ENG4C-A

“Don’t Know Much about Art”

Introduction

This is a "caper" story. A "caper" is defined in the dictionary as "a mischievous act: caper, frolic, joke, lark, prank, trick." As a verb, to "caper" is to "leap and skip about playfully: cavort, dance, frisk, frolic, gambol, rollick, romp." A "caper" story, then, is not supposed to be taken seriously—it is supposed to be pure fun. It takes us back to our childhood, where responsibility is for dull adults, and where kids invent their own games and make their own rules. In most crime stories, such as in "The Leopold Locked Room," you are invited to identify with the forces of law and order, and to fear the deranged criminals who threaten that order. A caper story, by contrast, invites you to identify with the criminal, or would-be criminal, as he or she (often along with his/her gang) plans to invade a well-nigh impregnable fortress—a bank, casino, or whatever—and escape with the loot. The film *Ocean's Twelve* is a good recent example of a caper.

Most crime fiction is about murder, but a caper story is almost always just about theft, and usually nobody gets hurt (except sometimes an anonymous guard or two). Often, you are not shown the victim at all—the target is just an institution, usually with more money than is good for it. If there *is* a human victim, he or she is more than likely greedy, arrogant, or cruel. The criminal, on the other hand, is usually made likable in one way or another; for example, he or she is clever, friendly, loyal, brave, resourceful, and so on. Most of all, he or she is having fun and is fun to read about.

"Don't Know Much about Art" is a caper story with a few unusual twists. For one thing, the hero is not part of a gang, and he is not at all clever (though part of the fun is discovering that he is smarter than anyone thinks). Also, there are not the usual incredibly sophisticated defences against theft to be overcome—one snip of a pair of wire cutters does the trick here. The usual pleasure of watching a little guy defeat a big one is alive and well, though. Setting the story in class-conscious England is part of it—this thief is very much a representative of the lower class against the upper class.

Simon Brett, the author, is Oxford-educated, but he knows his lower-class slang, and puts a lot of it into the mouth of his protagonist. Probably, for an English person, most of this slang is easily recognizable, but for a Canadian, some of it, especially cockney rhyming slang, can be puzzling. For example, Billy, at one point in the story, says he has "a good butchers at the pic." This sounds pretty destructive, doesn't it? But Billy does not take a butcher knife to the painting—he just looks at it. "Butcher's hook, take a look," goes the rhyming slang; a bit of slang so well-known that Billy does not even bother to add the "hook."

What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- assess ideas, issues, and information in a text
- use evidence to support your opinions
- analyze how society is presented in a story
- analyze an author's use of language and a variety of literary techniques
- use appropriate organization and language for assignments
- revise your work for greater correctness and readability
- use some new words appropriately

"Don't Know Much about Art" by Simon Brett (pp. 158–181)

Read the story in your textbook now, and if a word or phrase stumps you, check to see if it is in the following glossary.

Glossary

beady (adjective) – small, round, and shiny, like a bead. Beady eyes are intent and unblinking.

beetle (verb) – scurry quickly (like a beetle)

berk (noun) – rhyming slang for "fool"

bird (noun) – probably the most common slang term for woman/girl/girlfriend. In prison slang, a "bird" is a prison sentence, e.g., "He's doing 'is bird in Dartmoor." This comes from the rhyming slang term "birdlime," meaning "time."

blather (verb) – to talk on and on to no purpose

bloke (noun) – general term for a man of unknown name, e.g., "Look at that bloke over there." Very common

blue-rinse (noun) – old lady who uses a blue or purple rinse in her grey hair

bog (noun) – a toilet

boot (noun) – trunk of a car

Borstal (noun) – a reform school for juvenile offenders in England

boys in blue (noun) – the police

(cor) **blimey** (exclamation) – corruption of the oath "God blind me." Used as an exclamation. Also used in the form "blimey O'Riley"

bread (noun) – money

butchers (noun) – rhyming slang, short for "butcher's hook," meaning "look." A very common example of rhyming slang. Usual examples are "give us a butchers" or "let's av a butchers."

cheeky (adjective) – rude, impertinent

cobblers (noun) – rhyming slang, short for "cobblers' awls," "balls." Used as a general swear word, much in the way "balls" is used, e.g., "That's a right load of old cobblers," or as a one-word disagreement: "Cobblers!"

cop hold (verb phrase) – to take hold of, to look at

dekko (noun) – A look or glance. From the Hindustani, *dekho*

gaff (noun) – slang for house or place, e.g., "I'll meet you round my gaff in 10 minutes" and "He was all over the gaff" (all over the place). Originates from the nineteenth century when a "gaff" was a slang term for a fairground or place of cheap entertainment

geezer (noun) – a very common term for a man

git (noun) – popular mildly offensive word for someone you don't like. Only really used for males

gutrot (noun) – diarrhea

having it off (verb phrase) – engaging in sexual intercourse

incog (adjective) – short for incognito, meaning with one's identity disguised or concealed

jemmy (noun) – a variant of "jimmy," which is a short crowbar with curved ends used to pry things open

joanna (noun) – a cockney term for piano

kosher (adjective) – conforming to Jewish dietary laws. Here, it means alright, or as it should be.

Madonna (proper noun) – the Virgin Mary. In Italian, "Madonna" means "My Lady," and many old Italian paintings of the Virgin have the word "Madonna" in their titles.

madrigal (noun) – A song written for four to six voices, developed in Italy in the sixteenth century, and popular in England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries

mark (noun) – the victim of a con man's scam

mead (noun) – wine made from honey; popular in England in the Middle Ages

naff (adjective) – cheap, tacky, or of poor quality

nicked (past participle) – arrested

nipper (noun) – a small child

petrol (noun) – gasoline

poncy (adjective) – effeminate, snobby

posh (adjective) – smart and fashionable

punter (noun) – a customer, the paying public

saloon (noun) – British two- or four-door car, with separate trunk

set me up (verb phrase) – arrange for me to get caught, or otherwise made a victim

shooter (noun) – gun

shopped him (past participle) – informed on him to the police

skeletons (noun) – keys (from skeleton keys)

sniffy (adjective) – disposed to showing arrogance or contempt; haughty

sovs (noun) – short for sovereigns; gold coins formerly used in Great Britain

sprog (noun) – a child

starkers (adjective) – naked, nude. From "stark naked"

stumm (adjective) – quiet, silent

sugar daddy (noun) – a wealthy, usually older man who gives expensive gifts to a young person in return for sexual favours or companionship

swot (noun) – a person who studies hard. Also a verb meaning to study hard

taken for a ride (verb phrase) – strung along, deceived

tariff (noun) – rate or amount charged

tart (noun) – a prostitute; a disrespectful way of referring to a woman

tatty (adjective) – somewhat worn, shabby, or dilapidated

thick as a plank (adjective phrase) – stupid

twig (verb) – catch on, understand suddenly

whelk (noun) – large, mostly edible marine snail

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

12. Answer the following questions, just to make sure that you understand what's going on in the story.

    a) What is puzzling about Wally Clinton's recommending Billy for a job?

    b) Why does Billy figure that the meeting is arranged in a sauna?

    c) Why does Billy object to getting his instructions typed in capital letters?

    d) What is Red Rita's profession?

    e) Why does Billy ask Rita to arrange a meeting with an art dealer?

    f) How does Billy know in advance that the Peugeot is going to explode?

    g) What is Harbinger's plan, as Billy finally figures it out?

    h) What plan does Billy come up with himself?

There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.

Character

There are not very many characters in the story, are there? You get to know **Billy Gorse**, the protagonist, fairly well, but the other characters are just sketched in: **Red Rita**, "**Loxton**," **Lord Harbinger**, and **Mr. Depaldo** the art dealer are the only characters who speak, unless you count the anonymous American and Englishman, and the parking lot attendant.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

13. Try your hand at writing character sketches for the characters listed in bold type in the section titled "Character." Each sketch should be a paragraph long. Start off with a general, introductory statement, and then go on to deal with the following aspects of character:

    - Physical aspects (age, gender, weight, hair colour, and so on)
    - Mental aspects (intelligence, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and so on)
    - Moral aspects (good, bad, or mixed)
    - Characteristic speech patterns or actions

    Quote sparingly, if you can. Granted, for several characters, you are not given much to go on. But just because there is nothing to say about any of these aspects, don't just say nothing; rather, *say* that there is nothing to say. Make a point of noting what has been *left out* by the writer.

Plot

The sequence of events in "Don't Know Much about Art" is pretty simple:

- Billy meets "Loxton" in the sauna.
- Billy receives instructions at Red Rita's.
- Billy takes the tour of Harbinger Hall.
- Billy meets with Mr. Depaldo.
- Billy picks up the car.
- Billy attends the Stately Home Weekend at Harbinger Hall.
- Billy overhears Loxton and Lord Harbinger and becomes suspicious.
- Billy makes his own plan and steals the Madonna.
- Billy escapes on the bus.

As you will recall from the last lesson, there are usually five stages in the plot:

- Initially stable situation
- Disturbance
- Complication, or series of complications
- Climax
- Dénouement

Look back at the last lesson if you need to review what these terms mean.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

14. Your job now is the same as before—to see if you can identify the five stages of the plot in the story.

Setting

The settings in "Don't Know Much about Art" are: 1) the sauna, 2) Red Rita's place, 3) Mr. Depaldo's shop, and 4) Harbinger Hall. There are also the car park and the bus, but since nothing much happens in either place and neither is described in any detail, you can ignore them. In fact, the only setting that really matters is Harbinger Hall itself.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

15. Take 100 to 200 words to write about Harbinger Hall. You don't have to describe everything, but do include a few significant details. Besides simply describing the place, form answers to the usual questions: What kind of world is this—warm or cold, intimate or distant, easily understood or confusing, simple or complicated? Do the characters feel at home in it or not? What *difference* does it make? As you write, also remember that the Hall represents a social, as well as a physical setting.

Theme

Remember that the theme is what the story is really about—the general idea behind it. This is not a very complicated story, and a theme will not be very hard to find. Whatever theme you come up with, it will almost certainly have something to do with social class or intelligence (or both).

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

16. State a theme for the story (using a single sentence), and then explain how it is appropriate. Make this a three-paragraph mini-essay, with an introductory paragraph (including the name of the story and stating the theme); a middle paragraph, explaining how the theme is appropriate by making references to the story; and a final, concluding paragraph, expressing your own opinion about the theme. The middle paragraph should be the longest. The whole essay should be about 300 words long.

Style

As you have seen, there are no fully-drawn characters in "Don't Know Much about Art," and the plot is not particularly complicated or ingenious. The setting is important, but really only one point is being made—that Harbinger Hall is a terrible place. Style is where the story shines. As Donald Westlake's introduction states: "The wit and charm of Simon Brett are legendary among his writing colleagues." This is first-person narration, of course, and Brett has given Billy an expressive, engaging voice. What really makes the writing light up, though, is the slang, which conveys not only Billy's personality, but his whole world view. The sentence structure is revealing, too.

You'll notice that there are lots of short sentences and sentence fragments:

> It's just like they said it would be. These big metal-covered boxes opposite me with coloured lights and chrome keyholes on them. And at the top the wires. Not that thick. Quick snip with the old metal-cutters. No prob.

Billy's sentence structure shows that he is a man who takes in the world a bit at a time and leaves it pretty much as he finds it, not turning it into ideas or abstractions.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

17. It's time to get creative. Write a *short* story (about 300 words) of your own that uses a lot of slang. *Make up your own slang*. You can have fun with this—use a system, in the same way as cockneys use rhymes (you might use words that begin and end with the same consonant, for example, or words that end in "o"); or just make up words as they occur to you. The main thing is that your invented words should be fun to say, either because you just like the sound of them, or because they suggest meanings that appeal to you. Take "sprog," for instance (the slang word that Billy uses for "child"). The word is fun to say and it also sounds like a combination of "sprout" and "frog" (which compares a child to a vegetable growth and a bouncy little creature).

    When you have finished, make a glossary of your slang words like the one provided earlier in the lesson. Make sure that you have at least 10 slang words in it.

    You have to write your story *about* something, of course. Make it about someone finding out something. Use first-person narration, and keep your sentences simple, since people who use a lot of slang usually do not go in for complex grammar.

Phrases and Details

It's time again to look at some specific phrases and details, and to explain what they are there for. This time there will be two options offered for you to choose between in the next Support Question: 1) the phrase or detail is relevant to the crime; or 2) the phrase or detail is relevant to the class distinctions in British society. Write "yes" if you think that the detail or phrase in the story is relevant—some will be relevant in both ways at once. As before, you will be asked to explain your answer.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

18. For each phrase or detail listed in the left column, fill in the blanks in the other three columns, using point form.

Phrase or detail	Relevant to the crime? (Yes or no)	Relevant to social class? (Yes or no)	Explanation
Low lights in the sauna			
Loxton's voice is "private school," "prissy"			
Billy thinks Wally Clinton has been "casting aspersions on my literacy"			
Billy thinks big pictures must be worth more.			
The car is not a hatchback.			
Englishman says Billy "sticks out like a sore thumb"			
A toilet flusher with a "plunger like it was going to detonate a bomb"			
The ignition key does not fit the trunk of the car.			
Billy can't tell the copy from the original—"But then I don't know much about art, do I?"			
When Billy's suitcase falls open, the Madonna is not wrapped up.			
Billy says Harbinger should keep the copy because the police may be able to trace who ordered it.			

Manipulating the Reader

You will recall that the three areas in which a writer tries to manipulate the reader are the reader's feelings, his or her curiosity, and his or her judgement. In this story, with little action and not much dialogue, the reader's emotions and judgements depend almost entirely on what Billy says about himself and the situations he finds himself in. This can be a little tricky, because we have to believe that Billy is telling the truth as he sees it, and why should we? For one thing, Billy admits to some pretty embarrassing mistakes—we figure if he is open about those things, he will be open about others, too. What he says about his name is revealing, too. Many people, he notes, use false names, as "Loxton does." Billy remarks, "Not for me, that. Always stick to 'Billy Gorse.' Only time I tried anything different, I forgot who I was halfway through the job." This is reassuring. Billy is just too stupid to lie—he is almost too stupid to be a criminal.

Then there are the reader's feelings and judgements themselves. If the story is to work, the reader must like Billy and not judge him too harshly. And, of course, the reader's curiosity must be aroused and sustained.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

19. Go through the story carefully. Find two places where (or ways in which) the reader's feelings are manipulated in favour of Billy, and two ways in which the reader's judgement of Billy is manipulated in a positive way. Finally, find two places where the reader's curiosity is aroused. In each case, explain how the writer achieves this result.

The Logic of Detection

Detective logic, remember, usually takes the form of "If (or since) this, then that," or "If not this, then that." Billy is no Sherlock Holmes, and he says right out that he goes more by "a feeling you get," but he is nevertheless capable of using logic to figure out what Harbinger and Loxton are up to.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

20. See if you can work out Billy's logic, in point form, from the time he overhears Harbinger and Loxton while in the toilet, to the time he gets that nasty, trickly feeling in his belly. Remember to use "since ... then" and "if ... then" often.

When Do You Know?

This is a no-brainer—Billy tells us: "As soon as I was introduced to Lord Harbinger, it all came together." When he later sees the suitcase ready to be switched for the one in his room, it is only "as I expected." As detection goes, this is pretty easy. Could you figure out, though, what Billy is going to do about it? Possibly, but again, you would probably figure this out at the same point in the story where you figured out the solution.

Social Implications

What are the social implications of this story—the hints about how society is organized and how it works? What social groups are visible, what are they like, and how do they relate to one another? British society, like any other, is complex, and it is not accurate to divide it merely into upper and lower classes. Having said that, however, "Don't Know Much about Art" does simplify the picture almost to that extent. There is, of course, the upper class, represented by Lord Harbinger, with a little help from Loxton, and the criminal underclass (the "underclass" is a subgroup of the lower class, made up of petty criminals and thugs), represented by Billy and Red Rita. There are also those aspiring to the upper class, like Mr. Depaldo and the English pickle manufacturer who attends the State Home Weekend. Last, there are the uncomprehending Americans who seem unable to make any social distinctions at all. If you ignore the Americans, this will leave only three groups to focus on.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

21. Fill out the following table in point form, using information from the story.

Social group	Characteristics	Relations with other groups
Upper class		
Lower class		
Middle class		

Key Question

Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

You may have noticed that the plot of "Don't Know Much about Art" depends a good deal on coincidence:

- Rita just happens to know an art dealer who acts as a fence; he happens to be *not* the one used by Harbinger.
- Billy just happens to complain about the parking charge and gets a rate schedule that includes hours of operation.
- Billy just happens to get diarrhea and fall asleep on the toilet. Harbinger and Loxton just happen to have a conversation right outside.
- Billy just happens to sleep through tea, and also happens to see Loxton fiddling with the trunk of the car.

Usually, this amount of coincidence is considered to be a flaw in the plot—the protagonist of a mystery story is supposed to depend on his brain, not on luck; and the writer is supposed to work out a chain of cause and effect to make the final outcome look inevitable, or at least, probable. There is another way of looking at it, however—it could be plain good luck. Billy's good luck is an indication that we need not fight our inclination to wish him well, even though he is really nothing but a common thug.

12. For your assignment, you will write a short story and fill in a table. They will be marked out of a total of **50 marks**, using the rubric and Marking Guide that follow.

    a) To help you plan your story, create a table like the following one, and fill it in with your ideas. **(25 marks)**

	Protagonist (Main character)
Name **/2**	
Personal characteristics (age, appearance, employment, or activities) **/5**	
Relationships (friends, family, enemies) **/6**	
Flaw (the negative characteristic) **/4**	
Reason for taking action (What does this person need or want?) **/3**	
Why the reader will like this person (something positive about them, such as kindness) **/2**	
The good luck that lets this person succeed **/3**	

Marking Guide for Part a) (25 marks)

The table will be marked out of **25 marks**, according to the numbers given in each box. Your answers should be detailed, relevant, and imaginative.

b) Write a short story of about **750 words** with the following characteristics. **(25 marks)**

- The protagonist (main character) must have some reason to take action—he or she must want something or have a pressing problem.
- The protagonist must have a characteristic that is negative, whether by misfortune or poor choices—stupidity, poverty, ugliness, bad manners, lack of self-restraint, and so on.
- The protagonist must tell the story (first-person narration).
- The protagonist must succeed, mainly through astoundingly good luck.
- The reader must feel good about the protagonist's success.

The following rubric will be used for marking the story.

Rubric for Key Question 12, Part b) (25 marks)

Categories	Below Level 1 (0–49%)	Level 1 (50–59%)	Level 2 (60–69%)	Level 3 (70–79%)	Level 4 (80–100%)
Knowledge/ Understanding	setting is not described beyond the barest or most incidental mention; characters are not described enough for them to seem real to the reader	description of the setting has some specific details but not enough for the reader to imagine it; description of the characters is not detailed enough for the reader to believe in them	description of the setting is almost specific enough for the reader to imagine it; description of some of the characters is detailed enough for the reader to believe in them	description of the setting is specific enough for the reader to imagine it; description of the characters is detailed enough for the reader to believe in them	description of the setting creates sensory images for the reader; descriptions of the characters bring them to life for the reader
/6	0–3	3.5	4	4.5	5–6
Thinking/Inquiry	situation in which protagonist takes action, faces problem, and succeeds through good luck is not adequately established	situation in which protagonist takes action, faces problem, and succeeds through good luck is minimally established	situation in which protagonist takes action, faces problem, and succeeds through good luck is mechanically, but mostly appropriately established	situation in which protagonist takes action, faces problem, and succeeds through good luck is effectively established	situation in which protagonist takes action, faces problem, and succeeds through good luck is effectively developed in an interesting way
/7	0–3	4	4.5	5–6	7
Communication	first-person narration is not used, or is used minimally or inappropriately; lack of organization of story impedes understanding	first-person narration is used, but is not consistent; story is not well organized, but can be understood	first-person narration is mostly consistent; story is mostly organized so that it can be understood	first-person narration is consistent; story is organized for clear understanding	first-person narration is consistent and is in character's voice; story flows naturally and is organized for clear understanding
/6	0–3	3.5	4	4.5	5–6
Application	errors in spelling and grammar obscure meaning in places	errors in spelling and grammar distract the reader	several errors in spelling and grammar, but they do not distract the reader	few errors in spelling and grammar	almost no errors in spelling and grammar
/6	0–3	3.5	4	4.5	5–6

Now go on to Lesson 13. Remember, you do not send your journal to the Independent Learning Centre until you have completed Unit 3 (Lessons 11 to 15).