

**A Teacher's Companion**

to accompany

**AMERICAN SHORT STORIES**

**Seventh Edition**

**Bert Hitchcock ▪ Virginia M. Kouidis ▪ Eugene Current-Garcia**

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*Seventh Edition*

Prepared by

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New York Boston San Francisco  
London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore Madrid  
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A Teacher's Companion to accompany AMERICAN SHORT STORIES, Seventh Edition

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## PREFACE

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Why is it that often when we sit down to write something, the first and sometimes the only thing we can think of is what others have already written? Is that why there are epigraphs? As we preface this collection of materials for teachers using the seventh edition of *American Short Stories*, three pronouncements are echoing preemptively through our brains.

One of them, about the short story specifically, is Hortense Calisher's: "The short story is an apocalypse in a teacup."

One, more generally about fiction, is from Eudora Welty: "There is absolutely everything in great fiction but a clear answer."

And, even more generally about all literature, is Joy Williams's observation: "It is the unsayable which prompts writing in the first place."

If we all fully accepted the gist of these aphoristic pronouncements, this preface should end right here. Even if one is willing to risk apocalypse, if he or she will get no *clear* answers, there remains the bedrock impossibility of articulating anything in the whole enterprise of literature. Readers, critics, and teachers can experience something, but like the writer we can't put it into words. Can that be right?

Well, yes and no. Literature does communicate, does evoke. We human beings can and should talk about our experiences and share our knowledge. Absolute answers, no; ineffability, yes. And that's what makes reading and writing fun—lively, entertaining, enriching, frustrating, and fruitful. What follows, we hope, will help to make possible many such experiences.

Our special personal thanks go to Regina Dragoin, Fred Thiemann, and Kelly Gerald, who produced some of the commentaries on the individual stories. We are immensely indebted to many other colleagues, both locally and in the wide community of literary scholarship. Appreciative of the knowledge, perceptions, insights, imagination, and rhetorical skill these active professionals have offered, we hope we have quoted them accurately and acknowledged their echoes. Above all, we acknowledge the gift of talented short story writers. "In the beginning . . . ."

BH

VMK

## INTRODUCTION

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Let's be utterly pragmatic: How in the world can I intelligently and unembarrassingly fill forty minutes of class time on this story? Isn't that the question, often asked too close to the beginning of that class? We teacher-professionals want the quality of class time to be high; we want our individual and our educational institution's objectives to be achieved as fully as possible. But that naked question always looms.

We hope you will find help in the 62 answers to this query that follow. The commentaries on the individual stories provide facts, ideas, perceptions, analyses, observations, connections, and suggestions for approaching and discussing the texts and the reading experience. For each story there could be still more, and quite different information. If the individual commentaries are basically stimulating and useful, our basic goals will have been met. Such stimulation and use cannot occur without the guidance of a curious and committed scholar-teacher. For that no substitute exists. This individual will see that we have not provided canned goods to be opened, dumped, and warmed up for serving, but rather the ingredients and further suggestions for an attractive and nourishing full meal *to be* prepared as pleasurably and imaginatively as personally possible.

The resources now available to teachers and students through the Internet are mind-boggling, and we commend their use (with the usual academic caveats) to the full extent that individual minds and time can stand. The Gale Group's immense data offerings are only one quite relevant example.

In line with electronic audiovisual times, teachers may wish to seek films and videos for use with particular authors and individual stories. We have cited film versions of some of the stories. And the standard Internet searches can easily be conducted, or such catalogs as those of Teacher's Video Company and Films for the Humanities and Sciences can be consulted.

A perennial pedagogical suggestion by *American Short Stories* editors has been for regular, habitual student consultation of the DICTIONARY, made even easier now by online availability. Another strong general pedagogical recommendation continues to be the regular *reading aloud* of portions of story texts in class, by teacher and especially by students—on a regular basis.

One new, and perhaps idiosyncratic, suggestion is to point enthusiastically to the readily available resource of interviews with the writers themselves. The longer one teaches and deals critically with literature, the more one likes to hear from the living creators of enduring texts. Students too are likely to be interested in such (selected) revealing, which can enliven a dialogue at the outset. One book that offers interviews with four writers in this anthology (Mason, Boyle, Phillips, and Wolff) is Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver's *Passion and Craft: Conversations with Notable Writers* (University of Illinois Press, 1998). The "Literary Conversation Series" of the University Press of Mississippi, for another example, has separate volumes on James Baldwin, Raymond Carver, John Cheever, Louise Erdrich, William Faulkner, Bernard Malamud, Flannery

O'Connor, Grace Paley, Katherine Anne Porter, John Steinbeck, James Thurber, John Updike, Eudora Welty, and Richard Wright.

One final mention might be made of something alluded to in the preface of the anthology. That *American Short Stories* is ordered and contextualized historically makes it conveniently easy to teach a course that proceeds chronologically as a history of this national genre. The arrangement of the book's contents, however, does not prevent the offering of a very different kind of course, one that is thematically organized. We make suggestions for such groupings below, and others will readily occur to readers. The story selections are extraordinarily rich in offering wonderful versions of recurrent themes and motifs. We encourage all teachers, whatever their respective courses, to pair or trio stories for class reading.

Teachers can find lots of ways to fill class time with these stories. Personal curiosity and engagement will direct us most effectively. From the selection of the stories themselves to the selection of what might be observed about each of them, we hope we have helped in finding that direction.

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COMMENTARY, IDEAS, SUGGESTIONS  
FOR TEACHING AND DISCUSSING INDIVIDUAL STORIES

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**ALEXIE, Sherman**

**“This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”**

page 740

That he gave the title “Father and Farther” to a chapter of his novel *Reservation Blues* (1955) and to a section of his book of poetry *The Summer of Black Widows* (1966) may be used to remark the recurrent importance of this subject to Alexie as well as to point up the wit of his literary style. Surely part of the meaning of “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” involves the father-son relationship. It involves too the nature of fraternal friendship and efforts of communal as well as individual coping. Both affectingly poignant and tellingly critical, Alexie’s story is also very funny. Maybe, even, this order should be reversed for cause and effect: can it be said that humor essentially makes this distinguished story what it is?

There is much that is smile-to-laugh-causing in this narrative. Some of the humor may be a little black, but humor it is. In the case of “Nobody talked to Thomas anymore because he told the same damn stories over and over” (741), just the one word of profanity makes the difference. And although “nobody laughed” in the textual story, readers may very well do so when Thomas says, “Sounds like you all got a lot in common with Indians” in response to Cathy the flexible-pretzel gymnast’s complaint about the government’s having “screwed the 1980 Olympic team by boycotting the games” (744). Just as Thomas has had to contend with a broken arm after “he jumped off the roof of the tribal school and flapped his arms like a crazy eagle,” there is the stink of the death trailer that must be dealt with by Thomas and Victor in Phoenix, a stink that rolls out to greet and gag them. “Victor’s father,” we are told, “his ashes, fit in one wooden box with enough left over to fill a cardboard box.” “‘He always was a big man,’ Thomas said” (746). Before Thomas finally gives Victor the cardboard half of his father (748), the two youths handle the ash transportation “just the way it was supposed to be”: “Victor carried part of his father out to the pickup, and Thomas carried the rest. They set him down carefully behind the seats, put a cowboy hat on the wooden box and a Dodgers hat on the cardboard box” (746). The most

extensive comedy of the text—the hitting of the jackrabbit in Utah—seems both real, a very natural and organic experience of Thomas and Victor in this particular adventure, and magically real, incidences of which both precede (Thomas’s flying) and follow (the father’s resurrection as a salmon) this incident. Just as with the first two examples of the comic cited in this paragraph, readers are likely to smile as they make memorable connection with events, perceptions, and conversations from their own individual experiences. “‘Oh, man, he’s dead,’ Victor said as he looked at the squashed animal. ‘Really dead.’ ‘The only thing alive in this whole state and we just killed it.’ [. . .] ‘It had to be suicide.’ ‘I can’t believe this,’ Thomas said. ‘You drive for a thousand miles and there ain’t even any bugs smashed on the windshield. I drive for ten seconds and kill the only living thing in Nevada.’” (746–47).

If Thomas and Victor amuse and may even be considered buffoons, one thing is sure: they are reservation Native Americans. Here is the source of what has been a fairly serious critical problem for Alexie. This Native American writer has sometimes been vigorously attacked for his representation and perpetuation of negative Indian stereotypes—for example, the lazy or alcoholic Indian. Stephen F. Evans’s counter to such condemnation, which perceptively takes into account Alexie’s wonderful humor, seems much more on the mark. Evans claims that “‘ironic and satiric impulses consistently suffuse the tone, structure, realization of characters, and vision of contemporary reality” in Sherman Alexie’s work. Alexie, says Evans, “uses the meliorative social and moral values inherent in irony and satire, as well as conventional character types (including the prejudicial stereotype of the ‘drunken Indian’) as materials for constructing a realistic literary document for contemporary Indian survival.”

And for human survival more generally. It is in fact Thomas who tenders Victor’s father to Victor, not vice versa. He gives his sometime friend, through both words (whether his story about Spokane is true or not) and deeds, the “vision” that was, for Thomas, Victor’s dad: “*Take care of each other*” (745). Victor is, at least in terms of what he will do with his father’s ashes, seeing and doing new things. He may not fully understand everything, and he will not become Thomas’s best friend. Their, and Alexie’s, world is a real one—it is “cruel but real” (748). In this world, however, he now shares with, owes to, Thomas more than just the Indian’s “[whiskey] bottle and broken dreams” (748). Victor knows now and can communicate that sometimes deals can be good and trades fair. And Thomas can hear new stories coming to him (748). What saying Phoenix, Arizona, means is clear. Though consumed by fire, the mythological phoenix bird rises from its ashes; the Indian word *Arizona*, usually translated as “small spring,” is a source of fresh, pure, renewing, and lifegiving liquid.

Taking note and discussing one formal aspect of this story may be a worthwhile class activity. What if anything can be made of the fact that the separate little sections (denoted simply by a little extra spacing, or three asterisks if at the bottom of a page) alternate between the major time-present action of the trip to Phoenix and selected events from the pasts of Victor and Thomas? Both presented chronologically, it appears, there are six sections of the former and five, shorter in length, of the latter. What possibly is Alexie’s purpose or intent with such creation or selection, ordering, and structure? What is his achievement in such procedure?

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E 98 .M63 O9 1998

“Paper Pills”

page 293

Leading questions and provocative answers intended to promote sales appeared on the wrapper or dust jacket of Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* when it was first published in 1919. “What is the fiction that you remember—that sticks for years after reading it? *The mystery novel? The swashbuckler story? The motor-car romance? The propaganda novel?*” Well, “No,” of course. And “what stories do you remember?” The answer: “Is it not those in which people’s very souls are bared, in which their heart-beats are almost heard, in which life is not described but revealed.” (And then, of course: “Such a book is this one . . .”) With Doctor Reefy and all his little hardened scraps of paper, “Paper Pills” is one of the most memorable stories of Anderson’s collection. But what exactly does it reveal?

The central critical question about this story is what to think of the good doctor. Is he in fact good? Is he kind and sensitive—unselfish, giving? Or is he a calculating opportunist? If not a traditional hero endowed with exceptional courage and wisdom, is he then at least an admirable pragmatist, one who has found an effective and sanity-preserving if odd way to deal with the hard facts of life? Or are we presented here with a pathetic human being, a tragically isolated individual, a foolish eccentric, maybe even a man with serious mental health problems? In what ways (good, bad, neutral, normal) and to whom is or was this guy “funny”?

The narrator of the text seems to lend authority to an interpretation more favorable than not. The “story of Doctor Reefy and his courtship of the tall dark girl who became his wife” is not just a “curious” but also a “delicious” story. And both the story and the doctor himself are compared to certain Winesburg apples, which though they may be gnarled and twisted (or because they are) have special deliciousness and rare, concentrated “sweetness.”

That this little historical narrative is the closest thing to a linear story in this short story evinces Anderson’s revolutionary fictional method—his condemning the contrivances of “plot” and championing a new “loose” and impressionistic form. His effort to get so deeply and realistically into human life, especially the secret life, calls for such a concentration on character as opposed to action that in “Paper Pills” he may seem to have produced something in the literary tradition or form known as the *character*. Originating in the Greek *Characters* of Theophrastus (c. 370–287 B.C.E.) and experiencing a great vogue in England in the seventeenth century with such practitioners as Joseph Hall, Sir Thomas Overbury, and John Earle, this kind of short prose piece usually described a distinctive type of person, such as (by Overbury) “A Good Wife,” “A Courtier,” “A Tinker,” “A Pedant,” “A Fair and Happy Milkmaid.” Anderson’s Doctor Reefy is highly personalized and individualized, but it is interesting in this connection that “Paper Pills” was first published under the title “The Philosopher.” Interesting in another way is that “The Philosopher” became the title of another *Winesburg, Ohio* story—about another physician, Doctor Parcival.

That Doctor Reefy also appears importantly in a second story in *Winesburg* raises the theoretical critical question of the legitimacy of going outside a literary text to another literary text in order to aid, or effect, its interpretation. Chopin's "At the 'Cadian Ball" and "The Storm," both reproduced in this anthology, present the same challenge, or opportunity. In "Death" a younger Doctor Reefy and Elizabeth Willard are passionately attracted to each other and do not become lovers only because of "a half grotesque little incident" that interrupts their consummate embrace. He does not see her again until after her death. Earlier, Doctor Reefy had talked to her of love: "Love is like a wind stirring the grass beneath trees on a black night," he had said. "You must not try to make love definite. It is the divine accident of life. If you try to be definite and sure about it and to live beneath the trees, where soft winds blow, the long hot day of disappointment comes swiftly and the gritty dust from passing wagons gathers upon lips inflamed and made tender by kisses."

Is this the sort of thing he writes down and makes into paper pills, one wonders. Is this one of the "terrible" truths of "Paper Pills" that he has learned to deal with?

Anderson's story can provocatively be considered with, from this anthology, Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and Tallent's "Ciudad Juárez" for an obvious or not so obvious reason. See what you and your students conclude about the fact or possible fact of Doctor Reefy's having performed an abortion on the tall dark girl who was, in gratitude perhaps, to become his wife. What (other) explanation may be given for including the bloody tooth-pulling scenario in the next to last paragraph of the story?

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PS 3501 .N4 W579 1990

**“Sonny’s Blues”**

page 490

Within the community of African-American writers, the relationship between James Baldwin and Richard Wright bears a resemblance to that of the brothers in Baldwin’s story. Baldwin met Wright among the expatriate black artists in Paris in the late 1940s and 1950s, where both remained inescapably “native sons” (to borrow the title of Wright’s most famous work) of their racially divided homeland. Baldwin’s short stories, novels, and essays offer a counterpoint to the fiction of Wright, sixteen years his senior and already a major American writer. To turn to the blues-jazz metaphor of Baldwin’s story, we might say that he added his own distinctive half-beat to Wright’s overt social criticism. Both writers found their subjects in the pervasive racism of America in the decades preceding the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, and the work of both is distinguished by the successful joining of social criticism and artistic expression. There are, however, significant differences. Wright offers a more starkly naturalistic view of the racial dilemma. The black community in “Big Boy Leaves Home” is rendered powerless by institutionalized poverty, ignorance, and violence. A kid like Big Boy is necessarily reactive rather than an agent of his destiny. In his snake-infested hole, he is driven by terror and the instinct of self-preservation. With a bit of luck and a little help from the beleaguered black community he is able to flee northward, but he could as easily have been Bobo, consumed in the fires of white rage. The brothers in “Sonny’s Blues” have greater personal and social freedom and considerably more scope for reflection. Baldwin emphasizes individual psychology.

Appreciation of the differences between Wright and Baldwin might begin with the similarities between their stories in this anthology. Both are about young black men facing a hopeless future within oppressive environments. Harlem in the 1950s is almost as much a prison as rural Mississippi in the 1930s. As the narrator of Baldwin’s story rides uptown to Harlem with Sonny, who has just been released from prison, he thinks of the “vivid, killing streets of our childhood” and of the few who “escaped the trap” of the “smothering” tenements. And yet the narrator’s powers of reflection bring him self-understanding and perhaps, ultimately, transcendence. He thinks, “what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind” (495). Another difference within similarity is that Baldwin avoids focusing on violence, turning the terror and physical suffering of Big Boy in the dark kiln hole into a metaphor. Sonny writes from prison: “I feel like a man who’s been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside” (494). Both stories contain horrifying racial violence, but Baldwin introduces the hit-and-run death of the father’s younger brother as a jazz artist’s digression, whereas Wright makes the lynching of Bobo the central event of his story and runs the risk that violence will overwhelm the characterization of Big Boy.



Both stories incorporate a musical theme, but again there is an important difference. Wright uses music to enrich “Big Boy Leaves Home,” but music is not necessary to the plot or the theme. In “Sonny’s Blues” music is essential to Baldwin’s exploration of individual identity and brotherly love. The narrator, who has conformed to black middle-class standards of behavior, comes to realize that Sonny’s music is not escapism, like drugs and alcohol, but a powerful form of healing and self-discovery, both for Sonny and his listeners. To understand Sonny and his music requires an appreciation of how Sonny participates in the community of musicians led by Creole and of how a jazz artist builds upon and takes forward the black musical tradition. Sonny aspires to the music of Charlie “Bird” Parker, not “the old-time, down home crap” of Louis Armstrong (500). From Parker, Sonny has learned to impose “his own half-beat” on the music of his cultural heritage. Thus Baldwin’s indictment of racism is intertwined with a history and aesthetics of jazz. (Jazz is usually understood to advance the blues aesthetic, although the two musical forms are sometimes taken to be interchangeable.) This history includes the gospel music of the black street singers (504–505), the blues (succinctly defined at the top of 511), the music of Armstrong, and the bouncy bebop of the Harlem bars (492). The quality Sonny admires in Parker’s music is suggested at the beginning of the story when the narrator hears a boy whistling a tune “at once very complicated and very simple.” It is, he thinks, like the music of a bird.

Baldwin’s story, like Sonny’s music, is less Wright’s direct kind of social criticism than a testament to the human struggle to bring light out of darkness. Like a musical motif, images of light and dark play throughout “Sonny’s Blues,” with a pause now and then for an extended riff, as in the long passage in which the narrator remembers his childhood sense of darkness encroaching upon his family gathered in the living room after Sunday dinner (497). The interplay of dark and light culminates in the final scene at the Greenwich Village nightclub as the narrator in his dark corner observes how Sonny’s music creates a circle of light. He reciprocates Sonny’s gift with his own gift of a drink. The final image of the liquor glass on the piano as “the very cup of trembling” comes from Isaiah 51.22: “I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, *even* the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again.” The biblical image tells God’s chosen people that he has relieved them of suffering, but in Baldwin’s story that assurance seems less a reality than a possibility. The image is more hopeful than not, but like other modern writers Baldwin leaves us with the ambiguity at the heart of human existence. As in blues or jazz, the biblical text is reinterpreted in the living present.

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**BAMBARA, Toni Cade**

**“A Girl’s Story”**

page 563

Toni Cade Bambara has commented that the “initiation or rites of passage of the young girl is not one of the darlings of American literature. The coming of age for the young boy is certainly the more classic case. I wonder if it all means that we don’t put a value on our process of womanhood.”

Students might be asked to respond to Bambara’s statement. Does this imbalance persist, for instance, in recent movies? What “girl’s stories” have appeared recently? What accounts for the change—or lack thereof—in interest?

As the story begins, Rae Ann, who lives in a large American city, is lying on her bed in the pain of her first menstrual bleeding, and her feet are in Africa—propped against a decorative map of Africa she made at the community center. The scene describes many of the conflicts important in the story. Rae Ann, or Rachel, is “coming of age,” a time of “sturm und drang” for any adolescent.

Rae Ann’s passage is complicated as she navigates between two cultures (African and American), two homes (the center and the apartment), and two “mothers” (Dada Bibi and her grandmother M’Dear). M’Dear and Aunt Candy feel strongly that they are Americans, “ain’t nobody’s African,” but Rae Ann is drawn to the African stories and culture she discovers at the community center. She lives in an apartment overcrowded with people who are strangers to each other—so much so that M’Dear, with whom she shares a room, does not know that she has not yet begun to menstruate. Both M’Dear and Horace assume that Rae Ann, who is in fact a virgin, has had an abortion. The center, on the other hand, is filled with women and girls sharing stories and sewing and crafts. In contrast to M’Dear, Dada Bibi anticipates Rae Ann’s change, tells her it is “no private thing,” and offers to talk. Rae Ann thinks about the civil rights movement and Kwanza, and she sings Guinea-Bissau marching songs. There is also a picture of Jesus in the closet she shares with her grandmother.

The many more examples of the conflict in Rae Ann’s transition would make good topics for class discussion. What parts of her childhood does Rae Ann anticipate losing? How does she envision her role in the adult community? Does she trade one romantic tale for another? How does this story compare with boy’s stories? How is it different?

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PS 153 .N5 W56

## BARTHELME, Donald

### “The School”

page 535

Donald Barthelme is known in part for his dark commentary on contemporary society. In this story he renders the modern institution of the school as an unhealthy place, incapable of answering the questions that concern children and in need of demonstrations of human affection.

Since this story is so short, it might be interesting to read it aloud in class rather than have students read it before. The hesitancy of the speaker is immediately striking. What he is explaining seems natural enough, but the ellipses in his speech and his displacement of blame (“I don’t know why they died, they just died”) suggest that something is wrong. Even though the words *dead* and *died* appear several times in the first four paragraphs and the story continues to explore the outrageous epidemic of death that has plagued this class, the story is *funny*. Students might be surprised to find themselves laughing by the time the narrator fatalistically declares, “We weren’t even supposed to have a puppy.” Getting students to talk about their immediate reactions to the story might make for lively class discussion.

Barthelme creates a setting for existential crisis in this small story—at first the trees and the snake die, suggesting immediately the Garden of Eden lost, a loss of innocence. What do we make of the young teacher’s comment, “I don’t know what’s true and what’s not”? If the teachers are disoriented, the children must be truly bewildered. The paragraph that follows shortly after the teacher’s comment is full of the students’ questions and the teacher’s attempts to answer them. Why does Barthelme use elevated diction in framing the elementary school students’ last questions: “is death that which gives meaning to life?” and “but isn’t death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—”? Why the jargon in this question and in the children’s demand, “we require an assertion of value”? What kind of “value” do the students mean?

If the beginning suggests a loss of Eden, then how do the two teachers embracing, in spite of the rules, and a “new gerbil” walking into the classroom, conclude the story? Does an “assertion of value” itself require violating rules and risking being fired? Is this story a satire or is it black humor?

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PS 3552 .A76 Z87

**“Gryphon”**

page 643

Charles Baxter, himself a professor of English, has published articles on a variety of writers. Since this story shares some of the concerns Barthelme explores in “The School,” it might be interesting to have a look at Baxter’s article “The Donald Barthelme Blues,” in *The Gettysburg Review* 3:4 (Autumn 1990): 713–723.

In Greek mythology, gryphons are creatures with the body of a lion and the head of a bird of prey; they are “the hounds of Zeus,” but they are not particularly important in the Greek stories except as *sphinxes*. The monster outside the gates of Thebes, Greece, is a sphinx: the head of a woman on the body of a lion. The Sphinx monument in Egypt has this anatomy. In Egyptian mythology, however, the sphinx and the gryphon can be the same beast because the sphinx may have the head of a man, a ram, or a hawk. (The word *griffin* comes from the Greek word *grups*; if it has Egyptian origins, the *Oxford English Dictionary* doesn’t trace them.) A gryphon is also, by definition, an enigmatic person. Some class time probably should be devoted to identifying or defining the sphinx/gryphon. It is at once something terrible and strange, a riddler and guardian, a lovely man-eater. As a woman who dispenses and tests knowledge, she is like the sirens, or Eve, who tempt men through the men’s desire for knowledge. Miss Ferenczi describes the sphinx as “the most terrible angel” from whom no one can escape.

Miss Ferenczi appears coincidentally at the time Mr. Hibler is covering ancient Egypt with his class of fourth-graders. He develops a sudden cough and, as the students have already guessed, is absent the next few days. Miss Ferenczi is another mysterious stranger who appears almost magically in a small town, like Arnold Friend in Joyce Carol Oates’s story. She dresses unusually for Five Oaks, Michigan: her purse, lunchbox, lunch, glasses, and manner of speaking make the students whisper “Mars” to each other. The story about herself that she tells the students resembles a fairy tale: “her grandfather had been a Hungarian prince.” She seems to be peering into invisible places in the ceiling and out the window as she tells her story or lectures on Egyptian culture. Her comments on historical personages and faraway places seem to be intimate, firsthand accounts.

The students are both fascinated and confused by their substitute teacher. How do the reactions of Tommy and Carl differ? Why is Carl prepared to believe *The National Enquirer* while he immediately discredits Miss Ferenczi’s tales? Why does he later accept them? How do the students account for Tommy’s behavior at home after the first class meeting and after the second?

Miss Ferenczi’s last visit occurs in December, when the sunlight lies long and red-golden on the back wall of the classroom. In Egyptian legend, the statue of Memnon at Thebes (Egypt) was supposed to sing at sunset; in “Spleen LXXIX,” Charles Baudelaire merges the statue and the sphinx, and he has the half-man, half-bird sing as the sun sets, but it is ignored by everyone.

Miss Ferenczi tells the children's fortunes, including the fate of a child who will die before adulthood. The doomed fourth-grader reports his teacher to the principal immediately; Miss Ferenczi is sent home, and Tommy beats up the traitor. Why do the children defend Miss Ferenczi? How is she a gryphon and, by her definition, a sphinx?

The final paragraph of "Gryphon" is composed of familiar facts on insect life and the usual activities of an elementary school class. Mrs. Mantei is "no mystery," though she is like Miss Ferenczi in that she draws on the board and she lectures both on things the children can see and on things they cannot see. Mr. Hibler will test them on this knowledge, though he did not seem interested in the knowledge Miss Ferenczi imparted. Is it significant that *knowledge* is the last word of this story? How do the details of Mrs. Mantei's lecture compare with the points in Miss Ferenczi's? The headnote suggests that this story, like Barthelme's, can be read as a work of social criticism (how?) but that it is more than that. It is itself, perhaps, a fairy tale like "The Pied Piper of Hamelin."



“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

page 173

More than one scholar has commented on the disproportion of immense popular familiarity with this story (in part through film, it should be recognized) and the serious critical attention it has drawn. Although there has been some alteration in this state of affairs, it has not yet been overturned. Is “An Occurrence” just a trick, a surprise-ending story, or is it indeed literary art? Which is more justifiable, to call it (as Roy Morris does) “within its brilliantly controlled parameters, a perfect work of art” or (as Edward Wagenknecht does) “essentially [only] [just] a tour de force”? Stephen Crane more than liked it. “An Occurrence” was a story that had everything, he said; “nothing better exists!” Crane is one author, a younger contemporary, with whom Bierce has been compared or favorably associated. Others—earlier, contemporary, and later—are Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, and Jorge Luis Borges.

The headnote on Bierce in the anthology tends to place him outside the romantic camp of writers, but such placement can and should be questioned. Bierce himself would have questioned it. Consider, on the basis of “An Occurrence,” its author’s categorization as (1) a romantic, (2) a realistic, and (3) a naturalistic writer. Bierce himself had more praise for romancers than for writers of realism. *Realism* he defined in *The Devil’s Dictionary* as “the art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads.” “It has,” he says, “the charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole, or a story written by a measuring worm.” In realistic fiction, he claimed, “the writer’s thought is tethered to probability, as a domestic horse to the hitching post, but in romance it ranges at will over the entire region of the imagination—free, lawless, immune to bit and rein.” Forging his own chains, the realist writer can go on “explaining” for volumes and volumes “without illuminating by so much as a candle’s ray the black profound of his own ignorance of the matter.” While other of Bierce’s tales might more immediately lend themselves to seeing him as a naturalist, this story can also be so employed. Why, for example, is this only an “occurrence” at Owl Creek bridge and not a “tragedy” or something else?

*Gothic* is a descriptive or categorical term often assigned to for Bierce’s fiction. Some elements or aspects of Gothicism are more applicable here than others. Three that might fruitfully be looked at are Frederick S. Frank’s noting for Gothicism an intent of evoking an “aesthetic of deep pleasure in fear and admiration for the supernatural”; Juliann E. Fleenor’s statement that “the Gothic is a form created by dichotomies and the subsequent tensions caused by [. . .] dialectic”; and Joel Porte’s claim that American Gothic stories stress “an atmosphere of timeless and spaceless psychological distress.” More recently, the terms “impressionism,” “postmodern,” and “surrealism” have been called into play to talk about Bierce’s fiction.

Time, awareness, and perception are obvious and compelling matters to consider about this story. Because its sections are numbered, much attention has been given to the sections or movements or stages in “An Occurrence.” The four stages of postmortem consciousness—time

lag, extreme hypersensitivity, temporary reality, and physical death—have been cited. Cathy Davidson also talks about four movements or sections: the protagonist's two earlier perceptions (the first as he awaits execution on the bridge, and the second his perceptions as a plantation owner viewing heroism, etc.) are contrasted in a third (his hallucinatory perceptions as he descends from the bridge) which precedes the fourth, the actual dying or instant of death—"shortest in time but longest in the text." Modern and continuing studies of human near-death experiences should provide an interesting framework for student discussion, as will the observation that many aspects of what Bierce presents can (also) be seen as repressed memories of birth.

In *The Devil's Dictionary* Bierce defines *gallows* as "a stage for the performance of miracle plays, in which the leading actor is transported to heaven." He provides in addition a little poetry:

Whether on gallows high  
Or where blood flows the reddest  
The noblest place for man to die—  
Is where he died the deadest.

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has been read as a *philosophical* story (dealing with logic and epistemology), as *satire*, and as *anti-war* writing. In *The Devil's Dictionary* Bierce calls war "a by-product of the arts of peace." That entry also includes this sentence: "The student of history who has not been taught to expect the unexpected may justly boast himself inaccessible to the light."

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*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. Film. 1962. 29 min.

“De Rerum Natura”

page 675

Boyle’s middle name is pronounced kuh-RAGG-issun.

This wild and crazy and serious story “might be seen as an aggregate of all the Dr. Faustus tales from *Frankenstein* to *Species II*,” says John C. Hawley. In fact, certain elements of the traditional Faust story (about a man who sells his soul to the devil for earthly knowledge and power) are clearly present while others are not. Boyle’s “the Inventor” or “Great Man” is a well-known, honored public figure capable of superhuman and supernatural achievement. But the devil does not seem to be the designated source of his powers, and the making of a contractual pact, the central scene in medieval allegorical or later legendary and literary Faust accounts, is not depicted here—unless such may be made of his reaching into the “black mouth of the snake.” While it may be said that in this story the price of death is exacted for human overreaching, there is no actual devil figure doing the exacting and no suggestion of eternal damnation to follow.

Plainly evident in Boyle’s story is the figure of the modern “mad scientist,” evolved from his earlier incarnations as magician, alchemist, necromancer, sorcerer, or (aptly revived in these days of *Harry Potter*) wizard. The name of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s title character in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is universally recognized and immediately identified with the dangerous and unprincipled application of science and technology, although Frankenstein is often mistakenly thought to be the monster rather than his creator, the creature who is the agent of retribution rather than the scientist upon whom retribution is visited. Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s method of infusing life into inanimate matter is galvanization, his “raw material” human corpses. In the novel that Boyle himself puts in his short story, H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), the title character’s method is vivisection. In his attempt to propel human evolution, Moreau operates on animals. What he produces are grotesque mutilated approximations of human beings, and like Dr. Frankenstein, he is killed by what he creates. The sequel film *Species II* (1998) also deals with the making of new life forms, now through the addition of alien DNA; not as favorably received as *Species* (1995), it was described in a *Variety* review as being about “a half-human, half-alien beauty with a murderous urge to mate.”

Besides the Wells reference, Boyle includes a number of titles and names (personal, brand, geographical), quite a few capitalized proper nouns that may deserve investigation. For example: Wernher von Braun (the German rocket scientist who worked for Hitler before he worked for John F. Kennedy), Una Moss (suggestive of, in Spanish, “one more?”), and Horn & Hardart (the name of an early automat and restaurant chain, here bringing to mind the gates of horn in Homer’s *Odyssey*, through which—unlike passage through the gates of ivory—come the dreams that accurately foretell the future).

The narrative technique or formal structure of “De Rerum Natura” quickly calls attention to itself: the alternation of text in Roman print (note the use of grammatical present

tense) with italicized “selected” excerpts from *The Life* (biography) of the renowned protagonist. The first variety of these different sections of text is frequently the presentation of a short staged dramatic scene or tableau, and earlier more static ones tend to evolve into more active, plotted ones. In class, you might juxtapose in some detail the Roman-print sections that open and close the story: for example, the black eyes grinning above the mask become black eyes swimming behind bottle lenses, individual cheering becomes collective roaring, a traditional celebratory event occurs at the outset but a thousand Chinese rockets appear at the end, from birth to death, from the giver of life to being the one from whom life is taken, from terrorism to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Boyle’s story will probably afford a little dictionary workout for its readers: *deshabille*, *moue*, *caftan*, *babushka*, *ab ovo*, *canard*, *canaille* (for a start).

Joe David Bellamy in *Literary Luxuries* enumerates as Boyle’s “trademarks” “a sensibility keen about comedy, playfulness, protean horror, madcap imaginative leaps, and [. . .] dazzling excesses.” With stoolless cats, limbless-headless-tailless Furballs, a pet python, desiccating liquid/reconstituting flakes, and pig-boys specifically in mind, any or all of these trademarks might be investigated and assessed.

Described sometimes as a didactic epic, the original *De Rerum Natura* was the work of the Roman poet and philosopher Titus *Lucretius* Carus (c. 99–55 B.C.E.). The title’s usual translation is “the nature of things” but has also been rendered as “the way things are.” Lucretius presents arguments based on the ideas of Democritus and Epicurus, respectively, that everything, including man’s soul, is made up of material atoms subject to the laws of nature and that happy pleasure ought to be the chief object of human pursuit. He argues that human beings are lords of themselves and should fear neither gods nor death. Lucretius died before he completed his long poem—the insane suicide victim of a love potion, according to one famous report.

The story’s title invites us to speculate about “the nature of things,” to be alert to a possible answer or assertion about that in the text. The ending may say more about human nature than about the non-human, natural world. When the Inventor accomplishes what humanists have long seemed to fear from scientists, proof of the death of God, the “dignity of mankind” was “deflated” and “cries of outrage, despair, resentment” raised—plus finally a deadly attack on the former Great Man. Humankind must have hope, must have illusions, or else.

One obvious story in this anthology with which Boyle’s should be compared is Hawthorne’s early moralistic, man-of science story “The Birth-mark.” Another comparative inquiry: to question, on the basis of their stories included in this book, whether T. C. Boyle and Ursula LeGuin exemplify a common understanding of what “science fiction” writers are and do. And, one more query, is the Inventor the kind of Great Man that James Thurber’s Walter Mitty might daydream about?

Bellamy, Joe David. *Literary Luxuries: American Writing at the End of the Millennium*.  
Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1995.

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Lyons, Bonnie, and Bill Oliver, eds. *Passion and Craft: Conversations with Notable  
Writers*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998.

PS 379 .P35 1998

## CARVER, Raymond

### “Boxes”

page 582

This story includes many of the concerns usually found in “Carver Country,” the Yaknapatawpha of Washington State, yet it isn’t quite as pessimistic as much of Carver’s work. The people in this and other Carver stories are middle-class residents of a contemporary wasteland in which there is little community, little communication. Rootless and isolated, his characters scuttle sideways across ocean floors, trying to find a place for themselves. Like the characters of Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh,” they are surrounded by brand names and supermarkets; their world is familiar but somehow empty.

The narrator’s mother is an itinerant widow who joined her son and his girlfriend in rainy Washington and hates it; she wants to return to California in what she swears will be her last move. Packing boxes have been scattered around her apartment for six months while she put off the final relocation. The son finds his mother difficult and intrusive, yet he is distressed about her leaving, and he realizes that he may not see her again. Weeks later, when she calls him from California with a predictably negative report, the narrator overcomes his frustration with his mother and comforts her using a word his father used with her in gentler moments: when he said it, the narrator always felt “better, less afraid, more hopeful about the future.” “‘Dear, try not to be afraid,’ I say. I tell my mother I love her and I’ll write to her, yes.”

After the phone conversation, the last of several between mother and son in this story, the narrator watches a scene through the kitchen window: he sees a car pull up to a neighboring house and “someone comes out on the porch and stands there waiting.” The two people embrace and go inside the house. During this scene, Jill comments, referring to a catalogue, “This is what we want.” The ending of the story is ambivalent. The small tokens of affection, an embrace on the front porch, calling someone *dear*, offer the possibility of connection. The narrator’s relationship with Jill is still uncertain; she is outside his thoughts, he doesn’t “care five cents for curtains” (Jill’s effort at home decoration), but the last image of the story suggests an end to loneliness.

Students might be asked to comment on the title: how are boxes significant in the story? What are other indications of people living in isolation from each other? In this short story there are three phone calls; does this reflect on the distance or a breakdown in communication between mother and son? Because Carver’s style is similar to Hemingway’s, “Boxes” might make an interesting comparison with “Hills Like White Elephants.” How are the concerns these writers explore alike?

Clark, Miriam Marty. "Raymond Carver's Monologic Imagination." *Modern Fiction Studies* 3 (Summer 1991): 240-47.

Coles, Robert. "Teaching Raymond Carver." *The American Poetry Review* 22 (January/February 1993): 23-25.

Nesset, Kirk. *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Survey*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1995.  
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Runyon, Randolph. *Reading Raymond Carver*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1992.  
PS 3553 .A7894 Z86

Saltzman, Arthur. *Understanding Raymond Carver*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1988.  
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Trussler, Michael. "The Narrowed Voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver." *Studies in Short Fiction* 31 (Winter 1994): 23-37.



“Paul’s Case”

page 266

The critical division over Paul’s case ought to make for an interesting class discussion. One way to phrase the division would be to ask if the story presents Paul as a romantic hero or the helpless victim of an indifferent (naturalistic) universe. Is he courageously defiant, or is he a sensitive, artistic youth crushed by a dreary, materialistic, bourgeois society? The narrator seems to have some sympathy for him. Even his teachers have qualms about their persecution of him. His description of Cordelia Street shows the drabness of his life, and the portraits of Calvin and Washington on his wall have been interpreted as representing the oppression of church and state.

Or is Paul, as Loretta Wasserman puts it, “a weak-willed, morally corrupt [. . .] youth inevitably enmeshed and destroyed by his own illusions”? The descriptions of Cordelia Street and the people who live there are, after all, given from Paul’s point of view. Can the reader be sure that his point of view is not distorted? He obtains the money to go to New York by theft, and despite his apparent love for art and music in Pittsburgh, he never attends a play or a concert or visits an art museum in New York. He only eats, drinks, and sleeps. When he realizes he will be caught, he commits suicide. In the end the only realization he comes to is “that money is everything, the wall that stood between all he loathed and all he wanted.” Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. Wasserman maintains that, like the biblical Paul, Cather’s character is “called” by the Romantic connection between beauty in this world and truth in a transcendent realm. At the end, he “drop[s] back into the immense design of things.” Despite his “calling,” however, he is more an aesthete than an artist and is flawed in other ways.

Another critical issue in Cather’s story is whether or not Paul is homosexual, and, if he is, how his homosexuality relates to his alienation. In New York he has a “date” with a young man from Yale; the evening ends with the two parting coldly, but the reader is never told why. The “secret fear” attributed to Paul has been interpreted as a fear of his own sexuality. And the story consistently uses terms associated with homosexuality: gay, faggot, fairy, fagged, queen, unnatural, perverted, and secret love. If Paul is a homosexual, latent or otherwise, how does that affect the story?

The mystery of Paul’s sexuality and his love of beauty recall the life and writings of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), a figure with whom many of Cather’s readers in 1905 would have been familiar. The famous Irish playwright, essayist, and novelist advocated transforming one’s life into a work of art. As a corollary, in his famous essay “The Decay of Lying” he defended the proposition that Nature imitates Art, not the other way around as is usually supposed. In 1895, Wilde’s considerable fame turned to notoriety when the Marquis of Queensberry accused Wilde of having a homosexual relationship with his son. Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison on this actionable crime and died, a broken man, three years after leaving jail. The potential parallel between Paul and Wilde breaks down, however, on one crucial point: Wilde constructed his aesthetic façade upon a foundation of hard work, at least in the years of his greatest productivity.

Crabtree, Sherry. "Cather's *Paul's Case*." *Explicator* 58 (Summer 2000): 206–208 .

Meyering, Cheryl. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Willa Cather*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1994.

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Page, Phillip. "The Theatricality of Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 28 (Fall 1991): 553–57.

Pitcher, Edward W. "Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case' and the Faustian Temperament." *Studies in Short Fiction* 28 (Fall 1991): 543–52.

Saari, Rob. "'Paul's Case': A Narcissistic Personality Disorder, 301.81." *Studies in Short Fiction* 34 (Summer 1997): 389–96.

Salda, Michael. "What Really Happens in Cather's 'Paul's Case'?" *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (1992): 113–19.

Wasserman, Loretta. "Is Cather's Paul a Case?" *Modern Fiction Studies* 36 (Spring 1990): 121–29.

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PS 3505 .A87 1991

*Paul's Case*. Film. Perf. Eric Roberts. 1980. 52 min.

**CHEEVER, John**

**“The Swimmer”**

page 464

Set in a fictional suburb of New York City in the early 1960s, “The Swimmer” follows Neddy Merrill’s eight-mile journey home along the “Lucinda River,” a chain of suburban swimming pools leading from his host’s home to Neddy’s own. As in many of Cheever’s stories, the author explores the discontent of suburban life and the gulf between social stability and spiritual well-being among America’s newly prosperous middle class. This story was soon made into a film.

“The Swimmer” combines realistic details with fantastic ones. Students might do well discussing the realistic aspects of the story first. Despite Neddy’s psychological distress, he is still acutely aware of his physical and social environment. It is interesting at the end of the story to reconstruct recent events in Neddy’s life, from his apparent solvency and good life in the suburbs to his loss of wealth and social ostracism to his apparent nervous breakdown.

After establishing the fairly conventional plot line, students will be ready to discuss the fantastic properties of the story. The headnote in the anthology turns the reader’s attention to the images of changing seasons in the story, and this is a good place to start. The movement from midsummer into the gleam of winter parallels Neddy’s decline from the athletic man who left the Westerhazys to the feeble, seemingly aged man who struggles out of the last pool. Further discussion might include the dream, or nightmare, qualities of the story: the boarded-up homes, Neddy’s confusion about where his friends are, and the frightening ending. The epic qualities of this story are interesting, too. Neddy parallels legendary heroes like Odysseus in his quest for home and a return to order. This story can also be compared to Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”: in both stories the protagonists are trying to find their way home.

Students may feel that they have been misled by the author or deceived by the narrator. Cheever said in an interview that “The Swimmer” had been a very difficult story to write. He added, “I couldn’t ever show my hand. Night was falling, the year was dying. It wasn’t a question of technical problems, but one of imponderables. When he finds it’s dark and cold, it has to have happened. And, by God, it did happen. I felt dark and cold for some time after I finished that story” (Annette Grant, “The Art of Fiction LXII: John Cheever,” *Paris Review* 67, Fall 1976: 62). Ask students to trace the pattern of revelation in the story. What indications did we have early on that Neddy was confused and was willfully, or subconsciously, denying his troubled situation? On another level, how do middle-class, suburban values contribute to his demise? What are these values?

Auser, Cortland P. "John Cheever's Myth of Man and Time: 'The Swimmer.'" *CEA Critic* 29 (March 1967): 18–19.

Bell, Loren C. "'The Swimmer': A Midsummer's Nightmare." *Studies in Short Fiction* 24 (Fall 1987): 433–36.

Blythe, Hal, and Charlie Sweet. "Alcoholism and 'The Swimmer.'" *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 22 (September 1992): 9–10.

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---. "Man-Made vs. Natural Cycles: What Really Happens in 'The Swimmer.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 27 (Summer 1990): 415–18.

Cervo, Nathan. "Cheever's 'The Swimmer.'" *Explicator* 50 (Fall 1991): 49-50.

Collins, Robert G., ed. *Critical Essays on John Cheever*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982. 191–93.  
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Kozikowski, Stanley J. "Damned in a Fair Life: Cheever's 'The Swimmer.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (Summer 1993): 367–75.

O'Hara, James E. *John Cheever: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.  
PS 3505 .H6428 Z8

*The Swimmer*. Film. Dir. Frank Perry. 1968. 95 min.

**CHESNUTT, Charles W.**

**“The Passing of Grandison”**

page 146

Chesnutt’s work is a clear, deliberate, and very funny undermining of the plantation genre exemplified by the stories of Thomas Nelson Page and others. Until the very end of the story, Grandison, slave of “Colonel” Owens, seems to embody the “happy ducky,” a stock character of plantation fiction. If Grandison does not ultimately fit that stock character, he does have much in common with a figure from African-American folklore, the trickster. Ironically, that figure is also characteristic of Old Southwest humor, which was largely written by men who owned slaves.

One interesting and perhaps fun way to approach the story is to look for clues Chesnutt may have scattered that Grandison is not the utterly subservient Uncle Tom he appears to be. Charity, for example, speaks of her “Quaker blood”; the Quakers commonly helped escaped slaves. Dick Owens sees Grandison in conversation with several people, presumably abolitionists, in the North. And Grandison finds his way to Kentucky by keeping the North Star to his back, reversing the route escaped slaves took to freedom.

Chesnutt had to be careful in dealing with race relations in late nineteenth-century America. He does not attack slavery or racism directly, but he does so subtly and humorously. He gains the reader’s sympathy for Grandison by connecting the slave’s freedom with Dick Owens’s romantic quest to gain the hand of Charity Lomax. Chesnutt also reverses racial stereotypes. Dick, the white planter’s son, is lazy; Grandison, the black slave, has the initiative to make his way from Canada to Kentucky and escape with his wife and family. It is Dick who is fooled by the “stupid” slave who has cleverly plotted escape the whole time.

Another topic for discussion is the levels of significance of the title. Grandison passes from slavery to freedom. “Passing” in the African-American vernacular can mean passing for white. Ironically, until his escape, Grandison is passing for black, or at least his masters’ conception of what a black should be. Passing can also be a euphemism for dying: the Grandison the “white folks” have known can be said to die in the course of the story, as do the illusions he represents.

Delmar, P. Jay. "The Mask as Theme and Structure: Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Sheriff's Children' and 'The Passing of Grandison.'" *American Literature* 51 (1979): 364–75.

Hurd, Myles Raymond. "Step by Step: Codification and Construction in Chesnutt's 'The Passing of Grandison.'" *Obsidian II* 4 (Winter 1989): 78–90.

Render, Sylvia Lyons. *Charles W. Chesnutt*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.

PS 1292 .C6 Z85

CHOPIN, Kate

“At the ’Cadian Ball”

page 185

Taken solely in and of itself and not considered as a prequel to Chopin’s later story “The Storm,” “At the ’Cadian Ball” might be seen as a good representative example of popular, romantic late nineteenth-century American local color short fiction. Clear and distinctive—to many readers, even exotic—local color facts and features it has in abundance. And not just one happy loving couple united after trial and travail but a pair of blissful pairs bring the story to its warm, climactic close: being informed of their love and acceptance by Calixta and Clarisse means for both Bobinôt and Alcée that “the face of the Universe was changed” (191).

The unusual Louisiana culture that formed Chopin’s literary métier is prominent in this story. Reflecting ethnic and national background and social history, the distinctive activities, class status, and interactions of the Acadian and the Creole groups figure importantly here. Descendants of the French colonists expelled by the British from Acadia (in eastern Canada) who came to Louisiana in the mid-eighteenth century, the Acadians or Cajuns were looked down upon by the “superior” Creoles, whose ancestors were the original Spanish or, especially, French settlers of the area. As the title indicates, it is a “’Cadian” or “Cajun” ball that is the central event of the story, and Alcee Laballière’s attendance is viewed “contemptuously” by his kinswoman Clarisse. Such rural galas or communal frolics as these were a standard feature of local color stories, and this is a very specifically rendered, standard Cajun event with its black musicians, fiddling, serious cardplaying, lemonade and coffee, midnight gumbo, *le parc aux petits* for infant care, and the concluding ritual firing of pistols into the air. “Anyone who is white [note the racial restriction] may go to a ’Cadian ball,” says the narrator, “but he [note the gender] must pay for his lemonade, coffee, and chicken gumbo. And he must behave himself like a ’Cadian” (187).

To the vital class differences among those of French ancestry must be added a national distinction, related to gender, that appears in the very first paragraph of the story. For Calixta “the Spanish was in her blood,” and to Bobinot she is a “little Spanish vixen” for whom “the prairie people forgave [. . .] much that they would have overlooked in their own daughters or sisters.” Hot-blooded Calixta is in a class by herself, but in terms of passion and impetuosity Alcée comes closest to matching her. Bobinot and Clarisse come nowhere close. They are more of a pair in terms of a basic temperament of deliberateness that contrasts sharply with the vitality of the individuals they would marry. In “At the ’Cadian Ball,” however, social class triumphs. In the matrimonial pairings it is the conventional social and moral order that Chopin appears to validate and uphold. In the lower sphere of Louisiana Euro-American society, Calixta will marry Bobinot; in the upper, Clarisse has claimed Alcée. Everyone, with the possible exception of flirty, flighty Calixta, seems to be happy.

Have the class discuss how stable this resolution seems. Do most readers of the story react as Barbara C. Ewell predicts? She says that “none [of the four lovers], we suspect, will find much satisfaction in their accomplishments. The unpredictabilities of passion and the barriers of class complicate and unsettle the neat symmetry of the final couplings.” On the other hand, would we have such suspicions, or even “expectations,” as Ewell claims, if we did not know of a subsequent time in the lives of these individuals, as related in “The Storm”? Certainly, knowing of this, we can view the conclusion of “At the ’Cadian Ball” as ironic. The firing of pistols does not announce the end of the ball for any of the four and especially not for Calixta and Alcee. For them, we know, serious fireworks lie ahead. The storm (the cyclone) that sets the stage for the action of the first story prefigures, we can appreciate only in retrospect, the storm that will become the emblematic setting for the sequel story. If the concluding line of the earlier story is ironic, why cannot this be true as well of the concluding line (especially as prefaced by its preceding sentence) of the second? Why, indeed, must it not be? Life will continue beyond story’s end, and happiness is not eternal. But do we think this now only because the concept of sequence or subsequentness, the fact of non-closure of a particular story, is now operative?

Lawrence I. Berkove believes that “At the ’Cadian Ball” and “The Storm” “fit together seamlessly.” Berkove says that while “it would be an exaggeration to categorize these stories as moral fiction,” “it is also an exaggeration to deny or downplay the moral strands that run through them.” “These two stories,” he claims, “support morality by making readers face up to the consequences of acting foolishly and ignoring it.” Does careful textual analysis allow us to confirm such a view of Chopin’s intent or effect?

Beer, Janet. *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1997.

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Berkove, Lawrence I. “‘Acting Like Fools’: The Ill-fated Romances of ‘At the ’Cadian Ball’ and ‘The Storm.’” *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*. Ed. Alice Hall Petry. New York: G. K. Hall, 1996. 184–96.

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Evans, Robert C., gen. ed. *Kate Chopin’s Short Fiction: A Critical Companion*. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill P, 2001.

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Ewell, Barbara C. *Kate Chopin*. New York: Ungar, 1986.

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“The Storm”

page 181

This story is unique in *American Short Stories* in that it is, and is clearly advertised to be, a *sequel* to another. It therefore raises immediately the interesting question of whether and/or how integral the initial story is to an understanding of this one. Do we need to read Chopin’s “At the ’Cadian Ball” before reading “The Storm”? Some students could provide the answer to this question after reading both stories, some students reading them in the intended sequence and others not. “At the ’Cadian Ball” is set six years earlier than “The Storm,” a year before the marriages take place. Here we see Alcée and Calixta together, as well as the pairings of Bobinôt-Calixta and Alcée-Clarisse when the respective matches are fixed. What can be made, after dictionary consultation, of the alluded-to time and place of Assumption? Is this looking back in the characters’ history, or is it looking ahead to what will happen in the action of “The Storm”?

There will probably be little question about why Chopin might have been condemned—in her lifetime and later—for what she wrote in “The Storm.” What received social, religious, and moral beliefs and contentions may she be seen to be attacking in this story? Are there facts that she is dramatizing, “truths” she is “celebrating”? Is Chopin being a realist, a romanticist, or a naturalist in what and how she portrays human relationships and acts? A friend of the author once noted that she dealt with adult realities and wrote not for “the young person” but for “seasoned souls.” What exactly is meant when Chopin claims that Calixta’s “firm, elastic flesh was knowing for the first time its *birthright* [italics added]”?

Guy de Maupassant was an important literary influence on Chopin. D. H. Lawrence’s fiction has been called into comparative play in discussions of Chopin, as has the Bible’s “Song of Solomon” for both comparison and as a possible influencing source.

The imagery of this story is often commented on, the merging of the natural and the religious being pointed out. And the concluding one-sentence paragraph must be looked at and dealt with by all readers. Considering the context of the text of this story alone, students can discuss whether Chopin is (1) making a simple objective statement of temporal fact or (2) making a bold amoral assertion about at least this instance of adultery. Are there other interpretive options?

“The Storm,” reportedly written in a single sitting on July 19, 1898, is an awfully short piece of fiction to have five Roman-numbered sections. Analyze and evaluate this structure. Why does Chopin construct her story in the way(s) she does?

Apthorp, Elaine Sargent. "Re-Visioning Captivity: Cather, Chopin, Jewett." *Legacy* 9:1 (1992): 1-22.

Arner, Robert D. "Kate Chopin's Realism: 'At the 'Cadian Ball' and 'The Storm.'" *Markham Review* 2 (1970): 1-4.

Baker, Christopher. "Chopin's 'The Storm.'" *Explicator* 52 (Summer 1994): 225-26.

Gaude, Pamela. "Kate Chopin's 'The Storm': A Study of Maupassant's Influence." *Kate Chopin Newsletter* 1:2 (1975): 1-6.

Sempora, Margot. "Kate Chopin as Translator: A Paradoxical Liberation." *Louisiana Literature* 11 (Spring 1994): 83-96.

**CLEMENS, Samuel Langhorne (Mark Twain)**

**“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”**

page 110

In this sketch, deservedly among his most famous, Clemens employs many elements of Old Southwest humor. For one, he uses the basic framing device of a gentleman narrator relating a tale told him by a frontier type. One useful approach to the story is to compare Clemens’s two narrators, “gentleman” and “yokel.” Consider the tone created or projected by the narrators. The unnamed “gentleman” seems to be telling a joke at his own expense rather than at the expense of the frontiersman. The frontiersman himself seems pretty innocent, humble, and quite absorbed in his tale. Is Simon Wheeler as innocent as he appears? Or is he playing a joke on the “gentleman”?

As in Old Southwest humor sketches, and perhaps in such modern stories as “Cartoon” and “De Rerum Natura,” there are elements here of the tall tale. Clemens also employs the theme of shrewdness outwitted, a common theme of African-American, Native American, and Yankee literature as well as Old Southwest humor. Productive comparisons can be made to “The Passing of Grandison” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

Simon Wheeler’s narrative may seem rambling, but it is actually highly structured. One critic points out that Smiley’s betting is listed from the ordinary (a horse race) to the extraordinary (the parson’s wife’s health). This pattern is repeated in listing the pets Smiley keeps for betting purposes: ordinary (a horse) to less ordinary (a bull pup) to extraordinary (the frog Dan’l Webster). Wheeler also gives progressively more detail as the animal becomes less ordinary, that is, there is more detail about the frog than about the dog, and more about the dog than about the horse. Why would Clemens choose that particular structure? The story is three-fifths over before the frog story is told. What effect does that have?

Smiley’s “bull pup” is named Andrew Jackson. Clemens’s Whig background would dispose him to ridicule that president, but he names the frog after Daniel Webster, a hero of the Whigs. What do those names tell us about Clemens’s attitude toward the disputes of that era of American history?

Wheeler never finishes his tale. He breaks off to answer a call from the “front yard.” When he returns, he begins to tell the narrator about Smiley’s “yaller cow,” but the narrator interrupts and flees. What is the effect of the “endless” tale? What does it say about Smiley? the narrator? Sam Clemens?

Gerber, John C. *Mark Twain*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.

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McMahan, Elizabeth, ed. *Critical Approaches to Mark Twain's Short Stories*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1981.

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Wilson, James D. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Mark Twain*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.

PS 1338 .W5 1987

“Cartoon”

page 539

Linda S. Kauffman, in *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (U of California P, 1998), regards John Hawkes and Robert Coover as “masters of postmodern experimental fiction,” satirists of traditional mimetic representation whose “innovations blur the boundaries between different media.” “Their fiction,” she writes, “is an elegant affirmation of poststructuralist tenets: the pleasure of the text; chance and indeterminacy; the free play of signifiers and narrative codes.” In their work we see “different narrative codes collide” (193).

We should not forget the first tenet enumerated above and make sure that we do allow pleasure, just plain old enjoyment and good fun, in reading “Cartoon.” (Car? Tune?) How we have fun, however, and how Coover and his text have fun with us, can lead to more.

Wolfgang Isher’s investigation of the comic in Samuel Beckett’s plays is suggestive here. As Thomas Pughe explains it, Isher’s approach to the comic basically utilizes the “incongruity” theory of humor, and Isher’s particular view of comedy as a “tilting phenomenon” stems from the fact that “when we experience something as unstable and fluctuating that initially seemed static, we tend to laugh as a form of cognitive first orientation.” It is a “crisis response” to a situation “in which our cognitive and emotive capacities are overtaxed.” “Through laughing, we rid ourselves, for the time being, from the experience of destabilization” (*Comic Sense* 39). Surely readers are destabilized by the opening sentence of “Cartoon,” and for a while they continue to be so. With our laughter, though, again according to Isher via Pughe, “we do not rid ourselves from the necessity of sooner or later devising a strategy to accommodate and make sense of this experience.”

Do we exist and live in a “real” world or a “cartoon” world? A world that our physical senses and our brain indicate to us *or* a fantastic world that defies those indications yet may be more revealingly truthful and even redemptive? both? necessarily both? Can we know? Does it matter?

Whatever sense can be made of them, linguistic repetitions in the text of this nine-paragraph story are capable of objective capture and are worthy of discussion. There is the analogy of the cut lip from envelope licking in paragraphs one and eight, for example, and the sliding by of the cartoon town to conclude paragraphs one and six, and “enactment” and “reenactment” in the third and seventh paragraphs.

“Cartoon” may be seen as a *metanarrative*, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a narrative “concerned with the idea of storytelling, specifically one which alludes to other narratives, or refers to itself and its own artifice. Also: a piece of narrative [. . .] which provides a schematic world view upon which an individual’s experiences and perceptions may be ordered.”

Statements abound in this short story that comment on storytelling in various media, including this narrative itself, which exists in the traditional printed way, and on our experience as readers in interacting with this text. Three illustrations from the beginning of the story: “It’s as though they were walking side by side down two different streets” (paragraph 1), ““There are procedural matters involved here!”” (paragraph 2), and “enactment of this pronouncement” (paragraph 3). Many textual observations, assertions, or exclamations probably reflect or reproduce our readerly reactions to the text: “(this is both probable and confounding),” “the real [. . .] not completely real, after all,” ““ a certain inexplicable anxiety,” “not so much painful as vaguely unnerving,” “Who knows?” “it’s hard to tell,” “no solution, real or otherwise,” “like scratching an itch with legislation or an analogy,” and so on. The following may especially strike anxious students: “casting about for explanations,” ““if you know what I mean,”” ““failing his interpolations,”” “they can’t say I didn’t try,” “one tries, but it’s never enough.” Uncertainty, indeterminacy, and ambiguity are recurrently manifest in the frequent uses of *or* and *but*.

“Cartoon” ends with such a construction in the mind of the “real” (?) man as he questions whether he is wagging or being wagged by his “cartoon” (?) ears. Or nearly ends this way; it is precisely because he sees he has these wonderful things in order to have such a question that at the very, absolute (?) end he thinks, “Well, well [. . .] there’s hope for me yet . . .”

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“The Blue Hotel”

page 245

Called by Stanley Wertheim “the best of Crane’s Western stories and one of his handful of fictional masterpieces”—and regarded by the author himself as “a daisy” of a “novelette”—“The Blue Hotel” was rejected by *Harper’s*, *Century*, and *Scribner’s* magazines. The *Atlantic Monthly* was willing to accept it for publication only on the condition that Crane subsequently provide a book-length fiction manuscript to Houghton Mifflin. The story finally appeared, in two parts, in the considerably less prestigious *Collier’s Weekly* for 26 November and 3 December 1898.

What do we know now that those esteemed contemporary periodical editors did not?

For one thing, literary historians came to see Crane as an important pioneering American writer of *naturalism* (see pages 163–164 of the anthology), and this short story offers memorable encapsulation and distinctive dramatization of this philosophical outlook. The most famous of its definitive statements appears in the second paragraph of section VIII as the Swede makes his way through the storm from Scully’s blue Palace Hotel to the red-lamped downtown saloon. Says the narrator: “We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here, with the bugles of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smote, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb” (261). And then, also, as the Swede is knifed to death by the gambler: “a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon” (263). These assertions along with what appears to be the central, personally uncontrollable driving force of the story’s dramatic action (the Swede’s culturally obtained view of the West as the violent, endangering “middle of hell”) make “The Blue Hotel” a striking example of anti-idealistic, bleak deterministic literary naturalism, American style—and of Crane’s own trademark *irony*.

If such skepticism and dark outlook did not offer the uplifting inspiration sought by the editors of upper- and middle-class, mass-circulation American magazines in the late nineteenth century, this story’s dose of nihilism was hardly pure. In the text, environment is not claimed to be absolutely all-determining; human moral agency and individual responsibility are, rhetorically, strongly asserted. Still, for some of Crane’s contemporary and later evaluators, his mixed message could be and has been seen as artistic fault. The same narrator who makes the statements quoted above about the human condition claims also that “there can be little of dramatic import in environment. Any room can present a tragic front; any room can be comic”—in other words, it all depends on the human beings therein. And then there is the much critically debated final section of the story. Set months after the cash-machine sign’s impersonally “registering” the small amount of the Swede’s “purchase” which so chillingly and ingeniously concludes section VIII, section IX (unexpectedly, jarringly, incongruously, gratuitously?) puts

forward the ideas of human will, personal culpability, and inextricable human interconnectedness. It makes the murder the moral “purchase” of at least five other individuals. That ethical principles exist and that logical, deliberate reasoning is possible are clear claims here, despite the (guilty?) feelings of the cowboy that he is in “a fog of mysterious theory.” A killing that could have been prevented was not. “Sin” exists, and if there are sinners, it may be assumed that martyrs and heroes are also possible.

Is “The Blue Hotel” a comedy? a tragedy? Is it a parody or an ironic burlesque of the generic Western? Is it a work of economic and social criticism? Is it a dramatization of naturalistic determinism? Is it a story about victimization of various kinds? Is it a didactic tale teaching the moral lesson that we must never condone cheating? Is it a story of psychology warning us that obsessions and fears can become self-fulfilling prophecy? Is it simply a temperance piece (nothing bad would have happened if no alcohol had been consumed, right)? The answer is that it is all of these things, and not just these things.

Today, in postmodernism, it is said we privilege indeterminacy over determinacy, value fragmentation over unity, see multiple if contradictory perspectives as more truthful and honest than did preceding generations who demanded coherence and order in literature as in understandings of life. Try some imaginative class experimentation on such scores. What would students do if they had the editorial power to pass publication judgment on Crane’s story? What would they ask him to revise or rewrite, to cut from or add to his manuscript, to secure their acceptance? Particularly and expressly, what would they tell him about his conclusion, section IX?

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*The BlueHotel*. Video. Dir. by Jan Kadar. 1977. 55 min. American Short Story Collection. Available as video, VHS, DVD.

**“The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists”**

page 672

The antlers on the prows of the bikes in this story direct us to its ancient literary ancestor, the fable. A fable simplifies life’s complexity and attains universality by using animals to dramatize moral lessons. “The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists” recalls the race between the tortoise and the hare in the best-known fable of Aesop, probably a legendary figure and reputedly a Greek slave who was thought to have lived around 600 B.C.E. In Aesop’s fable the swift, flamboyant hare is beaten to the finish line by the slow and steady tortoise because the hare stops for a nap. Within the American tradition of folklore and humor, Joel Chandler Harris draws upon the oral tales of slaves (told by genial old Uncle Remus) to reinvent the hare and tortoise as the trickster Brer Fox and the equally cunning Brer Rabbit, who is determined to evade Fox’s stew pot. In addition to the proverbial wisdom about the con man outconned, the Uncle Remus stories can be read as covert comments on master-slave relations. More contemporary fables with which students may be familiar are George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, an extended fable, and T. S. Eliot’s poems in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (adapted into the popular stage musical *Cats*).

“The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists” might also be read as a parable that satirizes contemporary culture’s obsession with speed and materialism. Like the fable, the parable is an early form of the short story that emphasizes plot over character and points to a moral. Parables are more allegorical than fables—that is, every detail symbolizes some aspect of the story’s larger truth, and the situations in parables are more probable. The numerous details in Davis’s story present a challenge to the reader who requires allegorical consistency. One version of the truth represented surely draws upon Ecclesiastes 9:11: “I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” The story’s many contemporary details invite the reader to seek a specific version of the biblical wisdom. Among the possibilities suggested by a group of student readers are sex (there’s greater pleasure in not rushing to climax), capitalism (more profit is to be found in a slow, deliberate approach to the accumulation of wealth), and death (no one wants to be the first to cross that finish line). The challenge is to make all the details fit. What do the director’s chairs, books, and checkers symbolize? What counterparts to the various types of motorcyclists are to be found on the roads we drive every day? The opening phrase, “In this race,” indicates that the race of “patient” motorcyclists is not the only race in which one can (perhaps must) compete. What others are suggested? What does it mean to cross the finish line? Why does winning mean coming in last? Why is there always a photo finish? How does the concluding reference to the sun (and Ecclesiastes) complete the allegory?

The race itself and the final image of the slow-traveling sun that seems “to have been shot from a swift bow” link this modern fable to the paradoxes of the fifth-century B.C. E.

philosopher Zeno of Elea, a disciple of the monist philosopher Parmenides. Parmenides believed that since being *is* being, motion and change do not exist. Zeno devised four paradoxes that give priority to the reason over the senses and are intended to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in a pluralistic account of the universe. Two of them seem relevant to Davis's fable. In the Achilles paradox, the Greek hero races a tortoise. Achilles is ten times faster than the tortoise, but if the tortoise is given a ten-yard start, Achilles will never overtake him. In the time that it takes Achilles to cover the ten yards, the tortoise will have moved another yard, and when Achilles covers that yard, the tortoise will have moved another tenth of a yard, and so the race continues *ad infinitum* to a photo finish. In the arrow paradox, an arrow shot from a bow is said not to move but to occupy a series of spaces identical with itself. Both paradoxes are examples of proof from indirect argument (*reductio ad absurdum*), and even Zeno may have recognized that they are fallacious. If Davis does intend an allusion to Zeno, it may be to support the message that life is in the living: in being rather than becoming, in the journey rather than the destination. As has been said of Zeno, Davis may be having fun with her readers, sending them on a race for explanations that when unearthed only compound the mystery of her fable.

Discussion of "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists" might move to a consideration of fable or parable at the center of many narratives. Stories in this anthology that seem direct descendants of these genres include Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Birthmark," Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," Malamud's "The Magic Barrel," LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Paley's "Samuel," and Barthelme's "The School." Modern fable writers, perhaps including Davis, often use the old forms ironically to imply the absence of a clear and certain truth—except that truth itself is complex, ambiguous, elusive, and paradoxical.

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## ERDRICH, Louise

### “Fleur”

page 697

Like Bernard Malamud in “The Magic Barrel,” Louise Erdrich uses magical realism to describe life in the betwixt and between. Here Anglo and Chippewa Indian cultures collide on the American prairie sometime in the 1920s. Erdrich’s style of magical realism more nearly resembles the style of Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, a style that incorporates the magic, mythic, and religious histories of a culture with the events of everyday life. The result is a broader and, in some ways, a more accurate and encompassing representation of the essence of a community.

Class discussion might begin with a description of the mysterious Fleur Pillager, beginning with her name. *Fleur* means flower in French; it also suggests the fleur-de-lis, the armorial insignia of French nobility. *Pillager* is one who pillages, takes things with destructive force, as during a war. As a Pillager, she is already accorded cunning and certain power, but Fleur stands particularly close to the thin edge dividing the spirit world from the human, physical one. Look at Fleur’s appearance, her relationship with Misshepeshu, and the legends that spring up around her. Why is she nearly forced from the Indian community? What draws her to the community of Argus? (Is the name of the town, with its mythic associations, significant?) Pauline describes Fleur as one who “messed with evil,” and she speculates that Fleur might have been drawn by the arrogant marker of a tall church steeple in the town.

Pauline also navigates her way between two worlds: the different cultures of her parents and stepfather, and the worlds of childhood and adulthood. From this vantage point she recognizes the power of Fleur: somehow Pauline knows that Fleur’s “fifth toes were missing,” and she remarks of the men at the slaughterhouse that “they were blinded, they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh.” While she initially fears Fleur, the motherless Pauline comes to adore her for the attention Fleur pays her. Pauline’s insight into the nature of Fleur and Chippewa beliefs turns a story of gambling, revenge rape, and a “fair-minded” tornado into a clash of cosmic forces.

Lily is an interesting antagonist for Fleur. He is the other half of the fleur-de-lis, a flower associated with war. Fleur’s green dress fits her like a “skin of lakeweed” and she is associated with a serpentine lake monster. Lily has “a snake’s cold pale eyes and precious skin” and a bulldog with sharp teeth. In the stumbling fight between the sow and Lily, does Fleur become the sow? What in the passage suggests this? Pauline identifies Fleur early on as a shape-shifter. As Fleur is raped, she calls out to Pauline “in the old language” which Pauline hears and understands but does not act upon.

The story is divided into five sections, separated by line breaks. The first section introduces Fleur and concludes in suspense: “She almost destroyed that town.” The second section describes Fleur’s arrival in Argus, and it, too, concludes with a suspenseful line, “I was [. . .] the shadow that could have saved her.” The third section describes the rape and the events leading up to it; it ends in the moment of crisis—Fleur crying out to a helpless Pauline in the old language for help. The third section also describes the destruction wrought by a terrific tornado that hits the butcher’s shop particularly hard. In this storm Pauline again hears a cry for help, and this time she answers it by barring the outside door of the meat locker. The fourth section follows the climax of the storm and describes the destruction of Argus; and the last section acts as a frame to the story, placing Fleur again and now Pauline among the Chippewa. How do the divisions of this story affect the reader’s “progress” through the narrative? This story fits neatly on the pyramid Freytag uses to describe the action in many plays; is this story more “dramatic” than some of the other stories in this section of the anthology?

What in the tornado suggests that the summer storm is Fleur revenging herself on the men who raped her? How do the images of the pig in the storm connect this to the events of the night of the rape itself?

This story is also a story of initiation for Pauline, who is orphaned by the storm and who follows her blood back to the Chippewa settlement. Is it surprising that she reacts to her stepfather’s death with no apparent emotion? Is the girl Pauline mentions in the last lines Fleur or her child?

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**“Barn Burning”**

page 370

This story has a most interesting and unusual opening. In the country store being used as a courtroom to try his father for barn-burning, Sarty smells cheese and imagines he smells the canned meat through the cans. What is the significance of the fact that the courthouse is a country store, especially in light of the fact that the De Spain house impresses Sarty as being like a courthouse? Why the synesthesia of the second sentence? How does it set the tone for or prefigure the rest of the story?

Most critics agree that the story is an initiation story, but into what is Sarty being initiated? The De Spain house is itself beautiful, and it contains beauty, the rug Ab Snopes ruins and Mrs. De Spain, the first “lady” Sarty has ever seen. It has been seen as representing law, order, community, and tradition, a tradition to which Sarty’s full name, Colonel Sartoris, connects him. On the other hand, as Ab points out, it was built by “nigger sweat.” The community it represents is one in which, not long before the opening of the story, people could be bought and sold like cattle. Ab is also correct that De Spain now mixes “white sweat” with the black. Snopes is a tenant farmer, a position in many ways similar to slavery. The unpainted cabins the Snopeses move into were probably at one time slave quarters, and Ab refers to Major De Spain as the man who will own him “body and soul for the next eight months.”

Ab Snopes is a fascinating character. He is conventionally viewed as a disruptive force if not an outright evil one. For M. E. Bradford he represents the destruction of the social bonds and interrelationships that hold a community together. Like Satan or Adam and Eve after the fall, he must be cast out; therefore, despite the difficulty he has making it, Sarty’s choice to “betray” his father is the only possible moral choice. Kathy Cackett sees him as an “American Adam,” a figure attractive in some ways but ultimately destructive in his anomie, extreme individualism, and inability to accept any social norms. Increasingly, however, Ab is coming to be seen as more sympathetic if not heroic. He is at least to some degree a victim of class prejudice. His acts of rebellion can and have been seen as strikes against an oppressive power structure. Is Ab a hero, a villain, neither, or both?

Ab’s character cannot be discussed without reference to the imagery surrounding him. He is described as though he were made out of metal, specifically tin, and he performs his actions mechanically, “without heat.” He is compared to a wolf, and the hand with which he knocks on Major De Spain’s door is a “claw.” That he is described as something less, or at least other, than human is obvious. What is perhaps not obvious is how he got that way. For how much is he responsible, and for how much is the community in which he arose responsible?

At the end of the story Sarty flees into the woods surrounding the De Spain house after warning the Major of his father’s plan to burn the barn. Is the ending hopeful? From what is he escaping? to what? Ab Snopes will reappear in a number of Faulkner’s works of fiction. But

we will learn no more from Faulkner about Sarty; here he absents himself forever from the Yoknapatawpha County of his creator.

The last paragraph of “Barn Burning” deserves as much attention as the first, attention that should include an almost sentence-by-sentence comparison of the two. In what way does it convey the changed circumstances and prospects for Sarty from what existed, and were brilliantly conveyed, in the opening paragraph? In what ways might uncertainty and lack of knowledge still exist? At the end, having resisted the “old fierce pull of blood,” Sarty is in open, unrestricted nature, knowledgeable and knowing, experiencing directly with his senses. See what the class thinks about Faulkner’s word choice of “quiring” in the last line of the story. Is this just an archaic choice for “choiring,” which fits reasonably into the idea of “the silver voices of the birds”? (What was silver in paragraph one?) Might “quiring” reflect a form of an old root word meaning “inquiring”? Employing sound and free mental association, is the word and meaning of “quagmire” evoked for any student?

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**FITZGERALD, F. Scott**

**“Babylon Revisited”**

page 353

F. Scott Fitzgerald is known primarily as a great novelist of the “Jazz Age.” “Babylon Revisited,” however, is a story of that era’s aftermath, the “hangover” from the enormous party brought about by the stock market boom and ended by the crash of 1929. The hangover is literal in the note Lorraine Quarrles sends to Charlie, emotional in Charlie’s loss of his wife and the daughter he tries to recover, and economic in the crash. An interesting element of the story is the combination of horror and nostalgia with which Charlie views his life of “dissipation” in Paris during the last years of the boom. He calls it a “nightmare” several times, yet he also refers to the “magic” of a time when he and his friends were “like royalty.” Another interesting element is the opposing of images of coldness and hardness associated with his former life and the images of warmth associated with his daughter and scenes of family life at the Peters’.

The story contains constant references to time, from specific times like six o’clock to units of time—hours, minutes, moments. Why are those references appropriate to the story? *Dissipation* is a word commonly used for a life of vice and irresponsibility, but it is also a term from physics denoting the loss of heat with time, the law of entropy. Such a use of the term seems to bring together the themes of loss and time (the inescapability of the past and the limited time mortals are allowed for a future) and the heat/cold imagery.

At the end of the story Charlie is denied custody of his daughter and told to try again in six months. Is the end tragic or hopeful? By refusing the second drink he is offered at the bar, he shows his determination to stay sober and to fight for his daughter. But he also plans to try to make up for the delay by sending his daughter “things.” Has he learned his lesson about the potential of money to destroy human relationships? He will certainly try again in six months to get his daughter back, but can he? Or is he, as one critic asserts, like Sisyphus, whose “labor must forever resume at its starting place”? The same critic points out that the story is divided into five sections, corresponding to the five acts of Shakespearian tragedy.

Names are another way to approach the story. What are the implications of “Babylon” in the title? Charlie Wales’s name is reminiscent of Bonny Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, the Prince of Wales. Exiled in France, he attempted to gain the throne of England; when he failed, he attempted to return to France only to be refused entry because of a treaty between the French and the English. Charlie Wales is also an exile attempting, and failing, to find or make a home. His daughter’s name is Honoria, a reference perhaps to his lost honor? Lorraine Quarrles also has an interesting name. It sounds like “quarrels,” and a “quarrel” is the arrow of a crossbow.

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“The Revolt of ‘Mother’”

page 193

The opening exclamation “Father!” expresses the dismay of the dutifully acquiescent Sarah Penn, whose mother love and sense of injustice lead to an unprecedented challenge of her husband’s authority. The couple’s conflict is a humorous, homespun story of a bully outwitted by his meek adversary, but it is also a forceful analysis of gender inequality and how it demeans both the bully and his foe. Father, Adoniram Penn, is the American farmer, pioneer, and entrepreneur obsessed with wealth for its own sake and jealous of his personal power. The source of his authority is suggested by the biblical name Adoniram, which in Hebrew means “my lord on high,” and by the comic image of him atop “his two-wheeled dump cart, standing as proudly upright as a Roman charioteer” (199). Sarah’s and Adoniram’s use of the words “father” and “mother” to address each other reflects rural New England culture and characterizes a marriage in which individuality has been absorbed into gender roles.

The opening exclamation also signals the (re-) awakening of feminist consciousness in America. Freeman would not have thought of herself as an activist like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and until the 1980s critics did not see her as a feminist. Nonetheless, along with such other regionalists as Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, and Willa Cather, she sensitively lays open the practical and emotional consequences of women’s social marginalization. “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” is a simple story accessible to even unsophisticated readers, but its literary merits and feminist implications may be enhanced by placing it within American feminist criticism as it evolved from the late 1960s into the 1990s. Elaine Showalter’s paradigm (1985) of this criticism divides the period into three phases.

The first phase focused on the gender stereotypes and misogyny perpetuated in literature by male writers. This generation of feminist critics also sought to redress the scarcity of women writers in mainstream literary history. In this latter respect, Freeman, unlike Chopin and Gilman, did not need recovery; she was respected as an accomplished if minor writer, and the stories in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891) were anthology staples. Kate Gardner writes that critics focused on Freeman’s depiction of characters (mostly older women) and a culture (rural New England) in decline: “Until [the 1980s], however, the rebelliousness of Freeman’s characters was deplored, their feminism largely ignored, and the connection between these two characteristics missed entirely.” In the 1970s and early 1980s, women’s studies courses and anthologies devoted to “Images of Women in Literature” presented Freeman’s stories as ambivalent treatments of such female stereotypes as the old maid and the mother. Critics viewed Freeman as working within the conventions of sentimental romance or, like Gardner, read her work as transforming the “sensibility, traditionally associated with weakness and frailty, into a strength.” Sarah Penn, for example, does not throw off the role of mother but finds in it strength

to controvert her husband's authority and, so his tears suggest, help him attain a more complete humanity.

The second phase of Showalter's paradigm might be labeled *essentialist*. Feminist critics began to define a women's literary tradition by drawing connections between individual writers and discovering patterns of "historical and thematic coherence" within and among generations of writers. They also attempted to define a women's aesthetic. Essentialism gave some women writers and readers an identity and a sense of empowerment, but there was the danger that focusing on the difference of women's writing undermined claims for its equality with men's writing. Many women writers themselves objected to being placed in a female ghetto.

The women regionalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries held a respected place within the mainstream of American literature, but the effort to define a distinctive female tradition enhanced an appreciation of their achievements. They were understood to have advanced the local color and realist movements by asking what the American experience, in its great diversity, looked like from women's perspectives. What did the settlement of the country and the definition of the American character mean for women? Within the tradition of women's literature, the regionalists were clearly indebted to conventions of sentimental women's fiction and its celebration of domesticity. The tears Father sheds at the end of "The Revolt of 'Mother'" pay homage to this tradition, where the shedding of male tears signifies redemption by feminine virtue. One of Freeman's deviations from the sentimental tradition is her use of older women, like Sarah Penn, as her main characters. The continuing appeal of sentimental romance is attested by the film adaptation of "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Sarah and Adoniram are depicted as significantly younger, a scene of the couple preparing for bed has been added, and the feminist message is emphasized visually and by additions to the dialogue.

The second phase of feminist criticism also examined emotional affinities among women, particularly lesbian and mother-daughter relations. These relations held the promise of a new type of community based on cooperation rather than competition. The mother in particular was celebrated as a major determiner of character and gender identity, as well as the guardian and transmitter of relational values. No question, Sarah Penn's mother love propels her into the action that will probably reshape her marriage and may result in a family community of greater mutual respect and individual freedom.

Showalter's third phase joins critical interest in defining a distinctive feminine language to patriarchal theories of how human beings are constructed by language. Building on the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, French feminist theories of *écriture féminine* hypothesized a revolutionary woman's language that draws upon the child's pre-Oedipal (pre-speech) relationship to the mother and, later, the libidinal female body. The women regionalists left it to their radical modernist contemporaries to explore this aspect of language, but they may have, so feminist critics suggest, anticipated male theories of language as a game in which words have no fixed referent. Meaning is arbitrary and truth slippery. Power belongs to those who get to define reference. Among such theories, deconstruction explains language as being based on binary opposites. Cultural power relies on oppositions such as white/black, good/bad, man/woman, with the first half of the binary usually the privileged term. The critic's job is to demonstrate how binary oppositions break down. The privileged term usually can be

shown to contain its opposite, and vice versa. The cultural and political implication is that individual freedom depends on a subversion of the binary.

Feminists have used this methodology and philosophy to free both women and men from the politics of gender classification. Martha J. Cutter argues that the language of Adoniram and Sarah Penn reflects the male/female binary. Father can't understand Mother's language (of family and community), and he won't listen when she tries to speak his. He jealously guards his power and denies her subjectivity. Mother, therefore, finds a new language of the body, of action. This language does more than change the referent of "barn" to "home." According to Cutter, Mother's "revolutionary linguistic act emphasizes the arbitrary nature of signification [naming] itself and also seeks to undermine the fundamental oppositions which Father has used to structure his system of discourse, as well as his entire universe." After Mother's revolution, "barn" includes "home," and "home" includes "barn." For Cutter, this utopian dream is glimpsed in the final description of the evening landscape: "the air was very cool and calm and sweet. The landscape might have been an ideal one of peace." A previous generation of critics might simply have seen this landscape as a sentimental pastoral scene.

Cutter, Martha J. "Frontiers of Language: Engendering of Desire in 'The Revolt of "Mother."'" *American Literature* 63 (June 1991): 279–91.

DeEulis, Marilyn Davis. "'Her Box of a House': Spatial Restriction as Psychic Signpost in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'The Revolt of "Mother."'" *Markham Review* 8 (1979): 51–52.

Gardner, Kate. "The Subversion of Genre in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman." *New England Quarterly* 65 (September 1992): 447–68.

Reichardt, Mary R. *A Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992.

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Showalter, Elaine. Introduction. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

PS 98 W64 N48 1985

Toth, Susan Allen. "Defiant Light: A Positive View of Mary Wilkins Freeman." *New England*

*Quarterly* 46 (March 1973): 82–93.

*The Revolt of Mother*. Film. 1988.

“The Yellow Wall-Paper”

page 206

Horace Scudder, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, brusquely rejected “The Yellow Wall-Paper”: “I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself.” Gilman, in turn, speculated: “I suppose he would have sent back one of Poe’s on the same ground.” Would Scudder have objected to Poe’s depiction of complete madness, or was he really upset by the story of a woman driven mad by childbirth and her domestic role? Whatever the answer, the comparison with Poe opens a major direction for interpretation. Among other things, this is a gothic horror story about individual madness, much like Poe’s “The Black Cat.” Both use first-person narrators trapped in an insanity that is imaged as a house. The house itself may be the cause of the insanity, for in both Poe’s and Gilman’s story madness is entangled with marriage and the home.

After its publication in 1892 “The Yellow Wall-Paper” was little known and infrequently anthologized until its recovery by feminist critics in the 1970s. The favored interpretation of the narrator’s mental illness now focused on postpartum depression and the patriarchal oppression of women in Victorian society. In 1913 Gilman explained the autobiographical source of the story:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” to “have but two hours’ intellectual life a day,” and never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived.” This was in 1887.

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist’s advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite; ultimately recovering some measure of power.

Gilman sent a copy of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” to the noted physician in question, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia. He never responded to her, but years later she learned that because of her story he had changed his treatment of patients diagnosed with “nervous prostration,” or neurasthenia. Today Mitchell’s rest cure seems absurd to anyone even minimally acquainted with the rudiments of good mental health. Women and men are advised to get plenty

of exercise, eat a balanced diet, find stimulating work or other activity, reduce stress, and get enough sleep. As a young woman, Gilman designed such a regimen for herself. Her list included, in an era of corsets, wearing fewer clothes.

The cultural and social historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English provide a medical and scientific context for Gilman's account of female madness. Their focus is invalidism and hysteria among upper-middle-class and upper-class women from the mid-nineteenth century into the late 1910s. They argue that diverse aspects of patriarchal oppression converged to create a culture of invalidism in which upper-class women were encouraged to see themselves as inherently sick. Admittedly, there were actual threats to women's health peculiar to the era. The primary ones were death in childbirth and various gynecological problems due to frequent pregnancies (before the days of birth control) and primitive medical practices. Another significant threat was tuberculosis, a disease of epidemic proportions in the nineteenth century. Young women died from TB at twice the rate of young men, probably because of increased vulnerability due to hormonal changes associated with puberty and childbearing. TB made women more emotionally erratic, and this instability became an argument for their innate unfitness to enter a man's world. Other claims about female physical and mental inferiority have proven to be absurd or at least highly exaggerated. For instance, in the culture of invalidism the normal experience of menstruation was thought to increase a woman's fragility and susceptibility to disease. The medical profession held that being a woman made one ill and, Ehrenreich and English say, it "identified *all* female functions as *inherently* sick." Some contemporary feminists argued that it was in the interest of medical doctors to encourage female invalidism. It didn't take very many chronically indisposed upper-class female patients to ensure a doctor a comfortable living.

The culture of invalidism was supported by the scientific theory that women needed to conserve their energies for childbearing. Any exceptional sexual, physical, or intellectual activity was held to undermine their fitness for women's roles. (Men were warned not to expend their seed in sexual self-indulgence, but intellectual activity was not viewed as a threat to their manhood.) The German scientist P. Moebius (*Concerning the Physiological and Intellectual Weakness of Women*) presents the bias against women that was echoed by American scientists: "If we wish woman to fulfill the task of motherhood fully she cannot possess a masculine brain. If the feminine abilities were developed to the same degree as those of the male, her material organs would suffer and we should have before us a repulsive and useless hybrid." Psychologists believed the ovaries to be the determiners of a woman's character. Troubled women were sometimes subjected to unnecessary or grotesque uterine surgery or forced to endure rest cures like Mitchell's. According to Ehrenreich and English, women sometimes used this flawed science to their advantage. They might claim sickness in order to escape unwanted sex, as a form of birth control, or to gain attention for themselves. Female invalidism evolved into a mysterious condition known as hysteria. "The hysterical 'type' began to be characterized as a 'petty tyrant' with a 'taste for power' over her husband, servants, and children, and, if possible, her doctor." The disease generally baffled doctors, some of whom suspected deception while others treated it as a legitimate disease of the uterus.



Medical and scientific theories about the mind-body relationship in women offer one important cultural context for Gilman's attack, in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," on the treatment of female dis-ease. Little else in the story is so clear. Its ambiguities continue to intrigue readers. Take, for instance, the central symbol of the wallpaper. Its shifting configurations and permutations may cause the narrator's madness, or they may be the projection of her increasingly deranged mind. They may also hold the explanation of her situation. In the introduction to her casebook on the story, Catherine Golden notes that the wallpaper embodies the indeterminate meaning of the story itself.

The ending likewise remains ambiguous. The critical debate, says Golden, has been over whether the narrator, who has gone completely mad, is liberated or entrapped as she crawls, animal-like, out of her room and across the body of her husband, who has fainted at the sight of her. Critics who favor liberation see her as having become self-responsible or in her madness having attained a "higher sanity." Her madness may constitute a triumph over her husband. Another interpretation is that because her husband has forbidden her to write on paper, she gets the better of him by using the wallpaper for self-expression, which in turn leads to complete madness. Yet madness may be preferable to her husband's form of sanity, and perhaps the ending holds hope of future change. Critics who favor entrapment argue that there is no real liberation in complete madness. Still others argue that positive change will have to await changes in the culture.

A comparison of the short story with its film adaptation raises the issue of the changes required in moving from print to film. What are the technical limitations and possibilities of the two media? Why does such adaptation involve interpretation? The bias of the film version is decidedly feminist. We move outside the narrator's accelerating madness to a variety of scenes dramatizing women's oppression in Victorian society. (Is the film's being set in England an act of interpretation that alters the story in a significant way?) In the film, as in the short story, the husband, a doctor, imposes Mitchell's rest cure on his wife, encouraging her invalidism, but in the film he makes sexual demands on this woman who is clearly ill and fearful about another pregnancy. The film, then, provides more details about the victimization of upper-class married women.

Another feminist issue emerges if we consider the working-class women who are only glimpsed in "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Like the nurse Mary, they are factory laborers, domestic servants, field hands, and poorly paid governesses and teachers. Patriarchal culture had little concern for the legitimate health concerns of such women, for whom neurasthenia would have been a preposterous luxury. There is also the husband's sister Jennie, presumably a poor relation charged with supervising the house and the sick wife. Jennie is a reminder of the dependency of unmarried upper-class women. For them, marriage, whatever its abuses, would have meant security and social standing.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deidre English. "The 'Sick' Women of the Upper Classes" (1973).  
Rpt. in Golden: 90-109.

Golden, Catherine, ed. *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper*. New York: Feminist P, 1992.

PS1744 .G57 Y453 1992

*The Yellow Wallpaper*. Video. Dir. John Clive. Video. BBC. Perf. Stephen Dillon and Julia Watson. BBC. 76 min.

“A Jury of Her Peers”

page 297

Susan Glaspell’s writing, says Linda Ben-Zvi, is “marked by strong women, persons whose consciousness of themselves and their world shape her plays and fiction.” Glaspell’s plots “invariably turn on their experiences, relationships, and attempts to wrest at least a modicum of self-expression and fulfillment in societies that impede, if not prohibit, such possibilities.” Glaspell may be numbered among several earlier American women writers who were rediscovered and reclaimed in the later twentieth century, among them Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Zora Neale Hurston. This particular story, according to Elaine Hedges, “is by now a small feminist classic,” “a frequently visited landmark on our ‘map of rediscovery.’”

“A Jury of Her Peers” is based on an actual case, the Hossack murder case, about which Glaspell wrote many newspaper reports, in covering both the investigation and the trial for the *Des Moines Daily News* in 1900 and 1901. What have been seen as her two most striking alterations for her fictional treatment are worth discussing: (1) the accused never appears in the work and (2) the setting is altered from a public place (a courtroom) to a private space (the kitchen of a home).

“A Jury” is unusual in that it is the offshoot of what was originally a one-act play, *Trifles*. Why would Glaspell have chosen either of these titles? Which one do you think is best? Are there evidences in the short story text of its incarnation first as a drama—of its being written by a playwright and actress? (Susan Glaspell played the part of Mrs. Hale in the original production of *Trifles*.)

As with Willa Cather, art and artists are said to be frequent subjects or themes in Glaspell’s works. Who is/are the artist(s) in “A Jury”? What is/are the art(s) here? Veronica Makowsky says, however, that Glaspell tends to be uncomfortable with autonomy-seeking, art-achieving, assertive women, that she “ultimately condemns them as selfish, as evidenced by the fates she assigns them” in her creations. And Mrs. Wright in this story is said to be an example. Can you agree?

Glaspell’s many small details in this story have drawn large praise. What items can be seen to function as symbols? Do certain details function together as a “symbol system” that extends beyond the local, regional, and historical to larger themes and broader meanings? To choose a noun and a verb[al], a good bit of time could be spent considering all the implications and suggestions of “quilt” and “knot it,” for example.

Can “A Jury of Her Peers” be called *protest* fiction?

Ben-Zvi, Linda, ed. *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995.

PS 3515 .L35 Z86 1995

Makowsky, Veronica. *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

PS 3515 .L35 Z75 1993

“The Outcasts of Poker Flat”

page 116

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren savaged a story by Bret Harte as an example of bad fiction in their 1943 textbook *Understanding Fiction*. Even now, many critics are defensive or halfhearted in their praise of Harte. His language is without doubt stilted at times. (One critic describes it as the language of characters in nineteenth-century melodrama.) His characters lack depth and complexity; Harold Kolb describes them as “cardboard mannequins propped up in front of the scenery.” Harte also indulged in bald-faced sentimentality. Mother Shipton, the original whore with a heart of gold, starves herself to death so that the virginal Piney Woods might have more food. At the end, when Duchess and Piney die in each other’s arms, Harte writes, “And so reclining, the younger and purer pillowing the head of her soiled sister upon her virgin breast, they fell asleep.”

Despite these flaws, Harte has continued to appeal to readers since the 1860s, and Kolb points out that often teachers trying to repeat Brooks and Warren’s hatchet job have the whole process explode in their faces because students enjoy the story. What accounts for the continued popularity of Harte’s fiction? Is his manipulation of stock characters so effective that stereotype becomes archetype? Kolb maintains that Harte is popular because he is a humorist. How humorous is “The Outcasts of Poker Flat”?

Patrick Morrow claims that Harte has been judged harshly because the nature of his work has been misunderstood. Morrow maintains that Harte’s tales are not short stories but “parables.” In what sense can “Outcasts” be considered a parable? One might investigate the implications of the names “Mother” Shipton, “The Innocent,” and Oakhurst. The outcasts are of questionable character in Poker Flat (the term “flat” means busted or broke), but in nature they become selfless and sacrifice their lives for each other. Might the story be a parable about nature versus society? If so, how does one account for the fact that the characters are ultimately destroyed by nature?

Kolb, Harold, Jr. “The Outcast of Literary Flat: Bret Harte as Humorist.” *American Literary Realism* 23 (Winter 1991): 52–63.

Morrow, Patrick D. “Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and the San Francisco Circle.” *A Literary History of the American West*. Ed. Max Westbrook and James H. Maguire. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1987. 339–58.

PS 271 .L58 1987

Schornhurst, Gary. *Bret Harte*. Boston: Twayne, 1992.

PS 1834 .S33 1992

*The Outcasts of Poker Flat*. Film. Dir. Christy Cabanne. Perf. Jean Muir and Preston Foster. 1937. 68 min.

*The Outcasts of Poker Flat*. Film. Dir. Joseph M. Newman. Perf. Anne Baxter and Dale Roberts. 1952.

*The Outcasts of Poker Flat*. Video. Dir. Paul Stanley. 1958.

“The Birth-mark”

page 52

It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that Hawthorne composed this short story in the early months following his marriage in July 1842 to Sophia Peabody. In this light the story might be seen as a moral self-memo or personal reminder regarding hopeful romantic assumptions and necessary realistic accommodations in the state of matrimony. The basic idea for the story appears in several entries in Hawthorne’s notebooks—notations that show both the general and the particular in operation and that are very revealing about why and how Hawthorne wrote fiction. In the sentence he recorded on 25 October 1836, for example: “Those who are very difficult in choosing wives seem as if they would take none of Nature’s ready-made works, but want a woman manufactured particularly to their order.” And, in a character projection in a more serious vein, on 16 October 1837: “A person to be in possession of something as perfect as mortal man has a right to demand; he tries to make it better, and ruins it entirely.” And, growing more specific, on 4 January 1839: “A person to be the death of his beloved in trying to raise her to more than mortal perfection; yet this should be a comfort to him for having aimed so highly and holily.”

The second part of this last story germ is not realized in “The Birth-mark.” Neither Aylmer nor the reader secures any comfort from what clearly is a very selfish, unholy endeavor. As Alison Easton claims, Hawthorne’s art in this tale may indeed be an advance on the “formal moralism” of his 1830s work: “The Birth-mark” “avoids taking up a simple moral stance and retains its explanatory approach, working dramatically rather than relying on the mediation of a moralizing narrator or the foregrounding of allegorical image” (*The Making of the Hawthorne Subject*, 144). Still, Hawthorne’s emblematic/allegorical impulse is plainly in evidence here; his moral message, while engagingly dramatized, is uncomplicatedly explicit; what he has produced can be called, with little or no strain, *parable* or *exemplum*. It is not difficult, along with Hawthorne’s narrator in the concluding paragraph (62), to draw conclusions that propound metaphysical and theological fact and recommend the appropriate conduct. Perfection is God, and it exists only in heaven, outside time. To be human is to be imperfect; imperfection is an inevitable earthly quality. (The very hand of God on man is man’s imperfection; to all who are born must come the reminding mark of Original Sin.) Beware of pride; eschew desiring and attempting to exercise Godlike power. Do not let the intellect overrule the heart. Aspire; elevate the spiritual part of human nature over the grossly physical, but know that both exist. Even to approach the humaneness that borders or suggests or maybe even partakes of the immortal, one must accept and glorify the limitations of mortal human existence.

Hawthorne was sharply sensitive to the risk of producing wispy, unreal characters in writing such allegorical tales. That he achieves at least one person with substantial and expansive dimensionality if not unique personal individuality in this story is due in part to his use of the “mad scientist” figure, a character type naturally and vitally familiar to the cultural concerns of

mid-nineteenth-century America. (Hawthorne in fact makes recurrent use of brilliant, obsessively dedicated men of science; “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” are two examples from his short fiction. Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe, among other American poets, reflect poetically and pointedly on science, its promises and its effects.) Andrew Combe’s *The Principles of Psychology* was only one of many sources for Hawthorne and his compatriots to read about monomaniacal scientists. Probably the most famous, or infamous, of historical examples was the seventeenth-century Englishman Sir Kenelm Digby, who reportedly killed his wife in an unsuccessful experiment (using “viper-wine”) that attempted to make her more beautiful. Associations with characters from earlier literature come into play as well, including the culturally archetypal Faust, the scholar who desired knowledge and achievement far beyond human limits and acceptable moral bounds.

Aylmer’s name may have been suggested to Hawthorne by his knowledge of John Aylmer, an arrogant sixteenth-century Bishop of London. And/or he may well have been aware of the etymological meaning of the name (Elmer is its modern form) as “famous” or “noble.” “Aminadab” seems a more exotic and unusual choice. While it has been pointed to as Biblical in origin and has been interpreted strictly as an anagram (“bad anima”), it is more likely, as Thomas Pribek explains, that Hawthorne was drawing from “a number of similar uses of a literary type of the faithful servant” which employed this very name.

It is worth noting that “Georgiana” is the feminine form of “George,” which means “husbandman.” The extensive critical consideration of this story dealing with Hawthorne as producer of feminist fiction suggests profitable class discussion of this question. To what empathetic extent is Georgiana presented as a victim? To what extent is her victimizer condemned? Does Hawthorne ultimately support or attack a patriarchal, misogynist society?

Baym, Nina. *The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1976.

PS 1888 .B3

Pfister, Joel. *The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender, and the Psychological in Hawthorne’s Fiction*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991.

PS 1892 .P74 P45

Pribek, Thomas. “Hawthorne’s Aminadab: Sources and Significance.” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1987): 177–86.

Stoehr, Taylor. *Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists: Pseudoscience and Social Science in*



*Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters*. Hamden, CT: Shoe String, 1978.

PS 1889 .S7

**“Young Goodman Brown”**

page 43

One of Hawthorne’s most famous stories, “Young Goodman Brown” is a study in ambiguity and uncertainty. The story begins with Brown leaving his “aptly” named wife, Faith, for an “evil purpose” in the woods surrounding his village. Faith is an ambiguous figure. Is she allegorical? If she does represent Brown’s religious faith, what do the facts that she (1) has dreams when alone that make her “afraid of herself,” (2) wears ribbons of a color often associated with sexuality, and (3) participates in the black mass, serve to say about the nature of Brown’s faith in the first place? Is the figure who participates in the baptism of evil actually Faith or only a figment of Brown’s imagination? In the woods and at the black mass, Brown appears to meet people he knows and respects for their holiness. But Hawthorne constantly refers to them as forms or figures; sometimes they are disembodied voices. Are any of them really there? Are they false shapes conjured by the devil? Are they part of a dream? Is the whole experience a dream? The narrator raises that question explicitly.

The satanic stranger in the story claims to have known several of Goodman Brown’s ancestors and is described by Goody Cloyse as looking like Brown’s grandfather. Can that description be read as a symbol of original sin, an ancestral proclivity toward evil? Does the appearance at the black mass of everyone Brown knows, and many he does not, suggest the universality of such a proclivity? Near the end of the story, just as Brown and Faith are to be baptized by the devil, Brown shouts to Faith to look to heaven and resist the wicked one. Does that mean he has resisted the devil? Or does the fact that he recognizes evil in someone else and not in himself at that point mean that he has committed the sin of pride, of excluding himself from a humanity united in imperfection and susceptibility to sin? Has the devil won? Does Goodman Brown’s name become ironic at the end, or is it ironic from the beginning?

Several stories can be usefully taught in conjunction with “Young Goodman Brown.” How do Brown’s pride and self-righteousness compare with Mrs. Turpin’s in O’Connor’s “Revelation”? Another possibility is Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”; like Brown, Ichabod Crane travels alone in a dark wood and meets someone or something satanic. What are the differences between the two journeys, and what do those differences tell us about the two characters? the two stories? the two authors?

Bunge, Nancy. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1993.

PS 1888 .B8 1993

Coldiron, A. E. B. "Laughter as a Thematic Marker in 'Young Goodman Brown.'" *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 17 (Spring 1991): 19.

Hardt, John S. "Doubts in the American Garden: Three Cases of Paradisal Skepticism." *Studies in Short Fiction* 25 (Summer 1988): 249–59.

Hostetler, Norman H. "Narrative Structure and Theme in 'Young Goodman Brown.'" *Journal of Narrative Technique* 12 (Fall 1982): 221–28.

Keil, James C. "Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown': Early Nineteenth-Century and Puritan Constructions of Gender." *New England Quarterly* 69 (March 1996): 33–55.

Matheson, Terence J. "'Young Goodman Brown': Hawthorne's Condemnation of Conformity." *Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal* 8 (1978): 137–45.

*Young Goodman Brown*. Dir. Peter George. Independent film. 1993.

“Hills Like White Elephants”

page 384

In his “Preface to *The First Forty-nine*,” in *The Fifth Column and The First Forty-nine Stories* (1938), Hemingway lists “Hills Like White Elephants” as one of his favorites in the collection. Readers have agreed with him. The story is a masterful example of Hemingway’s signature themes of the failure of romantic love in the post–World War I wasteland and the miscommunication between men and women. It also exemplifies the spare Hemingway style: grammatically simple and short sentences, simple diction, and vivid symbolic detail. The narrator provides details of setting and action without comment, leaving the story to unfold through dialogue. As explained in the headnote, Hemingway likened his approach to writing to an iceberg that presents only one-eighth of itself to direct view.

We are given little information about the man and woman in this story, but intuitively we know about their conflicting desires and personalities, for theirs is a universal gender conflict. To supply a culturally specific back-story, the reader might place this couple within the postwar generation of American expatriates. Some of these deracinated and alienated young people had discovered greater personal freedom in Europe during the war; most were escaping American provincialism and adult responsibilities. The dollar was strong abroad, and a few, like Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, more or less supported themselves as writers; others relied on allowances from home. Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” describes the wasted lives of many in this generation, as well as their inevitable day of atonement. The bill eventually came due on their reckless pursuit of “fun,” to use a word from Hemingway’s story.

Because there are few clues about the personal history of the couple in “Hills Like White Elephants,” readers might well ask what has brought them to this small railroad station in Spain. Why (besides the reality for Hemingway of what editors and publishers would allow in print at this time) do they not use the word *abortion* for the operation they refer to? Abortion is illegal in Catholic Spain, a country of strong religious and family values, but the couple appears just to be passing through. They express no attachment to place or traditional values. We are given only the woman’s pensive resistance to the man’s impatient urging. Avoidance of the crucial word indicates the couple’s avoidance of genuine intimacy. It also heightens the story’s intensity and underscores the conflicting expectations of the couple. Their conversation suggests the girl’s emotional and practical dependence on the man. He avoids commitment and shirks responsibility. Their disconnection is heightened by the absence of names. He is “the American”; she is usually just “the girl.” (The nickname “Jig” may be an endearment or a lewd reference.) As “the girl” she is classified as inexperienced, and her dependent position is emphasized by such small details as the fact that she doesn’t understand Spanish or know the names of drinks.

Important influences on Hemingway's distinctive style were the older writers Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound. Anderson provided the example of an understated colloquial style, an artful artlessness, and the rejection of contrived plots. Stein's radically innovative prose demonstrated the importance of words as individual entities, like the visible brushstrokes in the painting of the postimpressionist painter Paul Cézanne. In the story "On Writing," Hemingway's alter ego Nick Adams thinks about his goals as a writer: "He wanted to write like Cézanne painted. Cézanne started with all the tricks. Then he broke the whole thing down and built the real thing. It was hell to do. He, Nick, wanted to write about country so it would be there like Cézanne had done it in painting. You had to do it from inside yourself. There wasn't any trick. Nobody had ever written about country like that. He felt almost holy about it." The opening paragraph of "Hills Like White Elephants" offers some idea of what sort of painting Hemingway/Nick had in mind. Its minimalist details and verbal economy paint a stark but vivid landscape fraught with the emotional tension between the couple situated indecisively between the train tracks: between the promise of the hills on one side of the Ebro River and the hot, shadeless plain on the other.

Ezra Pound's instruction to Hemingway about the need for exactness points to how many of Hemingway's stories resemble a dense lyric poem. In his Imagist manifesto of 1913, Pound dictated that the modern writer eliminate unnecessary words and avoid abstractions; he also stated that the "proper and perfect symbol is the natural object." Thus the girl's image of hills like white elephants suggests her swelling body, were she to complete her pregnancy, and it evokes a landscape of imaginative possibility that will be obliterated if she yields to the man's wishes. A white elephant is both an item that is no longer wanted and a rare and sacred animal. The man, unable to recognize or appreciate the suggestiveness of the image, is one of Hemingway's least sympathetic alter egos. A discussion of why readers usually sympathize with the girl rather than the man might lead to the story's symbolically rich texture and to gender differences in the conversational styles of the man and woman. Pamela Smiley's somewhat sympathetic reading of the man argues that he speaks with typical masculine logic and directness whereas Jig's speech is sensitive, imaginative, and less to the point.

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Hemingway, Ernest. *The Nick Adams Stories*. New York: Scribner, 1972.

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Johnston, Kenneth G. *The Tip of the Iceberg: Hemingway and the Short Story*. Greenville, FL: Penkevill, 1987.

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O’Brien, Timothy E. “Allusion, Word-Play, and the Central Conflict in Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’” *Hemingway Review* 12 (Fall 1992): 19–25.

Pound, Ezra. “A Retrospect” (1918). *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968. 3–14.

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Renner, Stanley. “Moving to the Girl’s Side of ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’” *Hemingway Review* 15 (Fall 1995): 27–41.

Smiley, Pamela. “Gender-Linked Miscommunication in ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’” *Ernest Hemingway Review* 8 (Fall 1988): 2–12.

**HUGHES, Langston**

**“Thank You, Ma’m”**

page 399

Like Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” and many other American novels and short stories, “Thank You, Ma’m” is a coming-of-age story. Roger, a young man who apparently has no family and no models to teach him right from wrong, comes to realize how closely he is tied to other people. He snatches Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones’s purse so that he can buy blue suede shoes. What is the significance of the fact that the object of desire for which he is willing to commit a crime comes from a popular song?

Mrs. Jones is an imposing figure both physically—she is described as a “large woman,” carries a purse heavy enough to knock Roger over, and picks him up by his shirt front, shaking him like a terrier would a rat—and emotionally. She is sympathetic to Roger; she washes his face, feeds him dinner, and gives him ten dollars to buy the blue suede shoes he wants. Perhaps she represents the matriarchal nature of urban African-American culture. The story could be read as a triumph of that culture over the white-dominated popular culture. Significantly, the song that popularized blue suede shoes was sung by Elvis Presley, who appropriated black music for a white audience.

Several stories in this anthology contain dialect of one sort or another. Clemens uses Southern frontier dialect in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” The grandmother in “A White Heron” speaks in a New England dialect, and Chesnut’s Grandison speaks the dialect of a nineteenth-century black slave. Black dialect is important to Hurston’s “The Gilded Six-Bits” and Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home.” Unlike these stories, “Thank You, Ma’m” makes no use of misspelling and very little use of nonstandard grammar. Yet the reader gets a clear sense of urban African-Americans speaking. Why? How does Hughes achieve that sense of dialect?

Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. 2 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 2002.

PS 3515 .U274 Z698 2002

“The Gilded Six-Bits”

page 338

Hurston’s story can very engagingly be juxtaposed with a number of other stories about marriage and married couples in *American Short Stories*. Chopin’s “The Storm,” Tallent’s “Cuidad Juarez,” Lahiri’s “This Blessed House,” and Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums” might make especially good pairings. For those who know other of Hurston’s works, comparisons within her own canon would be possible—for example, by making use of the three marriages of the protagonist in her best known and most highly regarded work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

A different kind of comparison—one more purely textual and linguistic—could be effected with other anthology stories that contain a rendering of the African-American vernacular or folk speech. The stories by Chesnutt and Wright might be the prime candidates here. Such close analytic investigation ought to be extended, however, to other authors’ attempts to reproduce authentically, or at least to suggest, the sounds and patterns of nonstandard speech by their characters, regardless of race or region. How is such a thing attempted? What are the measures of success?

Hurston’s (like Chopin’s?) is a story with a happy ending. But how long will it last? Is such a question a reasonable one for ordinary readers to ask? Is it a legitimate one for “serious” students, scholars, and critics of literature? Basic issues of literary theory and criticism can quickly be foregrounded here.

How and how well does Hurston depict or reveal the humanity of her created characters? How “real” or moving are their joy and their hurt? How clear and plausible are their motivations? Hurston was criticized by many of her fellow contemporary black authors because she chose to write celebratory rather than protest fiction. What exactly is being celebrated in “The Gilded Six-Bits”? Can Hurston be said to be protesting against anything? What difference does the race of her characters make? Interpret, explain, support, or take issue with Alice Walker’s claim that in this story Hurston “was able to make a literary statement about the use of stereotypes by whites to denigrate blacks, people quite different in themselves and to themselves from what white people apparently saw.” Is *primitivism* an appropriate concept to be employed here?



Chinn, Nancy, and Elizabeth E. Dunn. “‘The Ring of Singing Metal on Wood’: Zora Neale Hurston’s Artistry in ‘The Gilded Six-Bits.’” *Mississippi Quarterly* 49 (Fall 1996): 775–90.

Jones, Evora. “The Pastoral and the Picaresque in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘The Gilded Six-Bits.’” *College Language Association Journal* 35:3 (1992): 316–24.

Lowe, John. *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston’s Cosmic Comedy*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994.

PS 3515 .U789 Z77 1994

**IRVING, Washington**

**“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”**

page 22

A good way to get into the story is to start with the title. What or who is the legend of Sleepy Hollow? Is it Ichabod Crane? the Headless Horseman? Or is Sleepy Hollow itself the legend? The hollow seems to exist outside the reality of “the great torrents of migration and improvement” in the rest of the country. Sleepy Hollow, often seen as a pastoral ideal, seems to have sinister elements. It “bewitches” not only its inhabitants but any visitors, causing them to become sleepy and lazy. The epigram is from James Thomson’s “Castle of Indolence,” a poem that condemns indolence and promotes the Protestant work ethic. Sleepy Hollow’s “indolence” may be more ambiguous than it seems.

What is the nature of Ichabod Crane? “Ichabod” is Hebrew for “inglorious,” sometimes translated as “the glory has departed.” Critics have been divided, some seeing him as a pedantic but harmless victim of Brom Bones’s bullying, others as the “man who corrupted Sleepy Hollow.” He is compared to a snake at least once in the story, and he does seem to commit all seven of the deadly sins (though he seems to sublimate lust into gluttony). Few readers find him likeable, but is he evil? What is the nature of Brom Bones? Is he a bully or just an energetic youth? He has been compared to the “ring-tailed roarer” character from Old Southwest humor.

The supernatural, or a belief in it, plays a large part in the story. What is the significance of the fact that Crane’s favorite book is Cotton Mather’s book on witchcraft? The inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow seem comfortable with their ghosts, but Crane is terrified by his. What could Irving be saying by that fact? Is it significant that the Headless Horseman was a Hessian, a mercenary who fought against the American Revolution?

Like Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Irving’s story has been interpreted as a commentary on the position of the writer in the early nineteenth century. Some see Crane as a satire of the “pop” writer, Hawthorne’s “damned mob of scribbling women” or men who wrote like them. The scene in which Crane sets out for the party at Van Tassel’s farm on the “steed” Gunpowder has been seen as a parody of Bellerophon riding Pegasus, the flying horse of the Muses. Another way to look at the story is as a mockchivalric romance. The word chivalry is used several times, and the rivalry between Brom Bones and Crane is described in terms of medieval battle.

Bone, Robert A. "Irving's Headless Hessian: Prosperity and the Inner Life." *American Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1963): 167–75.

Bowden, Mary Weatherspoon. *Washington Irving*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.

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Daigrepoint, Lloyd M. "Ichabod Crane: Inglorious Man of Letters." *Early American Literature* 19 (Spring 1984): 68–81.

Hedges, William L. *Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802–1832*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.

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Pajak, Edward F. "Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane: American Narcissus." *American Imago* 38 (Spring 1981): 127–34.

Plummer, Laura, and Michael Nelson. "'Girls Can Take Care of Themselves': Gender and Storytelling in Washington Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (Spring 1993): 175–84.

Von Frank, Albert. "The Man Who Corrupted Sleepy Hollow." *Studies in American Fiction* 15 (Autumn 1987): 129–43.

*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Animated film. Narr. Glenn Close. 1988.

“Europe”

page 124

Not much seems to happen in this story. The few “dramatic” events that do occur—Jane’s refusal to return from Europe, Mrs. Rimmle’s neurotic breakdowns, and Becky’s death—happen off screen, so to speak, out of sight of the first-person narrator, hence out of sight of the reader. One approach is to discuss the significance of the indirectness of much of the story. But if nothing overt happens in the narrator’s gaze, James skillfully uses modulations of tone and plays on words to show the complexity of the relationship between the “centenarian” Mrs. Rimmle and her three daughters, Becky, Jane, and Maria.

In the first sentence of the story, when Mrs. Rimmle says Becky “really should go,” she does not say where. The narrator, the reader, and probably Mrs. Rimmle herself assume she means to Europe. But later events in the story bring to mind another meaning of “to go,” a euphemism for dying. For James and his narrator, Mrs. Rimmle represents the puritanical, life-denying society of New England. Europe represents a life-affirming culture free of the oppressive sense of “duty” Mrs. Rimmle imposes on her daughters. The old woman is compared to a “vulture” watching constantly over her daughters from a “stiff” chair. Late in the story she is compared to a mummy and a dying monarch brought out for display to dispel rumors of her death. The narrator several times refers to her as a “witch.” Europe is associated with such romantic images as lakes, flirtation, and poetry. What is the significance of the fact that the old lady never says the word “Europe” until after Becky’s death?

Why does Becky sacrifice money and eventually her life so that her sister can stay in Europe? In the Bible, Rebecca (Rebekah) is the wife of Isaac. She helps Jacob secure the patrimony due to her other son, Esau, and later helps him flee Isaac’s wrath. What are the parallels between the biblical Rebekah and James’s Becky? The narrator’s sister-in-law is another interesting character. One critic sees her as another representative of New England. Is she simply a *doppelgänger* of Mrs. Rimmle (both are New Englanders and widows)? Or is she at all sensitive to the plight of the Rimmle sisters? And why three sisters? Is there perhaps a suggestion of the fates? If so, is that suggestion ironic? The narrator is another interesting character. His attitude toward Mrs. Rimmle, her daughters, and the situation he reveals seems to change in the course of the story. How and why?

Buzard, James. "A Continent of Pictures: Reflections on the 'Europe' of Nineteenth-Century Tourists." *PMLA* 108 (January 1993): 30–44.

Han, Pierre. "Organic Unity in 'Europe.'" *South Atlantic Bulletin* 35:3 (1970): 40–41.

Hudspeth, Robert N. "A Hard Shining Sonnet: The Art of Fiction in James's 'Europe.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 12 (1975): 387–95.

“Birthmates”

page 728

It is not difficult to fathom John Updike’s choice of “Birthmates” for his selection of the one hundred best American short stories of the twentieth century. Although necessarily more limited in the scope of its plot, Jen’s story withstands comparison to such master studies of the American Dream as Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Among stories in this anthology, it holds its own with Eudora Welty’s “The Hitch-Hikers,” another portrait of the American salesman that made Updike’s list. Welty’s Tom Harris and Jen’s Art Woo have preferred the romance of selling to the struggles of personal commitment. Harris is a loner and drifter, while Art is a hustler like Miller’s Willy Loman. Art and Willy wrongly think that being liked will bring them success. Because Art is a hyphenated American, his American Dream seems all the more a will-o-the-wisp.

Art is plagued by the fear that he will fail as a salesman because American society views him as an outsider. His boss has labeled him first a Jap and then a Chink. The black woman at the welfare hotel refers to Asian Americans as “you folk,” and the welfare children make fun of his slanted eyes. Art deflects these painful insults by maintaining “a certain perspective” (730). Rather than becoming angry, taking legal action, or examining the psychology of his acquiescence, he attempts to ingratiate himself and thus becomes all the more pathetic. Art wants to be like Billy Shore, a hotshot all-American salesman with whom he shares a birthday. Billy’s apparent success in the world of computer sales is a nagging rebuke to Art’s failure. His mistake in booking himself into a welfare hotel while attending the sales conference of a “dying industry” suggests how close he is to being eliminated from the race for the American Dream.

Jen’s story, like Welty’s, has a leisurely pace that seems artless until its realistic details coalesce in a powerfully ambiguous summary image. Art Woo’s initial anxieties and self-doubts characterize him as someone who has become disconnected from his own feelings and from his wife, Lisa. He has preoccupied himself with surface appearances and has not been willing to plummet to life’s murky depths. His failed attempts at connection and communication find their symbol in the telephone in his hotel room. As he prepares to leave for the conference, he commits a characteristic act of excessive caution. He takes the telephone’s handset with him as a means of self-defense, only to have it grabbed by a child and thrown at him. The blow to his head (and his dignity) knocks him cold, releasing repressed memories of his failed marriage. In an ironic twist, the handset has opened communication between Art and his shadow self. We learn that his marriage has failed in part because he was not able to grieve with Lisa about the fetus (she calls it a baby) they aborted because of a genetic defect. “[H]e saw hope still, some feeble, skeletal hope, where she saw loss” (733). At the conference a stroke of unusual good luck comes

to Art when a headhunter puts him on to the possibility of a much better job than the one he fears he is about to lose. He gives the man his hotel number and experiences the euphoria of a new day's dawning.

In the trajectory of Art's rapidly fluctuating expectations the welfare hotel, home to mothers and children, does metaphoric service as a lying-in hospital. Earlier in this fateful day Art emerges from unconsciousness and his memory of his and Lisa's unborn child to find himself in the care of a forthright black woman named Cindy. He uses a birth image to describe to her his recent experience: "I feel like I died and came back to life head-first" (734). Cindy, a former nurse and now a junkie, becomes midwife to Art's rebirth. It will be a rough birth, for she says, "I don't got no milk and I don't got no Tylenol, my guests got to bring their own" (735). Her switchblade could prove a midwife's scalpel or a deadly weapon. All is uncertain.

Art's initial birth pangs are followed by his self-conscious encounters with other salesmen at the conference hotel. He hopes to avoid Billy Shore, his birthmate against whose success Art measures his own failure. When a headhunter, with a ring of hair that reminds Art of St. Francis, gives him the lead on a better job, Art joyfully thinks that he will be reborn in the mold of Billy. However, St. Francis, like the midwife, won't be of much help. Back in his hotel room, Art realizes that he has no handset on which to receive a call from the divine intercessor or to make a call to Lisa. A shadowy figure passes ominously outside his window, leaving behind the possibility of future violence. However, the shadow could be Art's own, for Art himself now realizes that he is a "haunted man." He knows that any call he might make would be "years too late." In the story's final sentences Art, like Lisa, remembers the aborted fetus as a child, a boy. The would-be child supplants Billy Shore as Art's birthmate. The child's unfitness for life serves Art as the mirror of his own inadequacy. He thinks to himself that because of skeletal defects the child "would have, in being born, broken every bone in his body." We can't be certain whether this image expresses the experience of Art's last twelve hours or anticipates his future. Has he been reborn or aborted? Or has he yet to experience the real pain of the self's birth? Does the ever-optimistic Art Woo hold on to that part of the American Dream that says a new start is always a possibility?

Lee, Don. "About Gish Jen." *Ploughshares* 26 (Fall 2000): 217–22.

Lee, Rachel. "Who's Chinese?" *Women's Review of Books* 19 (February 2002): 13–14.

Matsokawa, Uko. "MELUS Interview: Gish Jen." *MELUS* 18 (Winter 1994): 111–20.

Satz, Martha. "Writing About the Things That Are Dangerous: A Conversation with Gish Jen." *Southwest Review* 78 (Winter 1993): 132–40.

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**“A White Heron”**

page 138

Jewett is often compared with Hawthorne, and at least one critic has specifically compared “A White Heron” to “Young Goodman Brown.” Both stories begin at sundown with a protagonist going into dark woods. Both Goodman Brown and Sylvy meet mysterious strangers. Brown’s stranger carries a serpentine staff, Sylvy’s a rifle. The stranger in Hawthorne’s story is clearly meant to be Satan. The one in Jewett’s story seems to be more ambiguous. He kills birds, who, according to Sylvy’s grandmother, consider the young girl one of them, and he means to kill the beautiful and strange white heron to which Sylvy is drawn. But he is also friendly and kind to the little girl, and she finds herself attracted to him.

At the end of Hawthorne’s story, Brown clearly gives up much more than he gains in rejecting Satan (if indeed he does reject Satan). Unable, in his pride, to accept or identify with human frailty, he loses all sense of community. Sylvy too has ambiguous gains at the end. She has saved the heron, but the omniscient narrator mentions “treasures” that were lost to her and asks the question, “Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,—who can tell?” (144). On the other hand, if the “treasure” refers to the ten dollars the ornithologist offers Sylvy to show him the heron’s nest, the reference could be ironic. The little girl might simply be too young and attracted to the young man to realize that she has made the right choice.

Sylvy’s initial dread of the stranger, connected with his gun; her continued dread of the gun even after finding herself attracted to him; and her ascent of the giant pine tree leave the story open to Freudian interpretation. Many feminist critics interpret Sylvy’s dread of the ornithologist as representing an independent woman’s fear of ending up as a trophy decorating the house of a man. Still other critics see the ornithologist as representing the science, industry, and materialism of nineteenth-century America and Sylvy as representing an immediate “heart to heart” relationship with nature.

As in many stories, the characters’ names in “A White Heron” are significant. Sylvia means woodland. The name seems to reflect her immediate relationship with nature. Her grandmother is Mrs. Tilley, a name which suggests a relationship with nature perhaps less immediate than Sylvy’s but still closer than the abstract, scientific relationship of the stranger with the gun. The ornithologist is the only character without a name, which raises the question, why did Jewett not name him?

Cary, Richard. *Sarah Orne Jewett*. New York: Twayne, 1962.

PS 128 .T88

Dolberg, Lynn. "Unanswered Questions, Unquestioned Voices: Silence in 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Quarterly* 34 (June 1998): 123–32.

Held, George. "Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (March 1982): 55–65.

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“The Reach”

page 656

Although William Dean Howells could sometimes get a little carried away with his claims for distinctive American literary achievement, we should not fail to recognize the suggestive perceptiveness of many of his observations and pronouncements. In his editorial introduction to a 1907 novelette collection, *Shapes That Haunt the Dusk*, Howells asserts that “the writers of American short stories, the best short stories in the world, surpass in nothing so much as their handling of those filmy textures which clothe the vague shapes of the borderland between experience and illusion.” The American people, he says, “who seem to live only in the most tangible things of material existence, really live more in the spirit than any other. Their love of the supernatural is their common inheritance from no particular ancestry, but is apparently an effect from psychological influences in the past, widely separated in time and place.” Found among the inhabitants of all the nation’s very different regions, “it is something that has tinged the nature of our whole life, whatever its varied sources, and when its color seems gone out of us, or going, it renews itself in all the mystical lights and shadows so familiar to us that [. . .] we are scarcely aware how largely they form the complexion of our thinking and feeling.”

Stephen King might indeed seem to be, presciently, one of Howells’s major “renewals.” Students, who will already know of King, will probably identify him (test this in class?) as a writer of horror stories or supernatural fiction. Terminology can become very tangled here. Besides “horror” and “supernatural,” terms used both popularly and academically for the works of writers like King include terror, fantasy or the fantastic, Gothic, occult, the macabre, marvelous, uncanny, and even science fiction. Also employed formally but especially rich just in its vernacular uses is “weird”: “Stephen King writes weird stuff” probably echoes from any number of conversations we have overheard or participated in. However else we may want to categorize or characterize it, what King has written in “The Reach” is clearly a ghost story.

While in some respects typical, in many respects this is *not* your garden-variety ghost story. Reappearances or manifestations of the dead there certainly are, and there may be a spine-shivering moment or two. (Test this in class, too?) It is not really a scary story, though, not one that produces great fear or dread. It is in fact a tender story about love and family, community and caring, sharing and growing old. And it’s about secrets—the personal secrets of each human life and the universal knowledge of the dead that is a secret from all the living. Like Stella Flanders’s great-grandchildren in King’s concretely rendered “real world” of the Maine seacoast, we may be curious about this 95-year-old woman’s external island-bound past, but as readers who are privy to her inner experience, we are also interested in and curious about her future, which by cultural definition we probably assume will be less physically bounded. We are interested and curious, empathetic even, but not fearful. We are ready to “cross over” with her without dread. A “Reach” is defined in the story as “a body of water between two bodies of land,

a body of water which is open at either end” (658), but the term resounds far beyond physical geography. The Reach, we are told repeatedly, was wider earlier in life than it is later, and if the lands separated by the Reach are Life and Afterlife, it is to the latter, the mainland, that we all will go, the land by far the most extensive and populous in terms of human history. Should we be surprised, then, that we reach out to its beckoning shore, or that its citizens, especially those we love, reach out to us? To Stella and to readers of her story there is comforting release, not apprehension or horror. If we want to be intellectual or maybe even pedantic, we can talk about Stephen King as a writer of “numinous fiction” and distinguish between the *mysterium tremendum*, which is fearful, and the *mysterium fascinans*, the heavenly or supernally beautiful. (Such matters are considered in S. L. Varnado’s *Haunted Presence: The Numinous in Gothic Fiction*, University of Alabama Press, 1987.)

What about mystery itself, though? There is natural mundane and textual mystery—Stella’s relationship with Bull Symes, for example. And there remains the more haunting mystery of the preternatural. Since some of “The Reach” clearly comes to us from Stella’s perspective, can we say that what is related in this story of ghosts is simply what she thinks she has experienced but has in fact only imagined in her mind? If we find a grief-stricken Alden to be delusional as well as “slow,” then yes. But in providing the detail of Bill Flanders’s old cap at the end, King does not seem to want us to be able to explain mystery away so easily. Like William Dean Howells, he finds intriguing vagueness in the “borderland between experience and illusion” and discerns that the lights and shadows there may be “mystical.” Noteworthy authority marks the narrator’s claim that “there are things that can never be told, and there are things, not exactly secret, that are not discussed” (670). Certain “questions of Reach” continue to exist from all sides of the divide. “Do the dead sing? Do they love?” Do only good storytellers know?

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Magistrale, Tony. “Teaching the Intellectual Merits of Stephen King’s Fiction.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 44 (19 June 1998): B7.

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**LAHIRI, Jhumpa**

## “This Blessed House”

page 750

The house of the newlyweds Sanjeev and Twinkle is potentially one of the happier homes scattered across the domestic landscape mapped by this anthology. The American single-family home is said to be the envy of the world; without doubt it is the preeminent symbol of how successfully its occupants have pursued the American Dream. A house testifies to their good or bad taste; its architecture and interior decoration serve as measures of character, and its landscaping measures community pride. In literature, as in life, all these aspects of a house suggest the personalities and the mental and moral health of those who live within. For immigrants like the illegals in Helena María Viramontes’s story, and also the legal and upscale Indian couple in Jhumpa Lahiri’s, a house means security and cultural inclusion.

A young person’s rite of passage usually involves leaving home and, sometimes, establishing a home of his or her own. There are many variations on the plot. In the first sentence of his story, the recently married Young Goodman Brown crosses the threshold of the home he shares with his new wife and enters the forest. Like the traveling salesman in Eurdora Welty’s “The Hitch-Hikers” and Gish Jen’s “Birthmates,” he seems unable to find his way back home, for he remains psychologically isolated from his wife and community. In many stories, gothic and ancestral houses image diseased minds and serve as prisons of psychological and physical torment, as in Poe’s “The Black Cat,” James’s ““Europe,”” and Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” In the society of Edith Wharton’s “The Other Two” men hardly differentiate between their houses and their wives as valuable property and status symbols. Houses symbolize the marital health of their occupants in Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers,” Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Gilded Six-Bits,” Raymond Carver’s “Boxes,” and Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh.” The rundown farmhouse in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” reflects the inequality and miscommunication in this marriage, while the new barn/home substitutes compromise for authoritarian rule. The marriage in “This Blessed House” seems one of equals, but Sanjeev must learn the lesson that Freeman’s “Father” learns only belatedly. The mystery of what transforms a particular house (be it a new cow barn or a stately suburban residence) into a home is embodied in the housewarming gifts from Sanjeev’s friends and colleagues.

After a whirlwind courtship and two months of marriage, Sanjeev finds that his romantic feelings for Twinkle are giving way to irritation with her disorderly habits and flighty personality. She has upset his sense of order and personal prerogative. Among the numerous details that provide insight into their temperamental differences, her shoes, or lack of them, are richly and humorously symbolic. (The reader might be justified in thinking that Sanjeev has a foot fetish.) Twinkle’s three-inch pumps diminish Sanjeev’s physical stature and scratch the parquet floors he has worked so hard to acquire. Her wet (and wild) feet similarly threaten said floor and subvert Sanjeev’s efforts at order. His final gesture of placing her carelessly removed slippers in the bedroom indicates that he has accepted her sloppiness as an aspect of her charm or that he has resigned himself to what he can’t change. Although the story is told from Sanjeev’s point of

view, his biases and blind spots make it easy to guess what Twinkle would include on her list of marital grievances.

Most important, the differences between Sanjeev and Twinkle are reflected in their responses to the Christian paraphernalia left by the former occupants. The story develops through Sanjeev's effort to understand what these items mean to Twinkle and the reader's effort to understand what they mean to Sanjeev as well. Might the couple be responding in different ways to anxieties about cultural assimilation? Perhaps their anxieties involve conflicts between Hindu and Christian belief. The Christian bric-a-brac signals the couple's different tastes in many things but especially in home decoration. Certainly their differences raise the question of who will get to define the house (and the marriage). Whose house is it anyway? Twinkle calls her search for Christian items a treasure hunt. Allegorically, she may be exploring the mystery of how a house becomes a home. Like the housewarming gifts, the bric-a-brac may constitute a blessing. The point is that if this is to be a happy home, Sanjeev will have to accept the objects as being important to Twinkle. If their house and marriage are to be blessed, he will have to acquiesce to the mystery of his wife's individuality. Doing this will involve learning to love.

LEGUIN, Ursula K.

**“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”**

page 529

This fantasy parable draws upon the archetype of the scapegoat, the *pharmakos*, in what seems to be an anthropological description of a utopian community. The personal pronouns *you*, *us*, and *we* encourage readers to identify with the ethical dilemmas raised.

In 1975 LeGuin collected the story in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* with the subtitle “Variations on a Theme by William James.” In a brief introduction, she says that she had encountered the psychomyth of the scapegoat in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* but had forgotten it until she read James’s “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” There James asks how we would respond if the happiness of millions depended on the isolation and misery of one human being: Wouldn’t we feel “how hideous a thing would be [the] enjoyment [of happiness] when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?” Whereas Dostoevsky turned his back on social radicalism and became a “violent reactionary,” LeGuin views James as a genuine radical even though he seems “naively gentlemanly—look how he says ‘us,’ assuming all his readers are as decent as himself.”

The story’s narrator describes how the customs and behavior of Omelas reflect utopian assumptions about humanity. This society has apparently transcended age-old doubts about the possibility of mankind’s peaceful coexistence. Nature and urban architecture are integrated; the body and sensual pleasure are not regarded as evil. There is neither oppressive government nor institutional religion, neither slavery nor the slavish pursuit of money and power. “Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive” (530). The residents are a complex, sophisticated people who have thoughtfully weighed the conditions necessary for happiness. It is a community of joy; it knows no guilt. Unlike the people of Omelas, *we*, according to the narrator, have used our sophistication to institutionalize a bleak vision of human nature: “The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting” (530). The citizens of Omelas seem in all ways superior to us until we learn about the miserable child housed in a communal basement. With this information, Omelas becomes a dystopia, a place of repression and terror.

Before we hear of the child, the narrator asks us whether we can accept the beauty of Omelas: “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing” (531). Why wouldn’t we accept this utopian vision? Does it fly in the face of what we know about human beings? Our suspicions are justified by the mention of the child whose wretched existence guarantees the happiness of the rest of the community. If to this point LeGuin’s parable has a message, it may be that, ethnographically speaking, communal cohesiveness and happiness depend on a distinction between insiders and outsiders, between

those who belong and those who don't, between self and other. We displace suffering and what we do not like about ourselves onto a hapless scapegoat.

With the mention of the young people who leave Omelas, this quasi-anthropological study becomes a story that seeks meaning within the complexity of human reality. The ethical questions raised by those who leave include: Are these young people acting responsibly, indeed heroically? If their departure from Omelas reflects an admirable unwillingness to rest personal happiness on the suffering of another, might it not on the other hand be faulted as escapism? Would it have been nobler for them to remain in Omelas and work for the child's release and betterment? Or does the value of their flight lie in the ethical questions it ought to raise for those who remain behind? Must any utopia deny some essential aspect of human nature? The departure from Omelas described in the final paragraph recalls the exit of Adam and Eve from Eden. The world before the young people is similarly dark and full of uncharted possibilities. This unknown, unimaginable world may be either the real utopia or only another dream of escaping the inescapable.

In discussing the influence of James on her parable, LeGuin says that his unwillingness to accept happiness based on the suffering of others expresses the "dilemma of the American conscience." Pursuing LeGuin's comment, Jerre Collins reads "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" as a political parable of American capitalism. Those in power argue that the prosperity and advancement of civilization as a whole depend on the exploitation of underprivileged people at home and around the world. In 1973, when the story was first published, America's undeclared war in Vietnam would have provided one illustration. Subsequent history has provided numerous others.

In this anthology, Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" illustrates how in the past Southern whites defined their community by making blacks their scapegoat. The lynching of Bobo in a celebratory atmosphere of communal good feeling and singing constitutes a ritual sacrifice in which the dominant community reasserts its coherence and superiority. In terms of the psychomyth, we could say that the whites have projected their (Jungian) shadow self onto the dark skin of the African American. Another literary example of communal scapegoating can be observed in Melville's "Bartleby." The mysterious silence of Bartleby—writer/artist, misfit, nonconformist—helps Wall Street define and defend its core values of material well-being, hard work, rugged individualism, and progress.

Commenting on the origins of her story, LeGuin says it didn't begin with James but with the word *Omelas*. "It came from a road sign: Salem (Oregon) backwards [. . .]. Salem equals schelomo equals salaam equals Peace. Melas. O melas. Omelas. Homme helas."



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**LONDON, Jack**

**“To Build a Fire”**

page 281

This classic story apparently had its beginnings in a brief memo-note London wrote to himself—“Klondike (A Study),” it said, “Of a strong man wetting his feet, freezing to death in struggling to make a fire.” “Study” is an interesting term: is it an appropriate description of this work, whose impact has been said to depend essentially on mood and atmosphere?

Among familiar categorical ways that “To Build a Fire” has been interpretively viewed are: (1) as a work of naturalism, (2) as a tragedy, and (3) as a social critique. Any or all of these could elicit enlightening discussion. With regard to naturalism and/or irony, several of Stephen Crane’s most famous stories could be brought in for comparison—“The Blue Hotel,” for instance. Are the human deaths in the respective stories illogical and/or deserved? Is there an absence of irony and surprise in London’s story compared with Crane’s?

Aristotle’s classic definition or standards for tragedy could be interestingly applied to this *naturalistic* story—in which, theoretically, *tragedy* of this kind would not be possible. Consider the matter of *hubris*, or pride, the question of a moment of recognition, and the issue of catharsis for the audience. What, finally, is the status in our eyes of the protagonist (named Vincent in an early version but nameless here)? A hero, a typical human being, or a damn fool?

The argument that the story may be “a commentary on the man’s motivation for being in the Yukon” is put forward by George R. Adams, who says that “To Build a Fire” could be categorized as a “proto-environmentalist fable” showing “the judgment delivered by nature on a would-be violator.” According to Adams, London revised three or four times the moral he wished to convey in the story, moving from a focus on “the laws of the Yukon” to an emphasis of the Yukon code within a Darwinian framework and then on to a more ambiguous stand influenced by socialist critique.

The relationship between dog and man is a natural and obligatory consideration for this story, and an analytic characterization of the narrator or storyteller is a frequent critical exercise. In this regard, what is to be made of the final words of the story—of men as “food-providers and fire-providers”? Relate this story to Tobias Wolff’s “Hunters in the Snow.”

For his protagonist London (or his narrator) claims a quickness and alertness “only in the things [of life], and not in the significances.” How would you rate the writer of “To Build a Fire” on alertness to and ability to render both things and significances—and perhaps artistically to fuse them?

For fun, arrange for the recitation of Robert W. Service’s infamously popular poem “The Cremation of Sam McGee.”

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**MALAMUD, Bernard**

**“The Magic Barrel”**

page 473

With its opening phrase, “Not long ago there lived in uptown New York,” this story draws us into the “once upon a time” realm of fairy tale or fable, where a magic barrel promising us the girl or boy of our dreams is a possibility. The fantasy elements and the rabbinical student Leo Finkle’s search for love call to mind the paintings of Marc Chagall, who also found his subjects in the folklore and Hasidic mysticism of his Russian Jewish heritage. The concluding image of Leo offering flowers while violins and lit candles revolve in the sky resembles Chagall’s marriage scenes. Malamud is much admired for his seamless integration of reality and fantasy. As a realist he offers a story of immigrant assimilation into a mainstream America where young people marry for love, not to fulfill family expectations. As a fantasist he turns over Leo’s search for earthly and divine love to the old marriage broker Pinye Salzman.

Nearing the completion of his rabbinical studies, Leo awakens to his need for a wife. Marriage will give him a competitive edge in finding a congregation, or so a friend has told him, but it soon becomes clear to the reader, and eventually to Leo, that what he really needs is emotional and sexual intimacy. The word sex is never used, but a number of passages point to the truth that Leo suppresses from himself. In a Chagall-like fantasy-image of emerging (sexual) identity, he watches as “the round white moon, moving high in the sky through a cloud menagerie [. . .] penetrated a huge hen, and dropped out of her like an egg laying itself” (474). Later, in a slip of the tongue, he tells Salzman that he has come to realize “the necessity of premarital love” (“premarital sex” being the usual term). He rejects several women from Salzman’s barrel whose dowries include maturity, sometimes a career, family money, and exaggerated respect for the sanctity and social status of a rabbi. There is a humorous gap between Salzman’s practicality (love, which is primarily lust, may come after marriage) and Leo’s confused idealism (he wants an unused wife without physical defects). Leo eventually chooses with his heart, not his reason, the sexually provocative daughter of Salzman, Stella. Suffering, and perhaps the chicanery of Salzman, lead him to this choice, and it requires little knowledge of human nature to guess that marriage to Stella will not end his suffering. Suffering has, however, already made Leo a wiser man, and it may bring him closer to God than has his study of Jewish religious law.

The marriage broker combines the cultural archetypes of con man and deity. These guises, and their variations, suggest different interpretations of “The Magic Barrel.” Read as a fantasy or fable in which Leo, the Jewish everyman, seeks human and divine love, Salzman emerges as a mythical spirit-guide, a fairy godfather. But he is also a trickster. Our uncertainty as to the exact nature of the trick, as well as to who exactly is tricked, is one of the story’s delights. In Gary Sloan’s naturalistic reading, Salzman is a con artist, “a commercial cupid” who plots to

secure an upwardly mobile husband for his tarnished daughter (the final image suggests that she may be a prostitute) and a dutiful son-in-law for himself. Rabbi Leo Finkle would bring a secure income and social prestige to the marginal Salzman family.

In contrast, Stephen Bluestone reads the story as a retelling of mankind's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Bluestone characterizes "The Magic Barrel" as an allegory or "fairy tale-midrash," *midrash* referring to the Jewish tradition of scholarly reinterpretation of scripture to fit the situation of a new generation. Allegorically, events take place on the sixth day of creation (Leo is finishing his sixth year of university study) as God-Salzman addresses the question of a suitable mate for Adam-Leo. Salzman offers Lily as a practical choice, but he leaves Leo free to choose Stella as his wife and fate. This allegorical reading ironically casts the proper Lily as Lilith, the demonic first wife of Adam, while the tormented Stella becomes Eve. At story's end, Salzman, saying the Jewish prayer for the dead (*kaddish*), may, like God, foresee the suffering and death of Leo and Stella, as of all creation. Or Salzman may be crying for his own guilt in tricking Leo into a highly problematic marriage.

Class discussion might include a search for loopholes in any one of these interpretations. Where does fantasy intrude upon a naturalistic reading? Are there aspects of the story that resist incorporation into reading it as an allegory of the Fall? For many readers the magic of "The Magic Barrel" is that the various interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Salzman is marriage broker, con artist, trickster, spiritual guide, and God all in one. And there is the question of exactly what is magical about Salzman's barrel. What's in there? Is it just an old pickle barrel filled with odds and ends that he tries to pawn off as legitimate goods? Or does it hold the fulfillment of human desire? In the spirit of fairy tales, are we to believe that Salzman is a jinn in a pickle barrow? Or is the barrel a repository of possibilities that await realization in imaginative human action? That Malamud used this story's title for the collection of ten stories in which it is included (1958) suggests that the barrel contains both the scattered remnants of life that await a shaping imagination and the old ancestral stories needing reinvention by each new generation of writers. These reinventions may comprise the barrel's most important magic. As a receptacle of old and potential stories, the magic barrel rests among the trunks and boxes (and barrels) in which Jewish immigrants carried their personal possessions to America from the old country.

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“Shiloh”

page 592

While many of the contemporary stories in this anthology are set in contexts some students will necessarily find unfamiliar (such is the nature of postmodern fiction), Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh” should feel close to home because of its modern, sprawling urban landscape.

When the truck driver Leroy Moffitt returns home “like a gigantic bird flown home to roost” following a highway accident, he finds that the nest is falling apart. He has spent years “flying past scenery” only to be surprised by the changes in his once-small town and his home. The changes in the physical and cultural landscape are pretty clear; the changes at home are more subtle.

Though the story is told from Leroy’s point of view, the protagonist is his wife, Norma Jean. Pregnant, then married at eighteen so that she would not embarrass her mother, Norma Jean has been intimidated by her mother and husband for fifteen years or more. When Leroy returns home and when Mabel catches her daughter smoking, Norma Jean finally snaps: “I feel eighteen again, I can’t face that all over again.” At the end, Norma Jean, who has been associated with birds throughout the story, stands on a bluff and “waves her arms” while her limping husband struggles to catch up with her. Why is Norma Jean waving her arms? Is she falling and trying to regain balance? Is she jumping off the bluff? Is there something she wants to show Leroy? On another level, now that Norma Jean has decided to “leave the nest,” will she fly or fall?

Other controlling images in the story will make good subjects for class discussion or writing assignments. While Norma Jean is interested in body building, Leroy wants to build a home. Norma Jean takes body-building classes, then she begins constructing essays in her composition course; Leroy only plays at building with his toy logs. Leroy would like to rebuild his marriage, and living in an old-fashioned log cabin strikes him as appropriate. Also consider the war imagery in the story: Leroy—the king—is challenged by a Norman invader who “goosesteps” around the house and who finally defeats him at the Shiloh battlefield, the site of what Leroy and Mabel have hoped will be a second honeymoon. Here the log cabin has been shot full of holes. Notice that the discussion of divorce, of one partner’s seceding from the marital union, takes place near a cemetery for the “union dead.”

The reactions of Norma Jean and Leroy to changes in their lives and community are important. Norma Jean has been living in a kind of independence since Leroy started long-haul trucking—except that her mother comes over frequently and looks in her closets. What are the signs that she is breaking away from her overbearing mother and husband and moving aggressively toward a future of her own design? Where are the indications that Mabel and Leroy, bewildered by changes, are clinging to the past?

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“Bartleby, the Scrivener”

page 84

Students say they do not understand why Bartleby acts the way he does and why the narrator does not just throw him out. Confusion, or strong feelings, about Bartleby can be turned to the class’s advantage. Melville probably meant for Bartleby to be as inscrutable to the reader as he is to the narrator. The plethora of interpretations of the character attests to Melville’s success. One way to initiate discussion about the story is to ask students to share their impressions of Melville’s scrivener and point to particular passages that give them those impressions. The teacher can facilitate the discussion by asking, “Is Bartleby a rebel, or has he simply given up on life? or both?” “Is Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ passive resistance or fatalism? or both?”

The title is “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” but the tale is told by a Wall Street lawyer. Many critics contend that the story is more the narrator’s than the scrivener’s. Since students are often mystified by the narrator’s tolerance of Bartleby, another way to generate discussion is to ask students to give their reactions to the narrator. If they are exasperated by him, why is that? How would they have handled Bartleby? Why do they think the narrator acts as he does?

Another approach is to focus on the title in its entirety. Why did Melville call this a story of *Wall Street*? Bartleby is constantly referred to as being in a “dead-wall revery.” Why does Melville associate walls with death? What is the difference between the narrator’s attitude toward walls and Bartleby’s? Does the narrator’s attitude change in the course of the story? Leo Marx’s seminal essay “Melville’s Parable of the Walls” would be enormously helpful to both students and instructors in taking this approach.

Bartleby has been seen as representing the plight of the writer in nineteenth-century America. He creates nothing; he copies only for money. Significantly, what Bartleby copies are documents dealing with the estates of the dead. How do these elements of the story relate to the “dead letter” postscript to the story?

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“Pet Fly”

page 685

Rufus Coombs could be any recent college graduate. With a degree in political science but no work skills, he has found a job on Wall Street as a mail clerk in the ironically named Carter’s Home Insurance Company. Certainly Rufus doesn’t feel at home here, for nothing in his previous experience has prepared him for the politics in the vertical maze of this large bureaucracy. His misperception of this world is represented by his confusion of the pretty twin secretaries Mona and Lana Donelli. His attempt to make friends with Lana results in her complaint of sexual harassment, and he knows himself to be the object of his co-workers’ bemused scorn. Mr. Averill’s question “Is there something wrong with you?” pretty much summarizes how others feel about him and how Rufus feels about himself.

Rufus could become another Bartleby if he doesn’t wise up. This fate is suggested by the Wall Street setting and Rufus’s mailroom job. (Recall that after Bartleby’s death his employer hears a rumor that he was once a clerk in the Dead Letter Office.) And, if his current living arrangement seems gloomy, there is always the apartment below his, with its view of a brick wall. Rufus’s identification with the jumpy fly likewise recalls the fate of Gregor Samsa, the traveling salesman in Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis.” Gregor’s frantic acquiescence to the pressures of the business world turns him into a gigantic beetle that eventually dies from emotional and physical starvation. Within skyscraper capitalism, Rufus could similarly be transformed into a “fly buzzing against the glass, trying to get out” (689). The story implies that to get out—to escape the company basement—Rufus will have to become savvy to the ways of the world without losing his identity and integrity. As a black man, he will also have to learn to negotiate the shifting racial and ethnic borders within American culture.

In “Pet Fly” race functions both as a practical obstacle to getting ahead in corporate America and as a metaphor for the ambiguities of the corporate world. In that world, as in matters involving race, few clear and absolute borders exist. Rufus is bombarded with conflicting messages regarding race and power. Even his racial identity is destabilized. He has not understood that he was denied a professional-trainee position because of race, and his co-worker Big Linda Washington accuses him of being indifferent to his appearance because of his light skin. He concludes that Lana, a white girl, doesn’t like him because he is black. However, this assumption is apparently wrong, for she tells him that she thought he was Puerto Rican; her boyfriend is black. Ernie is a black man who has never made it out of the basement of Carter’s Home but has made the basement a power base. Mr. Drew is a light-skinned black man who even Rufus sees as only a “graduate student” of company politics. Mr. Averill, the big boss who has learned to play the game of survival, has worked himself up from the basement and thus may also be black. His racial ambiguity is perhaps what angers Rufus. Mr. Averill (is he morally “ill”?)

breaks company rules with impunity because, he tells Rufus, he is a man. To that end, he proposes making Rufus a professional-trainee floater.

As a floater Rufus will presumably learn to cross, or transgress, borders unseen. His literary predecessors are the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Mosley's hard-boiled detective Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins. Ellison's hero is the ancestor of both Rawlins and Rufus, and Rufus is perhaps the detective's boyhood self. The invisible man and Easy learned to survive in a white society that doesn't really see the black man. To borrow an image from "Pet Fly," it is as though mainstream America has erased him with the Wite-Out that Lana Donelli uses to correct typing errors. Rufus may escape the fate of Bartleby or Gregor Samsa—both dead flies, so to speak—to the extent that he can lead a dual existence. This will mean learning to use blackness as a mask that permits him to cross borders undetected. This art defines Easy Rawlins as both an African American and a hard-boiled detective.

Building on the work of the popular culture critic John Cawelti, Helen Lock writes that unlike a traditional detective, "the hard-boiled detective fights a lone battle against ["urban social corruption and moral ambiguity"] while struggling to prevent himself from being infected by the corruption on which they are based." A defender of the law, he must also be able to function in the criminal world and understand criminal psychology. If he is a black detective, he straddles not only the border between good and evil, but that between white and black cultures. He must have a "double-consciousness"; he must become a trickster. Lock says that "for the invisible man and for Rawlins, invisibility can be a powerful weapon only to the extent that, in making use of an inevitable stereotype, they also retain the ability to reject it when they choose, rather than simply having it imposed upon them." In the final lines of "Pet Fly" a similar course of action awaits Rufus as he ponders the dead fly. Will he, can he, accommodate himself to the shifting borders of power without losing his core identity?

The expensive bonsai crab apple Rufus bought for Lana and has now taken home symbolizes his challenge. The rejected plant represents the naivety of the boy who simply wanted to please a pretty girl, but its dwarf form also suggests the fate that awaits Rufus if he doesn't learn to play the system. A bonsai plant is a natural object that has been deformed into a highly stylized version of beauty. Its roots and branches have been clipped to stunt its growth. Rufus may be able to escape becoming the dwarf of himself if he learns to use his homeboy appearance (he is large, sloppy, and unsophisticated) as a mask. Like the purloined letter in Poe's story, he must hide himself in plain sight, visible only to the double vision of detectives like Auguste Dupin and Easy Rawlins.

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**“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”**

page 549

Like John Cheever’s “The Swimmer,” this story combines elements of the familiar and the real with unsettling turns in dreamlike realms to explore spiritual poverty in American society. The title of the story asks a question few of us can answer confidently, and perhaps none of us can answer as it concerns American society. In this eerie and suspenseful story, an adolescent girl is forced from her romantic and narcissistic life by a demon lover who first lures her with his cool image and rock-and-roll music, then threatens to kill her family if she does not comply with his demands. The action largely takes place on a suburban Sunday afternoon in the 1950s.

Oates’s story of initiation is almost guaranteed to engender lively classroom discussion. The protagonist, Connie, is familiar to most students. Students should be able to identify clearly the conflicts in the story. Like many teenagers, Connie is adjusting to new, adult social situations while remaining a child at home. Connie comments that there are two sides to her (as, later, there are two sides to Arnold Friend); what are these two sides? Who is Connie deceiving? Why? What are her relationships with the members of her family? What could the parents and her sister do to help Connie, who has no internal resources to summon when confronted by Friend? Had Connie gone to the family picnic, of course, she would not be in this nightmare at all.

Oates’s focus on the breakdown of the American family may lead to a discussion of other fractures in American society. Consider that the burger stand is described in religious images. The temples of consumer capitalism replace churches and spiritual and moral guidance. Connie and her friends have replaced traditional values and codes of behavior with images and codes so facile that Friend imitates and manipulates them easily. Connie is at first attracted by his image: tight jeans, boots, sunglasses, hip talk, and rock music. Who is Arnold Friend, anyway? (Several articles discuss his identity; one is listed below.) Is he the devil? What really happens at the end of the story? (What are the choices? Rape and murder, or being held hostage and then returned to her family? Is this a brush with the supernatural?) What does Connie mean by “going to” the landscape—land that has always been around her house but is now unfamiliar and vast?

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” can be compared profitably with John Updike’s “A & P.” In both stories a young person who is romantic, innocent, and vulgar all at once is suddenly asked to cross a threshold, literally, into a world that will be hard on him or her. A screen door separates Connie from Arnold Friend; in “A & P” Sammy has only to walk through the automated door of the grocery store. The differences between these stories of initiation might provide interesting class discussion.

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“The Things They Carried”

page 629

In an interview in *Contemporary Literature*, Tobias Wolff comments that in order to write effectively about the Vietnam War, a writer needs “an enormous amount of invention [. . .] to tell the story in a way that is redolent of the place, that grows from the ground of that particular place” (16). Wolff continues, “I am particularly admiring of [Tim O’Brien’s] story ‘The Things They Carried,’ which seems to me to be the best piece of fiction about Vietnam [. . .]. It’s a great story” (16). How is O’Brien’s story “redolent of place”? There are no extended passages describing the landscape or the appearance of Vietnamese villages or people. If the place is not so much Vietnam, then where is it? How do the detailed descriptions of the items and their weights contribute to creating this place?

The story opens with the greatest burden borne by Jimmy Cross—the unrequited, he thinks, love he has for a college student in the United States. The story closes with him unburdening himself of this load: “He would dispense with love; it was now not a factor.” Is O’Brien playing on the soldier’s last name, a cross refusing to bear the burden of love? In love, Cross decides, “there was no great mystery.” In this war zone there are no morals, no drama or meaning in death—Ted Lavender went just “boom-down.” The things they carry, Lavender’s death suggests, won’t save them or do them any good. How is it that love becomes dead weight in this place? Does discarding it make one’s load lighter? heavier?

The soldiers carry internal and external things. The external objects are heavy (we are told their exact weight), and most are necessary. The “emotional baggage of men who might die,” however, seems to be much heavier; they have “their own mass and specific gravity.” Cross describes his love for Martha as crushing, paralyzing, smothering. The greatest of these weights, however, is shame, humiliation, and cowardice. His shame and humiliation are what impel Lt. Cross to dispense with love, though Kiowa is impressed by what he mistakenly assumes is Cross’s grief over the death of Lavender. What other things do these soldiers carry within themselves: fear of death, fear of shame, a desire to be carried, to be “purely borne” themselves?

Students may be interested in discussing the way in which and the order in which O’Brien presents and explores the things they carried. He begins with Cross’s obsession with Martha, then recounts the tangible things “determined by necessity” carried by the soldiers. As in the following section, the list spins into narrative and then stops abruptly, usually with images of Lavender’s death. After each break the new section begins with a factual, dispassionate statement, but by the end of the section the description has turned to daydream or a narration of events. What effect does this pattern have on the reader? Students might also want to comment on the non-chronological plot. We are told in the second paragraph that Lavender “was shot in

the head outside the village of Than Khe.” What effect does O’Brien create by mentioning events before they actually occur in the story?

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“Revelation”

page 513

In “Revelation” Flannery O’Connor satirizes the pretensions of a conventional Southern matron, Mrs. Turpin, who believes that God has rewarded her and all clean-living, hard-working, decent white people with His unmistakable signs of grace: property and social position. The defining feature of Mrs. Turpin’s character is her habit of ranking and classifying all human beings:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her [. . .]. (515)

Mrs. Turpin’s self-importance, her preoccupation with manners and appearance, and her racism emerge as we observe her behavior, note her opinions of others, and mark how other people respond to her.

The primary setting for this story is a doctor’s waiting room where Mrs. Turpin comments on the various persons gathered. In her exchanges with the other people in the waiting room Mrs. Turpin identifies them by their dress and appearance and by her interpretation of their disposition: “the pleasant lady,” “the ugly girl,” “the white-trashy mother.” She regards other people as types, not as individuals, and she treats others according to how she perceives their social position. She interprets everything she sees and hears according to her own long-established prejudices, prejudices she attempts to justify in her internal monologues. Her smugness requires little else than that the world conform to her opinions. If there is nothing more flattering than having one’s beliefs confirmed, there is nothing more profoundly disturbing than having those beliefs exposed and challenged.

As Mrs. Turpin is busy celebrating herself, loudly thanking Jesus for making her the way she is, Mary Grace, “the ugly girl,” erupts violently. She physically and verbally attacks Mrs. Turpin as if the woman’s behavior has provoked her in some very personal way. It is from Mary Grace that Mrs. Turpin receives her first revelation in the story. It is a direct challenge to Mrs. Turpin’s self-conception: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.” Mary Grace’s attack jolts Mrs. Turpin sufficiently to cause her to question her place of privilege in God’s great design. In O’Connor’s fiction, such violent and grotesque events become the true vehicles for grace, making it clear that in her theology, such opportunities are not comforting, welcome, or expected by most human beings.

As Mrs. Turpin approaches the final revelation of the story, she angrily struggles to assimilate the contradiction to her self-image: “How can I be a hog and me both?” O’Connor’s satire is uncompromising in that no character she creates is wholly sympathetic. Her comedy often works by inverting certain aspects of the story so that we seem to be looking at a photograph and then at its negative. This effect can be observed in the principal inversion of the story, Mrs. Turpin’s final revelation in which those she has consigned to perdition are the leaders of the heaven-bound procession:

She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. (527)

It is easy enough to turn “Revelation” into a morality tale in which a bigoted woman’s sensibility receives much needed shock treatment. Such a reading, however, might serve to place the reader in that safe and predictable territory that Mrs. Turpin herself inhabits, a position that is consciously superior to another person’s experiences and essentially blind to O’Connor’s rejection of conservative platitudes. The harder a reader searches for the moral of the story, the more elusive the story becomes. What makes “Revelation” memorable and enjoyable is its cartoonlike, slapstick humor. Pain, hilarity, and recognition are seamlessly joined, while exaggeration grants us the ironic distance to assess the familiar characters, their insipid code of manners, their trite and automatic conversations, and their outrageous behavior.

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“Samuel”

page 487

There is no telling how many deaths Americans watch on television and in the movies each year. By the time most children start school, they have already witnessed hundreds of violent scenes in movies and on television. Newspapers also recount shootings, beatings, robberies, and murders in a kind of monotone. Grace Paley’s small, closely crafted story treats an event that might easily have come from the police report of any New York precinct: child killed while riding between cars on a subway, three others uninjured.

One approach sees this story as divided into three parts marked by shifts in verb tense. It begins in the present tense as it sets up the situation: “boys are very tough,” “boys are jiggling on the swaying platform” between subway cars. Though the boys, who are about eight years old, are having a great deal of fun, their game is dangerous and they are making the adult passengers on the subway uncomfortable. Some of the men remember their own youthful recklessness and are indulgent of the boys because “nothing happened” to any of the men. On the other hand, the women, several of them mothers, frown at the boys to express their disapproval. One lady extends her disapproval: “Their mothers never know where they are.”

At the moment the men begin their recollections of childhood daring, the story shifts into past tense. One woman scolds the boys, but they laugh at her and embarrass her. As their laughter continues, Samuel pounds one of his friends on his back and teases him. Suddenly the train stops with a “terrible hiss” because a man “whose boyhood had been more watchful” has pulled the emergency brake cord to stop the rough play by stopping the train. Samuel is “crushed and killed” beneath the wheels. After the accident the attitudes of the passengers change; men now remember “other afternoons with very bad endings,” and the women show concern for the mother and the boy, “wondering if he might be an only child.” The boys themselves behave differently. The scene moves from the subway platform to Samuel’s home, where his mother is hysterical over her son’s death. Her misery later gives way to hope when she has another child. At the end of the story, however, both the mother and the reader realize that “never again will a boy exactly like Samuel be known.” The last sentence is written in the future tense.

While students may readily admit that as a society we have grown callous to violence and death, particularly in the large, anonymous urban centers, they will likely be disturbed by the distant, detached tone Paley uses in telling the story of Samuel. This is a good topic for class discussion. Paley may be playing off the callousness of Americans concerning violence among young blacks in the inner cities. By the end of the story, Samuel has become an individual, a loved son who cannot be replaced, yet Paley has avoided the melodrama of the “human interest story.” By placing the story in the present, past, and future, Paley suggests that events cannot be limited to one moment in time. Past and present events have consequences in the future.

Samuel's death cannot be explained in terms of simple cause and effect; his death is caused by a confluence of attitudes and past events.

Like many other writers in this anthology, Paley comments on prejudice. One lady would like to warn the kids, but "three of the boys were Negroes and the fourth was something she couldn't tell for sure." Another woman thinks that "their mothers never know where they are." These prejudices are still fairly common. How does Paley challenge them?

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“Cheers”

page 683

This “short short” is long, long in its suggestive richness. It makes much use of the physical senses. (Does this make it “sensual,” “sensory,” or “sensuous”?) Note especially the first paragraph in this regard, and then see how sight and sound are brought into play throughout the story. Finally, another kind of *sense* is created: a sense of foreboding or wistful sadness or melancholy that arises from thinking or knowing what inevitably lies ahead for a ten-year-old child. And, might one claim, maybe especially for a female child who has so completely (as a cheerleader, no less) bought or been brought into the [male] American Dream. In this respect, consider the meaning or cause of “bumpy” in the last paragraph.

To continue in this vein, what is the significance of the repeated appearance of the color red? Why is the letter “on my chest” an A? Where are all the “red letters” in this piece? Here’s a good opportunity to look back to the nineteenth century and Nathaniel Hawthorne—and, along with literary history, to talk generally about cultural knowledge and literary allusion.

Other fruitful questions to ask: Why is the owner of the feed store but not the narrator or the sewing woman given a proper name? What about the point of view here? Who is the “speaker” of this piece? Why is this particular postcard on the wall? Why is the TV program *Queen for a Day*? Look at the coupled word choices “sharp and real” to describe the queen’s roses. What do you make of the sewing machine’s buzzing “like an animal beside the round clock”?

*Contrast* is a basic *modus operandi*, and effect, for this short short story. How explicit—or implicit, or suggested—are these contrasts? How does the picture presented here relate to the past? to the future? to the ideal or might-have-been? How does Phillips achieve all this?

Was the sewing woman herself once a young cheerleader? Is she a cheerleader now (“You do look pretty”)? What are the “cheers” of the title? When does one usually voice this word by itself: “Cheers!”?



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“The Black Cat”

page 64

One of the most compelling elements of this tale of horror is its levels of ambiguity. Is something supernatural going on? The first-person narrator seems to think so, but then he is insane. Or is he? Critics are divided; some believe he is insane, some that he is simply lying. In either case he does not seem to be terribly reliable. He begins the story by calling the events he relates “mere household events.” What does he mean?

Are there in fact two cats in the story? The title is “*The Black Cat*.” How likely is it that after murdering the first cat, he would find another identical to the first, even in its missing one eye? Could the second cat be a hallucination or a lie? If so, which cat did he seal in the wall with the body of his wife? What was the figure the narrator describes as a hanged cat on the one remaining wall after his house burned down?

A common psychoanalytical interpretation of the story is that the narrator has displaced his hatred for his wife and/or his fear and loathing of sex (“cat” or “pussy” is a vulgar term for the vagina). His extreme remorse after hanging the cat and his extreme lack of remorse after burying an axe in his wife’s brain seem reversed. One critic goes so far as to claim that they are literally reversed; that is, the narrator actually murdered his wife when he says he killed the cat. Another claims that the cat was not a surrogate for the wife but a rival for her affections. Does either claim seem to give adequate reason for the murder? If not, does the lack of adequate reason support the idea that the narrator is insane?

One historicist article points out the story’s relationship to the controversy, raging in the 1840s, over the use of the insanity defense in murder trials. Poe’s narrator seems to suffer precisely the symptoms of “monomania,” an obsession that forced him to commit his crime but otherwise leaves his reason intact. His definition of “perverseness” also seems to fit some contemporary definitions of homicidal mania. And the narrator does seem to be offering a sort of defense of his actions on the eve of being hanged for the murder of his wife. Does his “homicidal mania” excuse his crime?

One other striking element of the story is that no one in it has a name. The narrator never mentions either his or his wife’s. Only the title character has a name, Pluto, which is the Latin name for the Greek Hades, god of the underworld. Hades has also become another name for the Christian hell. What is the significance of both that cat’s name and the other characters’ anonymity?

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“The Purloined Letter”

page 70

For a time in the early 1840s Poe moved away from the gothic tales of horror and terror with which he had been so transformingly successful. He then devoted himself to “tales of ratiocination” that *seem*, conversely, to put a premium on reason and the intellect. During this period he wrote three stories featuring a character named C. Auguste Dupin that are generally credited with giving birth to modern detective fiction: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842–43), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). The last of these, Charles E. May has said, is “one of Poe’s most important experiments in the creation of the short story.” It is particularly fascinating because it is “Poe’s creation of a story that is about its own explanation,” “a model of the self-reflexive parable of the act of analysis itself.”

A sometimes asked question about Poe’s tales probably applies more to his detective stories than to his gothic fiction: Why, once the “mystery” is no longer mysterious (the effect has been effected, the outcome known, the solution provided), why would anyone reread a Poe tale? Some readers do not, of course, and others may just enjoy being frightened and will forget enough to achieve that end. But why, in the case of the detective stories, no matter how entertaining, would one want to keep having a secret revealed that is no longer a secret to be revealed?

Part of an answer may lie in the new psychological dimensions and depths that were major Poe contributions to the short story. He realized them through his technique of using first-person narrators of troubled or uncertain mind who are principal characters in the action of his tales. Such a narrator we do not have in “The Purloined Letter.” Here, Dupin’s companion reports the calculated exploits of his friend. Involving multiple interacting characters, this story offers a psychology, or psychoanalysis, that may be even more interesting than that of a mentally unbalanced narrator. The detective stories call into play (and play with, and allow others to play with) theories about the nature and experience of language—about perception, self-consciousness, communication, meaning, knowledge. Shawn James Rosenheim’s observation that “the central problem of Poe’s fiction is the existence of other minds” rings true for both the dramatic world of Poe’s stories and the critical commentary on them. As the title of the book *The Purloined Poe* (edited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson) asserts, this Dupin story has been ingeniously appropriated by others (beginning with Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida) for their own illustrative or polemic purposes (e.g., psychoanalysis and deconstruction). In the mass of convoluted discussion and esoteric argument that has resulted, John T. Irwin discerns a common thread that can be seen as structural or technical and that draws upon a concern with narration.

This recurrent thread has to do with the “geometrically structured plot” and (both scenically and psychologically) with doubling or repetition. The account of events that is framed

(the story narrated within the story of narration) in “The Purloined Letter” can be said to have two mirror-and-image scenes. One, in the royal bedroom, is told by the Prefect; the second, at the Minister’s residence, is told by Dupin. Mirroring each of these, the framing story (the story of the narration) also has two scenes. Both scenes take place in Dupin’s library and both are narrated by Dupin’s admiring friend. The characters in the tale (the actors at various circles in this drama) include the King and Queen, the Minister, the Prefect, Dupin, and Dupin’s companion, who are connected to one another in a complex web of ignorance, delusion, and knowledge. The last three of these characters are all reporters or narrators, but the very last one is primary, responsible ostensibly for the whole, the story text itself. He is the encompassing and enclosing “I” who interprets and creates all else.

A simpler consideration might articulate relationships that exist among the characters, beginning with Dupin and his obvious double antagonists. The smug master criminal and the ambitious bumbling policeman, neither of whom is a match for the brilliant amateur detective, have since become staples of the analytical detective genre. The relationship of the narrator with his friend Dupin *or* of Dupin with himself leads into more interesting if less entertaining psychological territory. This story’s themes, or pathologies, of revenge and envy, rivalry or competitiveness, can be connected to a number of Poe’s other stories.

Poe explained in a letter (1846) to Philip Pendelton Cooke why he abandoned the writing of detective fiction: “where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unraveling?” he asked. Even though in Poe’s opinion short stories intrinsically ranked below poetry as literary art, could what he produced in “mere prose” sometimes also achieve the “complexity” and rich “suggestiveness—some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning” that he strove for in poems? Is “The Purloined Letter” such a tale? Poe, wrote James Russell Lowell in *A Fable for Critics* (1848), was “three fifths [. . .] genius and two-fifths sheer fudge.” We readers will have to decide exactly what we think that ratio to be. The Seneca epigraph for this story is translated, “There is nothing wisdom hates more than cleverness.”

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PS 2642 .F43 N48 1993

**“The Grave”**

page 332

Like many other stories in this anthology, “The Grave” is a framed narrative. The events of the story take place in the memory of Miranda twenty years after they actually happened. The reader does not know the story is framed until the very end. What effect does this strategy have on the story? Why doesn’t Porter reveal the older Miranda at the beginning? Also like other stories, “The Grave” is a coming-of-age story. The ring her brother Paul finds in the grave, and for which she trades the dove screw head she has found in another grave, is a wedding ring. That fact and the flowers engraved upon the ring connect it with sex (flowers are an ancient symbol of fertility). That the ring was found in a grave connects it—and the sex it represents?—with death. After Paul has killed and skinned the pregnant rabbit (another symbol of fertility), he swears Miranda to secrecy. What is the secret knowledge he is afraid his father will find out he imparted to her? Birth and the sex it represents? death? both?

Miranda comes from a motherless family. She is hunting, a traditionally masculine sport. She is dressed in the same way as her brother, in “dark blue overalls, a light blue shirt, a hired-man’s straw hat, and thick brown sandals.” Only after she obtains the wedding ring does she think of going home and dressing in a more traditionally feminine fashion. How does her mixture of gender roles relate to the themes of sex and death? The story seems subject to a feminist interpretation.

If the story concerns death, it may also concern resurrection. The Christian imagery is unmistakable: the dove, the name Paul, Miranda’s request to be the one allowed to shoot if they come across a snake (a phallic image and an image of death as well as sin). Near the end, Miranda’s memory of the event “leapt from its burial place before her mind’s eye.” The story concludes with a vision of Paul in the “blazing sun” turning the dove over in his hand. Some critics argue that the story rejects the Christian idea of resurrection. The dove is described as having a “deep round hollow” in its center. Miranda and Paul’s grandparents have left the grave, only to be reburied in a public cemetery. Not only have they not been resurrected, they have been moved from family land to a grave more impersonal than the one they left. Perhaps Porter intended both, and the story embodies a God-haunted doubt or a doubt-haunted faith.

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**PORTER, William Sydney (O. Henry)**

**“The Caballero’s Way”**

page 220

Although he is best known for his stories of New York City, Porter also lived in and wrote about the southern, midwestern, and western parts of the United States and Latin America. The number of years in his writing career was low; his production (nearly 300 stories) and both his contemporary and continuing public popularity, very high; and the literary quality or artistic level of his achievement, somewhere in between. The romantic, joyous responses to life’s hardships that typify his trademark surprise endings have been seen as ironic opposites to the great amount of pain, grief, and humiliation in Porter’s own life. Perhaps the ending of this story provides a more direct reflection of the biographical facts.

“The Caballero’s Way” may be used to consider, and test, what have been enumerated as the major recurring themes in O. Henry’s fiction: (1) pretense and the reversal of fortune, (2) discovery and initiation through adventure, (3) contrast and adversity as stimuli to the imagination, and (4) the yearning for self-fulfillment in all human nature. More specifically, this story can be said to combine revenge and infidelity motifs in an unusually gruesome way. The claims that it is coldly narrated, almost totally free of sticky sentimentality, and ultimately a brilliant performance are worth scrutiny. All may derive from concentrated attention to the *narrator* or *teller* of the tale. Based on the textual evidence, how can this “person” be described? What is the tone of this storytelling voice, the personal sense or impression of who is “speaking” to the reader? What can be made of the “oh, yes” and the “let us say” in the third paragraph? How about the subsequent employment of second-person usage (you, your) and of the first-person (I) (the “chronicler”)? Are there gender implications involved with or asserted by any of this? Do readers feel a sense of the storyteller’s trying to be cute, entertaining, or funny as well as authoritative? What is the source of humor in this “gruesome” story? Who would characterize a singer’s voice as being like “a coyote with bronchitis” (223)? In this general regard, look at the story’s opening paragraph, especially its last line. Compare this paragraph to the one that opens Chesnut’s “The Passing of Grandison.”

“Maybe it’s one of them presumptions,” says the Kid (226). What such thing, or premonitions, do readers have about what is going to happen in this story? Have students review or reconstruct their individual experiences of reading “The Caballero’s Way,” and try to pinpoint in the text exactly when various readers first suspected what would occur in the plot.

The Cisco Kid of later comic books and movies differs significantly from the Cisco Kid of O. Henry’s stories. As an individual project, some adventurous student might like to travel this trail of information pursuit and capture.

Gallegly, Joseph H. *From Alamo Plaza to Jack Harris's Saloon: O. Henry and the Southwest He Knew*. The Hague: Mouton, 1970.

PS 2649 .P5 Z666

STEINBECK, John

“The Chrysanthemums”

page 389

Certainly one of Steinbeck’s best stories, “The Chrysanthemums” has been ranked with the best of Chekhov’s short fiction and called “one of the world’s great short stories.” The frequently noted influence of or similarity to the work of D. H. Lawrence is something that knowledgeable or curious teachers and students may want to pursue. Among the other Steinbeck stories with which this one is frequently paired and compared are “The Harness” and “The White Quail.”

An advertisement for a “video adaptation” (Mac and Ava Motion Pictures) of “The Chrysanthemums” calls this story “a sensitive account of a woman’s inner struggle to be valued in a male-dominated society.” It says that “the film, which illustrates a farm wife’s brief encounter with an itinerant tinker, examines the forces that prevent her from realizing her potential.” Parts of these particular assertions might be examined and analyzed. Is “account” the most accurate term that might be used? As the film is said to, does the story “illustrate”? Whatever the appropriate noun or verb, is “sensitive” an appropriate adjective? What are the preventative or inhibiting “forces” referred to here? What are other kinds of “forces” at work in the action of this story—“social” versus “natural” ones? What exactly is the “potential” that Elisa is said not to be realizing? On the other hand, what has she achieved, what has she admirably realized or manifested? Is this another story about art and the artist?

Three or four other recurrent critical concerns or claims about “The Chrysanthemums” can be fruitfully investigated. Elisa’s great *frustration* is one. (Apt term? Sources thereof?) Perhaps relate that Henry Allen frequently doesn’t come out very well in judgments about him as a human being and a husband. Is it impossible to provide a sympathetic character sketch of this man? Next is the “central or dominant symbol” of the chrysanthemums. And then, there is the claim that this is a story with a *surprise* ending—one “carefully foreshadowed” perhaps, but still a surprise ending. True?

Steinbeck talked about what he and readers he knew found to be a unique subliminal quality of the story. In a letter (1934) he claimed that it “is entirely different and is designed to strike without the reader’s knowledge.” “I mean,” he went on, that a person “reads it casually and after it is finished feels that something profound has happened to him although he does not know what or how.” If this is true, can we pinpoint what and/or how?

That there are several versions of this story may be of interest to young and old scholars and researchers. There has been particular interest in the periodical publication variant of the striking, important, three-sentence paragraph near the end of the story—in *American Short*

*Stories*, the paragraph that reads: “In a moment it was over. The thing was done. She did not look back” (396). In *Harper’s* the first two sentences were replaced by this one: “In a moment they had left behind them the man who had not known or needed to know what she said, the bargainer.” Is there a *bargainer* in this story? bargainers? a villain? villains?

Steinbeck’s vivid, colorful imagery in “The Chrysanthemums”—imagery based on nature, the land, the seasons, plants and animals—should not be overlooked.

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Higdon, David Leon. “Dionysian Madness in Steinbeck’s ‘The Chrysanthemums.’” *Classical and Modern Literature* 11 (Fall 1990): 59–65.

McMahan, Elizabeth E. “‘The Chrysanthemums’: Study of a Woman’s Sexuality.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (1968): 453–58.

Osborne, William R. “The Texts of Steinbeck’s ‘The Chrysanthemums.’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 12 (1966): 479–84.

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“Ciudad Juárez”

page 708

“Ciudad Juárez,” like Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” focuses on a couple’s decision about whether or not to get an abortion. Each story develops primarily through conversation freighted with unstated and conflicting personal needs. The husband in “Ciudad Juárez” is a more sympathetic figure than Hemingway’s American, yet each story dramatizes the difficulty men and women have in communicating with each other. Does the difficulty arise from biological differences, individual psychology, socialization into gender roles, or all of these? Dialogue is important in each story, but Tallent fleshes out Hemingway’s spare exchange by giving her couple a personal history. She also provides a detailed description of the landscape, a developed plot, and a variety of secondary characters. Especially important are the twin babies. They illustrate the increased stress on a mother (and father) brought by each additional child, and they are reminders of the uniqueness of individual human beings, even look-alikes. The sickly twin, Wills, represents the preciousness of life and the adult pain of loving helpless dependents. The Mexican urchin who guides Nina and Tom through the city’s streets is another special child. Among the secondary characters, the doctor in the Mercedes, Nina and Tom’s friend Paula, and the sitter Carmelita have marriages that serve as foils for the marriage of Nina and Tom.

For all their differences in surface richness, the Tallent and Hemingway stories are equally complex. Consideration of the ways in which each writer achieves complexity might lead to a discussion of different conceptions of storytelling and to the history of the short story. Hemingway, arguably the most influential American short story writer of the twentieth century, showed writers how to compress and pay attention to detail and how to make natural details resonate symbolically. However, his spare, noncommittal style tends to become moralistic, his characters stereotypical. Many of the best mainstream writers who followed him, a group to which Tallent certainly belongs, have preferred a more literal realism that addresses everyday ethical dilemmas. In “Ciudad Juárez” the landscape is itself virtually a character. Natural details are symbolic but they possess the particularity of the artifacts that an archaeologist, like Tom, uses to reconstruct earlier civilizations. Throughout the story Tom has been attentive to details of Nina’s appearance, but he cannot discover the mystery of her identity. The archaeological metaphor in the story’s last sentence suggests that such understanding eludes even those who love deeply.

“Ciudad Juárez” might profitably be read in conjunction with Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Cafe.” Both stories involve border crossings between Latin America and the United States, between a mythical (but also geopolitical) North and South. The North represents civilized order, law, reason, and light; the South is a nether world of confusion and chaos, license, emotional release, and pagan darkness. The Mexican boy who guides Nina and Tom is a realistic expression of his society but also a mythological imp who abandons them to the hellish labyrinth of the congested city. Nina and Tom have crossed the border for a weekend escape

from their anxieties about the abortion scheduled for Monday in Santa Fe. Mexico promises a holiday of forgetfulness, but escape eludes them. Similarly, Viramontes's immigrants look to the United States as a place of safety and opportunity. Their expectations are brutally disappointed, as are the expectations of Nina and Tom. In mythology those who, like Odysseus, descend into the realm of darkness seek knowledge of the future. Do lines, events, or images suggest that Nina and Tom have gained such knowledge on their trip to Juarez?

**THURBER, James**

**“The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”**

page 348

This may be a story *not* to say *anything* about. For once let students simply read and enjoy, and in this case, smile and laugh. They may, of course, have other reactions, and some of these reactions may depend on their marital status or their memories of Mom and Dad or other married couples in their family.

Two themes that Robert D. Arner sees in Thurber’s famous story are (1) “the war” between men and women and (2) psychological fantasy. One question that touches on both of them is, who in this story is operating on fictions? Is Mrs. Mitty, as well as her husband, a candidate? What role does fantasy play in our lives? Is it a beneficial or a detrimental role?

Thurber’s wonderful technical skill in this story makes impressively clear how fluid the boundary sometimes is between the “real” and the imagined worlds. How quickly does a reader get pulled into Thurber’s fictional Mitty-world and then get shocked back to “reality” simultaneously with Mitty—while remaining fully in the imaginary world of the story?

One could pay some attention to paragraphing in “The Secret Life.” What are Thurber’s rationales for these units? This might also be a good story to test for the less technical term “absurd.” Is it an appropriate descriptive term for Mitty and his actions? Is this an absurd(ist) story?

Have students seen movies or television shows based on “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”?

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*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Film. Perf. Danny Kaye. 1947. 110 min.



“A & P”

page 543

No good deed ever goes unpunished, they say. In this story of initiation, set in a small town near the Massachusetts coast in the 1950s, a young grocery store clerk loses his job after defending the honor of three perfect strangers when they are publicly humiliated by his prudish boss.

On a hot summer day three teenage girls, dressed only in bikinis, saunter into the A & P while Sammy is ringing up groceries. At first he leers at them, but when he observes the butcher sizing the girls up like so much meat, he begins to feel sorry for them. By the time they arrive at his register, he has become their defender, and in a noble but finally empty gesture he quits his job to demonstrate his disapproval of the manager's mishandling of the situation. Defending the morality of working-class America, Mr. Lengel chastises the girls in front of gaping customers and embarrasses them. After taking his stand against Mr. Lengel, a show the girls do not hear or see, Sammy makes a “clean exit” into a world he recognizes “was going to be hard to me hereafter.”

Like Connie in Oates's “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” there are two sides to Sammy, though in him they seem closer to a comfortable reconciliation. While he ogles “Queenie” and her compatriots and likens their breasts to scoops of vanilla ice cream, he also admires their handling of themselves and describes the complexion of one as “a sheet of metal tilted in the light.” In his ideas and his language Sammy is both lewd and romantic, immature and mature. In the end of the story he is romantic enough to defend the honor of girls he doesn't know and immature enough to be unable to discuss the situation with Mr. Lengel without making an ultimatum. Students might discuss the kind of person Sammy is and why the world will be “hard to” him. If this is a moment of rare insight, what is Sammy's epiphany? What details in the narrative had already suggested that Sammy is probably not well suited to a career in grocery store management?

Other interesting topics of discussion are the socioeconomic issues in the story and the qualities of the mythic romantic quest Updike uses. What identifies Sammy as a member of the working class, and the three girls as members of a privileged elite? How do students feel about a blue-collar hero's defending upper-class girls who do not acknowledge him? How does Sammy feel about this? In another vein, consider the mythic and romantic in the story. In one version the knight-at-arms defends a queen from a threatening troll; in another the young man is tempted by the song of sirens in swimsuits and abandons his place to follow them. The intrusion of epic romance into a Marxist dialogue, or the other way around, lends dignity and universality to this low-key story of a day at the A & P.

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- Goss, Marjorie Hill. "Widening Perceptions in Updike's 'A & P.'" *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 14 (November 1984): 8.
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- A & P*. Video, 30 min. Followed by Updike commentary.
- A & P*. Film. Dir. Bruce Schwartz. 1996. 17 min.

VIRAMONTES, Helena María

“The Cariboo Cafe”

page 717

The theme of border crossings genially introduced in Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” finds a powerful geopolitical update in Viramontes’s story of Central American refugees. The Gothicism that Irving uses with comic charm becomes horrifyingly real in the contemporary story.

Irving tells of the communal expulsion of a cultural outsider, the Connecticut schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, a pioneering spirit who casts an avaricious eye on the natural abundance of the Dutch settlement. He dreams of converting the estate of his would-be father-in-law into cash and then striking out for unclaimed territory. For almost two centuries America’s immigrants have continued to pursue Ichabod’s fabulous dream, but their opportunities have become increasingly limited. No unclaimed territory remains for the Central American illegals who are pursued down dark alleys with dead ends. The opening sentences of “The Cariboo Cafe” define the lives of these disappointed pioneers: fear of “La Migra” (the immigration authorities), pervasive uncertainty and anxiety, hope for a better life. The unnamed American city is probably Los Angeles. The desperate illegal immigrants could be from any number of Central American countries. The word *Contras* suggests that they are from Nicaragua, but Viramontes may have had in mind immigrants from El Salvador, *contras* thus designating not a specific political movement but simply opposition to authority. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, these countries, already impoverished by economic exploitation from the North, were torn apart by civil war. On both sides of the border the intervention of the United States—to stop the perceived spread of Communism and to curtail the flow of illegal drugs northward—was viewed with suspicion and outrage.

In “The Cariboo Cafe” the theme of border crossings is structurally expressed in three interlocking sections that the critic Debra Castillo characterizes as “unheard parallel monologues.” In the first section, the child Sonya and her little brother Macky are locked out of their apartment and become lost when they go in search of a key that may also symbolize the resolution to their immigrant quest. The second section is set in the Cariboo Cafe, what Sonya calls “the zero-zero place,” the seedy dead end at which the children and the café’s other customers — illegals, junkies, society’s rejects—have arrived. In this section, the narrative shifts from third to first person. The café’s owner, the cook, delivers a diatribe against the immigrants and thinks about his son JoJo, killed in Vietnam; his ex-wife Nell; Paulie, a junkie he has befriended; and Delia, Paulie’s girlfriend. A woman, clearly an illegal and probably a washerwoman, enters with the two lost children. The cynical cook has seen their type before, but he is attracted to Macky, who reminds him of JoJo. The cook is an ambivalent character. He speaks for the white power hierarchy, but he and his son are themselves victims of the interlocking economic and political system that threatens the illegals, a system symbolized by

*Coke*, the one English word Macky knows. The cook falls asleep before he can respond to a television announcement about the search for the missing children. Awaking at four a.m., he is distracted by Paulie. The cook feeds him, and Paulie repays him by becoming disgustingly ill in the toilet. The cook cleans up after Paulie, and sometime later the police enter seeking illegal factory workers who have taken refuge in the toilet.

Section three opens from the point of view of the washerwoman. She has fled her home country, where her young son Geraldo was captured, killed, and mutilated. As she watches Macky fall asleep in her apartment, the point of view switches to third person, briefly taking the perspective of Sonya before returning to the café on the following day. The cook again watches the threesome enter and notes the woman's improved appearance. He seems disturbed, and we learn that he has betrayed them to the police. When the police arrive, the woman hysterically resists. The final paragraph takes her perspective as she confuses Macky with Geraldo and is brutally beaten, if not killed. In her despair she has denied the border between the boys, probably to the detriment of Macky. Her final words, "My son and I" (calling forth an image of the *Pieta*), express her powerful but perhaps destructive mother love. The woman's absorption in Macky-Geraldo indirectly calls to mind Sonya, the child who has been forgotten. The washerwoman has absorbed the destructive masculine bias that robbed her of her son. Castillo suggests that although Sonya, the story's opening consciousness, has been silenced, she may be where a solution lies if she can find a voice.

Viramontes unites the historical present of the mother in her story with the myth of La Llorona, the weeping mother who returns from the dead to seek and mourn her lost children. The myth has regional variants, but Roberta Fernandez explains that historically La Llorona was an Aztec woman who killed her children to get revenge on her husband who betrayed her. She later regretted her action and returned to earth to find the children. In the historical present, La Llorona becomes all Latin American mothers who, like the illegal washerwoman, seek children "disappeared" by political violence. Mother-love transcends politics.

One of the most overtly political stories in the anthology, "The Cariboo Cafe" invites discussion about the border between aesthetics and politics. Does the story sacrifice life's complexity and ambiguity to a political agenda? Are the characters fully realized or are they stereotypical? Does the story glorify the mother's devotion to her son by stereotyping the cook as a bigoted representative of the male power structure? To what extent is the story's complex and innovative structure of shifting perspectives indebted to the complexity of the political situation? At the center of this complexity, the Cariboo Cafe is an actual place where the personal and the political intersect and cultures collide. It is both a refuge and a dead end. The word *cariboo*, which the cook thinks romantic, is a misspelling; it refers to a prehistoric era when Native Americans and the caribou that provided them sustenance wandered freely across a land without political borders. A final question might well be whether it is necessarily bad to write a story that makes a strong political statement.

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PS 153 .H56 B74 1989

“Nineteen Fifty-five”

page 604

Walker, like James Baldwin, uses blues music as a paradigm for living and writing. A blues performer carries the audience to the center of sorrow and of joy, both performer and listener testing the limits of the already given. Using the blues technique of contrast and opposition, Walker structures her story as a choice between authentic and counterfeit blues music, between life and death. Sonny in Baldwin’s story “Sonny’s Blues” prefers Charlie Parker to the “old-time, down home crap” of Louis Armstrong. Walker in turn suggests that the American psyche has wrongly preferred the corrupted blues of the white boy Traynor to the original music of the black singer Gracie Mae “Little Mama” Still. Traynor’s unhappiness and death represent the consequences of making the wrong choice.

Gracie Mae and Traynor are symbols. Traynor dies because a song of Gracie Mae’s has brought him wealth and fame but not wisdom. He keeps returning to Gracie Mae to find out what the song means, but understanding eludes him except, perhaps, in a remark he makes during a dinner with Gracie Mae at his mansion. Commenting on how his fans greedily mistake his version of the blues for the real thing, he tells her: “They want what you got but they don’t want you. They want what I got only it ain’t mine. That’s what makes ’em so hungry for me when I sing. They getting the flavor of something but they ain’t getting the thing itself. They like a pack of hound dogs trying to gobble up a scent” (612). What the inarticulate public probably wants is the love and contentment that Gracie Mae has attained; what the public thinks it wants is the glitter and sexual innuendo of Traynor. Gracie Mae has suffered hard, but she has found a couple of good men who accept her as she is and who enjoy life’s simple pleasures with her—good music and food, good sex, grandchildren, fishing. Traynor has distorted Gracie Mae’s sexual honesty and joy into the “nasty little [below the waist] jerk” of sexual titillation. Like Gracie Mae, Traynor overeats to the point of obesity, but he seems not to reach her self-understanding. Near their story’s end she says, “I finally faced up to the fact that my fat is the hurt I don’t admit, not even to myself, and that I been trying to bury it from the day I was born” (614).

In Gracie Mae and Traynor, Walker reinvents the historical figures of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton and Elvis Presley. Writing about fiction and fact in “Nineteen Fifty-five,” Andy Crosland summarizes Walker’s improvisation on history. Traynor, like Elvis, “gives away Cadillacs and houses. The character serves in the army in Germany. He is a singer who performs to screaming teenagers [. . .]. His hair is black and curly and he looks like a ‘Loosianna Creole.’ Traynor even has a manager who resembles Elvis’s Colonel Parker, and the character lives in a grand mansion like Graceland.” The song that Thornton and then Elvis recorded was “Hound Dog,” in 1953 and 1956 respectively. Crosland quotes Thornton as saying that while Elvis’s version sold more than two million records, “I got one check for \$500 and never saw another.” In Walker’s story Gracie Mae writes the song that Traynor’s manager virtually steals from her, but Thornton’s “Hound Dog” was written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Elvis, writes Crosland, “probably picked up the song from Freddy Bell and the Bellhops rather than from Thornton.” He changed some of the original lyrics, which were so simple (thirty-six words in six

lines) that even Traynor could have understood them. In reality, Colonel Parker didn't let Elvis associate with his songwriters.

Gracie Mae says she fought Bessie Smith, historically one of the great blues singers, to keep the song. However, Smith died in a car accident in 1937 when Thornton was ten years old. The battle is thus fiction, but the reference to Smith helps Walker retrieve the great and neglected tradition of women blues singers. Some of this history can be traced back through the title of the volume in which "Nineteen Fifty-five" first appeared, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). According to Maria V. Johnson, Walker adapted her title from the song "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down," recorded in 1920 by the blues singer Mamie Smith. The recording, apparently the first by a black female singer, came into being through the persistence of Perry Bradford, an African-American songwriter and businessman. In 1928 Lillian Miller, another African-American singer, wrote and sang the song "You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down." The process of influence at work from the making of the original recording to Walker's volume and story has been termed *signifying* by the literary theorist Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Signifying, meaning repetition with difference, occurs in Gracie Mae's adaptation of Smith's and Bradford's song and then in Walker's own literary act of bringing to light and promoting the blues tradition and its techniques. Johnson elaborates: "Gracie Mae and Traynor's unnamed song and their story told in "Nineteen Fifty-five" signify on Bradford's song and story. His/story is a part of Walker's story; both concern the racist and exploitative phenomenon of white singers imitating or 'covering' the songs of African Americans."

Corporate America's exploitation of black music is part of a larger threat to authentic cultural expression. At the end of "Nineteen Fifty-five" Gracie Mae predicts, "One day this is going to be a pitiful country." Many in Walker's audience would probably agree that authentic popular or folk culture has become an endangered species. Traynor's audience, like Traynor, may be hungry (without knowing it) for the self-knowledge available in Gracie Mae's version of the blues, but the entertainment industry has inserted itself between desire and genuine musical expression. Traynor's manager has bought up all of Gracie Mae's records, while on television Ed Sullivan and Johnny Carson purvey counterfeit culture. Students will be able to supply updated versions of this appropriation.

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PS 3573 .A425 Z94



**WELTY, Eudora**

**“The Hitch-Hikers”**

page 451

This early Welty story has recently secured renewed attention and new praise. In its quick, unexpected intrusion of violence into a relatively quiet story surface, it may be said to predict Flannery O’Connor’s short fiction. Neither overtly nor covertly theological, however, “The Hitch-Hikers” is vintage Welty in essential ways.

The inhabitants and institutions of the small Southern town, its community life and tone, Welty presents here in fine realistic detail—from the hotel and its proprietor, his dog, and his fetch-it boy, to town partying and recreation, the problems of the town constable, and the well-oiled civic communication web of information and gossip. “Establishing a chink-proof world of appearance is not only the first responsibility of the writer; it is the primary step in the technique of every sort of fiction [. . .],” Welty wrote in her famous essay “Place in Fiction.” While Welty very effectively reproduces and represents place in her story, in both fact and in “feel,” she is here (as usual) more concerned with investigating and revealing deeper human reality. What she discerns in the lives of men and women, and what becomes the essential content and technique of her fiction, is what she herself and many of her commentators refer to simply and ineffably as human mystery.

The major mystery in and of this story is focused on the traveling salesman Tom Harris. Is it worth considering, then, why he is not the title character? and why the murderer Sobby and the murdered Sanford are? Or are they themselves, expressly or even generally, the title figures? In Harris’s mind they are not real or “mere hitch-hikers. They were tramps” (453). Harris, who himself is called a “vagabond” (457), certainly appears to be attracted to them, and especially to the guitar that defines their “tramp” (non-hitchhiker) status. Carol (wrongly?) calls Sanford Tom’s “friend.” Have students consult the dictionary and discuss the differences in these three categorical terms for persons who travel.

Suggested by the small-town setting and the category of “traveling salesman” or “vagabond” for Tom, interesting connections or parallels with Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* can be pursued. (Of course, Tom is only a visitor, not a resident of this town.) As discussed in the commentary on Anderson’s “Paper Pills,” it would be instructive for students to produce a *character* for Tom. What do we know, what can be said about this man that we learn from the text of this story? A fairly detailed description or character sketch would be possible: he is “a thirty-year-old salesman traveling in office supplies” (451) who is “easily amused” (453) and who thinks that people are “often wrong” (460) in what they believe and say about him. Yet there is much about Tom that we do not know. Is it really true that he used to play the piano? What is it about him and music? What about him and his relationships to other people? (Investigate this question by focusing on Tom in relation to the hitch-hikers, Mr. Gene, Ruth, Carol—and even Mike the dog.) What revelatory hint or explanation of mystery may be given in the description in the story’s third paragraph of “a sensation he had known as a child: standing still, with nothing to touch him, feeling tall and having the world come all at once into its round

shape underfoot and rush and turn through space and make his stand very precarious and lonely” (451). Is this an adult sensation, appropriate at story’s end as well?

It is interesting and maybe significant to look at the proper names Welty chooses for the people and the places in this story. Tom (meaning “twin”), for instance, has left Victory to go to his eventful night in Dulcie, a name suggestive of the Latin *dulcis*, meaning “sweet.” But Tom does not find Dulcie very dulcet or dulcifying, nor very pleasing, agreeable, soothing, or melodious. “No,” he says at the end of the story as he hands over the music-making “box” and resumes his solitary traveling.

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Kreyling, Michael. *Understanding Eudora Welty*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999.

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Walter, James. “The Fate of the Storyteller in Eudora Welty’s ‘The Hitch-Hikers.’” *South Central Bulletin* 2 (Spring 1985): 57–70.

*The Hitch-Hikers*. Film. Dir. Alan Bergmann. 1989 30 min.

## WHARTON, Edith

### “The Other Two”

page 230

Continuing the long history of comparing Wharton to Henry James, the juxtaposition of this story and “Europe” illuminates both. James’s story has a first-person narrator through whose eyes we see everything. Wharton uses a third-person point of view, and the narrative is limited to Waythorn’s perspective. What difference does point of view make in the two stories? The reaction of James’s narrator to the Rimmle sisters changes in the course of the story from mildly ironic and satiric at the beginning to deeply sympathetic at the end. What seems to be Wharton’s attitude toward Waythorn? Toward Mrs. Waythorn? How can the reader tell?

Waythorn works for an investment firm on Wall Street. What is the significance of his occupation? He several times thinks of his wife as property. He jokes to himself about owning one-third of a wife and considers her first husband a “lien on the property.” He also compares his wife with an “old shoe” that has been worn by too many feet. What do such comparisons tell the reader about Waythorn’s personality and his relationship with his wife?

Barbara Anne White has connected the myth of Cupid and Psyche to the story. Psyche lived in happiness with Cupid until she discovered his identity, after which he abandoned her. In the story, Waythorn seems to look more closely at his wife’s past life and marriages than he has previously, but does he learn her identity, or does she become even more mysterious? He sees, or believes he sees, evidence that she may be a social climber who left a common middle-class husband for an upper-class New York husband, then abandoned him to marry the more financially secure Waythorn. Is there evidence in the text that corroborates or contradicts those suspicions? And what about Waythorn’s name? What might be implied by it? Thorny Way? What way is thorny, and for whom? for Waythorn? for Alice? for the other two? White sees the name as a pun on Wharton’s own name; it is an anagram of Wharton-y. If White is correct, why might she have created such a name for a character? What does it tell us about both the character and the author?

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Sweeney, Gerard M. “Wharton’s ‘The Other Two.’” *Explicator* 59 (Winter 2001): 88–91.

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PS 3545 .H16 Z93 1991

“The Use of Force”

page 327

The romantically named Mathilde in this story represents all children who instinctively resist the ministrations of authority in the guise of doctors, dentists, barbers, and the like. She is also one of Wordsworth’s god-sent children who daily feel the prison-house of society closing in upon them. Society in this deceptively simple story is not a poetic abstraction but a capitalist system of insidiously connected economic and sexual power. The narrator, a doctor, recounts a tragicomic battle of wills between himself and a stubborn little girl from whom he needs to obtain a throat culture. The battle, along with the questions it raises about the nature of heroism, resembles the battle between the Swede and the town of Fort Romper in Stephen Crane’s “The Blue Hotel.” Each story combines a naturalistic view of the human condition and an unlikely protagonist who, like the traditional romantic hero, fiercely resists his or her inevitable defeat. Crane places the terrified Swede within an indifferent universe of cold and snow, human deceit and violence. Williams pits a working-class (proletarian) child against male authority and privilege. To employ the jargon of cultural theory, the doctor represents the *hegemonic* power of the *patriarchy* (rule of the fathers). Patriarchal power is centered in governmental, economic, educational, and religious institutions, but it infiltrates all aspects of society, including intimate human relationships.

In “A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes),” Williams writes that a modern short story ought “by the style to wed the subject to its own time and have it live there and then. Have it live.” To achieve the marriage of style and culture, a story must capture the violence that “is the mood today.” “The Use of Force,” published in 1934, is very much of the Depression, a time of extreme economic hardship and widespread hopelessness. Williams, like many Americans then, was sympathetic to Communism’s account of a class struggle that would end in social equality. Artistically, however, he was hostile to the aesthetics of socialist realism, which advocated that the artist forgo art’s traditional focus on the individual and emphasize social injustice. Within social realism, characters tended to become types of either the oppressed or the oppressing classes. If Williams’s depiction of the little girl is a proletarian portrait, it exceeds the narrow definition of that genre because his story takes account of the complexity of the child, the doctor, and their conflict.

The self-justification of the doctor, the protagonist who devolves into the antagonistic character, suggests that he feels guilty about his use of force against the little girl. The doctor belongs to the class of well-intentioned liberals whose good deeds often meet with the hostility of those they seek to help and who are often unconsciously servants of oppressive power. The doctor’s complicity is suggested by his characterization of the child’s parents as “distrustful” and his awareness that they resent his three-dollar fee. They are suspicious of him, and he hates their obsequious efforts to make the child docile and devious in her relations with her superiors. The doctor’s attitude toward the child is ambivalent. He admires and wants to encourage her fierce individualism, but he also wants to subdue her to his will. We hear the rhetoric of patriarchal

self-justification in his comment near the end of the story that the child must be protected against herself as others must be protected against her. "It is social necessity" (330).

Discussion of "The Use of Force" might begin with a definition of the physician as an American icon, the dedicated healer of bodies and souls, and then move to a consideration of how closely the doctor in the story corresponds to the ideal. The use of a first-person narrator emphasizes the gap between the actual man and the icon. This doctor is a healer, but he casts a lustful eye on beautiful little girls. His condescension toward the parents paints him as a snob, and his anger at the child's stubbornness overpowers his professional objectivity. In the battle with the little girl he represents cultural authority and privilege. He is a white adult male; as a member of a prestigious and largely male profession he belongs to the solid middle class. His adversary is the female child of working-class parents; she lives in a damp tenement and lacks all power except for her beauty and animal-like fury. The parents are implicated in the betrayal of the child to the gender and class system by their command that she cooperate with the "nice" man and not be a "bad" girl, not do anything of which she should be "ashamed." Undaunted, she engages the doctor in an elemental battle of the sexes. Students sometimes miss the sexual imagery of the bloody encounter at the story's end. Symbolic rape of the child is indicated by her (vaginal) throat and bleeding mouth, the (phallic) silver spoon used as a tongue depressor, the membrane-covered hymenal tonsils, and the doctor's "longing for muscular release." Thus read, "The Use of Force" supports the view that rape is an assertion of power, not sexual desire.

The story ends without clear resolution. The doctor has gotten his throat culture and perhaps saved the child's life. She, however, is still furious and he has had no moral victory. He pays tribute to the little girl by remembering her name. She is Mathilde, an individual delineated in a few swift strokes of the writer's pen, who resists society's effort to deprive her of her personal secrets and her dignity in the name of her own best interests.

Gish, Robert F. *William Carlos Williams: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston. G. K. Hall, 1989.

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Slate, J. E. "William Carlos Williams and the Modern Short Story." *Southern Review* 4 (July 1968): 647-52, 659-64; rpt. in Gish, 160-169.

Williams, William Carlos. "A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes)" (1950). *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1954. 295-310; excerpts in Gish, 110-112.

PS 3545 .I544 A16 1954

“Hunters in the Snow”

page 616

“Hunters in the Snow” reads more like a Raymond Carver story than some of Carver’s own stories do. In this tale of male bonding gone bad, three friends spend a winter afternoon hunting deer in the countryside near Spokane, Washington. Like many of Carver’s characters, Frank, Kenny, and Tub fail in their relationships with other people—their most intimate relationships are based on deception. In his endorsement of *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, Raymond Carver asks, “How does [Tobias Wolff] come to be saying such absolutely true things about us?” It might be interesting to compare Carver’s “Boxes” with “Hunters,” with an eye toward understanding what these two writers regard as “absolutely true.” Or, might that be better put, what is absolutely false?

The story begins in violence and ends in horror. Students will likely want to discuss the violence in “Hunters” because it is so unexpected and so unnecessary. The practical joker Kenny instigates most of the violent action. Why does he tease his friends so much? While Kenny does needle his friends unpleasantly, his criticism, it seems, isn’t entirely unwarranted. Frank’s affair with a minor, Tub’s self-inflicted obesity, and the self-pity of both men diminish the reader’s sympathy for them.

Frank and Tub are, in even more destructive ways than Kenny, practical jokers. Both men deceive their wives (“Does Nancy know?” “Does Alice know?”), thereby undermining their marriages. Frank is superficially concerned with legal propriety (he will not hunt on posted land) and with the importance of people’s feelings (as reflected in his “mellow-speak,” which Kenny terms “hippie bullshit”), but he disregards both these things as he prepares to leave his wife for a fifteen-year-old girl. Tub is concerned with loyalty and with friends’ sticking up for each other, but he lies to everyone about his eating habits and he shows little concern for Kenny’s welfare once he has shot him (the same goes for Frank).

In an interview in *Contemporary Literature* (listed below), Wolff comments on his indebtedness to Flannery O’Connor. The stories of both writers are often violent, but while O’Connor’s violence usually occurs at a moment of divine revelation or a moment of grace, Wolff’s stories never get that far. His stories, he says, lead up to a choice “between salvation and damnation,” but his characters seldom experience an epiphany or a moment of grace. “In my fiction,” Wolff notes, “I think that kind of moment would ring false.” Would it? Why? To what end then is Wolff using violence? How does his violence comment on modern society and the modern human condition?

The title of this story might warrant class discussion. *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) is a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In it three hunters are trudging home at dusk while the villagers in the scene around them go about their daily activities. The village toward which the hunters are walking is painted in the far distance—the people and the houses are tiny, yet the scene is pleasant and inviting. At the end of Wolff’s story the hunters are not going homeward; they have taken a “different turn a long way back.” Two poets, William Carlos Williams and

Joseph Langland, have written poems on this painting. Langland describes the hunters as having finished their “Blood-annunciated day” and “Darkness stalks the hunters.” Does reading these poems alter the students’ reading of the painting or a reading of Wolff’s story?

Lyons, Bonnie, and Bill Oliver. “An Interview with Tobias Wolff.” *Contemporary Literature* 31 (Spring 1990): 1-16.

Review of *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*. *Nation* 6 February 1982:152.

Schreiber, Le Anne. “Controlled Fiction and Reckless Endings.” *New York Times Book Review* 15 November 1981: 1.

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Langland, Joseph. “Hunters in the Snow” in *Selected Poems*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1991.

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Williams, William Carlos. “Hunters in the Snow” in *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). Reprinted in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II, 1939–1962*. Ed. Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1988.

PS 3545 .I544 A17

## WRIGHT, Richard

### “Big Boy Leaves Home”

page 402

In the autobiographical volume *Black Boy* (1945, 1977; restored text, 1991), Richard Wright says that the question he posed in “Big Boy Leaves Home” was this: “What quality of will must a Negro possess to live and die with dignity in a country that denied his humanity?” In *Black Boy* Wright also spoke generally about what he was attempting as a young writer. “My purpose,” he said, “was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression. [...] If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with a sense of a new world.” “I wanted,” he continued, “to shape people’s feelings, awaken their hearts.”

How successful, in terms of his own objectives, do students think Wright is in this short story?

“Big Boy Leaves Home” Wright described simply as “a tale of a group of black boys trespassing upon the property of a white man and the lynching that followed.” The dictionary definition of *lynching* is punishment (usually execution) without due process of law, but this eighteenth-century American-born term came to be associated mainly with the horrendous, deadly white-mob violence against black males in the American South. Historical facts and statistics support such association: more than 80 percent of the lynchings reported in the United States since 1882 occurred in the states of the former Confederacy, with over 80 percent of the victims being African American and more than 90 percent being male. Other stories by major Southern writers, one black and one white, about this violent form of racism are Jean Toomer’s “Blood-Burning Moon” and William Faulkner’s “Dry September” and “Pantaloon in Black.”

Several more of Wright’s stories in his collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938, 1940) may be called lynching stories, particularly “Long Black Song,” but none surpasses the art and impact of “Big Boy,” which opens the volume. The antics and idyllic fun and games of the almost carefree adolescent boys that open the story are rendered by Wright in equivalently joyful realistic detail, but all this ends abruptly in section II: “‘Oh!’ [. . .] ‘Oh!’ [. . .] ‘a *white* woman!’” (412). The “CRACK!” of gunfire on the next page begins a complete shattering of these youthful and relatively innocent lives. What had been a friendly and benign natural world is transformed into an antagonistic one: “vines and leaves switched their faces”; “corn stubbles bruised their feet” (415). The racist world of Southern society of which they had clear intimation but little hard experience now becomes a full-blown monster dedicated directly to their deaths.

Wright makes his protagonist’s experience as he hides in the underground kiln terribly, affectingly, viscerally, sensuously, nightmarishly realistic and immediate, but Big Boy’s situation and his trials are also richly symbolic. To survive, many African Americans had to go



underground, figuratively if not literally. Both Wright (in his later short story “The Man Who Lived Underground”) and his protégé Ralph Ellison would write powerfully and directly about this social necessity. And underground is also associated with the underworld, with hell and purgatory. Big Boy has to kill a snake, the traditional symbol of evil, and he imagines killing members of the white mob with his bare hands and stomping on them “like he had stomped the snake” (426). Later he must indeed engage in mortal combat, to fight for his life by choking a dog that has discovered him. Mythologically, archetypally, it is a struggle reminiscent of classical encounters with Cerebus, the ferocious watchdog of the underworld.

Having presented almost unspeakable horrors, “Big Boy Leaves Home” comes full circle and closes on what appears to be a more positive, hopeful note. Once more the actions or events of the plot are underscored by the symbolic or archetypal. Nature regains some of the status it had at the beginning of the story. There is rainfall and later the provision of life-giving water, the slacker of physical and spiritual thirst, the traditional symbolic agent of renewal and rebirth. At the end “the sun had risen,” and there is a dancing in “the golden blades of sunshine” (433) just as there was at the outset.

As his story ends, Big Boy seems to be sleeping peacefully, off on his way to a new life up North. If we are willing to project his future from other, later writings of Richard Wright—notably, *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, whose protagonist is named “Bigger”—this new life will still be one of oppression and danger. Part Two of *Black Boy*, which deals with Wright’s life after he fled the South, is titled “The Horror and the Glory.” The horror of the South for African Americans “Big Boy Leaves Home” makes disturbingly graphic; the sarcastic irony of Wright’s epigraphic song “Is It True What They Say About Dixie?” could scarcely be deeper or more bitter. But in Big Boy’s survival, in his fight for his life and his humanity, in the will and ultimate dignity that this young black man displays, there is also glory.

Atkinson, Michael. “Richard Wright’s ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’ and a Tale from Ovid: A Metamorphosis Transformed.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 24 (Summer 1987): 251–61.

Blythe, Hal, and Charlie Sweet. “‘Yo Mama Don Wear No Drawers’: Suspended Sexuality in ‘Big Boy Leaves Home.’” *Notes on Mississippi Writers* 21 (1989): 31–36.

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PS 3545 .R815 Z6517

## STORY CLUTCHES

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### SAMPLE STORY GROUPINGS BY THEME, TOPIC, SUBJECT, CONCERN

(clutch: n. 1. a group or bunch 2. set of eggs incubated tr.v. 1. to hatch)

## ABSURD, THE

Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Cheever. "The Swimmer"

Barthelme. "The School"

Coover. "Cartoon"

Paley. "Samuel"

Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"

Davis. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists"

Boyle. "De Rerum Natura"

Mosley. "Pet Fly"

Alexie. "What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

## ANIMALS

Poe. "The Black Cat"

Clemens. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"

Jewett. "A White Heron"

London. "To Build a Fire"

Porter. "The Grave"

O'Connor. "Revelation."

Barthelme. "The School"

Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"

Mosley. "Pet Fly"

## CONFORMITY AND REBELLION: ACTION IN THE FACE OF EXPECTATIONS

Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"  
Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"  
James. "Europe"  
Jewett. "A White Heron"  
Chesnutt. "The Passing of Grandison"  
Chopin. "The Storm"  
Chopin. "At the 'Cadian Ball"  
Freeman. "The Revolt of 'Mother'"  
Gilman. "The Yellow Wall-Paper"  
Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Crane. "The Blue Hotel"  
Cather. "Paul's Case"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Steinbeck. "The Chrysanthemums"  
Hughes. "Thank You, Ma'm"  
LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"  
Updike. "A & P"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
Mason. "Shiloh"  
O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"  
Baxter. "Gryphon"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"  
Jen. "Birthmates"  
Lahiri. "This Blessed House"

## DEATH AND DYING

Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"

Bierce. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

Cather. "Paul's Case"

London. "To Build a Fire"

Anderson. "Paper Pills"

Porter. "The Grave"

Wright. "Big Boy Leaves Home"

Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"

Paley. "Samuel"

Barthelme. "The School"

Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"

O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"

Baxter. "Gryphon"

King. "The Reach"

Davis. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists"

Erdrich. "Fleur"

Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

## DOCTORS (PHYSICIANS)

Anderson. "Paper Pills."

Williams. "The Use of Force"

Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"

## DUPERY AND DECEPTION

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"  
Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown"  
Poe. "The Purloined Letter"  
Clemens. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"  
Chesnutt. "The Passing of Grandison"  
Porter. "The Caballero's Way"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Hurstun. "The Gilded Six-Bits"  
O'Connor. "Revelation"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"

## DUTY/RESPONSIBILITY/OBLIGATION

Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown"  
Hawthorne. "The Birth-mark"  
Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"  
Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"  
James. "Europe"  
Jewett. "A White Heron"  
Bierce. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"  
Chopin. "The Storm"  
Freeman. "The Revolt of 'Mother'"  
Crane. "The Blue Hotel"  
Anderson. "Paper Pills"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Williams. "The Use of Force"  
Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"  
Fitzgerald. "Babylon Revisited"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Hemingway. "Hills Like White Elephants"

Updike. "A & P"  
LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"  
Carver. "Boxes"  
Walker. "Nineteen Fifty-five"  
O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"  
Boyle. "De Rerum Natura"

#### ETHNIC GROUPS AND RACE

Chesnutt. "The Passing of Grandison"  
Hurstun. "The Gilded Six-Bits"  
Hughes. "Thank You, Ma'm"  
Wright. "Big Boy Leaves Home"  
Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"  
Paley. "Samuel"  
O'Connor. "Revelation"  
Bambara. "A Girl's Story"  
Walker. "Nineteen Fifty-five"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"  
Tallent. "Ciudad Juárez"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"  
Jen. "Birthmates"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"  
Lahiri. "This Blessed House"

#### FABLE

Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown"  
Hawthorne. "The Birth-mark"  
Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"  
Paley. "Samuel"  
LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"  
Davis. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists"  
Phillips. "Cheers"

#### FRIENDSHIP/CAMARADERIE/BONDING

Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"  
Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"  
James. "Europe"  
Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Porter. "The Grave"  
Wright. "Big Boy Leaves Home"  
Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"  
Barthelme. "The School"  
Walker. "Nineteen Fifty-five"  
Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"  
O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"  
Baxter. "Gryphon"  
Phillips. "Cheers"  
Jen. "Birthmates"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"



## GETTING HOME

Bierce. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"  
Cheever. "The Swimmer"  
Carver. "Boxes"  
Walker. "Ninety Fifty-five"  
King. "The Reach"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"  
Lahiri. "This Blessed House"

## HEROISM/DESIRE FOR THE HEROIC

Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"  
Porter. "The Caballero's Way"  
Crane. "The Blue Hotel"  
London. "To Build a Fire"  
Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Cheever. "The Swimmer"  
Updike. "A & P"

## HUMOR

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"  
Clemens. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"  
Chesnutt. "The Passing of Grandison"  
Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"  
O'Connor. "Revelation"  
Coover. "Cartoon"  
Boyle. "De Rerum Natura"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

## HUNTS AND HUNTING

(“the activity or sport of pursuing wild game”)

Jewett. “The White Heron”

Porter. “The Grave”

Wolff. “Hunters in the Snow”

## ILLNESS AND HEALTH

James. ““Europe””

Gilman. “The Yellow Wall-Paper”

Williams. “The Use of Force”

Hemingway. “Hills Like White Elephants”

O’Connor. “Revelation”

Bambara. “A Girl’s Story”

King. “The Reach”

## “IN ANOTHER COUNTRY”

Hawthorne. “Young Goodman Brown”

Hawthorne. “The Birth-mark”

Melville. “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Harte. “The Outcasts of Poker Flat”

James. ““Europe””

London. “To Build a Fire”

Porter. “The Grave”

Fitzgerald. “Babylon Revisited”

Faulkner. “Barn Burning”

Hemingway. “Hills Like White Elephants”

Steinbeck. “The Chrysanthemums”

Wright. "Big Boy Leaves Home"  
Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"  
Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"  
Paley. "Samuel"  
O'Connor. "Revelation"  
Coover. "Cartoon"  
Updike. "A & P"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
Bambara. "A Girl's Story"  
LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"  
Mason. "Shiloh"  
Walker. "Nineteen Fifty-five"  
King. "The Reach"  
Phillips. "Cheers"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"  
Tallent. "Ciudad Juárez"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"  
Jen. "Birthmates"  
Lahiri. "This Blessed House"

## JUSTICE

(legal and extralegal, formal and informal, carried and miscarried)

Poe. "The Black Cat"  
Poe. "The Purloined Letter"  
Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"  
Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"  
Chesnutt. "The Passing of Grandison"  
Bierce. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"  
Porter. "The Caballero's Way"  
Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Crane. "The Blue Hotel"

Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"  
Fitzgerald. "Babylon Revisited"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Wright. "Big Boy Leaves Home"  
Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"  
Updike. "A & P"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"

## MARRIAGE

Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown"  
Hawthorne. "The Birth-mark"  
Poe. "The Black Cat"  
Chopin. "The Storm"  
Freeman. "The Revolt of 'Mother'"  
Gilman. "The Yellow Wall-Paper"  
Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Anderson. "Paper Pills"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Hurstun. "The Gilded Six-Bits"  
Thurber. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"  
Fitzgerald. "Babylon Revisited"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Steinbeck. "The Chrysanthemums"  
Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"  
Cheever. "The Swimmer"  
O'Connor. "Revelation"  
Carver. "Boxes"  
Mason. "Shiloh"  
King. "The Reach"

Tallent. "Cíudad Juárez"  
Jen. "Birthmates"  
Lahiri. "This Blessed House"

## MEMORY

Anderson. "Paper Pills"  
Porter. "The Grave"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"  
King. "The Reach"

## MURDER AND MYSTERY

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"  
Poe. "The Black Cat"  
Poe. "The Purloined Letter"  
Porter. "The Caballero's Way"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
King. "The Reach"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"

## MUSIC

Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"  
Baldwin. "Sonny's Blues"  
Walker. "Nineteen Fifty-five"

MYSTERIOUS STRANGER, THE  
(including devil figure, satanic presence)

Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown"

Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Steinbeck. "The Chrysanthemums"

Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

Baxter. "Gryphon"

NATURE/THE NATURAL WORLD

Jewett. "A White Heron"

London. "To Build a Fire"

Porter. "The Grave"

Steinbeck. "The Chrysanthemums"

Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"

King. "The Reach"

PARENTS (BIOLOGICAL & SURROGATE) AND CHILDREN/FAMILY

James. "Europe"

Jewett. "A White Heron"

Cather. "Paul's Case"

Fitzgerald. "Babylon Revisited"

Faulkner. "Barn Burning"

Hughes. "Thank You, Ma'm"

Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"

Paley. "Samuel"

Baldwin. "Sonny's Blues"

LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
Bambara. "A Girl's Story"  
Carver. "Boxes"  
Mason. "Shiloh"  
Walker. "Nineteen Fifty-five"  
King. "The Reach"  
Boyle. "De Rerum Natura"  
Phillips. "Cheers"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"  
Tallent. "Ciudad Juárez"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

#### PRESENTNESS OF THE PAST, THE

Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Anderson. "Paper Pills"  
Porter. "The Grave"  
Fitzgerald. "Babylon Revisited"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Barthelme. "The School"  
O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"  
King. "The Reach"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"

#### POWER AND CONTROL

Melville. "Bartleby, the Scrivener"  
James. "Europe"

Jewett. "A White Heron"  
Chesnutt. "The Passing of Grandison"  
Freeman. "The Revolt of 'Mother'"  
Gilman. "The Yellow Wall-Paper"  
Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Cather. "Paul's Case"  
London. "To Build a Fire"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Williams. "The Use of Force"  
Fitzgerald. "Babylon Revisited"  
Faulkner. "Barn Burning"  
Cheever. "The Swimmer"  
Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"  
O'Connor. "Revelation"  
Updike. "A & P"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"  
Baxter. "Gryphon"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"  
Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"  
Jen. "Birthmates"

#### ROAD, ON THE, AND BORDER CROSSINGS

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"  
Crane. "The Blue Hotel"  
Cather. "Paul's Case"  
London. "To Build a Fire"  
Hemingway. "Hills Like White Elephants"  
Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"  
King. "The Reach"  
Davis. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists"  
Tallent. "Ciudad Juárez"



Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"

Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

## SALESMEN AND BUSINESSMEN

Steinbeck. "The Chrysanthemums"

Welty. "The Hitch-Hikers"

Jen. "Birthmates"

## SCIENCE FICTION

Hawthorne. "The Birth-mark"

LeGuin. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

Boyle. "De Rerum Natura"

## SEWING

Chopin. "The Storm"

Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"

Mason. "Shiloh"

Phillips. "Cheers"

## SEX, LOVE, MEN AND WOMEN

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"

Hawthorne. "The Birth-mark"

Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"

Chopin. "The Storm"

Chopin. "At the 'Cadian Ball"  
Freeman. "The Revolt of 'Mother'"  
Gilman. "The Yellow Wall-Paper"  
Porter. "The Caballero's Way"  
Wharton. "The Other Two"  
Glaspell. "A Jury of Her Peers"  
Williams. "The Use of Force"  
Porter. "The Grave"  
Hurston. "The Gilded Six-Bits"  
Hemingway. "Hills Like White Elephants"  
Steinbeck. "The Chrysanthemums"  
Updike. "A & P"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
Bambara. "A Girl's Story"  
Mason. "Shiloh"  
O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"  
Phillips. "Cheers"  
Mosley. "Pet Fly"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"  
Tallent. "Ciudad Juárez"  
Jen. "Birthmates"  
Lahiri. "This Blessed House"

#### SHORT SHORT STORY

Davis. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists"  
Phillips. "Cheers"

#### STORMS

Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"

Chopin. "The Storm"  
Cheever. "The Swimmer"  
Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"  
King. "The Reach"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"

#### SUPERNATURAL/FANTASTIC, THE

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"  
Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown"  
Hawthorne. "The Birth-mark"  
Poe. "The Black Cat"  
Malamud. "The Magic Barrel"  
Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"  
King. "The Reach"  
Davis. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists"  
Boyle. "De Rerum Natura"  
Erdrich. "Fleur"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

#### STORYTELLING

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"  
Clemens. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"  
Coover. "Cartoon"  
Baxter. "Gryphon"  
Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

## TEACHERS

Irving. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"

Barthelme. "The School"

Baxter. "Gryphon"

## VIOLENCE

Poe. "The Black Cat"

Bierce. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

Williams. "The Use of Force"

Faulkner. "Barn Burning"

Wright. "Big Boy Leaves Home"

O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"

Wolff. "Hunters in the Snow"

Erdrich. "Fleur"

Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"

## WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

Bierce. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

Faulkner. "Barn Burning"

Mason. "Shiloh"

O'Brien. "The Things They Carried"

Viramontes. "The Cariboo Cafe"

## WESTERNS

Harte. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"

Porter. "The Caballero's Way"

Crane. "The Blue Hotel"

Alexie. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

For those who love reading short stories, imagine the genre without the likes of Edgar Allen Poe or Oâ€™Henry, J.D Salinger or Issac Asimov, Washington Irving or F Scott Fitzgerald! Completely bleak and sombre isnâ€™t it?Â That is the influence that American writers have casted over the genre of short story. Usually shorter than a novel with a brief fictional prose narrative, short stories have found universal acceptance.