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STUDY GUIDE

**English Short Stories  
prescribed for Grade 12**



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SHORT  
STORIES

# The soft voice of the serpent

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## Storyline:

A healthy 26-year-old man is in a wheelchair. Soon he is strong enough to be wheeled into the garden. Everyone hopes that now it will be easier for him to come to terms with his loss. The first time he goes outside he is very aware of the movement of the wind through the flowers and trees, and against his slack body. Every day he is wheeled out to his favourite spot where he sits and reads.

At first he reads a lot, but his attention is regularly brought back to the "sunken place" where his left leg used to be. However, he always manages to put off the full realisation that he has lost his leg. He believes that by denying it, he will eventually feel that it has always been like this. In time, he does not need to distract himself with reading quite so much and he can sit and examine his surroundings with his wife often sewing beside him.

One day a big locust frightens her and she jumps up, scattering her sewing things. When she goes to prepare their tea, he notices a cotton reel she overlooked and then he becomes aware of a "curious old mannish little face" staring at him. It is a terrified locust. He examines it with interest, noticing its strangely human face and "flimsy paper" body stretched over a "matchstick" frame. With great effort, the locust tries to move but falls over. That's when the young man notices that, like him, it has lost a leg. Laughing, he calls his wife to come and see her new patient. The young man identifies strongly with the locust's **futile** attempts to move and the young couple watch it intently. But when the wife accidentally frightens it and it suddenly flies away, the **jovial** mood changes and the young man is left to face the reality of his situation.

## Setting:

- In a young couple's garden over a period of a few weeks
- The garden is surrounded by strongly scented fir trees, roses, and colourful flowers

## Themes:

- Confronting challenges head-on
- Accepting yourself
- Self-deception

## Narrative technique:

- Third person narrator (omniscient) – reveals young man's thoughts and feelings in a **detached** tone
- Descriptive language emphasising movement contrasts sharply with young man's inability to walk
- Metaphors ("slack, furled sail of himself") create vivid images

## Characters:

- Young man – a healthy 26-year-old who has lost his left leg, he is now confined to a wheelchair, has difficulty accepting his loss, identifies with the locust until the locust flies away and he is made painfully aware that he does not share that freedom
- Young woman – the man's wife, gentle and supportive, cares lovingly for her husband; is compassionate
- Locust – has lost left front leg, is afraid of humans, instils fear in humans, fails in enormous effort to walk but is able to fly away

## Contextual questions

1. Reread the opening scene of the story from “Swiftly free-wheeling ...” to “... and they pedalled away.”
  - a) Explain what the word “doggedly” suggests about Rob’s attitude to what he is doing. (2)
  - b) Is Mr Willison speaking from experience when he tells Rob that the “first thing an athlete has to learn is to break the fatigue barrier”? Justify your answer. (2)
  - c) Explain why the word “right” is in italics when Rob says “I’m all *right*”. (2)
  - d) Rob’s father says there is no reason “why two fit *men* shouldn’t cycle twelve miles in an hour and ten minutes”. Quote five consecutive words used to describe Rob that contradict the idea that he is a man. (1)
  - e) Is this statement TRUE or FALSE? Give a reason for your answer. (2)  
Rob is being awkward just as Mr Willison suggests.
2. Is this statement TRUE or FALSE? Give a reason for your answer. Rob is just as excited about the punch-ball as his father is. (2)
3. “He dealt the punch-ball two amateurish blows.” What does the word “amateurish” tell us about Mr Willison’s boxing skills? (1)
4. Identify the conflict between Mr and Mrs Willison. (1)
5. Describe how Mr Willison reacts when he hears that Rob has not been selected for the rugby team. (2)
6. Explain why Rob lies about being in the boxing team. (2)
7. On the night of the fight Mr Willison says to Grace “Don’t spoil my big night”. Explain what is wrong about him regarding this as *his* big night? (2)
8. How does Mr Willison think males prove that they are men? (1)
9. Reread the scene where Rob says he thinks he has appendicitis.
  - a) Quote one word that shows this might be a trick. (1)
  - b) Identify one emotion that Mrs Willison feels when Rob says he may have appendicitis, and explain why she feels that way. (2)
10. Suggest a reason why Mr Granger laughs when he hears that Rob is supposedly a member of a boxing team. (2)
11. In a sentence, summarise a lesson about parenting that this story teaches. (1)



### Word check:

**coax:** to persuade someone to do something gently



### Tip:

Writers usually use italics for:

- foreign words or phrases (i.e. words that are not English)
  - emphasis
  - titles of books, films, and plays
  - enabling the reader to notice the difference between things, for example, “A simple spelling rule states that when the sound is like ee as in meet, use *i* before *e* except after *c*.”
- The context will help you decide which of these reasons applies.



### Did you know?

- An amateur is someone who is passionate about a particular activity (such as a sport like cricket or boxing, or a hobby like astronomy or astrology), but has had no formal training and receives no pay for participating in it.
- An expert is someone with extensive knowledge and / or training in a particular field.
- A professional is someone who has expertise in a particular field and makes a living from it.

## Essay questions and other activities

1. In a paragraph of 100–120 words, explain why Mr Willison is so determined to turn Rob into a successful athlete. (15)
2. Consider the behaviour of both Mr Willison and Rob.
  - a) In a paragraph of 80–100 words, explain why Mr Willison behaves the way he does. (10)
  - b) In a paragraph of 80–100 words, explain why Rob behaves the way he does. (10)
  - c) In a paragraph of 80–100 words, write down the advice you would give these two people. (10)