

READING 5.1

Short Story: The Woman Who Talked to Horses

Leon Rooke (1934–) is an American-born author living in Ontario. He is a prolific short-story writer, novelist and poet. Rooke was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2007 (Toye 536–537).

READING FOR INFORMATION

- Read the short story a first time, underlining the words listed in the chart below and highlighting information essential to understanding the plot. (The vocabulary is listed in order of appearance in the text.)
- Fill in the chart, defining the words according to their contexts. (You may need to refer to a dictionary.)
- In sixty words or fewer, summarize the plot in the space provided.

COMPANION
WEB+

VOCABULARY	DEFINITION
1. emaciated (adj.)	
2. standoffish (adj.)	
3. strutted (v.)	
4. meek (adj.)	
5. tangible (adj.)	

VOCABULARY	DEFINITION
6. haughty (adj.)	
7. bristled (v.)	
8. glean (v.)	
9. placid (adj.)	
10. benign (adj.)	

PLOT SUMMARY

The Woman Who Talked to Horses

by Leon Rooke

"That's right," she said, "I talk to them. They will talk to me when they will talk to no one else."

"But they *can* talk," I said.

"Oh, sure."

5 "To each other?"

"All the time."

I looked over at the horses. They were in their stalls, eating hay, their rumps and hind legs about all I could see of them. They looked the same as they always had. I didn't believe they talked. I certainly didn't believe they
10 would talk to her.

"What's your fee?" I asked.

She looked off at the horses, too, then glanced at me, then worked one toe into the ground and looked at that. She was wearing blue cloth shoes with thick white shoelaces—all very clean. Too clean. She looked clean all
15 over. I didn't think she knew snot about horseflesh or about anything else. I figured she was a straight-out phoney.

"Your fee," I said.

She had a little itch behind one ear. She scratched there.

"Before we go into my fee structure," she said, "we need to have a quiet
20 discussion."

Fee structures? Holy Christ.

I had a good mind to turn and walk away.

"You won't tell me your fee?"

She pawed the ground again and the hand again went up to get at that
25 itch. I stared at that hand. She had long, slender fingers and white immaculate skin with hardly any fuzz on it, and wrists no thicker than my thumb. All very feminine. She wasn't wearing a ring; I noticed that. I had her figured by this time. She was another one of those frail, inhibited, emaciated females who knew nothing about the real world but like to think they could tell you
30 about horses. One of those grim, pitiful creatures who was forever saying to themselves and to each other, *I can relate to horses*.

I'd had my share of that lot back when I had been boarding.

"I can't tell you my fee," she said, "until I know what you want of me and
35 what you want it."

I nearly laughed in her face. The whole business was stupid. I didn't know why I'd let myself get talked into calling her. I wished now that she'd just get in her car and go away, so I could go into the house and tell Sarah, "Well, Sarah, you got any more of your dumb ideas? Let's hear them, Sarah." Something like that. And watch her shrivel up. Watch her mew and sob and
40 burn and hide away.

Christ, the time I was wasting. *All* the time I had wasted, listening to Sarah. Trying to take her seriously. Giving in when I knew it would prove a waste of time, all to keep a little peace in the house. To keep poor Sarah upright and not shrivelling.

45 I stared up at the house. Wondering if Sarah was watching. If she wasn't up there gritting her teeth, gnawing the woodwork, the broom in one hand, shoving hair out of her eyes with another, as she pressed her scared little face against a secret window. That was Sarah. Ever spying. The one way she had—so she'd tell it—of keeping her guard up.

50 "Mr. Gaddis?" the woman said.

"Yes, what is it?"

"All I need to know is what trouble it is you are having. With your horses. Then we can talk price."

"How about we talk *method*," I said. "Then price. You going to go up and whisper sweet nothings in these horses' ears? Is that what I'm paying you for?"

The woman eyed me peculiarly. Her head tilted, her mouth a shade open. It wasn't dislike so much—though I knew she did. Nor was she making judgments. I didn't know what it was. A quiet distance. A watching.

60 Disapproval, too: that was there.

"I don't know what the trouble is," I said. "That's why I called you. I want to know what's going on. All I know is they've been acting funny lately."

"Funny how?"

"It's hard to say. Standoffish, maybe."

65 "Horses are like that. Can't horses have moods, Mr. Gaddis?"

"Not on my time," I said. "They're not producing. You'd think the bastards had gone on vacation. Zombies, the lot of them."

"I see," the woman said.

Bull. She saw nothing.

70 I stared at her open throat. She had on this soft cottony blouse, tinted like old rose, with a wide, folded collar, and at her throat a gold necklace no thicker than a fish line.

She had on these black britches.

Up at the house Sarah had all the doors and windows shut up tight and outside not a hint of wind was stirring. Even the grass wasn't growing. It seemed to me all the life had gone out of that house. It looked dumb and impenetrable and cold.

"Sure they can have moods," I said.

"And they do. All the time. But this time it's different. This time it's affecting me."



She closed the blouse and held the hand at her throat.

85 “How do you mean?”

“I’m losing. I haven’t had a horse in the running all year.”

“That could be bad luck. It could be that the other horses are better.”

“Could be but it isn’t,” I said. “These are good horses.”

She glanced up at the house. Then she went on to the roofline and from
90 there up to the hills behind it. She wanted me to know she’d heard that
story a thousand times before. Every owner thought he had good horses.

I thought to tell her I had a fortune tied up in these horses. That they
were top dollar. Then I thought I had better not. You didn’t talk fortune and
top dollar when some nut was trying to get it from you. Especially a nut
95 who imagined she could talk to horses.

“About fees,” she said. “Naturally, if your horses that now are losing
begin winning after I’ve had my chat with them, then my fee will be higher.”

“A chat!” I said. “You’re going to have a chat with them?”

“A serious discussion. Do you like that better?”

100 “I don’t like any of it,” I said. “You wouldn’t be here if—” I stopped. I didn’t
see any point in raking up the family history.

“I didn’t invite myself, Mr. Gaddis. You invited me.”

She didn’t say that with any anger. She was playing it very cool.

We both heard a door slam, and turned. Over at the back door of the
105 house my wife stood, splashing out water from a white enamel pot. Then
she swayed a little, standing there with her head bowed. Something must
have told her we were looking. She glared our way, then flung her pot into
the yard, and strutted back inside.

The woman beside me laughed.

110 I was pretty surprised myself. Sarah is prone to the odd explosion now
and then—for reasons totally incomprehensible—but she’d never done
anything like this before, not when someone else was around. Meek and
long-suffering: that was the word for Sarah.

“I gather your wife dislikes that pot,” the woman said. She laughed again, a
115 velvety, softly arching laugh. I wanted to tell her it was none of her business.

“Forget Sarah,” I said. “A minute ago you were saying something about
your fee structure and my hypothetical winnings.”

“Was I?”

For no reason at all this woman suddenly squatted down on her legs and
120 began rooting through the thin grass with her long fingers. I couldn’t make
it out. I couldn’t tell whether she was searching for rock or flower or clover,
or for nothing at all. Maybe she had dropped a nickel. I had no idea what
the hell she was doing. I moved a little closer. I was tempted to step on her
hand. Her blouse ballooned out and I could see down her neckline to her
125 breasts. She wasn’t wearing any brassiere.

Maybe that’s why she was kneeling there.

She began speaking without lifting her head. "Yes," she said, "I think that's fair. Obviously much more is involved, more work for me, if I am to talk to your horses, root out their troubles, and get them winning. On the other hand, if you simply want me to walk over to the stalls and ask how they're doing today—"How you making it, kid," that sort of thing—and then come back here and simply repeat to you what they said, well in that case my fee would be minimum. Thirty dollars, let's say. Is that what you want?"

My wife was standing at the back door again. She had this fixed, zombielike expression which altered even as I watched. The skin reddened, her lips twitched, and in a moment she was twitching all over.

Then she pitched a pillow out into the yard. One of our big bed-pillows with the green slipcover still on it. Then she retreated.

The horse lady, down on the grass, hadn't noticed.

I had got around so that my back was to the door. "I was looking for something more solid," I told her. "Something tangible that I could act on. Useful, you know. Useful information. I have heard that you get good results."

She stood up. She turned and silently regarded the pillow in the yard.

"But you want my services for free, is that it, Mr. Gaddis?"

This made me mad. It was clear to me that this woman carried some sort of chip around on her shoulder. That she had no use for men. One of those, I thought.

"Now listen," I said. "George Gaddis pays for goods and services properly rendered, and he always has. He pays top dollar. But it's crazy for me to fork over hundreds of dollars just to watch you go over there for an hour or two and whisper into the ears of my horses."

She stopped studying the pillow and looked across at the door. No one was at the door. Sarah had closed the screen door, then she'd closed the cedar door behind it. It was quiet as a tomb in there.

"I don't often whisper, Mr. Gaddis," she said. "I speak distinctly and usually with some force, and if you'll allow me, most horses do the same."

Haughty and reproving. She seemed to think I deserved this.

"Their powers of articulation are quite well-developed, Mr. Gaddis. Perhaps more so than our own."

"They do talk?"

She bristled. "Yes, they talk!"

She struck off, moving down towards the fence at a determined pace.

She truly disliked me. There, she stood leaning up against the fence with her hands in her pockets. She had narrow shoulders and narrow bony hips that would fit in a cigar box. She was a woman all right, but she was too mean and skimpy for me.

"That filly I got from Quebec," I said, "she'd be speaking French, I suppose? *J'ai la mort dans mon â, J'ai la mort dans mon â, mon cœur se tend comme un lourd fardeau.*"

170 She spun and stared directly at me, her face burning. Mercy, one of the horses, plodded up to the fence and nuzzled her neck and shoulders. I wasn't impressed. **Mercy was a dreamer.** She liked people.

The woman strolled back, calm once more.

"We are getting nowhere," she said, "and my time is valuable. I did not
175 drive out here to give you a free estimate, or to illustrate my capabilities, or to listen to your troubles. No, Mr. Gaddis, the horses do not *talk* as such, not as we are talking, but they do think and develop their thoughts logically, except in dire cases. I am able, in a word, to read their minds."

"ESP, you mean?"

180 "Something like that." She fluttered a vague hand.

"You can guarantee this?"

"I do not give guarantees. I can swear to you that I shall talk to your horses, but the effectiveness with which you utilize the information I glean is clearly out of my hands."

185 "All right," I said. "Suppose I employ you and make good use of your information, and my horses begin winning. What's your standard contract? How much do you get?"

"Normally, ten percent."

"Good God! As much as that?"

190 "Yes. But in this instance I shall demand twenty-five."

She shot that out. She wasn't negotiating any more.

"You're out of your mind," I told her. **"You got a screw loose."**

"You are a difficult person to talk to," she said. "You are a distrusting person, a bullying one, and I should imagine your horses have picked up these
195 traits or are responding to them. It will make my job that much more difficult."

"Twenty-five *percent!*" I laughed. I still couldn't believe it. "Hell, lady, you'd be costing me more than my trainer does!"

"Then let your trainer talk to your horses."

It was my turn to walk down to the fence. Mercy saw me coming, and
200 plodded away.

"I'll have to think about this," I said. "I don't know if any of it makes any sense."

"You have my literature, sir," she said. "You have my testimonials. Call or not call, as you wish."

205 She started over to her car, a low convertible, red and shining and new, which stood in my driveway with the top down. Very expensive. Just as she was.

"I'd much prefer you *didn't* call," she said, stopping. "I don't believe I like you. Your situation does not attract my interest."

210 I waited until she got in the car.

"I don't suppose you like my horses *either*," I said. "I suppose you find

them dull, too. I suppose you're one of those sanctified, scrubbed-out bitches who puts the dollar sign first. I don't suppose you care one crap about my horses' well-being."

215 **Go for the throat, I thought. Get them in the old jugular.**

She wasn't offended. Her expression was placid, composed, even a little amused. I knew that look. It was the look Sarah had when she found me in something foolish. The look would last about two minutes, then she'd begin slamming doors.

220 She started the engine.

I stayed by the fence, close to laughter, waiting to see if this was a woman who knew how to drive a car.

She cut the engine. She stared a long time over at my house, her hands still up on the wheel, that same benign, watchful, untroubled look in her
225 face. Then she turned in her seat and looked down at my fences and barn.

All four horses had come out. Mercy had her nose between the lowest boards, trying to get at grass, but the other three had
230 their necks out over the fence, looking at the woman in the car.

Something funny happened in the woman's eyes and in her whole face. She went soft. You
235 could see it soaking through her, warming her flesh.

"Go on," I said. "Get out of here."

She wasn't listening to me.
240 She seemed, for the moment, unaware of my presence. She

was attuned to something else. Her jaw dropped open—not prettily ... she *was* a pretty woman—her brows went up, she grinned, and a second later her face broke out into a full-fledged smile.

245 Then a good solid laugh.

She had a nice laugh. It was the only time since her arrival that I had liked her.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Your stallion," she said. "Egorinski, is that his name? **He was telling me a**
250 **joke.** Not very flattering to you."

Her eyes sparkled. She was genuinely enjoying herself. I looked over at Egor. The damned beast had his rear end turned to me. His head, too. He seemed to be laughing.

She got her car started again and **slapped it up into first gear.** "I shall
255 send you a bill for my time," she said. "Goodbye, Mr. Gaddis."



As she drove out, down the narrow, circling lane, throwing up dust behind her and over the white fence, I could still hear her laughing. I imagined I heard her—sportive now, cackling, giving full rein to her pleasure—even as she turned her spiffy car out onto the highway.

260 Sarah was at the yard pump. She'd picked up the enamel pot and was filling it with water. She was wearing her print work-dress, but for some reason she'd put back on the high heels she'd been wearing last night. She'd put on her lipstick. The little scratch on her forehead was still there. It had swollen some.

265 She'd brought out a blanket and dumped that out in the yard beside the pillow.

As I approached, she glanced up, severe and meaning business. "Stay away," she said. "Don't touch me. Go on with whatever you were doing."

I could see now wasn't the time. That the time hadn't come. That maybe 270 it would be a long time before it did.

I went on down to the barn, scooted up the ladder, and sat on a bale of hay at the loft door. I looked out over the stables, over the fields, over the workout track and the further pasture and out over all of the long valley. I looked at the grey ring of hills. I wondered what had gone wrong with my 275 life. How I had become this bad person.

(2894 words)

Source: Rooke, Leon. "The Woman Who Talked to Horses." *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories*. Ed. Margaret Atwood and Robert Weaver. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986. 263–269. Print.

READING FOR MEANING

→ Read the questions below.

→ Read the short story a second and a third time (or more), answering the questions as you do so.

1. Which of the following statements is *false*? Circle the letter of the correct answer.
 - a) The narrator, George Gaddis, is the main character.
 - b) From the start of the story, the main character is contemptuous of the female consultant.
 - c) From the start of the story, the female consultant is contemptuous of the main character.
2. Why is it significant that no character other than George himself uses his first name?

3. Why is it significant that we never learn the name of the female consultant?

4. George calls his horses “zombies” (line 67) and refers to his wife as “zombielike” (line 134). Why are all the creatures in George’s world lifeless like zombies?

5. Explain the significance of the following: “Up at the house Sarah had all the doors and windows shut up tight and outside not a hint of wind was stirring. Even the grass wasn’t growing. It seemed to me all the life had gone out of that house” (lines 74–79).

6. George describes the house as looking “dumb and impenetrable and cold” (lines 79–80). Which characters in the story would George (erroneously) describe this way? How is this significant?

7. Why does Sarah put on lipstick and the high heels she’d been wearing the night before (lines 262–263)?

READING FOR RHETORIC

→ Answer the following questions.

1. It was Sarah’s idea to consult with “the woman who talked to horses.” George agrees to a consultation, “to keep poor Sarah upright and not shrivelling” (lines 43–44). How is this statement **ironic**?

2. During George's discussion with the female consultant, we get glimpses of George's wife, Sarah: we hear a door slam and see Sarah fling a pot into the yard; later, we see Sarah twitch and throw a pillow into the yard. What do these events **foreshadow**?

3. Explain the significance of the following **simile**: "It [the house] was quiet as a tomb in there" (line 154).

4. What is George's **epiphany**? What causes it?

EXAMINING AN ELEMENT: Character and Characterization



Working with a partner, examine character and characterization in "The Woman Who Talked to Horses." Turn to pages 3 and 8–9 in the *Literary Handbook* for an explanation of character and characterization and a worksheet on it. Complete a copy of the worksheet, applying it to George Gaddis. Be prepared to discuss your completed worksheet with the rest of the class.

DISCUSSION

- Discuss each of the questions below in small groups.
 - Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class and to explain them.
1. Is a person born bad, or does he or she become bad?
 2. Which is easier: being good or being bad?
 3. Do you think George will change?
 4. Given his character, the narrator is not reliable. Sometimes his observations are accurate; sometimes, they are not. List two accurate observations and three inaccurate observations made by the narrator.
 5. What is the topic of "The Woman Who Talked to Horses"? What is the theme?

A Question of PERSPECTIVE

leave George?

If you were Sarah, would you