Astronomer's Wife Study Guide

Astronomer's Wife by Kay Boyle

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Contents

Introduction

Kay Boyle's story "Astronomer's Wife" is a brief exploration of a woman's dissatisfaction with her husband and her life. The 1936 collection in which the story appeared, *The White Horses of Vienna and Other Stories,* was hailed almost unanimously by critics as a masterpiece and as evidence of an artist at the height of her powers, and the story demonstrates Boyle's maturity and subtlety as a writer. The protagonist, identified only as Mrs. Ames, is transformed in a small but profound way by her encounter with the plumber who comes to fix her house's clogged drain. The ordinariness and unremarkable nature of the action, and its deep emotional resonance, have deep similarities to the Joycean "epiphany" form of fiction while being at the same time striking in their originality.

Author Biography

Like many other members of the famous Lost Generation of American writers who inhabited Paris in the 1920s, Kay Boyle was born to a middle-class family in the Midwest—in her case, to the Boyle family of St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1902. Boyle's family was intellectually active and exposed her to avant-garde art early in her life—she even attended the famous Armory Show in New York in 1913. When she was twenty years old and living in New York, Boyle married a French exchange student, Richard Brault, and in 1923 moved to France with her new husband. By this time, Boyle was deeply involved in the avant-garde literary scene in New York, and while in France, she fell in with the American writers and publishers of Paris—especially Ernest Walsh, who edited *This Quarter.* By 1926, Boyle had left Brault and moved in with Walsh, whose child she bore soon afterwards. But Walsh died of a lung ailment just before their daughter was born.

Returning, despondent, to Brault in 1927, she quickly left him again to join an artists' colony run by Raymond Duncan, brother of the famed dancer Isadora Duncan. The colony revealed itself to be almost a cult, and Boyle—by this time definitively severed from Brault—moved back to Paris and began to work with husband-and-wife publishers the Crosbys and began to see the artist Laurence Vail. She had become a well-known writer by this time and was publishing in many of the most important journals of the day. During the 1930s, Boyle lived with Vail in England, Austria, and France until returning to the United States in 1941. She divorced Vail soon after and married Joseph Franckenstein, an Austrian aristocrat. She and her new husband returned to Europe where Boyle continued to write as a journalist for the *New Yorker* and the *Nation.*

In 1953, Boyle and her husband returned to the United States in an attempt to clear their names of the McCarthy-era smears that had been laid on them. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Boyle and Franckenstein remained in the United States, writing and also teaching at private schools. Franckenstein died in 1963. At this point, Boyle became deeply involved in feminist, civil rights, and antiwar movements while teaching at various colleges and universities and remained active in these causes for the rest of her life. She died in December of 1992.

Plot Summary

"Astronomer's Wife" begins with Mrs. Katherine Ames waking up in the villa in which she lives. She calls for the "girl," her maidservant, to bring her some coffee, and she begins to think about her husband, the astronomer. In her mind, he is distant and interested in abstract things. The maidservant interrupts her thinking by telling her that the plumber has arrived. Before readers learn why the plumber has been called, Mrs. Ames repeats her name to herself: "I am Mrs. Ames . . . I am Mrs. Ames." She shows the plumber to a room that has flooded, at the same time revealing to him and to readers that she and her husband are recent arrivals to the villa. The plumber examines the flooded room and remarks that he is sure the "soil line" is responsible for the plugged drain.

As he leaves to go outside and look at the pipes, the astronomer makes his only appearance in the story. He remains in bed but yells at his wife that "There's a problem worthy of your mettle!" Readers cannot tell whether he is referring to the plumbing or to something else. Mrs. Ames and the plumber proceed outside where the plumber notes that the drains are "big enough for a man to stand upright in them." Mrs. Ames, though, is not paying attention because she is thinking about how her husband's thoughts and the things that he says to her make her sad and make her wish that he would just not speak.

At this moment, Mrs. Ames looks at the plumber and notices that he is looking "up into her face." She notices physical characteristics about him—his hair "was as light as gold," he has "lean cheeks . . . rugged bones . . . firm and clean flesh." He suggests that the astronomer might want to go down into the drain with him. Mrs. Ames begins to think about the difference between men who descend, like the plumber, and men who go up, like her husband.

Everything about the plumber becomes appealing to her, and she continues to think about how her husband dissatisfies her. As the story ends, she steps into the drainpipe with the plumber.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The first few paragraphs tell of a woman, Mrs. Ames, waking up to her day as her husband still sleeps. She thinks about her daily life, which includes keeping herself busy during the day, doing tasks, while her husband is usually not far away, thinking or daydreaming. As she leaves the bedroom, she is met in the hallway at the top of the stairway by her female servant, who has come to inform her that the plumber has arrived.

As she heads to meet the plumber, Mrs. Ames practices introducing herself to him. The reader is then told what Mrs. Ames looks like: that she is youngish and that the light has been extinguished from her eyes.

She explains to the plumber that the leaking toilet started the night before and that she had shut off the main water supply as soon as she discovered the leak. When the plumber suggests a cause for the leak, Mrs. Ames apologizes that her husband was not awake to assist the plumber since they were discussing a topic that she knew little about.

The plumber suggests that they go to the garden to determine the cause of the leak and she is excited that he takes charge; her husband, still in bed, awakened by their voices, inquires about her involvement in the conversation with the plumber.

Mrs. Ames ignores her husband and leads the plumber outside to look at the pipes. The plumber suggests that her husband should come out and go with him to examine the pipes, since he was the man of the house. Mrs. Ames explains that her husband would never go underground, but only upward, to examine the stars.

As the plumber goes down into the pipes, and explains to her what he is doing, Mrs. Ames realizes that she understands the plumber in a way that she never understood her husband. When the plumber returns to the surface, he tells her what the problem was and she, thinking of a different set of problems – her personal life problems – asks how the problem can be fixed. The plumber says that all problems have a solution, as long as you look for it. This causes an awakening in Mrs. Ames and she chooses to go down into the drains with the plumber.

Analysis

The relationship between Mrs. Ames and her husband is strained. She is a woman of action, who does things with her hands while her husband spends his time thinking and dreaming. It is clear from the way she refers to his daydreaming, and the way that he has his head in the clouds, that she cannot relate to him. When the plumber arrives, she

immediately begins to compare him to her husband; the plumber is a man of action, not thoughts, and she feels a connection to him because of this.

There is an interesting theme of conflict throughout the story: up versus down, thought versus action. Mrs. Ames' husband, educated and wealthy, is continually looking upward and is lost in his thoughts while the plumber, who is a poor laborer, works underground with his hands. Mrs. Ames has no connection with her husband and his world of thoughts but she does feel a connection with the plumber. She can relate to his life of action and, ultimately, she chooses to go into the pipes with the plumber – choosing the laborer's life, the life of action, over the cerebral life her husband led.

Characters

Katherine Ames

Mrs. Ames is the focus of the story. She is married to an astronomer whose distant, overly intellectual nature has caused her to resent him. She is the astronomer's only real link with the day-today world, but she means little to him beside that. Longing for someone who is not wholly immersed in the life of the mind, she is intrigued by and attracted to the plumber, who stands for everything physical.

Mr. Ames

See The Astronomer

The Astronomer

The astronomer is married to Mrs. Ames. The narrator of the story says of the astronomer that "he was a man of other things, a dreamer." He spends his life examining the heavens and attempting at all times to remain as high above the earth as possible— Mrs. Ames says that he likes being "on the roof. Or on the mountains. He's been up on the tops of them many times." He never physically appears in the story, and readers only hear from him once when he yells that there is a problem for Mrs. Ames to solve. For Mrs. Ames, he is "the mind of all mankind."

The Plumber

The plumber is the astronomer's diametric opposite. Where the astronomer prefers to be up high, the plumber goes down into the pipes below the ground. He is described by his physical attributes, and at one point the narrator suggests that he is "brutal," clearly playing on the animal meaning of the word "brute." Mrs. Ames is attracted to him for his physicality, but at the same time he pays attention to her, looks her in the eye when he speaks to her, and treats her politely and pleasantly. At the end of the story, he speaks of a cow he once owned who lost her cud. "I made her another in no time," he tells Mrs. Ames, "out of flowers and things and whatnot." In a sense, Mrs. Ames is that cow, and the plumber wants to give her back an important element of her life—an engagement with the physical world—that she has lost.

Themes

Epiphany/Breakthrough

An "epiphany" is a sudden moment of clarity, often brought on by emotional stimuli or by very minor events. In "Astronomer's Wife," Katherine Ames has an epiphany about her husband and what he has done to her. She wakes up on this day much as she does every other day—alone. The prose of the story gives a sense of deadness, as the author's style is quite flat in the early part of the story. This corresponds with the state of emotional deadness in which the reader finds Mrs. Ames. In the course of the story, though, she begins thinking in specific terms about the way her husband relates to her. Although he is not cruel or abusive in any way, he is not fulfilling her emotional needs. He is distant, and, as befits his profession, he has his head in the clouds. He is always thinking of abstract things, of faraway stars and planets. The little details of daily life do not interest him, and he generally delegates responsibility for any of those details to his wife.

Through her encounter with the plumber, Mrs. Ames begins to take more notice of those very details of daily life that escape her husband. She takes note of the physicality of the plumber, of his vital engagement with the physical world, and this causes her to think even more about how dissatisfied she is with her husband. Years of suppressed emotions begin to well up and overflow, much like the floodwaters that caused the plumber to be called in the first place. In the end, she symbolically joins with the plumber in going underground, going as far away from stargazing husband as possible.

Symbolism: Body/Mind

The conflict between the physical nature of humans and their ability to think and reason has always been a concern of writers, artists, and philosophers. If it is thinking that defines humanity, must humans entirely devote themselves to rationality and intellectual inquiry? In "Astronomer's Wife," the astronomer represents the mind. Like the brain, the astronomer is located on top of the symbolic body of the villa, refusing to descend. He prefers to look above him, into the heavens. He is "a man of other things, a dreamer." He does not even use his body, remaining in bed for the duration of the story, and the reader learns nothing about his physical being.

The wife is caught in the middle. She has adapted to her husband's way of life, and she also relies primarily on her head: she is a problem-solver. She also respects the power of the mind, which "made steep and sprightly flights, pursued illusion, took foothold in the nameless things that cannot pass between thumb and forefinger." However, in the course of solving these problems, her emotions and the physical world come into play. In this story, the emotions are a bridge between the physical, sensual world and the mental world. As the story progresses, Mrs. Ames continues to think about her husband and resents his life of the mind.

The plumber is a blunt representation of the physical world. Where the astronomer works with his eyes and head, the plumber's relation to the world is physical: he works with his hands. Mrs. Ames thinks to herself that "her husband was the mind, this other man the meat, of all mankind." Mrs. Ames also notices physical details about him, such as his hair, his flesh, and even the veins on his hands. He has little respect for the astronomer's refusal to engage with the physical world, and at the end of the story he symbolically becomes part of that physical world when he descends, accompanied by the astronomer's wife, into the underground. Mrs. Ames explains that, by contrast, "Mr. Ames would never go down there alive. He likes going up."

Ascent and descent are treated ironically here. Generally, ascent is a going toward God, an improvement, a positive thing. Descent symbolizes evil, falling, negativity. Yet, by linking the ascent/ descent symbol with the mind/body duality, Boyle reverses their usual values. In this story, going down, engaging with the physical world, is a good thing. She even suggests that readers should not be so afraid of death, for death is just part of their nature as physical beings. Going up is the mark of a man who wishes he were not part of the world, and who has crippled his marriage and emotionally scarred his wife because of this desire.

Style

Point of View and Narration

The narration of this story is in the third-person limited, but it is not a conventional third-person limited. Boyle's narrator is very close to the mind of Katherine Ames, and records her thoughts. This is essential, for at the center of the story is her growing realization that she feels that her husband stunts her emotional life - a realization that takes place completely silently.

In addition, the style in which the story is written mirrors Mrs. Ames's increasing recognition of her feelings about her husband. When the narration describes Mrs. Ames's thoughts, the sentences are long and filled with adjectives, reflecting the freedom she has in her mind. But when the narrative begins describing Mrs. Ames's actions and her interactions with the plumber, the sentences become shorter, showing how constrained she feels.

As the story progresses toward its epiphany at the end, the language expands and incorporates more imagery, again mirroring Mrs. Ames's expanding emotional state.

Symbolism

Certainly this story is infused with symbolism. In the story's broadest manifestation of symbolism, Boyle turns one of the best-known symbolic structures in Western culture upside down. In this story, sinking, going down, or falling is good, while rising or ascension has a negative connotation. The astronomer has his head almost literally in the clouds; his wife notes that he likes being up high, on the roof or on top of the surrounding mountains. Yet that loftiness has caused him to neglect his wife's emotional needs. The plumber is the opposite of the astronomer; he has his feet on the ground both literally and figuratively. His body engages with the earth and, at the end of the story, descends into the earth, and his earthiness is the salvation of Katherine Ames.

These same symbols work on a narrow level, as well. The plumber's raw physicality represents, to Mrs. Ames, the promise of the sensual life that she has been deprived of while living with the astronomer. The astronomer's dreaminess and his separation from the material concerns of daily life symbolize how Mrs. Ames, as well, has been cut off from those elements of life - yet unlike the astronomer, she craves them.

Although it is not overt, the story also makes some oblique symbolic references to Greek mythology. Like Icarus, who made wax wings in order to fly only to see those wings melt when he passed too close to the sun, the astronomer's loftiness and his scorn for the earthbound seem to be his downfall. Similarly, the journey that the plumber and Mrs. Ames are about to take as the story ends suggests any number of similar journeys in classical mythology. For example, Orpheus, the semi-divine avatar of sensual music, had to descend into the underworld in order to rescue his wife, Eurydice,

who was imprisoned by Hades, king of the dead. Boyle inverts this myth, having the plumber take his symbolic lover into the underground in order to save her from her lifeless husband.

Irony

Boyle's inversion of traditional values - in her story, going up into lofty intellectual realms is bad, and sinking down into the sphere of the solely physical and sensual is good - characterizes the irony of this story. The story begins with foreshadowed irony, for in the first paragraph Mrs. Ames sings to herself a rhyme about a man leaving his wife, when at the end it is she who symbolically leaves her husband. In the following paragraph, the narrator remarks that Mrs. Ames, "once out of bed, had come into her own possession"; in fact, Mrs. Ames's daily life is barely her own possession, since she is so dominated by the way of life that her dry husband has made her live. The rest of the story shows this kind of subtle irony - seemingly innocent choices of words that reveal themselves to be carrying a much greater meaning when the reader reaches the end of the story.

Historical Context

Advances in Narration

"Astronomer's Wife" shows many of the advances and innovations in narration that were commonplace by the 1930s but were revolutionary in their time. Traditional first-person narration came directly from the voice of a character and used "I," while traditional third-person narration came from the voice of a being outside of the story who would describe all, some, one, or none of the character's thoughts. But in the late nineteenth century, a French author named Gustave Flaubert, who is most famous for his novel *Madame Bovary,* attempted to meld the two types of narration into a form that he called the "free indirect style."

In the free indirect style, the voice of the narrator speaks as someone outside of the character whose thoughts are being described, but at times the voice of the narrator becomes the voice of the character's thoughts—the diction and sentence structure and imagery will change and become similar to the way the character uses language. "Astronomer's Wife" is a good example of the free indirect style, for as Mrs. Ames becomes more and more interested in the physicality of the plumber and begins to draw mental comparisons between the dry, intellectual personality of her husband and the vital, earthy character of the plumber, the narrator melds into her, and begins to use much shorter, sharper sentences and physical imagery.

Boyle also uses the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique developed by authors such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf.

In a stream-of-consciousness narrative, the narrator attempts to transcribe, or write down, the exact thoughts of a character. This technique was influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, who believed that many of the small, seemingly insignificant details of how people talk and act can tell a great deal about their mental makeup. Mrs. Ames's growing use of words that describe physical objects and sensory impressions, as well as her inability to stop thinking about her dissatisfaction with her husband, indicate to readers that her choice to descend into the drainpipe with the plumber is in fact a very important and symbolic decision.

The Lost Generation

Kay Boyle was a member of a group of artistic-minded young Americans who, after World War I, moved to Paris to live and write and paint and sculpt and, in Boyle's words, "be geniuses together." Some members of this group were the writers Ernest Hemingway (whose novel *The Sun Also Rises* is considered one of the best portraits of this group), F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Robert McAlmon, and Hilda Doolittle. The writer Gertrude Stein, another American who had been living in Paris for some time, dubbed these Americans the "Lost Generation" partially because of their aimlessness,

dissatisfaction with their home country, and refusal to assimilate into the culture of France. Boyle, however, disliked this term.

Boyle arrived in Paris in 1922 with her first husband, but she had already had a great familiarity with the artistic avant-garde, having known many of the artists while living in New York. During the 1920s, she published stories in the so-called "little magazines" that were the outlets for these Lost Generation writers. She became especially good friends with the writer and publisher Robert McAlmon, and much later added chapters to his chronicle of the Lost Generation, *Being Geniuses Together.* At the end of the 1920s, Boyle separated from and divorced her first husband and married another expatriate artist, Laurence Vail, and with him moved first to the south of France, then to Austria and England. The 1930s—a period in which the main figures of the Lost Generation moved on, burned out, or became even more famous—then became Boyle's most productive period.

Critical Overview

Although she was a member of the famous Lost Generation of American artists and writers who inhabited Paris in the 1920s, the poet, novelist, and short story writer Kay Boyle never liked that characterization. Her writing echoes many of the themes common to such Lost Generation writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway—disorientation, the loss of a sense of home, alienation from one's acquaintances and family. But Boyle is different in that, unlike such writers as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, she concentrates on the double alienation of women and especially on middle-class women's difficulty in finding fulfillment.

"Astronomer's Wife" has rarely been specifically discussed by critics. However, most commentators on Boyle's work feel that the short story is her forté, and as a result they have primarily written about her mastery of the short story form, especially in this period of her life. The title story of the volume in which "Astronomer's Wife" appeared, "The White Horses of Vienna," has been frequently considered Boyle's finest story, one in which her concern with the inner lives of her characters—particularly notable in her early stories— is married to her social conscience and her interest in politics and history. In 1935, she won her first major prize for that story, the O. Henry Memorial Prize for the best American short story of the year.

Contemporary reviews for that volume point out Boyle's confident hand as a short story writer. In *Books,* Elizabeth Hart remarks that Boyle's "stylistic gifts are displayed to their best advantage in her short stories," and R. W. Seaver of the Boston *Transcript* notes that, in *The White Horses of Vienna,* "Boyle presents a series of acid-etched vignettes that are sometimes harrowing, occasionally confusing, but always powerful." Richard Carpenter compliments Boyle's "dagger-sharp images and crackling metaphors" and calls her "an exquisite manipulator of the nuances of phrase."

Not all of Boyle's reviewers were so impressed, even if they all recognized Boyle's skills. Criticism of her work from this time often expresses the opinion that Boyle was a brilliant stylist but that she did not concern herself with the issues of the day and how those issues affected people. The eminent mid-century critic Mark Van Doren feels that "her people are motionless, like frost-people on a pane of glass . . . they are [not] interesting in the way that men and women in stories can be interesting." E. H. Walton, of the *New York Times,* says that Boyle "has taken to lavishing her amazing, but exquisite, skill on situations so tenuous and rarified, on characters so wraithlike or pathological, that she leaves the reader unstirred by anything but her technical virtuosity." And the *Springfield Republican* writes that Boyle's "point-of-view towards her own creations is so extrinsic as to be really frigid . . . the icy beauty of Miss Boyle's language leave[s] her readers . . . in a state of morbidity."

Critical opinion of Boyle's short stories has grown friendlier over the years. Feminist critics have pointed out that the primary objection to Boyle's stories—that her detached tone left the readers unsympathetic to her characters—often sprung from a sense that as a female writer, Boyle should concentrate more heavily on the emotional reactions of

her characters. Boyle is now seen as a pioneering writer, injecting a feminist consciousness into the American short story and into the modernist movement.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Barnhisel holds a Ph.D. in English and American literature and currently teaches writing at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. He has published articles on such writers as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. In the following essay, he examines the wife's awakening and reconnection to the physical in "Astronomer's Wife."

Kay Boyle is a writer whose reputation has never been fixed. Critics through the years have been unable to come to a consensus about whether Boyle should be considered a classic writer or simply a minor, if talented, author of middlebrow novels and stories. Part of the problem is that she was associated with many groups and movements but considered herself a member of none of them. She is primarily identified with the famous Lost Generation of American writers in Paris in the 1920s but disliked the designation. Many of her stories have a strong feminist sensibility, but Boyle preceded many other so-called "feminist" writers and her stories rarely have the didactic tone of much early feminist writing. She is very difficult for critics to pigeonhole. The American poet, novelist, and short story writer William Carlos Williams remarked early in Boyle's career that her stories "are of a high degree of excellence; for that reason they will not succeed in America, they are lost, damned." Williams' prediction has only halfway been fulfilled because Boyle is still read frequently; however, she still has not joined what is customarily known as the canon, or the informal list of the classic authors of literature.

What almost all critics agree on is that Boyle is a master of style, of the elegant use of the English language. Gerald Sykes of the *Nation,* in a 1930 review, calls her a "stylist of unusual taste and sensibility," and Katherine Anne Porter, a year later, comments on the "technical virtuosity" of her stories. Babette Deutsch notes that Boyle's stories "shock eye and ear with a . . . splendid vigor. They pierce below surfaces with a . . . penetrating intensity." Other critics praise her "utter clarity," call her an "exquisite craftsman," and compare her stories to the "perfect brevity" of a sonnet.

In the 1930s and after, though, many critics praised her style while faulting her for what they saw as her chilly attitude toward her characters. Many reviews of *The White Horses of Vienna,* the 1936 volume in which "Astronomer's Wife" was published, condemn her writing as chilly, aloof, frigid, and detached from the characters being examined. Much of this attitude can be ascribed to a sense among critics that women writers should write passionately, emotionally, and with great involvement. And although Boyle does write this way at times, in the stories of *The White Horses of Vienna* she is quite aloof and detached.

Boyle's characters can also be aloof and detached, especially as in "Astronomer's Wife." That is clearly part of the point of the story. The story is grounded in one of the oldest philosophical issues: the division between the mind and the body. This division and the problems that arise from it form the basis of the subterranean conflict, which barely bubbles to the surface, between the astronomer and his wife. The astronomer's denial of physicality and his detachment from the day-to-day world cause a rift between himself and his wife.

Boyle's story draws heavily on a source that is never mentioned in the story but whose presence is everywhere. Although she never alludes directly to it, Walt Whitman's 1865 poem "When I Heard The Learn'd Astronomer" underpins this story.

Whitman's poem is spoken by a narrator who is listening to a lecture by an astronomer. The narrator looks at all of the astronomer's "proofs and figures" about the motion of the stars and he listens to the astronomer describe the stars in terms of mathematical equations, but "unaccountabl[y]" he becomes "tired and sick." To feel better, he leaves the lecture room, goes outside, and "look[s] up in perfect silence at the stars." Whitman's narrator is sickened by the astronomer's attitude toward the stars: the astronomer sees the stars simply as expressions of mathematical formulas, not as manifestations of the glory of nature. To feel better, the narrator must return to nature, go out into the "mystical moist night-air," and experience nature. Nature, for Whitman's narrator, is both spiritual— "mystical"—and physical—"moist." It is not intellectual; it must be experienced.

Mrs. Ames of "Astronomer's Wife" is much like Whitman's narrator in that her astronomer— her husband—has extracted all of the physicality and spirituality out of nature, and she wants it back. Unlike Whitman's narrator, though, she has been numbed to this feeling and not until the eminently physical plumber arrives does she realize what she has been lacking. The story recounts her realization that she needs to reincorporate the physical into her life. Her marriage has reinforced the division of mind and body because her husband is strictly mind and when she serves him she is greeted only by his "impenetrable silence."

The story begins, appropriately enough for a story about a metaphorical awakening, with Mrs. Ames waking up and rising out of bed. But this awakening is "an evil moment." For her, every day is the same: "the day would proceed from this [her awakening], beat by beat, without reflection, like every other day." Yet her morning ritual of exercise is a little jarring to the reader, for she chants to herself "left, left, left my wife and fourteen children." Already in the first two paragraphs the conflict between the astronomer and his wife is alluded to, and already it is submerged, left under the surface, just as it is in their daily lives.

The narrator's attention immediately sets upon the astronomer himself, who is "still asleep, or feigning it"—little matter because even when he is awake he might as well be asleep. He is a "dreamer" and is always absent from his wife even when in her presence. The narrator, whose consciousness is extremely close to that of Mrs. Ames, constantly uses imagery to reinforce the inexorable and regular nature of this couple's alienation from each other, comparing their relationship to a pendulum and a wave and undertow.

When the plumber arrives, Mrs. Ames stands at the top of the stairs repeating her name to herself. "I am Mrs. Ames . . . I am Mrs. Ames," she repeats to herself, "spoken soft as a willow weeping." She thinks of hers elf only as "Mrs. Ames," as a woman whose very name belongs to her husband: she is only the "astronomer's wife." She has even

forgotten that she is a "youngish woman," because of the weight of her "husband's mind . . . like a chiding finger on her lips."

But the taciturn plumber begins to bring her real personality forth. Much like the water that has "spread as far as the landing and lay docile there," Mrs. Ames's dissatisfaction with her husband and with the woman that she has become is laid out around her, but she does nothing about it. But the plumber, whose job is to fix things, seems to have been sent here to show Mrs. Ames that she has "a great dignity" and that she is undervalued by her husband. He also is "grave and stately"—adjectives that are customarily used to describe such men as the astronomer, not laborers like the plumber—and his identification with the physical world is not disgraceful or shameful. He notices the physical and sensory details about her, such as her "red kid slippers," as he details what the problem with the drain is.

Mrs. Ames apologizes for the fact that her husband cannot come down to meet with the plumber, but the plumber seems not to care. As the astronomer stays upstairs, only appearing through his voice (he shouts down at "Katherine" that "there's a problem worthy of your mettle," but the problem is not identified), the plumber stays with Mrs. Ames, apparently not caring that the "man of the house" cannot be bothered with this problem. While Mrs. Ames suffers from "despair" from hearing her husband, mentally comparing her life to a desert and to floating debris in the sea, the plumber continues with his work, utterly unaware of her boiling emotions.

This is not a story about the plumber's seduction of Mrs. Ames, but it certainly has those kinds of physical, even sexual overtones, even if they are only treated in the most remote, metaphorical, abstract sense (hence the critiques leveled at Boyle's stories). Instead, the plumber is a sort of savior figure. He is "brutal," but this word in its common use does not really fit what Boyle seems to mean; instead, Boyle uses this word in its connotation of "brute," or animal, for, like an animal, the plumber is intimately connected to the physical world. But he is certainly also a savior: as he pries up the drain cover, Mrs. Ames looks down at him and "saw that he was looking up into her face, and she saw too that his hair was light as gold." She begins to notice, and appreciate, physical details about him: "his lean cheeks, his high, rugged bones, and the deep seams in his brow," his fingers, and even the veins in the backs of his hands. It is clear that she no longer notices these things about her husband—and that he probably never noticed such things about her.

By the end of the story, the spatial construction of the earthy plumber and the lofty astronomer, and Mrs. Ames's position suspended between the two, is the central image and meaning of the story. While the astronomer remains upstairs, in his bed, using only his mind, the plumber descends literally into the earth, into the drain. Mrs. Ames's dissatisfaction with her husband's separation from the earth and all it represents—physicality, gravity, the pleasures of the senses—becomes so important that she makes the great symbolic decision to follow the plumber out of the house, away from her husband's sphere of influence, and into the earth itself, following the plumber, whose body she can't help but notice. At the end, emotion becomes connected with the plumber's physicality when he remarks that he must attack the drain trouble outside and

that "there's nothing at all that can't be done over for the caring." The "trouble," of course, is symbolically the "trouble" in the Ames marriage, and Mrs. Ames tells her servant that "the trouble is serious, very serious. When Mr. Ames gets up, please tell him I've gone down." Descending into "the heart of the earth," Mrs. Ames hopes to reconnect with what has been missing in her marriage and her life. Like the narrator of Whitman's poem, to truly understand the Earth and her place in it, she must distance herself from the very person whose job it is to explain those things to her.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, Critical Essay on "Astronomer's Wife," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Lynch is a freelance writer in northern New Mexico. In the following essay, she discusses ways in which Boyle's story marks a break from traditional narrative in its content, style, and form.

As part of the modernist movement of the 1930s, the work of Kay Boyle marks a break from traditional narrative writing on various counts. In "Astronomer's Wife," Boyle departs from traditional romance by depicting a woman's defection from her remote, intellectual husband when she comes in contact with an earthy, responsive plumber who comes to fix the overflowing toilet. The astronomer's wife, by definition an appendage of her husband, breaks with all traditional expectations of conformity and fidelity by responding to a man other than her husband, who is beneath her status socially; while the story is certainly romantic, it is a revision of traditional romance. Central to the story is the division of men and women into the realms of intellectual and physical. Boyle explores and challenges ideas of men and women as polarized and separate by providing characters that integrate these qualities, and connect on the basis of this integration. Setting and nature imagery, as well as allusions to systems in the human body, lend themselves to Boyle's depictions; characters are frequently reflected in the world around them, and Boyle uses unusual, terse language, particularly verbs, to flesh out the responses of her characters. The style and form of the story support Boyle's leanings toward the experimental as well. In *Kay Boyle, Author of Herself,* biographer Joan Mellen characterizes Boyle's writing as beginning "smack in the middle of things, with no exposition to introduce the reader to the characters, no explanation of their situation. One dramatic situational moment replace(s) the old-fashioned imperatives of plot, rising action, and resolution." In keeping with this idea, "Astronomer's Wife" is nonlinear in form, itself a break from the expected style at the time it was written, and told through the eyes of a woman.

It is no accident that the story begins with the main character waking up since the story is at heart about the protagonist's metaphorical awakening to the possibility of connection with a man. The first sentence is a generalization about the process of awakening, the first moments of consciousness, which the narrator calls "evil." According to this first sentence, in the first moment of consciousness, all things stand still and are painfully clear before the day's distractions commence. The second sentence, however, begins with the words, "But for women," suggesting that the opening sentence refers only to men. Thus, the second sentence makes a clear distinction between the worlds of men and women, establishing a tension between them, and locates the narrative in the realm of a woman. This marks a shift from average readership and assumption that the point of view in a story is masculine.

According to the narrator in the story, women cope with the horror of consciousness when they awaken by springing to action; they distract themselves with tasking and motion. This is at least the case with the astronomer's wife, who, when she feels the "interval gaping" with self-awareness, charges into her day by calling out for coffee and starting her morning exercise. She is a woman who keeps misery at bay by keeping

busy, for once she gets moving, she can "come into her own possession." These descriptions of activity in association with the astronomer's wife lend her the impression of physicality and motion. The words associated with her character are deliberately, disarmingly active; for example, she "fetches up" her voice rather than calling out, and her mayonnaise gets a "severe thrashing." Although she spends her days almost entirely in sight of her husband, she manages to be "absent from him all the day in being clean, busy, kind." Imbued with this sense of physicality, her day is like the functioning of a body; once begun, "through every room the pulse takes up its beating" and the "day would proceed from this, beat by beat." Her tasking keeps the circulation moving, just as she does with her own body when she begins her day. By contrast, her mind is deliberately turned off.

The astronomer's wife awakens in the upstairs of the house while her husband sleeps or feigns sleep. When she awakens, it is unclear whether or not they are even sleeping in the same room or bed. Later, when his voice is heard, it is only from another room, as he insults her, that the reader learns her name is Katherine. His slumber, real or feigned, is a metaphor for his general condition; he is silent and still most of the time, withdrawn from his wife, and generally dwells in his own mind. The astronomer is a man of thought, who goes high up, sits on the roof, in the mountains, or lies still, thinking. He is disassociated from the earth and the world of the body. He is generally described as sitting, lying, or lingering, never in any active verbs. The celestial world he scrutinizes is cold, distant, dead, untouchable, and this is the impression conveyed in relation to his wife. "The mystery and silence of her husband's mind lay like a chiding finger on her lips" and, as the plumber appears to notice, the light has been extinguished from her eyes.

Katherine's routine is interrupted both literally and figuratively by the arrival of the plumber. Because the astronomer is a man of thought rather than action, his wife is forced to attend to domestic situations such as the overflowing toilet. Pulled out of her routine, she puts on her scarlet and white dressing gown, suggesting passion and purity, both out of character for the woman introduced so far. As the plumber climbs the stairs, the wife repeats to herself over and over, "I am Mrs. Ames," as if rehearsing a role, as if this is an identity that does not belong to her, or as if she doesn't know who she is. In the introduction to Boyle's essay collection, *Words that Must Somehow Be Said,* editor Elizabeth S. Bell characterizes Boyle as committed to "making known the cries of the politically voiceless." Virtually voiceless at the opening of the story, in the process of her contact with the plumber, the astronomer's wife finds a voice, and makes deliberate choices.

When the plumber meets Mrs. Ames, he accommodates her by quieting his voice and his step, but he addresses her and meets her gaze fully, both the reverse of her experience with her husband. By virtue of his profession, the plumber poses a challenge to the woman's experience of men; her life is about service to a man so it is a new thing that the plumber comes to provide a service to her. They discuss the problem of the toilet in a matter of fact way, as if they are on the same terms, and, notably, the plumber is described as "dealing as a woman does with matters under hand." Oddly, Katherine is described as standing at the edge of a "pure seeming tide," an unexpected choice of

words for water from an overflowing toilet. Plumbing, and by association the body, is not portrayed as dirty, but as clean and natural as a tide, suggesting a connection to nature, a force that comes and goes daily. The word choices indicate an unorthodox view of the corporeal, and the ease with which the two deal with the situation suggests they are allied by their relationship to the natural world. The plumber's conclusion is that the system needs a valve, effectively a regulatory device for balancing the flow of water in the drain, and he rebukes her, "If you had a valve you wouldn't be caught like this." Like the plumbing system, the astronomer's wife needs a means of regulating the forces in her life. Their interaction also provides an opportunity for the astronomer's wife to have a voice, and she answers the plumber "without hesitation." In this context she can be herself, for "[h]ere was a man who spoke of action and object as simply as a woman did!"

Most of the powerful action that takes place between Katherine and the plumber occurs in the garden where the lush vegetation and flowing water correlate to the characters' emotional connection. Katherine sees the male world as like the ocean or the desert, vast and empty, in sharp contrast to her garden "with the vegetation flowering in disorder all around." In describing the garden, Boyle uses language that suggests power in nature, a thing uncontrolled, in sharp contrast to the cleaning and tasking that usually make up Katherine's world. During this scene in particular, Boyle uses language that suggests exceptional power and activity in everyday existence. For example, both Katherine and the plumber "lift" their faces, and she notices that his hands are "bound round and round with ripe blue veins of blood." All the descriptions of the plumber at this point are sensual and analogous to nature, and from this perspective they are "comprehensible to her." When the plumber goes into the drain and reports that "something has stopped the elbow," she relates to his practical language, especially the simplicity of the word elbow, so strongly that she is overcome. She sits down "powerless, her senses veiled, with no action taking shape beneath her hands"; the plumber effectively interrupts her habitual motion, so fundamental to coping with distress, and forces her to wrap her mind around the knowledge that men exist who are like her. In the midst of this revelation she sees weeds "springing up," forces of nature, and has no impulse to manage or destroy them the way her husband has controlled and managed her. Rather, she reflects on her realization that "her husband was the mind, this other man the meat, of all mankind."

Once she has absorbed this knowledge, the astronomer's wife decides to go into the ground with the plumber. Going down and underground is a metaphor for the unconscious, what is buried beneath the surface, and suggests emotion and sexuality. In going deeper into the earth, into the body, she opts to explore herself more deeply, rather than evading herself through activity. There is no actual need for her to go into the drain, but she tells the servant girl "it is very serious," speaking more for her internal condition of shifting consciousness than the external. She moves away from her husband in a deliberate way, instructing the servant "when my husband gets up, tell him I've gone down." Physically and emotionally, she moves in the opposite direction from him. She steps into the heart of the earth, effectively into her own heart, from which she has been divorced. In so doing, she integrates her brain and her body, systems that have been previously divided based on her experience of men and women.

Source: Jennifer Lynch, Critical Essay on "Astronomer's Wife," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the transformation that Katherine Ames undergoes.

Over the course of a career spanning more than fifty years, and throughout the publication of more than thirty-five books, Kay Boyle became intensely interested in many different types and schools of writing. An important figure in the avant-garde literary movement that took place in Europe in the 1920s, Boyle once openly stated, "The writer expresses. He does not communicate." Over time, however, she came to reverse this opinion, ultimately believing that it was a writer's duty to share his or her most impassioned convictions with readers. Her writing style correspondingly widened from the experimental and highly personal to the more conventional as she sought to explore her social concerns about human relationships and the world around her.

"Astronomer's Wife" first appeared in *The White Horses of Vienna and Other Stories* in 1936. Paul Sladky notes in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction* that it is one of Boyle's "transitional" stories, looking "backward to her earliest thematic concerns - the quest for identity, the hunger and need for human love and contact - and forward to the simpler, less experimental narrative style of later years." Occupying a middle ground, "Astronomer's Wife" both expresses one woman's moment of revelation and communicates Boyle's beliefs in the inherent capacity of people to transform the world.

Most of Boyle's stories, however, demonstrate love that is never attained as people fail to forge real, meaningful connections. As Sandra Whipple Spanier points out in her introduction to *Life Being the Best and Other Stories,* a collection of Boyle's short fiction spanning 1930 to 1936, Boyle is "an idealist in her view of human possibilities but a pessimist about their chances for fulfillment." However, Spanier also notes one important way that "Astronomer's Wife" differs from the majority of Boyle's stories - it "end[s] in a glimmer of hope for rescue." The story's final paragraph affirms the human capability to grab hold of a chance for redemption, even when it arises in most unexpected forms.

Boyle's contemporary, the poet William Carlos Williams, noted as early as 1929 the power of Boyle's short stories and her "comprehensive, if perhaps disturbing view of what takes place in the human understanding at moments of intense living." He also commented on the unique perspective Boyle brought to her work: "Few women have written like this before, work equal in vigor to anything done by a man." Boyle's transcendence of adhering to gender roles in her writing reflects her lifelong interest in women's rights. Boyle's feminism, as demonstrated in her personal experience and in her writings, predates the women's movement by several decades. The subject of "Astronomer's Wife" is a feminist one: as described by Sladky, it "deals with the loss and recovery of a woman's sense of self in an oppressive marriage, a subject that, at the time, was a dilemma widely experienced by women but not widely discussed." It thus "trumpets a brilliant herald for the feminism that lies decades ahead."

In Katherine Ames, the astronomer's wife, Boyle has created a woman thoroughly modern except for the lack of a mutually respectful relationship with her husband. In light of the cerebral Mr. Ames, who might "lay still for hours" or "linger in bed" long after the sun has come up, she not only carries out the traditional responsibilities of a home-maker, but she has taken on many of the responsibilities that would normally befall the man of the house. In so doing, she demonstrates a decidedly masculine side. For instance, she has the technical wherewithal to know to turn off the outside switch for the water as soon as the toilet begins leaking - though she does so while wearing her nightgown.

Ironically, the astronomer degrades Mrs. Ames's responsibilities in their home. When he overhears the exchange between the plumber and his wife, he calls out, "there's a problem worthy of your mettle!" Both Mrs. Ames and the plumber comprehend the derision in his statement, the implication that his work - thinking about the infinite world above their heads - is more important than his wife's work of caring for his earthly needs. Although Mrs. Ames appears to pay no attention to her husband, the plumber notices "a wave of color" in her face. Although a man who uses his hands and not his mind by profession, the plumber shows far greater sensitivity than does the astronomer.

The plumber also continually demonstrates his awareness that it is unusual to have a woman take charge of such maintenance problems. He believes that going into the underground drain pipes is "a study for a man who likes to know what's what" and proposes as a matter of course that Mr. Ames might like to come with him. He looks at Mrs. Ames "curiously" when she tells him that Mr. Ames is still in bed.

The plumber is a strong contrast to the astronomer. He is a "tough, hardy man." His body radiates vitality with his "strong, weathered face" and "flesh . . . as firm and clean as wood, stained richly tan with the climate's rigor." The astronomer, though never actually seen by the reader, has an implied weaker physique, one made for inert contemplation. Even in action, when not sitting on the roof or lying in bed, he is prone to "wander[ing] down the road," not moving with purpose as does the plumber. He is only interested in otherworldly concerns - his mind "made steep and sprightly flights, pursued illusion, took foothold in the nameless things that cannot pass between the thumb and finger." The plumber, however - a man whose work relies on using his hands - must focus on the concrete and "likes to know what's what." Mrs. Ames also specifically notes the differences between the two men. She appreciates that the plumber speaks simply and clearly, whereas her husband - who normally maintains his "mystery and silence" - is unable to communicate to her his concerns and interests. For instance, while she is able to understand the plumber's explanation of the drains - "something has stopped the elbow" - when the astronomer "spoke of height, having no sense of it, she could not picture it nor hear."

The plumber habitually and "suddenly" descends into the drain trap, in direct contrast to her husband, whom Mrs. Ames acknowledges would "'never go down there alive.'" Mr. Ames "'likes going up . . . on the roof, or on the mountains." As the plumber's voice reaches her from the "depths" of the earth, speaking clearly and plainly of ordinary and sensible matters, Mrs. Ames comes to the surprised and triumphant realization that

"men were . . . divided into two bodies. . . . Her husband was the mind, this other man the meat, of all mankind." She links her husband with the spiritual, for he "had always gone up, as the dead go," but she links the plumber with the body, for "she knew now that there were others who went down, like the corporeal being of the dead." As Robyn M. Gronning explains in an article in the *Explicator,* "Katherine can understand the plumber because he is down to earth. A man without his head in the clouds . . . [a man who] shares Katherine's practical, everyday world."

Mrs. Ames also responds to the plumber because, although he is definitely representative of a masculine being, he demonstrates certain feminine characteristics in his mannerisms, actions, and physique. The narration states that he deals with things "as does a woman with matters under hand." Although he wears heavy boots, he "quieted the sound of his feet" while walking down the hall. According to Mrs. Ames, "Here was a man who spoke of action and object as simply as women did!" Boyle further uses similar images to describe Mrs. Ames and the plumber, thus linking their feminine aspects. The plumber's protective leather apron recalls Mrs. Ames's smock, which she buttons up to the neck. Mrs. Ames's blonde hair is described as forming a "strange dim halo," while the plumber's hair is "light as gold." When he reemerges from the drains, Mrs. Ames sees "a bright little piece of his hair still shining, like a star." According to Gronning, "Separately, Katherine and the plumber are androgynous because they share in the positive virtues of each gender."

Mrs. Ames, further writes Gronning, "comprehends [the plumber] because he is a man who shares in her feminine world." He also is able to provide "true answers" to her questions. Mrs. Ames appreciates this straightforward approach because her life with the astronomer has been only a "continuous query to which there could be no response." The plumber comforts Mrs. Ames with his assertion that "[t]here's a remedy for every ill. . . . Sometimes it may be that . . . or sometimes the other thing. But there's always a help for everything amiss."

For the duration of the story, brief though it is, the dialogue between the two has double meaning. Mrs. Ames hears the plumber's words, not as referring to the house's plumbing problem, but to the inadequacies of her life. "Things come out of herbs and make you young again, he might have been saying to her; or the first good rain will quench any drought; or time of itself will put a broken bone together." Further, he tells her " [t]here' s nothing at all that can't be done over for the caring." She understands that he may be speaking either of the pipes or of her, for "his eyes were fastened on her face in insolence, or gentleness, or love." Mrs. Ames announces her intent to alter her life to the servant. "The trouble is very serious, very serious," she says, referring to her life situation, not the plumbing pipes.

Arm in arm with the plumber, Mrs. Ames will go down into the tangible world of the physical and the corporeal - she is descending at last from Mr. Ames's lofty heights to join the rest of mankind. As she and the plumber "stepped into the heart of the earth," they are really stepping into the mass of humanity. Through establishment of a connection with the plumber, Mrs. Ames assures herself of the unexpected opportunity to create and participate in a fulfilling relationship, both with a man and with society. As

Spanier sums up Boyle's "central story," it has "a belief in the absolute essentiality of love - both on a private and a public scale - and a sense of tragic loss when human connections fail, leaving individuals who are desperately in need of contact bounding off one another like atoms." Unlike many other of Boyle's characters, Katherine Ames is able to grab a chance at love and change her life.

While in Paris in the 1920s, Kay Boyle said that stories "were written in protest, and also in faith, and they were not unlike fervent prayers offered up for the salvation of man, for the defense of his high spirit, for the celebration of his integrity." In "Astronomer's Wife," Boyle presents a character who unhesitatingly grasps her own salvation, and in so doing, affirms the potentiality for the rest of humankind to use compassion to transform the world.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Astronomer's Wife," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Use the encyclopedia to research philosophers who have talked about the body/mind question. You will want to look at such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, and Immanuel Kant. What have each of these philosophers had to say about the body/mind duality?

Read some other stories about women whose relationships with men have been stifling or have somehow stunted them. A couple of good examples are Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre.* How does Boyle draw a different picture of a woman's growing independence?

Investigate types of narration and types of narrators. What kind of narrator does Boyle use in "Astronomer's Wife"? Describe the narration in some detail and compare it to other writers' uses of the third-person narration.

Explore the lives of middle-class housewives in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Is Katherine Ames' life typical? What options were open to women of her economic status at this time?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Divorce is still illegal in many Catholic European countries, and even where it is legal it is extremely rare.

1990s: Approximately half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce, and divorce is common even in such Catholic nations as Italy— where it became legal only a few years ago.

1930s: The "traditional family model" of a husband working and a wife taking care of the house is quite common, especially among middle-class families.

1990s: Middle-class wives are extremely likely to have a college education and to work outside of the home. In American society as a whole, most families see both parents working outside the home.

1930s: Feminism and women's roles in social and political causes surge during the years of the depression. Thanks to New Deal programs and both Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt crusading for women's issues and for women to take active roles in political offices, the number of women in high governmental positions increases dramatically. President Roosevelt positively affects the number of women in government by appointing the first female cabinet member, the first female ambassador, and the first woman on the Court of Appeals.

1990s: The number of women involved in social causes and political offices is the highest it has ever been. Women such as Jody Williams, Princess Diana, and Mother Teresa are recognized the world over for their commitment to humanitarian and charitable efforts. In government, after the 1992 election, the number of women in politics increases. Fifty-four women hold positions in Congress, including six senators and forty-eight representatives. By 1992, 13.4 percent of judicial officers are women and two women, Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, hold positions on the Supreme Court.

What Do I Read Next?

Fifty Stories (1981) is a collection of fifty of Boyle's best and most representative stories. Boyle's writing career was long and varied, and this anthology gives readers a glimpse of how this master of the short story developed her talents over time.

Plagued by the Nightingale (1931) was Boyle's first novel. In it, she examines the cultural conflicts between an American woman and the Frenchman she marries when the woman returns to France with her husband.

Another portrait of a woman trapped in a stifling marriage, more extreme than that in "Astronomer's Wife," can be found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic story "The Yellow Wallpaper," which was first published in 1892. In Gilman's story, a woman who is suffering from postpartum depression is given a "rest cure" by her husband. This cure forbids that she undertake any activity whatsoever, including the outlet that she had always used to express herself—writing. In the end, she descends into madness, and whether this is a tragic or triumphant ending is left for the reader to decide.

In 1968, Boyle took on a unique project. She interspersed chapters of her own between the original chapters of her friend Robert McAlmon's book *Being Geniuses Together,* a memoir of Paris in the 1920s. The joint work is a fascinating portrait of the personal lives of two very personable Americans who knew many of the most influential artists and writers of the twentieth century and who lived in the middle of one of the century's most active artistic scenes.

The best book of Boyle's life thus far is Joan Mellen's 1994 *Kay Boyle: Author of Herself.* The book is exhaustive and well-researched, and Mellen had the opportunity to know Boyle, and that acquaintance informs her biography.

Further Study

Bell, Elizabeth S., *Kay Boyle: A Study of Short Fiction,* Twayne, 1992.

Bell's book is probably the standard reference work for studies of Boyle's short stories. In brief descriptions and analyses, she outlines the most important themes and techniques of Boyle's work.

Elkins, Marilyn, ed., *Critical Essays on Kay Boyle,* G. K. Hall and Co., 1997.

Although not focused exclusively on Boyle's stories, this anthology gives the reader a good introduction to a number of different critical approaches to the study of Boyle's fiction.

Spanier, Sandra, *Kay Boyle, Artist and Activist,* Paragon House, 1986.

Spanier's biography of Boyle is not as thorough as Joan Mellen's but is, nonetheless, interesting.

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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 members□educational 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.

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

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.

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

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.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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