

Activity Sheet – Model One (*The British Museum Is Falling Down*)

Activity 1

Pre-questions:

When would you describe someone as fortunate? What about unfortunate? Is there anything someone can do to change their fortune?

Activity 2

Read the following text:

“It was Adam Appleby’s misfortune that at the moment of awakening from sleep his consciousness was immediately flooded with everything he least wanted to think about. Other men, he gathered, met each new dawn with a refreshed mind and heart, full of optimism and resolution; or else they moved sluggishly through the first hour of the day in a state of blessed numbness, incapable of any thought at all, pleasant or unpleasant. But, crouched like harpies round his bed, unpleasant thoughts waited to pounce the moment Adam’s eyelids flickered apart. At that moment he was forced, like a drowning man, to review his entire life instantaneously, divided between regrets for the past and fears for the future.

Thus it was that as he opened his eyes one November morning, and focused them blearily on the sick rose, three down and six across, on the wallpaper opposite his bed, Adam was simultaneously reminded that he was twenty five years of age, and would soon be twenty six, that he was a post-graduate student preparing a thesis which he was unlikely to complete in this the third and final year of scholarship, that the latter was hugely overdrawn, that he was married with three young children, that one of them had manifested an alarming rash the previous evening, that his name was ridiculous, that his leg hurt, that his decrepit scooter had failed to start the previous morning and would no doubt fail to start this morning, that he had just missed a first class degree because of a bad Middle English paper, that his leg hurt, that at his primary school he had proved so proficient in the game of who-can-pee-highest-up-the-wall of the boys’ outside lavatory that he had wetted the biretta of the parish priest who had happened to be visiting the playground on the other side of the wall at the time, that he had forgotten to reserve any books at the British Museum for this morning’s reading, that his leg hurt, that his wife’s period was three days overdue, and that his leg hurt.” (Lodge, *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, p. 4-5)

In pairs, answer the following questions:

1. Can you identify the misfortunes in Adam's life? How would you feel if you had the same problems?
2. What are the feelings the writer wants to create in the reader with regards to the main character?
3. Are there any elements in the text that could stir laughter? Do you think they are perceived in the same way by the character?
4. Why does the writer employ repetition when describing the character?
5. Having read the book, can you find examples in the text that announce the main themes of the novel?
6. How would you describe the atmosphere created by the writer in this fragment?

Follow-up activity

Write a 250-word essay on the crisis the main character experiences and the changes he undergoes throughout the novel.

Activity Sheet - Model Two (*The British Museum is Falling Down*)

Activity 1

Pre-questions:

Do you think that in today's society we can still speak of gender discrimination? Find examples to support your opinion.

Activity 2

Read the following extract:

“He passed through the narrow vaginal passage, and entered the huge womb of the Reading Room. Across the floor, disposed along the radiating desks, scholars curled, foetus-like, over their books, little buds of intellectual life thrown off by some gigantic act of generation performed upon that nest of knowledge, those inexhaustible ovaries of learning, the concentric inner rings of the catalogue shelves.

The circular wall of the Reading Room wrapped the scholars in a protective layer of books, while above them arched the vast, distended belly of the dome. Little daylight entered through the grimy glass at the top. No sounds of traffic or other human business penetrated to that warm, airless space. The dome looked down on the scholars, and the scholars looked down on their books; and the scholars loved their books, stroking the pages with soft pale fingers. The pages responded to the fingers' touch, and yielded their knowledge gladly to the scholars, who collected it in little boxes of file-cards. When the scholars raised their eyes from their desks they saw nothing to distract them, nothing out of harmony with their books, only the smooth, curved lining of the womb. Wherever the eye travelled, it met no arrest, no angle, no parallel lines receding into infinity, no pointed arch striving towards the unattainable: all was curved, rounded, self-sufficient, complete. And the scholars dropped their eyes to their books again, fortified and consoled. They curled themselves more tightly over their books, for they did not want to leave the warm womb, where they fed upon electric light and inhaled the musty odour of yellowing pages.

But the women who waited outside felt differently. From their dingy flats in Islington and cramped semis in Bexley-heath, they looked out through the windows at the life of the world, at the motor-cars and the advertisements and the clothes in the shops, and they found them good. And they resented the warm womb of the Museum which made them poor and lonely, which swallowed up their men every day and sapped them of their vital spirits and made them silent and abstracted mates even when they were at home. And the women sighed for the day when their men would be expelled from the womb for the last time, and they looked at their children whimpering at their feet, and they clasped their hands, coarsened with detergent, and vowed that these children would never be scholars.” (Lodge, *The British Museum is Falling Down*, p. 44-45)

In groups of three or four, answer the following questions:

1. How does the writer create the comic effect?
2. Identify the elements that form the comparison between the British Museum and a female's womb. What is the writer's attitude towards the scholars? Identify the elements that help the reader understand it.
3. What is the serious message hidden behind this comic comparison?
4. Identify at least two characteristics of postmodernist comic fiction in the text.

Activity 3

Still in groups, comment on the gender differences in the society Lodge portrays in this fragment. Please refer to the extent of such severe delimitation between men and women, as well as to the impact it had on women's lives. Support your comments with examples from the text.

Follow-up activity

Write a 300-word essay on the topic of gender differences as they appear in Lodge's novel *The British Museum is Falling Down*.

Activity Sheet - Model Three (*The British Museum Is Falling Down*)

Activity 1

Pre-reading question:

Have you ever been mistaken for someone else? What were the consequences? How did you feel about that particular situation?

Activity 2

Read the text below:

“As Adam pushed the door of the phone booth shut with his posterior and, trembling with excitement, dug in his pocket for change, a telephone bell rang, loud and insistent. Adam looked about him in bewilderment, unable to accept at first that the sound emanated from the instrument before him. But it evidently did. He lifted the receiver, and said hesitantly, ‘Halo.’

‘Museum Double-O-One-Two?’ demanded a female voice.

Adam obediently scrutinized the number at the centre of the dial. ‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘Hold on please. Your call from Colorado.’

‘What?’ said Adam.

‘Sorry it’s taken so long, Museum,’ said the operator brightly. ‘The lines are absolutely haywire today.’

‘I think you’ve got the wrong person,’ Adam began. But the operator had gone away. Adam wanted to go away too, but didn’t have the courage. Besides, he wanted to make a phone call himself. He opened the door of the kiosk and, still holding the receiver to his ear, leaned out to look into the foyer of the Museum, hoping to catch sight of the fat American.

‘Are you there, Museum?’

‘Oh. Yes, but look here—’ Withdrawing his head too quickly, Adam banged it on the door and dropped the receiver, which swung clattering against the wall. By the time he recaptured it, the operator had gone again, and a faint American voice was saying anxiously:

‘Bernie? Is that you, Bernie? Bernie?’

‘No, it’s not, I’m afraid,’ said Adam.

‘Ah, Bernie. I thought I’d lost you.’

‘No, I’m not Bernie.’

‘Who are you then?’

‘My name is Appleby. Adam Appleby.’

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Appleby. Is Bernie there?’

‘Well no, I’m afraid he isn’t. I’m sorry you’ve had all this trouble and expense, but—’

‘He’s out, is he? Well, OK, you can give him a message. Will you tell him he can have one hundred thousand for books and fifty thousand for manuscripts?’

‘One hundred thousand for books,’ Adam repeated, mesmerized.

‘Right. And fifty grand for manuscripts,’ said the man. ‘That’s great, Adam, thanks a lot. You been working with Bernie for long?’

‘Well, no,’ said Adam. ‘As a matter of fact—’

‘Your time’s up, Colorado,’ said the operator. ‘Do you want to pay for another two minutes?’

‘No, that’s all. Bye, Adam. Say hallo to Bernie for me.’

‘Good- bye,’ said Adam weakly. The line went dead. Adam replaced the receiver and leaned against the door, wondering what he should do. He might never see the fat man again. He couldn’t carry this undelivered message around with him for the rest of his life. It sounded important, too. A hundred thousand for books. Fifty grand for manuscripts. That mean dollars. Perhaps he should report the whole business to the operator.” (Lodge, *The British Museum is Falling Down*, p. 83-84)

In pairs, answer the following questions:

1. What sources of the comic can you identify in the text? Give examples to support your opinion. (students should refer to the *qui pro quo* situation, gestures, language)
2. What are the elements that block the communication between the characters? Can you think of other barriers in the process of communication?
3. How does Adam feel in this situation? Extract examples to support your point of view.

Follow-up activity

Having read the book, draw a parallel between the Americans’ attitude towards the British Museum and that of Adam’s. You should refer to other moments from the book, as well as to the title.

Activity Sheet – Model Four (*Chaging Places*)

Activity 1

Pre-questions:

Are you a bargain hunter? Have you ever discovered that what you thought to be a bargain turned out to be a mistake? How did you feel?

Activity 2

Read the text below and then, in pairs, answer the after-questions:

“Morris Zapp is a twentieth-century counterpart of Swift’s Nominal Christian – the Nominal Atheist. Underneath that tough exterior of the free-thinking Jew (exactly the kind T.S.Eliot thought an organic community could well do without) there is a core of old-fashioned Judaeo-Christian fear-of-the-Lord. If the Apollo astronauts had reported finding a message carved in gigantic letters on the backside of the moon, ‘*Reports of My death are greatly exaggerated*’, it would not have surprised Morris Zapp unduly, merely confirmed his deepest misgivings. At this moment he feels painfully vulnerable to divine retribution. He can’t believe that Improvidence, old Nobodaddy, is going to sit placidly in the sky while abortion shuttle-services buzz right under his nose, polluting the stratosphere and giving the Record Angel writer’s cramp, no sir, one of these days he is going to swat one of those planes right out the sky, and why not this one?

Zapp succumbs to self-pity. Why should he suffer with all these careless callous women? He has knocked up a girl only once in his life, and he made an honest woman of her (she divorced him three years later, but that’s another story, one indictment at a time, please). It’s a frame-up. All the doing of the little bitch who had sold him her ticket, less than half-price, he couldn’t resist the bargain but wondered at the time at her generosity since only a week before he’d refused to raise her course-grade from a C to a B. She must have missed her period, rushed to book a seat on the Abortion Express, had a negative pregnancy test and thought to herself, I know what I’ll do, Professor Zapp is going to Europe, I’ll sell him my ticket, then the plane might be struck by a thunderbolt. A fine reward for trying to preserve academic standards.” (Lodge, *Changing Places*, p. 26)

After-questions:

1. What was the situation the character found himself in as a result of a bargain?
2. What are the main sources that create the comic effect?
3. Identify the contrasting features of the main character. Bring arguments to support your opinion. Refer to the difference between essence and appearance.
4. Find examples of irony in the text.
5. How would you describe the tone of the fragment? Support your opinion with arguments.
6. What does the character think about abortion?

Activity 3

Debate

The class is divided into two. Students debate on the topic of abortion. One group will find arguments in favour of abortion, the other will be against it.

Follow-up Activity

Imagine an encounter between Professor Zapp and the student who sold him the ticket. The encounter takes place after Professor Zapp returns to America. Present the encounter using a humorous tone.

Activity Sheet – Model Five (*Changing Places*)

Activity 1

Pre-questions:

Do you want to study abroad? What are the main reasons Romanian students would prefer to study in other countries? Which difficulties do you think you would have when adapting to another learning system?

Activity 2

Read the following two extracts:

“The Zapps live in a luxurious house, in some disarray when I called, at the top of an incredibly steep hill. There are two young Zapps, twins, called rather preposterously Elizabeth and Darcy (Zapp is a Jane Austen man, of course - indeed *the* Jane Austen man in the opinion of many). The gossip here is that their marriage is breaking up, and Mrs Zapp intimated as much to me, so I suppose that might account for her rather off-putting manner, and his too, by the sound of it. The divorce rate is fantastically high here. It's rather disturbing when one is used to a more stable social environment. So is the way everybody, including Mrs Zapp, uses four-letter words all the time, even in front of their own children. It's a bit of a shock at first, hearing faculty wives and nice young girls saying 'shit' and 'fuck', as one might say 'Gee whizz', or 'darn it'. Rather like one's first week in the army.

I confess I had something of the raw-recruit feeling when I went to meet my classes for the first time this week. The system is so different, and the students are so much more heterogeneous than they are at home. They've read the most outlandish things and not read the most obvious ones. I had a student in my room the other day, obviously very bright, who appeared to have read only two authors, Gurdjieff (is that how you spell him ?) and somebody called Asimov, and had never even heard of E. M. Forster.

I'm teaching two courses, which means I meet two groups of students three times a week for ninety minutes, or would do if it weren't for the Third World Students' strike. There's a student called Wily (*sic*) Smith, who claims he's black, though in fact he looks scarcely darker than me, and he pestered me from the day I arrived to let him enrol in my creative writing course. Well, I finally agreed, and then on the first occasion the class met, what d'you think happened? Wily Smith harangued his fellow students and persuaded them that they must support the strike by boycotting my class. There's nothing personal in it, of course, as he was kind enough to explain, but it did seem rather a nerve.” (Lodge, *Changing Places*, p. 123-124)

“Desiree, your letter did nothing to lighten a heavy week. It isn't true after all that there are no students at British universities: this week they returned from their prolonged Christmas vacation. Too bad, I was just beginning to get the hang of things. Now the teaching has thrown me back to square

one. I swear the system here will be the death of me. Did I say system? A slip of the tongue. There is no system. They have something called tutorials, instead. Three students and me, for an hour at a time. We're supposed to discuss some text I've assigned. This, apparently, can be anything that comes into my head, except that the campus bookshop doesn't have anything that comes into my head. But supposing we manage to agree, me and the students, on some book of which four copies can be scratched together, one of them writes a paper and reads it out to the rest of us. After about three minutes the eyes of the other two glaze over and they begin to sag in their chairs. It's clear they have stopped listening. I'm listening like hell but can't understand a word because of the guy's limey accent. All too soon, he stops. 'Thank you,' I say, flashing him an appreciative smile. He looks at me reproachfully as he blows his nose, then carries on from where he paused, in mid-sentence. The other two students wake up briefly, exchange glances and snigger. That's the most animation they ever show. When the guy reading the paper finally winds it up, I ask for comments. Silence. They avoid my eye. I volunteer a comment myself. Silence falls again. It's so quiet you can hear the guy's beard growing. Desperately I ask one of them a direct question. 'And what *did you* think of the text, Miss Archer?' Miss Archer falls off her chair in a swoon." (Lodge, *Changing Places*, p. 125)

In pairs, answer the following questions:

1. How do the characters feel about the places they are in at the moment? Find examples in the text to illustrate your point of view.
2. What difficulties do they experience?
3. What is the writer's attitude towards the two university systems he describes? How is the comic effect obtained in each extract?
4. Can you identify any national stereotypes in the fragments? Explain bringing arguments.

Activity 3 (Homework)

In a 250-word essay, draw a parallel between the American and British academic worlds as they are portrayed in *Changing Places*.