

— Before You Read —

The Lady, or the Tiger?

Reading Focus

Have you ever felt as if you were “caught between a rock and a hard place”—where you needed to make a choice between two courses of action and neither option seemed quite right?

Journal In your journal, write about this difficult situation. What were the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action? How do you know you made the right choice in the end?

Setting a Purpose Read to learn about a difficult choice that’s a matter of life and death.

Building Background

The Time and Place

Like a fairy tale that takes place “once upon a time,” this story has a purposely vague setting.

Did You Know?

During the Middle Ages in England, guilt or innocence was decided through a practice known as an ordeal. An accused person was physically tested, and the outcome determined guilt or innocence. The accusers believed that supernatural forces controlled what happened. For instance, in the ordeal by water, the accused person was tied up and thrown into deep water. A person who floated was thought to be guilty; a person who sank was considered innocent. Unfortunately, those who sank often drowned before they could be hauled back up.

Vocabulary Preview

impartial (im pār’ shəl) *adj.* not favoring one side more than another; fair; p. 46

emanate (em’ ə nāt’) *v.* to come forth; p. 46

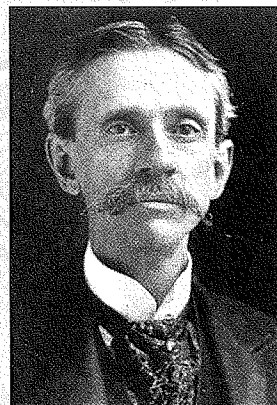
dire (dīr) *adj.* dreadful; terrible; p. 46

fervent (fur’ vənt) *adj.* having or showing great intensity of feeling; passionate; p. 47

imperious (im pār’ ē əs) *adj.* extremely proud and controlling; p. 47

novel (nov’ əl) *adj.* new and unusual; p. 47

presume (pri zōōm’) *v.* to take upon oneself without permission or authority; dare; p. 50



Meet Frank R. Stockton

Frank Stockton’s father wanted his son to be a doctor, but the boy became a wood-engraver, an inventor, and a writer instead. Most of Stockton’s early work was written for children, but he later turned his attention to short stories and novels for adults. His collected works fill twenty-three volumes, but he is remembered mainly for the short story “The Lady, or the Tiger?” This story was extremely popular; it was even made into an operetta! The story’s unusual ending created a flurry of letters to the author that continued throughout his life.

Frank R. Stockton was born in 1834 and died in 1902. This story was first published in Century magazine in 1882 and collected in The Lady, or the Tiger? in 1884.

The Lady, or the Tiger?

Frank R. Stockton ~

IN THE VERY OLDEN TIME, there lived a semibarbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammled,¹ as became the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts. He was greatly given to self-communing; and, when he and himself agreed upon any thing, the thing was done. When every member of his domestic and political systems moved smoothly in its appointed course, his nature was bland and genial;² but whenever there was a little hitch, and some of his orbs got out of their orbits, he was blander and more genial still, for nothing pleased him so much as to make the crooked straight, and crush down uneven places.

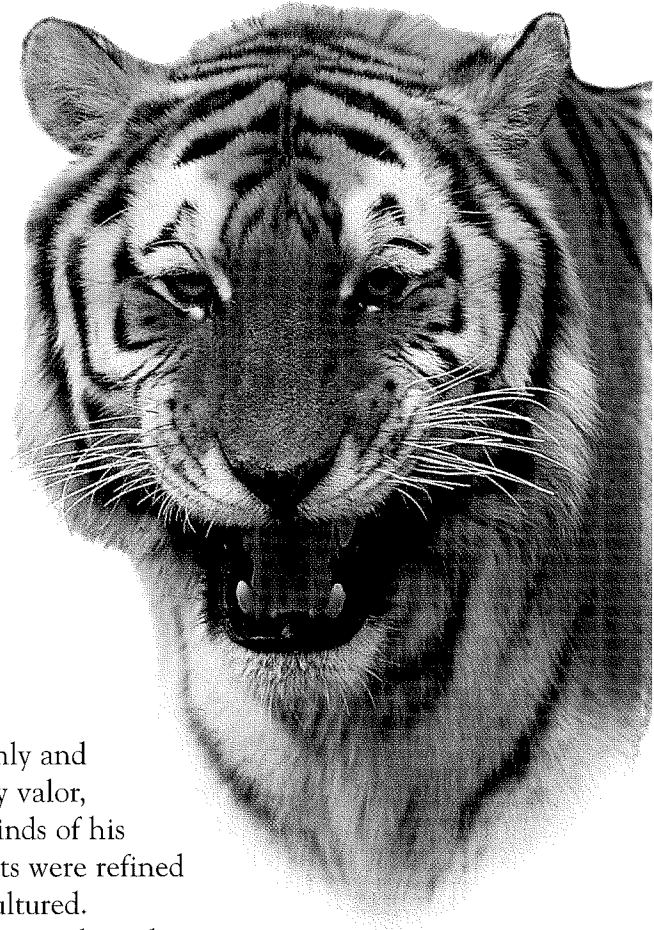
Among the borrowed notions by which his barbarism had become semified³ was that of the public arena, in which, by exhibitions

1. The king's ideas are somewhat uncivilized (*semibarbaric*); they are very showy (*florid*) and unrestrained (*untrammled*).
2. The king himself is generally agreeable and mild (*bland*) and pleasantly cheerful (*genial*).
3. *Semified* is a made-up word meaning "reduced in half or made partial."

of manly and beastly valor, the minds of his subjects were refined and cultured.

But even here the exuberant and barbaric fancy asserted itself.⁴ The arena of the king was built, not to give the people an opportunity of hearing the rhapsodies⁵ of dying gladiators, nor to enable them to view the inevitable conclusion of a conflict between religious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheater, with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime

4. Here, *asserted itself* means "exercised its influence; insisted on being recognized."
5. *Rhapsodies* are enthusiastic expressions of emotion.



The Lady, or the Tiger?

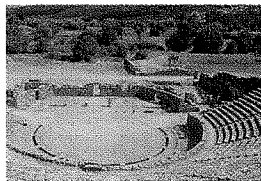
was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance.

When a subject was accused of a crime of sufficient importance to interest the king, public notice was given that on an appointed day the fate of the accused person would be decided in the king's arena,—a structure which well deserved its name; for, although its form and plan were borrowed from afar, its purpose emanated solely from the brain of this man, who, every barleycorn⁶ a king, knew no tradition to which he owed more allegiance than pleased his fancy, and who ingrafted on every adopted form of human thought and action the rich growth of his barbaric idealism.

When all the people had assembled in the galleries, and the king, surrounded by his court, sat high up on his throne of royal state on one side of the arena, he gave a signal, a door beneath him opened, and the accused subject

stepped out into the amphitheater. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the enclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side. It was the duty and the privilege of the person on trial, to walk directly to these doors and open one of

them. He could open either door he pleased: he was subject to no guidance or influence but that of the aforementioned impartial and incorruptible chance. If he opened the one, there



Did You Know?

An *amphitheater* is a circular structure with rising tiers of seats around a central open space.

came out of it a hungry tiger, the fiercest and most cruel that could be procured, which immediately sprang upon him, and tore him to pieces, as a punishment for his guilt. The moment that the case of the criminal was thus decided, doleful iron bells were clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience, with bowed heads and downcast hearts, wended slowly their homeward way, mourning greatly that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate.

But, if the accused person opened the other door, there came forth from it a lady, the most suitable to his years and station that his majesty could select among his fair subjects; and to this lady he was immediately married, as a reward of his innocence. It mattered not that he might already possess a wife and family, or that his affections might be engaged upon an object of his own selection: the king allowed no such subordinate arrangements to interfere with his great scheme of retribution and reward.⁷ The exercises, as in the other instance, took place immediately, and in the arena. Another door opened beneath the king, and a priest, followed by a band of choristers, and dancing maidens blowing joyous airs on golden horns and treading an epithalamic measure, advanced to where the pair stood, side by side; and the wedding was promptly and cheerily solemnized.⁸ Then the gay brass

6. The *barleycorn* is an old unit of measure equal to the width of one grain of barley—about a third of an inch. This phrase is similar to “every inch a king” and means that he was kingly in every way and in every part, top to bottom.

7. The king's plan for giving out punishment (*retribution*) and reward was of primary importance, and everything else was less important (*subordinate*), including family values.

8. *Epithalamic* (ep' ə thə lā' mik) refers to a song in honor of a bride and groom. When a wedding is *solemnized*, it is celebrated with a formal ceremony.

Vocabulary

impartial (im pār' shəl) *adj.* not favoring one side more than another; fair

emanate (em' ə nāt') *v.* to come forth

dire (dīr) *adj.* dreadful; terrible

bells rang forth their merry peals, the people shouted glad hurrahs, and the innocent man, preceded by children strewing flowers on his path, led his bride to his home.

This was the king's semibarbaric method of administering justice. Its perfect fairness is obvious. The criminal could not know out of which door would come the lady: he opened either he pleased, without having the slightest idea whether, in the next instant, he was to be devoured or married. On some occasions the tiger came out of one door, and on some out of the other. The decisions of this tribunal were not only fair, they were positively determinate:⁹ the accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty; and, if innocent, he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments of the king's arena.

The institution was a very popular one. When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding. This element of uncertainty lent an interest to the occasion which it could not otherwise have attained. Thus, the masses were entertained and pleased, and the thinking part of the community could bring no charge of unfairness against this plan; for did not the accused person have the whole matter in his own hands?

This semibarbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his most florid fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious as his own. As is usual in such cases, she was the apple of his

eye, and was loved by him above all humanity. Among his courtiers was a young man of that fineness of blood and lowness of station common to the conventional heroes of romance who love royal maidens. This royal maiden was well satisfied with her lover, for he was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom; and she loved him with an ardor¹⁰ that had enough of barbarism in it to make it exceedingly warm and strong. This love affair moved on happily for many months, until one day the king happened to discover its existence. He did not hesitate nor waver in regard to his duty in the premises. The youth was immediately cast into prison, and a day was appointed for his trial in the king's arena. This, of course, was an especially important occasion; and his majesty, as well as all the people, was greatly interested in the workings and development of this trial. Never before had such a case occurred; never before had a subject dared to love the daughter of a king. In after-years such things became commonplace enough; but then they were, in no slight degree, novel and startling.

The tiger-cages of the kingdom were searched for the most savage and relentless beasts, from which the fiercest monster might be selected for the arena; and the ranks of maiden youth and beauty throughout the land were carefully surveyed by competent judges, in order that the young man might have a fitting bride in case fate did not determine for him a different destiny. Of course, everybody knew that the deed with which the accused was charged had been done. He had loved the princess, and neither he, she, nor any one else

9. Usually, *tribunal* refers to a group of judges or a place of judgment. Here, it is "the king's semibarbaric method of administering justice," and its outcome is absolutely final (*determinate*).

10. *Ardor* means intense passion.

Vocabulary

fervent (fur' vənt) *adj.* having or showing great intensity of feeling; passionate

imperious (im pēr' ē əs) *adj.* extremely proud and controlling

novel (nov' əl) *adj.* new and unusual

The Lady, or the Tiger?

thought of denying the fact; but the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of the tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of; and the king would take an aesthetic pleasure in watching the course of events, which would determine whether or not the young man had done wrong in allowing himself to love the princess.

The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered, and thronged the great galleries of the arena; and crowds, unable to gain admittance, massed themselves against its outside walls. The king and his court were in their places, opposite the twin doors,—those fateful portals, so terrible in their similarity.



Mona Vanna, 1866. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Oil on canvas, 88.9 x 86.4 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

Viewing the painting: How would you describe this woman's personality?

All was ready. The signal was given. A door beneath the royal party opened, and the lover of the princess walked into the arena. Tall, beautiful, fair, his appearance was greeted with a low hum of admiration and anxiety. Half the audience had not known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

As the youth advanced into the arena, he turned, as the custom was, to bow to the king; but he did not think at all of that royal personage; his eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Had it not been for the moiety¹¹ of barbarism in her nature, it is probable that lady would not have been there; but her intense and fervid soul would not allow her to be absent

on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested. From the moment that the decree had gone forth, that her lover should decide his fate in the king's arena, she had thought of nothing, night or day, but this great event and the various subjects connected with it. Possessed of more power, influence, and force of character than any one who had ever before been interested in such a case, she had done what no other person had done,—she had possessed herself of the secret of the doors. She knew in which of the two rooms, that lay behind those doors, stood the cage of the tiger, with its open front, and in which waited the lady. Through these thick doors, heavily curtained with skins on the inside, it was impossible that any noise or suggestion should come from within to the person who should approach to raise the latch of one of them; but gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

11. A *moiety* (moi' a tē) means "a half."

And not only did she know in which room stood the lady ready to emerge, all blushing and radiant, should her door be opened, but she knew who the lady was. It was one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court who had been selected as the reward of the accused youth, should he be proved innocent of the crime of aspiring to one so far above him; and the princess hated her. Often had she seen, or imagined that she had seen, this fair creature throwing glances of admiration upon the person of her lover, and sometimes she thought these glances were perceived and even returned. Now and then she had seen them talking together; it was but for a moment or two, but much can be said in a brief space; it may have been on most unimportant topics, but how could she know that? The girl was lovely, but she had dared to raise her eyes to the loved one of the princess; and, with all the intensity of the savage blood transmitted to her through long lines of wholly barbaric ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled behind that silent door.

When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers as she sat there paler and whiter than any one in the vast ocean of anxious faces about her, he saw, by that power of quick perception which is given to those whose souls are one, that she knew behind which door crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He understood her nature, and his soul was assured that she would never rest until she had made plain to herself this thing, hidden to all other lookers-on, even to the king. The only hope for the youth in which there was any element of certainty was based upon the success of the princess in discovering this mystery; and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded, as in his soul he knew she would succeed.



April Love, 1855. Arthur Hughes. Oil on canvas, 88.9 x 49.5 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

Viewing the painting: Compare and contrast this painting with the one on page 48. Which woman seems more like the princess, and which seems more like the lady behind the door?

Then it was that his quick and anxious glance asked the question: "Which?" It was as plain to her as if he shouted it from where he stood. There was not an instant to be lost. The question was asked in a flash; it must be answered in another.

Her right arm lay on the cushioned parapet¹² before her. She raised her hand, and made a slight, quick movement toward the

12. Here, the *parapet* is a low wall or railing around the royal "box seats."

The Lady, or the Tiger?

right. No one but her lover saw her. Every eye but his was fixed on the man in the arena.

He turned, and with a firm and rapid step he walked across the empty space. Every heart stopped beating, every breath was held, every eye was fixed immovably upon that man. Without the slightest hesitation, he went to the door on the right, and opened it.

Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady?

The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way. Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semibarbaric princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?

How often, in her waking hours and in her dreams, had she started in wild horror, and covered her face with her hands as she thought of her lover opening the door on the other side of which waited the cruel fangs of the tiger!

But how much oftener had she seen him at the other door! How in her grievous reveries¹³ had she gnashed her teeth, and torn her hair, when she saw his start of rapturous delight as

he opened the door of the lady! How her soul had burned in agony when she had seen him rush to meet that woman, with her flushing cheek and sparkling eye of triumph; when she had seen him lead her forth, his whole frame kindled with the joy of recovered life; when she had heard the glad shouts from the multitude, and the wild ringing of the happy bells; when she had seen the priest, with his joyous followers, advance to the couple, and make them man and wife before her very eyes; and when she had seen them walk away together upon their path of flowers, followed by the tremendous shouts of the hilarious multitude, in which her one despairing shriek was lost and drowned!

Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the blessed regions of semibarbaric futurity?

And yet, that awful tiger, those shrieks, that blood.

Her decision had been indicated in an instant, but it had been made after days and nights of anguished deliberation. She had known she would be asked, she had decided what she would answer, and, without the slightest hesitation, she had moved her hand to the right.

The question of her decision is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to presume to set myself up as the one person able to answer it. And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door,—the lady, or the tiger?



13. Something that is *grievous* causes great grief or worry; *reveries* are daydreams.

Vocabulary

presume (pri zōōm') *v.* to take upon oneself without permission or authority; dare



Responding to Literature

Personal Response

What was your first reaction to the end of the story?

Analyzing Literature

Recall

1. In the kingdom described in the story, what happens after a person is accused of a crime?
2. For what crime was the young man thrown into prison?
3. When the young man was in the arena, what did the princess do, and what did he do?
4. What did the princess know about the lady behind one of the doors?
5. What question does the narrator ask at the end of the story?

Interpret

6. Why did the people in the community support the king's method of administering justice? Do you agree that the method is fair? Explain.
7. Why were the young man's actions considered a crime?
8. What do the young man's actions in the arena tell you about his relationship with the princess?
9. What would motivate the princess to send the young man to his death? What would motivate her to save his life?
10. In your opinion, why does the story end without an answer to the question?

Evaluate and Connect

11. The **narrator**, the person telling the story, directly addresses readers at the end. What is the effect of this technique? Explain.
12. Think about your response to the Reading Focus on page 44. How would you compare your situation with that of the princess or with that of the young man? Explain how your situation was similar and how it was different.
13. In what ways is the king's justice like flipping a coin to decide an important question?
14. Why is the princess described as "semibarbaric" rather than barbaric or civilized? In what ways does her *semi*barbaric nature make her decision more difficult?
15. Most stories end by telling you what happens to the main characters. This story leaves it open for the reader to decide. What is your opinion of this type of ending?

Literary ELEMENTS

Conflict

Every story revolves around a **conflict**, or struggle, between two opposing forces. An **external conflict** is one between a character and an outside force, such as another character, nature, society, or fate. An **internal conflict** takes place within the mind of a character who is torn between different courses of action.

1. What conflicts does the young man have? Are his conflicts external or internal? Support your answers with details from the story.
 2. What internal conflict does the princess have? Include specific lines from the text in your explanation.
 3. Why is the princess's internal conflict so important to the story?
- See **Literary Terms Handbook**, p. R3.

Literature and Writing

Writing About Literature

Review Imagine that you are a literary critic, and write a review of this story, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses. Which parts of the story are the most effective? Which scenes are the most vivid? Which parts do you think are the least effective? Be sure to provide a plot summary and details about specific lines or scenes from the story.

Creative Writing

And the Decision Is . . . Write a new ending for the story in which you reveal the princess's decision and show the effects of her decision on all the characters. What happens to the young man? How does she feel about it? What does the king do next? Be sure to use descriptive details, and try to match the style of the rest of the story.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Merely a Trick? Some people might dismiss "The Lady, or the Tiger?" as a trick on the reader because of its ending. Writer M. Griffin disagrees. Griffin insists that the epilogue "raises the story above the level of a 'trick'" and gives the story dignity by examining both human strength and human weakness. With your group, discuss and debate Griffin's opinion. Draw conclusions about whether Griffin was right or wrong and share them with the rest of the class.

Learning for Life

Convince Me! Imagine how the young man felt as he awaited his "trial" in the king's arena. As the young man, write a persuasive memo to either the king or the princess. The purpose of the memo is to persuade the receiver to spare your life.

Interdisciplinary Activity

Civics: On Trial In a small group, review what the narrator of "The Lady, or the Tiger?" says about how the people in the kingdom behave on trial days. Discuss what is similar and what is different about how people today react to trials covered in the media. Share your conclusions with the class.

Reading Further

If you'd like to read more by Frank R. Stockton, you might enjoy these works:

Short Story Collection: *The Best Short Stories of Frank R. Stockton* is a volume of timeless stories that show what happens when witty inventiveness is applied to absurd situations.

Novel: *The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine* is an adventure about two widows who set out on a relaxing retirement cruise to Japan only to become shipwrecked on a deserted island.

 **Save your work for your portfolio.**

