

High Life, Low Life

Aim

- To help students get a feel for the different types of people in the story and their relationships.

1 Write the words *high* and *low* on the board. Ask students to get into pairs and come up with as many different meanings of the words as they can, with example phrases/sentences. Call back suggestions from the whole class, and elicit/add any others that are missing. You could make this into a dictionary practice exercise.

Possible answers: physical position (high in the sky / low on the ground); feelings (high spirits (happy) / low spirits (sad)); status in society (a high position / a low position); strength/weakness (a high wind / a low speed); numerical value (high speed / low voltage); cultural value (high-brow / low-brow); musical (a high note / a low note); and – related to the title – level of luxury (high life / low life).

2 Ask students to read the Summary of the first part of the story. Ask them who represents the ‘high life’ and who the ‘low life’.

Answer: Joanna Whitaker is a rich widow = high life, and Annie Clayton is homeless = low life.

3 Ask them if they can see any parallels between the Clayton and the Whitaker families.

Answer: In both families an old lady wants to see a lawyer to sort out her financial situation after her death. Both women have children they haven’t seen for a long time.

4 Ask students to read Extracts 1 and decide who they refer to, and what part of the high-life / low-life category they fall into.

Answer: low life: a/c/d; high life: b/e

5 Ask them which people they think might be connected to the places described.

Answers: a Annie, b Mrs Whitaker, c criminal Wiseman, d Jackie, e Mrs Whitaker.

6 Ask students to read the information in the Characters list. Then ask them to read Extracts 2, and decide who says or writes them and which of characters they refer to.

Answers: a Mrs Whitaker talking about Charlie and Betty; b Wilma Patterson talking about Mrs Whitaker and Nat; c Nat talking about Tom Whitaker; d Nat talking about Tom Whitaker to Charlie; e Jackie and Nat talking about Annie; f Tom writing to Annie about Jackie; g Nat talking to Jackie about Charlie and Betty; h Betty, Charlie and Jackie talking about Nat.

7 Tell students that Nat Marley is the private investigator dealing with the Whitaker case. Ask them what they know about private investigators. What do they do? How do they behave? Ask if they have read any novels (e.g. by Raymond Chandler) or seen any films or TV series (e.g. *Philip Marlow*, *Mike Hammer*). Put them in pairs to make lists of the characteristics of these private investigators and anything else they know about them.

8 Ask students to read the quotations about Nat Marley in **Extracts 3** and decide (a) how close what he says and does is to their own ideas of a private investigator, and (b) what sort of person he seems to be.

Answers: (a) open (b) poor (i.e. he has no air conditioning, uses public transportation), untidy, lives alone, eats badly, usually dresses badly, doesn’t use taxis, has contacts for information, he cares about people / has a social conscience.

Based on what they have learned about Nat Marley’s character and actions in the story, ask students to write a feature on him for the *Daily News*.

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Summary of Chapters 1–4

High Life, Low Life starts when Nat Marley, a private investigator, saves a homeless woman called Annie Clayton, when she has a heart attack in the street. He has known Annie for some time and when he visits her in hospital she says she wants him to find her son Jackie whom she hasn't seen for twenty years, and to bring her a lawyer so that she can write her will.

The story of Nat helping Annie appears in the paper, along with his photograph, and after that he receives a letter from Mrs Joanna Whitaker the rich widow of Tom Whitaker, an aeroplane magnate. She has decided to make her will out in Nat's favour because he looks like her dead husband, and she is estranged from her own children, Charlie and Betty.

Extracts 1

- a 'We've lived on the streets,' Leona said. 'I can tell you, it's safer underground. Everyone knows each other here. If a stranger comes, we know about it. The subway workers know us. They leave us alone.' Leona started moving piles of black plastic bags. Underneath was an old metal box with a lock.
- b I looked around the room which was full of beautiful 1940s furniture. Nothing had been changed for years and I felt like I was in an old Hollywood movie.
- c The guy behind the desk looked as if he hadn't slept, washed or shaved for days. He smelled even worse than me. He lit a cigarette then coughed for a full fifteen seconds. Finally he was able to speak.
- d The Chelsea Arms hotel had seen better days. Now it just looked like any other cheap hotel. The floor was dirty white stone in the lobby. A guy was working on the computer, behind the window at the reception desk. There was another big guy sitting at a table opposite the reception desk. He was obviously there in case of any trouble.
- e Inside the elevator, it was all dark wood, thick carpets and mirrors. If this was just the elevator, imagine what the apartments were like.

Characters

Nat Marley: New York private investigator

Annie Clayton: a homeless woman

Mrs Joanna Whitaker: a rich widow

Charlie Whitaker: Mrs. Whitaker's son

Betty Osborne: Mrs Whitaker's daughter

Wilma Patterson: a lawyer

Jackie Robinson Clayton: Annie Clayton's son

Tom Whitaker: Mrs Whitaker's dead aircraft magnate husband

Ernest Wiseman: criminal, pretending he owns a taxi business

Extracts 2

- a 'Do you have any family?' asked Stella.
'A son and a daughter. They don't live in the city. I'd like to see more of them. Especially the grandchildren, but ...'
- b 'She wants it all [her money] to go to you. She read about you in the papers. Says you remind her of her late husband ... Says she couldn't think of a better person to leave everything to.'
- c 'Ed went on to tell me that [the man] worked hard and played hard. Even after he was married he played around with other women. It wasn't a happy marriage ...'
- d 'I hope appearance is the only thing I share with your father ...'
- e 'So mom's been on the street all this time?' he asked.
'Ever since she last saw you – in a cell,' I said.
- f *I can never be a real father to the child. Here's some money to help with food and clothes. And something for the future. Keep these stock certificates. One day they might be worth a lot of money.*
- g 'And that's not all ... You've got family. A half-brother and half-sister ... They live upstate.'
- h 'Finally, we'd all like to say a special thank you to the man whose hard work made this all possible. Without him, we might never have met.'

Extracts 3

- 1 After leaving the NYPD, I became a private investigator. Although I don't make that much money, I'm my own boss and I don't have to take orders from anybody. I prefer it that way.
- 2 Most offices in the building had their own air conditioning. Mine didn't, so it was hot and uncomfortable.
- 3 New York private investigators don't normally use public transportation. But I'm different.
- 4 For once, I looked smart. I had put on a clean shirt and my good jacket, which was just back from the cleaner's.
- 5 I left and took the number seven train home to Queens. I couldn't eat much of the takeout meal I got from the diner down the block.
- 6 I wandered over to McFadden's Bar on Second Avenue. The usual crowd of *Daily News* reporters was there ... I needed information and I knew just the guy who could help – Ed Winchester.
- 7 I felt both sad and angry as I put down the phone. Sad for the people who had to live out their lives on the streets. Angry about the society that put them on the streets.