

The Listeners

Based on the poem by Walter de la Mare

“Is there anybody there?” The Traveller rapped the heavy iron ring against the dark oak door at the entrance to an unknown place. Pale moonlight cast dappled shadows across the frame. Thick ferns blanketed the ground, their heavy dew soaking into the Traveller’s boots. The only noise was a soft crunch as the Traveller’s horse chewed on the grass. All other sounds seemed insignificant as if heard through a thick mist.

A sleek, black bird streaked from a stone turret that towered overhead. The Traveller stepped back, startled. With anger in his fist, he leapt forwards and rapped again on the door. “Is there anybody there?” he asked.

Nobody answered. He pressed his ear to the door and listened. There was nothing but endless, eerie silence. He glanced up at a window lined with ivy. He half-expected to see somebody staring down into his perplexed, grey eyes. Yet there was nothing. The icy fingers of terror sneaked between the layers of his coats and played about his beating heart.

Perhaps if he had known the truth of the matter, he would have been more scared still. For he was being listened to on the other side of the door. Beyond the dark oak and the ivy-lined sill, the Listeners listened. They stood and listened to the voice of the Traveller, as though it had travelled itself through a thick mist.

Along the empty hallways of the house, they drifted. Were they there before they hearkened the strange voice from the world of men? Or did they only exist in the air stirred and shaken by the Traveller’s loud calls? Whatever their reasons, the Listeners listened, beyond the oak and the ivy-lined sill.

Their presence hadn’t gone unnoticed. The Traveller’s skin prickled at something he couldn’t explain. Somewhere in his icy heart, he felt a strangeness; their stillness an answer to his call.

Once more, he smote the door; louder this time, more urgent. He lifted his head and shouted, “Tell

them I came.” He waited a while for their absent answer. “Tell them that I kept my word,” he cried.

Beyond the oak, the Listeners listened but never stirred. Every word the Traveller spoke fell like iron echoes in the shadowy stillness of the house. Though they knew that he was the last man left awake, they remained silent.

They remained silent and listened to the sound of a foot being slipped into a stirrup. They heard the rasp of iron shoes on cobblestones and heeded the silence that surged softly over them as the last man left awake departed.



RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. What are “dappled shadows”?
2. What does the phrase “with anger in his fist” tell you about how he knocked the door?
3. Find an example of personification within the text.
4. The author has used examples of alliteration within the text. What impact does this have?
5. What does the word “absent” tell you about the Listener’s answer?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

E

The attitude of the Traveller changes over the story. Explain how.

R

How many times does he knock on the door?

P

What do you think the Listeners are?

I

What do you think it means when it says “the last man left awake”?

P

Why was the Traveller desperate for the Listeners to know he kept his word? Who do you think “them” is?

Answers:

1. Specks or small shadows in a pool of light - when leaves cast a shadow
2. It was loud and forceful/angry/impatient
3. The icy fingers of terror sneaked between the layers of his coats and played about his beating heart.
4. Any suitable explanation of how the alliteration makes them feel as a reader
5. It never came/wasn't there/there wasn't an answer.

E: At the beginning he is angry and trying to work out if anybody is there. By the end, he realises that there are things listening and wants to make sure they know he came. He is more urgent than angry at the end.

R: 3

P: Suitable explanations may include ideas such as ghosts or spirits or even his imagination

I: He is the last person left alive/the only person in his world

P: Children may talk about "them" being deceased relatives/heaven/religious aspects who will judge him