

Part 3: Analyze the Literature

“The Elevator” is about a boy named Martin who recently moved with his father to a new apartment. Living on the seventeenth floor, Martin has no choice but to take the elevator. The idea of the elevator terrifies him. What exactly is Martin so afraid of? Use what you’ve learned about plot and conflict to analyze this unsettling story.

THE ELEVATOR

Short story by **William Sleator**

It was an old building with an old elevator—a very small elevator, with a maximum capacity of three people. Martin, a thin twelve-year-old, felt nervous in it from the first day he and his father moved into the apartment. Of course he was always uncomfortable in elevators, afraid that they would fall, but there was something especially unpleasant about this one. Perhaps its baleful¹ atmosphere was due to the light from the single fluorescent ceiling strip, bleak and dim on the dirty brown walls. Perhaps the problem was the door, which never stayed open quite long enough, and slammed shut with such ominous, clanging finality. Perhaps it was the way the mechanism shuddered in a kind of exhaustion each time it left a floor, as though it might never reach the next one. Maybe it was simply the dimensions of the contraption that bothered him, so small that it felt uncomfortably crowded even when there was only one other person in it.

Coming home from school the day after they moved in, Martin tried the stairs. But they were almost as bad, windowless, shadowy, with several dark landings where the light bulbs had burned out. His footsteps echoed behind him like slaps on the cement, as though there was another person climbing, getting closer. By the time he reached the seventeenth floor, which seemed to take forever, he was winded and gasping.

His father, who worked at home, wanted to know why he was so out of breath. “But why didn’t you take the elevator?” he asked, frowning at Martin when he explained about the stairs. Not only are you skinny and weak and bad at sports, his expression seemed to say, but you’re also a coward. After that, Martin forced himself to take the elevator. He would have to get used to it, he told himself, just the way he got used to being bullied at school, and always picked last when they chose teams. The elevator was an undeniable fact of life.

1. **baleful**: sinister, ominous.

Close Read Exposition (lines 1–40)



1. Reread the boxed details. What do you learn about the main character Martin in the exposition?



He didn't get used to it. He remained tense in the trembling little box, his eyes fixed on the numbers over the door that blinked on and off so haltingly, as if at any moment they might simply give up. Sometimes he forced himself to look away from them, to the Emergency Stop button, or the red Alarm button. What would happen if he pushed one of them? Would a bell ring? Would the elevator stop between floors? And if it did, how would they get him out?

That was what he hated about being alone on the thing—the fear of being trapped there for hours by himself. But it wasn't much better when there were other passengers. He felt too close to any other rider, too intimate. And he was always very conscious of the effort people made *not* to look at one another, staring fixedly at nothing. Being short, in this one situation, was an advantage, since his face was below the eye level of adults, and after a brief glance they ignored him.

Until the morning the elevator stopped at the fourteenth floor, and the fat lady got on. She wore a threadbare green coat that ballooned around her; her ankles bulged above dirty sneakers. As she waddled into the elevator, Martin was sure he felt it sink under her weight. She was so big that she filled the cubicle; her coat brushed against him, and he had to squeeze into the corner to make room for her—there certainly wouldn't have been room for another passenger. The door slammed quickly behind her. And then, unlike everyone else, she did not stand facing the door. She stood with her back to the door, wheezing, staring directly at Martin.

For a moment he met her gaze. Her features seemed very small, squashed together by the loose fleshy mounds of her cheeks. She had no chin, only a great swollen mass of neck, barely contained by the collar of her coat. Her sparse red hair was pinned back by a plastic barrette. And her blue eyes, though tiny, were sharp and penetrating, boring into Martin's face.

Abruptly he looked away from her to the numbers over the door. She didn't turn around. Was she still looking at him? His eyes slipped back to hers, then quickly away. She *was* still watching him. He wanted to close his eyes; he wanted to turn around and stare into the corner, but how could he? The elevator creaked down to twelve, down to eleven. Martin looked at his watch; he looked at the numbers again. They weren't even down to nine yet. And then, against his will, his eyes slipped back to her face. She was still watching him. Her nose tilted up; there was a large space between her nostrils and her upper lip, giving her a piggish look. He looked away again, clenching his teeth, fighting the impulse to squeeze his eyes shut against her.

She had to be crazy. Why else would she stare at him this way? What was she going to do next?

She did nothing. She only watched him, breathing audibly, until the elevator reached the first floor at last. Martin would have rushed past her to get

2. Consider what you've read so far about the setting and Martin's feelings about his surroundings. What do you think the main conflict will be about?

Close Read
Rising Action
begins (lines 41–80)



3. What event sets the rising action in motion?

4. Martin seems to perceive the strange lady as a threat. In your opinion, is this conflict real or in his head? Support your answer.

70 out, but there was no room. He could only wait as she turned—reluctantly, it seemed to him—and moved so slowly out into the lobby. And then he ran. He didn't care what she thought. He ran past her, outside into the fresh air, and he ran almost all the way to school. He had never felt such relief in his life.

75 He thought about her all day. Did she live in the building? He had never seen her before, and the building wasn't very big—only four apartments on each floor. It seemed likely that she didn't live there, and had only been visiting somebody.

80 But if she were only visiting somebody, why was she leaving the building at seven thirty in the morning? People didn't make visits at that time of day. Did that mean she *did* live in the building? If so, it was likely—it was a certainty—that sometime he would be riding with her on the elevator again.

He was apprehensive as he approached the building after school. In the lobby, he considered the stairs. But that was ridiculous. Why should he be afraid of an old lady? If he *was* afraid of her, if he let it control him, then he was worse than all the names they called him at school. He pressed the
85 button; he stepped into the empty elevator. He stared at the lights, urging the elevator on. It stopped on three.

At least it's not fourteen, he told himself; the person she was visiting lives on fourteen. He watched the door slide open—revealing a green coat, a
piggish face, blue eyes already fixed on him as though she knew he'd be there.

90 It wasn't possible. It was like a nightmare. But there she was, massively real. "Going up!" he said, his voice a humiliating squeak.

She nodded, her flesh quivering, and stepped on. The door slammed. He watched her pudgy hand move toward the buttons. She pressed, not fourteen, but eighteen, the top floor, one floor above his own. The elevator trembled
95 and began its ascent.² The fat lady watched him.

He knew she had gotten on at fourteen this morning. So why was she on three, going up to eighteen now? The only floors *he* ever went to were seventeen and one. What was she doing? Had she been waiting for him? Was she riding with him on purpose?

100 But that was crazy. Maybe she had a lot of friends in the building. Or else she was a cleaning lady who worked in different apartments. That had to be it. He felt her eyes on him as he stared at the numbers slowly blinking on
and off—slower than usual, it seemed to him. Maybe the elevator was having
105 trouble because of how heavy she was. It was supposed to carry three adults, but it was old. What if it got stuck between floors? What if it fell?

They were on five now. It occurred to him to press seven, get off there, and walk the rest of the way. And he would have done it, if he could have reached the buttons. But there was no room to get past her without squeezing against her, and he could not bear the thought of any physical contact with her. He
110 concentrated on being in his room. He would be home soon, only another

2. **ascent:** the act of climbing or rising upward.

Close Read
Rising Action
continues (lines 81–174)



5. What internal conflict is plaguing Martin in lines 81–84?

6. Tension builds as Martin and the lady meet again. What details in lines 88–105 help to create suspense about what might happen? One detail is boxed.

minute or so. He could stand anything for a minute, even this crazy lady watching him.

Unless the elevator got stuck between floors. Then what would he do? He tried to push the thought away, but it kept coming back. He looked at her. She was still staring at him, no expression at all on her squashed little features.

When the elevator stopped on his floor, she barely moved out of the way. He had to inch past her, rubbing against her horrible scratchy coat, terrified the door would close before he made it through. She quickly turned and watched him as the door slammed shut. And he thought, *Now she knows I live on seventeen.*

“Did you ever notice a strange fat lady on the elevator?” he asked his father that evening.

“Can’t say as I have,” he said, not looking away from the television.

He knew he was probably making a mistake, but he had to tell somebody. “Well, she was on the elevator with me twice today. And the funny thing was, she just kept staring at me, she never stopped looking at me for a minute. You think . . . you know of anybody who has a weird cleaning lady or anything?”

“What are you so worked up about now?” his father said, turning impatiently away from the television.


“I’m not worked up. It was just funny the way she kept staring at me. You know how people never look at each other in the elevator. Well, she just kept looking at me.”

“What am I going to do with you, Martin?” his father said. He sighed and shook his head. “Honestly, now you’re afraid of some poor old lady.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“You’re afraid,” said his father, with total assurance. “When are you going to grow up and act like a man? Are you going to be timid all your life?”

He managed not to cry until he got to his room—but his father probably knew he was crying anyway. He slept very little.

140  And in the morning, when the elevator door opened, the fat lady was waiting for him.

She was expecting him. She knew he lived on seventeen. He stood there, unable to move, and then backed away. And as he did so, her expression changed. She smiled as the door slammed.

145 He ran for the stairs. Luckily, the unlit flight on which he fell was between sixteen and fifteen. He only had to drag himself up one and a half flights with the terrible pain in his leg. His father was silent on the way to the hospital, disappointed and annoyed at him for being such a coward and a fool.

150 It was a simple fracture. He didn’t need a wheelchair, only a cast and crutches. But he was condemned to the elevator now. Was that why the fat lady had smiled? Had she known it would happen this way?

At least his father was with him on the elevator on the way back from the hospital. There was no room for the fat lady to get on. And even if she did, his

7. What details in lines 121–139 suggest a conflict between father and son?

8. Review your answer to question 4. Then consider the lady’s behavior each time Martin sees her on the elevator. Has your answer changed? Explain.

155 father would see her, he would realize how peculiar she was, and then maybe
he would understand. And once they got home, he could stay in the apartment
for a few days—the doctor had said he should use the leg as little as possible.
A week, maybe—a whole week without going on the elevator. Riding up with
his father, leaning on his crutches, he looked around the little cubicle and felt
a kind of triumph. He had beaten the elevator, and the fat lady, for the time
160 being. And the end of the week was very far away.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” his father reached out his hand and pressed nine.

“What are you doing? You’re not getting off, are you?” he asked him, trying
not to sound panicky.

165 “I promised Terry Ullman I’d drop in on her,” his father said, looking at his
watch as he stepped off.

“Let me go with you. I want to visit her, too,” Martin pleaded, struggling
forward on his crutches.

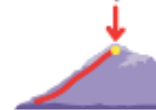
170 But the door was already closing. “Afraid to be on the elevator alone?” his
father said, with a look of total scorn. “Grow up, Martin.” The door slammed
shut.

Martin hobbled to the buttons and pressed nine, but it didn’t do any good.
The elevator stopped at ten, where the fat lady was waiting for him. She
moved in quickly; he was too slow, too unsteady on his crutches to work his
way past her in time. The door sealed them in; the elevator started up.

175 “Hello, Martin,” she said, and laughed, and pushed the Stop button.

9. In lines 145–160, the story takes an unexpected turn. How might this development affect Martin’s conflict?

Close Read
Climax (line 175)



10. Line 175 is the climax, or turning point, of the story. Do you think Martin is in danger? Explain your opinion.

Close Read
Falling Action and Resolution



11. The author ends this story at the climax. What is your opinion of the plot’s development and of leaving the conflict unresolved? Explain.

