

Premchand: Selected Short Stories

Required Reading. Read the following three stories from the course PDF: “January Night” (Poos ki Raat), “Thakur’s Well” (Thakur Ka Kuan), and “Big Brother” (Bade Bhai Sahib).

Purpose. Read each story as a separate literary case. Do not begin with a ready-made theme such as “poverty,” “caste,” or “education.” Instead, use close reading to investigate how narrative form, space, social relations, irony, and voice produce meaning.

Important: You are not expected to write a full essay at home. Bring brief notes, specific textual evidence, and at least one question you are genuinely uncertain about.

Reading Overview

Text	Primary Critical Approach	Key Concepts	Main Question
“January Night”	Social Realism and Material Conditions	precarity; labour; irony; environment	What does poverty make possible, impossible, or rational?
“Thakur’s Well”	Literary Space, Caste, and Gender	spatial exclusion; caste; access; focalization	How does a physical space become a social boundary?
“Big Brother”	Narrative Voice, Satire, and Colonial Education	first-person narration; irony; authority; curriculum	What kind of knowledge does the story value?

I. Premchand, “January Night” (Poos ki Raat)

Textual Focus: Halku, Munni, Jabra, the winter night, the field, debt, rent, and the ruined crop.

Critical Approach 1: Social Realism and Material Conditions

Key Concepts: social realism - material conditions - precarity - labour - debt - survival

The story begins with a seemingly small decision: whether three rupees should be used to pay the landlord or to buy a blanket. Follow the consequences of this decision carefully.

While Reading

Mark every reference to money, rent, debt, work, food, clothing, cold, and the crop.

Identify two moments when Halku appears to make a choice.

For each choice, ask what alternatives are actually available to him.

Notice when the narrator makes Halku’s situation comic, painful, or both at once.

Questions for Close Reading

1. Is Halku simply irresponsible when he fails to protect the crop, or does the story make his inaction understandable?

2. How does physical cold become part of an economic and social structure?
3. What does Munni understand about tenant farming that Halku initially resists?
4. Why does the destruction of the crop produce grief for Munni but a strange sense of relief for Halku?
5. How does Premchand prevent the story from becoming only a sentimental portrait of poverty?

Critical Approach 2: Human-Animal Relations

Key Concepts: companionship - vulnerability - embodiment - human-animal relation

Pay particular attention to Jabra. Do not treat the dog merely as decoration or as a symbol.

Find two moments in which Halku and Jabra share bodily experience: cold, warmth, fear, sleep, or protection.

Ask what Jabra can do that Halku cannot, and what Halku can do that Jabra cannot.

Consider whether their companionship changes the emotional meaning of poverty in the story.

Bring to Class

one passage about money, labour, or debt

one passage involving Halku and Jabra

one sentence explaining why the final line is ironic, unsettling, or both

one question you still cannot answer

II. Premchand, "Thakur's Well" (Thakur Ka Kuan)

Textual Focus: Gangi, Jokhu, the polluted water, the Thakur's well, access, fear, and the act of drawing water.

Critical Approach 1: Literary Space and Caste

Key Concepts: literary space - spatial exclusion - caste hierarchy - access - boundary

The central object of the story is ordinary and essential: water. Yet access to water is organized through social hierarchy. Treat the well not simply as a symbol, but as a material space controlled by rules about who may approach, touch, and use it.

While Reading

Draw a small spatial map: Gangi's home / the polluted water source / the shopkeeper's well / the Thakur's well.

Mark every moment when distance, hiding, movement, waiting, or physical danger becomes important.

Identify who has access to clean water and who must risk punishment to obtain it.

Notice how Gangi thinks about the supposed moral superiority of the higher castes.

Questions for Close Reading

1. How does a physical space become a social boundary?
2. Why is access to water also a question of power?
3. What is the relationship between purity as a social idea and the actual polluted water Jokhu must drink?
4. How does fear shape Gangi's movement through the village?
5. What does the failed attempt at the well reveal that a successful attempt might not have revealed?

Critical Approach 2: Gender, Labour, and Focalization

Key Concepts: gendered labour - focalization - interiority - social vulnerability

The story places us close to Gangi's fear, anger, reasoning, and bodily movement. Ask why the story of caste exclusion is focalized so strongly through a woman who must obtain water for a sick husband.

Find one passage that gives us Gangi's anger or internal reasoning.

Find one passage showing the physical risk involved in obtaining water.

Compare Gangi's labour with the conversation of the two higher-caste women at the well.

Bring to Class

your spatial map

one passage showing caste as a spatial system

one passage showing Gangi's interior response to hierarchy

one interpretation of the ending that goes beyond "the caste system is unjust"

III. Premchand, "Big Brother" (Bade Bhai Sahib)

Textual Focus: the younger brother's first-person narration, the elder brother's lectures, examinations, English education, play, age, and experience.

Critical Approach 1: Narrative Voice and Irony

Key Concepts: first-person narrator - retrospective narration - irony - characterization - narrative distance

The younger brother narrates the story, but his account repeatedly makes the elder brother both ridiculous and sympathetic. Pay attention to the difference between what the elder brother says, what the younger brother thinks, and what the reader may infer.

While Reading

Mark two moments when the narrator makes the elder brother look comic.

Mark two moments when the narrator shows sympathy or respect for him.

Find one moment when the narrator's judgment of his brother changes.

Notice the final kite episode and ask what it does to everything the elder brother has said before.

Questions for Close Reading

1. Is the elder brother a hypocrite, a victim of the educational system, a responsible sibling, or some combination of these?

2. How does the first-person narrator create both affection and satire?

3. Why does the younger brother repeatedly succeed in examinations despite studying less?

4. What happens to the elder brother's authority as the academic distance between the brothers decreases?

5. Why does the story end with both brothers running after a kite?

Critical Approach 2: Education, Authority, and Colonial Curriculum

Key Concepts: education - authority - curriculum - memorization - English - experience

Do not reduce the story to the message that "play is better than study." The elder brother's long speeches expose tensions inside a system of education based on examinations, memorization, English, historical names, geometry, and formulaic essay writing.

List three things the elder brother criticizes about formal schooling.

Identify one moment when he nevertheless reproduces the values of that same system.

Compare book knowledge with the life experience he invokes near the end of the story.

Questions for Close Reading

1. What kind of learner does the school system reward?

2. What kinds of knowledge are excluded from examinations?

3. Why does the elder brother continue to believe in discipline even when the system repeatedly fails him?

4. How are age, seniority, education, and authority connected—and where do they come apart?

Bring to Class

one comic passage and one sympathetic passage about the elder brother

three criticisms of formal education found in the story

one passage contrasting book knowledge with lived experience

one question about the final kite scene

What You Must Bring to Class

Story	Minimum Preparation
“January Night”	1 material/economic passage; 1 Halku-Jabra passage; 1 comment on the ending; 1 unresolved question
“Thakur’s Well”	spatial map; 1 caste/space passage; 1 passage on Gangi’s perspective; 1 interpretation of the ending
“Big Brother”	1 comic + 1 sympathetic passage; 3 critiques of schooling; 1 book/life knowledge passage; 1 question on the ending

Working Principle

textual observation → critical concept → interpretation

Do not begin with a general statement about Indian society and then look for quotations to prove it. Begin with the language, structure, space, voice, or action of the story and ask what larger social question becomes visible through it.

For every claim you make, be ready to answer:

Where in the text do you see that?

Optional Extension

If you would like to read one additional story, choose “Two Bullocks” (Do Bailon Ki Katha) and consider how anthropomorphism, friendship, labour, violence, and freedom complicate the boundary between human and animal experience.