The story
Old Mr and Mrs White and their only son Herbert are a poor but happy family. One night they receive a visit from Mr White’s old friend, Tom Morris.

Tom has been a soldier in India for many years. He shows them a monkey’s paw which he says can grant three wishes, but the wishes do not bring happiness: his own wife and son died after he got the paw. Morris doesn’t want to give the paw to his friend, but Mr White takes it.

After Morris has gone, Mr White wishes for £30,000. He feels the paw move in his hand but the money does not appear. Later, when he is alone, he sees a face at the window.

Next morning, there is still no money and Herbert goes to work as usual.

Later in the day, a stranger visits the house. He is from Maw and Meggins, the factory where Herbert works. Their son has fallen into some machinery and been killed. His body has been so horribly disfigured that the man advises the Whites against seeing it. He says the company wants to give them £30,000 in compensation for the loss of their son.

Three days later, the grief-stricken parents go to the nearby cemetery for their son’s burial. About a week later, Mrs White wakes her husband in the night to ask for the paw, forcing him to wish for their son’s return.

Back in bed, they hear noises outside the front door, and Mrs White runs downstairs, with Mr White calling after her not to go. He hears his wife cry out as she opens the door, but at the same time he has taken the paw and made the third and final wish: for his son to return to his grave. When he reaches his wife at the door, the street is empty.

Background to the story
William Wymark Jacobs (1863–1943) was a writer of short stories and novels who also worked as a post office official from 1883–99. A popular author in his time, he is not much remembered today except for The Monkey’s Paw, which he wrote in 1902. He was born in Wapping, in the East End of London, and wrote principally two kinds of short story: humorous stories about people who lived by the sea and boats, for example The Night-watchman; and horror stories like The Monkey’s Paw. The Monkey’s Paw was also dramatised for the stage.

The setting is Edwardian Britain (Edward VII reigned from 1901–1910) and the White family is portrayed as being from the skilled or semi-skilled working class, not very well off but ‘respectable’: Mr White is probably retired and Herbert has a steady job at the local factory. However, apart from a few references, for example to the Whites’ address or to Morris’s service in the Indian Army, reminding us of Britain’s Imperial presence in India at that time, the story could be imagined as taking place almost anywhere and at any time. This is no doubt why it continues to have such strong appeal today: Morris, for example, could easily be transposed into a tourist or traveller who has spent time in India.

There is an important moral lesson: Morris says that ‘the old Indian (who gave the monkey’s paw to his friend) wanted to teach us something – it’s never good to want to change things.’ So as with many good stories, we can approach it on two levels: both as an exciting and frightening tale, and as a story designed to make us reflect on the dangers of wishing too much for things to be other than as they are.
The Monkey’s Paw

Pre-reading activity

Match the words with the pictures

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the setting

Time: 10–20 minutes

Organization: Give the worksheet to each student or to each pair of students. Ask the students to match the picture with the correct caption. Then, ask the following questions. How many different people appear altogether in the pictures? Who are they or what are the relationships between them? It is possible to identify from the pictures and captions: Mr and Mrs White, Herbert, the soldier (Tom Morris), the friend of Tom Morris who was given the monkey’s paw, the Indian who gave it, the face at the window and the visitor (from the factory).

Key: 1e, 2a, 3b, 4d, 5f, 6c, 7j, 8g, 9h, 10i.

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the setting

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Key: 1e, 2a, 3b, 4d, 5f, 6c, 7j, 8g, 9h, 10i.
It was warm and sunny out in the street but in the little kitchen of number 13 Tower Avenue it was cold. Young Mr Black and his son Sherbet played cards and Mrs Black sat in silence.

‘Is your friend Tim Dorris coming tonight?’ asked Sherbet.

‘No,’ said his father, ‘he’s coming at eight o’clock tomorrow.’

‘Listen,’ said Sherbet. ‘There’s someone at the window now.’

It was Tim Dorris. He was a small, white-faced man. He came into the kitchen.

Mr Black said to his wife and son: ‘Tim was a footballer in China for thirty-one years.’

‘I wouldn’t like to go there,’ Sherbet said.

Then Tim quickly put his hand into the pocket of his trousers and took something out.

‘What is it?’ asked Mr Black.

‘It’s a monkey’s tail,’ said Tim. ‘An old Chinese gave it to my mother. It can give two wishes to six people.’

‘Give it to me,’ said Mr Black.

‘Yes,’ said Tim. ‘You’re my friend. I can give it to you.’

Young Mr White listened and thought.

Quickly, he put out his hand and took the tail.

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Story consequences

Chapter 3

After Morris ________, Mr White for £________. The paw ________ in his hand but the ________ did not come.
Later, when he was alone, he saw a ________ at the ________.

Chapter 5

A ________ came to the house. He was from Maw and ________, the ________ where Herbert ________.
He said that Herbert was ________ and ________ them a lot of money.

Chapter 6

_______ days ________, Mr and Mrs White said goodbye to their ________.
The big, new ________ was ________ miles from their ________.
About a ________ later, Mrs White got out of ________ because she could not ________.
The Monkey’s Paw

After reading activities

Chapter titles/Three wishes

Chapter titles

There are seven chapters in The Monkey’s Paw but the chapters do not have names. Here are some ideas for chapter titles. Choose the one you like best for each chapter.

Chapter 1
A happy family
A visit from an old friend
One cold, dark night
Your own idea

Chapter 2
The soldier from India
The third wish
Herbert comes back
Your own idea

Chapter 3
The first wish
Thirty thousand pounds
The face at the window
Your own idea

Chapter 4
The money does not come
Mrs White is angry
Herbert goes to work
Your own idea

Chapter 5
A visit from a stranger
Bad news
Thirty thousand pounds
Your own idea

Chapter 6
Goodbye to Herbert
Mrs White cannot sleep
The second wish
Your own idea

Chapter 7
A noise at the door
The third wish
Herbert comes back
Your own idea

Three wishes

1. What exactly happened when Mrs White ran downstairs at the end of the story?
2. You have three wishes. They are not dangerous like the wishes in the story. What do you ask for?
3. You can give three wishes to someone else but not to yourself. Who do you choose and what do you wish for them?
4. What would you do with the monkey’s paw?
5. Was the old Indian right to say that it’s never good to want to change things?

To the teacher

Aim: To develop an overview of the structure of the book, general language development (Chapter titles)/To reflect on the themes of the story (Three wishes)

Time: 10–15 minutes (Chapter titles)/15–30 minutes (Three wishes)

Organization: Check that the students have their books to consult and then give them this multiple choice exercise. Invite feedback from the whole class when they have finished the task alone, or in pairs.

For the second activity, give out questions or put them on the overhead projector. Ask the students to discuss in pairs or small groups one or more of the questions before getting them to report back to the whole class.