Africans Study Guide

Africans by Sheila Kohler

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Introduction

Sheila Kohler's "Africans" was first published in *Story* magazine in 1998. It received greater exposure when it was published the following year in Kohler's collection of interlinked stories *One Girl: A Novel in Stories.* The book is divided into four sections, each one representing a life stage. "Africans" is included in the largest of the four sections, "Courtship and Marriage." The story, like many of Kohler's works, is set in South Africa, where she grew up. The main theme concerns the betrayal of a woman by her abusive husband, and her ultimate betrayal by her loyal African servant. However, the story, which takes place in the mid-to late-twentieth century, also contains references to apartheid, the legalized racial segregation that took place in South Africa during this time. Apartheid denied blacks many rights, including the right to vote. Kohler published her story four years after Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first black president in the country's first free election. *One Girl: A Novel in Stories* was received well by the critics and inspired Cracks: A Novel (1999), which was based on one of the other stories in the collection. "Africans" can be found in *The Best American Short Stories 1999,* which was published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in 1999.

Author Biography

Kohler was born on November 13, 1941, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Although she later immigrated to the United States, her childhood experiences in South Africa would influence much of her writing. In 1988, Kohler's short story "The Mountain" earned an O. Henry Award, and in 1989, Kohler published her first novel, *The Perfect Place,* about a wealthy woman who is forced to remember her traumatic South African past. Over the next five years, Kohler published two books, a collection of short stories entitled *Miracles in America* (1990) and *The House on R. Street: A Novel* (1994). Like much of her fiction, these books are dark stories that deal with physical and psychological abuse as well as sexual issues.

In 1999, Kohler published *One Girl: A Novel in Stories,* a book of interconnected short stories that fall into different stages of life. The book was awarded the 1998 Willa Cather Fiction Prize and featured the story "Africans," which was also included in *The Best American Short Stories 1999.* Kohler's most recent work is *Cracks: A Novel,* which is based on the story "Cracks" from *One Girl: A Novel in Stories.* Kohler lives and works in New York City.

Plot Summary

"Africans" is a story told in recollection. It begins with a lengthy description of the Zulu people, who are the preferred servants of the narrator's mother. The Zulu society is built on loyalty, and the narrator gives several examples from their warrior history to demonstrate this fact. Now, however, following the occupation of South Africa by whites, many Zulus are servants. The narrator says that the Zulu she and her sister preferred was named John Mazaboko. Although John cares for both the narrator and her sister, Mkatie, he has a special relationship with the latter and saved her life on one occasion. He also serves as a teacher and guide to both girls, and they seek him out for advice. Like other male Zulus, John is not above performing any task. After the death of the narrator's father, her mother closes down most of the house and fires all of the servants except John.

The narrator and Mkatie go to a boarding school, and they only see John on holidays. While at school, they are kept busy playing sports, but they are not encouraged to be independent. The narrator remembers back to Mkatie's engagement. John asks questions about her fiancé, and Mkatie says he is an Afrikaner—a white South African who is a descendant of the Boer people. The Boers were farmers of European (mainly Dutch) descent, who were part of the colonization of South Africa by the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century. The Boers developed their own language, Afrikaans, which survived the loss of their independence to the British in the early twentieth century. Mkatie is sure that her mother will not approve of her fiancé, which implies that the narrator and her family are British; there was a long-standing tension between the Afrikaners and the British. Mkatie also notes that an ex-girlfriend of her fiancé is against the match, although the woman does not say why.

At her wedding, Mkatie lets her sister know that John will be moving in with Mkatie and her husband in the main house, while their mother will be staying in the cottage. When the narrator next visits her sister, Mkatie tells her that she caught her husband in a homosexual act. While the narrator thinks that Mkatie should have exposed him, Mkatie says that she could not because it would have ruined his career as a doctor. The narrator says that Mkatie's husband is also a pedophile. Her husband makes their son exercise and scrub his skin to improve his looks. Mkatie's husband also makes advances toward their son's friends. Mkatie wants a divorce but is afraid to go to a lawyer because her husband stalks her everywhere.

Many years later, the narrator visits again and notes that her sister is not doing well. Mkatie says that she cannot eat because her husband has started to get violent with her. After this visit, Mkatie takes a vacation in Rome and Instanbul, where she has an affair with a Turk. The Turkish man sends a love letter to Mkatie, which is intercepted by her husband. He is so distraught that he tries to kill himself by cutting his wrists, but Mkatie gets him in the clinic in time to save him. After he recuperates, Mkatie's husband starts to beat the children viciously, especially his son. He tries to beat Mkatie, too, but she is strong when she is angry. The narrator remembers that, during one of these fights, her sister was winning. However, Mkatie's husband calls for help from John, and,

after a moment's hesitation, John obeys, betraying his friendship with Mkatie by holding her down while her husband beats her.

Summary

Africans is set in South Africa during the 1940's. It tells the story of a white family who grows up with Zulu servants and focuses on the bond formed between two sisters and one servant, named John. As the narrator and her sister Katie grow older, Katie develops a strong connection with John, but is ultimately betrayed by him in her adulthood.

In the opening of the story, the narrator says her mother prefers to have Zulu servants, because they are disciplined warriors. She finds them to be obedient, loyal workers. The Zulu society is built on loyalty. They have suffered through several bloody wars under autocratic rulers. The narrator's mother believes that they work harder then other servants. They don't get sick and never hesitate to perform what is asked of them. Zulus wake before dawn to clean the carpets, scrub the floor and polish the silver. When they serve meals, the servants are dressed in starched white jackets and pants. They wear red sashes across the chest and white gloves.

The narrator's sister, Katie, loves John Mazaboko more than any of the other Zulu servants. John and Katie share a special bond. He chuckles when he is around her as though they share a secret joke. The narrator and her sister follow John around the house. They watch him polish floors, furniture and shoes. John is tall, strong and gentle.

Sensitive John couldn't bear to hear the two girls cry, when they were babies. As they got older, John taught the girls how to ride bikes and told them stories about Tokolosh, an evil spirit who lived in the fish pond at the bottom of the garden. When Katie was young, she had a parrot, which she accidentally stepped on and broke its wing. When this happened, she called John, who broke the bird's neck to end its pain. In the mornings, John brought the girls freshly squeezed orange juice and a newspaper for their Scottish nanny. He drew the curtains to let the sun in and said 'good morning' in his native language.

After the girls' father dies, their mother starts to withdraw. She closes up many of the rooms in the house and drapes the furniture with sheets. She gradually fires all the servants except for John, even though she says that John is a bit of a snob. The mother starts to drink too much, and the girls often have to find John to take her to bed. Shortly after, the mother sends her two daughters to boarding school. The girls only see John when they are home for holidays. At boarding school, Katie has a dream that she sees John and doesn't recognize him. The two sisters keep busy with classes and sports. Katie is tall and athletic. She has an ambition that is considered to be inappropriate for a Christian girl.

When the girls are older, Katie tells her sister, the narrator, about her plans to get married. The narrator has been living abroad with her husband and is home for a visit. The two sisters are in the dimly lit kitchen, which is filled with familiar smells of wet coal from John's fire in the courtyard. John is busy polishing silver with a toothbrush. He whistles softly as he works. He lifts and tilts his head to listen to the girl's conversation.

The narrator asks her sister about the man she is soon to marry. Katie says he is a heart surgeon. She says he is an Afrikaner. Katie paces back and forth. She says their mother is dead set against the marriage, because she believes that Katie's fiance is from a family that is common. Also, one of her fiance's exes called Katie and begged her not to marry him. Katie says that her fiance is frank and brutal, in a refreshing way, and also handsome and clever. He studied on a scholarship.

Katie's wears a white dress at her wedding. Her handsome groom stands beside her, and bridesmaids stand on the other side of her on the church steps. John is not with them. Katie tells her sister that her mother is letting her take John. She says she hasn't asked him to work for her yet, but she can't imagine starting a new life in a new house without him. Her mother will move to the cottage, while Katie and her husband take over the main house.

The next time the narrator visits, it is December. The climate is warm, and flowers are blooming. The family wears swimsuits and sips lemonade. When the narrator arrives, John greets her in the driveway. He says 'hello' to the narrator's daughter. Katie tells her sister that something has happened. Katie explains that she had thrown a party for her husband's family. In the middle of the party, she noticed that her husband wasn't there and went to look for him. Her husband seemed short tempered earlier that night, which is not unusual for him. She attributed this to long hours in the operating room, or her own careless housekeeping. He often complained that there was not enough discipline in the house. During the party, Katie burst into the study and found her husband on the floor, embracing another man. She was in shock and couldn't do anything while his parent's were there. The narrator tells her that she should have screamed, kicked her husband out of the house and caused a scandal. She's also noticed that her husband stares at his son's young friends and sometimes touches them. The son has become sullen and silent.

When Katie's sister returns in the spring, she tells her that sorrow grows in the garden where they sit and drink their tea. Katie now keeps the window shutters down most of the time and sleeps all afternoon. The narrator, Katie and John take a walk in the garden together. They sit down in the place where John had taught the girls how to ride bikes. John has grown thinner over the years. His face is gaunt, as if he had polished himself into oblivion. His spirit seems to have vanished, and his eyes have lost the glimmer of humor that he used to have when he looked at Katie. John sits with the narrator and tells her that Katie isn't eating enough. Katie says that she can't eat. She tells her sister about the night that she found her husband digging up roses in the garden outside her mother's cottage to plant cabbage. That night, he threw a glass at Katie and cut her lip.

Shortly after this incident, Katie leaves to travel in Rome and Istanbul. She writes letters to her sister, telling her that she met someone there, at the airport. When Katie comes back home, her husband finds a letter from Katie's lover, the one whom she met abroad. Her husband slits his wrists and sits at the bottom of the stairs, bleeding. He calls John and the children to come watch him die. John shakes his head at his boss and only does what he is asked to do. Katie finds them and rushes her husband to the clinic. Her

husband recuperates. However, when he returns home, he rages if anyone mentions 'Turkish delight.' He beats the children with his belt. He is especially hard on the son. He broke the son's bones and beat the eldest girl unconscious. Katie doesn't submit to him beating her children without trying to fight back. When she is angry, she is stronger than her husband. She grabs his hair, bites him and kicks him in the shins. During one fight in their bedroom, the husband is at Katie's mercy. He yells for John, and John appears swiftly and silently. He looms in the doorway, watching Kate pin down her husband. The husband asks for help, but John doesn't move. Then, the husband tells John to put Katie on the bed. John grasps Katie and holds her down. Katie struggles at first and yells, "what are you doing?" John doesn't't' respond, and Katie eventually gives up. The narrator imagines her sister lying on the bed with her face swollen and bruised, while she can hear the cries of children. Katie's hair blows across her forehead. Her cheeks are flushed and the scar on her lower lip is visible. Her round eyes are stained by thick lashes and tears. Katie looks up and sees the faces of John and her husband standing over her, in a blur of black and white. Her husband, the white boss, takes off his belt and beats it across her legs breasts, and face.

Analysis

Africans is a short story by Sheila Kohler as part of the collection "One Girl: A Novel in Stories." Set in South Africa, apartheid and the segregation of black Africans serves as backdrop to the story. This is evident from the beginning, when the narrator states that her mother prefers Zulu servants, because they are hard workers and fiercely loyal. As the girls grow older, the mother dismisses all the servants except for John. In spite of the fact that John almost seems to act as a father figure to the girls, by telling them stories and teaching them to ride bikes, he never becomes a real member of the family. John and Katie have an especially close relationship. However, when Katie gets married, John is not present.

The separation between black and white Africans is foreshadowed by John's absence at the wedding, but takes on a greater significance. Although John appears to be an important figure in Katie's life, serving as both friend and protector, he betrays her at the end of the story by holding her down as her husband beats her. This scene brings the theme of segregation full circle. John ignores the relationship he has with Katie and does what he is told to do, even though if it means hurting her. He responds to Katie's husband's orders while saying, "Yes baas." Early in the story, John is described as having a gentle nature. The anecdote about the time he kills Katie's bird to end its suffering is symbolic to this; however, this event also foreshadows John's passive nature. When he betrays Katie, his gentleness is exchanged for a willingness to follow orders.

The author uses a first person narrative in the story. The reader knows that the narrator is Katie's sister, although she is unnamed. The narrator allows for an outsider perspective of the story. She lives abroad, so the reader learns more of Katie's story through a series of "snapshots," whenever the narrator visits her sister. Although the two women are sisters, the narrator never gives an overt opinion about what is happening,

she simply retells the tale. The only time she addresses the situation personally is when she pleads with Katie to kick her husband out after Katie finds him with another man.

The relationship between Katie and her abusive husband seems to symbolize the relationship between black servants and white employers, because the husband's violent nature puts him in charge. The power struggle between husband and wife represents cultural power struggles during this time period that existed as a result of colonialism. Katie is a better fighter then her husband when she is angry. Even still, her husband wins, because he uses other resources, in this case the help of John. This symbolizes the nature of colonialism. African natives may have been stronger, but colonizers had more resources at their disposal.

Kohler's story paints a vivid picture of South Africa during apartheid. Although families often grew close with live-in servants after years of residing together in close quarters, the dividing line was still present. Through John and Katie's fictional history in *Africans*, this notion is made clear. In essence, we're enlightened with the tale of an all-too-real, tragic reality of a time period, when a sense of equality and overall humanity were overlooked.

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tragic reality of a time period, when a sense of equality and overall humanity were overlooked.

Characters

John Mazaboko

John Mazaboko is the favored Zulu servant of Mkatie and the narrator. John betrays Mkatie's trust at the end of the story. Mkatie's mother chooses John as a servant because of his Zulu heritage, which is based on loyalty. John likes spending time with Mkatie and her sister, although most of his time is spent cleaning and doing other menial tasks. When Mkatie's father dies, her mother fires all of the servants except John and retreats into herself, which puts increased pressure on him to run the household. As the years pass, John's extreme focus on work causes him to lose his individuality, and he no longer has the same joy in his relationship with the two women, especially Mkatie. He becomes a machine, doing what he is told and performing whatever task is necessary, including holding down Mkatie while her husband beats her, since he is unable to disobey an order from his male master.

Mkatie

Mkatie is the narrator's sister and lifelong charge of John. When Mkatie goes away to school, she excels in sports but is not encouraged to be ambitious, since most girls are destined to be obedient wives. Mkatie marries a doctor, despite the advice of her mother and her fiancé's ex-girlfriend. During a party she holds for her in-laws, Mkatie discovers her husband in a homosexual act and later tells her sister that he is also exhibiting pedophilic behavior towards her son and his friends. Her husband starts to get violent with her, at one point throwing a glass at her and cutting her lip. Mkatie tries to escape the marriage, first by asking her sister to go to a lawyer for her, then through an affair with a Turkish man. However, when her lover sends her a letter, it is intercepted by her husband, who then tries to kill himself. Mkatie saves him, but he is only more violent towards her because of her affair, and he also starts to beat their children. One day, Mkatie has her husband pinned and thinks she has won. However, her husband orders John to help him, and John obeys, holding a shocked Mkatie down while her husband beats her.

Mkatie's Husband

Mkatie's husband has homosexual tendencies, and Mkatie's discovery of this ignites Mkatie's affair and leads to his subsequent abuse of his wife and children. When Mkatie first meets her husband, she is excited about the match, although neither her mother nor her fiancé's ex-girlfriend is happy about it. During a party for his family, Mkatie's husband has sex with a man, which Mkatie discovers. From this point on, he turns increasingly violent toward his wife and starts to exhibit pedophilic tendencies towards his son and his son's friends. When he discovers that his wife has had an affair, he tries to kill himself, but Mkatie saves him. After this, he turns even more violent, savagely

beating his children, although Mkatie puts up a fight. On one occasion, he calls to John for help and orders John to hold down Mkatie while he beats her with a belt.

Mkatie's Mother

The mother of Mkatie and the narrator spends most of her time in an alcoholic haze, trying to get over her husband's death. In the beginning of the story, Mkatie's mother runs the household, hiring mainly Zulu servants because she knows that they are loyal. However, when her husband dies, she closes down most of the house, fires all of the servants except John, and gets into the habit of drinking until she passes out. When Mkatie gets married, her mother retreats even further, moving to the cottage and letting Mkatie and her husband have the main house and John.

Mkatie's Son

Mkatie's son is the narrator's nephew, and he lives under the threat of abuse from his homosexual father, who also likes to touch his friends when they change to go in the pool.

Narrator

The narrator is Mkatie's sister, who uses her own experiences, as well as information she hears from Mkatie and others, to tell the story. Out of all of their Zulu servants, the narrator and Mkatie like John best, although John has a special relationship with Mkatie. The narrator notes that John has served as a mentor and teacher to her and Mkatie and that they did not see him much while they were at school. When the narrator is married and living overseas with her husband and children, she makes annual visits to see her mother and sister. After her sister marries, the narrator hears increasingly worse stories on her visits. Her sister tells the narrator about her husband's homosexual and pedophilic tendencies as well as his acts of violence towards Mkatie and their children. At the end of the story, the narrator imagines what her sister must have looked like during one specific instance when she was being beaten by her husband—as John was holding her down.

Themes

Betrayal

At the end of the story, John Mazaboko betrays Mkatie's trust by holding her down while her husband beats her. This is far different from the treatment that she has come to expect from John. All of her life, John has proved that he wishes to protect Mkatie. For example, as the narrator notes, he saves Mkatie's life when she is very young. "He was unusually tall, and so strong he was able to catch the ancient armoire when it fell forward and almost crushed my sister as a small child." In addition to protecting Mkatie and the narrator, John has also served as a guide and teacher, showing them how to ride their bicycles and telling them Zulu stories. When Mkatie accidentally breaks her parrot's wing, he puts the bird out of its misery. "He took its pulsing neck between his fingers and wrung it swiftly. 'Better like this,' he told her." Most importantly, John and Mkatie seem to share a connection, a bond that transcends friendship and love. Says the narrator: "Whenever he saw her, he would chuckle as though they shared some secret understanding." As a result, when Mkatie is fighting with her abusive husband, she is shocked when John comes to her husband's aid. "John grasped my sister and held her down. At first she struggled, called out to him, 'What are you doing!'" However, when she sees that their connection is broken, Mkatie gives up and lets John hold her down while her husband beats her.

Loyalty

Although it may seem strange, John's extreme loyalty to Mkatie's family is the reason why he restrains her in the end. John is a member of the Zulu people in South Africa. As the narrator notes in the beginning, her mother had always "preferred Zulu servants," because they "were obedient, conscientious, and fiercely loyal. Their society was built on loyalty." As noted above, John demonstrates his loyalty to the narrator and her sister, Mkatie, countless times. However, his loyalty to his supervisors is even stronger than his loyalty to the two girls. For example, even though he desires to protect the girls, he feels he must ask permission in certain circumstances. Says the narrator: "Mother said he could not bear to hear us cry when we were babies and would beg the severe Scottish nanny to allow him to hold us in his arms." Although his service to the two girls is enjoyable, his primary service—to the household—is degrading. In one instance, the Scottish nanny complains to John about a smelly cupboard. "Wrinkling her nose, she said, 'It smells Zulu.' He bent down from his great height onto his hands and knees and scrubbed the closet clean." In addition, John is constantly polishing everything in the house, "even the soles of shoes."

Through the decades of loyal service doing menial tasks such as these, John undergoes a transformation. When the narrator is a grown woman and comes to visit Mkatie, she notes the changed appearance of John, who is now the servant of Mkatie and her husband. John has "grown thinner over the years, his face more gaunt, as

though he had turned inward and was bent on polishing himself into oblivion. Life in that house had worn away at his spirit." The sole focus of John's life has become his loyalty to his work. In the process, he has become incapable of recognizing or acting on his other emotions, such as his love for Mkatie. Says the narrator: "His eyes had lost that glimmer of humor when he looked at my sister." John's loyalty to Mkatie was based only on love and other emotions, not duty. Without these emotions, all that John is left with is his cultural tradition to be loyal to his master. In the end, although it may be hard to believe, John is being loyal to his master—his male master—by holding down Mkatie. In this maledominated South African society, Mkatie's husband outranks Mkatie. As a result, when Mkatie's husband gives John a direct order—"'Do what I tell you. Put her on the bed'"—John has no choice but to follow it.

Kohler also includes examples of disloyalty in the story, through the extramarital affairs of Mkatie and her husband. When Mkatie marries her husband, she has no idea that he has homosexual tendencies until she catches him having sex with another man. Mkatie is so distraught at her husband's indiscretions that she eventually chooses to have an affair of her own.

Roles of Women

As noted above, Mkatie holds a secondary rank to her husband, a fact that ultimately results in John helping Mkatie's husband beat her. Mkatie is taught that women in general are considered subservient to men, and are expected to serve very limited roles that are defined by men. For example, Mkatie shows athletic prowess but is not encouraged to excel in sports or pursue her dreams of being a doctor because "ambition was not considered seemly for Christian girls." In the place of ambition, the girls' school that Mkatie and her sister attend teaches them "meekness," "obedience, diligence, and . . . loyalty." In addition, the narrator notes that there were limited options for women in this time period: "As our headmistress pointed out, most of us were destined to be mothers and wives." Because of this male-centric dynamic, women are not encouraged to speak out against men. When Mkatie is engaged to her husband, Mkatie's mother gets a call from a frantic ex-girlfriend, begging Mkatie's mother not to let Mkatie marry him. As Mkatie notes, "She just kept saying, *'Please don't let her marry him.'"* While readers may first take this as a sign that the other woman is jealous of Mkatie, what is more likely is that the woman is trying to protect Mkatie. This other woman most likely knows about Mkatie's future husband's homosexual tendencies or abusive behavior. However, in this male-dominated society, the woman would not feel comfortable speaking out against him directly and might, in fact, feel unsafe doing so.

Sex

Sex has a negative in this story. In the very beginning, the narrator says that one of the reasons why her mother preferred male Zulu servants was that they "did not fall pregnant." In addition, the narrator references one famous Zulu warrior who required all of his followers "to remain celibate until they were forty." When John, a Zulu himself,

accidentally runs into a naked Mkatie as she is coming out of the shower, the narrator notes that he "lifted his eyes to the ceiling and gasped in horror." One of the biggest taboos is premarital sex. The girls at the narrator's boarding school are normally not encouraged to compete, for fear that it will make them independent and rebellious in their relationships with men. However, a bigger fear is the loss of their virtue, and so the girls do compete in sports as way "to combat sexual urges." The story's two extramarital affairs are also depicted as negative. When Mkatie discovers her husband "on the floor, embracing another man," she is horrified. However, Mkatie chooses not to expose him because, as a she notes to the narrator, "'He would have been ruined, struck off the doctor rolls.'" Homosexuality is one of the strongest sexual taboos in this society. Instead of exposing her husband's homosexual act, Mkatie has her own taboo affair with a man in Turkey. The narrator notes: "When my sister arrived back home, her husband found a letter from the Turkish lover and cut his wrists." Although his suicide attempt is unsuccessful, it prompts the subsequent abuse of Mkatie and their children, which in turn leads to the story's negative ending.

Style

Point of View

The story uses a first-person narrator, Mkatie's sister. In first-person narratives, the story is told from the point of view of one character, who gives readers information based on what the narrator has seen or heard. In this case, the narrator talks about her sister's life. Throughout the story, the narrator seems very dispassionate, merely reporting events. Even the most emotionally charged scenes, such as the narrator's retelling of Mkatie's husband's pedophilic acts, are described in plain, understated terms. The narrator says: "My sister's husband made their boy exercise in the morning to keep slim. He had him do sit-ups and scrub his fair skin with a loofah in the bath." In another example, the narrator describes the condition of her sister's deteriorating marriage: "By then my sister was keeping the shutters down and sleeping for hours in the afternoons." These simple statements have large implications, but the narrator leaves readers to draw their own conclusions.

However, at the end, the narrator switches tactics, suddenly turning from straight reportage to a passionate, in-depth description of the scene in which Mkatie is beaten. This abrupt change is designed to increase readers' sense of surprise and their sympathy for Mkatie. Says the narrator, "I imagine her lying on the blue silk counterpane, her face swollen as if she has soaked up water." This is a very lyrical description of Mkatie's face and is the first of many. The narrator also discusses the flush "that spreads over her cheeks like a stain," her "small chin" that "trembles," and eyes that are "as soft a blue as the silk beneath her." This is imagery that is imagined by the narrator, and it all builds up to the last sentence. Says the narrator: "The white *baas* takes off his belt and beats her across her legs, her breasts, her face." The narrator uses the contrast between the very personal, sympathetic description of Mkatie and the generic description of Mkatie's husband as the "white baas" to shock readers. This shock intensifies through the methodical style of the beating, which starts out bad, hitting "her legs," gets worse, hitting "her breasts," and finally gets to the worst part of all, "her face"—the same face that was just described in sympathetic detail by the narrator.

Setting

The physical setting is very important to the story. "Africans" takes place in South Africa, where the Zulus are a native people. Since the plot hinges on the effects of John's Zulu heritage, the story would not be as effective in any other location. There is an established history between the Zulu and white people in South Africa, and this story draws on that history. The temporal setting is equally as important. The story takes place over a long period of time, a fact that the narrator comments on near the end of the story, when she is trying to keep the specific details of her annual visits straight. "All those visits, year after year, have run into one another." Using a long period of time to

tell the story is an effective method, because it shows the long-term effects of too much loyalty without humanity by demonstrating John's part in the beating of his once-beloved Mkatie.

Imagery

The story makes use of many images, the majority of which suggest ideas of war and violence— a suitable imagery for the tumultuous South Africa setting. In some cases, these images of violence are very clear, as in the description of the Zulu warrior culture from the past. "There was the cruel Shaka, who armed his men with short stabbing spears," says the narrator. The use of the word "stabbing" especially calls to mind images of violence. In addition, when the narrator talks about how Mkatie's husband starts to abuse his children, she notes that he "beat the children with a belt, especially the boy, broke his bones. He beat the eldest girl unconscious." Even John's mercy killing of Mkatie's parrot is described in violent terms: "He took its pulsing neck between his fingers and wrung it swiftly."

Kohler also uses many images of blood in the story, starting, once again, with the description of the brutal Zulu kings, "who conquered much territory in a series of bloody wars." In addition, Mkatie recounts an incident where she found her husband planting cabbages in the middle of the night. His response is violent and bloody: "He had thrown a glass at her, cutting her lip, the blood streaming down her chin." In fact, Mkatie's husband himself provides one of the bloodiest images, when he tries to commit suicide. Says the narrator: "All the children stood in a hushed circle with John at the bottom of the stairs and watched the blood running down their father's hands."

In other cases, the violence and war imagery is subtler, such as when the narrator describes bottles of champagne at a party, "which were lined up like soldiers on a field of damask." Following this description, the narrator makes note of John's "white uniform and the red sash with the tassel." At an earlier point in the story, the narrator associates this red tassel with John's Zulu warrior heritage, while describing what male Zulu servants wear. Says the narrator: "Red sashes ran slantwise across their chests from shoulder to waist and ended in tassels that dangled on their hips like decorations of valor." At one point, even the ground outside the servants' quarters is described as "red." Collectively, this use of the color red, a color commonly associated with violence and war, serves to underscore the brutal nature of the story.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing Like her narration and some of her imagery, Kohler's use of foreshadowing—giving clues to future events—is very subtle in this story. When readers get to the end of the story, they may be shocked when John betrays his friendship with Mkatie. However, Kohler does offer some indications in the story that John might do this. In the beginning, John is a mentor to the two girls, who treat him like a mentor, not a black servant. When Mkatie is an adult, John tries to maintain this relationship but is

slowly shut out by Mkatie. This starts even while Mkatie is away at school. Says the narrator: "My sister dreamed that she had passed John on the stairs without knowing who he was." Later, after school, Mkatie tells John and the narrator that she is going to marry a doctor. "'You said you wanted to be a doctor, Mkatie,' John reminded her, and chuckled." John is trying to give Mkatie advice, showing her that she has set aside her own goals, but Mkatie completely ignores John's comment and goes on talking. At the end of this conversation, "John stared down at the toothbrush in his hand," recognizing that he is only a servant and that his advice and opinions no longer matter. This shunning of John continues throughout the story. John is not invited to Mkatie's wedding and is not consulted when Mkatie decides that he will move in and perform housekeeping for her and her new husband. John begins to focus only on work and following orders. As a result, when Mkatie's husband tries to kill himself, John is powerless to stop it. "John clucked his tongue and shook his head and did what he was asked to do." By the end of the story, when Mkatie's husband tells John—"'Do what I tell you. Put her on the bed.'"—John is once again powerless to do anything but obey.

Historical Context

The First Free Elections in South Africa

"Africans" was first published in 1998, four years after the first one-person, one-vote, nonracial free election in South Africa. In this election, Nelson Mandela, a black South African who had been imprisoned for twenty-seven years on political charges, was elected president. This event occurred after centuries of racial unrest and inequality in South Africa, which culminated in the twentieth century in the institution of apartheid, a strict system of racial segregation and oppression that came into being in the 1940s.

World War I and the Beginning of Apartheid

Racial segregation and discrimination had existed in one form or another in South Africa for hundreds of years. However, it was not until the 1940s that these practices were formalized into a complete system. When World War II broke out in 1939, South Africa, as an official member of the British empire, took up arms with the Allies against German forces in Africa. However, many Afrikaners—who had relied on German support during their fight for independence in the South African War (1899-1902)—did not support this move. In addition to Germany's prior support, many Afrikaners identified heavily with Germany's pro-Nazi, white supremacist policies. As a result, several Afrikaners split off from the South African government into a new political party, known as the Herenigde (Reunited) National Party, or HNP. At the same time, despite the attempts of segregationists to separate the races, the wartime production effort rapidly increased the number of nonwhite workers, especially blacks, in the cities. This influx of urban blacks, coupled with the rise of militant, nonwhite trade unions that were partly inspired by the Communist Party, alarmed whites.

The HNP tapped into this public fear. In the 1948 election, while the incumbent United Party structured its campaign on the idea that segregation of the races was impossible, the HNP won on a platform of apartheid, a word that means "apartness" in Afrikaans, the Dutch-based language of Afrikaners. Although the HNP lost the popular vote, it won the electoral college vote. Because of the weak victory of the HNP, later known simply as the National Party, the new prime minister, Daniel Malan, rapidly introduced apartheid legislation that would show immediate improvement in the lives of whites. In this way, his party could ensure its win of the next election.

Early Apartheid Legislation

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Malan government passed several legislative acts designed to increase the power and privilege of whites, segregate the races, and remove the ability of nonwhites to fight these changes. These included the 1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the 1950 Immorality Act, which collectively prevented interracial marriage or sexual relations. However, two other laws passed in

1950 had the greatest long-term effect. The Population Registration Act classified all South Africans as one of three categories— white, colored (mixed race), or native (black Africans; later referred to as Bantu)—while the Group Areas Act segregated urban business and residential areas by race and gave the best land to whites. The civil rights of nonwhites were increasingly limited or ignored, and, as the years passed, the overwhelming majority of South African land was given to whites. By law, nonwhites were required to remain separate from their white masters. While this idea worked in theory, in practice it did not make sense. Even though white South Africans owned most of the land and controlled the economy, they were still a minority in numbers, heavily outnumbered by blacks, whom they needed as cheap labor in their homes and businesses.

The African Resistance to Apartheid

Despite their oppression and the systematic removal of their rights, nonwhites fought back through resistance organizations like the multiracial African National Congress (ANC), which included some whites as members. These organizations used methods of opposition, such as strikes and boycotts, which were often met with violent consequences from the government. In 1959, several ANC members left to form a strictly black resistance organization, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which, in 1960, began to organize many public protests. On March 21, 1960, at one of the first of these demonstrations, thousands of blacks gathered peacefully outside a police station in Sharpeville to protest South Africa's pass laws, which required nonwhites to carry—and be prepared to present to any authority figure at any time—a set of detailed documents. These included a photograph, racial classification, fingerprints, and government-sanctioned rights of movement within the country. As a constant reminder of their white oppressors, these passes were a sensitive issue with many blacks, who were often harassed—even in their homes—by whites. The protesting blacks arrived at Sharpeville's police station without passes, attempting to be arrested en masse in an effort to clog the South African prison system while at the same time weakening South Africa's workforce by their absence. The Sharpeville demonstration turned violent when the police, nervous at the prospect of a black uprising, opened fire on the protesters. Almost 70 blacks were killed and more than 180 were injured.

International Censure

The Sharpeville incident focused worldwide attention on South Africa's apartheid system. In 1960, South Africa was banned from the Olympics, and in 1961, to the shock and dismay of white South African leaders, Albert John Lutuli, a Zulu chieftain and then-president of the ANC, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts in the struggle against the apartheid system. However, international censure did not faze South Africa, whose government voted in 1961 to become an independent republic, separate from the British Commonwealth. The government continued to intimidate and harass nonwhite residents, especially activists. As David Goodman notes in his 1999 book, *Fault Lines: Journeys into the New South Africa:* "Local police had sweeping

authority in the black townships, and they routinely harassed, brutalized, and even killed activists at will." Other incidents, including the mass killing of protesters in Soweto in 1976 and the murder of popular resistance leader Steven Biko in 1977, further helped to increase international pressure on South Africa, which eventually began to feel the strain of economic and other sanctions.

Critical Overview

"Africans" was included in 1999 in Kohler's *One Girl: A Novel in Stories,* a book that was not heavily reviewed. However, those who did review the book reacted positively. Some reviewers discuss the definition of the book and decide that it is more short story collection than novel, despite the book's title. Says the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly,* "This collection is a novel only in the most metaphorical sense, but that suits a book in which so much is accomplished by implication and suggestion." Likewise, in her review of the book for the New York Times, Sarah Saffian notes: "This is ultimately a story collection and not a novel . . . because while the threads running through do intertwine, her story lines are left tantalizingly unresolved."

Reviewers also note Kohler's skilled use of language. *The Publishers Weekly* reviewer calls the language "lush" and says that it "belies a sense of menace." Saffian calls Kohler's language "spare and haunting," saying that her "descriptions sing in their lyrical precision; at turns crisp and languid, they are always sensual, and often sexual." Reviewers also identify Kohler's use of narration to reveal the story. In her review of the book for *Library Journal,* Barbara Hoffert says that "these stories are told glancingly, without the burden of too many facts, allowing the complexity and occasional harshness of human interaction to come through." Likewise, Saffian says that Kohler "spools out information gradually, selecting what to reveal and what to keep hidden." On a similar note, Hoffert notes that, while "Kohler is not explicitly political in her writing . . . by capturing the power plays that define human relationships, she suggests the brutality of regimes like apartheid South Africa."

Most discuss the book as a whole, although some talk about "Africans" in particular. Hoffert gives the story a brief mention, focusing on Mkatie as "a wife shocked to discover her husband in another man's embrace and thereafter subject to his abuse." *The Publishers Weekly reviewer* gives "Africans" the biggest praise, calling it "the collection's strongest story."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Kohler's political and historical subtext in "Africans."

Kohler's "Africans" is actually two stories. On the surface, it is a powerful story about the betrayal of a white woman by her beloved African servant. However, for those who are familiar with the complex political history of South Africa, it yields much more. In her review of *One Girl: A Novel in Stories for Library Journal,* Barbara Hoffert notes: "Kohler is not explicitly political in her writing, yet implicitly, by capturing the power plays that define human relationships, she suggests the brutality of regimes like apartheid South Africa." In fact, upon further analysis, one can see that Kohler does much more than suggest the brutality of apartheid. Through the story's subtext, Kohler examines the crippling effects of apartheid through the study of John and his oppressed life.

So, how does one dig through the layers of the story to find this political subtext? The surface story provides several openings, but they may not be apparent to readers at first, given the narrative structure of the story. The narrator tells Mkatie's story in a series of flashbacks, starting with their early childhood and working forward in time, narrating the story in small, self-contained episodes. This episodic narration speeds up the pacing of the story, which makes it harder for readers to slow down and see the historical clues.

However, when one deliberately slows down and starts to examine the story in-depth, its emphasis on South Africa's political history becomes apparent. In the very first sentence, the narrator says: "Mother preferred Zulu servants." Right away, Kohler offers a depiction of history as compared to current events. The Zulu people, who were once mighty warriors, are now servants as a result of colonization of South Africa by white settlers. For those not familiar with the Zulu warrior heritage, Kohler gives historical background, disguised as an introduction to the character of John Mazaboko. The historical instruction begins with the second sentence: "She said they had been disciplined warriors." They had been warriors, but this is part of their long-lost history; now they are servants.

This is the first of many historical events that, on the surface, appear to be there only to advance the plot but which actually have deeper political implications when viewed as subtext. In fact, Kohler goes to great lengths to establish the importance of history. From her starting point of the Zulu nation, which prospered in the 1800s, she tells a story that ends in the second half of the twentieth century. This is a long time span for such a short story, especially one that, at first, seems to deal only with the life of one small family. Even the generic title of the story, "Africans," suggests that there is a broader historical context to the story. The title could be referring to any, or all, of the South African groups that are featured in the story - whites, blacks, or Afrikaners - since they all reside in Africa.

If history is so important to Kohler, why make it subtext? The answer appears to lie in one of the narrator's lines. When the narrator is describing her experience at the boarding school, she says: "we read nineteenth-century authors and studied history that stopped before the First World War, which was considered too recent to be taught objectively." While this statement may at first appear to be an indication that the narrator's school is merely behind the times, the implications go deeper than that. At this point in the story, the narrator and Mkatie are attending school during South Africa's apartheid years. One of the Afrikaner government's tactics during these years was to sugarcoat the more questionable aspects of apartheid in an effort to gain more support. By not teaching their schoolgirls about recent history - which is saturated with black oppression - the boarding school is using a similar tactic.

As the story progresses, the initial discussion of the mighty Zulu warrior society serves as a constant contrast to the present condition of Zulus like John. In Shaka's warrior society, Zulu loyalty was tested in many ways: by making soldiers travel "barefoot for greater speed and mobility," making them "remain celibate until they were forty," and, in some cases, making them "walk off a cliff." All of these tasks, even the self-sacrificial acts, have noble connotations, which have disappeared from modern day life for a servant Zulu. John's cultural tradition taught him to be extremely loyal, which in the past would have been used to mold him into a better warrior, but which today is exploited for menial tasks. In fact, on one occasion, he must clean a smelly cupboard, directly following an ethnic slur on his heritage by the Scottish nanny: "Wrinkling her nose, she said, 'It smells Zulu.' He bent down from his great height onto his hands and knees and scrubbed the closet clean."

This is not the only time that John bends down in the story - another sign of his conquered status. His head is also "bent" when he polishes silver. In fact, when John sees the narrator's little girl, he bows down before her as if she is royalty. *"'Nkosazana,'* he said, addressing my daughter with the Zulu title of honor and bowing his head, holding her hand." Through invocations like this, one never loses sight of John's Zulu heritage in the story. In some cases, the narrator even references John in masculine, warrior-like ways, although they inevitably have domestic associations. For example: "He was unusually tall, and so strong he was able to catch the ancient armoire when it fell forward and almost crushed my sister as a small child." John's strength, a quality that would serve him well in tribal war, is here being used to save the child of his white master.

In another instance, the servant uniform worn by John and other Zulus is described in distinctly war-like terms. "Red slashes ran slantwise across their chests from shoulder to waist and ended in tassels that dangled on their hips like decorations of valor." However, this flashy uniform is only meant to please their white masters' desire that servants look presentable when "they served at table." Even John's attempts at passing on his cultural heritage fail. When they are little girls, the narrator and Mkatie hear stories from John, such as one about "the Tokolosh, the evil spirit who lived in the fish pond at the bottom of the garden." If John were able to live with his own family, he would pass these stories down to his own children, spreading his culture to the next generation. However, when the two white girls grow up to be women, they promptly

dismiss John and his advice, so his stories ultimately fall on deaf ears, and he is unable to pass on his traditions.

In the end, however, Kohler's two stories - the top layer and the subtext - act as mirror images to each other. Both stories examine the effects of oppression. In the top layer, Mkatie chooses marriage over her initial plan to be a doctor and becomes increasingly more dependent on and fearful of her Afrikaner husband. In fact, when the narrator is discussing their experiences at school, she hints at the connection between Mkatie and John. Says the narrator: "We were taught meekness - for the meek would inherit the earth - as well as obedience, diligence, and, like the Zulus, loyalty."

However, there is an important distinction between the plights of Mkatie and John. If she chose, Mkatie could go to a lawyer for a divorce or have her husband's homosexuality exposed. When John is not around, she can also fight back against her husband. For John, these are not options. Because of the laws of apartheid, John is destined to be a servant until he dies. Even the fact that he must call Mkatie's husband "baas" reinforces his subservient status. As David Goodman explains in his 1999 book, *Fault Lines: Journeys into the New South Africa:* "Whites insisted that blacks address them as baas (boss) in perpetual acknowledgment of their mastery." For John, it does not matter by the end of the story, anyway, since his individual spirit has been burned out of him through years of menial service. In the end, the oppressive nature of the apartheid regime turns him into a robot, incapable of doing anything but adhering to his duties.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Africans," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

White is a Seattle-based publisher and editor. In this essay, White argues that Kohler's story must be read both literally and allegorically.

"Africans," by South African writer Sheila Kohler, is, at its heart, an allegory of power relations between individuals in a colonial setting. While the story can be appreciated on the level of its narrower, literal meaning, its characters and the struggles they wage are representative, to varying degrees, of the struggles of any colonial setting in the world where power was afforded and institutionally prescribed along the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. For a full appreciation of "Africans," one must read the story both literally and allegorically.

story both literally and allegorically.

To understand the story's literal dimensions, one must first have a general knowledge of South Africa's system of apartheid and the way that system impacts Kohler's characters.

"Africans" is narrated by a white South African woman who is recollecting a series of events that take place over a period of years and that are related to her sister, her sister's husband, and John Mazaboko, a family servant. Mazaboko, a man of Zulu heritage (one of the several ethnic groups that comprise the country's black population), has been with the family since the narrator's childhood and is described in glowing terms as a father figure to the narrator and her sister. The narration opens in the years following World War II, just as the South African government was embarking on what was one of the most ambitious policies of racial segregation the world had yet seen. "Apartheid," which comes from the Dutch and literally means "separateness," went far beyond the Jim Crow laws of the pre-civil rights United States and was perhaps second only to Nazi Germany's racial policies in the breadth and scope of its racial goals.

As this narration opens, South Africans are being legally forced to register according to their race ("white," "black," or "colored"), and laws are being passed that sanction "white-only" jobs, prohibit interracial marriages, and force blacks to carry "passes" on their persons that dictate where and under what conditions they are allowed to travel or work. So-called "homelands" are being established for specific ethnicities of the black population; a person of Zulu heritage such as Mazaboko, for instance, would very likely be relegated by law to living in the KwaZulu Natal homeland, with fine or imprisonment being the penalty for traveling outside of that area without the proper paperwork. In Mazaboko's particular case, however, because he is a domestic servant, his paperwork would allow him the "freedom" to live in white areas during the terms of his employment; losing that job would most likely mean losing that "privilege."

Despite blacks being the overwhelming majority of the population during apartheid's four-decade rule, they had no voting rights, and the vast majority of them lived in abject poverty. Economic and political power was held by whites of British and Dutch origin. This situation provided South African business with cheap labor, and it provided most

white South African families of even working class means with extremely cheap servants for their households or farms.

As the story progresses, apartheid plays a growing and increasingly ominous role behind the story's scenes, and it will have a tremendous impact in the way Mazaboko conducts himself in the story.

The family's economic background also plays a determining role in the characters' lives, particularly the lives of the sisters. Although there is no direct discussion of the family's economic status, readers are given several hints that it is of at least upper middle-class standing: the narrator and her sister are educated in English-style boarding schools, and when the narrator's sister is married, we are told that the mother complained that the man's family was "common."

The sister's fiancé is, in fact, an Afrikaner. Afrikaners are South Africans of Dutch descent, and most are farmers or members of the working class, known for their religious and political conservatism and most noted for their staunch support of the apartheid system.

Kohler assumes a knowledge of these various social constructs, and during the discussion the narrator, her sister, and Mazaboko have about the sister's fiancé, Kohler relies on this knowledge as she foretells the story's ultimate conflict.

The sister has just described her future husband's ethnic and economic background when the narrator asks her, "What is he like?"

"Frank," the sister responds, and with a hint of what looms before all of them, she adds, "Brutally frank. It's refreshing. Do you know what I mean?"

The narrator nods her head at this, and she describes Mazaboko's response as simply "star[ing] down at the toothbrush in his hand."

Without an understanding of apartheid, one could not grasp the sense of fatalism inherent in Mazaboko's gesture. While the narrator has certainly made a strong case for the servant's "loyalty" in the opening paragraphs of the story, even if that case is largely based on white stereotypes of Zulus, and while one wouldn't necessarily question the man's commitment to the family or to his job, the fact is that with the sister's impending marriage, Mazaboko knows that he'll be sent to work for the sister and her new husband, and he also knows that while working in the service of any white family is one thing, being relegated to the service of an Afrikaner, and a "brutally frank" one at that, will be quite another. Mazaboko's life is about to change, and all he can do if he wants to retain the "security" of his position is to act the "loyal" servant that he is and accept the changes without question.

As it turns out, it is not only Mazaboko's life that is about to undergo a radical transformation; shortly after her marriage, the sister discovers her husband has strong homosexual and pedophilic predilections that he acts upon. Her initial response is to protect her husband from public scrutiny; analogous to Mazaboko's response, she

remains silent, for if she speaks out, her husband's professional standing, and by extension her own social status and economic well-being, will be destroyed.

As the story progresses, Kohler steadily builds around her characters a box constructed of the hardwoods of economic, racial, and sexual determinism. Mazaboko, described by the narrator several years into the sister's marriage as a much thinner man with a "face more gaunt" and a spirit that has been "torn away" by his service to that household, has chosen to accept his fate and continue with the sister and her husband. Similarly, the sister, who was taught "meekness" as young school girl, and who was told by her headmistress that she and her classmates were "destined to be mothers and wives," suffers in silence. The narrator sparingly describes the sister during this time as "keeping the shutters down and sleeping for hours in the afternoons."

But when the husband's cruelty turns physical, the sister steps outside of Kohler's box and acts in her own defense, and for a brief moment, in the story's climactic scene, she is able to gain an upper hand. Unfortunately for her, Mazaboko knows perfectly well where his future meals will come from, and when he is forced by his master to choose between the powerless white woman he helped to raise from birth and the white man who will break him without a second thought if given the chance, Mazaboko reluctantly chooses the husband. Spending his "golden years" destitute in the streets or worse is not an appealing thought.

While this analysis of "Africans" is predicated on an understanding of the apartheid system, this story could easily have been set, with some minor revisions, in virtually any colonial setting. Apartheid was but one extension of the colonial rule that Africa, and much of the Third World, suffered under through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and mid-twentieth centuries. *Colonial rule* means the process by which (mainly European) powers, or *colonialists,* took economic and political control of local populations primarily through military means and enforced laws that helped them retain their power. Political and economic advantages were often prescribed along racial and ethnic lines; virtually every colonial power was "white," while the colonized were universally "non-white." Every country that was colonized had countless "Mazabokos," along with variations of all the issues and conflicts expressed in "Africans." In Africa, these dynamics of power began to shift starting in the 1950s, and apartheid, which was finally abolished in 1990s, was one of the final colonial hold-outs.

In the final scene in "Africans," Kohler has constructed the archetypal struggle for power at the height of colonial rule between the relatively powerless white woman, the seemingly omniscient white man, and the virtually helpless black man.

So what exactly is Kohler saying? Is she stating that it's a "man's world," and that males, regardless of their race, have power over women? Or is she suggesting that it's more particularly a "white man's world," and that to survive, black men must continually compromise, even at the expense of the ones they love and are loyal to? Or is her view more narrow than either of these summations: should "Africans" be read less allegorically and more literally as a reminiscence of one particular South African's experiences?

As to the story's larger meaning, it would be wise to start with the title for an answer. If the story were meant to be particularized to this narrator's experiences, Kohler would have chosen a more specific title such as "My Sister and John Mazaboko." Even the title "South Africans" would narrow its meaning to a greater extent, but the title "Africans" is a very clear indication that at the very least Kohler intended that the story's full meaning be read far beyond the attributes her narrator is able to give it and beyond the boundaries of South Africa itself.

More evidence that points towards an allegorical reading is the fact that none of the characters, with the exception of Mazaboko, is named: the narrator, the sister, the husband, their children, and the mother all remain nameless throughout the story and have all effectively become representatives of their roles in society. And Mazaboko, by virtue of the in-depth introduction of his Zulu heritage that Kohler give us, comes to represent the displaced and exploited black African in this allegory: a man steeped in heritage but who can only reach back for that heritage to serve the white household, or the white colonialist. Colonial powers relied heavily on their "Mazabokos" to help strengthen their hold on power.

As for the questions of interpretation, the answers can be found in the story's final scene. As the husband is being overpowered by the sister, he calls out to his servant for help. Mazaboko responds "swiftly and silently," as usual, but when he enters the room, he stops. Kohler makes a point to emphasize Mazaboko's hesitation before he continues to the bed.

It is not insignificant that Mazaboko, a man, assists the husband in beating the woman, just as it is not insignificant that the narrator and her sister attended a boarding school where the girls were educated to become good "mothers and wives." The world Kohler is describing is clearly a "man's world," but Mazaboko's hesitation, coupled with the earlier descriptions of him becoming "gaunt" and "spiritless" as a result of his service to the sister and her husband, point to a more definite conclusion that the world which she is describing is, above everything else, a "white man's world."

"Africans" takes place in a time and place that no longer exists; apartheid is gone, and ours is a post-colonial world. What Kohler has done in this story is to distill, in a few brief pages, the essence of what characters caught up in colonialism experienced in their struggles to survive.

Source: Mark White, Critical Essay on "Africans," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

The Best American Short Stories 1999, which includes the story "Africans," was adapted as an audiobook in 1999. It is available on four audiocassettes from Mariner Books. "Africans" is read by Kohler.

Topics for Further Study

Research the similarities and differences between slavery and apartheid and plot these comparisons on a two-column page. Find at least five civilizations from any time in history that have used slaves and try to identify at least one that has implemented apartheid-like conditions. Give a short description of each of these civilizations.

Find a non-African culture that has been affected by racial segregation. Research this culture and compare it with the South African culture of apartheid in the last half of the twentieth century. Write a script for a conversation between a black South African and a member of this other culture, in which they discuss what their lives are like.

Research the South African legal system in the mid to late twentieth century and re-enact any of the famous trials of anti-apartheid leaders in this time. For areas in which there is no record of the actual words used in the trial, try to imagine what might have been said, using your research to support your ideas.

Research what life was like for a black servant in South Africa from the 1940s to the 1970s and compare this to John's life in the story. Imagine that you are a servant in similar conditions, and write a journal entry describing your typical day.

At the end of the story, John betrays Mkatie, who then submits to a beating by her husband. Research cases of domestic abuse in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, and write a one-page description about what you think would happen next in the story. Use your research to support your ideas.

Research the travel habits of housewives during the 1960s and 1970s in South Africa and compare this information to Kohler's depiction of Mkatie's solo travels to Rome and Turkey. Discuss freedoms and restrictions that these women faced while traveling abroad.

Compare and Contrast

1940s and 1950s: In 1948, Daniel Malan and the National Party institute apartheid, a legalized system of separation and oppression, which gives preference to white - especially Afrikaner - interests.

1960s and 1970s: The disenfranchising effects of apartheid galvanize South African resistance groups, some of which exchange their nonviolent approaches for a move to militant opposition. The South African government kills or imprisons many resistance leaders, including Nelson Mandela, the head of the African National Congress, who in 1964 is sentenced to life in prison. In 1977, Steve Biko, the originator of the Black Consciousness resistance movement, dies from massive head injuries inflicted during his interrogation by the police.

Today: Following the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, Mandela successfully wins the presidency in 1994 and serves until 1999. During his presidency, Mandela takes the first steps to reverse the effects of apartheid, but tensions remain between some ethnic groups.

1940s and 1950s: Hendrik Verwoerd, a pro-Afrikaner extremist, is appointed minister of affairs in the South African government in 1950. The ruthless policies that he introduces quickly distinguish him as an icon of apartheid. When he experiences opposition from the Native Representative Council on his plan to place Bantu education under his auspices - thereby limiting blacks' ability to educate themselves enough to challenge the government - Verwoerd works quickly to abolish the council.

1960s and 1970s: Verwoerd's zeal becomes even greater during his rule as South Africa's prime minister from 1958 to 1966. Despite international condemnation, Verwoerd, who becomes known as *Die Rots* (The Rock), brutally crushes resistance efforts and orchestrates the separation of South Africa from the United Kingdom. In 1966, Verwoerd is stabbed to death by a light-skinned, multiracial parliamentary member who is passing as a white man.

Today: Wilhelm Verwoerd Jr., the grandson of Hendrik Verwoerd, shocks his family and Afrikaner countrymen as well as the world, when he becomes a member of the multiracial African National Congress in 1992. During the late 1990s, he works for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to help research, write, and edit the official TRC report on the lasting legacy of his grandfather's apartheid policies.

1940s and 1950s: With the exception of the Dutch Reformed churches - the main church of Afrikaners - most white Christian leaders in South Africa denounce the introduction of apartheid.

1960s and 1970s: In 1961, the Dutch Reformed Church withdraws from the World Council of Churches. In an effort to give biblical justification to its government's

apartheid system, the church commissions several studies. Nevertheless, apartheid becomes a controversial issue within the Dutch Reformed churches.

Today: Following a reversal of thinking in the 1980s, the Dutch Reformed church now denounces its former pro-apartheid stance and condemns apartheid as a sin.

What Do I Read Next?

Chinua Achebe is one of the most acclaimed novelists from Nigeria, a republic in West Africa. Achebe published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart,* in 1958, two years before Nigeria's declaration of independence from Great Britain. The novel, which Achebe wrote in English so that it would receive greater exposure, details the culture of the Ibo society at the end of the nineteenth century and shows the chaotic effects of colonialism.

(Harold) Athol Fugard, a white South African who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, attempted to resist the racist tendencies practiced by many other whites at this time. However, at one point, he made his black servants call him Master Harold and even spit in the face of one servant who had always treated him like a friend. Fugard, who grew up to become one of South Africa's most noted anti-apartheid writers, later dramatized the spitting incident in his play, *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys* (1982).

Kohler's Cracks: A Novel (1999) is an expansion of the short story "Cracks" from *One Girl: A Novel in Stories.* The story takes place in a South African boarding school. The book uses multiple middle-age narrators, including one named after the author. They collectively tell the tale in a series of flashbacks, in which they remember the horrible acts they committed in an effort to gain favor with their swimming coach.

Kohler's first novel, *The Perfect Place* (1989), tells the story of a wealthy middle-aged woman whose lover forces her to dredge up harrowing memories from her childhood in South Africa.

Rian Malan's family name is notorious, since one of his relatives institutionalized apartheid in 1948. Malan, an Afrikaner crime reporter, rebelled against his heritage and became a black sympathizer in his youth; however, when the violence in South Africa escalated in the 1970s, he left to avoid having to carry a gun for either side. In 1985, Malan returned to South Africa and began to re-investigate crime stories he had written about in the 1970s. In his book *My Traitor's Heart: A South African Exile Returns to Face His Country, His Tribe, and His Conscience* (1990), Malan discusses many of these violent stories, giving readers a brutal view of the effects of apartheid.

Nelson Mandela, a black leader of the African National Congress (a banned anti-apartheid organization), was sentenced to spend life in prison in 1964. As violence in South Africa increased in the 1970s and 1980s and the worldwide community began to condemn apartheid, Mandela's status as a political prisoner increased, and both local and international groups demanded his release. After he was finally released in 1990, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and, in 1994, during South Africa's first free elections, he was elected president. *In Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (1994), he tells the story of his tribal childhood, his political involvement, his imprisonment, and his life since his release.

Mark Mathabane grew up in a black ghetto outside Johannesburg, South Africa, where he and his family were subjected to crushing poverty, starvation, gang violence, and mistreatment by the police. Despite these conditions, Mathabane beat the odds, taught himself English, graduated at the top of his class, and earned a tennis scholarship to Limestone College in South Carolina. In his autobiography, *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* (1986), Mathabane details the horrors of his early life in South Africa.

Further Study

Hurford, Elaine, *Southern Africa Revealed: South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique,* Bookworld Services, 2000.

Hurford's photographic journal of southern Africa includes photos of the distinctive landscapes, wildlife, and cultures in the five title nations. Each section also includes a short history of the region.

Kanfer, Stefan, *The Last Empire: De Beers, Diamonds, and the World,* Noonday Press, 1995.

In the late nineteenth century, diamond and gold discoveries in South Africa forever changed the landscape, economy, and culture. People came from all over the world seeking their fortunes and increasing the spread of colonialism in South Africa, and Africans flocked to the mines to find work. As production methods became more sophisticated, corporations were formed to attract international investors. The biggest of these, the De Beers Consolidated Mines, helped reinforce the types of racial segregation among its workforce that would set the stage for twentieth century apartheid. Kanfer gives the history of De Beers which today controls a percentage of the worldwide sale of diamonds.

Lyman, Princeton N., *Partner to History: The U.S. Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy,* United States Institute of Peace, 2002.

Lyman, who was the United States ambassador to South Africa from 1992 to 1995, discusses the intricate process that was required to convert the apartheid state to a democracy. In particular, Lyman explains how the United States used its influence and resources to help assure that this was a peaceful transition.

Morris, Donald R., *The Washing of the Spears: The Rise of the Zulu Nation under Shaka and Its Fall in the Zulu War of 1879,* Da Capo Press, 1998.

Morris gives a history of the Zulu Nation, from its rise in the early nineteenth century to the crumbling of the Zulu empire during the late nineteenth century. The book details many battle scenes and features many illustrations.

Welsh, Frank, *South Africa: A Narrative History,* Kodansha International, 1999.

Welsh gives a history of South Africa from the arrival of the first white settlers to the end of Nelson Mandela's presidency. The book covers the famous events, such as the Great Trek and the Boer War, but also covers lesser-known events that have had a historical impact on the development of South Africa. Welsh draws on previously unpublished source material and his own background in international business to help tell the story.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board memberseducational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

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

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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