

stormy
and night...
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night...
a dark
storm
and night
It was a
dark
stormy
night...
It was a
dark
stormy
night...
It was a
dark
stormy
night...

Short Stories *for Students*

stormy
& night
stormy
night...
It was a
dark and
stormy
night...
night...



SHORT STORIES
for Students

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SHORT STORIES

for Students

Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on
Commonly Studied Short Stories

VOLUME 31

Sara Constantakis, Project Editor

Foreword by Thomas E. Barden



Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London

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Table of Contents

ADVISORS	ii
WHY STUDY LITERATURE AT ALL? <i>(by Thomas E. Barden)</i>	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
LITERARY CHRONOLOGY	xv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xvii
CONTRIBUTORS	xix
BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON <i>(by Stephen Vincent Benét)</i>	1
Author Biography	2
Plot Summary	2
Characters	5
Themes	5
Style	7
Historical Context	8
Critical Overview	10
Criticism	10
Sources	23
Further Reading	23
DAUGHTER OF INVENTION <i>(by Julia Alvarez)</i>	25
Author Biography	26
Plot Summary	26
Characters	28

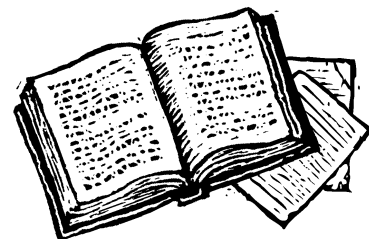


Table of Contents

Themes	29	Sources	117
Style	31	Further Reading	117
Historical Context	31		
Critical Overview	33	GOOD CLIMATE, FRIENDLY INHABITANTS	
Criticism.	33	(by <i>Nadine Gordimer</i>)	118
Sources	44	Author Biography	119
Further Reading	44	Plot Summary	119
		Characters	122
A DEVOTED SON (by <i>Anita Desai</i>)	45	Themes	123
Author Biography	46	Style	125
Plot Summary	47	Historical Context	126
Characters	49	Critical Overview	128
Themes	50	Criticism.	128
Style	52	Sources	134
Historical Context	53	Further Reading	135
Critical Overview	54		
Criticism.	55	THE JEWELS	
Sources	67	(by <i>Guy de Maupassant</i>).	136
Further Reading	67	Author Biography	137
		Plot Summary	138
END OF THE GAME (by <i>Julio Cortázar</i>)	68	Characters	139
Author Biography	68	Themes	141
Plot Summary	69	Style	143
Characters	71	Historical Context	143
Themes	72	Critical Overview	145
Style	73	Criticism.	146
Historical Context	73	Sources	153
Critical Overview	74	Further Reading	153
Criticism.	75		
Sources	84	AN OUTPOST OF PROGRESS	
Further Reading	84	(by <i>Joseph Conrad</i>)	154
		Author Biography	155
THE FENCE (by <i>Hamsad Rangkuti</i>).	85	Plot Summary	156
Author Biography	85	Characters	158
Plot Summary	86	Themes	159
Characters	87	Style	161
Themes	88	Historical Context	162
Style	89	Critical Overview	163
Historical Context	91	Criticism.	164
Critical Overview	93	Sources	175
Criticism.	93	Further Reading	176
Sources	99		
Further Reading	99	A RETRIEVED REFORMATION	
		(by <i>O. Henry</i>).	177
THE GARDEN OF STUBBORN CATS		Author Biography	178
(by <i>Italo Calvino</i>).	100	Plot Summary	179
Author Biography	100	Characters	181
Plot Summary	101	Themes	182
Characters	103	Style	183
Themes	104	Historical Context	185
Style	105	Critical Overview	188
Historical Context	106	Criticism.	188
Critical Overview	107	Sources	196
Criticism.	108	Further Reading	196

TEARS OF AUTUMN (<i>by Yoshiko Uchida</i>)	197	Characters	233
Author Biography	198	Themes	234
Plot Summary	198	Style	236
Characters	200	Historical Context	237
Themes	201	Critical Overview	239
Style	203	Criticism.	239
Historical Context	204	Sources	247
Critical Overview	206	Further Reading	247
Criticism.	207		
Sources	213	THE WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION	
Further Reading	213	(<i>by Agatha Christie</i>)	248
		Author Biography	249
THE TREASURE OF LEMON BROWN		Plot Summary	250
(<i>by Walter Dean Myers</i>)	214	Characters	253
Author Biography	215	Themes	254
Plot Summary	216	Style	256
Characters	217	Historical Context	257
Themes	218	Critical Overview	258
Style	220	Criticism.	259
Historical Context	221	Sources	266
Critical Overview	222	Further Reading	266
Criticism.	223		
Sources	229	GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS.	269
Further Reading	229	CUMULATIVE AUTHOR/TITLE INDEX	281
		CUMULATIVE NATIONALITY/ETHNICITY	
WITH ALL FLAGS FLYING		INDEX.	291
(<i>by Anne Tyler</i>)	230	SUBJECT/THEME INDEX	299
Author Biography	231		
Plot Summary	231		

Why Study Literature At All?

Short Stories for Students is designed to provide readers with information and discussion about a wide range of important contemporary and historical works of short fiction, and it does that job very well. However, I want to use this guest foreword to address a question that it does *not* take up. It is a fundamental question that is often ignored in high school and college English classes as well as research texts, and one that causes frustration among students at all levels, namely why study literature at all? Isn't it enough to read a story, enjoy it, and go about one's business? My answer (to be expected from a literary professional, I suppose) is no. It is not enough. It is a start; but it is not enough. Here's why.

First, literature is the only part of the educational curriculum that deals directly with the actual world of lived experience. The philosopher Edmund Husserl used the apt German term *die Lebenswelt*, "the living world," to denote this realm. All the other content areas of the modern American educational system avoid the subjective, present reality of everyday life. Science (both the natural and the social varieties) objectifies, the fine arts create and/or perform, history reconstructs. Only literary study persists in posing those questions we all asked before our schooling taught us to give up on them. Only literature gives credibility to personal perceptions, feelings, dreams, and the "stream of consciousness" that is our inner voice. Literature wonders about infinity, wonders why God permits evil, wonders

what will happen to us after we die. Literature admits that we get our hearts broken, that people sometimes cheat and get away with it, that the world is a strange and probably incomprehensible place. Literature, in other words, takes on all the big and small issues of what it means to be human. So my first answer is that of the humanist we should read literature and study it and take it seriously because it enriches us as human beings. We develop our moral imagination, our capacity to sympathize with other people, and our ability to understand our existence through the experience of fiction.

My second answer is more practical. By studying literature we can learn how to explore and analyze texts. Fiction may be about *die Lebenswelt*, but it is a construct of words put together in a certain order by an artist using the medium of language. By examining and studying those constructions, we can learn about language as a medium. We can become more sophisticated about word associations and connotations, about the manipulation of symbols, and about style and atmosphere. We can grasp how ambiguous language is and how important context and texture is to meaning. In our first encounter with a work of literature, of course, we are not supposed to catch all of these things. We are spellbound, just as the writer wanted us to be. It is as serious students of the writer's art that we begin to see how the tricks are done.

Seeing the tricks, which is another way of saying “developing analytical and close reading skills,” is important above and beyond its intrinsic literary educational value. These skills transfer to other fields and enhance critical thinking of any kind. Understanding how language is used to construct texts is powerful knowledge. It makes engineers better problem solvers, lawyers better advocates and courtroom practitioners, politicians better rhetoricians, marketing and advertising agents better sellers, and citizens more aware consumers as well as better participants in democracy. This last point is especially important, because rhetorical skill works both ways when we learn how language is manipulated in the making of texts the result is that we become less susceptible when language is used to manipulate us.

My third reason is related to the second. When we begin to see literature as created artifacts of language, we become more sensitive to good writing in general. We get a stronger sense of the importance of individual words, even the sounds of words and word combinations. We begin to understand Mark Twain’s delicious proverb “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” Getting beyond the “enjoyment only” stage of literature gets us closer to becoming makers of word art ourselves. I am not saying that studying fiction will turn every student into a Faulkner or a Shakespeare. But it will make us more adaptable and effective writers, even if our art form ends up being the office memo or the corporate annual report.

Studying short stories, then, can help students become better readers, better writers, and even

better human beings. But I want to close with a warning. If your study and exploration of the craft, history, context, symbolism, or anything else about a story starts to rob it of the magic you felt when you first read it, it is time to stop. Take a break, study another subject, shoot some hoops, or go for a run. Love of reading is too important to be ruined by school. The early twentieth century writer Willa Cather, in her novel *My Antonia*, has her narrator Jack Burden tell a story that he and Antonia heard from two old Russian immigrants when they were teenagers. These immigrants, Pavel and Peter, told about an incident from their youth back in Russia that the narrator could recall in vivid detail thirty years later. It was a harrowing story of a wedding party starting home in sleds and being chased by starving wolves. Hundreds of wolves attacked the group’s sleds one by one as they sped across the snow trying to reach their village. In a horrible revelation, the old Russians revealed that the groom eventually threw his own bride to the wolves to save himself. There was even a hint that one of the old immigrants might have been the groom mentioned in the story. Cather has her narrator conclude with his feelings about the story. “We did not tell Pavel’s secret to anyone, but guarded it jealously as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party had been sacrificed, just to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure.” That feeling, that painful and peculiar pleasure, is the most important thing about literature. Study and research should enhance that feeling and never be allowed to overwhelm it.

*Thomas E. Barden
Professor of English and Director
of Graduate English Studies,
The University of Toledo*

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of *Short Stories for Students (SSfS)* is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying short stories by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *SSfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific short fiction. While each volume contains entries on "classic" stories frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary stories, including works by multicultural, international, and women writers.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the story and the story's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in the work; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the narrative as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the story; analysis of important themes in the story; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the work.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the story itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the story was

written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the story or author. A unique feature of *SSfS* is a specially commissioned critical essay on each story, targeted toward the student reader.

To further help today's student in studying and enjoying each story, information on audiobooks and other media adaptations is provided (if available), as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical and reference sources that provide additional material on the work.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of *SSfS* were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed include: literature anthologies, *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges*; *Teaching the Short Story: A Guide to Using Stories from around the World*, by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE); and "A Study of High School Literature Anthologies," conducted by Arthur Applebee at the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature and sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that

each volume should have a mix of “classic” stories (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary stories for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. Works not selected for the present volume were noted as possibilities for future volumes. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in *SSfS* focuses on one story. Each entry heading lists the title of the story, the author’s name, and the date of the story’s publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

Introduction: a brief overview of the story which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.

Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author’s life, and focuses on events and times in the author’s life that may have inspired the story in question.

Plot Summary: a description of the events in the story. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.

Characters: an alphabetical listing of the characters who appear in the story. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character’s role in the story, as well as discussion of the character’s actions, relationships, and possible motivation.

Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in “The Eatonville Anthology”—the character is listed as “The Narrator” and alphabetized as “Narrator.” If a character’s first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name.

Themes: a thorough overview of how the topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the story. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead.

Style: this section addresses important style elements of the story, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if

applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.

Historical Context: this section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the work was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the story is historical in nature, information regarding the time in which the story is set is also included. Long sections are broken down with helpful subheads.

Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the author and the story, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section may include a history of how the story was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent works, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.

Criticism: an essay commissioned by *SSfS* which specifically deals with the story and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material used in compiling the entry, with bibliographical information.

Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

Media Adaptations: if available, a list of audio-books and important film and television adaptations of the story, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, musical adaptations, etc.

Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the story. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.

Compare and Contrast: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century or early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the story was written, the time or place the story was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.

What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might give a reader points of entry into a classic work (e.g., YA or multicultural titles) and/or complement the featured story or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works from various genres, YA works, and works from various cultures and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “Why Study Literature At All?,” a foreword by Thomas E. Barden, Professor of English and Director of Graduate English Studies at the University of Toledo. This essay provides a number of very fundamental reasons for studying literature and, therefore, reasons why a book such as *SSfS*, designed to facilitate the study of literature, is useful.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the *SSfS* series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the *SSfS* series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included.

Each entry may include illustrations, including photo of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing *Short Stories for Students*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of *SSfS* may use the following general forms to document their source. These examples are based on MLA

style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, thus, the following examples may be adapted as needed.

When citing text from *SSfS* that is not attributed to a particular author (for example, the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format may be used:

“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 19–20.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from *SSfS* (usually the first essay under the Criticism subhead), the following format may be used:

Korb, Rena. Critical Essay on “Children of the Sea.” *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 39–42.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of *SSfS*, the following form may be used:

Schmidt, Paul. “The Deadpan on Simon Wheeler.” *Southwest Review* 41.3 (Summer, 1956): 270–77. Excerpted and reprinted in *Short Stories for Students*. Vol. 1. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 29–31.

When quoting material from a book that is reprinted in a volume of *SSfS*, the following form may be used:

Bell-Villada, Gene H. “The Master of Short Forms.” *García Márquez: The Man and His Work*. University of North Carolina Press, 1990. 119–36. Excerpted and reprinted in *Short Stories for Students*. Vol. 1. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 89–90.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editorial staff of *Short Stories for Students* welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest short stories to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via E-mail at: **ForStudentsEditors@cengage.com**. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, *Short Stories for Students*
Gale
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Literary Chronology

- 1850:** Joseph Conrad is born Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski on December 3, in Berdiczew, Podolia, Russia.
- 1857:** Guy de Maupassant is born Henri René Albert Guy de Maupassant on August 5, in Chateau de Miromesnil, near Tourville-sur-Arques, France.
- 1862:** O. Henry is born William Sydney Porter on September 11, in Greensboro, North Carolina.
- 1883:** Guy de Maupassant's "Les bijoux" ("The Jewels") is published in his short-story collection *Claire de Lune*.
- 1890:** Agatha Christie is born on September 15, in Torquay, Devon, England.
- 1893:** Guy de Maupassant dies of complications from syphilis on July 6, in Paris, France.
- 1897:** Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" is published in serial form in the periodical *Cosmopolis*.
- 1898:** Stephen Vincent Benét is born on July 22, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.
- 1903:** O. Henry's "A Retrieved Reformation" is published under the title "A Retrieved Reform" in the April edition of *Cosmopolitan*.
- 1910:** O. Henry dies of cirrhosis of the liver on June 5, in New York City.
- 1914:** Julio Cortázar is born on August 26 in Brussels, Belgium.
- 1921:** Yoshiko Uchida is born on November 24, in Alameda, California.
- 1923:** Italo Calvino is born October 15, on Santiago de Las Vagas, Cuba.
- 1923:** Nadine Gordimer is born on November 20, in Springs, Transvaal, South Africa.
- 1924:** Joseph Conrad dies of a heart attack on August 3, in Bishopsbourne, Kent, England.
- 1925:** Agatha Christie's "Witness for the Prosecution" is published under the title "Traitor Hands" in the January 31 edition of *Flynn's Weekly*.
- 1937:** Anita Desai is born Anita Mazumdar on June 24 in Mussoorie, India.
- 1937:** Stephen Vincent Benét's "By the Waters of Babylon" is published under the title "The Place of the Gods" in the July 31 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*.
- 1937:** Walter Dean Myers is born Walter Milton Myers on August 12, in Martinsburg, West Virginia.
- 1941:** Anne Tyler is born on October 25, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- 1943:** Stephen Vincent Benét dies of a heart attack on March 13 in New York City.
- 1943:** Hamsad Rangkuti is born on May 7, in Medan, Indonesia.
- 1950:** Julia Alvarez is born on March 27, in New York City.

- 1956:** Julio Cortázar's "Final del juego" ("End of the Game") is published in his short-story collection *Final del juego (End of the Game)*.
- 1965:** Nadine Gordimer's "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" is published in her short-story collection *Not for Publication*.
- 1971:** Anne Tyler's "With All Flags Flying" is published in the June edition of *Redbook*.
- 1973:** Italo Calvino's "The Garden of Stubborn Cats" is published as a chapter of *Marcovaldo ovvero le stagioni in citta (Marcovaldo; or, The Seasons in the City)*.
- 1976:** Agatha Christie dies on January 12, in Wallingford, England.
- 1978:** Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son" is published in her short-story collection *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*.
- 1983:** Walter Dean Myers's "The Treasure of Lemon Brown" is published in the March edition of *Boys' Life*.
- 1984:** Julio Cortázar dies of a heart attack on February 12 in Paris, France.
- 1985:** Italo Calvino dies of a cerebral hemorrhage on September 19 in Siena, Italy.
- 1987:** Yoshiko Uchida's "Tears of Autumn" is published as a chapter of her novel *Picture Bride*.
- 1991:** Julia Alvarez's "Daughter of Invention" is published as a chapter of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.
- 1991:** Hamsad Ranguti's "The Fence" is published in the spring edition of *Manoa*.
- 1992:** Yoshiko Uchida dies after a stroke on June 21, in Berkeley, California.

Acknowledgments

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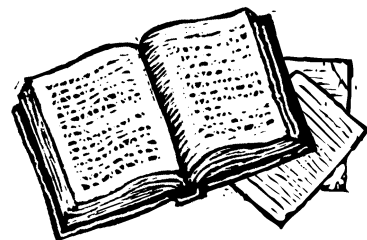
By the Waters of Babylon

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

1937

“By the Waters of Babylon” (1937) by Stephen Vincent Benét is a tale about the relatively primitive culture that survives after humans destroy modern civilization with technologically advanced weaponry. It has been noted by scholars that the story is a response to the horrors of war, particularly the bombing of the village of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Set at an unspecified time in the future, this science fiction tale is further classified as post-apocalyptic fiction. The narrator and protagonist of the story is John, the son of a priest for the Hill People. His people forbid interactions with places and things destroyed in the Great Burning, believing them to be dangerous. However, priests may visit Dead Places—buildings that once housed members of the old race, believed to be gods—to obtain metal and books of ancient knowledge. When John approaches manhood, he embarks on a journey to the most forbidden of all the Dead Places: the Place of the Gods, where it is believed that even the ground itself has the power to kill.

The story was originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* under the title “The Place of the Gods.” Benét changed the title when the story was printed in his collection *Thirteen O’Clock* (1938). The phrase “By the waters of Babylon” is taken from Psalm 137 of the Bible, in which exiled Jews long for a return to their homeland. In the story, this reflects the main character John’s quest to return his people to their ancestral home.





Stephen Vincent Benét (The Library of Congress)

The story was chosen by Donald A. Wollheim for *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* (1943), the first significant science fiction book anthology. The story is currently available in the collection *Beyond Armageddon* (1985), edited by Walter M. Miller Jr. and Martin H. Greenberg. “By the Waters of Babylon” is notable for depicting the lingering aftermath of large-scale devastation from war even though the concept of the atomic bomb and nuclear fallout was still years away when it was written.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Benét was born on July 22, 1898, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His father was a U.S. Army officer, and Benét spent much of his childhood in California, where his father oversaw a military arsenal. His father instilled a love of literature in him and his brother and sister, and Benét began writing stories at an early age. He attended both

a military academy and a prep school before being admitted to Yale University, where he studied poetry and worked on the *Yale Literary Magazine*. He also wrote three volumes of poetry by the time he earned his degree in 1919.

After college, Benét published his first novel, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (1921), and studied briefly at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he met and married another writer, Rosemary Carr. He returned to the United States and continued to write both novels and poetry. He received a poetry prize from the *Nation* but did not yet achieve popular acclaim. He then returned to France to work on a book-length narrative poem about the Civil War, *John Brown's Body* (1928). For this work Benét won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Still struggling financially, Benét concentrated on writing short stories for magazines, which paid better than novels or poetry. Throughout the 1930s Benét became a regular fiction contributor to the biggest magazines in the United States, often writing tales to meet specifications provided by the editors. Benét found that his most rewarding successes were those stories that built upon the mythic qualities of American history and culture, much like *John Brown's Body*. His most successful short story, “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1936), offers a fantastical tale in which the devil interacts with historic figures from American history. The success of the story led to a publishing contract with the *Saturday Evening Post*, which helped alleviate Benét’s financial woes. One of the stories that appeared in the *Post* as a result of this deal was “By the Waters of Babylon.”

Benét continued his success as both a short story writer and a poet for several years, and he added the title dramatist to his resume by adapting “The Devil and Daniel Webster” and other works for the stage. He began working on another book-length historical poem with an American theme, *Western Star* (1944), but died of a heart attack in New York City on March 13, 1943, before he could finish it. The incomplete work was published the following year and won the Pulitzer Prize.

PLOT SUMMARY

“By the Waters of Babylon” begins with a brief summary of the rules of a tribe that is later identified as the People of the Hills. This group

allows hunting to the west, north, and south, but no one is allowed to travel to the east. People are also forbidden from going to the Dead Places—except for a priest or the son of a priest, and then only when searching for metal. When someone visits a Dead Place, they and the materials they bring back must be purified upon their return. Far to the east lies the great river, and past the river is the Place of the Gods, which is off-limits to everyone—including priests.

The narrator of the story is John, the son of a priest. According to John, no one even dares to say the name of the Place of the Gods. “It is there that spirits live,” he states, “and demons—it is there are the ashes of the Great Burning.” John describes his first experience visiting a Dead Place with his father; it was a house with bones piled in the corner. Although he was afraid, John did not run away, and when his father returned with a piece of metal, he gave it to John to hold. Because John did not die from holding the metal, he is considered special and is destined to follow in his father’s footsteps as a priest. Because of this, John receives both special treatment—such as finer meat—and stricter discipline that is intended to prepare him for his eventual duties.

Over time, John learns the ways of being a priest. He ventures into the Dead Places in search of metal and overcomes his fear of the houses that hold the dead. He also learns the secrets of healing and other knowledge, most of which is kept secret from the rest of the tribe. This knowledge is taken from old books, and John’s responsibilities include learning how to read and write in this ancient language. John enjoys reading about the Old Days and the world that existed before the Great Burning.

John notes that their tribe is not primitive like the Forest People, who cannot make wool and who eat grubs for nourishment. Despite his own tribe’s comparatively advanced state, John craves even greater knowledge of the past world in the hope that it can further advance his people. When John becomes a man, he tells his father of his dream to go on a journey to seek such knowledge. He describes the Place of the Gods and even the gods themselves, as if they still lived. His father reminds him that traveling to the Place of the Gods is forbidden, but both seem resigned to the fact that John is going to make the journey. His father gives him a bow and three arrows to take with him.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- “By the Waters of Babylon” was adapted into a one-act play in 1971 by Brainerd Duffield. Published by Dramatic Publishing Company, the play is currently in print and available.

To be sure his decision is correct, John begins fasting and waits for a sign of what to do. He sees an eagle flying to the east, in the direction of the Place of the Gods. He then sees three deer traveling east, one of which is a white fawn—and John accepts this as a very important sign. He begins to follow the deer eastward. Along the way, a panther pounces on the white fawn, but John quickly draws his bow and kills it with a perfectly fired arrow. For him, this is final confirmation that he must make the trip to the Place of the Gods.

John travels east for eight days, passing many Dead Places and the occasional group of Forest People out hunting, though his stealth and magic keep him from being spotted by them. At the end of the eighth day, he finally reaches the great river, called Ou-dis-sun: “It is very long, very wide. It could eat all the streams we know and still be thirsty.” John is the first of his tribe ever to see it in person.

The next morning, John considers ending his journey and turning back; he fears that traveling to the Place of the Gods will result in his death. However, he knows that if he does not go, he will lose his spirit. He builds a raft to cross the great river, and when he finishes, he paints his face in preparation for death and sings himself a ceremonial song about his demise. On the river, John finds himself at the mercy of the currents—a magical trait of the great river, which appears placid. As he is carried across the water, he notices that “god-roads,” now all but stony ruins, once connected the Place of the Gods with the rest of the world. John tries to steer his raft, without much success. He fears that he will be carried off into the Bitter Water, a legendary vast sea. However, the current shifts and carries him closer to the Place of the Gods.

Before he can reach the shore, however, his raft crashes against something and capsizes. Fortunately, John knows how to swim, and manages to make it safely to land. John is surprised to find that the ground at the Place of the Gods does not burn his feet, as the legends state. He also discovers that the place is not mysterious or magical, or filled with evil and spirits, as he had often been told by the priests. Instead it is simply a huge Dead Place, filled with broken god-roads and ruined towers—and even a few towers that still stand tall. Although some patches of earth still show signs of the Great Burning, in many places grass grows through the cracked stone. He also sees a fish hawk and butterflies. As he walks, he discovers a large broken stone engraved with the letters “UBTREAS.” He also discovers a statue of a god or possibly just a man: “It had been made of white stone, and he wore his hair tied back like a woman’s. His name was ASHING, as I read on the cracked half of a stone.” John takes a moment to pray to this previously unknown god.

As he continues exploring, he finds many other animals. The abundance of pigeons leads him to think that the gods must have held special regard for them. He also sees wild dogs and cats, and everywhere he encounters numbers or words carved in stone, but cannot decipher their meaning. John gets hungry and remembers that the gods did not have to hunt because they got their food from magical jars and boxes. He had seen such food before in the Dead Places, and even tasted it once, but eating such food is strictly forbidden by the tribe. It is believed that the food can bring death. Having already defied death by walking in the Place of the Gods, John decides to eat the food of the gods as well.

He enters a large building in the center of town, which he takes to be a temple. Inside, the ceiling is painted with the stars of the night sky, and numerous tunnels lead off from the main building. John finds fruit inside some jars and eats it. Then he drinks something strong from glass bottles that affects his head. After a brief nap, he wakes to find that a large dog has joined him. He tries to scare it away, but it stays near. He decides not to kill it and continues his journey northward along an old god-road. The dog follows, and soon John discovers that a whole pack is sizing him up. He heads toward a fairly intact building, and as he gets near, the dogs rush forward to attack. However, John makes it inside the building and slams the door closed.

John climbs some stairs and finds himself in a hall with two doors, one of which has no handle—an elevator door. He guesses that the gods must have used a magical incantation to open the door. He opens the other door and finds himself in a place of remarkable riches. The room is furnished with well-preserved chairs and colorful rugs, and decorated with paintings and sculpture—art far beyond anything John has seen before. There are also many books, some of which he cannot understand even though he has learned the language of the gods. He finds machines that the gods used for cooking and washing but concludes that the magic they require to function has long since run out. John still feels the presence of magic and spirits in the house, however, and he is tempted to leave the place and find somewhere else to sleep. In the end, he decides to stay, and he builds a fire in the main room’s fireplace.

During the night, John has a vision or a dream of the Place of the Gods as it existed before the Great Burning. In the rush of light and sound, he sees innumerable gods traveling along the streets on foot and in vehicles. He sees the bridges they have built and the tunnels they have dug, and he even sees them traveling through the air. According to John, “They were great, they were mighty, they were wonderful and terrible.” John sees that they had the potential to accomplish virtually anything, and that even though they made mistakes, their quest for knowledge moved them toward a more perfect, peaceful state.

Then John sees what brought the time of the gods to an end. The city is destroyed by fire raining from the sky and a poison mist. He watches as the gods disappear, and the buildings fall into ruin. However, he cannot understand why it has happened. When he wakes the next morning, he continues exploring the home, looking for answers. Instead he finds a dead god, sitting in a chair and looking through a large window out over the city. John determines that he had chosen not to leave the city when the Great Burning came. John comes at last to the realization that the gods were actually people.

He then journeys back home from the Place of the Gods, fending off attacks from wild dogs and Forest People along the way. However, his newfound wisdom keeps him from being afraid. When he reaches home, he tells his father what he has discovered. His father warns him that such knowledge needs to be offered to their

people slowly and carefully. John agrees. Thinking of the fate of those who died in the Great Burning, he speculates, “Perhaps, in the old days, they ate knowledge too fast.”

John begins traveling to the Dead Places not just for metal, but also in search of books and other artifacts that will provide them with the knowledge of the old ways. He vows that when he becomes the chief priest of his tribe, he will lead his people across the river Ou-dis-sun—familiar to readers as the Hudson River—and into the Place of the Gods, which, he reveals, is named “new-york.” There, he will show his people the statue of ASHING and the other “gods” whose names he encountered, such as Lincoln, Biltmore, and Moses. He concludes: “They were men who were here before us. We must build again.”

CHARACTERS

John

John is the main character and narrator of “By the Waters of Babylon.” When the story begins, he is a boy from a tribe known as the Hill People. His father is a priest who performs purifying rituals and is also responsible for traveling into the regions known as Dead Places. These are the homes where an advanced civilization, considered by the Hill People to be gods, once lived. There, he collects metal for the tribe to use. John accompanies his father on these trips when he is young. Because he does not die from holding the metal, he is considered a candidate to become a priest once he reaches manhood. John is also very inquisitive and learns as much as he can about the old gods from the few surviving books the tribe has found. He is also shown to have a rebellious streak. For example, he once tastes some preserved food left behind by the gods, even though this is strictly forbidden by tribal law. As part of his rite of passage into manhood, John must embark on a journey. For this journey, John chooses to go east, which is forbidden by the laws of the tribe. This is where the Place of the Gods is found, and it is believed that entering the Place of the Gods will lead to certain death for a mere human. However, his thirst for knowledge drives him there. To reach the Place of the Gods, John journeys for eight days and has to cross a large river, which he does by building a raft. When he reaches the Place of the Gods, he realizes that everything he has been

told is untrue: it is simply a very large Dead Place. The ground is not poisoned, since grass grows and animals are found throughout. While in the Place of the Gods, John has a vision of how it was destroyed—in what his tribe calls the Great Burning. John also finds the preserved body of a dead god and realizes that they were just people. This convinces John that he must lead his tribe to rebuild the Place of the Gods and strive to re-create the greatness and knowledge that people once possessed.

John’s Father

John’s father is a priest for the Hill People, a group somewhat more advanced than the other prominent tribe in the area, the Forest People. As a priest, he is tasked with traveling to the otherwise forbidden Dead Places to find metal, which the tribe uses. He also performs purification rituals for those who travel to the Dead Places. When John is a child, his father takes him to a Dead Place and gives him a piece of metal to hold. This is apparently a test, and the boy passes it by not showing fear or dying from holding the impure metal. From then on, he knows that John will one day become a priest, and he helps the boy learn how to read and write in the old language of the gods. When John prepares to embark on a journey to prove his manhood, he tells his father of his plan to go to the Place of the Gods. Although his father states that it is forbidden to go there, the priest gives his son a bow and three arrows to use on his journey. When John returns, he tells his father about his experiences in the Place of the Gods. His father refuses to punish him, even though he has broken the laws of the tribe. His father officially grants him the status of priest, but he warns that revealing to the tribe too much about his experiences all at once may cause problems.

THEMES

The Potential Dangers of Technological Progress

In the story, the catastrophe called the Great Burning appears to have destroyed most of human civilization. Although the exact reason for the Great Burning is never revealed, it is suggested that technological progress allowed humans to develop weapons powerful enough to destroy each other on a massive scale. When John sees a

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- “By the Waters of Babylon” depicts a world in which civilization is largely destroyed by an unknown catastrophe that is usually interpreted as warfare. Read the clues offered in the text and come up with another explanation for the Great Burning that fits the available information. Write a brief story explaining how this terrible event came to pass.
- This story is an example of post-apocalyptic fiction. Read another post-apocalyptic story, such as “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Ray Bradbury. Write a short essay comparing the two stories. How are the worlds depicted in each story different? What message does each story convey to the reader? Which story do you prefer, and why?
- “By the Waters of Babylon” can be viewed as a cautionary tale, or a warning of what could happen in the future if the author’s message is not heeded. Can you think of any elements of modern society that should be improved to prevent bad things from happening? Choose a negative behavior you would like to see changed and write a cautionary short story about what might happen if the behavior is not changed. The behavior can be anything, from apathy about global warming to people not covering their mouths when they cough in public.
- Compare the culture in the story, set sometime in the future, to our modern culture. Beyond differences in technology, how do the two differ? Does the culture of the Hill People contain any positive aspects that you think are lacking in modern culture? Give a class presentation in which you report on your findings.
- The story is set in and around New York City, though much of the city has been destroyed at the time the story takes place. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, create a map that depicts John’s journey as he describes it in the story. Be sure to identify the landmarks he specifically mentions. Based on your map, where do you think the village of the Hill People is located?

vision of the Great Burning, he describes it as “fire falling out of the sky and a mist that poisoned.” The suggestion that the catastrophe was brought by warfare is reinforced by the advice John’s father gives him when he returns from the Place of the Gods: “Truth is a hard deer to hunt. If you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth. It was not idly that our fathers forbade the Dead Places.” This suggests that the ancestors of the Hill People feared that knowledge of the Dead Places would eventually lead humans to resume along the same path they traveled before, which would again lead to catastrophe and devastation. John accepts his father’s warnings and agrees that “the truth should come little by little” in order to prevent the same mistakes from happening again.

The Quest for Knowledge

Although the story clearly offers a warning about technological progress, the main character of John represents humanity’s enduring quest for knowledge. Although it is forbidden for the Hill People to travel to the east, John makes the journey anyway because he is driven by a desire to discover for himself the truth about the Place of the Gods. This desire is also seen in his earlier behavior, such as his willingness to hold the metal from the Dead Place and his curiosity over the food of the gods, which leads him to taste it. When he reaches the great river, he is briefly overcome by fear, and considers ending his journey there. However, even though he thinks he will die by setting foot in the Place of the Gods, he still chooses to go because if he does



The Hudson River with Manhattan in the background. In the story, this river is called Ou-dis-sun. (Image copyright Graça Victoria. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

not, “I could never be at peace with my spirit again.” His desire for knowledge overcomes his fears regarding his own safety.

In the story, John’s quest for knowledge is generally shown to be a positive attribute. If he had obeyed the laws of his people, as everyone else had—including his father—he never would have discovered the truth about the Place of the Gods. Presumably, this insight allows both John and the tribe to learn a lot about the humans who once lived in the Dead Places. In this way, the author suggests that bold and independent thinkers in search of knowledge and truth are the ones who lead humankind on its journey of progress.

Taboos and Omens

John’s tribe, the Hill People, are heavily reliant upon taboos and omens. The taboos function as the only apparent laws of their society. The taboos are intended to protect the Hill People from the dangers presented by the Dead Places and their products. Although John breaks the taboos to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, he fully expects to be punished severely or to die as

a result of his transgressions. Before he decides to make the journey to the Place of the Gods, John fasts and waits for a sign or omen to guide him. He sees an eagle flying east and takes that as an omen that his journey eastward is the correct course of action. He even waits for another omen, concerned that the first omen might be a trick played by evil spirits. He then sees three deer traveling east, and one of them is a white fawn; this is very significant to John, who sees it as a most encouraging sign and begins his journey immediately.

STYLE

Science Fiction

“By the Waters of Babylon” is considered science fiction by most definitions of the genre. Science fiction is literature that focuses on how science and technology affect humanity and the world around us. Although no single definition is widely accepted, science fiction in general depicts a world

different from our own, but different in ways that do not violate basic laws of nature. In this way, science fiction is different from fantasy. Very often science fiction stories are set in the future, which allows writers to show the long-term results of certain scientific or social developments on a grand historic scale.

The first known piece of literature generally acknowledged as science fiction is Lucian of Samosata's *True History*, written in the second century CE. This humorous work tells of a journey into outer space and encounters with alien life-forms. The development of modern science fiction is generally credited to three men: Edgar Allan Poe, some of whose stories relied upon the application of scientific principles to reach a resolution; Jules Verne, who used a rigorous scientific viewpoint to lend authenticity to his fantastical adventures; and H. G. Wells, who created the first modern examples of story types now fundamental to the genre, including tales of time travel (*The Time Machine*, 1895) and alien invasion (*The War of the Worlds*, 1898).

Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

"By the Waters of Babylon" is an example of post-apocalyptic fiction. This type of fiction is usually concerned with describing humanity's place in the world following some sort of devastating setback to civilization and the human species. This setback might come in the form of war, plague, forces of nature, technological accident, or even alien invasion. The term *post-apocalyptic* is derived from the biblical Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, which offers a vision of humanity's last days on Earth—though the term *apocalypse* has a broader meaning in religious studies. There is also a sub-genre of literature referred to as apocalyptic fiction, which depicts the actual catastrophes that befall humanity. These tales include both the catastrophic event and its aftermath.

Post-apocalyptic fiction was not widely seen until the aftermath of World War II, in which the power of nuclear devastation was shown to be not only possible but all too real. Some of the most popular examples of post-apocalyptic fiction include the novels *When Worlds Collide* (1933) and *After Worlds Collide* (1934) by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer, and the novel *On the Beach* (1957) by Nevil Shute. More recently, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy and *The Matrix*

film trilogy (1999–2003) by Larry and Andy Wachowski are examples of post-apocalyptic storytelling.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Spanish Civil War

At the time Benét wrote "By the Waters of Babylon," a civil war was raging in Spain. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Spain was a country in conflict with itself. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the country was governed as a republic, but this quickly gave way to a return to monarchy under King Alfonso XII in 1875. His son, Alfonso XIII, continued this monarchy until 1931. Beginning in 1923, however, the country was effectively ruled by a military dictator, Miguel Primo de Rivera, who had overthrown the parliament and earned the title of prime minister from the king in an effort to maintain order in the country. As the country's economic condition worsened during the Great Depression, Spanish citizens called for an end to both the military dictatorship and the monarchy. In 1931, a new republic was established in Spain that offered greater individual freedoms as well as the nationalization of certain industries within the country for the sake of public welfare.

However, the following five years saw increasing tension between radicals on either side of the political spectrum. Elections in 1934 shifted power to right-wing groups, who ended many of the reform policies of the previous administration. Revolts and discontent among left-wing supporters grew, and in 1936, control of the government again swung back in their favor. This led to discontent among the right-wing opposition, some of whom were military leaders who hatched a plan to overthrow the democratically elected government of the country.

A key figure in this attempted overthrow was Francisco Franco, a military leader who became the leader of the Nationalist faction. This group fought against the Republicans who supported the elected government. Instead of a quick defeat for either side, the battle turned into a bloody civil war. Aid arrived from many other countries. The Nationalists received significant support from Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany, and Benito Mussolini, the leader of Fascist Italy. Hitler and Mussolini wanted Spain to be ruled like their own countries were: by a central powerful

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1930s:** Scientists first discover the possibility of nuclear fission from radioactive materials. In 1939, the United States forms the Uranium Committee to study the possibility of using radioactive uranium as the basis for large-scale weaponry.
Today: Over twenty thousand nuclear weapons are known to exist, though the United States is the only nation that has used nuclear bombs in offensive warfare—against Japan in 1945.
- **1930s:** Spain is divided by a bloody civil war between the democratically elected Repub-

licans and the Fascist-backed Nationalist rebels.

Today: After decades of oppressive dictatorship, Spain once again operates peacefully as a democratic republic.

- **1930s:** Science fiction is a subgenre of literature found mostly in inexpensive magazines and enjoyed by a relatively small number of readers.

Today: Science fiction comprises many of the top-selling films, television shows, books, and video games.

authority that could prevent those with opposing viewpoints from speaking out.

One of the most infamous and tragic episodes of the war—and the one which was the inspiration for “By the Waters of Babylon”—involved the use of German planes to bomb the village of Guernica in 1937. Hundreds of villagers were killed and most of the town’s buildings were destroyed. This action was heavily criticized by Americans and Europeans since it betrayed the notion that wars were to be waged between soldiers—not against unarmed civilians. The military support of the Germans and Italians was devastating to the more modest Republican forces, which were finally driven to surrender in 1939. Franco then ruled Spain as an oppressive dictator until his death in 1975, and the country finally returned to democratic rule in 1978.

The Development of Atomic Weaponry

Although the Great Burning described in “By the Waters of Babylon” appears to reflect the devastation caused by nuclear weapons, research into these types of weapons was still in its infancy when the story was published. It was not until 1932 that scientists could confirm the different types of particles that make up an atom, the building blocks of all matter. It was also discovered

that the removal or addition of neutrons to the nucleus of a certain kind of atom could cause a chain reaction capable of generating massive amounts of energy. This chain reaction is called nuclear fission.

When Europe became embroiled in World War II in 1939, American and British military leaders saw the potential for nuclear fission to be used as a weapon. This ultimately led to the creation of the Manhattan Project in 1942. This was a top-secret endeavor to build the first successful atomic bomb. Though the project was controlled by the American military and run by American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, it included many of the world’s most foremost physicists. These scientists came up with a way to synthesize plutonium, a rare element necessary for atomic weaponry, as well as a method of remotely activating a nuclear core to create the ideal chain reaction. The first test of a nuclear weapon was carried out in a desolate area of New Mexico on July 16, 1945. The test, known as “Trinity,” was successful, and less than one month later, two atomic bombs were dropped by American forces on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The devastation caused by these bombs resulted in the almost immediate death of over one hundred thousand people and an equal number of deaths resulting



Statue of George Washington in front of Federal Hall in New York City. In the story, John believes this statue to represent a god named “ASHING.” (Image copyright Alex Neauville, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

from radiation exposure over the following year. Just as is suggested in Benét’s story, the site of a nuclear explosion is effectively “poisoned” by radiation for years afterward.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When “By the Waters of Babylon” was first published in 1937 under the title “The Place of the Gods,” Benét had already secured his place in American literature. His book-length poem about the Civil War, *John Brown’s Body* (1928), won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. He had also already written notable stories such as “The Sobbin’ Women” (1926) and “An End to Dreams” (1932) which won the O. Henry Award for Best Short Story in 1932. However, “By the Waters of

Babylon” was most overshadowed by a Benét story that preceded it by several months in the *Saturday Evening Post*: “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1936), which went on to win the author his second O. Henry Award.

“By the Waters of Babylon” was included in a Benét short story collection published in 1937, *Thirteen O’Clock*. The author decided to change the title at that time from its original name, “The Place of the Gods.” In *Stephen Vincent Benét: The Life and Times of an American Man of Letters, 1898–1943* (1958), biographer Charles A. Fenton notes that the critical reception of the collection was generally positive. Fenton calls the story “triumphant” and states that the story “rose above the level of tour de force where most such stories remain.” Reviewer E. B. C. Jones is more lukewarm about Benét’s writing. In a review for the *Spectator*, he comments, “Provided that the reader is not misled by the blurb into expecting ‘greatness’ from Mr. Vincent Benét, he will find much to enjoy in this American writer’s stories.” However, Jones does not single out “By the Waters of Babylon” for recognition.

In his book *Stephen Vincent Benét* (1962), biographer Parry Stroud states that the author “succeeds brilliantly in creating a narrator to develop his meaning.” Stroud notes that the story “is religious not only through the primitive rites and aspirations of the narrator, but fundamentally through Benét’s reverence for civilization.” The story has continued to age well in the eyes of scholars, particularly those studying science fiction as literature. W. Warren Wagar, in *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* (1982), writes, “Benét’s influence on postwar American speculative fiction was considerable. Many American examples of the post-holocaust tale reinforce the positivist side with a secret organization of scientist-survivors who aid the rebels in their struggle against unreason.”

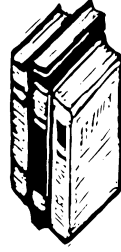
CRITICISM

Greg Wilson

Wilson is an author, literary critic, and mythologist. In this essay, he contends that “By the Waters of Babylon” is groundbreaking in ways not normally credited to it, and he explores how the story opened up the realm of science fiction to mainstream readers.

“By the Waters of Babylon” is a story plagued by its uniqueness. It is given too much credit for

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1938) is Benét’s best-known story. It concerns a nineteenth-century farmer named Jabez Stone who sells his soul to the devil for ten years of success. When his time is up, he hires the famous lawyer Daniel Webster to get him out of the deal. The devil arranges a trial, complete with a jury of the damned to decide the farmer’s fate. The story can be found in Benét’s *The Devil and Daniel Webster and Other Stories* (1975).
- *The City of Ember* (2003) is a post-apocalyptic novel by Jeanne DuPrau. Humankind has been driven underground for centuries by some kind of disaster on the surface—long enough to forget that they ever lived on the surface at all. As the underground society of Ember runs out of resources, two children discover a secret that can lead the people of Ember back to salvation and light—if they can triumph over the corrupt mayor of the colony. The novel received the 2006 Mark Twain Award for children’s literature.
- *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse* (2008), edited by John Joseph Adams, is a collection of twenty-two dark visions of the future from writers such as Stephen King, Gene Wolfe, and Octavia Butler. The anthology covers the spectrum from bleak to hopeful and includes an additional list of further readings.
- *The Hunger Games* (2008) is the first book of a trilogy by Suzanne Collins. A future country called Panem exacts revenge on the formerly rebellious regions that surround it by demanding that they each send one boy and one girl to take part in an annual televised death match. Only one will survive and be declared the winner. The book follows Katniss, a sixteen-year-old girl who volunteers to take the place of her sister in the competition, and a boy named Peeta, also chosen to participate.
- *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009) by Carrie Ryan is a post-apocalyptic novel of a different sort. The unspecified cataclysm in this book results in a world filled with flesh-eating zombies, where small groups of survivors manage to eke out an existence behind protective fences. The story is told by Mary, a teenage girl who longs to see the ocean, something she has only heard about as if it were legend.
- *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (1998) by Philip Gourevitch is a nonfiction account of all-too-real apocalyptic terror within the country of Rwanda. In 1994, over a three-month period, nearly a million Rwandans were killed in an effort to wipe out the Tutsi ethnic minority from the country. Gourevitch re-creates the horrific genocide through personal accounts and correspondence from those who lived through it, and even those who did not survive.

being a landmark work by some, and yet too little credit for popularizing the science fiction genre by others. Both views are valid, and both must be understood to view the story in the context of both the science fiction genre and literature as a whole.

“By the Waters of Babylon” is often recognized for launching the start of the post-apocalyptic subgenre of science fiction. However, it was hardly the first significant work of post-apocalyptic fiction

ever written. One post-apocalyptic vision prior to the twentieth century came from H. G. Wells in his novel *The Time Machine* (1895). The future world discovered by the time traveler in the story is the result not of a single catastrophic event but of a continual downward slide for humankind. The human species has split into two distinct races: the Eloi, who are peaceful but no longer strive for knowledge or progress, and the Morlocks,



WHAT BENÉT CREATES, THEN, IS A SCIENCE FICTION TALE WITHOUT THE SCIENCE. EVERYTHING IS VIEWED THROUGH THE CULTURE OF THE HILL PEOPLE, WHO SEE THE ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES OF THE 'GODS' AS MAGIC."

ape-like brutes who live in darkness and kill the Eloi for food. When the time traveler proceeds farther into the future, he finds that even these species have died out. Other examples include Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), both of which feature a plague that wipes out most of humanity. Another example is Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer's *When Worlds Collide* (1933), which features a rogue planet that passes close enough to destroy the Earth.

"By the Waters of Babylon" is at least different from many apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories that pre-date it because it suggests that humans are the cause of their own catastrophe. Along these lines, the story is highly regarded for its significance as a cautionary tale. It seems to offer a message to contemporary readers about how to avoid the devastation depicted in the story. Once again, though, earlier science fiction writers were already masters of the art of the cautionary tale. One might argue that the entire subgenre of futuristic science fiction arose from a desire to present cautionary tales in a way that allowed readers to draw a line from current circumstances to unpleasant conclusions (or, in some cases, pleasant conclusions). Significant examples of cautionary tales include Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), in which the future American government falls under the control of a small group of wealthy elite who crush a populist revolution. *Last and First Men* (1930) by Olaf Stapledon is another example, offering visions of many successive and unique iterations of humankind. In the book, the First Men destroy nearly the entire population of Earth through their carelessness. In these and other examples, humans are either largely or solely responsible for their own downfall.

Benét also gets credit for predicting the coming of nuclear war in his descriptions of the Great Burning. The story appeared before the development of the atomic bomb and describes ground that continues burning (as with radiation) long after the bombs have been detonated. However, his description is vague at best and involves some generous interpretation of "poison" and "burning." The author who most directly predicted the development of atomic weaponry was—once again—H. G. Wells, in his novel *The World Set Free* (1914). Wells in fact uses the term "atomic bombs" thirty years before such devices existed. Although his version of atomic weaponry is somewhat different in effect—not as powerful but lasting over a much longer period—Wells refers specifically to "the problem of inducing radio-activity in the heavier elements and so tapping the internal energy of atoms." This is an astonishingly accurate description of the actual physics involved in nuclear fission, which was not realized until nearly twenty years later. It is worth noting that one of the physicists who developed nuclear fission, Leó Szilárd, was inspired in his work by the description given in Wells's novel.

Although Benét's story was not the first significant work of post-apocalyptic fiction, nor did it accurately describe atomic war, it is still significant for several reasons. To appreciate these, it is necessary to look beyond just the plot of the story and focus on both its style and its audience.

In the 1930s, the science fiction genre was, from a commercial standpoint, not doing very well. The Great Depression had taken its toll on publishing in general, but genre magazines like *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Stories* were hit especially hard. *Amazing Stories*, which had boasted a circulation of over one hundred thousand in the mid-1920s, shrunk to about one-fourth of that. *Astounding Stories*, the leader in the genre, had a circulation of only about fifty thousand. In the mid-1930s, most science fiction published in such magazines belonged to the subgenre known as space opera—adventure stories that used outer space as a setting but did not focus on how technology can affect human culture. The start of the so-called Golden Age of Science Fiction—which saw the debut of writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury—was still a few years away, coinciding with John W. Campbell's

reign as editor of *Astounding* beginning in 1938. In other words, in 1937, the genre could be aptly described as stuck in a literary and commercial ghetto.

Meanwhile, the *Saturday Evening Post*—the publication in which “By the Waters of Babylon” was first published—was considered an American institution. It had been published under its best-known name for over a century and had arguably existed in a different form—launched by Benjamin Franklin—for another century before that, making it even older than the United States of America. Under the editorial leadership of George Horace Lorimer, the magazine was known for its iconic Norman Rockwell illustrated covers and its heartwarming tales of Midwestern characters. It also published fiction by some of the biggest names in contemporary literature, including William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Sinclair Lewis. By 1936, its circulation reached three million copies per year—a readership at least five times greater than the most popular science fiction magazine.

Going strictly by these numbers, “By the Waters of Babylon” was bound to have a greater literary impact than most science fiction stories simply because of where it was published. In addition, while science fiction readers might have recognized the story as not entirely original, the readership of the *Saturday Evening Post* was more accustomed to quaint stories about tractor salesmen and hardware store owners. They were much less likely to have been exposed to the subgenre of post-apocalyptic fiction. The fact that Benét was already a Pulitzer Prize-winning author put him in an ideal position to push the bounds of what *Post* readers were willing to try.

However, Benét’s accomplishments do not end at being fortunate enough to have his story published in a mainstream magazine. If the story had been written in a style typical of science fiction at the time, it would have likely been rejected by the magazine’s editor or, had it been published, by its readers. Instead, Benét created a perfect “gateway” story to capture the imaginations of readers who would not normally consider themselves fans of science fiction.

In fact, in reading the story, one does not see any tell-tale signs of science fiction until the very end. The style makes the tale feel more like myth or fairy tale than a prediction of mankind’s harrowing future. Benét uses simple sentence

structures and lyrical repetition to suggest the culture of the Hill People; especially noteworthy is the repeated sentence, “My father is a priest; I am the son of a priest.” The author also uses this repetition when John first arrives at the Place of the Gods, when three successive paragraphs begin with, “How shall I tell what I saw?” The style smacks of similarity to Native American oral tales and songs (as translated into English, at least), and this can hardly be coincidental. Benét reinforces this connection with the significance he places upon animals as messengers from the spirit world. Even the animals John sees—the hawk and deer—are ones considered important in many Native American cultures.

What Benét creates, then, is a science fiction tale without the science. Everything is viewed through the culture of the Hill People, who see the advanced technologies of the “gods” as magic. There are echoes of this in *The Time Machine* and even Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), but no one had offered this view of advanced human technology from the viewpoint of an outsider. This unique perspective would become an important component of science fiction literature in future publications. For example, Arthur C. Clarke would use it in much the same way for his *Against the Fall of Night* (1953), and would even get credit for the observation that advanced technologies would appear to be magical to less sophisticated cultures. This observation is known as Clarke’s Third Law of Prediction, which he did not come up with until 1973. Surely Benét deserves some credit for making the same observation—in motion, rather than just talking about it—many years before Clarke did.

The net impact of Benét’s work—owed to both his artistry and the circumstances of its publication—is that it opened up the realm of science fiction to mainstream readers. They suddenly saw that science fiction could be much more than they thought it was: cardboard space adventurers protecting damsels from menacing aliens. It nudged the genre ever-so-slightly out of its literary ghetto and toward respectability. And it brought new readers into the genre, helping to popularize what would very soon become the Golden Age of Science Fiction.

Source: Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on Stephen Vincent Benét’s “By the Waters of Babylon,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Toby Johnson

In the following essay, Johnson examines Benét's more speculative stories, comparing his style to the structures employed on the popular television show The Twilight Zone.

Sacred scriptures are still being written today. In spite of the widely proclaimed notions in the religions of the Book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that Truth was revealed once and for all, in the distant past, by their God, new religious myths and sacred writings are being produced all the time.

According to the major Western traditions, all of which trace their foundations to Abraham the Patriarch and the basis of their Scriptures to Moses the Liberator, the Bible and Koran represent the final written word of God.

In fact, though, religion has kept changing all through history. Theologians and Church officials have reinterpreted the details of the revelation, emphasizing different ideas at different times, usually to respond to changing political, cultural and moral circumstances. New ideas were introduced by spiritual writers, mystics, and poets. What characterizes this whole notion of Revelation in the past is an idea of authority that has dominated human culture until quite recently.

Today we no longer hold the argument from ancient authority to be exclusively convincing. We no longer look to the ancients for the only version of truth. So while religion still prevails as the proclaimer of cherished beliefs and stories that are passed down to influence human culture and behavior, much of the discussion of how to think about the meaning of life has shifted to anthropology, literature, poetry, and modern mythopoeism.

Curiously in our modern “demythologized” world, we are probably bombarded by more mythic stories than any human beings before us. Every night on TV we are offered story after story of heroes dealing with problems, overcoming obstacles and saving the world with every click of the remote and every turn of the hour. Of course, most of these stories aren't referenced to the meaning of life (though even a crime drama about the police capturing a criminal demonstrates the notion of the cosmic battle between good and evil).

Renowned comparative religions scholar and mythographer Joseph Campbell observed that virtually all the stories that interest human beings from poetic epics to religious mythology



ON THE SURFACE, BENÉT'S STORY IS A WARNING ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF MODERN WARFARE TO CAST US ALL BACK TO THE STONE AGE, AS THE CLICHÉ GOES. BUT IT IS ALSO A CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS MYTH. FOR THE HERO'S DISCOVERY IS THAT WHAT HE LEARNED IN THE LEGENDS OF HIS TRIBE AS TRUTH WAS REALLY A MISTAKEN VIEW OF HISTORY.”

to the modern novel follow the same basic pattern—what he called the hero cycle.

One of the areas of literature and modern popular culture, however, that does often explicitly deal with issues of meaning and metaphysical significance is what is loosely called science fiction. In a way, this flows right out of the modern rejection of the argument from authority. What makes a novel or a movie “science fiction” is usually that it is set in the future and it is in the future that the issues of meaning will be resolved.

Within the genre of science fiction is a sub-genre that deals specifically with spiritual and metaphysical issues that is perhaps best identified by its manifestation in 1950s television in the phrase coined by writer-producer Rod Serling: The Twilight Zone. Indeed what made a story fit in this category is that it dealt with a slightly alternative reality in order to make a salient or poignant observation about commonly shared reality, often by means of an ironic or surprising ending.

Stephen Vincent Benét preceded Rod Serling by some twenty years, but one can clearly find in his work precursors of the Twilight Zone. Benét's most famous story, “The Devil and Daniel Webster,” demonstrates this kind of modern myth creation following the ancient pattern of pseudepigraphy and interestingly twisting the notions of religious authority. The Faustian story is told by an anonymous narrator about an event in mythic time about characters from the indeterminate American past.

The story goes that the patriot, statesman and smooth-talking attorney Daniel Webster is called upon to defend one Jabez Stone in a trial contesting a contract with the Devil for Stone's soul. Webster argues democratic, American principles and humanistic values against the Devil's letter-of-the-law claim on Stone. While all this is told in the form of a tall tale, Webster's victory demonstrates the conquest of American humanism over traditional religion. The twist is that the Devil, Mr. Scratch, stacked the case in his own favor by populating the jury with denizens of Hell, all notorious murderers, pirates, renegades, or stiff-necked inquisitors in early American history. But Webster was able to change them back to compassionate men and so influence their verdict by his eloquence and by the beauty of the American dream of opportunity, even for the damned.

The legal basis of the defense is that Jabez Stone is an American citizen and so cannot be forced into the service of any foreign prince, even the Devil himself. It is noteworthy that the defense never calls for mercy or forgiveness based on Christian sentiments. Webster never calls upon religion to save his client. Rather his claim is based in the nobility and rightness of the American dream, even when it contains wrongs, for they too have played a part in the creation of America. In Benét's *Selected Works* (1942), this story is listed in the section called, "Stories of American History." This is misdirection. The story is not history at all but a fantasy cast with historical figures. Hence, it should have been placed in the section with other stories of its type collected under the rubric "Fantasies and Prophecies" which further demonstrate how modern wisdom is communicated in brief detours through the Twilight Zone.

The initial stories in this section are lighter fare to amuse and entertain; the latter were written as warnings of the rise of fascism. The first story in "Fantasies and Prophecies" sets the stage for the others in this section. It offers us—readers of Stephen Vincent Benét's some 60 years after his death at age 44 in 1943—a curious perspective on the writer's life and influence. "The Curfew Tolls" is couched in a series of letters written by an Englishman in the late 1780s to his sister back in England while he is convalescing at a spa on the French Riviera called St. Phillippe.

The epistler reports that he has made the acquaintance of a strange little man in the village

who demonstrates great knowledge of war and military strategy. The little man's own life seems shoddy and banal. He is a ne'er-do-well major who by twist of bad fortune has ended up on half-pay stationed in the little health resort with no promise of military accomplishment left to him.

The Englishman is fascinated by the little man's bravado and partly sorry for him because his life has come to so little. So he befriends him just at the time the major is dying. In reward, he is left the man's voluminous writings on military strategy and the obligation of writing the soldier's epitaph.

During the time of his final illness, the major asks the Englishman to read to him—not from the Bible, as one might have thought, but from the poem by Thomas Gray "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." The poem concerns the irony that death ends all ambition, and greatness—or the lack of it—may be but a mere fluke of fortune. The poet muses that in the graves of the country churchyard may lie souls who but for a simple twist of fate might have been world leaders or famous artists or poets.

My friend the major's malady approaches its term—the last few days find him fearfully enfeebled. He knows that the end draws nigh; indeed, he speaks of it often, with remarkable calmness. I had thought it might turn his mind toward religion, but while he accepted the ministrations of the church. I fear it is without the sincere repentance of a Christian. When the priest had left him, yesterday, he summoned me, remarking, "well, all that is over with," rather more in the tone of a man who has just reserved a place in the coach than one who will shortly meet his maker.

"It does no harm," he said reflectively. "And, after all, it might be true. Why not?" and he chuckled in a way that repelled me. Then he asked me to read to him—not from the Bible, as I would have expected, but some verses from Gray. He listened attentively, and when I came to the passage, "Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed," and its successor, "Some mute inglorious Miltons," he asked me to repeat them. When I had done so, he said, "Yes, yes. That is true, very true. I did not think so in boyhood—I thought genius must force its own way. But your poet is right about it . . ."

"Come Major," I said soothingly, "we cannot all be great men, you know. And you have no need to repine."

Here the story shifts into the Twilight Zone—and establishes the context for the other "Fantasies

and Prophecies”—with a surprise ending as the Englishman’s epitaph for the little major reveals that all this has been happening in an alternative reality. For the ne’er-do-well soldier turns out to have been one “Napoleone Buonaparte.” When the Englishman finally thinks of a conventional epitaph for the major’s stone, he admits that he thought of “excerpting the lines of Gray’s—the only ones that are still ringing in my head. But on reflection, though they suit well enough, they yet seemed too cruel to the dust.” The secular here gives way to the traditional even though the former is herein thought more appropriate.

The fantasy tale “The King of the Cats” is a comedy about the appearance of a greatly acclaimed orchestra director whose talent is based on his wielding his baton with a feline-like tail that is in itself a source of amazement. While most of the characters in the story are actual human beings, they all have names that sound like cat names while the conductor is a cat in a man’s disguise. The ruse of M. Tibault, the cat in director’s clothing, is foiled when the cat imposter is led to expose himself when he is told an old and magical story of the funeral of a cat on whose coffin was placed a small crown. Whenever the tale is told, it incites any real cats hearing it to exclaim, “Then I’m the King of the Cats,” which M. Tibault proclaims precipitously and suddenly disappears forever.

While the wisdom of the story is light, there is a cute message about cat psychology—and its implications for human psychology; namely, that every cat seems to think itself King of the Cats, which is to say, ego leaps to self-aggrandizing conclusions—supposedly to its own downfall. It must be noted that the trap didn’t work as expected for the Princess Vivraknarda (herself described as convincingly feline), whose suitor it was who set the trap of the retold tale in hopes of getting the princess for himself. Instead, at story’s end, she appears to have run off with Tibault to be his queen in the mysterious kingdom of the cats.

“Doc Mellhorn and the Pearly Gates” is a wonderful example of the Twilight Zone story. An old-time country doctor—the kind who does card tricks to calm youthful patients—dies and goes to Heaven, but because he is so obsessed with his profession and committed to helping his patients, he has no time for Heaven. Partly out of denial that he’s really dead and partly out of his dedication to his practice—his religion is serving

others—he quickly leaves Heaven and proceeds, through a backroads entrance, into Hell, noting, “Well, I can’t see that it’s so different than other places . . . Warmish, though.” There, he sets up practice easing the suffering of the damned *and* of their demon torturers as well. Of course, he is ruining Hell by making it too comfortable and is soon forced back to Heaven, though even then he refuses to take it seriously. The story ends with him playing a sleight-of-hand trick on the Father of Medicine, old Aesculapius himself.

As in “The Devil and Daniel Webster,” Benét makes fun of conventional Christian metaphysics and morals by offering the example of the scrappy, but kindly and plucky old American country doctor as the meaningful saint for today. The modern myth demonstrates virtue based on humanism and nonchalance, not religious purity and sanctimoniousness.

The first story of warning, “The Last of the Legions,” is an account in the first person of a Roman centurion of the withdrawal of Roman forces who conquered and occupied Britain, a withdrawal that is precipitated by the threats of Alaric on Rome itself. The gimmick of the story in great part is anachronism—a mainstay of the Twilight Zone style of storytelling. For example, the soldier says, “We’d have blocked up half those windows where I come from—once they start shooting fire arrows, big windows are a nuisance, even in a fortified town.” The allusion is to windows with glass. The centurion speaks with surprisingly modern sophistication, and world weariness, as he muses on the place in history the Roman occupation of Britain will ultimately play. Benét echoes his military childhood when the centurion notes: “I’m a child of the camp—I was brought up in the legion. The tale is that the first of us came with Caesar—I don’t put much stock in that—and of course we’ve married British ever since.” Indeed, he has less faith in legend and more in what he can actually see. As he observes the decline of Roman power, only half understanding that that is what is happening, he mourns the loss of discipline and authority, saying, “I don’t care for torture myself—it leaves a bad taste in your mouth—but there are times when you have to use a firm hand.” He wistfully envies one of his soldiers who has deserted the legion to stay with a woman he’s fallen in love with and thereby to “go native,” giving up Roman civilization and power for personal happiness. He also knows what he’ll do to the young man if he

catches him, even though he likes him: "I have my orders." He is a soldier; he does his duty. In the end, the Centurion longs to call out to the British barbarians to whom Rome has brought culture and civilization to remember the legion, but he sees, poignantly, that there is nobody to say it to who will understand, let alone care. Besides, as a soldier, he has no time for such personal things.

The next two stories have more emphatic warnings of, first, the coming danger, and, second, the possible aftermath. "The Blood of the Martyrs" and "Into Egypt" partake in what has become a sort of subgenre of its own within the category of speculative fiction and political commentary, the impending dystopia of totalitarianism. The stories, written in 1936 and 1939 respectively, describe a kind of Russian / German-like Orwellian dictatorship in which truth and humanity are sacrificed for power and efficiency. The two stories are surprisingly prophetic, written as they were a little before most Americans understood what had actually been going on in Nazi Germany. They were also, of course, antitotalitarian propaganda inspired by Benét's strong faith in Americanism at a time such propaganda was needed.

"The Blood of the Martyrs" tells of a Nobel prize-winning biochemist, Professor Gregor Malzius, who has been imprisoned, tortured and condemned to be shot in a purge of intellectuals in a fictional cultural revolution called the "cleansing." As the story opens, instead of being executed, Malzius, to his surprise, is being freed. The dictator himself has come to the prison to emancipate the professor and, indeed, to proclaim him new president of the National Academy of Science. As the emancipation proceeds, Malzius realizes the dictator is not interested in his research or in the truth that his science can uncover, but in having him, a respected and distinguished scholar, openly declare his allegiance to the dictator—and thereby to quash opposition to the regime beginning to appear in such places as the British Parliament. Because Malzius is terrified of being tortured further, he sees that his only real choice is to give in and be a pawn to the lies of the regime or to so egregiously offend the dictator as to finally provoke his long-threatened execution. He chooses not to betray his former students, to whom giving truth was paramount. Thus, after promising to sign a loyalty oath, he instead throws the inkwell at the dictator, splashing his face and uniform with ink. As the ploy succeeds and the

professor is about to be shot by firing squad, he thinks,

There had been a girl called Anna once; he had almost forgotten her. And his rooms had smelt a certain way and he had had a dog... He raised his head and looked once more at the gray foggy sky. In a moment there would be no thought, but while there was thought, one must remember and note. His pulse rate was lower than he would have expected and his breathing oddly even, but those were not the important things. The important thing was beyond, in the gray sky that had no country, in the stones of the earth and the feeble human spirit. The important thing was the truth.

"Ready!" called the officer. "Aim! Fire!" But Professor Malzius did not hear the three commands of the officer. He was thinking about the young men.

"Into Egypt" is about the expulsion of the "Accursed People" from the homeland, an obvious parallel to the Jews under Nazi Germany, though that is never said explicitly as such. The last of the Accursed People to pass through a checkpoint are a man and woman with a young child riding on a donkey. Livestock is specifically forbidden on this tortured march of expulsion, so the lieutenant at the checkpoint should confiscate the animal and will, but for one small thing. As he is questioning the father, he notices the child's hands. Because of that he allows the struggling little family to pass and to keep their donkey. But he is deeply disturbed. The punch line of the story is the lieutenant's explaining about the child: "Its hands had been hurt... In the middle. Right through. I saw them." The family is, of course, Joseph and Mary bringing poor little Jesus, already showing the wounds of his suffering—a poignant twist of the Christian myth, taking it out of its ancient, but distant and otherworldly context, and applying it to modern day politics with a message about ethnic tolerance.

The last of the stories Benét included in his "Fantasies and Prophecies" is one of his most famous because it is often considered a forerunner to the modern science-fiction story. "By the Waters of Babylon," published in 1937, is set in a future world after a terrible holocaust called the Great Burning has devastated the Earth. The narrator and protagonist is the son of a priest. He has been trained in the law; he knows the chants and the spells. He knows it is his place to continue the teaching that there are certain "Dead Places" divinely forbidden to people. But also because he is the son of a priest, he knows he

must follow the intuition of his dreams. In his dreams he has seen the gods walking and knows he must go to the Place of the Gods.

In obedience to the classic Campbellian hero-cycle, the young protagonist must risk the danger of the Dead Places to journey to the Place of the Gods. During the journey he remembers the legends he has learned about the gods. He expects it will kill him, but he must seek out the truth.

In a conclusion, now familiar to science-fiction fans from such movie classics as *The Planet of the Apes*, the young hero comes first to Washington DC and then to New York City. As he explores the strange ruins where he has been taught the Gods lived, in a sealed room he comes upon a semimummified corpse. He makes the great discovery that the Gods were men. He has achieved an enlightenment. From it he realizes that it was not gods or demons who caused the world to be as it is, but just men, like him: "They were men who were here before us. We must build again."

On the surface, Benét's story is a warning about the potential of modern warfare to cast us all back to the Stone Age, as the cliché goes. But it is also a critique of religious myth. For the hero's discovery is that what he learned in the legends of his tribe as truth was really a mistaken view of history. The dangers of the Dead Places were based on toxic poisons left by the war, not on mysterious taboo violations divinely revealed by gods. That same critique, the *Twilight Zone*-style story of science fiction, can be applied to the myths of current religion. Though Benét doesn't say it, isn't it the obvious corollary that the Bible and various sacred scriptures were written by men, not gods? Moreover the discovery—or rediscovery—of this truth offers the possibility for continuing human evolution.

Reading his stories with hindsight, one has to wonder what would have become of Stephen Vincent Benét had his life not ended so early. As it was, of course, he did achieve significant fame. His stories are part of the canon of American literature and he has become a minor mythmaker for the American vision. At any rate, stories like "By the Waters of Babylon" and "The Blood of Martyrs" demonstrate his prophetic vision and his grasp of the nature of myth and storytelling. He indeed is one of the mythopoeists of the sacred scriptures of humankind.

Source: Toby Johnson, "Stephen Vincent Benét in the *Twilight Zone*: Fantasy and Science Fiction," in *Stephen Vincent Benét: Essays on His Life and Work*, edited by David Garrett Izzo and Lincoln Konkle, McFarland & Company, 2003, pp. 206–214.

W. Warren Wagar

In the following excerpt, Wagar suggests that Benét's story had a profound influence on post-Holocaust stories that followed.

In American speculative fiction, the prototypical [post-apocalypse story] is Stephen Vincent Benét's much acclaimed "By the Waters of Babylon," first published in 1937 as "The Place of the Gods." The hero is a young man, a priest's son, who is slated to become a priest himself some day, in a tribal society of upstate New York after "the Great Burning and the Destruction." Somewhere to the east of the tribe, across the Hudson, lies the Place of the Gods, now a forbidden city of the dead. The young man defies the death penalty prescribed for such visits, and goes there to see it for himself. He learns that the "gods" were only men, like those of the tribe. His father spares his life, but warns him not to speak to the folk of his expedition. "Truth is a hard deer to hunt," he tells his son. "If you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth. It was not idly that our fathers forbade the Dead Places." But the spell is broken for the young man. Although he agrees with his father that the ancients may have eaten knowledge "too fast," he vows that when he becomes chief priest, "we shall go beyond the great river. We shall go to the Place of the Gods—the place new-york—not one man but a company . . . We must build again."

Benét's influence on postwar American speculative fiction was considerable. Many American examples of the post-holocaust tale reinforce the positivist side with a secret organization of scientist-survivors who aid the rebels in their struggle against unreason.

Source: W. Warren Wagar, "Prometheus Unbound," in *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things*, Indiana University Press, 1982, pp. 155–168.

Charles A. Fenton

In this excerpt from his critical biography of the author, Fenton offers a unique glimpse of Benét as a man caught between his ideals as an artist and his monetary needs.

[Early in his career, Benét's literary agent Carl Brandt] assured him that he would earn between five thousand and seventy-five hundred

dollars during the coming year. All he had to do was [write] . . . short stories. It sounded easy but Benét already knew different. “The short story,” he confessed to [his wife] Rosemary, “was never exactly my forte.” He was an instinctive poet, knowing and possessing the form since childhood, relishing its richness of scope, fascinated always by its technical abundance and problems. He had to discipline himself to the short story.

“Finished another short story today,” he told Rosemary in September 1921, “a very short one, thank God, only 4000 words. I tried to copy Millay-Boyd in it and rather produced the effect of an elephant trying to walk the tight-rope—I am not at my best in the flippant sentimental.” Even now, in mid-1922, his work sought after by editors, he made discouraging false starts in some instances and in other cases he laboriously finished stories that proved thoroughly unsalable.

[In 1925 Benét told his agent] that he wanted to write some stories he could be interested in. “I’ve got to have some fun doing these things,” he told Brandt. If he were going to do modern stories, they had to have something more than just sentiment. He didn’t propose to violate the various taboos, but what he wanted to work with, Benét said, was material that would be outside the conventional situations. He didn’t know exactly what they’d be; he knew what they wouldn’t be.

“Why not,” said Brandt, who by now had considerable confidence in Benét’s capacity and persistence. “The love stories aren’t selling, and you’re sick of writing them anyway. Why not. Let’s try it.”

Benét put aside the contrived romances of office girls and Long Island heiresses, and the mannered toughness of Manhattan sophistication. He wrote during the late winter of 1925 and the first four months of 1926 a group of short stories in a new mood and idiom. He abandoned the flippancy on which he had made most of his magazine reputation. He turned back, in much of the work he did during these months, to the American past, to the towns he had known as the nomadic child of an army family, and to those earlier periods he had possessed through his reading and his imagination. He began to give to his stories, freed from the jargon of the falsely contemporary, some of the poetic prose which fifteen years later became his singular voice in magazine fiction.



“THE PLACE OF THE GODS’ ROSE ABOVE THE LEVEL OF TOUR DE FORCE WHERE MOST SUCH STORIES REMAIN; THE NEW, POSTWAR WILDERNESS OF AMERICA HAD ITS ORIGINS, AS IT WERE, IN BENÉT’S IMAGINATIVE SENSE OF THE PRECOLONIST AMERICA OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.”

“He was the only one of us,” John Marquand said many years later, “who could write a story for the *Saturday Evening Post* make it read like literature.”

Benét’s objective with these 1925 and 1926 stories, though he did not thoroughly clarify his intentions, even privately, for several years, was no less a mission than to break to his individual talent the mold of American mass audience fiction. “We have our own folk-gods and giants and figures of earth in this country,” Benét said once. “I wanted to write something about them.”

Two ingredients were essential if Benét was to reproduce in marketable prose the success he’d already had with some of his verse. He must work with the American past, which would permit him nostalgic evocation as well as the display of his moving convictions about the national character. He must also—even more difficult—somehow inject into commercial fiction the fantasy so important to what was best in his poetic imagination.

“The Devil and Daniel Webster” consolidated the national role which had been slowly materializing for Benét ever since the publication of the ballads of 1922 and 1923. Though he wrote the story in ten days, it was in a very real sense the product of ten years of labor. Its realistic fantasy and extraordinary plausibility came from a decade’s drafts and revisions of those fifteen Oldest Inhabitant stories which preceded it. In Daniel Webster he had found an ideal folk-hero. Webster was ambiguous enough for productive characterization, less remotely sacred and frozen than Lincoln, majestic in his strengths and weaknesses, national in his values. Just as Longfellow rehabilitated Paul Revere, so too had Benét revitalized another tarnished hero.

Americans responded to the story in a way that astonished the *Post*, who published it in the issue of October 24. Soon the magazine wooed Benét and Brandt with an attractive contract that pledged four stories a year for \$1750 for each story. When Benét stopped off at Brandt's office he found himself, he said, "quite the white-headed boy. *Post* depending on me, etc." His publishers brought out the story in hard covers; it went through eleven editions during the next twenty years and was still in print in 1957. There were deluxe editions from fancy presses, with elaborate illustrations. It was precisely the kind of permanent classic which Benét had once denied "The Barefoot Saint" to be, "a story you can read in an hour but which you keep remembering for a long time."

When it was given the O. Henry Memorial Award as the best American short story of the year, Harry Hansen, the editor of the series, reported that it was one of the rare occasions when all the judges were unanimously of the same opinion. "Second and third readings," said one of them, "convince me of its fine chance for as near an approach to immortality as a short story can attain." It was as widely anthologized as any single American tale by an American writer. It reached continuous and additional audiences as operetta, one-act play, and full-length movie.

The rewards of being a man of letters were largely in the form of influence and prestige, neither of which Benét valued particularly. His joint earnings from lecturing and editing and reviewing barely paid the New York and Rhode Island rents. "Academy of Poets started. Wish they'd give me \$5,000," he noted in his diary after reading of the newly established grant. He still continued to depend on short stories for the major part of his income. During the second half of the 1930's, however, there was a profound alteration in his relationship with the circulation magazines.

Not once during the last three years of the decade did Brandt have to rely on the second-line magazines for sales. Benét's work no longer appeared in *Liberty* or *Redbook* or *Woman's Home Companion*. Eighteen of his new stories were published during 1937, 1938, and 1939. Thirteen appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, two in *Country Gentleman*, one in *Collier's*, one in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and one in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The purchase of "A Tooth for Paul Revere" by the *Atlantic* was the single forced sale

at a loss; all his regular buyers turned it down as too much of a fantasy. Each of the other seventeen stories, with the exception of "Schooner's Class" and "Into Egypt," was bought by the magazine of Brandt's choice, for prices—including the two that were rejected by the *Post*—which ranged from \$1250 to \$1750.

It was even more significant that only one of the eighteen stories was in the stereotyped formula Benét had formerly employed in at least two-thirds of his magazine fiction. "A Cat Named Dempsey," which the *Post* bought without hesitation, was a facsimile of the trivialities he had once written so regularly for *Metropolitan* and *Everybody's*. The other seventeen were divided among four significant categories; each was a notable example of magazine fiction at its most expert and adult.

The majority—"A Tooth for Paul Revere," "O'Halloran's Luck," "Oh, My Name Is William Kidd," the two new Webster stories, "Johnny Pye and the Fool-Killer," "Jacob and the Indians," "The Die-Hard," and "A Man from Fort Necessity"—were folk-tales of the American past. Two of the stories—"Doc Mellhorn and the Pearly Gates" and "Henry and the Golden Mine"—were modern fantasies. "Among Those Present" was contemporary satire, a vivid characterization done in the first person and reminiscent of Dorothy Parker and Ring Lardner; it was an excellent statement of Benét's complex feeling about New York and its effect upon the young men and women whose talent drew them to it. The remaining four stories were in certain respects the most important, overshadowing the charm of the American material, the richness of the fantasies, the bite of contemporary satire.

In this final group he extended the contemporary comment he had initiated in 1936 with "The Blood of the Martyrs." Two—"Greatness" and "The Last of the Legions"—were parables of the times in which he used episodes from the European past to illuminate the European present. "I thought of my man at the villa," reflects the Roman centurion as he and the legion prepare to leave Britain, "and how he might die in peace, even as Agathocles had said. But all the time, the moss would be creeping on the stone and the rain beating at the door. Till, finally, the naked people gathered there, without knowledge—they would have forgotten the use of the furnace that kept the house warm in winter and the baths that made men clean."

"Into Egypt," on the other hand, was a direct and moving indictment of totalitarian persecution, made plausible by the realistic portrait of a young fascist officer. The fourth story was a triumphant blend of all of them, in which he projected successfully the tempting, difficult fantasy of a future civilization. "The Place of the Gods" rose above the level of tour de force where most such stories remain; the new, postwar wilderness of America had its origins, as it were, in Benét's imaginative sense of the precolonist America of the sixteenth century.

Even Benét granted these stories some merit. For the first time he consented to the publication of a handful of them in book form. *Thirteen O'Clock* was published in 1937, *Tales before Midnight* in 1939. Of the twenty-five stories in the two collections, fourteen had originally been published in 1936 or later; several of the earlier ones had first appeared in such quality magazines as *Harper's* and the *Century*. "I have been trying to write the kind of short stories I like to write," he told an interviewer in 1939. It was characteristic of him that when he talked about his magazine fiction he said nothing of the editorial resistance which had been the prelude to this new level of achievement. "Fortunately," he said instead, "magazine editors are giving me considerable liberty."

The publication of *Thirteen O'Clock* and *Tales Before Midnight* was the first formal literary presentation of Benét in the storyteller role by which he had made his living since 1922 and with which most of his working time had been occupied. The reviews were both respectable and respectful; there were a number of warm acknowledgments of his achievement and some critical surprise at the high level of his performance. Everybody,—the reviewers, Farrar who encouraged him to allow the collections, Rosemary who read the galleys and congratulated him, the public who bought more copies than was customary with short story volumes—everybody was more pleased than Benét.

He eliminated stories ruthlessly when he made the selections for *Thirteen O'Clock*, leaving out a number from *Country Gentleman* that might have been included and several from *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Elks' Magazine*. He spent several weeks revising the token selection which he did tolerate; he made additional changes in the proofs. He altered the title of "The Place of the Gods" to "By the Waters of Babylon." The only

three he really approved of in *Thirteen O'Clock*, he said, were "The Devil and Daniel Webster," and "The Curfew Tolls."

He was more pleased with *Tales before Midnight*, all but two of whose stories had been published in 1937 or later. Even here he was diffident and scrupulous. "Look over old stories & discover I wrote a good many bad ones." It was his eighteenth book, however, and something of a milestone; the hard core of political creed and contemporary indignation gave the group an impressive unity. "I think they made a handsome book of it," he wrote his mother, "and I am glad to have the collection together."

Even the inevitable reviews by fastidious critics who deplored his tendency to write for money did not discourage him. When Robert Nathan told him how much he admired the stories, Benét answered with a cheerful reference to a bad notice he'd received. "I had just read a review of myself by an able young man," he told Nathan, "and was wondering whether I couldn't write because of (a) native incapacity or (b) because the machine was running down."

In point of fact his fertility and competence had been joined for the most propitious use of the medium of his career. His sensitivity to the past was now put to the even richer purpose of clarifying the present. He wrote these tales of totalitarian denunciation rapidly, once he conceived the situation, but always there was a period of blocked ferment which might last anywhere from ten days to a month. All kinds of factors and individuals contributed to his creative process during those preludes.

In the middle of November 1939, "money getting low," he struggled typically for a new story. "Try to think of story," he noted on November 15. "Try to work on story," two days later, "don't get anywhere." And on November 18, the same four or five hours of wrestling at his notes. "Try to work—no ideas." The exhausting germination continued on into the last days of the month, a kind of dry heaves of composition. "Try to work—get nowhere. Money running very low... Try very hard to think of story, but don't. Money extremely low... Cold. Don't get anywhere."

Then, abruptly and with splendid relief, the whole painful ordeal ended. A kind of sweet fruitfulness began. "Start idea for story 'Into Egypt,'" he noted on December 1. He finished the initial draft—10,000 words—the next day, and on the third day he typed it. Rosemary

read it with pleasure and approval, though Benét simply noted that “she seems to think O.K.”

The exhausting labor had been attended, however, by other elements than the need for money and his own resolve to sweat dryly until an idea came. On November 14, one day before he began work, he had read in the *Times* the appalling dispatches from Berlin. “Killing Jews in Germany,” he wrote in his diary. On November 18, during the fourth day of his search for an idea, his mother telephoned him from Pennsylvania. She, too, was thoroughly upset by the Nazi genocide and anxious to discuss it in detail with her son. On November 25, the ninth day of his sterile gestation, he walked downtown and back. On the way he stopped at Louis Cohn’s House of Books, to see if the dealer had any new Americana for him. Cohn, worldly and cosmopolitan, as familiar with Paris and Berlin as with New York, was in a terrible state. He and Benét discussed the new Nazi horrors. For ten more days these three encounters sat in his subconscious, along the still unlubricated tract of his indignation. Then on December 1 the various forces were freed. “Start idea for story, ‘Into Egypt.’”

On December 5 Brandt telephoned him. He liked the story very much. Five days later, on a Friday afternoon, the agent’s secretary called. Would he please come to the office some time on Monday, at his convenience, and talk to Mr. Brandt. Benét gloomily read the signs. “Damnfool *Post* probably doesn’t like story.” He stewed through the week end. On Monday his suspicions were confirmed. The *Post* had rejected “Into Egypt” because, they explained to Brandt, they had been getting so much material on Jews. “This is pretty silly,” Benét concluded in his diary, knowing perfectly well that the magazine’s fundamental objection had been to the story’s unequivocal and controversial position and theme.

The painful travail of November was now prolonged in different form. Ten more days went by, the bills continued to come in; at last Brandt telephoned once more. He had sold the story to the *Ladies’ Home Journal* for \$1500. “Get check,” Benét noted on December 29, “and pay school-bills.” A process which began on November 14, when he read the morning *Times*, ended almost seven weeks later when he spent the payment. The sequence of frustration, labor, and fulfillment was reproduced

each time Benét began and completed a major short story from 1937 through 1942; he wrote at least half a dozen each year and sometimes eight or nine.

Of the nineteen stories which Benét published between 1940 and early 1943 . . . four had been written some years before. They were bought now, appropriately, by the very magazines for which they had originally been intended. Thus, incongruously, at a time when his new short stories were being cited as classics, he was simultaneously appearing in *Redbook* and *Harper’s Bazaar* and the *American* with these culls from what Brandt called the B-file.

Several of his new stories, on the other hand—“The Captives” and “The Minister’s Books” in particular—were effectively constructed from the frontier research he was doing for *Western Star*. Others, like “The Great Swinglefield Derby” and “The Angel Was a Yankee,” were hasty and inferior fragments of Americana. A small group of these final stories of his career, however, were among his major achievements. In them he somehow matched, despite the full-time obligations of his war work, the noble themes and expert craft of “Into Egypt” and “The Blood of the Martyrs.” Such a story was “Freedom’s Hard-Bought Thing,” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1940. Like everything he was writing now, it brought the same extraordinary flood of letters; descendants of Negroes who had escaped on the underground, and relatives of those who operated it, wrote to thank him for it. The grandson of a slave wrote to describe how the bells in his grandfather’s collar had been packed with mud as he dodged his pursuers. Once again, as so often in the past, Benét was given the O. Henry Memorial Award for the best American short story of the year.

He had less and less time, however, for new work that required the concentration of such major short stories of this period as “The Bishop’s Beggar,” “A Judgment in the Mountains,” “The Prodigal Children,” and “Freedom’s a Hard-Brought Thing.” He was kept financially solvent only by Brandt’s tireless ingenuity, his own dogged and profitable labor during 1941 on a skillful movie version of “The Devil and Daniel Webster”—Hollywood provided the title, *All That Money Can Buy*—and the unexpected bonanza of a new two-volume collection of his poetry and fiction which was chosen as a

Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1942. “Absolutely no money,” he noted in his diary, “so borrow \$1000 from B&B. Then JF phones to say I will get \$3000 from BofM for advance on collected works.”

The *Selected Works* was heavily subscribed by the book club members, in a large part as a result of his new status as America’s most widely heard poetic voice. He continued to get these improbable riches from work which had in most cases been written years before. “Stan [Rinehart] stuns me,” he noted in 1942, “by saying B of M has paid further on set and I will get about \$6000 more.” He insisted on omitting some of the material which Basil Davenport, its editor, had chosen, including five short stories and some verse from *Heavens and Earth*. He also argued against Farrar and Rinehart’s tendency to make the volumes overelaborate. “My only other criticism,” he wrote Farrar, “is on the hand-lettered ‘Benét’ on the title-page, which seems to me unnecessarily fussy.”

On the whole, however, he was comforted by the quality of what he had written in the past, republished as it was in the midst of his wartime propaganda. “I am pleased and impressed by having this sort of edition,” he told Farrar, “and, thinking of my latter end, feel I probably don’t deserve it.” He was amused by the grudging respect which the critics gave the two volumes when they were published in June 1942. “The boys are always surprised that in spite of the fact that I am read, I show craftsmanship. If I had blown up like Bromfield then they could have written an article on how I used to have promise. But I haven’t blown up.”

And yet as he read the galleys of *Selected Works* he also felt a profound melancholy. He had done most of this work in the twenty-three fruitful years between his seventeenth and fortieth birthdays. Now he was forty-three and the conviction was growing within him that his major work was done. “Will I ever do good work again?” he wondered in the diary.

There were times when he could not be inwardly tranquil, though he could still be philosophical. “Get dummy for collected edition,” he wrote in his diary. “A very handsome tombstone.”

Source: Charles A. Fenton, excerpt from *Stephen Vincent Benét: The Life and Times of an American Man of Letters, 1899–1943*, Yale University Press, 1958.

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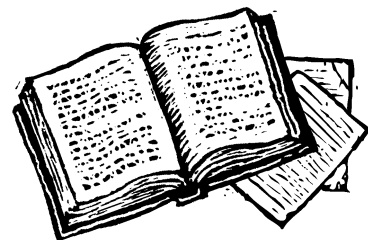
Daughter of Invention

“Daughter of Invention” is a chapter in Julia Alvarez’s first book-length work of fiction, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, published in 1991 by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. The book contains fifteen interrelated short stories about the Garcías, a Dominican family of four sisters and their parents. The story takes place in about 1961, soon after the García family has immigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic to escape the cruel and repressive dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. They live in an apartment in New York City and must adjust to the new and different lifestyle they encounter in the United States. Although the book deals specifically with the challenges a Dominican family faces assimilating into American culture, it also addresses the universal experience of all immigrants who must find their way in a new culture.

“Daughter of Invention” focuses on Laura García (Mami), Carlos García (Papi), and Yoyo, one of the four García daughters. Yoyo is called upon to write and deliver a speech at school to honor her teachers. After struggling to figure out what to say, Yoyo is inspired by the words of Walt Whitman. Laura is beside herself with pride when she hears the speech, but Papi is horrified. In a fit of temper, Papi forbids an incredulous Yoyo from giving her speech. Yoyo and the reader soon understand that Papi’s anger is not really brought on by Yoyo’s speech, but rather by his fear that challenging authority was dangerous, as it had been in his native country.

JULIA ALVAREZ

1991





Julia Alvarez (AP Images)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City on March 27, 1950. Three months later her parents moved the family back to their native Dominican Republic, headed by the dictator Rafael Trujillo. The Alvarez family lived in the Dominican Republic until 1960, when Julia was ten years old, but in many ways she was raised as an American because her family had deep ties with the United States. Alvarez's uncles had attended Ivy League schools and her grandfather was a cultural attaché to the United Nations. She lived with her parents, maids and many aunts on property owned by her mother's family. She ate American food, attended American schools and dressed fashionably.

During the 1950s, opposition to the Trujillo dictatorship grew in the Dominican Republic; Dominican police apprehended, jailed, and tortured ever increasing numbers of people. Alvarez's father was a member of an underground movement to oust Trujillo. The police, suspecting his involvement, kept watch on their home and rumors circulated that her father would be apprehended. In 1960, an American agent helped the family leave the country.

Alvarez felt as though she was coming home when she moved into the tiny New York apartment with her family. However, she soon began to miss her large extended family and their expansive home. Despite the increased freedoms in the United States, Alvarez, like the characters in her book, had huge adjustments to make in America.

Alvarez had difficulty adjusting to school in the United States. She understood enough English to succeed in her studies but she had trouble understanding the other students. Reading books gave her an escape, a new "homeland." On Alvarez's website, <http://www.juliaalvarez.com/about>, she reflects on how her determination to learn English led her to discover her passion as a writer:

When I'm asked what made me into a writer, I point to the watershed experience of coming to this country. Not understanding the language, I had to pay close attention to each word—great training for a writer. I also discovered the welcoming world of the imagination and books. There, I sunk my new roots.

Alvarez earned a B.A. from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1971 and an M.A. in Creative Writing from Syracuse University in 1975. She went on to teach creative writing at the high school level and then at Middlebury College and at the University of Illinois. She dedicated herself to her writing but encountered difficulties because of her background. She states on her web site that in the 1970s, "Latino literature or writers were unheard of. Writing which focused on the lives of non-white, non-mainstream characters was considered of ethnic interest only, the province of sociology. But I kept writing, knowing that this was what was in me to do." By the time Alvarez published her first book, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* she was forty-one years old and had been writing for over twenty years. She reminds students—from her own personal experience—not to get discouraged if it takes time to get published.

Alvarez has published many other books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry as well as children's books. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* was named a notable book by the *New York Times Book Review*. Alvarez has won numerous other awards, including the Latina Leader Award in Literature in 2007, the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature in 2002 and the National Endowment for the Arts Grant in 1987–1988.

PLOT SUMMARY

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents takes place in the early 1960s, just after the García family has fled to New York from the Dominican Republic. The family is trying to adjust to

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- The Suitor, adapted as a film by Gigantic Pictures and KTEH (2001), features an adult Yoyo García and is based on Alvarez's short story by the same name.

their new culture. In the story, there are hints that the family escaped the Dominican Republic because their father had been involved in some sort of protest of the regime of the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Alvarez relates that Papi had lost his brothers and friends to Trujillo and that there had been "late night disappearances"—a fate Papi feared as well. However, the exact circumstances of the family's escape are never specified. From the safety of their new home in New York, the family watches as Trujillo is assassinated and a new interim government finally plans a democratic election.

Now that Trujillo is gone, Papi thinks about going back to his country and, though Laura is opposed, she never tells Papi this. Laura is relieved to be away from the oppression in the Dominican Republic where she is looked down upon because she never gave birth to a boy. Nonetheless, she defers to Papi's authority in the traditional way of the Dominican Republic.

The story centers around, Laura, Papi, and Yoyo, one of their four daughters. In the evenings, each of them spends their time differently. Laura, who can no longer rely upon her prominent Dominican family for prestige, uses her evening to invent gadgets. Papi reads the Dominican newspaper, watches news of the Vietnam War on television, and dreams about going back to his country. Yoyo, a budding writer and poet, spends her evenings writing in her room.

The first half of the story centers around Laura's fascination with American gadgets. She takes frequent excursions with her daughters to the housewares departments in department stores, using those trips as inspiration for her creative and sometimes absurd inventions. Her

daughters both humor her and make fun of her. They also lament that Laura's time and attention is taken up with drawing new inventions, rather than helping them in their struggles adjusting to life in New York. The daughters seek permission to go out by themselves. They also complain that they do not feel accepted or welcomed by other kids, who throw stones at them and call them names. Laura shoos them away to focus on her inventions.

One night Laura sees one of her inventions—a suitcase on wheels—advertised in the *New York Times*, which she reads each night before sleeping. Laura herself had conceived of a suitcase on wheels, and, like all of her inventions, it remained just a drawing on a pad. Realizing that somebody else beat her to creating and selling this invention—and made millions in the process—Laura screams, terrifying Papi because it reminds him of the past. Hearing the screaming, the daughters file into their parent's room and Laura announces that she is through with inventing because she cannot compete with the Americans.

However, Alvarez informs the reader that Laura does invent one last thing to help Yoyo when she is in the ninth grade. Yoyo has been assigned to give a speech at school honoring her teachers for a school holiday called "Teacher's Day." The speech assignment is daunting to Yoyo, who is embarrassed by her accent and worried that a speech full of praise will not endear her to her peers.

Night after night, Yoyo struggles to write the speech but fails. The weekend before the assembly she panics. Laura, who is famous in the family for her misquoted American idioms says, "You'll see, like the Americans say, *Necessity is the daughter of invention.*"

On Sunday evening, Yoyo reads some Walt Whitman poetry for inspiration and comes upon words that shock and thrill her: "I celebrate myself and sing myself. . . . He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher." Using Whitman's words as inspiration, Yoyo writes a speech that she is proud of. She feels she has finally expressed herself in English. She reads the speech to Laura who tells her how beautiful it is and urges her to read it for Papi before he falls asleep. The reader never learns what exactly Yoyo says in her speech, only that she quotes Whitman.

They find Papi in bed, reading the Dominican newspaper with the television on. Yoyo reads her speech; Papi is horrified and furious. He forbids Yoyo from giving the speech, saying that it is boastful, disrespectful, and that it shows no gratitude. Laura is shocked. She thinks, "In the old country, any whisper of a challenge to authority could bring the secret police in their black V.W.'s. But this was America. People could say what they thought." Laura immediately stands up for Yoyo. Papi gets angrier, thinking that his home is turning into a "houseful of independent American women."

Papi grabs the speech from Yoyo and tears it into shreds. As Laura scolds Papi for what he has done, a distraught Yoyo tries to pick it up and put it back together but it is impossible. Laura suddenly understands that Papi is afraid because of his experience in the Dominican Republic, and her anger disappears. Alvarez writes, "Laura's face had crumpled up like a piece of paper. On it was written a love note to her husband, an unhappy, haunted man."

Yoyo is distraught and angry and lashes out at her father, calling him "Chapita," the nickname for the Dominican dictator. A furious Papi chases Yoyo down the hall but she gets to her room and locks the door just in time. The locks, just installed because of Laura's fascination with gadgets, save Yoyo from her father's rage. Her parents retreat to their room and Yoyo hears them discussing what happened and then, finally, she hears the sound of the television again.

Later, Laura knocks at the door and together Laura and Yoyo draft a speech of "stale compliments. . . wrought by necessity and without much invention." Nonetheless, Yoyo's speech turns out to be a great success at school.

That night, Papi arrives home with a big heavy cardboard box and calls Yoyo's name. At first, still angry, she does not answer him, but her mother begs her, telling her how much Papi loves her. Finally, Yoyo comes downstairs to find Papi setting up a brand-new electric typewriter. The typewriter has many special features and is even better than Laura's, which she had coveted. Yoyo comes to think of her speech as Laura's last invention and feels like Laura passed her pen and pad to Yoyo to allow her to start inventing.

CHARACTERS

Carlos García

Carlos García, or Papi, has brought his family to the United States to avoid political persecution in his native Dominican Republic. He is haunted by the fear he felt before emigrating that the Dominican secret police would come for him and his family. Nevertheless, despite building a successful medical practice in New York City, he still reads the Dominican newspaper and dreams about returning to his native country once the dictator has been overthrown.

At a pivotal point in the story, Papi loses his temper with his daughter Yoyo when she reads a speech that questions the authority of her teachers. He is terrified that reading such a speech will put her in danger, just as questioning the government in the Dominican Republic put the entire family in danger. Papi remains entrenched in the traditional ideas about male superiority and female subservience. He is shocked when Laura stands up to him and worries that his wife and daughters are becoming "independent American women."

Laura García

Laura, or Mami, was raised in the Dominican Republic as a member of a prominent family. Like the rest of the García family, she must make a huge adjustment to the culture of the United States. Laura embraces her increased freedom in the United States, where women can speak up and be successful. She calls her native country a "savage country," and thinks of herself there as "only a wife and mother. . . a high-class house-slave." Laura is an intelligent and creative woman and sees the potential to use her intelligence to make a name for herself in America. However, her traditional background demands that women defer to men and she consistently defers to Papi's authority.

Yoyo García

Yoyo, one of four García daughters, is a budding poet and writer. She is referred to as "the Big Mouth" in the story and is the sister who is selected as the spokesperson when the girls want to do American things like go to the movies or the mall. Nevertheless, she struggles along with her sisters to assimilate into the new culture.

Yoyo seems to find her "American" voice when she writes a speech to be delivered at

school inspired by Walt Whitman's ideas of autonomy and independence. Her mother, who also relishes the new autonomy granted her in America, is thrilled by her speech. However, her father, who carries fears with him born in the repressive regime in the Dominican Republic, becomes infuriated and destroys it. Yoyo angrily calls Papi by Trujillo's nickname—essentially referring to him as an authoritarian dictator. She later regrets this and finds the compassion to forgive her father. Nevertheless, her father's gift of a typewriter and Yoyo's sense that her mother has passed the torch on to her leaves the reader certain that Yoyo will continue to write about autonomy, freedom, and independence.

Mami

See Laura García

Papi

See Carlos García

Trujillo

Although he does not appear in this story, Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, is mentioned and his presence is felt throughout. Trujillo was assassinated on May 30, 1961. Under Trujillo, Dominican citizens were not allowed to criticize their government; those who did were threatened with disappearances and torture. The story alludes to “blood in the streets” and disappearances in the middle of the night under Trujillo. The family, especially Papi, continues to fear that questioning authority will have horrible consequences.

THEMES

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process of adapting to new cultural norms. In “Daughter of Invention,” Alvarez uses her characters to show how that process can be exciting, confusing, and sometimes painful. Mami, Papi, and Yoyo each adjust differently to the new culture they encounter in the United States. Yoyo and Mami embrace American ways while Papi, dreaming of returning to his homeland, in many ways resists. For example, Mami speaks to her daughters in English, while Papi tries to insist that she speak in Spanish, “so they wouldn't forget their native tongue.”

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Read “Song of Myself,” the Walt Whitman poem that inspired Yoyo's speech. Considering the repressive and authoritarian government in the Dominican Republic, write an essay reflecting on why Whitman's poem was so appealing to Yoyo.
- Research the women's liberation movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Based on Laura's background, write an essay about the challenges Laura will face if she continues to live in the United States during the women's movement. What predictions can you make about how Laura will meet these challenges? Support your predictions with evidence of Laura's personality and background.
- Research the history of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo's rule. Create a presentation to share with the class that includes a time line of significant events under Trujillo's rule; the economic situation of the country during the dictatorship; and a discussion of individual rights under Trujillo's regime.
- Research the history of immigration in the United States in the twentieth century. Write a paper concerning how the immigrant experience differed for women, men, and children. Are the experiences of Yoyo, Mami, and Papi representative of these differences? Use examples from “Daughter of Invention” to illustrate your points.
- Watch the film “The Suitor” based on Alvarez's short story by the same name. This story concerns Yoyo's adult. Compare and contrast the Yoyo in “Daughter of Invention” and in “The Suitor.” How is Yoyo different as she gets older? How is she the same? Explain.

For immigrants, learning a new language is only a very small part of acculturation. Greetings, food, traditional holidays, and expressions

that are taken for granted by natives can be confusing and disorienting to an immigrant. “Teacher’s Day,” something that Yoyo’s school apparently celebrates every year, has thrown her and her parents into confusion. Yoyo is selected to give a speech, and the García family wonders: What is appropriate to say? What will honor the teachers and not alienate the students? Will she be able to speak properly? Will her accent be too strong?

After much agonizing work, Yoyo finally succeeds in writing a speech that “finally sounded like herself in English!” She has not only been successful in learning the language, but she has also, readers are left to presume, challenged the authority of the teachers in a way that would have been unthinkable in the Dominican Republic. In this sense, Yoyo has become Americanized. Although her father rips up her speech, the ending of “Daughter of Invention” makes clear that she will continue to write in this almost defiant American voice.

Like Yoyo, Laura—Mami—embraces American culture. She is fascinated with American gadgets and conveniences which are absent in the Dominican Republic. She wants to be a leader—an inventor who conceives of these American products. Her attempts to use American expressions—even though she confuses them—is further evidence of her eagerness and enthusiasm to become fully assimilated. She sees her adopted country as one full opportunity for herself and her daughters, in contrast to the repressive Dominican Republic, where she not only lived under a violent, oppressive government, but also lived within the confines of traditional gender expectations that kept her “only a wife and mother.” When Laura stands up to Papi, defending Yoyo’s bold speech, it seems to indicate that Laura is headed toward becoming an independent American woman.

Papi is having the most difficulty acculturating to American society. He is entrenched in the ideas of his native country and cannot seem to grasp that things are different in the United States. He insists that the women in his family be subservient. He reads the Dominican newspapers and not the *New York Times*, as Laura does. Once the dictatorship falls, he dreams of going back to the Dominican Republic. In the end, Papi’s gift to Yoyo of a typewriter that has many special features—an American gadget—is

a hint that maybe Papi, too, will begin to adjust to the new culture.

Authority and Individual Freedoms

In “Daughter of Invention,” the García family has fled their native Dominican Republic in order to escape persecution for even covertly challenging the government. Once in the United States, however, different members of the family develop different views on individual freedoms. Yoyo and Laura, the women in “Daughter of Invention,” soon embrace the new freedoms that American culture grants them to become more than, as Laura says, “only a wife and mother.” Yoyo, for example, begs to be allowed to freely travel into the city or to the mall, as American teenagers do. Laura dreams of making a fortune as an inventor of useful American gadgets. “Better an independent nobody than a highclass houseslave,” thinks Laura.

Papi, on the other hand, has brought his family to New York City to escape the authoritarian, repressive dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. However, he had no intention of doing away with traditional ideas of authority that kept women subservient to men. He also found it impossible to shake off the fear that questioning authority would result in disappearances or worse.

These conflicts come to a head when Yoyo writes her speech for “Teachers’ Day.” Yoyo feels inspired by Walt Whitman’s words praising the common man and woman and the power of the individual: “I celebrate myself and sing myself. . . . He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” Yoyo incorporates Whitman’s words into her speech, a celebration and an awakening of her own individual power. Laura, too, believes the speech is beautiful. However, Papi is outraged, calling the speech “insubordinate. . . . improper. . . . disrespecting.” When Yoyo and Laura protest, Papi fears that they were becoming “independent American women.” Ironically, Papi, who himself suffered under the repressive government of Trujillo, tears up the speech and chases Yoyo across the house when she calls him by Trujillo’s nickname. She has identified the crux of the problem: Papi still believes in authority figures who ruled absolutely, and did not yet embrace the idea that all individuals should have power and freedom.



Doodling (Image copyright Mihai Simonia, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

STYLE

Autobiographical Fiction

Autobiographical fiction is a story based on the life of the author. While events in the story closely follow events in the life of the author, the author is free to embellish or create events to further the themes in the story. Alvarez based the stories in *How the Alvarez Sisters Lost Their Accents* on her own experience emigrating from the Dominican Republic to New York City in 1960. The work as a whole tells the story of the four Garcia sisters, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia. Yolanda, or Yoyo, is Alvarez herself. In “Daughter of Invention,” Alvarez tells her own story of learning to write in English, as an American, from her own point of view.

However, because Alvarez has fictionalized her account, she is free to emphasize some aspects of the story while deemphasizing others. For example, she is able to draw parallels between the girls’ resistance to parental authority and the Dominicans’ resistance to the dictatorship. This freedom allows her to convey her

central point: that Yoyo must find her own way in America, while continuing to be responsible for the heritage of her parents.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although “Daughter of Invention” is a fictional story, it involves real people and political events. It takes place in 1961, shortly after Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican dictator, was assassinated. The García family has fled the dictator’s violent regime to settle in New York City, where they watched the violence in their country on television. In New York, family members discover that they have individual rights and freedoms that were severely lacking under Trujillo.

The Dominican Republic Under Trujillo

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina was elected president of the Dominican Republic in 1930. Although there were breaks in his official presidency, in reality Trujillo controlled the country as a dictator for a continuous thirty-one

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1960:** The Dominican Republic has been ruled by a dictator for thirty years.
Today: The Dominican Republic has a democratically elected president. Elections in the Dominican Republic are considered free and fair.
- **1960:** Dominican citizens like the García family are fearful that challenging governmental authority will result in violence or death.
Today: The law in the Dominican Republic protects human rights. A 2007 study found that the government had not committed any

politically motivated killings in recent history but that security forces had used excessive force and committed many unlawful killings between 2005 and 2007.

- **1960s:** Dominican women are subservient to men.

Today: Under Dominican law women have the same status as men. However, in practice, women are discriminated against with regard to career opportunities, economic status, social status and in obtaining leadership positions.

years, from 1930 until his death in 1961. In the periods when Trujillo was not officially president, the office belonged to his brother, Héctor Bienvenido Trujillo Molina, who was president from 1952 to 1960, and Joaquín Balaguer Ricardo, who served from 1960 to 1961. These men served only as figureheads to preside over ceremonial affairs while Trujillo ruled behind the scenes.

During Trujillo's thirty-one years in power, the Dominican Republic experienced economic stability and growth. Trujillo and his family members each controlled one sector of the economy, forcing private owners to sell out to them and amassing vast private fortunes, while the majority of the country remained in poverty. Nevertheless, the nation paid down its foreign debt and attracted foreign investment. The public education system grew, illiteracy declined, and new roads, airports and public buildings were constructed.

Despite this, the citizens of the Dominican Republic lacked fundamental rights. Trujillo remained at the head of the only legal political party, as well as commander in chief of the armed forces. The press was tightly controlled. A secret police force that reported directly

to Trujillo terrorized the population; Trujillo worried constantly about conspiracies against his government and people Trujillo perceived to be his enemies were “disappeared,” tortured, and killed. It was precisely for this reason that the Alvarez family—and the fictional García family—emigrated to New York.

Trujillo's ruthless foreign policy led to his downfall. In 1937, under Trujillo's orders, the Dominican Army slaughtered approximately twenty thousand Haitian men, women and children in retaliation for the Haitian government's execution of Trujillo's secret agents in Haiti. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt demanded indemnity be made to Haiti. Then, in 1960, Trujillo ordered the assassination of Venezuelan president Romulo Betancourt. Betancourt had spoken out against Trujillo's policies and some Venezuelan influence was uncovered in a plot to overthrow Trujillo. The assassination attempt was unsuccessful; Betancourt was injured but not killed. This incident caused the Organization of American States to sever diplomatic relations with the Dominican Republic and to impose economic sanctions on the country. Trujillo was assassinated on May 30, 1961; some journalists reported that the CIA had been involved.



President Rafeal Trujillo of the Dominican Republic makes a speech warning his people against communism. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection | Corbis)

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, the novel in which “Daughter of Invention” appears, received many positive reviews and awards. In 1991, it won the Pen Oakland/Josephine Miles Award for books that present a multicultural viewpoint. It was also chosen as a Notable book by the *New York Times Book Review* and by the American Library Association.

Alvarez is considered one of the best Latino writers in the United States, and an important voice for Latino immigrants. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* was selected as one of four texts for the national reading project, “A Latino National Conversation.” Later in her career, Alvarez won the Latina Leader Award from the Hispanic Caucus Institute in Washington, D.C., in 2007.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents has inspired a sometimes heated conversation about the immigrant experience of acculturation into American society as well as the burden that immigrants carry with them when they come from a

repressive country. Ricardo Castells, in his article, “The Silence of Exile in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,” addresses critic Alice Hoffman’s favorable view of the García girls’ acculturation into American society. Castells argues that rather than “forging an assimilated dual identity,” the girls experienced “a form of alienation that is often symbolized by either silence or by an absolute failure to communicate with other characters.” Lucia M. Suarez, in the article “Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Repression,” states that the book speaks to “more than the dissonances experienced by children who migrate and are bicultural” but also to “those who are both challenged by bicultural and bilingual experiences and haunted by a silenced, and escaped, past of state repression.”

CRITICISM

Esther Mizrachi Moritz

Esther Mizrachi Moritz, JD, writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and educational materials. Her personal essays have been published in Lilith Magazine. In this essay, Moritz explores Alvarez’s portrayal of Laura as she finds balance between her traditional upbringing and the freedom she finds in America.

In Julia Alvarez’s story, “Daughter of Invention” Laura García, the mother in the García family, is strong, creative, compassionate, intuitive and intelligent. When the reader meets Laura, she is straddling two worlds. In the Dominican Republic, women had strictly defined roles and many limitations; in Laura’s own words, in her homeland, she could be “only a wife and mother.” In the United States, Laura tests some of her newfound freedoms, questioning some of her traditional ideas and roles but still embracing them and accepting the limitations they impose upon her. In Laura, Alvarez has created a complex character—a powerful woman who uses intuition and compassion to determine when to assert herself and stand up for her beliefs and when to embrace the traditions that are so important in her native culture.

In New York City, Laura becomes a fledgling inventor, obsessed with the creative American gadgets which she sees as “the true treasures women were after.” She is drawn to the gadgets in the housewares department of department stores, an area that is traditionally a woman’s

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- “Daughter of Invention” is only one of fifteen interrelated stories in the 1992 book, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. All the stories center around the García family, especially Alvarez’s alter-ego Yoyo, and their adjustment to life in the United States.
- *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, published in 2004, is a collection of seventy-eight poems by Julia Alvarez in which she looks back to her youth and forward to the unknown in an effort to understand the woman she is in the present.
- *Angela’s Ashes*, the Pulitzer-prize winning memoir by author Frank McCourt, was published in 1996. It tells of an Irish immigrant family’s struggles to escape poverty and to readjust to Irish culture when they return to their homeland.
- *The Short Sweet Dream of Eduardo Gutierrez*, published in 2002, is the biography of a young illegal Mexican immigrant, Eduardo Gutierrez. Gutierrez died at a construction site in Brooklyn. Author Jimmy Breslin delves into the indifference and corruption of politicians who turn a blind eye to the use and abuse of low-paid, illegal labor.
- *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by Amy Tan is a bestselling novel about the relationships between Chinese immigrant mothers living in San Francisco and their Chinese-American daughters. It was adapted for film in 1993.
- Edwidge Danticat’s young adult novel *Behind the Mountains* (2002) is written as the journal of Celiane, a young Haitian girl who leaves her homeland to join her father, who had moved to New York City five years earlier. The first-person narration brings to life the modern immigrant experience.

domain, but Laura is not the typical traditional housewife. Instead, confident that she is a smart and creative person who is worthy of recognition,



USING INTUITION AND COMPASSION TO GUIDE HER, LAURA SEEMS TO MANAGE THE IMPOSSIBLE BY STRADDLING TWO CONFLICTING CULTURES. SHE IS ALTERNATELY INDEPENDENT AND SUBSERVIENT, CHOOSING THE POSTURE THAT WILL BEST FIT EACH SITUATION.”

she dreams of inventing new gadgets and of making a name for herself in the United States. She spends hours researching, asking “intelligent questions” of the salespeople and then drawing her ideas on paper and sharing them with her daughters. But Laura is also very much a traditional, dutiful mother and wife. She never works on her inventions until “she had settled her house down at night.” Even though her daughters resent the time Laura spends dreaming up inventions, they still believe she is “a good enough Mami, fussing and scolding and giving advice,” although she miserably fails as an *American* mom, being a “terrible girlfriend parent.”

Laura seems to take her failures as a rebuke, using them as an excuse to revert to her mother-and-wife role. Although some of Laura’s inventions seem impractical, she draws a suitcase on wheels, an invention that proves that she has a keen and creative mind and is truly capable of inventing something worthwhile. Laura must recognize her own potential when this invention appears in the newspaper, albeit made by somebody else. But Laura stops inventing at that point, her dreams of success in tatters. She asks herself, “What use was it trying to compete with the Americans: they would always have the head start. It was their country, after all.” Instead, she reverts to traditional women’s work and begins doing her husband’s office-cleaning and bookkeeping.

Although she gives up her dreams for herself, Laura does not give up her dreams for her daughters. Yoyo, having written an impassioned speech that the reader can only guess heralds independence and freedom, delights her mother but makes her father deeply angry. Carlos tears up the speech, and Laura is furious. For a few moments she becomes a true American woman,

standing up to her husband and speaking her mind. She stands to her full height, tiny though she is, and lunges at Papi, yelling at him, asking if he has gone crazy. Carlos himself recognizes Laura's independence: "It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her. Soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women."

When Carlos furiously responds, calling the speech "an insult to her teachers," Laura's compassion takes over. She is able to see the whole picture, even with her anger at Papi. Laura is not simply a woman who is angry at her husband and who is standing up for her daughter; she is also a woman who has deep compassion and understanding for the man she loves. And she recognizes that man as a hurt and traumatized human being. Alvarez conveys these reasons for Laura's change of heart in one line, showing her skill as a writer and her mastery at creating complex characters: "Laura's face had crumpled up like a piece of paper. On it was written a love note to her husband, an unhappy, haunted man."

Laura's compassion for her husband shifts her back to her traditional subservient role. Intuitively, Laura knows that she must become a dutiful wife again to help her husband cope with the trauma in his past. She kindly tells him that he no longer lives in the Dominican Republic, "a savage country." She tells him, "This is America, Papi, America!" After Carlos goes to sleep, she gets out of bed to help Yoyo write a speech that will both serve its purpose and not hurt her father. The speech the two create is not the same one inspired by Whitman; instead, it is "two brief pages of stale compliments and the polite commonplaces on teachers, a speech wrought by necessity and without much invention." Laura, the dutiful wife, true to her tradition, will not take action against her husband's word.

Laura demonstrates the same deference to Papi when he talks about moving back to the Dominican Republic. She never voices her opinion—that she does not want to give up her American freedoms to return to the Dominican Republic where she will be judged a failure as a wife and mother because she bore no sons. Laura the American woman is proud of having daughters and understands the cruelty and the unfairness in her country's preference for male children. But Laura the Dominican woman cannot say

this to her husband. This leaves the reader wondering what would happen if Papi began planning to move back. Laura, whose growth and independence is tempered by her strong traditional background, may not have the strength to openly oppose Papi to protect herself. Would she ultimately defer to him as she does with the speech? The reader cannot say for certain.

Using intuition and compassion to guide her, Laura seems to manage the impossible by straddling two conflicting cultures. She is alternately independent and subservient, choosing the posture that will best fit each situation. Laura, the American woman, can conceive of successful new inventions, read the *New York Times*, and stand up to her husband. Laura, the traditional Dominican woman, settles her household before turning to her own inventions, cleans her husband's office, and remains silent even when she disagrees and complies with Papi's wishes.

Although some might view Laura's concessions as failure, Alvarez leaves the reader with the feeling that instead, she has passed on something essential to her daughter. Yoyo, Alvarez says, does not think of the rolling suitcase as her mother's last invention, but instead the speech full of platitudes that the two concoct in the night. However, "it was as if, after that, her mother had passed on to Yoyo her pencil and pad and said, 'Okay, Cuquita, here's the buck. You give it a shot.'" It seems certain that Laura has prepared Yoyo to fulfill her mother's dream of independence in America.

Source: Esther Mizrahi Moritz, Critical Essay on "Daughter of Invention," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Jennifer Bess

In this excerpt, Bess discusses how the silences among the Garcia family in How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents reflect their cultural exile.

In silence and in absence, Alvarez offers up a revolution of truth-telling. In "I Came to Help," she confesses that "the way we really change things is often through very simple action, small and quiet enough not to draw too much attention." At once painfully diminutive and shockingly potent, the omissions serve to reify the collective burden born by all who have been silenced: absence does indeed speak for itself—



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OF THAT EXILE."

though not as quietly as Alvarez suggests. In fact, the silences guarantee that Alvarez's readers will be pained by three particularly potent omissions of either subject matter or truth, thus obligating their understanding of her characters' losses.

Namely, the absence of Laura's inventions, the absence of Yolanda's Teacher Day address, and Yolanda's memory of a childhood mishap indicate the hardships of living in the hyphen and the costs of the prohibitions and violations the family suffers. The first two acts of silencing, in particular, reveal what Alvarez means in her autobiographical essays when she describes her golden handcuffs as symbolizing "those positions of privilege that often trap us women into denying our bodies, our desires, our selves." While the private stories of the four girls and their intimates illustrate this denial, the omissions and the violations their stories contain also act inclusively or centrifugally to embrace colonial history, or more precisely, what Glissant has called "nonhistory," the erasure of history in the traditional sense. Since all three losses mentioned above are also linked just as clearly to the family's privilege as they are to its pain, the omissions suggest the intricacies of a history in which the perpetrators of violation suffer an intense sense of exile and homelessness and thus share a sense of violation with those whom their ancestors have made to suffer. Centripetal forces reveal the private emotional costs of both privilege and violation, but they also coexist with centrifugal forces revealing historical and public costs. The novel foregrounds many losses through its omissions: Carla's inability to express herself clearly to the policeman after being sexually accosted, Yolanda's failure to communicate with her husband, Sandi's failure as a young artist. However, what Laura's inventions,

Yolanda's speech and the childhood memory of a particularly salient omission of truth share is their affiliation with the family's privilege and with the on-going theme of violation.

Beginning with Laura, she, more than her husband, embraces the opportunities America offers and finds ways of reveling in the mythic land of opportunity. Unlike Carlos, who is haunted by nightmares from his past as a revolutionary, Laura, as the wife of a man compelled by tradition to maintain his family's social standing without her economic help, is free to take in "the wonders of this new country." Though she fears her daughters' becoming too American, she sits up at night inventing items like those she sees in department stores, items to make a housewife's life more comfortable and leisurely. In other words, her inventions are her means of understanding her new world. They signal, like her "mishmash of mixed-up idioms and sayings that showed she was 'green behind the ears,' as she called it," her attempt to integrate herself, to define herself in the new country. Like many believers in the American Dream, she imagines herself an entrepreneurial millionaire only to be disappointed when she sees her latest invention, a suitcase on wheels, already on sale in a newspaper. At that point, she gives up: "What use was it trying to compete with the Americans: they would always have the head start. It was their country, after all." While the family's privilege has brought them safely into America, they remain in political and emotional exile, and Laura's inventions rank among the casualties of that exile. In fact, Laura's efforts and her failure to invent "gadgets to make life easier for the American moms" only expose what it is to be exiled: "To be exiled is to be from here and from elsewhere, to be at the same time inside and outside, settled in the insecurity of a painful and uneasy situation" (Lahens 1992, 736). Her attempts to bring ease to American moms only highlight her own dis-ease, her own insecurity despite the economic privilege she enjoyed in her homeland.

While Laura begins her entrepreneurial adventure with suitable gusto, self-assured that "she would prove to these Americans what a smart woman could do with a pencil and pad," the suitcase advertisement in the *New York Times* does more than thwart her ambition. When she sees it, she startles her husband from a troubled sleep that exposes the larger context

of her failure: he wakes asking, “¿Qué pasa?” What is wrong? There was terror in his voice, the same fear she’d heard in the Dominican Republic before they left . . . In dreams, he went back to those awful days and long nights, and his wife’s screams confirmed his secret fear: they had not gotten away after all; the SIM [Trujillo’s secret police] had come for them at last.” No longer is Laura a potent member of the de la Torre family; instead, she, like the victims her own ancestors, is now a powerless victim of forces she cannot control. If her story, like so many of the others alludes to the trauma of exile, then it also alludes to a more distant past, a past in which her ancestors profited (Oliver 1993, 211). Like Miranda’s, Laura’s privilege is in some sense at the root of the cost she presently incurs: she too is subject to exile because of the actions of the men in her life and in her nation’s past, and she too identifies with the suffering of the powerless now that she ranks among them.

Having learned from her own powerlessness, Laura finds the strength to “take up her pencil and pad one last time” when she encounters one with even less power to overcome her fate. For her daughter, she stands up to the complex legacies and realities of tyranny that have thwarted them both, simultaneously acknowledging her privilege and using it to resist oppression openly. When Yolanda is asked to deliver a speech honoring her teachers, she is at first terrified: “She still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public” for she bears both the weight of traditional prohibitions against vociferous women and the fear of her “classmates’ ridicule.” Inspired by Walt Whitman’s poetry, however, she finds herself in language and “[takes] root in it,” in some sense turning her back on the radical “devotions” that have indebted her to her father and homeland. Only in English, she feels, can one declare, “*I celebrate myself,*” and just as boldly as Whitman, she begins writing “recklessly” and passionately until “she finally sounded like herself in English” (emphasis in original). In America, she concludes, “people could say what they thought.” Yet her discovery of her voice, her birth as a writer, does not go unchallenged by her father. When she reads him the speech, he is horrified by her Americanization. And when Laura leaps to her defense, he thinks to himself: “It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her.” Becoming “vengeful” and “mad, . . . he tore the speech into shreds,” revealing what

he feels is his rightful authority in the family structure.

Buoyed by her mother’s support, Yolanda reacts defiantly to her father, and “in a low, ugly whisper” that parallels his rage, “pronounced Trujillo’s hated nickname: ‘Chapita! You’re just another Chapita!’.” After seeming narrowly to escape a beating, Yolanda retreats to her room with her mother, and they concoct a second speech, one full of “stale compliments” and “polite commonplaces,” for which she is praised by her teachers. With pieces of it coming from one of her father’s speeches rather than from Walt Whitman, the “barbaric yawp” has been transformed into palaver. So empty are her words that they are omitted from the text. In fact, the reader never knows the content of either the replacement or the original speech, so that their absence is as present as the absence of Laura’s inventions. The omission of Yolanda’s speeches, perhaps even more glaring than the loss of Laura’s inventions because it is a verbal one, signifies an utter violation of Yolanda’s voice, of her creativity and of her identity; the omission is the antithesis of Fanon’s call for self-invention. Like Laura’s, Yolanda’s optimism is thwarted, her self-expression denied. In the space of absent speech, in the hyphen between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, Yolanda has lost her voice, so that the genesis of a writer’s life is simultaneously exposed and concealed in the spaces between the words, between her own wishes and her father’s traditions and between those traditions and the blood of the Conquistadores.

Source: Jennifer Bess, “Imploding the Miranda Complex in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*,” in *College Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Winter 2007, pp. 78–105.

Publishers Weekly

In this excerpt of a Publishers Weekly profile on author Julia Alvarez, Alvarez discusses her career.

Alvarez’s journey to success took time. Before she published *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* at 41, she spent 25 years publishing fiction in small journals and magazines, and more than a decade as a “migrant writer” traveling from adjunct position to adjunct position.

“There were times when I thought, how can I write?” she recalls over coffee in her home. “Summers were always spent searching for the next job, and moving myself there and starting a new job. And a year after being the ‘Visiting This,’ I had to move on.”

Not until Middlebury hired her for a tenure track post in 1988, did she escape the wayfaring life. The college gave her professional incentive as well: Alvarez's chairman told her that if she didn't publish a book, she wouldn't earn tenure. And thus *García Girls* was born.

Now that she's achieved success, Alvarez has mixed feelings about its side effects. She raves about her editor Shannon Ravenel and about Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, which has published all of her adult fiction. (Her children's books are with Knopf's Young Readers.) But in *Saving the World*, one of the novel's two heroines, a novelist named Alma Rodríguez, expresses a disenchantment with the "book biz world" that mirrors Alvarez's own. "[T]he marketing strategies; the glamour shots, the prepub creation of buzz... the clubbiness of the blurbing... the panels in which one of every flavor minority is asked to respond to some questionable theme" all make Alma depressed.

Though Alvarez herself seems cheerful enough, she didn't spend all those years hunched over her writing to submit to the machinations of celebrity. What she wanted, she says, was to find readers, to be part of the literary conversation and to be able to support herself doing the work that she loves. *García Girls* forced her to recognize that, in today's book world, celebrity is what makes all those things possible.

Saving the World is Alvarez's third historical novel, and it reflects her ongoing fascination with women who quietly work to improve the world. Set alternately in the 19th and 20th centuries, the novel sprang from a footnote Alvarez spotted while researching *In the Name of Salomé*: because Santo Domingo was occupied by the French, it was skipped by Spain's 1804 smallpox expedition, which was carrying a new vaccine around the world. A little more research uncovered that the expedition included one woman, the rectress of an orphanage in La Coruña, Spain, whose job was to care for the orphans who served as live carriers for the vaccine.

"It always amazes me when I find in history these little anonymous people that were doing amazing things and on the backs of whom our civilization rode forward," Alvarez says. Since historical records weren't consistent about the rectress's last name, Alvarez christened her Isabel Sendales y Gómez. *Saving the World* juxtaposes Isabel's activism against Alma's depression, and the small pox plagues against AIDS,

but the novel also reveals how activism can happen to people unexpectedly, when they're confronted with a situation that electrifies their morals.

That's what happened to Alvarez and Eichner when they traveled to the Dominican Republic in 1996. They went so Alvarez, who was born in New York City but lived in the D.R. until she was 10, could write a short story for the Nature Conservancy, which was assembling an anthology of pieces written at their sites. While they were there, however, they were aghast at the poverty of the region's coffee farmers.

"In the Dominican Republic, we've seen people paid as little as 33 cents a pound of coffee," Alvarez says. "They have to sell their plots because they can't make a living out of them. They sell them to these big agribusiness concerns which are just acres and acres of whatever is the first-world commodity that is needed, and the farmers go off to the urban centers where they can't get jobs, or they try to get illegally into the United States. It just starts a whole spiral."

Eichner, who grew up in Nebraska, found the situation especially upsetting—it reminded him of what had happened to the family farms of his childhood. So when a group of farmers determined to hold onto their land asked Alvarez and Eichner to buy some nearby plots and join their group, the couple obliged.

The land buy spurred the creation of Alvarez and Eichner's organic, fair-trade coffee company, Café Alta Gracia, which pays farmers a living wage for their beans. The company, in turn, spurred the creation of an on-site school, Fundación Alta Gracia, to fight illiteracy in the region.

"One thing leads to another basically because you feel so helpless and not to do something feels unconscionable," Alvarez says. "It's the knock on your door in the middle of the night. I didn't go looking for it."

But the values that led Alvarez to shoulder such an enormous and unprofitable project were in place long before she and Eichner made their trip. Hard work, community service and sacrifice are refrains of her biography, ideals modeled for her early on by her father, who had to remake his life at 45 after fleeing the Trujillo dictatorship in 1960. A surgeon in the D.R., Alvarez's father set up a community clinic for Spanish-speakers in Brooklyn.

“Papi would get up at four in the morning to be at his *oficina* at six so that the people who were going to *la factoría* and had to be there at seven-thirty could see *el doctor* when they were sick,” Alvarez recalls. “He would go do house calls when he was done. He’d get home about eight-thirty, nine at night.”

In turn, Alvarez worked hard to make her father proud, earning scholarships to a boarding school when she was 14 and to Middlebury College, where she graduated Phi Beta Kapa. These days she still likes to think of herself as a “worker” whose job is to tell stories. And she’s happy to be far away from New York. “One of my neighbors is a sheep farmer. Another neighbor, the biggest compliment he gave me is: I’ve seen your books in the bookstore,” Alvarez laughs. When her book tour is over, she’ll be glad to return to Weybridge, where people see a writer’s work as, well, just work.

Source: “The Reluctant Celebrity,” in *Publishers Weekly*, March 27, 2006, pp. 49–50.

Lucia M. Suarez

In this excerpt, Suarez, in the context of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, discusses how representation of national identity is affected by interpretation of memory and history.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents narrates the interwoven memories of four sisters who left their native Dominican Republic in 1960 when their father’s safety was being threatened under the Trujillo dictatorship. It is a comical remembering of the girls’ process of integration, discovery, and loss. While many immigrants abandon an accent, even a language, in order to assimilate into a new culture, the accent here is performed to give comic relief to the narrative of immigration and integration, the pain of loss and the struggle to recuperate what was lost. Yolanda, the main character of the story, has assimilated so well that she no longer remembers her Spanish language. More emphatically, at a certain point, she can only recite the “great writers” of English literature. In a story about leaving her monolingual husband, she recounts how she could not figure out what to write or how to write his goodbye letter. Even her name, changed from Yolanda to Yoyo to Joe, seems to have transitioned from the interpellator that connected her to her Dominican roots to a nickname that erased both her gender and ethnic background. Language, here, is used



YOLANDA CANNOT PASS FROM ONE

CULTURE TO THE OTHER SEAMLESSLY, EVEN IF BOTH BELONG TO HER, BECAUSE HER ACCESS TO LANGUAGE IS LIMITED.”

in an exaggerated manner to signal the effects of the loss of identity. However, even though the García girls lose their Spanish accents, they cannot lose their Dominican heritage. It is that contradiction that forces Yolanda, the narrator in most of the stories, at first to lose herself to English in a dramatic identity crisis that later brings her right back to Spanish. She tells the husband she will leave: “Yo rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish.” But he cannot hear the cadence of the words or understand her rhyme. The humor of the vignette “Yolanda” masks the sadness and the confusion created by the character’s deep-rooted identity crisis. The story performs the attempt to recuperate an identity—Hispanic, Dominican, female—that is being contested by the very process of assimilation that Yo (and undoubtedly many Latinas/os) has worked so hard to achieve. In general, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* incites us to think about what is lost and question what is gained. In particular, it posits language (accents) at the fore of the negotiation between assimilation and contestation, memory and self-invention, exposing the need to embrace the two languages as part of a constructive whole for Latina/o communities.

Literary critic and Latina/o Studies scholar Frances Aparicio has worked extensively on the role of Spanish language loss and retention. She has suggested that Spanish is viewed as a lesser language for Latinas/os and as a language of advantage for English speakers. That is, if a family is from a Spanish-speaking culture and speaks only Spanish, the children are often encouraged to learn English, at the price of forgetting their Spanish in order to assimilate and have better possibilities of life in the United States. Aparicio notes that:

Spanish has been associated with poverty and marginalization, domesticated as a language fit only for family life, undermined as a public

language and as an intellectual tool, and defined as an obstacle to academic success. (2000, 250)

Conversely, Aparicio notes, elite American families will encourage their children to learn Spanish so that they may have access to more jobs where two languages are needed (1998, 9, 10). So Spanish is considered to be limiting for Latin American immigrant and Latina/o families—but expansive for the elite who will learn Spanish for economic advancement, maintaining a postcolonial inequality in place. I would like to contemplate the meaning of this construction and propose that Alvarez—and in her first novel, *Yolanda*—caught between her own assimilation and contestation, relies on humor to expose her specific struggles with wanting to be “American” and need to debunk the primacy of English in Latina/o lives. In effect, even if she (and/or Yo) has lost an accent, her use of syntax in English sometimes reminds us of English with Spanish grammar. In particular, the title of the novel signals the impossibility of complete assimilation, setting up the literary stage for the failure of losing an accent. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* tells us from the beginning that even if an accent (presumably a Spanish accent in English) is lost, the name, García, which has an orthographical accent, cannot be erased. Even if the girls become American, they cannot escape the Spanish name that identifies them.

The accent (in the story) and the syntax (in the author’s writing) are further accented by the stories of language loss. For example, in “Antojos” (Cravings), the first story, the trauma that the protagonist experiences because she has forgotten her “native” Spanish points to an exaggerated renunciation of her Hispanic heritage. I could almost visualize “Antojos” performed on a stage, forcing us to confront the character’s fears of the Dominican countryside, in contrast to the urban, and excessively American, identity she has forged in the United States. The story focuses on a return trip to the island after a five-year absence. Yolanda, the grown woman, has severed her physical ties to the country of her origin to the point that her cousins appear as “flashes of color in turquoise jump suits and tight jersey dresses.” These colors and styles of attire strike Yolanda as extreme. Yolanda hardly speaks Spanish; metaphorically, she has severed the cord with her mother’s land forever by not being able to communicate with it. But

Yolanda tries to remember her Spanish words; after all, she can understand most everything. “In halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, ‘¡En español!’ The more she practices, the sooner she’ll be back into her native tongue, the aunt insists. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she’ll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English or, like her mother, mixing up some common phrase.” Yolanda, the little girl, who worked for many years to lose an accent that in the United States classified her as “Other,” immigrant, Hispanic, minority, had lost the language that had nurtured her with love and tenderness in the cradle and during her most intimate childhood memories. The way her aunts insist that she speak Spanish and the way that she has abandoned its memory could imply that English is a traitorous language and that Spanish is a nurturing language. But that is actually not the case. What the story underscores is the hardship created by family (the aunts) and national (the new homeland, the United States) pressures with which bi-cultural people must deal.

The full-grown woman’s link to her family history was actually upheld only through her memory and/or desire to pick a *guayaba* (guava) from one of the trees in her grandmother’s yard. “Antojos” is also about Yolanda’s antojo for a hand-picked guayaba, a vestigial signifier of her link to her Hispanic heritage. To prove that her loss of language is not artificial, superficial, or temporary, the story takes us on a car ride with Yolanda toward the guava trees. At a point of artful, narrative suspense, Yolanda has a flat tire and finds herself alone in the country. Two men with machetes, returning from a hard day of labor in the field, stop and ask her if she needs help. Yolanda stiffens with fear and cannot respond or think in her parents’ Spanish. After a short while, these humble men notice the flat tire and change it for her. Yolanda still stands in fear. This fear is symbolic. While she thinks about her grandmother’s warnings against theft, rape, and violence, she is standing in the fear of her own reality, fear of losses, of not understanding, of not being able to communicate, of being foreign in the land that was supposed to be hers. She has grown up in the United States and received an education, and now she stands in fear in a plentiful country of tropical trees, ripe *guayabas*, and two tired men who have stopped to help her in

the tradition of the old world. Yolanda cannot pass from one culture to the other seamlessly, even if both belong to her, because her access to language is limited. Her fear may be warranted because bad things can happen anywhere, and she is not in an area she knows. But perhaps her fear is rooted in a history that she does not mention in the story: the fear of repeated violence and violations experienced in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo dictatorship.

I propose that *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* can be interpreted as a larger parable that traces an unacknowledged and (in Dominican memory) under-represented wound. Certainly, that wound could be located in the loss of language and the losses necessitated by assimilation. But, in the case of Yo, I speculate that the wound is deeper and less identifiable. It is the wound caused by the inherited legacy of the indecipherable horrors of the thirty-one-year Trujillo dictatorship that imposed loss of both memory and geography on many Dominican families.

One of the most horrible crimes committed during his years in power is the massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians (including Haitian-Dominicans and poor, black Dominicans who were mistaken as Haitians) in the border territories of the Dominican Republic in 1937. Supposedly, *el generalissimo* had his army kill undocumented Haitian workers with machetes so that he could later claim that it had been a peasant uprising. Trujillo plotted to wash his hands of responsibility for an order he had executed. Even though it was later discovered that, indeed, it had been a state-dictated massacre, the victims' families were never given any kind of justice. No one knew exactly what happened, or even the exact number of people who perished under this violence. Bernardo Vega's historical compilation *Trujillo y Haiti* (1988) informs us that the narratives of the massacre were so few and fragmented that it was impossible to weave a complete story of the tragedy. Mostly, the massacre received attention from foreign journalists such as Quentin Reynolds, Haitian authors such as Jean Price-Mars, and exiled Dominicans such as Luis F. Mejía. Some commentaries, such as those offered by lawyer Freddy Prestol Castillo y Rufino, did not appear until twenty-four years after the massacre. The repercussions of the massacre were many for both Haitians and Dominicans. In particular, for the Dominican nation,

the massacre confirmed a racist ideology that had been set into motion in the nineteenth century, and ultimately institutionalized by Trujillo. Historians Frank Moya Pons and Ernesto Sagás explain:

For decades before the advent of Trujillo, many Dominicans had falsely believed that they were white, Hispanic, and Catholic, while only Haitians were black. (Moya Pons 1998, 245)

What the Trujillo regime did was to take anti-haitianismo ideology to new intellectual and political heights by making it a state-sponsored ideology... Antihaitianismo ideology also defends a social-racial model in which only the light-skinned Hispanophile elite really fit. The rest of the Dominican people had to struggle to "whiten" themselves (at least culturally) or were alienated and excluded from the national prototype. Therefore, "whiteness" (racially and culturally) came to be identified with "Dominicanness," while "blackness" was rejected as alien, Haitian, and barbaric. Challenges to the hegemonic power of the state formed from below could thus be isolated and thwarted as "foreign" or "un-Dominican." (Sagás 2000, 66-68)

With an ideology of whiteness firmly in place, Trujillo redrew the racial image of the Dominican nation, erasing its African heritage. To be Dominican, the people had to condone (or "not know about") the massacre, and forget their own racial history and ethical responsibility. Living in a police state necessitated amnesia and silence. In the present, then, remembering one's identity calls for tackling not only fear but also myths of identity. This may be an equally scary project for anyone—individual, community, and/or nation—who has survived state repression by adhering to its rules and regulatory beliefs.

The extent of memory loss, imposed by violence, and the fear thus produced, during the Trujillo regime is underlined by numerous sources. In René Fortunato's three-part documentary film *El poder del jefe*, several scenes show Dominicans looking over their shoulders with expressions of alertness, fright, and guardedness, as they hush their conversations. Trujillo had anyone who spoke against him eliminated. Fortunato exposes the dictator's crimes, underscoring *el jefe's* implacable ire. The documentary informs us that Trujillo used to have anonymous, murdered, and mutilated bodies strewn in front of public buildings so that people would see what

could happen to them if they made the wrong move. With this background in mind, let us return to Alvarez's writing.

Her story "Mami, Papi, and the Four Girls," in *García Girls*, centers on the language and actions necessary to survive in a police state. This is the one vignette that has no humor, and probably does not exaggerate or draw on stereotypes at all. If anything, as the staccato scenes prove, this story describes very little of what was going on politically. Instead, the story offers glimpses of events that are not clear to the girls, from whose alternating point of view we get the information. "Mami, Papi, and the Four Girls" recounts the last experiences the family had on the island before a quick departure facilitated by U.S. contacts. Eventually, the father, Papito, receives a medical fellowship in New York. Clear information about his anti-Trujillista activities is not detailed. Nonetheless, *guardias*, two men from the police, came to visit the family in their search for him. Chucha, the maid, speaks very loudly; and we learn that Papito is listening from his hiding place in a panel in the closet of his bedroom. The *guardias*, described as fat and unappealing, have arrived at noontime: "time for every man to sit down at his table and break bread and say grace to God and Trujillo for the plenty the country is enjoying." Laura, the mother, comes home from shopping, sees the *guardias*, and puts on her hostess tone, inviting the men in for a cold drink and assuring them that her husband should be home any minute. She glances over to the maid, who makes a facial motion signaling that Papito is safe in hiding.

Effusively, Laura greets Carla and Sandi. "My darlings, my sweet Cuquitas, have you eaten?" They nod, watching her closely, and she sees with a twinge of pain that they are quickly picking up the national language of a police state: every word, every gesture, a possible mine field, watch what you say, look where you go.

Without drawing out the description, the narrator makes the severity of the situation clear. Papito, the father, has a hiding spot; the maids are ready to protect him; the girls are silent and careful; and the mother notices their fading sociopolitical innocence. Everyone is expected to pray not only to god but also (and without fail) to the "father" of the country.

In the same story, we learn that Yolanda remembers that she had almost gotten the family killed when she bragged at her friend's house

that her father had a gun. The friends told the family, and everyone was terrified. The parents shut her up in the shower and hit her. This is something they never did; they did not believe in corporal punishment for their children. Laura insists on raising her girls the American way, reading all of the literature available to do so. "[S]o she knows she shouldn't have beaten Yoyo that time the girl gave them such a scare. But you lose your head in this crazy hellhole, you do, and different rules apply.

It is particularly interesting that these stories are recounted in the voice, and from the perspective, of the girls, who were too young to know what was really going on at the time. Still, it is important to note what an effect the events had on their lives, their memories, and the way they would construct themselves and their histories over the years. As adults, at least two of them encounter a crisis of identity, questioning their pasts and their futures. Without a doubt, they are affected by multiple losses. As Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez has noted, migration "is an awareness of death" (1997, 190). And death of any kind at an early age can have a harsh, traumatic effect on its survivors. This figurative death is compounded by the unknown factors of life under Trujillo. The story points to a trauma of losses (accent, homeland, memory), which is at the heart of all of the stories in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*.

At this point, I would like to turn to scholar Cathy Caruth's work on trauma. She theorizes:

The story of trauma . . . as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life. (1996, 7)

Caruth argues that the victim of a traumatic experience is haunted, not by the reality of a violent event but, rather, by the fact that the violent event is not fully known. In the case of the García girls, and their stories throughout the text, we are constantly dealing with unknown factors. For example: What did Papi do that necessitated their sudden departure? What really went on under Trujillo?

In "Mami, Papi, Yoyo," the narrator recounts:

She would have realized her father had lost brothers and friends to the dictator Trujillo. For the rest of his life, he would be haunted by blood on the streets and late night disappearances.

Even after all these years, he cringed if a black Volkswagen passed him on the street. He feared anyone in uniform: the meter maid giving out parking tickets, a museum guard approaching to tell him not to get too close to his favorite Goya.

This passage exposes the father as a traumatized person whose present is affected in a distorted manner by past experience. The details of the experience are not related in political detail, but rather hinted at. In the story, we learn that Yolanda confabulated that her father had a gun. She did not know that he really did; she was just making up a wild story to impress her friends. She had no clue that such a story could get her father killed. In effect, she did not understand the parameters of her actions. Even years later, as she would recall this moment, she would focus on the fear in her parents' eyes, the punishment in the shower, and the after-effects that manifested themselves in her father's behavior in the United States. But she did not know what Trujillo was capable of doing. She did not have the compilation of history put into writing much later by authors including Bernardo Vega and Frank Moya Pons. Yolanda was focusing on English poetry (forgetting her past?) and struggling with the discrepancies in her life, affected by language loss and rediscovery.

Yet the stories bear witness to far more than the girls' loss of their accents. The stories expose the ways in which Yolanda is haunted by the situation that she and her family escaped. Without knowing exactly what they escaped, she knows that it was something terrible. She has survived that which many have not, and of which very few would come to speak. In archaic English, "accent" means "utterance" (Webster's 1986, 48). Using this definition, the accent is the utterance—the telling—of a dark traumatic past. Consequently, perhaps, the accent that the girls want to lose is that traumatic past. But they can only hint at a history of what cannot be fully known or told. In the end, Yoyo confesses that she "grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia." In short, Yolanda grew up to be haunted by the undeciphered violence of the past. In such a light, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is a literary representation of trauma, emphasizing its stronghold over the present.

Source: Lucia M. Suarez, "Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation," in *Meridians*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004, pp. 117–145.

Ricardo Castells

In this excerpt, Castells offers an example of how the García family, in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, experiences a silence of exile as they live between countries and cultures.

As a member of the 1.5 generation, Yolanda may suffer the most from the burden of silence, but this problem clearly affects the entire family. It seems that as we follow the narrative back in time, the Garcías' inability to express themselves in a coherent fashion occurs during every family crisis, beginning with the first years of their new lives in the United States. In ninth grade, Yolanda is chosen to deliver the Teacher's Day address at her school, but her father angrily silences her budding literary voice by destroying a speech that he considers disrespectful of her teachers. A few years earlier, Carla—the oldest of the four sisters—starts her American elementary school education by walking every day to the nearby Catholic school, where a gang of boys teases her and even throws rocks at her because of her foreign accent. Much worse, one day a flasher follows her home in his car and exposes himself to her, and the young girl's shock is such that she remains speechless throughout her entire ordeal. Alvarez writes: "Carla clutched her book bag tighter in her hand. Her mouth hung open. Not one word, English or Spanish, occurred to her."

Looking back at the novel's chronological development, Carla's reaction is merely the first example of the García girls' silence of exile. Whether in English or Spanish, in the United States or in the Dominican Republic, the four sisters find themselves caught between two languages and two cultures, as one would expect from members of an intermediate generation that has trouble finding its distinct cultural space. Nevertheless, these are the kinds of events that one could anticipate based on the end of the first chapter, a section that represents *The García Girls* temporal conclusion. After the two *campesinos* change the tire on Yolanda's car, she drives back toward the village, where she finds José, the young boy who had left the car to go for help. Unfortunately, José is now crying because the guard at the house nearby hit him after accusing him of lying; as the guard correctly tells the young boy, no *dominicana* would ever think of driving out to the countryside at night to pick *guayabas*. When Yolanda leaves the village to return to the family compound in Santo Domingo, her last glimpse of her lost paradise reminds

her once again that she is caught between two very different worlds that are both foreign to her:

In the glow of the headlights, Yolanda makes out the figure of the old woman in the black square of her doorway, waving goodbye. And above the picnic table on a near post, the Palmolive woman's skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance.

As Yolanda's chronological story concludes, we see that the two figures in the darkness symbolize her estrangement from both of her nations and cultures. She has little in common with a poor black woman from the Dominican countryside, and she realizes that her disastrous foray into the woods has merely caused pain for a young boy who graciously tried to assist her. At the same time, the blond hair and the pale skin of the Palmolive woman are potent reminders of Yolanda's incomplete assimilation into her adopted country. As she returns to the safety of the family compound, the reader can conclude that even Yolanda's appearance reveals that she is a real one-and-a-half: too light to be fully Dominican, yet too dark to be truly American. And although the Palmolive model's mouth is open as if she were calling out in the distance, the silence of exile—from both the United States and the Dominican Republic—prevents Yolanda from understanding whatever the woman might be saying.

Source: Ricardo Castells, "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," in *Bilingual Review*, Vol. 26, 2001, p. 40.

SOURCES

Alvarez, Julia, "Daughter of Invention," in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991, pp. 133–49.

Castells, Ricardo, "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," in *Bilingual Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, January–April 2001, p. 34.

Stavans, Ilan, "Daughters of Invention," in *Commonweal*, Vol. 119, No. 7, April 1992, pp. 23–25.

Suarez, Lucia M., "Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation," in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Autumn 2004, p. 117.

FURTHER READING

Alvarez, Julia, *Once Upon a Quinceanera: Coming of Age in the USA*, Viking, 2007.

Alvarez's second nonfiction book explores the Latino tradition of Quinceanera, a celebration marked by a big party of a Latina's fifteenth birthday. The book, which also explores other areas of Latino life in the United States, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Alvarez, Julia, *Something to Declare*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1998.

This collection of twenty-four essays tells Alvarez's story, including pieces on her childhood, her immigration to the United States, her college years, and her journey to becoming a published author.

Diderich, Bernard, *Trujillo: The Death of a Dictator*, Markus Wiener, 1999.

This book is a historical account of life in the Dominican Republic under the rule of the dictator, Rafael Trujillo.

Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, Dover Publications, 2007.

This book of poetry by Walt Whitman, first published in 1885, includes "Song of Myself," the poem that inspired Yoyo and infuriated Papi.

A Devoted Son

ANITA DESAI

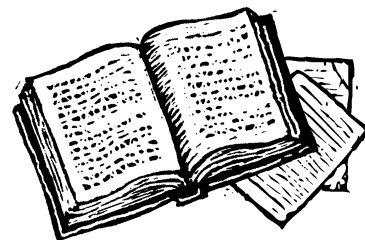
1978

Anita Desai's "A Devoted Son," first published in her collection *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978), is one of her better known short stories. Like much of Desai's fiction, "A Devoted Son" is set in her native India and focuses on domestic and familial concerns. Emphasizing character and language over plot, Desai explores how the relationship between a father and a son changes over time.

In "A Devoted Son," an illiterate worker named Varma makes sacrifices so that his son Rakesh can receive an education. Even as Rakesh succeeds, becomes a doctor, and travels to the United States to further his education, he still treats both of his parents with the greatest respect and honor. Rakesh eventually returns home, marries a woman selected by his mother, grows wealthy, and eventually opens his own clinic. He remains an ideal son.

After he retires, Varma's life takes a turn for the worse. His wife dies, and illnesses, both real and imagined, limit his life. While Rakesh remains the dutiful son, Varma comes to resent him for imposing strict dietary restrictions and giving him medicines and supplements that keep him alive when he longs to be dead. Rakesh dismisses his father's pleas, compelling Varma to assert his will in dramatic fashion near the story's end.

Through "A Devoted Son," Desai not only looks at the complex nature of family relations but also the difficulties in communication between





Anita Desai (Ulf Andersen | Getty Images)

people, the human condition, and the tension between life and death. Respect is also a key element of the text. Critics and scholars have responded positively to “A Devoted Son,” praising the story for its complexity and subtle undertones. While Desai is primarily known for her novels, stories like “A Devoted Son,” show her often underrated ability to create compelling short fiction as well.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Desai was born Anita Mazumdar on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India. She is the daughter of D. N. Mazumdar, a Bengali, and his German wife, Antoinette Nimé. Desai’s parents met in Germany, and her mother emigrated to India to be with her husband. Raised in Old Delhi, Desai experienced her country as both an insider and an outsider because of her exposure to various cultures. She grew up in a neighborhood

with Hindu, Muslim, and Christian residents. Though she spoke both Hindi and German at home, Desai received her formal education in English at British grammar schools and Queen Mary’s Higher Secondary School in New Delhi.

Desai was a voracious reader from an early age. She began writing at the age of seven, and by the time she was nine had published her first work in an American children’s magazine. She continued to write throughout her childhood, with much of her work inspired by changes she witnessed in Indian society at the time. These changes were caused by violent conflict between Hindus and Muslims as what had been the British colony of India was divided into the independent nations of India and Pakistan. Desai completed her education at Miranda House, an elite women’s college at Delhi University. She earned her B.A. in English Literature with honors in 1957.

That year, Desai published her first short story. While working in Calcutta, she continued to write and publish short fiction. She married business executive Ashvin Desai in 1958, and the couple had four children. Desai continued to write while raising her family. Her husband’s occupation took them to various cities in India, and Desai incorporated these new experiences into her fiction.

After several years of contributing short fiction to periodicals, Desai published her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, in 1963. She published two more undistinguished novels in the late 1960s and early 1970s. After publishing her first piece of juvenile fiction, *The Peacock Garden* (1974), and several other works, Desai found international acclaim with the novels *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) as well as the short story collection *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978) which included “A Devoted Son.”

In the 1980s, Desai continued to publish highly regarded fiction for both adults and younger readers, and she also began teaching. She first worked as a visiting fellow at Cambridge University, then moved to the United States to teach at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, and Mount Holyoke, in South Hadley, Massachusetts, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. During this time, she published her acclaimed novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988). In 1993, Desai became a professor of writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she remained until she retired in the early 2000s.

Desai continued to publish significant fiction while working as a professor. Such works included the children's book *The Village by the Sea* (1992), the novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), the short story collection *Diamond Dust* (2000), and *The Zig Zag Way* (2004). Now regarded as an important post-colonial writer, Desai was honored with the Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II in 2006. Desai lives and writes in upstate New York, though she continues to visit India on a regular basis.

PLOT SUMMARY

As "A Devoted Son" opens, Rakesh's family is celebrating his academic triumph. The morning papers report that he has earned high entrance exam scores for medical school, among the best in India. Rakesh comes from a humble background—he was "the first son in the family to receive an education"—and his family and his neighborhood rejoice at his success.

Varma, Rakesh's father, is particularly proud because of all the family has sacrificed economically and personally for his son. Varma is also happy because Rakesh bows and touches his feet just after seeing the results; the gesture is a sign of respect. When Varma tells the gathered crowd about Rakesh's act of respect, they are impressed. Yet some of Varma's neighbors and friends are envious as well, remembering that Varma never attended school and his father worked as a vegetable seller.

Rakesh's star continues to climb. He writes a thesis for his medical degree that brings him prestige among his peers, then wins a scholarship to study in the United States. There, Rakesh works in prominent hospitals before returning home. Not only does Rakesh come back to the "increasingly shabby colony" where his family has long made its home, but he returns to his father's yellow house at the end of the road. When Rakesh returns home, he again bows and touches his father's feet. His mother is quite pleased to learn he did not marry an American woman.

Rakesh agrees to marry an Indian woman his mother has selected for him. His mother chooses Veena, a fleshy woman from her native village who has not been educated and is somewhat passive. Rakesh's wife moves into his father's house and does not suggest that they set up their own

household. The couple has children and remains in Varma's home.

Rakesh becomes a success over the course of his lifetime. He works in the city hospital and becomes a top administrator. After serving there as a director, he leaves and founds his own clinic. He proudly drives his parents to the clinic while it is being built so they can see his name and many qualifications on a sign outside. By this point, Rakesh is the best and richest doctor in the community.

By the time Rakesh founds his clinic, Varma retires from his position at the kerosene dealer's depot where he has spent the past forty years. Around the same time, Varma's wife dies. Rakesh cares for his mother until her death, "pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne."

Everyone notes that Rakesh is a good man to his family. He is polite and kind to friends, and he is an excellent doctor and surgeon. Desai writes, "How one man . . . had achieved, combined and conducted such a medley of virtues, no one could fathom, but all acknowledged his talent and skill."

Despite this recognized ability, over time, Rakesh no longer comes to be regarded as special by those around him because his success and high status have become familiar. His father also begins to suffer after he becomes a widower. He becomes repeatedly sick with illnesses both real and imagined. Varma spends most of his days in bed, often lying so still that the family members who gather around him are concerned he might not be alive. Varma then abruptly rises and spits out betel juice (made from betel seeds and which produces a brick-red saliva) "as if to mock their behaviour."

During a big birthday party at his home for one of the family members, Varma plays dead in bed. Veena finds him, seemingly without a pulse, and the party is broken up immediately. The family and some remaining guests gather around Varma, who sits up and spits a red gob on the hem of Veena's new sari. This incident changes how the family treats him. Because they believe he might be faking it, no one becomes bothered what Varma does anymore, except his eldest son.

Rakesh continues to care for him, though all Varma does is spit at them. Rakesh brings him tea in bed in the morning in his favorite tumbler and reads the newspaper to him. When Rakesh comes

home from the clinic at night, he convinces his father to leave his room and spend time out in the garden. Under Rakesh's orders, servants take Varma and his bed outside on summer nights so he can sleep in comfort.

Although Varma appreciates Rakesh's care, he soon begins to resent his son because he takes charge of what his father eats. Varma is actually sick on occasion, and on one such day, he wants his daughter-in-law to make him a sweet dish, *soojie halwa*, and cream. But Rakesh tells him he cannot have *halwa* anymore. Instead, Rakesh offers, Veena can make a lighter dish with some sweetness, *kheer*—rice and milk.

Varma cannot believe what Rakesh is saying. It is incomprehensible to Varma that his son is not allowing him to eat what he wants. When Rakesh turns around to clean up the medicine shelf in the room, Veena leaves the room wearing a smirk only Varma sees. Varma despises the smirk and knows that he will see it again.

Over time, Rakesh eliminates more foods from his father's diet. First he limits all fried foods; then all sweets. Over time, anything that Varma really likes to eat is eliminated. The two meals he eats per day are simple and consist of bread and boiled lentils, vegetables, and chicken or fish. He is not allowed extra food for fear that overeating or rich foods would cause more illness.

Varma bribes his grandchildren to secretly buy sweets like *jalebis* for him at the local bazaar. When Rakesh and Veena find out, however, they punish the child and scold Varma for encouraging the child to lie. Varma sinks into his bed like a corpse, but no one cares.

Varma no longer regards Rakesh's attention in the morning as positive. Instead, he only values visits from other elderly residents of the neighborhood. Such visits do not happen often, though Bhatia, who lives next door, communicates with him more than the others. Bhatia is more mobile than Varma and comes outside to bathe at the garden tap. If Varma is outside, the two talk loudly over the hedge.

Every once in a while, Bhatia walks to the gate and enters the backyard where Varma lies on his night bed. Bhatia and Varma discuss their situations. Bhatia is sick too, and says he is envious of Varma's unlimited access to a doctor. This suggestion upsets Varma, and he reveals that his son does not feed him enough and

weighs the amount of food he is given. A horrified Bhatia responds, "Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?"

Varma continues his tale of woe, telling Bhatia that his daughter-in-law once refused him a piece of fresh fish. Varma also tells his neighbor that his son will not give him anything fried or cooked in butter or oil. Varma complains that his son—for whom he sacrificed immeasurably—treats him horribly, and he realizes he has come to see his son as heartless and tyrannical.

Although complaining to neighbors makes Varma feel better, he soon becomes genuinely sick. As a result, Varma receives less food but more medicine, powders, vitamins, and pills to attend to his many conditions. Sometimes, he has to be taken to the hospital where his stomach is pumped or he receives an enema. Whenever Varma feels pain or fear, his son produces new pills for him to take. Varma does not want them, telling Rakesh "Let me be. Let me die. It would be better. I do not want to live only to eat your medicines."

Rakesh tries to reason with his father to his face, but Varma insists he wants to die. Outside the door, Rakesh makes fun of his father, emphasizing his father's easy life. Varma responds by screaming that he is not allowed to eat and that Veena and his grandchildren do not care. Because he is weak, the words come out in grunts, croaks, and cries of pain. During one visit with Bhatia, though, with his family in earshot, Varma is able to say, "God is calling me—and they won't let me go." In reality, however, Rakesh's treatments keep his father alive and in fact "gave him a kind of strength that made him hang on long after he ceased to wish to hang on."

On one summer night, the servants take Varma and his bed outside on the veranda so he can take in the evening air. Veena puts many pillows under his head so that he is propped up to a sitting position. Though Varma begs to be allowed to lie down, Veena says Rakesh wants him to sit up.

Varma's grandsons play cricket in the yard, and Varma is scared he will be hit by one of their balls. When his son arrives home, the doctor ignores his wife's questions about food and drink in favor of attending to his father. Rakesh presses Varma's feet and asks about his condition. In contorted pain, Varma tells his son, "I'm dying. Let me die, I tell you." Rakesh dismisses

his feelings and tells him about a new medicine that “will make you feel stronger again.”

In response, Varma tells his son he does not want the tonic or any of the other medicines. He knocks the bottle out of his son’s hand, breaking it. The brown liquid spills all over Rakesh’s white pants, and he jumps up. The noise attracts the attention of the family. Varma is able to push away the pillows that prop him up and lies down again. Closing his eyes, he moans, “God is calling me—now let me go.”

CHARACTERS

Bhatia

Bhatia is Varma’s next door neighbor. Although he is old, Bhatia is still somewhat mobile, unlike most of Varma’s other neighbors. Bhatia visits Varma and is sympathetic to his complaints about how Rakesh treats him. Bhatia is horrified that Rakesh refuses his father food, saying it is disrespectful.

Rakesh

Rakesh is the dutiful son of Varma and his wife. Though his parents are illiterate, they invest much in him and his education so he can become a doctor. Rakesh becomes a success and even earns a scholarship to study in the United States. Returning home, he becomes a respected, gifted doctor and director at a local hospital, and he eventually opens his own clinic. Rakesh becomes rich and important but remains an ideal son known for his good nature. He is respectful in every way to his parents. Yet when Varma reaches the end of his working days and falls ill, Rakesh’s care for his father takes a new tone. Rakesh maintains his physical gestures of respect and reads the newspaper to him every morning, but he starts to control Varma’s food intake. Rakesh does not allow him to eat any fried or sweet foods and gives him numerous vitamins, tonics, and medicines. Varma finds this treatment disrespectful, becomes seriously ill, and wants to die. Rakesh dismisses his father’s opinions on this matter, caring for him as he believes he should. Rakesh respects his father but is oblivious to what the man really wants.

Varma

Varma is Rakesh’s father and Veena’s father-in-law. The son of a vegetable seller in the local

marketplace, Varma is illiterate and works at a depot for a kerosene dealer for forty years but values education for his children. He and his wife make sacrifices so their son Rakesh can receive an education. They are proud when Rakesh is a first division student at medical school and goes to the United States to continue his education. In the beginning, Varma is just as pleased when Rakesh continues to show his respect to himself and his mother. After Varma’s wife dies and Varma retires from his position, he “very quickly went to pieces.”

Varma begins to spend all his days in bed, complaining of illness. He would also lie in bed, seemingly dead, with everyone gathered around, then bolt up and spit out the betel juice. After he does this act during a party at the house, the rest of the family, save Rakesh, no longer pay attention to what Varma does in bed. While Rakesh continues to care for him and treat him with respect, Varma soon begins to resent his son as Rakesh imposes dietary restrictions one day when Varma really becomes sick. Varma is denied all the foods he likes and soon feels Rakesh is not feeding him enough. Varma sees Rakesh as disrespectful and believes that Veena is smirking at him as well.

Eventually, Varma shares his concerns with his elderly neighbor Bhatia, who agrees that it is wrong for a son to refuse food to his father. Such visits are Varma’s only happiness for a time. Soon, Varma really becomes quite ill and finds his diet is even more limited as Rakesh replaces food with vitamins, tonics, and medicines. Varma claims he only wants to be left alone to die, but Rakesh dismisses his desire. Varma snatches a bottle of medicine out of Rakesh’s hand at the end of the story to make his point and groans “God is calling me—now let me go.”

Varma’s Wife

Varma’s wife is Rakesh’s mother. Illiterate like her husband, she spends her days in cooking and taking care of her family. She helps put Rakesh through school and is immensely proud of his academic and professional success as a doctor. Varma’s wife is particularly pleased that Rakesh did not marry when he lived in the United States and that he allowed her to pick his wife for him. She selects the daughter of a friend from childhood who lives in her home village, and Rakesh marries her. Varma’s wife dies around the time her husband retires. During her final illness, Varma’s wife is cared for by her son. In an

ultimate gesture of respect, he is “pressing her feet at the last moment.” After her death, Varma falls apart and spirals downward.

Veena

Veena is the wife of Rakesh. She is selected to be his wife by his mother. Veena is the daughter of his mother’s friend from childhood and a native of his mother’s village. Desai describes her as “a plump and uneducated girl, it was true but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled like a charm.” While having a family with Rakesh and growing obese, Veena cooks and cares for the family. She specifically helps take care of Varma when he retires and becomes ill, though Varma comes to resent her as well because he sees her as disrespectful. Varma does not like Veena’s smirk when Rakesh puts limits on what he can eat and believes that she taunts him. Desai calls her a “smiling, hypocritical pudding in a rustling sari” at the beginning of the last scene.

THEMES

Respect and Devotion

One of the primary concepts explored in “A Devoted Son” is the often complicated nature of traditional Indian family relationships. Varma works for forty years, and he and his wife makesacrifices to ensure their son Rakesh can receive the education they did not. Rakesh rewards them by excelling at school, becoming a doctor, and turning out to be a wealthy, highly respected doctor and member of the community. Varma and his wife are even more proud that Rakesh treats them with deference and respect. Respect for one’s parents is highly valued in traditional Indian society. When Rakesh’s first division triumph is announced in the local paper, Varma proudly tells those who come to celebrate “do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning?... He bowed down and touched my feet.” Rakesh continues to give this gesture of respect to both of his parents throughout their lives. He even allows his mother to select his wife, instead of choosing a wife when he lived in the United States. This is also a mark of Rakesh’s respect for his parent’s and his cultural traditions. He clearly is a “devoted” son.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Using the Internet and resources at your library, research India’s educational system. Explore how the educational system has changed over time, how accessible education is to poor people like Rakesh, and the extent of parental involvement in their children’s schooling. Write an essay on your findings, and include related information from “A Devoted Son” in your essay.
- Stage a debate with a classmate over Rakesh’s treatment of Varma in “A Devoted Son.” Have one person take Rakesh’s side and explain why he treats Varma despite his father’s protestations. The other debater should argue Varma’s point of view about Rakesh. In the debate, make sure both parties address issues such as respect, appropriate care, and communication.
- Using the Internet and your library, research familial relationships in contemporary and historical India. Focus on such topics as family structures, living arrangements, and parental expectations, and how they have changed over time. Then create a presentation for the class about your findings, linking them to the text of “A Devoted Son” and comparing them to contemporary American society.
- In an essay, compare and contrast Desai’s depictions of families and economic issues in “A Devoted Son” and her young adult novel *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (1982). Both the short story and the novel feature difficult family situations as well as people dealing with problematic financial circumstances. In your essay, focus on the parent-child relationships as well as Desai’s depiction of wealth.
- In a group of three to five students, research a food mentioned in “A Devoted Son” and find a recipe to make the dish. Then make the dish and serve it to the class along with a presentation about its history and how it is made.

However, the shape of Rakesh's devotion changes over time. After the death of Varma's wife and his own retirement, Varma begins to complain of illness all the time. Sometimes these sicknesses have a basis in reality and sometimes they do not. He also begins to lie like a corpse in bed and after everyone gathers around in a tizzy, he sits up abruptly and spits out betel juice. When Varma does this during a birthday party at his house, it breaks up the party, and he spits on Veena's new sari. After this incident, "no one much cared if he sat up cross-legged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned grey as a corpse." Rakesh remains the respectful son, but everyone else cares out of duty. Varma sees Veena smirking when she thinks no one can see her, for example, and Varma believes his grandchildren laugh at him.

Rakesh begins to control his father. While remaining respectful, Rakesh will no longer allow Varma eat anything sweet or fried or anything he likes to eat. Over time, Varma actually becomes ill and Rakesh imposes more limits as he cares for him and keeps him alive. Rakesh treats his father as he believes a devoted son should, but he ultimately fails to show his father the simple courtesy of respecting his wishes. Ironically, the devoted son becomes his father's tormentor. Desai seems to be calling into question whether all the exchanges of respect and devotion between Rakesh and his parents make any of them happy.

The Indignities of Old Age

"A Devoted Son" looks at the high points and low points of Varma's life and his desire for death. In a number of ways, Desai's treatment of Varma and his relationship with his son and family can be seen as reflecting the struggles many people encounter; as they age they may feel useless and burdensome to their families. The story opens with Varma at the height of his adulthood. He has a house outside of a city, a job working at a kerosene dealer's depot, and a wife and family. He works very hard to take care of his family. His son Rakesh does much to make him proud, by doing well in medical school, earning a scholarship, traveling to the United States for more education, returning home to start his career, and, most of all, honoring and respecting his parents. Rakesh is an ideal son who becomes a rich, respected doctor and upright citizen.

But as Varma reaches the end of his working days, he finds his enjoyment of life and his personal freedom slipping away. His wife dies around the same time, and he finds himself being cared for by his son and daughter-in-law with help from servants and visits from the rest of the family. While Rakesh continues to care for his father as his health declines, Rakesh restricts his diet and feeds him more and more medicine. Varma feels utterly helpless. He cannot control what he eats. Eventually, he cannot even talk intelligibly. The one thing he can control, he feels, is whether he lives or dies. Varma does not die before the end of "A Devoted Son," but he feels dead inside, and Rakesh cannot, or will not, understand his father's distress. Desai writes of Varma near the story's end, "It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break, it was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying."

Communication

A secondary theme of "A Devoted Son" is communication, often related to perception and pride. While Varma and Rakesh seem to talk, they do not communicate, especially in Varma's old age. Varma tries to emphasize to his son how out of sorts he feels, but Rakesh does not listen and treats him the way he perceives a respected father should be treated. Rakesh dismisses his father's spoken desire to die. During one such exchange, Rakesh says "Papa, be reasonable." Varma replies, "I leave that to you. Let me alone, let me die now, I cannot live like this." After he leaves, Varma hears Rakesh mocking his words, for Rakesh cannot see the pain his father is in and how miserable his life, such as it is, has become. The situation becomes worse in this scene because Varma tries to verbally express how he feels, but "he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was an incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain."

In the last scene of "A Devoted Son," Varma communicates his point to Rakesh by tucking his feet so that Rakesh cannot touch them in a gesture of respect. Varma again expresses his desire to die, but Rakesh dismisses him again. Rakesh does not listen to his father but listens to his pride as the dutiful son; he keeps giving his father medicine that extends the life that he does not want. It is only when Varma knocks the bottle out of Rakesh's hand and Rakesh's white pants are covered by the liquid that Rakesh might finally understand what Varma



In the story, one of the rituals/traditions that the son keeps for his father is serving him morning tea. (Yamini Chao | Taxi | Getty Images)

has been trying to communicate. The story ends with Varma expressing the depths of his pain: “God is calling me—now let me go.”

STYLE

Climax

The climax is the point in the action of a story when the conflict reaches its peak. In “A Devoted Son,” the conflict between Varma and Rakesh builds through Varma’s illness as he desires to eat what he wants and to be allowed to die but is kept alive by his son and his son’s medicine. When Varma and his bed are put outside on the veranda by his sons’ servants, and Veena makes him sit up straight by placing pillows behind him, the climax nears as Varma is increasingly unhappy and fearful. The climax of “A Devoted Son” can be found in the final exchange between Varma and Rakesh as the son again dismisses his father’s desire to be allowed to die. When Varma tells his son that he wants no tonic and “swept the bottle out of his son’s hand with a wave of his

own,” Varma has communicated his feelings to his son. As the household gets turned upside down, the falling action of the story and conclusion consist of Varma relaxing flat on his bed and again asking for death.

Antagonist

In fiction, the antagonist is the character who works against the protagonist (also known as the hero). Rakesh can be seen as the antagonist of “A Devoted Son.” While he is the devoted son referred to in the title, he does not listen to his father’s needs or desires, but merely acts the way he believes a respectful son should. Such behaviors include succeeding at school, marrying the wife selected by his mother, and caring for his father through his old age. However, Rakesh will not allow his father to eat what he wants, setting off a conflict between them. Rakesh takes it one step further and dismisses his ill father’s desire to die. Instead, he gives him more and more medicines that Varma does not want and prolongs his life.

Protagonist

The protagonist is the central character in a work of fiction, the one who provides the central action for the development of the story. Varma is the protagonist in “A Devoted Son” because the story revolves around him, his life, and his relationship with his family, especially Rakesh. His son proves to be Varma’s antagonist. While Varma sacrifices much so that Rakesh can be educated, Varma is not happy when he becomes a widower and retires from work. Illness leads to more conflict with Rakesh and Veena, and dietary restrictions imposed on Varma by Rakesh only inflame the relationship. In the end Varma, as the protagonist, extracts some measure of revenge on Rakesh by breaking the bottle of tonic that his son holds in his hand.

Point of View

The point of view is the narrative perspective from which a work of fiction is written. “A Devoted Son” is written in third-person omniscient point of view. That is, the reader has a perspective on the narrative that is unrestricted by time or place. Desai gives some insight into the actions and minds of characters, primarily Varma. The story does not reveal the whole of his thought processes nor those of any character, but poetically explains the course of Rakesh and Varma’s complex relationship with insight and internal details.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1970s:** India's population is over 613,000,000. It is the second largest country in the world after China.

Today: India's population exceeds 1.1 billion. It remains the second largest country after China.

- **1970s:** India has an economy based on a centralized planning model.

Today: India has a free market economy.

- **1970s:** The Congress Party has a monopoly on political power in India as it has had for several decades.

Today: Regional parties as well as the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party have gained more political power, though a Congress Party-led coalition took power in 2004.

- **1970s:** Tensions between India and Pakistan turn into an armed conflict for a time during the decade.

Today: Tensions between India and Pakistan remain high, though some peace talks are planned in the early twenty-first century.

Setting

The setting is the time, place, and culture in which the action of a narrative takes place. While Desai is not specific about the setting of "A Devoted Son," it becomes clear over the course of the narrative that it takes place in India over several decades up to the late 1970s in a "shabby little colony at the edge of the city." Much of the action occurs in the little yellow house at the end of a road, where Varma raises his family and which Rakesh takes over to raise his own family as well as care for his father. The cultural norms of Indian culture are represented in the narrative, including, for example, the emphasis on parental respect and Rakesh's arranged marriage.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Population Trends

After India was granted its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the country became a republic in 1948. While India became a democracy at that time, certain aspects of society remained relatively unchanged or underwent limited changes by the late 1970s. For example, a majority of the population lived in rural communities. Most rural dwellers worked as farmers and lived in small

villages. Many people, both urban and rural, lived below the poverty line. However, in crowded Indian cities, there was a much larger middle class, and millions of Indians left rural villages to look for employment. Because of the housing demands that were created, housing could be in short supply in urban areas. Colonies like the one where Varma has his home were founded to meet such housing needs in and around cities.

Family Life

Family relationships remained important in India in the late 1970s. During much of the twentieth century, arranged marriages were common, though some young adults chose their own spouses. The higher the social class one came from, the greater the chance that one chose his or her own spouse. After marriage, the wife traditionally moved into the family home of her husband. Extended families of multiple generations often lived together, though there were differences between northern and southern India. In the north, households often included several generations of men, their wives, and their children. In the south, households were often organized around a matriarch. For example, southern households could include the families of a grandmother and her siblings, families of a mother and her siblings, and one's own siblings. The description of Varma's family situation



Indian cuisine (Image copyright Joe Gough, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

in “A Devoted Son,” is reflective of the family values in this time period.

Education and Literacy

India’s education system was greatly influenced by its experience as a British colony. Under law after independence from Great Britain, children were to be given a free education between the ages of six and fourteen. Most children attended primary school for at least a few years—even in rural areas—but state-run primary schools were often underfunded and not of great quality. By the time children reached the age of ten, however, parents in some parts of India took their children out of school so they could labor on the family farm or take care of their young siblings. Thus, far fewer continued their education in secondary school. Even fewer Indian students went on to attend college, and the vast majority who did so were male. (The British established a number of colleges and universities in India beginning in the late nineteenth century to educate the upper-middle class in India and prepare a class of bureaucrats and officials to help govern the country.) Most university students studied science, which was

considered more respectable, if not practical, than other subjects.

Literacy was an issue in India for much of the twentieth century and continued to be one into the twenty-first. Soon after gaining independence, India worked to increase its literacy rate by building more schools, training more teachers, and publishing relevant textbooks for students. By the end of the twentieth century, more than half the population of India had become literate because of these efforts. Indian women, however, generally became literate at a much lower rate than men. Thus, the depiction of education in “A Devoted Son” is representative of these trends, especially in the emphasis on an education in science for Rakesh.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Critics have praised Desai for her ability to explore generational differences and family life while employing poetic language and a sophisticated use of imagery and symbolism. Her descriptive skill is also regularly lauded, as

most critics embrace her elegant, detailed stories which often value character and setting over plot development. Thus, most critics respond positively to “A Devoted Son,” and the other stories in *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*.

While many see the stories in *Games* carefully, if not elegantly, put together, a few believe she places too much emphasis on communication overall. In a review of the collection, Victoria Glendinning writes in the *Times Literary Supplement*, “Anita Desai has the gift of being able to transfer an image that catches her own imagination to the imagination of her reader, and making it seem important.” Commenting specifically on “A Devoted Son,” Parvati Bhatnagar in *The Fiction of Anita Desai* notes “Anita Desai surely can delve deep into human emotions and express them in her masterly style.”

Some scholarly attention has been paid to “A Devoted Son” as well, with academics exploring the short story through the lens of food and issues of aging, for example. In the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Ira Raja looks at “A Devoted Son,” as “using the ageing body as a site for articulating national anxieties.” Raja argues that the story “shows modern systems of knowledge and power as far from being automatically and uniformly liberating for the aged.”

CRITICISM

A. Petruso

Petruso has a B.A. in history from the University of Michigan and an M.A. in screenwriting from the University of Texas at Austin. In this essay, she looks at the theme of respect as it pertains to the relationship between Varma and Rakesh in “A Devoted Son.”

In a review of Anita Desai’s short story collection *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* and novel *Fasting, Feasting*, Edward Hower comments, “In Anita Desai’s fiction, home is both a prison and a refuge. Those who escape face isolation from their families and society, but those who stay risk suffocation. Family tensions make her characters’ attempts to transcend domestic lives into personal triumphs or tragedies.”

Much of what Hower says can be applied to “A Devoted Son.” The story focuses on the relationship between Varma and his son Rakesh, and is set primarily in Varma’s home. With the



WHILE THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT RAKESH RESPECTS HIS FATHER (AND HIS MOTHER, FOR THAT MATTER), HE NEARLY RESPECTS VARMA TO DEATH IN HIS FATHER’S OLD AGE—AND THE NATURE OF THE RESPECT IS QUITE SUSPECT.”

support of his father, Rakesh becomes an overwhelmingly successful doctor and in Varma’s old age, takes over control of the household. While Rakesh remains respectful of his father at all times, the home, indeed life, becomes a prison for Varma, who is suffocated by his son’s attention. Varma’s personal life essentially becomes a tragedy.

One way to examine the situation between Varma and Rakesh is through the filter of respect. In this context, respect means to be obedient (acting to please parents), regard highly, and hold and act in admiration. Rakesh repeatedly offers gestures of respect to his father that are quite meaningful in Indian society. While there is no doubt that Rakesh respects his father (and his mother, for that matter), he nearly respects Varma to death in his father’s old age—and the nature of the respect is quite suspect. In fact, it is unclear if Rakesh really respects Varma or puts on the façade of respect as required by his society. The elderly Varma does not feel respected because his wishes for his life are ignored, not always respectfully, by the son who uses his medical knowledge to keep him alive.

Throughout “A Devoted Son,” Desai repeatedly refers to respect and gestures of respect as she sets up this heartbreaking situation. The first paragraph of the story has Rakesh looking at the rankings of test results in the newspaper, then finding his father on the veranda where he “sat sipping his morning tea.” Before saying anything, Rakesh “bowed down to touch his feet.” This gesture of respect establishes the fact that Rakesh is an obedient son who appreciates all the sacrifices his illiterate parents have made to give him an education which includes medical school. Rakesh works hard and receives top test scores as well, bringing more honor to himself and his family.

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Clear Light of Day*, published in 1980, is a novel by Desai. In the book, she explores the life of a middle-class Hindu family to offer a study of the city of Delhi that combines both fiction and history.
- *Diamond Dust*, published in 2000, is another short story collection by Desai. In these stories, Desai explores themes similar to those found in *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*. However, the stories are set in Canada and Latin America as well as India. The characters are also of various nationalities, but they still struggle with aging, human relationships, and illusion and reality.
- *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, published in 1999, is a novel by Kiran Desai, Anita Desai's daughter. The author explores the life of a postal worker in India who loses his job and disgraces his family. He moves into a guava tree and convinces people in the village that he is a holy man.
- *The Peacock Garden*, published in 1974, is a young adult novel by Desai. Set in India in 1947, the story focuses on a Muslim girl living in India at the time the country was partitioned into India and Pakistan. Her family becomes caught up in the conflict but does not leave. Instead, they hide in the gardens of the local mosque.
- *The Table Is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*, published in 2009, is a collection of short fiction and non-fiction edited by John Thieme and Ira Raja. The stories and essays focus on food and its meaning and culture, primarily in India. The collection includes "A Devoted Son."
- *Cat on a Houseboat*, published in 1976, is a young adult novel by Desai. Set in India, the story centers on a cat named by Papaya who likes to eat the fruit she is named after as well as travel. She goes with her owners when they stay on a houseboat in Kashmir.
- *Fathers and Sons*, published in 1998, is a collection of short stories edited by Alberto Manguel. In the collection, Manguel includes twenty stories which explore the often complex relationship between fathers and their sons. The collection includes "A Devoted Son."

The importance of Rakesh's gesture is emphasized during the celebration that follows. Varma responds to all visitors who say that his son "has brought you glory," by telling them, "Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet." Desai then reports that both women and men were deeply affected by what Rakesh did, so much so that women cried and the men "shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary filial behaviour."

Rakesh's rise continues as does his respectful behavior towards his parents. When he returns from his educational experiences in the United States, "the first thing he did on entering the house was to . . . bow down and touch his father's feet." Rakesh also does not take a wife in the United States as most Indian men who travel

abroad for their education do. "Instead, he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl [his mother] had picked out for him in her own village."

Over time, Rakesh becomes a local bigwig. He first works as a doctor at a hospital in the city, then he moves through the ranks to become a top administrator and director, before finally opening his own clinic. All the while, he, his wife Veena and their children follow tradition and live with his parents in "that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony." When his mother is on her death bed, Rakesh cares for her "in her last illness" and "sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne."

Through these events, Desai makes clear that "Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a

miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humor his wife and show concern equally for his children and his patients.” She also acknowledges his intelligence, “good manners,” “kind nature,” and skills as both a host and a doctor. Yet over time, Desai adds, “It came to pass that the most admiring of eyes eventually faded and no longer blinked at his glory.” With that statement, Desai shows a crack in the sheen that has covered Rakesh for the whole of his adult life. It is a clue that perhaps Rakesh has been living for adulation and hides his true feelings behind his respectful behavior.

After this point in “A Devoted Son,” the relationship between Varma and Rakesh starts to change. Shortly before the death of Varma’s wife, Varma retires from the kerosene dealer’s depot where he had been employed for four decades. He soon falls apart and spends most of his days in bed. Desai explains, “He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim.” Varma also begins to essentially fake his death, then rapidly sit up and spit betel juice. The act brings the attention of his family every time until he does it during a birthday party at the house. Varma ruins the party as well as his daughter-in-law’s new sari, causing everyone in the family except Rakesh to ignore such behaviors from that point forward.

Varma’s actions can be seen as a precursor to his desire to die, which becomes a major issue by the end of the story. However, Rakesh continues to be the respectful son. No matter what Varma does, Rakesh brings him tea in the vessel preferred by Varma, reads the morning newspaper to him, and compels him to spend his evenings outside on the veranda. Desai writes of Rakesh, “It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from spitting.” Yet there is no evidence that Rakesh tries to understand what is wrong with his father. Varma is faking his death over and over again—perhaps to get attention but perhaps because he is miserable or for some other reason that is unclear—but the doctor does not use his training to find out the source of his father’s misery. Rakesh merely uses his skills to keep his father alive. While this is a gesture of respect, it is also fraught with a lack of real interest in his patient, if not the desire for control.

When Rakesh begins to control what Varma eats, their relationship is forever transformed. After Varma eats *soojie halwa* with cream, “Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor.” With this statement, Desai makes clear that Rakesh no longer really respects Varma nor cares about what his father wants. Rakesh seems like he respects his father because he does all he can to keep his father alive—a gesture of respect to many. But he does not listen to Varma, instead acting like he must keep his father alive to prove his abilities as a doctor and to seem like a dutiful son.

Varma is startled by Rakesh’s first dietary restriction as “he stared at his son with disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach.” Refusing his father the food he likes is disrespectful, even if the food is harming him in some way. Varma is the father and Rakesh is his son, and Varma believes, with tradition on his side, his word should rule. Instead, nearly every food Varma likes is removed from his diet and replaced by limited portions of bland fare. Varma misses his wife’s cooking, and his attempts to bribe his grandchildren to get him sweets from the local bazaar only leads to more rebukes from Rakesh. The son admonishes him for sending his children to a part of the city where there are diseases and having them lie to their parents. Rakesh also reminds him that the sweets are not good for him. Rakesh is only deferential in that he keeps up a respectful appearance to his father and keeps him alive; Varma, however, sees only contempt.

Varma’s opinion of Rakesh is supported by his elderly neighbor Bhatia. Though Bhatia is initially jealous that Varma has unlimited access to medical care through Rakesh, Varma sets him straight. Bhatia is appalled at Rakesh’s dietary restrictions as well. Underscoring the key to the conflict between father and son, Desai notes:

the son’s sterling personality and character now underwent a curious sea change. Outwardly all might be the same but the interpretation had altered: his masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.

Respect seems like only a superficial emotion for Rakesh by this point.

This situation grows worse as Varma becomes ill and weak. Rakesh treats him with various medicines, tonics, vitamins, and powders.

Such items “became a regular part of his diet—became his diet, complained Varma, supplanting the natural foods he craved.” Varma tells Rakesh he wants to be left alone and to die but Rakesh dismisses such feelings with the statement “I have my duty to you, Papa.” That is the key point to the problem in Varma and Rakesh’s relationship. Rakesh is outwardly dutiful to his father. In Rakesh’s eyes, Varma has everything an elderly man could want: a caring family, food, shelter, and more. But Rakesh continues to treat Varma without regard of his feelings. Varma even overhears Rakesh mocking his complaints about the way he has to live. Rakesh does not want to understand Varma or the misery he feels at being kept alive, in effect, artificially.

For his part, Varma does not want to be kept alive by Rakesh’s medicine and supplements, but that is exactly they effect they have. Varma is also pained by being carried outside by the servants to take the night air, with Desai noting that Varma expresses his “agonized complaints” to them. In the last scene of “A Devoted Son,” Varma tries to get Veena to understand his pain but she insists that he be propped up by pillows on the veranda despite his protestations. His grandsons play cricket nearby though he might be hit by the ball since he cannot dodge it with his limited mobility. Varma lives in fear now, a fear his son has refused to see or understand.

When Rakesh arrives home that night, he continues to be the attentive son that he believes himself to be. Ignoring his wife and children, “he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken.” Rakesh also made a gesture of “reaching out to press his feet.” By this point, Varma sees the emptiness of gestures of respect as well as questions about how he is feeling. Rakesh, Varma has concluded, is not really a devoted son but an arrogant doctor who does not really care about him. Rakesh may have “smiled at him, lovingly” as they talk, but Varma does not buy it anymore.

Thus, Varma’s final gestures are empowering for him. He knocks the bottle of tonic out of Rakesh’s hand and is able to push the pillows away so he can lie down more comfortably on his back. Rakesh knows that Varma will die at some point, but Varma has finally taken a few steps to ensure it will be soon—he will no longer be kept alive by his son’s medicine. Rakesh’s respect and devotion are completely meaningless and will perhaps now be compromised. The irony of

Varma’s sacrifice is obvious by the end of “A Devoted Son.” If he had not given everything so his son could be the first in the family to be educated, would Rakesh have treated him the same way in his old age or would he have really been respectful?

Source: A. Petruso, Critical Essay on “A Devoted Son,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Fritz Lanham

In this article, Lanham discusses the intertwining careers of Anita Desai and her daughter Kiran.

They take literary trophies seriously in India. Consider the case of New Delhi-born novelist Kiran Desai. No sooner did she swipe the Man Booker Prize—Britain’s top literary award—than an Indian newsmagazine anointed her one the country’s “most eligible” singles.

The author chortles in reporting this news. She also seems flattered.

Her mother, Anita Desai, beams.

Mother and daughter—the long-famous Anita and the newly famous Kiran—made a rare joint appearance recently to read at the Wortham Theater Center as part of the Inprint Brown Reading Series. When Inprint booked the pair, Anita, author of more than 15 novels and a four-decade-long career, was expected to have top billing. Then came the awardfest for Kiran—she also won the National Book Critics Circle Award for “Inheritance of Loss,” her tale of immigration, class divisions and alienation set in India and New York. For many in the audience she was the face to see and voice to hear.

I met them for a pre-reading interview in the lobby of the Lancaster Hotel, a somewhat ironic venue given its clubby English décor and the tangled relations between West and East that animate the Desais’ fiction.

The two are a study in similarities and differences. Both speak softly, their accents a medley of linguistic influences—Indian, British, American, and in Anita’s case perhaps a trace of German. Physically they’re a contrast. Kiran is slim and the more bubbly of the two; she seems younger than her 35 years. Anita, at 69, is a more imposing figure, self-contained, the embodiment of benign dignity. Kiran lives in Brooklyn, Anita in upstate New York. Both visit India regularly, although Anita says she’s lived too long away from her



ANITA FINISHED HER FIRST NOVEL WHILE STILL IN HER 20S. 'INDIAN PUBLISHERS WEREN'T INTERESTED AT ALL,' SHE SAID. 'THEY LIKED TO REPRINT BOOKS FROM THE WEST OR PRINT TEXTBOOKS. THEY CERTAINLY DIDN'T WANT TO PUBLISH AN UNKNOWN YOUNG INDIAN WRITER.'

native country to feel at home there. "I've become a stranger wherever I go," she said wistfully.

Both agree that neither Kiran nor her three siblings grew up wanting to be writers. The kids were used to seeing their disciplined mother disappear to her desk every morning, and it seemed like an awfully boring way of life. Plus there was the meager payoff. Anita Desai's first novel, published in England in 1963, garnered only one foreign-rights offer, from a Romanian house willing to fork out 10 pounds.

Kiran planned to study biology. Her turnaround came when she took a creative-writing course with Phillip Lopate at Bennington College in Vermont. "After that it became crazy to think I'd tried to do something else," she says. "I very quickly fell into the rhythm and knew instinctively this is how you live a writing life. It felt very familiar."

Her mother began her own writing life at a younger age. Anita Mazumdar was born in Mussoorie, a hill town north of Delhi, the daughter of a Bengali businessman father and a German mother. She grew up speaking German and Hindi at home, English at school. As a kid she read voraciously—"the house was full of books," she said. She published her first story at age 9. At 12 she read the Brontë sisters and remembers telling herself, if writers can deploy language with such power, I want to be a writer.

After convent school she earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1957 from Delhi University. A year later she married businessman Ashvin Desai. Kiran is the youngest of their four children.

Anita finished her first novel while still in her 20s. "Indian publishers weren't interested at all," she said. "They liked to reprint books from

the West or print textbooks. They certainly didn't want to publish an unknown young Indian writer."

So she sent the manuscript to British houses, copying their addresses off the backs of their books. Peter Owen, a publisher who likes Commonwealth authors, took a chance and brought out "Cry, the Peacock." After that the books came at a steady clip, generally a new one every two to four years. Three have been nominated for a Booker Prize, including 1984's "In Custody," about an Urdu poet in decline. Considered by some her best novel, it was made into a Merchant-Ivory movie in 1993.

In 1988 Desai tapped into her German heritage for "Baumgartner's Bombay," about a German who flees to Calcutta to escape the Nazis. Her most recent novel, "The Zig Zag Way" (2004), is set in Mexico, which she visits frequently—favorite towns include San Miguel de Allende and Oaxaca.

She chose to write about Mexico because India resembles that country in many ways, she said.

"The same colonial powers—Spanish on the one hand, British on the other. The same centuries of history lying all around one, obliging one to sort it out. At the same time it is utterly foreign, which makes it intriguing. You have to go deep into it and explore to find out what it's all about."

When pressed about what themes tie her novels together, Anita finally decides it's "the outsider's experience, the outsider's perspective. It may have had something to do with my mother having been a foreigner in India."

Desai was in her mid-40s when she moved from India, first to England for a visiting fellowship and a year later to the United States, dragging in tow her youngest, 14-year-old Kiran. Anita taught creative writing at Mount Holyoke College and Smith College, then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, from which she's now retired. Asked about her current marital status, she simply says, "I've long lived alone."

After Bennington and the lightning bolt that changed her life, Kiran enrolled in writing programs, first at Hollins University in Virginia, then at New York's Columbia University. She took two years off from Columbia to finish her first novel, "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard," published in 1999.

A newspaper story about an Indian hermit who lived in a tree provided the seed. In Kiran's version a fired postal worker who has disgraced his family takes up residence in a guava tree and eventually persuades villagers he's a holy man. With its warm heart and touches of magical realism, "Hullabaloo" got a thumbs up from reviewers, including the notoriously hard-to-please Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*, who called it a "meticulously crafted piece of gently comic satire."

"When I started writing it, I had no idea what the story would be," Kiran told one interviewer. "I had no idea of the plot. It sort of gathered momentum and drew me along. It was an incredibly messy process, and I don't know if it was the smartest way to go about it, because this was my first book. So I had to teach myself how to write as I was writing it."

"The Inheritance of Loss," Kiran's second book, took her eight years to write, for the same reason she wrestled with "Hullabaloo." "It took a long time for me to even realize what I was writing about," she said, laughing. "There's no plot, in fact."

During its gestation, Anita interjected, "even the family was saying, why doesn't she go get a job?"

The ensemble-cast novel grew out of Kiran's own experience of coming to the United States and living "between countries." But she found that to understand the present—the novel is set in the mid-1980s—she needed to go back to immigrant experiences of her parents' and grandparents' generations. The first character that emerged in her mind was Jemumbai, an embittered, emotionally crippled retired judge who lives in a decaying pile in the northern Indian city of Kalimpong. As a young man Jemumbai had studied law in England, enduring the contempt and condescension of the British. He returned to India only to discover that his embrace of Western ways and values cut him off from his own people. The experiences of Kiran's grandfather, who left India to study in England, informs the character of the judge.

Next came the judge's long-suffering cook. One rich, the other poor, they have in common the hopes and humiliations attendant in journeying from India to the wealthy, powerful West. The cook experiences these vicariously through the life of his son Biju, who has scraped together enough money to fly to New York and overstay

his visa. In the Big Apple he joins an army of fellow undocumented immigrants working in cheap restaurants for low wages while trying to stay below the radar of everybody in authority. The novel moves back and forth between New York, where Biju bounces from job to job, and India.

Kalimpong, lying just below the border with Nepal, is full of Nepalese immigrants doing what immigrants everywhere do—looking for work and a better life. Among them is Gyan, a recent college graduate whom the judge hires to tutor his 16-year-old orphaned granddaughter Sai, who has come to live with him. Romance blossoms even as an incipiently violent Nepalese civil-rights movement hits the streets.

Ethnic conflict, class divisions, globalization, migration—grand themes weave together the lives of the characters.

"I could not have written about Kalimpong without having left India," she said. Living as an immigrant in the West allowed her to understand for the first time the Nepalese and what it meant to be an immigrant in India. Debates familiar to anyone in this country roil the politics there: Should a foreigner's language be taught in the schools? Are you still a foreigner if your family has been in the country three or four generations?

Unlike the dirt-poor Biju, Kiran arrived in the United States speaking English, the product of a privileged upbringing and good education. Pondering the differences between herself and other immigrants made her acutely aware of class divides.

"The same people who are poor in India are poor here," she said. "It would have been hard to write this book without including that side of the picture—the bigger side of the picture."

As the title of the book suggests, those who migrate give up things.

"Your language has to change, your clothes change, you have to adapt yourself to your surroundings," Kiran said. "There's always a gain, I don't think one wants to undo it. But there's also shame and loss."

When I suggest that for all its charm and humor "The Inheritance of Loss" is a pretty bleak book, Kiran doesn't entirely disagree. Sai and Gyan have a falling out and in the end seem unlikely to get back together. Biju returns to India, where he is robbed of literally everything

he owns, arriving back in Kalimpong in a borrowed woman's dress and nothing to show for his years in New York. An impoverished couple steal and sell the judge's dog Mutt, the only thing he loves.

"People wanted me to write at the end of the book, 'And then the dog came home,'" Kiran said, laughing. "But in reality the dogs don't usually come home."

But she does insist "there are little bits of hope." Sai grows up over the course of the book, "coming to a more complicated idea of happiness, a less selfish idea of what her possibilities might be. And Biju returns home—which to me is quite hopeful—against everything the world is telling him, realizing that what he really needs is his father and what his father really needs is him."

At times during the birthing pangs of "The Inheritance of Loss" the Desais worked in the same house, in the same room. But with both her novels Kiran waited until she'd finished a draft before showing it to her mother.

Kiran has read her mother's books but doesn't seem to have felt the elder's shadow looming over her. She neither modeled herself on her mother nor rebelled against her example. In retrospect she can see some common threads between their work.

"When I think of 'Baumgartner's Bombay' or 'Clear Light of Day,' I see similarities in terms of subject and character—solitude or exile or not fitting in," she said.

"But in terms of style, I wrote in the only way I could."

Source: Fritz Lanham, "Trailing Mama: Pen in Hands . . .," in *The Houston Chronicle*, April 8, 2007, p. 16.

Diane White

In this article, White presents a career portrait of Anita Desai.

Anita Desai speaks softly, and seldom in the first person.

The author of numerous critically praised novels—among them "Journey to Ithaca," "Baumgartner's Bombay," "Clear Light of Day"—is modest to a fault.

"When you are writing so much alone, it's such a solitary occupation," she says over tea in her Cambridge living room. "So that when you do stumble across someone who's read your books, it's a surprise."

It is plain that for Desai, the process of writing is all-important, more important even than the finished book. As for any fame that might accrue from being a celebrated novelist, she gives the impression of a woman deliberately immune to celebrity.

Since 1993, Desai has taught fiction writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. On Sunday, she will be one of 13 New England writers honored at the Boston Public Library's 13th Literary Lights dinner at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel.

She received a similar award two years ago from the New York Public Library. There have been many other honors, including three nominations for Britain's Booker Prize, for "Clear Light of Day" (1980), "In Custody" (1984), and "Fasting, Feasting" (2000).

Does she have a favorite among her books? She shakes her head. No. She never reads her work after it has been published.

"It can be very difficult to go back and read, because you want to rewrite everything."

She pauses. "But I suppose that's what makes one try again. With every book you feel you are making a fresh start."

Like many of her characters, Desai spans cultures. She was born in 1937, to a German mother and a Bengali father who met when he was doing graduate work in Berlin. She grew up in Old Delhi, speaking Hindi and German at home, and English at school. "English was the first language I learned to read and write," she says, "so English immediately became to me the language of books."

At age 7 she began her lifelong habit of writing every day. She was 9 when her first story was published.

Her bookshelves are packed with volumes by other writers, but there is no evidence of her own work.

However, a framed dustjacket from the British edition of her daughter Kiran Desai's first novel, "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard," hangs on one wall. She takes it down, to provide a closer look at the cover photograph: a back-lit monkey, fur aglow, reaching one long arm out toward a fruit.

"It's a wonderful photograph, isn't it?" And it is wonderful, an image that conveys joy, and yearning, too.

While Desai is reluctant to talk about her personal life, bits and pieces emerge during the interview. “One doesn’t see why that should be necessary,” she says. “Why should anyone be interested in the writer and not the book itself?”

She avoids book tours and promotional events, but occasionally she gives a reading, attends a writers’ festival, or accepts an award. “I hope I don’t have to give a speech,” she says of the BPL event.

According to “A Reader’s Guide to Twentieth Century Writers,” Anita Mazumdar received a BA in English Literature from Delhi University in 1957. The following year she married businessman Ashvin Desai. They have four children.

Carving a new path

In 1963, her first novel, “Cry, The Peacock,” was published in England. At the time, there was very little interest in the English writing being done in India. That has changed. A new generation of Indian writers—Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, among others—have achieved critical and popular success writing in English.

“English has been around India for centuries,” Desai says. “Indians have taken over the language and made it over, made it their own, the way Americans did, or West Indians, or Australians.”

In 1984, she left India for England to be a visiting fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University. She visits India but has never gone back to live there, although she returns again and again in her fiction to the India she knew as a girl and a young woman. “I spent most of my life in India, I went to live abroad in my 40s, and I think if you live that long in a place it’s in every pore of your being.”

In the early 1990s, two of her four children came to study at Bennington College. “At that stage, it became necessary to earn money, so I came to the States to take up a teaching job,” she says.

She taught at Smith and Mount Holyoke colleges before accepting an offer from MIT to join the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies—a tiny department, she says, compared to others at the university. Desai, now a professor, says she felt isolated in western Massachusetts

and welcomed the move to the urban, cosmopolitan atmosphere of the MIT campus.

“It’s very international, students from all over the world, working in so many different fields, very few of them in the arts. The arts are new territory for them to explore. And I think they come in need of the dimension that art provides.”

Desai’s novels are character studies, relatively short on plot. “The characters’ thoughts, emotions, sensations, those are what interest me most.

“If one is a novelist and one has chosen to write about certain characters, one has an obligation to be perfectly honest with them and about them, to be utterly truthful, not sentimentalize.”

Quest for truth

She believes that fiction allows a writer to come closer to the truth than any other form. “This is what interests me in fiction,” she says, “how you can use this technique to say what you really wish to say.”

Her characters are educated Indians trying to cope with their own changing culture, or that of a foreign country. Sometimes they are Westerners, often adrift in India, bewildered and overwhelmed by its people and customs. Her work is not overtly political, but her characters are sometimes touched by larger events.

In “Clear Light of Day,” the lives of the two sisters, Bim and Tara, and their brother Raja are changed by the violence between Hindus and Muslims in 1947. And in “Baumgartner’s Bombay,” a German Jewish refugee escapes the Nazis only to find himself in an Indian internment camp. Over the years, a number of different movie-makers have optioned the novel, but none has been able to obtain the financing to turn it into a film.

One novel, “In Custody,” was made into a film by producer Ismail Merchant, who also directed it. Desai wrote the screenplay, a task she says she would not care to undertake again. “In Custody” is the story of a teacher who seeks out a famous Urdu poet and discovers a drunken libertine, not the wise man he imagined. Desai and Merchant share an interest in Urdu, an Arabic literary language.

Desai typically spends a long time, years sometimes, collecting material, reading, researching,

thinking, “scribbling,” before she begins writing. Part of her novel “Fasting, Feasting,” is set in the United States. Despite her long residence here, she says she does not feel comfortable writing about America. “I find it very difficult. I suffer from a great sense of getting things wrong, of not understanding.”

“Diamond Dust,” a collection of short stories, was also published last year. She prefers the novel form, but since she teaches short story writing, she thought she would, as she puts it, “set myself an exercise in crafting short stories.”

The collected stories are set, variously, in India, the United States, Canada, England, and Mexico. For the past few years she has been spending vacations in a rented house in Tepotzlan, a village near Cuernavaca. She feels drawn to write about the place, which, as she describes it, sounds a perfect setting for a Desai novel.

“I feel utterly at home there. The people seem to be exactly like Indians. I can understand them and their way of life very easily. And at the same time it is strange, with its own rich traditions and mix of cultures.”

Source: Diane White, “Mixed Cultures, Singular Voice,” in *The Boston Globe*, March 20, 2001, p. F1.

Anita Desai

In this excerpt of a conversation between Desai, Philips, and Stevens, Desai discusses the concepts of First, Second, and Third World; her multicultural upbringing; and her use of English as her literary language.

Anita Desai: First World, Third World—they’re words which I grew up without, I did without, and I find I still don’t need. As Ilan argued, they strike me as eminently disposable words. When we talk of First, Second, Third World, what are we talking about? As far as I know these are meant to be economic terms, possibly political ones, but I don’t see how they could possibly apply to the world of culture. How can we have a cultural First World or Second or Third World, no matter backed by how much wealth? As for multiculturalism, I grew up in a country which over the centuries saw so many foreign invasions, accepted the foreign invaders, made their language and often their religion, certainly their culture, part of their own. This was the world I grew up in, in India, so it’s by no means a new or extraordinary experience for me here in the United States.

How did this affect me personally? I was born in India, I grew up in India, went to school there, but when one says “India” no Indian really knows what you mean. It’s just the opening to a hundred questions. Which region? Which part of India? Which state? Which language? Which religion? What particular background? Because India is a country made up of so many fragments, much smaller than the United States, but each little fragment has a culture which is so distinctly its own—its own language, its own script, its own literature. Which one do I claim as mine? All and none. My parents settled down in a part of India which was home to neither of them. My father came from Bengal, originally from quite a small village in what was then East Bengal, now Bangladesh, probably went to the local village school, belonged to a generation that went to such little local village schools but came out able to quote long passages from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or from Browning with which he used to like to regale us. My mother’s home, on the other hand, was in Germany. She left Germany in the late twenties. The Germany she knew was soon after totally destroyed. She never returned to it, and both of them made their home in north India, in Delhi, where I grew up.

It was a home with three languages. Obviously German had to be the very first one because that was the language of infancy, the one my mother spoke to us. With all our neighbors and friends we spoke Hindi, that was the language in Delhi. My parents believed very much in sending us to the local school. I went to the nearest one, the one I could bicycle to, and that happened to be a mission school, run by British missionaries. And so it was a matter of pure chance that the first language I was taught to read and write was English and by that accident it became my literary language. And of course I loved the literature that was given me in the English language, but I very soon became aware that the language did much more than that. It opened up world literature to me in translation. I couldn’t have read the Russian literature I did, the French literature I did, the Japanese literature that I did read and love, if it hadn’t been for the English language. To me the English language was the key to a world literature, which was what I was interested in. And without thinking about it, without pondering the matter or making choices that Ilan speaks of, I just used that language because to me too it was the key to literature, I could use it.

I certainly wasn't thinking of readers or of audience at the age when I did start to write and publish. I was simply employing a language which was my literary language, which I could use easily and freely and fluently. Over the years I gradually began to be aware that there were questions that did require pondering and thought and deliberation and choice, too. How could I make this English language, which I was told belonged to a country elsewhere which I had never visited and never seen, how could I make it express my Indian thoughts, my Indian way of life, and my Indian experiences? As I said before, there are so many other languages in India, and there are writers writing in Tamil and Bengali and Marathi and Oriya and Urdu and Hindi, in dozens of languages, some of which I know, some of which I read only in translation, some of which I'm totally ignorant. And I became aware that it wasn't only I who was writing in English who had this problem. In a way every Indian writer had that problem—how to reach beyond that small community which spoke exactly the same language that you yourself used.

I've been interested in finding ways of bending or expanding the language, so that it includes the tones and accents and rhythms of other peoples. I think I used that experiment most consciously in the last two books I wrote. One is called *In Custody*, which is about an Urdu poet and about the world of Urdu literature, and I had to incorporate the particular character of Urdu in the English language, and I was very conscious when I was writing dialogue of somehow bringing in that particular character that Urdu has, and I also wrote some verse for my chief character who was an Urdu poet and tried to put into it the imagery and the technique that Urdu writers do employ. And I used the same experimental form for the next book I wrote, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, because I wanted so much to incorporate my own familiarity and experience of the German language within my Indian experience, which sounds rather outrageously outlandish, but I was able to do it by bringing my German character to India and getting him to fit his Indian experiences to his German language and way of thought.

I would like to continue with these experiments, because it seems to me that the world as it is now has certainly stepped up the pace of emigration and immigration. One meets more and more people who travel, who often have no other

baggage but their own language, have to acquire more. But as I said before, this isn't a new or an American experience for me. It's an experience that belongs to my childhood in India, when I was surrounded by people from different regions and in fact different countries, and all had to find a common language somehow. And I would love to use language by piecing together all the fragments that are here and that I use. That is what I should really love to do. I've still not found a way of doing it, but I hope to sometime.

Source: Anita Desai, Caryl Phillips, and Ilan Stavans, "The Other Voice," in *Transition*, Vol. 64, 1994, pp. 77–89.

Anita Desai

In this article, Desai discusses the state of contemporary Indian fiction.

The words *Russian literature* instantly evoke a picture of a dacha in a birch wood, a samovar, white nights and black forests, and an impression of what V. S. Pritchett called the Russian "sense of justice and mercy and the inner life." Similarly, the words *American literature* conjure up pictures of the red soil of cotton fields, log cabins by the Mississippi, and high-rise commotion in inner cities, and powerfully convey the air of life, liberty, and license pursued by her writers. Then what do the words *Indian literature* evoke?

Above all, its antiquity, traditions that go so far back in time as to enter a primeval world that is arboreal rather than pastoral, a formal wilderness in which sages live and courtesans dance. But if such images were ever apposite, are they relevant now? That magical idyll is surely torn to shreds by today's strife, riots, and commotion, and the tranquil scene overtaken by events of ferocious injustice and the obsessive struggle for survival. The bedrock is no longer made up of the old orthodoxies of religion, caste, and family; everywhere are fissures, explosions, shatterings.

Does today's literature reflect the violence, plurality, and volatility of the Indian scene? Or its comforts, solaces, and exuberances? Which of the ancient themes have survived and which sunk out of sight forever? Which have emerged and overtaken them?

If we were to read large chunks of Indian writing in order to gather fresh impressions, one that would be sure to strike us is the underlying unity of the scene—a unity that belies the fissiparousness of the Indian scene, a unity that can give the impression of repetition and monotony.



TO THE INDIAN, THE LINEAR DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN THOUGHT IS STRANGE AND UNFAMILIAR—EVEN UNNECESSARY. THE INDIAN READER, LIKE THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHER, SEES TIME AS A CYCLE, A WHEEL, EVER TURNING, EVER CHANGING—NOT AS A SEQUENCE OF EVENTS, BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING AND ENDING WITH THE CLIMAX.”

Why do all Indian writers describe a landscape with the stock features of a mango grove, a river bank, cattle raising dust along a village path, a village well, and a crescent moon? We could go further and say that every mother we meet is self-sacrificing and hardworking, every father stern and authoritarian, every money-lender cruel and vicious, every peasant ignorant and starving. To make such statements is to make sweeping generalizations but, to tell the truth, when we look around we do not find all that many exceptions. We realize that exceptions are not what is wanted—what *is* wanted, what continues to give satisfaction, the satisfaction of the familiar and not the unexpected, is ever new variations on old themes. Witness the phenomenal success of the Ramayana as a television serial!

The fact is that the Indian writer uses characters, as he does features of the landscape, to represent wider truths. He does not see a character—or a tree, an ox, or a hill—as unique and particular; they merely symbolize the larger concepts that he regards as the only fit subjects for art. And so a river represents all rivers, a tree all trees, a lover all lovers—of gods, and men.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Indian poetry—Urdu, Sanskrit, or whatever—but it is present in fiction too, from Rabindranath Tagore’s 1915 novel, *The Home and the World*, where Bimala represents both Mother India in her “earthen-red sari with its blood-red border” and the mother goddess Durga, to Salman Rushdie’s 1983 novel, *Shame*, in which Sufiya Zenobia embodies the shame of a nation that denies

that emotion and flaunts shamelessness instead. In between the work of these two writers are countless novels in which peasants do what they are supposed to do—suffer and starve—women perform their womanly duties (which are those of the female deities), the rich portray greed, sensuality, and cruelty, and the savior comes to earth in the form of Brahma, Shiva, or Mahatma Gandhi (as in *Kanthapura*).

Not only is the Indian writer constantly aware of the other world of which the visible, palpable one is merely one aspect, but so are his characters. The villagers who live in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* see a shooting star in the night sky and instinctively exclaim, “Some good soul has left the earth,” and so forget their earlier heated discussion of caste. Even in the mundane world of Malgudi, with no pretensions to being anything but what it is—a small town in South India—R. K. Narayan’s cobbler reminds the reader of that “otherness”:

“I ask God every day and keep asking every hour. But when he is a little free he will hear me. Till then, I have to bear it.”

“What? Bear what?”

“This existence. I beg him to take me away. But the time has not come. It’ll come.”

Till then, he is simply a cobbler, in Malgudi. But he has reminded the reader of that other time, that other world in which he could be—a king? a saint? a shooting star?

It is hard to say if such philosophy, such religiosity, will survive in the writing of modern India. Gita Mehta’s handling of the theme of *guru-chela*, the religious leader and the pilgrim, in *Karma Cola*, shocked Indian readers by its satire and parody; they failed to notice that the satire was directed against those who belittled or demeaned the higher truths.

When Arun Kolatkar wrote his poems about the temple town of Jejuri in 1974, he had the personage Manohar enter an open door “wondering / which god he was going to find” and turn away “when a wide-eyed calf / looked back at him. / It isn’t another temple / he said / it’s just a cow-shed.” But the fact remains that the whole cycle of poems was built on the foundations of a temple town, a place of pilgrimage. To ignore that element in Indian life would be to amputate Indian thought and letters from one of its fundamentals—and for the writer to deliver an incomplete or amputated creature to the reader.

Another aspect of Indian thought that at one time seemed to be disappearing from Indian literature, influenced as it was by Western literature from the nineteenth century onward, and that has now returned alive and well, is the cyclical interpretation of time, which gives Indian literature, and all Indian art, its distinctive structure. In *The Speaking Tree*, Richard Lannoy wrote of the “unified field awareness” of the Indian which expressed itself in the art of the cave sanctuaries and in Sanskrit drama, and pointed out that in the classical age all literature was written on uniform strips of palm leaves, each strip containing a brief portion of the whole, a *sutra* or a *sloka*, to be read or scanned cyclically, displaying a synchronic rather than a diachronic attitude. Raja Rao, in the introduction to *Kanthapura*, wrote:

Our paths are paths interminable... we have neither punctuation nor the treacherous “ats” and “ons” to bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop, our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling.

It was the style he adopted for *Kanthapura* and for *The Serpent and the Rope*. He had in mind the models of the Puranas, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata—where the reader, or more commonly the listener, would take up the thread at any point. To the Indian, the linear development of Western thought is strange and unfamiliar—even unnecessary. The Indian reader, like the Indian philosopher, sees time as a cycle, a wheel, ever turning, ever changing—not as a sequence of events, beginning at the beginning and ending with the climax. The Victorian novel did have its effect on the early novelists of India and it was the model for their work, but the Indian writer has never shown the Western writer’s gift for exciting narrative in which event follows event till the climax is achieved—there are neither Graham Greenes in Indian literature nor Agatha Christies nor Jeffrey Archers. It is hard to find a taut, tightly structured novel in which each component counts and each works to move the narrative further, in which nothing lies idle or is wasted. The pace of the Indian novel has remained slower—it rambles, it sprawls, it meanders off into diversions.

And it is interesting to see that after twenty years in which the novel was written more or less on the Western model, in *Midnight’s Children* Salman Rushdie wound the straight line of

narrative into a circle and the serpent was seen to eat its own tail again:

There are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the whole lot as well.

Critics pointed out that he had entered the Latin American world of “magical realism,” to which he replied that he had reentered the older world of the Mahabharata, which was the true originator of magical realism. In *Shame* Rushdie mythologized still-living people and turned events in living memory into fantastic legends. The close was made distant, the distant close. Time and perspective altered and telescoped before our eyes.

Immediately there was a flood of younger writers delighted to return to the old style of story telling that was strangely the “latest” and “newest” style. In following his trajectory they found themselves traveling so far westward that, the world being in the shape it is, they had arrived in the east again.

One finds the same phenomenon present where language is concerned. For so many years the Victorian novel influenced the Indian novel, whether written in Bengali or Malayalam, its rules and artifices affecting even the language, but in the 1930s and 1940s experiments were already being made—by G. V. Desani, by Raja Rao—to bring into literature the accents, rhythms, and tones of Indian speech. Still, it was a literary language they invented, and that did not go very far in a country where the printed word has always had a separate existence from the spoken word. There is a language for books and a language for conversation, and the two are not the same—so we were taught in school and so we believed. R. Praver Jhabvala’s success in reproducing Indian speech rhythms in English were ignored because she did not have the right credentials—she is not Indian. It was Salman Rushdie again, in *Midnight’s Children*, who finally brought the spoken language off the streets onto the printed page, with such energy and electricity that the Indian reader was finally won over and the Indian writer saw the two tongues as one. And so we find we are back in the days of oral story telling, when the language employed had to be accessible, demotic, of and for the people.

As was to be expected, there was a long trail of imitators. The earliest—Namita Gokhale and Balraj Khanna—were capable of only the crudest imitations, but the novels of Amitav Ghosh, I. Allan Sealy, and Upamanyu Chatterjee have shown a growing sophistication in using that demotic manner. Clearly, the tongues of Indian writers—so to speak—have been set free from inhibition and have found confidence. Suddenly it was made apparent that the Indian writer had as distinctive and authentic a voice as the American or the Caribbean.

Whatever the quality of such prose, its writers certainly have a new confidence, a new ease and comfortableness that points to new beginnings. Where will that take us?

Source: Anita Desai, “Indian Fiction Today,” in *Daedalus*, Vol. 118, No. 4, Fall 1989, pp. 206–231.

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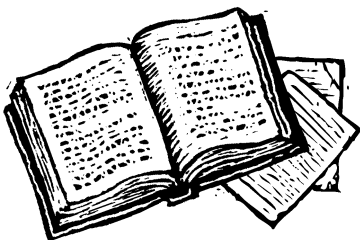
This collection of critical essays on Desai includes several which focus on *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*.

End of the Game

JULIO CORTÁZAR

1967

“End of the Game” is a short story by Argentinean author Julio Cortázar. It was first published in Spanish in 1956 in Cortázar’s third collection of short stories, *Final Del Juego*. It is available in English translation in a collection of Cortázar’s work titled *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, published in 1967. Although Cortázar is well known for works with a fantastic element, “End of the Game” instead involves ordinary people in ordinary situations. However, Cortázar allows a fantasy element into the story, as he portrays the game of a group of three adolescent girls—the Narrator, Holanda, and Letitia—who play in an imaginary kingdom by the railroad tracks near their house. In their kingdom, they create and wear elaborate costumes and pose for train riders. One rider, a young man named Ariel, begins dropping notes to the girls and they are enchanted by him. The story counterposes Ariel’s view of the girls and the girls’ perception of him. The two realities ultimately collide—and the game abruptly ends.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julio Florencio Cortázar was born on August 26, 1914, in Brussels, Belgium, to María Scott and Julio Cortázar. His father was an economist who worked for the Argentine embassy in Brussels. In the same month that Cortázar was born,



Julio Cortázar (© Sophie Bassouls / Sygma / Corbis)

World War I broke out, and Germany invaded Brussels. In 1916 the family fled the occupied city and moved first to Switzerland and then to Spain. They returned to Argentina when Julio was four years old, and soon after the move, Cortázar's father abandoned the family. Julio never saw him again.

As a child, Cortázar lived with his mother, his maternal grandmother, his aunt and his sister, Ofelia. He was an introvert and he loved to read. He suffered from asthma and was not an active child; although he was an excellent student. In 1932, Cortázar earned a teaching degree and began teaching high school; when not teaching, he spent long hours reading and writing.

Cortázar had been writing since he was a child—he completed his first novel at age nine—but he lacked confidence and hesitated to have his work published. In 1938, he published his first book of poems, *Presencia*, under a pseudonym, Julio Denis. In 1949, Cortázar published a play, *Los Reyes*, under his own name.

During the 1940s Cortázar worked as a manager in a publishing association. He continued to write and studied to qualify as a translator. He believed that translating was great training for a creative writer. During this period, Cortázar suffered from nightmares and used his writing as therapy.

Cortázar left Argentina for Paris in 1951 with few possessions and little money, escaping what he saw as the restrictive cultural life in Argentina for the more booming creative world of Paris. Paris had become known as a place for artists during this period and was the home of expatriate writers Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest

Hemingway, James Joyce, Henry Miller, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein. Cortázar's countrymen criticized him for leaving Argentina, arguing that he was not a true Argentinean writer if he was living and writing in Paris. Cortázar responded that the distance from his homeland allowed him to see it in a new light. He also pointed out that many other Latin American writers were writing from Europe and that the "boom" in Latin American literature at the time consisted mostly of works by writers living abroad.

In Paris, Cortázar was short on money and took various temporary jobs until he found contract work as a translator for the United Nations. He also began to make a name as a literary translator, translating great works including the complete prose of Edgar Allan Poe.

Ultimately, Paris proved to be very inspirational for Cortázar. It was in Paris that he published his first book of short stories under his own name, *Bestiario*, in 1951. He followed the work with a second collection of short stories, *Final del Juego* (1956), in which the story "End of the Game" first appeared. "End of the Game" also appeared in an expanded edition of this short story collection, published in 1964. The 1966 film *Blow-Up* by highly acclaimed director Michelangelo Antonioni was based on a short story from this collection.

During his lifetime, Cortázar published more than eighty short stories and six novels as well as many poems, plays, and literary translations. *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), published in 1963, sold five thousand copies in the first year and is considered to be Cortázar's most notable novel.

Cortázar died of leukemia on February 12, 1984, in Paris and is buried there.

PLOT SUMMARY

"End of the Game" is the story of three adolescent girls and a fantasy game they play in a field behind their house in full view of the Argentine Central Train Track. The girls, Letitia, Holanda, and the Narrator, live with Mama and Aunt Ruth, two disciplinarians who seem always to be disapproving of the girls' activities, chasing them across the house and yelling that they will end up on the street.

On a typical day, the girls eat lunch with Mama and Aunt Ruth, and then the Narrator

and Holanda help with the dishes. Often the girls cause a commotion while drying the dishes and instigate fights between Mama and Aunt Ruth. Letitia is excused from helping with the dishes because of an unexplained disability that involves a partial paralysis. The Narrator says:

Maybe it was the stiffness of her back that made her look so thin, for instance she could hardly move her head from side to side, she was like a folded up ironing board, one of those kind they had in the Loza house, with a cover of white material.

Letitia waits for the girls to finish their work and then, when Mama and Aunt Ruth take their naps, the three girls sneak out past the white gate to their “Kingdom,” the field where they play their game.

Letitia, whom the Narrator judges the “luckiest and the most privileged,” is the leader of the three girls and the creator of the game, “Statues and Attitudes.” The game can only be played when Letitia gives a signal to the others at lunch. The girls draw lots and the two who do not win choose ornaments for the winner to wear. Once the winner is dressed in ornaments, she has to pose as either a “Statue” or an “Attitude.” Attitudes are emotions like spite, jealousy, shame, and fear. Statues are more concrete—an oriental princess or a ballerina. The winner poses and waits until the 2:08 train goes by. The two girls who are not posing get a quick glimpse of the train riders and their reactions to the poses.

Letitia’s disability limits what she can do in the game. The Narrator says, “Letitia did Statues very well, poor thing. The paralysis wasn’t noticeable when she was still and she was capable of gestures of enormous nobility.” However, because Letitia has difficulty bending her back or turning her head and suffers from pain, she has difficulty with Attitudes, which require more movement.

One day, during the game, a note is dropped from the train that changes everything. It says, “The Statues very pretty. I ride in the third window of the second coach. Ariel B.” The girls are delighted and look for Ariel the next day. They get only a quick glimpse of him, but speculate that he is between sixteen and eighteen and is coming home from an English school.

Day after day, the girls continue to play their game and look forward to more notes from Ariel. He writes that he enjoys their poses. One note says, “The prettiest is the laziest.” The

girls surmise that Letitia is his favorite, and that he interprets her lack of movement as laziness. Letitia is pleased and begins acting like she is in love. She keeps Ariel’s note and her eyes shine during dinner that night. Even Mama and Aunt Ruth notice that Letitia is happy, and they assume that her new treatments are making her feel better.

The two other girls are envious that Ariel has picked Letitia as his favorite and they talk about their feelings before bed. That night the Narrator has a dream that she has had before in which she is on the train tracks and fearful of getting run over by a train.

One day, Ariel drops a note to say that he is going to get off the train to come chat with the girls the next day. Letitia is upset by this. Although she does not tell the others why she is upset, they understand that she does not want Ariel to know that she is disabled. The Narrator agrees, privately, that it “seemed ghastly to me that Ariel should find out,” but she asks Letitia to come anyway, getting “terribly gushy” and saying that Letitia “shouldn’t be afraid, giving as an example that true affection knows no barriers and other fat ideas.” However, Letitia decides not to go. She sends a note to be given to Ariel if he asks a lot of questions about her absence.

The next day, lunch seems to last for hours. Holanda gets slapped by Aunt Ruth for spilling food on the tablecloth. Finally, lunch is over and Holanda and the Narrator go out past the gate. When Ariel arrives, he is taller than they imagined, all dressed in gray, and seems shy. He reveals that he goes to the Industrial High School, not an English school, and the girls are disappointed. He praises the Statues and Attitudes, asks the girls their names and why the third one did not come. Holanda and the Narrator see that Ariel is very disappointed and distracted that Letitia is not there. Holanda gives him Letitia’s note; he puts it away and leaves shortly. Although the Narrator is curious about the contents of the note, she does not question Letitia about it or try to read it. The reader never learns what the note says.

The girls find Letitia under the lemon tree on the porch, and when they tell her about the meeting with Ariel she looks both happy and sad. Holanda predicts privately to the Narrator that the game is forever finished. As it turns out, there is one more day of the game, a final farewell. The next day, Letitia surprises the girls by giving them

the signal for the game, and when they get past the gate she has another surprise. Letitia takes out of her pockets their mother's pearl necklace, her rings, and Aunt Ruth's ring. The other girls worry that they will get caught and punished.

Letitia asks the girls to let her be the winner that day, and they agree. They choose "lovely things that would go well with the jewels" for ornaments. The Narrator says that Letitia poses as "the most regal statue she'd ever done," and when Ariel passes, he looks at only her, with his head hanging out of the window. When the train is gone, the girls see that Letitia has enormous tears pouring down her face. The girls put the ornaments in the box for the last time. The Narrator realizes that only in the game can Letitia look so grand, and that her disability, rather than being an advantage, will limit her life. The Narrator and Holanda go out the next day to watch for the train. Ariel's window is empty. The girls imagine him sitting on the other side of the coach, looking at the river. Facing the reality of Letitia's physical limitations has made all three girls grow up, and they never play their game again.

CHARACTERS

Ariel

Ariel, a young man who attends an Industrial High School, passes on the 2:08 train every afternoon. He sees the three girls each day in their poses and begins to throw them notes from the train. Ariel says that he likes the Statues. Soon he lets them know that he is transfixed by Letitia. One day, Ariel gets off the train to visit the girls. He is terribly disappointed that Letitia has decided not to come and meet him.

Aunt Ruth

Aunt Ruth lives in the house with the Narrator, Holanda, Letitia, and Mama. She is prone to shrieking and hysterics as she disciplines the girls and sets the rules along with Mama.

Holanda

Holanda is one of the three adolescent girls who live in the house. The three girls are very close and share a secret world outside by the tracks where they play their game. Holanda and the Narrator, both healthy, alternate between envying Letitia for her greater privileges and being extra kind to her because of her disability.

Letitia

Letitia, whose name means joy, is the center of the story. She is one of the three adolescent girls living in the house. Letitia has a physical disability that leaves her partially paralyzed and often in pain. The Narrator envies her as she gets special privileges due to her disability.

Letitia is the leader of the three girls. She is the creator of the game of Statues and Attitudes, and only she can give the signal that it is time to play. When she is in a pose, her disability is not noticeable. Ariel becomes smitten with her and plans to come and meet her. She cannot bear to let him know about her disability and instead writes him a note, the contents of which are never revealed to the reader. The last time Ariel sees her, she is bedecked in precious jewels taken without permission from Mama and Aunt Ruth, and she is in an unforgettably regal pose with tears streaming down her face.

Mama

Mama is a disciplinarian along with Aunt Ruth. She is prone to hysterics, and she chases Holanda and the Narrator around the house when they misbehave, screaming that they will end up on the street. However, Mama treats Letitia quite differently than she treats the Narrator and Holanda; Letitia is nursed and taken care of and not expected to do household chores. Many of the girls' actions are hidden from Mama, and the Narrator takes pleasure in imagining what might happen if Mama found out their secrets.

Narrator

The reader never learns the name of the Narrator. She is one of three adolescent girls living in the house with Mama and Aunt Ruth. The best part of the Narrator's day is going out to the "Kingdom" near the train tracks and playing the game, Attitudes and Statues. The game of fantasy seems more real to the Narrator than does her time spent in the house doing chores or dealing with Mama and Aunt Ruth.

At the beginning of the story, the Narrator believes that Letitia's disability is actually an advantage because it gives her special privileges. However, things change when the boy on the train falls in love with Letitia. The Narrator then realizes that Letitia has a terrible cross to bear, that only in the game can she pretend she does not have a disability. Facing this reality is a coming of age of sorts for the Narrator as well as

for the other two girls; once they face it, they never play their childhood game again.

THEMES

Envy and Guilt

The nameless Narrator in “End of the Game” is envious of Letitia and, at the same time feels terribly guilty for her envy. She envies Letitia’s special privileges:

Letitia didn’t have to dry dishes or make the beds, she could laze away the day reading or pasting up pictures, and at night they let her stay up later if she asked to, not counting having a room to herself, special hot broth when she wanted it, and all kinds of other advantages.

The Narrator also is envious when it becomes clear that Ariel prefers Letitia. This envy is complicated because the Narrator envies a disabled girl who is often in pain and who seems to be suffering. Thus she often feels guilty and tries to compensate by being extra nice to Letitia. In fact, the night the Narrator and Holanda discuss their resentment of Letitia, the Narrator has a dream that she says she has had before—she is on the train tracks and worries she cannot escape being hit by a train. This would place the Narrator in Letitia’s position—with a broken body—or would kill her. The dream is a manifestation of her guilty conscience because of her envy of Letitia.

Physical Disability as a Taboo Subject

Letitia’s physical disability is at the center of this story, although it is rarely discussed. Letitia herself never mentions it. Her disability is ignored in an effort to pretend that it does not exist. The Narrator observes:

In a household where there’s someone with some physical defect and a lot of pride, everyone pretends to ignore it, starting with the one who’s sick, or better yet, they pretend they don’t know that the other one knows.

When the Narrator attempts to talk with Letitia about why she is not going to meet Ariel, she does not mention Letitia’s disability, concerned instead that she “put it nicely.” She tells Letitia, “If you want, we can explain to Ariel that you feel upset.” Letitia refuses to talk about it, as well. “She said no and shut up like a clam,” the Narrator relates.

Letitia’s physical disability is so taboo within her family that it seems plausible that

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- In “End of the Game,” Cortázar does not reveal several elements of the story, including the name of the Narrator, the contents of Letitia’s note to Ariel, and the details of Letitia’s disability. Write an essay explaining why you think Cortázar made these choices. How would the story be different if these elements had been revealed? Would the story improve or would these revelations detract from the story? Explain.
- One of the unknowns in “End of the Game” is the contents of the letter Letitia writes to Ariel. Write an essay detailing what you think Letitia wrote. Support your answer with clues from the story.
- The girls are disappointed when they learn that Ariel attends the “Industrial High School” and not the “English School.” Use the library and the Internet to research the history of schools in Argentina in the 1950s. Write an essay in which you explain the role and purpose of industrial high schools in Argentina during that time. Who attended these schools? What did their students study? How might these students differ from students at the English school? Why might the girls have been disappointed that Ariel attends the industrial high school?
- Letitia’s name means joy. With a small group of classmates, discuss why you think Cortázar chose Letitia’s name.

she does not reveal it to Ariel in the letter, either, although the reader never knows for sure. However, facing the reality of the disability, even though it remains unspoken, is the catalyst that prompts the three adolescent girls to let go of their childhood game, and, in a sense, grow up.

Fantasy versus Reality

Fantasy is often an important part of childhood but in “End of the Game”, fantasy takes on an even greater significance than usual. In this



Pile of jewelry (Image copyright D7INAM17S, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

story, the girls' fantasy world is the most important part of their existence. They must get through the realities of day-to-day life such as washing dishes, doing chores and dealing with Mama and Aunt Ruth, but their one goal is to go outside and escape into their game. That world is the most rewarding to them, perhaps because when Letitia poses, she is regal and beautiful—she did not appear disabled at all.

Fantasy also plays a large role in the romance between Letitia and Ariel. These two characters never meet, and yet they act as if they are in love in a way that is reminiscent of fairy tales. However, although Letitia most likely does not tell Ariel in her letter exactly why she is saying good-bye to him, the reality of Letitia's physical disability and how it will limit her life—rather than give her special privileges—becomes clear to all three girls. Thereafter they give up their fantasy game.

STYLE

First-Person Point of View: Nameless Narrator

Cortázar makes a strategic decision when he writes “End of the Game” in the first-person point of view. A first-person narrator tells no more than he or she knows—and in fact, in this story there are many things the reader never learns, such as what Letitia writes in her letter to Ariel. In addition, the first-person point of view allows the reader to see this situation from

the point of view of a child. The Narrator views Letitia as the “luckiest and the most privileged of the three of us,” a unique point of view that no adult would share when evaluating Letitia's situation.

“End of the Game” is narrated by a central character who remains nameless throughout the story. Her nameless status is likely due to her relationship with Letitia. Letitia overshadows the Narrator to the extent the Narrator seems to lack her own identity separate and apart from Letitia. Indeed, Letitia's presence and her illness seems to dominate the entire family. When Letitia is unwell everyone caters to her, her mood governs the mood at the dinner table, and family members seem to consider Letitia above all else when making decisions. When Letitia quits the game, for example, the other two girls do not continue playing themselves, but accede to her wishes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When “End of the Game” was published, Cortázar lived in Paris, where he enjoyed a rich cultural life among other writers and artists. He had left his native Argentina in 1951, five years after Juan Domingo Perón became president of Argentina for the first time. In 1944, while Cortázar was teaching at the University of Cuyo in Mendoza, he had been arrested for protesting against Perón. This arrest led to his resignation from the university. Cortázar left Argentina because of the restrictions—political and cultural—under Perón.

Argentina Under Juan Domingo Perón

In 1943, Juan Domingo Perón was an army colonel and one of the leaders in a coup to overthrow the Conservative government. Thereafter, Perón became the Minister of Labor and was elected to the presidency in 1946 with 54 percent of the vote. He ran on a platform of pro-labor rhetoric and won with the support of the military, the poor, and the working class. He also had the support of many immigrants.

Perón's government, the *Partido Unico de la Revolucion Nacional* became known as the Perónist or Justicialista Party. Perón was against the aristocratic values that had previously existed in Argentinean government. He was a hero among the working class, whom he championed, providing social security, free public education for

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1950s:** A physical disability greatly limits the options for a person living in Argentina. Prejudice against disabled people limits social interaction, and few resources exist to help disabled people get an education or employment.

Today: Despite the passage of laws in Argentina, including job quotas for disabled people in 1981, an anti-discrimination law passed in 1988, and human rights legislation in 1994, the laws are barely enforced. Conditions have not yet been created that would allow disabled people to function autonomously.

- **1950s:** A system of primary and secondary education is in place in Argentina. Secondary education, which consists of grades eight and up, might take place at “Bachiller” schools, which focus on the arts and humanistic studies, “Comercial” schools, which focus on a business education, or “Escuelas Tecnicas,” or Industrial Schools.

Today: In 1995, most of the country abolishes the old secondary education system, instead adopting a system of specialization called “Polimodal.” Buenos Aires, however, continues with the system of primary and secondary education. In 2006, the Argentine Congress restores the old system of education and increases the length of compulsory education to thirteen years.

- **1950s:** From 1946 until her death in 1952 at the age of thirty-three, the charismatic and popular Eva Perón, is First Lady of Argentina. Perón has a profound effect on women’s political activity. In 1951, the Female Peronist Party, which she founded, has five hundred thousand members.

Today: Women are increasingly active and powerful in party politics. A quota system mandates that 30 percent of political candidates must be women, and Argentina is ranked among the top fifteen countries in the world in women’s participation in Congress.

all, low-income housing, health insurance, and paid holidays. He attempted to integrate the population and to empower the working class by expanding workers’ unions. However, Perón ran the government as a dictator, removing all but one of the Supreme Court Justices, exiling priests, and attempting to have only his supporters in positions of power. Eventually, the country fell into economic crisis, and opposition to Perón grew.

Perón’s second wife, Eva Duarte de Perón, known as Evita, was a charismatic former actress and is thought to have helped her husband gain popularity and win re-election in 1952. When Evita died that same year, Perón began drinking and exhibiting controversial behaviors. After a coup attempt failed to overthrow Perón in 1955, he made an infamous speech from his balcony, calling for all traitors

to be thrown into jail. A few days later, a second coup was successful and Perón fled to Spain.

Perón’s reign was not over. In 1973, after the military government failed to revive the economy or to control domestic terrorism, Perón was again elected president. He died on July 1, 1974, and his third wife, Isabel María Martínez de Perón served as president until she was removed by a military coup on March 24, 1976.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

According to Peter Standish in his book, *Understanding Julio Cortázar*, Cortázar’s short stories are his most significant works as they have “drawn the most unflinching admiration from readers, and they have inspired endless critical



Train traveling through the countryside (Image copyright remik44992, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

studies.” He calls Cortázar’s stories “protean creations that resist attempts to reduce and simplify them. It is characteristic of them to be open to multiple interpretations, and many thrive on ambiguity.” “End of the Game” is a good example of such ambiguity. What *did* Letitia write to Ariel? Did she, or did she not, admit her disability? Was it a positive thing or a negative thing that the girls gave up their fantasy world?

Terry J. Peavler, in his book *Julio Cortázar*, points to Cortázar’s great “ability to portray the psychology of adolescents and children” in “End of the Game” and to capture the “spirit of the three girls.” Indeed, that spirit is strong from the first pages of the story, when the girls bring good-natured chaos into the dull existence of the adults. The spirit is sustained throughout the story as the girls play their game, only to be lost when they must confront the reality of Letitia’s disability by story’s end. As Standish observes, “The transition into adulthood, a painful experience that has been dealt with by so many writers, marks not only a loss of innocence but also a loss of richness.”

CRITICISM

Esther Mizrachi Moritz

Esther Mizrachi Moritz, JD, writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and educational materials. Her personal essays have been published in Lilith magazine. In this essay, Moritz discusses the theme of lost childhood innocence in “End of the Game.”

“End of the Game” is a story about the end of childhood innocence and thereby an end to the rich imaginative, colorful world that the children live in. The reader meets the characters, Letitia, Holanda, and the Narrator as they are in transition between living almost exclusively in their childhood world of fantasy and having to face some harsh realities in their lives.

In the story’s first scene the girls are creating chaos in the orderly adult world. They are helping to dry dishes after lunch but are much more interested in causing arguments and confusion and upsetting Mama and Aunt Ruth. Immediately in this scene, Cortázar shows the reader the vast divide between the children and the adults. The girls are colorful, mischievous, and imaginative

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Tangerine* (2006), by Edward Bloor, is a young adult novel about a disabled boy who fights for his right to play soccer.
- Legendary Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and other Writings*, published in 2007. It contains stories, essays, and parables by Borges.
- *Julio Cortázar*, published in 2005, is a book of collected criticism on Julio Cortázar, edited by Harold Bloom.
- *A Model Kit*, first published in 1968 and published in English in 1972, is Julio Cortázar's classic novel about a city that is different to each person who inhabits it.
- Julio Cortázar's thirty-three-day trip on the Paris-Marseilles freeway in a Volkswagen camper in 1982 is memorialized in his book *Autonauts of the Cosmoroute*. A 2007 translation contains stories and photos.
- Darline Stille's *Eva Perón: First Lady of Argentina*, published in 2007, is a biography of the famous wife of Juan Domingo Perón, the dictator of Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s. Eva, known popularly as Evita ("little Eva"), was adored by Argentineans and even made a run for the office of vice president before ill health forced her to withdraw. She died of cancer at the age of thirty-three.
- *It Isn't Fair!: Siblings of Children with Disabilities* is a collection of essays published in 1993 by and about the siblings of children with disabilities. It is edited by Stanley D. Klein and Maxwell J. Schleifer and offers a range of perspectives on the relationships between disabled children and their siblings.
- *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) by American playwright Edward Albee, like "The End of the Game," involves a game of make-believe, in this case played between a husband and wife. Reality crashes in on the game during an ill-fated after-party.

and seem to be willing to do almost anything to bring vibrancy and excitement into their lives. They go through the motions of chores but are preoccupied with fending off the women's boring "bits of advice" and "drawn-out family recollections." They get a thrill out of causing fights between Mama and Aunt Ruth, upsetting the cat and being chased across the house. By contrast, Mama and Aunt Ruth are flat characters. They are dull and boring, preoccupied with chores and housework and prone to scolding and chasing the girls around the house with the "whipstick."

The rich, vibrant fantasy world of the girls pervades the girls' lives. They regularly sneak out past the white gate and into the wider world where life is infinitely more exciting and alive. The difference between the children's perspective and that of the adults is exemplified in Mama's threat that the girls will "end up on the street." The girls are perplexed by this threat. To them, ending up on the street seems normal, even desirable—the street would certainly offer more fun, more life, more richness than a mundane existence in a house doing chores.

The girls' sneak outside to what they call their "Kingdom" each day after lunch. The Kingdom is a fantasy world near the railroad tracks where the granite sparkles "like real diamonds" and where the river is "coffee and cream." They play right by the tracks, for what could be more exciting than a moving train? It holds the promise of the unknown, of a world even farther beyond the white gate, full of interesting strangers with whom the girls seek to interact, if only for the brief moment in which the train passes.

The girls, led by Letitia, have created an elaborate game based on fantasy that they play by the railroad tracks. The girls take out their ornaments that are hidden under a stone and work together to create elaborate statues, in anticipation of exhibiting a good pose for the passing train riders. The game is an alternate reality that completely consumes the girls. In the richness of their fantasy world they are swept into a place of pure beauty and joy where jealousy, shame, envy, and fear are celebratory poses and decidedly not difficult emotions. In their imaginations the girls become beautiful and admirable characters, perhaps a Chinese princess or the "Venus de Nilo." Most importantly, though, the Kingdom is the place where Letitia, who is disabled and often in pain, reigns supreme. In the

Kingdom, Letitia is beautiful, regal, and noble. In the Kingdom, Letitia could pose and be—or at least appear to be—physically well.

While the Narrator is fully aware of Letitia's disability at the outset of the story, in her immature view, the disability is an advantage. Although she calls Letitia "poor thing" (perhaps words she has heard adults use when speaking of Letitia) and describes Letitia's pain and partial paralysis, she shows her childish innocence by calling Letitia "the luckiest and the most privileged of the three of us." After all, Letitia is excused from chores and could "laze the day away" if she so chose. In the Narrator's childish point of view, Letitia's disability is something to envy.

Meeting Ariel, however, changes everything. After he first drops them a note, the girls make him an added character in their fantasy world, an unknowable train rider who represents the wider world and the unknown. They fantasize about where he goes to school and about how old he might be. When he makes clear that he admires Letitia, that is also based on a fantasy—about her physical beauty and of course, perfect health. For a while, Letitia lets herself be caught up in the fantasy of what the Narrator calls, "true affection" that "knows no barriers and other fat ideas."

But when Ariel expresses a desire to meet Letitia, the disability becomes a central issue that can no longer be denied. Ariel's note telling the girls that he will come for a chat the next day forces the three girls to face the reality of Letitia's condition. They can no longer pretend that Letitia is just like them and in fact, the luckiest of them. If Ariel meets her, he will see her physical limitations. In anticipation, all three girls become extremely aware of the disability. In that instant, childhood innocence is lost.

In fact, the Kingdom itself disappears. The Narrator, in trying to convince Letitia to come out with them to meet Ariel, no longer calls their play area the "Kingdom" but rather the "willows." Their special place is no longer part of a fantasy world.

In the final scene Letitia says good-bye to the game and to the innocence of childhood. This final time the pretend ornaments are not sufficient for the girls to use. Because the girls have lost their childhood innocence, they can no longer take baubles and imagine them into jewels. This time, Letitia has taken real jewels that belong to Mama and Aunt Ruth. Letitia's farewell pose

marks the transition between childhood and adulthood as she poses as "the most regal statue she'd ever done." Here, for the last time, Letitia is beautiful and an object of envy.

Now the girls must face the reality of Letitia's disability and the limitations she will face in her life (and loves). The next day Letitia's pain increases and the Narrator and Holanda must be absolutely silent, rather than boisterous and playful, to allow her to rest. The two girls go out to the willows but they do not even consider playing the game. And when the train passes, Ariel is no longer at his usual window. The game has ended. The fantasy world of childhood is gone.

Source: Esther Mizrahi Moritz, Critical Essay on "End of the Game," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Peter Standish

In the following excerpt, Standish discusses several of Cortázar's stories that feature adolescents and analyzes Cortázar's view of the passage between adolescence and adulthood.

Children and Adolescents

Quite a number of Cortázar's stories inhabit the world of children. Cortázar saw children as spontaneous and intuitive beings uninhibited by the trappings of adulthood, the conventions and patterns of thought and action that limit adults. He often casts doubt on the idea that our world can be accounted for in terms of reason, of cause and effect. When children are used as a vehicle for expressing that doubt, they are portrayed as being able to accept phenomena without the demand for rational order or logical explanation; the fantastic and the fantas-magorical can take their place beside the real, for perceptions stretch beyond the confines of reason and language. In *Territorios* (1978, 108) Cortázar refers to children as "*Eleatic*" and "*pre-Socratic*." The adult worldview will eventually impose itself, however: in "Manuscrito hallado en un bolsillo" (Manuscript found in a pocket) Cortázar writes that "*children look unflinchingly straight at things until the time comes when they are taught to locate themselves in the gaps between as well*" (*Cuentos completos*, 2:66).

For Cortázar the transition into adulthood, a painful experience that has been dealt with by so many writers, marks not only a loss of innocence but also a loss of richness. Notable among the losses is the child's sense of playfulness. It is

therefore understandable that many of Cortázar's adult characters, perhaps especially those who serve as his alter ego (one thinks especially of Oliveira, the central figure in *Rayuela*) are noteworthy precisely because they still cultivate that sense of playfulness and seem to be overgrown children. In one of his interviews, Cortázar said that everyone he had lived with had complained at one time or another about the degree to which he was still a child at heart. He acknowledges that they had reason to do so: "Faced with certain situations in which adults naturally tend to behave like adults . . . my reaction tends to be childlike, playful." In another interview he confessed: "I am still very much a child and very adolescent in many things . . . There's always been an adolescent side to all my emotional relationships."

One can observe the writer's complicity with children in such stories as "*Silvia*" and "*Las fases de Severo*" (Severo's phases). In the latter, the ailing Severo is attended by friends and relatives gathered around his bed. Together they enact a series of bizarre rituals, while the reader angles for a rational explanation of these activities. Toward the end of this story a child turns to the narrator, who happens to be called Julio, wondering if what he takes to be a game is over and asking for reassurance that it has indeed been a game; Julio assures the child that it has. Perhaps the story has all been a game, and so the joke is on the reader, who has been struggling to make sense of it. Perhaps, though, declaring it all a game is simply a way of dealing with something that is rationally incomprehensible, because conspicuously, at the close of the story, the adults are said to be busying themselves with routine things, donning their slippers and starting to sip mate, which, the narrator wryly concludes, are "things that always help."

Fernando, the narrator of "*Silvia*," is surely a thinly disguised Cortázar, since he lives as an exile in Provence, has friends who are Argentine or at least versed in Spanish American literature, and demonstrates such empathy with children. When Fernando first arrives at the house of some of these friends their young daughter Graciela rushes into his arms and settles herself on his knee, as if expecting to be told a story. It seems, however, as if their roles are reversed. Graciela keeps referring to Silvia, the young woman who looks after the group of children of whom Graciela is one, tending to their cuts

and bruises and other bodily needs and comforting them; apparently she is old enough to act like an adult, but still close enough to their world of cowboys and Indians for them to feel she is like an older sister. Fernando thinks he glimpses her in the firelight; he appreciates her figure and becomes attracted and absorbed by her as, all the while, he is engaged in conversation with the other adults about intellectual and artistic matters. When he asks the children about Silvia, they say simply that she comes along sometimes and that if he doesn't understand, he is silly; when he questions the adults, they dismiss Silvia as the children's imaginary companion, telling him not to let them string him along. But Fernando is smitten by curiosity and by Silvia, wishing both to understand rationally and to believe, because Silvia represents the lost power of childhood fantasy (and also arouses his adult lust). The rational explanation is that Fernando is getting drunk and that part of him is still credulously innocent and childlike. Yet the imagined Silvia grows in importance until she occupies his mind more fully than do the real adults. At a later social gathering, Fernando is obsessed with whether she is present or not, and when, at last, she is no longer, his sense of loss is palpable. Graciela has the final word when he asks her if Silvia is there: "How silly you are! It must be the moon . . . What a loony thing to think!" (21)

"Who is Silvia? What is she?" are questions that are familiar to us thanks to Schubert's setting to song a poem in German based on one in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (4.2). Elsewhere in that play (3.1) Shakespeare writes in a way that appears to encapsulate Fernando's predicament:

What light is light, if Silvia be not seen?
 What joy is joy, if Silvia be not by?
 Unless it be to think that she is by
 And feed upon the shadow of perfection.

The choice of Silvia as the name for the girl in Cortázar's story is probably not fortuitous but rather intended to call to mind the Schubert melody as a sort of leitmotif. Just as we know that Cortázar was often influenced by music, we also know that echoes of Shakespeare in his work are quite frequent.

Apart from any quest for the ideal love—"the shadow of perfection"—here in "*Silvia*" we have the child and adult worlds in contrast with one another, the one open to imagination and possibility, the other circumscribed by reason

and social custom. The story also has a meta-textual dimension, since it presents a fiction within a fiction. Graciela is told by her mother to go back to playing with the other children and stop telling Fernando stories, but Graciela grasps Fernando's face between her hands "to tear him away from the grown-ups," and she insists to him that she and the other children have not invented Silvia. Later, the mother chides Fernando for being gullible and falling for the children's version, and close to the end of the Cortázar's story, when Silvia seems to have vanished, the mother says that that is just as well, since they (the adults) had all had enough of "that story." In saying this she is no doubt alluding to the child's habit of inventing as much as to the specifics relating to Silvia. One might compare "Silvia" with other Cortázar stories that present a fiction within a fiction and use the embedded fiction to remind us that the outer one is no less fictional, no more deserving of trust: I refer to stories such as "*La salud de los enfermos*" (The health of the sick) and "*La isla a mediodía*" (The island at noon).

In many stories, then, including "*Bestiario*" and "*En nombre de Bobby*" (In the name of Bobby), the child's worldview is contrasted with the adult's. In a good number of them, however, the focus is on growing up. An early example is "*Los venenos*," a highly autobiographical story, which portrays an idyllic world of children playing in a garden; they are fascinated by a piece of fumigating apparatus brought by an uncle to put an end to an infestation of ants. The story also deals with first feelings of love: there is poison to harm the ants and poison to hurt the feelings of the child narrator. Beyond the ramifications of its title, "*Los venenos*" is a remarkably realistic and straightforward story; it is also an engaging and accomplished evocation of the edenic world of the children and the sensibilities of the child narrator. The interest in insects is typical of Cortázar; he sees spiders as weavers of destinies, associates rigidity and conformity with beetles, and hostility with ants. In some autobiographical passages in *Territorios* there are powerful evocations of lost innocence, of a lost sense of wonder (see, especially, "*Las grandes transparencias*" [Large-scale transparencias]), and in that same book (44) mankind is pictured fighting for liberty against the "horminids" (*hormiga* is "ant" in Spanish).

"*Final del juego*" (End of the game), the title story of that collection, is perhaps the most indicative

of how Cortázar regards the passage from childhood to adulthood. It is about three sisters who play "statues" on an embankment for the benefit of a boy they see speeding by periodically in a train. They dub him "Ariel" (Cortázar's allusion to Shakespeare's sprite). Ariel drops a note telling the girls how much he enjoys the show and saying that he is most intrigued by one whose name is Leticia. But she is handicapped, and there comes a time when the truth about her condition must be revealed in a note that is passed to Ariel. In these new circumstances Leticia, who is likened by the author to a trapped insect, poses for him one last time. Thus the game is put away, the facts of life are faced, and the handicapped Leticia (whose name means "Joy") is left in tears. And so it turns out that her name has been ironically chosen: the description of her early in the story as "the happiest of the three of us, and the most privileged" (394) proves to be the opposite of the truth.

A psychological handicap is perhaps what dogs the life of the narrator of "*Después del almuerzo*" (*After lunch*), another story to be found in *Final del juego*. After lunch, the narrator, an adolescent, obeys his parents' instructions and takes "it" (or "him") on a bus ride into the town. Whatever one may like to assume "it" actually is (for its identity is never revealed), more important is what it represents in terms of an adolescent's fears, inhibitions, and sense of responsibility. At one point the adolescent tries to abandon "it," to break away, but in the end he returns home as anticipated and is even proud to have done so. The recurrent images of dead leaves in this story suggest that some of the problems are not exclusive to the adolescent or escapable in adult life.

Shortly before his death, in semblance an old man, Cortázar wrote a prologue to a collection of stories by a friend, in which he singled out the ability of children to strip bare the world of those who pretend to control them, thus rendering it derisory: "But adolescence emerges, slowly and bitterly; in that murky in-between state games enter an area in which prohibitions will be violated . . . These are fake adults who cannot accept the rules of the game . . . the adolescent turns one last time toward his past in a final, desperate attempt at resistance."

Among the stories that concentrate on young people, two stand out because they focus directly and solely on the sufferings of adolescence, the road to independence from a mother

figure, and the achievement of sexual maturity. “*La señorita Cora*” (*Nurse Cora*) was first published in 1966, in the collection *Todos los fuegos el fuego*; almost twenty years later Cortázar published the story “*Ud. se tendió a tu lado*” (whose title, as will become evident, is not translatable) in *Alguien que anda por ahí*. Each is an interesting narrative experiment in which the style in some way represents the theme.

In “*La señorita Cora*,” Pablo Morán, an adolescent, is admitted to a hospital for an appendectomy, but complications arise and lead to his death; the story is concerned with the relationship between the boy, his mother, and Nurse Cora, a triangular relationship in which the boy is the apex. The opening words, a monologue by the mother, at once establish her domineering protectiveness as she complains about the clinic’s failure to provide a guest bed for her and about her “little boy’s” disorientation on realizing he would be without her: “He is only fifteen and no one would believe it always sticking to me though now that he’s in long trousers he’s trying to fool everyone and pretend to be a grown man” (548). Her complaints center on “that hussy of a nurse,” whose authority in the clinic is confused by the mother with rivalry for the care and attention of Pablo. His mother is an amusingly convincing stereotype: she is over possessive, a social snob, and unwilling to release her son into manhood; she has a henpecked husband whose behavior, in her view at least, is typically male; and she is jealous of Cora as a potential rival and garrulous to boot. Just as it seems that the story might slip into triteness, there comes the first narrative surprise: “I’ll have to make sure the blanket is keeping my baby warm, I’m going to ask them to have a second one handy just in case. Yes, of course I’m warm enough, thank goodness they’ve finally gone, Mom thinks I’m just a boy and creates so much fuss.” In the middle of a paragraph Cortázar has moved from one monologue to another, from the mother to the boy. The blanket issue is seen from two points of view. So too are the mother’s enforced absence and her protests against it. It becomes clear that Pablo’s inclination to “pretend to be a grown man” is not all a matter of show, though she cannot accept that fact. Nevertheless, his wish to grow into independence is contained by boyish enthusiasm. Thus the noise of the lift evokes in him memories of an exciting horror film, and when his sweets are taken away by the nurse, one is not quite sure whether his indignation is caused by the fact of having them removed, as if from an

irresponsible child, or because he simply wants to suck mints. Many actions and reactions point to Pablo’s ambivalence: this young man still reads comics, blushes repeatedly at the slightest cause, has a voracious appetite that he feels he must deny, finds it impossible to talk about normal bodily functions, and is acutely embarrassed at his own sexuality. As the story progresses, the shifts of perspective become more sudden, taking place in mid sentence, and are sometimes not even signaled by punctuation marks. Moreover, more perspectives are involved than those of the boy and his mother: most importantly, Cora comes into play. When she does so, the sentence thread that links Pablo with his mother like an umbilical cord is replaced by a new bond, with the nurse, a bond that has both maternal and sexual overtones.

We have already seen that a union can be forged between Pablo and the women, first his mother, then Cora, by means of narrative style. Another respect in which language can be called mimetic in this story is in the changes of style—now puerile, now blasé, now composed—reflecting the protagonist’s attitudes. Sometimes we see a loose interdependence of too many statements, in the manner of an enthusiastic, but not particularly articulate, child. In all senses, Pablo’s style matures in the course of this story; the hospital stands for the school of life, in which he acquires self-assurance and independence, growing free of his mother and then even of Cora, to die with a sad and lonely dignity.

Cortázar admitted that he was very fond of this story and that he had identified closely with Pablo, having himself experienced similar feelings when being treated by a young woman dentist. Furthermore, Freud, he says, confirms the adolescent tendency to project erotic fantasies onto caregivers. As he wrote the story, Cortázar was Pablo; he both loved and hated Cora. In *Último round* (149; “upper floor”) Cortázar said that (at least until 1969) he had never written anything as erotic as “*La señorita Cora*.”

All through his evolution, Pablo is viewed with sympathy; he is indeed adolescent in the original sense of the word, for his physical and mental anguish run in tandem. Other characters may view him with patronizing disdain (Marcial and, to some degree, Cora also) or insensitivity (his mother), but the reader is made to feel sympathetic throughout and senses that an awesome outcome is inevitable. One might perhaps compare this story with that of the boy on the boat in *Los*

premios (The Winners), Felipe (see chapter 5). Lacking in experience but determined to assert his adult self, to “behave like a grown-up,” he makes a rash sortie into the forbidden zone; his motives are recognized for what they are, but he fails to achieve his aims and provokes adult reactions that range from mockery and amusement to sympathetic understanding. To paraphrase the comments of one sympathetic (adult) fellow passenger, what makes him so engaging is that he is on the verge of change; he is aggressive, fearful, dimly aware of love; he senses that the time is near but doesn’t know of what.

In another story in *Todos los fuegos el fuego*, “*El otro cielo*,” the protagonist, who this time is an adult, is still seen as partially dependent on his mother. We see him in two contexts, the Buenos Aires of Perón and the Second World War, and the Paris of Lautréamont and the Prussian War, his passage from one to another being realized fantastically. His Buenos Aires self represents the epitome of middle-class behavior running along the expected channels, whereas in Paris his existence is bohemian and precarious. The two are linked by the common image of the arcade, in such a way that having entered the Pasaje Güemes in Buenos Aires the protagonist can exit from the Galérie Vivienne into Paris, break with conventionality and, most significantly for our present discussion, the expectations of his mother. Thus the arcade is, in a sense, a duct through which life passes, and what matters for us is that it passes from mother and wife relationships to one that is more free; “*El otro cielo*” is evidently concerned with broader issues than that of a son freeing himself from his mother’s apron strings. Although the arcade is not quite a symbol of the umbilical cord, it is certainly an evocative image, one which suggests that the passage to the other side, to the alter ego, is related to the transition to adulthood. Interestingly, the transition to adulthood is here associated with a move toward greater authenticity of being; there seems to be some contradiction between it and the association that Cortázar more commonly makes between adulthood and loss of spontaneity and suppression of the instinctual.

It is within the Buenos Aires setting that Cortázar dwells somewhat on the adolescent crisis; the spectral figure of the South American who moves about Paris makes one think of the author’s own passage to France and the transformation that experience brought about in him,

a man nearing forty. Cortázar writes, as if in echo of the image of Pablo in “*La señorita Cora*”:

Round about 1928 the Pasaje Güemes was the treasure cave that offered a delicious mixture of glimpses of sin and mint candy (590).

My mother always knows if I’ve slept at home . . . [her] present consists of a clear tacit signal that the offense is over, the son has returned to normal life at home with his mother (592).

It was to be another decade before Cortázar returned to the theme of adolescence as his central concern in what proved to be another experimental story, this time a more daring one: “*Ud. se tendió a tu lado*.” The title of this story is ungrammatical, offering immediate proof of the way in which here theme and form are inextricably entwined. The ungrammaticality arises from Cortázar’s inventive use of second-person pronouns. In standard Spanish there are both familiar and honorific (polite) forms of pronouns; in Argentine Spanish there are additional dialectal variants, which extend the palette. This is not the place to enter into technical details regarding how Cortázar deploys these devices in “*Ud. se tendió a tu lado*.” The effect is to create ambiguity surrounding the identity of the referent and the narrative point of view adopted; in other words, the reader is not always sure who is being talked about and by whom. One wonders, for example, whether Cortázar is using both familiar and honorific forms to refer to a single person. If so, does the use of one or the other imply a change of attitude toward that person, and is that change of attitude on his own part or on the part of another character in the story? Is it perhaps the narrator’s attitude that changes with the pronouns, or is it a case of authorial omniscience giving way, at times, to perspectives that are narrative-internal, that is, those of the characters in it? We have already noted that the title is strange. Also puzzling is the opening line, which may mean “When was the last time I/he/she/you had seen him/it/you naked?” Nor is this the end of the perplexities. The first paragraph is a long, single-sentence onslaught on the reader, comparable with the opening of “*La autopista del sur*” and some other stories; during this sentence, a succession of images of adolescent self-awareness—the locked bathroom, the croaking voice, the self-absorption—gives way to a flurry of childlike dependence: “to the habit of throwing his arms around his mother’s neck, of rough affection and slobbery kisses, Mommy, dear Mommy, dear Denise, Mommy or Denise according to the

mood and the hour, you little puppy, Denise's little puppy".

This establishes the theme clearly enough as the ambivalence of adolescence. The vacillation between "Mommy" and "Denise" is, it seems, paralleled by the confusion of pronouns, and thus one is left wondering how far the child is still strongly attached to his mother and how far he is truly independent and self-reliant. By referring to both mother and son with second-person pronouns Cortázar achieves two effects: he places Denise and Roberto close together, and himself close to them. It is as though the two "you" forms bind mother and son into one being at times addressed as a child, at times as an adult; Cortázar, then, uses a dual form of address that is analogous to Roberto's use of "Mommy" and "Denise." Other characters in the story are kept at a distance by being referred to in the third person. Moreover, the confusion of second-person referents reflects, in a formal, linguistic way, the emotional, even physical link between those referents, the mother and the son; the "you" forms are functioning as a linguistic equivalent of the umbilical cord.

Inventive and highly successful though this story may be, we should note that the writer's self-awareness is also reflected when he explicitly states that ordinary language is not up to the task in hand: thus the characters are said to be engaged in "an almost incomprehensible exchange of monosyllables, laughs, and shoves from the new wave that no grammar could make clear and that was life itself laughing at grammar" (144).

Adolescence reappears in "Siestas," a story first included in *Último round*. It is also a major focus of the title story of Cortázar's last collection, *Deshoras*, published in 1982. There, he traces the beginnings of love in pages that echo the emotional atmosphere of "Los venenos," and he continues with passages (especially in the third section) that might almost be paraphrases of parts of "La señorita Cora" and "Ud. se tendió a tu lado." In "Deshoras" ("Unreasonable Hours") the boy Aníbal senses in Sara, the big sister of his best friend, Doro, that same amalgam of nurse, mother, and potential lover; but he does not feel he can express his interest and so he yearns for her in silence, believing that she is unaware of his feelings. The story begins with a first-person narrator, Aníbal himself, but soon switches to the third, a switch that will later prove to be crucial. Sara is a surrogate mother to Doro because of the physical incapacity of

their mother. Sara's mothering extends to Aníbal, who is devastated one day when she comes into the bathroom and sees him naked. To compound his suffering, Sara then marries a man who takes her away. Years later when, for all their good intentions, Doro and Aníbal have lost touch and the latter has moved to Buenos Aires, become an adult, and entered into a business partnership, chance leads his path to cross with Sara's. After a brief moment of embarrassment they start to communicate as adults, and she reveals to him that years before, when she had come into the bathroom, she had already been aware of his interest in her and so had entered deliberately in the hope of curing him of his longing. It seems that now, as adults, they have reached the point where they will consummate the relationship. However, at this juncture the narrator reminds us of his identity by slipping back into the first person; by doing so he emphasizes that he has been telling a story, using words that for a while had "gone along astride reality" but that are now yielding to it in the form of his wife reminding him of things that need to be attended to about the house. The main point of "Deshoras," then, rather as in Carlos Fuentes's story "La muñeca reina" (*The doll queen*), has to do with levels of fictionality. In the dénouement of "Deshoras" the hopeless and idealized longing of Aníbal for Sara seems to be satisfied by means of the author's trick of suggesting that the two of them meet by chance years later as adults and become lovers; yet this adult encounter remains a literary one, "written" by the narrator, still ideal. One is reminded of the elusive perfection of Silvia, of the joy that may be had in imagining that she is "by."

Source: Peter Standish, "Chapter Three: Winning by a Knockout," in *Understanding Julio Cortázar*, University of South Carolina Press, 2001, pp. 34-45.

Terry J. Peavler

In the following excerpt from a book about Julio Cortázar's work, Peavler discusses Cortázar's ability to portray the psychological complexities of his child and adolescent characters.

One of Cortázar's greatest strengths as an artist was his ability to portray the psychology of children and adolescents, a talent he displayed masterfully in the title story of *Final del juego* (*End of the Game*). "End of the Game" concerns three young girls, one of whom is crippled, that pose in a field as statues for the entertainment of passengers on the 2:08 train. Each day they draw

lots to determine which one will be the statue; the two losers select costumes and jewelry. One day a young passenger, Ariel, drops a note from the window, expressing his appreciation for their efforts. After several more days and notes, some of which express the young man's preference for the statues of Letitia, the crippled girl, their admirer announces that he is going to get off at their town so he can visit with them for a while. Letitia refuses to meet with him, but sends him a letter by way of the other girls. On the following day, Letitia poses, tears streaming from her eyes, and the young man stares from the train window for the last time. The next day Letitia is too ill to go to the tracks, and Ariel's face is no longer visible on the train. Presumably he now sits on the other side of the car, gazing out the opposite window.

The power of "*End of the Game*" derives from Cortázar's ability to capture the spirit of the three girls, which in turn is dependent upon his decision to use one of the three as narrator. This choice of narrative voice is perfect for rendering the story, for the narrator does not fully comprehend or appreciate all events. This limited understanding is thus all that is shared with the reader, who is forced to become, as it were, another child within the story.

Narrative voice is equally critical in "*Los venenos*" (*Poisons*), one of Cortázar's classic studies in juvenile psychology. The narrator, a young adolescent, eagerly awaits the arrival of a new machine that is to be used to kill ants. He is disappointed by the device's appearance, but its ample weight restores his confidence, and his pride receives a boost when it is made clear that for safety's sake his younger sister will not be allowed to help in the extermination. On the first test run, the machine functions perfectly, and the narrator busily helps his uncle operate it, using mud to seal off all avenues of escape for the poisonous smoke: ("I positioned myself alongside him with my hands covered with mud up to the elbows, and one could see that that was a job for men" [*Relatos* 2:79]). The extermination project is delayed for several days during which the narrator's cousin, Hugo, pays a visit. Not only does Hugo arouse a good deal of jealousy in the narrator, he quickly enamors his younger sister. During one of the children's games, the neighbor girl, with whom the narrator is infatuated, injures her knee. As the protagonist doctors the wound, he notices how bravely she looks at

Hugo, without crying. With his juvenile love inflamed even more by Lila's bravery, he digs up his jasmine plant, gives it to her, and helps her plant it in her own garden. When the ant fumigator is again pressed into service, after Hugo has returned to Buenos Aires, the poisonous smoke works its way through the underground passages to the jasmine plant. As the narrator struggles to save the tree, he discovers that Lila now has Hugo's most prized possession, a peacock feather that he refused to give to the other children. Infuriated, he leaps back into his own yard, "I opened the can of poison and I threw two, three heaping spoonfuls into the machine and closed it up; thus the smoke thoroughly invaded the ant hills and killed all the ants, leaving not a single ant alive in the garden" [89].

Such a gloss cannot begin to do justice to the many nuances of infantile jealousy and pride that Cortázar captures through his careful manipulation of language. Line after line, paragraph upon paragraph, he seems to have discovered the exact phrasing to recreate these sensations in his readers. The story overtly narrated is but a superficial beginning, for many equally interesting stories flow beneath its surface. One key to the success of such works is the depth to which the author himself identified with his juvenile protagonists: "The depth of sensibility of the girl, Isabel, in '*Bestiary*' is mine, and the boy in '*Los venenos*' is me. In general, the children that move about in my stories represent me in some way."

While "*End of the Game*" and "*Los venenos*," both from the same collection, are arguably the stories in which Cortázar best reveals this sensitivity, his interest in the theme carries over into later collections as well. In "*La señorita Cora*" ("*Nurse Cora*") the protagonist is a bit older (fifteen), but equally sensitive, especially with regard to his budding adulthood.

In reality, "*Nurse Cora*" has two protagonists, the young patient, hospitalized for an appendectomy, and his youthful nurse. The patient, Pablo, has been badly spoiled by his dotting mother, who hovers over him in the hospital, to his great embarrassment. He finds Cora most attractive, but his request to call her by her given name is coldly rejected. From that moment on, the two are constantly at odds: he is humiliated by such routine hospital procedures as temperature taking and bathing, for he wants to show his manhood and strength, while she seems bent on

increasing his embarrassment and keeping him in his place. The surgery does not go well; an infection develops, and high fever and pain set in. Cora, suddenly concerned for her ward's life, reverses her attitude, now remaining constantly at his side and comforting him. However, when she begs him to call her Cora, shortly before his death, he steadfastly refuses.

"Nurse Cora" is an ambitious experiment, for not only does it develop the psychological crisis of two protagonists in a relatively brief space, it changes perspective a total of thirty-four times. The dominant perspectives are those of the two main characters, but others are also represented. The story opens, for example, with the voice of the hovering mother: "I can't understand why they don't let me spend the night in the hospital with the baby, after all I'm his mother" [*Relatos* 2:207; *All Fires* 65]. As in those fantastic stories in which two realities are gradually fused, this initial orientation is clear for several lines. However, before even the first paragraph is finished, the perspective switches to that of Pablo: "I wonder if the baby's warm enough with that blanket, just to be sure I'll ask them to leave another one in reach. Of course I'm warm enough" [207; 66]. As this quote indicates, not only is the perspective constantly shifting, but the changes often come in the middle of an event or idea, with one character finishing what another has begun, even if what is completed is a thought.

The transitions, which link thirty-five clearly definable segments over a span of only eighteen paragraphs, are much akin to the bridges used in jazz, and given Cortázar's affinity for that musical form and its incorporation into many of his major works, especially *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*) and "*El perseguidor*" ("*The Pursuer*"), both predecessors of "*Nurse Cora*," one may assume that the similarity is deliberate. The major 'instruments' in this case are the mother, Pablo, Cora, and Cora's boyfriend, Marcial, who also serves as Pablo's anesthesiologist. In addition to the eighteen paragraphs, the story is broken into six major elements: 1) before the initial surgery; 2) immediately after the operation; 3) complications, Cora begins to soften somewhat; 4) Pablo's condition worsens and Cora continues to weaken; 5) Pablo's perspective dominates as he grows increasingly feverish; 6) now Cora's perspective is dominant, a second operation is performed, and Pablo dies. If textual extension (the number of lines devoted

to a particular theme, character, or perspective) is any measure, the domination of the mother at the beginning yields to the struggle between Cora and Pablo, and Pablo emerges as a man only when he is on the brink of death.

Source: Terry J. Peavler, "Chapter Four: Short Stories—the Psychological," in *Julio Cortázar*, Twayne Publishers, 1990, pp. 65–68.

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FURTHER READING

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Cortázar, Julio, *Hopscotch*, translated by Gregory Rabassa, Knopf Doubleday, 1987.

This novel is Cortázar's most acclaimed work. Gregory Rabassa won the first National Book Award to recognize the work of a translator for this translation.

Cortázar, Julio, *Blow-Up, and Other Stories*, Pantheon Books, 1985.

This short story collection includes "End of the Game" as well as "Blow-Up," Cortázar's short story that was made into a film in the 1960s.

Link, Theodore and Rose McCarthy, *Argentina: A Primary Source Cultural Guide*, Rosen Publishing Group, 2003.

This book details the history and culture of Argentina, including the arts, geography, myths, education, industry and the government.

The Fence

HAMSAD RANGKUTI

1997

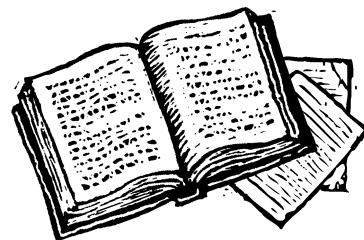
“The Fence” is a short story by Indonesian author Hamsad Rangkuti. It takes place during the rainy season in Sumatra, Indonesia, where Rangkuti lives. The story can be found in the textbook *British & World Literature for Life and Work* (1997).

The story is narrated by a child of unknown age and gender. It begins in the pouring rain. An old vagrant takes shelter under the eaves of the house where the Narrator lives with Mother and Father. This leads to a discussion between Mother and Father about whether they need a fence to protect their house.

Mother is convinced they should build a fence to keep vagrants away. Father, on the other hand, believes they do not need a fence because they have nothing valuable in the house to protect. He thinks they should open their doors to vagrants who need help. But Mother manages to convince Father that a fence is needed. Once the fence is built, the family feels protected for a short time. But one day, during the rainy season, the family forgets to lock the gate and learns a lesson about fences and life.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rangkuti was born in 1943 in Medan, Indonesia. As a child he lived in Kisaran, a town in North Sumatra, Indonesia. There were no libraries



where he lived. His family was very poor and he could not even afford to buy a newspaper. Rangkuti managed to read great authors like Anton Chekhov and Ernest Hemingway by visiting the local government office, where the Sunday editions of local newspapers were posted on the wall. Rangkuti also learned about storytelling from his father who was a teacher of the Koran, the Muslim holy book. It was these experiences that inspired Rangkuti to write his first short story when he was sixteen.

Rangkuti began his writing career while living on the streets of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital city. Here he mingled with the many thousands of poor who lived alongside him. He slept on a piece of paper on the floor of Balai Budaya cultural center in Menteng. These experiences helped Rangkuti acquire material for his stories, which heavily feature the poor and underprivileged in his country.

Between 1986 and 2002, Rangkuti worked as an editor at *Horison*, a literary magazine. He has also served on the Jakarta Arts Council and has published four collections of short stories in addition to a novel. His stories have appeared in Indonesian and foreign magazines as well as textbooks. Rangkuti won the 2003 Khatulistiwa Literary Award and the prestigious 2008 Southeast Asian Writers Award for his short story anthology *Bibir dalam Pispot (Lips in a Pisspot)*. In 1981, he won the esteemed Jakarta Arts Council Award for his then-unpublished novel *Ketika Lampu Berwarna Merah (When the Light Is Red)*, which was finally published in 2001.

Rangkuti is dedicated to building respect for literature in Indonesia and believes in teaching children to appreciate literature from a young age. Rangkuti retired from *Horison* in 2002 and continues to write and teach creative writing.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with heavy rain, a common occurrence in Sumatra during the rainy season. Through the window, the Narrator spots an old man taking shelter under the eaves of the house. The old man is hunched over.

Mother turns out the light and peeks through the curtain, trying to keep the old man from seeing that the family is watching him. She cautions the Narrator and Father that if the old man

knows they are watching, he will soon knock on the door. Mother complains that the family needs to build a fence—without one, the yard is open to all. Goats come in and wreck the plants and noisy children chase their toys all over the yard.

Father disagrees with Mother. He sees no reason to prevent people and animals from coming in. “Let them enjoy what we have. Just let them be,” he says. He adds that a fence is not needed if there is nothing in the house worth protecting.

Mother and Father argue about whether they have anything that needs protecting. Mother says the house needs protecting, but Father reasons that no one would steal a house—rather, it is the house which protects its contents. Father argues there is nothing valuable to protect in their house, so there is no need for a fence. Mother gets offended. She asks Father whether he thinks the family is worth protecting.

Father responds that another type of fence is needed to protect people—faith in God. “That’s what you have to instill in yourself and the children,” he says. “That’s what’s needed to serve as a fence in this life.” Mother accuses Father of changing the subject and expresses her fear that their eaves will become a gathering site for vagrants.

The Narrator, who is just tall enough to see out the window, looks out and sees more than five people standing under the eaves with the old man, “rubbing their chests to keep warm against the cold.” Mother is agitated by this news and predicts the growing crowd of vagrants will soon be knocking on the door. Father says, “If they knock, let them come in.”

Eventually, the vagrants do knock, and Father and Mother argue about whether to let them in. The Narrator finally opens the door at Father’s urging.

The vagrants tell the Narrator that the old man is freezing to death and ask for some hot coffee and ointment to rub on his chest. Mother protests that there is not enough coffee left for the family, which the reader finds out later is a lie. She reluctantly gives the old man coffee and ointment to rub on his chest. The vagrants take care of the old man.

After a while, the old man feels better. He talks about the rain and how he has to keep running for shelter. He expresses gratitude that not everyone has a fence. But, he says, the rain has slowed down his journey. When asked where

he is going, he answers that he does not know. When asked if he has a home, he responds, "Traveling is my home." When asked how far he is going, he says, "Let's say until I reach a fence, but that fence is far away, very far away. And when I'll reach that fence, I don't know. So, I just have to keep on going, just keep on going until I reach it."

Soon the rain subsides. The vagrant leaves and Mother prepares more coffee, saying that now they are really out of coffee and sugar.

Father and Mother have a discussion about whether there is a need to keep the sugar jar if there is no sugar to put in it. Father thinks they should get rid of the sugar jar if they are out of sugar, and uses the example of the fence. If there is nothing to protect from vagrants, he says, a fence is unnecessary—so too is a sugar jar if there is no sugar to protect from ants.

Mother wins the argument by pointing out that they have to keep the jar so that when she buys sugar, she will be able to keep it safe from ants. Father agrees. He realizes that protection is often needed before one acquires something valuable. And so he agrees to build a fence.

The Narrator and Father build a simple fence made of leftover lumber and bamboo. After that, the neighborhood children have to ask permission to get balls that fall into the family's yard. Mother feels respected. Father sets up a table and chair outside and Mother serves him coffee and fried bananas there every day. Sometimes she brings some out for herself, too. The Narrator comments, "Everything was finally safe and secure behind the fence."

But one day three months later, during the rainy season, the family forgets to lock the gate and a group of vagrants—including the same old man—takes shelter under the eaves of their house. Again, Mother cautions the family that they should not let the vagrants see them peeking out the window or they will knock. She expresses regret that they forgot to lock the gate and grumbles: "Now they'll come in whenever they like." Father again displays his generous attitude. "Let them come in," he says. "It's raining."

The vagrants knock at the door and, at Father's urging, the Narrator opens the door despite Mother's protests. The vagrants do not answer when asked if something is wrong. They push their way into the house, carrying the old

man. When they are in, the old man suddenly comes to life, and Mother screams.

The men pull out knives and tie the family to their chairs. They search the house and are confused when they do not find valuables. They say, "We have broken into the wrong house. This here's a poor man's house! There's nothing worth taking. The stuff in here is an insult to our profession."

They grab Father by the collar and accuse him of acting like a rich man by building a fence. They tell him that it was the fence that made them decide to rob the house. The robbers leave and the Narrator and his family untie each other.

Mother and Father have another discussion about the fence. Father blames the fence for the robbery. The Narrator asks if they are going to take down the fence. Father says they will not decide now. He asks for coffee, but Mother says there is no sugar. Father asks why the jar is still on the shelf. Mother responds that they may get sugar later. Father says he is getting a headache and asks for his tobacco.

CHARACTERS

Father

Father is a generous and kind soul. He sees no reason to keep vagrants off his property. He wants to share what he has, though he has very little. He objects to building a fence, but he is not very strong-willed. He allows Mother to convince him they need a fence in case they are someday able to acquire valuable things to protect. Father is a religious man. He believes that faith in God and remembering the principles of faith are the only protection his family needs. Father frequently smokes his pipe and seems to use it for emphasis when he speaks.

Mother

Mother is not a trusting person. She wants to hide from the vagrants and to keep them far away from herself, her family, and her house. She does not want to share her property or her possessions. She lies and says they are out of coffee when Father asks her to share it with the sick old man. Her fear leads her to insist on a fence to keep people out. Her fears come true when she fails to lock the gate.

Narrator

The Narrator is a child of unknown age and gender. She or he is just tall enough to look out the window, which indicates youth. The Narrator is unsure what he or she thinks about the fence and about sharing with the vagrants. The child seems to weigh the different attitudes presented by Father and Mother.

Old Man

The old man takes shelter under the eaves twice. The first time, he is genuinely sick and needs the family's help. The second time, he pretends to be sick to gain entry and then turns on the family to rob them. The old man is a wanderer. He says he has to keep walking even though he has no known destination. He says he will walk until he comes to a fence, which will be very far away. The old man is talking about his life as a journey that will continue until some barrier—death, perhaps—prevents him from going further.

Vagrants

The group of vagrants takes shelter under the eaves and gains entry to the house twice. The first time, the vagrants seem to be genuinely trying to help the old man. The second time, they return as a group of robbers, fooled by the fence into thinking there are valuables in the house.

THEMES***“Us and Them”:* Divisions Between People**

In this story, the fence built by the family is an actual barrier that divides people. In erecting a fence, Mother is saying to the vagrants, “This is my property. Keep off. You don't belong here.”

Before the fence is erected, the vagrants feel appreciative of the family. They can take shelter under the eaves of the house, and when the old man is sick, they receive help from the family. But once the fence is up, it divides them from the family. It sends the message, “We don't trust you. We have more than you and we want to keep our possessions safe from you. We want you to stay away from our property.” The vagrants react strongly to this unspoken message and come to feel at odds with the family. They perceive them as rich and therefore no longer like them. The fence creates a rivalry between the family and the

vagrants. Because the vagrants have been treated as untrustworthy, they start to act in an untrustworthy manner. They will stay away only as long as the barrier of the locked gate keeps them out.

In the end, the vagrants realize that the family is actually an “us” and not a “them.” This makes them feel both foolish and angry. They accuse the family of pretending to be something they are not. For example, one of the vagrants angrily grabs Father by the collar and says, “A poor man carrying on like a rich man, huh? What did you build that fence for?”

Father built the fence at Mother's urging. But in reality, Father sees commonality between himself and the vagrants, and thus he feels no need for the fence. Mother, on the other hand, is fearful of the vagrants. She views them as different from herself, and wants to keep them as far away as possible. Mother and Father represent two extremes in the way that people treat each other. The Narrator is in between, observing both and trying to form independent opinions.

In treating the vagrants as “others,” the family brings harm upon themselves. Rangkuti's meaning is that creating divisions between people and treating others as less than oneself may lead to the exact outcome that is feared. In other words, “The Fence” is a story of self-fulfilled prophecy. When seen and treated as brothers, the vagrants will act as brothers. But when treated like criminals that cannot be trusted, they will act the part. Rangkuti seems to be saying that if everyone is treated with respect and kindness (as was Father's original instinct), they will rise to the expectation and treat others in the same way.

Faith in God as Protection from Harm

Father tells Mother she is looking for the wrong sort of protection in a fence. When asked what sort of protection people need, Father replies, “It's faith in God and remembering the principles of Faith. That's what you have to instill in yourself and the children. That's what's needed to serve as a fence in this life.”

Each parent has a fundamentally different philosophy on what can best protect them from harm in life. Mother wants to hoard and protect her material possessions. She thinks physical barriers will protect her most valuable objects. Father, on the other hand, thinks that faith in God is the surest form of protection. He believes his most valuable possessions are his kindness, generosity, and his belief in brotherhood. He

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- In “The Fence,” Father advises that “faith in God and remembering the principles of faith” offer more protection than a fence. Read *Losing Your Religion, Finding Your Faith: Spirituality for Young Adults* (1998) by Brett C. Hoover. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Father’s idea of the principles of faith with Hoover’s definition of faith. Do Father’s actions fit into either of these ideas of faith? Explain.
- People use many kinds of boundaries to protect themselves. For example, when asked by a stranger or an acquaintance how they are, people often respond “fine,” even when they are upset about something. Or, they tell a friend they cannot come over because they need to study for a test or do chores around their house. Think about a boundary that you regularly maintain. What is the purpose of the boundary? How does it benefit you? How does it limit you? In a group of three or four students, discuss boundaries that each of you regularly maintain. Discuss whether the boundary is useful and what might happen if it were let down.
- “The Fence” takes place in Sumatra, Indonesia. Research and write a travel pamphlet about Sumatra in which you describe the climate, food, places of interest, and culture. For example, you may discuss what the weather is like at different times of year, or when is the best time to visit. You will want to mention what language the people speak, what food they eat, and describe historical sites or places of natural beauty a tourist might wish to explore.
- The Narrator never reveals his opinion about whether the fence should be built. Pretend you are the Narrator and you have grown up. Write a letter to Mother and Father stating your position on the fence. Was building a fence a good idea? Will you build a fence around your own home? Why or why not?
- Select and research a wall or fence that divided or currently divides countries, such as the Berlin Wall, the fence between Mexico and the United States, or the fence that separates Israel and the Palestinian Territories. In an essay, take a position for or against the existence of the wall or fence. Use Rangkuti’s story to support your arguments.

believes, too, that God can protect people everywhere they go—fences, however, can only protect people when they are at home. His belief in this is evident when he says of the fence, “Anyway, sometimes you have to go out through the fence, which means it will have lost its purpose.”

In Father’s view, true faith offers him an impenetrable protection that a physical barrier cannot. He is a religious man who sees it as his duty to help the vagrants by sharing what he has. He believes that God will protect him for acting according to God’s principles.

As it turns out, Father is correct that the physical barrier is not enough to protect his family. In fact, the fence he erects only puts his

family in harm’s way. In building it, Father is forced to violate his principles of brotherhood and generosity. He lets go of his spiritual beliefs, and as a result, fails to be protected.

STYLE

Allegory

“The Fence” can be read as an allegory, a story with a moral, ethical, or religious lesson in which the characters represent things or abstract ideas. Mother and Father represent two opposing attitudes about society’s responsibility toward those who are different or less fortunate. One attitude



Wooden fence (Image copyright Steve Mann, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

is a clear “us and them” division between people. This is represented by Mother, who hides behind the curtains, is hesitant to share her belongings, and insists on building a barrier between the family (“us”) and the vagrants (“them”). The

opposing attitude is represented by Father, who feels it is appropriate to help the vagrants and welcome them into his home. Father’s motivation is his religious belief—this is why he tells Mother that faith in God is the only true

protection they have. Rangkuti's story advocates for adopting Father's attitude of brotherhood between people and eschewing boundaries.

The end of the story teaches the lesson that boundaries bring about the very harm that they seek to prevent. Through his characters, Rangkuti is asking his readers to consider the consequences of dividing segments of society from one another. He uses his characters to show how social division turns people into enemies and invites violence, chaos, and unhappiness. The lesson espoused in "The Fence," then, is that people have a religious duty to help, welcome, and embrace those who are less fortunate.

Point of View

Point of view refers to how the author presents a story to the reader. It is the perspective from which the story is told. "The Fence" is told from the first-person ("I") point of view of the child. This means that all the events in the story, including the discussions between the adults, are seen from the point of view of the unnamed child narrator. The point of view can be identified in the very first sentence, which refers to the old man sheltering under the eaves: "Through the window I saw him hunched over as if bowed by the weight of the cane in his hand." The advantage of this point of view for this story is that the child does not have too many preconceptions about how life should be; for the most part, he or she simply listens and reports on the arguments made by his mother and father and does not take sides, although he or she does in the end influence Father into putting up the fence. Although a first-person point of view would allow a focus on the narrator's thoughts and feelings, the author chooses not to do so in this story, preferring instead a more objective approach that tells the story through dialogue and puts the focus on the central theme of the building of the fence and its consequences.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Indonesia as a Setting for Literature

Indonesia is made up of over seventeen thousand islands that span the Pacific and Indian Ocean and bridge the continents of Asia and Australia. As such, it is the largest archipelago, or island chain, in the world. Sumatra, where "The Fence" is set, is one of the five main islands of Indonesia, and its

most densely populated one. Indonesia experiences two climates: the dry season, between June and September, and the rainy season, between December and March. The remaining months are considered transitional seasons. During the rainy season, heavy torrential rains like the ones in "The Fence" occur daily.

Indonesia is the world's third largest democracy and has the largest Muslim population in the world. Its state philosophy consists of five principles, the first of which is the belief in one God. Its natural resources include crude oil, natural gas, tin, copper and gold, and its agricultural products include rice, tea, coffee, spices and rubber.

Despite Indonesia's rich natural resources, poverty is a major issue in the country. In "The Poor Fear Public Orders," a 2002 *Jakarta Post* article, members of the public were asked to speak about poverty in their capital city. Citizens were quoted expressing their concerns that the government did not compassionately deal with the poor and the homeless. Moreover, some stated that because the homeless in Jakarta are not considered residents, they are prohibited from running informal businesses such as street vending, and they have no right to live in the capital.

Other issues facing Indonesia include improving education, stopping corruption, addressing past human rights violations, and addressing climate change.

Literature in Indonesia

Rangkuti and other Indonesian writers have complained over the years about their country's lack of emphasis on literature, which makes it difficult for writers, even well-respected ones, to make a living. To illustrate this dilemma, a 1999 *Jakarta Post* article cited the Indonesian poet Viddy A.D:

My poor, poor author
Your new masterpieces still await you
So how come you are dead?
While that other man who is no literary
figure
Who we all hope will die for the misery he
caused so many people
Continues living.

The author of the article comments, "Viddy could have been mourning for the entire Indonesian literati. Respected and widely celebrated Indonesian poets still cannot make a living from their literary pieces alone."



A modest house (Image copyright bkp, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

The article discusses the plight of a respected literary figure, H. B. Jassin, who was seriously ill at the time and struggling to pay his medical bills. Of this author, Rangkuti said, “I think Jassin’s entire medical treatment should have been paid for by the government. After all, he doesn’t only belong to his family, he is a national asset.” Rangkuti and others blame the Indonesian government, which has historically discouraged literature, for their plight.

Through *Horison*, the magazine where Rangkuti worked, he and other authors are involved in programs that develop an interest in literature in young readers. Rangkuti also teaches and offers support to young Indonesian authors. Such work is important to Rangkuti because as a child, he had to struggle to read. There was no library where he grew up and he could not afford to buy newspapers.

Religion and Literature

Stories with Islamic themes thrive among teens in Indonesia. These stories, popularized by the publisher Asy-Syaamil Cipta Media, tend to center around struggling teens who are rescued by their religion. One example, given in a 2002 *Straits*

Times article, “Fiction with Islamic Theme Selling Well in Indonesia,” tells of a young girl who is struggling because she is very poor and her father gambles. But when she begins wearing a Muslim headscarf, or hijab, her life turns around.

Eka Wardhna, Asy-Syaamil Cipta Media’s publishing manager, thinks the renewed interest in Islamic literature is connected to the religious revival Indonesia experienced in the 1980s. Because of their emphasis on God and righteousness, these stories may be considered by some religious Muslim parents as less objectionable than those presented in secular literature.

Although “The Fence” does not fall squarely into the genre of religious fiction, it does have religious themes. Father believes that acting according to the principles of faith will keep the family safe. But the characters fail to do so, and as a result are not safe. Rangkuti’s theme differs from other popular religious fiction in that it is less heavy handed—it merely implies the moral of the story rather than stating it outright. However, the underlying message that faith in God earns one His protection is clear.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Rangkuti is recognized as a leading author in Indonesia, noted especially for his short stories. He is considered a senior figure in this genre in a country that boasts many fine writers of short stories. Unlike in the United States, newspapers in Indonesia publish short stories every week in their Sunday editions, so there is a large market for the genre, and many younger writers have been encouraged or inspired by Rangkuti's long-established work. Rangkuti has also won prestigious awards, including the Khatulistiwa Literary Award in 2003 for his short story anthology *Bibir dalam Pispot* (*Lips in a Pisspot*), and the prestigious Jakarta Arts Council Award in 1981 for his first novel *Ketika Lampu Berwarna Merah* (*When the Light Is Red*.)

Along with many other high-quality Indonesian writers, Rangkuti is little known in the West, largely because of a lack of many translations of his work into English. His short story, "The Fence" is an exception to this neglect. It is considered a work of literary significance as it has been translated into English and included in textbooks for study by students in the United States. As such, Rangkuti can lay claim to being one of the few, perhaps the only, Indonesian writer whose work is read by thousands of young English speakers.

CRITICISM

Esther Mizrachi Moritz

Esther Mizrachi Moritz, JD, writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and educational materials. Her personal essays have been published in Lilith magazine. In this essay, Moritz explores how fences affect people in literature and world events.

In "The Fence," Rangkuti explores how artificial boundaries affect humans. In this simply written story, the author poses important and thought-provoking questions about fences—artificial boundaries built with the purpose of protecting something. Rangkuti questions whether a fence is truly protective or offers a false sense of security. He suggests that the principles of faith, brotherhood and kindness are more protective than a fence and that fences—which represent the opposite of brotherhood—can cause the very harm that they are designed to prevent.



RANGKUTI'S STORY EXTENDS BEYOND THE LITERARY WORLD. HISTORY HAS SEEN MANY WALLS ERECTED BETWEEN COUNTRIES AND COMMUNITIES. A FAMOUS EXAMPLE IS THE BERLIN WALL, WHICH WAS ERECTED BY THE COMMUNIST EAST GERMAN GOVERNMENT IN EAST BERLIN IN 1961."

In this story, two competing views of human nature are presented, one fearful and pinched, the other generous and based on a spiritual understanding of life. Each view has implications regarding how people should treat one another and from where true security and peace in life may come. Mother argues for what might be seen as the common sense view that seems to rely on logic. This point of view says, We have something of value—a house—so let us protect it and keep outsiders away. This is, perhaps, a natural human instinct, to seek privacy and security. Mother is annoyed at the people who come into her yard, whether they are children or vagrants. It is all a nuisance to her, a violation of her privacy and an invasion of her peace and quiet. Mother is a person who takes a pessimistic view of human nature. She always fears the worst and therefore takes the most ungenerous attitudes. She thinks that if she shows the vagrants any tolerance, or gives them anything, they will just want more. She is motivated by fear, the need to defend what she regards as her own, and a heart that is closed to the needs of others beyond her immediate family.

Father does not see things that way at all. He is a man of generous, open-hearted instincts, who seems to live with a natural understanding of the brotherhood of man. He does not insist on protecting what he owns from others. He is a religious man, and he takes seriously the injunction found in all religions to give alms, to show generosity to those who have nothing, and to help the sick. He offers the stricken old man coffee, even though it is the last the family has (or at least, his wife tells him it is the last, but she is not being entirely truthful). Father is a perfect example of a man who will give the last of what

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *The Indonesian Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (2009) is a book edited by Tineke Hellwig and Eric Tagliacozzo. It includes articles, letters, photographs, cartoons, essays and more, all from and about Indonesia. Some have been translated into English for the first time.
- *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006) is Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir of her travels to Italy where she eats, to India where she prays, and finally, to Indonesia, where she finds love.
- *Fences: A Play* (1983), is a Pulitzer prize-winning play by August Wilson in which he explores emotional fences built by a man who is prevented from participating in major league baseball because of racial prejudice.
- *Homeless* by Gerald Daly (1996) is a comprehensive international study on homelessness. Daly argues for a broader definition of homelessness to encompass those who are in danger of becoming homeless, in order to begin addressing this problem.
- *Menagerie, 1* (2006) edited by John H. McGlynn is the first in a series of volumes that focus on the modern Indonesian short story. This book contains stories with a wide variety of themes. Authors represented include Rangkuti, Ahmad Tohari, B.Y. Tand, Budi Darma, Danarto, Gerson Poyk, J.E. Siahaan, Leila S. Chudori, and Nh. Dini. The volume also includes poetry, a photographic portfolio, and a literary essay.
- *Can't Get There from Here* (2005) by Todd Strasser, is a young adult novel about a homeless girl named Maybe who is tired of living on the streets.
- *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music* (2008) is a story written by Steve Lopez about a homeless musician suffering from mental illness and a man who befriends him. In 2009, this book was made into a motion picture.
- *Indonesian Writing in Translation* (2009) by John M. Echols, first published in 1956, is an invaluable volume because it makes available a generous selection of Indonesian literature translated into English. Writers represented include Amal Hamzah, Walujati, Abdul Muis, and Sitor Situmorang.

he has to help those in need. He will do it gladly, without even thinking about it. He does not question the old man's motive. He just gives where it is needed.

Father also makes a telling point in his discussion with his wife about whether they should build a fence around their house. He realizes that no fence can completely divide people off from one another: "[S]ometimes you have to go out through the fence, which means it will have lost its purpose." He means that people cannot always retain a rigid separation between themselves and others. People will mingle, and he implies that everyone has to learn how to get along with everyone else.

Father's views stem directly from his religious faith. He is a man who, if surrounded by enemies, would likely rely not on his own strength or courage to survive but on his faith that all life comes from God, that God gives and God takes away, and the best security in life is to do God's will. Father would probably argue that because God, in all religious traditions, is love, if His commandments are respected, and people have faith in His promises, no man has anything to fear. Faith is all the security a person needs, and faith envelopes a person like an invisible protective cloak that is quite different from, and superior to, a physical fence. A fence is simply a sign of man's fear, of his refusal to trust, his willingness

to focus on the bad side of human nature. Although Father is a Muslim, the religious view he espouses might be found amongst people of almost any religious faith.

Father's flaw, if it might be put facetiously, is that he listens to his wife and allows the fence to be built. Of course, the fence works well enough for a while. It appears that it has accomplished everything Mother hoped for. No one disturbs their peace. Their home is a model of tranquility. But the fence does not survive its first real test, when the rainy season returns and people start needing shelter again. Someone in the family—it is not stated which one, although Father blames his wife—forgets to lock the gate. Perhaps the failure to lock the gate suggests the inevitability of human error. People always make mistakes, the point being that one cannot rely on one's own efforts to protect oneself. Sooner or later something will go wrong.

As the climax of the story unfolds, a profound point is made. Human nature is not a fixed thing. Individual people may not be intrinsically good or bad. They take at least part of their nature from how others regard them and how others treat them. The example is the old man. When he first comes to the house he is no more than a sick old man seeking shelter. But on his return, when the house is protected by a fence, he is aggressive and threatening, and his companions are thieves. His nature has been altered by the fear and distrust emanating from the house. The building of the fence was more than just a physical act; it sent out subtle messages that changed the way others thought and behaved.

This point is conveyed by the fact that the scene in which the vagrants return is almost an exact copy of the first scene in which they appeared. The same sequence of events and the same words are used. There is a knocking at the door; Mother says not to let them in, but Father says to do so; on both occasions the men identify themselves, when asked who they are, as "us." The author wants to show that nothing has changed except an attitude and a perception. A certain attitude, expressive of a set of underlying beliefs, has been allowed to triumph in the home of the Narrator, and that attitude has poisoned the people against them. The mild old man who seemed to be on the verge of death has been transformed into a criminal who is prepared to do whatever it takes in order to get what he wants. The fence, instead of becoming a means of security, has become a kind

of lightning rod, attracting the very thing it is designed to keep out.

Although set in an unfamiliar place and culture, "The Fence" nonetheless has some resonance for Western readers because its theme is a universal one. Anyone familiar with Western literature will think immediately of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," in which Frost explores similar questions as Rangkuti does in "The Fence." The poem revolves around a wall that is built between neighbors that must be mended each spring. One neighbor, the narrator of the poem, sees no need to continue maintaining the wall. Like Father in "The Fence," he questions the need for a boundary on his property. Like Father, he is not sure what he and his neighbor are each protecting, and he worries that keeping others out may not be the right thing to do. He muses:

Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

When Father in "The Fence" asks these same questions, Mother's answers seem simple. She says the fence is protecting valuables that could one day be inside the house. It is keeping out people who may want to take the valuables. But Mother cannot point to anything that actually needs protecting. Similarly, the neighbor in Frost's poem does not reveal there is anything to protect. Instead, he repeats the same line twice: "Good fences make good neighbors," he says. Frost's narrator, like Father, keeps wondering why this should be so. When he gets no answer, he concludes that his neighbor "moves in darkness." This is the opposite of Father's "enlightened" view of the world that includes kindness and brotherliness.

Both Father and Frost's narrator address what it feels like to be on the outside of a fence. They agree that when one is on the outside of the fence, one wants what is on the other side. This recalls yet another literary wall from the 1960 musical play "The Fantasticks" written by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt in which a wall separates two families. A girl and a boy who live on opposite sides of the wall both want what lies beyond the wall because their fathers have forbidden it. In this case, the boy and girl want to get to know each other. Like Rangkuti's vagrants, they manage to get through the barrier and end up falling in love. If the barrier never existed, they may have never noticed each other at

all, similar to how the vagrants had no thoughts about stealing from the family before the fence existed.

Rangkuti's story extends beyond the literary world. History has seen many walls erected between countries and communities. A famous example is the Berlin Wall, which was erected by the Communist East German government in East Berlin in 1961. It was designed to stop poor East Germans from moving to prosperous West Germany. But East Berliners, like the vagrants and the couple in "The Fantasticks," wanted what lay on the other side of the wall. Of the approximately ten thousand East Berliners who tried to escape, about five thousand were successful. They came up with creative ways to get past the barrier, such as floating over the wall in a hot air balloon and digging tunnels so they could crawl under the wall. Even though the wall was rebuilt three times, each time bigger and more secure, they would not be deterred. Guards and dogs watched over the barrier and people caught trying to cross it were shot on sight. Finally, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall was taken down, to much anticipation and celebration.

Another fence has been the subject of debate—the one at the border between Mexico and the United States. The U.S. government argues that the fence is needed to keep illegal immigrants from crossing the border and taking American jobs and resources, while others argue the fence is an impractical and expensive substitute for proper immigration policy. Lessons from Rangkuti's story can be used to examine this debate. For example, Rangkuti might ask whether a wall between Mexico and the United States would truly be protective, or whether it would serve to further entice people to try to cross it. Moreover, he might think the principles of faith, brotherhood, and kindness should be considered in attempts to resolve the matter. In his simply told story, Rangkuti manages to provoke thought about complex current and historical issues like this one.

Source: Esther Mizrahi Moritz, Critical Essay on "The Fence," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Ary Hermawan

In this article, Hermawan discusses Hamsad Rangkuti, the recipient of the 2008 Southeast Asian

Writers Award, and traces his writing career from his childhood on.

There was no library in Kisaran, North Sumatra, where Hamsad Rangkuti, the recipient of the Southeast Asian Writers Award 2008, lived as a child.

As he could not afford to buy newspapers, and so visited the local administration's office to read the Sunday editions of local newspapers that were put on the wall.

There he read the works of journalists and authors, including great Russian and American authors like Anton Chekov, Maxim Gorky, Ernest Hemingway and O. Henry, who incited his interest in becoming a writer.

Born in 1943, he was 16 when he wrote his first short story, *Sebuah Nyanyian di Rambung Tua* (A Song in an Old Rubber Tree).

Hamsad was an acute daydreamer. He used to make up stories in his mind long before he knew anything about literature. He could sit for hours in a tree and fantasize about everything he liked.

"I enjoyed it. It felt like being in another world, the world of imagination," he wrote in the introductory chapter of his short stories collection, *Bibir Dalam Pispot* (Lips on the Chamber Pot), which won him the S.E.A. Award 2008.

Having learned the art of story telling from his father, Hamsad used to tell stories to his friends, who called him a liar for he often mixed reality with fantasy.

"In order for people to like your story, you must add a lie in it. This is not a crime. It is beauty. A beautiful lie. Many writers hate this term for it makes literature sound like a crime, and therefore they prefer calling it 'imagination,'" Hamsad told *The Jakarta Post* at his home in Depok, West Java.

Nevertheless, Hamsad said he was a realist in that his works were a reflection of real events. He just bent the narratives, fictionalizing them by adding some dramatic elements.

When he moved to Medan and published his second short story, *Mesjid* (Mosque), he was immediately recognized by the city's prominent authors, who lent him magazines and more on Indonesian literature.

A renowned writer in Medan, Sori Siregar, then suggested that Hamsad rewrite his short story *Panggilan Rasul* (The Calling of the Apostle)

and send it to *Sastra* magazine in Jakarta to test his talent as a writer.

He followed the suggestion and a month later he was notified that his short story would be published by the prestigious magazine. He recalled he was extremely excited to tell his fellow writers about the news.

Together with other writers from North Sumatra, he was invited to attend the Indonesian Authors Conference in Jakarta in 1964.

Ironically, the story was never published by *Sastra* magazine as the publication was closed down due to its support for the Cultural Manifesto, which was banned by Soekarno.

Popularly known as *Manifes Kebudayaan*, the manifesto attacked the artistic restriction imposed by Soekarno who then favored leftist intellectuals in Lekra (The Institute of People's Culture), which was affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party.

HB Jassin, an icon in Indonesian literature, sent the story to *Horison* magazine; it was published in the magazine's fourth edition, and Hamsad decided to stay in Jakarta.

In his early years in the capital, he slept on a piece of paper on the floor of the Balai Budaya cultural center in Menteng. During those years, he said, he found it hard to write, producing only seven short stories in nine years.

However, it was also the time when he delved into the darker side of Jakarta, where poverty lingered among posh buildings. He interacted with people on the streets, talking with the destitutes and prostitutes.

One of his best short stories, *Ketika Lampu Berwarna Merah* (When the Light Turns Red), depicts the life of beggars and prostitutes found along the railroad near the Ciliwung River.

The idea to write *Pispot* (The Chamber Pot) came to him while he was in a public minivan. He happened to listen to a woman who told the passengers about a robbery that just happened.

In *Pispot*, Hamsad tells the story of the alleged robber who was arrested by the police. He was believed to have swallowed a stolen necklace and was forced to take laxatives.

He relieved himself three times, but the police could not find any evidence in the chamber pot. The narrator who had accused him felt bad because his accusation had been proven baseless.

He then apologized to the alleged robber and took him to his home, but on the way the man confessed to him that he had taken the necklace because his child was seriously ill.

The jewelry was not found in the chamber pot because every time it came out, the man swallowed it again.

"I think the reason why the stories in *Bibir dalam Pispot* outlast their times is that they tell of the suffering of the poor, which is still a fact of life in Jakarta," Hamsad told the *Post*.

Though published in *Kompas Publisher* in 2003, most of the stories in the anthology were written in the 1980s when he was at the height of his career as a writer. He became chief editor of *Horison* magazine in 1986 and left the position in 2002.

The S.E.A Award 2008 is the second award for the anthology. In the year of its release, it was awarded the Khatulistiwa Literary Award for Indonesia's Best Fiction 2002/2003.

"I was surprised. I really did not expect it," he said.

Hamsad said he would be traveling to Bangkok on Sept. 25 to receive the award from Thai Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. He said a friend was kind enough to pay the ticket for his wife, Nurwindasari, to accompany him to Bangkok.

"We'll be there until Idul Fitri," he said.

Hamsad said he had written a two-minute story to be recited at the award ceremony. The story, *Mayat Seorang Wanita Tua* (Dead Body of an Old Lady), tells how vagrants stole the dead body of an old lady.

"I still want to write stories that are lasting. I don't want to write cliché stories. Young writers should know this as well. You've got to have a story to write, you can't just play with words," he said.

Hamsad said he was currently involved in a program run by the Ministry of Education's Language Center to teach and offer support to young authors.

Source: Ary Hermawan, "Hamsad Rangkuti: Long Journey of a Short Story Master," in *Jakarta Post*, September 27, 2008.

T. Sima Gunawan

In this article, Gunawan talks about Hamsad Rangkuti's 2002–2003 Khatulistiwa Literary Award for

Indonesia's Best Fiction and gives some background on Rangkuti's life and writing.

When veteran literary figure Hamsad Rangkuti learned he was selected as the winner of the Khatulistiwa Literary Award for Indonesia's Best Fiction 2002–2003, one of the first things he did was to order a box of name cards.

"I made the order at a sidewalk kiosk for Rp 25,000 per 100 name cards. And see, now the box is half empty," said Hamsad, showing the box of his name cards when *The Jakarta Post* met him at his modest home in Depok, West Java.

The award was presented at the posh Plaza Senayan in South Jakarta on Oct. 17 after his collection of short stories, *Bibir dalam Pispot* (Lips on the Chamber Pot) beat the other four nominators—Joko Pinurbo's *Telepon Genggam* (Cell Phone), Nukila Amal's *Cala Ibi*, Sapardi Djoko Damono's *Ada Berita Apa Hari Ini, Den Sastro?* (What's the News Today, Den Sastro) and Radhar Panca Dahana's *Lalu Batu* (Then Stone).

The 60-year-old won Rp 70 million and a scholarship for a writing course in London from the British Council as well as to have his winning work translated into English.

"I am looking forward to England. I hope I will get many experiences that will inspire me to write," said Hamsad. So far the only foreign countries he has visited are Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

As for the money, he plans to buy a minivan that will be operated as an *angkot* (public transport). This new business will be managed by his two unemployed sons—one of them is an engineer and the other one has a college degree in art.

Hamsad has four children from his marriage to Nurwindasari—his youngest child is still in high school, while the other one is married and has a good job.

"I already have education insurance for my youngest child and hopefully I will not have any problem with the money to finance her education," said Hamsad, who obviously is devoted to his family very much.

Born in Titikuning, Medan, North Sumatra, in 1943, Hamsad's father was a Koran teacher who was also a good story teller.

"As far as I remember, I am the fourth of seven siblings—two of them died when they were very young. But my parents told me they actually

had 10 children. Well, you know that at that time, life was very hard and infant mortality was high. It's a miracle that we have lived so long," he said.

Such conditions, in fact, has inspired many of his stories, which are also based on many daily experiences and his keen observation of his surroundings.

"I tell stories of the poor and their sufferings, but I am not lamenting," he said.

The winner of a literary award from the Jakarta administration in 2000 has been writing since he was a teenager. But he said that at that time, he was so shy that he did not dare use his real name, Hasyim. Therefore, he decided to use a nom de plume, Hamsad—which is a combination of his own name, his father's, Muhammad Saleh, and his mother's, Djamilah.

He admitted that at that time he was not so productive as he found it hard to write. But things changed after he joined a six-month writing workshop conducted by the Institute of the Jakarta Art Education and the Ministry of Information in 1975.

His short stories have been published in the local and foreign media, including *Manoa*, a Pacific Journal of International Writing, University of Hawaii Press (1991), *Beyond the Horizon and Short Stories from Contemporary Indonesia*, Monash Asia Institute (1991). He has had four collections of short stories published too, some child stories and a novel, *Ketika Lampu Berwarna Merah* (When the Light Turns Red, 2001).

"The one that has sold best is my last book, *Bibir dalam Pispot*. But, it has not yet been reprinted," he said.

According to Hamsad, only 3,000 copies of the book were printed, meaning that even though the book has won such a prestigious award, the sales has not surpassed 3,000 copies as many are still available at local book stores.

Hamsad, who was the editor of *Horison* literary magazine from 1986 to 2002, said the magazine printed 12,000 copies, but 9,000 copies were subscribed by the Ministry of Education to be distributed to the high schools across the country.

He lamented the poor reading culture among the people of this country, especially literary books. "Even my children don't like reading my books. So I tell them the stories,"

said Hamsad, who also likes story-telling, a skill he learned from his father, in addition to painting.

The title of his book, *Bibir dalam Pispot* is taken from the titles of his two short stories—*Maukah Kau Menghapus Bekas Bibirnya di Bibirku dengan Bibirmu?* (Will You Erase the Mark of His Lips on My Lips with Your Lips?) and *Pispot* (the Chamber Pot).

The first short story, which is quite popular here and has been presented several times in short-story reading events, tells about a woman who asked the narrator to kiss her before she committed suicide by plunging into the sea.

The other one is about a man who was accused of snatching a gold necklace in a public minivan. The man was believed to swallow the necklace and was forced to take laxatives. He relieved himself three times, but the police could not find any evidence in the chamber pot. He actually stole the necklace because he needed money to buy medicine for his child who was seriously ill. But the police could not find the necklace because every time the jewelry came out, the man swallowed it again.

Hamsad's only novel, *Ketika Lampu Berwarna Merah*, was a winner of a writing competition held by the Jakarta Art Council in 1981 and was serialized at *Kompas* newspaper in the same year. It was published as a book only in 2001 and a film producer was interested in making a film based on the book. For this, Hamsad was paid Rp 2.5 million.

"It's hard to live as a writer," said Hamsad, whose receives Rp 600,000 for a short story published in a daily newspaper here.

Yet, he decided to resign from *Horison* because he wanted to concentrate in his writing. He is now still working on his second novel about the *becak* (three-wheel pedicab) evictions in Jakarta.

At the same time, he has also been moved by the fate of thousands of squatters who lost their homes during the recent forced evictions by the Jakarta administration. "I am interested in writing about the evictions of the poor people," said Hamsad.

Source: T. Sima Gunawan, "Hamsad, a Modest Man Finally Gets His Due," in *Jakarta Post*, November 2, 2003.

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This book is a compilation of photography, graffiti, and writing from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

McClynn, John, ed., *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 1991.

The entire issue is dedicated to fiction and poetry from Indonesia and is designed to introduce Indonesian writing to a new audience. Indonesian authors in this issue include Seno Gumira Ajidarma, Goenawan Mohamad, Hamsad Rangkuti, Toenggoel P. Siagian, Sitor Situ Morang, Pramodya Ananta Toer, Putu Wijaya, and Umar Nurzain.

Taylor, Frederick, *Berlin Wall: A World Divided, 1961–1989*, HarperCollins, 2008.

Taylor merges the official history of the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall with personal accounts and archival materials

Vickers, Adrian, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

This book, written by an Australian professor of Asian studies, provides information about modern Indonesia's social and political landscape.

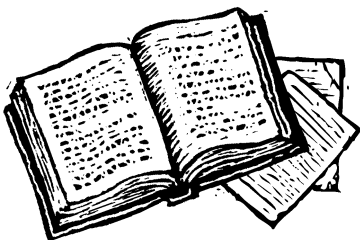
The Garden of Stubborn Cats

ITALO CALVINO

1983

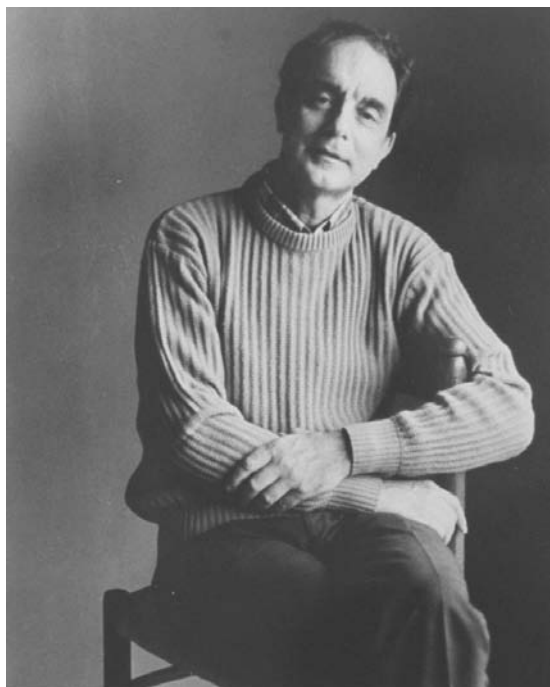
“The Garden of Stubborn Cats” (1983) is a short story by Italian author Italo Calvino. It is part of the collection *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City* (1983), in which all the stories revolve around the title character and his unusual adventures in a rapidly urbanizing Italian city. Though the stories were originally published in Italian in the 1950s and early 1960s, they were unavailable to English-language readers until 1983, when Harcourt began publishing the author’s earlier works with translations by William Weaver.

In “The Garden of Stubborn Cats,” Marcovaldo decides one day during lunch break to follow a neighborhood cat. He discovers a secret world that exists within the one he inhabits, where cats have adapted to fashion their own urban way of life. Like the other stories in *Marcovaldo*, “The Garden of Stubborn Cats” is notable for the elements of fantasy and humor the author injects into an otherwise realistic setting. The story also serves as a bittersweet cautionary tale about the things that are lost in the name of progress.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Calvino was born near Havana, Cuba, on October 15, 1923, to two Italian botanists and teachers, Mario Calvino and Eva Mameli. The family returned to Italy in 1925 to live in Sanremo, a



Italo Calvino (The Library of Congress)

northern coastal town very close to the French border. Situated between the Mediterranean Sea and the Maritime Alps, Sanremo enjoys mild weather with a year-round temperature of around fifty degrees Fahrenheit. These conditions allowed the family to successfully grow fruits scarcely seen in the region. Calvino grew up amidst these and other natural wonders, and he inherited from his parents an interest in the sciences and in nature. However, even at a young age Calvino had aspirations to become a writer.

In 1941, Calvino enrolled at the University of Turin. He studied agriculture rather than writing because he knew his parents considered a career in the arts less distinguished than one dedicated to science. In 1943, he transferred from Turin to the University of Florence, where he continued his studies. While he was in school, World War II raged throughout Europe and eventually arrived at Italy's shore. When called for military service by the Italian government, Calvino refused and instead joined a resistance group. After the war, he returned to the University of Turin. This time, however, he chose to study literature. He was soon published as both a short story writer and a journalist.

Calvino's early works of fiction were realist in nature, based largely upon his own experiences during and after World War II. He also became an editor and soon realized that the books he was writing were influenced by the expectations of others. Determined to write something that he himself would enjoy reading, in 1952 Calvino created *The Cloven Viscount* (1962), a fantastical novel in which the main character is split down the middle by a cannonball—and continues living as two separate people. Calvino then received an assignment to collect the most significant folktales from across the many dialect regions of Italy and re-create them in standard Italian for a single volume. The result was *Italian Folktales* (1962).

Calvino continued to publish stories and novels that incorporated elements of fable, myth, and fantasy into realistic modern and historical settings. Some notable works include the stories collected in *Cosmicomics* (1968), and the novels *Invisible Cities* (1974) and *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1981). The postmodern aspects of this last novel—in which the reader is cast as a character and the story revolves around the reading of Calvino's newest novel—solidified the author's reputation among English-language scholars and brought renewed interest in his earlier work. Calvino was invited to deliver a series of lectures at Harvard University in 1985, but in September, while still in Italy, he suffered a stroke and died twelve days later at the age of sixty-one. His notes for the lectures were published after his death as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* in 1988.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Garden of Stubborn Cats" is one of a series of related stories in *Marcivaldo, or The Seasons in the City*, that detail the experiences of a poor worker named Marcivaldo and his family over the course of five years. Each of the twenty stories is set during one season of those five years, with "The Garden of Stubborn Cats" representing autumn of the fifth year—the second-to-last story in the collection. According to the Author's Note at the beginning of the collection, "These stories take place in an industrial city of northern Italy," though a specific city is never named.

The tale opens with a description of how the progressively urban environment of the city has, over the years, changed the world of cats who

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- A miniseries based on the stories in *Marcovaldo* was created for Italian television in 1970. The series, directed by Giuseppe Bennati and starring Nanni Loy as the title character, is not currently available.

exist within it. Long before, the varied structures and spaces of the city allowed cats to roam, explore, and share the same living space as people. As the city expanded upward, it became a uniform mass of tall buildings that not only lacked the character it once had, but also kept cats from roaming as freely as they once did. The narrator notes that “the cat of a recent litter seeks in vain the itinerary of its fathers, the point from which to make the soft leap from balustrade to cornice to drainpipe, or for the quick climb on the roof-tiles.”

This new environment has forced cats to adapt to a new world in which they exist alongside but separate from people. The narrator refers to this as “a negative city, that consists of empty slices between wall and wall, of the minimal distances ordained by the building regulations between two constructions.” Although most people of the city know nothing of this cat world, Marcovaldo discovers it during a lunch break at the warehouse where he works. While everyone else has gone home, he remains behind to eat the small snack he has brought, and encounters a tabby wearing a blue ribbon that appears to live nearby. After eating, Marcovaldo follows the cat on a stroll through the neighborhood.

Though he had once thought there were few cats in the area, he sees new ones every time he follows his new friend. He feels as if he is getting a unique glimpse into the world of cats—though he often finds himself abandoned by them in some dead-end space, limited either by his agility or because he is not a true member of cat society. However, he also discovers parts of the human world as seen through the eyes of a cat.

One restaurant in particular, the Biarritz, catches his fancy. He finds it while following the blue-ribboned tabby and peers down into the establishment through one of the open windows just beneath its domed roof. It is an upscale and elegant place with live violin music, impeccably dressed waiters, and fine silver dishware. The tabby appears to want Marcovaldo to follow along the roof toward the kitchen of the restaurant, but Marcovaldo is taken with the extravagant dining room. He also becomes fixated upon a fish tank that sits directly below his window; in the tank, huge trout swim, waiting to be hand-picked by customers for their meal. He hatches a plan to bring a fishing pole to the window, lower the line into the tank, and somehow catch one of the fish for himself. Marcovaldo reasons to himself, “I couldn’t be accused of theft; at worst, of fishing in an unauthorized place.”

He goes home for his fishing gear and returns to the window. He successfully lowers the line, complete with a worm-baited hook, without being noticed by the people in the restaurant. One of the trout takes the bait, and Marcovaldo draws it up out of the tank, “over the laid tables and the trolleys of hors d’oeuvres, over the blue flames of the crêpes Suzette, until it vanished into the heavens of the transom.” He yanks the fish through the window and it lands on the ground behind him. Before he can get to it, the tabby pounces on the fish and runs off; Marcovaldo steps on the fishing pole to stop it, but the line pulls off the rod, and the cat disappears with his prize.

However, the fishing line trails behind it, and Marcovaldo quickly follows the line to track down the cat. The line leads him “into more and more cattish places,” but he manages to keep the end of the line just in sight. After following it along the sidewalk, he finally throws himself to the ground and manages to grab the end of the line. He follows the line and arrives at a rusty gate that leads to a garden. There is a small building at the opposite end. It is a tiny patch of nature, with two trees and a pond, surrounded by tall buildings on each side. In the garden, Marcovaldo discovers all types of cats: “tiger cats, black cats, white cats, calico cats, tabbies, angoras, Persians, house cats and stray cats, perfumed cats and mangy cats.” He realizes that this garden is the “heart of the cats’ realm.”

Marcovaldo sees that his trout is stuck in a tree, where the line has become tangled and the

cats cannot reach it. He struggles to free it but carefully keeps the fish from dropping down to the waiting cats below. Suddenly the cats are distracted by a rain of fish parts—including heads, tails, and organs—from over the tops of the garden walls. Not yet sure of the meaning of this, but wanting to take advantage of the distraction, Marcovaldo attempts to draw in the line with his trout. However, as he does, two hands appear from a window of the small house at the back of the garden; one hand cuts the fishing line with a pair of scissors, while the other catches the fish in a pan.

Marcovaldo is approached by a group of mostly older women, and suddenly the rain of fish-parts is explained: they are cat-lovers who gather daily to provide their leftovers to the cats of the garden. Marcovaldo asks why the cats gather there, and a woman tells him that this is the only place they have left. Other women chime in, explaining that the garden is the last remaining sanctuary in the city not just for the cats, but also for birds and frogs. He asks who owns the garden and its tiny villa, and he is told that it belongs to a noblewoman called the Marchesa who always remains hidden inside. According to people on the street, the woman has been offered huge sums of money for the property—which is the last undeveloped piece of land in the downtown area—but refuses to sell. She has also been threatened, but to no avail. Some people believe the old woman keeps the home so that the cats and other animals will still have a place of their own. Others think she hates the cats and tries to drive them away. “Marcovaldo realized that with regard to the old Marchesa opinions were sharply divided: some saw her as an angelic being, others as an egoist and a miser.”

Two groups form at the garden entrance, arguing over whether or not the garden should be torn down to make room for a new skyscraper. Those in favor of tearing it down complain that the garden produces mosquitoes and attracts mice in addition to the cats and birds. Unsure what to say, Marcovaldo blurts out that the old woman in the villa stole his trout. The two arguing factions convince him to knock on her door and ask why she did it. He does, and finds that she is already frying the fish. He explains the situation and tells her that one of the cats stole the fish from him. She interrupts him, expressing her hatred for the cats. She tells

him that the cats keep her prisoner there by blocking and scratching her if she tries to leave. They also prevent her from selling the place, destroying contracts before she can sign them. They even scared away a lawyer, she says. As she continues with her complaints, Marcovaldo remembers that he must still return to work, and he walks away.

As winter gets underway, the cats mostly vanish from the garden. However, one winter night, they reappear, causing a great disturbance with their meows. The neighbors investigate the commotion and discover that the old woman who owns the garden villa has died. By spring, the garden is torn up and workers begin construction on a new skyscraper. However, their efforts are constantly hampered by the meddling of countless cats, birds, and frogs still fighting to preserve their small remaining piece of the city.

CHARACTERS

The Marchesa

The Marchesa is an old woman who lives in a tiny villa attached to a garden. Her lot is the last remaining piece of undeveloped land in the quickly growing downtown area, and she is surrounded by high-rise buildings. She is a mysterious figure seldom seen in the neighborhood. Passersby and neighbors have several theories on why she has refused to sell her very valuable property to a developer. Some believe it is because she wants to preserve the last remaining natural habitat for the city’s animals. When Marcovaldo’s fish becomes stuck in one of her trees, she catches it in a pan and fries it for herself. He knocks on her door to ask about the fish, and through the window blind he sees only “a round, pale blue eye” as well as “a clump of hair dyed an undefinable color, and a dry skinny hand.” Later he is able to glimpse her face, and it seems to him to be “the face of a cat.” Marcovaldo is surprised when the woman expresses hatred for the many cats that occupy her garden. She insists that the cats are keeping her prisoner there, afraid that if they let her leave, she may sell the place to a developer. She even suggests that the cats ruined one deal for the sale of the property by destroying the contract. One night the following winter, the Marchesa dies in her tiny villa. Her garden is filled with cats crying, as if in mourning.

Marcovaldo

Marcovaldo is a poor factory worker who lives in a large city in northern Italy. Every day he brings his lunch to work with him in a sack, while all the other workers go home for lunch. He refers to this meal as a snack, suggesting that Marcovaldo is left hungry afterward. This explains why he comes up with the idea of “fishing” in the tank of the Biarritz Restaurant for a trout, and why he is so determined to reclaim the fish after the tabby cat runs off with it. His fishing scheme also reveals Marcovaldo to be clever and adventurous. Indeed, he would never have stumbled upon the Biarritz if he were not willing to follow a neighborhood cat on its journey, which also indicates his adventurous spirit. Marcovaldo also seems to experience extremes of luck, both good and bad, that ultimately leave him in the same sorry position in which he began. For example, he is lucky to find the Biarritz, and even luckier when he manages to successfully catch a trout from the tank and haul it up through the dining room without being seen. However, bad luck takes over when the tabby cat steals his fish and runs away. Even when he finds the fish again—another lucky break—it is stolen by the Marchesa before he can retrieve it.

THEMES

The Negative Effects of Progress

An important theme that runs through “The Garden of Stubborn Cats” is the negative consequences progress can have on a community. The city in the story is rapidly changing—new skyscrapers appear and buildings become taller and more uniform. As these changes unfold, cats are no longer able to live as they once did, visibly intertwined with the world of people. Cats are now trapped in what the narrator calls “an uninhabitable city,” where courtyards have disappeared and the nonstop flow of cars on the streets is deadly. Progress has also stripped the city of gardens, trees, and ponds, leaving the garden on the Marchesa’s property the last remaining safe haven for cats, birds, and frogs. After the Marchesa dies, even this last piece of nature is destroyed in the name of progress, dug up so that a cement foundation can be poured in its place to support a new skyscraper.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Compare “The Garden of Stubborn Cats” to Stephen Vincent Benêt’s short story “The King of the Cats” (1929), which can be found in *The Signet Classic Book of American Short Stories*, edited by Burton Raffel (2004). How do the two authors differ in their depiction of cats in relation to humans? How are they similar? Write an essay in which you report on your conclusions.
- In many areas of the world, increasing feral cat populations pose a problem for both humans and for local wildlife. These feral cat populations are made up largely of lost, unwanted, or neglected family pets that have not been spayed or neutered and therefore reproduce at an alarming rate. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research different strategies that have been used for dealing with feral cat populations. Write an essay comparing the different methods and explain which method you consider to be the most effective and why.
- Calvino was intimately familiar with the northern Italian cities of Milan and Turin but instead chose to set his tale in an unnamed “industrial city of northern Italy.” Why do you think he avoids specifying a real-world city where the tales take place? Give a short class presentation explaining your answer.
- In Calvino’s story, Marcovaldo discovers an entirely unfamiliar world within his own city by following a tabby cat. For example, he never knew of the existence of the Biarritz Restaurant or the Marchesa’s garden until he was led there by the cat. Try altering your daily routine in a way that forces you to encounter some new place or experience, or to see the familiar in a new light. Document your experiences in a short essay and share it with other students.



A cat in a garden (Image copyright tlorna, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

The Resilience of Nature

Even as progress takes away the last remnants of nature from the city, wildlife still finds a way to survive. Cats adapt to the “negative city” made up of the spaces that humans cannot reach or occupy. Along with the birds and frogs, they locate the one area of nature that still exists in the city and claim it as their own. The cats even prevent the Marchesa from selling her lot to builders by intimidating people and tearing up the paperwork. In a fantastical display of their perseverance, after their garden is destroyed, they remain on the site, sabotaging the workers’ efforts to continue building.

Conflict between the Social Classes

The city depicted in the story is clearly divided along class lines. When Marcovaldo follows the tabby through the neighborhood, he discovers things he has never seen before, including a fancy restaurant. The restaurant is not new, but Marcovaldo has never encountered it because it is

not a part of the working-class world he inhabits. In fact, had he not followed the cat, he would probably never have known the restaurant existed. Marcovaldo is clearly a poor man—he brings his lunch to work in a sack and can only afford to smoke half a cigar each day. He is dazzled by the dining room of the Biarritz Restaurant, with its upscale atmosphere and sumptuous food. Marcovaldo sees a man inside the restaurant who is in utter contrast to himself. As he selects a fresh trout from a tank to be prepared for his meal, the man has a “grave, intent air” and selects his fish “with a slow, solemn gesture.” The man is utterly indifferent to the extravagance of his surroundings and acts “solemn as a magistrate who has handed down a capital sentence.”

STYLE

Magic Realism

Although Calvino’s work does not fit neatly into existing categories of literature, “The Garden of Stubborn Cats” is perhaps best described by the term *magic realism*. Magic realism is literature that depicts a realistic setting and characters but also contains some fantastical or inexplicable elements. These fantastical elements are treated by the characters and by the author with a ready acceptance and a subdued, matter-of-fact tone. In other words, the fantasy elements of the story are given the same credibility as the more realistic elements, instead of being treated as something unbelievable or extraordinary. Magic realism has also been described as literature that blurs the distinction between the real and the fantastical. In all cases, magic realism is notable for its grounding in a realistic setting rather than a fantasy-based world.

Magic realism is primarily identified as a genre arising broadly from Latin American culture. Cuban author Alejo Carpentier was one of the first to advance the notion of Latin American literature as a mix of the real and the magical in his novel *The Kingdom of this World* (1957). Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine author, wrote many stories in the 1930s that intertwined the real with the unreal and often focused on literature itself as a topic, as some of Calvino’s works do. Perhaps the single most significant work of magic realism, in terms of the genre’s recognition on the world stage, is the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1950s:** Approximately twenty-five million feral cats exist in the United States, compared to around twenty-three million cats kept as household pets.

Today: Thanks to dedicated spay and neutering programs, as well as increased interest in keeping cats as indoor pets, the number of feral cats is estimated by some experts to be as low as ten million, with around ninety million cats kept as pets.

- **1950s:** The first landmark works that show the beginnings of magic realism, by authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier, are not yet available in English.

Today: Works of magic realism have achieved both critical and popular success around the world. Authors such as Gabriel García Márquez reach the *New York Times* bestseller list and win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Although magic realism is mainly associated with Latin American writers, British Indian author Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel *Midnight's Children* is considered by many to be a landmark work of the genre. This story chronicles the lives of supernaturally gifted children born just as India achieves its independence in 1948. It is worth noting that Calvino's stories in *Marcovaldo* were written before magic realism was recognized as part of any literary movement and were written independent of the development of such fiction in other regions of the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Italy During and After World War II

Calvino grew up during troubled times in Italy. After World War I, Italy fell under the control of Benito Mussolini. Though King Victor Emmanuel III was technically the head of the nation, he essentially granted Mussolini unlimited powers as prime minister with the hope that the country could avoid turning to socialism, which emphasizes the rights of the working classes at the expense of the very wealthy. Indeed, Mussolini used violent and brutal tactics to crush those who supported socialism, as well as any others who questioned his philosophies. This type of

political rule is called fascism. Mussolini's forces invaded both Ethiopia and Albania and claimed those countries as part of an Italian empire. During World War II, Mussolini aligned Italy with Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany.

Although Mussolini was expelled from office just after Allied forces arrived in southern Italy in 1943, he managed to retain control of northern Italy with the help of—and at the insistence of—Hitler's German forces. These events split Italy in half for the remaining two years of the war. After the end of the war, the Italian people voted to abolish the monarchy and establish a democratic republic. Even in these years, however, the country was divided into citizens who supported workers' rights through socialism and communism and those who feared the spread of these movements. The Catholic Church took an official position against communism, threatening to excommunicate any Catholic citizen who supported it. The U.S. government also opposed these movements due to growing fears of the communist Soviet Union's influence in Europe.

Unlike after World War I, the opposition to communism and socialism led not to another fascist takeover but to a relatively moderate party gaining majority control of the Italian government. This allowed Italy to prosper economically and culturally, with artists and writers



Orange tabby cat like the one in the story (Image copyright Grigoryeva Liubov Dmitrievna, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

finally able to express themselves without fear of sanctions by the government. With economic growth came urbanization, especially in northern Italian cities like Milan and Turin. The rapid expanse of these cities meant that older, smaller buildings were often torn down and replaced by uniform apartment buildings and skyscrapers, as in Calvino's story.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

"The Garden of Stubborn Cats," like the other stories in *Marcovaldo*, took a very long time to become available to English-language readers. As Calvino himself states, the earliest stories in the collection were written in the 1950s, and the later stories—which would include "The Garden of Stubborn Cats"—were first written in the early 1960s. It would be another twenty years before they were translated into English. By this point—in 1983—nearly all of Calvino's other major works were already available in English. For many of Calvino's readers, then, the publication of *Marcovaldo* was a glimpse back at the

earlier work of an author who had continued to mature and refine his style over the course of two decades. It is not surprising, then, that some critics felt the stories lacked some of the qualities that were praised in the author's later works. Other critics, however, hailed the works as being among the author's most accessible for uninitiated readers.

In a review for the *New York Times*, Anatole Broyard states that together, the stories of the book "have a mild charm," but he also notes that the author's work "leans almost entirely on irony, but of a rather bland or schematic kind." Broyard compares Calvino to "a blocked writer who is forever starting brilliant books and not quite finishing them." Thomas Sutcliffe, in his examination of Calvino's work for the *Times Literary Supplement*, calls both *Marcovaldo* and the collection *Adam, One Afternoon and Other Stories* (1957) "poor and elderly relations" when compared to the author's later books. Paraphrasing one of the author's own descriptions from *Marcovaldo*, Sutcliffe states, "These stories are too short-story-shaped to seem like real Calvino."

However, others felt that the early stories showed a direct lineage to Calvino's later work. Franco Ferrucci, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, declares, "What is so much admired by the readers of Mr. Calvino's later *Invisible Cities* was already at work in *Marcovaldo* and with a more cogent narrative drive." Ferrucci states of the author, "He writes lightly and jauntily; any trace of effort is concealed. But what catches the reader goes beyond the unspotted perfection of the style; it is his uninhibited poetic sense of life." Miranda Seymour, in a review for the *Spectator*, notes of the author, "There are not many people who would contemplate buying one of his novels for the sheer fun of it," but hopes that *Marcovaldo* "will do something to redress the balance." She calls the stories Calvino's "earliest and most accessible works."

Dean Flower, writing for the *Hudson Review*, notes that the stories have a "charming simplicity" compared to some of the author's other works, and offers this recommendation: "For anyone curious about the foundations of Calvino's many fictions of invisible cities, these stories should be required reading." Brad Leithauser, in an essay on the author's work for the *New York Review of Books*, asserts that *Marcovaldo* "paints a ferociously claustrophobic portrait of the life of an unskilled Italian factory worker. Yet this

is a claustrophobia continually loosened by an author whose improbable and antic imagination delights in undoing realism's tight conventions."

CRITICISM

Greg Wilson

Wilson is an author, literary critic, and mythologist. In this essay, he explores how "The Garden of Stubborn Cats" fits the prevailing definition of magic realism.

Italo Calvino is a writer whose work has been variously characterized as postmodernism, neo-realism, fantasy, science fiction, metafiction, and magic realism. Though all these terms are correct, "The Garden of Stubborn Cats," like the other stories contained in *Marcovaldo*, fits best into the category of magic realism.

The designation of "The Garden of Stubborn Cats" as magic realism might be troublesome for those who choose to define that genre along cultural lines. Such a definition is not unexpected, since most modern readers associate magic realism with Latin American names such as Isabel Allende, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Alejo Carpentier. But the term was originally borrowed from a German art critic, who used it to describe post-expressionism, a type of visual art that emerged in the 1920s. And the current meaning of magic realism seems to be open for at least some debate.

Venezuelan author Arturo Usler Pietri was the first to apply the term to literature in 1948, and some have even argued that his novel *Las Lanzas Coloradas* (1931) is one of the first examples of magic realism. In 1949, Cuban writer Carpentier coined the term "lo real maravilloso" ("the marvelous reality") to refer to a way of depicting the world common in Latin American literature. In such works, Carpentier suggests, miraculous or supernatural occurrences might be treated as common, natural events. However, to say only Latin American fiction can exhibit magic realism does an injustice to both Latin American writers and non-Latin American writers. First, it distinguishes between stylistically similar works purely based on the ethnicity of the author rather than on any objective qualities found in the works themselves. A work written by Calvino would not qualify as magic realism, and yet an identical work written by Jorge Luis Borges would suddenly be transformed into



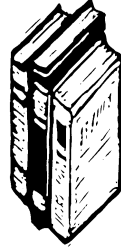
TO CLASSIFY 'THE GARDEN OF STUBBORN CATS,' AS WELL AS THE OTHER STORIES CONTAINED IN *MARCOVALDO*, AS MAGIC REALISM LEADS TO A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN HOW THE GENRE IS VIEWED."

magic realism, despite being exactly the same on the page. Second, it lumps together a huge and rather diverse group of cultures in a relatively superficial way. Usler Pietri was Venezuelan, Carpentier was Cuban, García Márquez is Colombian, Allende is Chilean American, and Fuentes is Mexican. This covers a broad range of cultures and regions. Why would it make sense to include these authors but not others, based primarily on geography? What about authors of Latin American descent who happen to grow up in the United States? How about Latin American writers who spend much of their lives in other countries, as Fuentes did? To rely on an author's geographical location as a defining trait of magic realism seems to provide very little in the way of literary insight.

The definition of magic realism, then, should rest solely on the qualities found within the work. Even here, the definition has been debated. It is generally accepted, however, that a magic realist work depicts a realistic world rather than an imaginative one, and that the "magic" involves supernatural elements within this realistic setting. To leave it at that, however, risks too much overlap with the contemporary fantasy genre. Indeed, some fantasy writers have dismissed magic realism as a pretentious or culturally charged term used for marketing works of fantasy. The other crucial element in magic realism—and one not found in conventional fantasy—is that the fantastical elements are treated by the characters and author as an expected and natural part of the narrative world.

For example, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) and R. A. Lafferty's short story "Nine Hundred Grandmothers" (1966) both contain a similar supernatural element: elderly people who shrink in size as they get older until they are impossibly small from any

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Cosmicomics* (1968) is a collection of Calvino tales centered on the nature of the universe and life on Earth. Scientific facts are bent and distorted into humorous and enchanting tales of fantasy that depict, among other things, the very crowded moments before the beginning of the universe, the last days of the dinosaurs, and a moon that passes close enough to Earth for early humans to hitch a ride on it.
- *Invisible Cities* (1974) is a novel that builds upon Calvino's preoccupation with the urban and the fantastic. In it, explorer Marco Polo describes to Mongolian leader Kublai Khan cities that have been incorporated into the leader's kingdom but which he will never personally see. The cities Polo describes are improbable and evocative, and perhaps are based on nothing more than the explorer's imagination. However, they hold the leader's interest and have done the same for many readers.
- *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1981) is the work that defines Calvino to many readers, since it was his first widely successful novel in English. The book focuses on the reader beginning a new novel by Calvino, though the novel seems to constantly shift, beginning the novel-within-a-novel several times but never advancing far, frustrating the reader within the novel (who just might be you).
- *Ficciones* (1962) is a collection of short works by Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine writer who is considered by many to be one of the forerunners of magic realism. Some of the works resemble traditional stories, while others are more like fictional essays. All reveal clever and wondrous ways of looking at the world. The book is available in an English translation by Anthony Bonner, also titled *Ficciones* (1994).
- *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) by Gabriel García Márquez is perhaps the single work most closely associated with the magic realism genre. In it, the author chronicles several generations of the Buendía family living in the fictional Colombian town of Macondo—in which the most unusual occurrences are simply part of the family's colorful history.
- *Winter's Tale* (1983) by Mark Helprin brings magic realism to New York City. The novel centers on an orphaned immigrant burglar and his magical encounters with—among others—a dying heiress and a flying horse, both of whom serve as his protectors.
- *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* (2009) by Novella Carpenter is a nonfiction account of a food writer who transforms a vacant lot in the economically depressed California city of Oakland into a farm complete with livestock. Carpenter chronicles both the urban hardships of the city's residents and the positive effects of providing a community-owned oasis.
- *The Graveyard Book* (2008) by Neil Gaiman won the 2009 Newbery Award. It is a novel that reads more like a collection of short stories, each focusing on a period in the life of Nobody Owens, a orphaned boy raised by the spirits that inhabit a graveyard.

realistic standpoint. In the Lafferty story, this supernatural occurrence is found in an alien race, and the entire story revolves around the protagonist's discovery of this phenomenon. The supernatural element, then, is treated by both the

character and the author as something noteworthy and outside the normal natural world; in this case, it hardly matters whether this unnatural world is identified as an alien planet or a mythical land. It is clearly *other* in origin.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Úrsula, the matriarch of the Buendía family, suffers a fate similar to the grandmothers in Lafferty's tale: "Little by little she was shrinking, turning into a fetus, becoming mummified in life to the point that in her last months she was a cherry raisin lost inside of her nightgown . . ." However, in this work, the shrinking takes place in the family home, and although it is noticed by the family does not merit special attention, shock, or amazement. The news of her shrinking is presented with the same matter-of-fact tone as any other family event. This understated tone when referring to fantastical occurrences has come to be recognized as a hallmark of magic realism.

To qualify as magic realism, then, a work must feature a realistic setting in which supernatural or fantastical elements are interweaved as if part of the natural order of things. "The Garden of Stubborn Cats" lives up to this definition quite favorably. Marcovaldo's world is one of warehouses and skyscrapers, of hunger and poverty, and sharp class distinctions. At the same time, however, Marcovaldo discovers an impossibly small garden that serves as the last sanctuary for all the wild creatures of the city. His reaction to this is not incredulity but a feeling of acceptance and honor—as if he has finally been granted admittance into the secret world of the cats. Another defining moment occurs earlier in the tale, when Marcovaldo fishes for a trout in the fish tank inside the Biarritz dining room. He catches one and hauls it up with his fishing pole through the dining room, up to a high window near the ceiling. To lower the line in the first place seems whimsical, but to actually catch a fish—and then retrieve it without anyone in the restaurant noticing—pushes the tale into the realm of magic realism. The ending as well—in which cats, birds, and frogs sabotage the construction of a new skyscraper on the site of their former sanctuary—is presented in a matter-of-fact tone that refuses to acknowledge the implausibility of the situation.

To classify "The Garden of Stubborn Cats," as well as the other stories contained in *Marcovaldo*, as magic realism leads to a fundamental shift in how the genre is viewed. Calvino's stories were written in the 1950s and early 1960s, and first published together in 1963; this would put him among the early pioneers of the genre, if one were to base such things purely upon publication dates. Even more significantly, by the culturally neutral definition of magic realism given earlier,

Bohemian author Franz Kafka would have to be acknowledged as one of the forerunners of the genre. In works such as *The Metamorphosis* (1937; published in German in 1915), Kafka juxtaposes realistic settings with fantastical occurrences that are described in an utterly objective tone. In *The Metamorphosis*, for example, a man named Gregor Samsa awakens to find that sometime during the night, he transformed into a giant bug. His primary concern, of course, is how he will get to work.

Although at least some of the works of Kafka and Calvino fit the description of magic realism, it is worth noting that these are singular authors who do not represent the beginning of a literary movement. And it is through a literary movement—rather than through the specifications of a genre—that Latin American writers like those mentioned previously have made a significant impact on the world of literature. To include Calvino and Kafka among the list of early practitioners of magic realism does not diminish the accomplishments of Latin American "boom" authors; to ignore them, however, would be to deny the genre of some of its essential works—regardless of the country in which they were written.

Source: Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on Italo Calvino's "The Garden of Stubborn Cats," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Franco La Polla

In the following essay, *La Polla* notes how the author incorporates modern elements, such as mass communication and comics, with more traditional Italian literary traits in *Marcovaldo*.

Marcovaldo, at the time of its publication (1963), was meant as a text for the Italian secondary school, but after a careful perusal it stands as one of the author's finest works, both in terms of its language and inventiveness. I would like to start by quoting the very first lines of the book, which introduce the story "Mushrooms in the City," because I think them very telling as regards some of *Marcovaldo*'s main concerns.

The wind, coming to the city from far away, brings it unusual gifts, noticed by only a few sensitive souls, such as hay-fever victims, who sneeze at the pollen from flowers of other lands.

One day, to the narrow strip of ground flanking a city avenue came a gust of spores from God knows where; and some mushrooms germinated. Nobody noticed them except Marcovaldo, the

worker who caught his tram just there every morning.

This Marcovaldo possessed an eye ill-suited to city life: billboards, traffic-lights, shop-windows, neon signs, posters, no matter how carefully devised to catch the attention, never arrested his gaze, which might have been running over the desert sands. Instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence.

The first sentence is a perfect example of Calvino's typical period in this work: it refers to the winds and its gifts, as in a Romantic poem, and proceeds with those "few sensitive souls" whose sensitivity actually does not belong to the soul but to the body. This first sentence already shows an opposition that is to be found throughout the book, the opposition between soul (spirit) and body (matter).

The presentation of the main character is, in turn, very Calvinoesque: Marcovaldo—whose very name, with its medieval resonance, tells about his difference, his separation from the modern world—is not like all the other inhabitants of the city; he never lets himself be ensnared by the city's lights and display; he is attracted by leaves and feathers. He is a fabled character (just like any respectable fairy-tale family, his is a rather large one), a hero called to a destiny of greatness by the difference existing between him and the others, in spite of the fact that Marcovaldo's "greatness" does not mean anything in a world much too big for him, like that of contemporary mass society, and in a way the book is a continuous exemplification of this idea. In addition, the presentation of the character is, in its own way, a sort of development of the opposition of spirit/matter.

The last part of the quotation is even more important. In fact, it outlines one of the peculiar traits of the character. Marcovaldo is not the typical sanctioned hero; he sees the manifestations of nature despite the vast product of culture which is the city; he sees in the seasons, his own desires, what his existence is lacking. That is to say, Marcovaldo entertains with nature a relationship which is not founded on identification, but which is a *critical* one: nature is not the setting in which to lose oneself in an anti-Cartesian impulse and in a perfect fusion of subject and

object, but only the means for understanding his own "cultural" situation.

Marcovaldo does not live, does not experience a *mythology* of his own. On the contrary, what happens to him is always caused by an impossibility of mythology, by the awareness that one cannot recuperate the natural values. In one of the most renowned stories of the book, "Moon and Gnac," this impossibility is shown in a particularly remarkable way. Here we have not only a perfect example of the opposition, but we can even *see* such opposition and the consequences it brings about.

Moreover, the opposition may lead to another one, which is however not less traditional than the former: dream/reality. In the story "The Wrong Stop" Marcovaldo, continuing along a march that in its uncertainty and darkness borders on the experience of a nightmare, eventually finds himself on a jumbo jet heading for India, the very place where that night he had dreamt he was going under the influence of a movie. It is a very interesting operation in technique: Calvino brings nearer to our view (through the character's eyes) every detail, every particular, so that reality comes out twisted, and—paradoxically—just because it is closer to our view. Of course, there is no context within which the detail gets sense and meaning, and just as with some procedures in the field of painting following the pop art period, the particular becomes a sign for itself, free from any relationship with the reality it is a part of. As with body art, a line, a curve, and a color exhaust the universe that is possible for the observer; they prove themselves to be absolute and mysterious. But the mystery is easily resolved as soon as the context emerges, and in the case of *Marcovaldo* the moral is very simple. There is an old saying: you'd better be careful with your wishes because they might come true. Marcovaldo's wishes come true, but in the same way Donald Duck's dreams used to do: like a sweet, enchanting nightmare.

The reference to comics must not surprise anyone: in fact, Calvino is a passionate advocate of the most unusual and up-to-date forms of narrative, including comic books. He himself in the important introduction [to *Marcovaldo*] speaks of "very simple narrative structures" with a clear allusion to cartoons and comics... After all, what's the meaning of the story "Marcovaldo at the Supermarket" but that of being a peculiar version of a cartoon in a tone that is perhaps a vaguely sad one, but nonetheless enlivened by the

rhythm of the events, especially in its final crescendo? The ending of the story is pointed out by the author as an image of a consumer society, of the loss of identity between human beings and things, of the change into goods suffered by a loss of values. This is certainly true, but it pertains to the ideology of the text, whereas the form conveys such ideology in the style of cartoons and comics.

Calvino is well-known all over the world for his practice as a metanovelist, for his figure as a writer who is very sensitive to narrative as a self-mirroring technique. A book such as *If on a winter's night a traveler* bears undoubted witness of his deep concern with metanarrative. But we must also remember that Calvino—like all the Italian writers of his generation—comes from the neo-realistic experience, which far from being a trademark of the Italian cinema has long afflicted our fiction and literary theory as well. He himself admits that the stories in *Marcivaldo* are, after all, “a kind of modern fable, a comic-melancholic digression in the vicinity of ‘neo-realism.’”

The forms of mass communication, born in the States (from movies to the comics), have found a clever, sharp observer in Calvino who used them as material for renewing the practice of writing. *Marcivaldo*, then, ranks among Calvino's several attempts to adjust, as it were, two zones of narrativity which were originally strangers to each other, to redeem the genre of the story, making it catch up with the present (that is to say, with the most advanced, innovative research) after snatching it—through invention and irony (for example, in his delightful trilogy *Our Ancestors*)—from the past, the past being a temptation that is a constant, unchanging reality in Italian culture. *Marcivaldo* is in some ways a version of pop narrative by an Italian author, one who rightly and cleverly does not want to get rid of the past by merely erasing it, an author who has been working a long time in order to be able to open a way leading to the evolution of the genre, to a new history of narrative language, patterns and techniques.

Source: Franco La Polla, “A Note on *Marcivaldo*,” in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1986, pp. 38–41.

Dean Flower

In the following excerpt, Flower examines the way Calvino addresses social class issues in Marcivaldo.

An unskilled laborer with a wife and several children to feed, Marcivaldo is always searching his city for some sign of a relenting. In one story, he finds this relenting in the form of mushrooms springing up under the city's trees. As it turns out, the mushrooms are poisonous. Yet, because there are not enough of them, the poison is not fatal. Marcivaldo and his family enjoy the poisoned, metropolitan pleasure of eating the mushrooms and surviving them. In Mr. Calvino's work, irony too springs up underneath the city's trees . . .

In another story or chapter, Marcivaldo comes out of a Technicolor movie to find the city shrouded in fog, blurred and disguised, as it were, by his uncritical and romantic imagination. As the only remaining inhabitant of the city during August, the traditional month for European vacations, Marcivaldo is interviewed by a television crew. But after another interesting beginning, the story slips away into a series of familiar ironies.

This may be the trouble with Marcivaldo and with Mr. Calvino's work in general: It leans almost entirely on irony, but of a rather bland or schematic kind. One feels, in reading the book, a sort of fatigue in regard to irony, like the fatigue some of us felt with novels about sex in the 60's. Like sex, irony needs flesh on its bones or it becomes just one more of Ezra Pound's “accelerated grimaces.”

Mr. Calvino invents, but he does not persevere. His most popular book in America, “*If on a winter's night a traveler*,” consists of 10 beginnings of novels, and one is reminded of the writer in the Donald Barthelme story who could not do middles. For all his supposed “freedom” of imagination, Mr. Calvino is like a blocked writer who is forever starting brilliant books and not quite finishing them. It may be a sign of our restless times. One can imagine a literature composed exclusively of beginnings, incomplete stories and novels for people too impatient, or too clever, to follow anything to a conclusion.

A sentence from Italo Calvino's introduction to his “*Italian Folktales*” reveals the secret behind the magic of the earlier stories in “*Marcivaldo*”: “I believe that fables are true.” Conversely, Mr. Calvino believes that reality is fabulous. When he began the stories of “*Marcivaldo*” in the 1950's and 60's he did not know he was creating a masterwork in the narrative trend labeled the *nouveau roman* by French critics. He simply followed his instincts as a storyteller and

achieved a durable balance between the heritage of 20th-century Italian neorealism and a fabulous vision of reality . . .

[“*Marcovaldo*”] is a series of ecological allegories in the form of urban tales. Psychological insights are held back in favor of cartoons in which facts and people succeed one another with the geometrical smoothness of movie animation . . . Even early in his career, his rhetorical virtuosity disguised the subtlety and depth of his vision—especially in some of the stories in “*Marcovaldo*,” like “The City Lost in the Snow,” “A Saturday of Sun, Sand and Sleep” and “The Wrong Stop.” He writes lightly and jauntily; any trace of effort is concealed. But what catches the reader goes beyond the unspotted perfection of the style; it is his uninhibited poetic sense of life.

Each story belongs to a season, and all of them together take their shape from the cycle of the seasons. Marcovaldo lives through the stories as the double of the writer, observing, reflecting and comparing in a perfectly detached way. He is a humble and romantic blue-collar worker lost in the big city, which perverts rhythms and obfuscates cycles. He is trapped in the unreality of this modern city (the setting is vividly evoked in “Marcovaldo at the Supermarket”), a place that even suffocates the life of the animals in the stories “The Garden of Stubborn Cats” and “The Poisonous Rabbit.” He longs for nature, and nature rewards him in surprising ways. Mushrooms sprout out of the cement in “Mushrooms in the City”; the sky suddenly opens wide in “Park-Bench Vacation”; the moon shines brighter than the neon signs in “The Moon and GNAC.”

What is so much admired by the readers of Mr. Calvino’s later “*Invisible Cities*” was already at work in “*Marcovaldo*” and with a more cogent narrative drive. “*Invisible Cities*” seems like a memory, while “*Marcovaldo*” conveys the sensuous, tangible qualities of life.

The awareness of social class typically taken for granted by American writers is never forgotten in Italo Calvino’s most recently translated book [*Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*] . . . Readers familiar with the fabulous ingenuities of *Invisible Cities* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, which are less novels than meditations on the mysteries of fictive structures, may be surprised at the charming simplicity of these tales . . . For the hero, Marcovaldo, illusions flourish in every story. Hard pressed by poverty, demanding wife and children, peremptory employers, a dreary industrial city, his

own aging body, Marcovaldo schemes endlessly to outwit his fate . . . If you’ve seen “Big Deal on Madonna Street” or any Vittorio Gassmann comedy, you will know Marcovaldo at once: touchingly earnest, full of romantic notions, a big talker yet a gentle man, certain to fail.

Calvino deepens the comedy by constant reminders of social reality. If Marcovaldo trades lunches with a boy of wealthy family, someone instantly steps in to call him a thief. Lured into a supermarket but without any money, playing Santa Claus for the spoiled children of the rich, or trying to dispose of too many free samples of detergent, Marcovaldo is only driven back where he came from. Affluence is a soap bubble in the sky, glimpsed for a moment, then leaving “only smoke, smoke, smoke.” Emphasizing this naturalistic trap, as the book’s subtitle indicates, are the seasons: the twenty stories carry us through the yearly cycle five times, without the slightest suggestion that anything will change.

[There are] flights in almost all of these stories, fantastic swerves up, up and away from reality, as readers of Calvino’s better known works will have guessed. Marcovaldo is literally aloft at the end of one story when in a thick fog the bus he boards turns out to be an airplane bound for Singapore. This is not just another joke at Marcovaldo’s expense. Calvino ends the tale with a mysteriously resonant uplift: “The night beyond the windows was full of stars, now that the plane had passed through the thick blanket of fog, and was flying in the limpid sky of the great altitudes.” For all his Chaplinesque foolishness, Marcovaldo seems to know about such things: *the* great altitudes. In another story he finds himself the only inhabitant left in the city during a mid-August holiday, and he begins to explore it as a wholly new world: a building he sees every day becomes “in its reality” a quarry of gray sandstone; an old wooden fence has fresh pine boards. He discovers a whole realm of “bark and scales and clots and nerve-systems.” Even after being violently pulled back through the looking-glass, interviewed by a TV crew, and put to work on the floodlights while a famous film star dives into the city fountain for the cameras, Marcovaldo is “blinded and dazed” by overlapping versions of reality. He concludes that his dream city probably wasn’t real, but Calvino and the reader know better. For anyone curious about the foundations of Calvino’s many fictions of invisible

cities, these stories should be required reading. They *are* a guide to the night.

Source: Dean Flower, "A review of *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*," in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Summer 1984, pp. 308–309.

Miranda Seymour

In the following excerpt, Seymour argues that Marcovaldo is among Calvino's most accessible works for readers unfamiliar with the author.

Calvino, always the most skittishly elusive of writers, has become increasingly absorbed in making impenetrable filigree pagodas of his books and the hidden implications are difficult to extricate. But in reserving their highest admiration for the elaborate craftsmanship of the artifice Calvino's devotees risk turning him into a writer's writer, directing himself to an elite audience of enthusiasts. There are not many people who would contemplate buying one of his novels for the sheer fun of it. And that is a pity, for Calvino is a jester and an entertainer as much as he is a scholarly magician. The general reader should not be frightened of him.

It is to be hoped that the publication . . . of Calvino's earliest and most accessible works will do something to redress the balance . . . We have already been given the enchanting collection of Italian folk-tales selected and re-told by Calvino. *Adam, One afternoon* . . . introduced us to the author as a masterly teller of fables which are both cynical and gay, set mostly in the poor villages of wartime Italy. Mood and time link them closely to *Marcovaldo*, notably in the title story of Liberoso, the country boy who tries to court an urban Miss with offerings of grasshoppers and beetles and—the final horror—live frogs which he sends hopping through her kitchen.

Liberoso is a sketch for the portrait of Marcovaldo, a countryman struggling to accommodate himself to city life. Genial, well-intentioned and not very bright, Marcovaldo's attempts to reconcile peasant lore with urban existence lead him into comic disasters and Chagall-like fantasies. He can fall asleep on a rubbish heap with a bunch of buttercups pressed to his nose, but a visit to the supermarket conveys only the hurried impartial greed of the housewives and a roar of trolley wheels before fantasy takes over with a vast crane descending to scoop all their purchases back on to the shelves.

All artefacts are enemies to Marcovaldo. He can make sense of them only by translating them

into familiar objects. A row of hoardings is transformed into a forest where he goes to chop down wood until the police discover and reprimand the culprit. A rabbit being used for toxic experiments is seen as a fellow stranger from the country and carried home for reassurance until the civic authorities burst in to retrieve it. A rubber plant rescued from its tub in a foyer is magically changed into a tropical monster of prodigious size before the evening wind snatches it from Marcovaldo's hands and blows it away in a gust of yellow leaves.

Undeterred by the catastrophes he is causing, Marcovaldo stumbles on, attaching himself to anything that looks familiar in an alien world. Imagination and invention are his weapons.

Merry and entertaining, the history of Marcovaldo reflects the young Calvino's sense of the stultifying effect of everyday urban life among the workers. If Marcovaldo is in part a clown, he is also an individualist who refuses to fit into the expected pattern. A displaced Hesiod, he remains staunchly and endearingly himself.

Source: Miranda Seymour, "Shimmering," in *The Spectator*, Vol. 251, No. 8098, September 24, 1983, pp. 23–24.

Thomas Sutcliffe

In the following review excerpt, Sutcliffe argues that the stories in Marcovaldo and Adam, One Afternoon do not compare favorably to the later works in which the author breaks free from established literary constraints.

What does Italo Calvino want us to know? Asked of almost any other writer the question would probably seem crassly unspecific or simply irrelevant, but it retains a particular pertinacity with regard to Calvino. In more detail the question could be put like this: does he want us to discover what we know for ourselves, or does he want to persuade us to accept certain patterns in which knowledge might be placed? His work invites both proposals. He is, perhaps, the least dogmatic of writers, and yet by virtue of that openness he is acutely susceptible to a reconstruction in other forms; his books can readily be appropriated to exemplify a single thesis or ideology. Calvino doesn't appear to discourage that procedure, not in recent work at least. More than Borges and Pynchon, even, his books invite the attention of literary theorists, indeed often speak their language, and clearly share with them certain preoccupations. So it's easy to think of his colleagues as being, not other writers, but



IN THE LATER STORIES IN THESE TWO BOOKS THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE OF CALVINO'S IMPATIENCE, HIS DESIRE TO WRITE WITHOUT CONSTRAINT. FANTASY OCCASIONALLY TAKES OFF BUT ITS FLIGHT IS CLUMSY, BURDENED WITH A DUTIFUL REALISM, AND THE CONCERNS ARE EXPRESSED WITHOUT THE GRACE HE LATER ACHIEVED."

academics working in the field of literary interpretation and hermeneutics. The subject they share is the place of narrative in our lives . . .

He would, I think, enjoy the suppositional etymology which derives the word *narrative* from the latin *gnarus*—knowing or skilled—and he has elaborated through his books the connections between reading, cunning, interpretation and knowledge. The real importance of his contribution is that he remains aware of the limitations of theory and preserves the value of the exception to the rule. His is an artist's knowledge, not a theorist's. He knows that pattern and order might be all that are available to us but avoids the fallacious conclusion that everything is then covered. Life evades the patterns laid down upon it, which is why narratives can never cease, and a mental ordering which proved to have no exception would freeze experience. So in Calvino's writing random detail comes to have a moral force, because it offers the only remaining resistance to theory. The two hold each other in a tension which has traditionally been preserved by the opposition of the literary theorist and the artist. Almost uniquely, Calvino maintains the balance of power within his own books, indeed often on the same page or within the same sentence. As he says: "I agree to the books being read as existential or as structural works, as Marxist or neo-Kantian, Freudianly or Jungianly; but above all I am glad when I see that no single key will turn the locks."

The source of Calvino's morality of narrative, and the origins of his concern with the labour of reading, lie in his passion for folk-

tale. In the preface to his classic collection of Italian folk-tales, published early in his career, he expressed the opposition between identifying theory and distinguishing reality more quietly. To represent the various types of tale which recur he chose "versions that struck me as being the most characteristic, the least stereotyped, the most steeped in local colour." Without that thin defensive line of local colour what difference would there be between *characteristic* and *stereotyped*, the good and evil faces of order? Calvino also cites approvingly the Tuscan proverb, "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it", which captures exactly the mute expectancy of the folk-tale, the sense that it requires something of you which it will not name. Folk-tales remain merely dumb until you realize that you are required to complete them yourself, to fill in your own particulars.

The transformation which follows is prefigured in the magical metamorphosis which so often concludes this type of story, frog into prince, from the apparently worthless to a shining merit. It is important also that the folk-tales Calvino likes best are not parables. They have no dogma to conduct, no possessive interest in the career of their own meaning. The knowledge they convey is not information but a procedure experienced in the act of reading. They teach cunning by requiring it of the reader in order to understand . . .

His later work offers something much more like a catalogue of the potential thoughts of men and women in this century. His erudition is enormous; it is hard to think of a way of thinking about the world which doesn't make a guest appearance somewhere in the books (in *Cosmicomics* he even gives a cheerful sit-com vitality to the principle laws of physics). But none comes with the writer's authorization. The point is sharply made when Calvino offers some notes about the intellectual background to the stories collected in *Our Ancestors* (it is a feature of Calvino's modesty that he is the least mystifying of writers about his own procedures, an etiquette he shares with Eliot and Empson). Anyone who has read those fabulous *mélanges* of invention and humour might find the author's suggestions bathetic: *The Cloven Viscount* is offered as an allegory of the divisions of Cold War, or *The Invisible Knight* as providing a critique of the "organization man" in a mass society. But these readings are dismaying only if we take such

interpretations as exclusive, and Calvino repeatedly demonstrates that rival interpretations have no force against each other. In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* a group of travellers, magically struck dumb, tell their individual stories through the arcane and silent symbolism of the tarot pack. The book is not about communication, as none of the stories is verified; they are speculations on the part of the narrator, interpretations of the pictures and even the manner in which the cards are selected. Like the sorcerer's apprentice Calvino sets off a flow of meaning from what appears to be a limited source.

The book proves its point, the infinite capacity to invent the world and the resistance of the world to all invention. Meaning and detail are inseparable but unconnectable . . .

It is perhaps improper to require the latest books to fall into line with this narrative about Calvino's concerns, but no alternative is available. In fact the publishers have arranged an intriguing flashback for his readers [*Adam, One Afternoon and Other Stories* and *Marcivaldo, or The Seasons in the City*], because although the books come dressed in new clothes they are poor and elderly relations. Calvino explains in a note that the stories in *Marcivaldo* were written in the early 1950s, "the Italy of the neo-realistic movies", and in the mid-1960s "when the illusion of an economic boom flourished". This is more evidence of his good manners but it is hard not to read it also as a plea of mitigation, and one which is to some extent required. The stories of *Adam, One Afternoon* are largely set in the Second World War and the period immediately following. Anyone familiar with Calvino's later books will feel a certain disquiet on reading these; the instinct is something like "It's too quiet out there". The exhilarating attack of works like *Invisible Cities* or *If on a Winter's Night* never comes. Elsewhere Calvino has hinted that at this stage in his career he was not writing with the purposeless pleasure he discovered in folk-tales. "I had made efforts to write the realistic-novel-reflecting-the-problems-of-Italian-society and had not managed to do so. (At the same time I was what was called a 'politically committed writer')". The hyphens, shackling the words into a slogan, and the quotation marks, holding the disreputable title at a distance, tell the story. *Marcivaldo* dutifully depicts the life of a poor family in an Italian city. The worker of the title longs for the country, worries about his family and dreams of escaping

routine. The stories in both collections are pervaded by the same sense of the deceptions of desire and of resentment about the delusions of appearance, a dismay that is unthinkable in more recent works.

In the later stories in these two books there is some evidence of Calvino's impatience, his desire to write without constraint. Fantasy occasionally takes off but its flight is clumsy, burdened with a dutiful realism, and the concerns are expressed without the grace he later achieved. Marcivaldo goes out in winter to saw down billboards for firewood and is suddenly illuminated by the headlight of a short-sighted motorcycle policeman. The latter has already mistakenly challenged two advertisements and isn't going to be fooled again. "Smart idea. That little man up there with the saw represents the migraine that is cutting the head in two. I got it at once." The idea, that vanity distorts what we see, is characteristically Calvino, but the expression of it seems embarrassed and uncertain. It is as though the sudden joke is seen as delinquent when there are more important things to worry about—the oppression of the poor, the emptiness of consumerism, the corruption of capital. The best story of all, *The Argentine Ant*, is undoubtedly the quietest as regards its implicit message. A young couple moves into a new house only to find it overrun with ants. Their neighbours have learnt, by devising elaborate and ineffectual stratagems, to quell the irritation they cause, a crawling in the skull. The story simply describes how insignificant things can make life intolerable, but it remains open to any number of other interpretations, is not sealed off by the anxiety to achieve a specific end which marks many of the other tales.

The collections could, without absurdity, be described as sincere, that familiar apology for a faltering in style. But sincerity as a term of judgment is disabled by the later writing; it suddenly looks to make embarrassing assumptions about the identity between appearance and meaning. In *Marcivaldo*, the worker sees a plant, "one of those plants that are so plant-shaped, with leaves so leaf-shaped, that they don't seem real." These stories are too short-story-shaped to seem like real Calvino. They are obedient not only to a genre, with a familiar set of rules and gallery of effects, but also to the ideas they wish to see prevail. As a result they can't finally be rescued by the detail they contain, because it exists to confirm theory, not to undermine it. That

delicate cold war between a perceived order and resistant, exorbitant life has broken down. The stories certainly don't issue from the same writer who concludes, in *The Invisible Knight*, "The art of writing tales consists in an ability to draw the rest of life from the little one has understood of it: but life begins again at the end of the page and one realises that one knew nothing whatsoever." At the beginning Calvino thought he knew what the reader needed to know; folk-tales taught him that that's something only the reader *can* know.

Source: Thomas Sutcliffe, "Before the Art of Cunning," in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4196, September 2, 1983, p. 921.

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When Calvino died in 1985, he had already compiled notes for a series of lectures to give at Harvard University later that year. This posthumous collection includes his notes for five of the six lectures he was scheduled to give. Each lecture concerns a literary quality he feels is important for authors who aim to create works of lasting importance. The qualities are "Lightness," "Quickness," "Exactitude," "Visibility," and "Multiplicity."

Calvino, Italo, *Why Read the Classics?* Pantheon, 1999.

This posthumous collection of previously published essays and criticism covers a wide range of writers and works that qualify as classics. It even offers several of Calvino's own unique and humorous criteria for determining what constitutes a classic.

Harrison, Robert Pogue, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

It may or may not be coincidence that Harrison, a professor of Italian literature, seems to share Calvino's affinity for gardens. In this extended essay, Harrison concentrates on the way gardens are presented in works of literature, and what they are used to represent. He covers everything from the Garden of Eden to the film adaptation of *Aeon Flux* (2005).

Weiss, Beno, *Understanding Italo Calvino*, University of South Carolina, 1993.

This critical study devotes a different chapter to specific works or genres in which the author wrote, covering everything from his neorealistic early period to his posthumous works.

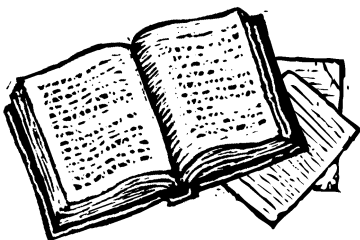
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants

NADINE GORDIMER

1965

Race relations and racial prejudice are perennial themes in the work of renowned South African author Nadine Gordimer. Many of her stories and novels are set in her native country during the era of apartheid, when government policy officially relegated black South Africans to second-class status. Gordimer's characters are often liberal in their attitudes; in some cases, a shattering experience forces a naive or racist white to alter his or her views.

The story "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants," originally published in a collection entitled *Not For Publication* (1965), differs somewhat from this pattern. Although its main character undergoes a trying experience, her racist beliefs remain unaltered and unquestioned. The narrator relies on the counsel and assistance of the character she calls Jack, but she continues to treat him condescendingly. This ironic contradiction, drawn with Gordimer's characteristic subtlety, reveals much about the entrenched ideology of apartheid. Beyond the racial dimension, the story explores other dynamics of power in interpersonal relationships, as a mysterious drifter inserts himself into the main character's lonely life and proceeds to take advantage of her. "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" is currently available in Gordimer's short story collection, *Six Feet of the Country* (1986).





Nadine Gordimer (AP Images)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

In a remarkable career spanning more than half a century, Nadine Gordimer has captured the wrenching reality of the South African experience in her short stories and novels. Gordimer was born November 20, 1923, in Springs, South Africa, a white mining town in the Transvaal region near Johannesburg. Her father, Isidore, was a watchmaker originally from Lithuania; her mother was born in England. Gordimer's early years in school exposed her to South Africa's culture of apartheid. She was educated at home for most of her adolescence after being diagnosed with a heart condition at age nine. Deprived of social interaction with other children, she took sustenance from her local library and began writing stories at an early age. For one year, she studied at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

As a young writer, Gordimer was able to publish stories first in small South African magazines, then in prestigious American publications such as *Harper's* and the *New Yorker*. By the age of thirty, she had two published collections to her

credit, along with her first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953).

Her characteristic style was established early in her career. Her stories are realistic and ironic, influenced by French writers such as Guy de Maupassant and Gustave Flaubert. She focuses on intimate details in the daily lives of ordinary people. However, because they are set within a highly charged social milieu of racial discrimination, her stories convey strong political messages via the difficult situations her characters are forced to negotiate. The predominant theme of her work is the corrosive effect of social injustice, especially the apartheid system, on the human spirit. As her career progressed, more overt and radical political tactics entered her narratives, and she herself became more outspoken and active in the movement to dismantle apartheid. Nevertheless, she remains faithful to the belief that literary art should not devolve into political propaganda.

The story lines of Gordimer's acclaimed novels reveal the intricate complexity of her art. In *A World of Strangers* (1958), which was banned by the South African authorities, a visiting Englishman makes two sets of friends, one white and one black, only to discover the barriers keeping them apart. The white protagonist of *A Guest of Honour* (1970) finds himself taking sides in a dangerous power struggle when he is invited to return to a newly liberated African country in which he formerly served as a colonial official. Gordimer won the prestigious Booker Prize for *The Conservationist* (1974), the story of a wealthy white Johannesburg industrialist who buys a farm outside the city but knows little about the blacks who live on his land, one of whom turns up dead.

When Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991, South Africa had taken its first steps toward the transformation that would bring anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela from prison to the presidency three years later. She remained a relevant and critical voice well into the second decade of the new South Africa. In 2005, Gordimer's fourteenth novel appeared, entitled *Get a Life*. Her eighteenth short story collection, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, was published in 2007.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" is written in the first person in everyday, colloquial language. The narrator appears to be telling a story,

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- “Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants” was made into a one-hour television movie in 1982. The film was part of a seven-part series called “The Gordimer Stories,” a coproduction of Bavaria TV and Teleculture. Directed by Lynton Stephenson from a screenplay by Gordimer, the film starred Danny Keogh and Trix Piennar. Although the film was shot in South Africa, it was not aired on South African television. It was shown on public television stations and screened in some independent theatres in the United States. Other adapted stories in the series include “A Chip of Glass Ruby,” “Six Feet of the Country,” “Not for Publication,” “City Lovers,” “Country Lovers,” and “Oral History.”
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either directly to the reader or perhaps to an unknown third party. In the story’s opening paragraphs, the narrator, whose name is never mentioned, introduces herself as a bookkeeper of a petrol (gas) station and garage. “I’m forty-nine,” she says, “but I could be twenty-five except for my face and my legs. I’ve got that very fair skin and my legs have gone mottled, like Roquefort cheese.” She assesses her appearance objectively because “to myself I admit everything.”

The narrator has worked for years at the gas station, located near a shopping center in a suburban section of Johannesburg. Her only colleagues are the white auto mechanics, whom she labels a “bunch of ducktails,” and the black petrol attendants, to whom she refers as “boys”—but not necessarily because they are young. In fact, one of the “boys,” Madala, has worked there for twenty-three years.

The narrator lives in the city in an inexpensive flat along the bus route that takes her to her workplace. She is formerly married, with a daughter and twin grandsons who live in Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe). She has only seen her grandchildren once. She mentions she is on friendly terms with

some of the suburbanites who live near the garage, as well as the local hairdresser and pharmacist. Her other social connections include one female friend (unnamed) who accompanies her to the movies on Friday nights, and a lonely older couple called the Versfelds whom she visits for lunch on Sundays.

She regrets that she has no friends at her workplace. Since she has nothing in common with the mechanics, she says, “I’d sooner talk to the blacks, that’s the truth, though I know it sounds a strange thing to say.” She is not on good terms with old Madala: after he refused to run errands for her, she complained to her manager, who declined to fire such a longstanding employee. She has greater respect for “the boss-boy, Jack,” who in her view is more intelligent than some whites. She complains about him as well, disturbed that he was getting too many phone calls from people asking for him by his African name. He charms her by explaining that “Here I’m Jack because Mpanza Makiwane is not a name, and there I’m Mpanza Makiwane because Jack is not a name, but I’m the only one who knows who I am wherever I am.” She mentions that she used to buy brandy for Jack, before blacks could purchase liquor on their own.

The narrator mentions that on occasion, men take a liking to her at the service station, sometimes inviting her out for a drink. This leads her into a description of a recent encounter with a man who tried to buy gas with Rhodesian currency. Jack enters her office to tell her about the man. Sizing him up through the window, she sees he is “one of those men you recognize at once as the kind who moves about a lot.” She asks Jack to stay with her in the office as she talks to the stranger, who is concerned about a possible robbery. The stranger, a young man with sunburned skin and streaky blond hair, says he has just arrived in the country and has not yet changed his money. He takes off his watch and gives it to her, claiming it is gold. She agrees to hold it temporarily, helping him look up directions to Kensington on a wall map. After he leaves, she notices that the watch is not gold, but she decides to give him the benefit of the doubt. He returns promptly with South African money, she returns the watch, and the two have a brief, friendly chat about hotels where he might stay while in Johannesburg for a couple of weeks or so.

Days later, Jack reports that while the narrator was out on lunch hour, the man had come again but did not buy any gas. He looked in the

office window and said he would come back later. Jack is suspicious of the drifter—he notices that his tires are worn out, making it unlikely that he had traveled all the way from Rhodesia. He returns at the end of the day and buys some gas. He tells the narrator that he needs to find another place to stay. She mentions a hotel near her home that is run by a nice woman named Mrs. Douglas. He asks her to speak to the proprietress on his behalf, and gives her a lift there. After Mrs. Douglas gives him a room, the drifter invites the narrator to have a drink with him. Instead of taking her to the hotel lounge, he brings a bottle of gin to her flat. He tells her he fought in the Congo on the side of the native chief Tshombe against Irish soldiers.

The next day, the drifter appears at the narrator's apartment while she is preparing dinner for herself, and she feels obligated to offer him a meal. He seems to take no notice either of the food or of his surroundings. He tells little about himself and asks nothing about her. The narrator tells Jack about the goings-on with the drifter, even though she normally makes it a point not to speak to natives about her private life or anything to do with other whites.

After an absence of five or six days, the drifter returns to the garage at the end of the day and drives the narrator home. She buys pies and again they eat together. He tells her with annoyance that some "smart alecks and swindlers" owe him money but are refusing to pay. He tells her he is thirty-seven years old, which seems surprisingly old to her. She sees scars on his body, some of which he acquired in his boyhood, others during the fighting in the Congo. He stays the night, and in the morning asks for the key to her flat, revealing that he has left Mrs. Douglas's hotel without paying. The narrator, feeling a personal obligation to the hotel keeper, pays for his room herself, without telling him. She does, however, continue to confide in Jack.

She comes home from work to find the man in her flat. She shows him a picture of her daughter, asking if he is familiar with the Rhodesian town where she lives, but he shows no interest. When he goes out to buy cigarettes, the narrator is suddenly struck with fear and decides to lock him out, but when he returns, she changes her mind and lets him in, feeling somewhat foolish for being afraid. At this point, the narrator digresses from her story briefly to wonder what might become of her in the future if she ends up

alone; she thinks of haunting newspaper stories about women found dead in their homes.

The drifter makes a casual remark about Princess Margaret's visit to South Africa some years back which causes the narrator to suspect him of lying about his age. She calculates that he could be as young as twenty-five rather than thirty-seven, but she does not believe he could be that young "You could always get rid of a boy of twenty-five. He wouldn't have the strength inside to make you afraid to try it." This is the narrator's first admission that she is afraid of the drifter. She would have felt safer, she recalls, if someone else had known about his presence, but she had nobody to talk to. She continues to mention him to Jack, asking him to estimate the man's age, but when Jack asks if he is still around, she denies it.

The drifter tells her he is having a mechanic friend work on his car before departing for the city of Durban the following Saturday. She feels relieved, but guilty that she had been considering how to make him leave. They have a pleasant moment together. However, on Saturday, he does not leave. Another week passes, and when she asks about his car, he tells her he no longer has it, that it was sold, and he is waiting for the money. She suspects him of lying about it, but continues to lend him small amounts of money.

She begins to feel more fearful for her own safety; only when she is at work at the garage does she feel safe. She asks Jack, "What's a '59 Chrysler worth?" He replies, "With those tyres, nobody will pay much." Jack then ventures to ask her why she does not move to Rhodesia to be near her daughter. The narrator is impressed by the compassion and intuitiveness this question demonstrates: "They've got more feeling than whites sometimes, that's the truth," she says. She declines to answer Jack's question, but instead she does "something I should've done long ago": she writes down her address for him and asks him to send someone to check on her if she ever fails to show up for work.

That evening, she finds the drifter has gone without warning. Filled with terror that he will reappear, she asks to stay with her friends the Versfelds for a few days. Even still, she cannot sleep soundly. When she returns to her flat, she buys a chain for the door and a heavy curtain for the window and stays at home, afraid to re-enter the building after dark.

Some days later she learns from Jack that the drifter had been to the garage. She cannot hide the anxiety that fills her face. Jack says, "I told him you're gone. You don't work here any more. You went to Rhodesia to your daughter. I don't know which place." Jack then returns to the newspaper he's reading; the narrator comments that "he fancies himself quite the educated man." She does not thank him.

In the final paragraph of the story, the narrator reports that she has not seen the drifter again, and that she never spoke about him to anybody: "as I say, that's the trouble when you work alone in an office like I do, there's no one you can speak to."

CHARACTERS

Mrs. Douglas

Mrs. Douglas is the proprietress of the New Park Hotel in Johannesburg, around the corner from the narrator's home. The narrator mentions the hotel to the drifter when he is looking for a place to stay in town, and she goes with him to ask Mrs. Douglas for a room. Later, the narrator discovers that the drifter has left the hotel without paying. Out of a sense of obligation to Mrs. Douglas, she secretly pays for the room and makes up an excuse for the drifter.

The Drifter

The drifter is a mysterious, unnamed character who moves in with the narrator and takes advantage of her passive good nature and isolation. He arrives at the gas station where the narrator works, driving an American car with worn-out tires and carrying Rhodesian money. He looks young and thin with blond hair and a deep suntan. He has false teeth and scars on his back and stomach. The narrator describes him as "like one of those men you see in films, you know, the stranger in town who doesn't look as if he lives anywhere." He tells her he is thirty-seven years old, but later details suggest he may be quite a bit younger. He tells her he has been a mercenary fighting on the side of a native leader in the Congo, and that he has come to Johannesburg "on business" and because some people owe him money. After staying for several nights in a hotel recommended by the narrator, he skips out without paying. He spends one night with the narrator, then asks for the key and moves in with her. The narrator is afraid to ask

him to leave. She eventually begins to distrust him and to fear for her own safety. He departs as mysteriously as he arrived.

Jack

Jack is a petrol attendant at the suburban Johannesburg gas station where the narrator works. "Jack" is a nickname he uses in white circles; his real name is Mpanza Makiwane. She refers to him as "the boss-boy," since the station manager works in an office in the city. Like the other petrol attendants, he is black. The narrator trusts and respects him more than the other black employees, although she is very conscious of the gap in their social status. She used to buy brandy for him when South African blacks were prohibited from purchasing alcohol.

Jack's behavior in the story reveals him to be observant, intelligent, and sensitive. He serves the drifter when he first comes to the service station, and he is immediately suspicious of him because of his foreign currency and the worn-out tires on his car. Throughout the story the narrator speaks to Jack about the drifter. Although she does not tell him the drifter is living with her, nor that she feels threatened by his malignant presence, Jack grasps the situation and, on his own initiative, takes decisive action to protect his co-worker.

Madala

Madala is a black petrol attendant at the service station. Although he has worked there for twenty-three years, the narrator still thinks of him as a "boy." He refuses to run personal errands for the narrator, and so she complains to her superior about him. But the manager does not fire Madala because he has worked there for so long.

Mpanza Makiwane

See Jack

The Narrator

The narrator of "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" is a forty-nine-year-old white woman who works as a bookkeeper at a garage in suburban Johannesburg. She is formerly married and her grown-up daughter lives in Rhodesia with her husband and twin sons. She is rather vain, proud of her "perfect size fourteen" figure, and conscious of her appearance. Her racial views are typical of ordinary white South Africans during the apartheid era. She refers to her black co-workers as "boys," even those who are clearly

older than she is. She thinks and says insulting things about blacks and thinks of them as her inferiors. However, her more respectful attitude toward Jack indicates some flexibility in what otherwise seem to be hardened stereotypes. Recalling Jack's sensitive regard for her plight leads her to remark that blacks have "got more feeling than whites sometimes, that's the truth." Nevertheless, she continues to condescend to Jack even while confiding in him.

The narrator's social life is rather thin—she has a few casual friendships, but nobody with whom she can discuss intimate details of her private life. Her loneliness and desire for intimacy help explain why she gets involved with the drifter and becomes vulnerable to his wiles. Her interactions with the drifter are mostly passive. She agrees to his suggestion that they have a drink in her flat; later, she acquiesces to his request to move in. Rather than confront him about his failure to pay her friend Mrs. Douglas, she pays the hotel keeper out of her own money. Lacking the nerve to lock the drifter out of her home or ask him to leave, her passivity puts her in a frightening, potentially dangerous situation.

The Versfelds

The Versfelds are a lonely, elderly couple whom the narrator frequently visits on Sundays. When the narrator becomes terrified that the drifter may return, she asks to stay a few days at their home.

THEMES

Loneliness and Isolation

The narrator of "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" is a middle-aged, working-class white woman who lacks a strong social network. She complains, with some justification, that her work in the petrol station does not afford her opportunities to develop friendships. She is prevented from befriending her co-workers as a result of being the only female who works there, and also because of the racial divide separating her from the black gas attendants. "I'm quite friends with some of the people from the luxury flats round about," she says, but these casual acquaintanceships are of little value to her. The female friend she goes to the movies with and the lonely couple she visits on Sundays are likewise not true friends in whom she can confide. The narrator is without close relatives as well. The only family members

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- What is the significance of the fact that the reader never learns the name of either the narrator or the drifter? Give a class presentation in which you consider possible names for these characters and how they might alter the story's flavor.
- Research the history of white mercenary soldiers in African conflicts and write a brief report. How might this background information help you create a fuller portrait of the drifter?
- Imagine the narrator's life prior to the point at which we meet her in the story. Write a time line of significant events leading up to and shaping the character as she exists in the story.
- Write an essay in which you discuss how Gordimer builds tension in her portrayal of the drifter. Look closely at the effects of specific words, phrases, and descriptions.
- Compare Gordimer's treatment of racial conflict with the true story of Sandra Laing as depicted in Judith Stone's *When She Was White* (2008). What conclusions can you draw about the meaning of skin color? Write an essay in which you present your argument.
- Rewrite "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants," or a section of it, in the third person from an omniscient narrator's viewpoint. How would the story differ, and what do those differences indicate about the choices Gordimer made in constructing the story?
- Read *Spud* (2007) by John van de Ruit, a comic novel about a young boy in a South African prep school at the time of the end of apartheid. How does the portrayal of race relations in this novel (written long after the end of apartheid and set during its demise) differ from the portrayal of race relations in Gordimer's work. Write an essay in which you compare the novel and Gordimer's short story.

she mentions are her daughter, who lives out of the country, and her twin grandsons. That she has only seen her grandchildren once suggests that the narrator and her daughter are not close.

In contrast to the narrator's social isolation, the story's black characters appear to live among tighter social bonds. The "boys" at the garage are usually referred to as a group, customarily "yelling with laughter over something in their own language." Early on, the narrator mentions that Jack receives many phone calls at work from "uncles and aunts and brothers-in-law." The disparity in the social lives of the characters subtly underscores the notion, pervasive in Gordimer's fiction, that white South Africans live in precarious circumstances.

Toward the end of the story, Jack asks the narrator why she does not live closer to her daughter. An unvoiced answer appears in her mind: she values her independence. However, throughout the story she mentions her loneliness and dread of ending up alone. These fears grow in magnitude once she takes up with the drifter: "Every Sunday you read in the paper about women dead alone in flats, no one discovers it for days." It worries her that there is no one she can tell about the drifter's menacing presence in her apartment. The only one with whom she discusses the drifter is Jack, although she lies to him about some of the details and communicates rather obliquely. She clearly feels uncomfortable discussing personal matters with a black man. It seems likely that in this case, her need for human connection overcomes her racial prejudices. Jack's concern prompts her to give her co-worker her address, an initial step toward remedying her isolation. She is rewarded for reaching out to Jack when he finds a clever way to protect her from the drifter. Expressing genuine appreciation or fondness for Jack is unthinkable to her, though, and she remains an isolated figure.

Abusive Relationships

Gordimer throws suspicion on the character of the drifter from his earliest appearance in the story. After he tries to pay for gas with foreign currency, he offers the narrator his watch for collateral, falsely claiming it to be gold. The narrator decides to help him for reasons that are perhaps unclear even to her, but that may center on physical attraction. On their second encounter, he enlists her help in securing a room in the

New Park hotel near her home. Later, the narrator learns that he has abused her kindness, and threatened her good name, by checking out of the hotel without paying. Instead of confronting him or demanding that he right this wrong, she goes to the hotel and pays for his stay herself without telling him. This is the first clear sign that the narrator is actively participating in, or enabling, her own mistreatment.

The drifter is highly assertive in his relationship with the narrator, and she is steadfastly passive. When he first invites her to have a drink, she thinks he intends to take her to the hotel bar, a neutral location, but instead she lets him into her flat. He leaves the bottle there, which means he will have to come back. He next appears at her door during the dinner hour, and the narrator feels obliged to feed him. A week later, he shows up at the garage and drives her home. She invites him in again, and this time he spends the night, presumably commencing a sexual affair. In the morning, the narrator remarks, she still does not feel like she knows him at all. He tells her almost nothing about himself—possibly lying even about his age—and asks her little about herself. The reader is unclear whether the drifter is genuinely interested in the narrator or merely eager to take advantage of her.

The abuse continues when the drifter asks her to leave him the key to her flat and she acquiesces. He soon becomes a malingering presence, and the narrator grows afraid to ask him to leave. She no longer trusts him and comes to believe that his apparent kindness is "just a trick that he could do, so real you couldn't believe it when it stopped just like that." His demeanor and facial expressions terrify her. Each step of the way, she misses opportunities to put a stop to a relationship that grows increasingly abusive. By the story's end, she has to stay at her friends' house, fearing for her safety.

Racial Prejudice

The impact of racial injustice, in particular South Africa's apartheid system, on psychology and human relations is an abiding theme of Nadine Gordimer's fiction. In "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants," Gordimer filters the action through the viewpoint of a conventionally racist white woman. Her first-person narration is sprinkled with derogatory comments about blacks such as "of course they're like children." She takes deliberate measures to exert her power over her black



Johannesburg skyline (Image copyright Neil Wigmore, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

co-worker Jack, sending him on an errand “just to show him that he mustn’t get too free with a white person.” She recounts that when old Madala refused to do her bidding, she tried to get him fired. The narrator’s racial prejudices play a meaningful role in her identity. They seem to provide her a way to express a sense of personal power—a power revealed to be lacking in her relationship with the white male drifter.

The narrator’s relationship with Jack is interesting in light of her ingrained racism. She cannot deny Jack’s good nature and intelligence, saying, “you get more sense out of the boss-boy, Jack, than you can out of some whites.” She relies on his judgment when she asks him to guess the drifter’s age, and on his technical knowledge when she asks him to estimate the value of the drifter’s car. While she does not tell Jack the whole truth of her affair with the drifter, she reveals enough for him to get the picture. Jack appears to view her as an individual rather than a stereotype. The question he asks at the end of the story—“Why don’t you live there in Rhodesia with your daughter?”—strikes at the heart of her isolation and vulnerability. In a brief moment of reflection on Jack’s insight, the

narrator confesses, “They’ve got more feeling than whites sometimes, that’s the truth.” It is possible that this act of friendship makes a crack in the ideological shell of her prejudice. Nevertheless, even after Jack’s little white lie throws the drifter off her scent and gets her out of her difficulty, she remains contemptuous, mocking him as he reads the newspaper with the remark that “I think he fancies himself quite the educated man.” The favor Jack has done her, and the man himself, seem to remain invisible to her.

STYLE

Narration

“Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants” is written in first-person as one individual’s account of her experiences. Because there is no objective or omniscient viewpoint, the narrator is the reader’s only source of information—the reader knows only what the narrator knows or chooses to tell. This narrative device enhances the sense of mystery surrounding the character of the drifter, since the narrator learns comparatively little about him, declining even to mention his name.

Gordimer is employing the technique of the “unreliable narrator,” one whose awareness or understanding of situations and other characters is limited or untrustworthy. In the first paragraph, the narrator claims that “to myself I admit everything.” However, her racial prejudices, signaled from early in the story, severely skew her perception of Jack’s role in the events she recounts. She seems uneasy about confiding in Jack and surprised by the intelligence he displays—all she can think to say is, “sometimes you find yourself talking to that boy as if he was a white person.” Jack’s astute assessment of the narrator’s predicament, and the cunning way he helps get her out of it, are revealed to the reader, although they seem to remain obscure to the narrator. In this way, Gordimer allows her reader to separate from and transcend the narrator’s limited consciousness, and this is key to the story’s effectiveness.

Suspense

The action of the story revolves around the way the drifter inserts himself into the narrator’s life, eventually causing her to fear for her personal safety. But the story’s opening offers no sense of threat. Gordimer builds suspense gradually, using ominous hints that point to a slowly gathering storm.

For example, when the narrator first meets the drifter in the office of the petrol station, she asks Jack to stay in the room. In their first encounter, the drifter leaves his watch for a deposit and says “It’s a gold one.” The narrator can see that the watch is a fake, but decides to give the drifter the benefit of the doubt. These early signs point both to the drifter’s shifty character and the narrator’s passive nature. This dynamic repeats itself when the drifter invites himself to stay in the narrator’s apartment, admitting that he left the New Park Hotel without paying. The narrator makes no protest and even pays his hotel bill. By this point it is apparent that the narrator is placing herself in a dangerous situation. The suspense reaches a climax as the narrator acquires a feeling of being menaced but seems to lack the wherewithal to protect herself.

Irony

Dramatic irony results from language or events that reveal meaning to the reader in a way that may not be apparent to the characters involved. It is a powerful feature of literary art, and one used well by Gordimer. Irony is a classic device of satire and social commentary and is pervasive in

Gordimer’s fiction. The main irony in “Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants” stems from the narrator’s relationship to Jack. Even though she talks to him about the drifter throughout the story and is influenced by his views during her crisis, she fervently believes that she has nobody to talk to. Even in the last paragraph of the story, the narrator claims that she “never breathed a word to anybody about it.” The apparent contradiction reveals, with sad irony, the blinders caused by the narrator’s racist worldview—blinders strong enough that they seem to make the character oblivious to her own experience.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants” first appeared in 1965 during a period of sweeping historical change in Africa. In the decades after World War II, the European powers that had dominated the continent gradually withdrew their colonial administrations as they faced increased opposition from armed liberation movements. In the year 1960 alone, seventeen African nations gained their independence. But problems plagued the new nations from the start. The colonial powers had drawn the borders between African states with little regard for the ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the territories. Furthermore, Europeans retained control of many sectors of Africa’s economy. For these reasons, many conflicts occurred during and after the formation of independent states. For example, the Republic of Congo declared independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960. But just eleven days later, the province of Katanga seceded from the new republic. Katanga’s political leader, Moïse Tshombe, was allied with Belgian mining interests. He employed European mercenaries—in the Gordimer story, the drifter is one of these mercenaries—to defend the break-away province from United Nations troops who were brought in at the request of the Congolese government.

Most of the newly independent African nations were governed by black leaders. But Gordimer’s South Africa, which had been independent since 1931, remained under the control of the white Afrikaner population. The white South African government institutionalized a system of enforced racial segregation called apartheid. This system was marked by a set of repressive and racist policies, similar to the Jim Crow laws that once prevailed in the American

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1960s:** The nations of Africa are in the midst of wresting their independence from European colonial states. In the first part of the decade, Rhodesia is a British colony under white minority rule, while the Congo achieves independence from Belgium in 1960. In 1965, white-ruled Rhodesia makes a unilateral declaration of independence, which is not accepted by Britain and results in international sanctions.

Today: Decolonization of Africa is complete, and there are fifty-three sovereign members of the African Union, including the former Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe.

- **1960s:** Leaders of the banned African National Congress, South Africa's leading apartheid opponents, are either imprisoned

(as are Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu) or in exile (like Oliver Tambo).

Today: The African National Congress has been South Africa's governing party since the elections of 1994. Party leader Jacob Zuma becomes president in 2009.

- **1960s:** Under apartheid law, no black worker is permitted to hold a position above the lowest paid white in any South African company.

Today: While economic inequality remains a major problem in South Africa, the government has instituted a program of Black Economic Empowerment to spread equal opportunity to historically disadvantaged groups, including Indians, Chinese, and blacks.

South. For example, the Mixed Marriages Act and Immorality Act banned intimate relations between the races. The Group Areas Act declared many residential areas off-limits to non-whites, relegating millions to a bleak existence in the impoverished townships on the outskirts of South Africa's major cities. The Separate Amenities Act segregated public spaces such as schools, hospitals, buses, and beaches.

Among the most despised apartheid laws were the pass laws that required black South African men to carry passbooks at all times under penalty of imprisonment. These identification books contained detailed information such as fingerprints, place of employment, and sometimes a personnel evaluation from the individual's employer. Police or other government employees could demand to see a person's passbook for any reason and use the information found therein to deny permission to travel in certain areas.

Many white South Africans supported the ideology of racial discrimination underlying

apartheid, and countless others accepted it through passive indifference. But there were white liberals who sought social justice either through their personal relationships with blacks or by joining civil rights groups. These individuals sometimes worked to support South Africa's leading organization for black solidarity, the African National Congress (ANC), which began a nonviolent "defiance campaign" in 1952. This campaign followed the principles Mohandas Gandhi had used during his years organizing South Africa's Indian population before the First World War. A more militant organization, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), was founded in 1959.

In early 1960, both of these groups prepared campaigns to protest the pass laws, enforcement of which had sharply increased. On March 21, a crowd gathered in the center of Sharpeville township, without passbooks, and marched to the local police station. When the crowd failed to disperse after several hours, police opened fire, killing sixty-nine and wounding more than 180. Most were shot in the back while trying to escape automatic weapon fire.

The Sharpeville Massacre was a major turning point in South African history. The government responded by declaring a state of emergency and banning the ANC and PAC. Leaders in the ANC decided that nonviolent protest had failed to bring about meaningful change, and they formed an underground military wing headed by Nelson Mandela. Mandela was arrested in 1962 and spent the next twenty-seven years in prison. His release in 1990 and subsequent negotiations with President F. W. de Klerk led in 1994 to South Africa's first multiracial elections, which Mandela and the ANC won.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

By the time "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" was published in the collection entitled *Not for Publication* (1965), its author had already established her reputation as a contemporary master of the short story. In the years that followed, Gordimer gained more critical attention for her novels than her stories, although she continued to publish prolifically in both genres. The first book-length study of Gordimer's work, by critic Robert F. Haugh, ranked her higher as a practitioner of short fiction than as a novelist. A critical consensus holds that her literary skills are perfectly suited to short story writing. Her powers of observation, the great variety of character types she is capable of fully realizing, and her succinct encapsulation of social and moral issues through characters and situations are a good match for the genre. Scholars such as Martin Trump admire Gordimer's ability to illustrate how living in a repressive society affects the lives of ordinary characters, especially women.

In some of Gordimer's better-known stories, a character's flash of insight serves as that "life-giving drop" or nugget crystallizing the essential meaning of a situation or chain of events. In a story such as "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants," on the other hand, the essence is to be found in what the main character *fails* to understand. In his essay "Echoes from Elsewhere: Gordimer's Short Fiction as Social Critique," critic Graham Huggan argues that Gordimer's short stories gain their power from how much is not spelled out but left for the reader to infer. By looking beneath the surface or against the grain of the narrative, the reader can bring to light a "submerged consciousness" and an alternate

interpretation of the action. Such an analytical method is appropriate for "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants"; here the submerged consciousness could be that of Jack, whose point of view seems likely to be broader and more acute than the narrator's.

A more recent scholarly essay by Mari-Ann Berg uses "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" as the representative case to define a certain type of unreliable narrator, one whose preconceptions block out information from the outside world and whose voice thus exists not in dialogue with reality but in a sterile monologue. To provide evidence for her case, Berg closely examines the syntax and vocabulary used in the story for what they reveal of the narrator's mind-set.

CRITICISM

Roger K. Smith

Roger K. Smith is an author and writing teacher. In this essay, he reflects upon the theme of power in "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants."

Nadine Gordimer's fiction is widely admired for laying bare how hierarchical structures of social power operate in everyday life. Through her character's interactions, motivations, attitudes, and assumptions, Gordimer sketches a social landscape bounded by inequality and haunted by the active presence of injustice. In Gordimer's South Africa, the segregation and oppression of the majority black population is an overwhelming factor in the lives of people of every racial category. Racial discrimination, written into law and carried out within social institutions, is also perpetuated within the minds of human beings and in their relationships with each other. The narrator and main character of "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" reflects and carries out the values of apartheid in her daily life in Johannesburg. But "Good Climate" also implicates gender, as well as age and social class, among other forces structuring power relationships in society.

On another level, power exists within and between individuals as either an oppressive or a liberating force. The brief and sinister affair between the narrator and the drifter whom she meets in the petrol station provides a revealing instance of how interpersonal power can be accumulated and wielded. While the drifter represents one model of the sources and uses of personal power, the character of Jack represents

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Gordimer won the Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Conservationist* (1974). Shifting between different narrative points of view, the novel explores the distance between a wealthy white landowner and the community of black laborers who live on and around his property.
- In *July's People* (1981), Gordimer imagines a black revolution that succeeds in overthrowing apartheid. The tables are turned as a white middle-class couple flees to the countryside under the protection of their former servant, July.
- *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1990) is a posthumously published collection of stories by Bessie Head, a mixed-race South African writer who lived in exile in Botswana. These stories take place in cities, rural villages, and black South African townships. Like Gordimer's fiction, these stories reveal the way in which systems of social power shape people's everyday lives and relationships.
- André Brink, a major literary figure in South Africa, wrote the novel *A Dry White Season* (1979). In this story, a white Johannesburg teacher overcomes his indifference to apartheid as he investigates the death of a black janitor at his school.
- "*Master Harold*" . . . and *the Boys* (1982), by South African playwright Athol Fugard, unravels the inhumanity of life under apartheid as a white child, and the two black servants who love him spend a rainy afternoon together.
- *Out of Bounds: Seven Stories of Conflict and Hope* (2008) by Beverly Naidoo, reveals the nature of oppression in South Africa's history through stories told from the point of view of children. Each story is set in a different decade, and the book includes a historical timeline for richer contextual understanding.
- In their book *Apartheid and Racism in South African Children's Literature, 1985–1995* (2001), researchers Donnarae MacCann and Yulisa Amadu Maddy analyze the ways young adult and children's fiction, from the apartheid era and into the "new" South Africa, indoctrinate young people in the values of white supremacy.
- Gordimer solicited twenty-one short stories from famous writers worldwide, ranging from Salman Rushdie to Kenzaburo Oe to Woody Allen, for the volume *Telling Tales* (2004). Proceeds from the book go to HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention in South Africa.

another. His competence and insightful, helpful comments to the narrator suggest that power is also a quality of inner character separate from social status.

In the story's opening paragraphs, the narrator introduces herself by way of several statements that indicate her level of social power or status, and her perception of that status. When she says, "I'm forty-nine but I could be twenty-five except for my face and my legs," she is revealing her awareness of youth and beauty as diminishing assets in her portfolio of social capital as a woman. On the other hand, the years she has worked as a garage

bookkeeper bring her a certain power of seniority within her workplace. Her real source of authority at work, however, comes from being white, and therefore authorized to watch over her black co-workers. She preserves and flaunts her white privilege by referring to her black co-workers as "boys" even though they are grown men. In fact, one of the petrol attendants has served twenty-three years, almost certainly more than the narrator has, and his conflicting claim to power is a source of tension at the garage.

The gas station's suburban location allows the narrator to associate with what she calls "a



**POWER EXISTS WITHIN AND BETWEEN
INDIVIDUALS AS EITHER AN OPPRESSIVE OR A
LIBERATING FORCE.”**

very nice class of person.” These casual acquaintanceships, and the fact that Rolls-Royces and other luxury cars occasionally turn up at the pump, increase the narrator’s sense of status. In reality, she lives alone in a small, cheap flat in an old apartment building; she is formerly married with a daughter living out of the country whom she rarely sees; and her social network appears to consist of one female friend and one couple even lonelier than herself.

Perhaps because it is her only source of status on society’s totem pole, this woman does not hesitate to flex what power she possesses toward the black men at her work site. She looks down on them with remarks such as, “of course they’re like children.” It seems to satisfy her that they show sufficient respect to call her missus. It is her practice to send the “boys” to the nearby shops on personal errands, such as to buy her cigarettes. This clearly exceeds the gas jockeys’ responsibility to her, since she is not their boss, but the narrator takes such personal service for granted as part of her white privilege. She “had a dust-up” with Madala, the senior black employee, when he refused to act as the narrator’s servant in this manner. She tried to get him fired, but the station manager chose to keep Madala on because of his years of service. She also complained to her boss about the number of phone calls coming in for “the boss-boy, Jack.” Jack’s real name is Mpanza Makiwane, but the narrator will only refer to him by his “white” name. She reveals her racist mindset when she speaks to him about it:

So I said to him one day, ‘why do you people have a hundred and one names, why don’t these uncles and aunts and brothers-in-law c[o]me out with your name straight away and stop wasting my time?’ He said, ‘Here I’m Jack because Mpanza Makiwane is not a name, and there I’m Mpanza Makiwane because Jack is not a name, but I’m the only one who knows who I am wherever I am.’ I couldn’t help laughing.

His disarming response to the narrator’s arrogant, condescending question reveals Jack’s dignity and diplomacy. His remark also conveys a deeper truth: Jack knows who he is, among whites as well as his own people. He knows enough to maintain a calm demeanor in the face of patronizing whites like the narrator. These qualities of character give Jack a personal power that outstrips his low social status. The narrator seems to understand that Jack falls somewhere outside the narrow boundaries of her prejudiced worldview. She admits that Jack has more sense than some whites. Even though he rarely calls her missus, she doesn’t mind because “it doesn’t sound cheeky, the way he speaks.” She even went to the trouble of buying brandy for him regularly when blacks were barred from purchasing alcohol—an illegal act that theoretically could have put the narrator in danger.

In contrast to Jack, the character of the drifter derives his power, and deploys it, in more unsavory ways. On first sight, the narrator describes him as “one of those men you recognize at once as the kind who moves about a lot.” This enigmatic first impression is heightened when the stranger tries to pay for his petrol with Rhodesian currency and gives her a fake gold watch as collateral. From this first appearance, the drifter is revealed as a person whose presence exudes a vague sense of threat, who has little respect for social norms, and who is willing to lie and manipulate to get what he wants.

Later scenes confirm these impressions. He returns to the gas station to ask for the narrator’s help finding a place to stay, even asking her to speak to a hotel proprietress on his behalf. He then invites the narrator to have a drink—not at the hotel lounge or a nearby bar, as would be customary for near-strangers, but at her flat, out of a bottle he has. The narrator agrees, either because she’s interested in the stranger or perhaps uncomfortable saying no. When the drifter enters the narrator’s home before the two have gotten to know each other, his male power comes into play in the form of an implicit threat of violence.

In fact, the man is (or has been) a mercenary soldier, paid to fight in the Congo on the side of a native leader. This is the only significant piece of information the narrator (and the reader) picks up regarding the drifter’s identity, but it is a meaningful clue. The qualities associated with mercenaries—willingness to resort to violence, and loyalty to no cause save oneself—are

consistent with the character he displays. She learns little else about him: he tells her he has come to Johannesburg “on business,” but never elaborates. He says people owe him money, but not who or why. It seems likely that he even lies to her about his age. The sense of mystery enshrouding the character is key to the dangerous power he acquires over her.

It is not long before the drifter is preying on her weakness to manipulate her in more consequential ways. It is unclear whether there is a genuine sexual attraction between the two of them; Gordimer’s language is very discreet in that regard. What is clear is that he spends the night at her flat, and in the morning says to her, “Leave me the key. I might as well use the place while you’re out all day.” The drifter then admits that he left her friend’s hotel without paying. The narrator’s actions at this point amount to forfeiting her power in the relationship. By letting him stay, she is allowing him to move in with her indefinitely; by failing to confront him about his hotel bill, she ends up feeling obligated to pay it for him, to salvage her own honor with her friend the proprietress. Her reasons are uncertain, but they appear to involve some combination of loneliness, lust, pity, and passivity.

Whatever her motive, the result is that she is powerless to keep him from having his way. Even after she begins to feel afraid, she still gives him the benefit of the doubt, and cannot bring herself to lock him out: “what was there to be afraid of? He was such a clean, good-looking fellow standing there; and anybody can be down on his luck.” Only when she figures out that he has lied about his age does her situation finally become clear to her. The narrator now realizes the malevolence of the drifter’s predatory male power and perceives even his charms in a new light: “he could be nice if he wanted to, it was like a trick that he could do, so real you couldn’t believe it when it stopped just like that.” However, understanding her plight does not make her any more able to extricate herself from it.

Unable or unwilling to seek help from her few white friends, her only resource—although she does not recognize him as such—is Jack. The narrator’s racism and sense of pride keep her from admitting to herself that she is confiding in her co-worker, but in reality she has revealed enough to Jack for him to glean the situation. Furthermore, he accurately judges the drifter from the start. But even in the depths of her crisis,

the narrator is so reluctant to rely on a black person for advice that she tries to compensate by asserting her power. She sends him on an errand “just to show him that he mustn’t get too free with a white person.” Jack then displays his sensitivity once again, asking with genuine concern, “Why don’t you live there in Rhodesia with your daughter? The child must look after the mother. Why must you stay here alone in this town?” Jack’s astute and caring question seems to temporarily upset the narrator’s racist belief structure; she says, “They’ve got more feeling than whites sometimes, that’s the truth.” While she doesn’t answer the question, she responds by giving him her address, to check on her in case she fails to appear for work. Later, back at home in dread of the drifter’s reappearance, she takes comfort thinking that Jack will send someone around if she should disappear. Jack’s small act of friendship has empowered her to take the first step out of her isolation. He subsequently helps her much more decisively: the crafty lie he tells the drifter protects the narrator more effectively than she has been able to protect herself.

Ultimately, however, Jack’s good deeds are not enough to break through the shell of the narrator’s racism. Even though he may have saved her life, she cannot help treating him with condescension, snickering that “he fancies himself quite the educated man” because he reads the newspaper. She concludes, “that’s the trouble when you work alone in an office like I do, there’s no one you can speak to”—willfully oblivious of the invisible black co-worker who has rescued her. This ironic, bitter-sweet conclusion is in keeping with a broader theme in Gordimer’s work: even though the problem of social injustice is enacted through everyday human interactions, the solution to injustice must take place at a broader level. Acts of kindness and solidarity represent human power in the best sense of the term, but nevertheless, the collective madness underpinning the edifice of apartheid remains intractable.

Source: Roger K. Smith, Critical Essay on “Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Andrew Vogel Ettin

In this excerpt, Ettin examines the tension between feminism and a commitment to racial justice in the works of Nadine Gordimer.

Nadine Gordimer’s career as a writer has coincided with enormous changes in continental African and national South African society and



AN EVEN MORE PRESSING CONSIDERATION IS GORDIMER'S PRAGMATIC APPRAISAL OF HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO MOBILIZE EFFECTIVELY AGAINST THE EMERGENCIES OF BLACK LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA."

politics, many of which she has recorded through her essays and fiction. Although "human being" and "writer" always seem to be her principal definitions of herself, her awareness of being an African during this period in history should be understood for its deep importance to her and her work. We will begin by trying to grasp in this chapter that conscious sense of African identity, the biographical and literary origins of which will be explored in the next chapter. We will also consider here two other contexts of social identity that have been more problematic for Gordimer, a woman writer of Jewish parentage.

These years during which she has been writing have been crucial in the history of literary and sociopolitical feminism. A female writer whose intense gaze is directed toward the public as well as private realms of life and one who also has depicted many socially conscious, politically involved, and sexually free female characters, Gordimer nonetheless has held herself apart from feminism in her statements on public policy and, to a degree, in her fiction. In contrast to her readiness to identify herself as an African writer, she has particularly rejected classification as a "woman writer." In this chapter we will analyze Gordimer's critique of feminism and her concept of how gender identity has figured in her own development as a writer.

For Gordimer, claiming an identity as a "white African" is not an oxymoron. While her antiapartheid work as a writer and as a citizen derives from a broad commitment to human rights, it might be fair to say that, for her, apartheid not only denies human rights in general but specifically denies the real essence of South Africa. Her writings register her continuing awareness of multiracialism as a fact—perhaps the one great fact—of that place. Contrast this, for instance, with a text coming out of contemporary San

Francisco, Chicago, New York, or London, all multiracial and multiethnic. Although some of that diversity might appear through the mix of accents or the passing of different-hued pedestrians and bit players, it is not unusual at all for people of color to be absent from a white author's novel set in New York City. This is a fact which *should* be unusual, because it is hard to visualize a New York City comprised entirely of Caucasians, and because racial divisions are also facts of living in America. Nor is such separateness only a literary phenomenon.

Gordimer takes pride in being a "white African" and attesting that this need not mean being a racist. With ample opportunities to leave, she has avowed an African identity. The place about which she writes is not simply a background or landscape, no matter her obvious affection for that landscape; rather, it and the people who inhabit it are the subject and substance of her art. That place also holds the nation to which she lays at least as much claim as the white supremacists she detests. Accepting the Bennett Award from *Hudson Review* in 1986, she referred to "the country that owns me (for I do not say 'my Africa'—it's the other way round)."

Clearly, Gordimer's own relationship, as a writer and citizen, with her South African environment is complex. For much of her career she has been virtually at war with the government's racial and social policies. She has not only revealed their cruelties incisively through her fiction, but in essays and speeches she has expressed her abhorrence candidly and advocated internal and external opposition to those policies. She publicly supported the economic sanctions advocated by the African National Congress (ANC), and upon the unbanning of that organization she immediately joined. Three of her books have been banned in South Africa for periods ranging up to a dozen years; the prohibition of *Burger's Daughter* elicited from her and others a scathing exposé of the country's censorship procedures, as she shrewdly and characteristically used the press against the enemies of the press and the words of the censors themselves to articulate their own ignorance and stupidity. Still, Gordimer has remained devoted to South Africa, a patriot in ways that the right-wing nationalists and Boer separatists could not comprehend.

She has, to be sure, worked free from the more stringent penalties with which other South Africans have been oppressed. Her books have

not been banned permanently; she has not been jailed, put under house arrest, or restricted in her public or social activities; nor has she been driven into exile. She has noticed, with some resentment, that some in the literary world at large might like her to have been more persecuted; had she been, she would be a more romantic legend. Despite having spoken frankly even when it was dangerous to do so and made the exposure of apartheid's destructiveness a dominant concern in her fiction, she has disdained the presumption "by self-appointed cultural commissars" that the South African writer is obliged to do so to earn moral credit with the rest of the world. "Can you imagine this kind of self-righteous inquisition being directed against a John Updike for not having made the trauma of America's Vietnam war the theme of his work?" Instead, she has insisted that the artist's moral obligations are to art—this from a writer whose essays constitute a powerful attack on the racial and racially influenced socioeconomic structure of her country.

On the one hand sneered at as "the blacks' darling" by rightist whites who resent the acceptance given her (personally and artistically) by black artists, she has been attacked on the other by some black separatists resentful of a white author depicting blacks whose lives she cannot share completely. Because she cannot become a black writer, she has insisted that there are ways in which blacks and whites do know one another and therefore deserve the right to write out of that knowledge, while she has also noted that there are indeed ways in which she as a white South African cannot know the lives of black compatriots, this being one of the human costs of apartheid. The societal priorities and aesthetic concerns of black artists and white artists will likely be different in such a land. She has expressed how South African realities shape the limitations and possibilities.

She recognizes, especially because she is a writer, that social circumstances (including access to books) can explain what may appear to be fundamental differences among people of different races. "The business of relating the social conditions I saw about me to law or to any moral questions came to me from outside, from reading." Perhaps Gordimer's committedness as a writer can be attributed to her consciousness of the role that reading had in her own moral development: "Would I ever even be a writer if I couldn't have gone and used the

public library? But no black child could use that public library." It is that understanding that leads her to stress the importance of changing "the structure of culture" in a free South Africa of the future, "where the bookstores are, where the libraries are, [now] in the white areas only." Her awareness of the social and political conditions within which culture dwells appears also in her analysis of the government-owned South African television, on which she has not yet appeared, not because she has been boycotted but because she has boycotted it. "I banned myself," she has said, from "the most effective tool for the propagation of [the government's] ideas." Analyzing the strategy for co-optation, she has noted that allowing her works to be shown on television or appearing there in even a purely literary discussion allows the authorities to use this as evidence of freedom in the country. Notably, she also sees these decisions not simply as personal matters of conscience but as issues to be decided in concert with other writers and the leadership of the political organization she has long supported, the African National Congress.

It is surely telling that Gordimer's writings are far more fully integrated than is the society of which she writes. Not that she falsifies or writes as if actual barriers did not exist; the fact of separateness is part of her work's reality and realism, but she makes the effort to compensate for the fact by the conscious acknowledgment of "black" or "colored" or "Asian" presences in her work (to use—as circumstances make unavoidable—the terminology of white governmental racialism). Such characters are infrequently central in the novels, although they are more often so in individual stories. Even more rarely does Gordimer use a character from one of these South African legal categories for her narrator or for a narrative perspective. This itself attests to her belief that in a racist society, there will be limits to one's ability to understand someone of another grouping as if one could be inside that person and think through that mind simply as the mind of another human being, "like yourself" (as Leviticus enjoins us to think about our neighbor).

While "white African" and "African writer" are titles Gordimer accepts easily, though with no facile assumptions regarding their meanings for her life and work, the category of "woman writer" seems more problematic for her. Gordimer's

political convictions and treatment of female characters in her works suggest a keen understanding and heightened awareness of the special circumstances of women's lives as well as a remarkable grasp of the appraising, judgmental, emotion-laden ways in which men talk and think about women, in particular and in general. One of the notable aspects of her art is her affecting creations of numerous independent, politically engaged, and sexually (like all of her characters, heterosexually) energetic women. Certainly it is notable that many feminist readers are surprised to find that in her expository works Gordimer is not more explicitly feminist than she is and that she actually eschews a commitment to feminism. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that she, like many female (as well as some male) Africans, sees feminism as right in principle but dangerously distracting from the battle against apartheid in practice.

Women actively and riskily working against governmental oppression of the African majority, abound in Gordimer's writing from the early works to the present and afford many varieties of resistance or activism, even if one surveys only the novels. Helen Shaw, the somewhat autobiographical narrator of her first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), runs directly contrary to familial and social patterns in befriending and unsuccessfully trying to offer living space for a black woman student and subsequently is changed in her racial consciousness by the repressive apartheid laws passed after 1948. In the next book, the most committed white activist, the one character who manifests a moral political conscience, is an Afrikaner woman, Anna Louw. The jaded but unsettled female narrator of *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) is moved near the end of the book to enter into commitment and the process of history in her own small but dangerous way, as she contemplates making a bank account accessible to the banned Pan-Africanist Congress, an offense punishable by a lengthy jail sentence. *Burger's Daughter* (1979) affords so diverse a panoply of female political activism that it deserves to be studied by itself from just that perspective, while *A Sport of Nature* (1987) offers through the central character of Hillela a larger-than-life romance figure of a woman equally at ease in the bedroom and on the battlefield, crucially involved with the politics of a changing Africa. In *My Son's Story*, published in 1990, the sexual and intellectual lover, Hannah, the domestic and quietly maternal wife, Aila, and the sociable and highspirited daughter, Baby, all prove to be committed antiapartheid

activists, the last two emerging surprisingly involved with underground activity more dangerously and violently subversive than anything undertaken by the well-known political activist who is husband and father to them. Expressed through them (as it was through Hillela) is a wholeness of commitment contrasting with the man's more analytic appraisal of "positions," tactics, and strategy.

An even more pressing consideration is Gordimer's pragmatic appraisal of how difficult it is to mobilize effectively against the emergencies of black life in South Africa. Concentrating on anything else does seem distracting, dangerous, and potentially divisive (though there is no inherent reason why feminism should be divisive). Characteristically, she herself locates her reaction to feminism precisely in terms of place and time: It "doesn't seem irrelevant to me in other places in the world, but it does seem at the present time to be a kind of luxury in South Africa. Every black woman has more in common with a black man than she has with her white sisters."

We may find, consequently, a tension in Gordimer's self-identification between the universalism implied by her spiritual, socialist political outlook on the one hand and the particularism of her African self-identification on the other. Yet, to say this is only to admit in her work and thought the double awareness to which every construct of faith and belief leads us. By tracing how Gordimer's sense of herself as an African developed, we can appreciate more fully how that led her beyond the personal or private to a broader identification with humankind.

Source: Andrew Vogel Ettin, "A White Woman Writing in South Africa," in *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*, UP Virginia, 1992, pp. 10–35.

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The Jewels

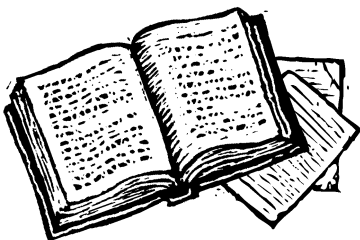
GUY DE MAUPASSANT

1880

“The Jewels,” first published in 1880, is one of several hundred stories penned by Guy de Maupassant during his meteoric ten-year writing career. In theme and style it is similar to many of his other stories. Through the dispassionate eye of an invisible narrator, it examines the hypocrisy of humankind and implies that the roots of this hypocrisy lie in the capitalist system.

“The Jewels” recounts the story of Monsieur Lantin, an unimportant clerk in a government ministry similar to the ones in which Maupassant himself toiled for many miserable years. Through various plot twists it is revealed that Monsieur Lantin’s wife had extensively cheated on him during their marriage, receiving from her lovers many pieces of expensive jewelry, which Monsieur Lantin had assumed were fake. After her death he cashes them in for an enormous amount of money and drowns whatever grief he may have felt at her death in a new life of conspicuous consumption and ostentatious displays of his newfound wealth.

Like all of Maupassant’s best writing, “The Jewels” is a short and direct piece. The characters pursue their needs in the blind and desperate fashion of animals and learn nothing from their disappointments and failures. Through such characters, Maupassant espouses a bleak view of human nature—it seems that he holds out no hope for people changing unless the conditions that create their selfish desperation change first.





Guy de Maupassant (*The Library of Congress*)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Guy de Maupassant was born on August 5, 1850, into a wealthy and artistic family with pretensions of greater grandeur: just before his birth, his parents rented the eighteenth-century Chateau de Miromesnil near Dieppe, France, so he could be born into luxury. However, baby Guy came early and so was actually born at the modest home of his grandmother thirty miles away. Maupassant was christened at Miromesnil, though, and his mother, Laure, maintained the fiction throughout her life that her son had been born at the chateau. Such social pretension, and its tragic futility, would become Maupassant's main subject matter as a writer.

After years of unhappiness, Maupassant's parents separated when he was eleven, a situation that caused the first of many reversals of financial fortunes in his life. He lived with his mother in the seaside town of Etretat, where he discovered what was to be a lifelong devotion to swimming and boating. He was a passable student at the *institution ecclésiastique*, better in languages than sciences, until he was expelled for writing sacrilegious poetry. His mother then sent him to the *lycée* in

Rouen to finish his education. Rouen was a large and important city, and Maupassant soon met an old friend of his mother's family: the writer Gustave Flaubert, a man who would be a primary influence on Maupassant. Socially, Maupassant was a compulsive womanizer and contracted syphilis from a prostitute in his early twenties.

The young Maupassant enrolled in law school, but his studies were cut short by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in July 1870. After Prussia defeated France in 1871, Maupassant was prevented from resuming his studies by the failure of his family's business. Because of this, he was forced to spend the ensuing twelve years as a civil servant, first in the Ministry of the Navy in Paris, then in the Ministry of Education. Although he complained long and bitterly about working in these posts, the years Maupassant spent in the realm of the *petit bourgeois* (the middle class) gave him the fodder for hundreds of the stories he began to write during these years.

It was with Flaubert's encouragement that Maupassant began to take himself seriously as a writer, eventually churning out three hundred short stories that depicted the lives of everyday people in France. With Flaubert's help, these were published in French newspapers such as *Le Gaulois* and *Gil Blas*. Maupassant attained both critical and popular success in 1880 with "Boule de Suif" ("Ball of Fat"), a story about a patriotic whore who is manipulated by the upper-class members of her train compartment into sleeping with a Prussian officer so that the train will be allowed to proceed. Flaubert proclaimed this story to be "a masterpiece," and its tale of a whore who possesses the integrity that her wealthy companions lack became an overnight sensation in France. The collection in which it appeared, *Les soirées de Médan* (*Evenings at Médan*), was reprinted eight times within two weeks.

Maupassant was celebrated in his time, and is widely admired today, for the directness and economy of his style. He adopted this skill from his mentor Flaubert and from his friend, the novelist Emile Zola. Flaubert, who took great care in his works to illuminate the intimate details of everyday life, is considered one of the earliest exponents of realism in fiction. Zola is associated with the naturalist school, a close cousin of realism that aims to illustrate the social and cultural forces that drive characters' behavior. Maupassant was admired by American writers Ernest Hemingway and Henry James, and his stories

are read in American high schools today as examples of leanness and brevity. He was an unflinching observer of human nature in all its generosity and meanness and did not hesitate to highlight the hypocrisy of the norms of the social world.

Maupassant's literary career lasted only ten years. He died from the effects of syphilis on July 6, 1893, at the age of forty-three, and is buried in the cemetery at Montparnasse.

PLOT SUMMARY

The plot of "The Jewels" is very simple, as is the case with all of Maupassant's work. The author lays out the bones of the story and the reader is left to interpret its meaning.

The reader is first introduced to the story's protagonist, Monsieur Lantin, a clerk in a government ministry. Right away it is mentioned that the amount of Monsieur Lantin's salary is 3,500 francs. While it is difficult to know precisely what this amount represented in Maupassant's time, the fact that his salary defines Monsieur Lantin as much as any other characteristic is significant in the reader's understanding of Maupassant's world. It underscores the central role played by money and social class in all of his characters' actions.

The story introduces Monsieur Lantin's future wife, Madame Lantin, by the characteristics that most define her. She is the daughter of a deceased tax collector, a girl from a family that is "poor but honorable, quiet and unassuming." But her main characteristic—and the quality that makes Monsieur Lantin desperate to marry her—is that she "seemed the very epitome of the virtuous spouse to whom every sensible young man dreams of entrusting his life."

The two characters marry and Monsieur Lantin is described as "unbelievably happy" with his new wife. He marvels at her seductiveness even six years after they first meet, and also at her amazing ability to manage their finances so that "there was no attention, no delicacy, no refinement" that she did not bring to their home life. He feels like a rich man, indeed.

Madame Lantin's perfection is marred by two vices: her love of the theatre and her desire to own jewelry. But she apparently has no trouble being supplied with tickets to all the latest premieres by her female friends (other wives of

"petty officials"), and she comes home almost every night with some new piece of costume jewelry. At first Monsieur Lantin rebukes her for this vice, saying that fake jewels are in bad taste. Since they cannot afford real gems, she should appear "only in her grace and beauty." But since the jewels do not cost Monsieur Lantin any money, he comes to regard them as charming, if incomprehensible, foibles. As long as he continues to get what he needs from his wife, he pays no attention to these aspects of her personality.

Madame Lantin at first begs her husband to accompany her to the theatre, but he refuses on the grounds that he is too tired. He finds an evening at the theatre "horribly exhausting" after a long day toiling at his job. Madame Lantin is at first very reluctant to attend public performances without her husband, but he insists: "He'd beg her to attend with some lady in her acquaintanceship. . . . It took her a long time to give in, as she didn't find this arrangement quite proper." The fact that Monsieur Lantin is too tired from his job to accompany her sets the stage for all that follows. Maupassant, in his role as an invisible narrator, never reflects on Monsieur Lantin's exhaustion as illustrative of any injustice in the larger socioeconomic structure of French life. But the reader may speculate about its significance in this man's life and in the lives of billions of workers worldwide. Monsieur Lantin is grateful when Madame Lantin stops begging him to attend the theatre and agrees reluctantly to go instead with her female friends.

One can also only speculate how Madame Lantin's insatiable craving for jewels that her husband cannot afford is motivated by the socioeconomic condition of the world in which she moves. When Maupassant explains that Madame Lantin is extremely reluctant at first to go out in the evenings without her husband to escort her he gives the reader one of the only clues about her possible feelings as she makes the transformation from a dutiful and virtuous wife into a woman who is extravagantly showered with expensive gems by other men.

As the story continues, Madame Lantin meets her demise in classic Maupassant style that spans all of three sentences. "One winter night, upon returning from the opera, she was shaking with cold. The next day she was coughing. A week later, she succumbed to pneumonia." At this juncture Monsieur Lantin's life takes a drastic turn for the worse. His hair turns white, he cannot stop crying,

and strangely, he now finds he cannot even feed himself on his salary, whereas his wife had always managed to provide him with “excellent wines and delicate foods” that he finds he is no longer able to afford. Penniless and hungry a week before his next paycheck, Monsieur Lantin decides to try to sell some of his wife’s costume jewelry, which he never liked anyway, feeling that if she could have real jewels she should appear “only in her grace and beauty.” Monsieur Lantin thinks that any of the gaudy pieces should bring in seven or eight francs, enough for a meal. He selects a large necklace and sets out to find a jeweler.

Once at a jewelry shop, he displays the necklace to the merchant. He is ashamed to be revealing the poverty that has led him to hocking such a worthless object. To Monsieur Lantin’s astonishment, the man offers him fifteen thousand francs for it. Thinking the man must be crazy, he hastens to another shop where he is offered eighteen thousand francs. Even more amazing, this jeweler claims to recognize the necklace because he himself sold it in the first place. Both of the merchants assume Monsieur Lantin is a thief, and this one asks for his name and address. Looking into his record book, the jeweler tells Monsieur Lantin that this necklace was indeed delivered to his address—to Madame Lantin.

Fleeing the store in bafflement, Monsieur Lantin is in the middle of a boulevard when he has the thought that if this necklace—and all the other objects in his wife’s jewel case—is real, they must have been gifts. But from whom? He faints and is carried by passersby to a pharmacy, then taken home by taxi, where he locks himself in and cries all day. The next morning, still baffled and hungrier than ever, Monsieur Lantin returns to the jewelry store, but cannot at first make himself enter because of his intense feelings of shame. As he paces in the street, he notices rich-looking people and imagines how easy their lives are, how happy they must be. “How lucky a man is if he’s rich! With money you can snap out of any grief.”

Driven by hunger, Monsieur Lantin enters the jewelry shop and accepts the eighteen thousand francs for the necklace. He tells the merchant he has several other items that have come to him “from the same legacy” and promises to bring them by. The jeweler and his assistants all know full well what is happening and can barely contain their amusement at Monsieur Lantin’s

role in this transaction. They fully understand that he is a betrayed husband cashing in on a rich man’s love affair with his now-dead wife. The assistants rush outside to laugh their heads off. “With malicious bonhomie the merchant declared, ‘It all comes from somebody who invested everything in jewelry.’”

But Monsieur Lantin quickly gets over his shame and brings all the remaining jewelry to the same jeweler. He haggles over the price of each item, demanding to see the original sale receipts—almost all of the pieces had been purchased from this shop—to make sure he is not being cheated. He leaves with nearly two hundred thousand francs. With this enormous amount of cash in his pocket he is a new man: a man who no longer feels sad about his wife’s death, a man who no longer feels anything at all, it seems, except a desire to spend money and brag about his newfound wealth. He consumes expensive foods and wine and spends the night with prostitutes. Each time he tells someone about his new wealth he increases the amount by a hundred thousand francs. He dramatically resigns from his job, declaring he has inherited four hundred thousand francs.

But the moment in which Maupassant signals that this tale has no happy ending—and highlights the impossibility of humans learning anything from their experiences—comes in the final three lines of the story. “Six months later he remarried. His second wife was extremely virtuous but she had a temper. She caused him a lot of suffering.” A reader can only contrast this with Monsieur Lantin’s prior marriage, during which he was “unbelievably happy.” Maupassant is asking which is better—the contentment Monsieur Lantin experienced born of ignorance in his first marriage, or his present unhappiness with his loyal yet angry wife? This is the world of Maupassant, in which there are no happy endings.

CHARACTERS

The Jeweler

The jeweler runs the shop from which Madame Lantin’s jewels were purchased. By chance, Monsieur Lantin enters this shop, intending to sell what he believes are cheap costume jewelry items. At first the jeweler suspects Monsieur Lantin of theft. When he figures out that the man is selling gems provided to his wife by other lovers, he can barely contain his amusement.

Madame Lantin

Madame Lantin is the second main character in “The Jewels.” The reader never sees anything from her point of view, and she is known to the reader only through her husband’s eyes. She remains a mystery until her secret affairs are revealed after her death—and even then the reader knows nothing substantive about her feelings or motives. She is more of a prop that moves the story forward than an actual character.

Madame Lantin is admired by many men and seems to be “the very epitome of the virtuous spouse to whom any sensible young man dreams of entrusting his life.” Only after her death does the reader wonder how many such “sensible” young men are completely fooled by the duplicity of their virtuous-seeming young wives. The reader is told, “Anyone who knew her kept repeating, ‘The man who lands her will be a lucky stiff.’” Only at the end of the story does the reader see how cruelly true this description is, as she was “landed” not only by Monsieur Lantin but by one or more very wealthy men. Furthermore, while she did bring luck—in the form of wealth—to Monsieur Lantin, it was at the expense of his happiness and dignity.

Monsieur Lantin views his wife as a sexy, seductive woman, and thinks her only flaw is her attraction to the theatre and to gaudy pieces of costume jewelry. Of course, her flaws run much deeper than this, and she ends up being a fraud on several fronts. She is repeatedly unfaithful to her husband. Her skill at running the household finances on her husband’s meager income also appears to be counterfeit. After her death, when Monsieur Lantin is unable to even eat enough on his own income, the reader wonders how Madame Lantin was able to keep him supplied with delicacies; these must also have been financed by her lovers.

The overall impression a reader has of this mysterious woman is one of capability and contentment. No information is offered on the depth of the unhappiness she must have experienced because of her husband’s unwillingness to accompany her to the theatre or his inability to buy her expensive jewels. The reader can only imagine the emotions that transformed Madame Lantin from a woman who was reluctant to attend the theatre with her female friends because of the impression of impropriety this might cause, to a woman who publicly displayed expensive presents from her rich lovers each time she went

out. In short, Madame Lantin is a mystery from beginning to end. She serves only to illustrate the points about human nature and society that Maupassant seeks to make in this story.

Monsieur Lantin

Monsieur Lantin is the main character in “The Jewels.” He is the protagonist from whose viewpoint the story is told. Maupassant’s spare style offers little detail about Monsieur Lantin’s emotions and motivations, but what is offered represents virtually all the character development in the story.

Monsieur Lantin is a petty official, “chief clerk at the Ministry of the Interior,” a man who makes a modest income of 3,500 francs a year. He is an average man, a hard worker who is too tired after a day’s work to go to the theatre with his young, pretty wife, whose friends “always managed to get her a box at the latest hit.” He rejoices in his beautiful and seductive wife, who also has the talent to manage their household affairs so well that Monsieur Lantin feels he is living a life of luxury well beyond the means of his limited income.

Monsieur Lantin is heartbroken when his wife dies suddenly from pneumonia. He is described as crying without ceasing, “his soul ravaged by an intolerable agony.” His hair turns white and he “nearly followed her to the grave.” He falls into debt and finally decides to try to sell off his wife’s “tinsel” for the “seven or eight francs” he imagines it may bring, in order to tide him over to his next paycheck. He selects the large necklace that had been his wife’s favorite. When he discovers to his amazement that the necklace is not made of false gems but is real and worth eighteen thousand francs Monsieur Lantin falls into a new abyss of despair, shame, and confusion.

After realizing that his wife’s extensive jewelry collection is the result of a secret affair, Monsieur Lantin’s character changes. He becomes overwhelmingly jealous of people who have money, and envies their seemingly easy lives. This transformation is described in two short paragraphs. Seeing what he imagines are rich people “strolling with their hands in their pockets,” he thinks, “How lucky a man is if he’s rich! With money you can snap out of any grief. . . .” Monsieur Lantin is now revealed as a shallow person, or at least someone with few emotional or spiritual reserves to draw on. Beset by sorrow too difficult to deal with, he

now seeks happiness only in money and unmeasured consumption of wine, food, and prostitutes.

Maupassant does not spell out the reasons why this change occurs. The reader must infer that it stems from Monsieur Lantin's realization that he has been entirely fooled and that all the world is laughing at him, beginning with the jewelers who will pay him so handsomely for his wife's jewels. He seems to feel no remorse or residual sadness as he sells all of the remaining pieces of jewelry and becomes a man made rich by his wife's love affairs with other men.

THEMES

Wisdom

A common theme in Maupassant's work is the inability of human beings to acquire wisdom, and "The Jewels" makes that point clearly. The protagonist, Monsieur Lantin, is every bit as blank and empty at the end of the story as he is at the beginning. He is portrayed as a dutiful office worker, content to stay home with his wife after work and enjoy the simple animal pleasures she offers him: food, wine, comfortable surroundings, and sex. He has no interest in the two things that vitally move his wife: the theatre and jewels. His lack of interest in what is going on literally under his nose leads directly to his lack of wisdom: If he had paid attention to her strange ability to get box seats at theatre premieres and to come home with new gems almost every night, he might have acquired the wisdom to alter his tragic ending.

Maupassant, however, does offer a motive for Monsieur Lantin's tragic lack of interest in his wife's activities: He is just too tired after work. This is the condition from which Maupassant himself suffered during his years as a clerk in a ministry very similar to the one in which Monsieur Lantin works. Maupassant complained bitterly to Flaubert, his writing mentor, that the exhaustion incurred after spending entire days doing meaningless paperwork prevented him from being able to write when he got home. In a sense, Maupassant's work as a petty government official threatened to prevent him from acquiring the wisdom to hold onto the best thing in his life—his writing—just as Monsieur Lantin loses through the same inability to acquire wisdom what he really values—his wife.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- The socioeconomic system of capitalism creates the conditions for the tragedy of "The Jewels." Write a one-thousand-word essay on the beliefs and values of capitalism. How do they contribute to the actions and reactions of Monsieur Lantin and Madame Lantin in the story?
- Research other socioeconomic and political systems. Are there systems in which wealth is more evenly distributed or in which citizens do not have to work so hard that they are unable to enjoy their leisure time? Or are there systems or eras in which work was even more oppressive than it is in "The Jewels"? For example, when was the idea of the "weekend" created? What about the eight- or ten-hour workday? When was health insurance first offered to workers by their employers? What brought these changes about? Using PowerPoint or similar software, give a class presentation in which you summarize your research.
- In some respects, "The Jewels" is a rags-to-riches story like many famous fairy-tales, such as "Cinderella"—that is, of course, until everything goes sour. List ten ways in which what happens to both Monsieur and Madame Lantin is different from that of a conventional fairy-tale. Then analyze what Maupassant may have been trying to convey by highlighting these differences in "The Jewels."
- In S.E. Hinton's young adult novel *That Was Then, This Is Now* (1971), the protagonist, Bryon, must make a profound choice when he learns a dark secret about his foster brother, Mark. Compare Bryon's decisions with those Monsieur Lantin makes in "The Jewels." In what ways are the characters similar? In what ways are they different? What conclusions can you draw about Maupassant's ethical views versus Hinton's? Write an essay in which you present your findings.



A beautiful pearl necklace (Image copyright Andreas G. Karelias, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

This theme relates to Maupassant’s critique of the entire social structure of capitalism—specifically, that the workers are kept too busy and too exhausted either to rebel or to create. Either act would require wisdom, something that they tragically have no time to acquire.

Self-preservation

“The Jewels” offers two separate stories of self-preservation. In Monsieur Lantin’s case, he appears to have met his basic needs by marrying Madame Lantin, who is pretty and economical. She provides him with everything he requires to survive in a manner that feels abundant. He is described as too tired after a day at his job to do much else than survive on this basic level, and he has in her found a means to do it in style. After her sudden death, however, Monsieur Lantin discovers that he has no means of self-preservation: All the joy and loveliness disappears from his home, and he discovers to his horror that his income is not even enough to feed himself. He becomes unable to survive and sets out to sell what he believes are imitation jewels that had

belonged to his wife in order to get enough money for food until his next paycheck.

When he discovers that these jewels are real, however, he suddenly acquires an entirely different set of requirements for self-preservation: He decides he needs to be rich in order to be happy. With great wealth at his fingertips, Monsieur Lantin suddenly begins to believe that wealth can bring him happiness. Now he can retire from his job, cavort with prostitutes, and drink wine that costs “twenty francs a bottle.” He has found a new form of self-preservation—through material objects—and the reader is left to wonder if this form will prove any more sustainable than the last.

Madame Lantin is also engaged in a struggle for self-preservation, although the extent of her efforts is only made clear to the reader (and to Monsieur Lantin) after her death. Unlike her simple husband, this woman needs more than simple pleasures: She needs the stimulation of attending the theatre and the glamour of beautiful and expensive jewelry. The things she wants, unlike the things her husband wants, can only be acquired

through guile, as her husband's income cannot provide them. Only rich men can fulfill her needs. A reader does not know what Madame Lantin suffered to get what she needed; only that she felt it was improper for her to attend the theatre without her husband in the company of women friends. One can only imagine how conservative viewpoint changed to the point where she could have affairs with men who showered her with expensive gems. Or perhaps it was a case of deception from the outset, and she only pretended to object to this supposed impropriety so that Monsieur Lantin would harbor no suspicion of her real activities. In either case, Madame Lantin represents a struggle for self-preservation that takes place entirely in secret.

STYLE

Dénouement

Dénouement is a French word that means “the unknotting.” In fiction or drama, it denotes the resolution of conflict. The *dénouement* follows a story's climax and provides an outcome to the primary plot situation as well as an explanation of secondary plot complications. The *dénouement* often involves a character's recognition of his or her state of mind or moral condition.

What is notable about *dénouement*, or resolution of conflict, in many of Maupassant's stories is that it does not occur, or at least not in the classic sense. In “The Jewels,” for example, the ending of the story does not resolve the conflict at all. To begin with, the conflict is very vaguely defined. Whether it is Monsieur Lantin's ignorance about his wife's character, his inability to survive on his own salary, or his tiredness after work, or something else entirely, none of these conflicts is resolved by the story's conclusion, at which point Monsieur Lantin has entered into an entirely new set of conflicts (lying about his money, patronizing prostitutes, and marrying another woman, who is described as bad-tempered and who makes him unhappy). This ending constitutes the opposite of a *dénouement*, which often involves a character's recognition of his or her state of mind or moral condition. A reader may surmise, therefore, that Maupassant does not believe that neat *dénouements* accurately reflect life as he experiences it or the world as he hopes to portray it.

Tragic Flaw

In Maupassant's stories, every major character has a tragic flaw—that is, a quality that leads to his downfall—and every character suffers from it and forces those around them to suffer for it too. In “The Jewels,” Monsieur Lantin's tragic flaw is his blindness to his wife's affairs with other men, affairs that bring her wealth and also make Monsieur Lantin's own home life far more comfortable, as he discovers to his horror after her death.

But Maupassant's fiction also uses the tragic flaw to indirectly comment on society. For example, Monsieur Lantin's flaw is not his own fault in the classic sense—that is, it does not stem from his own character, but from societally induced conditions. Monsieur Lantin is so tired because he is forced to work long hours at a dull job. If he were rich, like the men who shower his wife with jewels as they accompany her to the theatre, presumably he would not have to work and thus would not be so tired.

Madame Lantin's flaw—the weakness that leads her to betray her husband—is clearly a moral failing of a personal sort. Since the story reveals nothing of her inner life, the reader can scarcely make a judgment about the sources of her undoing. Yet from a certain angle, her actions can be interpreted as triggered by the social circumstances under which she lived. Her professed fondness for jewelry suggests a hunger for material wealth that her husband is unable to satisfy. Such a hunger may well have been stimulated by envy of her peers. If she had not known and socialized with “the wives of some petty official,” who “always managed to get her a box at the latest hit,” perhaps she might not have been so overcome by the craving for riches that precipitated her betrayal. Maupassant, in his attempt to be truthful about the world as he sees it, slightly blurs the boundaries between the classic tragic flaw (stemming squarely from the hero's inner character) and the human weakness caused by the unjust social norms of ordinary middle-class life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“The Jewels” takes place in late-nineteenth-century Paris, between the years 1870 and 1880. The subtle tremors of instability beneath its placid, urbane surface suggest the social milieu of the years following the brief Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Maupassant was mobilized as a soldier in that

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1880s:** Women have few options for making money, especially enough to buy the kinds of gems Madame Lantin acquires by other means in “The Jewels.”

Today: Women in most industrialized countries have as many opportunities as men to change their economic status by going to school and working.

- **1880s:** In the late nineteenth century syphilis is a major killer of men and women both old and young. Guy de Maupassant dies of syphilis, as does his brother Herve. The disease follows its typical pattern in Maupassant, afflicting him with a stream of seemingly unrelated maladies before it finally attacks his brain, resulting in insanity and death.

Today: Syphilis is rarely found in an advanced stage. Treatment with widely available

medicines such as penicillin is extremely effective for early-stage syphilis, and other drugs are effective against later stages of the disease.

- **1880s:** The economy of France is built on capitalism and a rigid system of social classes. Many people labor in factories or offices with little financial reward. Even a steady job in a government office is no guarantee of wealth or status.

Today: In the developed world, the boundaries between social classes are considerably more fluid. People with limited means and education have a chance to get wealthy by recording a piece of music or selling a domain name on the Internet. However, the capitalist economy continues to foster inequality between the haves and have-nots.

war, and his most famous story, “Boul de Suif,” is set in the midst of the conflict. The 1880s, the era in which Maupassant wrote the majority of his stories and novels, was also a period of turmoil in which the political beliefs and long-held assumptions of the French people were in flux. Maupassant’s work, while not overtly political in content, reflects the unstable norms and values of the historical era in which it was composed.

Prior to around 1865, the French population was clustered mainly in rural areas. France experienced industrialization and the resulting migration of the populace to cities later than England and on par with the United States, whose country-to-city exodus also did not take place in force until the twentieth century. France, however, was becoming increasingly multiethnic during the late nineteenth century, and refugees from Eastern Europe flocked there. The teeming city of Paris underwent many social and sanitary improvements during this time, such as the famous widening of city boulevards by Baron von Haussman

and the subsequent elimination of centuries-old slums, whose inhabitants were relocated to outside the city center.

From 1852 to 1870, France was ruled by Emperor Napoleon III, the grandson of France’s military hero, Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon III ran an authoritarian government that pursued colonial acquisitions in Asia and Africa, and opened the Suez Canal. Napoleon III was also belligerent toward his European neighbors—under his rule France occupied Rome and fought with Britain against Russia in the Crimean War. Napoleon III also pursued his expansionist policies in North America, supporting the confederacy during the American Civil War and occupying Mexico City, in which he installed an Austrian archduke as emperor. On both of these occasions, U.S. military power drove Napoleon III back to France.

In Europe, Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck goaded the war-happy French leader into declaring war in July 1870. The French army was swiftly beaten and forced to surrender



Theater (Image copyright Vladyslav Morozov, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

by September 1. The Prussians moved in to occupy Paris, which surrendered. France was then forced to give up important economic regions Alsace and Lorraine to Germany, paving the way for Germany's replacing France as the most important European power. Napoleon III was sent into exile to England, where he died two years later. The Third Republic was then set up in France, which would last until the German occupation of 1940. Bitterness over the diminished importance of France on the European stage and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine darkened the outlook of the French populace for years. This bitterness and sense of defeated ambition is in keeping with the pessimistic outlook that colors Maupassant's stories.

After France's defeat, Third Republic leader Adolphe Thiers signed the Treaty of Frankfurt, which forced France to pay reparations to the newly created German empire. Resistance to this led to the establishment of the Paris Commune, a left-wing workers' group that held power for only two months before being violently suppressed by the Thiers government. Following

this, the French government underwent ten years of upheavals, with those politicians favoring a parliamentary republic fighting it out through elections with those who wanted a return to monarchy. The themes and characters in Maupassant's stories reflect these events by evoking the unstable emotions, qualities, and values of the time period in which they were written

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Few literary critics have made specific reference to "The Jewels," but much that has been written about Maupassant's overall body of work can be applied to this story. Maupassant wrote hundreds of stories that explore similar themes of human corruptness and the failures of a socio-economic system that gave people few noble choices. He wrote stories at a breakneck pace during the ten years he was actively writing—roughly thirty per year—and was somewhat repetitive in the themes and characters he created. Perhaps because his career was so brief,

however, neither critics at the time nor today fault him for it.

The critic for whom Maupassant himself wrote was his teacher and mentor, Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert prodded the young Maupassant to focus more seriously on his writing and offered no concrete praise for his work until Maupassant presented him with the story “Boule de Suif” (“Ball of Fat”), which Flaubert declared to be a masterpiece. The public agreed, and the story was printed eight times within the following two weeks; from then on, his writing career took wing. He published three books of stories per year, which were widely translated and well received by critics and the public.

However, Maupassant is not usually placed in the very highest ranks of French writers, probably because his medium was that of the short story or novella, as opposed to full-length novels. Nevertheless, he is revered by critics, writers, and readers worldwide for the brevity and brilliance of his writing style. Writers including Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James professed deep admiration of Maupassant for his uniquely concise style and deeply pessimistic outlook. Conrad wrote:

He is merciless and yet gentle with his mankind; he does not rail at their prudent fears and their small artifices; he does not despise their labours. It seems to me that he looks with an eye of profound pity upon their troubles, deceptions and misery. But he looks at them all. He sees—and does not turn away his head. As a matter of fact he is courageous.

As Conrad’s comment shows, Maupassant’s work earned him a spot among the pantheon of great storytellers.

CRITICISM

Melanie Bush

Melanie Bush is a journalist and teacher. In this essay, she discusses Maupassant’s use of language in “The Jewels,” as well as his views of human nature and the capitalist economic system.

Like many great writers and artists throughout history, Guy de Maupassant took an “outsider’s view” of the world around him. That is, he did not subscribe to the prevailing values and beliefs of the culture in which he lived, and he was thus able to observe them from a critical distance. His outsider’s stance is reflected in



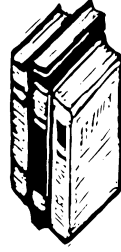
MONSIEUR LANTIN’S CHANGE OF HEART
REVEALS MAUPASSANT’S VIEW OF HUMAN
NATURE. THE STORY IMPLIES THAT A MAN WILL
ADAPT (OR SIMPLY ABANDON) THE VERY DEEPEST
OF HIS MORAL BELIEFS TO WHATEVER WILL ALLOW
HIM TO LIVE THE LIFE OF GREATEST EASE.”

every aspect of his writing: the themes he explores, the characters he portrays, the situations he creates in which these characters play out their parts, and even in the mood and style of his writing itself. These qualities set him apart both then and today as much as his subject matter. Maupassant’s short masterpiece, “The Jewels,” reveals all these dimensions of his singular, jaundiced, and sometimes cynical vision. He perceives the corruption lurking in human nature and the greed and avarice driving the socioeconomic system. As a writer, he uses language to puncture the surfaces of normality and look deeper.

Maupassant has a manner of using words to turn assumptions upside down and inside out, questioning everything. Indeed, from the opening paragraphs of “The Jewels,” it is clear that the reader is in skeptical hands. The first piece of information about the main character, Monsieur Lantin, is how much money he makes per year. While this is perhaps a solid piece of factual information, it hardly follows the conventional way of identifying someone in polite society. Meanwhile, and equally strange, each piece of information about Monsieur Lantin’s new wife is preceded by the modifier “seemed,” such as: “The girl seemed the very epitome of the virtuous spouse to whom any sensible young man dreams of entrusting his life” and “the imperceptible smile that always haunted her lips seemed like a reflection of her heart.”

While the detail about Monsieur Lantin’s annual salary may simply suggest a writer who wants to cut to the bare bones of a matter, it also subtly points to money as a driving motivation for this character, as the story will bear out. The repeated use of the word “seemed” in the phrases

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- H. E. Bates's *The Modern Short Story* (1941) is an introduction to the short story form that gives due regard to Maupassant's place in the genre's development.
- In Siobhan Dowd's young adult novel *Solace of the Road* (2009) a blonde wig helps Holly Hogan conceal her identity and take to the road as Solace, an older, bolder version of her own self—but her journey only leads to more secrets buried in her past.
- *Madame Bovary* (1857), the masterpiece by Maupassant's mentor Gustave Flaubert has themes in common with "The Jewels," yet it centers on the point of view of the adulterous wife. Bored with married stability and hungry for the finer things in life, Emma Bovary engages in two tempestuous affairs while playing the role of virtuous spouse. The book is considered one of the great novels of all time and the best example of the school of realism.
- *Sentimental Education* (1869) was the last novel written by Flaubert. It concerns the conflicts among monarchists and republicans during the same era in which "The Jewels" takes place.
- In "Boul de Suif" (1880), a novella-length story from the same era as "The Jewels," Maupassant contrasts the hypocrisy and selfishness among the upper classes with the patriotic heroism of the working class. The story's hero is a prostitute who reluctantly offers herself to a Prussian officer in order to free herself and nine other French prisoners. But after her selfless act, her fellow prisoners shun her, wrapped up in their hollow, conventional morality. The story can be found in the collection of Maupassant's stories, *The Best Short Stories* (1999).
- Maupassant's "A Day in the Country" (1881) is a bittersweet tale of two romances sparked in one summer afternoon along the River Seine. The story was made into an exquisite film by French cinema giant Jean Renoir in 1936. It can be found in *The Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant*, a collection of 128 stories.
- Maupassant's "The Necklace" (1884) comes from the same period as "The Jewels." Maupassant explores the same idea of a poor woman's lust for gems—but with a very different outcome. Mathilde borrows a diamond necklace to attend a once-in-a-lifetime party and pays for it with a lifetime of drudgery when it gets lost. The story is included in the collection of Maupassant's stories, *The Best Short Stories* (1999).
- *Germinal* (1885), by Émile Zola, is the most celebrated novel by another of Maupassant's French contemporaries, the master of the school of naturalism. Zola's depiction of working life is unsparing as he tells the harrowing story of French coal miners who go on strike to protest their brutal working conditions, and the price one family pays for their mining livelihood.
- *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2001) by Dai Sijie. This semi-autobiographical novel concerns two boys at a re-education camp during the cultural revolution in China and their love for a local seamstress, whom one of the boys "educates" using Western novels, such as those by nineteenth-century French author and Maupassant contemporary Honoré de Balzac. The seamstress, like the wife in "The Jewels," surprises everyone in the end.

describing Madame Lantin gives the reader the impression that Maupassant is equally skeptical about what one can really know about a young woman from the impression of "angelic purity"

she presents. From the first lines of the story, therefore, the reader is on shaky ground: The world has been made unfamiliar, its basic social signifiers called into question.

It is inevitable that a writer who places such a strict restraint on the number of words he uses must choose every word with great care. “The Jewels” is a scanty seven pages long. The words “seem” and “sensible” here are important; they will acquire great resonance later in the story. In fact, the seeds of its tragedy are sown in these first few sentences, by these particular words. It is part of Maupassant’s genius that he can turn such innocuous words as “sensible” and “pure” into satiric betrayals of those very concepts. In Maupassant’s world, things are frequently other than what they seem.

Following his marriage, the reader is told, Monsieur Lantin is “unbelievably happy” with his angelic-seeming wife, who is not only seductive but also manages the household so well that “they appeared to be enjoying a life of luxury.” Again the word “appeared” signals the reader that something is amiss, and indeed, after this short paragraph indicating Monsieur Lantin’s happiness, nothing continues in a normal manner.

The first wrong note sounded in Monsieur Lantin’s perfect symphony is his wife’s immoderate love of going to the theatre and her compulsion to acquire “false gems.” Monsieur Lantin lacks the energy to enjoy the theatre after his hard day’s work and admonishes his wife for “this passion for frippery.” Yet Madame Lantin attends the theatre frequently, often getting “a box at the latest hit and even at a premiere or two,” while bringing home gaudy pieces of jewelry almost every evening, which she admires passionately. Once again, things are not as they seem. On a second reading, a reader aware of Madame Lantin’s secret can imagine what is in her mind as she scrutinizes her costume jewelry, right under her husband’s nose, “as passionately as if savoring some profound and secret delight.” She even drapes pearls around his neck, “laughing with all her heart and exclaiming: ‘How funny you look!’” Her laughter is at his expense. Her false gems are not so false; her ideal marriage not so ideal.

Maupassant does not speak directly about Madame Lantin’s duplicity; the details of her secrets follow her to the grave. It is clear that she was motivated to have affairs with rich men by her desire to own real jewels. Maupassant, an invisible narrator, passes no judgment on her, or on any other character—making judgments is not his job, but the reader’s. Clearly, Madame Lantin, like her husband, has completely adapted the morality she grew up with to serve her own needs.

She comes from a family that is “poor but honorable, quiet and unassuming,” but a reader wonders just how deeply these pious values could possibly have been instilled in Madame Lantin if the desire for jewelry can completely annihilate them. This is Maupassant’s point and indicates his attitudes toward human nature.

Monsieur Lantin undergoes a similar transformation, spurred on by material yearnings, after his wife’s sudden death. He discovers that his income is no longer enough to support himself in a basic manner, and it occurs to him to try to sell some of his wife’s “tinsel,” as he calls her trinkets: “The very sight of them each day marred his memory of his beloved.” Indeed, the jewels had driven him and his wife apart much more than he knows. When he discovers all of the pieces are real and worth a fortune, presumably given to his wife by a rich lover or lovers, Monsieur Lantin feels an intense—but very brief—unhappiness at this betrayal. His hunger soon overtakes his shame. Proclaiming that money can buy happiness, he uses the proceeds from his wife’s jewelry collection to embark upon a life of excessive opulence involving expensive food, wine, and prostitutes.

The most striking plot element of “The Jewels” concerns Monsieur Lantin’s complete and immediate adaptation to his changed situation without so much as a moment’s regret. Early in the story he tells his wife that “her grace and beauty,” not her accessories, “are the rarest gems.” But all the qualities he supposedly admired in his young wife—her “angelic purity” and her appearance of virtue—seem to have no value to him anymore. Monsieur Lantin’s change of heart reveals Maupassant’s view of human nature. The story implies that a man will adapt (or simply abandon) the very deepest of his moral beliefs to whatever will allow him to live the life of greatest ease. Gently but incisively, Maupassant pierces through the social codes humans profess to live by. For an extra touch, Maupassant shows the jeweler thoroughly enjoying his role in the sordid affair of the Lantins. Aware of the truth beneath the pretense of their transaction, he matches Monsieur Lantin’s sober countenance “with malicious bonhomie.”

Since it is Monsieur Lantin’s work-induced exhaustion that makes him unable to go out with his wife in the evenings, and his meager salary that causes her to take up with richer men, the story highlights Maupassant’s sardonic view of the socioeconomic system in which the story takes place. Maupassant never suggests openly

that Monsieur Lantin's exhaustion might illustrate any larger socioeconomic realities, yet the reader can discern his views of its significance in this character's life and in the lives of workers worldwide. Maupassant himself worked in a government ministry much like Monsieur Lantin's for most of his adult life. He complained bitterly and often about this to his mentor, Flaubert, writing:

I cannot work. . . . my mind is barren, worn-out by the calculations that I do from morn till night. . . . I become only too aware at certain moments of the futility of everything, the unconscious malevolence of Creation, the void in my future (whatever it may be), I feel coming over me a total indifference for everything and a desire to remain quietly in a corner without any hopes or irritations.

Being too drained after a day at work to attend to what he regarded as his true vocation was clearly infuriating to Maupassant. The depth of his rage at the system that forced him to toil away at meaningless work manifests in the dreadful fate he deals out to Monsieur Lantin as punishment for finding himself in the same situation. Madame Lantin also suffers from the facts of her economic situation; the choice she makes to step outside the bounds of the normal social order are caused by the inability of her husband, working as hard as he does, to provide for her needs.

The closest Maupassant comes to pinpointing the failures of capitalism is when he has Monsieur Lantin say, "How lucky a man is if he's rich! With money you can snap out of any grief, you can go wherever you like, you can travel, you can take your mind off your sorrows! Oh, if only I were rich!" And this seems to be true for the brief period in which Monsieur Lantin enjoys the spoils of his dead wife's possessions, as free from any constraints of morality as she perhaps was herself: "Outside in the street, he gazed at the Vendôme Column, longing to climb it as if it were a greasy pole." This image perfectly captures the ignominious way the protagonist has clawed his way to the top of the social hierarchy.

This animal-like ability to seek one's own personal comfort at the expense of any ideals seems to be the point Maupassant is making about human nature in "The Jewels." It is a point he illustrates vividly in many of his stories. The sole hint that social values have any sticking power whatsoever is given only in the last three sentences, in which it is revealed that Monsieur

Lantin has now gone and done it again. This time, however, marrying a "virtuous" woman has worse consequences for him, as if he had failed to learn his lesson the first time. This time around, there is no seductiveness and extravagant dining; perhaps this new wife truly is what she seems.

Source: Melanie Bush, Critical Essay on "The Jewels," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Guy de Maupassant

In this introduction to a collection of stories by Guy de Maupassant, Miles claims that the author has been wrongly characterized as a misogynist. Miles states that the stories collected in this volume demonstrate that Maupassant was even-handed when it came to pointing out the flaws of both men and women.

Of the roughly 330 stories Maupassant wrote during his life, most were produced during his *decennium mirabile* 1880–90, that is to say the decade between the death of Flaubert and the beginning of the *belle époque*. My selection represents, therefore, approximately one-tenth of his total output and contains some of the most familiar as well as the finest of his oeuvre. It differs from previous anthologies in English in two important respects. First, although a good, representative proportion of the best-known stories set in Normandy is included (such as "*Boule de Suif*", "*Hautot & Son*", "*The Christening*"), many of the stories here show Maupassant writing about the lives of those earning their living in the increasingly important urban settings of the time, notably Paris. In "*The Jewels*", for example, Monsieur Lantin's future wife and her mother have moved from the provinces to the capital in order to better themselves. The two peace-loving anglers caught up in the war in "*Two Friends*" earn their livings as a Parisian watchmaker and haberdasher respectively. The collection also includes accounts of the *demimonde* vacationing at Riviera resorts such as Nice and Biarritz (as in "*Rose*"), as well as those travelling to other similar destinations, using the relatively recently established railway system beginning to link French citizens in ways hitherto undreamt of ("*Train Story*", "*Idyll*" and "*Encounter*").

Furthermore, many previous English-language collections, both British and American, include a preponderance of stories (with the exception of '*Boule de Suif*') showing Maupassant as, if not misogynistic, at least deeply cynical in his portrayal



HIS REPUTATION IN VICTORIAN AND, EVEN MORE SO, EDWARDIAN GREAT BRITAIN HAS BEEN PERPETUATED BY SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS OF EDITORS WHO PRESENT STORIES EMPHASIZING A CAVALIER OR SUPERIOR ATTITUDE TO THE OPPOSITE SEX.”

of women. His reputation in Victorian and, even more so, Edwardian Great Britain has been perpetuated by successive generations of editors who present stories emphasizing a cavalier or superior attitude to the opposite sex, cautionary tales, possibly, for the use of unsuspecting milords up against the perceived *rouerie feminine* or wiles of French minxes under the Entente Cordiale. This collection seeks to redress that previous imbalance by attempting to show the great struggle the writer engages in to resist the commonly held view that it was both necessary and laudable in a man to adopt such an attitude. In reality, there exists in Maupassant deep sympathy for the often ignominious position of women in the society in which he lived, and his portrayal of the female characters in “*Mother of Invention*” and “*Minor Tragedy*” for example, is untypical of his times. That women often feature in his tales as devious, fickle, mendacious and greedy there is no doubt. Stories such as “*Laid to Rest*” and “*The Million*” amply illustrate this. But so too do the male figures, who, like the females, also frequently exhibit other equally unattractive characteristics. We need look no further than the stupid and brutal count in “*A Woman’s Confession*” or the insufferably chauvinistic doctor, in “*Madame Husson’s Rose King*” to note Maupassant’s even hand.

In the Normandy farm and peasant life of his time, harsh conditions bred equally harsh and unforgiving social attitudes. But even with increasing education and urbanization, Maupassant witnessed in the capital and at the fashionable resorts frequented by the wealthy an equally brutish ethos which he exposes with both frankness and humour. Under a façade of opulence and sophistication, his characters operate on a level no higher, as Henry James put it, than the gratification of an instinct. That instinct was to follow

blindly and unquestioningly the exhortation made earlier in the century by Guizot but frequently attributed to Napoleon III: “*Enrichissez-vous!*” (“Get rich!”).

When Maupassant met the schoolboy Proust in 1885, it was, of course, in Paris. During Maupassant’s lifetime the capital was enjoying what might be described as its defining moment. His parents’ generation, and he as a young man under the Second Empire, had witnessed the virtually wholesale destruction of the old, medieval Paris and its transformation under the Baron Haussmann into the architecturally elegant and logically planned city we know today. Accompanying industrialization, radical changes in its social life were well under way, with the nineteenth-century equivalent of shopping malls established in the glassed-in arcades, department stores opening for the first time and, on the wide new boulevards, large terrace cafés to replace the earlier, smaller and more private *cercles*.

The newly laid out city parks and *buttes* or escarpments were happy hunting grounds for both the *flâneur* and the pick-up. Shops, which hitherto had been smaller, more intimate venues for negotiation became places of display, often with pretty women at the counters acting as attraction. A new, and to him suspect, spirit of exhibitionism was beginning to manifest itself, culminating in what he regarded as the ultimate monstrosity of the Eiffel Tower, built for the Paris Exhibition of 1889. In ‘A Parisian Affair’, a story in which the wife of a country solicitor daringly seeks in Paris the excitement missing in her home life, he is quick to note the proliferation of objects and *bibelots* with which the crowded, cluttered, overstuffed and overdecorated interiors of home are filled. He speculates, again before his time, on the meaning behind these emblems of acquisition and collection. Stories such as “*Encounter*” and “*New Year’s Gift*” hint at the reification and commodification of girls and women as he gives telling glimpses of the fake princesses, the mock marquises and, of course, their moneyed manipulators. The time is ripe for manipulators such as Svengali and Professor Higgins, types whose names, associated with baser motives, are legion under the Third Republic.

Rarely do the stories exceed 2,000–3,000 words in length. Maupassant is working under what Baudelaire describes as “*les bénéfiques éternels de la contrainte*” (“the infinitely beneficial influence of constraint”) in which less means more. His style

is therefore highly economical, with sentences sometimes as brief as two words. The strokes are swift, spare and deliberate in an effort to achieve concentration and distillation. He is often concerned with recording one single, sometimes life-changing instant. Like the best of the Impressionist painters who were his contemporaries, and following Japanese wisdom in the concept of *utsuroi*, or point of change, he manages to convey the timeless fragility of the moment as well as the flux in which it occurs.

When Maupassant himself takes the stage as narrator, he often appears as a type: Maupassant the sailor (“At Sea”), the Norman (“Hautot & Son”), the civil servant (“The Jewels”), the sportsman (“Coward”), or the traveller (“Minor Tragedy”). Looking for the drama concealed beneath the surface of everyday life, he finds undercurrents which go unnoticed by others and concludes that chance rules all. Contrary to popular belief, the trick endings often associated with his stories are comparatively rare, though a sting in the tail is a characteristic feature. No morals are drawn and the irony which informs his work shows him anticipating our own times.

For many writers, including the austere James in his *Partial Portraits*, they are “a collection of masterpieces”. He conveys no disrespect in adding that “as a commentator, Monsieur de Maupassant is slightly common while as an artist he is wonderfully rare”. In the eyes of his friend Turgenev, through whom his name became well known in Czarist Russia, he is an admired and esteemed colleague. Later, Joseph Conrad in his *Notes on Life and Letters* was to join the ranks of the many who acknowledge him as the master of the short story and see the consummate simplicity of his technique as stemming from moral courage. Like Elizabeth Bowen, who translated him and recognized him as a quintessentially French writer, Conrad notes that she “neglects to qualify his truth with the drop of facile sweetness” and “forgets to strew paper roses over the tombs”. Later writers still, like Maugham and Hemingway, acknowledge with gratitude their debt to him. Ultimately, however, his reputation at the beginning of the twenty-first century depends, Gentle Readers, on those like yourselves in whose hands this book now lies.

Source: Guy de Maupassant and Sian Miles, “Introduction,” in *A Parisian Affair and Other Stories*, Penguin, 2004, pp. xii–xxvii.

A. H. Wallace

In this chapter, Wallace points to elements from Maupassant’s own biography to explain why the author seems preoccupied with cuckolds, and why he has so little sympathy for them.

Cuckoldry in Maupassant’s Writing and His Life With Father

Maupassant is more kind to women than to men in his writings. This is nowhere more evident than in the fact that he wrote so many stories about cuckoldry where the male cuckold is not simply ridiculed, but is presented as pathologically weak and inferior to the female whose antipathy for his inanity drives her to make a cuckold of him. The reader cannot often escape the message: Maupassant thought that an inferior man and his convention-oriented society were justification enough for a woman’s cuckolding of her husband and that the weak male victims deserved a writer’s contempt, not his sympathy. Yet many are led by anecdote and imprecise statements about Maupassant’s “misogyny” to conclude that even stories dealing with cuckoldry were veiled attacks on the female which stemmed from a desire to defend the notion of male superiority. Such a conclusion distorts one’s perception of the biographical evidence that appears everywhere in his fiction and further leads to a confusion as to the general meaning and consistency of his vast work.

Maupassant always experienced a personal pang at seeing a man in the process of being duped by his wife, though he loved to write about such a situation. France of the nineteenth century had far more permissive rules for the behavior of women than the English-speaking countries of the same era, but it is evident that Maupassant overestimated the extent of the promiscuity of French married women. This exaggeration is in direct proportion to his personal hurt as is evidenced by his brooding treatment of cuckoldry. Few of these stories contain that good-humored ribaldry of the tradition of the fabliaux under whose influence he was both intuitively and consciously writing.

It has been suggested that Maupassant is a “mother’s boy.” But certainly not by choice! If his father had been the kind of domineering genius who coincided with what Maupassant’s masculine pride told him a man should be, if the elder Maupassant had verified the he-man qualities and dazzling charm Maupassant ascribed to

himself, then perhaps Maupassant's art would not have been so fraught with males who are asinine victims of females whose dominance is due only to their prey's weaknesses. As the hero in *Lui?* says: "I am certain that eight out of ten husbands are cuckolds." Cuckoldry is one of the dominant themes in Maupassant. It begins in the early poem "Somme" and persists until almost the last story.

An examination of a few stories will demonstrate how an author transmuted his own life into fiction. And though it is dangerous to seek personal experiences as the prime source for the stories of any author, the critic of Maupassant who did not investigate the extent of correlation between his life and stories would be derelict. *Le Testament* depicts a situation which encourages and, in the end, justifies a wife's cuckolding her husband. The wife, married for her money and betrayed from the beginning by her husband, had, herself, taken a lover. And now in her will she confesses, pardons the husband's infidelity which had driven her to adultery, but affirms her right to dispose of her property as she chooses. She chooses to leave her entire estate to her lover who is, in turn, to give it to their bastard son, René, whom the philandering husband had with understandable complacency assumed to be his own. There is here evident a hint of Maupassant's personal misery over having had a father who he supposed cared little for Laure de Maupassant; in the author's eyes, his own father had done all the wrong things and escaped any sort of retribution because of fate's indulgence and his mother's long-suffering and determination to protect the family.

The situation described in *Le Testament* so haunted Maupassant that he used aspects of it in *Une Vie* and later with but minor changes in the celebrated *Pierre et Jean*. The narrator in *Le Testament* expresses Maupassant's admiration for a wife who avenges herself of her husband's infidelity. Might not we suppose that the hero's vehement defense of his mother's adultery—"Very well, I contend that my mother's will is one of the most beautiful, the most loyal, the greatest things that a woman could concoct"—to be an expression of Maupassant's admiration for his mother and anger toward his father?

It is true that all of Maupassant's stories do not attempt to justify cuckoldry. Remarkable is the fact, however, that Maupassant so persistently

presents situations in which the wife's adultery is defended, even elevated as the act of a superior being; and all the more remarkable in the repertoire of a man often accused of misogyny and of being motivated by a secret passion to ridicule and dominate womankind. Having written stories in which cuckoldry is presented merely as a fact of nineteenth-century life—a latent possibility of femininity—why does Maupassant return to the theme already once demonstrated that the husband who is cuckolded is but getting his just deserts? It must be that he was never able to resist exploring the possibilities of a situation which he felt his father's behavior and that of men like him encouraged. Doubtless, he would have justified his mother had she decided to behave in the manner of some of his female characters. Maupassant was bitter because his father, like so many husbands, did not measure up and was, in comparison to his wife, a mediocre, pusillanimous creature.

The author, on occasion, cared nothing about justifying the adulterous wife. In *Le Vengeur* he tells of a man who married his friend's widow. The deceased had obviously been too old to satisfy the flaming passions of his young wife. This the widow's husband realizes, and the realization haunts him with doubts about her fidelity, past and present. At length he wheedles from her a confession that she had taken a lover in her previous marriage. Here Maupassant is fascinated with the psychology of a man who almost willfully allows suspicion to destroy his happiness—not with justifying the adultery of the wife. The hero proves incapable of generosity toward a woman who shredded convention without what might be considered due provocation. Maupassant, himself, was choosy about the conditions which inspired him to defend the female. He was somewhat stuffy where "women's liberation" was concerned. On occasion he subscribed to the male notion that the rules for women were justifiably more strict than those for men.

Maupassant's idea that the superior woman had a right, almost a duty, to cuckold a husband *who accepted the married man's right to have mistresses and frequent prostitutes*. That his father made no bones about playing with other women did not set well with Maupassant.

One is struck by Maupassant's sympathy for the woman who had been the victim of the customary convention which allowed fathers and mothers to decide whom their daughters

were to marry. Clearly such a social injustice caused him to side with the defenseless woman, to suggest that those who forced a young girl into cuckolding her husband—himself a willing accomplice—were to blame. And just as evident is Maupassant’s conviction that man is not without defense against cuckoldry and so deserves no pity for weakness. Here, then, is another explanation for his continual refusal to sympathize with the cuckold.

Source: A. H. Wallace, “Cuckoldry in Maupassant’s Writing and His Life With Father,” in *Guy de Maupassant*, Twayne Publishers, 1973, pp. 24–44.

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An Outpost of Progress

JOSEPH CONRAD

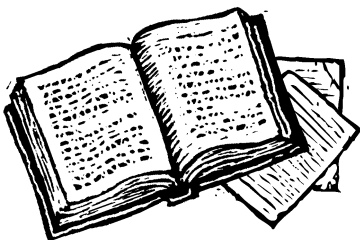
1897

Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" is a short story that has been all but eclipsed by the author's only other tale of central Africa, the short novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Both stories involve a trading post in the heart of the jungle and focus on the savagery and madness than can afflict "civilized" humans so far from the protections of their familiar world. However, readers may find that the shorter length and the darkly humorous style of "An Outpost of Progress" make it the more accessible of the two tales.

Originally printed in two installments in the magazine *Cosmopolis*, the story was later published in the collection *Tales of Unrest* (1898). "An Outpost of Progress" is currently available in the public domain from sources such as Project Gutenberg, and the story is also included in the Penguin Classics collection *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and Other Stories* (2007).

The story concerns two inexperienced agents, Kayerts and Carlier, who run a remote trading station in the jungles of colonial Africa. During the many months that elapse between contact with trading company officials, the men are left to their own devices at the station. The isolation and harsh conditions affect them both physically and mentally, and the two men end up meeting with tragic fates.

The tale borrows many details Conrad picked up during his short time as a steamboat captain in the Congo Free State, a region that later became





Joseph Conrad (The Library of Congress)

famous for the barbaric treatment of native peoples at the hands of European agents. Conrad himself called the story “the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa, the main portion being of course ‘The Heart of Darkness.’” Though the horrors depicted in Conrad’s tale must have seemed outrageous to many British readers, he writes in his original Author’s Note to *Tales of Unrest* that the story “is true enough in its essentials. The sustained invention of a really telling lie demands a talent which I do not possess.”

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Berdychiv, Ukraine, on December 3, 1857. His father Apollo was a Polish patriot and esteemed author and translator, responsible for bringing the works of Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare to Polish readers. The region in which they lived was part of the Russian empire, and Apollo’s activities with an anti-Russian organization led him to be arrested

and exiled to a desolate region of northern Russia. Although his family was granted permission to live there with him, the harsh conditions proved too difficult for them, and they were allowed to move back to the Ukraine. However, Conrad’s parents had both contracted tuberculosis, a highly contagious respiratory illness that often resulted in a slow death. Conrad’s mother died of the disease when he was seven years old, and his father died when Conrad was eleven.

After his father’s death, Conrad was taken in by an uncle from his mother’s side of the family, Tadeusz Bobrowski, who lived in Cracow, Poland. Although Conrad had not regularly attended school, his father had taught him French in addition to his native Polish. Bobrowski saw to it that young Conrad received ample tutoring in various subjects. But Conrad’s greatest desire was not to study but to travel, a goal that was threatened by his looming service in the Russian Army. Since he was technically a Russian citizen, Conrad, like other Russian citizens, faced compulsory military service when he legally became an adult. Therefore, at the age of sixteen, both for health reasons and to avoid being forced into the Russian Army, Conrad traveled to Marseilles, France, with the intent of becoming a seaman.

Conrad initially worked aboard French vessels, but a series of gambling debts left him out of favor with his previous employers. After Conrad made an unsuccessful attempt at suicide, his uncle took care of his outstanding debts. Conrad then gained a position aboard an English vessel in 1878, even though he was only twenty years old and did not yet speak English. He quickly learned the language from his fellow crew members, and Anglicized his given name to Joseph Conrad—though he never legally changed it. By 1886, Conrad had obtained his master mariner’s certificate and had become a British citizen.

Although he had already traveled to various ports around the world, it was not until 1889 that Conrad was hired as a steamboat captain on a ship that serviced trading stations along the Congo River in Africa. Although the experience was brief and unpleasant, it served as the inspiration for both “An Outpost of Progress” and his most famous work, *Heart of Darkness*. After his stint in Africa, Conrad resumed work as a seaman, but began writing in his free time aboard the ship. In 1894, he gave up his life at sea and concentrated on finishing his first novel,

Almayer's Folly. He also met and married a woman named Jessie George in 1896.

Many of Conrad's early works were based on his experiences as a merchant seaman, including *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897). Although these and subsequent works received critical acclaim, Conrad was not financially successful as a writer until around 1913, when his collection *'Twi'xt Land and Sea* (1912) and his novel *Chance* (1913) became popular. Finally achieving fame and wealth, Conrad continued to write for another decade—though his earlier works, relatively ignored upon initial publication, are the ones that have most captured the attention of readers and critics ever since. He died of a heart attack on August, 3, 1924, at the age of sixty-six.

PLOT SUMMARY

"An Outpost of Progress" takes place at a trading station in an unnamed African location, presumably at the end of the nineteenth century. After the station's founding agent dies from fever, the director of the trading company assigns an employee named Kayerts to be in charge of the station, with another man—Carlier—to serve as second-in-command. Kayerts is a short, fat man who spent seventeen years working for the Administration of the Telegraphs, but took a position with the trading company to earn more money. A widower, his one desire is to be able to provide a dowry for his daughter, Melie, who is currently being raised by his sisters. Carlier is tall, broad, and thin-legged, and is a former cavalryman who has relied upon his family members for money. His brother-in-law arranged for the position with the trading company. The author describes Carlier in the following way: "Having not a penny in the world he was compelled to accept this means of livelihood as soon as it became quite clear to him that there was nothing more to squeeze out of his relations."

The director leaves Kayerts and Carlier at the station with enough provisions for six months, and he offers an encouraging speech about achieving one's potential. Because the station is so far from any other station along the river—the closest one is three hundred miles away—the territory offers the men vast opportunities to have exclusive rights to trade with locals, and they will receive a percentage

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- An unabridged audio version of *Tales of Unrest*, which includes "An Outpost of Progress," was released by Jimcin Recordings in 1982. This version, read by Walter Zimmerman, is currently available as an audio download from audible.com.
- A film adaptation of "An Outpost of Progress," was directed by Dorian Walker in 1982. The forty-five-minute film stars Simon MacCorkindale and Thomas Hellberg, and was released on VHS by Monterey Video in 1998. It is not currently available on DVD.

of what they take in as trade. The director also gives the men a list of projects to complete in the six months before he returns: "plant a vegetable garden, build new storehouses and fences, and construct a landing-stage." As the director's boat pulls away from the station, he tells an old servant traveling with him that the two men are useless imbeciles. He doubts that any of the projects will get done. The old servant says simply, "They will form themselves there."

The other key employee of the trading station is a native who claims that his name is Henry Price, though everyone calls him Makola. He is originally from Sierra Leone, and his wife is from the city of Loanda, both along the western coast of Africa. They have three children who also live at the station. Makola speaks English and French, and is indispensable to Kayerts and Carlier as an intermediary between the locals and the trading company. Makola is also in charge of the storehouse, which contains all the items—including beads, fabric, and wire—that are used for trading with the locals. Although he generally appears eager to help, he is described as "taciturn and impenetrable," and secretly hates the two new station agents.

The two men begin their stay optimistically, believing that the locals will bring them great quantities of ivory to trade for their goods. They

make it a point to spend most of their time in their station house, which was built by the previous station agent. It is an extravagant building complete with a wraparound porch. Kayerts and Carlier take care to stay out of the sun as much as possible, since this is reportedly what led to the fever that killed the first agent. They decorate the interior of the station house but never attempt any of the projects assigned to them by the director. Carlier does, however, straighten out the large wooden cross that marks the grave of the previous agent, which had become crooked.

On the rare occasion that tribesmen visit the station to trade, Kayerts and Carlier are all but superfluous to the process; Makola spends hours negotiating with the warriors, while the two agents just sit on the porch and make insulting comments about the natives. In between such visits, the bored men resort to reading books and newspapers left behind by the previous agent. They also develop a relationship with Gobila, the chief of the villages near the station. Gobila believes the white men are immortal—even the dead one who previously ran the station—and offers them food and wine daily. Considering the meager supplies left by the trading company, his offerings are a necessity for the men. For five months the agents live a sedentary life, occasionally trading for ivory, periodically nursing each other through bouts of illness, and completely ignoring the list of tasks given to them by the director.

One day, a group of armed natives arrives at the station. The agents realize that the men are not locals—Carlier notes they are probably from the coastal region, because they have guns—and speak a language even Makola seems unable to understand. Makola's wife, however, is able to converse with the men, and after she feeds them, Makola escorts them off into the jungle. That night, Kayerts and Carlier are kept awake by drumming in the surrounding villages; both men also think they hear gunshots somewhere out in the jungle.

The next day, Makola disappears and returns with one of the armed men, ignoring Kayerts for most of the day. While he is out fishing, Carlier notes that many locals are traveling across the river by canoe for some reason. In the afternoon, Kayerts sees three columns of smoke in the distance; Makola informs him that some of the local villages are burning. Makola then tells Kayerts

that the armed men come from Loanda, the same city as his wife, and that they have a great deal of ivory to trade. He also mentions, however, that they are bad people who abduct women and children. Despite this, Makola says, "Station in very bad order, sir. Director will growl. Better get a fine lot of ivory, then he say nothing." Both men blame the poor state of the station on the ten hired workmen supplied by the trading company, a group of natives from a warlike tribe brought in from a different region. The workmen are in poor health due to their change in diet, and their morale is low due to homesickness.

Makola tells Kayerts that he will make the arrangements for the ivory trade that evening and recommends that the agents remain indoors all night. Makola also suggests that they provide the workmen with palm wine so they can have a festive evening, which will help them work better the following day. Kayerts agrees. A bonfire is built, and the party—which includes both the workmen and some locals from Gobila's villages—carries on well into the night. Later, Carlier is awakened by shouting, which is followed by a gunshot. The two agents venture outside, but Makola urges them back indoors, assuring them he has the matter under control.

The next morning, Carlier summons the station workmen with the usual ringing of a bell, but no workmen appear. Makola steps out of his hut and informs the agents that the workmen all went away the previous night. After further questioning, Makola reveals that he traded the workmen—forced to work as carriers by the armed men—for six giant ivory tusks. Kayerts is appalled that the workmen were sold into slavery, though Makola insists that he operated in the best interests of the trading company, since they all agreed that the workers were useless at the station. Kayerts vows to file a report on Makola's actions, and he refuses to accept the ivory as station property.

Carlier discovers that the single gunshot heard the night before was one of Gobila's villagers being shot dead by the armed men. Carlier concludes that they carried off the workmen, who were drunk from the palm wine Kayerts and Makola provided to them. Unfortunately, some of Gobila's villagers had also been there and were likely carried off as well. Both men agree not to touch the ivory, since it was earned through dealing in slavery. However, the next morning, both men end up helping Makola weigh the ivory

and store it in the company storehouse. Carlier justifies their actions by stating that since the workmen belonged to the company, so must the ivory that was paid for them.

After the chaos brought by the armed men, Gobila orders his people to stay away from the dangerous trading station. This leaves Kayerts and Carlier to rely upon their company food stocks and their own hunting skills to feed themselves. The agents try to make peace with the villagers but are greeted by arrows. The six-month mark passes, but the company steamer does not arrive with fresh provisions. Carlier successfully shoots a hippo but loses it in the river to Gobila's people. The two men grow sick and weak as two more months go by; they are forced to carefully ration their remaining food, which consists only of coffee, rice, and a small amount of sugar and cognac that Kayerts insists on saving in case either of them becomes seriously ill.

One day, Carlier tells Kayerts that he wants to use some of the sugar in his coffee, but Kayerts refuses to let him have it. This leads to an argument in which Carlier calls Kayerts a "stingy old slave-dealer" and a "pot-bellied ass." Carlier begins chasing Kayerts around the station house; Kayerts escapes to his room and grabs his revolver. He proceeds cautiously around the porch of the building, fearing that Carlier is going to kill him. Eventually the two men collide, and a shot rings out. Kayerts thinks at first that he has been shot, but soon realizes that he has shot Carlier dead. Kayerts tells Makola that Carlier was trying to shoot him as well, but Makola finds Carlier's gun still in his room. Makola tells Kayerts that they will say Carlier died of fever and will bury him the next morning.

By morning, a thick fog has rolled in, and Kayerts wakes to the sound of the long-awaited steamer approaching the station. Carlier's body still lies unburied in the station house. Panicked and wracked with guilt, Kayerts fears that the steamer has come to take him back to civilization to face justice for what he has done. The steamer docks, and the director, puzzled that no one has met them at the shore, heads up toward the station. He finds Kayerts hanging dead from one arm of the large, sturdy cross that marks the grave of the original station agent: "And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director."

CHARACTERS

Carlier

Carlier is the second-in-command of the African trading station where the story takes place. He is described as "tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs." Carlier is a former cavalryman who, despite serving in the military, never received a commission and counts on his relatives to support him. When the relatives run out of money, his brother-in-law secures for him an appointment with the trading company. From the start, Carlier is less concerned with the duties of his position than he is with the percentage of profit he will earn from the station's trades. Although at first he makes a show of deferring to Kayerts as the station chief, Carlier soon dispenses with the notion that Kayerts is his superior. For example, though he agrees with Kayerts's order not to touch the ivory that Makola secures through a slave trade, Carlier betrays this agreement by helping Makola weigh the tusks. Carlier also convinces Kayerts not to tell the director about the slave trade, and he openly argues with Kayerts when the station chief refuses to let him have some of their rationed sugar for his coffee. This enrages Carlier, who attempts to strike Kayerts and chases him around the station house. In the end, Kayerts—fearing for his life—shoots the unarmed Carlier through his right eye and kills him. Makola suggests that they will say Carlier died of fever and will bury his body the next morning, but the company steamer arrives before the men can bury him.

The Director

The director of the trading company is the man in charge of all the trading stations in the region. He escorts Kayerts and Carlier to their remote station, leaves them with supplies, and provides a list of projects for them to complete during their six-month assignment at the station. As his steamer leaves the station, he confides to a fellow passenger that he thinks the two men are imbeciles, and he is glad to have gotten rid of them for six months. The director's return trip to the station is delayed for two months due to problems with another company boat; the director decides to deliver provisions to other, more important trading stations first. When he finally arrives at the station, he finds Kayerts hanging by a makeshift noose from one arm of the cross that marks the previous station agent's grave.

Gobila

Gobila is the chief of the villages nearest to the trading station. He is described as “a gray-headed savage, thin and black, with a white cloth round his loins and a mangy panther skin hanging over his back.” Gobila visits the station periodically, and the station agents entertain him with their modern wonders such as matches and ammonia. He appears to like the agents a great deal, and even believes that they are immortal. He believes that the previous station agent, who allegedly died from fever, is not dead at all—he merely waits underground for some unknown reason. Because of his fondness for the agents, Gobila arranges for the women of his village to deliver food to the station each day. However, after the station workmen are abducted—and one of Gobila’s subjects is shot dead in the process—the old chief warns his people to stay away from the station and its dangerous occupants. Kayerts and Carlier attempt to reconnect with Gobila’s villagers after their food supplies run low, but the villagers fire arrows at them.

Henry Price

See Makola

Kayerts

Kayerts is the man appointed as the newest chief of the African trading station that serves as the setting for the story. Described as “short and fat,” Kayerts is a widower and longtime employee of a telegraph office in Europe. He has taken a position with the company so he can earn money for the future dowry of his daughter, Melie, who is being raised by Kayerts’s sisters. Kayerts begins his term as chief in high spirits, taking seriously his responsibility to look out for the well-being of the employees there. However, as time drags on, he proves to be an ineffectual leader—Makola takes charge of trading, and Carlier becomes blatantly insubordinate. Kayerts also becomes physically unable to lead the camp because his swollen legs almost completely prevent him from walking. In the end, he shoots Carlier after the other man attacks him. Afterward, he finds that he cannot face returning to civilized society, where he is convinced he will be judged for his savage deeds. Just before the company steamer arrives, he hangs himself from the cross that marks the grave of the previous station chief.

Makola

Makola is third-in-command at the African trading station where the story takes place. A native

of Sierra Leone, Makola insists his name is Henry Price, though Kayerts and Carlier—as well as the locals—call him Makola. Makola speaks French and English, and serves as the intermediary between the station agents and native traders. In actuality, Makola appears to run the trading operation singlehandedly. It is he who secures a trade of six large ivory tusks in exchange for ten of the company’s workmen. He arranges for the men to get drunk and fall asleep, which allows the traders to easily abduct them. From the beginning, it is stated that Makola hates both Kayerts and Carlier, though his actions toward them are never mean or hostile. He is married to a woman from Loanda, and they have three children, all of whom live with the couple in a small building at the station. After Kayerts kills Carlier, it is Makola who suggests that they cover up the killing by saying that Carlier died of fever. At the end of the story, Makola is the only station employee who remains alive.

THEMES***Civilization Versus Savagery***

The descent of Kayerts and Carlier seems to reflect the notion that there exists in every “civilized” person a potential for savagery that is kept at bay by the comforts of modern society. The men are described as “two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds.” According to the narrator, “Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death.” The narrator also notes that “the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart.” Without the restrictions and rules of society, the men begin to ignore rules of politeness, cleanliness, and ultimately, basic human rights. In the end, an inconsequential argument results in a violent physical confrontation that leaves Carlier dead.

Physical and Mental Decay

The two main characters in the story show a direct link between their physical and mental states. Optimistic and hopeful when they arrive, Kayerts and Carlier are also at their healthiest.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- “An Outpost of Progress” is one of two stories Conrad wrote about his brief experience as a steamboat captain in the Congo Free State. The other is the novella *Heart of Darkness*. Read both stories and write a short essay comparing the two works. How are the stories similar? Do both stories focus on similar themes, or does each seem to provide a unique message? Is there a character in one story who seems to mirror a character in the other?
- At the time Conrad wrote “An Outpost of Progress,” nearly all of Africa was feeling the effects of European colonial rule. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, select an African country and write a report on its history of colonialism. When and how did the country achieve its independence? What lasting effects did colonialism have on the country?
- Conrad considered “An Outpost of Progress” to be his best short work. Read some of the author’s other famous short stories, including “The Secret Sharer,” “Youth,” and “Amy Foster.” Write an essay in which you discuss whether you agree or disagree with Conrad’s assessment of his own work? Be sure to include examples from his stories to support your opinion.
- The omniscient point of view employed by Conrad in the story allows the author to include thoughts and feelings from many different characters in a relatively short span of words. Joined by two or three of your classmates, lead a discussion about point of view. What are some other advantages to using the omniscient point of view? What are some disadvantages? How do you think the story might have been different if it were told solely from Kayerts’s point of view?
- The narrator offers only a brief—and possibly unreliable—description of the fate of the trading station’s original chief, whose grave is marked by a cross. Using the information provided in the story as inspiration, write a short story detailing the original station chief’s experiences up until his death. Be sure to include characters that interacted with the original chief, like Makola and Gobila.

The longer they spend at the station, the sicker they both become. After several months, Kayerts has difficulty walking. As their stay drags on, their mental states deteriorate. Carlier becomes paranoid and quick to anger, and the small amount of respect he once offered to Kayerts as his superior disappears completely. After shooting Carlier, Kayerts becomes so deranged from fear and guilt that when the company steamer finally arrives to take him back to civilization, he decides to kill himself rather than face judgment for his actions.

Colonialism

Though the subject is only explicitly mentioned once, colonialism is a theme that runs through the story. Colonialism is the expansion of an empire’s

territory by establishing colonies in other regions. People who already live in the region are generally placed under the rule of the colonizing empire. Kayerts and Carlier are operating a trading station in Africa, but in essence, this is a colonial outpost established by Europeans to maintain economic control over the area. As with many colonialists, Kayerts and Carlier view their actions as beneficial to the locals—they see themselves as part of a force that brings progress to a desolate and backward region. Carlier even describes himself and Kayerts as “the first civilized men to live in this very spot.” The pair reads an old newspaper article from back home that applauds the efforts of men like themselves, who “went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth.” Near the end of the story, the trading



Pile of elephant ivory. In the story, Carlier and Kayerts become involved in the ivory trade.

(Image copyright Joe Mercier, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

company is even referred to by the narrator as the Great Civilizing Company.

However, this positive view of colonialism runs contrary to the men's actions and attitudes while at the station. Instead of bringing civilization and progress, they bring about the enslavement of their own workmen and the death of a friendly local villager. In addition, the two men never make any improvements to the station or to the area in which they live, nor do they make any effort to learn how to communicate directly with any native peoples.

STYLE

Omniscient Point of View

"An Outpost of Progress" is told through an omniscient, or "all-knowing," point of view. With an omniscient narrator, the reader can be given insight into the thoughts of many different characters, rather than just a single viewpoint character. For example, the story begins by providing a

glimpse of the world through Makola's perspective, but later reveals the thoughts and feelings of Carlier, Kayerts, and—at the end—the director of the trading company. The narrator also offers insights into the thoughts of the village chief Gobila, as well as an explanation for the general discontent and illness among the company workmen at the station. An omniscient narrator may also provide information that does not come directly from any character. For example, the narrator notes that the physical appearance of both Kayerts and Carlier changes dramatically during their first five months at the station, but neither man notices the change in the other. The narrator also provides a small amount of background information about the previous station agent, who is dead and buried before the story begins.

Irony

"An Outpost of Progress" contains numerous examples of irony. Irony is a literary device where the author deliberately creates a disparity between what is said and what is meant, or where the author reveals crucial information to readers

that is not revealed to one or more characters. The first type is known as verbal irony, while the second type is called dramatic irony. Foremost among the many examples of verbal irony in the story is its title. The author sets the reader's expectations by describing the station as an "outpost of progress" but quickly reveals the description to be entirely untrue. The main station house is filthy and unkempt: "The plank floor was littered with the belongings of the white men; open half-empty boxes, torn wearing apparel, old boots; all the things dirty, and all the things broken, that accumulate mysteriously round untidy men." The station chiefs make no effort to improve anything while they are there, though the director has given them a list of projects to complete. The men themselves seem not to progress but to regress, losing the basic social skills and courtesy that allowed them to exist in society.

Similarly, at the end of the story, the narrator refers to the trading company as "the Great Civilizing Company (since civilization supposedly follows trade)," even though the opposite has proven to be the case over the course of the tale. In reality, trade brings nothing to the locals but death and treachery. No attempt is even made to help "civilize" them, and the natives' profits from trade consist of what Carlier refers to as "rubbish" and "rags."

Dramatic irony also appears in the story, such as when the narrator reveals that the steamer has been delayed due to complications with another boat, and that the director is busy supplying his more important trading stations first. Kayerts and Carlier only know that the boat is long overdue and have no idea when—or if—it will return for them.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

European Colonialism in Africa

"An Outpost of Progress" was written at a time when European colonialism in Africa was at its peak. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, two distinct but related factors contributed to an all-out race among European nations to claim portions of the African continent as their own territories. First, the work of British explorers such as David Livingstone (1813–1873), Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890), and John Speke (1827–1864) had demystified the continent for

Europeans. These explorers mapped large sections of Africa and assessed its worth in terms of raw materials and human capital. Second, many countries in Europe were quickly developing industrialized economies, in which a country's worth is based largely on how much raw material it has for manufacturing products and how many consumers it has who will purchase the produced goods. The enormous and resource-rich continent thus offered great opportunities to expand existing industries.

A few areas of Africa had already been claimed as colonies of European nations. Algeria, for example, which sits across the Mediterranean Sea from France, had been claimed as a territory by that country after a trade dispute. However, the area of Africa known as the sub-Saharan region—because of its location south of the Sahara Desert—was viewed with much greater interest because of its vast supplies of natural resources, which included rubber, copper, ivory, and diamonds. Great Britain laid claim to massive areas in the eastern and southern areas of the continent, while France took ownership of most of western Africa. Several other countries also claimed portions, mostly along the western coast.

One of the most notable—and notorious—colonization efforts was undertaken by King Leopold II of Belgium. Although he believed that Belgium should join in the expansionist race to claim a portion of Africa, the idea was not a popular one among his subjects or among members of the parliament. Leopold decided to pursue the matter on his own, recruiting journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley to stake out a claim in the central region of Africa known as the Congo. In 1884–1885, a meeting known as the Berlin Conference was held among European leaders to settle disputes regarding the different African territories that had been claimed by various countries. As a result of that meeting, Leopold was essentially granted private ownership of a region of the Congo that encompassed over seven hundred thousand square miles—more than seventy times larger than the country of Belgium which he ruled—and was home to an estimated thirty million African people.

It was in this region, known as the Congo Free State, that Joseph Conrad worked briefly as a steamboat captain during the heyday of European exploitation of Africa. The Congo Free State was not bound by the laws of any country

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1890s:** Africa is divided up into colonies controlled by various European countries, most notably Great Britain, France, and Belgium.
Today: All African regions once claimed as European colonies have established independence from Europe, though many still recognize borders established during colonial rule.
- **1890s:** Ivory obtained from the tusks of elephants is one of the most profitable commodities of colonial Africa.
Today: In an effort to save critically endangered elephant populations, the United Nations enforces a ban on almost all ivory trading that has been in place in 1989.

because it operated more or less as private lands. As such, it was the epicenter for brutal treatment of native Africans by European traders and opportunists. Although Leopold himself never visited the Congo Free State, agents enacting his strategy to extract profits from the land often forced native Africans to work under crushing deadlines and quotas. Those who could not fulfill such demands would have one or both hands severed at the wrist as punishment. Through violence, disease, and starvation, the population of native Africans in the Congo during Leopold's rule fell dramatically—it has been estimated that between five and twenty million people were killed. In 1904, a British diplomat named Roger Casement wrote a report that detailed the atrocities being committed in the Congo Free State. In 1908, thanks to Casement's report—as well as some of the works of Conrad, which were among the first popular writings to call attention to the horrifying situation in the region—the Belgian government took control of the Congo Free State.

Since this colonial period, Africa has attempted to establish independence from European ownership claims. Most areas have succeeded in establishing their own independent nations, though the continent has been indelibly shaped by the boundaries set by the European empires. In some cases, these arbitrarily determined borders have resulted in continued strife between tribes that existed centuries before colonization began.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

“An Outpost of Progress” was first published in two parts as a magazine serial in 1897. Conrad himself was not happy that the story was divided in half, feeling that it diminished the story's impact. The entire story was published the following year in *Tales of Unrest*, a collection that received generally favorable reviews. However, with three favorably reviewed novels already published by that time, the collection did little more than affirm that Conrad was indeed a skilled writer of tales set in foreign places.

In an 1899 column for the *New York Times*, William L. Alden states that the story collection, along with Conrad's previous novels, has “given him a place among the most original writers of the day.” Alden concedes that Conrad's published works up to that point contain flaws, though he notes that such flaws “can easily be eliminated, and that when they disappear his work will be so much better than it now is that he will rank considerably higher than he does at present.” In other words, Alden concludes, “he has not as yet done the best that is in him.”

An unnamed critic for the *Times* of London was not as kind to the collection upon its review in 1898. In particular, the reviewer states that Conrad extends his passages in unnecessary ways, padding the content with superfluous wording and psychological speculation. He contends that Conrad seems to put too much thought into each sentence, “and having no great gift of narrative



Fishing village along the Congo River, 2008. Conrad's experiences along the Congo inspired many of his works, including "An Outpost of Progress." (© Images of Africa Photobank | Alamy)

he buries even that gift under mountains of words." The reviewer states, "For ourselves, we confess that Mr. Conrad's method affects us like a dull speech at a public dinner." However, the reviewer also states that "An Outpost of Progress" "has more of matter to the amount of words than the rest, and has some merit as a nightmare."

In 1899, the London *Academy* honored *Tales of Unrest* as one of the three best books of the year. Despite this acknowledgement of his talents, Conrad's writing attracted a relatively small audience, even after his other African tale, *Heart of Darkness*, was serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899. Conrad's work remained largely unappreciated by readers until 1912, when his collection *'Twiixt Land and Sea* was published and earned him the best sales of any of his books. From then on, Conrad's literary reputation steadily grew. Scholars rediscovered his earlier works and finally afforded them the attention they failed to receive before. Although "An Outpost of Progress" has

been overshadowed by the similar and longer *Heart of Darkness*, it is worth noting that Conrad himself considered the former story to be his best short work.

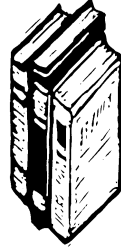
CRITICISM

Greg Wilson

Wilson is an author, literary critic, and mythologist. In this essay, he argues that "An Outpost of Progress" offers a glimpse into the ideas and techniques Conrad continued to develop in his subsequent works.

It would be easy to simply label "An Outpost of Progress" a tale that depicts the horrors of colonialism and focus serious scholarly attention on some of Conrad's meatier, more symbolic works. Indeed, the relative lack of critical study of the story suggests there are few treasures to

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is Conrad's most famous work. It is a novella that deals with many of the same themes as "An Outpost of Progress." In the story, a British boat captain named Marlow is hired by a Belgian company to pilot a steamer along a trade river in Africa. He ends up on a mission to bring back a rogue trader named Kurtz—who might be insane—from his distant trading outpost. The tale parallels Conrad's own brief experience as a steamboat captain in the Belgian Congo.
- *Almayer's Folly* (1895) was Conrad's first published novel, and bears some similarities to "An Outpost of Progress." It concerns a Dutchman from Java who establishes a trading post in the jungles of Borneo; although he marries a local and has a daughter, his efforts to become wealthy lead only to failure, and he ultimately ends up isolated from his family and from civilization.
- *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) is a Conrad novella inspired more by the author's experience as a seafarer. In it, a black sailor named James Wait joins the crew of the *Narcissus* for a trip from India to England. He is soon discovered to be suffering from tuberculosis. As his health deteriorates, the men of the crew form a bond with him that transcends their prejudices. The book includes a preface by the author—excised from its first publication—that explains that literature must appeal to the senses and emotions of readers if it hopes to achieve recognition as art.
- *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) by Alan Paton is a novel that deals largely with race relations in South Africa. The two main characters are Stephen Kumalo, a black priest in a small village, and a white neighbor named James Jarvis. In the book, Kumalo travels to Johannesburg to help his troubled sister and to look for his son Absalom. He soon discovers that Absalom has been arrested for murdering James Jarvis's son, a black rights activist who lived in Johannesburg. Rather than forcing the two fathers apart, the murder and subsequent trial bond them, and both men embark on an effort to improve their village together.
- *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. Written in English, the book is widely regarded as the first significant African novel in English literature. The novel tells the story of a Nigerian leader named Okonkwo who is exiled from his villages after an accidental killing. When he is finally allowed to return years later, he finds that white colonists have moved into the area and brought many changes to the villages. Okonkwo then attempts to lead his former people in an uprising against the white settlers and their new government.
- *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o offers a view of colonialism from the viewpoint of native people. In it, Kenyan resistance fighters rebel against the colonial government in an attempt to gain their country's independence. The book focuses on Mugo, a Kenyan who was once held in a British detention camp and has now returned to the village. Although he resists the oppression of the British rulers, he holds a secret about the betrayal of a resistance fighter who was executed by the British.

unearth in its comparatively short length. However, the story contains key elements that Conrad would later utilize in other significant works, especially *Heart of Darkness*. In particular, the story shows his critical views on colonialism and modern

society, and reveals much more obviously how irony informs his controversial depictions of native Africans. Examining these early manifestations of important ideas and techniques provides a clearer indication of the author's aims in his later works.



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IN ANY WAY.”

“An Outpost of Progress” is, like Conrad’s other works, critical of colonialism in Africa. This message appears again in *Heart of Darkness*, and many readers of both works accept the message as simply being, “colonialism is bad.” However, this message is delivered subtly. Only once is European colonialism directly addressed in “An Outpost of Progress”; Kayerts and Carlier read through an old newspaper article they find at the station, praising “the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth.” The two men take comfort in this praise, imagining a future of billiard rooms and warehouses on the very spot where the trading station stands.

The scene is obviously written for comic effect, but the criticism inherent in the text is directed not so much at colonialism but at the two agents themselves. This is an important point that will come up again later. For now, it is enough to see that the story is not explicitly critical of European colonialism. In fact, it is worth noting that the only direct harm brought to native Africans in the story is perpetrated by other Africans. Likewise, the only violence carried out against white colonists is done by whites (whether it be by their own hand or someone else’s).

There may be a simple explanation for this lack of a direct attack on colonialism. At the time the story was published—seven years after Conrad’s own experiences in the Congo—most non-Africans were still largely unaware of the atrocities being committed there in the name of civilization and progress. George Washington Williams, an African American publisher and activist, had written an open letter to King Leopold II of Belgium which detailed the cruelties he had witnessed; however, the letter—published as a pamphlet—was heavily

criticized by Henry Morton Stanley, a Welsh journalist turned African explorer who had helped King Leopold II lay claim to much of the Congo Free State. Viewed as something of a hero among British citizens, Stanley’s criticism carried much weight—though Williams’s account is now regarded as truthful. In any case, besides the letter written by Williams, there were precious few accounts available in Europe of the inhumane treatment of native African peoples under colonialism. Indeed, it was not until seven years after Conrad’s story was published that Roger Casement’s famous report detailing the atrocities committed in the Congo Free State was released.

Since his audience was mainly British, it seems unlikely Conrad could have provided a harsher critique of colonialism at the time, unless he wanted it to go unpublished. Still, what Conrad does accomplish is subtle and perhaps just as important: he illustrates that colonialism is a destabilizing force in Africa. Instead of merely criticizing the actions of a few cruel agents, he shows that the very system itself upsets the existing cultural equilibrium of the region. Note that Makola is from Sierra Leone, far from the story’s setting in the Congo. (Though this setting is never explicitly stated by the author, it is generally accepted, based on all the incidental clues and the author’s own experiences.) He has been brought far from his own home by the trading company, whether directly or indirectly. His wife comes from another region as well, as do the traders who visit the station and trade ivory for the station’s workmen—who are themselves from another part of Africa. Traditional tribal regions are no longer honored; disputes between tribal groups increase as people become displaced or—like the Loanda gunmen—roam the countryside with European-made weapons, taking what they can. This is actually a much broader criticism than if Conrad were to have detailed the horrors of the Congo Free State, which were, after all, performed under the leadership of the Belgian king, and had little directly to do with British colonies in Africa.

However, Conrad’s most scathing criticism is reserved not for colonialism specifically but for so-called “civilized” society and its human products. Colonialism is merely the mechanism by which these failings are exposed. Kayerts and Carlier are described by the narrator as “perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the

high organization of civilized crowds.” In other words, the two men are worthless as individuals, but survive because of the safety net provided by the modern world. Conrad drives their worthlessness home repeatedly to the reader, stating that they are “imbeciles” who are “both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought.” Yet it is society that Conrad blames for allowing such men to exist. They were never challenged or required to be anything other than machines. He writes, “Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings.” Indeed, his tone toward the two men is actually one of pity, and so he compares them to frightened children and blind men.

It is here that “An Outpost of Progress” shows its significance to Conrad’s body of work as a whole, because in it he offers one of the clearest descriptions of his philosophical viewpoint found in any of his fiction. This is the flip side of Conrad’s assertion that modern society allows unfit humans to flourish: the idea that humans, when removed from the protections and comforts of civilization, become whatever they have the potential to become. Note that this is very different from the idea that humans cut off from society become savages. In the case of Kayerts and Carlier it may be true, but only because—as Conrad so carefully reminds the reader throughout the entire story—these two men are worthless and therefore without any meaningful potential.

Perhaps the most important words in the story are spoken by an inconsequential character aboard the steamer after the two agents are dropped off. “They will form themselves there,” the old servant says to the director. With that, he sums up the thesis of the work: humans only show their true nature when the façade of civilized society is stripped away, and many people in modern society would not be able to exist under such conditions. This theme appears throughout Conrad’s body of work, but is especially notable in *Heart of Darkness*. However, without “An Outpost of Progress” and its clear expression of this theme, many readers have simply interpreted the other work as a depiction of humanity’s tendency toward savagery, as exemplified by the ivory trader Kurtz.

Another key element of the story may shed light on what is probably the greatest modern controversy related to Conrad: the accusation that his work is racist. This accusation was leveled by

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who criticized passages from *Heart of Darkness* that he felt dehumanized the African characters. However, looking at “An Outpost of Progress”—which in many ways is a sort of test run for *Heart of Darkness*—it becomes clear that Conrad’s depictions are viewed through a highly ironic narrative voice. This voice is present in *Heart of Darkness*, but may be harder for readers to identify.

The ironic voice in “An Outpost of Progress” is so forceful that it would be hard to miss. Even the title of the story drips with irony, since nothing that happens at the station resembles progress in any way. Viewing Conrad’s depictions of Africans through this ironic lens, the purpose of the text shifts significantly. When the narrator describes the African traders who visit the station, they are described as “naked, glossy black, ornamented with snowy shells and glistening brass wire, perfect of limb.” Their language is described as “babbling” and their eyes as “startled, never-resting.” But this is clearly intended to express the viewpoint of the station agents, who see the Africans as alien creatures. Indeed, Carlier even refers to a group of African warriors as “fine animals.” The narrative voice conveys the attitudes and prejudices of Kayerts and Carlier, and perhaps Conrad even meant it to convey the viewpoint of the average British reader. But his goal is not to validate this viewpoint but to reveal it as both naïve and worthy of ridicule.

Even when the narrator seems to offer the viewpoint of a native African, the irony continues—though the uninformed European remains as the target. Who can take seriously the description of Makola as an ideal company employee who “cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits”? A judgment is being made of Makola that sums up the fears and suspicions of Europeans, but when placed in the context of his other traits, it seems absurd. Just in case there remains some confusion among the reader, the narrator later mentions “the Evil Spirit that rules the lands under the equator.” This follow-up passage removes all doubt that the viewpoint expressed is not meant to be Makola’s, but that of a fearful European reader. In *Heart of Darkness*, the narrative voice gives way to a viewpoint character, which makes the ironic stance somewhat less clear to the reader.

“An Outpost of Progress” may rightly be viewed as a less masterful attempt to explore the themes and setting that would later prove critical to the success of *Heart of Darkness*. However, the

story offers insight into Conrad's later work because of its relative lack of ambiguity and unmistakable narrative voice. It is also the best showcase for the author's ironic wit and grim sense of humor, which play a less substantial role in *Heart of Darkness*.

Source: Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

John Gray

In the following essay, Gray examines the nature of barbarism in "civilized" society.

At the close of Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress", the director of the Great Civilising Company arrives at a remote African trading post in search of two of the firm's representatives. Having set out to bring civilisation to the region—"Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and—and—billiard rooms"—they end up trading slaves for ivory and drift into a feud in which one of them is killed. The survivor hangs himself on the cross marking his partner's grave, where he is found "with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director."

Like the better-known *Heart of Darkness*, "An Outpost of Progress" is usually read as a sardonic commentary on imperialism. The story arose from Conrad's travels in the Belgian Congo, where in the years 1885–1908 (when Congo was the personal fiefdom of Léopold II) roughly ten million people died as a result of starvation, overwork and mass murder. Yet Conrad is doing more than attacking colonialism. His larger target is the illusion that barbarism is an alien condition that erupts beyond the frontiers of civilised life.

In reality, the threat of barbarism comes from within civilisation itself. This is not to endorse the Romantic myth of the noble savage. "Primitive" peoples are just as prone to cruelty and folly as the rest of humankind, and human history is not—as Rousseau taught—a long decline from original innocence. The distinction between civilisation and barbarism does not mark some societies off from others. It runs through all societies and through every human being. Violence and madness are never far beneath the surface, and when they break through it is often in savagery that is sanctioned by authority.

Civilised life is an artifice created and sustained by flawed humans, and for that reason alone it can never be secure. It is not a condition

of peace—as even Hobbes imagined—but rather a system of conventions that mitigates ongoing conflicts. Examples are the conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners of war and prohibiting torture that were embodied in international law after the Second World War. These are not optional extras of civilised life; they are part of what it means to be civilised at the present time.

The weakness of civilisation is that it encourages the illusion that it is the normal human condition, and when this is punctured barbarism can return almost unnoticed. A shift of this kind may be under way in the "war on terror". As the danger of murderous attacks mounts, supposedly secure freedoms are vanishing. Some loss of liberty is unavoidable; the notion that the threat of terror can be removed by a change in foreign policy is mere fantasy. But if we think of the danger as coming from some far-off region, we will fail to understand its roots in current conflicts. We will drift into a world where we retain the appearances of civilised life—the quays, warehouses, barracks and billiard rooms of Conrad's deluded traders—while civilisation itself melts away.

Source: John Gray, "The Savage Within," in *New Statesman*, August 21, 2006, p. 42.

Ted Billy

In the following excerpt, Billy examines in detail the works that make up Conrad's Tales of Unrest.

Although Conrad's critical reputation rests primarily on his five major novels (*Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory*) and two long tales (*Heart of Darkness* and *The Shadow-Line*), he also distinguished himself as a short-story writer. Among his seven volumes of short fiction are such frequently anthologized tales as "Youth," "The Secret Sharer," and "The Lagoon." The fact that *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*, two of his greatest novels, began as short stories suggests that Conrad seriously applied himself to the art form, though, in the course of his artistic career, he increasingly gave in to temptation to compose potboilers to satisfy his ever-accelerating financial needs. This was largely in keeping with the decline in his artistic creativity in his later years, for, as in the case of his novels, his early short-story collections exhibit his best work. He sometimes wrote short fiction that displayed extensive affinities with his novels, as in the case of "A Planter of Malata" and "Because of the Dollars," which correspond with *Victory*. Yet despite the uneven quality of his shorter works, Conrad's tales dramatize



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his characteristic themes: human isolation, existential mystery, and the vulnerability of the individual amid the vast forces of nature.

The publication of Conrad's first collection of tales (which followed the appearance of *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*) elicited mixed critical response from reviewers who praised the exotic atmosphere of the Malayan stories but also bemoaned their oppressive gloom. The *Daily Telegraph's* anonymous reviewer singled out “The Lagoon” and “Karain, a Memory” for their depiction of the “wild picturesque life” of the Archipelago but objected to the morbidity and loathsomeness of “The Idiots” and “An Outpost of Progress.” After criticizing Conrad for his slipshod artistic method, the anonymous reviewer for the *Daily Mail* praised “The Return” for its keen psychological insight (Sherry, 103). Edward Garnett, writing an anonymous review for the *Academy*, obviously knew Conrad's artistic aims thoroughly, for he praises the literary artist's vision in dramatizing the assertion of ego in “a chaos of experience” (Sherry, 105). According to Garnett, Conrad forces us to confront the darkness of human nature while perceiving human nature in relation to the surrounding universe (Sherry, 105–6). Conrad's technique is modern, Garnett asserts, in the same way that Turgenev and Flaubert are modern (Sherry, 107). The *Academy* gave one of its awards in 1899 to Conrad's *Tales of Unrest*, with the quasi-imperialistic comment that Conrad “has annexed the Malay Peninsula” for English fiction (Sherry, 110).

“Karain” (which originally appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1897) unfolds as a sequence of

retrospectives told by an unnamed gunrunner who has returned to civilization. The narrator recalls how he and his cohorts, Hollis and Jackson, smuggled guns to Karain, a native ruler involved in territorial disputes. Although Karain poses as a haughty leader in the light of day, at night he seems paranoid and cannot do without the constant companionship of an old sorcerer. When the gunrunners return for a final sale, they learn of the death of the old wizard. Some days later, Karain bonds their ship and confesses that he suffers from remorse. He narrates the story of the betrayal of his friend, Pata Matara, whom he had accompanied in pursuit of a Dutchman who had run off with Matara's sister. After many years they found their quarry, but Karain had become so obsessed with the thought of the girl's reputed beauty that he shot Matara before she could be killed. Since that day, Matara's phantom has haunted Karain, and only the old wizard's charms could ward off the ghost. Now that the charms are useless, Karain asks the white men to take him to their land of unbelief for protection. Anxious to be rid of Karain, Hollis gives the Malayan a potent charm from the West. The talisman, a Jubilee sixpence representing Queen Victoria, fascinates Karain, who leaves the ship triumphantly to rejoin his subjects. The Malay rejoicing prompts Conrad's conspicuous authorial intrusion, whereby the narrator inquires about the reader's reaction to the sham resolution to the problem. This places the burden of interpretation squarely on the reader.

The closing scene, set in London long after the main episode, involves a conversation between Jackson and the narrator. Jackson's recollection surfaces when he seems to see Karain's face reflected in a gun shop window. Jackson cannot forget the native chieftain, but in response to his old friend's sense of wonderment, the narrator calls his attention to the restless activity in the street. To Jackson, the compulsive nature of hectic modern life seems unreal, prompting the narrator to conclude that his comrade “had been too long away from home.” Their humorous exchange documents the bankruptcy of their reliance on illusions of civilized order and continuity. Both Karain and the Westerners are victims of their cultural memories. Jackson's epiphany regarding the barbarism of Western culture has validity, even though Conrad depicts him as a romantic buffoon. Ultimately, Conrad implies

that the supposedly superior English are sophisticated victims of cultural conditioning.

Lawrence Graver endorses the narrator's perspective, even though he also takes into consideration the tale's enigmatic ending, for he views the final scene as a disclosure of the moral discovery made by the Westerners. Yet the narrator's comments are ambiguous at best and, at worst, obtuse and supercilious. More recent criticism of "Karain" has not abandoned the search for a moral touchstone but has more closely examined Conrad's complex narrative structure. Mark Wollaeger maintains that the foregrounding of the status of words at the end of "Karain" harkens "back to the opening pages, in which the narrator introduces the reader to an exotic fictional locale through a virtual invocation to the evocative resources of language" (44–45). Thus, the story's circularity underscores the illusory quality of words, both factual and imaginative. Language never allows us to go beyond the represented to the real (Wollaeger, 47).

"The Idiots" (first published in the aesthete-oriented *The Savoy* in 1986) unfolds as a melodramatic tale with an ironic denouement. Passing through Brittany, where he observes the behavior of some imbecile children. Conrad's narrator makes inquiries about them and eventually pieces together enough information to relate their story. The unfortunate children are the offspring of Susan and Jean-Pierre Bacadou, who had married in order to raise strong sons to tend the farm. As each child proves mentally unsound, Jean-Pierre's frustration leads to verbal and physical abuse of his wife. When she is provoked into retaliation, Susan stabs him in the neck and flees from the house. She turns to her mother for assistance, but Madame Leveille is scandalized by her daughter's action. She flees again, only to hear the voice of a potential rescuer that she mistakes for her mortally wounded husband. Deluded by her panic, Susan leaps into the sea. In a terse epilogue, the narrator reports the recovery of Susan's body and reveals that the Marquis de Chavenes plans to appoint Madame Leveille guardian of the children and administrator of the farm so that the land will not fall into the hands of his political enemies.

Although Conrad refers to "The Idiots" as "an obviously derivative piece of work" in his 1898 "Author's Note" to *Tales of Unrest*, this story cannot be dismissed as merely borrowed melodrama. Conrad's primary concern is not the domestic

turmoil involving the parents of four imbecile children but rather the warped sensibilities of three successive generations set against the backdrop of widespread political, social, and religious corruption. Like his chief models at the turn of the century—Maupassant, Flaubert, and Zola—Conrad derides the inhumanity of modern institutions, the corruptions of their officials, and the foolishness and ignorance of their victims. Conrad crystallizes multiple meanings of his title in an ironic epilogue that mixes superficial consolation with sarcasm aimed at sanctimonious authority. Conrad's ending undermines the foundations of European civilization—hypocritical institutions such as marriage, religion, and monarchy.

In "An Outpost of Progress" (reprinted from *The Cosmopolis*, 1897), a kind of companion piece to his acclaimed *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad weaves his web around the inane predicament of two simpletons, Kayerts and Carlier, who command a trading post in a remote part of Africa. With wry, caustic wit, Conrad details their absurd incompetence at an outpost where "progress" means ivory, and "civilizaion," extermination. They understand nothing and do nothing, except to straighten the large cross marking the grave of the chief who built the station and to protest feebly before finally acquiescing when they learn that Makola, their native assistant, has sold their workers and some villagers into slavery in return for ivory. Emotionally overwrought by prolonged isolation, Kayerts accidentally shoots Carlier in a squabble over sugar rationing. Hearing the whistle of the approaching company steamer, Kayerts insanely reacts by killing himself. When the Managing Director finds his body hanging from the cross, Conrad calls attention to the obscene sight of Kayerts's tongue protruding from his mouth as a final salute to the idiocy of the colonial enterprise. As this final image suggests, "An Outpost" ultimately mocks hierarchical modern civilization as well as its mindless stooges. For Conrad's tale has as much in common with *Bouvard et Pecuchet* as it does with *Heart of Darkness*. Like Flaubert's savage attack on bourgeois stupidity, Conrad's narrative satirizes the dull, mechanical sensibilities conditioned by Western culture's mania for organization and regimentation. Conrad's robotic drones function only within the confines of their routines, and once estranged from their habitual frame of reference they begin to disintegrate. But a culture that thrives by exploiting the stupidity and indolence of its masses

eventually will be undermined by these same qualities. Ultimately, Conrad's main target is the hierarchical authority of Western civilization, not its mindless automatons.

Conrad himself called "The Return" (which was never serialized) a "left-handed production" in his "Author's Note" to *Tales of Unrest* and bitterly referred to it as "odious" and "infernal" in his letters to Edward Garnett shortly after its composition. Twentieth-century critics have tended to follow his lead in condemning this marital melodrama. Lawrence Graver considers the story an "example of an artistic road not taken," "one of the strangest works in the Conrad canon" (34), largely as a result of the apprentice author's unfamiliarity with the materials of his narrative. But although the tale has more than its share of flaws, it does reveal much about Conrad's attitude toward life and fiction, and the qualified meanings that can be derived from both.

"The Return" unfolds as a Jamesian tale about a case of linguistic "possession" that prevents a husband from reconciling with his wife. Mrs. Alvan Hervey leaves her husband for another man, only to discover that she cannot go through with her desertion. She returns to her husband, who has just her farewell note and responds to her sudden reappearance with stunned disbelief. The story's O. Henry ending (that is, Hervey's abrupt departure) underscores the illusory nature of human knowledge as the opening pages of the final scene emphasize the haunting refrain, "Impossible to know." Alvan Hervey has just prepared himself to live the rest of his days without his wife, whose love had always seemed assured. Now he finds that he must live *with* her but *without* "certitude immaterial and precious," for he believes that he cannot be sure what his wife really thinks or feels. Hervey recognizes that he has been duped by his wife's conventional façade of amiability and now confronts a world in which all external signs may be deceptive. At this point it seems all too easy to interpret the story as a parable of existential unfathomability, yet the story ultimately subverts its own quasi-nihilistic final disclosure of epistemological incertitude, for Conrad distances himself from the central intelligence responsible for the final revelation by emphasizing the cookie-cutter conformity on Hervey's psychological myopia, Conrad's tale calls into question Hervey's reliance on words as his trusted refuge. For "The Return" also illustrates the folly of putting one's faith in language, for words cannot guarantee stable selfhood.

"The Lagoon" (originally published in *The Cornhill* in 1897) features a moribund plot that, with the exception of Arsat's narration, remains almost totally static. A white man arrives by boat at the home of Arsat, a Malayan he has known for many years. Together, they await the death of Arsat's wife, Diamelen. As they wait, Arsat recounts the story of his longing for the woman, who belonged to his own Ruler. Arsat and his brother had successfully carried off Diamelen, but, in the process, Arsat had to forsake his brother, who was killed by the pursuing natives. Thus, Arsat betrayed not only his Ruler but his brother as well in his obsession to possess Diamelen. Following this account, Arsat announces her death, and at the close he vows to avenge his brother's death. Conrad's final glimpse of the mournful scene emphasizes both Arsat's determination to reaffirm his cultural identity and the white man's refusal to believe that such a self-destructive sacrifice is necessary. The conclusion of "The Lagoon" appears problematical because Conrad presents two opposing viewpoints but does not endorse either. With its emphasis on silence and immobility, the ending serves as a synecdoche of the whole tale.

In his Malayan tales, Conrad frequently contrasts Eastern and Western attitudes, usually to the detriment of European culture. He derides Western hypocrisy and rapacity, by-products of modern civilization, and casts a favorable light on the traditional values and instinctive qualities of his fictional South-Seas natives. Yet, in "The Lagoon," Conrad does not draw such a sharp contrast between the white trader and the Malayan warrior. The nameless white man suffers from the delusions of self-aggrandizement, but he is not the only character blinded by egoism. For Arsat's confession, the pivotal tale within the tale, implies that a kinship of desire unites the two man characters. Conrad converts the title of his story into a psychological morass, in which the death of the dream of possession results in the petrification of selfhood. In his struggle to overcome his psychological immobility, Arsat seems to cultivate yet another myopic obsession. He intends to recover his former identity, which can only lead to death. For Conrad demonstrates that serenity always lies beyond the reach of those in pursuit of self-interest or haunted by the consequences of their previous actions.

Source: Ted Billy, "The Short Fiction: *Tales of Unrest* (1898), *A Set of Six* (1908), *Twixt Land and Sea* (1912), *Within the Tides* (1915), and *Tales of Hearsay* (1925)," in



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A Joseph Conrad Companion, edited by Leonard Orr and Ted Billy, Greenwood Press, 1999, pp. 281–286.

A. James M. Johnson

In the following essay, Johnson analyzes Conrad's depiction of race in "An Outpost of Progress."

Recent currents in critical inquiry have tended to liberate literary works from the limitations of canonical approaches. As a result it is now possible to read texts traditionally received as being subversive in a more complex manner. Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" is a case in point. This short story, which V.S. Naipaul argues is "the finest thing Conrad wrote," and which Conrad himself considered his "best story," is widely known as a powerful critique of European culture, yet Conrad employs racially charged representations to dramatize his critique, and this latter fact has not received adequate attention. When the issue of racism is acknowledged as a legitimate critical concern, "An Outpost of Progress" loses its clearly interrogative status and appears to occupy a much more problematic position. Indeed, what emerges is a text that is situated at an ideological crossroads: firmly in the grasp of dominant configurations even while enacting a subversive assault.

"An Outpost of Progress" is set at a remote trading station in Congo, where the actions of the two protagonists, Kayerts and Carlier, provide a bleak and unflattering view of European culture. Constituted by "the high organization of civilized crowds," these "perfectly insignificant" characters are "incapable of independent thought," and thus

view themselves in the language provided by conventional dogma: they are "pioneers of trade and progress" engaging in "the sacredness of the civilizing work . . . bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth." Conrad demonstrates an enormous discrepancy between imperialist rhetoric and reality when these two "blind men" become accomplices in a trading incident (orchestrated by Makola, their local liaison) in which the station's ten indentured African labourers are exchanged for six huge tusks of ivory. Kayerts and Carlier are initially shocked by this transaction. "Slavery is an awful thing," Kayerts claims, to which Carlier replies, "Frightful—the sufferings." Yet they soon become accustomed to the idea, especially after weighing the tusks.

The slave trading incident proves to be the pivotal event in the story, for when Kayerts and Carlier allow "the sacredness of the civilizing work" to be eclipsed by the more tangible and the more nakedly aggressive interests of "commerce," they rupture the cultural fabric that sustains them in a foreign environment. Upon their arrival in the Congo, "they felt themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness." The narrator goes on to suggest that

the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart . . . a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike.

Kayerts and Carlier are initially protected from this "discomposing intrusion" precisely by the illusions propagated by "civilized crowds." When these illusions are compromised, however, the impinging wilderness becomes a mirror in which they dimly perceive their own moral nakedness: "the great silence of the surrounding wilderness, its very hopelessness and savagery seemed to approach them nearer, to draw them gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting." Soon relations between the two men become strained, and a trivial quarrel develops into a violent altercation in which Carlier is shot and killed. Kayerts then finds himself alone and confronted by his actions. Slave trading and murder prove to be realities that he is unable to contain with rhetorical props. On the next day, the Company steamer

arrives, and with it the mentality of the “civilized crowd” returns:

Progress was calling to Kayerts from the river.
Progress and civilization and all the virtues.
Society was calling to its accomplished child
to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed,
to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to
return to that rubbish heap from which he had
wandered away, so that justice could be done.

But Kayerts can no longer take refuge in the illusions provided by his community, and instead, he “look[s] round like a man who has lost his way,” and then hangs himself.

Through the downward spiral enacted by his protagonists, Conrad dismantles the rhetoric of “Progress and civilization” and replaces it with the reality of the “rubbish heap.” This attack on European culture and its imperialist activities has been readily identified by critics. Brian Shaffer, for example, suggests that “An Outpost of Progress” offers a parody of the optimistic teleology of Herbert Spencer, and Jeremy Hawthorn lauds “the steadiness and penetration of Conrad’s ideological position. There are no romanticizing or idealizing impulses here; rather, there is the impulse to expose attempts to romanticize or to idealize imperialism.” But such commentators tend to avoid the ideological complexity of Conrad’s writing by dealing only with his interrogative stance and by thus avoiding the racial codings that enable his subversive position. J. C. Hilson and D. Timms begin their treatment of the story by stating that “Conrad is far more interested in what happened to the whites in the Congo than in what happened to the blacks.” This is no doubt accurate, but taking their cue from Conrad, these critics are not concerned with non-Europeans either, an oversight that tends to normalize rather than to interrogate demeaning representations. The statement, “what happened to the blacks,” is notable here, for it implies an historical distance from the reality of racial exploitation when it can be argued that “what happened” is continuing to happen in the realm of representation.

In Conrad’s Africa, Europeans come into “contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man.” Africa and Africans become indistinguishable, and together embody a vision of primal nature to which Europeans such as Kayerts and Carlier descend from the duplicitous realm of culture. There are three groups of Africans in “An Outpost of Progress.” The people who inhabit the village closest to the trading station appear in the guise of the noble

savage: they are “naked, glossy black,” and “perfect of limb,” and like animals they send “quick, wild glances out of their startled, never-resting eyes.” Conrad here depicts nature’s vital alternative to the impotence and indolence embodied by Kayerts and Carlier. Meanwhile, the minimal culture that the text endows on these people is denigrated: their language is like “an uncouth babbling noise,” and their chief, Gobila, is a “savage” with superstitious beliefs that include propitiating “Evil Spirits” with “extra human sacrifices.” Even the perspicacity of Gobila’s perception that white men are “very young, [and] indistinguishably alike,” is connected not with penetrating intellect but with a natural simplicity that also includes viewing white men as “immortal.” It may seem specious to censure Conrad for providing a demeaning representation of African culture in a text that presents a negative view of European culture. There is, however, an important distinction to be made here. Conrad demystifies European culture—this is the very core of his project. The same cannot be said of his presentation of Africa. European culture is presented as being false; African culture, to the extent that it exists in Conrad’s text, is not false, but rather appears as a manifestation of the “savagery” of “primitive nature and primitive man.” One could say that Africans are not granted the sophistication required to generate the illusion of culture.

The representation of the other two groups of Africans in “An Outpost of Progress” does not depart significantly from the portrayal of Gobila’s people. There are the ten labourers who work at the trading station:

They were not happy, regretting the festive incantations, the sorceries, the human sacrifices of their own land; where they also had parents, brothers, sisters, admired chiefs, respected magicians, loved friends, and other ties supposed generally to be human.

Conrad seems to intend to bestow sympathy on these people who have been taken from another part of the Congo to become the virtual slaves of the trading Company. But such sympathy, manifest in the understatement of the suggestion that “They were not happy,” exists alongside a condescending and patronizing tone that is particularly evident in the clause, “other ties supposed generally to be human.” Furthermore, the entire passage reduces African culture to clichéd forms of the primitive (“festive incantations,” “sorceries,” “human sacrifices”). As for the third and final group of indigenous people, the aggressive slave traders with their leader, “a powerful

and determined-looking negro with bloodshot eyes," they embody the "pure unmitigated savagery" that is the very essence of the wilderness. With these marauders, the condescending suggestion of "human sacrifices" encountered with the other peoples is replaced by the ruthless reality of slavery.

Whether they appear as noble savages, as passive victims, or as violent marauders, the Africans in "An Outpost of Progress" are fixed in the realm of nature. Furthermore, the occasional African who strays out of the realm of nature and into the deceitful and hypocritical realm of culture is clothed by Conrad in obviously ill-fitting garments. This can be seen in *Heart of Darkness* in the characterization of Marlow's helmsman and fireman, the former referred to as a "fool" and the latter likened to "a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs." In "An Outpost of Progress" it is Makola, the African who engineers the slave trading incident and is arguably the dramatic pivot of the story, who appears in this guise. Hilson, Timms, and Hawthorn all agree that Conrad's text is primarily concerned with the fictional quality of European culture, and they also agree that this central concern is focused on Makola. Hilson and Timms maintain that Makola is "the living symbol of the ruthlessness and duplicity of the Company"; the "true representative of the hypocritical system." Hawthorn singles out Makola as the character who "is able to adapt to the dominant needs of imperialism: maximal extraction of wealth disguised by the most convincing lies." What needs to be added here is that Makola's function within the text's general critique of Europe is based in large part on the dynamics of race.

The initial description of Makola suggests a dual identity:

The third man on the staff was a Sierra Leone nigger, who maintained that his name was Henry Price. However, for some reason or other, the natives down the river had given him the name of Makola, and it stuck to him through all his wanderings about the country. He spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping, and cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits.

The narrator appears to be ambivalent about which of two signifiers is more appropriate for this man: "Makola" or "Henry Price." Makola is an African name conferred by other Africans,

and is the name that is used repeatedly in the text. Henry Price, on the other hand, is mentioned only once, and is a European name that, it would seem, is affected unsuccessfully by the subject himself. Indeed Makola is very much a man of artifice and affectation; his accomplishments include the mastery of various signifying systems (dialects, calligraphy, accounting) that are essential to the operation of the European trading company. Meanwhile, underneath the false surfaces of culture that Makola seeks to affect there is an African identity that is presented by Conrad in derogatory and condescending terms: he is "a Sierra Leone nigger" who "cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits."

Makola's dual identity can best be understood in relation to Kayerts and Carlier. Makola is "very neat in his person," and is depicted at one point washing himself, a detail that counterpoints the description of Kayerts and Carlier as "dirty" and "untidy men." Kayerts and Carlier move from the superficially ordered but ultimately false realm of culture (signified by Europe) to the anarchic realm of nature (signified by Africa). Makola seeks to reverse this movement, but is unsuccessful, for he is evidently properly at home in the amoral wilderness. After all, he is the real villain of the story (the architect of the slave deal) against whom the ineffectual Europeans appear merely pathetic. While Kayerts and Carlier suffer crises after the slave deal, Makola simply relaxes with his children, untroubled by an exchange that seems to be well within the normal bounds of his conduct. The Europeans are revealed to be hypocrites in that they have beliefs that are undermined by their actions. Makola, conversely, lacks beliefs, and like the wilderness itself, has no conscience. Thus, while Makola is surely a victim of the Company (his occupation marks his self-alienation), Conrad's portrayal of him is hardly likely to generate sympathy. Makola's identity is summarized by the statement that he is "a civilized nigger," a designation that in the racial context of the story should be read as an oxymoron: the word "civilized" connotes the false surfaces of Europe that he seeks to affect; the word "nigger" connotes the reality of Africa that he cannot escape.

Richard Ruppel points out, in a discussion of the generic affinities of *Heart of Darkness*, that a "derisive attitude toward westernized natives is an unattractive but common feature of exotic stories" in the 1890s. While Ruppel does not elaborate on the motivation underlying such characterizations,

it could be suggested that “westernized natives” intimate the permeability of racial boundaries, a possibility that is then countered, or contained, by a “derisive attitude.” Certainly this would seem to be the conclusion reached by Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow in their extensive survey of the British image of Africa:

The Westernized African contravened the clear-cut distinction the British had drawn and intended to maintain between themselves and the Africans—ruler and subject, white man and “nigger,” civilized and savage... The Westernized African was an ever-present reminder to the British that the disparity could be overcome in a single lifetime. They viewed the acculturated African as a threat to their prerogatives and to the established social order. Their response in the literature was to make him a target for ridicule and censure... At any rate, the quality of African mentality was believed to be of such a nature that any manifestation of civilized behavior was believed to be superficial and tenuous, since sooner or later the African would revert to savagery.

Viewed alongside the presentation of Makola in “An Outpost of Progress,” this passage suggests how far Conrad is from subverting the racial views of his culture. Makola’s “civilized behavior” is decidedly “superficial and tenuous”—underneath his “Westernized” veneer lurks his true “savagery.” Of course Kayerts and Carlier, and the Company as a whole, also display a “tenuous” hold on “civilized behavior,” but they go to Africa to have this revealed. Africa functions as the obverse of culture; Africans (such as Makola) who exhibit the accomplishments of culture appear to be somehow out of place.

Conrad’s forceful critique of European culture and imperialism in “An Outpost of Progress” exists uneasily alongside a demeaning representation of non-Europeans that pulls his text back into the orbit of dominant structures of thought. Conrad’s Europeans may exist in the hypocritical realm of culture and consciousness, but they still occupy a dominant position over his Africans, who are essentialized to embody the lowest common denominator of savagery. Furthermore, Conrad provides a perspective that allows Europeans to mediate their enslavement to hypocrisy. In a letter composed in the Congo in 1890, he writes to his aunt, Marguerite Poradowska, “while reading your dear letters I have forgotten Africa, the Congo, the black savages and the white slaves (of whom I am one) who inhabit it. For one hour I have been happy.” In “An Outpost

of Progress,” Africans are savages while Europeans, arguably, are slaves—slaves to the lie of culture. While Kayerts and Carlier are slaves for whom there is no possible release, they do not necessarily represent the absolute European condition. Conrad’s response to his aunt’s letters suggests that he is momentarily released from oppressive circumstances through an aesthetic appreciation of European writing. In this sense, even if there is no hope of final freedom, there may at least be the possibility of parole. A residual value that adheres to culture in “An Outpost of Progress” can be seen in this light, for Conrad’s ironic narrative, with its sweeping and penetrating omniscience, defines by its very nature the existence of a heightened intellectual vantage point. The text offers the reader a momentary release from slavery through aesthetic appreciation. In other words, although this story is one of Conrad’s most pessimistic statements, the narrative hints at an alternative defined by its own commanding point of view: a detached awareness that adumbrates the later arrival of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Regarding “An Outpost of Progress,” Daniel Schwarz points out that

the narrator’s confident moral stance and self-control, demonstrated by the discipline and unity of the tale’s structure, affirm the existence of an alternative and far more attractive concept of civilisation than the one espoused by the predatory colonialists.

Evidently, then, an element of European aesthetic activity survives the general discrediting of culture and continues to dominate the African realm of nature. In Conrad’s presentation the European and the African may meet in the primal realm of nature, but only the European occupies the realm of culture, and of course it is from the realm of culture, however compromised it may be, that the text itself proceeds.

Source: A. James M. Johnson, “Into Africa: ‘The Black Savages and the White Slaves’; Joseph Conrad’s ‘An Outpost of Progress,’” in *English Language Notes*, Vol. 33, No. 4, June 1996, pp. 62–71.

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This memoir, first published in 1912, is the author's own story of his life up until his first literary success, *Almayer's Folly*. Although it has been criticized by some biographers for containing occasionally questionable information—such as his childhood story about pointing to the blank expanse marked Africa on a map and choosing it as his future destination—it is nonetheless a compelling and well-written account straight from the author's pen.

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This book provides a detailed account of the horrors perpetrated in the Congo Free State under King Leopold of Belgium's private rule, and the ongoing failure of modern Europeans

to recognize the damage wrought upon Africa by their ancestors.

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This is a massive chronicle of the systematic takeover of the African continent by European powers, all in the name of spreading progress and civilization. Pakenham reveals the myriad injustices perpetrated not only by agents of European governments, but also by opportunists who took advantage of the chaos created by colonialism.

Stape, John, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, Vintage, 2009.

A noted scholar of Conrad's work and life, Stape offers a detailed glimpse of the author based on his own division of the author's life into three distinct stages: his difficult childhood; his adventures as a seaman; and his unforeseeable foray into the world of literature.

Wrong, Michela, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*, Harper Perennial, 2002.

For those who believe colonialism is a ghost of the distant past, British journalist Wrong draws a straight line from the horrors of King Leopold II's Congo Free State to the ruthless dictator of Zaire, Mobutu Sésé Seko. Although his stated aims were to obliterate any remaining colonial influence in the Congo, Mobutu resorted to means every bit as brutal and self-serving as those of Leopold's agents.

A Retrieved Reformation

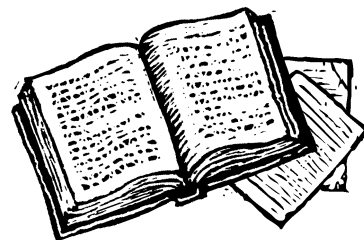
“A Retrieved Reformation” (1903) is considered a classic, though minor, entry in the canon of prolific short story writer O. Henry. The story focuses on Jimmy Valentine, a skilled thief and safecracker who leaves behind his life of crime for the love of a small-town woman named Annabel Adams. Jimmy assumes a new identity, finds a new, respectable life in Elmore, Arkansas, and plans to marry Annabel and move West with her. But his plans go awry when Jimmy is forced to crack one more bank vault when his fiancé’s niece accidentally becomes locked in one at his future father-in-law’s bank.

O. HENRY

1903

“A Retrieved Reformation” uses O. Henry’s favored literary devices, such as word play and twist of fate, to explore ideas about identity, right versus wrong, and how the power of love can change a man. “A Retrieved Reformation” was probably inspired by a story told to O. Henry by a cellmate when the author was serving time in the Ohio Federal Penitentiary after being convicted of embezzlement in 1898. Though O. Henry began writing and publishing short stories while in prison, “A Retrieved Reformation” was probably written in New York City where he moved in 1902 after his release from prison.

“A Retrieved Reformation” was originally published under the title “A Retrieved Reform” in the April 1903 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Since that time, it has been reprinted and included in many anthologies. For example, the





O. Henry (The Library of Congress)

story was included in *The Best Short Stories of O. Henry*, published in 1994. “A Retrieved Reformation” also was adapted by Paul Armstrong as a play, *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1909), which became better known than the story and inspired a series of plays about criminals in the early 1900s. These plays, in turn, were a primary source of inspiration for gangster movies of the 1930s.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

O. Henry is the pseudonym of William Sydney Porter, who was born on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. He was the son of Dr. Algernon Porter and his wife, Mary Jane Virginia. Henry’s mother died when he was three years old. His alcoholic father left his medical practice to try to become an inventor. He failed. As a result, O. Henry was raised primarily by his grandmother and an aunt, and his education was limited to what he learned at a school run by his aunt. Even so, he was an avid reader of popular literature of the time, and liked to draw.

After leaving school at the age of fifteen, O. Henry began working at his uncle’s drugstore in Greensboro. He spent five years in his uncle’s employ before his health and curiosity about the world compelled him to move to Texas in 1882. He moved to a ranch managed by friends from Greensboro. He worked for two years on the ranch before relocating to Austin. There, he took successive jobs as a clerk and bookkeeper, then a draftsman in the state land office. Eventually, in 1891, he became a teller at the First National Bank.

In 1877, he eloped with seventeen-year-old Athol Estes, with whom he had a daughter, Margaret. That year, O. Henry also launched his career as a writer. He contributed written sketches to newspapers across the country, including the *Detroit Free Press*. In 1894, he resigned from the bank to found, run, and edit his own publication, a humor magazine called *The Rolling Stone*. Though the magazine failed within a year, it was highly regarded by contemporaries.

After the failure of *Rolling Stone*, O. Henry briefly moved to Houston, where he wrote for the *Houston Daily Press*. In 1896, he was arrested for embezzling funds from the First National Bank and returned to Austin to stand trial. It is unclear whether he was actually guilty of the crime, but instead of facing the trial, he fled first to New Orleans and later to Honduras. When his wife became ill, O. Henry returned to Austin, where she died in 1897. He was convicted of embezzlement and sent to the federal penitentiary in Ohio.

O. Henry served three years and three months in prison, and during this time he published his first stories and used the pseudonym O. Henry for the first time. After a brief stint in Pittsburgh, where he worked for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, he moved to New York City in 1902. There, he blossomed as a writer, inspired by the whole of his life experiences as well as the teeming metropolis that was now his home. He became more prolific as a short story writer and was published regularly by various newspapers and magazines, including *Cosmopolitan* which published “A Reformed Reformation” in 1903. The following year, he published his only novel, *Cabbages and Kings* (1904).

In his last years, O. Henry published numerous collections of short stories, including several inspired by New York City. Among his last short story collections were *Roads of Destiny* and *Options*, both published in 1909. After suffering

much ill health and financial desperation, he died of cirrhosis of the liver on June 5, 1910, in New York City.

PLOT SUMMARY

When “A Retrieved Reformation” opens, Jimmy Valentine is working in a shoe shop in prison. He is called into the warden’s office, where he learns that the governor has pardoned him. Jimmy expected the pardon much sooner because of his numerous friends on the outside. Because he is pardoned, he only had to serve ten months of a four-year sentence.

The warden tells Jimmy to “live straight” and cease his safe-cracking, but Jimmy denies ever doing this illegal activity. The warden reminds him that he was convicted of committing a crime in Springfield by a jury and had no alibi that he wanted to share. Jimmy denies ever being in Springfield.

The warden tells Cronin, an officer, to give Jimmy the appropriate clothes to leave the prison and to ready him for release the next morning. At that time, the civilian-dressed Jimmy is also given five dollars and a railroad ticket out of town. Before Jimmy leaves, the warden also presents him with a cigar.

As soon as he leaves prison, the pardoned Jimmy goes straight to a restaurant and eats a solid meal. He then smokes a cigar—not the one the warden gave him but one of better quality. Jimmy then makes his way to the railway depot and boards a train.

He gets off the train three hours later in a small town that is something of a home to him, and he goes to Mike Dolan’s café. Mike apologizes for not being able to get Jimmy out of prison sooner, but explains there were protests and a governor who was somewhat unwilling to issue a pardon. Jimmy gets a key from Mike and goes to a room where his belongings are stored.

Inside the room, Jimmy finds everything untouched since he last left it. Even the shirt collar button that Jimmy pulled off Detective Ben Price, who arrested him, is still on the floor. Jimmy pulls out a dusty suitcase hidden in the wall which contains the carefully manufactured tools of his trade as a safecracker. Among the tools are several items invented by Jimmy.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- “A Retrieved Reformation” was adapted into a popular stage play titled *Alias Jimmy Valentine*. The play was written by Paul Armstrong and first produced on Broadway in 1909.
- A silent film, also called *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, was adapted from the stage play of the same name and based on “A Retrieved Reformation.” The film was directed by Maurice Tourneur, starred Robert Warwick as Jimmy Valentine, and was released in 1915.
- *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, another film adaptation of “A Retrieved Reformation,” was directed by Jack Conway, starred William Haines as Jimmy Valentine, and was released in 1928. It was the first sound film released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- “A Retrieved Reformation” was read by Frank Muller and included in the audio book *The World of O. Henry*. The audio book was published by Recorded Books and released in 1984.
- “A Retrieved Reformation” was adapted into an operetta entitled *Under a Silvery Moon*. The book and lyrics were written by William M. Ross and the music by George Broderick. It was produced by the Westchester Regional Players in March 1995.

When Jimmy returns downstairs to the café, he has changed into his own clothes and is carrying his now clean suitcase. When Mike asks him, “Got anything on?” Jimmy tells him that he is simply a representative from a food company. Mike is amused by Jimmy’s response and makes him a non-alcoholic drink, as Jimmy does not drink alcohol.

Within the next week, several bank safes are robbed. The crimes take place in Richmond, Indiana; Logansport, Indiana; and Jefferson City, Missouri. Detective Price begins to investigate the robberies and finds that the methods used to commit the robberies are similar. As Price visits

each of the scenes, he believes that Jimmy is the perpetrator. Someone overhears him say, "That's Dandy Jim Valentine's autograph. . . . Yes, I guess I want Mr. Valentine. He'll do this bit next time without any short-time or clemency foolishness."

Because of Price's past experiences investigating Jimmy, he believes he can track him. The safecracker favors traveling distances between jobs, leaving town quickly, and doing the work alone. Jimmy also enjoys "a taste for good society." Price's investigation is reassuring to other safe owners.

A short time later, Jimmy enters the small town of Elmore, Arkansas. The community is not on a railway line so he has to ride a mail-hack (horse-drawn vehicle) into town. As Jimmy gets off, his appearance is compared to an athletic student home from college.

Jimmy walks to the hotel where he intends to check in and passes by the Elmore Bank. There, he sees a young woman, Annabel Adams, who captures his attention. As O. Henry writes, "Jimmy Valentine looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man."

Jimmy begins asking questions and giving dimes to a young boy sitting on the bank's steps in exchange for information. Jimmy learns about the town, and when Annabel leaves, he finds out her identity. Annabel's father owns the bank that he planned on robbing.

Going to the Planters' Hotel, Jimmy registers as Ralph D. Spencer. He tells the clerk that he has come to town to open a business. The clerk says that a shoe business would fit in nicely, as there is no store that focused exclusively on that product. The clerk also lavishes praise on his town. Jimmy tells him that he will spend a few days checking Elmore out for himself.

Jimmy takes the name Ralph as his permanent identity. He stays in town and becomes a prosperous shoe store owner. Jimmy also finds success socially and becomes acquainted with Annabel. By the end of the year, Jimmy is socially prominent, highly respected, and engaged to Annabel. His wedding to Annabel is coming in two weeks. Even her father, Mr. Adams, likes Jimmy (now Ralph) and considers him part of the family.

Determined to turn his back on his old life, Jimmy writes a letter to a friend named Billy. Jimmy wants to meet Billy in Little Rock so that Billy can tie up some loose ends for him and so

that Jimmy can give Billy his safecracking tools. He also writes to Billy that he has gone straight and plans to move out West with his bride to get a fresh start away from any old business interfering with his new life. Jimmy states, "I wouldn't touch a dollar of another man's money now for a million."

Shortly after Jimmy writes this letter, Detective Price comes to town. He checks up on Jimmy. Price notes that Jimmy's future wife is the bank owner's daughter and wonders what Jimmy is planning.

The next morning, Jimmy has breakfast with his future in-laws. He has plans to leave Elmore for the first time since he moved to town. Not only will Jimmy meet his friend in Little Rock, he also has plans to order a suit for his wedding and purchase a gift for his bride-to-be.

After breakfast, Jimmy, Mr. Adams, Annabel, Annabel's sister, and her two young daughters venture out together. They stop so Jimmy can get his suitcase from his hotel room, then go on to the bank. The group goes inside the bank, and Jimmy brings along his suitcase.

When Jimmy sets the suitcase down, Annabel picks it up. She notes its heavy weight, which Jimmy explains away as a bunch of "nickel-plated shoe-horns" that he is returning. Jimmy tells her he is trying to save some money by returning them himself.

Inside the bank, Mr. Adams shows off his new safe and vault. The small vault features the latest technology including a time lock. As Mr. Adams flaunts these items to Jimmy, his future son-in-law "showed a courteous but not too intelligent interest." The two girls start to play with the vault and safe. As they play, Price enters the bank, waits, and tells the clerk that he is waiting for a man.

The situation grows tense when the elder girl, May, shuts the younger, Agatha, in the vault while they are playing. Imitating her grandfather, May also locks and turns the combination knob. Mr. Adams becomes distraught when he cannot open the door—it turns out the combination has not been set up and the vault clock is unwound.

Mr. Adams tries to calm down the girls' hysterical mother, but also admits that there is no one in the area who can open the door of the safe. He expresses concern for Agatha's safety, as there is little air in the vault. Annabel asks Jimmy to do something.

Jimmy tells all present to get away from the door as he opens his suitcase of safecracking tools. Drawing on all his skills, he gets the safe open in ten minutes. Agatha comes out alive.

Jimmy walks toward the bank's exit, but Price is standing in the doorway. Jimmy greets him and is ready to give himself up. But Price surprises Jimmy by saying "Guess you're mistaken, Mr. Spencer. Don't believe I recognize you. Your buggy's waiting for you, ain't it?" With that, Price walks out of the bank and leaves Jimmy to his new life.

CHARACTERS

Agatha Adams

Agatha is the five-year-old niece of Annabel Adams. Agatha is accidentally locked inside the new safe and vault while playing with her sister May at their grandfather's bank. Jimmy uses his safecracking skills to save her life.

Annabel Adams

Annabel Adams is the daughter of Mr. Adams, the owner of the bank in the small town of Elmore, Arkansas. She catches the eye of Jimmy soon after he arrives there. Upon seeing Annabel for the first time, Jimmy decides to leave his criminal ways behind. Jimmy loves her and her family and how she feels about him. O. Henry writes, "Annabel's pride in him almost equalled her affection." For his part, Jimmy explains in a note to Billy, "I tell you, Billy, she's an angel. She believes in me; and I wouldn't do another crooked thing for the whole world." It is for Annabel that Jimmy reveals his safecracking skills to save Agatha, but Jimmy's status in her life is unclear at the end of the story.

Annabel Adams's Married Sister

Annabel Adams's married sister is the daughter of Mr. Adams and the mother of May and Agatha. She accepts Jimmy as a member of her family during her sister's courtship. She becomes hysterical when her youngest daughter is accidentally locked in the safe at her father's bank.

Mr. Adams

Mr. Adams is the bank owner in Elmore, Arkansas, whom O. Henry describes as "the typical, plodding country banker." Mr. Adams has two daughters. One is married with two young daughters of her own. The other is Annabel, and Mr. Adams

approves of her engagement to Jimmy. After Mr. Adams shows off his new bank safe and vault to Jimmy and his family, one of his granddaughters gets locked into the safe. Mr. Adams thinks there is no one nearby with enough skill to break it open and save Agatha until Jimmy saves the day.

Billy

Billy is the recipient of Jimmy's letter. In the note, Jimmy arranges a meeting to give Billy his safecracking tools because he wants to live a normal life with Annabel.

Cronin

Cronin is the prison guard who brings Jimmy to the warden at the beginning of the story. After the warden tells Jimmy about his pardon, Cronin returns him to his work and gets him a set of clothes for his life outside of prison walls.

Mike Dolan

Mike Dolan owns a café where Jimmy Valentine has a room. Mike left Jimmy's room there untouched after Jimmy was arrested and sent to prison. Mike is part of a group that helped get Jimmy pardoned and released from prison. When Mike asks Jimmy if he has a job lined up, Jimmy says he represents a food company.

Dolph Gibson

Dolph Gibson is the driver of Jimmy's horse and buggy on his way to the railway station when Jimmy is scheduled to leave for Little Rock before Agatha gets stuck in the safe.

May

May is Annabel's nine-year-old niece. She accidentally locks her younger sister, Agatha, in the safe at her grandfather's bank.

Planters' Hotel Clerk

When Jimmy stops in Elmore, Arkansas, he talks to the hotel clerk about the community. The clerk answers Jimmy's questions about the town and the prospects for opening a shoe store there. The clerk is impressed by Jimmy's appearance and the way he carries himself.

Ben Price

Ben Price is the respected detective who has been on Jimmy's trail several times. Price arrested Jimmy at his room in Mike Dolan's café (losing a button in the process) and helped get him convicted. After Jimmy is released from prison on a

pardon from the governor, Price begins to track him again after several safes are robbed. Price finds the reformed Jimmy in the small Arkansas town seemingly living an upright life. Price is in the bank when Jimmy is forced to use the tools of his trade to save the niece of his fiancée. Price does not arrest Jimmy but allows him to go on his way.

Ralph D. Spencer

See Jimmy Valentine

Jimmy Valentine

Jimmy Valentine is the primary character in “A Retrieved Reformation.” At the beginning of the story, he is in prison for breaking into a safe. Though Jimmy tells the prison’s warden that he is not a safecracker and did not commit the crime, he immediately begins to ply his trade after being pardoned only ten months into a four-year sentence. Before Jimmy begins breaking into safes, however, he travels to the café owned by Mike Dolan. There, Jimmy learns that Mike and others helped gained the pardon for him. Jimmy also gains access to his room where his expensive safecracking tools have been kept and where he was arrested.

After committing several crimes, Jimmy makes his way to Elmore, Arkansas. As soon as he enters the town, Jimmy sees Annabel Adams, falls in love on the spot, and decides to leave his life of crime behind. Jimmy changes his name to Ralph D. Spencer and opens a successful shoe store in the community. He also becomes involved with Annabel and is engaged to her within a year. Shortly before the wedding is to take place, Jimmy writes a letter to a former colleague, Billy, and arranges a meeting to give Billy the tools of his safecracking trade.

The day Jimmy is to meet Billy in Little Rock—and buy his wedding suit as well as a gift for Annabel—fate intervenes. Annabel’s young nieces are playing with their grandfather’s new safe and vault when the elder locks the younger inside. Because no one else in the area knows how to break into the vault and save the young girl, Jimmy responds to their cries for help. He demonstrates his expertise in safecracking and rescues Agatha.

The Warden

The warden is in charge of the prison where Jimmy is serving his sentence. He informs Jimmy he has

been pardoned by the governor ten months into his prison term and advises him to leave his criminal life behind. He also tries to talk to Jimmy about his crimes, but Jimmy denies being a safecracker and burglar let alone in the cities where the crime he was convicted of took place. Before Jimmy leaves prison, the warden gives him a cigar.

THEMES

Power of Love

One of the primary themes in “A Retrieved Reformation” is the power of love. Jimmy is quite content to make his living robbing banks until he sees young Annabel Adams. As O. Henry writes, “Valentine looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man.” Jimmy’s feelings for Annabel inspire him to change his life. He becomes an upright citizen complete with a new name, new occupation, and a new family.

Even breaking into the safe to save Agatha is a testimony of Jimmy’s love for Annabel. When May accidentally locks Agatha inside their grandfather’s new vault and safe at his bank, their mother becomes distraught and their grandfather cannot get them out. The nearest expert is hours away in Little Rock. Annabel loves Jimmy as much as he loves her and does not panic. Before she asks for his help and Jimmy uses his safecracking skills to save the day, “Annabel turned to Jimmy, her large eyes full of anguish, but not yet despairing. To a woman nothing seems quite impossible to the powers of the man she worships.” Their love saved the day for Agatha and proved how much Jimmy has changed.

Right versus Wrong

Another theme explored in the short story is right versus wrong. When the warden tells Jimmy that he has been pardoned by the governor, he tries to impress on Jimmy that he must stop committing crimes and doing wrong. The warden says to Jimmy, “Now, Valentine, you’ll go out in the morning. Brace up, and make a man of yourself. You’re not a bad fellow at heart. Stop cracking safes, and live straight.” The warden is trying to advise Jimmy that his lifestyle, which takes him on the wrong side of the law, will inevitably result in the loss of his freedom again.

The wrong-living Jimmy only decides to live in the right after seeing Annabel Adams. Taking on a new identity to solidify his life changes, he

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Using both the Internet and your library, research how prisoners were treated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. What were prison conditions for men such as O. Henry and the fictional Jimmy Valentine? Did they have access to the same services as prisoners do today? What constituted rehabilitation? Create a presentation for your class with your findings and make connections to the short story.
- “A Retrieved Reformation” was written during the beginning of the Progressive Era. With some members of your class or group, research different aspects of the Progressive Era and the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Discuss how the era affected the story or O. Henry himself as an author, and how the Progressive Era compares to American society today. Also speculate on how the story might be updated to the present day.
- In an essay, compare and contrast Jimmy Valentine with Su-Jen Chou and her mother in the young adult novel *Midnight at the Dragon Café: A Novel* (2005) by Judy Fong Bates. How does each character handle being in a new and strange environment? How does it affect the characters’ life choices? Do you think the mistakes each character makes are irreversible? Why or why not?
- With a classmate, stage a debate over the gender stereotypes in “A Retrieved Reformation.” What gender roles are present in the story? Does O. Henry accurately reflect the gender roles of his day or does he exaggerate them for literary purposes? Do his characters accurately reflect their genders?

does not leave Elmore for the next year as he establishes himself as an upright citizen. Jimmy is a business owner and travels in the best social circles. He even wins Annabel as his future wife and becomes an accepted member of her family. Determined to leave his old life of crime behind,

Jimmy plans to move West with her, away from his old life, “where there won’t be so much danger of having old scores brought up against me.”

Though the narrator says that the old Jimmy emerges when he uses the tools of his safecracking trade to rescue the little girl, Jimmy does live up to the credo he stated in his letter to Billy. Jimmy writes, “I wouldn’t do another crooked thing for the whole world.” Jimmy has lived in the right for a year, and even Ben Price does not want to spoil it for him. His wrong life has turned right and apparently stayed that way.

Appearances and Reality

Another concept explored in “A Retrieved Reformation” is appearances versus reality. Except for Jimmy, every character in the short story is straightforward; they are what they seem on the surface. Jimmy, however, lives a life of duplicity. He denies being a criminal. But even to his friend Mike Dolan, Jimmy keeps up the pretense of a cover story. Jimmy says to Mike when asked about his next job, “I don’t understand. I’m representing the New York Amalgamated Short Snap Biscuit Cracker and Frazzled Wheat Company.”

Although Jimmy changes his identity to win Annabel, he keeps from her the truth about his past. The only way Jimmy thinks he can keep up appearances at the expense of the reality of his life is by moving West with Annabel. Yet the reality of who he is intrudes when Agatha is accidentally locked inside the vault of her grandfather’s bank by her sister May. Jimmy saves the girl, at Annabel’s request, thus revealing at least part of the reality of who Jimmy is. When he begins this process by taking off his coat and rolling up his shirtsleeves, “Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place.” Though Ben Price does not reveal who Jimmy really is and walks away, the reality of Jimmy’s life in Elmore has probably changed. It is unclear if Annabel will still marry him or even if he will stay in the community.

STYLE

Protagonist and Antihero

In “A Retrieved Reformation,” Jimmy Valentine is both the protagonist of the short story and an antihero. The protagonist is the central character of the story and also serves as a focus for its themes and incidents. An antihero is a central



A turn-of-the-century bank (© ClassicStock | Alamy)

character in a fictional work who does not possess traditional heroic qualities and distrusts conventional values. Jimmy is the focal point of “A Retrieved Reformation,” as it is his life and choices that form the story’s plot. But Jimmy is also an antihero. Until he sees Annabel Adams, he chooses to live on the wrong side of the law and lie about his life. When he meets Annabel for the first time, Jimmy changes but keeps the new people in his life in the dark about his past. Jimmy cannot remain heroic, though, because his fiancée’s niece gets locked into her grandfather’s safe. While his actions are heroic because it could mean the end of his new life, he is still an antihero overall.

Word Play

Word play can be defined as using words cleverly so they take on alternate meanings. Puns and other plays on words are signatures of O. Henry’s fiction. In “A Retrieved Reformation,” Jimmy

Valentine’s name can be seen as an example of word play. Valentine is a reference to Valentine’s Day, the holiday of love. This is appropriate, as it is love that compels Jimmy to leave his life of crime. Another example of a clever phrase is found early in the story, when Jimmy puts on the clothes given to him by the warden before his release. The author describes the clothes with several puns. He writes, “He had on a suit of the villainously fitting, ready-made clothes and a pair of the stiff, squeaky shoes that the state furnishes to its discharged compulsory guests.” The use of “villainously” is a play on the criminality of Jimmy and other prisoners who must wear the clothes that do not fit well, while “discharged compulsory guests” is an interesting way to describe recently released prisoners.

Melodrama

A melodrama is any type of literary work which uses stereotypical characters, exaggerated emotions

and language, simplistic morality, and conflicts. “A Retrieved Reformation” is considered a melodrama because it possesses many of these qualities, including a simplistic sense of right and wrong. Jimmy can be seen as a stereotypical character, a good-hearted criminal who changes for the better because of a woman. Annabel is also a stereotypical character. She is a young woman who loves Jimmy without question and has no other discernable qualities other than her own loveliness. Even their relationship is melodramatic. Just the sight of Annabel’s beauty compels Jimmy to relinquish his life of crime, an exaggerated incident that fits the definition of melodrama. Jimmy’s love for Annabel is idealistic based on her appearance, and there is no discussion of the development of their relationship until they near their wedding date. The ending of “A Retrieved Reformation” is also melodramatic. When May accidentally locks Agatha in the vault, their mother becomes hysterical, and there is no one for miles who can save the day. Because of the situation, the reformed Jimmy reverts to his past and uses the safecracking tools he is ready to give away to dramatically save the girl.

Twist of Fate

In fiction, a twist of fate is a coincidence in which events take an unexpected turn. O. Henry often used twists of fate in his short stories. In “A Retrieved Reformation,” the twist of fate happens at the end of the story. The reformed Jimmy is on the verge of giving away his safecracking tools when Agatha is accidentally locked in the vault at her grandfather’s bank. Because of this unfortunate incident, Jimmy is compelled to return to his old life, at least for the moment, and save his fiancée’s young niece. This twist of fate changes the path of Jimmy’s life, though another twist of fate comes along in the form of Ben Price. Price is there to check up on Jimmy and perhaps arrest him for several robberies involving safes and vaults committed after his release. When Jimmy sees Price at Mr. Adams’s bank, he is ready to give himself up, but Price lets him go and keeps Jimmy’s real identity a secret. Jimmy still has a chance to remain reformed.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Criminals as Celebrities

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, certain criminals became celebrities in American culture primarily through news accounts of

their escapades but also through such media as dime store novels, stage plays, and even early films. Such criminals and their violent acts became part of the American mythology and helped define an element of the American identity. Some of the criminal cultural icons of this time period included Jesse James, Butch Cassidy, the Dalton Gang, and Bill Doolin. They represented an outlaw culture that became part of the literature and mythology about the way the American West was settled.

Many of these criminals were bank and train robbers who became glamorized, even idealized, as folk heroes. Some critics believe that such criminals were seen in a positive light because the banks and trains they robbed seemed symbolic of the powerful and wealthy, and ordinary Americans liked the idea of brave, rebellious men of their own social class causing trouble for the wealthy and powerful. One of the first American bank/train robbers to capture the American imagination was Jesse James, who was seen as a sort of American Robin Hood because of his exploits between the 1860s and 1880s. He committed dozens of robberies and killed at least six people before being murdered himself by a member of his gang at the age of thirty-four.

While James became the first bank/train robber around whom a celebrity mythology was created, more soon followed. Butch Cassidy headed a gang called the Wild Bunch which robbed a number of banks and trains with flair beginning in 1889. Cassidy and his cohorts found success in the United States but also lived and robbed in South America as well.

The Dalton gang, led by Bob Dalton, staged four successful train robberies in 1891 and 1892 before meeting their end in a gun fight when they tried to rob two banks simultaneously in October 1892. Only one of the five gang members who participated in this crime survived. By this time, Bill Doolin—who had once been a member of the Dalton gang—had formed his own gang, which committed robberies between 1892 and 1895. He was killed by a posse that ambushed him in 1896.

The exploits of these criminals were celebrated in various ways, besides newspapers and popular songs. Dime store novels became popular in the late nineteenth century. These novels were inexpensive, cheaply produced, widely available, and often featured sensational stories. The topics of dime store novels were not limited to criminal activities. Tales of the lawless Wild West, detective stories, and historical fiction were common in the late 1800s, and more genres were

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **Early 1900s:** The United States experiences cycles of economic boom mixed with economic panics and downturns, including a major one in 1907. One contributing factor is the poor oversight of banks by the federal government.

Today: Although the U.S. economy grew at a phenomenal rate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, a major economic downturn occurs in 2008. Some economists blame the poor oversight of banks by the federal government.

- **Early 1900s:** The United States has a charismatic president in Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican born into privilege.

Today: The United States has a charismatic president in Barack Obama, a Democrat from an unprivileged background.

- **Early 1900s:** In 1900, 13.6 percent of the population of the United States is foreign-born.

Today: In 2000, 10.4 percent of the population of the United States is foreign born.

- **Early 1900s:** The Model T car is introduced by Henry Ford in 1908. It revolutionizes American business and transportation as the automobile becomes more affordable for the average American.

Today: While cars are an essential part of American society, the American auto industry seems locked in a losing battle with foreign-made cars. However, Ford remains the most financially stable American car company and seems poised for a comeback.

- **Early 1900s:** American women do not yet have the right to vote. Though the National American Woman Suffrage Association is growing, it would not be until 1920 that women were allowed to vote.

Today: Not only do American women retain the right to vote, but they also hold a variety of elected offices, including serving in Congress and helming state governments.

added in the early twentieth century. While the motion picture industry was in its infancy in the early 1900s, one of the most popular films was *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). This silent film was based on a crime committed by Cassidy, and showed the robbery as well as the chase that ensued. It is generally considered one of the first westerns ever produced and was quite influential.

O. Henry's "A Retrieved Reformation" both reflected this trend and contributed to it. The 1909 stage play *Alias Jimmy Valentine* was based on "A Retrieved Reformation" and surpassed it in popularity, further spreading the concept of criminal as celebrity. A 1915 film version of the play was also influential in the development of filmed depictions of criminals. "A Retrieved Reformation" continued to indirectly inspire more plays and films about criminals over the next few decades of the twentieth century.

Population Shift

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the United States was transforming from a predominantly rural society to a predominantly urban one with cities of every size throughout the country. While cities began gaining greater population than rural areas as early as the 1830s, it was not until the 1880s that the United States became a predominantly urban country. By 1890, the American frontier had disappeared, and by 1900, the United States was the most rapidly urbanizing nation in the West. Within two decades, the majority of Americans would live in urban communities.

The shift to city life was not without controversy. Some believed cities of all sizes offered opportunities unavailable in rural areas for better quality of life and greater opportunities for work and business. Other believed that cities

were crude and exploitative, representative of the worst America had to offer.

Prisons and Prison Reform in Early Twentieth-Century America

While a number of Americans had tried to improve and reform prisons and prisoners in the United States before the early twentieth century, the Progressive Era (a period in the early twentieth century in which social reform efforts intensified) saw profound changes in attitudes toward crime as well as the institutions that housed them. Reformers in this time period came to believe that people broke the law because of their environment or mental health and not simply because they wanted to commit a crime. Administrators of prisons began to analyze why inmates had broken the law and used their findings to determine how each inmate would be treated behind bars. O. Henry himself was allowed to write and submit stories for publication while serving his prison sentence. His time in prison also led him to meet colorful characters and affected the whole of his literary life directly or indirectly.

Rehabilitation in prison was not seen as possible by many progressives. Instead, the concept of parole was introduced in the first decade of the twentieth century. When sentenced to probation, the person convicted of a crime did not go to jail but underwent counseling and was supervised by a probation officer. Probation was often given to offenders who were well-groomed, young and middle class, however. Another problem with parole was that its cost was the responsibility of city governments—not state governments, which paid for prisons. Because cities often could not or did not fund probation programs well, the parole system was flawed in this time period.

In the early 1900s, other reforms such as indeterminate sentencing and parole were also becoming more common. This time period saw states creating laws that allowed prisoners to earn reductions of their sentences through good behavior. Thus, inmates only stayed in prison for the amount of time it took to be reformed. Prisoners with indeterminate sentences were given a range of time, then could bring their case before the parole board. Parole, or supervised freedom, was given to model prisoners who showed that they had been reformed



A man stands next to a safe. (© ClassicStock / Alamy)

by their prison experiences. While indeterminate sentencing and the parole system was as flawed in practice in this time period as probation, they marked progress in thinking about prison.

Reformers also affected how inmates were treated in prison. Chain gangs were introduced in the South in the late nineteenth century. Reformers objected to prisoners being chained together and forced to perform manual labor at gunpoint, but it took decades for chain gangs and similar forms of forced prison labor to be outlawed in some states. The practice continues in a few states to this day. Some reformers, even in the 1800s, believed that prisoners should not work at all; they believed such labor was similar to slavery. Others were sure that it was beneficial for prisoners to work, but that prisons should not benefit from inmate labor or use it as a form of punishment. Laws restricting labor were passed in the late nineteenth century, and the movement gained strength in the early twentieth century. It is unclear if Jimmy in the story was forced to do labor in prison, but he did gain early release from the institution.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

“A Retrieved Reformation” is one of the best-known short stories in O. Henry’s canon, though it is often considered a minor work as well. At this time, O. Henry was developing a reputation as an author who crafted strong short stories with realistic details and a sense of accurate atmosphere. He was admired for his use of words and ability to create a surprise ending. He was soon considered by critics to be the definitive short story writer in the United States. O. Henry was also quite fashionable with readers who made him the most popular writer of the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Writing about the author in 1916, the *Bookman* praises “A Retrieved Reformation” for its “situation and suspense.” However, the view of critics such as Katharine Fullerton Gerould anticipates the negative critical response to stories like “A Retrieved Reformation” which began to emerge in the 1920s. At that time, the more serious, often minimalist styles of short story writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Stephen Crane became more popular and respected. Though O. Henry continued to suffer critical denigration if not neglect—though some praised his democratic themes and interesting characterizations—readers embraced the author into the twenty-first century.

Today, stories by O. Henry are still highly regarded by readers and educators. Reviewing a collection of the author’s stories for a children’s book section of the *Washington Post Book World*, Michael Dirda praises “the wonderful ending” of “A Retrieved Reformation.” Writing about the background of the story, Wayne Rapp of the *Columbus Dispatch* notes, “Porter’s [O. Henry’s] sensitive portrayal of the common person, without the rough edges of real life, made him a champion of the emerging middle-class readership—people close enough to the struggle of rising about their backgrounds to remember their humble beginnings.” Rapp concludes, “O. Henry’s characters. . . always present themselves with dignity. O. Henry saw to that, his dignity having been so deeply eroded by his prison experience.”

CRITICISM

A. Petruso

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TO FULLY SYMBOLIZE HIS TRANSFORMATION, JIMMY CHANGES HIS NAME TO RALPH D. SPENCER. UNLIKE JIMMY VALENTINE, THIS NAME IS NOT MAGICAL AND SYMBOLIC, BUT IT SHOWS THE DEPTH OF HIS DESIRE TO DISTANCE HIMSELF FROM HIS PAST AND HIS LIFE AS A CRIMINAL.”

the University of Texas at Austin. In this essay, she looks at how symbolism is used in the short story “A Retrieved Reformation.”

As a short story writer, O. Henry is credited with creating new archetypal fiction characters, employing surprise endings and plot twists, and using language creatively, especially puns. Many of his short stories, including “A Retrieved Reformation,” also demonstrate the author’s prowess with symbolism. Though his stories are often brief, the symbolism he utilizes make them complex and rich, worth reading over and over again. By looking at the symbolism in “A Retrieved Reformation,” the depth of the story becomes more clear, and the author’s response to the rhetorical question “Can people really change” is more obvious.

O. Henry’s use of symbolism in “A Retrieved Reformation” helps tie the story together in a number of ways. Jimmy Valentine’s name is one key symbol to understanding the story and the character. Jimmy is a criminal, but like many of this author’s characters, one with unexpected depth and perhaps a heart of gold. As a name, Valentine underscores this heart. Valentine is associated with Valentine’s Day, St. Valentine, and love. In other words, Jimmy may be a convicted criminal but he has a heart.

Even the warden notices this aspect of Jimmy. In the first paragraphs of the story, the warden tells the newly pardoned Jimmy, “Brace up, and make a man of yourself. You’re not a bad fellow at heart.” At first, Jimmy dismisses this advice and returns to stealing. Jimmy tells Mike that he is a representative of the “New York Amalgamated Short Snap Biscuit Cracker and

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- “The Ransom of Red Chief” (1907), a short story by O. Henry, is one of his best-known tales, available in most collections of his work. This short story focuses on two fugitive kidnappers who hold a young child for ransom. However, the plot twists unexpectedly when their boy victim wants to stay with them.
- “Babes in the Jungle,” is a short story by O. Henry included in his collection *Strictly Business: More Stories of the Four Million* (1910). It explores a confidence man (scam artist) from the West who comes to New York City to ply his trade. While he believes he will find many dupes in the big city, it is he who becomes taken in.
- “The Man Higher Up,” is a short story by O. Henry included in his collection *The Gentle Gafter* (1908). It concerns a con-man named Jeff Peters who dupes a burglar out of his loot, but the con-man ends up becoming duped himself.
- “A Double-Dyed Deceiver” (1905), a short story by O. Henry, focuses on a desperado

with a heart of gold who kills a man in Texas, flees to South America, and unknowingly becomes involved with the family of the man he has killed. Instead of robbing them as planned, he goes along with the mother’s belief that he is her dead son.

- *A Collection of Stories* (1994) is an anthology of short stories by Edgar Allan Poe for young adults. The collection includes some of Poe’s best-known stories, including “Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.”
- *The Best Short Stories of Mark Twain* (2004) is a collection of stories as well other narratives with an autobiographical bent by another master of short form fiction. The book includes well-known stories by Twain, including “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” and “The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg.”
- *American Dragons: Twenty-Five Asian-American Voices* (1993) is a short story collection for young adults edited by Laurence Yep. It includes many stories that focus on people looking for their place in the world.

Frazzle Wheat Company.” (The reference to cracker can also be seen as a veiled allusion to his true occupation.)

However, Jimmy lives up to his name when he arrives in Elmore, a fact that the author emphasizes by using Jimmy’s full name—Jimmy Valentine—several times. For example, when he sees Annabel Adams walking into her father’s bank, “Jimmy Valentine looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man.” His glance affects Annabel as well: “She lowered her eyes and coloured slightly. Young men of Jimmy’s style and looks were scarce in Elmore.”

To fully symbolize his transformation, Jimmy changes his name to Ralph D. Spencer. Unlike Jimmy Valentine, this name is not magical and symbolic, but it shows the depth of his desire

to distance himself from his past and his life as a criminal. O. Henry also symbolizes Jimmy’s change by comparing him to a phoenix, a large mythical bird. He describes Ralph Spencer as being “the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine’s ashes—ashes left by the flame of a sudden and alternative attack of love—[who] remained in Elmore, and prospered.” According to legend, a phoenix burned itself to death every five hundred years and came out from the ashes as a new phoenix. In literature, a phoenix symbolizes renewal and the remaking of one’s self, often for the better. This is exactly what happens to Jimmy the moment he becomes Ralph Spencer—he is a remade man who devotes himself to an honest and clean life.

Over the next few pages of “A Retrieved Reformation,” Jimmy shows the depth of his

change. His honest living becomes a lifestyle. Though he is lying about his past as a criminal just as he did when he claimed to be a representative of a cracker and wheat company, Jimmy no longer lives a life of going from job to job, town to town, crime to crime as a safecracker, nor does he desire to do so ever again. Joining the mainstream of American society, Jimmy becomes a respectable citizen of Elmore and a business owner who is about to marry into the family of the town's banker. As Jimmy explains in the letter to Billy, "I've got a nice store. I'm making an honest living, and I'm going to marry the finest girl on earth two weeks from now." To keep his criminal past from intruding, Jimmy plans on giving his safecracking tools to Billy and taking his bride to the West, where he can be more safe from his past intruding on his new life.

The heart and phoenix symbols reach their climax at the end of the story. When Annabel begs him to get her niece out of the locked safe, Jimmy asks for the rose she is wearing. While the color is not mentioned, a rose is often used as a symbol of love. A red rose in particular typically represents blood or the sacrifice of one's self for profound love. In this case, the rose symbolizes the extent to which Jimmy loves Annabel and his new life. He loves Annabel so much, in fact, that he is willing to put their love on the line to save Annabel's niece. Referring back to the phoenix symbol, O. Henry shows Jimmy transforming again into a more respected version of his safecracking self: "Jimmy stuffed it [the rose] into his vest-pocket, threw off his coat, and pulled up his shirt-sleeves. With that act, Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place." For love, the phoenix that was Ralph is turned to ashes and a new Jimmy emerges. This Jimmy is not interested in stealing money but in saving a little girl from a horrible death by suffocation.

In ten minutes, Jimmy has the safe open and rescues Agatha. At this point, it is unclear what Jimmy's future will hold. Though Detective Ben Price has been trailing Jimmy for the crimes he committed before he came to Elmore, Price is impressed by Jimmy's actions and treats him as the respectable Ralph Spencer. As a phoenix, Jimmy has already been reborn twice, but what will he tell the Adams family about his skill at opening safes? Can he explain it away or does he have to reveal who the heart-denying Jimmy Valentine really was? The author does not answer such questions with clarity.

Shoes also play a symbolic role in "A Retrieved Reformation." In prison, Jimmy is employed in a "prison shoe-shop." The story opens with him "assiduously stitching uppers." Shoes come into play again when Jimmy decides to open a shoe shop as the reformed Ralph Spencer. O. Henry uses shoes as a symbol of freedom for Jimmy. He is working on shoes shortly before being freed, and the shoe business becomes his legitimate life's work when he decides to leave crime behind. Jimmy walks away from his old life. Shoes are intrinsically linked to liberty in "A Retrieved Reformation."

A final symbol in "A Retrieved Reformation" is the concept of "safe." In a classic example of O. Henry word play, Jimmy does not rob banks by holding up tellers but breaks into safes and vaults to steal money. A safe can be defined in two primary ways. For the purposes of Jimmy's profession, a safe is a strong metal container with a complex locking system that stores and protects money and valuables. But safe also means to be protected, unharmed, and undamaged. To be safe means to be unlikely to cause or result in injury or destruction.

When Jimmy stops robbing safes and takes on a new identity, he thinks he is safe. He can give away his expensive, well-crafted safecracking tools and marry the girl of his dreams. To further ensure the safety of his new life, Jimmy plans to take his wife out West "where there won't be so much danger of having old scores brought up against me." Just as Jimmy thinks he is safe from his past, however, the accident involving the safe at the Adams Bank takes place. Jimmy risks his safe new life and his safe new love to crack open a safe which is harming a little girl.

Detective Price is awed by Jimmy's sacrifice and thus keeps his true identity safe from the Adamses. When "A Retrieved Reformation" ends, Jimmy has a chance at keeping his new life. He is perhaps a phoenix again since he acts by the guidance of his new heart to save Agatha. A hopeful reader sees Jimmy jumping on the buggy to Little Rock, getting rid of his tools, marrying Annabel, and going West where they live together in safety from Jimmy's past. This ending for "A Retrieved Reformation" would be the gathering of all of O. Henry's symbolism into one satisfying package.

Source: A. Petruso, Critical Essay on "A Retrieved Reformation," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.



IT WAS GENERALLY AGREED THAT WHEREAS IN LITERATURE IT WAS POSSIBLE TO DOUBLE BACK IN TIME AND TELL EARLIER EVENTS AFTER LATER ONES, THIS WAS INAPPROPRIATE IN DRAMA AND FILM, WHERE ALL SIGNIFICANT NARRATIVE ACTION SHOULD BE PORTRAYED IN STORY ORDER.”

Ben Brewster

In the following excerpt, Brewster looks at the relationship between “A Retrieved Reformation” and several works based upon it as examples of situational dramaturgy.

In this paper, I shall attempt to illustrate situational dramaturgy at work in an early twentieth-century play, Paul Armstrong’s *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (premiered at the Studebaker Theater, Chicago, 25 December 1909), and the film adaptation of it directed by Maurice Tourneur for World Film in 1915.

Armstrong’s play derives from a short story by O. Henry, *A Retrieved Reformation*, first published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1903. The staging that premiered at Chicago and then moved to Wallack’s Theater in New York on 21 January 1910 was produced by Liebler & Co., directed by Edward E. Rose, and starred H.B. Warner as Jimmy. Extracts from the play and synopses were published in contemporary magazines, and I have seen four typescripts (prepared in both Chicago and New York) of slightly different versions in the Billy Rose Library in New York. French version of the play adapted by Yves Mirande and Henry Géroulle as *Le Mystérieux Jimmy* was produced at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris, premiering on 26 June 1911. Tourneur later claimed that ‘I produced the French stage version of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*’. According to Jean Mitry, between 1910 and 1912, Tourneur worked as an actor and stage manager for Abel Tarride, the actor-manager of the Théâtre de la Renaissance, and also directed some productions there, so the claim may well be correct. I have not located a text of the French version, but from the detailed summary included in a review by Montcornet in *Le Théâtre*, it is clearly close to a

version premiered at El Teatre Principal, Barcelona, on 16 April 1912 in a Catalan translation (probably from the French) by Carles Costa as *El misteriòs Jimmy Samson*, which was published many years later. The French and Catalan versions are fairly free adaptations, and it is possible that the French one influenced Tourneur or his uncredited screenwriter (if any) in the film adaptation. This was produced in 1915 by the World Film Corporation with Robert Warwick in the lead part.

O. Henry’s story is only a few pages long, and essentially presents a single situation: Jimmy Valentine, an expert safecracker, is released from prison, collects his burglar’s tools, and travels to Elmore, Arkansas, where he plans to rob the bank. However, he falls in love with the bank manager’s daughter, reforms, opens a shoe shop, prospers, and gets engaged to the girl he loves. A police detective with a warrant for his arrest arrives in Elmore just as Jimmy is preparing to leave for the West with his bride. At that moment it is discovered that her little niece has been shut into the new bank vault, which has a time lock. Jimmy uses his tools to open the safe and save the little girl, and the detective thereupon tears up the warrant, allowing Jimmy to marry and live happily ever after.

This account of the situation involves a lot of backstory; its bare bones is the ironic position Jimmy is placed in: if he rescues the little girl, he betrays his identity, is arrested, and his reform goes for nothing; if he sticks to his new persona, the little girl dies. This is a characteristic situation: the protagonist is confronted with a dilemma, and the action is suspended to allow all its implications to be grasped; the dilemma poses two contrasting moral outcomes; it evokes the chains of circumstances that led to the protagonist’s need to decide, and the possible future outcomes of his decision. Like most situations reduced to bare bones, it is not original. As Montcornet pointed out in *Le Théâtre*, it is the situation in *Les Misérables* that the escaped convict Jean Valjean finds himself in when, while disguised as M. Madeleine, the humanitarian mayor of Montreuil-sur-mer, he and his nemesis, the police detective Javert, are bystanders as père Fauchelevent is caught under a heavy cart; should he allow Fauchelevent to die, or raise the cart off him, revealing his great strength and thereby reinforcing Javert’s already aroused suspicions as to his real identity?

This situation provides the climax and leads to the dénouement—acting out of character, the detective tears up the warrant—in all the versions of the *Alias Jimmy Valentine* story and is consistently described in reviews in ‘situational’ language. However, it is not enough to constitute a full-length stage play, which has to be divided into a number of acts, and, in situational dramaturgy, such acts have to have their own mini-climaxes and dénouements, i.e. their own secondary situations. As Tourneur remarked: ‘Structurally there is no more resemblance between the O. Henry fiction and the Armstrong comedy than there is between a chess board and a woman weeping.’ Armstrong motivated the situation by providing a new and more complex chain of prior events, allowing for this series of climaxes. Before his arrival in the town where the action is set (Springfield, Illinois, in the various plays and films), Jimmy had met the banker’s daughter, Rose Lane, before; he had rescued her from the attentions of a masher on a train, and in the resulting fight, the masher had fallen from the train and been so badly injured that he died, not before denouncing his assailant as a safe-cracker. Rose meets Valentine again when she is visiting Sing Sing prison with her uncle, the Deputy Governor of New York; Valentine has been jailed on the basis of the masher’s testimony, but proclaims his innocence (and his inability to crack safes). On learning of his chivalrous action, Deputy Governor Fay believes his protestations and promises to get him a pardon; Rose subsequently persuades her father to give him a post in his bank in Springfield. Doyle, the detective who had got him convicted and vowed to nail him again after the pardon, traces him to Springfield and arrives with a warrant for another crime (committed in Springfield, Massachusetts). Valentine succeeds in bluffing Doyle with a carefully prepared alibi. The basic situation of the story then follows.

The action is distributed over four acts (though one typescript presents this as three acts, the last having two scenes, as the fourth act in the others is very short). The first act is set in the Warden’s office in Sing Sing, with the visit of Rose, her uncle, and members of the prison reform league the Gate of Hope. The Warden offers his visitors an exhibition of criminal types, culminating in the request to Jimmy that he open a safe without knowing the combination, which he insists he is unable to do. Rose recognises Jimmy, and persuades her uncle to secure him a pardon. The

second act takes place immediately after Jimmy’s release, in a hotel lobby in Albany, where Jimmy has arranged to meet Rose. Jimmy is approached by Detective Doyle, but refuses to become a stool pigeon. Red Joclyn and Bill Avery, former associates of Jimmy’s, appear, and Valentine tells them he is going straight (provoking a minor situation where he is nearly seduced back into crime by his former partners, to be discussed in more detail later). Rose introduces Jimmy to her father, and the latter, at her request, offers Jimmy a job in the Springfield bank. Jimmy promises to get Joclyn a job there too. The third act takes place in that bank several years later. Jimmy (going by the name Lee Randall) is now Lane’s trusted right-hand man, and Joclyn is a watchman. Avery, who has reformed and married a widow whose son is a photographer, arrives with a photograph he has had made for Jimmy. Avery has been trailed by Doyle, who announces his imminent arrival. Jimmy decides to brazen out the situation, using the doctored photograph to establish an alibi. He is successful, but as the crestfallen Doyle prepares to leave, Red runs in calling ‘Jimmy’, to say that Kitty Lane has been locked into the safe. Act 4 (or Act 3, scene 2) is set in the vault. A blindfolded Jimmy opens the safe with Red’s assistance, watched unbeknown to them by Doyle and Rose. When Jimmy takes off the blindfold he sees Doyle, and gives himself up. Rose comes forward and pleads for him; realising that the two are in love, Doyle tears up the warrant and leaves the couple together.

The problem with this structure is that it sags in the middle. The first act is fine, climaxing with the attempt by Warden Handler to persuade Jimmy to demonstrate his safecracking skills, Rose’s revelation, and Fay’s promise to have him pardoned; the third has Jimmy bluffing Doyle; and the fourth is the climactic situation; but the second only has the attempt by Joclyn and Avery to tempt Jimmy back to criminality. The French version of the play eliminates the second act, and Tourneur’s film drastically cuts it. The French play has two acts in Jimmy’s office in the bank before the final vault scene (here, too, Act 3, Scene 2), and adds a new character, a villain, to complicate the relations between Jimmy and his former associates on the one hand, and his dealings with the detective on the other. Act 2 reveals that Rose is engaged to a ne’er-do-well cousin, but has fallen in love with Jimmy. Evans (as the detective is called in the French and Catalan versions) tries to persuade Rose’s father that Jimmy and his friends are untrustworthy,

without success. Jimmy is unsure of the conversion of one of his associates (here called Dick le Rat) and leaves the office in darkness with the safe open. There is a scuffle in the darkness, and when Jimmy and the bank's owner return and turn the lights on again, \$20,000 is missing, and Dick is unconscious on the floor. In Act 3, Scene 1, the banker wavers in his trust, but the cousin is later caught passing out forged banknotes, and Jimmy reveals that the money stolen from the safe was forged bills he had deliberately substituted for the real thing as a test for Dick's honesty. The cousin is sent packing, and the detective is baffled, but then Kitty is found to have been locked in the safe, and scene 2 is the standard climax and dénouement. The obvious weakness of this solution is the loss of the bluffing scene, as well as something curiously old-fashioned in the introduction of a conventional villain in addition to the more ambiguous nemesis figure of the detective (though perhaps there is another Hugolian precedent in the doubling of Javert by Thénardier).

The film follows some of the changes introduced into the French version, notably the conflation of Lieutenant Governor Fay and Rose's father Lane, and the virtual elimination of Act 2 (reduced to two short scenes in a bar sandwiching a third in Fay's house). This creates some problems: it makes sense that Jimmy, with a former criminal associate in tow, would stop off in Albany to thank his benefactor en route from Sing Sing to New York City, but not that he should travel all the way to Illinois for the same purpose; and it is unclear how the lieutenant governor of another state would have the power in Sing Sing that Fay is supposed to have. This would not worry a Parisian audience, who probably had no idea where either Springfield is, or of the status of a lieutenant governor of an American state, but it might seem a problem for American spectators (though I have no knowledge of adverse critical comment about the film on these grounds at the time). The key situation in Act 2, the moment when Jimmy's associates try to persuade him back to a life of crime, is shifted by Tourneur into what in the American play is Act 3, in Jimmy's Springfield office, again following the French adaptation's model of boosting the incidents in Act 3.

A much more important change in the film is in the exposition. Whereas O. Henry's story begins with Jimmy's release from prison, and the first scene in both the American and French versions of the play is set in the Warden's office in Sing Sing while he is serving his sentence, the 1915 film



OF ALL THE CHARACTERS THAT FIGURE IN THE O. HENRY STORIES JIMMY VALENTINE IS BY FAR THE MOST WIDELY KNOWN; IN FACT, HE IS THE ONLY CHARACTER WHO BY NAME STANDS OUT CONSPICUOUSLY IN THE LONG ROSTER.”

begins by establishing Lee Randall, alias Jimmy Valentine, as a safe cracker, showing him and his associates Red, Avery, and Cotton carrying out a bank robbery, and their pursuit by Detective Doyle. There follows a direct representation of the incident with Jimmy, Cotton (the masher) and Rose on the train, Cotton's confession, Jimmy's arrest and his arrival in Sing Sing.

In directly representing what was backstory in the play, Tourneur is following standard prescriptions of the period. It was generally agreed that whereas in literature it was possible to double back in time and tell earlier events after later ones, this was inappropriate in drama and film, where all significant narrative action should be portrayed in story order. Nevertheless, *in medias res* openings were highly valued . . .

Source: Ben Brewster, “‘Alias Jimmy Valentine’ and Situational Dramaturgy,” in *Film History*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1997, pp. 388–409.

Robert H. Davis and Arthur B. Maurice
In the following excerpt, Davis and Maurice explore the origins of the character of Jimmy in “A Retrieved Reformation.”

The question of the original of the Jimmy Valentine of “A Retrieved Reformation” is likely always to remain a matter of controversy. According to Dr. George W. Williard, who was the night doctor at the penitentiary, the original Jimmy was one Jimmy Connors. Dr. Williard, who was a friend and admirer of Porter, has contributed the following reminiscences:

He was the last man you would ever pick for a crook. Toward every one he was quiet, reserved, almost taciturn. He seldom spoke except in answer. He never told me of his hopes, his aims, his family, his crime, his views of life, his writing—in fact, he spoke of little save the details of his pharmaceutical work in which he was exceptionally careful and proficient.

The chief means by which I judged his character was by the way he acted and by one or two little incidents which brought out the man's courage and faithfulness.

I respected him for his strict attention to business, his blameless conduct, and his refusal to mix in the affairs of other prisoners. He seemed to like me personally because I did not ask him personal questions and because I showed the consideration that one intelligent man must feel toward another under such circumstances. So we grew to be friends.

He was as careful and conscientious as if the drug store at the prison had been his own property. His hours were from six in the evening to six in the morning. Often I left at midnight with Porter in charge and I knew things would run as regularly and effectively until morning as if I had remained. Porter was almost as free from prison life as any one on the outside. He received all the magazines and did a lot of reading. He did not sleep in a cell but on a cot in the hospital during the day time. His ability and conduct were such that, once he had demonstrated them, there was never any danger that he would have to eat and sleep and work in the shops with the other prisoners.

Convicts who were ill or who claimed to be ill would be brought into the hospital in charge of a guard and, ranging themselves along the front of the drug counter, would be given medicines by the drug clerk according to my instructions. It was part of Porter's duties to know a couple of hundred drugs by number as well as by name and to be able to hand them out without mistake quickly. Constant desire of prisoners to escape work by feigning illness necessitated the physician and his clerk being always on their guard against shams. Often some violent convict, when refused medicine, would rebel.

One night a huge Negro to whom I refused a drug became abusive. The guard who had brought him in had stepped away for a moment and the prisoner directed at me a fearful torrent of profanity. I was looking around for the guard when Sydney Porter, my drug clerk, went over his counter like a panther. All of his hundred and seventy or eighty pounds were behind the blow he sent into the Negro's jaw. The Negro came down on the floor like a ton of brick. He did not utter a word.

Another time a certain piece of equipment was stolen from the penitentiary hospital. There had been a good deal of stealing going on and I was responsible when it happened during my "trick." I mentioned this to Porter and he gave me the name of a certain official who, he said, had stolen the property. I told the warden who had taken the property and said it would have to come back at once. In twelve hours it was back. Porter said in his quiet way: "Well, I see you got in your

work." It was the only time he ever told on any one and he did it merely out of loyalty to me. Although nearly every drug clerk at the prison was at some time or other guilty of petty trafficking in drugs or whisky, Porter was always above reproach. He always had the keys to the whisky cabinet, yet I never heard of his taking a drink.

The moment I read O. Henry's description and character delineation of Jimmy Valentine in "A Retrieved Reformation," I said, "That's Jimmy Connors through and through." Connors was in for blowing a post-office safe. He was day drug clerk in the prison hospital at the same time that Porter was night clerk. The men were friendly and often, early in the evening, before Connors went to bed, he would come and talk to Porter and tell him of his experiences.

Although Connors admitted himself guilty of many other jobs he claimed not to be guilty of the one for which he was serving time. Another man who resembled Connors had blown a safe and Connors was arrested and sent to prison for it. Because of fear of implicating himself in other jobs of which he was guilty, he said, he never told on the other man and went to prison innocent. This statement was borne out early in his term in the penitentiary by the arrival of the sheriff who had sent him up and who, in the meantime, had arrested the real culprit and secured from him a confession. To right his wrong the sheriff went to Washington, but the inspectors knew Jimmy Connors and said he doubtless was guilty of some other jobs and had best stay in prison for safe-keeping. He did stay, giving O. Henry the chance to meet him and find inspiration for "A Retrieved Reformation."

Porter never said a word to me about his own crime, but another man once told me that Porter had told him that he had been "railroaded" to prison, so I think he secretly held himself unjustly dealt with. The fact that he and Jimmy Connors agreed on this point in their respective cases doubtless drew them together.

Poor Jimmy! He never lived to try any sort of reformation on the outside. He died of kidney trouble in the penitentiary hospital, May 19, 1902, which was after Porter left and before Jimmy Valentine became famous in story, play, and song. He was a wonderful chemist and I still, in my daily practice, use one formula he gave me. It is not saying too much, I am sure, to state that the recent craze for "crook" plays in the theatrical world may be traced directly to this dead prisoner, for from him O. Henry drew the character which made the story famous, and from the story came the first "crook" play which won wide success, leading the way to the production of many similar plays. You would recognize instantly, if you knew customs and conditions, that the prison atmosphere at the beginning of the story was

gathered bodily from Ohio penitentiary life as Porter knew it.

Of all the characters that figure in the O. Henry stories Jimmy Valentine is by far the most widely known; in fact, he is the only character who by name stands out conspicuously in the long roster. Probably that is largely due to the popularity of the play and the association of Jimmy's name with the play title. It is a peculiarity of the stories that the names of the men and women who figure in them mean nothing or little. Much the same may be said of the short stories of Guy de Maupassant, with whom O. Henry has so often been compared. In O. Henry's case the exceptions to this rule are few. The name of Frank Goodwin, who is the outstanding figure through the stories of *Cabbages and Kings*, is relatively well remembered, and in the same book the name of "Beelze bub" Blythe has been preserved through sheer force of alliteration. Della of "The Gift of the Magi"; Dulcie of "An Unfinished Story"; Hetty of "The Third Ingredient"; and Nancy of "The Trimmed Lamp" are not entirely forgotten names. But of the hundreds of thousands who have read and reread the O. Henry tales, how many can recall without reference to the printed page the name of the heroine of "A Municipal Report," the heroine of "The Enchanted Profile," the hero of "Mammon and the Archer," or the hero of "The Defeat of the City"?

Dr. Williard's about the original of Jimmy Valentine is not shared by Al Jennings, who believes that Porter drew the suggestion of his story, not from Connors, but from a convict at the Ohio Penitentiary by the name of Dick Price. On one occasion the combination of the safe in a publishing house near the prison had been lost. As it was necessary to reach the contents of the safe without delay, the prison warden was approached with the suggestion that among the inmates there might be some deft cracksmen who could deal with the situation. Price was the immediate selection, and he justified the warden's confidence. Ten seconds after he began operations the safe was open. The warden and the convict had just returned to the post office after the feat when Porter entered. "Dick Price," says Al Jennings, "is the original of the immortal Jimmy Valentine... Bill Porter took but one incident out of that tragic life for his story 'A Retrieved Reformation.'" Like the Jimmy Connors of Dr. Williard's suggestion, Price never had a chance for any sort of reformation on the outside. He too died within prison walls.

The history of the real Jimmy Valentine [says Jennings] shadowed, embittered, done to death

in the stir, was just another of the tragedies that ripped through the film and showed Bill Porter the raw, cruel soul of the "upper crust." Dick Price was one of the unfortunates who really never have a chance in life. His father, who had been a soldier in the Union army, died of delirium tremens when the boy was a child, and his mother, by taking in washing, sometimes managed to provide enough for them to eat. At other times Dick fed himself from the garbage cans. One day when he was eleven years old, ravenous with hunger, he stole a ten-cent box of crackers from a box car. "And for that," he afterwards related, "they sent me to hell for the rest of my life."

The reformatory held him for seven years and then turned him out a master mechanic. He tried to go straight, but it was no use. No sooner had he found a job when some one learned of his reform school record and he was discharged. He had to steal to live. He cracked a safe, took a few hundred dollars, was caught and sent to prison. After his release his situation was again desperate. He cracked another safe, and as it was his third offense under the "habitual criminal act," which then prevailed in Ohio, was sentenced to prison for life. He was then twenty. He remained in the penitentiary for the remaining sixteen years of his existence. The sentence involved the denial of all privileges. He could not have a book or paper. He could neither write a letter nor receive one. Naturally he became morose and brooding, what the convicts called a "stir bug."

For his legal safe opening exploit he was promised a pardon. The story deserves detailed telling both for the reason of its association with "A Retrieved Reformation," and because it was a service of great value to the state. In connection with the placing of the Press-Post Publishing Company in the hands of a receiver there was a scandal with which Columbus rang. There were wholesale charges of theft. The stockholders, believing themselves to have been robbed, blamed the directors; the directors pointed to the treasurer and obtained a warrant for his arrest. He locked the safe and fled. Some of the most prominent men in Columbus were implicated. The court had to get the papers out of the safe. Then some one suggested applying to Warden Darby of the penitentiary for the services of a clever cracksmen who might help them out of the difficulty.

The warden first thought of the use of nitroglycerin, but that was considered too risky as it was necessary to recover the papers intact. Jennings, then a privileged convict, recommended the particular talents of Dick Price for the task,

and Price was selected, the warden promising to do everything in his power to secure a pardon in case of success. In a closed carriage the warden, Price, and Jennings were taken from the prison to the office of the publishing company. Various state officials were already there. Filing his nails to the quick, Price went to work. His sensitized fingers found the combination, there was a turn of the dial, a pull at the knob, and the safe was open. There were the papers necessary to serve the ends of justice. The next morning every newspaper in Columbus was full of the sensational story. All sorts of explanations were given, one account ascribing the feat to the use of a steel wire, and another to the use of a paper cutter. Price's premonition that he would not receive the promised pardon proved right. He was already dying when the news came that the application had been denied.

Jennings relates that he told Porter the details of the safe opening, but that the latter revolted at the thought of a man filing his nails to the quick and then filing until the nerves were exposed. "Colonel, this is a wonderful episode. It will make a great story." Even then he was storing it away for future use. "Bill took no notes," says Jennings. "Once in a while he would jot down a word or two on a scrap of paper, a corner of a napkin, but in all our rambles together I never noticed the pencil much in evidence. He preferred to work his unfailing memory."

"A Retrieved Reformation" was published in the spring of 1903. Jennings asked Porter why he had not used the story before, and the reported reply was: "I've had it in mind, Colonel, ever since you told me of it. But I was afraid it would not go. Convicts, you know, are not accepted in the best society even in fiction." Asked further why he had departed from Dick Price's method of safe opening, he explained:

Colonel, it chills my teeth to think of that grunting operation. I prefer a set of tools. I don't like to make my victims suffer. And then, you see, the tools enable Jimmy to make a present to a friend. That gift illustrates the toleration of the man who has been in prison. Jimmy decided to quit the game himself, but he does not expect the whole world to share his fervor of reform. Instead of burying the instruments of his former profession, as your reformed citizen would have done, he straightway sends them to a former pal. I like that spirit in my character. The ordinary man who makes a New Year's resolution immediately sends down censure on the fellow who isn't perched on the wagon with him.

Jimmy does no such thing. That's one of the advantages of spending a few vacations in prison. You grow mellow in your judgments.

Source: Robert H. Davis and Arthur B. Maurice, "The Dark Hour," in *The Caliph of Bagdad: Being Arabian Nights Flashes of the Life, Letters, and Work of O. Henry*—William Sydney Porter, D. Appleton and Company, 1931, pp. 142–50.

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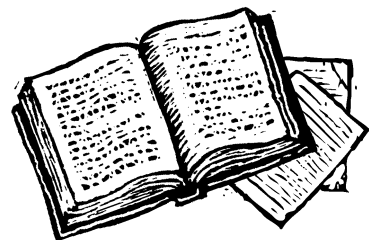
Tears of Autumn

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

1987

Yoshiko Uchida's "Tears of Autumn" explores the dramatic decision by a young Japanese woman to leave her family and immigrate to the United States to become a "picture bride." Like many real-life Japanese picture brides in the early twentieth century, Hana Omiya agrees to marry a man she has only seen in a photograph. To meet him, she crosses the Pacific Ocean and embarks on a difficult new life as an immigrant in America. The story, which also serves as the opening chapter to Uchida's novel *Picture Bride* (1987), illustrates the bittersweet combination of homesickness, disappointment, and hope that Hana experiences on this journey. She leaves Japan because she wants to escape the restrictions she would face there as a woman, especially in a family whose financial fortune has faded. But she finds that the man she has agreed to marry is neither as prosperous nor as young as she had hoped.

Uchida is known primarily as a writer of children's and young adult historical fiction about Japanese American families. Although "Tears of Autumn" is a story aimed at adults, it still focuses on a coming-of-age theme. Hana finds that the United States is not what she expected. The story illustrates her disappointment but also her resolve to make a better life for herself than she might have experienced in Japan. Much of Uchida's fiction focuses on characters who survive ordeals brought by prejudice against immigrants of Japanese origin, and "Tears of Autumn" is no exception. Hana combines realism with optimism to find strength in both her cultural identity and her independence.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Yoshiko Uchida was born in 1921 in Alameda, California. Her father, Dwight Takashi Uchida, immigrated to the United States from Japan as a young man, apparently hoping that he would complete the university education he had begun in Japan by attending American medical school. But the need to work to support his family, and to bring his mother and sisters to the United States, replaced those dreams. He eventually worked in management for a San Francisco office of a Japanese import-export firm. Uchida's mother, Iku Umegaki, was introduced (through letters, not in person) to her father by professors at the university they both attended. Like Hana in "Tears of Autumn," she decided to start a new life through marrying and making her way in the United States. As early members of a Japanese Independent Congregational Church, Uchida's parents maintained close ties to fellow immigrants and tried to pass their pride in Japanese cultural traditions on to Yoshiko and her sister. Despite their best efforts, however, the girls grew up identifying as Americans. As Uchida wrote in *The Invisible Thread* (1991), an autobiography for young readers, she realized during a family trip to Japan that "deep down inside, where I really dwelled, I was thoroughly American." Nevertheless, even in America, Uchida reflected, the same "long invisible thread" that bound her parents to Japan seemed to "wind just as surely" around her.

Like other Japanese Americans, Uchida's identity was challenged and transformed by the traumatic experience of internment. When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Uchida was about to graduate from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in English, history, and philosophy. But since the United States was fighting Japan, it was believed that Japanese Americans posed a national security threat. Therefore, Japanese and Japanese Americans like Uchida and her family were ordered to leave their homes and possessions and report to relocation centers, or internment camps, around the western United States where they were imprisoned. Uchida and her family were sent to the relocation center at the Tanforan Racetrack south of San Francisco. They were allowed to bring only a few suitcases of their belongings with them.

While she was interned, Uchida taught at a school that was created to help get the children in the camp into a routine. Several months later,

the government moved the Uchida family to the Topaz interment camp in the remote Utah desert. Uchida was permitted to leave the camp under the sponsorship of a Quaker group, and in 1943, she accepted a graduate fellowship and began studying education at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Her career as a published writer began during her early years as a teacher. In 1952, she received a Ford Foundation Fellowship and traveled to Japan to collect folk tales that she would publish upon her return. Eventually her writing would include novels for young readers about Japanese immigrants to the United States, featuring plots and themes that echoed her family's experiences. She is the author of over thirty books, many of them recipients of awards and recommendations from groups such as the American Library Association and the Junior Library Guild. Uchida is primarily recognized for her determination to capture the history of Japanese Americans for young readers, but in later years she also wrote about this history for adults. In 1982, she published *Desert Exile*, a memoir about her family's internment experience. In 1987, she published *Picture Bride*, the novel which includes "Tears of Autumn." Her multifaceted efforts to encourage understanding of America's multicultural history, with both its challenges and triumphs, continued until her death in 1992.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Tears of Autumn" begins with young Hana Omiya standing on the deck of a steamship making its way from Japan to the United States through a "turbulent November sea." Rather than being excited about the arrival in America, Hana wishes she were not going. She is seasick and nervous, and her thoughts lead her back to the beautiful scenery of her home, Oka Village, and the family and comforts she has left behind. Hana thinks about "bright persimmon dotting the barren trees beside the thatched roofs. . . fields of golden rice stretching to the mountains where only last fall she had gathered plump white mushrooms," vibrant seasonal images of food and color that contrast with the "leaden and lifeless" way she feels when she stares at the ocean.

Like other women of her era (the early 1900s), Hana is dressed in the Japanese style of a silk kimono (a long robe-style dress with wide sleeves).

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- While the film *Picture Bride*, produced in 1994 by Miramax Studios, was not actually based on Yoshiko Uchida's novel, it offers a complementary story about a young Japanese woman who travels to Hawaii to meet her husband for the first time. It takes place during the same era as Hana's journey to California.

Her "pompadour" (a hairstyle of the era in which women piled their hair high on top of their head) seems "too heavy for so slight a woman." The reader begins to wonder why such a young, homesick, and seemingly traditional girl has left her home country. Standing on the deck of the ship, Hana asks herself the same question.

Through a flashback sequence, Hana's process of both remembering and doubting why she decided to make this journey is revealed. She is traveling because she is on her way to marry someone she has never met. Readers learn how Hana's uncle mentioned, during a visit to her family, that he was helping to find a wife for his friend's son, Taro Takeda. Taro had left Japan nearly ten years ago and now owns a small store in the United States. While Hana's uncle does not originally intend for Hana to consider marrying Taro, Hana becomes interested for several reasons.

First of all, Hana is twenty-one years old, which is considered old for a single woman of her culture in this era. Her mother has begun to pester her about getting married before it is too late. Her family, including her brother-in-law who now heads the household, worries that Hana's completion of a high school education has made her too independent to marry. He worries because if she failed to marry, it would mar her family's honor. Indeed, while Japanese culture in this era promoted modernization and education for women, it also continued to stress very traditional roles for women.

Secondly, Hana wonders if Taro might be a more "suitable prospect" for Hana than even her uncle and mother seem to think. Her family has a high-class background as members of the land-owning *samurai*, an elite class in Japan. But their fortunes have faded since Hana's father died fifteen years earlier, in part because of his death and also as a result of financial reform efforts on the part of the Japanese government during what historians call the Meiji Era of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Because *samurai* families are no longer as powerful as they once were, emigration to the United States to marry a store owner is now an acceptable option for Hana.

When Hana hears her uncle speak of Taro, she experiences an awakening desire to escape the restrictions of life as a woman in Japan. She respectfully asks her uncle, whom she addresses using the Japanese term of respect, "San," to consider her as a bride for Taro. Her uncle is surprised that she would want to move so far away; he uses the term "Chan" with her name, a word used with children's names in Japanese.

But Hana wants to be treated like an adult, and though she maintains proper respect for her family, she also wants more independence. She does not want to marry the men her mother has previously suggested to her, men whose lives promise only the kind of predictable existence her married sisters now live. Furthermore, her mother will not allow her to pursue a career. Thus, marrying a man in the United States offers a chance at both escape and adventure. Hana's mother objects to sending Hana so far away at first, but she is convinced to begin arranging the marriage when Hana, her uncle, and her brother-in-law persist, and when the village Buddhist priest approves. For each of these characters, marriage to Taro offers a possible solution to a perceived problem: Hana's unmarried status.

The story then describes the long process of negotiation by which Hana became a "picture bride." This term emerged among Japanese American immigrants to describe a phenomenon that began in part because of U.S. immigration laws. In 1908, American lawmakers, because of prejudicial fears about the impact of Japanese immigrants, restricted immigration to prohibit any further arrivals. Known as the "Gentleman's Agreement," this law let women come from Japan to the United States, as long as they were relatives of or would become wives of men who were already there. The Japanese government

negotiated this system because it believed that encouraging women's immigration offered those immigrants already in the United States a better chance of establishing stable families and prosperous futures.

Hana had heard of "picture brides who went [to America] with nothing more than an exchange of photographs to bind them to a strange man." Now she will become one, but the process involves much more than exchanging photographs. The same customs that dictated arranged marriages within Japan were applied to the women in Japan and men in the United States designated as potential matches. Letters and meetings between the two families established that the health, education, and ancestry of Hana and Taro were suitable to one another. Finally, Hana received a letter and photograph from Taro. She took it to the outhouse, the only place where she could have privacy, to read it and contemplate what her future husband might really be like.

After these memories are described, the story returns to Hana, standing at the ship's rail, hoping that her husband will be prosperous enough for her to live a leisurely life in America. But these hopes give way to anxiety about her arrival the next day in San Francisco—she is so overwhelmed by fear and sickness that she vomits over the ship's railing. Up and ready the next morning, she puts on a brave face and her finest clothes. Like the other immigrants on board the boat, however, she does not disembark at San Francisco, but rather at Angel Island, a facility at which officials detain potential immigrants in order to verify they are healthy. Hana feels degraded by the health tests she must undergo. It is only after three days of frustration that she receives a note from Taro telling her he will meet her when she is released.

When she is released from Angel Island, she must ride another boat to San Francisco. She disembarks, and an unimpressive-looking man comes forward to welcome her. It is Taro. He is older than he appears in the picture he sent, and she is visibly taken aback. He is not the prosperous young merchant she had hoped for, and yet she politely tries to excuse her confusion by saying that she is nervous rather than disappointed. Taro speaks "gently" to Hana about his plans for her: she will stay with some friends while he arranges the marriage. He does not actually mention the wedding, and Hana is grateful for his modesty, which spares her further embarrassment.

The story concludes with the couple riding yet another boat, the ferry that will take them across the bay to Oakland. Taro happily reassures Hana, who expresses reluctance about another long sea journey, that the journey will be a quick and easy one. His laughter reassures her, and she laughs as well, relieving tension and allowing her to come closer to accepting the decisions that have brought her to this new home. "I am in America now," she reflects. The final image of the story, in which Hana sits "carefully beside Taro, so no part of their clothing touched," reveals both her modesty and her continuing independence. Leaving Japan has not allowed her to leave Japanese ideas of propriety behind, but she continues to make her own decisions, thus maintaining her sense of herself as an individual.

CHARACTERS

Hana Omiya

Hana Omiya, the protagonist of the story, is a twenty-year-old woman who is leaving Japan for the United States in the early twentieth century. Just prior to her departure, she lives in Oka Village with her mother, older sister, and brother-in-law. Life in Oka has seemed oppressive for her ever since she graduated from Women's High School in the city of Kyoto, an accomplishment that makes her a well-educated woman for her era. This education has led her to resist the traditional ideal of Japanese marriage that her family wants her to fulfill. Her family has a high-class background because her father was a *samurai*, a member of the traditional Japanese elite, but their finances have declined since his death. Hana would like to move to Tokyo to pursue a career as a teacher, but her mother finds the idea of her going to live in a city alone unacceptable. Hana compromises with her family by agreeing to be promised in marriage to Taro Takeda. She hopes her life in the United States will be prosperous and adventurous, but during her ocean voyage to San Francisco, she begins to experience doubts. She is proud but polite. When she meets Taro, who is not in his appearance the man she expects, she tries to hide her shock. The end of the story implies that she is resolving to make the best of her situation, maintaining her individuality while also complying with her promise to marry Taro.

Hana Omiya's Brother-in-law

The husband of Hana's eldest sister exemplifies the traditional Japanese husband. He wants the home he lives in (once the home of Hana's father) to be traditional. Hana, who has refused until now to marry, does not fit into such a home. He considers her to be "the spirited younger sister who stirred up his placid life with what he considered radical ideas about life and the role of women." He encourages Hana to marry Taro as a way of getting her out of his household.

Hana Omiya's Mother

Hana's mother wants what she sees as best for her daughter: a marriage that will offer her stability and a chance for a good life. She has experienced a class decline in her own life. She went from being the wife of the "largest landholder of the village" to a woman without servants and money. Thus, she encourages Hana to marry in order to secure a comfortable life while she can, just as she has done for Hana's three older sisters. But Hana shows little interest in the men her mother suggests, which her mother finds "embarrassing." Because her daughter's future seems so risky to her, Hana's mother agrees to try to match Hana with Taro even though she doesn't want her daughter to go to the United States.

Hana Omiya's Sisters

Hana has three older sisters, each of whom has the kind of dutiful, restrictive marriages that Hana wishes to avoid. Her eldest sister lives in the home she grew up in with her husband, and has what the narrator describes as a duty to "perpetuate the homestead." Hana notices that this oldest sister speaks of the possibility of a life in America with "a longing ordinarily concealed behind her quiet, obedient face." She has also noticed that her other two sisters, married to merchants in larger cities, seem to have "loveless" marriages. Her sisters provide examples of the kind of relationships that Hana does not want for herself.

Hana Omiya's Uncle

Hana's uncle introduces Hana to the possibility of becoming a picture bride. He is the brother of Hana's mother. He is also a friend of Taro Takeda's father, which is why he is trying to find a Japanese woman who will travel to the United States to marry Taro. Though it is Hana's idea, not his, to consider her as a match, he accepts it enthusiastically because he believes she might

lead a better life there. He acts as the intermediary between the two families as the marriage is arranged, securing the agreement of everyone to the proposal.

Taro Takeda

Taro Takeda is the man whom Hana has promised to marry. He is a thirty-year-old Japanese-born man who has lived in the United States for almost ten years. He owns a store in Oakland, California, that sells dry goods and Asian-style foods. Hana believes that he is prosperous; she cannot tell much more about him from his "brief and proper" letters, which comply with cultural expectations of modesty. Though he has been described as prosperous by his father, when Hana first sees him, she is surprised that he is "slight," with a "sallow and pale" face. He seems older and less striking than she expects, but she also learns that he is gentle and kind.

THEMES***Coming of Age***

Hana's decision to leave her family behind illustrates her desire to act and be treated as an adult. She takes responsibility for the consequences of her decision to leave Japan and marry Taro. Though her and Taro's families played a role in arranging the marriage, Hana recognizes that it was her idea to use the marriage as a way of escaping home. Her sickness and regret during the journey illustrates her awareness that life may have been easier and safer when she did not have to take responsibility for her actions. "It was she who had first planted in her uncle's mind the thought that she would make a good wife for Taro Takeda," she reflects regretfully at the beginning of the story. She knows she cannot blame her uncle or her mother for the situation she now finds herself in because it was she who set the plan into motion. At the end of the story, she is better prepared to take responsibility for her actions, remarking that "this is the man I came to marry." She has knowingly taken a risk and now must face her impending marriage alone, as an adult.

Role of Women

Hana both challenges and accepts the ideals of femininity that she was raised with. As much as she does not want to marry a Japanese man and

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Research the life of an immigrant to the United States. You could read about a famous immigrant from the past, or interview one who is living today. Then, write an essay describing or imagining that person's journey to the United States. What made him or her excited to arrive? What made that person sad about leaving his or her home country? Then, consider what makes that journey different from Hana's, and why. Consider how factors such as gender, country of origin, class, historical era, and reasons for moving to the United States affect a person's immigration experience.
- Consider Hana's decision to become a picture bride. Write a list of "pros" and "cons" of this decision. Then, write a letter to her in Oka Village before she agrees to marry Taro. Would you advise her to become his bride, or to do something else? Why? Is it hard to advise a woman who lives in a different culture and era from yourself? Consider how your own values and beliefs may conflict with those of Hana.
- Research the Gentleman's Agreement of 1908, which restricted immigration to the United States from Japan. Why was this policy enacted even though it clearly discriminated against immigrants from Japan? How did this policy compare and contrast with the ways in which the United States treated immigrants from other countries? Write a paper in which you analyze the policy and what it reveals about American culture during this era.
- Discuss with your classmates what might become of Hana in the United States. Do you think she will be glad she came, or will she regret her decision? Then, read Yoshiko Uchida's novel *Picture Bride* to learn about how Uchida portrays Hana's life after her arrival in the United States. Does it surprise you? Share the results of your reading with your classmates. Discuss whether you think Hana's situation was typical of other picture brides, or of arranged marriages in general. What might affect whether such marriages had happy or disappointing outcomes?

live a conventional life, she is also reluctant to break with the social expectations of women altogether. She does not defy her mother by pursuing a career as a teacher, though she clearly longs to. Becoming a picture bride for a Japanese man in the United States seems to offer a compromise between the strict expectations of the culture in which she was raised and a possibility for greater independence. Hana finds a way to avoid the examples of her three sisters, who have all agreed to "proper, arranged and loveless marriages." Hana's marriage might also be "proper, arranged and loveless," but because it will be in the United States, away from the families and culture of both herself and her husband, it promises at least a greater degree of flexibility. Moreover, Hana is choosing to enter this marriage. While Hana does not illustrate the adamant

independence that an American heroine of her era might, she does show a realistic effort to balance the restrictions imposed by her gender with her desire for freedom. This negotiation process illustrates how feminism, a movement that promotes autonomy of women, works within a culture that emphasizes familial duty and conformity.

Immigration and Immigrants

Immigration, the process of moving to a new country, is always accompanied by emigration, the act of leaving an old one. By focusing on Hana before, during, and after her journey, "Tears of Autumn" shows how complex these processes can be. Hana's excitement for a new life in America exists alongside the tears mentioned by the story's title. The reference to fall, and thus the cycle of seasons,

alludes to the fact that the cycle of regret for leaving and excitement at arriving will likely be one that will continue as she adjusts to life as an American immigrant. Though the story ends on the day of her arrival at her new home, it implies that Hana will return to the question of whether she has done the right thing by leaving Japan.

Scholars who study immigration use the terms “push” and “pull” factors as one way of describing motivations for immigration. What “pushes” Hana from Japan is clear: she does not want to become a Japanese wife. Life in her village offers only the certainty of “smothering strictures” and years of hard farming labor. Even if she were to move to a Japanese city, as two of her sisters have done, she would still be bound by tradition. What “pulls” Hana to the United States is less certain: she hopes that marrying a Japanese man away from Japan might offer greater freedom and prosperity. Like many immigrants to America, the act of immigration is a bittersweet one, offering a promise, but not necessarily the certainty, of a better life.

Asian American Life and Thought

“Tears of Autumn” reflects on the history of the Asian American immigration experience. The picture bride phenomenon shows how Japanese Americans coped with a restrictive immigration policy and their struggle to put down roots in a new homeland, one that did not always welcome them kindly. Hana’s devotion to fulfilling her family’s ideals of propriety, despite her own desire for independence, also testifies to a key tension within Asian American culture. Hana comes from a culture in which the individual is not imagined as an independent being, but one who must fulfill the expectations of her family and community. Because American culture stresses individualism and independence, a conflict of identity occurs. Such self versus community conflicts occur for many immigrants, but Asian American immigrants have experienced them in a distinct way, intensified by the racial discrimination and exclusion they have faced in the United States. Hana’s “flight to America for what seemed a proper and respectable marriage” shows her effort to balance her identification with American values with her desire to maintain her Japanese cultural identity.



Like Hana, these immigrants traveled from Japan to San Francisco by ocean liner. This ship, the Shinyu Maru, arrived in July 1925.

(© Bettmann | Corbis)

STYLE

Historical Fiction

“Tears of Autumn” was published in 1987 but the story takes place more than a half a century earlier. When the story was published as the opening chapter of Uchida’s novel *Picture Bride*, Uchida inserted the dates 1917–1918 to identify the story’s exact historical setting. Because the story dramatizes the experiences that real people of this era had, it falls into the literary genre known as historical fiction.

Sometimes, writers of historical fiction focus on well-known historical events, such as wars, or on the life of a well-known figure, such as a queen or an artist. But “Tears of Autumn,” like many other works of historical fiction, focuses on a fictional character who represents what a real-life Japanese picture bride might have faced on her journey to the United States. The “event” of interest is not one that is read about in history books, but rather one that was experienced by many ordinary women who became immigrants and

picture brides. As a woman living in the United States and writing in the 1980s, Uchida might have wanted to better understand why an independent person like Hana would have consented to such a marriage. Including details such as the style of Hana's kimono, the kinds of food she eats, and the detention she faces on Angel Island, allows readers to experience this past vividly. Historical fiction allows writers to re-create the past based on the concerns of the present.

Point of View

The story of "Tears of Autumn" is told from the perspective of Hana. She is not the narrator, but no other character receives the kind of insights from the narrator that she does. Readers learn about why Hana is making the journey to the United States through a description of her memories and observations. Readers know some of her thoughts but not others, a point of view style known as "limited omniscience." For example, readers do not know exactly what her mother, uncle, or brother-in-law think of the idea of arranging a marriage between Hana and Taro—they only know what Hana supposes they think based on her memories of what they have said or on her observations of their facial expressions. Because the story offers insights into exactly what Hana is thinking—including the hopes and doubts she has not shared with her family or anyone else—readers gain a more complex understanding of her motivations. She is not a simple, heroic character, but rather a complex one with deep and sometimes conflicting feelings.

Journey Motif

Journeys work in "Tears of Autumn" to move the story from one point to the next. Hana journeys by boat from Japan to Angel Island, from Angel Island to San Francisco, and, after riding a streetcar, from San Francisco to Oakland. The story both opens and closes with her on the deck of a ship. Uchida uses this physical movement to suggest the personal journeys that Hana is also undergoing: from Japanese to Japanese American, from single woman to wife, and from child to adult.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Meiji Era of Japanese History

In 1868, political power in Japan underwent a significant shift. For centuries before that, control over Japanese affairs rested in the hands of a

central military leader known as a *shogun* who in turn controlled a feudal-style *samurai* class of local warrior rulers. The revolution that began in the 1860s became known as the Meiji Restoration because it restored power that emperors had lost to shoguns centuries before. Emperor Meiji, who ruled until his death in 1912, undertook direct imperial rule that allowed him to institute trends toward industrialization and Westernization that had been resisted by previous military regimes. The Meiji Era became the era of modernization.

Such reforms affected the lives of young people dramatically. Some young men of the *samurai* class supported the Meiji Restoration because they saw a new approach to industry, education, and world affairs as crucial for the nation's survival, even though such reforms ended prior *samurai* class privileges. Meiji Era efforts to industrialize Japan did, in fact, make the nation a much stronger player in world affairs. For young Japanese women of this era, like Hana Omiya, Meiji reforms meant the introduction of Western-style approaches to female education. These efforts did not, however, encourage the individualistic development of women. Rather, this "modern" approach to education stressed the idea that well-educated, professionally trained women would create stronger families and better-educated children, thus benefiting modern Japan as a whole.

Asian American Immigration History

Immigrants to the United States from Asia played a crucial role in developing the agricultural and industrial economies of the western United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pioneers from places such as China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, and India worked as sugar harvesters in Hawaii, miners in California, railroad builders in Utah, and as farmers and farm laborers throughout the region. These laborers worked hard to take advantage of the same American dream that attracted immigrants from Europe to the United States. But immigrants from Asia, a group historian Ronald Takaki has collectively referred to as "strangers from a different shore," did not always find the United States to be a welcoming home.

States passed laws restricting the rights of these immigrants, barring them from testifying in court and owning land. Even though such a trade was unheard of in China, many Chinese immigrants started laundries to earn a living,

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1910s:** Japanese immigrants face the ethnic hostility of immigration restrictions and acts of racism. This treatment continues well into the 1940s, when over one hundred thousand West Coast Japanese Americans face internment (detention in remote camps) during World War II.
- **1980s:** President Ronald Reagan signs legislation apologizing for internment and begins the process of paying reparations (compensation payments) for those who suffered.
- **Today:** Japanese Americans celebrate their heritage at expanding institutions like the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles.
- **1910s:** Women immigrate to the United States from Japan as “picture brides” because laws restrict Japanese from immigrating unless they are family members of current U.S. residents.
- **1980s:** A new immigration law, the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments Act, requires that immigrants who come to the United States as spouses of U.S. citizens must prove the validity of their marriage after a two-year waiting period.
- **Today:** Debates over who should and should not be able to immigrate to the United States play a prominent role in national politics and elections.

simply because these establishments offered a way to have a business that did not require land or much inventory. Asian American workers were paid less than their European American counterparts for equal work, and were then blamed, during hard times, for being willing to work for less money. In 1882, after a period of economic uncertainty, the U.S. government passed a law that specifically barred Chinese laborers from entering the country.

When the U.S. government began to consider limiting the immigration of Japanese immigrants, the Japanese government secured a policy that would allow women to continue to come to the United States, as family members. This agreement—known as the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907—offered one way of responding to the loneliness and prejudice faced by Japanese-born men living in America. It also gave rise to the picture bride system by which women came to the United States from Japan without ever seeing the men whom they had promised to marry. According to Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers From a Different Shore*, in 1905, women made up only 7 percent of the Japanese American population on the U.S. mainland. By 1920, that number had risen

to 34.5 percent. Though arranged marriages were common in Japan, Americans found the practice objectionable and pressured Japan to stop allowing such emigration in a 1921 diplomatic arrangement known as the “Ladies’ Agreement.”

American immigration policy for Asians became increasingly restrictive in the 1920s. In 1922, the Supreme Court dismissed the petition for citizenship made by a Japanese-born man, Takao Ozawa, on the grounds that only “whites” could be U.S. citizens. Two years later, the Immigration Act of 1924 ordered that the only people who were allowed to immigrate to the United States were ones who could eventually become eligible for citizenship. Because they were not white, and thus could not become citizens, the Act essentially prevented all Asians from coming to the United States. Those already living in the United States could only hope that their children would be born in the country and become citizens that way.

The hostilities they faced did not fade easily and even worsened in the coming decades. Mistreatment of Japanese and Japanese Americans reached its zenith during World War II, when the U.S. government forced Japanese Americans



After arriving from Japan in 1920, these “picture brides,” like Hana, faced detention and inspections at San Francisco’s Angel Island Immigration Station. (© Bettmann | Corbis)

living on the West Coast to evacuate their homes and live in remote internment camps (despite the fact that the United States proclaimed it was fighting a war for freedom. Though the internment ended in 1945, it was not until the 1960s that the U.S. government developed immigration policies that allowed Asians to come to the country in greater numbers.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Although “Tears of Autumn” is often included as a story in anthologies of fiction, it has received little critical attention as an independent story. However, *Picture Bride*, the novel for which it serves as a first chapter, has been well received by scholars, especially those interested in Asian American literature and history. Reviews often focus on the important contribution Hana’s

story makes to documenting the history of picture brides. For example, writing in a 1987 *Western American Literature* review, Susan Sunada praises the author’s use of “insight, pathos, and deep understanding” and “her graceful, dignified” approach to narrating Hana’s story.

Picture Bride has also been interpreted by scholars as performing a function beyond that of recording history. In fact, one scholar’s analysis of late twentieth-century novels about picture brides suggests that Uchida and others use the story to innovate upon, rather than relate, history. Rocío G. Davis writes in “Itineraries of Submission” that these novels “challenge stereotypes and revise stories,” thus implying “the need to see beyond superficial accounts and articulate alternative versions of history.” This is consistent with the reputation of Uchida’s books about Japanese Americans for young readers, which offer not just history, but an

engaged approach to thinking about contemporary identity through reflecting on the past.



FOR THOSE WHO HAVE GROWN UP IN A

COUNTRY AND AGE IN WHICH WOMEN'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS ARE CONSIDERED AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT, AND SOMETIMES MORE IMPORTANT, THAN FAMILY NEEDS, HANA'S WILLINGNESS TO COMPROMISE MAY BE PUZZLING OR FRUSTRATING."

CRITICISM

Maureen Reed

Reed teaches humanities at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. In this essay she considers how the story's "unrealistic" approach allows it to propose a solution to a realistic and important challenge faced by the African American community: ensuring success for young men.

"The test of a round character," asserts British writer E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, "is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat." Forster, himself a novelist, raises an interesting question. "Round characters" may be the ones that surprise, engage, and convince fiction readers of fiction, but what if they disappoint them in the process?

Hana Omiya, the protagonist of Yoshiko Uchida's short story "Tears of Autumn" is a character whose ability to surprise may engage and disappoint readers simultaneously. Because the story narrates her memories of the path that led her to become an immigrant to the United States from Japan, readers learn about a puzzling contradiction within her character. Hana is independent and longs for an adventurous, free life away from the restrictions faced by women in Japan. Yet she has also agreed to become a picture bride, which means she is promised to a man she will not meet until she crosses the ocean to marry him. It is curious as to why she has compromised herself to this arrangement and given in to her family's fears about her remaining single. Her actions beg the question of whether a chance at a better life in America could possibly be worth the risk of marrying a man she might not love, or even worse, who might oppress her more than her relatives in Japan do.

Part of Uchida's goal as a historical fiction writer is to raise such questions through the surprising, and possibly disappointing, actions of Hana. Writing in the 1980s about a woman who immigrates some seventy years in the past, Uchida took on the task of helping readers to understand why a woman of Hana's background acts as she does. Uchida knew her audience would likely have very different values, particularly when it came to the customs of arranged

marriage. For those who have grown up in a country and age in which women's individual needs are considered at least as important, and sometimes more important, than family needs, Hana's willingness to compromise may be puzzling or frustrating.

The dilemma posed by Hana's marriage stems from her complexity as a character. If Hana were a "flat character," in the words of Forster, she would conform more easily to readers' expectations of an old-fashioned woman who becomes a picture bride without questioning the practice. Or she might reject the system altogether, becoming an unshakeable feminist heroine who adamantly refuses to marry to sacrifice herself. But instead Hana is both traditional and rebellious (which is, arguably, what makes her interesting as well as confusing). Within the very same paragraph, she is both a character who "wanted to escape the smothering strictures of life in her village" and one who comes up with the idea of "a flight to America for what seemed a proper and respectable marriage."

Reading that second quotation closely, however, leads to the possibility of seeing Hana as a "round" character with complex motivations. Hana imagines her journey to America as a "flight," an escape more than a journey with a clear destination. Moreover, because her goal is a marriage that "seemed" appropriate enough for her family's standards, Hana may be more interested in creating a situation that looks good than in actually getting married. Perhaps Hana initially sees her marriage as a cover for pursuing a new life in the United States. Convincing her relatives to arrange the marriage, Hana believes she has found the means to an end.

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Yoshiko Uchida's novel *Picture Bride*, published in 1987, features "Tears of Autumn" as its opening chapter. It continues the story of Hana from when she decides to immigrate to the 1940s, when she and her family must leave their California home because of the World War II internment of West Coast Japanese Americans.
- Uchida wrote two memoirs of what it was like to grow up in California as the daughter of Japanese immigrants like Hana Omiya and Taro Takeda. *Desert Exile* (1982) is aimed at adult readers, while *The Invisible Thread* (1991) relays this story for younger audiences. Both books describe how her parents came to the United States as well as the author's own coming of age as a Japanese American girl in the 1930s. Both memoirs conclude with Uchida's experience of being interned as a college student in the 1940s.
- Uchida also wrote many award-winning novels about Japanese American characters for young readers. Perhaps the best known are the Rinko Trilogy, three novels about Rinko Tsujimura, who is eleven when the series begins. They follow Tsujimura as he grows up, like Uchida, in California in the 1930s. The three books in the series are *A Jar of Dreams* (1981), *The Best Bad Thing* (1983), and *The Happiest Ending* (1985). Uchida also wrote a novel and a sequel, *Journey to Topaz* (1971) and *Journey Home* (1978), that portray one family's wartime internment experience through the eyes of a girl, Yuki Sakane, who is eleven when World War II begins.
- Ronald Takaki published the authoritative history of Asian Americans, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, in 1989. Rebecca Stefoff has adapted this book into a series about Asian American history for young readers. *Spacious Dreams: The First Wave of Asian American Immigration* (1994) includes the history of picture brides.
- Jade Snow Wong's memoir, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, first published in 1950, offers a compelling story of an ambitious young Chinese American girl growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1930s and 1940s. The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Wong became an award-winning writer and artist.
- Anzia Yeziarska's novel *Bread Givers*, published in 1925, remains a classic of immigrant literature. It narrates the story of a Russian-Jewish girl named Sara Smolinsky who has recently settled in New York. Smolinsky's independence and desire for an American life brings her into conflict with her father, an Orthodox rabbi.

Her act may be devious and short-sighted, but it also may also be her only option. She has finally found a way to please both herself and her family. What begins as her idea becomes an act of family collaboration; it would not be possible otherwise. Hana's mother will not agree to send Hana away until Hana's uncle, brothers-in-law, and the village priest approve. "A man's word carried much weight for Hana's mother," readers learn. Hana, who had never succeeded in

convincing her mother to let her go to Tokyo to become a teacher, has now found an approved method of escape, one in which men who are concerned about her unmarried status are conspiring to achieve. In particular, Hana realizes that her brother-in-law, the head of her household, "would be pleased to be rid of her, the spirited younger sister who stirred up his placid life with what he considered radical ideas about life and the role of women."

Perhaps it is this characterization that may most trouble readers who wish that Hana would find a more independent and direct way of asserting herself. They may wonder why Hana can't simply stand up for herself, run off to Tokyo, and become a teacher. Again, a "flat character" might do these things, but then Uchida's story would be unrealistic, more true to readers' idealistic desires for heroines than to the historical era she is writing about.

In her book *Issei Women: Echoes from Another Frontier*, historian Eileen Sunada Sarasohn has described Japanese women in Hana's era as constrained by tradition: "Raised to be demure, submissive, feminine, and even coquettish, totally dedicated to family and children, issei women lived in a Japan that confined them to a domestic world with no status, little power, and few opportunities." Issei women, a term that refers to the first generation of Japanese women immigrants to settle in the United States, may have found those ideals tested by their experiences and own desires, but options for living outside these traditions were few. Japanese culture in this era, known as the Meiji Era, did increasingly promote education for women as part of a larger cultural attempt at modernization and nationalization. Hana, a Kyoto Women's High School graduate, experienced such reforms. The point of this education was not for women like Hana to pursue a career, but to increase women's ability to pass on values to their children. "In Meiji Japan," writes Sarasohn, "the smallest unit of society was the family, not the individual." Even in the United States, which may have espoused more progressive ideals for women, issei women would be bound by their immediate families when at home, and restricted by racism when interacting with society.

If Hana has made a mistake in thinking she can escape these Meiji traditions by marrying a man in the United States, she is the first to realize it. Her seasickness on the boat alludes to her physical aversion to the destination that awaits her. Her only way of comforting herself seems to be hoping that she will marry a man rich enough to have a fine home and servants. Taro Takeda's meek appearance, at the end of the novel, implies that this will not be the case, and that Hana's escape fantasy has led to a disappointing outcome. In fact, one way to describe the main event of "Tears of Autumn" is that it is a painful story of Hana coming to terms with the consequences of the compromise she has tried to make between

herself and tradition. Accepting responsibility means crossing the border between childhood and adulthood. Perhaps this is why "Tears of Autumn" functions not only as an independent short story but also as the opening chapter of a novel, *Picture Bride*, which shows the unfolding of Hana's adult life in the United States, as the impact of her decision to immigrate continues.

Meeting Taro on the boat dock in San Francisco could be the straw that breaks the camel's back, for he seems older and less prosperous than Hana has imagined him to be. But Uchida skillfully shows Hana neither repudiating Taro nor breaking down with disappointment. Rather, Hana experiences a measured acceptance of her situation. Critic Esther Mikyung Ghymn, in her book *The Shapes and Styles of Asian American Prose Fiction*, notes that Uchida often ends her books about Japanese American characters by "stressing inner strength." Ghymn notes that Hana, though occupying a "much darker world" than characters Uchida had previously written about for children, still ultimately illustrates "resilience." Ghymn refers to this as Uchida's "positive vision," a desire, not inconsistent with American culture, to be optimistic even when struggling.

Some readers may want Hana, at the end of the story, to do more than make the best of her situation. Laughing with Taro will not likely make up for Hana's lost ideal of escape. Taro may be gentle and kind in ways that illustrate his own depth as a character, but Hana has stopped far short of telling him that he was not what she expected. Hana's complexity as a character, and the fact that she matures in the story, makes it possible for readers to understand why she acts as she does, regardless of whether they see it as disappointing. She has just completed a long journey made up of many difficult steps: convincing her mother to arrange her marriage, leaving her family and Japan behind, withstanding a long ocean voyage, and enduring the humiliations of Angel Island. Constrained by the expectations of Japanese women that surround her, Hana cannot be the kind of feminist heroine some may desire her to be. And yet she accepts the outcome of her journey with maturity and grace, becoming a different sort of feminist character. When she sits "carefully beside Taro, so no part of their clothing touched," she honors traditions of modesty and compliance while also maintaining her separate self and dignity. Compromise between herself and her

culture is not something she can overcome with one youthful act of escape. The ending implies that Hana's new life will be an ongoing process of negotiation, of finding herself within, not removed from, others' needs and expectations.

Source: Maureen Reed Critical Essay on "Tears of Autumn" in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Frances Ann Day

In the following essay, Day offers an account of Uchida's life and analyzes the significance of her historical fiction. The essay also provides an overview of anti-Japanese discrimination and its aftermath.

Yoshiko Uchida was born November 24, 1921, in Alameda, California. Her mother, Iki Umegaki Uchida, a poet, and her father, Dwight Takashi Uchida, a businessperson, were born in Japan and came to the United States as young adults. Uchida's mother loved books and their house was filled with them. She often read Japanese stories to her two daughters. She was a deeply caring and giving person. "Don't ever be indifferent; indifference is the worst fault of all," she told her daughters (personal communication).

Uchida was interested in books and writing from a very early age. She started writing stories when she was ten. Being the child of frugal immigrant parents, she wrote her stories on brown wrapping paper which she cut up and bound into booklets. Uchida was a saver and kept these booklets until her death in 1992. The first is titled "Jimmy Chipmunk and His Friends: A Short Story for Small Children."

As a child, Uchida not only wrote stories but kept a journal which she also saved. She recorded special events such as the day she got her dog and the sad day he died of distemper. In her journal, she drew a tombstone for him and decorated it with floral wreaths. She preserved the joy and sadness of special times in her life by writing about them.

Uchida experienced the rejection and alienation felt by many Japanese people who grew up in the United States. Although her family gave her much love and security, she longed to be accepted by the outside community. When she was ten, her family took a trip to Connecticut and the experience of being perceived as a foreigner was very painful. As an adolescent, she still believed in the melting pot; she perceived integration into white American society as the

way to overcome the rejection she had experienced in so many aspects of her life.

Uchida was busy studying for her final exams at the University of California when war between Japan and the United States was declared. She and her family were among 120,000 West Coast Japanese Americans who were uprooted from their homes and imprisoned in concentration camps by the United States government. The Uchidas were sent to live in a horse stall at Tanforan Racetrack and then moved to Topaz, a bleak concentration camp in the desert in Utah. Uchida has written about this horrific experience in several of her books including her autobiographies, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* and *The Invisible Thread*.

Finally in 1976, President Gerald Ford announced that not only was the evacuation wrong, but Japanese Americans were and are loyal Americans. In 1983, the Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment established by the United States Congress concluded that a grave injustice was done to Japanese Americans and that the causes of the uprooting were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of leadership. In 1988, a Redress Bill was passed by Congress to mitigate some of the massive financial losses suffered by Japanese Americans. And so, many years after the tragic wartime uprooting, the country finally acknowledged that it had made a terrible mistake. But it came too late for most of the Issei (first generation) Japanese Americans who, like Uchida's parents, were deceased, and too late for many Nisei (second generation) also.

Uchida graduated with honors from the University of California with a B.A. in English, Philosophy, and History. She earned an M.A. in Education from Smith College, Northhampton, Massachusetts. She taught elementary school at Topaz and in Philadelphia. She was a full-time writer most of the time after that.

In 1952, Uchida was awarded a fellowship to study in Japan. "My experience in Japan was as positive and restorative as the uprooting and imprisonment had been negative and depleting. I came home aware of a new dimension to myself as a Japanese American and with new respect and admiration for the culture that had made my parents what they were. The circle was complete... I am proud to be a Japanese American and am secure in that knowledge of myself."

Yoshiko Uchida died in June 1992 at the Alta Medical Center in Berkeley, California. A gifted writer, she wrote over thirty books from 1949 to 1991 and won many honors and awards. Her lively, beautiful books are a very special gift to young readers and to everyone interested in children's literature. She gave her readers a sense of hope, affirmation, and purpose. She felt that people need the sense of continuity that comes from knowing about the past. She reinforced the pride of young Japanese Americans and gave them a profound remembrance of their history and culture. Her superb books portray the pain of rejection, the spirit of determination, and love of self and others. Her body of work constitutes a significant contribution to the world of literature for young readers.

Source: Frances Ann Day, "Yoshiko Uchida, Japanese American (1921–1992)," in *Multicultural Voices in Contemporary Literature: A Resource for Teachers*, Heinemann, 1999, pp. 191–193.

Kathie Meyer

*In the following review, Meyer summarizes the plot and importance of *Picture Bride*, the novel for which "Tears of Autumn" serves as an opening. She also explains why "picture marriages" took place in the Japanese American community.*

After President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Immigration Act of February 20, 1907, otherwise known as the Gentlemen's Agreement, some remaining loopholes allowed sizable numbers of Japanese to immigrate. Among these loopholes was the custom of "picture marriages," a variation of the usual arranged nuptial, accounting for the jump from 410 married *issei* women in the United States in 1900 to 22,193 by 1920.

During this time, a man seeking a wife could send his photograph back to Japan, where a go-between (usually a family member) would shop it around until finding a suitable mate agreeable to the long, hard journey to America ending with marriage to a virtual stranger. It is here where the story of twenty-one-year-old Hana Omiya begins in Yoshiko Uchida's novel, *Picture Bride*. The arrival of women such as Hana changed the community of Japanese America from predominantly bachelor laborers to families seeking permanent settlement.

While the literary theme of separation is widespread, almost a necessity throughout Western historical fiction, the raw edge of Japanese-American history is particularly rife with

involuntary, and unplanned disconnection. In her story spanning Hana's life from 1917 through 1943, Uchida illustrates this severance with simple grace in many ways, climaxing at Topaz, a World War II internment camp in the Utah desert. Because readers are perhaps most familiar with racism regarding Native Americans, Uchida's novel is an important voice for expelling the myth of "give me your tired, your poor" and the conception that all settlers followed a compass pointing westward. Unadorned by unnecessary complexity of subplot and motive, the book carries readers along by the strong, emotional undertow of Hana and Taro's conjoined life in Oakland, a life more often heart-breaking than triumphant.

If the simplicity of the story is its strength, it is also its weakness. Readers would do well to further research the times of Hana and Taro's family and friends using other authoritative sources for a greater historical understanding. However, *Picture Bride* stands solidly as deeply felt narrative, a tale of admirable resiliency in spite of tragic and unjust circumstances.

Source: Kathie Meyer, Review of *Picture Bride*, in *Western American Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Winter 1988, pp. 412–413.

Yoshiko Uchida

In the following two excerpts, taken from a memoir of her family's experience of internment during World War II, Uchida describes the "picture bride" marriage of her parents, and her ongoing motivation for writing about Japanese Americans.

My father, Dwight Takashi Uchida, came to California in 1906 at the age of twenty-two, after having taught Japanese in a small school in Hawaii for about three years. He arrived on a small cargo boat and landed in San Francisco just three months after the great earthquake to find the tower of the ferry building still askew and Market Street piled high with ash.

He had hoped to go to Yale and eventually to become a doctor, but he went first to Seattle where his mother, having just lost a daughter to leukemia, had immigrated to be with another of her daughters. There he found work in a general merchandise store owned by a successful Japanese entrepreneur, M. Furuya, and abandoned his earlier ambitions. A year later he was sent to manage Furuya's Portland store where he stayed for nine years, earning enough to send boat fare to his two remaining sisters in Japan, so they could join their mother in Seattle.

While he was manager of the Portland Furuya, it doubled in size and became one of the first Japanese stores to have a branch of the United States Post Office on its premises. It was as an employee of Furuya that my father learned to wear a white shirt and black bow tie every day, always to be punctual, and to answer the telephone before it rang twice. These habits became so thoroughly ingrained, they remained with him the rest of his life.

His work at Furuya brought him to the attention of the manager of the San Francisco branch of Mitsui and Company, and in 1917 he went to San Francisco to become one of its employees. In the same year he married Iku Umegaki, who had come from Japan the previous year to marry him.

They had never met, but had corresponded for over a year at the suggestion of professors who knew them both while they were students at Doshisha University in Kyoto, one of Japan's foremost Christian universities.

It seems incredible to me that my mother—a shy, reticent, and sheltered woman—could have taken so enormous a leap across the Pacific Ocean, leaving behind her family and friends and all that was dear to her. And yet many Japanese women did the same in those days. I believe those early Issei (first generation Japanese immigrant) women must have had tremendous reserves of strength and courage to do what they did, often masked by their quiet and unassertive demeanor. They came to an alien land, created homes for their men, worked beside them in fields, small shops, and businesses, and at the same time bore most of the responsibility for raising their children. Theirs was a determination and endurance born, I would say, of an uncommon spirit.

My mother was twenty-four when she came to the United States and was the eldest of five children. Her father, once a samurai, had been a prefectural governor, but died when my mother was twelve. It was a harsh struggle for her mother to raise five children alone, and it became necessary for her to send the youngest boy to a temple to be raised as a priest, although some years later she herself became a Christian.

My mother worked for her room, board, and tuition at Doshisha University and also did such chores as mending and ironing for some of her American missionary instructors. Her favorite teacher once asked her to embroider two and

a half yards of scallops around one of her petticoats. It was a task my mother could accomplish only by staying up every night long after all the other girls had gone to bed and working for many hours beside the small light left burning in her dormitory. And it was only after several weeks that she finally finished the tedious chore. In those early years, there existed such a close bond between student and teacher, and my mother's admiration for her teachers was so great, that rather than feeling exploited she considered it a privilege to work for them.

It was the same respect and trust that led her to come to America to marry my father, following the advice of the Japanese professors who knew both my parents and urged their union.

I imagine her decision to leave Japan was a much more difficult one than my father's, for while he came to join his mother and sister, she had no one except him. She left behind her mother, three brothers, and a sister, and the day she sailed she cried until her eyes were so swollen she could scarcely see. I know how much my mother must have missed her family in Japan, but I also know she never regretted having come to America to marry my father.

The wartime evacuation of the Japanese Americans has already been well documented in many fine scholarly books. My story is a very personal one, and I speak only for myself and of those Issei and Nisei who were in the realm of my own experience, aware that they are only a small part of a larger whole. The story of my family is not typical of all Japanese immigrant families, and the lives of many other Japanese Americans were undoubtedly touched with more wartime tragedy and heartache than my own.

Still, there are many young Americans who have never heard about the evacuation or known of its effect on one Japanese American family. I hope the details of the life of my family, when added to those of others, will enhance their understanding of the history of the Japanese in California and enable them to see it as a vital element in that glorious and complex story of the immigrants from all lands who made America their home.

If my story has been long in coming, it is not because I did not want to remember our incarceration or to make this interior journey into my earlier self, but because it took so many years for these words to find a home. I am grateful that at last they have.

Today as a writer of books for young people, I often speak at schools about my experiences as a Japanese American. I want the children to perceive me not as a foreigner, as some still do, or as the stereotypic Asian they often see on film and television, but as a human being. I tell them of my pride in being a Japanese American today, but I also tell them I celebrate our common humanity, for I feel we must never lose our sense of connection with the human race. I tell them how it was to grow up as a Japanese American in California. I tell them about the Issei who persevered in a land that denied them so much. I tell them how our own country incarcerated us—its citizens—during World War II, causing us to lose that most precious of all possessions, our freedom.

The children ask me many questions, most of them about my wartime experiences. “I never knew we had concentration camps in America,” one child told me in astonishment. “I thought they were only in Germany and Russia.”

And so the story of the wartime incarceration of the Japanese Americans, as painful as it may be to hear, needs to be told and retold and never forgotten by succeeding generations of Americans.

I always ask the children why they think I wrote *Journey to Topaz* and *Journey Home*, in which I tell of the wartime experiences of the Japanese Americans. “To tell about the camps?” they ask. “To tell how you felt? To tell what happened to the Japanese people?”

“Yes,” I answer, but I continue the discussion until finally one of them will say, “You wrote those books so it won’t ever happen again.”

And that is why I wrote this book. I wrote it for the young Japanese Americans who seek a sense of continuity with their past. But I wrote it as well for all Americans, with the hope that through knowledge of the past, they will never allow another group of people in America to be sent into a desert exile ever again.

Source: Yoshiko Uchida, “Excerpt from *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of an American Family*,” in *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of an American Family*, University of Washington Press, 1982, pp. 4–10, 153–154.

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Kikumura, Akemi, *Issei Pioneers: Hawaii and the Mainland, 1885–1924*, Japanese American National Museum, 1992.

This exhibition catalog contains images of photographs and other artifacts that illustrate both the rewards and hardships of the first generation of Japanese Americans.

Lim, Shirley Geok-lin, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, eds., *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women’s Anthology*, Calyx Books, 1989.

This collection of poetry, prose, art, and reviews includes the story “Tears of Autumn” alongside others illustrating Asian American women’s experience, as well as the editors’ analysis of the themes of identity that emerge from this body of work.

Takaki, Ronald, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 1993, revised edition, Back Bay Books, 2008.

Takaki writes the history of the United States from a multicultural perspective. The story of Japanese American history emerges alongside not only that of other Asian Americans, but also the histories of other diverse American ethnic groups.

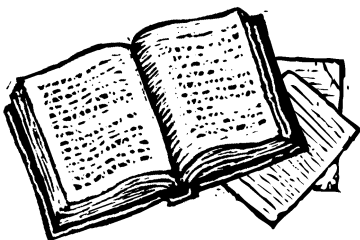
The Treasure of Lemon Brown

WALTER DEAN MYERS

1983

The “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” is a coming-of-age story about Greg Ridley, a teenager who learns a lesson about the value of family through an encounter with a homeless man named Lemon Brown. Originally published in a 1983 issue of *Boys’ Life*, the official magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, the story suggests that boys like Greg, who struggles with school and his father’s expectations for success, can find wisdom in unexpected places. Such uplifting messages are not unusual in the work of author Walter Dean Myers, a noted writer of young adult fiction about African Americans. But Myers is also known for depicting the realities and obstacles of everyday life: in “The Treasure of Lemon Brown,” the urban setting of Harlem is one in which homelessness and violence nearly overshadow the efforts of Greg’s family and others to build community.

The story is often anthologized in language arts textbooks, perhaps because it teaches a moral lesson that is neither controversial nor difficult to understand. But the story does not express these high ideals without also emphasizing the difficulty of the real-life struggles Myers’s young readers may face themselves, or may have witnessed in the lives of others. Greg wants to play basketball but cannot pass math; Lemon Brown was once a blues star but now lives on the streets. The “happy ending” does not resolve these problems but rather shows Greg’s discovery of the “treasure” that family and community support can offer. Though Myers has never re-published this story





Walter Dean Myers (Photo by Constance Myers. Courtesy of Walter Dean Myers)

in any of his own collections, readers can find copies of it in numerous textbooks, including Prentice Hall Literature's *Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes* (Bronze, Grade 7), McDougal Littell's *The Language of Literature* (Grade 8), and Glencoe McGraw-Hill's *Literature* (Course 3).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Myers was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia, in 1937. The fourth of five children, Myers lived a turbulent early life of poverty and family upheaval. His mother died when he was three. Soon after, Myers went to live with his father's former wife, the mother of his two half sisters, in Harlem, New York. Florence Dean, who raised Myers with the help of her new husband, Herbert Dean, was of German and Native American descent; Myers's parents, as well as his new foster father, were African American. (Myers later took "Dean" as his middle name in recognition of their support.) In Harlem, the center of the nation's African American community, Myers found a stable family environment and the neighborhood

that became the setting for much of his later fiction. "Harlem is the first place called 'home' that I can remember," Myers wrote in a memoir of his early life, *Bad Boy*, published in 2001. "It was a magical place, alive with music that spilled onto the busy streets from tenement windows and full of colors and smells that filled my senses and made my heart beat faster."

Despite being welcomed into this new family, Myers's young life in Harlem was not easy. A speech impediment and behavioral problems created difficulties in school. Despite his passion for basketball and his interest in reading, which was cultivated by teachers who saw his potential, by the age of sixteen Myers felt "adrift," as he put it in *Bad Boy*. He barely escaped several brushes with the law. Fearing eventual arrest, he enlisted in the army on the morning of his seventeenth birthday. While he did not face combat, his four years in the army, followed by a succession of menial jobs, led him to question the direction of his life.

Myers began to write poetry, stories, and articles in an effort to follow his childhood dream of becoming a writer. Reading "Sonny's Blues," a short story by famous African American writer James Baldwin, encouraged Myers to focus on documenting the African American experience. Though he found success in writing for adults, his career really took off when he entered and won a writing contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Myers began writing more books for young people. He took writing classes, including one at Columbia University, which helped him to secure a job in publishing. By the late 1970s, Myers became a full-time writer. A prolific writer of over fifty books, including both fiction and nonfiction, Myers writes primarily for children and young adults. Many of his books have received commendations from groups such as the Library of Congress and the American Library Association, which has awarded him both a Caldecott Medal and numerous Coretta Scott King Awards and Honors. In 1994, the American Library Association granted him the Margaret A. Edwards award, one of the nation's highest honors for writers of young adult fiction, in recognition of his ongoing contribution of meaningful and appealing African American characters to literature. As of 2009, Myers lived in New Jersey and continued to publish extensively.

PLOT SUMMARY

“The Treasure of Lemon Brown” opens with a disappointed young man, Greg Ridley, sitting on the front steps of his apartment building in Harlem, New York. A storm is coming, and the narrative emphasizes that the dark weather and emerging winds reflect Greg’s own frustrated mood. The story almost immediately flashes back to a scene two nights before between Greg and his father. Greg’s father had just received a letter from the high school principal notifying him that Greg is in danger of failing his math class. Because Greg is already a year older than his father was when he dropped out of school, apparently because he had to work, his father is frustrated. Greg seems to be wasting a precious opportunity for an education.

Greg is angry because his father has told him he can no longer play basketball. He hasn’t been allowed to play for his school team, perhaps because he did not make the team, or perhaps because his father will not let him devote so much time to sports. But Greg has been invited to play for a neighborhood community center team known as the Scorpions, and his father had told him he could do so as long as his grades are good enough. The letter from the high school has just made that impossible. His father tells him that the idea of him playing basketball now “must be some kind of a joke” and insists that Greg head to his room and study.

The story returns to the scene of Greg sitting on the stoop two nights later, reluctant to go inside to where his father and his math book are waiting. Instead he goes for a walk around his neighborhood of Harlem, in New York City. Harlem has been the heart of the African American community ever since southerners started migrating there from rural communities in the early 1900s in search of jobs and better lives.

When lightning starts to cross the night sky, Greg decides to take shelter in an abandoned building called a “tenement,” a several-storied apartment building designed to house many families at once. Tenements were built in the Harlem boom years of the early 1900s, but this one stands vacant and “graffiti-scarred,” in “grim shadows.” Though some might find this scary, Greg has a different association. He was outside the building recently for a tournament of checkers, a game African Americans have traditionally played outdoors in Harlem and elsewhere as a way of socializing. He remembers

that the door was open then and decides to head back to get out of the rain and stay away from his father.

Once inside, Greg spends time looking around at his surroundings. The room is filled with abandoned furniture and what seems to be a pile of rags on the floor. Sitting on an old couch by the window, he watches the flashing neon sign of the bodega, a corner grocery store, down the street and thinks again about his argument with his father. Greg is tired of his father’s lectures about how hard he has worked to get where he is today. As the wind and rain continue outside, Greg realizes that he hears something “breathing” and then hears a voice, “high and brittle, like dry twigs being broken,” threaten him with a razor. Greg turns to see that the pile of rags in the corner is actually a person, an old man with “a black, heavily wrinkled face. . . . surrounded by a halo of crinkly white hair.”

To his relief, Greg recognizes the man, whose name is Lemon Brown. Greg has seen him before leafing through clothes left out in a donation box for the Salvation Army, a charity. Greg tells Lemon he is only looking for a place to wait out the storm; Lemon questions why he does not go home and asks Greg if he is there to steal his treasure. Greg doubts that Lemon has a treasure, but Lemon ignores this and starts to tell Greg about his life as a blues musician and about the son he “used to have” who reminds him of Greg. When Greg asks Lemon how he ended up homeless, Lemon tells him that “hard times caught up” with him.

Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of three men who come into the house trying to steal the “treasure” they have heard Lemon talk about. Greg and Lemon hide at the top of a flight of stairs and watch the men come in. One of them holds a piece of pipe as a weapon. As they call out in search of Lemon, they claim they don’t want to hurt him, but Lemon rightfully fears that they mean to do him harm. He grasps Greg’s hand as they hide in the shadows, clearly trying to protect the young man. When one of the intruders starts to climb the stairs, Lemon steps forward with his arms raised, forming “an eerie sight, a bundle of rags standing at the top of the stairs, his shadow on the wall looming over him.” Greg helps scare the men away by howling, to make it seem as if the house is haunted. Lemon throws himself on top of the man who is approaching, who gets up and runs away with the other men.

When Lemon and Greg look out the window, they see that the man who approached Lemon may be slightly hurt, at least enough to leave Lemon alone for a while. Lemon tells Greg he is not hurt any more than usual, which makes Greg think he has had a hard life.

Lemon then takes out his “treasure” from its hiding place underneath the rags covering his legs. It turns out to be nothing of monetary value, as the thugs hoped, but rather just a bundle of old newspaper clippings, reviews of Lemon’s blues performances as a young man, as well as the old dented harmonica he used to play. Lemon explains that he gave his son this bundle when he went off to war (presumably World War II) because “if you know your pappy did something, you know you can do something too.” The clipping and harmonica were sent back to Lemon after his son was killed. “Him carrying it around with him like that told me it meant something to him,” Lemon explains. “That was my treasure, and when I gave it to him, he treated it just like a treasure.”

Greg reacts to the treasure without much enthusiasm at first, finding it hard to believe that Lemon risked his life against the thugs for these seemingly worthless things. Lemon scolds him, asking “What else a man got ’cepting what he can pass on to his son?” Lemon then sends Greg home, since the thugs are now gone, and tells Greg not to worry about him. He will be leaving for East St. Louis, a city in Illinois, in the morning, so the thugs will not find him if they return the next night. Greg walks home around the puddles, trying not to think about how angry his father might be. He considers telling his dad about Lemon but decides to keep it a secret, perhaps because his father won’t approve. Greg rings his doorbell so his father will let him in. The rainstorm has passed, and so too has Greg’s anger at his father gone away, because Lemon has encouraged him to consider his father, who has worked hard and loves Greg very much, in a new light. With a smile, Greg anticipates the lecture his father will give him, realizing that such lectures are how his father tries to help him to live a good life. The pride Mr. Ridley is trying to instill in Greg now seems more like a treasure than a burden.

CHARACTERS

Jesse Brown

Jesse Brown is the deceased son of Lemon Brown. When Jesse was little, Lemon traveled around playing the blues in order to support Jesse and his mom.

After the death of Lemon’s wife, Jesse was raised by his aunt. Lemon tells Greg that “when the war come, he saw fit to go off and fight in it.” After Jesse dies while serving (likely in World War II), the army returns the bundle of newspaper clippings and a harmonica that he carried there to his father, who had given it to him before he left. This bundle, as well as the memory of his son’s pride in him, becomes Lemon’s treasure.

Lemon Brown

Lemon Brown is the character whose “treasure” teaches Greg the lesson at the heart of the story. Lemon is an old man, likely in his seventies or eighties, whom Greg at first thinks of only as someone he has seen picking through trash in the neighborhood. Because of their conversation, Greg learns that Lemon, once known as “Sweet Lemon Brown,” was once a blues singer and harmonica player who traveled around the South performing. His son’s death seems to be part of the “hard times” that have caught up with Lemon in recent years. Now he is homeless and dressed in tattered clothes, kept warm by rags tied around the parts of his body the clothes do not cover. As hard as his life seems, Lemon takes pride in his treasure, the memory of who he was and what it meant to his son. This helps him to protect himself in the bold ways Greg sees when Lemon confronts thugs in the abandoned building. Lemon teaches Greg how to be proud of himself.

Greg Ridley

Greg is the protagonist, or main character of the story. He is a fourteen-year-old high school student who lives in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. At the beginning of the story, he is walking outside alone, facing the disappointment that has come from his father’s refusal to let him play basketball because of his poor academic performance. Greg’s encounter with Lemon Brown in an abandoned house leads him to better understand why his father has such high expectations for him. At the beginning of the story Greg feels frustrated by his father’s nagging; by the end, he is racing home excited to see his dad, pressing the “button over the bell marked Ridley” to let his dad know he is home. His smile, even when he thinks about “the lecture he knew his father would give him,” shows that Greg has become proud of himself. Lemon’s story of his son gives Greg a stronger sense of identity.

Greg Ridley's Father

Greg Ridley's father has high expectations for his teenaged son. This is because he has had a hard life and wants a better one for Greg. Mr. Ridley often reminds Greg that he had to drop out of school when he was thirteen, and he wishes he "had half the chances" that Greg has in life. For as long as Greg has been alive, Mr. Ridley has worked for the post office, a job that he only got after studying hard to pass an exam. He takes pride in his job despite its tediousness, but wants a better, brighter future for his son. This is why he constantly reminds Greg that it is important to work hard in school.

Three Thugs

Three men from the neighborhood come into the abandoned house where Greg and Lemon Brown are talking. Greg recognizes them as neighborhood thugs and notes that one of them is armed. The men believe that Lemon Brown's treasure has monetary value and intend to threaten or harm him until they get it. Standing up to them brings Lemon and Greg closer together. The thugs may also remind Greg of the kind of aimless, mean life his father does not want him to lead. Success at school will help Greg avoid growing up to become a thug himself.

THEMES

Fathers and Sons

The story opens with Greg avoiding his father and ends with him eagerly returning home to him. Meeting Lemon Brown, who defines his treasure as what a man "can pass on to his son," changes Greg's estimation of his father. Lemon's fatherly guidance and protection during the encounter with the thugs opens Greg's eyes to ways in which his own father has tried to protect and secure a good life for his son. Furthermore, hearing the story of Lemon and Jesse Brown's relationship inspires Greg to listen to his father with greater openness and trust.

Heritage and Identity

Young people can carve out an identity for themselves by learning about the history and aspirations of their ancestors. At the opening of the story, Greg's desire to identify with something can be seen in his pride in being selected to play basketball with the Scorpions. He is devastated when his father

refuses to let him play on account of his grades. When he meets Lemon Brown, he is searching for a way to define himself, having rejected his father's ideas about school and having been barred from playing basketball. Lemon's stories help him see two ways in which African Americans have defined who they are as a people. First, Greg hears about Lemon's past life as a blues musician, singing music with roots extending back through the experience of slavery to African cultural traditions. Secondly, he also hears about Lemon's pride in his son's military service and death while at war for his country, referring to the long and proud history of African American veterans. These stories of tradition and sacrifice inspire Greg to reassess what his own father might have to offer him in the way of stories about heritage.

Coming of Age

The climax of the story illustrates a coming-of-age process for Greg. When the thugs move into the abandoned building to attack Lemon Brown, Lemon urges Greg to hide. He squeezes "Greg's hand in his own hard, gnarled fist," a fatherly gesture of love and protection. But rather than simply watching Lemon fight back, Greg decides to help out. He decides to make the scene "even eerier" by howling as Lemon stands at the top of the stairs, so that the thugs will be scared off by the ghostlike figure. At first Greg cannot howl ("nothing came out"), and he must try again. His efforts, combined with Lemon Brown's jump, drive the men from the house.

Greg's decision and determination at this climactic moment reveal his maturation over the course of the story. He rises to a challenging situation, thinks about someone besides himself, and succeeds at defending himself and his new friend, an elder who deserves respect even if he lacks a home. Helping Lemon Brown and listening to his story helps him to better understand his own father. He may not become an "A" math student, but he has become a stronger, more mature person by the end of the story.

Homelessness

Greg's encounter with Lemon Brown teaches him, and readers of the story, that homeless people are not invisible—rather, people without homes are still people with stories, pride, and skills. Greg literally does not see Lemon when he first walks into the abandoned building. In fact, he mistakes him for "a pile of rags or a torn mattress." After Greg identifies him as the

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Interview several friends or family members about what, if any, possessions they consider to be their treasures, and why. Explain that their treasure could be something without monetary value, something someone has passed onto them. Write a report of what you learn about what people consider as treasures. Include an explanation of what your own treasure is. Conclude by considering how these treasures compare to the one held by Lemon Brown.
- Myers wrote “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” after being inspired by an old newspaper advertisement for a blues musician. Ask a librarian for help locating old newspapers or magazines to look at, and choose a picture of a person that inspires you. Write a short story about this person in which you imagine a moment at which they help another person, in the way that Lemon helps Greg. What special treasure or lesson might this person be able to offer another?
- Contact your local government or social service agency, or ask for help at your local library, to research the problem of homelessness in your area. Who is affected and why? What efforts has your community made to help people who are homeless, and what goals does it have for future action? What obstacles exist to ending or preventing homelessness in your area? Present your findings to your classmates and discuss whether you are surprised by your findings.
- Watch the 2009 movie *The Soloist*, about a journalist who tries to help a homeless classical musician. How does the story compare to “The Treasure of Lemon Brown”? Is it more or less realistic? How does the relationship of the two characters compare to that of Lemon and Greg? Write an essay comparing the two stories and the lessons they each teach about homelessness.
- Research the history of African Americans as soldiers in World War II. What kinds of obstacles did they face, not only fighting the war, but also due to discrimination and racial tensions in the military and at home? Based on what you learn, write a letter that Jesse Brown might have sent home to his father, perhaps asking Lemon for advice, or thanking him for what he has taught his son. Then, write a response from Lemon back to Greg.
- Make a time line that begins in 1900 and ends in 2010, making marks for every ten years (1900, 1910, 1920, etc.). Above the time line, write what might have been happening in the life of Lemon Brown at various points in time. For example, if he was in his seventies when the story takes place in 1987, when might he have been born? When did he tour as a blues musician? When might his son Jesse have been born? Then, on the bottom half of the time line, write down notable events in American and African American history that occurred from 1900 to 2010. When did African Americans begin moving to Harlem? When did blues music become popular? When did World War I, World War II (the one in which Jesse was likely killed), and the Vietnam War take place? What about notable events in the civil rights movement, such as the march on Washington? After you have completed your time line, write an essay about what you have learned about history from filling in the life of Lemon Brown.

old man he has seen “picking through the trash on the corner and pulling clothes out of a Salvation Army box,” Greg doubts that Lemon could actually have any sort of treasure. Because

Lemon is homeless, Greg does not take him seriously. But after learning about his experiences as a musician and as a father, Greg realizes that Lemon is a human being who deserves respect.



Like others who have found themselves homeless, Lemon Brown has lived a life marked by sorrow, but not without “treasures.” (Image copyright Doctor Kan, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

Homelessness is also typically seen as a weakness, a notion which Lemon puts to rest after he defends both himself and Greg from the thugs who attack to get to his treasure. By protecting them, Lemon demonstrates that he has survival skills, which is impressive considering both his age and the harshness of the life he has lived. Though Lemon Brown might not be a typical homeless person, or even a realistic one, he does illustrate that although those who live in the streets may lack homes, they still possess dignity, strength, and wisdom.

STYLE

Dialogue

Much of what we learn about Lemon Brown emerges from the conversation that he and Greg have before and after they chase the thugs away from the abandoned house. Myers uses dialogue to deliver the words of the characters as people might actually say them in real life.

This helps the reader observe the characters in action. The style of how they say what they say is important: Lemon speaks like an old blues man, born and raised in the South, while Greg speaks like an urban teenager. But the content of what they say is also important, as it allows readers to absorb what the characters are learning from one another and what the author wants their interaction to teach. In the following conversation, for example, Lemon and Greg debate whether Lemon actually has a treasure in characteristic style:

“You ain’t one of them bad boys looking for my treasure, is you?” Lemon Brown cocked his head to one side and squinted one eye. “Because I told you I got me a razor.”

“I’m not looking for your treasure,” Greg answered, smiling. “If you have one.”

“What you mean, *if* I have one,” Lemon Brown said. “Every man got a treasure. You don’t know that, you must be a fool!”

Using dialogue allows Myers to show, rather than simply narrate or summarize, the lesson that Greg learns from Lemon.

Young Adult Literature

“The Treasure of Lemon Brown” has achieved success as a work of young adult literature. This genre is not defined by any strict stylistic or content guidelines, because teenagers, like older readers, have a wide variety of tastes in fiction. But more often than not, young adult literature features young adult characters. Young adult readers of “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” find a main character who is himself young and going through a transformative moment. Greg faces a frustrating situation (his grades and his father’s response to them) and finds new strength to approach these challenges when he meets and helps Lemon Brown. The focus of the story is not the setting or the social problem of homelessness, though these play important roles. Rather, the focus is on the development of Greg as a person. Myers is known for his skill in this area. For example, in her biography of the author, *Presenting Walter Dean Myers*, Rudine Sims Bishop attributes Myers’s success to his focus on characters, writing that his works appeal to young readers because he “knows and cares about the things that concern his readers and because he creates characters that readers care about and are happy to spend time with.”

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Homelessness

During the early 1980s, homelessness in America increased rapidly. Myers was likely aware of this dramatic increase when he first published “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” in 1983. As Martha Burt writes in her book, *Over the Edge: The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s*, homelessness was “not an invention of the 1980s,” but social service agencies did begin to report “a greatly increased demand for their services, reflecting the effects of high unemployment, a rising cost of living, and a retrenchment in government programs.” Burt estimates that homelessness grew about 22 percent each year from 1984 to 1987. Americans noted and grew concerned about this trend, especially since the 1980s was a decade in which, at the other end of the class spectrum, many wealthy Americans seemed to grow even more prosperous. The story of Lemon Brown illustrates a key question Americans were asking at this time, as cycles of boom and recession created both winners and losers, about what they considered most valuable, as a nation. The exact cause of Lemon’s homelessness is

not clear, but his sense of his own value as a person, with an important story to treasure and to tell, has not been shaken by his misfortune.

History of the Blues

Lemon Brown is an old “blues man,” a singer and harmonica player who once toured the South with bands and earned notice in newspaper reviews. Blues emerged, from roots in African music traditions as well as the historical experience of slavery, as a popular musical form in the early decades of the 1900s. Historian Burton Peretti, author of *Lift Every Voice: A History of African American Music*, has noted that “the singer’s inventiveness was a hallmark of the blues,” meaning that the way in which a singer interpreted a song mattered greatly to its impact. “In a standard blues song,” Peretti explains, “no two stanzas were typically played or sung the same.” Performers such as singer Bessie Smith and guitarist Robert Johnson gained fame among audiences through their honesty and individualism, and their ability to use music to convey how they—and their audiences—felt about their troubles. Blues endures as a popular musical style because it provides a way to describe, endure, and understand struggles of the past and present.

The Impact of the Vietnam War on African American Identity

Myers published the story within ten years of the end of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” Greg learns that Lemon’s son Jesse was killed as a U.S. soldier fighting in a war that is not specifically named in the story, but is likely World War II. Myers was likely thinking about the more recent experiences of African American soldiers in Vietnam as he crafted Jesse’s story: the author finished his own military service before the Vietnam War, but one of his younger brothers was killed in combat during this conflict.

The Vietnam War has a poignant significance for African American military and social history, for while it was one of the earliest conflicts in which the American Army was desegregated, discrimination persisted. Moreover, many of the young men fighting the war came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, a trend noted and felt deeply by the African American community. Writer Wallace Terry, who reported on African American soldiers in Vietnam for *Time* magazine, notes in his 1984 book *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, that African American soldiers died “at a higher rate, proportionately,

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1980s:** *The Cosby Show*, one of the most popular shows on American television, features comedian Bill Cosby playing a doctor and the father of an upper-class family in Brooklyn, New York.

Today: *Everybody Hates Chris*, a television show based on the experiences of comedian Chris Rock as a middle-class teenager in Brooklyn, earns critical praise.

- **1980s:** In the wake of an economic recession early in the decade, homelessness rises at a dramatic rate.

Today: High rates of mortgage foreclosures and unemployment lead to a rise in the number of Americans seeking help from homeless shelters.

- **1980s:** Few African Americans serve in national political office, despite the gains of the civil rights movement.

Today: Though the number of African Americans serving in national political office is still small, Barack Obama, first elected to national office as a U.S. senator from Illinois, now serves as the first African American president in U.S. history.

than American soldiers of other races.” African American soldiers in Vietnam, inspired by the civil rights movement at home, forged a sense of community despite the discouragement they felt. Terry reports that as the war continued they began calling themselves “Bloods” and found “a new sense of black pride and purpose” as they came together. While Myers gives less attention to the African American military experience than he does in other works, such as his 1988 Vietnam novel *Fallen Angels*, the fact that Lemon’s son was killed in a war suggests the extent to which Myers and others were reflecting on the war’s impact on the African American community even into the 1980s. While Jesse may be a minor character, it is his death at war that has allowed Lemon to see how much a father’s love can mean to a son, and this is the essence of his treasure.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Because “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” was published as a short story in a magazine, critics did not review it at the time of its publication. Scholars who study the work of Myers tend to focus on his longer works, or the collections of stories he has published, and “The Treasure of

Lemon Brown” has not appeared in such collections. Also, the lesson offered by Lemon’s treasure is clear and easy for readers to appreciate. Such transparency makes this story appropriate for young readers, but it also explains why critics have not extensively analyzed it.

Critics have noted in other works, however, themes that also emerge strongly in this story. For example, in his essay “‘Keepin’ It Real’: Walter Dean Myers and the Promise of African-American Children’s Literature,” critic R. D. Lane has noted the potential of Myers’s young characters to inspire and empower young readers. “In every novel,” writes Lane, “there is some sense that the protagonist has become stronger.” Greg’s encounter, consistent with the trend noted here, illustrates Myers’s desire to use his fiction to “strategically arm the young reader for adversity.” He brings audiences into the story in a way that “garners Myers the respect from educators, his literary peers, and, most importantly, his massive young black readership.”

Myers is also often praised for his writing stories that are true to the experiences of young people in American cities. “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” portrays a situation that some might find unrealistic, for Greg’s encounter with



An abandoned building, like the one in which Greg takes shelter and meets Lemon Brown

(Getty Images)

the homeless-but-happy Lemon, and their defeat of the thugs, takes on a contrived, if not fairy tale, tone. Nevertheless, even if the plot is not realistic, the authenticity of the language and settings of the story remain consistent with critics' praise of what Rudine Sims Bishop, in her book *Presenting Walter Dean Myers*, has called one of Myers's "major contributions": "his authentic and generally positive portrayal of Black life in urban United States." Throughout his works, Myers educates his readers about African American cultural history through his characters' relationships with traditions of sport, music, and community. From Greg's love of basketball, to Lemon's career as a blues musician, and in the father-son bond they forge through their banter, "The Treasure of Lemon Brown" illustrates the commitment to affirming African American identity that the author has been praised for elsewhere.

CRITICISM

Maureen Reed

Reed teaches humanities at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. In this essay she considers how the story's "unrealistic" approach allows it to propose a solution to a realistic and important challenge faced by the African American community: ensuring success for young men.

In *Walter Dean Myers: A Literary Companion*, critic Mary Ellen Snodgrass refers to "The Treasure of Lemon Brown" as an *exemplum*. This Latin word literally means "example." In literature it is used to describe a story that one uses to make a point about morality. In medieval times, a priest might use an exemplum within a sermon to instruct his congregation how to act. Referring to this modern story as an exemplum calls attention to the fact that it uses the meeting of a frustrated teenager and a homeless man as an opportunity to illustrate the lessons that young members of the African American community may learn from one another about family, history, and pride. Just like Greg learns from Lemon, readers of the story learn by witnessing the experience of Greg.

Critics like Snodgrass would agree that the lesson readers take away from the story is similar to the one that Greg Ridley learns from Lemon Brown: that treasures lie in unexpected places, and pride and family love can be more valuable than fame and fortune. Lemon, a homeless man, teaches a teenager that those who live on the streets have rich stories to tell. He also convinces Greg to go home to his father and to take his stories and words of advice seriously. Just as Lemon's son Jesse found inspiration in his father's stories while serving on the battlefield, Greg might be able to hear something worthwhile in his own father's stories, especially the one about overcoming his lack of education to become a postal worker. Before he meets Lemon, Greg feels "he had heard [his father's] story too many times to be interested." But by the end of the story, when he anticipates with a smile the "lecture" his father will give him, Greg seems to believe that his father's story will help him as he tries to approach school more diligently.

Because the story is written for a young audience, its lesson is conveyed through a gentle lens. Despite a gritty urban setting, many details of the story are less harsh than they could be. For example, gang violence is absent from the story, and Greg walks the night streets without any

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Myers is a prolific writer of fiction for young adults. For those who like short stories, he has published two collections about teen-aged Harlem characters in the last decade: *145th Street* (2000), and *What They Found: Love on 145th Street* (2007).
- Readers who love basketball might enjoy a two-novel series by Myers that traces a young athlete's journey from high school in Harlem to college in the Midwest: *Hoops: A Novel* (1981) and *The Outside Shot* (1984). *Slam!* (1996) also features a basketball player, a Harlem teenager whose poor performance in school threatens his future.
- *Somewhere in the Darkness* (1992) is one of Myers's most well-received novels. Like "The Treasure of Lemon Brown," it explores the relationship between a young man and his father, in this case a convicted criminal who returns to Harlem to find his son.
- *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, was written in 1995 by

now-president Barack Obama. It discusses father-son relationships and questions of race.

- *Bad Boy* (2001) is a nonfiction memoir by Myers. In it, he explains how the short story "Sonny's Blues," by noted African American author James Baldwin, served as a turning point for his writing. Like much of Myers's work, family relationships in an urban African American community serve as the driving force behind this story.
- *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music* (2008) is a nonfiction book by journalist Steve Lopez. It considers the plight of homelessness through the relationship between Lopez and Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless violinist he meets on the street. Lopez tries to help Ayers, who once held great promise as a student of classical music. But to do so he must reckon with the difficulties imposed by Ayers's mental illness.

apparent fear. It's not clear that Lemon actually has the razor he says he does when Greg enters the abandoned house, and the thugs who threaten Greg and Lemon are armed only with a pipe, not a gun or a knife. Though Lemon is dressed in rags and lives on the streets, he seems to accept his situation without much protest. When Greg asks him if he is hurt after the encounter with the thugs, Lemon replies:

When you get as old as me, all you say when something hurts is 'Howdy, Mr. Pain, sees you back again.' Then when Mr. Pain sees he can't worry you none, he go on mess with somebody else.

Lemon is proud and tough. He does not apparently suffer from mental illness or health problems, as many homeless people do.

Such choices by Myers give the story a softer edge than it might have had at the hands of

another author. Some might conclude, as a result, that the story is unrealistic. But recall that it was originally published in *Boys' Life*, the magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, and since then it has found its way into numerous middle and high school textbooks. It may be, then, that the same qualities that make the story an exemplum, ideal for these sorts of publications, make it seem safer than real life to others. It could be interpreted as a sort of fairy tale, an unlikely situation in which a boy finds a kind old man in an unexpected place, and everyone is safe and happy in the end.

And yet Myers does not always write such fairy tales. He has received numerous awards as an author for creating complex portrayals of the African American community, in particular for writing about realistic characters with whom young readers can identify. For example, critic



PERHAPS MYERS REFUSES TO DEPICT LEMON BROWN TRAGICALLY BECAUSE HE WANTS TO EMPHASIZE THAT, DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS LIKE HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY, LEMON, AND OTHER ELDERS LIKE HIM ARE THEMSELVES TREASURES, FULL OF STRENGTH AND WISDOM.”

R. D. Lane, in “Keepin’ It Real,” an essay about Myers’s work, has pointed out that the author’s “novels do not always end happily” and that “many of his characters do not evolve into fine, upstanding citizens.” Why, then, would Myers write “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” as a gentle fairy tale-like story? Perhaps this is because the lesson that Myers wants to teach ultimately has nothing to do with exposing young readers to the harsh realities of poverty and social problems. They likely know a lot about these already, courtesy of the evening news or maybe even their own life experiences. Therefore, his goal for this story may not actually be about being painfully realistic, but rather about offering fictional inspiration for solving a different kind of real world problem: the need for young African American men to find role models and success.

Indeed, this issue has been one of great concern in recent years to the African American community. In the wake of the civil rights movement, community leaders have repeatedly asked what still needs to be done to ensure a better life for African American boys. Many African American leaders and thinkers have weighed in on this issue. In 1995, for example, Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, an African American organization, organized the “Million Man March” in Washington, D.C. He sought men from around the country to unite in a symbolic effort to work with their communities to solve social problems. Writing in 2004, literary critic bell hooks suggested in her book *We Real Cool* that African American men need to overcome a legacy of shame left by the history of slavery and racism. In words that could be applied to the character of Greg Ridley, she

observed that black boys who “need to prove their value through performance” tend to become interested in sports because it is considered a “masculine” realm for success. “However,” hooks writes, “black boys who do not find their way to sports or are unable to succeed playing sports have little or no opportunity to regain lost self-respect,” which can lead to frustration or violence. Also speaking in 2004, comedian Bill Cosby, who had been the star of one of the 1980s most successful television series, raised eyebrows and made headlines when he criticized the African American community for failing to parent responsibly. In Cosby’s opinion, the problems of the African American community can be blamed less on racism from whites and more on African Americans’ own failure to take responsibility for their families. Robert M. Franklin, president of Morehouse College, a historically African American institution, has also weighed in on this debate, suggesting in his 2007 book *Crisis in the Village* that efforts to build hope for young people and families must come from within the African American community.

Regardless of the stance taken in this ongoing discussion, those who have taken part in it have explored two key issues. First, they have considered to what extent racism has impacted the ability of African American men to be successful and help their families and communities. Second, they have contemplated what African Americans can do within their communities to help young men achieve pride and success. Looking at “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” within the context of this discussion offers a way to better understand why, in this story, Myers does not emphasize realism so much as role models. He sees friendship between older and younger generations of men as a potential solution to the problems for young black men wrought by racism and poverty. This approach is consistent with a community pattern that scholars Leon D. Caldwell and Joseph L. White write about in their essay “Generative Fathering: Challenges to Black Masculinity and Identity,” in which they argue that both biological and non-biological African American fathers and father figures must “participate in the transmission of African American culture and the nurturance of healthy children to sustain our communities.” This is, in effect, what Lemon Brown does: he protects a young boy from harm and teaches him about parents, children, and cultural heritage by relaying the story of his own relationship with his son. He steps in to help, not because Greg is his child, but

because Greg is a child of his community who needs guidance.

Myers knew how important such community-oriented parenting was firsthand, for as a child, he was raised by people who were not his parents: his father's former wife (who was, incidentally, not African American) and her husband. In an autobiographical essay he published in a collection about young adult authors' lives called *Speaking for Ourselves*, Myers writes about his effort to figure out what was positive about being African American, especially in a world that "didn't understand" him. Like any teenager, he was sure that his foster parents didn't understand him either, but he came to realize that his foster father "gave me the most precious gift any father could give to a son. He loved me." His foster mother, for her part, taught him to understand "the value of story, how it could serve as a refuge for people, like us, who couldn't afford the finer things in life."

The lesson taught by "The Treasure of Lemon Brown" can be understood, then, as a combination of love and heritage, the two values Myers states that he learned from his foster parents, and two qualities he sees as imperative to the success of the African American community. First, the story asserts that there is no greater treasure a parent can pass on to a child than love, meaning both the love a parent gives and the love a parent teaches a child to have for oneself. "What else a man got 'cepting what he can pass on to his son, or his daughter if she be his oldest?" Lemon asks Greg near the end of the story. Through this question, Greg comes to realize what his father is doing when he nags Greg to study. It is his way of telling Greg he loves him and wants what is best for him.

Second, as Myers learned from his foster mother, a story can have a tremendous value in teaching a child who he is and why he should be proud of himself. This happens at multiple levels in "The Treasure of Lemon Brown." Lemon's story of his life as a blues musician teaches Greg to have a greater understanding of both the humanity of a homeless person and the rich history of African American culture. Lemon's story inspires Greg just as it once inspired Jesse, thus convincing Greg to pay more attention to the stories his father tells about his life. Though his love of basketball need not disappear, Greg realizes that African American history, as lived through the lives of his father and Lemon and

Jesse, offers him other ways to feel proud of himself as a young African American man.

Finally, Myers uses this story as an exemplum aimed at teaching young African American readers to be proud of their community. Greg's father is neither absent nor negligent. He has had a hard time reaching Greg, but with the help of Lemon, himself a father figure for Greg, he will succeed in helping Greg to have a good life. Perhaps Myers refuses to depict Lemon Brown tragically because he wants to emphasize that, despite the presence of social problems like homelessness and poverty, Lemon, and other elders like him are themselves treasures, full of strength and wisdom. Myers wrote in the essay "Writing and Revising 'The Treasure of Lemon Brown'" that he was inspired to write the story after having "seen, in an old newspaper, an advertisement for a blues singer," wondering about his life story, and then wanting to write about someone discovering "what I had discovered, the past life of a human being." Though the story of Greg's encounter with Lemon may be "unrealistic," it inspires readers to consider community as a source of strength, one that might help young people like Greg to survive very realistic problems.

Source: Maureen Reed, Critical Essay on "The Treasure of Lemon Brown," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Walter Dean Myers

In the following essay, Myers expresses his desire to reach and inspire inner-city youth audiences through the use of accessible language and recognizable situations.

When I start a story I am always aware that at least part of my audience is the "uninspired reader." I prefer the term *uninspired* because it sounds less negative than *reluctant* and, to me, it is far more accurate. Reading has always brought me a great deal of pleasure and I come to the subject with the idea that if one is "reluctant" to read it must be because of some discomfiture with the reading process. Taking this approach as I watched young people read, I began searching for the discomfits that I suspected existed.

I understand reading to be two processes; the first is the act of decoding the words, sentences, phrases, and varied meanings of a contained writing form such as the essay, the short story, the novel, or the poem. The second process is that of "owning" the essential meaning of the piece being read, incorporating it fully into the reader's intellectual landscape. It is only when

readers have the ability to fully absorb the material being read that the process becomes pleasurable and a lifelong reader is created. Until then reading is only a chore and, to many, only another opportunity to fail.

While a great deal of attention is paid to the decoding or defining of single words, if the word can be sounded phonetically and recalled from memory, it is considered successfully decoded and therefore “read.” But I believe that in the uninspired reader, a lack of understanding of either the culture, subculture, or social strata from which the words are derived can still limit the concept of ownership. A phrase such as *he has money* could mean, depending on the context, that the referenced “he” has *some* money as opposed to *no* money, or it could mean that the referenced “he” has a great deal of money. As I decode this phrase I depend on my recognition of the individual words but also on the cultural range that gives me access to several possible meanings.

This is even clearer in a phrase like *Western Europe*. The term has little meaning to a person lacking knowledge of European history and development. A morning headline announcing that “The economy grew despite a decline in consumer spending” depends on a wider information range than many readers enjoy. When we consider the knowledge range of some inner-city youths, it is easy to see that the lack of information relative to culture, social issues, or just plain data can interfere with the decoding process sufficiently to make reading a chore. I get this same feeling when I read computer manuals. I have a perfect ability to sound out the words and usually can define them individually, but the codification of “tech talk” invariably prevents me from incorporating the material into my own intellectual scenario, and I find myself guessing at what is meant.

I’m not simply suggesting that some young people have a language other than English as their basic communication tool or that some speak a form of Black English. I want to extend my argument to include, as barriers to reading, the growing social and informational divide that is happening in our society.

When I look at the growing number of college graduates and compare it to the growing number of high school dropouts I understand that the differences between well-educated Americans (of any race) and the undereducated have

widened considerably over the last two decades. The same argument can be made for a divide in the social and cultural interaction in the workplace. Workers communicate with each other and learn a common job-related vocabulary. Clearly, when fewer inner-city youths find employment in large companies (Bob Herbert of the *New York Times* reported on July 19, 2004, that 44 percent of black high school dropouts are unemployed [A17]), the sharing of workplace vocabulary suffers and, when income levels vary as greatly as they do today, offsite activities also lose commonality. In short, as the greater society divides itself into the haves and have-nots economically, it also divides itself into the haves and have-nots linguistically. The conversation around the house of a middle-class black family is going to be significantly more diverse than that of a family in which unemployment is chronic.

What is happening in our society is that the exchange of language is being restricted as interaction is restricted. This doesn’t affect the decoding of individual words as much as it does phrases. If young readers are not familiar with the phrases being used they tend to gloss over them, even if they could read the phrases aloud, because the meaning is unclear. The result is the “uninspired” reader.

As a writer I especially want to reach the uninspired reader. I believe it is vital for the country and important for social order, and I relish my shared experiences with inner-city youths. To engage this audience I seek to use their language, their phrases, and their cultural contexts in a way that will make the stories as user-friendly as possible. This doesn’t mean that I can’t extend or embellish the language and even the meanings, but it is important that my basic references be accessible.

If my language can be easily handled by readers, then they can turn their attention to the essence of the story and begin that process of mentally and emotionally re-creating it in their own mind. If my work is interesting enough, the reader joins the ranks of the inspired. The reluctant reader becomes the eager reader.

I also know that I can help the reader by teaching, within the context of a story or work of nonfiction, a specialized language similar to the way this language is taught in the workplace. If I am careful to define the language I am using in the first chapters of a book, I will ease the reader through the entire experience.

Why doesn't this happen more often? Why don't more young readers find some book that turns them on and then become the enthusiastic readers we want them to be? The answer lies in the total reading experience. To many would-be readers, all written material has become a challenge, an opportunity to show their inadequacies. I feel I should be striving to bring the reader to language and story and convincing him or her that the journey is worth the while.

Toni Morrison has said that she expects her readers to do whatever work is required to reach her sophisticated offerings. Harold Bloom dismisses the uninspired reader as having an uninspired mind hardly worth the reaching. While I respect Ms. Morrison and will continue to read her books (and some that Harold Bloom recommends) I believe that it is equally the responsibility of the author to reach the audience. If I can't transmit my ideas and feelings using the rich cultural tools of my black heritage, the failing lies with me as much as with the reader. Writing, for me, becomes most satisfying when it is the openly complicit and joyful act of a writer and reader both enjoying a book.

Source: Walter Dean Myers, "Writing for the Uninspired Reader," in *The English Journal*, Vol. 94, No. 3, January 2005, pp. 36–38.

Walter Dean Myers

In the following essay, Myers recounts his challenging boyhood and how he has used writing to better understand his own identity.

The real name is Walter Milton Myers. I was born in August 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. The whole town is about ten square blocks, or smaller than the Harlem community in which I was raised. The trip to Harlem from Martinsburg was precipitated by the death of my mother when I was two.

Being raised Black in America has been the major influence in my life. First I had to figure out whether being Black was a good or bad thing. This is no mean trick when all of the heroes I was presented with were White. Finally I decided that being Black was at least okay.

The next problem was to figure out what being Black meant. Did it mean that I was a good athlete? Could I "naturally" sing and dance well? Was I sexually wonderful? The only thing I knew for certain was that I wanted to be like everyone else. To an extent I was like everyone else. I wore the same kind of clothes, the same

brand of sneakers, went to the same schools. Oh, I did read more than some of my friends, but that didn't really count.

When I reached fifteen I had my first crises. Sorry, that's **CRISES**. The world didn't understand me. My folks didn't understand me. And no one seemed to understand the important things in life. Except me, I knew it all. I remember being relieved that at least someone knew what it was all about.

My foster father was a wonderful man. He gave me the most precious gift any father could give to a son. He loved me. He did it without articulating the nuances, and without really understanding the kind of person he was allowing me to be.

My foster mother understood the value of education, even though neither she nor my father had more than a rudimentary education. She also understood the value of story, how it could serve as a refuge for people, like us, who couldn't afford the finer things in life, or even all of what came to be the everyday things.

I've always been a bit uneasy about my lack of formal education. I was a good reader, and I took to stories to find my true identity. Could I have been an enchanted prince? Although the idea seems odd now, it certainly seemed better than being the poor child of a janitor when I was in my preteen period.

Langston Hughes lived a few blocks away. It was my discovery of Hughes that allowed my first efforts at writing to assume a new posture, one that said I could write about poor people in general, and poor Black people in particular. Wonderful.

Writing, being a writer, is wonderful. I love it more than anything else in the world. I think it's God's gift to me, and I would like to be remembered as giving something back to the world.

What I do now is to rediscover my life, in bits and pieces, and write about the wonderment of the rediscovery so that others might share. There are so many parts I haven't written about yet, but which I will come to soon. I hope.

Source: Walter Dean Myers, "Walter Dean Myers," in *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*, edited by Donald R. Gallo, National Council of Teachers of English, 1990, pp. 148–150.

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- Jonathan Kozol is the author of award-winning books about education and social justice. In this book, he documents the experiences of the homeless in New York in the 1980s. The book emphasizes firsthand accounts of homelessness that allow the reader to understand how this social problem has impacted individual lives.
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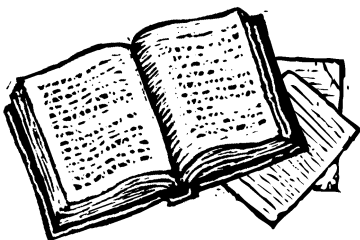
With All Flags Flying

ANNE TYLER

1971

Originally published in the June 1971 issue of *Redbook*, Anne Tyler's "With All Flags Flying" is a highly regarded short story often studied in English classes. Tyler is considered one of America's greatest living writers and is primarily known for her critically acclaimed, award-winning novels. She has also written a number of respected works of short fiction. Considered a relatively minor work in her canon, "With All Flags Flying" was nominated for an O. Henry Award in 1972 and is included in the anthology *Prize Stories 1972: The O. Henry Awards*.

"With All Flags Flying" focuses on an eighty-two-year-old man named Mr. Carpenter. Though he has valued his independence his whole life, he realizes he is no longer able to live alone. Carpenter has a loving family but does not want to rely on them for help as he becomes more elderly. Rather than become a burden to his loved ones, he decides he wants to live out his days in an old folks' home. He refuses to consider any other option proposed by his family and follows his chosen path not to be a burden on them as he nears the end of his life. Through "With All Flags Flying," Tyler explores issues of aging, family dynamics, control, and freedom by showing the determination of one man to live and die on his terms.





Anne Tyler (Getty Images)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Phyllis Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on October 25, 1941. She was the daughter of Lloyd Parry and Phyllis (Mahon) Tyler. Her father worked as a chemist and her mother was a social worker. Her family adhered to the Quaker faith, and she spent her early years living in various Quaker communes in the Midwest and South, including North Carolina. Tyler was home-schooled, which made it difficult for her to make friends. Although she felt alienated from other children, she was an enthusiastic reader and loved stories and books.

At sixteen, Tyler entered Duke University on a full academic scholarship. There, she majored in Russian and appeared in a production of Tennessee Williams's play, *The Glass Menagerie*. She also began to publish short stories in literary magazines and was twice honored with the Anne Flexner Award for creative writing. Tyler graduated Phi Beta Kappa at the age of nineteen, then began working on a master's degree in Russian at Columbia University.

When she was twenty-one years old, Tyler met Taghi Modarressi, a native of Iran who was studying to be a psychiatrist. The couple married six months later and eventually had two daughters, Tezh and Mitra. Because of visa issues, Tyler and her husband moved to Montreal in 1963. There, her husband studied at McGill University and Tyler worked as an assistant librarian in the law school. She also began her writing career with her first two published novels, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964) and *The Tin Can Tree* (1965).

The family moved to Baltimore in 1967, where Tyler's writing career began in earnest. She wrote and published numerous short stories, including "With All Flags Flying" (1971), and also garnered attention as a novelist with the publication of her 1972 novel *The Clock Winder*. She then published *Celestial Navigation* in 1974 and *Searching for Caleb* in 1976. Nearly all of her fiction was set in her adopted home city of Baltimore, and her stories were domestic in nature, focusing on the details and dramas of everyday life.

In the 1980s, Tyler's novels became highly regarded and critically acclaimed, beginning with *Morgan's Passing* (1980) and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). Several novels published in this decade were given major awards. *Morgan's Passing* was honored with the Kafka Prize, while *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* was given the 1983 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. Tyler also won the 1985 National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), which was adapted into a major motion picture in 1988. In 1989, Tyler was honored with the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Breathing Lessons* (1988).

Although Tyler's later novels did not receive the acclaim her earlier ones did, she continued to publish regularly and be regarded as one of the most gifted novelists in modern American literature. Among her best-known works of this time period are *Saint Maybe* (1991), *Ladder of Years* (1995), *The Amateur Marriage* (2004), and *Noah's Compass* (2010). A widow since her husband's death in 1997, Tyler continues to live and write in Baltimore. She is known as an intensely private person who refuses most interviews and public appearances.

PLOT SUMMARY

As "With All Flags Flying" opens, an eighty-two-year-old man named Mr. Carpenter lives alone in a two-room house located on the last bit of farm property he owns near a superhighway in Baltimore County. He has felt weaker recently and household chores have been neglected. He has come to the conclusion that he can no longer live alone. Carpenter has been expecting that a more obvious sign or health problem would drive him to make this change, but "it was only weakness that put a finish on his living alone."

One Saturday morning, Carpenter gets ready to leave. He packs a hunk of bread and

two Fig Newtons in a paper bag along with a spare set of underwear and a razor. He puts on T-shirt, work boots, and a suit he bought in 1944. Carpenter leaves his other possessions in the house, which include a pen, a few clothespins, and a comb. Before he departs from his home, he reflects on his life. He was born with nothing but built a life with his wife, their five children, and many possessions. Now Carpenter feels like he needs next to nothing. As Tyler writes, "Now he had the brown paper bag; that was all. It was the one satisfaction in a day he had been dreading for years."

To leave the house, Carpenter climbs up a steep bank to the superhighway. It takes much effort on his part. His knees buckle twice, forcing him to sit and rest. When Carpenter makes it to the superhighway, he can walk for long periods of time, but sweats profusely. After a half an hour, he sits down to rest, and a young man on a motorcycle stops. The rider offers Carpenter a lift to Baltimore, where Carpenter is headed.

Riding behind the young man, Carpenter soon relaxes and enjoys his ride on the motorcycle: "It was a fine way to spend his last free day." Within a half an hour, they reach the city. The motorcycle rider drops him off at his oldest daughter Clara's house. Nearly fifty, Clara is married to a salesman and has six children. Carpenter is rather disappointed that the ride had to end.

After Carpenter gets off the bike and the motorcycle rider roars away, Clara comes out of the house and hugs him. She also admonishes him for not calling her to pick him up. Carpenter immediately tells her that he wants to live in an "old folks' home." He also states that while he likes to visit her, he does not want to live with her. Clara reminds him that she and her family have always wanted him to live with them when the time came. Carpenter remains firm in his decision, but tells her "What I *will* rely on you for is the arrangements with the home. I know it's a trouble."

Inside the house, Carpenter eats his bread and squished Fig Newtons with a glass of milk. Though Clara offers to make him a hearty breakfast and give him fresh cookies, he wants to eat the food that he has brought with him. Tyler writes of the Newtons, "They seemed to have come from somewhere long ago and far away." Carpenter then asks his daughter to clean up his house. Clara offers to bring all the contents back, but he does not want any of them and tells her to "Take it to the colored people." Clara is confused by her father's request,

but he does not explain why he does not want his possessions.

After her father eats his lunch, Clara leads him to the upstairs guest room. All Clara's children come up to greet their grandfather. Carpenter admits a particular attachment to his only granddaughter, Francie, who was "too young yet to know how to hide what she felt." Carpenter enjoys hearing about her life and love interests. When she leaves, "the room seemed too empty, as if she had accidentally torn part of it away in her flight."

Carpenter begins the process of getting into a home and handling his family's expectations about this phase of life. Getting into a home proves to be difficult, as there are waiting lists and expenses. His family proves problematic to Carpenter as his son-in-law tells him nightly that he is welcome to live with the family. But Carpenter has no intention of staying there because he has already decided to live in a home and does not want to change his mind. His grandchildren also work hard to impress upon him that they want him to stay. In addition, his other daughters, spread around the country, tell Carpenter he can come and live with them if he does not want to stay with Clara. They also warn him that old folks' homes are not pleasant. Though Carpenter feels pride at the kind of adults his children have become, he remains firm in his decision.

While staying at Clara's, Carpenter continues to feel weak but fights it by walking two blocks every day. He also helps out around the house, shelling peas and fixing household items. Yet he is only able to climb the stairs once a day and spends many hours sitting in a chair. Tyler writes, "Never once did he disgrace himself by falling down in front of people. He dropped nothing more important than a spoon or a fork."

Carpenter's name has been placed on a waiting list at a home, but Clara struggles with the idea of him living there. She tries to get him to change his mind, but Carpenter has known for many years how he wants to spend his elderly years. He believes that many old people chose to be weak and were forced to live according to their families' desires, but he remembers a teacher he once knew named Lollie Simpson who had determined what kind of old age she wanted to have. A thin woman, she had a plan that left her dependent on no one. She wanted to sit in a chair, read magazines, eat fudge, and get as fat as she liked.

Like the teacher, Carpenter does not want to be dependent on anyone else. He has lived his life this way and wants to go into the home by himself. Tyler also notes, “He could have chosen to die alone of neglect, but for his daughters that would have been a burden too—a different kind of burden, much worse.” While waiting to get into the home, Carpenter fends off his family’s many attempts to change his mind. He also refuses to talk about the past, even about his deceased wife with Francie.

On the day Carpenter is to enter the home, Clara and Francie drive him there. Clara is in tears, but her father tells her “There’s no need to be sad over *me*.” Clara wishes he would change his mind about living with her, but he remains silent and sure of his decision.

When they arrive, Carpenter climbs the steps on his own and carries his paper sack that contains his change of underwear and razor. He checks himself in and answers all pertinent questions himself. The intake woman, Carpenter, Clara, and Francie ride an elevator to the second floor and go to room 213. There, the intake worker introduces Carpenter to his new roommate, Mr. Pond. Pond says he is used to sleeping by a window, but he offers either bed to Carpenter, who says he does not care.

Carpenter then tells his daughter that she can go home, but adds “Don’t you worry about me. I’ll let you know if there is anything I need.” After saying good-bye, Clara and Francie leave and Carpenter unpacks his few belongings into the bureau. Pond insists that Carpenter take the bed by the window so he can watch his family leave.

Looking out the window, Carpenter watches Clara and Francie get into their car. Clara is still crying. Pond tells Carpenter, “*Now* they cry. Later they’ll buy themselves a milk shake to celebrate.” Carpenter tells him it was his choice to come, while Pond reveals that his son chose to put him in the home because his wife is pregnant. Carpenter tells Pond that he had options within his family, “But I’m not like some I have known. Hanging around making burdens of themselves, hoping to be loved. Not me.” Pond replies, “If you don’t care about being loved, how come it would bother you to be a burden?”

Pond resumes reading the Bible and Carpenter sits on his bed and watches Clara’s car drive away. He takes off his suit coat and shoes, lies down on the bed, and looks up at the ceiling. He feels fatigued and weak. He repeats his promise to

live gracefully until “the moment of my defeat.” He also hopes that Lollie Simpson is alive somewhere eating fudge and gaining weight.

CHARACTERS

Mr. Carpenter

Mr. Carpenter is an eighty-two-year-old widower who is focused on controlling how he spends his last days. Because he is feeling weaker and believes that he can no longer live alone in his modest two-room home in Baltimore County, he decides to move in with his daughter Clara while waiting for a spot at an old folks’ home. To that end, Carpenter wakes up early one Saturday morning and begins to walk along the superhighway to her home in Baltimore. The effort takes much out of him, but he is picked up by a young motorcycle rider. Carpenter finds the ride thrilling and fulfilling, a last taste of freedom before living with his daughter’s family, finding an old folks’ home, and moving there.

Tyler explains his motivation by writing, “He had chosen independence. Nothing else had even occurred to him. . . . He could have chosen to die alone of neglect, but for his daughters that would have been a burden too—a different kind of burden, much worse.” For Carpenter, independence means living at a home with few possessions, needing no care from attendants, and not being a burden on anyone. In the end, Carpenter gets his wish and is dropped off at the home by Clara and Francie. Though his roommate, Mr. Pond, does not share circumstances, Carpenter is content to end his days there living on his terms, “gracefully till the moment of my defeat.”

Clara

Clara is one of Mr. Carpenter’s four daughters. She is nearly fifty years old, married to a salesman, and the mother of six children. The fleshy, caring Clara lives in a stone house in Baltimore. She is surprised when her father shows up at her door on the back of a motorcycle. When Clara learns that her father wants to live in an old folks’ home, she is upset, as she and her family had planned that he would live with them when he could not continue to live alone. Though Clara does find him placement in a home, she tries to change his mind, but to no avail. Driving to the home for the elderly in tears, she gives into her father’s wishes and leaves him there.

Clara's Husband

Clara's husband is Carpenter's son-in-law and works as a salesman. Like his wife and children, he tries to change Carpenter's mind about moving to an old folks' home. Every night that Carpenter is in his home, his son-in-law says, "Is it that you think you're not welcome here? You are, you know. You were one of the reasons we bought this big house." Despite such efforts, Carpenter goes into the home.

Francie

Francie is Mr. Carpenter's thirteen-year-old granddaughter. She is Carpenter's favorite grandchild. He enjoys listening to her talk about boys and love without self-consciousness. However, when Francie begins to question him about the past—which he regards as an attempt to change his mind about living in the home by showing the value of his life—Carpenter will not give an inch. Francie goes with her mother to drop him off at the old folks' home, holding his hand tightly the whole way there and hugging him just as hard when they leave him in his room.

Lady in Blue

The lady in blue is the intake person at the old folks' home to which Carpenter is taken. She checks him in, takes him to his room, and introduces him to his new roommate, Mr. Pond.

Motorcycle Rider

Early in "With All Flags Flying," a motorcycle rider stops along the superhighway in Baltimore County to offer Mr. Carpenter a ride. He is a young man with long hair and a "shabby" appearance. Carpenter accepts the ride and enjoys the freedom he feels as a passenger on the bike. The motorcycle rider takes Mr. Carpenter into Baltimore and drops him off at Clara's house.

Mr. Pond

Mr. Pond is Carpenter's roommate at the old folks' home. Described as fat and balding in his old age, Pond has been sent to the home by his son because his daughter-in-law is pregnant. Unlike Carpenter, Pond does not want to be at the home. Sitting in a rocking chair and reading the Bible, Pond offers the bed by the window to his new roommate, even though he has been using it himself. Carpenter ultimately takes him up on his offer and explains why he wants to be at the home, to which Pond replies "If you don't care

about being loved, how come it would bother you to be a burden?" Carpenter has no reply.

Lollie Simpson

Lollie Simpson is a schoolteacher Carpenter once knew. He admires her greatly for her simple plan for her senior citizen years. Though "thin and pale" at the time, she wanted to spend her last days sitting in an armchair, reading magazines, eating as much homemade fudge as she wants, and getting fat as she likes without any regrets or cares in the world. Carpenter's plan for independence is greatly inspired by her.

THEMES

Aging

One of the primary themes in "With All Flags Flying" is aging and issues related to the elderly. Carpenter is an eighty-two-year-old widower who has lived alone in a two-room house since his wife's death. For many years he has had a plan for how he wants to spend the end of his life. This short story focuses on what happens when Carpenter realizes that he can no longer live alone. Describing his feelings of weakness, Tyler writes, "A numbness in his head, an airy feeling when he walked. A wateriness in his bones that made it an effort to pick up his coffee cup in the morning. He waited some days for it to go away, but it never did." This situation makes it clear to Carpenter that he has to put his plan for his last years into motion, confirmed by the physical cost of his effort to try to walk to his daughter Clara's home in Baltimore.

At Clara's, Carpenter continues to feel this age-related weakness but stands firm on his plan to move into an old folks' home. While Clara and her family as well as three other daughters try to change his mind, he is also loved and respected by them. However, Carpenter focuses on his plan—inspired by Lollie Simpson's which he had heard years ago—well aware of how physically weak he feels. Though he feels lucky about his life, he also is aware of issues of life and death, especially after the relatively uncomplicated death of his wife. Tyler writes, "His final lot was to weaken, to crumble and to die—only a secret disaster, not the one he had been expecting." Living in an old folks' home allows Carpenter to live his aged years as he likes—somewhat independently without being a burden to his family. While his roommate Mr. Pond

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Using the Internet and the library, research the history of homes for the elderly in the United States. How have they changed over time? Have services improved? Create a presentation with your findings, focusing a significant part of your presentation on the early 1970s, when the story was written, versus present day. Include analysis of the brief references and descriptions of homes for the elderly from “With All Flags Flying” in your presentation.
- In a small group, list the reasons why you believe Mr. Carpenter is determined to avoid living with his family and wants to spend his remaining years living in a home for the elderly. Discuss your findings. Do you agree with his line of reasoning? How would you feel if you were him, one of his daughters, or one of his grandchildren?
- Write a short story that tells the tale of “With All Flags Flying” from a different character’s perspective, adding your own creative touches to flesh out the narrative. For example, what do you think the motorcycle rider’s perspective of Mr. Carpenter would be? What is the rider’s story? How do you think Francie or Clara or Mr. Pond might tell the story and view Mr. Carpenter’s determination?
- In an essay, compare and contrast “With All Flags Flying” with the young adult novel *The Floor of the Sky* (2006) by Pamela Carter Joern. Both stories focus on an elderly man, loss, and his relationship with a beloved granddaughter. How does each man handle the situation presented to him? How are they alike and how do they differ?

questions Carpenter’s true motives for wanting to live at the home, Pond has been forced to live at the home by his son and pregnant daughter-in-law. The path of his elder years is different from Carpenter’s but shows another common way the elderly are treated by their families.

Control

Another main theme found in “With All Flags Flying” is the concept of control. Carpenter is determined to maintain control of his life as much as possible. After his wife’s death, he chooses to live alone in a two-room house with as few possessions as possible. When Carpenter begins to feel the effects of aging—a weakness that limits his ability to take care of himself and his home—he puts his plan into motion for how he wants to spend his last years.

Though Carpenter’s family tries to convince him to abandon his plan, he is determined to spend his last days living in a home for the elderly. He knows he has to fight off their attempts to change his mind and maintain control. He tries to do so by not hurting the feelings of Clara, his other daughters, son-in-law, Francie, and others, but his goal and retaining control are all that matters. In the end, Carpenter checks into the home where he believes he will not be a burden to his family and where he does not have to hope to be loved. Unlike Pond, who has had no control over his fate because his family put him there, Carpenter is exactly where he wants to be because he chose to be there.

Ironically, one of the moments in which he has the least control also has the most meaning for Carpenter. Struggling to walk along the superhighway to reach Clara’s house, Carpenter accepts a ride from a young male motorcycle rider into Baltimore. While he feels uncertain riding on the back at first, he soon becomes “perfectly comfortable” save for the helmet he wears. While he is directing the young man where to go, he is not in control of the bike but free to feel the air from its back.

In the city, Carpenter feels “People in their automobiles seemed sealed in, overprotected; men in large trucks must envy the way the motorcycle looped in and out, hornet-like, stripped to the bare essentials of a motor and two wheels.” In the end, “he was sorry to have the ride over so quickly.” When he goes to the old folks’ home in his daughter’s car—reaching his final goal of control over how he lives his life—he finds himself wishing he was going there on a motorcycle.

Family

One undercurrent to the story is the importance of family. Though Carpenter does not want to live with his family, they are important to him. In his quest to control his own destiny as much as possible, he does not want to hurt them or their



An elderly man in his bedroom (© Whisson / Jordan / Corbis)

feelings as he tries to ensure that his last days are spent as he so desires. He knows he has become too weak to live alone, but he cannot choose to continue to live alone and die neglected because it would cause an intense, lifelong hurt on his children: “for his daughters that would have been a burden too—a different kind of burden, much worse. He was sensible enough to see that.” He loves them too much to inflict that kind of pain on them. So Carpenter makes the choice to go to Clara’s house and demonstrate her importance to him by allowing her to help him by closing up his home and finding him an old folks’ home.

While on a waiting list for a home, Carpenter has to fight for his plan to be executed but appreciates his time with his family, particularly with his thirteen-year-old granddaughter Francie. During his stay at Clara’s, Carpenter reflects on his family with pride as they try to convince him to let them take care of him. He appreciates their efforts and is proud of them:

All his children had turned out so well, every last one of them. They were good, strong women with happy families, and they had never given him a moment’s worry. He was luckier than he had a right to be.

Even when Clara leaves him at the home, he is concerned with his daughter’s feelings, telling her “Don’t you worry about me. I’ll let you

know if there is anything I need.” By the end of the story, it seems clear that he wants to maintain his relationship with his family as long as he can live at the home on his own terms.

STYLE

Setting

The setting is the time, place, and culture in which the narrative’s action takes place. In “With All Flags Flying,” the setting is contemporary time (the early 1970s) in Baltimore and Baltimore County. Many of Tyler’s works take place in Baltimore, where the author has made her home for many years. She draws on her personal knowledge of the city and its surrounding areas in this story and her other fiction. For example, the description of the superhighway, the location of Clara’s home and its contents, and perhaps the old folks’ home all reflect Tyler’s relationship with the area and enhance her portrayal of her setting.

Protagonist

In “With All Flags Flying,” Mr. Carpenter is the story’s protagonist. A protagonist is the central character of a fictional work who serves as the focus of a story, its themes, and gives meaning to its development. Carpenter is the primary character in the short story. It is he who realizes that he is too weak to live alone any more and works to ensure that the last years of his life are spent in the manner in which he desires. For Carpenter, that means having a positive relationship with his daughters and their families but living in an old folks’ home with few possessions. It is this quest that informs the development of the story.

Brand Names and Visual Images

Another characteristic of Tyler’s fiction which can be found in “With All Flags Flying” is her use of specific details to add character and depth to her stories. Tyler often uses specific product brands in her descriptions. For example, in “With All Flags Flying,” Carpenter packs Fig Newtons in his paper sack and eats them. Later, in her description of Francie, Tyler specifically mentions “Band-Aids,” while Carpenter wonders on his way to the home, “Whatever happened to DeSotos?”

Tyler’s use of informative details expands beyond such brand names to descriptions that provide vivid visual images. In the beginning of

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **Early 1970s:** The United States is involved in a controversial war in Vietnam and has a vibrant counterculture movement which includes antiwar activism.

Today: The United States is involved in controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While there are protests against the war, the antiwar movement does not have the same counterculture element to it.

- **Early 1970s:** The Gray Panthers activist group is founded by Maggie Kuhn and addresses concerns of older Americans.

Today: The Gray Panthers remain active in fighting for the rights of older Americans.

- **Early 1970s:** The United States is facing severe economic problems, including an oil and gasoline crisis as well a recession.

Today: The United States is facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression in the 1930s.

- **Early 1970s:** Rebellion in the form of 1960s counterculture is becoming a part of mainstream society.

Today: Rebellion can be purchased at the mall in the form of Goth and punk clothing.

“With All Flags Flying,” for example, it becomes easier to imagine Carpenter because of her description of his outfit: “He was wearing a brown suit that he had bought on sale in 1944, a white T shirt and copper-toed work boots.” Tyler employs similarly lucid descriptions of minor details throughout the story to enhance its depth and meaning.

Conflict

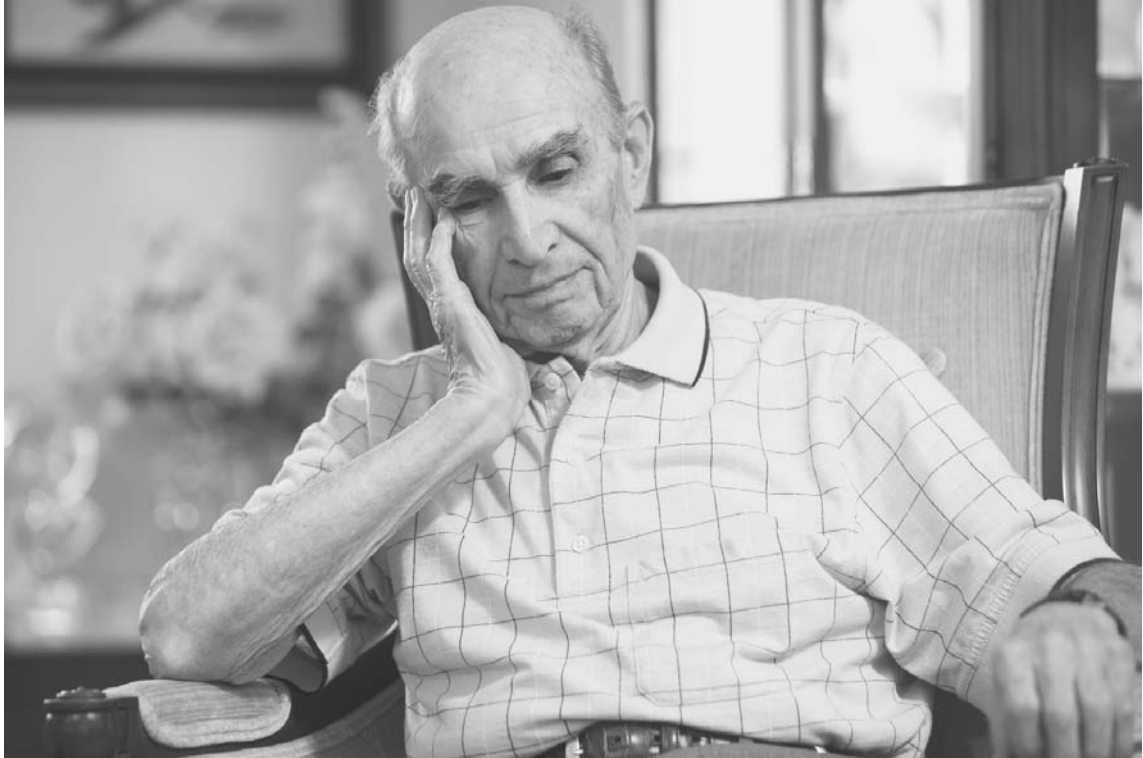
In a work of fiction, the conflict is the issue that is to be resolved in the story. In “With All Flags Flying,” there are several conflicts, all of which revolve around Mr. Carpenter. One conflict is internal and focuses on his coming to terms with his aging. While he is not happy that has become weak and unable to live alone, he is determined to fight it through actions like walking to his daughter’s house, using walking as an exercise while living at Clara’s, and determining how he will spend his last years. Another conflict is between Carpenter and his family. He believes his best course of action is to live in an old folks’ home. However, his daughter Clara, her family, and Carpenter’s three other daughters do not want him to live in such a home as they are all happy to have him live with them. Carpenter is forced to be in conflict with them over the issue

but remains firm in the face of their efforts. The conflict here is not without love and understanding. Carpenter loves his family and is proud of how his daughters turned out, but he wants to live in an old folks’ home and gets his way in the end. Though this conflict is resolved, his internal conflict continues at the story’s end.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Changes in American Society

In the early 1970s, Americans were still dealing with and reeling from the massive social changes of the revolutionary 1960s. The rise of the counterculture in the 1960s, for example, led to many aspects of this movement, such as questioning authority and tradition, being incorporated into mainstream American society in the 1970s. The administration of Richard M. Nixon, who took office in 1969, continued to escalate American involvement in the Vietnam War. By 1973, a peace treaty had been reached and American troops soon withdrew from Vietnam. The United States and South Vietnam were essentially defeated when the communist forces from North Vietnam took over the whole of the country in 1975. The counterculture movement,



The man in the story contemplates his future and aging, alone. (Image copyright Monkey Business Images, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

the Vietnam War, and other problems left Americans questioning themselves, their society, and their place in the world. Over the next decade, Americans became less optimistic and more apathetic and passive, politically and otherwise, especially after the Watergate scandal brought the Nixon presidency to an early end in 1974. Some critics believe that in this short story Tyler was reacting to changes in American society as Carpenter wants to control his fate in a world undergoing massive changes. She also included a counterculture type of character in the motorcycle rider who gives Carpenter a ride to his daughter's home in Baltimore.

Gray Panthers and Other Activist Movements

Despite the changes in American society, many Americans were restless and questioned traditional authorities and assumptions. There were a number of high-profile, effective social justice and liberation movements in the 1970s. The feminist movement fought to become a greater part of mainstream American life, while gay rights,

Native American, Chicano, and handicapped activists gained ground. While feminists were trying to effect real change in American society by confronting sexual subordination and male dominance, African American activists continued to confront racial discrimination and the rule of white elites.

In 1970, Maggie Kuhn organized the first prominent activist group for older Americans. Founded with a few friends, it was originally called the Consultation of Older and Younger Adults for Social Change. Dubbed the Gray Panthers by a New York talk show producer, Kuhn and her group dealt with the issues facing retirees and the elderly, including loss of income, role in society, and the lack of networking opportunities. While the Gray Panthers primarily focused on the problems and challenges facing the elderly, they also spoke out about the Vietnam War, race relations, health care, housing reform, and other concerns of mainstream American society through sit-ins, picket lines, demonstrations, and media appearances.

Though Kuhn's group started small, its growing membership led to the organization of local networks during in the 1970s. By 1975, the Gray Panthers held their first national convention. Three years later, Congress passed laws to end age discrimination and increase the age of mandatory retirement from sixty-five to seventy. By the mid-1980s, the Gray Panthers had a public policy office in Washington, D.C.; by 1995, the group had seventy thousand members. In "With All Flags Flying" Carpenter is not a Gray Panther or activist, but his quest to control his fate reflects a core value of the group, to stand up for one's own rights and beliefs no matter what kind of pressure is faced.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Like many of Tyler's short stories, "With All Flags Flying" has received little individual critical attention, though stories such as "With All Flags Flying" are regularly used in the classroom. First published in *Redbook* in 1971, "With All Flags Flying" was included in the annual collection of O. Henry Award-winning stories in 1972.

Critics have commented that Tyler "is a fine short-story writer," as Elizabeth Evans writes in *Anne Tyler*. In the limited critical writing about her short fiction, critics have noted her repeated use of Baltimore and North Carolina as settings. Tyler is also lauded for tackling subjects and character types not often found in her novels, though she still favored domestic dramas and exploring sometimes difficult interpersonal relationships. Evans writes, "the stories need to be read for the good writing and moving experiences."

Referring specifically to "With All Flags Flying," Evans notes "Nothing is more appealing to Anne Tyler the writer than the task of rendering old men, and in this story she is unerring in her description." Evans concludes that "the story celebrates one man who meets old age with little physical strength but great courage of spirit."

CRITICISM

A. Petruso

Petruso has a B.A. in history from the University of Michigan and an M.A. in screenwriting from the University of Texas at Austin. In this essay,

she examines the concept of freedom in "With All Flags Flying."

Anne Tyler's popular short story "With All Flags Flying" gracefully explores a number of themes in the tale of eighty-two-year-old Mr. Carpenter. One major idea, underscored by symbolism found in the story, is the concept of freedom and the need to be as independent as possible. Carpenter wants to be as free and independent at this time of his life as he has been for the eighty-two previous years. He spends the whole of the story ensuring that his life choice to be free to live and die where he chooses is met. By looking at the complex, detailed ways Tyler delves into freedom and independence through Carpenter, the importance of these ideas to him—if not all free-spirited Americans—can be better understood.

This theme is laid out in the first scene in "With All Flags Flying." Tyler opens the story with the statement, "Weakness was what got him in the end," forcing Carpenter to give up the independence he has by living alone. While he prepares to leave the house he owns, Tyler describes his life to this point, emphasizing his attachment to being free from material possessions as much as possible:

He had grown from an infant owning nothing to a family man with a wife, five children, everyday and Sunday china and a thousand appurtenances, down at last to solitary old age and the bare essentials again, but not bare enough to suit him.

In this key description, Tyler emphasizes how much Carpenter values being free of belongings. While he loves his children and family, it is implied he owned much during that period of his life for their sake, not for himself. Living alone as he chooses, he would rather possess only what he absolutely must have.

In these first paragraphs, Tyler underscores this point by describing his home and listing his belongings. He had once owned a farm but had sold it many years ago. He now lives in a two-room house on a small piece of the land that he retains with "a few sticks of furniture, a change of clothes, a skillet and a set of dishes. Also odds and ends, which disturbed him." These items include a pen, comb, clothespins, and other small household items. If Carpenter had had his way, he would not have owned any of these items, as they compelled the question "Why should he be so cluttered?"

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *The Magic Paintbrush*, published in 2000, is a young adult novel by Laurence Yep. It focuses on a young boy named Steve who goes to live with his grandfather in Chinatown after the unexpected death of his parents. Though his grandfather is impoverished and initially does not connect emotionally with Steve, the pair bond over a magic paintbrush given to Steve by his grandfather.
- *Searching for Caleb*, published in 1976, is a novel by Tyler. The novel focuses on Justine Peck, who marries her first cousin, Duncan. She hesitantly follows him in his attempt to flee the rigid life of the Peck family, and in the process she helps her grandfather find his brother Caleb who escaped the family many years ago.
- *In My Grandmother's House: Award-Winning Authors Tell Stories About Their Grandmothers* (2003). This anthology, edited by Bonnie Christensen, includes short stories by various authors about their grandmothers and their relationships with them. Featured authors include Beverly Cleary, Gail Carson Levine, and Minfong Ho.
- *Breathing Lessons*, published in 1988, is a novel by Tyler. It explores the life and marriage

of Ira and Maggie Moran as they travel to the funeral of an old friend. The couple has been married for twenty-eight years, not always happily, but remain deeply bonded despite their struggles.

- *Shiloh and Other Stories*, published in 1982, is a short story collection by Bobbie Ann Mason. Her often deceptively simple stories focus on life in rural Kentucky. Many of her characters feel out of place in their lives.
- "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," published in 1977, is a short story by Tyler. The narrative concerns a mother and her mentally challenged son, Arnold. Taking care of her son proves too challenging, and she is compelled to commit him to a state institution. The story can be found in the ninth edition of *The American Tradition in Literature* (1998), edited by George Perkins and Barbara Perkins.
- *The Optimist's Daughter*, published in 1972, is a short novel by Eudora Welty. The novel explores the experiences of Laurel, a young woman who takes care of her father after a surgery. After her father's death, Laurel must handle the response of his second wife, Fay, and deal with memories found at his home in a small Mississippi town.

When Carpenter gets ready to leave his house, he puts on a suit, T-shirt, and work boots then packs a change of underwear, a razor, a hunk of bread, and two Fig Newton cookies in a paper bag. When he leaves his home, it is "without another glance," and he later has his daughter Clara close up the home and get rid of what remains there. Packing everything he owns in a paper bag "was the one satisfaction in a day he had been dreading for years." For Carpenter, owning as little as possible and living simply has been important to his sense of freedom. Leaving with less is symbolic of Carpenter's need to be as free as possible.

Tyler contrasts Carpenter's humble abode with the busy home of his daughter. Clara is married to a salesman with six children under the age of twenty, including Carpenter's favorite thirteen-year-old Francie. Describing the outside of Clara's dwelling, Tyler writes that Clara "lived in a plain, square stone house that the old man approved of. There were sneakers and a football in the front yard, signs of a large, happy family. A bicycle lay in the driveway." Clara has a big kitchen and a guest room for her father. He does not condemn his daughter's home or life; it is what he wants for her and the rest of his daughters. For him, this time of life has past



IN HIS OWN WAY, HE WANTS TO BE AS FREE AS FRANCIE, AS FREE AS HE FELT RIDING ON THE MOTORCYCLE, AND AS CLOSE TO AS FREE AS HE WAS LIVING ALONE IN HIS OWN HOUSE. NONE OF THIS WOULD BE POSSIBLE LIVING WITH FAMILY MEMBERS, IN HIS MIND.”

and he wants to be free of it except as a visitor, and he resists all efforts—much appreciated as they are because it shows they were raised well—to get him to stay. Carpenter prefers the austerity of the old folks’ home, where he has a simple room with beds and a rocking chair, a roommate, and a bureau in which to put his few belongings. There, he is again free from material possessions and has few responsibilities to anyone but himself.

In “With All Flags Flying,” Carpenter’s journeys between places also are imbued with ideas about freedom. When he realizes he can no longer live alone, he does not call Clara to pick him up. He decides to walk along the superhighway from his home in Baltimore County to her home in the city proper. The effort is exhausting, but he knows it is the last time he will be truly free and alone. After some time, a “young and shabby” man “with hair so long that it drizzled out beneath the back of his helmet” on a motorcycle stops and offers the already exhausted elderly man a lift. Carpenter enjoys the ride as “He felt his face cooling and stiffening in the wind, his body learning to lean gracefully with the tilt of the motorcycle.” Tyler adds this statement to underscore what Carpenter is now losing: “It was a fine way to spend his last free day.”

Tyler uses the motorcycle as a symbol of freedom. Being on two wheels, moving in and out of traffic with ease, and open to the world in a way a car cannot be are all liberating for Carpenter, who greatly appreciates every aspect of the journey on the bike—except the helmet. Tyler links the motorcycle to his lack of interest in material things at this stage of his life by noting that it is “stripped to the bare essentials of a motor and two wheels.”

At Clara’s, Carpenter continues to walk each day, “fighting off the weakness,” but he cannot be free from it. His lack of freedom continues when Clara drives him to the old folks’ home and tells him that she is upset by his choice. Francie comes along and does not want to let go of her grandfather either. As Tyler explains, Francie is “her usual self except for the unexplainable presence of her other hand in his, tight as wire.” Carpenter knows he could not have walked there, but Tyler notes that the first motorcycle ride has given him a taste of unobtrusive freedom that he wishes he could have tasted again. She writes, “If he had had his way, he would have arrived by motorcycle, but he made the best of it.” He has had a taste of this freedom and it means much to him.

Carpenter’s relationship with and pleasure in his granddaughter Francie is also linked to the theme of freedom. Tyler writes that Francie was “too young yet to know how to hide what she felt. And what she felt was always about love . . .” Tyler emphasizes, “all he had to do with Francie was sit smiling in an armchair and listen” as she talked about her life and her loves. Carpenter appreciates how the young girl can be so free in who she is and what she wants, though “everything she said made the old man wince and love her more.”

He knows Francie will not be like this forever, but for now, the time she spends with him fulfills him in a way no other relationship does. She is as free as he was on the back of the motorcycle, with a face open to the wind of life and seemingly endless possibilities. Francie appreciates their relationship as well, as she tries to talk to him about the past so that he might stay, and she accompanies him to the old folks’ home, gripping his hand tightly as she counts red convertibles. She believes that when she finds number 101, it will contain “her true love.” A convertible is not a motorcycle but arguably the closest to it that a car can be. Like her grandfather, perhaps Francie will someday want to be free in her old age.

It is inherent in Carpenter to be free. As Tyler writes mid-story, “He had chosen independence. Nothing else had even occurred to him.” It is why he has no use for anything but the bare minimum of material goods, deeply enjoys the motorcycle ride, and favors Francie over her brothers. When he planned for the time in his life when he could no longer care for himself, he wanted to be free, too. Tyler long had high regard for what Lollie

Simpson wanted to do in her later years for this reason. The thin schoolteacher wanted to become fat by eating what she liked, including homemade fudge, sitting in her chair, and reading magazines. She did not intend to care or worry; she believed her choices would accord her freedom. Tyler writes, “He admired that—a simple plan, dependent on no one.”

By living with Clara and her family or one of his other daughters, Carpenter believes he will not be free to be himself as much as he will be in an old folks’ home. He also does not want to be a burden of any kind. He despises most older people on this point because they choose to live without freedom. Tyler notes, “Most, he thought, were weak, and chose to be loved at any cost. He had seen women turn soft and sad, anxious to please.” Carpenter cannot live this way or even put himself in this position. It is against his nature. In his own way, he wants to be as free as Francie, as free as he felt riding on the motorcycle, and as close to as free as he was living alone in his own house. None of this would be possible living with family members, in his mind. Though Carpenter cannot be free from weakness nor his age, he can be free of the daily grind of his family’s expectations. He wants to be free to be a carpenter who is building his future and pursuing his destiny on his own terms. Carpenter achieves his goal of a free choice in where he spends his last years, but he must face the next step, which includes living in a home for the elderly where he will have less choice about what he eats, where he goes, and how his day is organized. Perhaps realizing that he has given up some of his freedom so that he can be free from being a burden to his family, he tells himself near the conclusion of “With All Flags Flying,” “Let me not give in at the end.”

Source: A. Petruso, Critical Essay on “With All Flags Flying,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Cengage Learning, 2010.

Jessica Teisch

In this excerpt, Teisch highlights the major themes of Tyler’s novels and addresses her literary influences.

If Jane Austen were to cast her eye on 21st-century society, her observations might touch a nerve with contemporary novelist and short-story writer Anne Tyler. Author of the best-selling *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Breathing Lessons* (1988), and more than a dozen other novels, Tyler explores the motives, conflicts,

and aspirations of middle-class families. Like Austen, whom she cites as one of her favorite novelists, Tyler hones in on the age-old preoccupations of courtship, marriage, child rearing, and familial responsibility. These concerns play out at ordinary events—births, family dinners, road trips, and funerals—usually in Baltimore and its environs. Tyler broadened her reach in *Digging to America* (2006), which explores culture clash, identity, and belonging from the perspective of an American couple and an assimilated Iranian family. The story nonetheless still features the insular suburban characters and domestic dramas we have come to expect. “One doesn’t go to Tyler for the shock of the new. One goes to her for the pull of the old, because her preoccupations are more in line with, say, George Eliot’s than Don DeLillo’s” (Katharine Whittemore, “Ordinary People,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 5/01).

Despite a focus on family life, there is nothing small about Tyler’s Baltimore world and her ordinary people’s lives. Her marvelous creatures may be wilder, less traditional, and more dysfunctional than Austen’s passionate characters, but they ring just as true today as they might have two centuries ago. As Tyler’s grandparents, wives, bachelors, and teenagers approach an understanding of their lives and of each other, they exhibit moments of quiet desperation. “In my childhood I was trained to hold things in, you see,” says aging patriarch Daniel Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1975).

“But I thought I was holding them until a certain time. I assumed that someday, somewhere, I would again be given the opportunity to spend all that saved-up feeling. When will that be?”

Tyler spent much of her childhood in North Carolina, and she follows the southern tradition. She credits Eudora Welty as her literary inspiration: “Reading Eudora Welty when I was growing up showed me that very small things are often really larger than the large things” (*New York Times*, 5/8/77). Critics note the influence of Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, and William Faulkner as well. Tyler’s novels, however, often lack the historical contexts that frame these southern writers’ works. And, though quirky, her characters are not gothic, gritty, or alluring; her women are decisive and meddling, not vacillating and submissive, and her men, often repressed, are “accidental tourists” playing the roles of doctors, husbands, and even kidnappers. Instead of judging her imperfect creations, Tyler examines them

with a cool, affectionate eye and guides them toward redemption and second chances—a recurring theme—as they search for ideal relationships.

Like many of the quietly eccentric personalities in her novels, Tyler had an unconventional upbringing. The only daughter and eldest of four children, Tyler was born on October 25, 1941, in Minneapolis. Her father was a chemist and her mother a social worker. During her childhood, her family, in search of a communal lifestyle, lived in a Quaker community in rural North Carolina. These years gave Tyler an appreciation of farming, crafts, carpentry, cooking, music, and books, and her eventual Southern literary flavor. When her family settled in Raleigh, Tyler attended her first formal school. She entered Duke University at age 16, where she studied with writer Reynolds Price, wrote her first short fiction, and won the Anne Flexner Award for creative writing twice. After graduating, she pursued a master's degree in Russian Studies at Columbia University, met Iranian psychiatrist Taghi Modarressi, whom she married in 1963, and started to publish her first short stories.

When her husband's visa expired, the couple moved to Montreal, where Tyler focused on writing. *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964) marked the first of her character-driven novels. *The Tin Can Tree*—and the birth of her first daughter, Tezh—followed a year later. In 1967, her second daughter, Mitra, was born. The family settled in Baltimore, the locale of many of Tyler's novels, in 1967. Throughout the 1970s, Tyler published five well-received novels, though none were commercial triumphs; her ninth, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), catapulted her to literary success. The following year Tyler was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. *The Accidental Tourist* and *Breathing Lessons* made Tyler an American icon. *Back When We Were Grown-Ups* (2001), with its widow-protagonist, represented an attempt to lift her spirits after her husband died in 1997. Since then, the reclusive Tyler, who rarely gives face-to-face interviews or book tours, continues to mine Middle America's everyday moments and vast emotional wealth.

While Tyler is considered one of America's most significant contemporary writers, her work is often overshadowed by her male contemporaries. Her modest themes—marriage, family relationships, society's misfits—seem middlebrow,

somehow, to cynics. “While her fans revere her as a modern-day Jane Austen, her detractors regard her as an up-market Joanna Trollope,” claims critic Lisa Allardice (“Accidental Celeb,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 1/4/04). Chided as too sentimental, precious, simplistic, unhistorical, antifeminist, self-absorbed, shockingly unpolitically correct, and an implausible story plotter, Tyler prefers tradition over literary experimentation.

Underneath her repressed bachelors and dysfunctional teenagers, however, lie great emotion, psychological depth, and eternal optimism. Neither a “chick lit” writer nor exclusively a women's writer, Tyler charms both women and men, who perhaps find comfort in her characterizations of men and women searching for their identities. After all, it's not hard to feel well adjusted by comparison. John Updike, Nick Hornby, and Roddy Doyle count themselves among Tyler's fans. Her prose possesses grace and realism. Eudora Welty said about *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*: “If I could have written the last sentence . . . I'd have been happy the rest of my life.” If “Tyler is the Plain Jane of American fiction, both in style and subject matter,” says Lisa Allardice, “it is this deceptive comeliness and innocence that appeals to her readers: she holds up a forgiving mirror to Middle America.”

Source: Jessica Teisch, “Anne Tyler,” in *Bookmarks*, November–December 2006, pp. 22–27.

Robert W. Croft

In this excerpt, Croft discusses themes in Anne Tyler's novels.

Almost everything that Anne Tyler has ever written contains an inherent paradox. On the one hand, the world she writes about is an ordinary world, a circumscribed world, limited to home and family, and she rarely ventures far from those subjects. Yet the journeys her characters make are nevertheless far-ranging, for they are journeys of self-exploration. During these journeys Tyler's characters attempt to learn more about themselves and their places in the world.

The chief vehicle that Tyler uses to express this contradictory vision of life is the family. The human family is the basis unit of all society. It is the one common construct that all societies share. Even so, the reaction of people to their families is uniquely individual for each person. Tyler loves to explore the tension between an individual character and his or her family,



TYLER LOVES TO EXPLORE THE TENSION BETWEEN AN INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER AND HIS OR HER FAMILY, EXPLORING THE WAYS IN WHICH FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ARE FORMED; HOW, IF EVER, THEY CHANGE; AND THE WAYS IN WHICH EACH MEMBER OF A FAMILY AFFECTS OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS.”

exploring the ways in which family relationships are formed; how, if ever, they change; and the ways in which each member of a family affects other family members. Oddly, on the one hand, the family is nurturing, giving the individual his or her very identity. Because of the day-to-day contact between the individual and the family, however, the individual sometimes begins to feel restricted or even imprisoned.

Such is the case in *Saint Maybe*, where Ian Bedloe feels these contradictory emotions. At first Ian is a 17-year-old boy eager to conquer the world. Yet Ian's guilt over causing his brother Danny's death causes him to return to his family and take over the responsibility for them for the rest of his life. After some soul-searching, however, Ian eventually works through his feelings of restrictedness and accepts his position in the family. At other times the effects of family can almost paralyze a person, as in the case of Macon Leary of *The Accidental Tourist*. Returning to the clutches of his baked potato-eating family, Macon remains there, at first literally immobilized in a cast, until Muriel Pritchett comes along and frees him. Or take the case of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, whose title suggests the contradictory effects of family on the individual. On the one hand, the family nurtures and provides a base for the individual so that when a person is away, he or she does miss home, thus producing a feeling of homesickness. At the same time, if the family does not provide the right influences or the proper measure of nurturing, then the home can produce psychological and emotional sicknesses in its members. Cody Tull, for instance, cannot overcome the effects of his father's desertion. He spends his whole life viewing time only as a commodity useful

for making more money. Cody's sister, Jenny Tull, who suffers the most debilitating effects from her mother Pearl's abuse, becomes anorexic. Worse still, she repeats the cycle of child abuse with her own daughter Becky. Finally, Ezra Tull, whose restaurant provides the scene for many of the unfinished family dinners on the novel, fails to maintain the one relationship that would have connected him to the rest of the world and made his break from his family successful. Instead, Cody runs away with Ezra's fiancée, Ruth Spivey, leaving Ezra to attempt to re-create a substitute family in the guise of a series of family dinners that never quite come off. Essentially, he spends the rest of his life alone, never leaving his mother's home and living only through the lives of the people who work and eat in his restaurant.

In response to the family's restrictiveness, many of Tyler's characters dream about escape. They yearn for the freedom that they think they will find out on their own in the world. Yet what usually develops in Tyler's novels is a sort of escape/return paradigm. Her characters run away from home but then return later to their original situations. In *The Clock Winder*, Elizabeth Abbott flees the neediness of the Emerson household only to return and marry into it, thus permanently assuming both the Emerson name and identity. In *Earthly Possessions*, when Charlotte Emory decides to leave her stultifying family, she receives some outside help in the guise of her bumbling bank robber/kidnapper, Jake Simms. Later, however, on her own initiative, she decides to return home. In Tyler's latest novel, *Ladder of Years*, Delia Grinstead walks off down the beach to escape her family only to return at the end of the novel, having realized that she was really running away from herself.

Even those characters who seem to make successful breaks from their families don't really change their situations as much as they think they do. Justine Peck, in *Searching for Catch*, who spends her whole life trying to escape her Peck ancestry, marries her own cousin and winds up joining a traveling carnival and telling fortunes, just as she has always done. Although Morgan Gower, in *Morgan's Passing*, leaves his wife Bonny, he only winds up replacing Leon Meredith as Emily Meredith's husband and fellow puppeteer. In effect, he is merely playing another role, as he has all his adult life. And Macon Leary, in *The Accidental Tourist*, after breaking away from his marriage to Sarah, quickly attaches himself to Muriel Pritchett, another woman with a child.

Another recurrent theme in Tyler's work is her fascination with art. As a writer herself, Tyler understands the tension between the outside world and the inner creative world of the artist, whether he or she be a writer, painter, sculptor, or musician, or any of a number of other crafts that provide Tyler's characters with creative outlets. In *The Tin Can Tree*, James Green is a photographer whose pictures attempt to impose an order on the world both of the subject and the photographer. More important, for a moment, these photographers stop the passage of time, giving the artist an opportunity to view the world at a moment in which the flux of the world has been arrested so that it can be examined. This order imposed by the artist is his or her unique vision of the world. It gives the artist tremendous power. At the end of *The Tin Can Tree*, when Joan Pike replaces James as photographer, she realizes this artistic power to capture the lives of the characters she has been trying to understand, unsuccessfully, over the course of the novel. Yet, in this one instant of time, as she focuses the camera's lens on her subjects, she is able to capture and, perhaps, comprehend them for the first time.

In *Earthly Possessions*, Charlotte Emory uses this same technique of photography. Having inherited her father's photography studio, Charlotte spends a lifetime taking pictures of strangers. Unlike her father, however, Charlotte allows her customers to wear whatever outfits they like. Usually, the customers, thinking that they are hiding their true identities, choose outlandish costumes. What Charlotte discovers, though, is that these disguises ultimately reveal much more than they conceal about her subjects' lives.

Other types of artists that Tyler incorporates into her works include writers, such as Macon Leary in *The Accidental Tourist*, who writes a series of guidebooks for travelers who don't like to leave home. On the surface, Macon's concern as a writer is rather mundane, chronicling as he does the deterioration of various hotels and restaurants. Yet, in the actual task of writing, Macon is an artist fascinated with points of grammar and diction. Thus, in his books he creates another world, a place ordered according to his unique vision of life.

Still other characters gain satisfaction from other creative outlets. Ira Moran, in *Breathing Lessons*, is a framemaker who frames the ordinary works of other people, such as needlepoint and photographs. In a way this activity hardly seems an art. In her novels, however, this is exactly what

Tyler attempts to do: capture the ordinary aspects of life and reveal how extraordinary they really are. This process makes her, as a writer, not so much a commentator on life in the last half of the twentieth century as an observer of life. Ira's simple job of framing these ordinary artifacts shows his own attempts to create order and to comprehend the ordinary. In *Saint Maybe*, Ian's job as a furniture maker creates a sense of his craftsmanship and his unique ability to order his world. In his mind, having caused the death of his brother Danny, Ian does not want to work on any furniture that does not have straight lines that can easily be mended if he messes them up, unlike human lives. By the end of the novel, however, he has grown as an individual and as an artisan. Thus, by the time he is expecting his son Joshua, Ian's attitude toward furniture-making has changed. As he works on a cradle for his son, Ian begins to appreciate the curves of the cradle as they bend off beyond the horizon of his thoughts.

The most important artist figure in all of Tyler's fiction is Jeremy Pauling of *Celestial Navigation*, the character who she has admitted is perhaps the closest to her own personality, although she herself is neither as reclusive nor as ineffectual as Jeremy. Over the course of the novel, Jeremy's sculptures grow from small, flat structures to fully rounded, three-dimensional creations. His sensibility of looking at the world and noticing texture and form more than character is Tyler's attempt to recreate the workings of the mind of the artist. In fact, the agoraphobic Jeremy can make sense of the outer world only by the first ordering it and then translating it into an artistic creation.

Besides art, Tyler's characters attempt to impose order on their worlds in other ways. Macon Leary's systems in *The Accidental Tourist* are his attempt to create an orderly world safe from the dangers of the outside world, which has taken the life of his son Ethan. Mrs. Emerson's clocks in *The Clock Winder*, all ticking in synchronization, or at least as close as she can manage until Elizabeth Abbott shows up to set them straight, are another symbol of the attempt to achieve and maintain order. In addition, Mrs. Emerson's letters, dictated first into a dictaphone so that she can organize her thoughts, are still another example of a character's attempt to bring order into his or her chaotic life. Another set of letters, the Peck's obligatory bread-and-butter thank you notes, imprint an order on the behavior of the members of the Peck family. Even

Caleb, who has been away from the rest of the family for sixty years, feels compelled to send one of these cryptic missives to Justine after he leaves.

The world, however, is not an orderly place. Often Tyler's characters must face that fact and try to cope with this chaos in a variety of different ways. Many of them have fascinations with games that are played according to Rules and have definite winners and losers. Cody Tull, in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, loves Monopoly, at which he cheats to win. In *Breathing Lessons*, Ira plays solitaire. In *Saint Maybe*, Ian Bedloe plays parcheesi with his niece and nephew after the death of his brother. But the dice that roll in that game provide further evidence of the chanciness of life.

Source: Robert W. Croft, excerpt from *An Anne Tyler Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1998, pp. 7–11.

Patricia Rowe Willrich

In these excerpts, Willrich reveals Tyler's insight on her characters and themes.

In the 1960's, Tyler's short stories began appearing in *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Harpers*. In the more than 40 stories she published, Tyler frequently focused on a single character, writing from an understated third-person voice, presenting a single incident or a single day in a way that symbolizes a whole life. The settings were usually Southern, and the themes—as in her novels—were family relationships, alienation or loneliness, the failure of communication between individuals, and the search for meaning in life. Tyler says there will never be a published collection of her short stories because she only likes about five of them.

In the introduction to *The Best American Short Stories of 1983*, which she edited, Tyler explored the question—"What are the qualities that separate a wonderful short story from a merely good one?"—and she concluded: "... almost every really lasting story ... contains at least one moment of stillness that serves as a kind of pivot." To Tyler, the short story writer should be a "wastral. He neither hoards his best ideas for something 'more important' (a novel) nor skimps on his material because this is 'only' a short story."

Anne Tyler's main interest is character. She wants her characters to "shine through." She says, "As far as I'm concerned, character is everything. I never did see why I have to throw in a plot, too." She commented in a 1977 interview:

"The real joy of writing is how people can surprise one. My people wander around my study until the novel is done. It's one reason I'm very careful not to write about people I don't like. If I find somebody creeping in that I'm not really fond of, I usually take him out. I end a book at the point where I feel that I'm going to know forever what their lives are like."

Tyler finds her characters almost entirely in her own mind, or in her own words, "Sometimes a news item or the sight of someone standing at a bus stop will set me to thinking, and maybe years later a character will come out of that." Some of her more important characters are, quite clearly, facets of herself. Tyler knows she's on the right track with her writing when her characters take on a life of their own and start informing her:

"What's hard is that there are times when your characters simply won't obey you. I'll have in mind an event for them—a departure, a wedding, a happy ending. I write steadily toward that event, but when I reach it, everything stops. I can't go on. Sentences come out stilted, dialogue doesn't sound real. Every new attempt ends up in the wastebasket. I try again from another angle, and then another, until I'm forced to admit it. The characters just won't allow this. I'll have to let the plot go their way. And when I do, everything falls into place."

Tyler thinks about her characters for awhile once she finishes a book. She worried about Jeremy, in *Celestial Navigation*, who feared leaving home, having a hard time going by himself in her manuscript to her publisher in New York. She also realizes after she finishes a book "that the day dreams I have been weaving are no longer my private property."

The novelist regards her characters as populating a town where they would know each other and would become friends. As she wrote in an essay: "Sometimes I imagine retiring to a peaceful little town where everyone I've invented is living in houses on Main Street. There are worse retirement plans. After all, they are people I've loved, or I never would have bothered writing about them." Tyler also says she knows that "there are some central preoccupations that keep popping up over and over in my books. I'm very interested in space around people. The real heroes to me in my books are first the ones who manage to endure and second the ones who somehow are able to grant other people privacy ... and yet still produce some warmth."

Tyler doesn't consciously write a novel to fit a theme:

“Any ‘large questions of life’ that emerge in my novels are accidental—not a reason for writing the novel in the first place but either (1) questions that absorb my characters, quite apart from me, or (2) on occasion, questions that may be thematic to my own life at the moment, even if I’m not entirely aware of them. Answers, if they come, come from the characters’ experiences, not from mine, and I often find myself viewing those answers with a sort of distant, bemused surprise.”

Writing novels is, for her, mostly telling lies. “You set out to tell an untrue story and you try to make it believable, even to yourself,” she says, “which calls for details; any good lie does. I’m quicker to believe I was once a circus aerialist if I remember that just before every performance, I used to dip my hands in a box of chalk powder that smelled like clean, dry cloth being torn.”

Source: Patricia Rowe Willrich, “Watching Through Windows: A Perspective on Anne Tyler,” in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 497–516.

Mary Ellis Gibson

In this excerpt, Gibson defines the theme of familial fate in Tyler’s work.

Like many writers, southern and otherwise, Tyler is obsessed with family, but this obsession does not fall into the familiar pattern of nature versus nurture, of maturity forged out of or against familial influences. Instead, for Tyler the familial becomes the metaphysical. Family is seen in the light of cosmic necessity, as the inevitable precondition of human choice. As Updike perceptively says of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, “genetic comedy . . . deepens into the tragedy of closeness, of familial limitations that work upon us like Greek fates and condemn us to lives of surrender and secret fury.” Updike is surely right to suggest that fatedness is at the center of Tyler’s family fictions.

Yet fate in these novels is not precisely the fate of Greek tragedy. Tyler’s fates lie somewhere between the classical Greek fates, or *moira*, who work our destinies in accordance with some cosmic order—those fates who preside over Sophoclean irony—and the more oppressive fate or *heimarmene* of the gnostic dualists and their anti-metaphysical descendents the existentialists. In Tyler’s fiction, tragedy and comedy, or the mix of them, grow not from the conjunction of a hero’s *hybris* and his fate but from the contest between human caring and nihilism. Again and again we see Tyler’s characters, with their rootedness, their

entanglements, and their inherited predispositions, come up against the possibility of change. Tyler’s families live through a repeating pattern of desertion and reunion. Those who desert—or escape—inevitably carry their pasts with them; those who remain are in danger of becoming too passive, of awakening to find themselves in situations not of their making, of becoming dissociated from their own bodies and the physical world around them. In narrative structure, in characterization, and in the emblems through which she describes the human plight, Tyler works an intricate commentary on the nature of fate and on the importance of family to individual understandings of fate and responsibility.

Source: Mary Ellis Gibson, “Family as Fate: The Novels of Anne Tyler,” in *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Fall 1983, pp. 47–58.

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French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, famous for her 1949 feminist work *The Second Sex*, here tackles the topic of aging from sociological, historical, political, and cultural perspectives.

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This collection of critical essays on Tyler primarily focuses on her novels. It explores such topics as her connection to William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and three artist figures in her fiction.

Teisch, Jessica, “Anne Tyler,” in the *Bookmarks*, November–December 2006, p. 22.

This scholarly article summarizes trends in and critical response to Tyler’s writing and offers related biographical information.

The Witness for the Prosecution

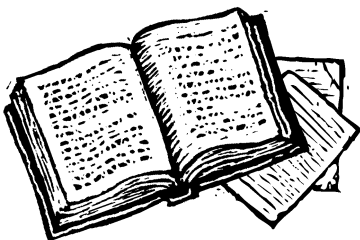
AGATHA CHRISTIE

1925

“The Witness for the Prosecution” (1925) contains many of the qualities that make Agatha Christie’s mystery fiction successful: a scandalous murder; an elaborate plot in which even the most basic truths are not what they seem; and a twist ending that both capitalizes upon and tweaks the rules by which crime fiction authors are expected to play. However, it is also unique among her more famous works for several reasons. For one, it does not feature one of her trademark literary detectives like Hercule Poirot, but instead focuses on a lawyer who does not appear in any of her other stories. Secondly, the murder has already occurred, and the police have already arrested a solid suspect. Finally, there appear to be no other viable suspects for the crime.

The story can be found in *The Witness for the Prosecution and Other Stories*, published by St. Martin’s in 2001. It concerns a lawyer named Mayherne who represents Leonard Vole, a man accused of murdering a wealthy widow named Emily French. The evidence against Vole is compelling, but he claims to have a solid alibi for the time of the murder—he was with his beloved wife, Romaine. However, when Mayherne questions Romaine, he discovers that the case is far more complicated than he hoped it would be.

Although the story is regarded as one of the author’s better short works, it did not achieve great renown until the author adapted it for the stage in 1953. The play, which followed the story





Agatha Christie (AP Images)

fairly closely until the end, was a success in London and on Broadway, and Christie herself considered it one of her best works for the stage. Filmmaker Billy Wilder turned the play into a movie in 1957, and it was nominated for six Academy Awards. The film version of “The Witness for the Prosecution” is considered by critics and audiences alike to be a classic courtroom drama.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Christie was born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller in Torquay, England, on September 15, 1890. Her father died when she was just eleven. Her sister Margaret—also known as Madge—and her brother Monty were each at least ten years older than she, so Agatha spent much of her time with her mother. She attended school irregularly, but learned a great deal at home and developed an early love of literature. Her sister Madge was a successful short-story writer. Her stories were published in *Vanity Fair*. It was Madge who first introduced Agatha to the Sherlock Holmes

stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. Agatha herself published her first poem in a local newspaper at the age of eleven.

As a teenager, Christie’s main literary interest continued to be poetry, and she even won prizes for her work from *The Poetry Review*. During a bout of illness in which she was kept from other activities, Christie’s mother suggested that she try to write a story. She did, and she enjoyed the experience. She followed her first attempt with several more stories and tried to get them published, even though she was not as successful as she was with her poetry. She even wrote a full-length novel and received important encouragement and critical advice from a local author named Eden Phillpotts. One day, Christie told her sister Margaret she was interested in writing a detective story. Margaret discouraged her, stating that such stories were difficult to write—she even bet her sister that she could not do it. Although it would take several years, Christie remembered the bet and vowed to prove her sister wrong.

She married Royal Flying Corps pilot Archie Christie in 1914, shortly after the start of World War I. While her husband fought in France, Christie worked as a nurse and eventually became a pharmacist at the local dispensary. It was there, with much idle time and a newfound knowledge of a wide variety of medications, that Christie’s mind returned to the idea of detective fiction. The result was her first published novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), which introduced the world to the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot.

After the success of her first novel, Christie immediately continued with additional novels and a string of short stories featuring Hercule Poirot. By the end of the decade, she had produced many of her most enduring works, including *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), which marked the first book-length appearance of her other great literary creation, Miss Jane Marple. By 1930, Christie had also divorced her first husband and married Max Mallowan, an archeologist, to whom she remained devoted for the rest of her life.

Christie went on to publish over sixty novels during her fifty-six-year career, as well as more than 150 short stories. Christie also wrote more than a dozen plays, many of which were adaptations of her previous work. In 1955, she was honored with the very first Grand Master Award presented by

the Mystery Writers of America; that same year, the Mystery Writers of America also chose her stage adaptation of “The Witness for the Prosecution” for Best Play. Christie’s popularity has continued ever since, with over two billion copies of her books sold worldwide. Christie died on January 12, 1976, at the age of eighty-five.

PLOT SUMMARY

“The Witness for the Prosecution” begins with a conversation between Mr. Mayherne, a lawyer who often catches himself mindlessly cleaning his spectacles, and his client Leonard Vole, a thirty-three-year-old man who is accused of murder. Mayherne stresses to his client the gravity of the situation in which he finds himself; the younger man seems dazed, as if he cannot believe what he has been accused of. Mayherne tells him that the best strategy is simply to reveal everything so that Mayherne can figure out the most appropriate defense. Vole takes this to mean that Mayherne suspects him of being guilty, and he assures his lawyer that he did not murder anyone. Despite the evidence, Mayherne finds himself believing Vole.

The lawyer asks Vole how he knew the victim, Miss Emily French. Vole states that one day, he saw her having difficulty crossing the street because she was overloaded with packages. Because she was an older woman in her seventies, Vole took it upon himself to help her make it across the street with all her parcels, and she thanked him. That same night, he saw her again at a party thrown by a friend. He spent some time talking to her, and she seemed to take a liking to him. She invited him to come over and visit her, and when he agreed, she put him on the spot to commit to a specific day. After she left, Vole discovered she was very wealthy, single, and lived with at least eight cats.

Mayherne tries to determine exactly when Vole found out that Miss French was wealthy, stating that such a fact could be important to how the jury reacts to him. If he did not know the woman was wealthy at first—and indeed, she was not the type to appear wealthy at first glance—then the jury would view Vole as a charitable man rather than an opportunist. The issue is an important one, Mayherne states, because the prosecution will argue that Vole was in dire financial straits at the time, which was true, and

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- “The Witness for the Prosecution” was adapted for BBC television in 1949 by writer Sidney Budd and director John Glyn-Jones. This version stars Dale Rogers, Mary Kerridge, and John Salew, and is not currently available.
- Another television adaptation of the story was created for the American series *Lux Video Theatre* in 1953. Adapted by Anne Howard Bailey and starring Andrea King, Tom Drake, and Edward G. Robinson, this version of the tale is not currently available.
- The story was adapted for the stage by the author in 1953. The stage play is available in the collection *The Mousetrap and Other Plays* (1978).
- A film adaptation was made based on the play—rather than the original story—in 1957. Directed by Billy Wilder and starring Charles Laughton, Marlene Dietrich, and Tyrone Power, the film was released on DVD by MGM in 2001. Although the individual title is currently out of print, a DVD version of the film is available in the Billy Wilder DVD Collection, released by MGM in 2003.
- A television movie was created in 1982 as an adaptation of the 1957 film—three times removed from the original story. It was directed by Alan Gibson and starred Ralph Richardson, Beau Bridges, Deborah Kerr, and Diana Rigg, and is not currently available.

will think he only agreed to spend time with her to get at her money. However, Vole cannot establish or prove exactly when he found out about Miss French’s wealth—only that he was told by his friend George Harvey, who threw the party Vole was attending.

Mayherne asks Vole why he would spend so much time with a single elderly woman. Vole suggests it was a combination of his inability to

say no and his need for a motherly figure in his life, since his own mother died when he was a child. Mayherne considers this answer satisfactory, though he does not know how a jury will respond to it. He then asks when Vole started assisting Miss French with the management of her finances. Vole states that after he had visited the woman several times, she had asked him to look into some investments that worried her. Mayherne points out that Miss French's bankers and her maid, a woman named Janet Mackenzie, contend that the woman was very financially savvy and did not need a man to take care of things for her. However, Mayherne answers his own skepticism with a reasonable explanation: Miss French used her financial dealings as a way to appear helpless and convince Vole that she needed his expertise. As Mayherne sees it: "She was enough of a woman of the world to realize that any man is slightly flattered by such an admission of his superiority."

Mayherne then asks Vole if he ever helped himself to any of her money when handling her finances. A shrewd lawyer, Mayherne sees two possible ways of defending his client, depending upon how he answers the question. If Vole did not take any of Miss French's money, it would show him to be an honest and trustworthy person. However, if he did make a habit of swindling her out of some of her fortune, he would then have a motive for keeping the woman alive, so he could continue bilking her. Vole insists that he did not take any of Miss French's money.

Mayherne then points out a most problematic piece of evidence: Miss French changed her will shortly before she died, making Vole the main beneficiary of her fortune. Vole insists that he did not know about it, though Janet Mackenzie contends that Vole not only knew about it, but that Miss French discussed it with Vole on more than one occasion. Vole insists that Mackenzie must have misunderstood, though he also notes that the maid—protective of her employer—did not like him.

Mayherne reveals that Mackenzie is a key witness in the murder, because she returned briefly to Miss French's house at nine thirty on the night the woman was murdered and heard her talking with a man in the sitting room. Vole is relieved to hear this, because he insists that he left Miss French's house before nine and was home with his wife Romaine by nine thirty. Mayherne promises that he will take a statement

from Mrs. Vole as soon as she returns from a trip to Scotland, but he is still troubled by nagging questions: If Vole did not murder Miss French, who did? And who was the woman having a friendly conversation with at nine-thirty in the evening?

Mayherne asks if anyone else can confirm Vole's alibi, but Vole tells him no. The lawyer is hardly encouraged by the thought of a devoted wife vouching for her beloved husband, since it may not be enough to convince the jury. Mayherne then reveals that Janet Mackenzie has stated that Miss French believed Vole to be single, and that she had hoped to marry him sometime in the future. Vole laughs at the absurdity of this but confesses that his wife never met Miss French, and that he never explicitly told Miss French that he was married. Vole admits that he hoped she would see him as a sort of adopted son and would offer to help him out financially. But he did not attempt to seduce her or convince her to marry him.

Despite Vole's unscrupulous behavior, Mayherne states his belief in the man's innocence and insists he will try his best to exonerate Vole. Mayherne leaves and heads for the Vole residence, hoping to speak to Mrs. Vole. He is surprised to discover that she is not English, but Austrian—a former actress. She insists upon hearing the details of the case against her husband. Mayherne obliges, ending with the fact that she is the only one who can confirm his alibi on the night of the murder. Romaine asks if her testimony will be enough to clear her husband, but Mayherne does not appear optimistic.

Romaine then changes her attitude abruptly, telling Mayherne that she hates her husband, and that her testimony will actually confirm that he did in fact murder Miss French. According to her, Vole returned home at twenty minutes after ten with blood on his coat and even confessed to her that he had done it. Mayherne notes that courts cannot force spouses to testify against one another, but Romaine reveals that she and Vole never actually married. In fact, she is already married to another man in Austria who is in an insane asylum. Mayherne asks why she feels such bitterness for Vole, but she will not answer. Although he doubts the woman's story, he realizes that his duty to defend his client has just become much more difficult.

The police court proceedings commence. The main witnesses for the prosecution are Janet

Mackenzie and Romaine, whose last name is not actually Vole but Heilger. Both witnesses are damaging to Vole's defense, but Mayherne tries to implicate a nephew of Miss French's as the culprit. This seems plausible, since the man had asked her for money before and had recently gone missing from the places he used to frequent. Then, on the day before the trial is set to begin, Mayherne receives a letter, poorly written, from a woman calling herself Mrs. Mogson. The letter claims that she can prove Romaine's testimony is a lie if Mayherne is willing to pay her two hundred pounds. It also provides a location and time to meet that evening.

Mayherne has no other options available and so meets Mrs. Mogson in her squalid, dimly lit room at "a ramshackle building in an evil-smelling slum." The woman is middle-aged. Her face is partly obscured by a scarf, and she has a nervous habit of clenching and unclenching her fists. She notices him staring at the scarf and pulls it away to reveal an "almost formless blur of scarlet" that causes him to recoil. Mrs. Mogson asks him for the money, but Mayherne insists that he only has twenty pounds to give her. She reluctantly agrees and offers Mayherne a bundle of love letters.

They are from Romaine to a man addressed as "Max," and in the most recent one, she lays out her plan to lie about Vole's whereabouts and get him convicted of a crime he could not have committed—all so she will be free of him. Mrs. Mogson also insists that on the night of the murder, when Romaine says she was waiting at home for her husband at 10 P.M., she was actually at the Lion Road Cinema with her mystery man. According to Mrs. Mogson, the unnamed recipient of the letters is a man she once loved. Romaine stole him away from her, and when she pursued the man, he threw acid on her face, disfiguring her. This explains her hatred for Romaine, and her desire to see the woman exposed as a liar in court.

Mayherne confirms Romaine's whereabouts at 10 P.M. on the night of the murder thanks to an employee at the theater, who recognizes her from a photo. According to the employee, she and her male companion were at the theater for about an hour. Mayherne is convinced that Romaine's testimony against Vole is completely false, and once again he sees hope of clearing his client's name. He passes his evidence on to the trial counsel for the defense, known only as "Sir Charles." Mayherne himself is not able to participate in

the trial, since the British legal system of the time required two different types of lawyers: solicitors like Mayherne, who dealt with clients directly; and advocates, who represented the clients in court proceedings but otherwise did not deal with them.

The trial begins, and the various sordid details of the case—including the murder of a wealthy old woman, and the damning testimony of Romaine Heilger against her former lover—awaken the interest of the public. Janet Mackenzie takes the stand first, offering what she knows about the relationship between Miss French and Leonard Vole. The counsel for the defense is able to shake her testimony only slightly, and points out that although she heard Miss French speaking with a man on the night she was murdered, she cannot identify Vole as that man.

Then Romaine Heilger takes the stand and presents her account of the night of the murder: Vole had left that evening with a crowbar, returned home late with blood on his shirt and confessed to the killing, then burned his clothes in the stove and threatened Romaine to keep her quiet about it. The counsel for the defense begins his cross-examination by accusing the woman of making up the entire story, which she denies. Then he produces the fateful love letter, which reveals Romaine's plan to get Vole convicted despite his innocence. The woman breaks down on the stand and confesses that she made the story up, and that Vole returned home at 9:20, just as he said. Vole confirms this with his own testimony. The case is turned over to the jury, who quickly return with a verdict of "not guilty."

Mayherne is pleased with the verdict but cannot help wondering about the motive behind Romaine Heilger's false testimony. When he pictures her in his mind, he recalls that she had a habit of nervously clenching and unclenching her fists, not unlike his own habit of absentmindedly cleaning his glasses. Suddenly he pieces it together: Mrs. Mogson, the woman who gave him the love letters, was Heilger all along. She was an actress, capable of changing her voice and personality, and skilled enough at applying makeup to fake a quickly revealed disfigurement in a poorly lit room. However, she could not hide the unconscious habit she had with her hands.

Mayherne encounters Heilger sometime later and confronts her with his suspicions. She confesses it all, stating that it was the only way she could convince the jury of his innocence. As

Mayherne himself had implied, the testimony of a devoted wife is not as compelling as a reluctant alibi taken from a woman who hates the man on trial. It was all an act, of course, inspired by her love for Vole and her dedication to securing his freedom—there was no “Max” at all. Mayherne insists that he could have obtained Vole’s acquittal without her antics, but Heigler insists that she could not rely upon Mayherne to prove Vole’s innocence—especially because she knew all along that he was actually guilty.

The Author’s Expanded Ending for the Stage Adaptation

To readers who are familiar with Christie’s 1953 stage adaptation of the story, the ending above may seem incomplete. When the author adapted the story as a play, she decided to expand the ending based on the particular needs of stage drama and on her own dissatisfaction with the ending after twenty-eight years of reflection. According to Ira Levin in his Introduction to *The Mousetrap and Other Plays* (1978), “Other playwrights had adapted some of her novels to the stage; they had erred, she felt, in *following the books too closely*.”

The amount of material added or changed at the end is small, but significant. In the play, Romaine reveals her plot to secure Vole’s freedom immediately after he is acquitted, rather than at some unspecified time after the trial. In addition, Mayherne—who has essentially been replaced by the character of Sir Wilfrid Robarts, the defendant’s actual trial lawyer—does not guess Romaine’s deception before she reveals it. Most significantly, however, the story features an additional twist following Romaine’s statement that her husband is actually guilty of murder. While still immersed in the chaos of the courtroom, a young woman approaches Vole and describes herself as his “girl.” Thrilled that he has been acquitted, she talks of their future, traveling abroad together. When Romaine confronts Vole about the girl, he admits to having an affair, noting cruelly that the girl is fifteen years younger than Romaine. Vole then warns Romaine that he cannot be prosecuted again for murder, but she can be charged with being an accessory—so she should just keep quiet about the whole plot. Enraged, Romaine grabs a knife, which is lying on a table in the courtroom labeled as a piece of evidence, and stabs Vole dead.

CHARACTERS

Emily French

Emily French is a wealthy, elderly woman who, despite her riches, lives and dresses simply enough that a stranger might mistake her for a poor person. She develops a relationship with Leonard Vole, who begins visiting her at her home in Cricklewood. He assists her with some financial investments, and she subsequently changes her will to make Vole the main beneficiary when she dies. According to later statements by her housekeeper, Janet Mackenzie, French believed that Vole was single, and she had formed a romantic attachment to him. She changed the will because she thought the two were going to be married. Before the story begins, French is murdered by a blow from a crowbar.

Romaine Heilger

Romaine Heilger is Leonard Vole’s mistress, who lives as his wife. She is described as a tall, pale woman with high cheekbones and a distinctly foreign look. An Austrian who was once an actress, Romaine has a husband who is reportedly confined in an Austrian madhouse, which prevents her from obtaining a divorce and marrying Vole. When she discovers that Vole’s alibi depends solely upon her testimony—and that such testimony might not sway the jury—she claims to hate Vole and vows to testify that he did commit the murder. This she does, but the counsel for the defense discredits her on the witness stand by producing letters written by Romaine to another man; the last of these letters confirms Vole’s innocence. Vole is acquitted, and later, Romaine admits to Mayherne that her plan was to appear to be a witness for the prosecution, so that when she was finally forced to confirm Vole’s alibi, the jury would lend it more credence. To accomplish this, she not only pretends to hate Vole, but also disguises herself as Mrs. Mogson and presents fake love letters to Mayherne—evidence that the lawyer uses to discredit Romaine’s “false” testimony for the prosecution. All this she did because of her love for Vole and her desire to keep him out of jail. Romaine also admits that the discredited testimony she gave against Vole was true on at least one point: he was indeed guilty of the murder.

Janet Mackenzie

Janet Mackenzie is the maid of Miss Emily French, the wealthy widow that Leonard Vole is

accused of killing. According to Mayherne, Mackenzie seems to hate Vole. He contends that Vole was pretending to have a romantic interest in Miss French so that the woman would change her will to include him as a beneficiary. Mackenzie knows about Vole mainly through personal conversations with her murdered employer, so much of her testimony is unsubstantiated. However, Mackenzie testifies that on the night of the murder, she returned to Miss French's residence at approximately nine thirty, and heard her employer speaking to a man. Vole's alibi—or lack of alibi—for this time period becomes the most important element in his defense. During the trial, the trial lawyer for the defense is able to get Mackenzie to contradict herself slightly during her testimony, though the main evidence she presents is largely unshaken.

Mr. Mayherne

Mr. Mayherne is the lawyer responsible for defending Leonard Vole in his trial for the murder of Miss Emily French. He is described as “a small man, precise in manner, neatly, not to say foppishly dressed, with a pair of very shrewd and piercing gray eyes.” He has a habit of absentmindedly taking off his glasses and cleaning them. When he first meets Vole, Mayherne asks many probing questions of his client in an attempt to establish what his motives were in spending time with the elderly Miss French. Mayherne even asks his client if he committed the murder, aware that the facts of the case will help determine the strategy he employs in Vole's defense. When he becomes convinced of Vole's innocence, Vole's wife—who turns out not to be married to Vole at all—claims that she can testify to his guilt. Mayherne believes that her story is false and dedicates himself to disproving her testimony. After receiving a note that offers assistance with the case, Mayherne meets with Mrs. Mogson, who sells him a batch of love letters in which Romaine admits Vole is innocent. Mayherne uses these to sway the jury in favor of acquittal, though Mayherne is still puzzled by Romaine's attempt to frame her husband. Upon later reflection, Mayherne realizes that both Mrs. Mogson and Romaine exhibited the same unconscious habit of clenching and unclenching their fists. This leads him to the suspicion that Mrs. Mogson was actually Romaine in disguise, and that the whole endeavor was intended not to frame Vole but to provide a compelling defense. And even though Mayherne is convinced of Vole's innocence, he

ultimately finds out from Romaine that the man was guilty of Miss French's murder.

Mrs. Mogson

Mrs. Mogson is a vulgar, middle-aged woman who lives in an unkempt room in “a ramshackle building in an evil-smelling slum,” a place known as Shaw's Rents. She wears a scarf that hides a face disfigured by acid, which she says was thrown on her by a former lover who left her to be with Romaine Heilger. For this reason, Mrs. Mogson sets out to destroy Romaine by revealing her affair with another man and her attempt to get Vole convicted of murder even though he did not kill anyone. In the end, Mayherne discovers that Mrs. Mogson is actually Romaine Heigler in disguise; the accomplished actress fooled him into thinking she was someone else, using makeup and dim lighting to fake her disfigurement.

Leonard Vole

Leonard Vole is a thirty-three-year-old man accused of murder. The victim is an elderly woman with whom he had been spending a great deal of time. Although he maintains that their relationship was more like a mother and her adopted son, others contend that the murdered woman thought their relationship was a romance, and that the two would probably marry soon. Vole already has a wife named Romaine. He also has severe financial troubles that would provide motive for killing the wealthy woman after convincing her to include him as a beneficiary in her will. Vole contends that his wife will provide an alibi for the night of the murder, but when his lawyer questions her, she states that she will testify that Vole—who is not legally her husband—is guilty. Vole seems unable to explain this betrayal by his wife and still insists that the two are in love. In the end, Romaine contradicts her previous testimony and admits that Vole was home at the time of the murder. After he is acquitted, Romaine reveals to his lawyer that he did indeed commit the murder.

THEMES

Deception

Deception is the key element in the interactions between nearly every major character in the story. From the start, Vole lies to Mayherne about being guilty of the crime; he only acknowledges pieces of the truth when confronted by witnesses or hard evidence to the contrary. For

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Some critics have dismissed Christie's works as being more like puzzles than literature. They tend to rely heavily upon relating the circumstances of a crime and the clues available to solve it, and focus less on conventional literary concerns such as characterization or sensory details. What do you think? State your case for "The Witness for the Prosecution." You can choose to "defend" the story as literature or "prosecute" it. Present your arguments to your class as you would to a jury of readers.
- Compare "The Witness for the Prosecution" to another Christie story, "Where There's a Will," which can be found in the same volume. In what ways are the two stories similar? In what ways are they different? Does Charles's elaborate plan seem more or less plausible than Romaine's? Why?
- The twist at the conclusion of "The Witness for the Prosecution" is literally hidden from readers until the final word of the final sentence. Try writing a short story in which the final word somehow changes the reader's perception or understanding of the rest of the story. Share your story with another student or group of students.
- Much of the story is told in flashback through testimony by Vole and Heilger. After reading through the story, create a time line that shows how events unfolded, from Vole's initial meeting with French to his acquittal at trial.

his part, Mayherne tells Vole that he will use different strategies for the man's defense depending upon whether or not Vole actually did it—in effect revealing his willingness to deceive the jury as part of his duty to defend Vole. Mayherne even asks if one of Vole's friends would alter his recollection of when a certain conversation occurred, in a way that would be beneficial to Vole's defense.

However, the master of deception in the tale is Vole's partner Romaine. It is important to note that she does not begin her deception until she learns from Mayherne that her testimony, confirming her husband's whereabouts at the time of the murder, might not be enough to keep him from being convicted. At that moment, she decides to "play a lone hand," in which no one else is aware of her deception. She deceives Mayherne and the jurors into thinking that she actually hates Vole and comes forward with testimony confirming his guilt. She also deceives Mayherne by disguising herself and offering evidence to disprove her own court testimony. Finally, her greatest deception is revealed: she knew all along that her husband was guilty of the crime, and her original "deceptive" and recanted testimony was actually true. The only presumably honest person in the tale is the murdered woman's maid, Janet Mackenzie, who is never shown directly.

Perception and Prejudice

An important part of "The Witness for the Prosecution" is its examination of how prejudice can affect human perception. Mayherne knows this, since his job is to determine how jurors will react to the various circumstances of Vole's case. For example, he knows that a thirty-three-year-old man spending time with a woman forty years older than he will appear suspicious to jurors unless Mayherne can establish that Vole's motive was purely charitable. Mayherne also knows that jurors will be more suspicious of a wife's confirmation of her husband's alibi than the testimony of an unbiased witness, because a wife is expected to stand by her man under any circumstances. Taken as a whole, the facts of the case align all too well with the typical person's prejudices regarding younger men taking advantage of older, wealthy women. In defending Vole, Mayherne looks for a way to defuse those prejudices against his client.

However, Mayherne himself suffers from limited perception based on his own prejudices. When he meets Romaine, he assumes her to be a vindictive woman and rules out any chance of her being helpful to her husband's case. This prevents Mayherne from seeing Romaine's true plan, where a more suspicious person might have picked up on it upon meeting "Mrs. Mogson." Mayherne is also prejudiced in his belief of his client's innocence; once he makes this early judgment, he does not truly consider the possibility



Still from the 1957 film adaptation *Witness for the Prosecution*, starring Marlene Dietrich (right)
(© INTERFOTO | Alamy)

that Vole is actually a murderer, even though he later learns that this is the truth. Like Mayherne, Romaine understands the probable prejudices of the jurors and devises a plan that takes advantage of those assumptions.

STYLE

Mystery Fiction and the Whodunit

Like most of Christie's stories, "The Witness for the Prosecution" is best described as a mystery. Mystery fiction usually centers on a crime or transgression that has been committed, with the bulk of the plot devoted to determining who is responsible for the crime. This type of story is also known as a "whodunit," since the main goal is generally to find out who committed the crime, how they did it, and why. The person resolving the mystery is often a detective or investigator of

some kind, and many authors—like Christie—use a detective character who is featured in several stories or novels.

It is generally accepted that the mystery genre in modern literature owes its origins primarily to a single author: Edgar Allan Poe. In works like "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844), Poe laid the foundations for the genre: a scandalous or sensational crime perpetrated by an unknown entity; a detective, often an amateur not directly affiliated with the police, who undertakes to solve the mystery; the presentation of clues to the reader, just as they are available to the characters within the story; and the use of logic and reasoning to arrive at the correct solution. These conventions were expanded upon and refined by writers such as Wilkie Collins, with his novel *The Moonstone* (1868), and Arthur Conan Doyle, whose detective Sherlock Holmes

is perhaps the most famous literary creation of the mystery genre and one of the best-known characters in all of literature. After Doyle, Agatha Christie was instrumental in further pushing the boundaries of detective fiction, bending and even breaking some long-standing conventions that had both defined and limited the genre for decades.

Legal Procedural Fiction

Procedural fiction is concerned with depicting the steps involved in a specific process. The most common type of procedural is the police or crime procedural, in which a detective or investigator goes through the steps necessary to solve a crime. The story usually begins with the commission or discovery of a crime and ends with the perpetrator being caught. Police procedurals are considered one type of mystery fiction. Legal procedurals, usually considered a part of the mystery genre, focus on the details of the trial and sentencing process, and feature at least one main character who is a lawyer involved in the case. Since the term “procedural” has become closely associated with the mystery genre, not all literary works concerned with legal proceedings would be classified as procedurals. For example, the plays *Inherit the Wind* (1955) by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee and *The Crucible* (1953) by Arthur Miller rely on a courtroom setting but do not feature a mystery component as the driving force behind the story.

In many legal procedurals, the case has been “solved” incompletely or incorrectly, which leads to a trial. It is up to a lawyer for either the prosecution or the defense to discover the truth and prove the defendant’s guilt or innocence. Legal procedural fiction is often considered a part of crime procedural, since many works include both the police investigation and trial as different parts of a single case. It is worth noting that the author considered to be a pioneer of the police procedural—Lawrence Treat—was also a lawyer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Great Britain Between the World Wars

Christie published her first works in the years shortly after World War I. This period was one of relative peace and prosperity in Great Britain, since the country was not directly affected by

warfare in the same way as many other European countries. However, the horrors of war most definitely made an impression upon the sensibility of the British people. This opened the door for modernism in Britain, in which writers rejected traditional styles and forms in favor of experimentation. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot revolutionized the way literature was created and interpreted with works that attempted to express the brutal realities of modern life and the inner workings of a character’s mind. The end of war also once again opened up the borders between the nations of Europe, allowing for greater economic and cultural interaction.

Another important factor in Britain’s evolution at this time was the trend toward independent rule for areas held as British territories. During World War I, soldiers from the many dominions once under full control of the British Empire—including Australia and India—helped to fight for the Allied cause against the Axis Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. After the war, many citizens of these dominions pressed for greater independence from Great Britain. This led to the Statute of Westminster in 1931, which allowed greater freedom of government for Australia, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Independence for India and Nigeria, both still held as British possession, was still decades away.

The Rise of Genre Fiction

Even as modernism was changing the face of literature in the 1920s, genre fiction was exploding in popularity among English and American readers. Genre fiction generally refers to stories that adhere to a certain type of formula or common setting, such as mystery tales or science fiction. Genre fiction began to rise in popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when inexpensive publishing methods allowed for the creation of many new periodicals that catered to all sorts of interests. Many of these periodicals published fiction tailored to their specific audience, while larger magazines published a variety of fiction to appeal to a broad readership.

The aims of genre fiction were generally not seen as literary. Rather, such stories were often considered more as entertainment or sometimes as educational diversions aimed at working-class readers. Mysteries in particular served to offer readers puzzles to solve, or at least to entertain

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1920s:** England's justice system consists of two different types of lawyers: solicitors, who work directly with clients, and barristers, who actually argue cases in court.

Today: The once-strict separation of duties between solicitors and barristers has lessened, with solicitors often arguing client cases in court and barristers frequently dealing directly with the public.

- **1920s:** Detectives at Scotland Yard (the headquarters of London's Metropolitan Police) utilize the Central Fingerprint Bureau, cre-

ated in 1901, to identify criminals based on fingerprint records.

Today: Criminologists can identify criminal suspects based on trace amounts of genetic material left at a crime scene.

- **1920s:** Women over the age of twenty-one finally gain the right to vote in the United Kingdom in 1928.

Today: In 2009, there were 128 female Members of Parliament, the highest number ever.

them with the author's ability to create a surprising yet credible solution. Such stories featured subjects such as murder or the supernatural, which might not be considered appropriate in more artistic literature of the time. Because such stories were seen as light or disposable entertainment, they were printed on rough, cheap paper known as "pulp." Christie's stories, which relied heavily on formula and puzzle-like crimes to solve, were among the most popular genre fiction being published.

One of the most important pulp magazines of this era was *Black Mask*, which began publication in 1920. It was co-created by esteemed journalist H. L. Mencken as a purely commercial enterprise. Mencken hoped the magazine would generate enough money to offset the losses incurred by publishing his true labor of love, a literary magazine called *The Smart Set*. *Black Mask* was successful from the start, and it became the premier publication for mystery writers who worked in a new style that would come to be labeled as "hard-boiled" detective fiction. The magazine published early works by writers such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Erle Stanley Gardner, all of whom would become legends of the mystery genre.

Pulp magazines and genre fiction dominated during the 1920s and 1930s, providing cheap

entertainment for readers and a literary proving ground for fledgling writers. With the advent of World War II, however, resources like paper were rationed for use in the war effort. This squeezed small publishers, forcing them to go out of business or increase their prices. Some genre magazines remained successful throughout this time period, such as *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Astounding Science Fiction*. But many of the magazines that excelled during the height of pulp entertainment lost their best writers to higher-paying, more respectable publications, and steadily declined in popularity.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

By the time "The Witness for the Prosecution" was published in 1925, Christie was already firmly established as an accomplished mystery writer. She had written several well-received mystery novels and dozens of short stories—including several that featured one of her most famous creations, detective Hercule Poirot. As but one of many Christie stories, it did not receive special recognition when it was first published. Even in later years, few critics had much to say about the story on its own; Stewart H. Benedict, in a 1962 essay for the *Claremont Quarterly*, contends that



The Old Bailey Courthouse in London (Image copyright Chris Jenner, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

the story is one of several of the author's acknowledged classics that "really test the ductility of coincidence."

It was not until Christie adapted the story for the stage in 1953 that it became a critical and commercial success. The review of the premiere in the London *Times* is mostly positive, noting that "when the trial is over and there seems no more to be said she swiftly ravel[s] again the skein which the law has unravelled and leaves herself with a dénouement which is at once surprising and credible." The play opened in New York the following year to even greater success, with two of the main cast members winning Tony Awards for their performances. Christie also won a 1955 Edgar Award for Best Play from the Mystery Writers of America. The success of the play spawned yet another adaptation, this time for film. Directed by Billy Wilder and starring Tyrone Power, Marlene Dietrich, and Charles Laughton, the 1957 film was nominated for six Academy Awards and earned Elsa Lanchester a

Golden Globe for her portrayal of Miss Plimsoll, a character not found in either of Christie's versions of the story. The film adaptation has continued to grow in stature over the years and is likely to be the version of the story with which most modern audiences are familiar.

Still, in its original form, "The Witness for the Prosecution" is generally acknowledged as one of Christie's best short works; it embodies the qualities that readers enjoy most in her writing. In her biography *Agatha Christie* (1986), Mary S. Wagoner states that the author "perfected the art of plotting, while her 'serious' contemporaries shied away from plot as an oversimplification of the complexities of experience." And author Anthony Burgess, writing in *Life* in 1967, states, "Agatha Christie has been entertaining us so long and so relentlessly that she has soared above the level of the entertainer."

CRITICISM

Greg Wilson

Wilson is an author, literary critic, and mythologist. In this essay, he compares the original short story to Christie's later stage adaptation, noting that many of the changes arose from the different requirements of the medium.

At first glance, there is little in "The Witness for the Prosecution" that cries out for a stage adaptation. The story is largely about plot, strategy, and perception. It has very little in the way of dramatic action, save for one scene—and even that is severely abridged, lessening its impact. When comparing the original to its adaptation, however, it is clear that these weaknesses were really more like opportunities that allowed the author to present a dramatic work that retained the core of the original story, yet expanded so significantly upon it that the work could be enjoyed anew by even her most avid readers.

Upon first inspection, the story seems inappropriate for a stage adaptation because it features too many locations and not enough description and dialogue. As a story, "The Witness for the Prosecution" is short, lean, and double-barbed. It seems as if Christie were so concerned about getting the skeleton of the plot down that she left out all the extraneous parts. The story begins after the murder has already been committed, and after Leonard Vole has been arrested for the crime and had a lawyer appointed to him.

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *The Sign of the Four* (1887; also known as *The Sign of Four*) by Arthur Conan Doyle is the second novel to feature detective Sherlock Holmes. A young woman asks the detective to help her uncover the mystery of her missing father and the large, extravagant pearls she has received as gifts from an anonymous benefactor.
- *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) is Christie's first published novel. It is also the first work in which one of her most enduring characters, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, is featured. The story centers on the poisoning of a wealthy widow who has recently married a younger man.
- *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is one of Christie's best-known works. When it was first published, it stretched the mystery genre beyond its established conventions. Christie once again puts Poirot on the case of the death of a wealthy widow, as well as her suitor. The twist ending was the source of controversy among many mystery readers and critics at the time, though it is generally accepted today as both clever and plausible.
- *And Then There Were None* (1939) finds Christie once again putting a new twist on established rules of the genre. In the novel, ten people—each involved in some way with a murder—are invited to an island by an unknown host. One by one, they are systematically killed off. One of them must be the killer on this isolated island, and yet by the end of the book, all appear to be dead. Like many

Christie novels, however, everything is not as it first appears.

- *Tears of the Giraffe* (2002) by Alexander McCall Smith is the second in the Scottish author's series of books about Precious Ramotswe, an enterprising woman who decides to open a private detective agency in her native country of Botswana. This volume finds Precious taking cases involving a missing American, an unfaithful butcher's wife, and the scheming maid of her own fiancé.
- *Scat* (2009) by Carl Hiaasen is a modern mystery of a different flavor. In it, two Florida students investigate their biology teacher's disappearance during a field trip to a local swamp. As in many of Hiaasen's mysteries, the secret surrounding the disappearance reveals a clash between corporate interests on one side and environmentalists and endangered animals on the other.
- Like most mysteries, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), by Mark Haddon, centers on an unusual death. However, the details are anything but typical: the victim of the crime is a neighbor's poodle, and the investigator is Christopher Boone, a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning type of autism. As Boone searches for evidence of the dog's killer, he uncovers even bigger secrets related to his own family—secrets that will force him to step outside his world of comforting routine.

In addition, the climactic courtroom scene—around which the entire story is based—is virtually nonexistent, with most of the dialogue paraphrased instead of being presented as a contemporaneous account. In fact, for what most people now think of as a story centered on courtroom testimony, almost all the action takes place away from the courtroom.

The number of locations—almost none of which are described with any sort of detail—is dizzying for such a short tale. The first scene presumably takes place in a meeting room at the prison where Leonard is being held, and the second takes place in the Vole home. The action then shifts briefly to police court, then to Mayherne's office, and then to the Shaw's Rents



THE DIZZYING REVELATIONS PILED ATOP ONE ANOTHER IN THIS FINAL SCENE MIGHT SEEM A BIT MUCH WHEN COMPARED TO THE SIMPLER, CLEANER SHOCK OF THE ORIGINAL STORY, BUT THE EXPANDED ENDING IS MORE THAN JUST AN ATTEMPT TO OUTDO THE ORIGINAL.”

room occupied by Mrs. Mogson. This is followed by a brief jaunt to a cinema on Lion’s Road and then—at long last—the courtroom for the main trial. The final scene is given this downright sumptuous, painterly description: “He did not see her again until some time later, and the place of their meeting is not relevant.” The story, then, is at least superficially the opposite of what one would consider when looking for work to adapt for the stage: too many locations and not enough dialogue

It is understandable, then, that the play aims to condense all the action into just two locations: the court—identified in the play as the Old Bailey in London—and the chambers of Vole’s lawyer, Sir Wilfrid Robarts. The location changes may seem small, but they had a profound effect on how the story would be adapted. Above all, the changes acknowledge the importance of the courtroom testimony, which is the source of much of the drama and tension in the work. Suddenly the work has become a courtroom drama—of course, it always was, but Christie tried her best to ignore this fact in the original text. There are good reasons for her reticence in focusing on the courtroom aspects. First, although Christie was familiar enough with outlining the details of a crime and the maneuverings of those trying to avoid justice, she had no knowledge of the workings of trials. As she later protested to theater producer Peter Saunders before agreeing to attempt the adaptation, “I don’t know a thing about legal procedure. I should make a fool of myself.” This explains her original handling of the pivotal courtroom scene in the story; she simply did not know the particulars of how such a trial would unfold. It was only when asked to create the stage adaptation that Christie finally researched the subject and interviewed lawyers.

There was another significant change required due to the focus on courtroom proceedings. In the original story, the viewpoint character is Mr. Mayherne, a solicitor for Leonard Vole. In the traditional British justice system, a defendant like Vole would have two lawyers: a solicitor, who would handle the gathering of information and interactions with the defendant, and an advocate, who would be the official defender of the client during the trial. This split of duties poses a problem in a tale like “Witness for the Prosecution,” since the lawyer who does all the work on the case—Mayherne—is not the one who confronts the witness in court. In the original story, it is in fact quite easy for a modern reader to miss the fact that Mayherne is *not* the one cross-examining Romaine Heigler during the trial. The advocate, referred to only once as “Sir Charles,” is the person vaguely referred to as “counsel for the defense” in the courtroom scene. While British readers of the time might have easily understood the distinction, modern readers—especially American readers—may be easily confused.

For the short story, then, Christie’s solution for this problem is to downplay the courtroom action, which reduces the role of the advocate. For the play, however, Christie goes a different route. Knowing that the courtroom scenes are the heart of the drama and action, she downgrades the importance of Mayherne (renamed Mayhew in the play), and promotes Robarts the advocate to the position of main character. The latter is the better solution for a dramatic adaptation, and one cannot help but wonder if it would have been a better choice for the original story as well. Of course, the play was written with the benefit of an additional twenty-eight years of experience and reflection, so this comparative failing of the short story is perhaps forgivable.

The other significant difference between the two works is, of course, the ending. The original story packs a one-two punch at the end as Mayherne realizes Romaine is also Mrs. Mogson, the woman who provided the love letters, and then learns that Leonard was actually guilty of the murder. Not content to leave this twist alone, the play offers a quadruple-whammy: in addition to the two previous shockers, Romaine learns that Leonard has actually been cheating on her with a younger woman, and she impulsively stabs him to death in the very courtroom where he was acquitted. The dizzying revelations piled atop one another in this final scene might seem a bit

much when compared to the simpler, cleaner shock of the original story, but the expanded ending is more than just an attempt to outdo the original. Much of it has to do with the special characteristics of stage drama as opposed to literature.

In the story, Mayherne realizes that Mrs. Mogson is actually Romaine after he notices that both clench and unclench their fists. However, what works beautifully on the page does not necessarily work as well on the stage. For example, it is rather difficult to show an audience a character coming to a realization, which is an internal thought process. Some dramatic works bypass this by allowing the character a monologue that describes their thoughts, but this would hardly be appropriate in the more realistic setting and style of *Witness for the Prosecution*. In addition, in the story the author can “play fair” by offering a passing description of the hand movements to readers, giving them the opportunity to guess the woman’s identity before it is revealed. It would be hard for audience members—some of whom might be sitting toward the back of the theater—to pick up that this subtle physical movement is a clue to Mrs. Mogson’s identity. For these reasons, then, the play reveals the woman’s true identity via a direct confession by Romaine, complete with an imitation of Mogson’s voice for audience members who still cannot follow.

The other problem the original story’s ending has on the stage is that the final revelation does not involve any sort of climactic action. It would seem silly for the curtain to simply drop after Romaine reveals Vole’s guilt in the murder. On stage, something must *happen*. This is solved with the expanded ending, which adds both another revelation—externalized for the audience and Romaine in the appearance of Vole’s mistress—and a most devastating action: a murder. The pacing of this final scene might seem rushed, but it certainly delivers on action and drama.

There is one additional benefit found in the stage ending, though its significance might be more subliminal or even academic. In the original story, the killer and his accomplice go free, presumably with a large amount of money. In the stage version, the killer is himself murdered, and his accomplice goes to jail not for perjury but for murder. Justice is ultimately served, unlike in the original story. This is in keeping with many of Christie’s other works; her murderers are generally

forced to answer for their crimes. Even in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), where the guilty parties are allowed to go free, it is presented as an act of greater justice, since their victim was himself a child killer. Christie felt strongly about the added ending for *Witness for the Prosecution*, and even had to insist that she would not allow the play to be produced unless the ending appeared as she wrote it. And although the original story has its own strengths, Christie was astute at preserving the positives and building upon the dramatic opportunities the original work afforded. As she herself wrote in her autobiography, “I was as nearly satisfied with that play as I have been with any.” It is doubtless many audience members would agree.

Source: Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on Agatha Christie’s “The Witness for the Prosecution,” *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Mary Wagoner

In the following excerpt, Wagoner examines the importance of Christie’s work when viewed in the context of other modern literature.

How important a writer was Agatha Christie? By quantitative measures—sales of books and box office demand for her plays, she may prove the best-selling writer in English in the twentieth century. Her books have outsold any other writer’s, and *The Mousetrap* and *Witness for the Prosecution* have become trans-atlantic institutions. Agatha Christie has found a prodigious reading and play-going audience.

Measuring Agatha Christie qualitatively is more difficult. Despite her popular success, some of her writing is clearly trivial and some, after only half a century, seems extremely dated. No one, for instance, could take Christie seriously as a poet, and not all her prose merits close attention. Her romance thrillers seem either excessively arch or simply silly today, and her spy thrillers tend to be either preachy or absurd.

Though uneven, her straight Mary Westmacott novels would seem to have a better chance of survival than her thrillers. *Absent in the Spring* and *Unfinished Portrait*, in particular, combine interesting narrative techniques and compelling story threads to produce firmly disciplined narratives. These novels merit larger audiences than either has in fact enjoyed. The other Westmacott novels, which mix occultism and frequently glib psychologizing, are less impressive.

The two Christie autobiographical books, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* and *An Autobiography*, are enormously attractive works. Both display the writer's narrative skill; both exhibit her singular personal charm. Yet Agatha Christie's reputation never depended on these efforts.

The Christie achievement must be measured by her whodunits. She dominated twentieth-century classic British detective fiction in all three of its forms: the short story, the novel, the play. As a mystery writer, she outproduced her rivals, even as she maintained an extraordinary level of workmanship for over half a century.

Her detective fiction is outstanding, both for the variety she achieved within the form's rigorous rules for plot development, and for her invention of entertaining, if stylized, characters. Such fiction allows only one basic kind of resolution. The detective must discover who committed the crime and must explain away the puzzlement and misunderstanding the criminal managed to generate. With a Christie whodunit, a reader confidently anticipates an ending that will satisfy expectations, but he can count on being surprised by the manipulation of details that lead to that ending.

Agatha Christie's remarkable success in creating many plots of this type clearly depended on her ingenuity with mutations and permutations of basic patterns . . . [She] constantly reused situations, characters, clusters of characters, and settings. But she made her tales seem fresh by varying at least one basic narrative element from work to work . . . No other writer of this century has so fully understood the craft of combining and recombining, to give readers a familiar, yet new, imaginative experience.

In short, she perfected the art of plotting, while her "serious" contemporaries shied away from plot as an oversimplification of the complexities of experience.

Further, as other twentieth-century writers began to avoid highly typed, externalized characters, Agatha Christie polished the art of creating them . . . Christie specialized in creating figures readily identifiable by their manners and their social or personal quirks, figures belonging to the grand tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British fiction, the tradition of Fielding, Smollett, Austen, and Dickens. Christie peopled her mystery tales with figures whose manners, dress, and speech invited readers to label them according to their social identities

and personal quirks. These characters rarely, perhaps never, reveal new dimensions of human nature. Instead they suggest that an understanding of individuals, whatever social microcosms they occupy, is merely a matter of recognizing what types of people they are.

This comedy-of-manners approach to characterization in Agatha Christie's mystery tales sets up a comedy-of-manners approach to social history, one that focuses on little details of lifestyle . . . [With] her specificity about manners, Christie entices willing suspension of disbelief in the kinds of characters and the kinds of situations she invents. She also recorded a time and a place convincingly. Conceivably, future generations may use her works as a source of social history, as twentieth-century social historians now use the writings of Smollett and Trollope.

Finally, the fact that the distinguishing techniques of Agatha Christie's whodunits are out of step with current practices may, paradoxically, represent the most significant aspect of her career. The extraordinary popularity of her works suggests that there are still readers drawn to plot and to typed characters, as well as to the recording of social history. Her works demonstrate the fact that the traditional elements of fiction have vitality in them yet. Because she imbued her mystery making with this vitality, Agatha Christie, who modestly saw herself as a literary sausage maker, may claim a more important place in literary history than she seemed ever to expect. In her subgenera, she kept alive elements of the grand tradition in British novel writing.

Source: Mary Wagoner, excerpt from *Agatha Christie*, Twayne Publishers, 1986, pp. 141–143.

Emma Lathen

In the following excerpt, Lathen examines Christie's popularity with American readers.

Why do Americans gulp down Agatha Christie in such quantity? Our most eminent literary critics have asked the question with genuine and growing bewilderment. Their pardonable zeal to espy a new [Leo] Tolstoy or [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky blinds them to the essence of Gutenberg's invention. They fail to recognize that, ever since the availability of the printing press, mankind has been evincing a dogged determination to read. And Americans, as usual, have taken a simple human desire and run away with it . . . Now genius is just as rare in literature as it is every place else. The world has long accepted the fact that the



WARTIME RATIONING, AUSTERITY, NATIONAL HEALTH—ALL FORMED PART OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S ACCURATELY OBSERVED ENGLAND. SO TOO DID EDUCATIONAL GRANTS AND YOUTH HOSTELS IN LONDON, WEST INDIAN HOSPITAL NURSES AND BUS CONDUCTORS, THE VERY RICH STAYING RICH IN A WELFARE STATE.”

lack of a [Christopher] Wren or a [Charles] Bulfinch has never prevented people from erecting buildings. Instead they have settled for the nearest reliable craftsman . . .

In the same sense, Agatha Christie has become a vernacular art form in her own right. And there is no doubt at all about the nature of her functionalism. She writes a readable book, a book that remains readable come hell or high water. This in itself is enough to explain her sales in the US, in the world.

American enthusiasts of James Joyce or Virginia Woolf do not see it this way. An embattled crew—as they have to be—they fight every inch of the way. Very well, they concede grudgingly, Agatha Christie is an honest, reliable craftsman. What's so wonderful about that? Surely there are plenty of them around. What makes this one so attractive to the American reading public?

In some circles it is tactless to reply that readable writers are not really thick on the ground. Provocative, insightful, gritty . . . yes. Readable . . . no. Narrative thrust, as we must all admit, is hopelessly old-fashioned. But then, so are most book readers, at least in this country. Coteries may be interested in the psyche; people still like stories. Agatha Christie is, *par excellence*, a story-teller.

Fortunately the second reason is less invidious. By making her works so quintessentially English, by becoming a chronicler of British small beer, Christie creates a special dimension of interest for her foreign audience, including Americans. Her intricate embroidery of domestic trivia obscures some of her consistent defects, such as shallow characterization and hackneyed

situations. At the same time it leaves untouched her great strengths—the absolute mastery of puzzle, the glinting edge of humour, the accurate social eye. There are millions of us ready to attest that this is a more than satisfactory trade-off.

A chorus of unanimity rises on at least one of these points. Friend and foe alike bow to the queen of the puzzle. Every Christie plot resolution has been hailed as a masterpiece of sleight-of-hand; she herself as a virtuoso of subterfuge. Tributes like these are heartwarming and deserved. They are not, however, altogether accurate. Agatha Christie's brilliance lies in her rare appreciation of the Laocoon complexities inherent in any standard situation. She herself rarely condescends to misdirect; she lets the cliché do it for her. When a sexually carnivorous young woman appears on the Christie scene, the reader, recognizing the stock figure of the home wrecker, needs no further inducement to trip down the garden path of self-deception. Wilfully misinterpreting every wrinkle, he will have strayed so far into the brambles by the time of the inevitable murder that nothing can get him back on course. Then the solution, the keystone of which is simply the durability of the original marriage or attachment, comes as a startling *boulevercement* for him—not to mention the carnivore. The contrapuntal variations on this theme are explored in *Evil Under the Sun*, *Murder in Retrospect* (in Britain *Five Little Pigs*), and *Death on the Nile*.

The same deadly common sense informs the Christie approach to impersonation and collusion. After all, any mystery aficionado worth his salt knows how to react when a large fortune and several dubious claimants are trailed enticingly before him. Like Pavlov's dog, he's been there before. Then comes the grand finale, the bland Christie assumption that, if an inheritance is worth shenanigans now, it was worth even more one death back. Therefore—good heavens!—the impostor is not any of those obvious suspects but is the man, or woman, who is already enjoying full possession of the money bags. So runs the logic of *A Murder Is Announced*, *There Is A Tide* (*Taken at the Flood* in Britain), and *Dead Man's Folly*. The twist is then reversed for *Funerals Are Fatal* (*After the Funeral*), where the skulduggery begins one death later, instead of one death sooner, than expected.

This Christie penchant for exhaustive combinations and permutations really blossoms

whenever two people conspire to commit a crime. Outlandish yokings of every description abound. But, by and large, it is safe to say that whenever an obvious male ne'er-do-well exists, no woman is ineligible to be his accomplice. In this respect Dame Agatha showed her colours as early as *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, where the gruff, middle-aged companion, complete with tweeds and walking shoes, emerges as a passionate partner in murder. From these promising beginnings she has made a clean sweep of the field, including the devoted secretary (*Sparkling Cyanide*), the protective Swedish child lover (*Ordeal by Innocence*), the subnormal housemaid (*A Pocket Full of Rye*), and the crisply independent poor relation (*The Patriotic Murders*, in Britain *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*). Yet for a ruthless exploiter of every conceivable possibility, these achievements were not enough. The apotheosis of Christie conspiracy is reserved for *Murder in the Calais Coach*, otherwise the *Orient Express*, where everybody is guilty.

All of this lies well within the canon of the classic detective story and is deeply satisfying to those of us who like to see a rigid form explored to its outermost limits. But inevitably the further Agatha Christie wanders off the beaten track, the closer she comes to overshooting the bounds of credulity. Here is where her export market enjoys a clear-cut advantage. An English reader may boggle at palpable absurdities. Not so an American. By the time we have absorbed the larger realities of English life, together with the special aspects illustrated by St Mary Mead [Miss Marple's village] we are not going to strain at gnats. For example, there is the geography of England. To American eyes, this involves an incredible number of people in a very constricted space. What's more, instead of trying to spread out, they all seem to be going to London constantly.

And there is the eternal question of age. Who counts as young, who counts as old? Above all, when do people retire? Every American, assiduously working his way through the Christie *oeuvre*, can grasp the broad outlines of employment in the colonial civil services. But what is he to make of all those fifty-year-old men, coming home to marry and start families as country gentlemen of leisure? . . .

Which raises the ultimate mystification. What in the world do these people do, day in, day out? . . .

Even before he stumbles over a body in the library, the American reader realizes that he lacks the proper yardstick to measure normal English behaviour.

The list could continue indefinitely, but the moral is self-evident. To read Agatha Christie, an American is required to abandon all his own social experience and surrender himself to a never-never world where voices are rarely raised, where breeding is more important than money, and where a really good herbaceous border matters more than anything else . . .

If the lulling background is English, the humour is universal—at least in the vintage Christie, which can be defined roughly as running from the mid thirties through the end of the fifties. At the beginning of her career she strayed into broad set pieces, with Bundle Brent rocketing adorably around the countryside and Hastings functioning as all-purpose stooge. But with success came relaxation and the introduction of fleeting vignettes and brief asides reflecting the author's point of view. Taken as a whole, they constitute an irresistible interpretation of the human condition.

For extra measure, the Christie assemblage includes a gallery of bystanders who transcend minor considerations of reality, creatures of inspired fantasy. These amiable *jeux d'esprit*, who can well be incorporated under the title of The Crazy Ladies, rarely figure as prominent members of the cast. But they are forever memorable.

No, Agatha Christie is not a comic writer. Black humour, mordant wit, condescending irony are—thank God—alien to her native genius. She is the author of straightforward light fiction who uses humour as leavening so that, throughout her great period, everything she wrote breathes a spirit of sanity, kindness and detachment. It is quite enough to endear her to millions of readers.

And then, while their guard is down, she tells them more about what has happened to England since the First World War than *The Times*—either of London or New York. That quick and unerring eye for the homely detail is worth volumes of social history. In *Styles* we start out with servants, with open fires, with bedroom candles. Little by little, the servants fade away, electric lights reach the bedroom, and central heating warms good and bad alike. No one, including *The Economist*, has tracked the shift of English

household practice from labour-intensive to capital-intensive with such unobtrusive persistency.

Outside the home her characters, even if they are derived from a golden world that never existed, move competently through one social upheaval after another. Wartime rationing, austerity, National Health—all formed part of Agatha Christie's accurately observed England. So too did educational grants and youth hostels in London, West Indian hospital nurses and bus conductors, the very rich staying rich in a welfare state. Dame Agatha mentioned these things to us long before anybody else did because she had a noticing eye. Capital punishment disappeared for Christie malefactors, and young people left those bed-sitters with the ubiquitous gas ring in order to share apartments—and Agatha Christie registers the fact, then casually passes it on. The Empire dies, employment goes up and down, the youth movement is spawned and it is all there, as seen from the Aga stove. There is no pretension, no didacticism. But it is the record of an era, drawn dispassionately and effectively.

Even on the delicate ground of American characters, Christie rarely sets a foot wrong. Here her victory consists less in attracting a devoted American audience than in avoiding its alienation. Refined creative instinct, or a lot of horse sense, saved Christie from the fatal error of sending Hercule Poirot to New York, or Miss Marple to Washington, DC. (English readers must often yearn for a little reciprocity along these lines.) Indeed, Christie was generally sparing in her use of Americans.

So much for the content of Christie's work. There is one final point to be made concerning her record in the United States. All those impressive sales figures stress the insatiable demand for her books. But there is another side to the coin. In addition to mass consumption, Agatha Christie represents mass production. Her long, hard-working life has filled the shelves with title after title. Now mystery reading often presents some of the symptoms of addiction, with the hardened fanatic devouring larger and larger dosages until a book a night is required to satisfy the craving. Everyone who has ever been bitten by the bug knows the joy of unearthing a new, appealing author, followed by the bitter discovery that his entire output consists of two volumes. With Christie, there is no such brief encounter; she is with you for life. And by the time there are over forty works to a writer's credit, re-reading becomes more than a possibility, it

becomes an insurance policy. Nothing makes us feel safer than an Agatha Christie we read twenty years ago.

Source: Emma Lathen, "Cornwallis's Revenge," in *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, edited by H. R. F. Keating, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977, pp. 79–94.

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Morgan, Janet, *Agatha Christie: A Biography*, Knopf, 1984.

This comprehensive account of Christie's life offers a more balanced view of the author and

her works than Christie's own autobiography, which tends to focus more on fond memories than on her literary output. The book also includes many photographs of the author and her family.

Sayers, Dorothy L., *Lord Peter: The Complete Lord Peter Wimsey Stories*, Harper, 1986.

Sayers was a contemporary of Christie who published her first mystery novel in 1923. She left the genre behind in 1939 to work instead on translations and religious texts. However, her literary creation Lord Peter Wimsey, amateur sleuth and wealthy gentleman, is perhaps her

most enduring legacy. This volume collects all of Sayer's short stories about Wimsey, who was also featured in a dozen novels.

Thompson, Paul, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society*, Routledge, 2004.

The beginning of the twentieth century was known in Britain as the Edwardian period, named for King Edward VII. Historian Thompson documents the era with accounts of British citizens from nearly every conceivable background and social class, bringing to life the period during which Christie came of age.

Glossary of Literary Terms

A

Aestheticism: A literary and artistic movement of the nineteenth century. Followers of the movement believed that art should not be mixed with social, political, or moral teaching. The statement “art for art’s sake” is a good summary of aestheticism. The movement had its roots in France, but it gained widespread importance in England in the last half of the nineteenth century, where it helped change the Victorian practice of including moral lessons in literature. Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe are two of the best-known “aesthetes” of the late nineteenth century.

Allegory: A narrative technique in which characters representing things or abstract ideas are used to convey a message or teach a lesson. Allegory is typically used to teach moral, ethical, or religious lessons but is sometimes used for satiric or political purposes. Many fairy tales are allegories.

Allusion: A reference to a familiar literary or historical person or event, used to make an idea more easily understood. Joyce Carol Oates’s story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” exhibits several allusions to popular music.

Analogy: A comparison of two things made to explain something unfamiliar through its similarities to something familiar, or to prove one point based on the acceptance

of another. Similes and metaphors are types of analogies.

Antagonist: The major character in a narrative or drama who works against the hero or protagonist. The Misfit in Flannery O’Connor’s story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” serves as the antagonist for the Grandmother.

Anthology: A collection of similar works of literature, art, or music. Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Eatonville Anthology” is a collection of stories that take place in the same town.

Anthropomorphism: The presentation of animals or objects in human shape or with human characteristics. The term is derived from the Greek word for “human form.” The fur necklet in Katherine Mansfield’s story “Miss Brill” has anthropomorphic characteristics.

Anti-hero: A central character in a work of literature who lacks traditional heroic qualities such as courage, physical prowess, and fortitude. Anti-heroes typically distrust conventional values and are unable to commit themselves to any ideals. They generally feel helpless in a world over which they have no control. Anti-heroes usually accept, and often celebrate, their positions as social outcasts. A well-known anti-hero is Walter Mitty in James Thurber’s story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.”

Archetype: The word archetype is commonly used to describe an original pattern or model from

which all other things of the same kind are made. Archetypes are the literary images that grow out of the “collective unconscious,” a theory proposed by psychologist Carl Jung. They appear in literature as incidents and plots that repeat basic patterns of life. They may also appear as stereotyped characters. The “schlemiel” of Yiddish literature is an archetype.

Autobiography: A narrative in which an individual tells his or her life story. Examples include Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and Amy Hempel’s story “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried,” which has autobiographical characteristics even though it is a work of fiction.

Avant-garde: A literary term that describes new writing that rejects traditional approaches to literature in favor of innovations in style or content. Twentieth-century examples of the literary avant-garde include the modernists and the minimalists.

B

Belles-lettres: A French term meaning “fine letters” or “beautiful writing.” It is often used as a synonym for literature, typically referring to imaginative and artistic rather than scientific or expository writing. Current usage sometimes restricts the meaning to light or humorous writing and appreciative essays about literature. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* epitomizes the realm of belles-lettres.

Bildungsroman: A German word meaning “novel of development.” The *bildungsroman* is a study of the maturation of a youthful character, typically brought about through a series of social or sexual encounters that lead to self-awareness. J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* is a *bildungsroman*, and Doris Lessing’s story “Through the Tunnel” exhibits characteristics of a *bildungsroman* as well.

Black Aesthetic Movement: A period of artistic and literary development among African Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s. This was the first major African-American artistic movement since the Harlem Renaissance and was closely paralleled by the civil rights and black power movements. The black aesthetic writers attempted to produce works of art that would be meaningful to the black masses. Key figures in black aesthetics included one of its founders, poet and playwright Amiri

Baraka, formerly known as Le Roi Jones; poet and essayist Haki R. Madhubuti, formerly Don L. Lee; poet and playwright Sonia Sanchez; and dramatist Ed Bullins. Works representative of the Black Aesthetic Movement include Amiri Baraka’s play *Dutchman*, a 1964 Obie award-winner.

Black Humor: Writing that places grotesque elements side by side with humorous ones in an attempt to shock the reader, forcing him or her to laugh at the horrifying reality of a disordered world. “Lamb to the Slaughter,” by Roald Dahl, in which a placid housewife murders her husband and serves the murder weapon to the investigating policemen, is an example of black humor.

C

Catharsis: The release or purging of unwanted emotions—specifically fear and pity—brought about by exposure to art. The term was first used by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *Poetics* to refer to the desired effect of tragedy on spectators.

Character: Broadly speaking, a person in a literary work. The actions of characters are what constitute the plot of a story, novel, or poem. There are numerous types of characters, ranging from simple, stereotypical figures to intricate, multifaceted ones. “Characterization” is the process by which an author creates vivid, believable characters in a work of art. This may be done in a variety of ways, including (1) direct description of the character by the narrator; (2) the direct presentation of the speech, thoughts, or actions of the character; and (3) the responses of other characters to the character. The term “character” also refers to a form originated by the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus that later became popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is a short essay or sketch of a person who prominently displays a specific attribute or quality, such as miserliness or ambition. “Miss Brill,” a story by Katherine Mansfield, is an example of a character sketch.

Classical: In its strictest definition in literary criticism, classicism refers to works of ancient Greek or Roman literature. The term may also be used to describe a literary work of recognized importance (a “classic”) from any time period or literature that exhibits the traits of classicism. Examples of later works

and authors now described as classical include French literature of the seventeenth century, Western novels of the nineteenth century, and American fiction of the mid-nineteenth century such as that written by James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain.

Climax: The turning point in a narrative, the moment when the conflict is at its most intense. Typically, the structure of stories, novels, and plays is one of rising action, in which tension builds to the climax, followed by falling action, in which tension lessens as the story moves to its conclusion.

Comedy: One of two major types of drama, the other being tragedy. Its aim is to amuse, and it typically ends happily. Comedy assumes many forms, such as farce and burlesque, and uses a variety of techniques, from parody to satire. In a restricted sense the term comedy refers only to dramatic presentations, but in general usage it is commonly applied to nondramatic works as well.

Comic Relief: The use of humor to lighten the mood of a serious or tragic story, especially in plays. The technique is very common in Elizabethan works, and can be an integral part of the plot or simply a brief event designed to break the tension of the scene.

Conflict: The conflict in a work of fiction is the issue to be resolved in the story. It usually occurs between two characters, the protagonist and the antagonist, or between the protagonist and society or the protagonist and himself or herself. The conflict in Washington Irving's story "The Devil and Tom Walker" is that the Devil wants Tom Walker's soul but Tom does not want to go to hell.

Criticism: The systematic study and evaluation of literary works, usually based on a specific method or set of principles. An important part of literary studies since ancient times, the practice of criticism has given rise to numerous theories, methods, and "schools," sometimes producing conflicting, even contradictory, interpretations of literature in general as well as of individual works. Even such basic issues as what constitutes a poem or a novel have been the subject of much criticism over the centuries. Seminal texts of literary criticism include Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesie*, and John Dryden's *Of*

Dramatic Poesie. Contemporary schools of criticism include deconstruction, feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, new historicist, postcolonialist, and reader-response.

D

Deconstruction: A method of literary criticism characterized by multiple conflicting interpretations of a given work. Deconstructionists consider the impact of the language of a work and suggest that the true meaning of the work is not necessarily the meaning that the author intended.

Deduction: The process of reaching a conclusion through reasoning from general premises to a specific premise. Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes often used deductive reasoning to solve mysteries.

Denotation: The definition of a word, apart from the impressions or feelings it creates in the reader. The word "apartheid" denotes a political and economic policy of segregation by race, but its connotations—oppression, slavery, inequality—are numerous.

Denouement: A French word meaning "the unknotting." In literature, it denotes the resolution of conflict in fiction or drama. The *denouement* follows the climax and provides an outcome to the primary plot situation as well as an explanation of secondary plot complications. A well-known example of *denouement* is the last scene of the play *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare, in which couples are married, an evildoer repents, the identities of two disguised characters are revealed, and a ruler is restored to power. Also known as "falling action."

Detective Story: A narrative about the solution of a mystery or the identification of a criminal. The conventions of the detective story include the detective's scrupulous use of logic in solving the mystery; incompetent or ineffectual police; a suspect who appears guilty at first but is later proved innocent; and the detective's friend or confidant—often the narrator—whose slowness in interpreting clues emphasizes by contrast the detective's brilliance. Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is commonly regarded as the earliest example of this type of story. Other practitioners are Arthur Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammett, and Agatha Christie.

Dialogue: Dialogue is conversation between people in a literary work. In its most restricted sense, it refers specifically to the speech of characters in a drama. As a specific literary genre, a “dialogue” is a composition in which characters debate an issue or idea.

Didactic: A term used to describe works of literature that aim to teach a moral, religious, political, or practical lesson. Although didactic elements are often found inartistically pleasing works, the term “didactic” usually refers to literature in which the message is more important than the form. The term may also be used to criticize a work that the critic finds “overly didactic,” that is, heavy-handed in its delivery of a lesson. An example of didactic literature is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Dramatic Irony: Occurs when the reader of a work of literature knows something that a character in the work itself does not know. The irony is in the contrast between the intended meaning of the statements or actions of a character and the additional information understood by the audience.

Dystopia: An imaginary place in a work of fiction where the characters lead dehumanized, fearful lives. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* portray versions of dystopia.

E

Edwardian: Describes cultural conventions identified with the period of the reign of Edward VII of England (1901–1910). Writers of the Edwardian Age typically displayed a strong reaction against the propriety and conservatism of the Victorian Age. Their work often exhibits distrust of authority in religion, politics, and art and expresses strong doubts about the soundness of conventional values. Writers of this era include E. M. Forster, H. G. Wells, and Joseph Conrad.

Empathy: A sense of shared experience, including emotional and physical feelings, with someone or something other than oneself. Empathy is often used to describe the response of a reader to a literary character.

Epilogue: A concluding statement or section of a literary work. In dramas, particularly those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the epilogue is a closing speech, often in verse, delivered by an actor at the end of a play and spoken directly to the audience.

Epiphany: A sudden revelation of truth inspired by a seemingly trivial incident. The term was widely used by James Joyce in his critical writings, and the stories in Joyce’s *Dubliners* are commonly called “epiphanies.”

Epistolary Novel: A novel in the form of letters. The form was particularly popular in the eighteenth century. The form can also be applied to short stories, as in Edwidge Danticat’s “Children of the Sea.”

Epithet: A word or phrase, often disparaging or abusive, that expresses a character trait of someone or something. “The Napoleon of crime” is an epithet applied to Professor Moriarty, arch-rival of Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle’s series of detective stories.

Existentialism: A predominantly twentieth-century philosophy concerned with the nature and perception of human existence. There are two major strains of existentialist thought: atheistic and Christian. Followers of atheistic existentialism believe that the individual is alone in a godless universe and that the basic human condition is one of suffering and loneliness. Nevertheless, because there are no fixed values, individuals can create their own characters—indeed, they can shape themselves—through the exercise of free will. The atheistic strain culminates in and is popularly associated with the works of Jean-Paul Sartre. The Christian existentialists, on the other hand, believe that only in God may people find freedom from life’s anguish. The two strains hold certain beliefs in common: that existence cannot be fully understood or described through empirical effort; that anguish is a universal element of life; that individuals must bear responsibility for their actions; and that there is no common standard of behavior or perception for religious and ethical matters. Existentialist thought figures prominently in the works of such authors as Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Albert Camus.

Expatriatism: The practice of leaving one’s country to live for an extended period in another country. Literary expatriates include Irish author James Joyce who moved to Italy and France, American writers James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald who lived and wrote in

Paris, and Polish novelist Joseph Conrad in England.

Exposition: Writing intended to explain the nature of an idea, thing, or theme. Expository writing is often combined with description, narration, or argument.

Expressionism: An indistinct literary term, originally used to describe an early twentieth-century school of German painting. The term applies to almost any mode of unconventional, highly subjective writing that distorts reality in some way. Advocates of Expressionism include Federico Garcia Lorca, Eugene O'Neill, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce.

F

Fable: A prose or verse narrative intended to convey amoral. Animals or inanimate objects with human characteristics often serve as characters in fables. A famous fable is Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare."

Fantasy: A literary form related to mythology and folklore. Fantasy literature is typically set in non-existent realms and features supernatural beings. Notable examples of literature with elements of fantasy are Gabriel García Márquez's story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" and Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas."

Farce: A type of comedy characterized by broad humor, outlandish incidents, and often vulgar subject matter. Much of the comedy in film and television could more accurately be described as farce.

Fiction: Any story that is the product of imagination rather than a documentation of fact. Characters and events in such narratives may be based in real life but their ultimate form and configuration is a creation of the author.

Figurative Language: A technique in which an author uses figures of speech such as hyperbole, irony, metaphor, or simile for a particular effect. Figurative language is the opposite of literal language, in which every word is truthful, accurate, and free of exaggeration or embellishment.

Flashback: A device used in literature to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story. Flashbacks are often introduced as the dreams or recollections of one or more characters.

Foil: A character in a work of literature whose physical or psychological qualities contrast strongly with, and therefore highlight, the corresponding qualities of another character. In his Sherlock Holmes stories, Arthur Conan Doyle portrayed Dr. Watson as a man of normal habits and intelligence, making him a foil for the eccentric and unusually perceptive Sherlock Holmes.

Folklore: Traditions and myths preserved in a culture or group of people. Typically, these are passed on by word of mouth in various forms—such as legends, songs, and proverbs—or preserved in customs and ceremonies. Washington Irving, in "The Devil and Tom Walker" and many of his other stories, incorporates many elements of the folklore of New England and Germany.

Folktale: A story originating in oral tradition. Folk tales fall into a variety of categories, including legends, ghost stories, fairy tales, fables, and anecdotes based on historical figures and events.

Foreshadowing: A device used in literature to create expectation or to set up an explanation of later developments. Edgar Allan Poe uses foreshadowing to create suspense in "The Fall of the House of Usher" when the narrator comments on the crumbling state of disrepair in which he finds the house.

G

Genre: A category of literary work. Genre may refer to both the content of a given work—tragedy, comedy, horror, science fiction—and to its form, such as poetry, novel, or drama.

Gilded Age: A period in American history during the 1870s and after characterized by political corruption and materialism. A number of important novels of social and political criticism were written during this time. Henry James and Kate Chopin are two writers who were prominent during the Gilded Age.

Gothicism: In literature, works characterized by a taste for medieval or morbid characters and situations. A gothic novel prominently features elements of horror, the supernatural, gloom, and violence: clanking chains, terror, ghosts, medieval castles, and unexplained phenomena. The term "gothic novel" is also applied to novels that lack elements of the traditional Gothic setting but that create a similar atmosphere of terror or dread. The

term can also be applied to stories, plays, and poems. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur* are both gothic novels.

Grotesque: In literature, a work that is characterized by exaggeration, deformity, freakishness, and disorder. The grotesque often includes an element of comic absurdity. Examples of the grotesque can be found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O'Connor, Joseph Heller, and Shirley Jackson.

H

Harlem Renaissance: The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s is generally considered the first significant movement of black writers and artists in the United States. During this period, new and established black writers, many of whom lived in the region of New York City known as Harlem, published more fiction and poetry than ever before, the first influential black literary journals were established, and black authors and artists received their first widespread recognition and serious critical appraisal. Among the major writers associated with this period are Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Hero/Heroine: The principal sympathetic character in a literary work. Heroes and heroines typically exhibit admirable traits: idealism, courage, and integrity, for example. Famous heroes and heroines of literature include Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Margaret Mitchell's *Scarlett O'Hara*, and the anonymous narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Hyperbole: Deliberate exaggeration used to achieve an effect. In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth hyperbolizes when she says, "All the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten this little hand."

I

Image: A concrete representation of an object or sensory experience. Typically, such a representation helps evoke the feelings associated with the object or experience itself. Images are either "literal" or "figurative." Literal images are especially concrete and involve little or no extension of the obvious meaning of the words used to express them. Figurative images do not follow the literal meaning

of the words exactly. Images in literature are usually visual, but the term "image" can also refer to the representation of any sensory experience.

Imagery: The array of images in a literary work. Also used to convey the author's overall use of figurative language in a work.

In medias res: A Latin term meaning "in the middle of things." It refers to the technique of beginning a story at its midpoint and then using various flashback devices to reveal previous action. This technique originated in such epics as Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Interior Monologue: A narrative technique in which characters' thoughts are revealed in a way that appears to be uncontrolled by the author. The interior monologue typically aims to reveal the inner self of a character. It portrays emotional experiences as they occur at both a conscious and unconscious level. One of the best-known interior monologues in English is the Molly Bloom section at the close of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is also told in the form of an interior monologue.

Irony: In literary criticism, the effect of language in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is stated. The title of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is ironic because what Swift proposes in this essay is cannibalism—hardly "modest."

J

Jargon: Language that is used or understood only by a select group of people. Jargon may refer to terminology used in a certain profession, such as computer jargon, or it may refer to any nonsensical language that is not understood by most people. Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" both use jargon.

K

Knickerbocker Group: An indistinct group of New York writers of the first half of the nineteenth century. Members of the group were linked only by location and a common theme: New York life. Two famous members of the Knickerbocker Group were Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant. The

group's name derives from Irving's *Knickerbocker's History of New York*.

L

Literal Language: An author uses literal language when he or she writes without exaggerating or embellishing the subject matter and without any tools of figurative language. To say "He ran very quickly down the street" is to use literal language, whereas to say "He ran like a hare down the street" would be using figurative language.

Literature: Literature is broadly defined as any written or spoken material, but the term most often refers to creative works. Literature includes poetry, drama, fiction, and many kinds of nonfiction writing, as well as oral, dramatic, and broadcast compositions not necessarily preserved in a written format, such as films and television programs.

Lost Generation: A term first used by Gertrude Stein to describe the post-World War I generation of American writers: men and women haunted by a sense of betrayal and emptiness brought about by the destructiveness of the war. The term is commonly applied to Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others.

M

Magic Realism: A form of literature that incorporates fantasy elements or supernatural occurrences into the narrative and accepts them as truth. Gabriel García Márquez and Laura Esquivel are two writers known for their works of magic realism.

Metaphor: A figure of speech that expresses an idea through the image of another object. Metaphors suggest the essence of the first object by identifying it with certain qualities of the second object. An example is "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun" in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Here, Juliet, the first object, is identified with qualities of the second object, the sun.

Minimalism: A literary style characterized by spare, simple prose with few elaborations. In minimalism, the main theme of the work is often never discussed directly. Amy Hempel and Ernest Hemingway are two writers known for their works of minimalism.

Modernism: Modern literary practices. Also, the principles of a literary school that lasted from roughly the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of World War II. Modernism is defined by its rejection of the literary conventions of the nineteenth century and by its opposition to conventional morality, taste, traditions, and economic values. Many writers are associated with the concepts of modernism, including Albert Camus, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, and James Joyce.

Monologue: A composition, written or oral, by a single individual. More specifically, a speech given by a single individual in a drama or other public entertainment. It has no set length, although it is usually several or more lines long. "I Stand Here Ironing" by Tillie Olsen is an example of a story written in the form of a monologue.

Mood: The prevailing emotions of a work or of the author in his or her creation of the work. The mood of a work is not always what might be expected based on its subject matter.

Motif: A theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that recurs throughout a single work of literature or occurs in a number of different works over a period of time. For example, the color white in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a "specific" motif, while the trials of star-crossed lovers is a "conventional" motif from the literature of all periods.

N

Narration: The telling of a series of events, real or invented. A narration may be either a simple narrative, in which the events are recounted chronologically, or a narrative with a plot, in which the account is given in a style reflecting the author's artistic concept of the story. Narration is sometimes used as a synonym for "storyline."

Narrative: A verse or prose accounting of an event or sequence of events, real or invented. The term is also used as an adjective in the sense "method of narration." For example, in literary criticism, the expression "narrative technique" usually refers to the way the author structures and presents his or her story. Different narrative forms include

diaries, travelogues, novels, ballads, epics, short stories, and other fictional forms.

Narrator: The teller of a story. The narrator may be the author or a character in the story through whom the author speaks. Huckleberry Finn is the narrator of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Novella: An Italian term meaning "story." This term has been especially used to describe fourteenth-century Italian tales, but it also refers to modern short novels. Modern novellas include Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilich*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

O

Oedipus Complex: A son's romantic obsession with his mother. The phrase is derived from the story of the ancient Theban hero Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, and was popularized by Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Literary occurrences of the Oedipus complex include Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner."

Onomatopoeia: The use of words whose sounds express or suggest their meaning. In its simplest sense, onomatopoeia may be represented by words that mimic the sounds they denote such as "hiss" or "meow." At a more subtle level, the pattern and rhythm of sounds and rhymes of a line or poem may be onomatopoeic.

Oral Tradition: A process by which songs, ballads, folklore, and other material are transmitted by word of mouth. The tradition of oral transmission predates the written record systems of literate society. Oral transmission preserves material sometimes over generations, although often with variations. Memory plays a large part in the recitation and preservation of orally transmitted material. Native American myths and legends, and African folktales told by plantation slaves are examples of orally transmitted literature.

P

Parable: A story intended to teach a moral lesson or answer an ethical question. Examples of parables are the stories told by Jesus Christ in the New Testament, notably "The Prodigal

Son," but parables also are used in Sufism, rabbinic literature, Hasidism, and Zen Buddhism. Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "Gimpel the Fool" exhibits characteristics of a parable.

Paradox: A statement that appears illogical or contradictory at first, but may actually point to an underlying truth. A literary example of a paradox is George Orwell's statement "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" in *Animal Farm*.

Parody: In literature, this term refers to an imitation of a serious literary work or the signature style of a particular author in a ridiculous manner. Atypical parody adopts the style of the original and applies it to an inappropriate subject for humorous effect. Parody is a form of satire and could be considered the literary equivalent of a caricature or cartoon. Henry Fielding's *Shamela* is a parody of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*.

Persona: A Latin term meaning "mask." Personae are the characters in a fictional work of literature. The persona generally functions as a mask through which the author tells a story in a voice other than his or her own. A persona is usually either a character in a story who acts as a narrator or an "implied author," a voice created by the author to act as the narrator for himself or herself. The persona in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the unnamed young mother experiencing a mental breakdown.

Personification: A figure of speech that gives human qualities to abstract ideas, animals, and inanimate objects. To say that "the sun is smiling" is to personify the sun.

Plot: The pattern of events in a narrative or drama. In its simplest sense, the plot guides the author in composing the work and helps the reader follow the work. Typically, plots exhibit causality and unity and have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes, however, a plot may consist of a series of disconnected events, in which case it is known as an "episodic plot."

Poetic Justice: An outcome in a literary work, not necessarily a poem, in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished, especially in ways that particularly fit their virtues or crimes. For example, a murderer may himself be murdered, or a thief will find himself penniless.

Poetic License: Distortions of fact and literary convention made by a writer—not always a poet—for the sake of the effect gained. Poetic license is closely related to the concept of “artistic freedom.” An author exercises poetic license by saying that a pile of money “reaches as high as a mountain” when the pile is actually only a foot or two high.

Point of View: The narrative perspective from which a literary work is presented to the reader. There are four traditional points of view. The “third person omniscient” gives the reader a “godlike” perspective, unrestricted by time or place, from which to see actions and look into the minds of characters. This allows the author to comment openly on characters and events in the work. The “third person” point of view presents the events of the story from outside of any single character’s perception, much like the omniscient point of view, but the reader must understand the action as it takes place and without any special insight into characters’ minds or motivations. The “first person” or “personal” point of view relates events as they are perceived by a single character. The main character “tells” the story and may offer opinions about the action and characters which differ from those of the author. Much less common than omniscient, third person, and first person is the “second person” point of view, wherein the author tells the story as if it is happening to the reader. James Thurber employs the omniscient point of view in his short story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.” Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” is a short story told from the third person point of view. Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn* is presented from the first person viewpoint. Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* is an example of a novel which uses the second person point of view.

Pornography: Writing intended to provoke feelings of lust in the reader. Such works are often condemned by critics and teachers, but those which can be shown to have literary value are viewed less harshly. Literary works that have been described as pornographic include D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Post-Aesthetic Movement: An artistic response made by African Americans to the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Writers since that time have adopted a somewhat different tone in their work, with less emphasis placed on the disparity between black and white in the United States. In the words of post-aesthetic authors such as Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, and Kristin Hunter, African Americans are portrayed as looking inward for answers to their own questions, rather than always looking to the outside world. Two well-known examples of works produced as part of the post-aesthetic movement are the Pulitzer Prize-winning novels *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

Postmodernism: Writing from the 1960s forward characterized by experimentation and application of modernist elements, which include existentialism and alienation. Postmodernists have gone a step further in the rejection of tradition begun with the modernists by also rejecting traditional forms, preferring the anti-novel over the novel and the anti-hero over the hero. Postmodern writers include Thomas Pynchon, Margaret Drabble, and Gabriel García Márquez.

Prologue: An introductory section of a literary work. It often contains information establishing the situation of the characters or presents information about the setting, time period, or action. In drama, the prologue is spoken by a chorus or by one of the principal characters.

Prose: A literary medium that attempts to mirror the language of everyday speech. It is distinguished from poetry by its use of unmetred, unrhymed language consisting of logically related sentences. Prose is usually grouped into paragraphs that form a cohesive whole such as an essay or a novel. The term is sometimes used to mean an author’s general writing.

Protagonist: The central character of a story who serves as a focus for its themes and incidents and as the principal rationale for its development. The protagonist is sometimes referred to in discussions of modern literature as the hero or anti-hero. Well-known protagonists are Hamlet in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

R

Realism: A nineteenth-century European literary movement that sought to portray familiar

characters, situations, and settings in a realistic manner. This was done primarily by using an objective narrative point of view and through the buildup of accurate detail. The standard for success of any realistic work depends on how faithfully it transfers common experience into fictional forms. The realistic method may be altered or extended, as in stream of consciousness writing, to record highly subjective experience. Contemporary authors who often write in a realistic way include Nadine Gordimer and Grace Paley.

Resolution: The portion of a story following the climax, in which the conflict is resolved. The resolution of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is neatly summed up in the following sentence: "Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and every body smiled."

Rising Action: The part of a drama where the plot becomes increasingly complicated. Rising action leads up to the climax, or turning point, of a drama. The final "chase scene" of an action film is generally the rising action which culminates in the film's climax.

Roman a clef: A French phrase meaning "novel with a key." It refers to a narrative in which real persons are portrayed under fictitious names. Jack Kerouac, for example, portrayed various friends under fictitious names in the novel *On the Road*. D. H. Lawrence based "The Rocking-Horse Winner" on a family he knew.

Romanticism: This term has two widely accepted meanings. In historical criticism, it refers to a European intellectual and artistic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that sought greater freedom of personal expression than that allowed by the strict rules of literary form and logic of the eighteenth-century neoclassicists. The Romantics preferred emotional and imaginative expression to rational analysis. They considered the individual to be at the center of all experience and so placed him or her at the center of their art. The Romantics believed that the creative imagination reveals nobler truths—unique feelings and attitudes—than those that could be discovered by logic or by scientific examination. "Romanticism" is also used as a general term to refer to a type of sensibility found in all periods of literary history and usually

considered to be in opposition to the principles of classicism. In this sense, Romanticism signifies any work or philosophy in which the exotic or dreamlike figure strongly, or that is devoted to individualistic expression, self-analysis, or a pursuit of a higher realm of knowledge than can be discovered by human reason. Prominent Romantics include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

S

Satire: A work that uses ridicule, humor, and wit to criticize and provoke change in human nature and institutions. Voltaire's novella *Candide* and Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal" are both satires. Flannery O'Connor's portrayal of the family in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a satire of a modern, Southern, American family.

Science Fiction: A type of narrative based upon real or imagined scientific theories and technology. Science fiction is often peopled with alien creatures and set on other planets or in different dimensions. Popular writers of science fiction are Isaac Asimov, Karel Capek, Ray Bradbury, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

Setting: The time, place, and culture in which the action of a narrative takes place. The elements of setting may include geographic location, characters's physical and mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place.

Short Story: A fictional prose narrative shorter and more focused than a novella. The short story usually deals with a single episode and often a single character. The "tone," the author's attitude toward his or her subject and audience, is uniform throughout. The short story frequently also lacks *denouement*, ending instead at its climax.

Signifying Monkey: A popular trickster figure in black folklore, with hundreds of tales about this character documented since the 19th century. Henry Louis Gates Jr. examines the history of the signifying monkey in *The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, published in 1988.

Simile: A comparison, usually using “like” or “as,” of two essentially dissimilar things, as in “coffee as cold as ice” or “He sounded like a broken record.” The title of Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” contains a simile.

Socialist Realism: The Socialist Realism school of literary theory was proposed by Maxim Gorky and established as a dogma by the first Soviet Congress of Writers. It demanded adherence to a communist worldview in works of literature. Its doctrines required an objective viewpoint comprehensible to the working classes and themes of social struggle featuring strong proletarian heroes. Gabriel García Márquez’s stories exhibit some characteristics of Socialist Realism.

Stereotype: A stereotype was originally the name for a duplication made during the printing process; this led to its modern definition as a person or thing that is (or is assumed to be) the same as all others of its type. Common stereotypical characters include the absent-minded professor, the nagging wife, the troublemaking teenager, and the kind-hearted grandmother.

Stream of Consciousness: A narrative technique for rendering the inward experience of a character. This technique is designed to give the impression of an ever-changing series of thoughts, emotions, images, and memories in the spontaneous and seemingly illogical order that they occur in life. The textbook example of stream of consciousness is the last section of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Structure: The form taken by a piece of literature. The structure may be made obvious for ease of understanding, as in nonfiction works, or may be obscured for artistic purposes, as in some poetry or seemingly “unstructured” prose.

Style: A writer’s distinctive manner of arranging words to suit his or her ideas and purpose in writing. The unique imprint of the author’s personality upon his or her writing, style is the product of an author’s way of arranging ideas and his or her use of diction, different sentence structures, rhythm, figures of speech, rhetorical principles, and other elements of composition.

Suspense: A literary device in which the author maintains the audience’s attention through the buildup of events, the outcome of which

will soon be revealed. Suspense in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is sustained throughout by the question of whether or not the Prince will achieve what he has been instructed to do and of what he intends to do.

Symbol: Something that suggests or stands for something else without losing its original identity. In literature, symbols combine their literal meaning with the suggestion of an abstract concept. Literary symbols are of two types: those that carry complex associations of meaning no matter what their contexts, and those that derive their suggestive meaning from their functions in specific literary works. Examples of symbols are sunshine suggesting happiness, rain suggesting sorrow, and storm clouds suggesting despair.

T

Tale: A story told by a narrator with a simple plot and little character development. Tales are usually relatively short and often carry a simple message. Examples of tales can be found in the works of Saki, Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, and O. Henry.

Tall Tale: A humorous tale told in a straightforward, credible tone but relating absolutely impossible events or feats of the characters. Such tales were commonly told of frontier adventures during the settlement of the west in the United States. Literary use of tall tales can be found in Washington Irving’s *History of New York*, Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, and in the German R. F. Raspe’s *Baron Munchausen’s Narratives of His Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*.

Theme: The main point of a work of literature. The term is used interchangeably with thesis. Many works have multiple themes. One of the themes of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” is loss of faith.

Tone: The author’s attitude toward his or her audience maybe deduced from the tone of the work. A formal tone may create distance or convey politeness, while an informal tone may encourage a friendly, intimate, or intrusive feeling in the reader. The author’s attitude toward his or her subject matter may also be deduced from the tone of the words he or she uses in discussing it. The tone of

John F. Kennedy's speech which included the appeal to "ask not what your country can do for you" was intended to instill feelings of camaraderie and national pride in listeners.

Tragedy: A drama in prose or poetry about a noble, courageous hero of excellent character who, because of some tragic character flaw, brings ruin upon him- or herself. Tragedy treats its subjects in a dignified and serious manner, using poetic language to help evoke pity and fear and bring about catharsis, a purging of these emotions. The tragic form was practiced extensively by the ancient Greeks. The classical form of tragedy was revived in the sixteenth century; it flourished especially on the Elizabethan stage. In modern times, dramatists have attempted to adapt the form to the needs of modern society by drawing their heroes from the ranks of ordinary men and women and defining the nobility of these heroes in terms of spirit rather than exalted social standing. Some contemporary works that are thought of as tragedies include *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner.

Tragic Flaw: In a tragedy, the quality within the hero or heroine which leads to his or her downfall. Examples of the tragic flaw include Othello's jealousy and Hamlet's indecisiveness, although most great tragedies defy such simple interpretation.

U

Utopia: A fictional perfect place, such as "paradise" or "heaven." An early literary utopia was described in Plato's *Republic*, and in modern literature, Ursula K. Le Guin depicts a utopia in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas."

V

Victorian: Refers broadly to the reign of Queen Victoria of England (1837-1901) and to anything with qualities typical of that era. For example, the qualities of smug narrow-mindedness, bourgeois materialism, faith in social progress, and priggish morality are often considered Victorian. In literature, the Victorian Period was the great age of the English novel, and the latter part of the era saw the rise of movements such as decadence and symbolism.

Cumulative Author/Title Index

A

A & P (Updike): V3
 Achebe, Chinua
 Civil Peace: V13
 Marriage Is a Private Affair: V30
 Vengeful Creditor: V3
 Adams, Alice
 Greyhound People: V21
 The Last Lovely City: V14
African Passions (Rivera): V15
Africans (Kohler): V18
Aftermath (Waters): V22
After Twenty Years (Henry): V27
 Agüeros, Jack
 Dominoes: V13
 Aiken, Conrad
 Silent Snow, Secret Snow: V8
The Aleph (Borges): V17
 Alexie, Sherman
 *Because My Father Always Said
 He Was the Only Indian Who
 Saw Jimi Hendrix Play "The
 Star-Spangled Banner" at
 Woodstock*: V18
All the Years of Her Life (Callaghan):
 V19
 Allen, Woody
 The Kugelmass Episode: V21
 Allende, Isabel
 And of Clay Are We Created: V11
 The Gold of Tomás Vargas: V16
 Alvarez, Julia
 Daughter of Invention: V31
 Liberty: V27
America and I (Yeziarska): V15
American History (Cofer): V27

Amigo Brothers (Thomas): V28
And of Clay Are We Created
 (Allende): V11
 Anderson, Sherwood
 Death in the Woods: V10
 Hands: V11
 Sophistication: V4
Animal Stories (Brown): V14
An Outpost of Progress (Conrad): V31
Anxiety (Paley): V27
The Arabian Nights (Burton): V21
Araby (Joyce): V1
Art Work (Byatt): V26
 Asimov, Isaac
 Nightfall: V17
Astronomer's Wife (Boyle): V13
 Atwood, Margaret
 Happy Endings: V13
 Rape Fantasies: V3
Aunty Misery (Cofer): V29
*Average Waves in Unprotected
 Waters* (Tyler): V17
Axolotl (Cortázar): V3

B

Babel, Isaac
 My First Goose: V10
Babette's Feast (Dinesen): V20
Babylon Revisited (Fitzgerald): V4
 Baida, Peter
 A Nurse's Story: V25
 Baldwin, James
 The Rockpile: V18
 Sonny's Blues: V2
 Balzac, Honore de
 La Grande Bretèche: V10

Bambara, Toni Cade
 Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird: V4
 Gorilla, My Love: V21
 The Lesson: V12
 Raymond's Run: V7
Barn Burning (Faulkner): V5
 Barnes, Julian
 Melon: V24
 Barrett, Andrea
 The English Pupil: V24
 Barth, John
 Lost in the Funhouse: V6
 Barthelme, Donald
 The Indian Uprising: V17
 *Robert Kennedy Saved from
 Drowning*: V3
*Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of
 Wall Street* (Melville): V3
The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant
 (Wetherell): V28
 Bates, H. E.
 The Daffodil Sky: V7
The Bear (Faulkner): V2
The Beast in the Jungle (James): V6
 Beattie, Ann
 Imagined Scenes: V20
 Janus: V9
*Because My Father Always Said He
 Was the Only Indian Who Saw
 Jimi Hendrix Play "The Star-
 Spangled Banner" at Woodstock*
 (Alexie): V18
 Beckett, Samuel
 Dante and the Lobster: V15
The Beginning of Homewood
 (Wideman): V12

- Bellow, Saul
Leaving the Yellow House: V12
A Silver Dish: V22
- Bender, Aimee
The Rememberer: V25
- Benét, Stephen Vincent
An End to Dreams: V22
By the Waters of Babylon: V31
- Berriault, Gina
The Stone Boy: V7
Women in Their Beds: V11
The Best Girlfriend You Never Had
(Houston): V17
- Beware of the Dog* (Dahl): V30
- Bierce, Ambrose
The Boarded Window: V9
A Horseman in the Sky: V27
An Occurrence at Owl Creek
Bridge: V2
- Big Black Good Man* (Wright): V20
- Big Blonde* (Parker): V5
- The Birds* (du Maurier): V16
- Bisson, Terry
The Toxic Donut: V18
- Black Boy* (Boyle): V14
- The Black Cat* (Poe): V26
- Black Is My Favorite Color*
(Malamud): V16
- Blackberry Winter* (Warren): V8
- Bliss* (Mansfield): V10
- Blood-Burning Moon* (Toomer): V5
- Bloodchild* (Butler): V6
- The Bloody Chamber* (Carter): V4
- Bloom, Amy
Silver Water: V11
- Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird*
(Bambara): V4
- The Blues I'm Playing* (Hughes):
V7
- The Boarded Window* (Bierce): V9
- Boccaccio, Giovanni
Federigo's Falcon: V28
- Boll, Heinrich
Christmas Not Just Once a Year:
V20
- Borges, Jorge Luis
The Aleph: V17
The Circular Ruins: V26
The Garden of Forking Paths:
V9
Pierre Menard, Author of the
Quixote: V4
- Borowski, Tadeusz
This Way for the Gas, Ladies and
Gentlemen: V13
- Boule de Suif* (Maupassant): V21
- Bowen, Elizabeth
A Day in the Dark: V22
The Demon Lover: V5
- Bowles, Paul
The Eye: V17
- A Boy and His Dog* (Ellison): V14
- Boyle, Kay
Astronomer's Wife: V13
Black Boy: V14
The White Horses of Vienna: V10
- Boyle, T. Coraghessan
Stones in My Passway, Hellhound
on My Trail: V13
The Underground Gardens: V19
- Boys and Girls* (Munro): V5
- Bradbury, Ray
The Golden Kite, the Silver Wind:
V28
There Will Come Soft Rains: V1
The Veldt: V20
- Brazzaville Teen-ager* (Friedman):
V18
- Bright and Morning Star* (Wright):
V15
- Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx): V23
- Brown, Jason
Animal Stories: V14
- Brownies* (Packer): V25
- Burton, Richard
The Arabian Nights: V21
- Butler, Octavia
Bloodchild: V6
- Butler, Robert Olen
A Good Scent from a Strange
Mountain: V11
Titanic Survivors Found in
Bermuda Triangle: V22
- B. Wordsworth* (Naipaul): V29
- Byatt, A. S.
Art Work: V26
- By the Waters of Babylon* (Benét): V31
- C**
- Callaghan, Morley
All the Years of Her Life: V19
- Calvino, Italo
The Feathered Ogre: V12
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: V31
- Camus, Albert
The Guest: V4
The Canal (Yates): V24
The Canterville Ghost (Wilde): V7
- Capote, Truman
A Christmas Memory: V2
Caroline's Wedding (Danticat): V25
- Carter, Angela
The Bloody Chamber: V4
The Erlking: V12
- Carver, Raymond
Cathedral: V6
Errand: V13
A Small, Good Thing: V23
What We Talk About When We
Talk About Love: V12
Where I'm Calling From: V3
- The Cask of Amontillado* (Poe): V7
- The Catbird Seat* (Thurber): V10
- Cathedral* (Carver): V6
- Cather, Willa
The Diamond Mine: V16
Neighbour Rosicky: V7
Paul's Case: V2
A Wagner Matinee: V27
The Celebrated Jumping Frog of
Calaveras County (Twain): V1
- The Censors* (Valenzuela): V29
- The Centaur* (Saramago): V23
- The Challenge* (Vargas Llosa): V14
- Chandra, Vikram
Dharma: V16
- Charles (Jackson): V27
- Cheever, John
The Country Husband: V14
The Swimmer: V2
- Chekhov, Anton
The Darling: V13
Gooseberries: V14
Gusev: V26
The Lady with the Pet Dog: V5
A Problem: V29
- Chesnutt, Charles Waddell
The Goophered Grapevine: V26
The Sheriff's Children: V11
- Children of the Sea* (Danticat): V1
- Chopin, Kate
Désirée's Baby: V13
A Point at Issue!: V17
The Storm: V26
The Story of an Hour: V2
- Christie, Agatha
The Witness for the Prosecution:
V31
- A Christmas Memory* (Capote): V2
- Christmas Not Just Once a Year*
(Böll): V20
- The Chrysanthemums* (Steinbeck):
V6
- A Circle in the Fire* (O'Connor): V19
- The Circular Ruins* (Borges): V26
- Cisneros, Sandra
Eleven: V27
Little Miracles, Kept Promises: V13
Woman Hollering Creek: V3
- Civil Peace* (Achebe): V13
- Clarke, Arthur C.
Dog Star: V29
"If I Forget Thee, O Earth...":
V18
The Star: V4
- A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*
(Hemingway): V9
- Cofer, Judith Ortiz
American History: V27
Aunt Misery: V29
- Collier, Eugenia W.
Marigolds: V28
Sweet Potato Pie: V30
- Connell, Richard
The Most Dangerous Game: V1

- Conrad, Joseph
An Outpost of Progress: V31
Heart of Darkness: V12
The Secret Sharer: V1
Conscience of the Court (Hurston): V21
Contents of a Dead Man's Pockets (Finney): V29
A Conversation from the Third Floor (El-Bisatie): V17
A Conversation with My Father (Paley): V3
The Conversion of the Jews (Roth): V18
Cortázar, Julio
Axolotl: V3
End of the Game: V31
House Taken Over: V28
The Pursuer: V20
The Country Husband (Cheever): V14
Crane, Stephen
A Mystery of Heroism: V28
The Open Boat: V4
Crazy Sunday (Fitzgerald): V21
The Curing Woman (Morales): V19
- D**
The Daffodil Sky (Bates): V7
Dahl, Roald
Beware of the Dog: V30
Lamb to the Slaughter: V4
Dante and the Lobster (Beckett): V15
Danticat, Edwidge
Caroline's Wedding: V25
Children of the Sea: V1
The Darling (Chekhov): V13
Daughter of Invention (Alvarez): V31
Davies, Peter Ho
Think of England: V21
Davis, Rebecca Harding
Life in the Iron Mills: V26
A Day Goes By (Pirandello): V30
A Day in the Dark (Bowen): V22
Day of the Butterfly (Munro): V28
de Balzac, Honore
La Grande Bretèche: V10
de Maupassant, Guy
Boule de Suif: V21
The Necklace: V4
Two Friends: V28
de Unamuno, Miguel
Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr: V20
The Dead (Joyce): V6
Death in the Woods (Anderson): V10
Death in Venice (Mann): V9
The Death of Ivan Ilych (Tolstoy): V5
Debbie and Julie (Lessing): V12
The Deep (Swan): V23
The Demon Lover (Bowen): V5
- Desai, Anita
A Devoted Son: V31
Games at Twilight: V28
Desiree's Baby (Chopin): V13
The Destructors (Greene): V14
The Devil and Tom Walker (Irving): V1
Devlin, Anne
Naming the Names: V17
A Devoted Son (Desai): V31
Dharma (Chandra): V16
The Diamond as Big as the Ritz (Fitzgerald): V25
The Diamond Mine (Cather): V16
Diaz, Junot
The Sun, the Moon, the Stars: V20
The Difference (Glasgow): V9
Dinesen, Isak
Babette's Feast: V20
The Ring: V6
The Sailor-Boy's Tale: V13
Sorrow-Acre: V3
Disorder and Early Sorrow (Mann): V4
Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee
Meeting Mrinal: V24
Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter: V18
Doctorow, E. L.
The Writer in the Family: V27
Doerr, Anthony
The Shell Collector: V25
The Dog of Tithwal (Manto): V15
Dog Star (Clarke): V29
The Doll's House (Mansfield): V29
Dominoes (Agüeros): V13
Don't Look Now (du Maurier): V14
The Door in the Wall (Wells): V3
Dostoevsky, Fyodor
The Grand Inquisitor: V8
The Heavenly Christmas Tree: V30
Doyle, Arthur Conan
The Red-Headed League: V2
Dr. Heidegger's Experiment (Hawthorne): V30
du Maurier, Daphne
The Birds: V16
Don't Look Now: V14
Dubus, Andre
The Fat Girl: V10
Dybek, Stuart
Hot Ice: V23
- E**
The Eatonville Anthology (Hurston): V1
Edwards, Kim
The Way It Felt to Be Falling: V18
Eisenberg, Deborah
Someone to Talk To: V24
- El-Bisatie, Mohamed
A Conversation from the Third Floor: V17
Elbow Room (McPherson): V23
The Elephant Vanishes (Murakami): V23
Eleven (Cisneros): V27
Eliot, George
The Lifted Veil: V8
Ellison, Harlan
A Boy and His Dog: V14
I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream: V15
Jeffy Is Five: V13
"Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman: V21
Ellison, Ralph
The Invisible Man, or Battle Royal: V11
King of the Bingo Game: V1
The End of Old Horse (Ortiz): V22
End of the Game (Cortázar): V31
An End to Dreams (Benét): V22
The English Pupil (Barrett): V24
Erdrich, Louise
Fleur: V22
The Leap: V30
The Red Convertible: V14
The Erlking (Carter): V12
Errand (Carver): V13
The Eskimo Connection (Yamamoto): V14
Eveline (Joyce): V19
Everyday Use (Walker): V2
Everything That Rises Must Converge (O'Connor): V10
Exchanging Glances (Wolf): V14
The Eye (Bowles): V17
Eyes of a Blue Dog (García Márquez): V21
- F**
The Fall of Edward Barnard (Maugham): V17
The Fall of the House of Usher (Poe): V2
The Far and the Near (Wolfe): V18
Far, Sui Sin
Mrs. Spring Fragrance: V4
The Fat Girl (Dubus): V10
Faulkner, William
Barn Burning: V5
The Bear: V2
Race at Morning: V27
A Rose for Emily: V6
That Evening Sun: V12
The Feathered Ogre (Calvino): V12
Federigo's Falcon (Boccaccio): V28
The Fence (Rangkuti): V31
Ferrell, Carolyn
Proper Library: V23

- Fever* (Wideman): V6
 Finney, Jack
 Contents of a Dead Man's Pockets: V29
The First Seven Years (Malamud): V13
The First Year of My Life (Spark): V28
Fish (McCorkle): V24
 Fitzgerald, F. Scott
 Babylon Revisited: V4
 Crazy Sunday: V21
 The Diamond as Big as the Ritz: V25
 Winter Dreams: V15
 Flaubert, Gustave
 A Simple Heart: V6
Fleur (Erdrich): V22
Flight (Steinbeck): V3
Flowering Judas (Porter): V8
Forty-Five a Month (Narayan): V29
Fountains in the Rain (Mishima): V12
Four Summers (Oates): V17
 Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins
 A New England Nun: V8
 Old Woman Magoun: V26
 The Revolt of 'Mother': V4
 Friedman, Bruce Jay
 Brazzaville Teen-ager: V18
- G**
- Gaines, Ernest
 The Sky is Gray: V5
 Galsworthy, John
 The Japanese Quince: V3
Games at Twilight (Desai): V28
 García Márquez, Gabriel
 Eyes of a Blue Dog: V21
 The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World: V1
 A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: V6
 The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock: V16
The Garden of Forking Paths (Borges): V9
The Garden of Stubborn Cats (Calvino): V31
The Garden Party (Mansfield): V8
 Gardner, John
 Redemption: V8
 Gibson, William
 Johnny Mnemonic: V26
The Gift of the Magi (Henry): V2
 Gilchrist, Ellen
 Victory Over Japan: V9
The Gilded Six-Bits (Hurston): V11
 Gilman, Charlotte Perkins
 Three Thanksgivings: V18
 The Yellow Wallpaper: V1
Gimpel the Fool (Singer): V2
Girl (Kincaid): V7
- A Girl like Phyl* (Highsmith): V25
The Girls (Williams): V25
 Glasgow, Ellen
 The Difference: V9
 Glaspell, Susan
 A Jury of Her Peers: V3
 Gogol, Nikolai
 The Overcoat: V7
The Golden Kite, the Silver Wind (Bradbury): V28
The Gold of Tomás Vargas (Allende): V16
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants (Gordimer): V31
The Good Doctor (Haslett): V24
A Good Man Is Hard to Find (O'Connor): V2
A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain (Butler): V11
The Good Shopkeeper (Upadhyay): V22
Goodbye, Columbus (Roth): V12
The Goophered Grapevine (Chesnutt): V26
Gooseberries (Chekhov): V14
 Gordimer, Nadine
 Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: V31
 Once Upon a Time: V28
 Town and Country Lovers: V14
 The Train from Rhodesia: V2
 The Ultimate Safari: V19
Gorilla, My Love (Bambara): V21
The Grand Inquisitor (Dostoevsky): V8
The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket (Kawabata): V29
The Grave (Porter): V11
A Great Day (Sargeson): V20
Great Day (Malouf): V24
Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases (Gustafsson): V22
The Green Leaves (Ogot): V15
 Greene, Graham
 The Destructors: V14
Greyhound People (Adams): V21
The Guest (Camus): V4
Guests of the Nation (O'Connor): V5
A Guide to Berlin (Nabokov): V6
Gusev (Chekhov): V26
 Gustafsson, Lars
 Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases: V22
- H**
- Half a Day* (Mahfouz): V9
The Half-Skinned Steer (Proulx): V18
Han's Crime (Naoya): V5
Hands (Anderson): V11
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World (García Márquez): V1
- Ha'Penny* (Paton): V29
Happy Endings (Atwood): V13
Harrison Bergeron (Vonnegut): V5
 Harte, Bret
 The Outcasts of Poker Flat: V3
The Harvest (Rivera): V15
 Haslett, Adam
 The Good Doctor: V24
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel
 Dr. Heidegger's Experiment: V30
 The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable: V7
 My Kinsman, Major Molineux: V11
 The Wives of the Dead: V15
 Young Goodman Brown: V1
He (Porter): V16
 Head, Bessie
 Life: V13
 The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses: V30
 Snapshots of a Wedding: V5
Heart of Darkness (Conrad): V12
The Heavenly Christmas Tree (Dostoevsky): V30
 Heinlein, Robert A.
 Waldo: V7
 Helprin, Mark
 Perfection: V25
 Hemingway, Ernest
 A Clean, Well-Lighted Place: V9
 Hills Like White Elephants: V6
 In Another Country: V8
 The Killers: V17
 The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber: V1
 The Snows of Kilimanjaro: V11
 Soldier's Home: V26
 Hemon, Aleksandar
 Islands: V22
 Hempel, Amy
 In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried: V2
 Hendel, Yehudit
 Small Change: V14
Henne Fire (Singer): V16
 Henry, O.
 After Twenty Years: V27
 The Gift of the Magi: V2
 Mammon and the Archer: V18
Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry (McCracken): V25
 Highsmith, Patricia
 A Girl like Phyl: V25
Hills Like White Elephants (Hemingway): V6
The Hitchhiking Game (Kundera): V10
 Hoeg, Peter
 Journey into a Dark Heart: V18
Holiday (Porter): V23
A Horse and Two Goats (Narayan): V5

- A Horseman in the Sky* (Bierce): V27
Hot Ice (Dybek): V23
House Taken Over (Cortázar): V28
Houston, Pam
 The Best Girlfriend You Never Had: V17
How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again (Oates): V8
How Much Land Does a Man Need? (Tolstoy): V28
How to Tell a True War Story (O'Brien): V15
Hughes, Langston
 The Blues I'm Playing: V7
 Slave on the Block: V4
 Thank You Ma'm: V29
A Hunger Artist (Kafka): V7
Hurst, James
 The Scarlet Ibis: V23
Hurston, Zora Neale
 Conscience of the Court: V21
 The Eatonville Anthology: V1
 The Gilded Six-Bits: V11
 Spunk: V6
 Sweat: V19
- I**
I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream (Ellison): V15
I Stand Here Ironing (Olsen): V1
If I Forget Thee, O Earth. . ." (Clarke): V18
If You Sing like That for Me (Sharma): V21
Imagined Scenes (Beattie): V20
Immigration Blues (Santos): V19
Immortality (Yiyun Li): V24
In Another Country (Hemingway): V8
In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried (Hempel): V2
In the Garden of the North American Martyrs (Wolf): V4
In the Kindergarten (Jin): V17
In the Middle of the Fields (Lavin): V23
In the Penal Colony (Kafka): V3
In the Shadow of War (Okri): V20
In the Zoo (Stafford): V21
The Indian Uprising (Barthelme): V17
The Interlopers (Saki): V15
The Invalid's Story (Twain): V16
The Invisible Man, or Battle Royal (Ellison): V11
Irving, Washington
 The Devil and Tom Walker: V1
 The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: V8
 Rip Van Winkle: V16
Islands (Hemon): V22
- J**
Jackson, Shirley
 Charles: V27
 The Lottery: V1
 One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts: V30
Jacobs, W. W.
 The Monkey's Paw: V2
James, Henry
 The Beast in the Jungle: V6
 The Jolly Corner: V9
Janus (Beattie): V9
The Japanese Quince (Galsworthy): V3
Jeeves Takes Charge (Wodehouse): V10
Jeffy Is Five (Ellison): V13
The Jewels (Maupassant): V31
Jewett, Sarah Orne
 A White Heron: V4
Jie, Zhang
 Love Must Not Be Forgotten: V30
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall (Porter): V1
Jim Baker's Blue Jay Yarn (Twain): V27
Jin, Ha
 In the Kindergarten: V17
Johnny Mnemonic (Gibson): V26
Johnson, Charles
 Menagerie, a Child's Fable: V16
 The Jolly Corner (James): V9
Jones, Thom
 The Pugilist at Rest: V23
Journey into a Dark Heart (Høeg): V18
Joyce, James
 Araby: V1
 The Dead: V6
 Eveline: V19
Julavits, Heidi
 Marry the One Who Gets There First: V23
A Jury of Her Peers (Glaspell): V3
- K**
Kafka, Franz
 A Hunger Artist: V7
 In the Penal Colony: V3
 The Metamorphosis: V12
Kawabata, Yasunari
 The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket: V29
Kew Gardens (Woolf): V12
The Killers (Hemingway): V17
Kincaid, Jamaica
 Girl: V7
 What I Have Been Doing Lately: V5
King of the Bingo Game (Ellison): V1
King, Stephen
 Sorry, Right Number: V30
Kingston, Maxine Hong
 On Discovery: V3
Kinsella, W. P.
 The Thrill of the Grass: V30
Kipling, Rudyard
 Mowgli's Brothers: V22
 Mrs. Bathurst: V8
 Rikki-Tikki-Tavi: V21
Kitchen (Yoshimoto): V16
Kohler, Sheila
 Africans: V18
The Kugelmass Episode (Allen): V21
Kundera, Milan
 The Hitchhiking Game: V10
- L**
La Grande Bretèche (Balzac/de Balzac): V10
The Lady with the Pet Dog (Chekhov): V5
The Lady, or the Tiger? (Stockton): V3
Lagerlöf, Selma
 The Legend of the Christmas Rose: V18
Lahiri, Jhumpa
 A Temporary Matter: V19
 This Blessed House: V27
Lamb to the Slaughter (Dahl): V4
Last Courtesies (Leffland): V24
The Last Lovely City (Adams): V14
Last Night (Salter): V25
Lavin, Mary
 In the Middle of the Fields: V23
Lawrence, D. H.
 Odour of Chrysanthemums: V6
 The Rocking-Horse Winner: V2
Le Guin, Ursula K.
 The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas: V2
The Leap (Erdrich): V30
Leaving the Yellow House (Bellow): V12
Lee, Don
 The Price of Eggs in China: V25
Leffland, Ella
 Last Courtesies: V24
 The Legend of Sleepy Hollow (Irving): V8
The Legend of the Christmas Rose (Lagerlöf): V18
Lessing, Doris
 Debbie and Julie: V12
 A Mild Attack of Locusts: V26
 No Witchcraft for Sale: V30
 Through the Tunnel: V1
 To Room Nineteen: V20
The Lesson (Bambara): V12
Li, Yiyun
 Immortality: V24
Liberty (Alvarez): V27

Life (Head): V13
Life in the Iron Mills (Davis): V26
The Life You Save May Be Your Own (O'Connor): V7
The Lifted Veil (Eliot): V8
Little Miracles, Kept Promises (Cisneros): V13
 London, Jack
 To Build a Fire: V7
Long Distance (Smiley): V19
The Long-Distance Runner (Paley): V20
Lost in the Funhouse (Barth): V6
The Lottery (Jackson): V1
Love Must Not Be Forgotten (Jie): V30
Lullaby (Silko): V10

M

The Magic Barrel (Malamud): V8
 Mahfouz, Naguib
 Half a Day: V9
 Malamud, Bernard
 Black Is My Favorite Color: V16
 The First Seven Years: V13
 The Magic Barrel: V8
 Malouf, David
 Great Day: V24
Mammon and the Archer (Henry): V18
The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg (Twain): V7
The Man to Send Rain Clouds (Silko): V8
The Man Who Lived Underground (Wright): V3
The Man Who Was Almost a Man (Wright): V9
The Management of Grief (Mukherjee): V7
 Mann, Thomas
 Death in Venice: V9
 Disorder and Early Sorrow: V4
 Mansfield, Katherine
 Bliss: V10
 The Doll's House: V29
 The Garden Party: V8
 Marriage à la Mode: V11
 Miss Brill: V2
 Manto, Saadat Hasan
 The Dog of Tithwal: V15
A Map of Tripoli, 1967 (Wetzel): V17
Marigolds (Collier): V28
Marriage à la Mode (Mansfield): V11
Marriage Is a Private Affair (Achebe): V30
Marry the One Who Gets There First (Julavits): V23
 Marshall, Paule
 To Da-duh, in Memoriam: V15

Mason, Bobbie Ann
 Private Lies: V20
 Residents and Transients: V8
 Shiloh: V3
The Masque of the Red Death (Poe): V8
Mateo Falcone (Merimee): V8
 Maugham, W. Somerset
 The Fall of Edward Barnard: V17
 Maupassant, Guy de
 The Jewels: V31
 McCorkle, Jill
 Fish: V24
 McCracken, Elizabeth
 Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry: V25
 McCullers, Carson
 Wunderkind: V5
 McPherson, James Alan
 Elbow Room: V23
The Medicine Bag (Sneve): V28
Meeting Mrinal (Divakaruni): V24
Melanctha (Stein): V5
Melon (Barnes): V24
 Melville, Herman
 Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall Street: V3
Menagerie, a Child's Fable (Johnson): V16
Meneseteung (Munro): V19
 Merimee, Prosper
 Mateo Falcone: V8
The Metamorphosis (Kafka): V12
The Middleman (Mukherjee): V24
A Mild Attack of Locusts (Lessing): V26
The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable (Hawthorne): V7
 Mishima, Yukio
 Fountains in the Rain: V12
 Swaddling Clothes: V5
Miss Brill (Mansfield): V2
 Mistry, Rohinton
 Swimming Lessons: V6
The Monkey's Paw (Jacobs): V2
Moon Lake (Welty): V26
 Moore, Lorrie
 You're Ugly, Too: V19
 Morales, Alejandro
 The Curing Woman: V19
 Morrison, Toni
 Recitatif: V5
The Most Dangerous Game (Connell): V1
Mowgli's Brothers (Kipling): V22
 Mphahlele, Es'kia (Ezekiel)
 Mrs. Plum: V11
Mrs. Bathurst (Kipling): V8
Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter (Divakaruni): V18
Mrs. Plum (Mphahlele): V11
Mrs. Spring Fragrance (Far): V4

Mukherjee, Bharati
 The Management of Grief: V7
 The Middleman: V24
 Munro, Alice
 Boys and Girls: V5
 Day of the Butterfly: V28
 Meneseteung: V19
 Walker Brothers Cowboy: V13
 Murakami, Haruki
 The Elephant Vanishes: V23
My First Goose (Babel): V10
My Kinsman, Major Molineux (Hawthorne): V11
My Life with the Wave (Paz): V13
 Myers, Walter Dean
 The Treasure of Lemon Brown: V31
A Mystery of Heroism (Crane): V28

N

Nabokov, Vladimir
 A Guide to Berlin: V6
 That in Aleppo Once...: V15
 Naipaul, V. S.
 B. Wordsworth: V29
Naming the Names (Devlin): V17
 Naoya, Shiga
 Han's Crime: V5
 Narayan, R. K.
 Forty-Five a Month: V29
 A Horse and Two Goats: V5
The Necessary Grace to Fall (Ochsner): V24
The Necklace (Maupassant): V4
Neighbour Rosicky (Cather): V7
The New Dress (Woolf): V4
A New England Nun (Freeman): V8
The News from Ireland (Trevor): V10
The Night the Ghost Got In (Thurber): V19
Night (Tolstaya): V14
Nightfall (Asimov): V17
No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger (Twain): V21
No Witchcraft for Sale (Lessing): V30
A Nurse's Story (Baida): V25

O

O. Henry
 A Retrieved Reformation: V31
 O'Brien, Tim
 How to Tell a True War Story: V15
 The Things They Carried: V5
 Where Have You Gone Charming Billy?: V29
 O'Connor, Flannery
 A Circle in the Fire: V19
 Everything That Rises Must Converge: V10

- A Good Man Is Hard to Find*: V2
The Life You Save May Be Your Own: V7
- O'Connor, Frank
Guests of the Nation: V5
- O'Flaherty, Liam
The Sniper: V20
The Wave: V5
- Oates, Joyce Carol
Four Summers: V17
How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again: V8
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: V1
- An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (Bierce): V2
- Ochsner, Gina
The Necessary Grace to Fall: V24
- Odour of Chrysanthemums* (Lawrence): V6
- Ogot, Grace
The Green Leaves: V15
- Okri, Ben
In the Shadow of War: V20
- Old Woman Magoun* (Freeman): V26
- Olsen, Tillie
I Stand Here Ironing: V1
- Once Upon a Time* (Gordimer): V28
- On Discovery* (Kingston): V3
- One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Solzhenitsyn): V9
- One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts* (Jackson): V30
- The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (Le Guin): V2
- The Open Boat* (Crane): V4
- The Open Window* (Saki): V1
- Orringer, Julie
The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones: V23
- Ortiz, Simon J.
The End of Old Horse: V22
- Orwell, George
Shooting an Elephant: V4
The Outcasts of Poker Flat (Harte): V3
The Overcoat (Gogol): V7
- Ozick, Cynthia
The Pagan Rabbi: V12
Rosa: V22
The Shawl: V3
- P**
- Packer, ZZ
Brownies: V25
The Pagan Rabbi (Ozick): V12
- Paley, Grace
Anxiety: V27
A Conversation with My Father: V3
The Long-Distance Runner: V20
- P**
- Paris 1991* (Walbert): V24
- Parker, Dorothy
Big Blonde: V5
- Paton, Alan
Ha' Penny: V29
- Paul's Case* (Cather): V2
- Paz, Octavio
My Life with the Wave: V13
- The Pearl* (Steinbeck): V22
- A Perfect Day for Bananafish* (Salinger): V17
- Perfection* (Helprin): V25
- Phillips, Jayne Anne
Souvenir: V4
- Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (Borges): V4
- Pirandello, Luigi
A Day Goes By: V30
- The Pit and the Pendulum* (Poe): V29
- Poe, Edgar Allan
The Black Cat: V26
The Cask of Amontillado: V7
The Fall of the House of Usher: V2
The Masque of the Red Death: V8
The Pit and the Pendulum: V29
The Purloined Letter: V16
The Tell-Tale Heart: V4
- A Point at Issue!* (Chopin): V17
- Pomegranate Seed* (Wharton): V6
- Porter, Katherine Anne
Flowering Judas: V8
The Grave: V11
He: V16
Holiday: V23
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall: V1
- Powell, Padgett
Trick or Treat: V25
- The Price of Eggs in China* (Lee): V25
- The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses* (Head): V30
- Private Lies* (Mason): V20
- A Problem* (Chekhov): V29
- Proper Library* (Ferrell): V23
- Proulx, E. Annie
Brokeback Mountain: V23
The Half-Skinned Steer: V18
- The Pugilist at Rest* (Jones): V23
- The Purloined Letter* (Poe): V16
- The Pursuer* (Cortázar): V20
- Pushkin, Alexander
The Stationmaster: V9
- R**
- Race at Morning* (Faulkner): V27
- Rangkuti, Hamsad
The Fence: V31
- Rape Fantasies* (Atwood): V3
- Raymond's Run* (Bambara): V7
- Recitatif* (Morrison): V5
- The Red Convertible* (Erdrich): V14
- The Red-Headed League* (Doyle): V2
- Redemption* (Gardner): V8
- The Rememberer* (Bender): V25
- Repent, Harlequin!* Said the Tockman (Ellison): V21
- The Replacement* (Robbe-Grillet): V15
- Residents and Transients* (Mason): V8
- Resurrection of a Life* (Saroyan): V14
- A Retrieved Reformation* (O. Henry): V31
- The Revolt of 'Mother'* (Freeman): V4
- Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* (Kipling): V21
- The Ring* (Dinesen): V6
- Rip Van Winkle* (Irving): V16
- Rivera, Beatriz
African Passions: V15
- Rivera, Tomás
The Harvest: V15
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain
The Replacement: V15
- Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning* (Barthelme): V3
- The Rocking-Horse Winner* (Lawrence): V2
- The Rockpile* (Baldwin): V18
- Roman Fever* (Wharton): V7
- Rosa* (Ozick): V22
- A Rose for Emily* (Faulkner): V6
- Roselily* (Walker): V11
- Roth, Philip
The Conversion of the Jews: V18
Goodbye, Columbus: V12
Rules of the Game (Tan): V16
- S**
- The Sailor-Boy's Tale* (Dinesen): V13
- Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr* (Unamuno/de Unamuno): V20
- Saki
The Interlopers: V15
The Open Window: V1
- Salinger, J. D.
A Perfect Day for Bananafish: V17
- Salter, James
Last Night: V25
- Santos, Bienvenido
Immigration Blues: V19
- Saramago, José
The Centaur: V23
- Sargeson, Frank
A Great Day: V20
- Saroyan, William
Resurrection of a Life: V14
- Sartre, Jean-Paul
The Wall: V9
- Say Yes* (Wolff): V11
- Sayers, Dorothy L.
Suspicion: V12

- The Scarlet Ibis* (Hurst): V23
 Scott, Sir Walter
 Wandering Willie's Tale: V10
The Secret Life of Walter Mitty
 (Thurber): V1
The Secret Sharer (Conrad): V1
 Sharma, Akhil
 If You Sing like That for Me: V21
The Shawl (Ozick): V3
The Shell Collector (Doerr): V25
The Sheriff's Children (Chesnutt):
 V11
Shiloh (Mason): V3
Shooting an Elephant (Orwell): V4
*The Short Happy Life of Francis
 Macomber* (Hemingway): V1
Silent Snow, Secret Snow (Aiken): V8
 Silko, Leslie Marmon
 Lullaby: V10
 The Man to Send Rain Clouds: V8
 Storyteller: V11
 Yellow Woman: V4
 Silver, Marisa
 What I Saw from Where I Stood:
 V25
A Silver Dish (Bellow): V22
Silver Water (Bloom): V11
A Simple Heart (Flaubert): V6
 Singer, Isaac Bashevis
 Gimpel the Fool: V2
 Henne Fire: V16
 The Son from America: V30
 The Spinoza of Market Street: V12
 Zlateh the Goat: V27
The Sky is Gray (Gaines): V5
Slave on the Block (Hughes): V4
The Slump (Updike): V19
Small Change (Hendel): V14
A Small, Good Thing (Carver): V23
 Smiley, Jane
 Long Distance: V19
The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones
 (Orringer): V23
Snapshots of a Wedding (Head): V5
 Sneve, Virginia Driving Hawk
 The Medicine Bag: V28
The Sniper (O'Flaherty): V20
The Snows of Kilimanjaro
 (Hemingway): V11
Soldier's Home (Hemingway): V26
 Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr
 *One Day in the Life of Ivan
 Denisovich*: V9
Someone to Talk To (Eisenberg): V24
The Son from America (Singer): V30
Sonny's Blues (Baldwin): V2
 Sontag, Susan
 The Way We Live Now: V10
Sophistication (Anderson): V4
Sorrow-Acre (Dinesen): V3
Sorry, Right Number (King): V30
Souvenir (Phillips): V4
 Sparks, Muriel
 The First Year of My Life: V28
The Spinoza of Market Street
 (Singer): V12
A Spinster's Tale (Taylor): V9
Spunk (Hurston): V6
 Stafford, Jean
 In the Zoo: V21
The Star (Clarke): V4
The Stationmaster (Pushkin): V9
 Stein, Gertrude
 Melanctha: V5
 Steinbeck, John
 The Chrysanthemums: V6
 Flight: V3
 The Pearl: V22
 Stockton, Frank R.
 The Lady, or the Tiger?: V3
The Stone Boy (Berriault): V7
*Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on
 My Trail* (Boyle): V13
The Storm (Chopin): V26
The Story of an Hour (Chopin): V2
Storyteller (Silko): V11
The Sun, the Moon, the Stars (Díaz):
 V20
Suspicion (Sayers): V12
Suzu and Leah (Yolen): V29
Swaddling Clothes (Mishima): V5
 Swan, Mary
 The Deep: V23
Sweat (Hurston): V19
Sweet Potato Pie (Collier): V30
The Swimmer (Cheever): V2
Swimming Lessons (Mistry): V6
- T**
 Tan, Amy
 Rules of the Game: V16
 Two Kinds: V9
 Taylor, Peter
 A Spinster's Tale: V9
Tears of Autumn (Uchida): V31
The Tell-Tale Heart (Poe): V4
A Temporary Matter (Lahiri): V19
Thank You Ma'am (Hughes): V29
That Evening Sun (Faulkner): V12
That in Aleppo Once... (Nabokov):
 V15
There Will Come Soft Rains
 (Bradbury): V1
The Things They Carried (O'Brien): V5
Think of England (Davies): V21
This Blessed House (Lahiri): V27
*This Way for the Gas, Ladies and
 Gentlemen* (Borowski): V13
 Thomas, Piri
 Amigo Brothers: V28
Three Thanksgivings (Gilman): V18
The Thrill of the Grass (Kinsella):
 V30
Through the Tunnel (Lessing): V1
 Thurber, James
 The Catbird Seat: V10
 The Night the Ghost Got In: V19
 The Secret Life of Walter Mitty:
 V1
*Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda
 Triangle* (Butler): V22
To Build a Fire (London): V7
To Da-duh, in Memoriam (Marshall):
 V15
To Room Nineteen (Lessing): V20
 Tolstaya, Tatyana
 Night: V14
 Tolstoy, Leo
 The Death of Ivan Ilych: V5
 *How Much Land Does a Man
 Need*: V28
 Toomer, Jean
 Blood-Burning Moon: V5
Town and Country Lovers
 (Gordimer): V14
The Toxic Donut (Bisson): V18
The Train from Rhodesia
 (Gordimer): V2
The Treasure of Lemon Brown
 (Myers): V31
 Trevor, William
 The News from Ireland: V10
Trick or Treat (Powell): V25
 Twain, Mark
 *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of
 Calaveras County*: V1
 The Invalid's Story: V16
 Jim Baker's Blue Jay Yarn: V27
 *The Man That Corrupted
 Hadleyburg*: V7
 No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger:
 V21
Two Friends (de Maupassant): V28
Two Kinds (Tan): V9
 Tyler, Anne
 *Average Waves in Unprotected
 Waters*: V17
 With All Flags Flying: V31
- U**
 Uchida, Yoshiko
 Tears of Autumn: V31
The Ultimate Safari (Gordimer): V19
 Unamuno, Miguel de
 *Saint Emmanuel the Good,
 Martyr*: V20
The Underground Gardens (Boyle):
 V19
 Upadhyay, Samrat
 The Good Shopkeeper: V22
 Updike, John
 A & P: V3
 The Slump: V19
 The Use of Force (Williams): V27

V

Valenzuela, Luisa
The Censors: V29
 Vargas Llosa, Mario
The Challenge: V14
The Veldt (Bradbury): V20
Vengeful Creditor (Achebe): V3
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings (García Márquez): V6
Victory Over Japan (Gilchrist): V9
 Vonnegut, Kurt
Harrison Bergeron: V5

W

A Wagner Matinee (Cather): V27
 Walbert, Kate
Paris 1991: V24
 Waldo (Heinlein): V7
Walker Brothers Cowboy (Munro): V13
 Walker, Alice
Everyday Use: V2
Roselily: V11
The Wall (Sartre): V9
Wandering Willie's Tale (Scott): V10
 Warren, Robert Penn
Blackberry Winter: V8
 Waters, Mary Yukari
Aftermath: V22
The Wave (O'Flaherty): V5
The Way It Felt to Be Falling (Edwards): V18
The Way We Live Now (Sontag): V10
 Wells, H. G.
The Door in the Wall: V3
 Welty, Eudora
Moon Lake: V26
Why I Live at the P.O.: V10
A Worn Path: V2
 Wetherell, W. D.
The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant: V28
 Wetzell, Marlene Reed
A Map of Tripoli, 1967: V17
 Wharton, Edith
Pomegranate Seed: V6
Roman Fever: V7

What I Have Been Doing Lately (Kincaid): V5
What I Saw from Where I Stood (Silver): V25
What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence (Wideman): V24
What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (Carver): V12
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? (Oates): V1
Where Have You Gone Charming Billy? (O'Brien): V29
Where I'm Calling From (Carver): V3
A White Heron (Jewett): V4
The White Horses of Vienna (Boyle): V10
Why I Live at the P.O. (Welty): V10
 Wideman, John Edgar
The Beginning of Homewood: V12 Fever: V6
What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence: V24
 Wilde, Oscar
The Canterville Ghost: V7
 Williams, Joy
The Girls: V25
 Williams, William Carlos
The Use of Force: V27
Winter Dreams (Fitzgerald): V15
With All Flags Flying (Tyler): V31
The Witness for the Prosecution (Christie): V31
The Wives of the Dead (Hawthorne): V15
 Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville
Jeeves Takes Charge: V10
 Wolf, Christa
Exchanging Glances: V14
 Wolfe, Thomas
The Far and the Near: V18
 Wolff, Tobias
In the Garden of the North American Martyrs: V4
Say Yes: V11

Woman Hollering Creek (Cisneros): V3
The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock (García Márquez): V16
Women in Their Beds (Berriault): V11
 Woolf, Virginia
Kew Gardens: V12
The New Dress: V4
A Worn Path (Welty): V2
 Wright, Richard
Big Black Good Man: V20
Bright and Morning Star: V15
The Man Who Lived Underground: V3
The Man Who Was Almost a Man: V9
The Writer in the Family (Doctorow): V27
Wunderkind (McCullers): V5

Y

Yamamoto, Hisaye
The Eskimo Connection: V14
 Yates, Richard
The Canal: V24
The Yellow Wallpaper (Gilman): V1
Yellow Woman (Silko): V4
 Yeziarska, Anzia
America and I: V15
 Yiyun Li
Immortality: V24
 Yolen, Jane
Suzy and Leah: V29
 Yoshimoto, Banana
Kitchen: V16
You're Ugly, Too (Moore): V19
Young Goodman Brown (Hawthorne): V1

Z

Zlateh the Goat (Singer): V27

Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index

African American

Baldwin, James
The Rockpile: V18
Sonny's Blues: V2

Bambara, Toni Cade
Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird: V4
Gorilla, My Love: V21
The Lesson: V12
Raymond's Run: V7

Butler, Octavia
Bloodchild: V6

Chesnutt, Charles Waddell
The Goophered Grapevine: V26
The Sheriff's Children: V11

Collier, Eugenia W.
Marigolds: V28
Sweet Potato Pie: V30

Ellison, Ralph
King of the Bingo Game: V1

Hughes, Langston
The Blues I'm Playing: V7
Slave on the Block: V4
Thank You Ma'm: V29

Hurston, Zora Neale
Conscience of the Court: V21
The Eatonville Anthology: V1
The Gilded Six-Bits: V11
Spunk: V6
Sweat: V19

Marshall, Paule
To Da-duh, in Memoriam: V15

McPherson, James Alan
Elbow Room: V23

Myers, Walter Dean
The Treasure of Lemon Brown:
V31

Toomer, Jean
Blood-Burning Moon: V5

Walker, Alice
Everyday Use: V2
Roselily: V11

Wideman, John Edgar
The Beginning of Homewood: V12
Fever: V6
*What We Cannot Speak About We
Must Pass Over in Silence*: V24

Wright, Richard
Big Black Good Man: V20
Bright and Morning Star: V15
The Man Who Lived Underground:
V3
The Man Who Was Almost a Man:
V9

American

Adams, Alice
Greyhound People: V21
The Last Lovely City: V14

Agüeros, Jack
Dominoes: V13

Aiken, Conrad
Silent Snow, Secret Snow: V8

Alexie, Sherman
*Because My Father Always Said
He Was the Only Indian Who
Saw Jimi Hendrix Play "The
Star-Spangled Banner" at
Woodstock*: V18

Allen, Woody
The Kugelmass Episode: V21

Alvarez, Julia
Daughter of Invention: V31
Liberty: V27

Anderson, Sherwood
Death in the Woods: V10
Hands: V11
Sophistication: V4

Asimov, Isaac
Nightfall: V17

Baida, Peter
A Nurse's Story: V25

Baldwin, James
The Rockpile: V18
Sonny's Blues: V2

Bambara, Toni Cade
Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird:
V4
Gorilla, My Love: V21
The Lesson: V12
Raymond's Run: V7

Barrett, Andrea
The English Pupil: V24

Barth, John
Lost in the Funhouse: V6

Barthelme, Donald
The Indian Uprising: V17
*Robert Kennedy Saved from
Drowning*: V3

Beattie, Ann
Imagined Scenes: V20
Janus: V9

Bellow, Saul
Leaving the Yellow House:
V12
A Silver Dish: V22

Bender, Aimee
The Rememberer: V25

Benét, Stephen Vincent
An End to Dreams: V22
By the Waters of Babylon: V31

- Berriault, Gina
The Stone Boy: V7
Women in Their Beds: V11
- Bierce, Ambrose
The Boarded Window: V9
A Horseman in the Sky: V27
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge: V2
- Bisson, Terry
The Toxic Donut: V18
- Bloom, Amy
Silver Water: V11
- Bowles, Paul
The Eye: V17
- Boyle, Kay
Astronomer's Wife: V13
Black Boy: V14
The White Horses of Vienna: V10
- Boyle, T. Coraghessan
Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail: V13
The Underground Gardens: V19
- Bradbury, Ray
The Golden Kite, the Silver Wind: V28
There Will Come Soft Rains: V1
The Veldt: V20
- Brown, Jason
Animal Stories: V14
- Butler, Octavia
Bloodchild: V6
- Butler, Robert Olen
A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain: V11
Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle: V22
- Capote, Truman
A Christmas Memory: V2
- Carver, Raymond
Cathedral: V6
Errand: V13
A Small, Good Thing: V23
What We Talk About When We Talk About Love: V12
Where I'm Calling From: V3
- Cather, Willa
The Diamond Mine: V16
Neighbour Rosicky: V7
Paul's Case: V2
A Wagner Matinee: V27
- Cheever, John
The Country Husband: V14
The Swimmer: V2
- Chesnutt, Charles Waddell
The Goophered Grapevine: V26
The Sheriff's Children: V11
- Chopin, Kate
Désirée's Baby: V13
A Point at Issue!: V17
The Storm: V26
The Story of an Hour: V2
- Cisneros, Sandra
Eleven: V27
Little Miracles, Kept Promises: V13
Woman Hollering Creek: V3
- Cofer, Judith Ortiz
American History: V27
Aunty Misery: V29
- Collier, Eugenia W.
Marigolds: V28
Sweet Potato Pie: V30
- Connell, Richard
The Most Dangerous Game: V1
- Crane, Stephen
A Mystery of Heroism: V28
The Open Boat: V4
- Davies, Peter Ho
Think of England: V21
- Davis, Rebecca Harding
Life in the Iron Mills: V26
- Diaz, Junot
The Sun, the Moon, the Stars: V20
- Doctorow, E. L.
The Writer in the Family: V27
- Doerr, Anthony
The Shell Collector: V25
- Dubus, Andre
The Fat Girl: V10
- Dybek, Stuart
Hot Ice: V23
- Edwards, Kim
The Way It Felt to Be Falling: V18
- Eisenberg, Deborah
Someone to Talk To: V24
- Ellison, Harlan
A Boy and His Dog: V14
I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream: V15
Jeffty Is Five: V13
"Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman: V21
- Ellison, Ralph
The Invisible Man, or Battle Royal: V11
King of the Bingo Game: V1
- Erdrich, Louise
Fleur: V22
The Leap: V30
The Red Convertible: V14
- Faulkner, William
Barn Burning: V5
The Bear: V2
Race at Morning: V27
A Rose for Emily: V6
That Evening Sun: V12
- Ferrell, Carolyn
Proper Library: V23
- Finney, Jack
Contents of a Dead Man's Pockets: V29
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott
Babylon Revisited: V4
Crazy Sunday: V21
- The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*: V25
Winter Dreams: V15
- Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins
A New England Nun: V8
Old Woman Magoun: V26
The Revolt of 'Mother': V4
- Friedman, Bruce Jay
Brazzaville Teen-ager: V18
- Gaines, Ernest
The Sky is Gray: V5
- Gardner, John
Redemption: V8
- Gibson, William
Johnny Mnemonic: V26
- Gilchrist, Ellen
Victory Over Japan: V9
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins
Three Thanksgivings: V18
The Yellow Wallpaper: V1
- Glasgow, Ellen
The Difference: V9
- Glaspell, Susan
A Jury of Her Peers: V3
- Harte, Bret
The Outcasts of Poker Flat: V3
- Haslett, Adam
The Good Doctor: V24
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel
Dr. Heidegger's Experiment: V30
The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable: V7
My Kinsman, Major Molineux: V11
The Wives of the Dead: V15
Young Goodman Brown: V1
- Heinlein, Robert A.
Waldo: V7
- Helprin, Mark
Perfection: V25
- Hemingway, Ernest
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place: V9
Hills Like White Elephants: V6
In Another Country: V8
The Killers: V17
The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber: V1
The Snows of Kilimanjaro: V11
Soldier's Home: V26
- Hempel, Amy
In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried: V2
- Henry, O.
After Twenty Years: V27
The Gift of the Magi: V2
Mammon and the Archer: V18
- Highsmith, Patricia
A Girl like Phyl: V25
- Houston, Pam
The Best Girlfriend You Never Had: V17
- Hughes, Langston
The Blues I'm Playing: V7
Slave on the Block: V4
Thank You Ma'am: V29

- Hurst, James
The Scarlet Ibis: V23
- Hurston, Zora Neale
Conscience of the Court: V21
The Eatonville Anthology: V1
The Gilded Six-Bits: V11
Spunk: V6
Sweat: V19
- Irving, Washington
The Devil and Tom Walker: V1
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: V8
Rip Van Winkle: V16
- Jackson, Shirley
Charles: V27
The Lottery: V1
One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts: V30
- James, Henry
The Beast in the Jungle: V6
The Jolly Corner: V9
- Jewett, Sarah Orne
A White Heron: V4
- Johnson, Charles
Menagerie, a Child's Fable: V16
- Jones, Thom
The Pugilist at Rest: V23
- Julavits, Heidi
Marry the One Who Gets There First: V23
- Kincaid, Jamaica
Girl: V7
What I Have Been Doing Lately: V5
- King, Stephen
Sorry, Right Number: V30
- Kingston, Maxine Hong
On Discovery: V3
- Kinsella, W. P.
The Thrill of the Grass: V30
- Lahiri, Jhumpa
A Temporary Matter: V19
This Blessed House: V27
- Lavin, Mary
In the Middle of the Fields: V23
- Le Guin, Ursula K.
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas: V2
- Lee, Don
The Price of Eggs in China: V25
- Leffland, Ella
Last Courtesies: V24
- London, Jack
To Build a Fire: V7
- Malamud, Bernard
Black Is My Favorite Color: V16
The First Seven Years: V13
The Magic Barrel: V8
- Marshall, Paule
To Da-duh, in Memoriam: V15
- Mason, Bobbie Ann
Private Lies: V20
Residents and Transients: V8
Shiloh: V3
- McCorkle, Jill
Fish: V24
- McCracken, Elizabeth
Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry: V25
- McCullers, Carson
Wunderkind: V5
- McPherson, James Alan
Elbow Room: V23
- Melville, Herman
Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall Street: V3
- Moore, Lorrie
You're Ugly, Too: V19
- Morales, Alejandro
The Curing Woman: V19
- Morrison, Toni
Recitatif: V5
- Mukherjee, Bharati
The Management of Grief: V7
The Middleman: V24
- Myers, Walter Dean
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: V31
- Nabokov, Vladimir
A Guide to Berlin: V6
That in Aleppo Once...: V15
- O. Henry
A Retrieved Reformation: V31
- O'Brien, Tim
How to Tell a True War Story: V15
The Things They Carried: V5
Where Have You Gone Charming Billy?: V29
- O'Connor, Flannery
A Circle in the Fire: V19
Everything That Rises Must Converge: V10
A Good Man Is Hard to Find: V2
The Life You Save May Be Your Own: V7
- Oates, Joyce Carol
Four Summers: V17
How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again: V8
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: V1
- Ochsner, Gina
The Necessary Grace to Fall: V24
- Olsen, Tillie
I Stand Here Ironing: V1
- Orringer, Julie
The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones: V23
- Ortiz, Simon J.
The End of Old Horse: V22
- Ozick, Cynthia
The Pagan Rabbi: V12
Rosa: V22
The Shawl: V3
- Packer, ZZ
Brownies: V25
- Paley, Grace
Anxiety: V27
A Conversation with My Father: V3
The Long-Distance Runner: V20
- Parker, Dorothy
Big Blonde: V5
- Phillips, Jayne Anne
Souvenir: V4
- Poe, Edgar Allan
The Black Cat: V26
The Cask of Amontillado: V7
The Fall of the House of Usher: V2
The Masque of the Red Death: V8
The Pit and the Pendulum: V29
The Purloined Letter: V16
The Tell-Tale Heart: V4
- Porter, Katherine Anne
Flowering Judas: V8
The Grave: V11
He: V16
Holiday: V23
The Tilting of Granny Weatherall: V1
- Powell, Padgett
Trick or Treat: V25
- Proulx, E. Annie
Brokeback Mountain: V23
The Half-Skinned Steer: V18
- Rivera, Beatriz
African Passions: V15
- Rivera, Tomás
The Harvest: V15
- Roth, Philip
The Conversion of the Jews: V18
Goodbye, Columbus: V12
- Salinger, J. D.
A Perfect Day for Bananafish: V17
- Salter, James
Last Night: V25
- Santos, Bienvenido
Immigration Blues: V19
- Saroyan, William
Resurrection of a Life: V14
- Sharma, Akhil
If You Sing like That for Me: V21
- Silko, Leslie Marmon
Lullaby: V10
The Man to Send Rain Clouds: V8
Storyteller: V11
Yellow Woman: V4
- Silver, Marisa
What I Saw from Where I Stood: V25
- Singer, Isaac Bashevis
Gimpel the Fool: V2
Henne Fire: V16
The Son from America: V30
The Spinoza of Market Street: V12
Zlateh the Goat: V27

Smiley, Jane
Long Distance: V19
 Sneve, Virginia Driving Hawk
The Medicine Bag: V28
 Sontag, Susan
The Way We Live Now: V10
 Stafford, Jean
In the Zoo: V21
 Stein, Gertrude
Melantha: V5
 Steinbeck, John
The Chrysanthemums: V6
Flight: V3
The Pearl: V22
 Stockton, Frank R.
The Lady, or the Tiger?: V3
 Tan, Amy
Rules of the Game: V16
Two Kinds: V9
 Taylor, Peter
A Spinster's Tale: V9
 Thomas, Piri
Amigo Brothers: V28
 Thurber, James
The Catbird Seat: V10
The Night the Ghost Got In: V19
The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: V1
 Toomer, Jean
Blood-Burning Moon: V5
 Twain, Mark
The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County: V1
The Invalid's Story: V16
Jim Baker's Blue Jay Yarn: V27
The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg: V7
No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger: V21
 Tyler, Anne
Average Waves in Unprotected Waters: V17
With All Flags Flying: V31
 Uchida, Yoshiko
Tears of Autumn: V31
 Updike, John
A & P: V3
The Slump: V19
 Vonnegut, Kurt
Harrison Bergeron: V5
 Walbert, Kate
Paris 1991: V24
 Walker, Alice
Everyday Use: V2
Roselily: V11
 Warren, Robert Penn
Blackberry Winter: V8
 Waters, Mary Yukari
Aftermath: V22
 Welty, Eudora
Moon Lake: V26
Why I Live at the P.O.: V10
A Worn Path: V2

Wetherell, W. D.
The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant: V28
 Wetzel, Marlene Reed
A Map of Tripoli, 1967: V17
 Wharton, Edith
Pomegranate Seed: V6
Roman Fever: V7
 Wideman, John Edgar
The Beginning of Homewood: V12
Fever: V6
What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence: V24
 Williams, Joy
The Girls: V25
 Williams, William Carlos
The Use of Force: V27
 Wolfe, Thomas
The Far and the Near: V18
 Wolff, Tobias
In the Garden of the North American Martyrs: V4
Say Yes: V11
 Wright, Richard
Big Black Good Man: V20
Bright and Morning Star: V15
The Man Who Lived Underground: V3
The Man Who Was Almost a Man: V9
 Yamamoto, Hisaye
The Eskimo Connection: V14
 Yates, Richard
The Canal: V24
 Yeziarska, Anzia
America and I: V15
 Yolen, Jane
Suzy and Leah: V29

Antiguan

Kincaid, Jamaica
Girl: V7
What I Have Been Doing Lately: V5

Argentinian

Borges, Jorge Luis
The Aleph: V17
The Circular Ruins: V26
The Garden of Forking Paths: V9
Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote: V4
 Cortázar, Julio
Axolotl: V3
End of the Game: V31
House Taken Over: V28
The Pursuer: V20
 Valenzuela, Luisa
The Censors: V29

Asian American

Kingston, Maxine Hong
On Discovery: V3
 Lee, Don
The Price of Eggs in China: V25
 Tan, Amy
Rules of the Game: V16
Two Kinds: V9
 Uchida, Yoshiko
Tears of Autumn: V31
 Yamamoto, Hisaye
The Eskimo Connection: V14

Australian

Malouf, David
Great Day: V24

Austrian

Kafka, Franz
A Hunger Artist: V7
In the Penal Colony: V3
The Metamorphosis: V12

Bosnian

Hemon, Aleksandar
Islands: V22

Canadian

Atwood, Margaret
Happy Endings: V13
Rape Fantasies: V3
 Bellow, Saul
A Silver Dish: V22
 Callaghan, Morley
All the Years of Her Life: V19
 Mistry, Rohinton
Swimming Lessons: V6
 Mukherjee, Bharati
The Management of Grief: V7
The Middleman: V24
 Munro, Alice
Boys and Girls: V5
Day of the Butterfly: V28
Meneseteung: V19
Walker Brothers Cowboy: V13
 Swan, Mary
The Deep: V23

Chilean

Allende, Isabel
And of Clay Are We Created: V11
The Gold of Tomás Vargas: V16

Chinese

Jie, Zhang
Love Must Not Be Forgotten: V30
 Jin, Ha
In the Kindergarten: V17
 Yiyun Li
Immortality: V24

Colombian

- García Márquez, Gabriel
Eyes of a Blue Dog: V21
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World: V1
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: V6
The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock: V16

Cuban

- Calvino, Italo
The Feathered Ogre: V12
 Rivera, Beatriz
African Passions: V15

Czech

- Kafka, Franz
A Hunger Artist: V7
In the Penal Colony: V3
The Metamorphosis: V12
 Kundera, Milan
The Hitchhiking Game: V10

Danish

- Dinesen, Isak
Babette's Feast: V20
The Ring: V6
The Sailor-Boy's Tale: V13
Sorrow-Acre: V3
 Høeg, Peter
Journey into a Dark Heart: V18

Dominican

- Alvarez, Julia
Daughter of Invention: V31
Liberty: V27
 Diaz, Junot
The Sun, the Moon, the Stars: V20

Egyptian

- El-Bisatie, Mohamed
A Conversation from the Third Floor: V17
 Mahfouz, Naguib
Half a Day: V9

English

- Barnes, Julian
Melon: V24
 Bates, H. E.
The Daffodil Sky: V7
 Bowen, Elizabeth
The Demon Lover: V5
 Burton, Richard
The Arabian Nights: V21
 Byatt, A. S.
Art Work: V26

- Carter, Angela
The Bloody Chamber: V4
The Erlking: V12
 Christie, Agatha
The Witness for the Prosecution: V31
 Clarke, Arthur C.
Dog Star: V29
"If I Forget Thee, O Earth...": V18
The Star: V4
 Conrad, Joseph
An Outpost of Progress: V31
Heart of Darkness: V12
The Secret Sharer: V1
 Davies, Peter Ho
Think of England: V21
 du Maurier, Daphne
The Birds: V16
Don't Look Now: V14
 Eliot, George
The Lifted Veil: V8
 Far, Sui Sin
Mrs. Spring Fragrance: V4
 Galsworthy, John
The Japanese Quince: V3
 Greene, Graham
The Destructors: V14
 Jacobs, W. W.
The Monkey's Paw: V2
 Kipling, Rudyard
Mowgli's Brothers: V22
Mrs. Bathurst: V8
Rikki-Tikki-Tavi: V21
 Lahiri, Jhumpa
A Temporary Matter: V19
This Blessed House: V27
 Lawrence, D. H.
Odour of Chrysanthemums: V6
The Rocking-Horse Winner: V2
 Lessing, Doris
Debbie and Julie: V12
A Mild Attack of Locusts: V26
No Witchcraft for Sale: V30
Through the Tunnel: V1
To Room Nineteen: V20
 Maugham, W. Somerset
The Fall of Edward Barnard: V17
 Okri, Ben
In the Shadow of War: V20
 Orwell, George
Shooting an Elephant: V4
 Saki
The Interlopers: V15
The Open Window: V1
 Sayers, Dorothy L.
Suspicion: V12
 Wells, H. G.
The Door in the Wall: V3
 Williams, William Carlos
The Use of Force: V27
 Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville
Jeeves Takes Charge: V10

- Woolf, Virginia
Kew Gardens: V12
The New Dress: V4

Eurasian

- Far, Sui Sin
Mrs. Spring Fragrance: V4

French

- Balzac, Honore de
La Grande Bretèche: V10
 Beckett, Samuel
Dante and the Lobster: V15
 Camus, Albert
The Guest: V4
 Cortázar, Julio
Axolotl: V3
The Pursuer: V20
 de Maupassant, Guy
Boule de Suif: V21
The Jewels: V31
The Necklace: V4
Two Friends: V28
 Flaubert, Gustave
A Simple Heart: V6
 Merimee, Prosper
Mateo Falcone: V8
 Robbe-Grillet, Alain
The Replacement: V15
 Sartre, Jean-Paul
The Wall: V9

German

- Böll, Heinrich
Christmas Not Just Once a Year: V20
 Mann, Thomas
Death in Venice: V9
Disorder and Early Sorrow: V4
 Wolf, Christa
Exchanging Glances: V14

Haitian

- Danticat, Edwidge
Caroline's Wedding: V25
Children of the Sea: V1

Hispanic American

- Allende, Isabel
And of Clay Are We Created: V11
The Gold of Tomás Vargas: V16
 Alvarez, Julia
Liberty: V27
 Cisneros, Sandra
Eleven: V27
Little Miracles, Kept Promises: V13
Woman Hollering Creek: V3
 Cofer, Judith Ortiz
American History: V27
Aunty Misery: V29

García Márquez, Gabriel
Eyes of a Blue Dog: V21
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World: V1
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: V6
The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock: V16
 Morales, Alejandro
The Curing Woman: V19
 Rivera, Beatriz
African Passions: V15
 Rivera, Tomás
The Harvest: V15
 Thomas, Piri
Amigo Brothers: V28

Indian

Chandra, Vikram
Dharma: V16
 Desai, Anita
A Devoted Son: V31
Games at Twilight: V28
 Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee
Meeting Mrinal: V24
Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter: V18
 Lahiri, Jhumpa
A Temporary Matter: V19
This Blessed House: V27
 Manto, Saadat Hasan
The Dog of Tithwal: V15
 Mistry, Rohinton
Swimming Lessons: V6
 Mukherjee, Bharati
The Management of Grief: V7
The Middleman: V24
 Naipaul, V. S.
B. Wordsworth: V29
 Narayan, R. K.
Forty-Five a Month: V29
A Horse and Two Goats: V5
 Sharma, Akhil
If You Sing like That for Me: V21

Indonesian

Rangkuti, Hamsad
The Fence: V31

Irish

Beckett, Samuel
Dante and the Lobster: V15
 Bowen, Elizabeth
A Day in the Dark: V22
The Demon Lover: V5
 Devlin, Anne
Naming the Names: V17
 Joyce, James
Araby: V1
The Dead: V6
Eveline: V19

Lavin, Mary
In the Middle of the Fields: V23
 O'Connor, Frank
Guests of the Nation: V5
 O'Flaherty, Liam
The Sniper: V20
The Wave: V5
 Trevor, William
The News from Ireland: V10
 Wilde, Oscar
The Canterville Ghost: V7

Israeli

Hendel, Yehudit
Small Change: V14

Italian

Boccaccio, Giovanni
Federigo's Falcon: V28
 Calvino, Italo
The Feathered Ogre: V12
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: V31
 Pirandello, Luigi
A Day Goes by: V30

Japanese

Kawabata, Yasunari
The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket: V29
 Mishima, Yukio
Fountains in the Rain: V12
Swaddling Clothes: V5
 Murakami, Haruki
The Elephant Vanishes: V23
 Naoya, Shiga
Han's Crime: V5
 Waters, Mary Yukari
Aftermath: V22
 Yoshimoto, Banana
Kitchen: V16

Jewish

Asimov, Isaac
Nightfall: V17
 Babel, Isaac
My First Goose: V10
 Bellow, Saul
Leaving the Yellow House: V12
A Silver Dish: V22
 Berriault, Gina
The Stone Boy: V7
Women in Their Beds: V11
 Doctorow, E. L.
The Writer in the Family: V27
 Eisenberg, Deborah
Someone to Talk To: V24
 Friedman, Bruce Jay
Brazzaville Teen-ager: V18
 Helprin, Mark
Perfection: V25

Kafka, Franz
A Hunger Artist: V7
In the Penal Colony: V3
The Metamorphosis: V12
 Malamud, Bernard
Black Is My Favorite Color: V16
The First Seven Years: V13
The Magic Barrel: V8
 Orringer, Julie
The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones: V23
 Ozick, Cynthia
The Pagan Rabbi: V12
Rosa: V22
The Shawl: V3
 Paley, Grace
Anxiety: V27
A Conversation with My Father: V3
The Long-Distance Runner: V20
 Roth, Philip
The Conversion of the Jews: V18
Goodbye, Columbus: V12
 Salinger, J. D.
A Perfect Day for Bananafish: V17
 Singer, Isaac Bashevis
Gimpel the Fool: V2
Henne Fire: V16
The Son from America: V30
The Spinoza of Market Street: V12
Zlateh the Goat: V27
 Stein, Gertrude
Melantha: V5
 Yolen, Jane
Suzy and Leah: V29

Kenyan

Ogot, Grace
The Green Leaves: V15

Mexican

Paz, Octavio
My Life with the Wave: V13

Native American

Alexie, Sherman
Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock: V18
 Erdrich, Louise
Fleur: V22
The Leap: V30
The Red Convertible: V14
 Ortiz, Simon J.
The End of Old Horse: V22
 Silko, Leslie Marmon
Lullaby: V10
The Man to Send Rain Clouds: V8

Storyteller: V11
Yellow Woman: V4
 Sneve, Virginia Driving Hawk
The Medicine Bag: V28

Nepalese

Upadhyay, Samrat
The Good Shopkeeper: V22

New Zealander

Mansfield, Katherine
Bliss: V10
The Doll's House: V29
The Garden Party: V8
Marriage à la Mode: V11
Miss Brill: V2
 Sargeson, Frank
A Great Day: V20

Nigerian

Achebe, Chinua
Civil Peace: V13
Marriage Is a Private Affair: V30
Vengeful Creditor: V3
 Okri, Ben
In the Shadow of War: V20

Peruvian

Vargas Llosa, Mario
The Challenge: V14

Philippine

Santos, Bienvenido
Immigration Blues: V19

Polish

Borowski, Tadeusz
This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen: V13
 Conrad, Joseph
An Outpost of Progress: V31
Heart of Darkness: V12
The Secret Sharer: V1
 Singer, Isaac Bashevis
Gimpel the Fool: V2
Henne Fire: V16
The Son from America: V30
The Spinoza of Market Street: V12
Zlateh the Goat: V27

Portuguese

Saramago, José
The Centaur: V23

Puerto Rican

Cofer, Judith Ortiz
American History: V27
Aunty Misery: V29
 Williams, William Carlos
The Use of Force: V27

Russian

Asimov, Isaac
Nightfall: V17
 Babel, Isaac
My First Goose: V10
 Chekhov, Anton
The Darling: V13
Gooseberries: V14
Gusev: V26
The Lady with the Pet Dog: V5
A Problem: V29
 Dostoevsky, Fyodor
The Grand Inquisitor: V8
The Heavenly Christmas Tree: V30
 Gogol, Nikolai
The Overcoat: V7
 Nabokov, Vladimir
A Guide to Berlin: V6
That in Aleppo Once...: V15
 Pushkin, Alexander
The Stationmaster: V9
 Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: V9
 Tolstaya, Tatyana
Night: V14
 Tolstoy, Leo
The Death of Ivan Ilych: V5
How Much Land Does a Man Need: V28
 Yezierska, Anzia
America and I: V15

Scottish

Doyle, Arthur Conan
The Red-Headed League: V2
 Scott, Sir Walter
Wandering Willie's Tale: V10
 Spark, Muriel
The First Year of My Life: V28

South African

Gordimer, Nadine
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: V31
Once Upon a Time: V28
Town and Country Lovers: V14
The Train from Rhodesia: V2
The Ultimate Safari: V19
 Head, Bessie
Life: V13
The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses: V30
Snapshots of a Wedding: V5
 Kohler, Sheila
Africans: V18
 Mphahlele, Es'kia (Ezekiel)
Mrs. Plum: V11
 Paton, Alan
Ha'Penny: V29

Spanish

Unamuno, Miguel de
Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr: V20
 Vargas Llosa, Mario
The Challenge: V14

Swedish

Gustafsson, Lars
Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases: V22
 Lagerlöf, Selma
The Legend of the Christmas Rose: V18

Trinidadan

Naipaul, V. S.
B. Wordsworth: V29

Welsh

Dahl, Roald
Beware of the Dog: V30
Lamb to the Slaughter: V4

West Indian

Kincaid, Jamaica
Girl: V7
What I Have Been Doing Lately: V5

Subject/Theme Index

Numerical

- 1920s (Decade)
The Witness for the Prosecution: 258
- 1930s (Decade)
By the Waters of Babylon: 9
- 1950s (Decade)
End of the Game: 74
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 106
- 1960s (Decade)
With All Flags Flying: 237
Daughter of Invention: 32
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 127
- 1970s (Decade)
With All Flags Flying: 237
- 1980s (Decade)
Tears of Autumn: 205
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 222

A

- Abusive relationships. *See* Dysfunctional relationships
- Acceptance
Tears of Autumn: 209
- Acculturation. *See* Assimilation
- Accuracy
The Witness for the Prosecution: 259, 261, 264
- Activism
With All Flags Flying: 238–239
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 134
- Adaptation
The Witness for the Prosecution: 259–262

- Adolescence
End of the Game: 75, 77–82
- Adultery
The Jewels: 136, 140, 151–153
- African American culture
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223, 225–226
- African culture
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 132
An Outpost of Progress: 173–174
- African history
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 126–128
- Aging
With All Flags Flying: 230, 231–233, 234–235, 238–239
A Devoted Son: 55
- Allegories
The Fence: 89–91
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 113
- American culture
With All Flags Flying: 237–239
Daughter of Invention: 28–29
- American dream
Daughter of Invention: 36
By the Waters of Babylon: 15
- American literature
A Devoted Son: 64
- Anachronism
By the Waters of Babylon: 16
- Animals
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 100
- Antiheroes
A Retrieved Reformation: 183–184

- Apartheid
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118, 122, 124, 126–128
- Apocalypse
By the Waters of Babylon: 8, 11–12
- Appearance vs. reality
A Retrieved Reformation: 183
- Art
With All Flags Flying: 245
- Asian American history
Tears of Autumn: 203, 204–206, 210, 211–213
- Asian American literature
Tears of Autumn: 206
- Asian culture
The Fence: 91–92
- Asian history
The Fence: 91
- Assimilation
Daughter of Invention: 29, 33, 39–40
- Atomic weaponry. *See* Nuclear warfare
- Authenticity
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223
- Authority
With All Flags Flying: 235
Daughter of Invention: 25, 28, 30
- Autobiographical fiction
Daughter of Invention: 31
- ## B
- Barbarism. *See* Brutality
- Betrayal
The Jewels: 143, 148

- Black culture
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223
- Black-white relations
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 133
- British culture
The Witness for the Prosecution: 264–265
- British history
The Witness for the Prosecution: 257
- Brutality
An Outpost of Progress: 159, 168
- C**
- Capitalism
The Jewels: 136, 149
- Caribbean culture
Daughter of Invention: 31–32
- Characterization
With All Flags Flying: 246–247
A Devoted Son: 62, 65
- Charity
The Fence: 86
- Childhood
End of the Game: 75, 75–77, 77–82
- Christian mythology
By the Waters of Babylon: 17
- Civilization. *See* Society
- Class conflict
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 105
- Climax. *See* Conflict
- Coincidence
A Retrieved Reformation: 185
- Colonial Africa, 1870–1960
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 126
An Outpost of Progress: 154, 162–163
- Colonialism
An Outpost of Progress: 160–161, 164–166
- Coming of age
End of the Game: 75–77, 79
Tears of Autumn: 197, 201
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214, 218
- Communications
A Devoted Son: 45–46, 51–52, 55
- Communism
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 106
- Community
The Fence: 88
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214, 223, 226
- Compassion
Daughter of Invention: 35
- Conflict
With All Flags Flying: 237
A Devoted Son: 52
The Jewels: 143
A Retrieved Reformation: 185
- Contradiction
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118
Tears of Autumn: 207
- Control. *See* Authority
- Corruption
The Jewels: 145, 146
- Crime
A Retrieved Reformation: 177, 182, 184, 185–186
The Witness for the Prosecution: 248, 252, 256–257, 265
- Cuckoldry. *See* Adultery
- Cultural conflict
Daughter of Invention: 28, 35, 43–34
- Cultural identity
Tears of Autumn: 197
- D**
- Death
A Devoted Son: 46, 47, 48–49
The Jewels: 138–139
- Decay
An Outpost of Progress: 159–160
- Deception
The Witness for the Prosecution: 253, 254–255
- Description (Literature)
With All Flags Flying: 236–237
A Devoted Son: 54–55
- Detective fiction. *See* Mystery
- Devil
By the Waters of Babylon: 14–15
- Devotion
A Devoted Son: 50–51
- Disappointment
Tears of Autumn: 197
- Disapproval
End of the Game: 72
By the Waters of Babylon: 7
- Discipline
End of the Game: 69
- Domesticity
A Devoted Son: 45
- Dysfunctional relationships
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 124
- E**
- Education
A Devoted Son: 45, 47, 54
- Emotions
With All Flags Flying: 243
A Devoted Son: 55
A Retrieved Reformation: 184–185
- English history
The Witness for the Prosecution: 265–266
- Envy
End of the Game: 72
The Jewels: 143
- Erotic love
Nurse Cora: 80
- Escape
Tears of Autumn: 199
- European culture
An Outpost of Progress: 172–175
- Exile
Daughter of Invention: 43–34
- F**
- Fairy tales
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 224–225
By the Waters of Babylon: 13
- Faith
The Fence: 86, 88–89, 92, 94
- Familial love
With All Flags Flying: 233, 234
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223
- Family
With All Flags Flying: 230, 232–233, 235–236, 247
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214, 223
- Family life
With All Flags Flying: 242
A Devoted Son: 53–54, 54
- Family relationships
With All Flags Flying: 233, 243–244
Daughter of Invention: 27–28
A Devoted Son: 45, 47–48, 55
- Fantasy. *See* Illusion (Philosophy)
- Fascism
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 106
- Fate
With All Flags Flying: 247
A Retrieved Reformation: 177, 182, 185
- Father-child relationships
With All Flags Flying: 232–233
Daughter of Invention: 28
A Devoted Son: 45, 55
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214, 216, 218, 223
- Fear
Daughter of Invention: 40–41
The Fence: 87, 88, 93
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 121
- Female identity
Tears of Autumn: 200
- Female-male relations
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 121, 124
Tears of Autumn: 200
The Witness for the Prosecution: 250–251, 253, 254
- Femininity
Tears of Autumn: 201–202

- Feminism**
With All Flags Flying: 238
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 131–134
Tears of Autumn: 202, 209
- Freedom**
With All Flags Flying: 230, 232–233, 234, 239–242
Daughter of Invention: 30
A Retrieved Reformation: 190
- French history**
The Jewels: 143–145
- G**
- Generation gap**
A Devoted Son: 54
- Generosity**
The Fence: 87, 93–94
- God**
The Fence: 86, 87, 88–89, 90–91, 94
By the Waters of Babylon: 14
- Good and evil**
The Fence: 95
- Grandparent-grandchild relationships**
With All Flags Flying: 232, 234, 241
- Greed**
The Jewels: 146
- Guilt (Psychology)**
End of the Game: 72
- H**
- Heritage**
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 218, 226
- Heroes**
By the Waters of Babylon: 18
- Heroines**
Tears of Autumn: 209
- Hispanic culture**
Daughter of Invention: 40
- Historical fiction**
Tears of Autumn: 203–204
- History**
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223
- Holocaust**
By the Waters of Babylon: 17, 18
- Homelessness**
The Fence: 86, 91
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214, 217, 218–220, 221, 224
- Hope**
Tears of Autumn: 197
- Human condition**
A Devoted Son: 46
- Human nature**
The Fence: 93, 95
The Jewels: 136, 140, 146, 148
- Humanism**
By the Waters of Babylon: 15
- Humor**
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 100
An Outpost of Progress: 154
The Witness for the Prosecution: 265
- Husband-wife relationships**
Daughter of Invention: 28, 34–35
The Jewels: 138, 140
The Witness for the Prosecution: 251–252
- Hypocrisy**
The Jewels: 136
- I**
- Identity**
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 112
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 132
A Retrieved Reformation: 177
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 218
- Illusion (Philosophy)**
End of the Game: 72–73, 76–77
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 100
- Imagery (Literature)**
With All Flags Flying: 236–237
A Devoted Son: 54
- Imagination**
A Devoted Son: 55
- Immigrant life**
Daughter of Invention: 25, 29–30, 33, 39
Tears of Autumn: 197, 199–200, 202–203, 204–206
- Imperialism**
An Outpost of Progress: 168, 173–175
- Independence. See Freedom**
- Indian culture**
A Devoted Son: 64–67
- Indian history**
A Devoted Son: 53
- Infidelity**
The Jewels: 140, 151–153
The Witness for the Prosecution: 252
- Innocence**
End of the Game: 75–77
- Insight**
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 128
- Intuition**
Daughter of Invention: 35
- Irony**
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 107
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118, 126
An Outpost of Progress: 161–162, 167
A Retrieved Reformation: 191
- Islamic culture**
The Fence: 92
- Isolation**
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 123–124
An Outpost of Progress: 154
- Italian history**
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 106
- J**
- Japanese culture**
Tears of Autumn: 198–199, 203
- Japanese history**
Tears of Autumn: 204
- Jealousy**
The Jewels: 140
- Justice**
The Witness for the Prosecution: 262
- K**
- Kindness**
The Fence: 87, 88
- Knowledge**
By the Waters of Babylon: 3, 6–7
- L**
- Language and languages**
Daughter of Invention: 37, 39–43
A Devoted Son: 63–64
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 110–111
The Jewels: 146–149
A Retrieved Reformation: 184, 185
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 227–228
- Latin American history**
End of the Game: 73–74
- Law and order**
The Witness for the Prosecution: 257
- Legal procedural fiction. See Law and order**
- Life (Philosophy)**
A Devoted Son: 46
- Literacy. See Education**
- Loneliness**
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 123–124
- Love**
With All Flags Flying: 233
A Retrieved Reformation: 177, 181, 182, 184, 189–190
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 226
The Witness for the Prosecution: 253
- M**
- Madness**
An Outpost of Progress: 154
- Magical realism**
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 105–106, 108–110

- Marriage
Tears of Autumn: 197, 199–200, 201, 202, 207
- Martyrdom
By the Waters of Babylon: 17
- Metaphysics
With All Flags Flying: 247
By the Waters of Babylon: 14, 16
- Misogyny
The Jewels: 149–151
- Money
The Jewels: 138, 146, 148
The Witness for the Prosecution: 251
- Morality
A Retrieved Reformation: 185
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223
- Mother-child relationships
Daughter of Invention: 28, 34–35
El otro cielo: 81
Nurse Cora: 80
- Motif
Tears of Autumn: 204
- Multiculturalism
A Devoted Son: 63
- Murder
An Outpost of Progress: 158
The Witness for the Prosecution: 248, 250–252, 253
- Music
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 221, 223
- Mystery
The Witness for the Prosecution: 248, 256–257, 257–258, 262
- Mythology
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 111
By the Waters of Babylon: 14
- N**
- Narrators
End of the Game: 69–70, 73, 83
The Fence: 88, 91
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 119–120, 125–126, 128
- National identity
Daughter of Invention: 39–43
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 132
- Native American mythology
By the Waters of Babylon: 13
- Nature
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 105, 113
- Neglect
The Jewels: 138
- Nostalgia
By the Waters of Babylon: 19
- Nuclear warfare
By the Waters of Babylon: 8, 9–10, 12
- O**
- Obstacles
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214
- Old age
With All Flags Flying: 230, 231–233, 238–239
A Devoted Son: 51
- Omens. *See* Prophecy
- Opposites
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 111
- Oppression (Politics)
Daughter of Invention: 27
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 132–133
- Optimism
With All Flags Flying: 243
Tears of Autumn: 197, 209
- Order
With All Flags Flying: 245–246
- Outsiders
A Devoted Son: 59
The Fence: 95
The Jewels: 146
- P**
- Pain
End of the Game: 77
- Parent-child relationships
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 226
- Passivity
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 123
- Perception (Psychology)
A Devoted Son: 51–52
The Witness for the Prosecution: 255–256
- Persecution
Daughter of Invention: 28
- Pessimism
The Fence: 93
- Physical disability. *See* Weakness
- Plots
A Devoted Son: 55
The Witness for the Prosecution: 248, 259, 264
- Point of view (Literature)
A Devoted Son: 52
End of the Game: 73, 84
The Fence: 91
An Outpost of Progress: 161, 167
Tears of Autumn: 204
- Post-apocalyptic fiction. *See* Apocalypse
- Poverty
The Fence: 91, 97
- Power (Philosophy)
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118, 128–131
- Prejudice
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118, 124–125, 128
Tears of Autumn: 197, 199
The Witness for the Prosecution: 255–256
- Pride
With All Flags Flying: 232
A Devoted Son: 51–52
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223
- Prison reform. *See* Reform
- Privacy
The Fence: 93
- Privilege
Daughter of Invention: 36–37
- Progress
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 100, 101–102, 104
An Outpost of Progress: 173
By the Waters of Babylon: 5–6
- Prophecy
The Fence: 88
By the Waters of Babylon: 7
- Prostitution
The Fence: 97
- Psychology
With All Flags Flying: 243
End of the Game: 75, 82
- R**
- Race relations
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118, 122, 122–123, 133
Tears of Autumn: 210
- Racism
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 118, 123, 124–125, 128, 131
An Outpost of Progress: 172–175
Tears of Autumn: 211
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 225
- Realism (Cultural movement)
The Fence: 96
Tears of Autumn: 197
- Reality
End of the Game: 72–73
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223–226
- Rebellion
Tears of Autumn: 207
- Reform
A Retrieved Reformation: 187
- Religion
The Fence: 92
By the Waters of Babylon: 14, 15, 18
- Religious beliefs
The Fence: 90, 93–95
- Repetition
By the Waters of Babylon: 13
- Repression
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 128

- Resilience
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 105
Tears of Autumn: 209
- Respect
A Devoted Son: 50–51, 55–58
The Fence: 88
- Revelation
By the Waters of Babylon: 14
- Right and wrong
A Retrieved Reformation: 177, 182–183, 185
- Rites of passage
By the Waters of Babylon: 3–4
- Rituals
By the Waters of Babylon: 5
- Rivalry
The Fence: 88
- Romantic love
End of the Game: 73
A Retrieved Reformation: 177
- S**
- Sacrifice
A Retrieved Reformation: 190
- Savagery. *See* Brutality
- Science fiction
By the Waters of Babylon: 1, 7–8, 10–13
- Seasons
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 113
- Seduction
The Witness for the Prosecution: 251
- Self examination (Psychology)
With All Flags Flying: 243
- Self exploration. *See* Self examination (Psychology)
- Self identity
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 134
- Self preservation
The Jewels: 142–143
- Separation (Psychology)
The Fence: 88, 94
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 111
Tears of Autumn: 211
- Setting (Literature)
With All Flags Flying: 236
A Devoted Son: 53, 55
The Witness for the Prosecution: 259–261
- Sexuality
Nurse Cora: 80
- Silence
Daughter of Invention: 43–34
- Sincerity
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 116
- Slavery
An Outpost of Progress: 157, 172
- Social class
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 105, 112–114
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 122
The Jewels: 138
- Social protest
With All Flags Flying: 237–239
- Social values
The Jewels: 149
- Society
The Fence: 89–91
The Jewels: 140, 143
An Outpost of Progress: 159, 166–167, 168
- Spanish culture
Daughter of Invention: 39–40
- Spanish history
By the Waters of Babylon: 1, 8–9
- Spirituality
By the Waters of Babylon: 14
- Sports
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 216, 223
- Stereotypes (Psychology)
A Retrieved Reformation: 184–185
- Storytelling
The Witness for the Prosecution: 264
- Success
A Devoted Son: 47
- Suicide
An Outpost of Progress: 158, 159
- Suspense
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 126
- Symbolism
A Devoted Son: 54
A Retrieved Reformation: 188–190
- T**
- Taboo. *See* Disapproval
- Technology
By the Waters of Babylon: 5–6, 13
- Tension
A Devoted Son: 46
- Totalitarianism
By the Waters of Babylon: 17
- Tradition
Tears of Autumn: 201, 207, 209
- Tragic flaw. *See* Vulnerability
- Transformation
A Retrieved Reformation: 189
- Trust (Psychology)
The Fence: 88
- Truth
A Devoted Son: 62–63
By the Waters of Babylon: 14, 18
- Tyranny
Daughter of Invention: 37
- U**
- Urban life
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 101–102, 114
A Retrieved Reformation: 186–187
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214, 223
- V**
- Values (Philosophy)
The Fence: 86, 93
- Vietnam War, 1959–1975
With All Flags Flying: 237–238
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 221–222
- Violence
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 223–224
- Vulnerability
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 123
The Jewels: 143
- W**
- Warning
By the Waters of Babylon: 7
- Wars
By the Waters of Babylon: 1, 9–10, 12, 18
- Weakness
With All Flags Flying: 231–232
End of the Game: 72, 77
Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants: 131
The Jewels: 143
- Wealth
The Jewels: 139, 143
The Witness for the Prosecution: 250
- Western culture
An Outpost of Progress: 170–171
- Wisdom
The Treasure of Lemon Brown: 214
- Women in literature
Daughter of Invention: 33–35
The Jewels: 150
- World War I, 1914–1918
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 106
The Witness for the Prosecution: 257
- World War II, 1939–1945
The Garden of Stubborn Cats: 106–107