

Blueprint for Reading

the **Author**

**Elsie Singmaster
(1879-1958)**

Elsie Singmaster was born in Pennsylvania and lived much of her life in Gettysburg, eventually writing about Civil War events there. She is known for her stories of local miners and the Pennsylvania Dutch. Her first story appeared in a teacher's journal when she was eleven. When asked about the story, she said, "The plot was not wholly original; when the story was printed, my conscience began to trouble me and has ever since."

Background Bytes

This story is set in eastern Pennsylvania, in a bleak coal-mining town that had grown as coal replaced wood as the major industrial fuel. That happened in the 1840s when there was an influx of immigrants to the United States who constituted a large, willing labor force. These newcomers to America, eager to succeed in a new country, often had to work under desperately unsafe conditions. The accident that killed the protagonist's father is one of many such disasters that plagued the coal-mining industry until federal legislation in the 1930s encouraged mine safety. As you read, notice Jennie's drive to become a productive, hard-working American, despite the many obstacles in her path.





Mr. Brownlee's Roses

As Jennie Swenson closed the outer door of her mother's kitchen, pulling with all her strength against the wind, she heard far up the street a man's loud singing.

I went to a ball one night,
It was a fancy hop;
I danced until the lights went out,
And the music it did stop.

Stanislaus Sobieski, usually called Stan Sobski, night fireman at Mr. Brownlee's greenhouse, was going to his work. His song was old; new songs, he said, did not fit his voice. He was apparently not disturbed by the fact that work began at six o'clock and it was now seven.

To Jennie, Mr. Brownlee's greenhouse was paradise; she did not understand how anyone could be late for work there. All else in the mining town was black and grim; there was no money for paint, and there was no time for cultivating gardens. At each end of Main Street towered a frame structure called a breaker, to whose lofty summit ran cars filled with coal. Beside each breaker grows a mountain of black refuse, separated from the coal as it descended in long chutes.

There had been a third mine along the hillside, and its owner, Mr. Brownlee's father, had built a small greenhouse for his own pleasure. As the mine grew lean, he began to sell flowers. Presently he was shipping a thousand American Beauties each night to New York. The present Mr. Brownlee was shipping three thousand before he went to war. Now he and his sister were once more sending roses, five thousand in a night—not American Beauties, but newer and more fashionable varieties: Premier and

Word Bank **refuse** (REF yoos) *n.*: something that is discarded as worthless or useless



Columbia and Radiance, in various shades of rose and pink; Talisman, a blending of pink and apricot and gold; double white Killarneys and long yellow buds of *Souvenir de Claudius Pernet*.¹

Jennie did not know their names or even their distinct and lovely odors; she knew only their colors, seen when she walked slowly by, looking eagerly for panes of glass on which the white paint was worn away. She often watched Mr. Brownlee and his sister. He was tall and a little lame, and his hair was slightly gray; Miss Brownlee was short and broad, but not stout. She had clear blue eyes, wavy hair, and a broad white forehead. Her brother could do no strenuous work; but she worked from morning till night, directing the laborers, inspecting rows of plants, and superintending the packing of roses.

At the same instant that Jennie heard Stan singing, she wound her scarf more tightly around her neck, locked the door, and hung the key behind a shutter. For

hours a light snow had been falling, and now an east wind was beginning to blow. Stan had now reached the middle of his song.

And this is what I ate:
A dozen raw, a plate of slaw,
A chicken and a roast,
Some oyster stew and ice cream too,
And several quail on toast.

In the moment while she waited for Stan to pass, Jennie was tempted to turn back to the kitchen and study. There was a good light and perfect quiet—for Mrs. Swenson, a nurse, was on a case, and Jennie's sisters, Anna and Gertrude, lived in Wilkes-Barre.²

But what Jennie required for study was not quiet—it was company. There were incomprehensible passages in her Latin lesson; insoluble problems in her alg-

1. *Souvenir de Claudis Pernet* (SOOV NEER DEE KLAW dee iss peer NAY) is a type of rose.

2. *Wilkes-Barre* (WILKS BARE ee) was the largest city in the Wyoming Valley in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Word Bank **incomprehensible** (IN kahm pree HEN sih bul) *adj.*: impossible to understand
insoluble (in SAHL yuh bul) *adj.*: incapable of being solved

ebra. If she did not graduate in June, she could not get a position. Better the storm and the long walk to Hilda Yonson's kitchen, where there were no less than eight younger children, than peace and quiet and blankness of mind.

Gertrude and Anna were astonished at her dullness. She could not be a stenographer³ because she was too slow; she could not teach because she was too dull; she could not be a nurse because she was too timid. The teachers gave aptitude tests, but she showed no aptitude for anything. When she was excited or embarrassed her Swedish tongue refused to say "j"; it refused now.

"I *must* get a job!" wailed Jennie aloud to the storm.

She stepped from the boardwalk, already swept bare, into a drift up to her knees. Instantly she laughed and shook the tears out of her eyes. She was a true Swede, tall and broad and strong. She started briskly down the street. The lights in the neighbors' houses were dimmed by whirling snow, but far above them hung a light at the top of the breaker.

She heard a shrill bell which heralded⁴ the rising of the elevator from the mine. In a moment a line of tired men would pass the corner. Five years ago there had been an evening when the loud whistle blew and everyone went running and crying to the pit head. Mrs. Swenson had been the first to get there and first to know that she was widowed.

At the third corner Jennie halted. There were two ways to the Yonson house: one down Main Street; the other through side streets, past Mr. Brownlee's greenhouse. Jennie took a step in that direction; then, laughing at herself,

ran on down Main Street, then up a sharp hill.

From the Yonsons' porch the whole of the Wyoming Valley was visible in daylight—cities and towns and roads, schools and factories; and in every town and village a towering breaker. A part of the valley had a strange and solemn name, "The Shades of Death," a memorial of Colonial war and massacre.

Tim Yonson sat before the stove, in a coal-blackened rocker reserved for his use. His face and hands were clean, but they were not white. He smoked a long pipe and talked to Mrs. Yonson, who was washing dishes. There was a child on each side of the table, each pair of eyes on a book.

"Good efening,⁵ Yennie," said Tim.

"Good efening," said Mrs. Yonson.

Hilda looked up. "Hello! Thought you weren't coming."

As Jennie unwound her scarf, Mrs. Yonson set a large plate of Swedish cookies on the table to lighten the evening's labors, and it was not until half past nine that Jennie rose to leave. Mr. Yonson had gone to bed and so had five or six children.

"I certainly am grateful," sighed Jennie.

Mrs. Yonson had difficulty with many English letters. "Come efery night till you are old, and Hilda will not yet pay what your moder done for us."

Jennie had expected to have the wind in her face, but it blew from every direction in turn. Regardless of the stinging snow, she turned down the dark street

3. A *stenographer* (stuh NAHG rih fur) is a person who specializes in taking dictation in shorthand; either on a special machine or by hand.

4. *Efening* is 'evening' with a Swedish accent.

5. *Heralded* (HAIR ul did) means announced.

Studying the Selection

First Impressions

Jennie is single-mindedly focused on success, yet she appreciates the warmth and friendship of the Yonson home. She is equally drawn to the greenhouse. In a few paragraphs explain why the greenhouse is so appealing to Jennie. How is she similar to Mr. Brownlee's roses?

✓ Quick Review

1. What are American Beauties?
2. Summarize Stan Sobieski's role in the story.
3. Describe Mr. Brownlee and his sister.
4. What happened to Jennie's father?

📄 In-depth Thinking

5. Why is Jennie so worried about her studies? What evidence do we have that she is *not* a "dull girl"?
6. What do we learn about the Yonson family from Jennie's visit there?
7. Describe the conditions necessary for the roses' survival. How is their delicacy symbolic?
8. How might you state the theme of this story?

📁 Drawing Conclusions

9. Jenny laughs at herself three different times in this story. Describe each occurrence. What do these incidents say about her character?
10. Write about a time in your own life when an interest or hobby led to a personal opportunity.





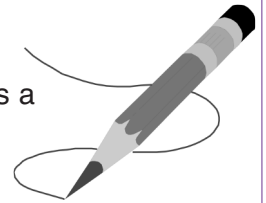
on External and Internal Settings

Setting helps create mood. When a place is described as dark and cold, we react negatively towards it. Conversely, a warm and well-lit setting attracts us. Use descriptive and precise language in the following assignments.

1. Write a paragraph about an outdoor setting that produces a negative mood.
2. Write a paragraph about an indoor setting that produces a positive mood.
3. Write in detail about a place that *instantly* cheered or depressed you.

Creating and Writing

1. Write a short essay about the effect of Mr. Brownlee's greenhouse. Consider not only its impact on Jennie but on the town as a whole. In general, what do roses symbolize? Specifically, what might Mr. Brownlee's roses symbolize?
2. A **synonym** is a word with the same or approximate meaning as another word. An **antonym** is a word with the opposite meaning. A synonym for *happy* is *glad*; an antonym for *happy* is *sad*.



Think of one word to describe Mr. Brownlee's greenhouse. Then list five synonyms and five antonyms for that word. Define each word. Most likely you will find that some of the antonyms will describe the town. Using these descriptive antonyms, write a paragraph describing the bleak mining town in the story.

3. Using charcoal pastels, sketch a town scene on a piece of paper. Use only black to sketch the entire scene—the sidewalks, streets, buildings and people. Now use color to draw a single object, such as a flower or tree. Place it at or near the center of your picture. Notice how the one bit of color brightens the whole page. Think how Mr. Brownlee's greenhouse does this for the people of the mining town. Now, notice the black dust on your skin, on your fingers, and imagine this dust as being always there. If you were a coal miner, or if you lived in a mining town, this dust would be all around you. When you wash your hands, notice if any of the black dust sticks to your skin or stays under your fingernails. Now, recall how Jennie described Tim Yonson's hands, clean but not white.