sky. As I waited, I peered through the downpour, but no one came. Finally I went back and found him huddled beneath a red nighthshade bush beside the road. He was sitting on the ground, his face buried in his arms, which were resting on his drawn-up knees. "Let's go, Doodle," I said.

He didn't answer, so I placed my hand on his forehead and lifted his head. Limply, he fell backward onto the earth. He had been bleeding from the mouth, and his neck and the front of his shirt were stained a brilliant red.

"Doodle! Doodle!" I cried, shaking him, but there was no answer but the rosy rain. He lay very awkwardly, with his head thrown far back, making his vermilion<sup>19</sup> neck appear unusually long and slim. His little legs, bent sharply at the knees, had never before seemed so fragile, so thin.

I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked very familiar. "Doodle!" I screamed above the pounding storm, and threw my body to the earth above his. For a long time, it seemed forever, I lay there crying, sheltering my fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy<sup>20</sup> of rain.

**18. evanesced** (ev'ə-nest) v.; faded away, disappeared.

**19. vermilion** (vör-mil'yan) adj.; bright red.

**20. heresy** (hēr'ə-sē) n.; here, mockery. Heresy generally means "denial of what is commonly believed to be true" or "rejection of a church's teaching."

**SYMBOLISM**

What do the details in the description of Doodle in the last two paragraphs remind you of? Why do you think the writer makes this association?

**Most students will see**

**the similarity between the scarlet ibis and Doodle's dead body.**

**The writer makes this association to reinforce the symbolic link between Doodle and the scarlet ibis.**

**SYMBOLISM**

In lines 468–470, what does the narrator call his dead brother?

**"my fallen scarlet ibis"**

The Scarlet Ibis 183



Cornell

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Cornell



Cornell



Cornell



SKILLS PRACTICE

The Scarlet Ibis

**Symbol Chart** In "The Scarlet Ibis," some of the people, places, things, and events stand both for themselves and for something beyond themselves. Fill out the symbol chart below to see how symbols convey meaning in the story. In the first column are passages from the story. Locate a symbol from each passage, and write it in the second column. Then, write the meaning of the symbol in the third column. The first row is done for you. Fill in the bottom row with a symbolic story passage that you find on your own.

Story Passage	Symbol	Meaning
That winter we didn't make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again (lines 258–260).	spring	new start; rebirth
When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread his magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the gloriously iridescent, rustling vortex (lines 233–236).	peacock	love and protection; a happier, kinder world
Sadly, we all looked back at the bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in our yard, beneath the bleeding tree (lines 372–374).	scarlet ibis	Doodle, who is also frail and rare and living in a hostile world he does not belong in
Any attempt the student makes to identify a passage with a symbol and to make a guess at its meaning, should be given credit.		

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Part 1

Collection 6: Symbolism and Allegory

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Skills Review

LITERATURE

Test Practice

The Scarlet Ibis

Complete the sample test item below. Then, read the explanation at the right.

Sample Test Question	Explanation of the Correct Answer
Which of the following are recurring symbols in "The Scarlet Ibis"? A birds B flowers C bees D tombstones	The correct answer is A; the writer uses birds as symbols all through the story. B and D are not correct because they are used only once. C is not correct because bees aren't mentioned in the story.

**DIRECTIONS:** Circle the letter of each correct answer.

- The description of Doodle's last summer as "blighted" foreshadows —  
A Doodle's birth  
B Doodle's coming death  
C the scarlet ibis  
D life in the South
- The scarlet ibis symbolizes Doodle in that both the child and bird are —  
F able to move very quickly  
G trying to learn to fly  
H rare, beautiful, and fragile  
J very fond of being outside
- The setting of the story as presented in the opening paragraph could best be described as—  
A sad and suggestive of death  
B cheerful and suggestive of life  
C peaceful and suggestive of heaven  
D haunted and suggestive of danger
- Which of these details is not an example of foreshadowing in the story?  
F "Don't hurt me, Brother," he warned."  
G "The oriole nest . . . rocked back and forth like an empty cradle."  
H "One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket. . . ."  
J "Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do. . . ."

SKILLS FOCUS

**Library Skills**  
 Analyze  
 symbolism



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Selection Title \_\_\_\_\_

## Symbol Chart

A symbol is an object, person, or event that stands for something more than itself. Think about a symbol in the story you just read. Write the symbol at the center of the chart below. In the surrounding lines, describe the different possible meanings of the symbol. (The number of meanings will vary with the selection.)

The diagram is a symbol chart. In the center is a circle with the word "Symbol" written inside. Four lines extend from the circle to four trapezoidal sections arranged around it. Each trapezoidal section contains five horizontal lines for writing.

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