

## Style

28 When Fitzgerald describes John, he sometimes uses a lyrical, poetic style:

*The dark rumples of oblivion were less loud at the patter of his child's feet ... [page 76].*

*... his life had been a series of struggles up a series of rugged hills ... [page 76].*

*... he cherished less than the usual number of illusions ... [page 76].*

Can you find other examples of this kind of style?

29 Fitzgerald sometimes uses exaggerated or overblown language to obtain a comic effect:

*Edith Andros, calculating shrewdly that the new dress would stand out more sensationally against vestments already rumpled ... (i.e. that her baby would look better than the others after they had got dirty at the party).*

Look again at the paragraph that starts *An hour passed* [page 79].

Which words or phrases suggest that the author is comparing the children's activity to a military operation?

Guidance to the above literary terms, answer keys to all the exercises and activities, plus a wealth of other reading-practice material, can be found on the student's section of the Macmillan Readers website at: [www.macmillanenglish.com/readers](http://www.macmillanenglish.com/readers).

## You Were Perfectly Fine

by Dorothy Parker

### About the author

Dorothy Parker was born Dorothy Rothschild in 1893 in New Jersey, in the USA. Her mother, who died when Dorothy was very young, was of Scottish descent. Her father was a Jewish garment-manufacturer<sup>1</sup>.

Dorothy grew up in New York City, where she attended a Catholic convent school, and then Miss Dana's School in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1916, she sold some of her poetry to *Vogue* magazine, where she later worked, writing copy for fashion photographs and drawings. She then became a drama critic for another magazine, *Vanity Fair*. At this time, she married Edwin Pond Parker II. They were divorced some years later, but Dorothy continued to use his surname.

Dorothy was a key member of the Algonquin Round Table. This was a group of journalists, editors, actors and press agents who met regularly for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel, New York City, over a period of about eight years, starting in 1919. The magazine *The New Yorker* was also founded at the hotel. From 1926 until 1955, Dorothy's short stories were published at irregular intervals in this magazine. Many of them are based on incidents and conversations that took place at the Algonquin.

In 1926, a book of Dorothy's poems was published under the title *Enough Rope*, and it became a best-seller. Parker released two more volumes of verse, *Sunset Gun* (1927) and *Death and Taxes* (1931), along with the short-story collections *Laments for the Living* (1930) and *After Such Pleasures* (1933).

In 1934, Dorothy married the actor-writer Alan Campbell who was 11 years younger than her. They went to Hollywood as a screenwriting team and bought a farm in Pennsylvania. Dorothy became pregnant at the age of 42, but she lost the baby in the third month of pregnancy. Dorothy and Campbell were divorced in 1947 and remarried in 1950. Their marriage was always difficult and they spent long periods living apart. Campbell died in 1963 and Dorothy returned to New York. Her

<sup>1</sup> someone whose job is to make clothes

last important piece of writing was a play, *The Ladies of the Corridor*, an account of life in a New York residential hotel. By this time she was drinking heavily and in 1967 she died alone in a hotel room.

Dorothy Parker is remembered for her cynical, urbane humour and sharp observations of human behaviour. Her witticisms are often quoted, and theatrical dramatisations of her work are still very popular.

## About the story

*You Were Perfectly Fine* was published in 1929, the same year that Parker won the O Henry Award for the best short story of the year, with *Big Blonde*. Her writing was criticised by some as 'flapper verse', a style associated with over-confident young women making fun of conventional social and sexual rules. However, Parker's short stories, though often witty, are also spare and incisive, and more bittersweet than comic.

The economy of this story, and its amusing conversation, make it perfect for theatrical performance.

## Background information

### The 1920s in the USA

The decade of the 1920s is sometimes known as 'the Roaring Twenties' or 'the Jazz Age', and is often described as a time of carefree abandon and excess in all things. This is only partly true, and did not apply to all sectors of society. After the First World War, there was a period of prosperity and economic expansion in the USA. Production increased and more people were able to afford things like refrigerators, cars and washing machines. There was a demand, too, for more entertainment, and the number of music bars, theatres and cinemas grew. Social changes meant that women were freer than before, and this was reflected in their dress and speech. Dorothy Parker was a 'modern' woman who did what she wanted and spoke her mind freely.

### Prohibition

In the USA, 'Prohibition' refers to the period from 1920 to 1933 when the manufacture and sale of alcohol was prohibited by law. It was thought that if people did not drink alcohol, they would work harder and there would be less crime. However, the law was not a

success. Criminal gangs sold alcohol on the black market, and there was violence between the different gangs. Many people ignored the law and drank anyway.

In the story, set in the late 1920s, the young man is suffering after drinking heavily the night before. Dorothy Parker herself drank heavily, and the meetings of the Round Table were certainly not alcohol-free. *You Were Perfectly Fine* is essentially a critical observation of the negative effects of heavy drinking.

## Summary

It may help you to know something about what happens in the story before you read it. Don't worry, this summary does *not* tell you how the story ends!

The story is based on a conversation between a young man and woman.

Both have attended the same dinner in a hotel restaurant the night before, but the young man cannot remember much about it because he drank too much. Today, he feels terrible and asks the girl how he behaved at the dinner. The girl tells him that he was *perfectly fine*, but gradually reveals various events that took place which make the young man feel ashamed of himself. Finally, the girl describes how they both went for a taxi ride together at the end of the evening. Her description of what happened in the taxi leaves the young man feeling worse than ever.

## Pre-reading exercises

### Key vocabulary

This section will help you familiarise yourself with some of the more specific vocabulary used in the story. You may want to use it to help you before you start reading, or as a revision exercise after you have finished the story.

## Exclamations

Peter, the young man in the story, is sorry that he drank too much the night before, and the girl tries to reassure him that his behaviour was not as bad as he thinks. They preface many of their comments with different expressions showing repentance or reassurance.

1 Look at the following exclamations. Which do you think are made by the man and which by the woman?

- a) *Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear.*
- b) *Oh, goodness ... everybody was feeling pretty high.*
- c) *Good heavens, no ... Everyone thought you were terribly funny.*
- d) *Why, you didn't do a thing ...*
- e) *My, you were funny.*
- f) *Dear God. What'll I ever do?*

## Expressions

The young couple in the story use a number of informal or colloquial expressions.

2 Match the expressions in bold below with their definitions in the right-hand column. Then read the story and check your answers.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 I kept trying to make it (out of bed).              | a) without worries                             |
| 2 The hair of the dog (in the story, <i>masiff</i> ). | b) in an advantageous position                 |
| 3 I'm through.  | c) paid excessive attention to                 |
| 4 I did think you were just a little tight.           | d) behaved badly, stupidly                     |
| 5 You made too much fuss over her.                    | e) never going to do something ever again      |
| 6 Was I making a pass at her?                         | f) I think I'm going to collapse               |
| 7 I haven't got a care in the world.                  | g) drunk                                       |
| 8 I'm sitting pretty.                                 | h) have decided to stop doing something        |
| 9 I'm off the stuff for life.                         | i) manage to do something                      |
| 10 I feel a collapse coming on.                       | j) making an amorous advance                   |
| 11 I made such a fool of myself.                      | k) an alcoholic drink taken to cure a hangover |

## US English

The writer uses some words and expressions that are mainly used only in the USA.

3 Look at the words below and complete the sentences in British English.

angry	go and join	suppose	finished	go and make
joking	pavement	tie	excellent	

### US English

- 1 I'm through with drinking.
- 2 I must have been dandy.
- 3 Is everybody sore at me?

### British English

- 1 I'm ..... with drinking.
- 2 I must have been .....
- 3 Is everybody ..... with me?
- 4 You were only fooling. You were only .....
- 5 You didn't like his necktie. You didn't like his .....
- 6 You sat down on the sidewalk. You sat down on the .....
- 7 I guess it must have been. I ..... it must have been.
- 8 I'll go make you a drink. I'll ..... you a drink.
- 9 I'd better go join a monastery. I'd better ..... a monastery.

## Main themes

Before you read the story, you may want to think about some of its main themes. The questions will help you think about the story as you are reading it for the first time. There is more discussion of the main themes in the *Literary analysis* section after the story.

### Male/female relationships in New York society in the 1920s

At this time, women in the USA were achieving greater equality with men. This was the time of the 'flapper' or young woman who cut her hair short, wore short dresses, smoked, drank and went out to parties. It is not clear if the woman in the story is of this type, but it is certainly possible. She was at a dinner the night before with a mixture of people, married and unmarried, they all drank or did not mind if others drank, and, as far as we know, she was not officially escorted by a man.

4 As you read the story, ask yourself:

- a) Do the men and the women in the story seem to have equal status?
- b) Who has greater control over the situation, Peter or the young woman? Why?

The place of alcohol in society

The conversation in the story revolves around the fact that Peter drank too much the previous evening, and now, feels terrible and cannot remember much of what happened. At the time, drinking alcohol was officially prohibited by the government, and yet it is obvious that it continued, even in public places, such as the hotel or restaurant where the previous night's dinner has taken place.

The conversation between Peter and his 'girlfriend' seems to take place in an apartment and, again, there is abundant alcohol available, since she offers more than once to make him a drink.

5 As you read the story, ask yourself:

- a) What seems to be the general attitude of the people in the story towards alcohol?
- b) How is the young woman in the story using alcohol to manipulate Pete?



## You Were Perfectly Fine

by Dorothy Parker

The pale young man eased himself carefully into the low chair, and rolled his head to the side, so that the cool **chintz** comforted his cheek and temple.

"Oh, dear," he said. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear. Oh."

The clear-eyed girl, sitting light and erect on the couch, smiled brightly at him.

"Not feeling so well today?" she said.

"Oh, I'm great," he said. "Corking<sup>2</sup>, I am. Know what time I got up? Four o'clock this afternoon, sharp. I kept trying to make it, and every time I took my head off the pillow, it would roll under the bed. This isn't my head I've got on now. I think this is something that used to belong to Walt Whitman<sup>3</sup>. Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear."

"Do you think maybe a drink would make you feel better?" she said.

"The hair of the **mastiff** that bit me?" he said. "Oh, no, thank you. Please never speak of anything like that again. I'm through. I'm all, all through. Look at that hand; steady as a **humming-bird**. Tell me, was I very terrible last night?"

"Oh, goodness," she said, "everybody was feeling pretty high. You were all right."

"Yeah," he said. "I must have been dandy. Is everybody sore at me?"

"Good heavens, no," she said. "Everyone thought you were terribly funny. Of course, Jim Pierson was a little stuffy<sup>4</sup>, there, for a minute at dinner. But people sort of held him back in his chair, and got him calmed down. I don't think anybody at the other tables noticed it at all. Hardly anybody."

<sup>2</sup> *old-fashioned*: wonderful, splendid

<sup>3</sup> influential American poet and humanist (1819-1892)

<sup>4</sup> *informal*: criticising anyone whose behaviour is unusual

"He was going to sock<sup>5</sup> me?" he said. "Oh, Lord. What did I do to him?"

"Why, you didn't do a thing," she said. "You were perfectly fine. But you know how silly Jim gets, when he thinks anybody is making too much fuss over Elinor."

"Was I making a pass at Elinor?" he said. "Did I do that?"

"Of course you didn't" she said. "You were only fooling, that's all. She thought you were awfully amusing. She was having a marvellous time. She only got a little tiny bit annoyed just once, when you poured the clam-juice down her back."

"My God," he said. "Clam-juice down that back. And every vertebra a little Cabot<sup>6</sup>. Dear God. What'll I ever do?"

"Oh, she'll be all right," she said. "I just send her some flowers, or something. Don't worry about it. It isn't anything."

"No, I won't worry," he said. "I haven't got a care in the world. I'm sitting pretty. Oh, dear, oh, dear. Did I do any other fascinating tricks at dinner?"

"You were fine," she said. "Don't be so foolish about it. Everybody was crazy about you. The maitre d'hotel was a little worried because you wouldn't stop singing, but he really didn't mind. All he said was, he was afraid they'd close the place again, if there was so much noise. But he didn't care a bit, himself. I think he loved seeing you have such a good time. Oh, you were just singing away, there, for about an hour. It wasn't so terribly loud, at all."

"So I sang," he said. "That must have been a treat. I sang."

"Don't you remember?" she said. "You just sang one song after another. Everybody in the place was listening. They loved it. Only you kept insisting that you wanted to sing some song about some kind of fusiliers<sup>7</sup> or other, and everybody kept shushing<sup>8</sup> you, and you'd keep trying to start it again. You were wonderful. We were all trying to make you stop singing for a minute, and eat

<sup>5</sup> *informal*: to hit someone or something with a lot of force

<sup>6</sup> probably referring to John Cabot the Italian-born explorer who discovered Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in North America. Peter is comparing Elinor's

vertebrae to small islands

<sup>7</sup> soldiers armed with a gun

<sup>8</sup> telling someone to be quiet

something, but you wouldn't hear of it. My, you were funny."

"Didn't I eat any dinner?" he said.

"Oh, not a thing," she said. "Every time the waiter would offer you something, you'd give it right back to him, because you said that he was your long-lost brother, changed in the cradle by a gypsy band, and that anything you had was his. You had him simply roaring at you."

"I bet I did," he said. "I bet I was comical. Society's Pet, I must have been. And what happened then, after my overwhelming success with the waiter?"

"Why, nothing much," she said. "You took a sort of dislike to some old man with white hair, sitting across the room, because you didn't like his necktie and you wanted to tell him about it. But we got you out, before he got really mad."

"Oh, we got out," he said. "Did I walk?"

"Walk! Of course you did," she said. "You were absolutely all right. There was that nasty stretch of ice on the sidewalk, and you did sit down awfully hard, you poor dear. But good heavens, that might have happened to anybody."

"Oh, sure," he said. "Louisa Alcott<sup>9</sup> or anybody. So I fell down on the sidewalk. That would explain what's the matter with my — Yes. I see. And then what, if you don't mind?"

"Ah, now, Peter!" she said. "You can't sit there and say you don't remember what happened after that! I did think that maybe you were just a little tight at dinner — oh, you were perfectly all right, and all that, but I did know you were feeling pretty gay<sup>10</sup>. But you were so serious, from the time you fell down — I never knew you to be that way. Don't you know, how you told me I had never seen your real self before? Oh, Peter, I just couldn't bear it, if you didn't remember that lovely long ride we took together in the taxi! Please, you do remember that, don't you? I think it would simply kill me, if you didn't."

"Oh, yes," he said. "Riding in the taxi. Oh, yes, sure. Pretty long ride, hmm?"

<sup>9</sup> US novelist, most famous for *Little Women*, a novel about four sisters, thought by some people to be over-sentimental and moralistic (1832–1888)

<sup>10</sup> happy, cheerful; here, as the result of drinking

“Round and round and round the park,” she said. “Oh, and the trees were shining so in the moonlight. And you said you never knew before that you really had a soul.”

“Yes,” he said. “I said that. That was me.”

“You said such lovely, lovely things,” she said. “And I’d never known, all this time, how you had been feeling about me, and I’d never dared to let you see how I felt about you. And then last night – oh, Peter dear, I think that taxi ride was the most important thing that ever happened to us in our lives.”

“Yes,” he said. “I guess it must have been.”

“And we’re going to be so happy,” she said. “Oh, I just want to tell everybody! But I don’t know – I think maybe it would be sweeter to keep it all to ourselves.”

“I think it would be,” he said.

“Isn’t it lovely?” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Great.”

“Lovely!” she said.

“Look here,” he said, “do you mind if I have a drink? I mean, just medicinally, you know. I’m off the stuff<sup>11</sup> for life, so help me. But I think I feel a collapse coming on.”

“Oh, I think it would do you good,” she said. “You poor boy, it’s a shame you feel so awful. I’ll go make you a whisky and soda.”

“Honestly,” he said, “I don’t see how you could ever want to speak to me again, after I made such a fool of myself, last night. I think I’d better go join a monastery in Tibet.”

“You crazy idiot!” she said. “As if I could ever let you go away now! Stop talking like that. You were perfectly fine.”

She jumped up from the couch, kissed him quickly on the forehead, and ran out of the room.

The pale young man looked after her and shook his head long and slowly, then dropped it in his damp and trembling hands.

“Oh, dear,” he said. “Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear.”

## Post-reading exercises

### Understanding the story

- 1 Use these questions to help you check that you have understood the story.
- 1 How does the young man feel at the beginning of the story? How do you know?
- 2 How do you think the young woman feels? What evidence is there for your opinion?
- 3 What time did the young man get up? Why?
- 4 What does the young man want to know about the previous evening?
- 5 According to the young woman, why was Jim Pierson a little stuffy?
- 6 Why was Elinor a tiny little bit annoyed?
- 7 How long was the young man singing? How did the maitre d’hotel react?
- 8 Why didn’t the young man eat anything?
- 9 Why was the young man taken out of the hotel?
- 10 What happened on the sidewalk?
- 11 Where did Peter and the young woman go in the taxi? What happened in the taxi?
- 12 How does the young woman feel about what happened in the taxi?
- 13 Why do you think Peter asks for a drink?
- 14 How do you think Peter feels after the young woman leaves the room?

## Language study

### Grammar

#### Ellipsis

In informal spoken English, we often omit words at the beginning of sentences if the meaning is clear from the context.

Look at these examples from the story:

*Not feeling so well today?* [page 103]

*Know what time I got up?* [page 103]

*Pretty long ride, hmm?* [page 105]

<sup>11</sup> material, substance; here, referring to alcohol

1 Complete the sentences below so that they mean the same as the examples on page 107.

Aren't ..... ?

Do ..... ?

It was ..... ?

2 Write the phrases below as complete sentences.

1 Seen Sandra?

2 Nobody at home today, I'm afraid.

3 Anybody want more food?

4 You be here tomorrow?

5 Your father got a car?

6 Dora coming to the party?

### Fronting in informal speech

In informal spoken English, as in literary English, it is quite common to begin an affirmative sentence with the object or complement, in order to give this part more emphasis.

3 Look at these examples from the story. Who is speaking? What would the normal word order be?

"*Corking, I am.*" [page 103]

"*Society's Pet, I must have been.*" [page 105]

4 Rewrite these sentences so that the object or complement is given more emphasis.

1 We had an excellent dinner last night.

*Excellent dinner we had last night.*

2 That was a great concert!

3 They were furious with me.

4 He's my favourite singer.

5 That must have been awful.

6 She's feeling terrible.

### The use of get

Get is one of the most common verbs in spoken English. It has several different meanings. Look at the different uses of get in these examples from the story.

*This isn't my head I've got on now.* (wearing)

*But people ... got him calmed down.* (managed)

*She only got a little tiny bit annoyed.* (became)

*I haven't got a care in the world.* (don't have)

*But we got you out, before he got really mad.* (take; became)

5 Rewrite the sentences above using the words in brackets and making any other necessary changes.

6 Rewrite these sentences using an appropriate form of get.

1 I don't think he received my letter.

2 She'll come and collect you from the airport.

3 I realised later that I hadn't understood the joke.

4 Tom has finally had his car fixed.

5 When are you going to have your hair cut?

6 Make her stop singing in the shower, will you?

## Literary analysis

### Plot

1 The girl describes the previous evening to Peter. What were the main events? Make a list:

– Peter poured clam-juice down Elinor's back.

– Jim was going to hit Peter but ...

– The maitre d'hotel ...

2 What was the most important event of the evening, according to the young woman? Do you think Peter remembers anything about it?

3 What is the young woman referring to when she says *maybe it would be sweeter to keep it all to ourselves*? Why do you think she says this? Does Peter agree with her? Why?

4 What do you think will happen now?

### Character

5 How are the young man and woman described at the beginning of the story? What do these descriptions tell us?

6 How would you describe the young woman? Why do you think the author does not give her a name?

7 How would you describe Peter? Do you think this is the first time he has drunk too much? What evidence is there?

8 Which other people are mentioned in the story? What is their relationship with the two main characters?

## Narration

- 9 Do you believe the young woman's version of what happened the night before? Why?
- 10 Do you think that Peter believes what the young woman tells him? Why?
- 11 What is the main type of narration in the story: description or direct speech? What effect does this have?
- 12 Think about how the story would have been told from the point of view of Jim Pierson, Elinor, the maitre d'hotel, or the waiter. How would it be different?

## Atmosphere

- 13 What elements contribute to the humour of the conversation? Think about, for example, the order in which events are told, and the details provided.
- 14 How does the author give us an idea of the lifestyle of her main characters? Think about the hotel, the meal, the taxi, drink etc.
- 15 Is the atmosphere of the story light-hearted or is there a dark side to it? Why do you think this?

## Style

- 16 Read the beginning of the story as far as "Not feeling so well today?" she said. How does the author convey the contrasting physical states of her main characters?
- 17 Most of the story consists of direct speech. Who speaks the most? Who asks the most questions? Why?
- 18 Notice how Parker mostly uses 'he said' or 'she said' without any adverbs or explanatory phrases. Why do you think she does this?
- 19 Notice how the young woman 'consoles' Peter, but at the same time suggests that he behaved very badly e.g.:  
"I don't think anybody at the other tables noticed it at all. Hardly anybody." [page 103]  
"She was having a marvellous time. She only got a little tiny bit annoyed just once, when you poured the clam-juice down her back." [page 104]  
Can you find any more examples of this mixture of reassurance and revelation? What effect does it have?

- 20 This story is sometimes performed as a play. Try reading part of it aloud. Do you think it would be effective as a play?

Guidance to the above literary terms, answer keys to all the exercises and activities plus a wealth of other reading-practice material can be found on the student's section of the Macmillan Readers website at [www.macmillanenglish.com/readers](http://www.macmillanenglish.com/readers).