

*Hannah*, a short story by Malachi Whitaker (in *Short Stories for Creative Language Classrooms*, Cambridge University Press, 1993)

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Read the first part of the story.

**Part one**

The girl Hannah was seventeen, and she had made almost all that array of cakes and pastries on the kitchen dresser. She stood looking at them, her healthy pink face glowing with pride. She wore a blue dress and a white apron, and her hair waved down her back to her waist in a golden-brown shower.

The party should be a lovely one. All the girls from her Sunday-school class were coming, and four of the best-behaved boys as well. Then there was to be the young man, Thomas Henry Smithson, the one that all the girls secretly laughed at. Really, he was too conscientious, too lumberingly polite for anything. His hats seemed always small, his trousers tight, his boots big. But her mother liked him. He helped to make things go, sang a few songs in a voice he called baritone, and never lost his temper.

Hannah felt that she could put up with anything so long as Ralph Wellings turned up. He was nineteen. A strange boy for the little, fat, jolly parson to have as his son! Hannah had heard that he was wild, but he had never seemed wild to her. Sometimes they had met in the twilight, and he had walked along by her side through Pennyfoot woods to Hoyle's farm and carried the dozen eggs that she had gone to fetch back with him in a sugar-bag.

Of course, you were supposed to be still a child at seventeen, but Hannah didn't feel exactly like a child. She could talk to Ralph Wellings about the things she knew – the proper way to make candied toffee, the books she had recently found in the attic, old books in which all the letter esses were effs, the nicest hymn tunes. He never laughed at her, and she found this refreshing.

She loved him very much, admiring his forehead, for some reason, most of all. It was high and white. His blue-black hair, parted at the side, waved as beautifully as did hers. 'If we get married and have some children, they're sure to have curly hair,' she thought. She liked, too, his flecked hazel eyes and his long fingers with their triangular nails. He called her 'nice child', and always seemed glad to see her.

She took her entranced gaze from the cakes and went into the dairy. The house had once been a farm, and the cool, stone-shelved room was still called the dairy. One side of it was laden with food. There was a whole, crumb-browned ham on a dish by the side of a meat-plate on which stood a perfectly cooked sirloin of beef. Another dish held four or five pounds of plump, cooked sausages. The trifles were ready, so were the stewed fruits for those who liked plainer sweets, and there was more cream, Hannah felt, than could possibly be used.

She ran out of the room, smiling with delight, to look for her mother.

'Are you getting ready, mother?' she called.

'Yes.'

Her mother stood, bare-armed, in front of the oval mirror, a worried look in her eyes, her mouth filled with steel hairpins. She had her skirt on, but her black satin bodice was flung over the curved bedrail.

'Aren't you washed, child?' She seemed to speak harshly because of the hairpins. 'The company'll be here before we know where we are. We sh'll have a rush, you'll see.'

'Never mind, mother, everything looks lovely. I wish the party was beginning just now.'

She ran out of the room and changed her dress in a perfect fury of speed. Her face was clean enough, her hands white. What was the use of washing over and over and over again? Now she was in the summer pink dress that made her look older than ever before. The skirt was flounced, and she jumped round ballooning it, running a comb through her hair at the same time.

'He'll like me, he'll like me, he will,' she chanted. And she ran across to her mother's room and flung herself panting on the great bed.

'Hannah, Hannah, be a lady!' cried her mother, rebukingly.

With your partner(s), fill as many squares below as you can.

|                       | Appearances | Personality | Interests |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Hannah                |             |             |           |
| Thomas Henry Smithson |             |             |           |
| Ralph Wellings        |             |             |           |

**Think about the first party you went to.** What details of *your* party are like those described in this part of the story: food and drinks? Guests? Hannah's feelings of anticipation?

**There are 23 lines left in the story. What do you think happens in those 23 lines?**

With your partner(s), make up a short ending. When you are ready, tell your ending to another group and listen to theirs.

Read part 2

**Part two**

Hannah seemed to have been asleep for a long time. She woke slowly, feeling the grey light on her eyelids. Her hands, gnarled and shrunken, lay outside the blue-and-white coverlet. A shadowed white plait straggled over one shoulder, thinning to a thread-tied end as it reached her breast.

She moved a little, opened her eyes, and moistened her lips. The morning was sunny and still. It felt warm, warm. She dozed a little and went on thinking of the party her mother had given when she was seventeen. On that day Ralph Wellings had kissed her for the first time. Unknowingly she smiled. The pink dress with its flounces, she remembered that, too. How lovely it had all been.

She looked up when the door opened and frowned a little, seeing an ugly, middle-aged woman with a paper-backed book in her hand.

'Well, grandma,' the woman said in a kind and cheerful voice, 'I've been up a few times, but you were asleep. George is just going to the Post Office in the doctor's car, so will you sign the pension form? He's in a bit of a hurry. I'll help you up.'

She put a soft wrap about the old woman's shoulders and supported her while she wrote. 'H-a-n-n-a-h' she mouthed, then her attention was attracted by something else for a moment. She stared at the completed form and gave a fretful cry. 'Oh, grandma, you've gone and done it again! We sh'll have no end of bother. You've signed Hannah Wellings, and your name's Smithson – Smithson – Smithson.'

**What do you think of this ending?** In what way is it different from the one you created? Discuss this point with your partner(s).

**What might have happened between the first and the second part?** Imagine as many explanations as you can then write down the one you like best.

**Imagine you are Hannah.** Write a poem entitled "*Regrets*" by completing the following lines:

**Write your book report.**

*How I wish...*

A ...

N...

N...

A...

H...